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PIANOFORTE

FIRST PLACE, JENNIE HACKMAN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

When I was six, my father made it his year long vocation to remodel one half of our basement. He spent months building cabinets, nailing plywood, and sawing long slabs of green, marble-y counter top. He then carefully selected tough, blue carpet and wallpaper with a surreal, Southwestern theme. On the wall, he hung the skull of a bull, purchased at a neighbor's yard sale for ten dollars. To spare the novelty of his year's work, he had moved all the items that had once occupied the space to the other, untouched half of the basement. The items that did not fit had been thrown away.

The corner where my sister and I had once parked our plastic Fisher Price vehicles was invaded by my father's newly constructed walk-in pantry. Upon his request, my mother stocked the shelves with countless cans of vegetables that we would never eat, several two-liter bottles of caffeine-free Diet Coke, and at least two dozen 60-watt light bulbs. A brand new washer and dryer had displaced the other corner, where we had kept our costume trunk of satiny red flapper dresses and feather boas. Our finger paintings on the cold cement walls had been covered in plywood; the door frame where my mother had marked our heights every January was hidden with crown molding and two layers of bright white paint.

The most significant relocation was the moving of my bulky, mahogany piano from the very center of the space. From the middle of the room, I could better see my audience and they, all around me, had a better view of my quick moving fingertips. Boxes of old files and old photos surrounded me, by bouquets of artificial flowers contained in thick-woven, handmade baskets. I had taken several sheets of blank printer paper, cut each into a large oval, and drawn faces with a box of Crayolas. With duct tape snatched from my father's tool chest, I stuck the faces on the piles of junk surrounding me. I played for the faces, and they watched patiently, listening to simple melodies read off the pages of *Piano for Young Beginners*, which I bought for a quarter at a yard sale. I had drawn each face with an equal countenance of reverence and astonishment; a constant, albeit staged, encouragement.

The instrument itself was a large mass of dark wood, which had been given to me when my aunt died. She had used the piano as a

resting place for other items that she didn't know what to do with. The top was used as a sort of shelf where she had often placed cold glasses, which had left the aftermath of condensation, those round, rotten rings, across the majority of the surface. The instrument had been kicked in the side, two black keys were missing, and when you opened the lid, it reeked of marijuana and Camel cigarettes, the familiar stench of my dead aunt's house. It hadn't been played in twenty years; the keys were yellowing and sometimes stuck when I pushed on them. The white key of center C, the crux of a piano, had been impaled with a lit cigarette that had left a burn, a small crater carved into the center of the key. My thumb fit perfectly into it. To me, it was flawless, the little indentation not a blemish, but a sign that we were soulmates.

When the basement was finished, the piano was pushed into a dark corner on the other side, hidden four feet behind the furnace.

The first time I was alone in the new room, I lay with my back flat on the carpet and stretched my arms and legs as distant from my body as I could. The backs of my hands scratched against the clean of the carpet and my calves scraped against its newness. Above, I inspected the carefully painted ceiling and the track lighting. I could hear my dog barking from the backyard; her collar jingling its dog tags as she hobbled around through the grass. An old song played in the room above me: my father listening to Billie Holiday, beating his left foot onto the hardwood. Thumping and clicking: rhythmically. In the kitchen, my mother ran the sink and did the dishes, abandoning the chore halfway to bang on the window and yell at the dog.

In the basement, the heavy scent of sawdust had overpowered the musty, overt scent of what cellars should smell like. In this space, the familiar perfume of mold, mothballs, and decades of comfortable dust was gone.

The change was dizzying; closing my eyes, I could feel the sawdust penetrating my skin: an imaginary blanket of whipped and airy wood shavings. My palms felt gentler holding the soft snowballs of feathery sawdust, but each second I could feel my lungs tightening, my breathing growing shorter, as if I was being choked. I needed air, not clean air, but air muddled with mold and thick furnace fumes. At once, I collected myself from the carpet and ran to the door separating the old from the new; the comfort of memory from the unbearable weight of right now.

