

The Somber Melody of the Untuned Tuner

By Michael David Johnson

“Ow!” The piano tuner flinched, his lids shut tightly as if pulled by strings. He hammered down his blade and quickly tore off a small piece of tissue paper. He licked it and keyed the small cut on his face then quickly scuttled to the vacant kitchen.

The kitchen was poorly lit and looked rarely used. The sink was dressed in a small dry layer of filth and the counters were besmirched just the same. Only a small empty glass sat on the table. The glass was stained with the vagrant smell of cheap liquor.

Next to the kitchen was a small wooden table big enough for two, maybe more, resting in a shadowed corner. A single chair stood aside the table, cocked sideways out from under it. Above the table was a humble bulb fixed plain and alone. It was not on, nor were any of the lights in the unit. They never seemed to be on. The only light that ever came in crept between a dingy set of curtains and a grimy window on the east side of the flat. The thin stream of light would sneak through the dirty panes and sullied fabric halting on a finely crafted piano covered with a solid layer of dust. Its tone could probably produce angels, being that it resides with such a tradesman. The piano however stood like the bulb, alone and untainted.

One last note rang before the piano tuner picked up the earpiece to a black phone hanging upon the bare wall. “Hello?” His b-flat resonated into the phone. “Oh yes, hello.... yes ma’am...8:30?...okay, I’ll see you then.” He placed the phone back in its place.

He sauntered down a narrow hall, also bare on the walls except for an aged black and white photo. The tired portrait was of a woman, probably in her thirties and full of life. She had fair skin and deep bright eyes. The faded memory of her smile made an attempt to light the dark grey hall.

In a musty bathroom he finished his shave. He rinsed his face with cold water from the worn chrome faucet and patted it down with an old white cloth. He hung the rag on a hook next to his small rectangular mirror above the sink.

“What shirt should I wear today boy?” The piano tuner looked down to his shaggy hound melted on a little round rug. The hound popped his head up and watched the man as he shuffled through his closet mostly full of white collared shirts. “I think this one will do it, what do ya think, eh?” The dog lowered its head as if disappointed and, with his large eyes, stared up at the piano tuner holding a clean white collared shirt. The piano tuner buttoned up the shirt, tucked it in his black slacks, and rubbed his hand on the hound’s soft, wrinkled head.

Back in the musty bathroom, the man ran a palm of grease through his thick brown hair and combed it back. “Looking sharp old man.” The piano tuner took a last glance in the mirror.

He put on a black reefer hanging from a coat rack by the door, snatched a small black leather bag near by, and walked out the door of the street-side apartment.

The piano tuner raised his fist to a small wooden door of an apartment on the wealthier side of town. He waited. No response. The piano tuner put his leather bag on the ground and reached into his reefer. He pulled out a small silver pocket watch. It read 8:29. He stuffed the silver watch back into his pocket and lifted his hand once more. He

tapped the door twice and was about to tap a third, but was halted by the opening of the door.

A fair woman, probably near the same age as the piano tuner, stood at the entryway of the apartment. Bright lights shining through the doorway gave the woman the illusion of glowing. Her blonde locks shimmered in the lights, outlining her face full of glamour, full of life. The piano tuner froze for a moment. "May I help you sir?"

"Oh, uh yes ma'am," the piano tuner finally bellowed out. "The name is Jonathan Stillman. I am here for your piano. To tune it that is."

The woman let out a soft giggle beneath her breath, "Oh yes, right this way."

Jonathan picked up his bag and followed her into the apartment. The air in the apartment was like spring in the park garden, fresh and new. Jonathan passed a little wooden bureau on his right side. It was smooth and well polished. Jonathan reflected off the piece. To his left a large window let the sun in and caress the living room and everything in it. A beige sofa basked in front of the window and a coffee table with a marble top and brass legs sat in front of it. The walls were coated with a clean white paint to which the sun admired its ray. In the midst of the sun's brilliance stood an old piano. The wood on the instrument was not like that of the bureau. It still let off a glare, but not as vivid. The ebony polish was wearing. Ivory keys on the piano gave it a refined touch, however the keys were wearing as well.

The woman walked him toward the piano, "Well, here it is Mr. Stillman."

"A beautiful piece ma'am."

"It has seen better days though."

"It's still in good shape, just well loved," Jonathan remarked. There was a short pause. "If you don't mind, I am going to hop to it now."

"Oh certainly, don't let me keep you. I am just going to be in the other room here straightening up a bit. Please let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you ma'am."

"You can call me Sera." She smiled and walked toward a hallway.

Jonathan removed his reefer and placed it on the back of the sofa, which was near the piano.

An hour passed by and Sera walked back into the room. She was sifting through papers in the top drawer of the bureau, focused on her task. Sera glanced up at Jonathan, who was heavily concentrated. She stopped her rummaging and watched. His ear was raised as he stretched each string. His hand and body motions moved elegant and gentle, like an artist. He seem to pay careful attention to every movement, every sound. He nodded his head slightly as each pitch was released from the strings.

Sera stood silent and stared. A few minutes went by before Jonathan turned his head toward Sera. She quickly reached back to the drawer and began rummaging again. She closed the drawer empty handed and began to pace back toward the hallway. Midway out of the room she stopped and turned to Jonathan.

"Would you like something to drink Mr. Stillman?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, no thank you ma'am," Jonathan looked up in Sera's direction while he answered and then proceeded back to tuning.

Sera stood for a second, perhaps looking for more to say, and then silent still, walked away.

