

Anticipation

The doorbell. Peter ignored it, and kept writing. He was near deadline for the piece on his computer screen -- puffery to accompany the statistics of a corporate annual report. After two days of starts and stops, he had a handle on it. Finish this, and get back to the novel.

The doorbell again, more insistent. Ding-dong, ding-dong. He sighed, left his study and went to the big Dutch door in the kitchen that served as front door. A small man, graying, with a black bag.

"Mr. Keating? I'm here to tune the piano."

His head was still at the computer. "Pardon?"

"I guess it was your wife who called."

Meg should have told him. Or better, arranged this visit when she was home from school. But that wasn't this man's fault. "Of course, Mr. . . ."

"Casey. Howard Casey. Been years since I was here. It must be pretty far out of tune."

"My wife didn't mention you, but please come in."

Shown to the living room, Mr. Casey set his bag beside the bench and took off the piano lid with astonishing ease, standing it firmly against a sofa. He sat down, turning for a moment to look out the wide arc of sliding glass doors that framed the piano. The garden was coming into full spring bloom; behind it, burgeoning oaks and maples began to fill the spaces between dark firs and pines at the forest edge. "I wish I came more often. I look after a lot of pianos, and this one has far the best view."

"Thank you," Peter said. The money for their sylvan retreat, in Meg's home town, was a bequest from her aunt, but the concept was his. The only room without such a view was his den, a small bookshelved room whose skylight provided ample daylight with nothing save an

occasional storm to distract him. This music room/living room was the architect's chef d'oeuvre, but he had also given their bedroom, the guest bedroom and their country kitchen ample glass with varied views of gardens, mountain laurels and New Hampshire forests.

"Your view of springtime out there," Mr. Casey said, "might inspire a composer." He took his tuning forks and brass key out of the black bag and surveyed Peter. "I guess you're not a composer." He paused. "A poet? Are you a poet?"

An unintentionally painful question. He had tried newspapering, hoping for promotion to music critic, but found the deadline bustle uncondusive, the work unrewarding. He gave it up when a cynical old-timer, seeing his long blond hair parted down the middle, dubbed him Keating the Poet. Keats for short. The derisive moniker stuck; he left.

"No," he told Mr. Casey, "I write mostly corporate stuff."

"I knew you weren't a composer, or you'd keep it in tune. You don't even play?"

"No. My wife does, but she has a piano at school."

"She's the music teacher, right? At the high school?"

Meg gave up hopes of becoming a concert pianist about the time he decided he wasn't likely to become a critic. She found satisfaction in coaching students from wretched dissonance into a well-received orchestra that won a regional prize now and then. "Yes," he told the tuner, "but if she's called you, I guess she's thinking of taking it up seriously again."

"Maybe not. You have a house guest coming." He struck a tuning fork on the heel of his hand and began at middle C. "Going to play a concert in town Saturday night, right?"

Great, Peter thought. I don't know the tuner's coming, and don't know we're putting up some concert pianist. He went back to work.

Or tried to. He couldn't help hearing that most of the strings were extravagantly off-pitch. Mr. Casey got the middle octave tuned, then started the next one up. Peter found himself

waiting for each note. Middle C and the C above must resonate, and on up and down. Even untutored ears recognize the harmonic, as they do when an orchestra is tuned to the oboe's pitch.

He might work this into the novel. The piano as metaphor for expectation. Or resolution. A lesson from a music professor, years ago: Most listeners hear when a dominant-seventh chord resolves into the tonic, or a minor-key variation returns to the major. Few could name it, but most recognize it. Western music is built on such anticipations: ears conditioned over centuries to await those resolutions.

He got back to the annual report, but his mind's ear half-listened until each string in the living room was tightened to the right pitch; he didn't get as much work done as he'd hoped. Mr. Casey finished, ran off a few scales, then began a pretty little piece, probably Mozart. Peter went into the living room as he finished, gave him a polite bit of applause, wrote him a check and showed him to the door.