I sat on the end of the ancient, broken treadmill, rested my elbows on my knees, and cupped my hands under my chin. From there, I could again concentrate on the muffled barks of the dog that, within seconds, ceased completely. And oozing from the living room, that smoky,

deep blue voice singing about Strange Fruit and poplar trees regained its powerful, early-evening clarity.

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My father gave me a hammer for my seventh birthday. Not one of those dainty hammers, but a man's hammer; its handle longer and heavier than my forearm; its head made of dense, cold metal. With it, he handed me an old baby food jar filled with sharp, silver nails the size of my index finger, and pointed to a cardboard box. Taking a step forward I found a mound of scrap wood, collected under a thin blanket of sawdust.

The wood pieces were what remained of my father's project. Among the ends and corners of 2-by-4s and cylindrical chunks of a wooden banister, were triangles and squares of wavy crown molding. My fingers rippled along the edges carved smoothly and nurtured with sandpaper. With greed, I ran my hands through the pile of wood, disregarding the rough, splintery edges that scraped my palms and wrists.

For a year I had watched my father make an entire room with hammer, nails, and wood. His unwrapped, and almost inappropriate, gift was astounding. The difference between imagination and reality was suddenly explicit. With these pieces I could build something to hold in my hands and it would be made of wood and steel: solid and indestructible.

Later that night, I sat on my piano bench in the old part of the basement and stared at the box of wood. Crawling onto my knees, I dug my hands into the box and began sorting the pieces by their shape: the squares in one pile, the rectangles in another, and the long, slender pieces in a third.

I started by selecting the best square-shaped segment I could find. I then chose one rectangle and four accompanying smaller, leaner pieces. Connecting them with five nails, I decorated the square piece with magic marker. When I was done, I inspected my work. In my hands I held a crude interpretation of a doll: four uneven and disproportional limbs, a stout trunk of a body, and a frighteningly geometric head. Its illustrated face featured buggish, close-set eyeballs, a button nose, and Julia Roberts lips. Remembering what my mother had told me, that every doll had a soul, I gasped at the profundity of my creation. I whispered, "Hello, you." And then I named her Amelda.

With the remaining pieces, I gave life to seven more dolls, each with its own awkward proportions, bizarre hairstyles, and distinguishing expressions. I gave them names like Elizabeth, Sally, and Henrietta. The last doll, by far the largest and thickest, I drew with

tiny, linear lips, reading glasses, and a few strands of dark brown hair. I named him Daddy.

I put my materials away and pushed the piano bench into the corner. Weakly, I grabbed the piano by its dark brown shoulders and managed to wheel it into the center of the room. I pulled the bench behind the instrument and then gathered the dolls in my arms. Carefully arranging them around the room, I gave a nervous bow, and then took my seat behind the keys. Placing my thumb on the crater of middle C, I began playing "Frosty The Snowman."

The piano is a lonely instrument. White, black, white, black, white, white, black: I dreamt of little fingers, perfect chords, slow scales, and racing arpeggios. Sitting behind the keys, I wondered how such a large noise could be the consequence of such simple, small movement of fingertips.

All day, I would sit on that bench: feet flat, back straight, knuckles arched. I wondered if my parents were listening upstairs. I thought my mother probably knew that I was going to be a genius: Mozart, Haydn, Tchaikovsky, all those old guys in my father's old textbooks; I would be one of them. I imagined myself in one of those powdered wigs sitting in the center of a concert hall. I would wear a real tuxedo, and my audience would be made of flesh and marrow, not wood.

In my basement, my fingers thumped on the keys and filled the room with discordance. Through the white noise I heard a beautiful, imaginary melody: a sonata, a minuet, a waltz. The music came from the notes, to my eyes, veins, fingertips, and then everywhere: swimming through my hair, scaling my skin, spitting out freckles. I organized its energy; its strong, stubborn, vibrating hammers inside fought with my very malleable heartstrings.

