

MR. PIANO MAN

I rocked gently in my favorite recliner, studying a client's blueprints, into the second hour of a Montecristo Cuban our daughter Bonnie gave me for my birthday. Our rickety spaniel, Barney, snorted a half-growl, half-groan without bothering to lift his head or open his eyes, a feeble attempt to fulfill the guard dog duties he'd been shirking ever since the black splotches on his back started fading to gray. The front door swung open, momentarily blocking the Packers game muted in the corner. My wife tottered into the living room, balancing four Nordstrom boxes in her arms, the front door still ajar. The afternoon sun reflected off the windowpanes, casting an orangish ring around her hazel-green eyes. The surrounding skin stretched as though she'd already had that facelift she'd been hinting about, even though she sure didn't need it.

Lisa dumped the packages onto the couch and scanned the room. "Work and football. Huh, what a surprise," she said, her tone snippy and demeaning. It was pretty clear she'd been to the hairdresser that morning, dirty blond waves stiff, each curl set perfectly in place, fresh out of one of those half-eggshell-shaped kilns they jam over ladies' heads in the beauty parlor. "Bonnie's coming over for dinner soon. I thought we were going over the wedding invitation list together."

Shit. Forgot about that. "Sorry. This is due tomorrow. But I'll be done soon," I said.

She stood in the middle of the room, her hand on her chin as if contemplating whether to bother scolding me for working on the weekend again. "I've been thinking about our big argument last week," she said. "I felt bad for accusing you of disappearing whenever Bonnie or I needed you. Too harsh, and I'm sorry."

I too hadn't been able to get that argument off my mind, and it guilted me into some deep

soul-searching that didn't leave me in a good place. It was always work, my standard excuse, cop-out. I'd missed Bonnie's high school volleyball games, dances that Lisa chaperoned without me. Birthday parties, proms, meeting the new boyfriend, anniversaries, Valentine's Day. I'd even cancelled vacations and weekends away. Shit, when I think back on it like that, I damn near missed her entire childhood.

I missed so much, they'd lately taken to ignoring me like the dog. Sad part was that for all those years, it hadn't bothered me.

Until now. It sure as hell was bothering me now. And I was determined to do something about it. Not sure what. I'd just have to figure that out. The wedding might be a good place to start.

I couldn't miss Bonnie's wedding. Oh, I was going to be there. Of course, I'd be there. But I wanted to be involved, the planning, be part of the family for a change. Bonnie had moved out of the house years ago, four years of college, currently in grad school. At least she came home for holidays and weekends from time to time. But something about getting married seemed so permanent, like she wouldn't ever be coming back. I had to salvage whatever little time I might have left with her. At least she'd picked a good guy to marry.

"It's okay. I've just been slammed with so much work lately. I'll cut back, I promise," She scooted over to me, sat on my lap, and hugged me.

"Just like always. But, hey, forget that." She popped up and rubbed her hands together, as if washing them, a bright look on her face. "Were you serious about wanting to help with the wedding?"

"You bet," I said, energized, surprised. Lisa had worked up a checklist of duties for everyone: her, Bonnie, the groom to be. Even the future mother-in-law. But I'd been the odd man

out, nada, zilch. I'd gotten the "Just stay out of our way" treatment.

"Okay, good. I've got a great job for you," she said. "You're going to love it." She just stood there, hands clasped in front of her chest as if in prayer, anxiously awaiting a response, giddy. Hoping to build my enthusiasm by holding back until I begged for disclosure. But this wasn't her first grand announcement. We'd been married for twenty-seven years, and whenever Lisa eagerly offered something *for me*, what she usually wanted was something *from me*. But what? Last week she wouldn't even let me lick envelopes. I'm getting suckered into something. I glanced over to the football game. The front door swayed from the breeze, the neighbor's cat standing on the threshold purring, contemplating whether it was safe to enter.

Lisa fidgeted, clinging to that devilish simper, then blurted, "Okay, I'll just tell you. You can play the piano at Bonnie and Jake's wedding."

