

THE PIANO TEACHER

Katerina Olevsky went again to the window and looked anxiously out in the hope that the child had arrived at last, but she saw no little girl with her father and mother coming up the steps of her house. Nervously glancing at her watch, she found to her relief that they were only five minutes late, and might still arrive after all. So much depended on it. It had been such a long while since she had had a new pupil.

Thank heaven she owned her little town house outright. She had made sure of that because her revered father had believed that one's property should be made free and clear from the lender's grasp, recalling the horrific tales told by their Russian forebears of the unscrupulous and brutal methods used against the hapless peasants to prevent them from owning their own property. And her late husband, a piano teacher in his own right, had bought her a small life insurance annuity, which, together with her income, had been barely sufficient to meet the needs of herself and her friend Veza. So a new pupil coming twice a week – it might be the beginning of something new. And, it promised the possibility of seeing the dentist at last to do something about her aching teeth, and perhaps dining out again!

She paced back and forth in the dusky, cavernous room that she had proudly used for thirty three years as her music studio from which she had nurtured so many superb pianists. She remembered one in particular, a dark haired boy with fierce blue eyes who came bounding up these very stairs with his friends to announce that he had been chosen to play Beethoven sonatas at Carnegie Hall in New York (always Beethoven! There were other composers too, she would remind them, but the boys must always have the towering Austrian). They had crowded noisily into the room and Katerina gave them

cake and sodas (he was only fourteen years old) in celebration. That was such an exciting time. He was only one of several young people who began with her as nondescript kids, many shy and withdrawn, who had not exhibited any outstanding musical talent, but whom she sensed as possessing that indefinable yearning to sacrifice everything on earth to perform the great compositions – these she brought along like precious delicate plants until they blossomed on the stage of the venerable Carnegie Hall, where she herself had played on several occasions. And when her students had brought the performance to a triumphant conclusion, they would signal to her, and she would come forward into the welcoming lights to shake his hand.

But that was a long time ago, she thought, reaching into the pocket of her loose brown sweater and plucking out a cigarette. Now she was largely forgotten. She was once sought after and had any number of students, but she gave her lessons in the southeast corner of Washington, D.C., and the continuing decay of that part of the city discouraged middle class parents from sending their children to what was said to be an area where crime was frequent. And then, there was the traffic accident in which she had been seriously injured, and only recently recovered. By then, a great many families had moved to the suburbs, too far to come to Katerina's, and so the number of her students dwindled steadily like sand in an hour glass until she had only a very few remaining, and they were growing older and would soon be going to college. Indeed, it was only through the compassion of one of her old friends, Regina, a very fine harpsichord artist who had been concerned about her, that the possibility of a new pupil arose. Someone in Regina's book club told her that a neighbor was seeking a new teacher for his little girl to replace the one who had left the area. Regina almost immediately called the child's

father, Mr. O’Connell - who had no musical experience himself - and had fulsomely told him about the legendary Katerina and her accomplishments (and that she did not charge so very much). After that, he had phoned Katerina last week, and in a mellow, quiet voice, agreed to come today to discuss the matter of engaging Katerina as his daughter Isabella’s instructor.

“Please, God, let them come,” she said wistfully, going again to the window in a cloud of blue smoke, to look moodily at the street below. Just then her friend Veza, from the old days in Russia, emerged through the curtains separating the music room from the kitchen. She was over eighty years old, about ten years older than Katerina. “They will come”, Veza growled, panting with difficulty as she moved an ungainly stack of sheet music to the floor in order to make room on the crowded coffee table for a dish of candy. “Why wouldn’t they come? Or are they too stupid to want the best?” “Of course, you’re right; what was I thinking of?” replied Katerina lightly, to reassure her that all was well. The warmth in Katerina’s eyes as she looked at her friend faded quickly however as she took note of the candy provided by Veza for their expected guests. Frowning, she came back from the window to look down critically at the heap of diminutive butterscotch squares, each wrapped in dull brown paper bearing an obscure legend. She scooped up several in her broad hand and after looking at them with distaste, allowed them to trickle back into the dish. “I told you to buy something especially nice,” she said reprovingly. Speaking always in Russian to Veza, the ponderous language had a particularly disapproving tone. “These are not suitable for the people that are coming. You should have bought truffles, or chocolates with fruit.”

