

Andrew Snover  
**Normal Piano**

The piano spoke to her immediately when she saw it in the church basement among the rummage items. The blond streaks in the strawberry wood gleamed through the dust and caught the light.

“How much for the piano?” she asked the young man attending the metal box that served as a cash register.

“I don’t think it’s for sale, unfortunately. We were just sort of using it as a shelf to display our wares, so to speak.” He saw something in her expression and said, “Then again, the lady who used to play it passed away... must be seven years ago now, and it hasn’t been touched since then. If nobody else wants it, then maybe it’s yours. They might be up for selling it. Just beyond my pay grade, that’s all.”

The young man pointed her toward the pastor, who referred her to the chairman of the property committee, who told her it was a trustee issue, and he would ask for it to be added to the agenda for the next meeting. She left her name and number with each of them and elicited a promise to call either way.

As soon as she got home, she found her thoughts returning to the piano. It was a baby grand, too big for the dining room or the den, but it might work over in that one corner of the living room. She looked around. The change would be good. The love seat was threadbare and out of style now even if it had been in perfect condition. The sofa was all right, but it would have to be moved against the west wall, under the window. There was no other place for it, but over there it would all fit perfectly. She could see the whole room coming together.

It took discipline to avoid rearranging the room before she heard back from

the trustees. That week she saw a music store on a drive, and she pulled over to look at the pianos just in case. They were all beautiful in their own way, gleaming black, or rich espresso-brown wood. Upright, grand. They even sold full-size electric pianos with all eighty-eight keys, nothing like the dinky synthesizers she had played with in her youth. The selection was impressive, but she realized as she pushed a few keys on a monstrous concert piano with a six-figure price tag that she wasn’t in the market for a piano—not just any piano. She wanted that beautiful gem languishing in the dark church basement. She already thought of it as her own. She turned and left the store.

In the end, the trustees didn’t take too much convincing, but it seemed to her that the process dragged interminably. They reached out on the phone with a maybe and she blurted out at once, “Name your price.” They were kind people, and they were fair. The price was high, but, she reasoned, the money was going to a good cause. The youths of the church were traveling somewhere, or the roof of the church was being replaced. She could cut out a few luxuries; she could eat more rice. Either way, she had her prize. The trustees arranged for the piano to be delivered to her home, and she joyously rearranged her home to welcome it. When she was finished, the living room furniture was centered around an empty gap in the corner, expectant like a restaurant patron awaiting a blind date.

They got the thing in the house with no trouble. They grunted and mumbled directions to each other, but before long she was helping them take off the protective blankets and screw the nuts onto the leg bolts. They weren’t professional movers, just volunteers from the church who had gotten roped in. One of the boys squatted to attach a leg, and then took one knee when the nut wouldn’t thread. He mumbled and muttered, smiling like the nut was purposely playing a trick. He went from one knee to both knees, then curled over like a Muslim at prayer. His shirt rode up slightly, and she saw the dimples in his back, then the little archipelago of his spine pushing up his shirt. He looked like a child bent over a toy, focused on the game. Finally, he cursed, and she asked if everything was all right, but he stood up and she realized he had succeeded and cursed in victory. “Thank you,” she said, “for all your work.”

The piano fit perfectly in the space she had prepared for it. She gave the men a tip and thanked them again and again. Too big a tip. She felt that her life had turned a corner—something had hatched—and she was saying goodbye to the only witnesses. She wanted somehow to make them see the gift they had given her.

As the furniture had moved to make space for the instrument, her schedule rearranged to center on it, and her priorities spun themselves into new orbits around the time she spent sitting at the keys. The keyboard felt like it fit her hands somehow. It was the same size as any other keyboard, but her fingers could stretch to make a full seventh, and her left hand didn't need to be checked by her eyes. The keys took on personalities. G sharp below middle C had a slight fatness to it, an extra width that her fingers could feel although it was invisible to the eye. The third F key had a scar. It was thinner than a hair, but her fingers felt it and soon came to expect it. In this way all of the keys had individuality, and her hands were never lost.

The lessons she had taken from ages eight to eleven all rushed back, and her hands took to playing as if she had continued weekly for the intervening decades. Reading music was a challenge, but the piano taught her hands. After three weeks the little black marks made sense to her eyes, and she saw them for their topography. She climbed the scales and mustered focus for the chords, and then the music took on its own momentum, and her hands simply rode the notes as they rose and fell, as a shorebird might ride the wind.

