

The Last Weed in the Garden

If I'd met Joey and Miss B in different places, I would never have pictured them in the same room, let alone put myself right in the middle.

Miss B likes to tell people she's a gardener. That ends the conversation with the *uninteresting* ones, as she says. If you aren't one of those, you might get her to unspool her full title: Ruth Carol Bartholomew, Founder and Headmistress of Miss B's Garden of Music for Budding Talents. And bud they do—or I should say *we* do, me being one of her piano students. Most of us make it into music programs like Juilliard or Eastman.

And all from a school in Florida that nobody's ever heard of, unless they happen to be savvy to the local Tampa music scene. People know her success stories are true, but they don't know how she does it. You'd probably think she only accepts the cream of the crop; not the case.

Which brings me to Joey.

Joey Machese could not claim to be the cream of anything. I might have called him a diamond in the rough, although even that's a stretch.

I got to be good friends with Joey after he came to Miss B's. We've had our ups and downs, something I'll get into later. He calls me Em, which I never let anyone do, but he has a way of getting to me. To everyone else I'm Emma.

Joey grew up in Ybor, the old Latin Quarter of Tampa where the Italian and Cuban immigrants made cigars a hundred years ago. Now the old cigar factory buildings sit empty, and the neighborhood is sort of shabby-artsy, with closed storefronts and tattoo parlors wedged between bars and galleries. There's a park with chickens wandering around. Joey's dad owns a hole-in-the-wall cafe that stays in business on his lasagna recipe, plus his mom helping out.

Joey told me no one in his family ever had any musical talent. One day when he was six, he climbed up on his Aunt Mima's piano bench and picked out a tune. He remembers his dad saying "Joey, wait—what was that? It almost sounded like *Bohemian Rhapsody*." His dad was a big *Queen* fan, and played them a lot in the restaurant.

Joey smiled, shrugged, and played the tune again.

“It is! Son, who taught you that?” He looked at Mima, who just threw her hands in the air. The only songs she knew were hymns. Joey’s mom didn’t play, so she was out.

Then and there, Mima gave her old upright piano to Joey. His dad happened to know a musician named Stan Perez who ate in the restaurant every Thursday. They shook hands on a trade deal: piano lessons for lasagna.

After a few years, Stan realized Joey’s ear was better than his. The kid’s practice habits could use cleaning up, but he might go somewhere with music. Stan inquired at Miss B’s and set Joey up with an audition.

So onto the Palm Avenue bus gets Joey Macheese, age fourteen, in this short tie and long jacket, too much hair gel making him look like somebody out of the *Godfather*, to Miss B’s for his audition. His mom came with him. He said later that when he got to the school building and saw that it looked like the White House, only haunted and covered with vines, he got this urge to hold his mother’s hand. Or maybe turn around and run the other way.

The doorbell rang, and it was Joey and his mom.

“Hi, welcome to the Garden,” I said, “I’m Emma.” I’m one of Miss B’s student assistants. “You must be Joseph Macheese?”

“Ma-kay-zee.”

I said Oh sorry, no one ever gets my last name right either.

“What is it?”

“Smith,” I giggled, but Joey burst out with this big laugh that turned out to be almost a trademark.

I recall telling him and his mom how much I loved Miss B’s, been here three years, I’m fifteen, a sophomore. Here, have a seat, she’ll be right down. Joey says I can chatter to the point he has no idea how I’m breathing.

“Would you like some fresh hot tea?” My question to all guests.

Joey’s mom said no thank you.

“You got any iced sweet tea?”

The mom shot him a look, like *You are not in your father’s restaurant*.

“Sorry. No thanks, I’m good.”

I had to run to class, so I left them on the couch to wait for Miss B. I remember them looking the parlor up and down. The place has a seen-better-days vibe to it—chandelier so dusty it swallows its own light, old square grand piano with a sign on it that says *Do Not Play*, potted plants all over the place.

Joey said Miss B kind of materialized out of nowhere. She didn’t make a sound, not even footsteps, which spooked him. You do have to get used to her. She reminds me of Liszt—the composer? Tall and thin, pale, with short, straight hair the color of that rain you see in the distance coming down from storm clouds. She wears a lot of long flowing skirts and men’s smoking jackets. Although I never saw her smoke.

Joey gave me this rundown on how it went:

“Joseph, Mrs. Machese...pleasure to meet you.” Heavy southern, highly ornamented, big curvy hairpin dynamics. “So Joseph, you wish to study piano here with me.”