I couldn't control a 'you've got to be kidding me' chuckle. "I can't play the piano."

"But I already promised Bonnie that you'd do it. I know you used to play, and you've got six months to practice."

I glanced back at the Packer game, just in time to see a long touchdown pass. Lisa stepped in front of the TV. I had no intention of sitting on a piano bench naked in front of three hundred friends and family, fingers stumbling over little black and white keys that all looked the same. "Not a chance. You've got to find something else for me to do."

"Last week you felt left out and were moaning, practically begging, for something to do for the wedding. 'Everyone's got jobs, and they're playing a fun role. Everybody but me.' Those were your exact words, Dennis."

Of course, I didn't need the reminder. It was true. But she'd dismissed me. "This wouldn't

be the kind of stuff you'd like." When I persisted, she said, "Oh, okay. How about you just write a check whenever Bonnie and I find something we can't live without?" They both giggled and changed the subject.

But I needed to be more than just Mr. Moneybags. I yearned to contribute, do my share. I didn't need to stand out or be a star; I just wanted to be part of the team. But playing the piano—what was she even thinking?

I could see the disappointment on Lisa's face, her eyes scrunched together, the skin between her brows wrinkled like fingers shriveled after an hour in the tub. She misted up. I sure didn't want to bring her to tears. Instead, she resorted to pleading. "I lobbied for you. Bonnie said that you'd flake out like you always did. But I convinced her that having you at the piano would be much more intimate and personal than hiring a professional."

I'd been rolled down that guilt trip road before. I guess it'd worked for her in the past, but I couldn't do what I was incapable of doing. "You should have checked with me first. I don't even know how to play the piano."

"That's nonsense. Your mother told me just last week that you were a little Mozart as a kid." Lisa slid onto the arm of my easy chair and leaned into me. "You're just a little rusty. You'll pick it back up in no time. The old piano your mom gave us when she moved into Sunshine Manor last year is still in the basement."

"Mom's mixed me up with my brother, just like she's been confusing everything else these days." Little Mozart. What a joke. I'd flunked out of piano lessons on the second stanza of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.

I'd regretted giving up on the piano too soon, didn't even last a month. I probably weaseled

out because my little brother picked it up right off and outshined me. I'd quit, dropped out. "How about we just ask my brother to play? He'd be happy to do it."

"All you have to do is play background stuff while the guests are arriving—that's it. Nothing more. Six months, plenty of time to get ready."

Six months was a long time. I couldn't help but wonder what I could do with all those days and weeks to practice. Could this be my rebirth, my second chance? Naw, don't even start with that crazy thinking. I didn't need that kind of stress, not at my age. It'd just be another regret, and an embarrassing one at that. "I'm sorry. Can't you just find a different job for me?"

"Don't worry about it. Just forget it. Bonnie was right. We'll get somebody else, or just play a CD." She strolled out of the room. Not ranting, or furious, or angry. Rather, the look on her face downhearted, let down, disappointed.

Disappointed in me.

I went down to Harper's music store the next morning and purchased the easiest book I could find: *Teach Yourself How to Play the Piano*.

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Nothing came back to me from the few weeks of lessons I'd endured over forty years earlier. I started right from the beginning: how to sit at the piano, finger numbering, playing with curved fingers, the keyboard, and finger aerobics. Nothing a four-year-old couldn't master with the slightest exertion. I found the middle C right off. Then the A, and the B note, all the way to G. Onto half, quarter, and full notes, treble clef, and bass clef. Uncovered the mystery of the black keys, sharps, and flats.

Near the end of the third day, just as my initial enthusiasm started to wane, I managed to tap

out a few recognizable bars of *Jingle Bells*. Tonic for a sagging ego. I repeated, again and again, over and over, committing the notes to memory. By the following evening my fingers subconsciously floated from key to key and, magically, without thought, *Jingle Bells* miraculously filled the air, ricocheting off our basement walls.

