

## Flames Like Voices

There was a piano on the lakeshore that creaked with the rhythm of the wind. Veiled beneath a sunless sky, it sat seasoned and imperfect, infringed upon by mountains of sand and clay, and remaining persistent in its mission to piss Ley off. He'd made music with it once but now the thing was damned and, like most damned things, would spite its maker until the end.

Ley had decided its fate days ago after cancelling the dozens of piano lessons lined up on his calendar. He'd been pacing around his new house in the awkward way one does while on the phone with someone unfamiliar—when he stopped in front of the old upright piano that his dad had fished out of their storage shed. His family had owned a grand piano once that, when played, could sound as melodic as the soft hiss of a gentle fire or as dissonant as a roaring, all enveloping mass of flame—depending on the piece, though it had not survived long enough to reach their new home. Instead, a discolored, yellowish looking thing that hadn't been played in years sat in the middle of Ley's living room, nauseating him as he explained to his old aspiring-pianist neighbors that he had moved.

Now, after hauling the thing through his backyard and onto the lakeshore, Ley stared at it, his fingers dancing over the surface as if to play the wood rather than the keys. Before, he would've wanted nothing more than to take a seat, lift the fallboard, and play something—but now it was after and there was only one thing he really wanted to do.

He set that bum of an instrument on fire. The piano burned like it was good for nothing else, which, to Ley, was quite true.

When Ley was six, he played the piano for the first time. His mother taught him how to play “Mary Had a Little Lamb” with one finger, then two, and so on until he could do it with all

ten. She had been so gentle with him then that, looking back, Ley almost couldn't fathom his blissful childhood had ever warped into such a twisted adolescence. His mother hired a piano tutor a few years later.

"I've taught you everything I know," she'd said.

"But I like learning with you, Mama," he'd said. She ruffled his hair and pinched his cheeks.

"You're so cute! I think you'll like this lady, Ley. She used to teach at a private school. Isn't that interesting? We're paying a lot for her so you better work hard, okay?"

He had just nodded.

Ley's father was standing in the kitchen peeling potatoes and listening to the same classical piano CD that Ley's mother used to play whenever he was in the house. Ley didn't know if she did it to inspire or annoy him, but either way it was the last thing he wanted to be listening to.

"I got an email today about a recital at your school. Why didn't you tell me about it? I would've taken off work," his father said.

"Sorry," Ley replied. "I didn't think you'd want to go."

"Why would you think that?" His father put down the peeler and stared at Ley. This was something he did often: stare and stare until Ley made some kind of effort in whatever conversation they were having.

"Why wouldn't I think that?"

"Because I'm your father and I want to support you."

Ley scoffed. "Since when?"

“Since—” His father cut himself off, as if actively not talking about what happened would mean it didn’t happen. “God, you’re just like your mom,” He said, messaging his temple.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Ley said with mock assurance. “Mom never went when she was alive so you shouldn’t have to go now that she’s dead.” He threw his notebook into his bag and stood.

“I think that’s a little unfair.”

“I’m going to study in my room. Music’s distracting.”

“Ley.”

Ley moved toward the stairs, throwing his bag over his shoulder and turning his head to look at his father.

“I quit band, Dad. I don’t know why you’re still getting those emails,” Ley said, climbing the stairs. He sprawled over his bed, abandoning his homework and putting headphones in. He didn’t play classical piano music—or classical violin, or classical anything. Instead, he played metal and pop and indie and K-pop and anything that *didn’t* have piano. He blasted playlist after playlist through his headphones as he sat back, watching the ceiling fan and tuning out the banging on his door and the shouts that were no doubt about the burnt piano corpse in his backyard.

“I don’t think you’re a pyromaniac.”

Ley lounged in Dr. Morgan’s office on a beige couch that looked exactly like what you’d expect from a psychiatrist. Ley’s shoulders were slumped, and his hands were folded limp in his lap as he pursed his lips and avoided the woman’s gaze.

“That’s a relief, I guess,” Ley said.

“Pyromania is more intense than one isolated incident. Setting a piano on fire as a way of coping with your mother’s death wouldn’t justify that kind of diagnosis.”

“That’s not why I did it.”

“Oh?” Dr. Morgan asked, leaning forward in her seat. “Why *did* you set your piano on fire, Ley?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It pissed me off.”

“Why did the piano make you angry?” She sounded exactly like Ley expected a psychiatrist would sound: calm, sure, and incredibly condescending.

“I don’t know.”

“I can rephrase. Why did you think that burning the piano would make you feel better?”

“I didn’t.” Ley shifted in his seat. “I just wanted to.”

“Why did you want to?”

“I don’t know! I saw it in my house, and I wanted it gone! That’s it. There’s no deeper meaning to it, I just wanted her gone,” Ley said, his voice rapid and unsteady. “—*it* gone.” Dr. Morgan scribbled something onto her notepad. “What are you writing?”

“Do you think it’s possible that you chose to set your piano on fire because of the way your mom died?”

“What?”

“If your mother had died any other way, do you think you still would have burned your piano?”

“Yes!” Ley said. “Probably—what are you saying?”

