

Please Don't Kick the Piano

James M. Thorne

Some wise and enterprising piano manufacturer would do well to produce a kick-proof model with a sturdy padded panel just above the pedals. The walnut and mahogany veneers are beautiful but vulnerable to the petulant toes of teenage girls. At least so thought the wise and enterprising Mrs. Bloom as she winced at the veneer-threatening percussion that accompanied her daughter's practice session. "Kick it one more time and you'll be down under the piano with a rag and furniture polish!" she yelled. But her own toes hurt with some long-ago memories.

"I've got a better idea," daughter Lisa called back. "Let me get under the piano with a box of matches, and I'll burn the horrid thing up! Mom, why do I have to take these dumb lessons? What possible good will it ever do me?"

"It will make you into a refined and talented young lady," Mrs. Bloom lied. "And boys will come from afar just to sit under the window and listen to you play, their hearts breaking from the beauty of it," she added, carrying the lie just a little further.

She thought about her own husband with his tin ear and knew of a certainty that her own arduous years of piano lessons were of absolutely no consequence in their courtship. She had taken him to a symphony once; he had fallen asleep and snored magnificently through Barber's Adagio for Strings. She was so embarrassed that it had become a favorite story of his, repeated endlessly at parties while she stood with a fixed smile and imagined herself feeding him, piece by piece, down the garbage disposal.

"If it's supposed to make me into a refined and talented young lady," Lisa retorted, "why is it turning me into a raving maniac?"

"You were always a raving maniac," Mrs. Bloom said sweetly. "Maybe, with enough practice, you can become a refined and

talented young lady maniac. Boys won't come from afar to sit under the window of a raving maniac."

"No boy is going to come and sit under my window, anyway," Lisa said with the finality that betrays cautious hope.

"Don't be too sure. Kevin the paper boy sat in our driveway on his bicycle yesterday for about five minutes listening to you practice, and that's a fact because I watched him."

"Not Kevin the paper boy! Oh, Mom, that's horrible! Kevin plays the piano at assemblies and accompanies the school choir. He plays concert stuff. That's like having Paganini standing outside your window listening to every mistake you make!"

"Paganini astraddle his bicycle," laughed Mrs. Bloom. "Besides, Paganini was a violinist."

"I don't care what he was. This is it! I quit piano today! I can't have Kevin the paper boy laugh at my mistakes!"

"He didn't seem to be laughing. In fact, he seemed to be rather enjoying it. Look," Mrs. Bloom suggested, "you don't have to practice in the afternoon if you're worried about Kevin the paper boy. Do your homework in the afternoon and practice right after supper. That way your father can listen to you instead of Kevin."

"A nice touch," Mrs. Bloom congratulated herself. "A little coup. Let him suffer through the tantrums and the trills. He deserves it! Oh, yes he does!"

So she was perhaps a little disappointed when the new schedule worked beautifully. Lisa suddenly became quite dutiful—even enthusiastic—about practicing in the evening, and her father seemed to tolerate the sessions without any apparent discomfort. It didn't seem quite fair. A couple of weeks later, she was surprised again when Lisa reported that her music teacher had suggested that she try some duets with her mother. "It's to help me learn how to accompany people," she explained. "I have to learn how to keep playing and not stop when I make a mistake."

"What about my mistakes?" objected Mrs. Bloom. "It's been years since I had to practice." She suddenly realized she was groping for excuses just like her daughter. Lisa picked up on the rationalization immediately. "But Mother, think of how talented and refined you will become. Think of the men from afar, sitting under your window, their hearts breaking."

"Astraddle their bicycles," giggled Mrs. Bloom.

So they selected a Mozart sonatina arranged for four hands. Mrs. Bloom practiced a little in the midmornings, when she was all alone and didn't have to worry about Kevin the paper boy laughing at her mistakes. Lisa practiced right after supper, mostly ignored by her tolerant but tin-eared father, and then the two women sat down on the piano bench together. By mutual and unspoken consent, Mrs. Bloom assumed the lower clef, and Lisa played the upper melody. The two suffered through miscues, stops, starts, and initial awkwardness; for two brains, two pairs of eyes and ears, four hands, and twenty fingers were all trying to cope with Mozart's musical dance of ideas, communicated through two centuries to Mrs. Bloom and Lisa, seated side by side on the piano bench.