A few months later she invited a friend from work to come over for a visit, soon after their desks got moved close together, and when the friend came, she asked about the piano. "So pretty," the friend exclaimed. "Is that the natural color?"

She agreed to play for her new friend, and she picked a piece at random from one of the many she kept piled on the closed top. "I'm really not so good," she said before starting. "I try to play the notes, but I'm afraid I'm not that precise."

The piece was short, but the friend asked for another, and another. She played them all with personal spirit, inhabiting them fully no matter how brief. After a tour de force rendition of a Beethoven sonata, she asked the friend, "Do you mind if I just play? Sometimes I like to improvise off a tune, see where the mood takes me." She felt comfortable in front of this new workmate, and when thinking back she was surprised that she had allowed herself to share something so intimate. It felt like confessing her faith to a stranger. But she played, and she closed her eyes and let the music take her away. When she returned she saw that her new friend was crying.

"It's just," the friend said, "I used to play the violin, and I loved it so much. I don't know why I stopped. I don't think I even own it anymore. Or it's lost in the

basement. But now I don't know—should I try to find it and get back in shape? I never..." the friend looked at her face, "I was never that good. Your face when you play. It's like a Buddha statue, or Gandhi. It's like my old grandmother napping."

They stayed polite at work, but that had been the pinnacle, and in later years she wondered whether her playing had made the other woman hopeful to play so well, or hopeless that she would ever dig down to that bedrock. Hopeless that she could rise to that plane.

Slowly the piano taught her how to truly play. Her fingers learned the keys, and her eyes learned the notes, and her ear learned the tones, and along with these somehow her heart learned the music. After a time or two through a piece, her fingers and her mind stopped working, and the music came directly from the buzzing center of her soul. She played alone for hours a day, and when she finished she felt as if she was awaking from a long dream. She thought often of her mother practicing at their small upright, grunting in frustration and sometimes even stomping a foot. Her mother had practiced for hours and played beautifully, but her position as substitute for the church organist and rehearsal accompanist for the choir had required her to rush through many hymns. She had been required only to play them well, faultlessly, rather than with the heart and soul that her daughter now knew must have been beating their wings against the cage of proper tempos and comforting melodies.

Then, as her time with the piano continued, she grasped the sadness in the happy songs, the wildness in the tame ones. She didn't realize at first that this was anything rare, until it was pointed out to her by a houseguest. Whenever she hosted people the conversations would naturally cluster in the kitchen and dining room, until eventually the piano would call to her from its corner of the living room. Her feet would carry her there, and before long her guests would be called in to join her by the music pouring forth. One evening her friend said, "I never knew you could play like that. But really, even more than that, I never knew anyone could play 'Joy to the World' with such sadness. Sorrow. It sounded like 'Ave Maria.' You have a gift."

And she smiled and shrugged and said, "It's the piano."

The friend replied, "I've seen a piano before. That's just a normal piano. A

pretty one, for sure. But it's the way you play. It's like you wrote the song yourself, and I can tell why you felt the need to write it."

She shrugged again and said, "It's just the piano, really."

And it really was. As her playing improved she tried other pianos, out at a friend's house or in an empty auditorium at the school where her sister taught. She appreciated the character of each one, the different stiffness of the keys, the pressure it took to push the pedals. But none of them responded to her the way her piano at home did, or she didn't respond to them the same.

As time went by the piano became the way she heard the world. A song would catch her ear on the radio, and she could hold it in her mind, but she never knew whether she liked or disliked it—whether she believed it—until she played it at home. The keys told her what they thought, and they sometimes surprised her. A melody on the radio she noticed for its fun bounce sounded clunky and trite in her living room conservatory, or a lonesome song turned out to be just a pop tune in a minor key. Sometimes a small snatch of a jingle would unfold itself into a sweeping adventure. The piano seemed like an element or a chemical, reacting with other elements in unexpected ways, forming bonds and synthesizing, combusting, according to some set of rules that would take careful research to suss out. As the years passed she began to hear the world through the reactions of the piano, as a person with poor eyesight might see only through lenses of a certain strength.