“I think that your mother’s death was traumatic for you and seeing that piano in your new home reminded you of her. I think that everything you associated with your mom burned in the

housefire except for the piano, and you chose to set it on fire to erase the last thing that was left of her.”

The silence that followed Dr. Morgan’s words was filled only with the spatial tapping of her pen and the sound of Ley fiddling with his jacket’s zipper.

“Ley? How do you feel?” Dr. Morgan pressed.

He shrugged. Dr. Morgan stared and stared in the same way Ley’s father did, but Ley couldn’t make an effort in *this* conversation. She frowned.

“We’re out of time for today but I think that you’d really benefit from coming to see me again. I’ll give your dad the same recommendation but everything we’ve said will stay confidential.”

“Right.” Ley muttered.

When Ley was fifteen, he set his first fire. It was a week after his mother had purchased a five-hundred-dollar hardcover set of twelve different piano sheet music bind-ups. They had maroon spines, green covers, and golden lettering. Ley hated them. He tossed them into a burning barrel one by one, watching the pages shrivel and blacken.

“She’s wrong. What good is all this music?” he’d said.

His mother had found him sitting back in a lawn chair and grinning at the rising flames.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Ley had ignored her. She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

“What did you do?” She spat and he twitched his eye as her spit dotted his cheek. “What did you burn, Ley?”

“You know,” He said. The look on her face was as aggressive as the fire burning behind them. She grabbed his wrist and, in one motion, ripped him from his seat and thrust his hand into the flames.

“Jesus!” He had said as he wrenched his hand away. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” As Ley cradled the afflicted hand against his chest, his mother slapped his face and barreled inside, slamming the door behind her.

Ley brought his hand in front of his face and wiggled his fingers revealing skin that wasn’t blistered or raw—just hot and aching. Skin that barely needed to heal at all and could probably still be used to play the piano.

Ley’s eyes narrowed and he *briefly* considered shoving his hand back into the fire.

A rustic pearl colored upright piano sat in Ley’s living room in the same place as the last one. It had black, vine like designs trailing up its side and golden pedals beneath the stool. Ley’s stomach turned as he stared at it, his hand immediately sliding into his right pocket.

“Do you like it?” It was Ley’s father. The man’s hand brushed the piano’s surface as he watched Ley from across the room.

Ley said nothing.

“I bought it from an old lady down the street. She said it’s in really good shape.”

“Is that so?” Ley’s voice drifted as his fingers clasped around the cylindrical object in his pocket.

“Why don’t you play it?” His father said.

“I’m okay.”

“C’mon son. Don’t quit this just because she’s gone. I don’t want you to end up like her.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It means nothing. I just don’t want you to be like your mom. I want you to be you—the you that loves to play the piano.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

Ley hesitated but ultimately moved toward his father and seated himself before the piano. There were cracks in the paint all across the fallboard, and as he lifted it, he saw that the white keys were all stained a yellow-brown color. He pressed down on one of them.

*It sounds okay.*

Ley’s fingers hovered over the keyboard as his father put a firm hand on his shoulder and squeezed it, as if to say: *Go on, son.* Ley inhaled and began to play. His body completely tensed up after a few seconds, leaving an awkward jumble of notes and chords lingering in the air. Another squeeze from his father. Ley tried a second time, his gaze shifting to the right where his mother would’ve been sitting. Frozen again. It was like the keys had been frosted over and no matter how well or how fast he played, the cold would find him and spread up his arms and into his body until he was nothing but ice. He clenched his fists and groaned.

“Ley.”

“Shut up!” He snapped. “Just give me a second.”

Ley’s third attempt was the worst. It began well enough but as he moved further into the piece, his hands became stiff and hard to manage. The music fell apart as Ley slammed his rigid fingertips onto the keys so hard that they left little bloody fingerprints.

“Fuck,” Ley gasped as his father pulled his wrists away from the instrument. “Fuck! I told you I couldn’t do it!”

“Ley. Wait, Ley!” His father shouted as Ley ripped his wrists free and fled upstairs.

Ley twisted the lock on his bedroom door and pulled the lighter out of his pocket. He sat on the floor with his back resting against the side of his bed and his knees pulled up against his chest. His thoughts swirled as he sat there, clicking and re-clicking the lighter and trying, and failing, to imagine a feeling worse than sitting in front of that *thing* and having to listen to the discord his fingers were creating.

Ley’s father had meant well, he knew that, but where had that care for Ley’s wellbeing been before his mother died? Why should Ley excuse his father’s ignorance when the man could’ve avoided being ignorant by just being a *good father*?

Ley wanted to punch something. He wanted to hit the wall so hard his fist would come out the other side. He wanted to destroy the wall with his bare hands. He wanted to rip apart the entire house until there was nothing left but bones.

“Just like my mom, he says.”

His eyes followed the small flame hovering above the metal piece of his lighter as it disappeared and reappeared over and over in his hand—until it didn’t disappear. He watched as his hand moved toward the curtains, and from the curtains, his hand found his dresser, and from there, his closet, until the entire room was engulfed in heat.