“Then you should have told me what you wanted,” retorted Veza swiftly. “And where would you get such fine sweetmeats?” she scoffed, her wizened face crumpling like music paper into a thousand wrinkled lines. “Do you think we live on the Nevsky Prospect?” She was always fond of referring to the great boulevard in Petersburg where her parents would take her as a child before the terrible times of starvation in the 1920’s. Chuckling, she removed the paper from one candy, inserted the morsel in her toothless mouth and began sucking on it with satisfaction.

“I wouldn’t turn up my nose at these,” she said, smacking her lips. Veza had bought them from the nearby Latino market where she was indulgently treated by the amused staff. She refused to venture any further because she lived in great fear of deportation, notwithstanding Katerina’s assurances that she was lawfully in America. She had arrived in America an untold number of years ago when immigration was easier, and had married a scoundrel, an American who had taken all her money and run away from her in New York. She appeared one day in desperation at Katerina’s house, and she and her husband took her in out of loyalty to Veza’s family whom they had known well in Russia. Katerina loved her not only because of that, but because in her grumbling, cantankerous way, she had helped her attend her husband in his last painful year with a devotion and gentleness that endeared her to Katerina forever.

“It is important that we make a good impression,” murmured Katerina, going again to the window as the autumnal sun began to decline above the narrow street. It was already fifteen minutes after noon, and the O’Connells were now overdue. “If you are so worried,” scolded Veza, as her parting shot in returning to the kitchen, “why don’t you put on some of your nice clothes, instead of the same rags you wear every day?”

Katerina looked over at Veza and smiled indulgently. She had said the same thing to Veza day in and day out without managing to influence the old lady in the least. Veza would invariably be found in a massive, tattered grey shawl which followed at her heels like a faithful puppy, an old shirt, and a pair of olive military pants which neither woman could recollect having acquired. Her bulky shoes, worn without socks and revealing to the observer her swollen ankles whenever the shawl allowed, completed her customary attire.

Still smiling, and shaking her head, she recalled her beloved husband, throwing up his hands when Veza appeared day after day in her outlandish clothes, and saying: “Where does she think she is? Begging in Moscow?” But Katerina nonetheless pondered her companion’s admonition that her own clothing was wanting in charm; indeed, lately she was well aware of it after looking every day at Veza’s disconcerting apparel and comparing them uneasily with her own. In fact, because of Veza’s extraordinary appearance, Katerina had always insisted that she not make an entrance to the music room when pupils or their parents arrived but must disappear behind the curtain, on the pretext that there must be no disturbance in the rapport which the teacher must create between herself and her clients. For herself, her own shabby apparel was taken by her clientele for the eccentricity expected and admired in one who was recognized as a genius. But now, when she needed clients desperately, she knew that she should do something to embellish her appearance if she were to gain their acceptance.

In fact, she had scolded herself for not having done so up to now, but she feared that a new outfit might subtly interfere with the ease of her teaching, a constraint which could not be tolerated. She also feared that, if she wore the brash colors in vogue today

the student might be distracted; or the constricting designs of modern clothing might readily pinch and squeeze the ample Katerina just when total concentration on the music was absolutely necessary. But nonetheless, she could not help but groan in dismay as she examined her dull brown cardigan sweater; it “was as rumpled as if a horse had rolled over it.” She frowned with distaste as she noted the cigarette ash lingering among its folds.

“This will not do”, she murmured, sweeping the grey particles from her, which only created a more slovenly appearance as the ash declined to fall to the ground, but either hung about her in the air, or remained on her sweater in the form of large white smudges or trailing grey pathways down the length of the garment. “Disgusting”, she thought; there was no avoiding the fact that “Veza and I both look like paupers.” But to take off the sweater now would not provide a solution. It would only expose the defects of her heavy suede shirt that she found so comfortable and roomy as she sat with her pupils; there were several places where the stitches had parted under the arms, but which had added to the ease of her reach when she illustrated a difficult passage. It is the subtleties of pianistic skill that determine whether a performance is either a pedestrian effort or one which brings the composition to life and joy, and Katerina could not sacrifice it simply in order to appear *chic* to her good but naive clients. And worse, a badly played piece could keep her awake all night, sometimes giving rise to nausea. “Impossible”, she declared.