After a lunch break, Peter got back into the rhythm of the corporate piece, and was almost finished when he heard Meg come home. He imagined her putting her school stuff away and changing into that alluringly clingy pants-suit. Anticipation again. The clink of glasses and a ritual knock on his door announced that she had wine and cheese in the living room; he joined her. "Hello, dear."

She gave him a perfunctory kiss. "Sorry I'm late. Do I look any different?"

After twenty years of marriage, any husband would be wary. "You always look wonderful to me." He studied her. A figure almost as lissome as the day they'd met, waistline unsullied by pregnancies. Brown eyes and pert nose and full lips. Perhaps they could make love tonight. Chestnut hair now released from its schoolmarm's bun. Of course, the hair. "You've been to the hairdresser's."

"You're a dear to notice." She pirouetted to make it curl and flounce on her shoulders. "I cancelled the after-school rehearsal to make the time. Told the kids it was a bonus for sounding good."

"Your piano tuner came. Says we're expecting a house guest. You're gussying up for him?"

"Peter Keating, you make me angry sometimes. I've spent weeks planning my high school reunion, and you're cooped up in that windowless den paying no attention."

He'd forgotten. This weekend. "Of course not. You'll be the envy of your classmates." He poured the wine. The kitchen table had at one point been piled with pages of program-book ads she had solicited: *To the Class of '88. Compliments of . . .* He should have paid more attention to the program itself. They clinked glasses. "They should be grateful for the time you've spent."

"Thank you. We'll make some money for the scholarship fund."

"That's great. But who's our houseguest? A pianist?"

"Peter! It's in the program, if you'd read it. What is it you're so wrapped up in, anyway?"

"Now who's not paying attention? It's only a ten thousand dollar job. The Burn's Company's annual report. And the novel."

"Of course. I'm sorry. I'm so proud of you, really, the disciplined way you keep working on the commercial stuff and find time for your real writing. I apologize."

"And I'm sorry about forgetting your reunion. I should have read the program. Who's the pianist?"

She frowned, and took a deep breath. He loved the way she counted to ten, stifling anger. Finally: "You do annoy me sometimes. My old classmate Bethany. My roommate our first year at the conservatory."

"Bethany Pond?"

"You remember her? She's the big attraction, a mini-concert after dinner. A donation to the scholarship fund."

Beth. He had always wondered whether Meg knew. Apparently not. "I do remember her," he said as casually as he could.

It had been torrid but transient. Beth broke it off, wanting a lover or husband who could afford to follow her around the world on concert tour. He'd met Meg on the rebound -- and counted himself fortunate. Never regretted it. Not for a moment; never even looked at another woman. "When is she coming?"

"Tomorrow night. She wants to spend most of Friday rehearsing her program for Saturday night. You won't mind a little background music?"

"Wonderful. Today the piano tuner. Friday, scales. Never mind; I'll manage. Let's go to the kitchen and get some dinner. And then early to bed."

"Dinner, at least. I have to do a little more work on the reunion."

Two days later, Bethany Ponds was ensconced in the guest room. Still a beautiful woman. Meg met her at the station after school, brought her home. "You remember my husband Peter?"

"I do." Nonchalantly. "Hello, Peter."

"Welcome."

They had dinner in the kitchen, the three of them. Peter left them talking reunion, and went to his den.

He had expunged those few weeks before Meg from his mind; suppressed them. Now he wanted to recall them, get them down in black and white. He might develop a whole new episode in the novel. But his fingers remained poised over the keyboard like threatening but rainless clouds. He felt disloyal. Memories came, but words did not.

After a half-hour, he put the novel aside and began work on a new corporate commission, ad copy for an integrated line of kitchen appliances. Practical enough to focus the mind. He made some progress, and quit when he heard them in the living room on the way to bed.

"I should have guessed you'd have a Steinway," Beth was saying as he joined them.

"Just tuned," Meg said. "Two days ago."

"You're too thoughtful. May I?" She sat down, and ran off a few bars -- Chopin? -- that used the full length of the keyboard. "It's lovely. I can't wait to do some work in the morning." She turned and saw Peter. "You won't mind?"