Don't misunderstand, this was no re-creation of Vladimir Horowitz in Carnegie Hall. The number of notes were sparse, the arrangement basic. But the rendition was perceptible, actually recognizable by anybody as *Jingle Bells*. For a guy like me, that little kindergarten performance advanced me to the front of the class. Empowered with rejuvenated zeal, I played *Jingle Bells* for the next three days straight, mostly without flaw, even adding a few extra notes from time to time for depth.

Say goodbye to Mr. Moneybags and hello to Mr. Piano Man.

Over the next few months my confidence skyrocketed. I advanced from *Skip to My Lou* and *On Top of Old Smoky* to *Brahms's Lullaby* and *Plaisir d'amour*. From single finger to two and three finger notes. I graduated to Level 2, then to Level 3 songbooks, even purchased a Level 4 for the next week. I increased practice time to two hours a day, three on weekends, sometimes more. I fell behind at work, but I didn't care. I hired a piano instructor, two half-hour sessions per week.

Chi taught me to play with feeling, sensitivity, and softness. She banned my heavy right foot from the pedal. One day she brought out her two-month-old baby, placed her in my arms, and instructed me to caress the tiny infant. I hadn't been around a baby for a few decades, but instinctively my fingertips flitted over her smooth skin. She actually giggled and smiled at me, as much as a two-month-old can giggle and smile.

"That's the way you must play the piano," Chi said. "Delicately, with kindness and love."

Pretend your fingers are feathers caressing, glissading over the keys.”

I moved on to elementary versions of *Greensleeves*, *The Moonlight Sonata*, and *Für Elise*. One day, for the first time, Bonnie tiptoed along the basement steps and parked halfway down. I spotted her out of the corner of my eye, but pretended not to notice. I decided to dazzle her; win her over. Instead, my fingers petrified and the music turned to clunky mush. I lost my place, mind went blank, missed notes that had been automatic for days. I started over, then things really deteriorated. My foot slipped off the pedal with a thud, and I winced at the shrill sharp that should have been flat. Flustered, I just stopped playing. No point going from bad to horrible.

From the top of the stairs I heard Bonnie say to Lisa, “I told you this was a bad idea.” Then they both disappeared.

Four months, down the drain. Wasted.

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I moped around the house. Took a week off and missed a few lessons. I felt Bonnie slipping away. Ignoring me, single word answers, not talking about the wedding when I was around. She was her usual jovial self with Lisa, but not around me. I couldn’t get her off my mind. And the piano didn’t seem to be the solution.

Driving home from work one day, the light turned green and I impulsively yanked the wheel, turning left from the right lane. Luckily, no wreck, or cop. A few minutes later I pulled up to Bonnie’s apartment, no plan, none whatsoever, nervous, nothing to lose.

Just as I reached for the doorbell the front door jerked open. Bonnie gasped, raised two fingers to her lips, and shuffled back a few steps. “What are you doing here, daddy?”

I hesitated, uneasy, trying to gather my wits. And confidence. I’d never done this before. “I

just thought I'd drop by and see if you were free for dinner. Maybe that little sushi place you like."

She sighed and smiled, like she was relieved that I wasn't delivering bad news. Then she fumbled through her purse, pulled out her keys, and locked the door. "You should have called first. I'm off to class, running late." She pecked my cheek, and whisked away. "Maybe next time." And she was gone.

Back home, disconsolate, I considered going to Lisa and hanging it up, but dreaded the dog-faced response I was sure to get. So, instead, I trudged down to the basement and started over. I locked the door at the top of the stairs.

Jingle Bells, Greensleeves, my fingers magnetized straight to the notes, without thought. Like I'd never stopped playing. Pleasing sounds conjured out of that big brown box of wood and wires and chords and thin layers of ivory. Comforted by the solitude of the basement, captivated by the allure of the piano. *My piano*. That old Baldwin upright Mom bought for my brother half a lifetime ago. Peeling, warped, a dangling key, coffee-stained, cockeyed bench seat. Still singing, spooling, meandering, tumbling from note to note. Sweet and faithful. It played for *me* now, and only me. *Moonlight Sonata, Für Elise, Joyful, Joyful*. Music that took me to a serene place I never knew existed. Music that had taken on new meaning ever since I started playing it myself. Melodies generated from the tips of my own fingers.