The apartment was full of tension as Jonathan struck and adjusted each discordant note. The singular notes continued for about an hour until the sound of the last pitch bent gracefully into place and faded to a rest.

A melody broke the silence. A solemn harmony, with notes only angels might speak, filled the air. Sera walked out from the hallway. She stood next to a wall at the opening of the room where Jonathan sat at the piano. She watched. Jonathan did not play the instrument; he was involved with it. His arms swayed and fingers pressed the keys as the ocean and the shore on a calm day might dance with one another. After a moment passed he stopped, turned, and looked to where Sera was watching. This time, when she saw that he noticed her, she did not scuttle. Instead she smirked, her lips curved slightly up into her cheeks.

“Ma’am...”

“Please, call me Sera.”

Jonathan nodded and continued, “I think that you’ll find the tune of this piano to be quite pleasing.”

“I am sure of it. Thank you very much.” She paused. “What was that piece that you were playing?” Sera asked with stern interest.

“It has no name,” Jonathan replied discretely.

“Well, it was beautiful.”

“Thank you ma’a...” He stopped and cleared his throat, “Thank you Sera.”

There was a pause. She looked at him.

“Well, I have to get going now, other appointments soon.”

“Right, of course.” Sera pulled out a small envelope and handed it to Jonathan. “I’m sure this will be enough.”

Jonathan, without opening the envelope, put it in his pants pocket. “Thank you, now I must be on my way.”

Sera walked Jonathan to the door. He opened the door and turned toward her, “Have a nice day, Sera.” He turned again, stepped out of the apartment, and shut the door behind him.

Sera leaned back against a wall next to the door. She looked around the house, and toward the piano. Suddenly she stood up and walked toward the piano. She stopped next to the sofa and picked up Jonathan’s black reefer. She hustled back toward the door and opened it. She looked around outside her apartment. “Mr. Stillman...” There was no response. “Jonathan,” She called out. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen. She walked back into her apartment and closed the door. She hung the reefer in a closet near the front entryway. “He’ll come back for it,” she said assuredly. “Or I’ll call him later.”

Jonathan unlocked the door to his apartment and walked in. The shaggy hound, lying like an old rug on the floor, lifted his head up toward Jonathan. “Hey boy.” He set his bag down and walked into the kitchen. He opened a cabinet, pulled out a glass and grabbed a bottle of scotch from another cabinet. He poured the liquor into the glass and gulped a sip of it. He looked down to the hound. “Boy, I just tuned a piano for a gem.” The hound rose its head again suddenly and looked toward the man. “No boy, I didn’t. I tuned and I left.”

The hound lowered its head, almost as if disappointed. “Aaarrru,” the hound let out a small sigh.

“I know boy, I should have.” He paused and stared at a wall. He didn’t appear to be focused on the wall though, just that he was looking towards its direction. He gulped down the remainder of his glass of scotch. “Maybe next time boy.”

Jonathan looked toward the entryway of his apartment. Next to the door stood an empty coat rack. “Damn. I left my coat.” He looked down toward the hound. “I’ll be back boy. I’m gonna go pick it up before it gets any later in the day.” Jonathan rushed out of the apartment.

Sera looked at a small clock on a nightstand. 4:07. Jonathan had yet to return for his coat. She walked out of her room into the hallway lit by a bright yellow light. From the hallway she kept on toward the bureau. On the wall, next to the bureau was a black phone. She picked up the receiver.

Knock, knock.

She replaced the receiver, walked to the entryway and opened the door. Jonathan stood still. His eyes admired her.

“Mr. Stillman,” her words seemed to take him from his still stance, “I was just going to call you. You left your coat on the coach.”

“Uh, yes, I didn’t even realize until I got home. The weather was so warm this afternoon that I didn’t need it.”

“Well I have it right here.” She opened the closet next to her and emerged with his black reefer.

“Thank you.” There was brief silence. “I should be going now. Thanks again.” Jonathan began to turn away.

Quickly Sera spoke, “Oh, won’t you come in for a moment? Have some tea or maybe something to eat?”

Jonathan turned toward her, “Well I…”

“I mean, it’s getting to be eve, and if you don’t have anything to do tonight, I’d really enjoy some company.”

Jonathan looked hesitant. She stepped aside with room for him to enter. He hadn’t answered her yet. Her smile invited him in further. Her blond hair glinted from the light of the late day’s sun gleaming through the window in the room behind her. She was still glowing, as she did earlier that day. He stepped into the apartment and she shut the door behind him.

A lamp embraced the room with a warm yellow glow. Two empty mugs sat on a rectangular coffee table near the sofa next to the piano. Next to the mugs were two plates, each with a few little crumbs. Jonathan and Sera sat on the sofa smiling and laughing. Jonathan pulled out his silver pocket watch. 9:47.

“Oh. It’s getting to be late. I didn’t even notice the time go by.”

“Thank you for coming in, Jonathan. I had a wonderful evening.”

“No, thank you. I haven’t had this much fun since… Well, for a long time. I really must be going now though.”

They both stood up and walked toward the door. He opened the door.

“Now don’t forget your coat this time.”

“Or maybe I should.” Jonathan chuckled.

Sera grinned. “Should I expect to see you again?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Soon I hope.”

“Very soon.”

“Tomorrow night”

“Yes...tomorrow night.”

“Alright then Jonathan, I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Have a good night Sera. Sleep well.”

“You too Jonathan.”

There was a pause. Jonathan looked lost for a moment. Sera stood by the door

“Well, uh...goodnight” Jonathan nodded his head, turned and walked away.

As Sera gently closed the door, a tiny creak decrescendoeoed to a rest.