Still, she wavered; if there were time to change her clothes perhaps she would have done it if it meant keeping her new pupil – she had a nice blouse with little sheep and lambs stitched into the collar - but she couldn’t risk the possibility that the family

would come while she was changing and Veza would be the first to greet them. That was definitely not to be wished. But it was too late in any case. There was a knocking at the door (the door bell had long since expired). They had come.

Glancing quickly at the curtain to be sure that Veza had not appeared, Katerina rushed to the door and opened it to the fresh faced family smiling uncertainly up at her. “Hello! Come in, please,” she said loudly, beaming happily down at them, gesturing them forward through the door with her large arm. They were very attractive, as engaging as a bouquet of smiling flowers, with the little pretty girl holding her mother’s hand. “Please,” she urged, noting that they were taken aback by her burly appearance and her large arms, to say nothing of her garments. But she was not surprised. She knew how formidable she appeared, an old Russian peasant woman in disreputable clothes looming over their heads, but in time these sweet Americans would become her friends, if she could only be given the chance. Then they would see.

After they exchanged excited courtesies while hanging up coats in the little entry way – producing to Katerina’s ear a melodious arrangement of voices which she always secretly enjoyed and named the “trill in the right hand” – they were all seated in the music room. “That’s a beautiful piano!” burst out Mrs. O’Connell suddenly, leaning forward as though to examine it more closely. She was an attractive woman in her forties, wearing a grey long sleeved sweater who reminded her of several women from Estonia that had become her friends. She had the same broad shoulders and very long arms, the long slim waist and the prominently broad nose, and if she had suddenly spoken in Russian, Katerina would not have been surprised.

“Thank you,” Katerina said, looking fondly at the instrument. “It is rosewood, very old. It was my father’s. He taught me to perform.”

“Was it made here, in the United States?” inquired Mr. O’Connell, a handsome man about fifty, with regular, symmetrical features, and intelligent, friendly eyes.

“Oh, no. We brought it from Russia when we came here in 1937. It’s a wonderful piano.” She paused and smiled warmly at Mrs. O’Connell. “I don’t have any children,” she said, “except this one.” She nodded fondly at the piano, which, in its high gloss, seemed like a debonair young man waiting patiently but with every expectation of coming forward shortly to demonstrate his skill.

“Shalll we have some music?” said Katerina, leaning from her armchair, and speaking to the pretty little girl sitting next to her mother: “Would you like to play something for us, Isabella?” But the little girl was not listening; she was staring in open mouthed astonishment at something over Katerina’s shoulder. Her parents were gaping too and just as incredulously, so that the whole family appeared like a botched or bizarre family photograph where everyone has grimaced distastefully at the camera. Katerina, whose chair by the side of the piano faced the parents, turned with alarm to see what had so shocked them.

There, thrust between the curtains, a head protruded: yellow in complexion, practically hairless, wizened with countless wrinkles and obviously without teeth, the apparition grinned diabolically at the four stunned spectators. “Chai”? It hissed, scowling fiercely at each in turn. Not getting any response, she uttered the word again. “Chai” was the Russian word for tea, but when pronounced by Veza, it sounded like an utterance of terrible menace. Contrary to Katerina’s stern admonition, Veza had chosen to intrude

upon her while she was in the midst of the sacred conference between the teacher , the student and her family – and to have done so in the face of such an important meeting. For a moment, looking with horror at the glowering face lodged in the curtain, Katerina had simply no idea what to do about it. Make a scene about it? Upbraid Veza? No, she decided firmly. That would only increase the sense of impropriety and embarrassment that all but Veza were feeling now. And it would hurt Veza deeply, who had only wished to help. “What is vital now,” she thought, “is to keep up appearances at all costs. Make bricks from straw, make bricks from straw”, a familiar refrain she had heard from her father, must be her purpose now.