Her time at the keyboard became her journal, her meditation. The voices of her friends began to take on musical notes that she could almost see, their conversations walking up and down the keyboard. At a coffee shop she heard a large, barrel-chested older man trying to flirt with a young female cashier, and she said to herself, "I wonder what my piano would think of this."

Even when nothing new had happened to her that she needed to sort out on the keys, she could sit down to play and soon enough a memory would surface and carry her along. A little tune brought up her mother at the kitchen counter, pant leg dusty with flour, too busy to look when she brought in something to show. What had it been? She followed that small melody, expanded it, slowed it down. What had it been? Something from the yard outside. A creature of some sort? No, no, it was hard, unalive. Her left hand stroked slowly, like she might rub an upset child's back to comfort. What had it been? Not an animal, but it was a discovery, a finding. A bone? A shell? The yard had been full of terror and wonder for her



as a child. She once saw a fawn, curled like a rosebud in a nest of leaves. She once found a cat that had been hit by a car and dragged itself under the hostas to die.

The fawn was a nice memory, a small run that her right hand made, tripping upward through the notes. But the cat was closer to the mark. What had it been? The steady tones of her left hand called her back down, searching. What had it been, the item in her hand, the palm-up offering of pain? That cat, its blood on the grass, the slight rise of the chest, the way her eyes avoided of their own volition the broken part of the animal. What was it? Her left hand pounded a chord. She hadn't brought the cat inside to show her mother—of course that couldn't be it.

Then, like pendent clouds finally releasing their rain, the right hand found the answer. The shells. The small blue shards. The eggshells on the flagstones. The small nest above, too low.

The tempo had picked up, her right hand running through scales up and up, but always dropping back to join the left and its inexorable beat. As her mind circled closer to the truth, the right hand was darting up and back, up and back, like an animal trying to escape a snare, like a cock fluttering in a fighting pit.

Her mother's white-dusted pant leg above her, and the sudden red smear from her hand. The cupped eggshell, with its contents still inside. Too young yet: too little, too new. Her mother too busy to even look down until finally she had tapped enough red streaks onto the white-and-gray denim to make it clear something was wrong.

And then the scream, the whoosh of air as her mother dropped to a crouch beside her, shouting, "Is that your blood? Show me your hands. Show me! Is that your blood?"

Her hands at the keyboard slowed, and the first melody returned, no longer probing. She played it with steadiness and certainty. She had cried then, eye to eye with her mother, unable to answer the question. No, not her blood, no, not hers, no. But when her mother asked, she had nodded yes. *Is that your blood?* Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Her mother saw the egg and said, "Oh, baby, what did you do? What did you do?"

In this way she remembered everything. Her whole life took on melodies and motifs. She could hum her heartbreak at not being chosen for a school play. She could whistle her first lover's hair, his eyes, the feel of his hands on her waist as he

lifted her onto the hood of her car, the friction of his fingers as he tucked her hair behind her ear. The great and small events of her life took on order, and arranged themselves into the grand work, impossible arpeggios somehow harmonizing into the opus that she was living out every day in front of the piano.

After years, something changed. She sat down and played a simple scale, and the F note sounded slightly sharp. It was a small problem, but it threw her off, and she was unable to force herself to overlook it. So she called to get the instrument tuned. After the man had done his work, she sat down to play for the first time in a week, and middle C sounded low.

She called another company, and they came to tune it. The technician said that it sounded all right to him, although his machine did indeed show that a few notes were slightly off. "You shouldn't be able to hear that, though," he said. "It's such a small difference I think only a dog could tell."

But she could tell. The black keys somehow sounded like the white keys, and the lowest octave had taken on an odd plunking timbre, rather than the deep resonance that she cherished. So she called a third company, and they came out. The radiator was the problem, this woman said. The radiator was too close to the piano, and the changes in heat were wreaking havoc on the wires and wood. Temperature and humidity, that's what you have to look out for.

They sold her a humidifier, specially designed. It had a small reservoir and a heating element that mounted on the underside of the piano. It monitored the humidity inside the piano, and switched on whenever it was needed. Best of all, it came with sensor and a small red light that lit up whenever the water level got low. They included a watering can, a long, arcing thing like a hummingbird's beak that would let her refill it without getting on her hands and knees. She was glad the problem had been identified and solved. She watered the instrument lovingly, sometimes crawling underneath to make sure she wasn't overfilling the reservoir. It felt like gassing up a single-seat airplane.