A few days later the home phone rang and I answered. "Hi Bonnie. I'll get mom for you."

"No, I called for you. Checking to see if I could cash in on that raincheck for dinner."

I was still holding the phone, staring at it, the dial tone buzzing, when Lisa walked in. I asked her if she wanted to take a walk, maybe have some lunch at that cozy French café on the lake. But she declined, harried and distracted. Then she zipped off, some problem with the baker and the

wedding cake. I'd noticed her stress level rising as the wedding got closer. I wondered if she regretted campaigning for me to play the piano. Just one more thing for her to worry about.

I glanced down at my cellphone ringing. Jack Dobbs. He'd already left three messages. I had to get back to work, clients were starting to grumble about my absences.

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Chi announced a recital for all her students in three weeks. She assigned me an unfamiliar piece to play for my first concert appearance, *Lady Clancy's Lullaby*. Difficult and too many notes. But worst of all, I couldn't find a recording of the song anywhere, so there was no way of knowing exactly how it was supposed to sound. It took me weeks to get the notes down, and even then, it sounded shaky, the timing a little off, the rhythm dull and boring.

I arrived early on the big day, secretly pleased to actually be playing *in concert*. A perfect trial run for the wedding: no family, no friends. A chance to shed the jitters before a few strangers, nobody judging me. I didn't tell Lisa or Bonnie. They might have showed up.

I sat in the musician's section, surrounded by thirty-four laughing, giggling little girls, some nudging a friend and pointing in my direction. A few girls were eleven or twelve years old, but most were under ten. Not a single boy. I slinked low in my chair, a lame attempt to blend in. Together we comprised the entirety of Chi's ensemble of piano students: a room full of preteen girls in pretty white, pink, or blue dresses, and me, a chubby, bald guy with untamed ear hairs, stubby fingers, and nearly a half-century old. I closed my eyes to visualize my notes but panicked when I suddenly couldn't even recall the title of my song.

A little girl named Melanie strode to the piano, nine years old according to the program. She sat on the bench, sighed deeply, and then plunged into Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6 in D-Flat*

Major. Her long, dainty fingers danced delicately across the keys, up and down the keyboard, her head and torso sliding along the bench in sync. For nearly five minutes I sat captivated, devouring every note, marveling at the advanced technique and level of skill possessed by this wunderkind. Who knows, that could have been me had I not abandoned the piano so many decades ago.

I leapt to my feet and offered a rousing “Bravo, bravo.” I figured that Chi had surely started with her prize prodigy to set the tone for the day. But Melanie was followed by ten or so equally talented youngsters. The music was spectacular, perhaps the best concert I’d ever attended. Certainly the most exhilarating.

But the fear of actually having to perform myself soon squashed my high spirits. The standard too rigorous, the bar too high. This didn’t seem to be a *Jingle Bells* type of crowd. My gaze shifted from side to side, scouring the room for the most discreet exit. I didn’t belong here, and nobody would be sad to see me go. I plotted my escape.

But what about the wedding? Lisa, Bonnie, and Jake. They were all counting on me. I’d already quit once. I couldn’t give up now, not again. I tried to envision my music, the notes I had to play.

Halfway through the program, Chi announced intermission. Everyone filed outside for cookies, cake, and lemonade. I slid over to the piano and placed my music on the rack. My entire song, every note, was lost somewhere in a black hole inside my head. I just needed a quick refresher, enough time to reclaim the magic. I stared at the music and started slowly, hovering over the keys without depressing them. Hoping my fingers would instinctively know where to go once I gave them a little nudge.

Someone touched my shoulder from behind and I jumped. A slight girl in a pink frilly dress.