“This is Veza,” she said, rising and bestowing an expansive, glowing smile upon the face in the curtain. “She is a very old friend of mine from days long gone by. I’m afraid she has remained faithful to her Russian tongue, and rarely speaks our language. She asks whether you would like some tea?” With an elegant sweep of her arm toward the old woman, she pretended to look invitingly at the O’Connell family, but hoping desperately that no one would call for Veza’s brackish tea, the squares of sugar, the cracked cups which she favored – the chipped remains of the once resplendent tea service of the Czarist days which she inherited from her parents. It would be impossible!

But fortune favored Katerina and she soon realized that she needn’t have worried; the disquieted O’Connells graciously but quite unequivocally declined the offer, probably because of Veza’s menacing appearance and also perhaps by the fact that Katerina made no encouraging gesture of her own by requesting for herself a draught of the proffered brew. Veza was, however, greatly disappointed, as her deepening scowl testified. She pointed out to all of them vehemently that the tea was “very strong” and

would “give the child her life”. That was enough for Katerina; in a moment Veza would have frightened the child out of her wits. She pulled herself to her full imposing height. “Veza, not today, please,” she said in Russian, with a cordiality not free of an undertone of peremptoriness. “Perhaps they will come again to enjoy your tea at another time.” There was a pause, an exchange of sharp glances between the two, and then Veza grudgingly acquiesced; muttering some bitter but unintelligible words to the family, she withdrew her head from the curtain and left them in peace.

After addressing the family with a large, rolling shrug of the shoulders and a sad smile which suggested helplessly “what can one do with relatives?”, Katerina sat down again in her chair and looked at the little girl who might be her future pupil. “Now, Isabella, will you play something for us on my piano? I would be very happy if you would.”

“Okay,” she said shyly, coming forward and slipping gracefully onto the bench. She gave a quick anxious glance over her shoulder to her mother, who returned her a broad smile and a vigorous nod of encouragement. The girl was such a pretty little thing! She was seven years old, with glowing black eyes matched by her long glossy black hair falling to her shoulders, and she had a sweet half-smile, the left side of her mouth doubtful and uncertain, but on the right side, a friendly fetching smile that touched Katerina to the heart.

“Let me see your hands, darling.” She reached over and gently took them, turning them in her own broad palms. They were like little flowers, she thought, but there was more. The length and shape of the fingers were just what she was looking for. In fact, they reminded her of Kirsten, the daughter of the Finnish ambassador, whom she had

once taught for a few months sometime in the sixties. What a hussy, that one! Talent pouring from her veins, but would never practice, only interested in the boys! Her eyes were always dancing about looking for fun. She looked intently at Isabella's eyes and was startled by what she saw: the even steady gaze, illuminated by the glow of her black eyes. This was it, she exulted. The vision. She looked over her shoulder to her parents and nodded in triumph. But still, as she turned back to Isabella, she reminded herself severely, there was no guarantee in music. She remembered Elena, who had everything until she began to play. Ugh! Like a monkey with a hammer. What a fight with her father when she told him!

“What do you wish to play?” she asked. “The Magdalena notebook, of Bach,” murmured the girl. “Excellent!” cried Katerina, clapping her hands. “But don't rush. Make sure you are comfortable.” As Isabella settled herself, Katerina watched her with a fierce intensity, uttering a silent prayer. “Lord,” she beseeched, “she needn't be a child prodigy; you could count them on one hand. It will be enough if she takes pleasure in the music.” She watched with approval the girl's straight back, the careful placement of her hands - she must have had a capable teacher – and then she began a very nice approach to the music, somewhat lacking in the gaiety which Katerina thought essential, but certainly not exhibiting the wooden, unfeeling pounding that she had feared. There were serious slips here and there which offended her, unwelcome dissonances too, but these were to be expected ; they could easily be corrected. She could do quite a bit with her!