"Of course not," he lied. "But shall we call it a night now?" He put an arm around Meg, his hand sliding to her rump as he steered her toward the bedroom. A statement, if Beth was watching.

"You're right," Meg said. "I have school in the morning. Good night, Bethany," she said over her shoulder.

"Good night, you two."

They did not make love, though. In most marriages, there are less physical rituals of reassurance: a hip tucked solidly into a groin; a hand resting almost idly on that hip, or cupping a breast. A murmuring, a kiss, then a lazy rolling apart to find more comfortable positions for the night. It took only moments for Meg's breathing to slow. After a time, he slept too.

She was up early. By the time he showered and shaved, she had the kitchen redolent of bacon. Beth sat in the breakfast nook. He stuck to his regimen of granola and yogurt, reading the newspaper while the two gabbed about recent travels, mutual friends, which classmates were coming, how to dress. He glanced up occasionally, half-listening. Appraising.

Most people their age showed the years: Bodies sag; faces grow creases. He and Meg were lucky, younger-looking than most of their contemporaries, but would hardly be mistaken for the short side of forty. Beth might: She could be in a women's skin cream ad, the ones you think must surely be retouched. Brows plucked thin and high over eyes unbetrayed by wrinkles or bags. Chin carried high and blonde hair brushed back to display a neck as smooth as alabaster, plunging into a peasant blouse that suggested still-taut breasts.

He and Meg kept the house cool and wore sweaters. "You must be chilly," he interrupted their reminiscences. "Shall I turn the heat up a notch?"

"Thank you, I'm fine. Hot-blooded, I guess." She gave him a half-smile and went on with Meg about some math teacher who was coming. He went back to his newspaper.

"Peter's very disciplined," Meg said as she set off for school. "At his desk at eight-thirty." Thoughtful wife, suggesting that her friend shouldn't expect much small talk. "So you'll have only a few minutes to get acquainted. Or re-acquainted?" She came around the table to give him a peck on the forehead, but didn't object when he turned it into a real kiss. "Just leave the dishes in the sink. Back about four."

It wasn't as awkward as he feared. "You're having a successful career," he offered.

"Thank you, Peter. Yes. A lot of travel, though."

"New York is your base?"

"Boston, actually, not so far from here. A nice condo, but I'm never home. Can't keep even a cat, let alone a husband. I envy your settledness."

"We're comfortable. Meg enjoys her work. I do enough corporate work to help keep bread on the table, and have time for more creative writing."

"You've published? I'm away so much I could easily miss a rave review."

"A few short stories. Novel in the works. Speaking of which, it's eight-thirty. Work time." He stood, feeling awkward. "You're welcome to linger over the newspaper; I've read enough." He poured himself a cup of coffee and popped it in the microwave for twenty seconds so its heat would linger. "There's more in the pot."

"Thanks, but I'm fairly disciplined myself. Two hours every morning, a bit longer before a concert. I'll just load the dishwasher for Meg and get to work; hope I won't disturb your writing."

The steaming coffee pervaded his den, a Pavlovian stimulus to work mode. He'd hardly gotten his mind wrapped around kitchen appliances, though, when she sat down at the piano next door. First some scales, not calculated to inspire the writing mind, but not intrusive. He got through a few paragraphs. Then she began the sonata. Beethoven. The *Moonlight*. Pianissimo. He could hear the left hand playing the octaves Mr. Casey had tuned, the right hand doing gentle triplets. The piano tuner had been less distracting. He persisted a few minutes, clicking at his own keyboard, but couldn't concentrate. He slipped into the living room.

There was a trace of perfume that he hadn't noticed in the kitchen. The matte black of the piano diffused the morning light. The lid, closed, mirrored garden colors. From the doorway she was half-profiled, facing away. Some pianists hunch over the keyboard. Beth sat with shoulders back, chin high, eyes open as though reading some invisible sheet music. Perfect posture maximizing physical assets. He made himself close his eyes to concentrate on the music. He

should urge Meg to play at home now and then. He edged back toward the door to go back to work.

She must have caught the movement in the corner of her eye; she looked over. "Oh, hello there, Peter. I must be disturbing you. I should practice more softly."