On those days, I sat alone in a very cold basement. On the other end of the space was a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It was decorated in cobwebs and a faint glow that barely penetrated the orbiting darkness. On the keys, my fingers dropped like tears. I was the saddest girl ever to play a piano.

There was a knock on the basement door one day and I said, "Come in." My mother peeped her head in and then her toes. She walked across the cool cement and stood before me, behind the piano, and then rested her forearms on the dusty lid of the instrument.

She said, "On Tuesday afternoon I'm bringing you to meet a woman named Ms. Lim. She's a piano teacher. No more banging on these keys, you'll learn from her."

All of the blood in my body rushed to my face and settled

there, blushing my cheeks. “Banging on the keys.” I moved my lips to those words. I did not understand. I thought this was music.

“Four o’clock, Tuesday.” My mother tapped her palm on the wooden top. “Look alive,” she said and smiled awkwardly. Turning to make her exit, she noticed Amelda propped up against a box of Legos. She made a face that burned my cheeks with a deeper crimson. It was the very particular look of a bewildered mother stumbling across her daughter’s bizarre doll made of scrap wood and rusty nails. I felt like shouting, “Get out!” but instead slammed my hands on as many keys as I could reach. All at once they smacked the felted hammers inside the instrument, forcing a crude, carnivorous explosion of sound. My mother jumped a little and then left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

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It was four in the afternoon and the sky was more grey than blue. From the front seat of the stout, tan Buick, my mother searched the rear view mirror for the attention of my eyes.

“Alice.”

Looking up, I caught my mother’s glance, her green-blue eyeballs waiting for me in the small mirror. I blinked hard and opened my mouth half way.

“Alice.”

I sat on the edge of the slippery leather seat. With my fingers, I scratched at the pieces of the macaroni necklace hanging around my throat. The noodles, covered in Elmer’s glue and cheap red glitter, were strung together on a frizzy line of green yarn and then tied in a knot at the nape of my neck. Releasing the glitter with my fingernails, the sparkles crept quietly onto the front of my ivory turtleneck and fell like snowflakes, landing between the seams of my acid-washed denim skirt. Within moments I was covered in tiny, imaginary rubies.

That morning, my mother had carefully French braided my thin, straight hair, tying split ends loosely together where the braid stopped, two inches from the belt of my skirt. The braid, which had begun the day immaculate and symmetrical, was now an uneven auburn mess, clinging with static to the leather car seat. I reached behind my back and pulled the braid over my right shoulder, smoothing the static with my fingertips and smearing the braid with more loose glitter.

Opening my car door, my mother looked at me and then took a wet index finger and tried, without luck, to wipe away the traces of a grape juice mustache, worn with endearment on my upper lip.

“You’re a mess,” she said, and then pointed to the canvas bag

at my feet. I reached by my toes and grabbed the new, white strap, stiff with starch and unfamiliarity. Stepping my right foot, and then my left foot, out of the Buick, I tapped the bumps of the driveway with my black patent leather shoes, stepping on all the cracks.

"Your coat," she said. I grabbed the long, green flannel jacket off the seat of the car and threw my arms inside the sleeves, wrapping my glittered limbs within the scratchy fabric.

Connected by a tight squeeze of the hands, we walked the length of the driveway, climbed the narrow slate steps, and stood at the door of a very large and very white raised ranch. To the left of the door was a wood panel that read, LIM and then below, 4 Lewis Street.

Under the panel was a pearly white doorbell. Turning towards me, my mother said, "Ready?" and, without waiting for a response, extended her hand and clicked her index finger on the button. An unexpected, sudden chorus of musical notes and rhythms swam through the house and sent footsteps marching towards the door.

My mother suddenly let go of my hand and, startled, I studied her turned cheek, still staring straight ahead at the heavy, carved oak door. I lightly tapped her hip with the palm of my left hand, but she continued to stare ahead, saying only, "Shh," and brushing her hips with her hands, as if wiping away cat fur or dryer lint.