“Delightful!” she cried at the conclusion, beaming at the parents, whose suspenseful faces fixed on Katerina softened to expressions of pride and gratitude. And to the girl, she came up behind her with an enveloping hug , whispering in her little ear that

seemed like a bud that was soon to open beautifully, that “you were very, very good!” “Thank you,” Isabella said in a small voice as she practically disappeared in Katerina’s vast arms.

“Oh, yes,” she thought, envisioning the sweet child arriving every week to her house, how bright she would make it. “She is such a delight; she is irresistible. What kind of a musician I can make of the little dove, who knows? We shall see.” She stood up to inform the parents that she would be very pleased to take Isabella on when Mrs. O’Connell, who had now become exhilarated by her child’s success, urged Isabella to “play the Musette for Ms. Olevsky.” Katerina was not at all discomfited by the unexpected interruption. Isabella had now become her pupil, and it was always a pleasure as well as a duty to listen to her students perform a new composition. “Of course,” she nodded, “but which Musette? There are so many.”

“We don’t know,” Isabella replied with a little shrug. “It’s anonymous”, her father pointed out.

“A mystery! Good,” Katerina said, returning to her arm chair close to the piano. “Please,” she nodded to the girl. It was her signal to begin; it was the time that every nerve in every fiber of her body reaches out to the music; she is the essence of the music itself, and every breath she draws is the great ebb and flow of it.

So Isabella began to play the introduction, very softly, sweet music of sadness and regret, like the autumn rain falling on the flowers that will not survive, just as someone’s love is gone, not to return. Her child’s fingers lingered on the keys, as though enamored by the poignancy of the music. “Oh, my God,” thought Katerina, pressing her hand to her heart, “how does she know? How could she?” It was a piece that she

cherished for a young man. Andrei, whom she had loved desperately many years ago. He had died suddenly, and though she had later married a man whom she had also loved, she had never forgotten him, and when there were occasions after a dream in which he appeared to her, she would play the musette in his memory. “But not like that!” she marveled, “no one could have taught her that!” Rapt, she listened as Isabella went on to the part that offered reassurance and peace to her love, when she suddenly struck notes that sounded not only dissonant – plainly in error – but also suggested a playful mood, wholly at variance with the tenderness of the piece.

Katerina was horrified. “No!” she called out. “No!” She rose up from her chair and rushed to the piano and struck the girl’s right hand aside. “No, that is not correct! Listen!” She sat down beside her and started to play. But she had frightened the child. The blow on the arm was not painful, but the shout together with the woman suddenly looming over her, terrified her. She shrank from Katerina, and turned toward her mother. “I’m scared Mom,” she whimpered, tears in her eyes. She held out her arms to her mother, who, plainly upset too, reached out to Isabella who slipped away from the bench and ran to her.

“Oh, Isabella I am so sorry,” cried Katerina, “I just want to show you how that part should be played. Here, listen,” and she started again to play. “Largo, Isabella, largo, do you see?” The grave sadness of the piece welled out into the room, but Isabella was already standing at her mother’s knees, who clasped the girl in both arms, looking reproachfully at Katerina as though she had been betrayed. “Oh, Mrs. O’Connell,” she implored, breaking off the music, and turning around to face her. “Please forgive me;

this is not my way – I have never done that before. It was just...she was so splendid. She played like an angel. And these little mistakes... I had to show her.”

Mr. O’Connell, with furrowed brow, stood up. “Thank you, Ms. Olevsky,” he said firmly, “we understand that it was just an expression of your dedication to music. I think we’ll go home now and talk about it, and get back to you.” But in Katerina’s mind, the only one who mattered was the little girl, whom she had frightened in a deed that was unpardonable. The child was standing next to her mother but a few feet forward, facing Katerina, looking fearfully at her, her eyes half closed. Mr. O’Connor took her hand and went into the coat room. “Here, here, Isabella!” Katerina called. “Here is what it should be.” She went back to the piano and once again began to play. But they did not stop to hear. Instead, she heard the door quietly close, but she did not turn again.

She went on, the music swelling full and rich, her lips moving silently with its deep sonority. Then Andrei came to her, as he did in her dreams, his face full of love and compassion. She tossed her head proudly, welcoming him like a young girl, caressing the music as he approached.

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