He was *so* wishing not to, right then. His tie felt too tight. She seemed to be able to look right through him. He told me later that it was the *blink*. Funny he caught that right away. Miss B has this intent way of studying you. Then she finally blinks, but slowly, almost like she’s re-focusing her eyes. Some kids swear her pupils change size.

“Miss Bartholomew,” said his mom, “We’ve been told he has a gift.”

“Of course, Mrs. Machese,” said Miss B, sweeping the air with one hand. Joey noticed her fingers were long with blunt tips. “Every aspiring musician who comes through that door has been told he or she has a gift. We have to determine whether your son has...what I call *promise*—and if so, we must do what it takes to nourish this promise, to allow it to blossom. More to the point, *Joseph* must do what it takes.” She looked back at him.

“I practice, like an hour-and-a-half a day,” Joey’s voice cracked. He instantly thought *Jesus, good thing I’m not applying for voice lessons.*

She said that was a good start, and now she wanted to hear him play. Miss B led him up the grand staircase, and his mom said his face looked white, like he expected the gallows at the other end.

But her studio is nicer than you'd think—it's airy, with big arched windows. Two mahogany chairs with butt-worn places on the seats, a huge Bösendorfer grand sitting in the center of a beat-up oak floor. Lots of music and little framed photos on shelves.

He looked at the piano. The keyboard grinned back malevolently. He sat on the bench, which seemed to be adjusted for someone seven feet tall. His feet didn't reach the pedals. He fiddled with the knobs until he got it to the right height.

"All right, Joseph, what will you play today?"

"Beethoven, Sonata opus number...um....." He stared at the keys as though they might remember.

"Well, just go ahead and play. Then we'll know which one it is, won't we?"

It turned out to be Opus 14, number 1, and he got a fair amount of it out before screwing up. He said the sweat kept making his fingers slip off the black keys.

When he was through, she asked Beethoven's dates, and he didn't know *those*. He had to be shitting a brick at that point. But miracle of miracles, Miss B said he did show *promise*, although he had a lot of catching up to do.

And so began Joey's education here at Miss B's. The thirty of us students do all our schooling here, because Miss B has the general college prep stuff too. She only charges what each family can afford, which is great, and Joey had no worries.

Well, almost none.

Miss B insists on High Tea in the parlor every afternoon from 2:00 to 3:00. On nice days we go out to the verandah. We do it in two shifts. I brew it up, and a couple of us serve and do clean-up every day. Joey helps me all the time, and if I thought he was a little crude, now I have to admit he's pretty sweet.

Joey's one worry? He liked Tea *too* much. Not the half-hour break, the actual beverage. He told me that every morning on the bus, he was daydreaming—and not about Brittany Fong, who he thinks is unbelievably hot; about *Tea*.

He almost told his parents, but changed his mind. He figured his mom would freak. And he felt fine. He was doing much better on the piano—he was on his second Chopin Etude. If you don't know those, rest assured they're hard.

I didn't realize how serious this worry of his was, until he asked to get on my bus with me in the afternoon, then circle back and transfer to his. He wanted to talk in private, he said. I thought maybe he had a crush...but then he was obsessed with Brittany, so that didn't seem likely. Curiosity had me.

So the bus conversation went like this:

“Em, here's the deal. I need you to help me with something.”

“Help? Sure...” I wondered where this was going.

“Yeah. Remember how I was talking about Miss B's tea? Have *you* noticed anything weird about it?”

“You're still on that tea thing? No...just tastes like normal tea. Although I never actually liked hot tea until I went there. Guess it grew on me.”

“See, that's just it! I hated it hot, remember? But now I can't *wait* 'til Tea every day. How fucked up is that?”

I got that sinking sensation you get when something you've been denying stares you in the face.

We spent the rest of the forty-minute bus ride talking about the tea. No, I didn't know where Miss B got it. She always kept it in her own canisters. But yes, I had a craving—I just hadn't admitted it. You didn't get a high, or want more and more or anything, like a junkie. One cup did it. Whatever *it* was.

“So Em...I figured out an experiment to find out if the tea is doing something.”

“You've already thought this out?”

“Yeah. We'll get some *regular* tea and give it to the 2:00 Tea group. That'll be, like, the placebo. You know what that is, right? And we'll keep giving Miss B's tea to the 2:30 group. Oh, and of course *she* has to drink her own stuff.”

I was horrified. “Oh god, I don’t know, Joey. You mean, do this behind her back? She trusts me. I’d feel terrible about—”

“Em, how bad will you feel if you’re doping everybody without them knowing?”

It was hard to come back on that one.

So we would start the experiment on Monday. Joey’s dad always ordered this tea called *Tifton* in bulk for the cafe. Joey would sneak some out and supply it to me, and I would pull the switch for half the students. We could make observations, and drink the placebo to see if we started to feel any different.