As the heavy door swung open, I mouthed "Mama," and took a step backwards, as if meaning to return to the car. Except as soon as I did, there emerged in front of us a door frame of pale light, cut, as if sketched with an ink pen, with the sharp silhouette of a very short woman. We could see in the room nothing in means of furniture or other belongings; the walls were indistinguishable and the room seemed motionless and vacant. All that could be seen was the large rectangle of pale light and then: brief, geometric darkness in the shape of a woman.

"Come," said the short silhouette. "Come in."

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Ms. Lim was a petite woman with waxy skin and a thick Filipino accent. Upon entering, she required that I take off my shoes and when I did, I would ogle the baby Grand piano perched in the corner of her living room. It was lacquered in black onyx, reflecting the faint curl of light accidentally entering through the curtains. The beautiful instrument was reserved for her use only, and so every Tuesday afternoon she took me into the basement, where her pale-brown upright piano waited for us. When I sat down, my little socked toes would sink into the plush ivory carpet that reminded me of the thick coat of my neighbor's cat,

the one that was beautiful, but dangerous to pet. Even on the warmest days, the room was very cold, and everything, even the tea she sipped as she watched me play, smelled like jasmine.

Her tiny, coal black eyes and tight wrinkles resembled the linear music staff and round little quarter notes that she pointed to on the sheet music. When she looked me square in the eyes, I watched the pale reflection of my face transform them into Magic 8 Balls. While I studied my white face floating around their deep, inky surface, she would yell at me, sometimes in English, but usually in a language I didn't understand. Pointing to the wooden metronome with her short, crooked index finger, she would then grab my hands, slam them on the nearest available keys, and pound them up and down with the rhythm until my fingers were pink. In the meantime, I would cry, cry, cry, and then run out of the house to my mother, always waiting in the Buick, reading *People Magazine*. Every Tuesday at 4:00 I would return to Ms. Lim's basement.

While I learned various finger exercises and simple melodies, I could hear her quiet husband up in the kitchen, pouring rice into a pot of boiling water. The grains clicked the bottom of the pot with a sudden velocity, like a million baby cockroaches scuttling across a hardwood floor. I rarely saw her husband, except in the dark sometimes at four o'clock when I entered. His hair was very black and very thin, his eyes larger and smokier than his wife's. He would clasp his hands together in front of his body, give me half a nod, and disappear into the next room. I liked him very much.

But I was terrified to be left alone in a room with this oppressive woman, especially knowing that my only protection was a quiet, ghost of a man who, as far as I knew, did nothing but nod at guests and cook fragrant rice. My fingers would clumsily trample the keys, missing notes and adding sharps and flats where they sounded awkward. Ms. Lim would shriek, in English, "You didn't practice!" and I would plead with her, offer to swear on the Bible, that I had indeed practiced, hours in fact. But she would just shake her head, sip her tea, and clasp her lips together into a sharp circle that looked like a clenched fist.

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Meanwhile, my father had begun his strange ritual of exiling himself to the flashy new basement, sitting on a fluffy recliner, and watching the *Goodfellas* VHS that my mother had given him for Christmas. He tapped his slippered feet and fat, rough hands in rhythm to the gunfire and shouting, taking breaks to sip sneaky clear liquids out of a tall glass.

During these episodes, his face would turn very red and his eyes would grow buggy and veiny. With a slippery, clumsy voice, he would yell at Ray Liotta as he snuck around, inciting fear with his fictionalized vengeance. With each watch, my father would grow angrier and angrier at Ray Liotta, until his voice was so loud that my dog woofed and barked at him from upstairs in the kitchen. This happened every night.

While Ray Liotta was being berated by my father, I would sit on the other side of the basement behind the piano and tap very lightly on the keys. I practiced all the songs that I hadn't been able to play for Ms. Lim in my last lesson. My fingers were strangely eloquent, the ringing of the keys lucid and finally in tune. I had relocated the happy dolls to give them each a new view: Daddy propped up on the bench next to me, his cheeks recently drawn in with rosy circles of red crayon.