"No, please don't stop. I have to get back to work. I was just enjoying anticipating where you're going."

Those carefully-shaped eyebrows arched quizzically, hands still fingering the keys.

"What does that mean, please?"

"I'm probably saying it wrong. Old Professor Schmidt's theory that you must remember: Great music leads us to anticipate the next passages, almost yearn for them, be satisfied when they appear."

"Of course. It's been years since I thought much about theory." She smiled archly. "But if I don't meet your anticipations?"

An intentional play on words? He would ignore that. "I'll enjoy the variations." He had the words out before hearing his own unintended double entendre.

She laughed. "I'd forgotten how clever a wordsmith you are. Come sit for a minute."

"No, really, I should get back to work."

She didn't stop playing, but shifted to her right on the wide bench. "Peter, I won't bite!"

"Only for a minute." He sat down. At the computer, he always curled into the keyboard like a comma. Now he put his hands on the piano bench to force himself into better posture, conscious of hers. "Right there, for instance. You've drifted into another key, but I know you'll come back to the home key."

"Very good."

"You're playing this tomorrow night?"

"I am. He wrote it for a student, you know."

"I remember," he said. "Poor lovesick Beethoven. In Hungary, right?"

"When she wouldn't marry him, he went back to Vienna."

"Never returned to Budapest?"

"We don't know. There are sometimes second chances." She paused, hands poised.

"Here's a variation. He's turned the melody upside down. But you can still recognize it?"

He could because she'd told him. "And I can anticipate that you'll turn it right-side up again." She laughed. He waited, and heard it come back. "Ah, there it is. I can go now."

"No, stay for the finale. *Presto agitato*."

The music turned stormy, but still familiar. Emphatic chords in the left hand. She leaned into him to reach them, her thigh warm against his hand. Her fingers strong, sure amidst the black and white keys. Her breasts were creamy. He found himself anticipating the bass chords. Yearning for them. Becoming aroused. He took his hand off the bench. He ought to get back to work. Put the appliances aside, and get some of this into the novel.

She came to Beethoven's soft conclusion. "Now the moonlight."

"I remember. *Like a Fantasy*, as he called it."

"You're good. Someone later gave it the name we all know." Her fingers rested on the keys as the final notes faded into the silence.

"That was lovely," he said. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. I'll take a break and have a walk in your lovely garden. Perhaps you could name the flowers for me."

He demurred. "I'm afraid it's Meg who's the gardener. I'll get back to work."

In his den, he tried to capture the last few minutes, carefully choosing to write in third person, feeling himself aroused again as he found the words to describe the moments beside her on the bench. After a time, he heard her come back to the piano, a piece he couldn't place.

They had soup and a sandwich at noon. "That music after your break. Was it Beethoven too?"

"You have a good ear. The *Appassionata*. In case I'm asked for an encore."

She went for another walk in the garden after lunch. He made himself work on appliances. After a time, she came back to the Beethoven. He kept working. She quit when Meg got home, earlier than usual, giving him some respite; he made real progress.

They were gossiping over coffee, Meg still in school clothes, when he emerged. "You had a good day at school?"

"Not bad. The year-end concert's coming along, but I'm sure you heard better music here. Bethany didn't disturb you? You got some work done?"

"Made some progress this afternoon, yes."

"I'm afraid I ruined his morning." Beth gave him a frowny-face, eyebrows beetled, lips pouted, then turned back to Meg. "We talked music theory. He's pretty good."

"He worked at it when he thought he might end up marrying a concert pianist, or becoming a newspaper critic."

"But he's forgotten a lot," Peter said, finding his way back into the conversation. "Some of it recollected, though. Theme and variation. Anticipation. Yearnings." He stopped; he hadn't intended to go down that road. "Tell Beth more about your orchestra."

After dinner they took brandies to the living room. "Meg, why don't you two play together for me?"

"I couldn't! Too rusty."

"We might try," Beth said. "In our first year at conservatory we played Brahms' *Lullaby* together. I'll bet you still have the sheet music somewhere." She stood.