Carly. Blond hair, ponytail, a missing front tooth, couldn't have been more than six years old.

"What piece are you playing?" she asked.

"Lady Clancy's Lullaby."

"Never heard of it. Do you mind if I give it a try?"

I hesitated, reluctant to surrender these few precious minutes I needed in a desperate bid to recapture my mojo. But Carly wasn't the type of person I could ever say no to. "Of course."

I slid to the left edge, unwilling to surrender the entire bench. Carly settled in the middle. She perused the music quickly, then her fingers started flying. Her focus intense, the rhythm, timing, perfect. The young virtuoso played like a seasoned concert pianist. She played like she'd known Lady Clancy forever. By the third stanza I knew exactly how my song was supposed to sound, and it wasn't like the clumsy giant-clomping-through-the-muck version I'd been practicing. Carly finished and flashed an adorable, toothless smile. "You pick good songs," she said. "Maybe you and me could play a duet together sometime."

I nodded, speechless, deflated.

Beginners stacked the second half of the program. But for me, the damage had been done. A stark reminder of what I could've been had I just worked a little harder, had I not quit after the first few fumbled notes forty years ago. And now with three weeks of nonstop practice I couldn't even match what a six-year-old had managed to do in three minutes.

An hour later I staggered out of the recital a bedraggled man. All I could recall about my performance was that I had to apologize twice for stopping in the middle of the piece, then starting over because I'd gotten lost in the notes. I never finished. I was utterly exposed, an impostor, the bogus piano man.

Chi congratulated each student as they exited. I skipped the line, snuck out the kitchen door, and circled through the backyard.

Two more weeks until the wedding.

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I didn't touch that piano again for a week after the recital. Spent all those days brooding, trying to snake my way out of playing at the wedding. I'd suffered enough embarrassment that day at Chi's house to last me a decade.

Then Chi showed up at my front stoop one day, four giggly little girls in tow. She barged in when I opened the door and said, "We're not leaving until we get you fixed."

It took some time, hours. But in the end, she calmed me, trained me to concentrate on the music by having the girls yell and scream and laugh at me while I played. The racket irritated me at first, embarrassing. It took a while, but I finally managed to block out the chaos and get through a song, then another, and another. It didn't extinguish the anxiety, just upped the concentration level, and set the jitters aside.

I'd started taking Bonnie out to lunch on Wednesdays. It was awkward at first, but then we started talking about the piano, and music. I never realized she liked it so much. We talked about Bach vs. Beethoven, street musicians in San Francisco, chanting Bavarian monks, and Josh Bell in the DC subway.

Over the next few weeks, Lisa sometimes sat at the top of the basement stairs and listened to me play. She always kept quiet to not rattle me, and I pretended not to notice. But I saw her, and appreciated the audience. I heard her humming a few times, like she was actually enjoying the music. She'd even cozied up to me on the couch the past few evenings, just like the old days before

all this wedding stress. .

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On the day of the wedding I arrived at the church two hours early. I jiggled the front door, but it was locked. The gray-haired janitor said, “Hour before the event. Preacher shows up, then I open the door.” So I wandered about the grounds, trying to relax.

Around back I saw a door propped open and I stuck my head in. Bonnie ran out, her hair in curlers, and wrapped her arms around me. “I’m so happy you’re here.” Then she twirled about, big smile, hand circled over her head, like she did as a little girl in her ballerina and princess outfits.

“How do you like the dress?”

“Love it. But even more, I love you in it.” For some reason, a little shiver raced through my body as I said the words I hadn’t uttered often enough over the years. “You nervous?”

She beamed. “Not a bit. Just excited.” I’m not sure why she was so calm while I was jittery as hell. Seemed like it should have been the other way around. She might have noticed my hands shaking, or my heart beating fast when she hugged me. “You just relax and have some fun. If you fumble a few notes, it doesn’t matter.”

“I’ve been practicing. I’ll do my best, then we’ll walk down the aisle. Together.”

“You’re here for me. Playing for me. That’s all I care about.” Then she ran off. “Got to get ready now.”