One night, as my fingers were curling around the keys of "Little Blue Bird", I heard heavy footsteps making their way across the rough fabric of the other side. The door handle slowly turned and then I watched as my father walked across the room to where I sat behind the piano. His steps were crooked and clumsy, as if he had spun around in circles a dozen times. He placed his glass on the top of the piano and then steadied himself by grabbing the shoulders of the instrument with his big hands.

The piano swayed back and forth as his hands tried to compensate for his vertigo. A quarter inch of clear liquid slept in the bottom of his glass and was rocked back and forth like a little baby in a cradle. Suddenly, his body jerked violently to the right, creaking the old wood of the piano as he tried to hold on. I stood up from where I sat, as if to help him, but then noticed that the two left feet of the instrument had taken flight and that the piano might tumble and break. I didn't know what to do.

The tall glass with the quarter inch of liquid slipped along the flat surface of the instrument, capsizing with the weight of my dizzy father. It hit the ground with a velocity that was just enough to shatter the thick glass into dozens of little pieces. The sound was like the wind chimes that hung outside the kitchen. It was as if a hundred of them were hit at once with a powerful movement of wind, but harder, more deliberate than any storm this season. It was how I imagined they'd sound if somebody had thrown them from the roof of our house onto the concrete steps: a million little pieces of broken sound.

My father steadied himself and the piano landed with a thud, regaining its balance. I looked at the ground where the glass had fallen: the tiny pieces reflected the glow of the light bulb from across the room. My father's drink was splashed on top of the pile of shards,

more powerfully illuminating the heap. It smelled like the chemical my mother would put on my knees when I fell off my bike, the one that burned and sizzled white pus as it cleaned out the cut.

"Play me a tune," he barked.

I stared at him, not knowing what to do. My fingers sat in two tight balls, motionless on my lap. I could feel the perspiration, buried inside my fists, growing warm.

"Play me," he started, and then paused. "A fucking tune."

I uncurled my fingers, wiped my palms on my jeans, and perched my hands upon the keys. I arched my fingers and straightened my back. I watched the dolls watch me; I felt Daddy, the wooden one, sitting quietly beside me.

I played him "Little Blue Bird." All the right keys were in perfect rhythm; my staccato notes like the tiny clicks of clear little hiccups; I crescendoed, and I decrescendoed in all the right places.

When I was done, I looked at him, waiting for a response. He paused and then erupted into laughter. His breath was strong and pungent; it smelled the same as the puddle on the ground.

When he was done laughing, he said, "You call that music," not as question, but as a statement. He turned around and then stumbled out of the room. I heard him fall onto the recliner and when a few moments had passed, the voice of Ray Liotta resumed on the television.

I slammed my forearms onto the keys, one elbow pointing to the high notes, the other to the low. I rested my head on top of them. Inconsonant noise filled the room.

I could feel the happy eyes of my audience staring at my hunched over body, wondering about the warm water flowing from my closed eyes. The resonance of the keys had subsided; the felted hammers lay still inside the piano, waiting for me.

Getting up from the bench, I walked across the basement to where I had left the cardboard box, where now only a few extra wooden pieces sat among sawdust. I returned to the piano, where I placed the box on the bench, lifted Daddy, and placed him inside. I then did a sweep of the room, collecting Amelda, Sally, Henrietta, and all the rest. I put them inside the box with Daddy and then placed my birthday hammer on top. Returning to the other end of the room, I found a small gardening spade on top of my father's workbench. I placed the spade next to the hammer on top of all the dolls.

Barely noticed by my father, I ascended the stairs and opened the door that led to the kitchen. I listened for my mother; she was upstairs in the bathroom, cutting my sister's bangs. Taking my jacket off the coat rack, I inched my way across the linoleum and then through the

carpet of the family room. Opening the front door, I slunk outside and, with careful hands, closed the door behind me and eased the clicking of the screen door's handle, as not to make a sound.