"I don't need it; I'll remember." Meg went to the piano with her, taking the left-hand side. "Good music before bed."

He recognized it. *Guten Abend, gute Nacht*. Good evening, good night. Meg wasn't as regal at the piano, but was nonetheless a very pretty woman. All three of them sang the final words: *Morgen fruh, wenn Gott willt, Wirst du wieder geweckt*. They applauded each other.

"A nice evening," Beth said. "God willing, see you in the morning."

"But not too *fruh*," Peter said. "We don't get up until eight on Saturdays, and you have your concert."

"I'll be sure you're *geweckt*," Meg said. "I'll knock on your door."

"Thank you. *Gute Nacht*."

He hummed the tune as he and Meg went to their room, remembering more of the words. "How about we *schlupf* *unter die Deck*? Slip under the covers?" She was at the bathroom mirror in her nightgown, brushing her hair. He gave her a kiss on the back of the neck, his hand sliding down.

"Of course, dear, but then to sleep; tomorrow's a busy day. Or do you need to be distracted from our pretty house guest?"

"It wouldn't hurt. She's a pretty woman. But so is my wife."

"You're sweet. A little sag under the jaw, but I could hide that if I kept my chin up in the air."

Oh, a little jealousy. Might envy make the heart grow fonder? He nuzzled under her chin. "Your chin tastes fine to me."

She turned unexpectedly to give him a long kiss, pressing against him while reaching for the light switch. “Come to bed, love.” In the darkened bedroom, she turned the covers back and stood, enough starlight through the uncurtained picture window to silhouette her as she slipped the nightgown off. “We’ll sleep in a little longer in the morning.”

Appassionata, he thought as she began unbuttoning his pajamas. She wanted no foreplay, as aroused as he and quickly astride him, her breasts soft but nipples hard as he reached up to hold her, share her rhythm. It had been years since she made love to him, and he managed to hold back, savoring every thrust, until they came together like a starburst. After a time, they rolled over to lie belly to belly as he softened and slipped away. “I love you, Meg,” he murmured as he kissed her gently.

“And I love you too,” she whispered back. “Remember that.”

After breakfast, the two women busied themselves in the kitchen, making hors d’oeuvres, reminiscing about conservatory days. Retreating to his den, he finished a good first draft of the appliances piece, earning himself a few hours to work on the novel. Finding a place for a piano tuner didn’t seem too contrived. After lunch, Beth ran through the two sonatas on the evening’s program, then she and Meg both went for naps. He found where a pianist might fit in, and tried the first few paragraphs several times. Unsatisfied, he left all the words on the page and went to the bedroom to join the nap brigade. Meg didn’t stir as he eased onto the bed.

The reunion turned out to be a nice party. Meg had rented the church hall, bigger than needed but the only building in town with decent acoustics, she said. A few blue and white crepe streamers, the school colors, for atmosphere; tables of six clustered around a hardwood dance floor to be used later. She’d urged everyone to bring a folding-poster display of then-and-now

photos. Most had; they were on tables at the back of the room, along with yearbooks and trophies.

There were more than a hundred, mostly couples, maybe a dozen singles. After an hour to get reacquainted over hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar, an ample potluck supper. At their table were a couple and a bachelor he didn't know, but chatted with. A local combo played mostly oldies and Big Band numbers. Beethoven was definitely not background music; Beth's performance would be the grand finale.

Before that, though, Meg had left time for more socializing, and dancing. When the dishes were cleared, and most people had refreshed their drinks, she had him take her out on the floor to get people up and moving, then went back to table-hopping, gossiping with classmates.

Beth knew everyone too, of course, and did her share of making the rounds, but then saw him sitting alone. "May I have the next dance?" They were playing an oldie, *Begin the Beguine*. A bossa nova. She took his hand to be led to the floor, then turned into his arms. "Just like you said about the sonata," she murmured.

"How's that?"

"You lead well. It's easy to anticipate where you're going," she laughed up at him.

"Expectations. Isn't that what you said it's about?"

"Of course. I don't think we ever danced."

