Audition

by Erica Hoskins Mullenix

“You have exactly one hour.”

My piano tutor, a walnut-faced shrew, rapped my knuckles with her small plastic baton to smack them back into the proper tempo, an adagio I'd mastered weeks before. One hour until the audition and damn if this woman didn't break the skin of two of my fingers.

We'd been at it since early that morning, for hours, and I guess my mind had slipped away for a few seconds. Raluca, my tutor, likely a war criminal in her home country or, just as likely, the trigger for an estranged granddaughter's eating disorder, sipped hot tea with an ear toward perfection from my selected piece. I felt the sting of the baton before I ever saw it coming.

“These people are my friends, Cami,” continued Raluca, and I knew she was exaggerating. Raluca was respected. Raluca was not liked. “They are only considering you as a favor to me. You will not embarrass.”

Gently appraising my knuckles with the fingers of my right hand, I thought of the assistant principal of my old elementary school who, I was sure, was my actual benefactor in the “give the talented black kid a fighting chance” community service project enthusiastically launched the day I pecked out some passable Scott Joplin on an old piano in the cafeteria. The music teacher had a friend who had a friend who had connections with certain foundations that specialized in spinning the lives of poor kids into fundraising dollars, and now here I was with the supposedly famed Raluca Ene and my bleeding knuckles auditioning for The Bestest and Mostest Prestigious Music Academy in the World which should simultaneously serve as Cami's Ticket out of the Ghetto Because Who Would Ever Want to Live There Around Those People.

I asked Raluca for a glass of water, then waited as she disappeared into her kitchen. I needed the break from my audition piece and tinkered with Simon and Garfunkel as quietly as I could on the piano surrounded by Raluca's photos and awards. Their Bridge

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Over Troubled Water was my mother's absolute favorite song, and it's the one thing I carry with me that's always full of good memories. Hysterical giggles from me and my sisters would rise over each sour note as she faked and flung poor Garfunkel's harmony against my little brother's falsetto whenever we were making dinner or riding in the car or just sitting around having us a good time. God, she couldn't sing worth shit.

My father played the organ for a very large Baptist congregation for money. That was his job, along with hiring the church's many band musicians and choir directors. He was also the de facto staff counselor for all the closeted gays worshiping at any given moment in the seven weekly services. He had never been a believer, but the church pastor didn't consider being saved by Jesus Christ as a requirement for musicianship. Especially not when my dad could hook him up with so many confused, closeted gays for weekend retreats and consensual sex in the name of the Lord. Once, after a particularly fruitful retreat, the pastor bought my mom a new minivan out of gratitude for my dad's faithfulness and on the front seat when we picked it up from the dealership was a platter of homemade cookies baked by one of the pastor's young daughters. Thank you, read the note. And keep the plate.

“Cami, you truly want to honor your mother's memory?”

Raluca placed a glass of water on the side table behind me. I braced for her trademark insensitivity as I spun around to face her. A few months earlier, I'd screamed at her the reason why she sometimes catches me playing that song and, even though I hadn't shared it from a good place, I still regretted telling her, no matter the accidental rage that had come with it.

“Be flawless in your audition. You can only do that if you put your family—-your mother, your father, your sisters, your brother—-out of your mind like they never existed. And that cannot happen if you're fooling around with Simons and Greefindle moments before the performance of your life.”

She followed the advice with her favorite platitude: I tell you this not to hurt you, but to help you.

When the people writing my ticket out of the ghetto with their pens and checkbooks would ask me how I ended up living alone right after high school with no family and no support but for their pens and checkbooks immersing me in music and books and secondary education and groceries, my answer was the acceptable, tragic narrative of my entire family being killed by a drunk driver on their way home from church. Would I be as talented and as marketable if they knew my father had been the one driving drunk and, yep, high at the wheel? With his family in the car after introducing his Baptist preacher employer to more fresh penis? People lose their families to neglect, abandonment, disease, misfortune or some combination of it all every day. They can't even dream of being assigned a foundation accountant who hands out concert tour per diems and accepts scanned receipts by email (”Don't lose the originals, Cami. Never lose the originals.”)

Mothers die or disappear, fathers die or were never around in the first place. Raluca was probably raised by monkeys in a Romanian asbestos factory, or so Google would tell me if I ever bothered to search up her biography. She clawed her way into a respectable post-hardship life without ever knowing if a per diem was a fish, a fabric or some kind of salty snack. After performing private concertinas for three American presidents and waking up one day as an old woman, she scoffed at people who, like me, were being miraculously rescued by the guilt-driven generosity of others.

She brushed off any chance of a retort with a wave of her hand. Drunk, dead, murderous daddies and mommies singing off-key with laughing children being not even close to the point, that adagio was waiting. Picking up her baton, Raluca took her seat beside mine.

“Start again.”