



Für Vater

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‘He’d love to hear it again,’ Mum said. ‘We all would, son.’

I flinched, and she looked up from her coffee. I tugged my blouse up a bit further. It wasn’t low cut, but it had a habit of slipping down on me anyway. I sighed, trying to smile.

‘It’s been years, Mum.’

She smiled. ‘Since you’ve seen him?’

‘Since I’ve played.’

‘Really? When you were with-’

‘Yeah.’

She reached a hand across the table. I let the tips of my fingers brush hers.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘He’ll understand.’

I glanced at the time in the corner of my phone. 2:28am. I blinked. The keyboard sat up against the wall and, with a groan, I got to my feet.

I couldn’t find the keyboard’s stand, so I set it on my chest of drawers. It wasn’t the most comfortable setup; I had to curl my legs to the side just to sit down, but, thinking back to school where I had to balance it on an office chair, this wasn’t so bad.

I placed my finger on C, and frowned. It was dusty. Yawning, I got to my feet to look for a cloth. It was embarrassing how long it took me to find one. Well, a clean one; I found two crusted with makeup in the bathroom. The clean one was hidden behind a dozen plastic carrier bags in a cupboard. I wouldn’t say I’m a hoarder. Though, looking around the room, others may disagree.

I sat, right hand on a high E, left on the A ready for the third bar. And I sat, and I sat. My ring finger twitched, but it would not play. Once, I actually pressed the key, but too softly to even make a sound. I think I imagined the whisper of an E.

It was so easy to see Dad's hands near mine. So easy to see him playing the low notes while I played the melody. Sometimes, he'd poke at one end of the piano to produce an obnoxiously high B while I practised, and I'd look up to see him grinning, a mischievous glint in his eye. I don't think I ever shouted at him, but I remember being angry at the time.

I brought my hands to my side, and took a deep breath. It was shakier than I intended. Closing my eyes, I counted to five, then put my hands back in place.

Für Elise - also known by the catchy title of Bagatelle No. 25 in A Minor - is one of the first pieces most piano students will learn. Its melody is instantly recognisable, and easy for all ears to appreciate; it's the kind of piece that brings images to the mind, even to the less synesthetic of us.

I imagine a couple walking through a garden, unforced smiles on their faces. They don't hold hands.

I slammed my fists on the keys. I couldn't play the fucking thing. A child could play cleaner chord progressions.

I stood to get some water. I downed the glass in one go, and poured another. I stared at the keyboard. Even after so long, the keys around the middle C were darker; a thin layer of what I'd guess was sweat had dried to them. I rubbed my eyes, and pulled out my phone. 3:32am. No notifications. I loaded up Tinder, and swiped right on everyone.

Most newcomers to piano will only learn the right hand of Für Elise, and only its first section. The second section, when the key swaps from A Minor to C Major, is significantly more difficult.

It adds colour to the previous melody; if our couple was walking through a garden before, perhaps they have stopped by chirping birds to eat apples. Perhaps the couple sits on a bench, looking out at a glimmering sea. Still, they do not touch.

Mum answered the phone quickly. 'What is it?'

'I can't play.'

Hesitation. 'Honey, it's today. You said-'

'I can't do it. I tried, and I'm just shit at it. I can't play.'

'I think you're too hard on yourself.' She paused, waiting for a response. 'Listen. I'll come pick you up, so you don't have to take the bus. Would that make things easier?'

'What? Why would it?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she snapped. No, snapped was an unfair word. It was more that it was blurted out, out of desperation. She sounded so tired. 'I just want to help. I don't know how to help you, and I just want to help, okay?'

I looked down at the keyboard. 'Has Dad seen me?'

'He's seen pictures.'

I gripped my skirt. 'Won't he be mad at me?'

A question piano students often ask is, of course, who is the "Elise" in Für Elise?

Mum was on the way, and I started playing other Beethoven. Moonlight Sonata was the first piece I ever learned, and my hands started the melody without my permission.

I imagined Dad sitting here with his pale hands on the black keys. He commented on how awful they sounded together - 'I don't know how you make those ugly notes sound

good' - and I tried to explain key signatures to him. By staying within the same notes of a scale, black keys that sounded ugly alone could add powerful colour to a piece or, in Moonlight Sonata, even be the root note.