"No, we didn't," she said. "Listen to the words." She softly sang along with the combo's vocalist: *and now when I hear people curse the chance that was wasted/ I know but too well what they mean./ Oh yes let them begin the beguine. . . .*

There was a tap on his shoulder. Meg. "May I cut in? I want to dance with my husband again before you play."

"Perfect timing," Beth said graciously. "I need to visit the powder room before my performance." She gave him a smile. "Thank you, Peter."

Meg danced very close. Another oldie, a fox trot. Was it coincidence that she sang along, too? *Night and Day, you are the one*. He hummed with her, then pulled back to do a few fancy steps. They had always danced well together, and he could see other couples watching admiringly; they won a little round of applause as the song finished. Meg, blushing attractively, let him lead her back to the table, but had him sit down while she went to the bandstand to do the introduction.

"Many of us remember Bethany Pond as the most musical person in our class. She's gone on to an international career as a concert pianist. We're delighted to have her back."

People were mostly talked out, welcoming a chance to sit, and the *Moonlight Sonata* was like another favorite oldie. No words, but he felt as though he could hum the whole thing, anticipate every note. When she reached the finale, *presto agitato*, leaning into the bass notes, he could almost feel her thigh against his hand.

The combo could have gone home, but stayed to listen, and led a standing ovation, inviting an encore. Beth played the final movement of the *Appassionata* as urgently as the name deserved, and earned more applause. Meg went up to thank her, thank everyone for coming, call it a night.

It was late when they got home, but Meg and Beth poured nightcaps and sat in the living room comparing notes on whom they'd talked with, what people were doing, who had aged most. He stayed with them for a few minutes, then yawned and headed for bed. They talked long enough that he hardly felt Meg slip in beside him.

Sunday they slept in. He succumbed to a breakfast of waffles and bacon. They read the newspaper in the living room, admiring the sunny profusion of flowers through the glass doors.

The two women strolled the garden, then came back to try a few more four-hand pieces. At Meg's suggestion, they drove to visit a recently-restored historic homestead a half-hour away. They had a late-afternoon dinner at a very good restaurant on the way home. He read a book in the living room while Beth practiced for her next performance back in the city, another Beethoven sonata, and Meg went through her yearbook adding notes. They had brandy. They went to bed early. "Straight to bed," Meg warned. "I'm exhausted."

"It's been just lovely," Beth said to Meg at breakfast Monday morning. "I've enjoyed your home, and your writer husband -- and your piano. A superbly warm instrument, in perfect tune, in that perfect setting. If I were invited, I'd stay another day."

"You'd certainly be welcome," Beth said cautiously. "You don't need to get back to the city?"

"Not until Tuesday. It would be nice to have another quiet evening with you two."

"You make yourself at home," Meg said, "and enjoy the piano." She paused. "Peter hasn't seemed to complain, so I guess you're not disturbing his writing. I'll try to slip away from school as early as I can."

"Wonderful!" Beth said.

"I might even get back for lunch."

He could not remember when Meg ever came home from school for lunch. He excused himself, gave her a peck, went to his den and closed the door. The unfinished new page in the novel stared at him. He tried a few more words. It seemed an eternity before he heard the garage door roll open, the car start, the scrunch of gravel as Meg backed down the drive. The engine sound faded as she drove down the road. *Diminuendo.*

In the silence he heard Beth take dishes from the sink and put them into the washing machine. Divertimento.

Her footsteps came down the hall into the living room, then went beyond, apparently to the guest bedroom. Variation.

At last he heard her come to the piano and begin the *Appassionata*. He willed himself to write a few paragraphs. They didn't come out well. He went into the living room.

She must have been watching for him. "Good morning again!" She sat this time at the bass end of the bench, leaving room for him at the treble keys. "Come," she said.

He sat down on the bench, but with his back to the piano. Improvisation. The morning sun sparkled on dewy flowers. "Good morning indeed."

She smiled, lips slightly parted. Their eyes met. Her fingers led Beethoven into a dominant-seventh chord, then paused. "Can you anticipate what happens next?"

"I can," he said.

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