Outside, I noticed the silent stillness of the early evening air. The neighborhood looked as it did every night at 8PM, heavy July air dancing circles with BBQ smoke, black labs lapping up contents of water bowls, the streets lined with fallen dogwood petals. Everything was the same except that no children played outside; the yards were abandoned; the streets seemed haunted by the silent laughter of the missing children. I noticed the slight emulsification of the clouds against the roundness of the full moon, growing white in the curly, marble sky. With my box, I headed for the backyard.

Behind our yard was a stone wall of fat, moss-covered rocks leading to the woods. Trying to balance the box in my arms, I climbed over the wall and tripped on a sharp rock, falling head first towards the ground. My dolls were scattered all around me, but their little bodies remained rigid and ridiculous while my limbs landed tangled up on a pile of summer leaves. Pulling myself up, I noticed two bloody knees, which had been cut in my clumsiness. Looking at them, I thought of the acrid potion my mother would pour on them when I returned; I remembered the same stinging odor of the clear drink spilt and left on the floor beside my piano.

I grabbed the dolls, the spade, and the hammer, and threw them into the box. Standing up and holding the box in my arms, I continued into the forest. I walked for ten minutes through oak trees, poison ivy, and deep mud, feeling the hungry mosquitoes that swarmed my body, looking for sweet blood and finding it on my neck, legs, and everywhere in between. And then I found it, the fort that my sister and I had built last summer, now overgrown and covered in ferns and tall grass. We had stolen two white bed sheets from the linen closet and hung them on the branches, building a wall and a canopy. The sheets were now a deep, smoky brown, stained by rain and dusty wind; they hung pathetically on the branches.

Stepping in to the center of the fort, I knelt on the ground and looked above me. A hole had been nibbled through the canopy by some insect or animal and, through it, I watched the windy air color the darkness of the sky. The moon glowed nearby.

Taking the hammer out of the box, I placed it on the ground in front of me and then ruffled through the box to find Daddy. Holding him in my hands, I looked at his little ridiculous face, his blushy, blood red cheeks, and his crooked, thick rimmed reading glasses. I took the hammer, and with the two metal claws of its back removed each nail,

Daddy laid on the grass before me, six mismatched pieces that were now nothing but a small pile of wooden scraps. I did the same to the next doll, and to the next, until I was alone with nothing but a heap of wood: eight heads, eight bodies, and too many limbs to count.

I then took the spade and began digging a hole that was, within an hour, two feet deep. I bent over and pushed the pile of broken bodies into the hole with my forearm. They fell into the grave; dozens of wooden pieces clicking together like little clogs marching across hardwood. The face of Daddy poked up between the body of another doll and the head of Henrietta. With the spade, I scooped the dirt, filling the hole and burying the dolls.

Returning to my feet, I jumped up and grabbed the sheets above my head. Leaves fell on top of my hair and shoulders; a spider crept down my arm. I brushed it off, and then placed the sheet into the empty cardboard box. When I had removed both sheets, I placed the box on top of the freshly dug sepulcher. I took the spade in one hand, my birthday hammer in the other, and somehow, through the darkness, found my way to my backyard.

In the house, I walked through the living room and into the kitchen where my mother sat at the table with a mug of tea and flannel pajamas. She looked both angry and terrified. I stood before her with my spade and hammer and she stared and then said, "Where were you? It's 9:30." And then, "Where the heck were you?"

"Playing," I answered and proceeded into the basement. She didn't follow me.

Ray Liotta still growled on the television. My father had rewound the tape and started it over. He snored and slept on the recliner; he looked like a very big, ugly monkey.

In the dark side of the basement, I returned to my piano bench, placed my tools on top of it, and arched my fingers on to the keys, my little thumb laying comfortably in the cratered cradle of middle C. I played "Little Blue Bird" as loudly as my fingers would allow.