Mum knocked on the door. She tried to do it in a sort of rhythm, but it was way off. I landed softly on the C sharp for the cadence.

'Coming,' I said.

It's in the second break of Für Elise that we understand that the piece is not from the perspective of our happy couple. There is an onlooker, madly in love with one of them, hiding in the bushes. When the couple laughs, the onlooker nearly screams, and retreats further into the bushes.

I'd lost the bag for the keyboard too, so I had to carry it under an arm into the hospital. An older man being wheeled by a nurse scowled at me. I swallowed, looking away and following closer to Mum. The receptionist recognised her, and he was all smiles as they talked.

'He's been expecting you,' the receptionist said. 'You can head right over.'

I struggled with the keyboard, trying to lift it higher. Mum nodded to me.

'My ... daughter's going to play for him. Isn't that right?'

There's always that brief moment of confusion, when someone refers to the huge person as a woman. I can see it in their eyes, and then they realise what was meant, and maybe they force a too-wide smile onto their face. Maybe they frown.

Maybe Mum had mentioned me before, because the receptionist didn't have to do either. He just moved his smile over to me, and said it was lovely to meet me. I said I couldn't offer to shake his hand, gesturing to the keyboard, and he laughed.

The week before dad woke up, I had my first surgery.

Dad had aged decades in the years since I'd seen him. Countless wrinkles on his forehead, his skin tight around his eyes. And he was so thin. I could see his cheekbones.

I gave him a smile, and he offered a hug. I looked around for somewhere to set the keyboard down, and settled for the window-sill. I gave Dad the hug. He was so light.

'You look so different,' he said.

I swallowed. 'Yeah.'

'It's good. It suits you.'

I pulled my blouse up. 'Thanks.'

Mum brought in a chair, and set it over next to the keyboard. I hurriedly explained that I'd lost the stand, and Dad nodded, smiling. Against his withered, bony face, his eyes were so bright.

A nurse was standing in the corner of the room, and I turned to her. She was smiling too. 'Is it okay if I ask you to leave?'

'Of course. I'll be just outside if you need me.'

Mum sat on the bed next to Dad. When I sat to play, I couldn't see them, so I stared out the window. Dad had a room away from the car park, so the view was of a bright green field, with dense trees beyond. Far past, in the distance, there were hazy outlines of hills. There were large clouds, but they were hardly moving at all, frozen in the sky, waiting for me to play.

So I did.

Für Elise has always been a favourite of his. In a way, I'm envious of him and my mother; they won't waste time overthinking pieces, so they find more beauty in it.

I messed up in bar four. I hit an F. I nearly stopped there and then, nearly opened the window and threw the keyboard straight out, but I kept going. Softer. Slower. I knew Dad wouldn't mind the mistake, if he even noticed it.

I stared out the window as my right hand moved on its own, bumbling along and hitting all sorts of wrong keys. I looked out across the field, and, even from this distance, saw the trees swaying in the wind. I imagined the couple in the forest. They picked apples. My dad would never eat an apple again.

I stopped playing. My parents were sitting together, their hair starting to grey, my father too weak to even stand. Too early, too unfair. They didn't touch. My throat ached.

'I just want you to know, Dad, I just, I really love you, okay?'

He said nothing, but just nodded and smiled.

'Really,' I said. 'I wish I was better for you. Oh, now I'm making it about me, and I just-'

'Play,' he said softly. He gestured to the keyboard. 'It's okay.'

I looked down. My hands were shaking as I put them back in place. I closed my eyes, and started to play again.

I was crying just before that last section change; when we realise that we're onlookers, watching love, but never attaining it. That wasn't right. Not for my mother and father, still smiling, and not for me, still breathing.

I stopped playing mid-bar, murmured an apology, and skipped right to the end. Für Elise's famous melody echoed one last time, and I played it so slowly, so softly it could barely be heard over the plastic click of the keys.

I played the perfect cadence on A.

Nobody quite agrees on who "Elise" was. Beethoven died in 1827 and the piece wasn't discovered until 1867, with the words "Für Elise" scrawled messily across the top. There are dozens of theories on who it was, but it's hard to imagine that any of the possible Elises returned the love Beethoven had for them; he was, of course, the onlooker.