But the piano went out of tune again. She played for friends, and they all protested that her music was lovely as ever, but her ear told her otherwise. She began to read the sheet music carefully, methodically. She had to trust that if her fingers played the notes on the sheet, then the right sounds would come out. But they didn't.



Sometimes they did, to be sure. She still sat on the bench every day, trying and trying. Not giving up. And sometimes the instrument responded as it always had, and her hands wandered the keyboard, roaming, running free. But then a note would come out wrong, and another. She would center around that key, unable to avoid it, her hands sniffing closer until she was playing it again and again. D4, D5, D4, D5, her ear straining for the difference. D4, D5. D4, D4, D4, D4, D4.

Eventually she stopped. She never came to the decision, but every time she had gone a few days and her fingers began to itch for the keys, she pleaded with the music, "Stay gone. Stay gone." But the music would not listen, and it crept from her hands through her mind to her heart, until she was back at the keyboard. Every session ended with a painful, tuneless banging on a single key, and every time she hit the same key, it was like her mind was the piano wire and she was winding it around a peg, cranking tighter and tighter.

The red light glared at her from the humidifier under the piano. It wasn't bright enough to cast a shadow, but when the lights were off in the living room, the red dot was there, and as she looked at it, she felt it grow and shrink, as if it was advancing and receding, approaching her eye in waves. So she took the battery out of the sensor. She had friends over, and they asked her to play, and she protested that the thing was out of tune. They didn't believe her, because recently she said this no matter how the piano sounded, but she played the first notes of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and murmurs of agreement went around the room.

The piano sat. She heard a pop song in a department store one day, and it got stuck in her head, and a week later she still couldn't get it out. She resolved to try the piano, wary, like she was taking strong medicine and needed to be precise with the dosage or risk harmful side effects. But she sat down at the bench and tried the notes of the song, and everything came out wrong. She pounded the keys and tried to sing the melody to force the keys to join in. She knew no words for the song, so the singing came out as a throaty, open-mouthed, groaning hum, and she sang louder and louder until her voice cracked and she was sobbing.

She still had the number for the church trustee. Yes, they would take the piano back after all these years, but they couldn't refund her money, of course. That was

fine with her, as long as the thing was gone. They offered to give her a note for tax purposes, marking it as a charitable donation. The value could be what she had paid those years ago, or even more if she thought the value had increased. If there had been any changes, any improvements. But no, she told them, there had been none of those. A letter wouldn't be necessary. Just get it out.

They sent over young people, just as before. The young people took off the legs and removed the reservoir for the humidifier. They got the piano up onto a dolly and wheeled it to the door, but it didn't fit through.

They took the door off its hinges and tried again, but they could only fit the low part of the piano through the opening. It was too tall. She got out a measuring tape, and they checked all the dimensions, and the leader said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, I don't think we could get it to fit even if it was as light as a feather. It's just too big." He showed her the tape against the piano, against the doorway. She knew it couldn't be true, but the numbers were clear, and the thing itself seemed to have grown. When they wheeled it in all those years ago, she had looked over the top and seen the man's face, red with strain. She could still picture it. Now the piano towered over her.

She didn't argue. When she tells it, she didn't argue. She didn't protest that it was impossible, that the instrument had to fit back out. She didn't try to reason with them that pianos don't grow, doors don't shrink. She just asked them to wheel it back into the living room and put the legs back on. And it has sat there ever since, while her life goes on around it. There are only two possible ways to combine the furniture, and one of them partitions off a full third of the room for the piano and leaves a cramped semicircle for everything else. She tried this for a while, but the remaining portion of the room was too small for a true living space and made the whole room feel confined. Eventually she just rearranged the couches so that the piano was back in its center-stage position, with every event in the living room swirling in front of the beautiful dusklight-orange instrument with its closed lid.

Her little toddler nephew likes to climb up on the bench and bang on the keys, and a cousin used it to practice for a few years. There are water stain rings on the top, and scratches on the keyboard lid. Sometimes a friend will pound out "Chopsticks" or "Heart and Soul." But you'll never hear her play. Never again.