

Mornings

by avocadoben

Over the last years of her life, my mornings began when Mom decided to play. Sitting on her black, ball-and-claw stool, she'd raise the key cover, stretch her neck and shoulders, and take slow, deliberate breaths. A deep, meditative state descended over the room and her hands would levitate toward the keys as if controlled by an invisible specter. Poised over the ivories, fingers otherwise frail with age, trembled with energy, eager to attack.

Sometimes they released a frenzy of Rachmanonavian madness that smashed through the apartment with such fury the walls and windows shook. Sometimes the piano wept melancholy Blues so sad and steamy they lingered over the floor like a dense, Shakespearean fog. Sometimes Baroque. Sometimes Jazz. Sometimes a synthesis of the best and worst and not-yet-named would dance off the strings, filling my home and heart with unforgettable bliss.

Two hours every morning she played from memory or improvised. Body alive with movement, head bobbing like a conductor's baton, she wallowed in the swamp of her passion. But despite her consuming zeal, she never smiled or turned an eye my way. From my chair, I watched, and listened, and loved but was forbidden access to her thoughts. Then, as suddenly as it started, the music stopped, darkness fell over her, and she'd shuffle back to bed.

Depression was the termite of her soul and the once strong timbers that supported her palatial emotional life had been slowly chewed to dust. No longer able to stand, she retreated to bed and wouldn't read, hardly ate, and longed for death. Moving in with me seemed to elevate her agony.

The one thing that brought her joy was the Steinway. She never explained exactly how she got it except to say it was a gift from "a gentlemen" she met after the war. I asked about him once, a long time ago, when I was a young man myself. Her smile hinted at lusty,

Parisian love-making but she never spoke of that, only how their mutual adoration for music restored their war-torn souls.

We also never spoke of Dachau. Her time there as a teenager makes me wonder not only how she survived, but how she could possibly love again. When I asked, she caressed my cheek in her powerful hands.

You must remember this, my son: Love is not an option, it is the only option. Without it, we wander a vast desert of *banality* becoming both prisoner and executioner in our own death camp.

Her eyes were clear and calm and the words crawled out of her with the innocence of kittens. She smiled as if to say this one truth glued together the entire universe and that in sharing it, we were safe.

But the woman who held my face in her hands so long ago, said those words when Dad was still alive, and before my sister Sasha picked up the needle. Back when life and love and hope were plentiful and she still taught at the conservatory.

Teaching brilliant, young students filled the hollows of her soul, but over time, the emptiness expanded and her skills diminished. Not much, mind you, even then she was a brilliant, gifted musician, but at that level, excellence is not measured by the degrees hanging on a wall but by the degree of passion created through one's art. When she could no longer electrify her audience, she was done, a victim of her most feared adversary: banality.

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I stayed with her by day and paid Mrs. Benzoni to care for her at night. The additional cost of medicine and doctors was prohibitive, so I took a second job. Living on homemade soup and walking to work was good for me, god knows. I needed to lose some weight, but I must confess, I dearly missed Katz's pastrami and Broadway plays.

Two years consumed her meager savings and government assistance became necessary. The answer came one hot, June morning. On the desk the envelope sat for almost two weeks before I mustered the courage to reach for the letter opener. Hid inside was the expected notification: REJECTED, printed in bold, red ink. I

cried, knowing the last years of her life, like those of her youth, would be spent in poverty.

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"Do you have any idea how much that piano's worth? What's wrong with you, Avi? Sell the damned thing. Mom's comatose; she'll never even know it's gone."

"It stays, Sasha. I'll starve before I sell it."

My sister slid her coffee cup over the small, wooden table. The noise on Flatbush Street drifted through the café's open door as she glared at me.

"You always believed that romantic shit she filled your head with. Well listen up, little brother; life is not a sonata!" She pulled back a sleeve, revealing her own broken trail of pain. "It's a filthy place where beauty comes to die. Look at her—she went from the most beautiful, brilliant woman I've ever known, to someone who can't wipe her own ass. Sell the god damned piano and save yourself."

"What's wrong with you? She got old. She's frail."

Sasha lifted the cup to her lips and looked at me through rising steam. "You know that's not true."

"What, she didn't get old?"

"No, she didn't just get sick, she gave up. All that talk of pursuing excellence was bullshit. When she realized she wasn't the woman she thought she was, she died. Truth is, she died a very long time ago." The slamming coffee cup sounded her disgust. "But like usual, she couldn't admit her own frailty and needed praise from a protégée. Now your life, like mine before you, is being shoveled into the blast furnace of her madness."

"That's crazy talk. Are you using again?"

"Cleaner and more sober than I've been in years. Truth is, I'm not the addict here. You, little brother, are the one chasing something that has broken your heart in the past, and will break it again in the future."

"Mom loved us. She'd never do anything to hurt us."

"Mom may have loved us, but," Sonia's eyes narrowed, "she hated herself. Think about it. She escaped a god damned concentration

camp. Who knows what she saw there and what those sick bastards made her do. She was too tender for that kind of brutality. She played and taught to forget. Everything she did was performance, little brother, an endless, brokenhearted performance of the dead."

"I won't sit and listen to this."

"Suit yourself. I'm only trying to save you the pain I wasn't able to avoid myself."

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That night I poured more water in the soup and looked at the Steinway, imagining what it was like to make wild, passionate love in Paris.