Nothing at first. I was surprised at how easy it was to disguise the Tifton, and nobody said a word about the taste being any different. But about three weeks in, Brittany Fong said this to me in the girl’s room:

“I just don’t get it, Emma...my lesson with Heller today? Epic *fail*.”

Brittany was one of the top violin students. She was notorious for her obsessive practicing schedule. She did not go to lessons unprepared. I asked what happened.

“Well, I was playing the Mendelssohn, and I just couldn’t get the vibrato right. My wrist felt—I don’t know...stiff. And then he like *yelled* ‘Tune that passage up!’ I mean...*me*, out of *tune*?”

“Wow, Brit. But you know how super-picky old Give’em Heller can be. You’re such an amazing player, I bet he was just trying to—”

“No...it wasn’t that. Even *I* could tell my playing was crap.”

I didn’t think too much about it, especially because I had a competition coming up, and I was using all my time practicing and trying not to be a nervous wreck. It was the final round of the state Pre-College Concerto Competition. The first prize was \$2000 cash and a scholarship. I was playing the Grieg on Saturday with the University Orchestra. It was a huge deal, and all my family and friends were coming to the Finals.

So my practice session that day went down the tubes. Grieg has those big Nordic sweeps that have to be just right, and they were just *not*. The orchestra rehearsal two days ago went pretty well, but today...stress. Best to just call it a day.

You can envision the scene Saturday evening at the University concert hall: Four of us finalists backstage in formalwear, scared shitless, trying to act like we performed concertos all the time; Miss B and all the faculty out there, students, friends and families; Joey, fifth row-left of center with our moms and dads; everybody a little jumpy.

In the front sit five judges. I have the first slot on the program.

The theater darkens, and the stage lights come on. The orchestra tunes up. The conductor comes out, takes a bow, then talks about these four wonderful performances about to happen. Then it's time for me to come out.

I'm in this new midnight-blue silk dress. It swishes nicely as I walk onto the stage. The lights are brighter than I expect, almost blinding. I bow, sit at the Steinway concert grand, take a deep breath, and nod to the conductor: *ready*.

The tympani rolls to the first crashing chord. I strike it with dramatic force, and then the majestic descending chords. They come out flawlessly. Close your eyes and it could be Martha Argerich. The orchestra comes in with an ethereal, forest sprite-like melody, and I echo it.

Or more like trip over it.

Something's wrong. In the next instant, I have to pick up a fast passage that I haven't missed in months—until now. God, what's wrong? My fingers have been replaced by boiled egg noodles. I'm behind the orchestra. They're playing on. The conductor is looking at me. I'm fucking frozen. I try to play a few notes, catch up somehow—but I draw a blank. I am lost, totally lost.

Nothing to do but put both hands in my lap.

The orchestra comes to a stop.

The conductor gives me a *do you want to start over* signal.

I blink, my eyes beginning to water at the brightness of the lights. I mouth *No*, stand, and

walk off the stage. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of one of the judges slowly shaking his head as he writes something down.

I know now. I can't do this—not now, maybe never.

I remember mumbling *excuse me* as I ran through the backstage area, past the others, and out the side door. I never even looked up, because eye contact with winners was too painful for a loser. I knew Joey would look for me, but he was the last person I wanted to see. He tried calling and texting me over and over. I basically cried on my mom's shoulder all weekend, and didn't even talk to Miss B when she called.

Monday morning I dragged myself back to school. I went in early because Miss B wanted to have a talk over tea. We had a couple of cups and a heart-to-heart that really helped. I kept thinking about Joey's experiment, but dared not say anything. Miss B chalked up Saturday to nerves and bad luck. She said she had *unswerving* confidence in me for the future. So I had a glimmer of hope.

Joey showed up at 8:30 looking for me, but I hid in a practice room.

By Tea time, I couldn't avoid him any longer. He came into the kitchen while I was brewing the tea, and gave me this sad puppy look—like it was *his* most horrible weekend of *his* life.

I lost it. “Joey, please leave. Not now!”

“Em, come on...I am so sorry about what happened, it really, really sucked—”

“Joey, the experiment is over. The regular tea—it's killing us!”

“What? It's just Tifton straight from the restaurant! I drank it for years, it can't be doing anything.”

“For god's sake, Joey. It made me forget how to play the piano!”

Then he said I had it backwards, it was *Miss B's* tea that was weird, and we'd all been addicted, but now we weren't craving it anymore, wasn't that great.

He still wasn't getting it.

