

Dedushka's Piano

Pianos didn't belong in hardware stores. Least of all, working pianos didn't belong in hardware stores. The initial plan was to move the piano back to the house or at least move it to the storeroom. However, the piano had no wheels and the instrument couldn't be maneuvered without dismantling the shelves, despite their best attempts. It remained in the far back corner of the store collecting dirt and sawdust.

Alex couldn't say he had one, specific problem with the piano. In fact, it eventually just joined into the building's decor. He would get to the store after school, sit behind the desk trying to focus on his college applications and the piano would be his mostly silent companion. The problem was when the piano came into view of curious eyes and touching hands.

The children were the worst, in Alex's opinion. While Dad was looking at different screws or Mom was debating various types of sealants, the piano seemed to call to their children. The sound gave Alex endless headaches as the grubby hands slammed on the exposed keys. They would close the piano lid, but fingers would still find the ivories and the pounding would begin again. As they locked the shop at night, Alex would run his fingers through his hair as if a headache could be drawn out through his follicles.

Alex had been working in the shop on a Saturday, the final wave of weekend warriors clear of the building and allowing him to actually focus on his own work. The piano was quite after another round of "Bashing with Clenched Hands" by an eight-year-old with a bad attitude. Alex didn't mind working the weekends while his parents were

out running errands. He got some spare cash before meeting with his friends and the store was mostly quiet.

The electronic tone buzzed and young woman walked in, slowly browsing the shelves. She started at the front of the shop, examining a series of paint swatches that were on display and straightening the stacks. When she turned the corner and disappeared behind a shelf, Alex heard a small clattering and the sound her scooping up a few screws that were left out on display. She walked with a slow, casual gait, gazing over the shelves as she rounded a corner. She had light blonde hair, sharp features, pale green eyes and a metal ring through her lower lip. Pretty, in Alex's opinion, but different from the usual kind of girl he would talk to. Obviously out of place, Alex watched her curiously until her eyes fell on the piano.

Calmly, she approached the instrument, her fingertips grazing the wood as if to read the dents and scratches. Pausing in her exploration of the piano, she wiped some sawdust off the surface with her fingers and peered inside to examine the strings. Alex was confused until the girl finally sat down at the piano bench and placed her fingers on the keys.

The sound the piano made was different from the pounding. Alex didn't recognize the song. He could acknowledge, however, that the piece wasn't easy to play. It was light and delicate, like a bird singing rather than the normal wailing of cats. The piano player's fingers moved quickly and softly as if she were touching something alive that needed to be calmed instead of the cold instrument. The music changed and swelled. It was louder, yet retained the smoothness. The girl's fingers moved, each one carefully coordinated to stay out of the other's way. The song started to slow and eventually, dissipated into a

final resounding chord that filled the store.

Smiling, the musician stood and walked up to the counter. "Still plays pretty well, considering how long it's been here."

"You came in here looking for that piano, didn't you?"

The girl nodded and extended a hand. "Hannah."

"Alex."

"Would you believe I've been trying to find this store for three years?"

"What do you mean? How'd you know about this place?"

"Back in the 30s, this was a music store," Hannah explained, looking around. "My great-grandparents on my Dad's side came over as Russian immigrants to open it. Music was a universal language and people always came back to the shop. So, the store actually did pretty well among other immigrants. In the later 50s, they turned it over to some other family. A Polish neighbor, I think. They couldn't get the piano out, though."

"Which is why it's been here since before the people we bought the store from," Alex guessed. "The last owners said we could keep it for a hundred more bucks, but then we couldn't figure out how to move it afterward. We always thought it was just a giant middle finger from the last people who were using this space."

"Regrettably, that may have been one of our fingers," Hannah raised her hand in apology. She tapped on the counter with her thumbs, biting the metal ring through her lip as she considered her options. "So, how much do you want for it?"

"You'd have to talk to my dad, he's the owner. But I think if you can find a way to get out of here, he'd probably give it to you."

"I have a couple of uncles who own a moving business. They're used to lifting

awkward things. It'll be tough, but it could probably squeeze if they got creative."

"We'd be glad to get rid of it!" Alex smiled. "Unless more people like you come in to play it. Where'd you learn to play like that?"

"Grams," Hannah said. "And she learned from Dedushka himself. She died last year, but I think my Dad would love to see Dedushka's old piano or at least hear music coming from it again."

Within the week, the piano was gone. It had taken a good part of the afternoon and both of Hannah's muscular uncles to move it, but they had gotten it out. The first thing that Alex embraced was the quiet. He'd spent the first few days enjoying the silence. Regular customers asked about it and Alex found he enjoyed telling the story about reuniting the piano with its former family.

Yet as time went on, Alex missed the piano. He didn't miss the banging of the children, but Hannah's playing in particular. It wasn't the usual rock or pop that he listened to and the music had a hold on his chest. He went online and found songs that sounded like her music, but nothing had the same effect. It wasn't just while he was in the hardware store either. He was looking for traces of the song in school and tried to remember the exact pattern of the note as he was trying to fall asleep. The music elevated from an interest to an obsession.