Once, during her own practice time, Mrs. Bloom gave a frustrated—but tentative—kick at the piano just to see if it felt the same. She had special trouble with a trill for the left hand. Unreservedly right-handed, she could not make her fingers move fast enough for a proper trill. She tried crossing her right hand over and letting more nimble fingers handle the trill, but it was too distracting, and finally she had to eliminate the trill and simply play the bass note. Mr. Bloom didn't even notice.

Mrs. Bloom had an odd moment of reflection a few days later when Lisa's music teacher told her that the idea for the duet was entirely Lisa's, although the teacher seemed pleased that Mrs. Bloom had taken up the challenge that her daughter's decision had posed. Mrs. Bloom searched for the motivation behind Lisa's untruth and decided that it was a simple ploy to make her a fellow sufferer by requiring her own practice routine. The plan had backfired, because she was beginning to enjoy it.

Then one evening the piece came together. About a third of the way through, with no mistakes by either, each became aware that they were completely in sync with each other. They could sense each other's growing excitement and began to anticipate each other's timing and inflections. There was first a shared expectancy and then a growing certainty that this time would be perfect, that not only would there be no mistakes, but they were incapable of making mistakes. They felt the tangible thrill that jazz

musicians feel sometimes, late in the lonely nights, when the music takes hold of them and plays them as if they had become their own instruments. They felt the cumulative excitement of a team on a hot streak, when everything works and the crowd goes wild with excitement and anticipation.

The thrill grew and carried them through to the final chords, and Lisa squealed with excitement and gave her mother a hug and a squeeze. Even Mr. Bloom looked up and smiled. Mrs. Bloom went to bed that night inexpressibly happy and curled up against her husband; her dreams were full of great, round things which seemed to burst when one touched them, filling everything with such incredible sweetness that she was sorry when she woke up and had to make breakfast for Mr. Bloom.

A few days later, Lisa somehow got Kevin the paper boy disengaged from his bicycle and into the house. "My music teacher gave me this duet," Mrs. Bloom heard her daughter explain disingenuously as she steered Kevin over to the piano bench. "Mom has been practicing it a little with me, but she gets so busy and really doesn't have the time." Mrs. Bloom stood in the doorway and leaned against the jamb, twisting the dishtowel in her hands, partly amused and absolutely fascinated by her daughter's manipulation of Kevin.

Then they began to play, and from the opening notes, they were in sync. Kevin, sight-reading the music for the first time, handled the bass part crisply and flawlessly. Mrs. Bloom's breath caught as he executed the left-hand trill with precision and grace. Lisa, with weeks of careful practice behind her, was caught up in Kevin's technical skill, and Mrs. Bloom could feel the electrical excitement build as they fed on each other's playing.

"So!" thought Mrs. Bloom. "So! This is what it was all about. The whole idea for the duet was for Kevin the paper boy, and I was simply used." The initial amusement gave way, and a strange sadness welled up as she seemed to feel herself supplanted in her daughter's affections.

Kevin's and Lisa's hands danced through the final chords, and Lisa squealed with excitement and gave Kevin a hug and a squeeze. Mrs. Bloom turned quickly away; even that had been simply practice for Kevin.

At supper that night, Mrs. Bloom winked at her daughter and said, "So, your mother doesn't have the time to practice with you, and you had to enlist Kevin the paper boy!"

"Isn't he cute, Mom?" gushed Lisa. "And how do you like the way he plays? Isn't he marvelous? We've made a deal. He helps me with my practicing in the afternoon, and I help him finish his paper route."

"Did you need to lie?"

"It was only a little lie," grinned Lisa with absolute innocence. "Now you don't have to practice anymore, except when I'm trying to learn a new duet. I don't want Kevin to hear all my mistakes. Besides, you told me that piano playing would make me into a refined young lady, and what good is a refined young lady if she can't attract boys?"

"Sitting under your window, their hearts breaking," said Mrs. Bloom in a tiny voice, wondering why her own heart was breaking.

"Silly me," she thought that night, when her tears began to flow onto her pillow. "Silly, old, foolish me. I should be happy that I have such a clever daughter. I should be happy that my clever daughter has snared a boyfriend. This is the way life is." And she held in her sobs so she wouldn't wake her husband because there wasn't a thing she could tell him that he would even begin to understand.

James M. Thorne is an architect, practicing in Sunnyvale, California. He never kicked the piano, but his sisters all did. He won third place with this story in the 1994 Short Story contest sponsored by *BYU Studies*.