I watched all the way, until she disappeared into the next room.

The old man caretaker called out and waved me to the sanctuary.

I followed the pastor down the aisle, past twenty or so early arriving guests milling about out front. Up a few steps he carefully stepped over a long black extension cord stretched across the

altar stage. It brought back memories of our high school glee club singing the national anthem at my graduation. I hadn't been so careful. I'm not sure whether it was the tripping, the cackling from my buddies in the stands, or my voice cracking at "the rocket's red glare," but that day had haunted me ever since. I high-stepped over the cord.

I arranged all my music on the rack. I had it all planned out. Fifteen songs, the order mapped out, forty-five minutes, no repeats. Didn't really need the sheet music; I was more of a muscle-memory-type player. I wasn't good enough to read music and play at the same time. But Lisa convinced me that the songbooks would be comforting.

I checked my watch. Guests started drifting in, talking, laughing, nobody paying particular attention to me. I sat on the bench, working up the gumption to get started, eager, anxious, maudlin, terrified, battling my nerves. Six months of practice all for this moment, right now.

I took one last deep breath and thought of Lisa, how she'd endorsed and supported me, despite my past disengagement. And Bonnie, how excited she was to marry, our renewed connection over the past weeks. I looked around the church and noticed Jake chortling with his groomsmen. It struck me that our time with Bonnie wasn't ending. This wedding was just the beginning of a bigger, better family.

I started playing. Softly. Not the standard pre-ceremony wedding fare. Nothing that gave me the *Lady Clancy* fidgets. I played *Brahms Lullaby* and *Greensleeves* and Christmas music in May. I'd selected music I could play, easy tunes, piano music friendly to stubby fingers.

Twenty minutes in, no stumbles, no missed notes, fingers on autopilot, leaning into the music. Just like in the basement. I flipped the pages in my songbook like the real piano players do, like I knew what I was doing. I chanced a glance around between songs and caught sight of Chi in

the back pew throwing me two thumbs up.

I flowed right into *Angels We Have Heard on High*. My mojo on high octane. I starting thinking of Bonnie, the two of us walking down the aisle, arm in arm. Halfway through the song my right middle finger slipped from the E to the F. I cringed, wincing at the sour tone, and immediately stopped. Frozen. I frantically looked up to the music, desperate to find my place. Where was I? My heart rate doubled, and perspiration oozed out of the palms of my hands. I wiped them off on my pants. Didn't help. But when I scanned the church, nobody seemed to notice, or take much interest. Not a single person even looked my way.

I wasn't good enough to pick up where I left off, so I started the tune over. But my fingers turned to lead pipes, and I recoiled. Recital angst zipped through my mind. Parallel visions of Carly's fingers dancing across the keyboard and me slinking out the back door. I kept my head down, not daring to chance a peek around.

Just then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I shuddered. Lisa slid onto the bench beside me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I whispered.

"You keep saying you just want to be part of the team."

"Yeah, but ..."

"Well, we're the team. You and me." Lisa flipped the music to the next song.

My muscles relaxed. The alone feeling faded away. Forgot all about the shanks. "Okay then, let's do it."

"I've been sitting at the top of the stairs for weeks, listening. It warms my heart to hear you play the piano." I wiped my eye before that tear started dribbling down my cheek. Lisa pointed to the songbook. "How about we try this one?"

Jingle Bells. I wasn't going to play that today. Too Christmassy. I glimpsed over the top of the piano. No hisses. No boos. Nobody cared. *Jingle Bells*. Why not? I laid my fingers over the ivories, index on the middle C. And away they went like robots marching to the beat of the Pied Piper. I swayed to the music, and Lisa swayed with me. In harmony. Her hand resting on my thigh. I was part of the family once again.

I played for forty-five minutes without having to repeat a single piece. The miscues and bungled notes had been ignored or gone undetected. I'd made it through and done my part, in the background, a minor character in the overall scheme of things. But a character all the same.