He told his friends the story of the girl and her piano a dozen times, to the point where they would groan when he started the tale again. His mother noticed his interest and bought him classical music CDs, hoping that it would ease his impatience. He spent more time in the shop, imagining the sound of the piano filling the static shelves, but not getting any other work done.

“Is this really about the music?” His mother asked one evening. “You’ve never been that interested before.”

“I feel like I need to hear it. I can’t explain it. She was playing it and I felt...light, I don’t know.”

“I don’t think it’s the music, Alex,” his mother chuckled. “It sounds like what you really liked was the company.”

“Company? You mean Hannah?”

“She’s very cute.”

“She’s in college, mom.”

“What’s wrong with that? She’s only two years older than you. You should call her. You never know.”

However, sitting in the shop one day, Alex noticed the silence as his only companion. The song drifted into his head again, but he noticed that the memory wasn’t just the music. Slim, elegant fingers darted across the keys. Alex didn’t have to think about whose fingers they were. Only one person could play that well. He looked at the notepad next to the cash register. Hannah’s number was there, taunting him. Finally, Alex gave in and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Hannah?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“Alex...the guy who found the piano?”

“Oh Alex! Yeah, yeah, what’s up?”

“Not a lot,” Alex smiled. “I’m just working at the shop. Listen, I have a question.”

“Sure, what can I do?”

“That song you played when you found the piano...what was it called?”

“*Beznadezhnyy*? What about it?”

“Do you know who wrote it? I’ve been trying to download it, but I have no idea where to find it.”

“You probably won’t,” Hannah explained, letting out a long breath.

“*Beznadezhnyy* was a song that Dedushka wrote when they were getting ready to sell the store. He wanted it as a standing testament to the piano, so even if he couldn’t take the instrument, he had some part of it.”

“So it’s not online?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Hannah said. “Sorry, dude...”

“Damn it,” Alex cursed. “It’s been stuck in my head for days and I can’t get it out.”

“Well,” Hannah said. “Do you have a computer?”

“Yeah, why?”

“How about I swing by on Saturday with my keyboard? We plug it into the computer and record it there. I can even play some of Dedushka’s other music for you. He wrote about a dozen songs before they sold the store.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“No, not at all,” Hannah said. “In fact, we could make an album! Just record all of Dedushka’s music and post it online. We can even record some of it for my portfolio! This is gonna be great! What time should I come to the store?”

“You should probably come to my place,” Alex said. “How about noon?”

“I still got the address, I’ll be there!” Hannah said, excitedly hanging up the phone. Alex could only smile in response.

Saturday came surprisingly quickly. Alex had cleared a space in his room and his parents were working in the shop for the day. Hannah pulled her car up to the curb and parked outside his door. She was wearing a black beret and bright red lipstick. After a minute or two of struggling the keyboard upstairs, Alex and Hannah were set up in his room.

“OK,” Hannah said, cracking her knuckles and running her fingertips along the keys. “How about we start with *Beznadezhnyy* and work our way from there?” The afternoon passed in easy bliss. Hannah was skilled at her craft and played the keyboard almost as well as the piano. Alex felt more like an assistant, taking notes on the music and adjusting the sound under Hannah’s instruction. But his room was filled with the music for the rest of the day.

“I should go,” Hannah said, packing up her keyboard. “I promised a friend I’d run sound for her at an open mic night. You wanna meet up again?”

“Sure, how about next Saturday? Record some more?”

“Sounds good,” Hannah said, coiling the cord around her forearm. “Actually, you busy tonight? I could use some arm candy for the mike night.”

“Audio arm candy?”

Hannah laughed, almost dropping the cords. “Oh my god, that needs to be a techno song as soon as possible. But seriously, you got plans?”

“Not really. I don’t know how helpful I’ll be.”

“Great! You can be my boyfriend.”

“What?”

“You can keep other guys from hitting on me while I’m working,” Hannah explained, folding up her equipment. “It’s hard to do anything when there’s some drunk loser breathing down my neck.”

“Oh right,” Alex said, picking up the keyboard. “I’ll call my folks from the car.”

“Good idea,” Hannah said, leading down the stairs. “And hey, you can even buy me a drink.”

“I’m 18.”

“Then I’ll buy me a drink and you pay me back,” Hannah said, putting the equipment in the back seat. “But if anyone asks, you’re 21.”

“Got it,” Alex said, putting the keyboard in the trunk of Hannah’s car. “Let’s get going.”

“You know something?” Hannah grinned, looking at Alex as he climbed into his seat. “You need a haircut, but you’re pretty cute for a young guy.”

“You’re just cute...” Alex said before he could stop himself.

Hannah only laughed in response, “Maybe my boyfriend for more than tonight. We’ll see how it goes.”

“I meant to ask you,” Alex said as Hannah started the car. “What is *Beznadezhnyy*?”

“It’s Russian. It means *Hopeless*, he was trying to capture the emotion of having to leave his piano behind.”

“How does your Dad like it by the way?”

“He plays it almost every day,” Hannah said. “Except when I’m over. Then it’s my music that fills the air for a change. I do play better.”

“*Beznadezhnyy*,” Alex smirked. “I like it.” He considered the foreign word for a minute, surprised with how uplifted it made him feel.