

## Amateur Piano Tuner

Stanford awoke to a mouth of ash and a sandpaper tongue. A shower thrummed nearby. He sat up slowly, gingerly. A leaky bladder of poison had been installed behind his forehead. If he could hold his head just so, the pain would not slosh about.

Daylight poured in through naked windows, illuminating the bed like an altar. Or not even a bed really, he saw now, just a mattress on the floor. The scene struck him as surprisingly lurid. Discarded clothes in heaps on the floor. Overturned candles spilling dried wax into a stained rug. An explosion of makeup utensils.

Stanford peaked beneath the covers, nothing there but flesh, a sticky mushroom poking out from an unshorn bush. The night before returned in a kaleidoscope of fractured moments. A dark hotel bar, the bite of a cold gin and tonic on the back of his throat, jaw stretched open in a raspy laugh, a row of perfect ivory teeth, a tongue coated in menthol and red wine, his fingers raking blond strands dark at the roots, a small pink breast in his hand, a hard dark nipple in his mouth.

He waited for a tide of regret to swell, felt himself instead scoured clean, a new man. He was finally alive again, he thought. The night had brought a downpour of endorphins, awakening the hunter in his soul. How could it be wrong? It was a victimless crime. Those who would be hurt would never know. Had he not resisted his own evolutionary imperative long enough? Did he not toil for years in a prison of his own flesh, tortured by a sexual thought every seven seconds?

An echo of his son's voice broke through the gauze of his smugness: "That's sus, Papi."

Stanford declined to probe this tenderness, happy to be distracted by a vibration somewhere nearby. A text had just arrived in a tablet on the floor. It appeared unlocked. This path leads only to misery, he thought, even as he picked up the device.

u go home w that guy from the hotel?

yes 😞 and he's still here

whaaaa???

right? go home, dude

y do i do this?



he looks so old in daylight

oh god, I hope he's not married

gross. probably divorced. was it good at least?

ugh. like getting fondled by an amateur piano tuner

lol

got to cleanse this off me in the shower. hope this dude just leaves

brunch?

Cracks immediately splintered across Stanford's brittle emotional façade. He worked to slow his breathing, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Nearly gagging on own breath, he became aware of an absence, a vacancy on his ring finger where his wedding band was meant to be.

He rolled onto one knee, waited for his temples to stop throbbing. He could remember trying and failing to fit the ring on the index finger of his right hand early in the night. Did he stuff into his pocket?

His clothes lay strewn in a confused pile. He seemed to have undressed in the wrong order. He searched both pockets, once, twice, a third time. Nothing. His eyes made a frantic inventory of the room. Could it have rolled somewhere? It was impossible to tell. The space was a wasteland of detritus.

Stanford grabbed his clothes again, shook each garment violently. No ring, but his phone tumbled onto the rug. Six missed calls from his wife, a long string of texts. He scrolled through it quickly, seeing it evolve from pleasant to worried to angry back to worried. His daughter had called him twice, and texted: "Aren't you going to call to say goodnight?" His son had sent four texts in a span of minutes:

Papi r u ok? 😞

Papi please call us

Before my bedtime 🇵🇪

8:30!

The words cut like shrapnel, each one drilling into his bottomless reservoir a self-loathing.

The shower suddenly stopped, and Stanford scabbled after his clothes. Swallowing nausea, he burst into the daylight shoeless and disheveled, squinting against a cold sun, lost, hopelessly lost.