“Joey, *yes* it’s Miss B’s tea—it’s why we *were* doing so great. And it’s not just me having problems, I’ve heard other kids saying stuff too. And surprise, it’s the ones from the *Tifton* group.”

“Hmm. Miss B did rip me a new one last Thursday for ‘extraordinary sloppiness’ during my lesson. I guess I’ve been a little unfocused lately...”

“So you’re *unfocused*, and I’m humiliated big time. Really Joey? Is that what we came here for?”

“Okay Em, you win. Experiment over, back to Miss B’s tea.”

“Thank you. Not that I need your permission.”

Then he said *he* was going to fake-sip at Tea, to see how things went staying off it. He stood there with this look on his face, like a cogwheel was still turning in his brain.

“Why are you still in the kitchen, Joey?”

“I just thought of something. Can I have a sample of Miss B’s tea? Maybe we can send it to some lab to be analyzed.”

Jesus, did he never give up?

“Analyzed? What would you do then? Confront Miss B? Tell your mom and dad?”

“Good question...I’ll figure that out later. Come on Em, don’t you want to find out?”

By now I was *so* over the whole mess.

I spooned some loose tea into a ziplock baggie and handed it to him.

“Thanks. Where do you think might do an analysis?”

“How in the world would I know? Look, you’ve got the tea, now would you *please* go out to the parlor and leave me alone?”

Later he told me he sent the sample to the Tifton tea company, claimed it was theirs, and that something seemed wrong with it.

The next four weeks passed pretty uneventfully. I was doing a lot better, and so was everybody else. Except Joey. I saw him in the practice rooms working like a fool every day, but

when he played some Bach for me, for the first time I was having to keep the shock off my face. Seriously not good. He was beginning to believe my theory about the tea.

So the next Thursday I was at school early, and in walked Joey wearing this look I couldn't quite read. Confusion? He had a folded paper, like a one-page letter in his hand, and was about to show it to me when he spotted Miss B coming down the stairs. She had on one of her smoking jackets—a bronze velvet one—and a long yellow scarf that matched her skirt.

He stuffed the paper into his back pocket. “Show this to you later, Em.”

“Good morning, Joseph. ‘Morning, Emma.”

“Morning, Miss B.”

“Joseph, your lesson is at nine today, isn't it? May I suggest you use this time to work on your Bach? You can use my studio.”

No surprise, Joey agreed. He took the stairs two-by-two, and on the way up, called out “lunch, verandah.” He would show me the paper then.

Except at lunch when he reached into his pocket to get it, it wasn't there.

“Crap! It must've fallen out somewhere. Did you see it anyplace, Em?” His eyes scanned the verandah floor.

“Uh, no, or I would be showing it to *you* right now.”

“Geez, I wonder where it is. It's the letter from the lab at Tifton. It came up negative—bupkis, just plain old *tea*. I don't get it, they had to've missed something.”

“Hm. Weird. Guess that settles that.”

Joey was about to jump out of his chair to go look in the parlor when he was blanketed by a cloud of yellow. It was Miss B's chiffon scarf hanging over his face. As she swished the scarf over her shoulder, he turned to look at her. Her lips were blood red, slick with a fresh coating of her favorite lipstick. His eyes shifted to her right hand, which held a folded sheet of paper.

“Joseph. I found this beneath the piano bench just after your lesson this morning. I want to see you in my studio after class. Emma, please be there too. Four-forty-five.”

“Yes Ma'am.” We were both dead.

It felt like the afternoon would never end. Must be what dread does to you. Finally 4:45 rolled around, and Joey and I went up to Miss B's studio. The sun was low in the sky, filtering through the windows and lighting up thousands of tiny dust motes. It made me think of that oldies tune "The Party's Over."

We sat on the two mahogany chairs and waited. Miss B always sat at her piano unless she was giving a lesson. She came in carrying a tray with two cups of tea and set it on an end table between the chairs. A beam of daylight glinted through the delicate china.

"Here," handing a cup to Joey, "Drink up. Freshly brewed."

"No thanks, I'm not really thirsty."

Did he actually *say* that?

"Oh, I insist. You know how I value our traditions, and Tea is an important one." She rested one elbow on the piano and blinked.

He couldn't come up with another excuse, so he drained the cup in a few gulps.

She tilted her head toward the other cup. "That one is for you too."

"Miss B—"

She looked theatrically at the teacup, then back at Joey.

He finished off the tea.

"All right, now let's discuss what's going on." She reached inside the piano, where she stashes things, and pulled out the letter. "This is addressed to you, Joseph. It appears to be some sort of laboratory report on a tea sample. I'm confident you can explain."

Joey swallowed hard a couple of times, like the tea might be coming back up.

I decided to start. "Miss B, it...wasn't just Joey." I wasn't sure how much to say. She obviously knew something, but how much had she figured out?

"So Emma, are you going to speak for Joseph?"

That wasn't exactly my plan.

Joey finally said "No, it's all my fault, Miss B. That letter...I sent the tea in to see if something—uh, *different*—was in it. See, Em and I thought we were, like, addicted."

Miss B raised her eyebrows. She turned her eyes to me.

“We sort of craved it...but—” I looked at Joey.

“But...?” Miss B’s cheeks were blotchy, and it wasn’t from rouge, because she never wore it. “You never felt harmed by it, did you?”

“No Ma’am.”

“Joseph, Emma...as you no doubt know, disturbing issues have been plaguing the students. In all these years of tending my beloved Garden, this is the first time I’ve had a problem with—well, shall we say *weeds*. And a mystery about why they kept popping up. Now here’s this letter...and coincidentally, you two brew and serve Tea every day. Am I to assume you meddled with it in some way?”

Joey gulped again and laid it out. Yes, we had substituted Tifton tea for the 2:00 group. Yes, he had talked me into the whole thing. And he admitted he’d still been holding out on drinking the tea.

“Well, Joseph.” She blinked again. “So you are the *last* weed. You leave me unclear whether to praise your investigative persistence, or condemn the way you’ve conducted yourself.”

We were waiting for the ax to fall.

“Let me give you some food for thought. There is a reason every graduate of this school has been successful. It has to do with talent, discipline and hard work, but also proper *nourishment*. Without that—how do I put it? You hit a wall. Joseph, you’ve found it. And Emma, I felt so terrible for the way you found yours, but you’ve recovered nicely.”

“So Miss B...when you say *nourishment*—the tea...” Joey was going to ask what was in it.

“Joey!” I panicked and almost knocked the tea tray to the floor.

Miss B let out a sigh and smiled, which I totally did not expect. “It’s all right, Emma. I can’t dismiss curiosity in my students as *all* bad. What you two did was shameful, but your motives were not insincere. So before we discuss your consequences, I will throw a bone to your curiosity. This means sharing with you something only a handful of musicians know. And it does not leave this room, understood?”

We nodded, surprised she would trust us with anything at this point.

“Very well. The tea is from Java. It’s grown high in the mountains there, has been for centuries. My supplier is from a long family line of tea farmers who keep the crop going every year.”

Joey said “Centuries? So you’re not the first one who—”

“Found the secret? By no means. I will say, it’s been a well-kept one. But not from Beethoven. Or Chopin, Liszt...Paganini.” She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “It’s even said it was over Tea that Brahms fell in love with Clara Schumann.”

“Brahms?” I gasped. “...Beethoven?”

“No way,” Joey’s eyes were wide.

“*Way*, as you say, Joseph. How do you think they so fully realized their potential? The tea found its way to Europe long ago. And today it still nourishes the best musicians in the world, including of course some of our alumni.”

We both wanted so badly to ask which musicians were on the stuff now, but we kept our mouths shut.

“Now,” she said, “About our present situation.”

Joey asked if we were going to be kicked out.

“Fair question, Joseph. Make no mistake, I would be justified in expelling both of you for stirring up this mischief.” She tossed the letter back into the piano. “But that tea I had you drink? Consider that your second chance.”

I saw Joey exhale, and I felt tears of relief jump to my eyes.

“The reason for my leniency may surprise you. As I’ve sat here, I have had a small epiphany. It occurs to me that a Garden with never a weed may be *too* perfect. Here we’ve focused so much on nourishing musical promise, we’ve neglected to nourish *humility*. And how does one build resilience if one doesn’t experience a bump or two? So I’m instituting a new policy. During the course of study, each student will be *required* to take a six-week sabbatical.”

“Sabbatical?”

“Time off, Joey,” I said.

“What, from school?”

“Oh, heavens no!” said Miss B. “From Tea.”

We both eventually graduated with honors. Meanwhile, we didn’t talk about the experiment, until one random afternoon at Tea. Joey and I were out on the verandah, and he said this:

“Wonder what she did with that letter?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, not really. It didn’t prove anything anyway, dumb-shit lab.”

That was when I confessed.

“Joey...that tea sample? It wasn’t Miss B’s. I put Tifton in that baggie.”

He looked at me for a second. “You...put—”

“Tifton.”

He laughed so crazy hard, his eyes watered.

He raised his teacup to mine. “To the experiment,” he said.

And he didn’t say this, but we were both thinking it was a damn good thing we were musicians and not scientists.