

THE MUSIC LESSON

Joe Carvalko

My granddaughter sat next to me at the piano waiting to start her first lesson. On the rack in front of us, the music for “Some Enchanted Evening,” stared back, which, but for Amy’s question, “Poppie, when did you learn to play the piano?” would have been unremarkable.

When I didn’t respond, she insisted, “Poppie, who . . .?”

“My aunt played and she showed me. Now, you know your alphabet, so let’s start there.”

Amy wasn’t finished. “Does she still play?”

“I don’t think so . . .”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t know.”

Sometimes we hide the truth because, as in this case, my student needed to hear the harmonies, not the dissonance of a woman once musically possessed. But, as the time passed, Amy’s question kept putting me back on Maple Street.

During the war I lived with my grandparents. I remember sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for my favorite chicken soup, looking passed the sink and through the back window, where uncut grass grew about as high as nature wanted it. I also listened to my Aunt Lucia, as she practiced piano sixteen hours a day. Other than I, no one took notice how often and repetitively she devoured one or another practice book, until she traversed into the melodic intricacies of a Chopin concerto. Then everyone listened.

Lucia was born into a family with four brothers— Franco, the youngest at five and Seby the oldest at twenty-two. When she turned six, Papa bought a piano and she started lessons,

quickly showing a talent for unraveling complex musical passages. When she turned twelve, she traveled 20 miles to study at a conservatory. For a family of bakers, it represented training by the best teachers in the county.

Even as a child, I knew how remarkably she played, yet, strangely, she showed no artistry whatsoever in talking civil to those outside the family. I remember retired Mr. White from next door, who sat on his stoop watching the world go by. If he saw Lucia he would shout, “How’s the music today?” Her stock comeback was, “Stick your head in the sand.” Others might have heard: “A-hole,” or “Screw you.” Jerry the mailman, who always looked for ways to ask her for a date, got a middle finger thrust skyward.

When you live with someone who seems bent on perfecting their skill, you may not see the despair or the profound depression that motivates them. On the surface her incessant practicing did not seem bizarre, but more to be admired as the ambition of a prodigy, a future concert pianist—, until one afternoon when she drank iodine, and then flung the bottle at Mama who happened to be passing by the toilet.

A minute later, hair stretched out behind her, she ran down the stairs and into the street, and then disappeared into an alley that separated the duplexes. Mama called Papa who closed the bakery and dispatched half-dozen workers to find her.

Except for Seby, the other brothers were serving during WW II, so like millions of Americans Lucia followed its progress in the news. February 15, 1945, the day she drank the iodine, her mother found a copy of a newspaper on her bed. The headline read, “Ten Cities Bombed.” The details painted a picture of ruination and death. In time we learned that one of the cities was Dresden, Germany, where 25,000 civilians died during the bombing. After Mama’s

initial hysteria, I saw her waving the newspaper on the stoop, yelling to Papa about what may have set Lucia in a direction toward her grave.

An hour passed, and by now, not only the bakers, but two cops, and Mr. White were looking behind bushes and down alleyways. Then, two duplexes down something moved from behind a large juniper. She sat crouched, iodine tattooing her chin. Seby asked, “Lucia, let’s go, Mama’s worried.” Her wide green eyes stared back. Reluctantly, she went with her brother. When she got to the house, Mama and Papa surrounded her. After a few minutes, Seby coaxed her into a car and drove her to the hospital. From there an ambulance took her to the Institute for Living in Hartford, where they diagnosed a form of schizophrenia. Papa had lost Mama for five years to what was likely a post-partum depression, and Lucia’s illness brought back memories, which he wrote about in a book of verse that was handed down after he died.

When Lucia went away, the house became a somber place. Whole days would pass when the only sounds were the clothes swooshing back and forth in the washing machine, or the rare occasion when Mama turned on the radio to hear the news. When she returned about six months later, Lucia needed her solitude more than ever. To give her extra privacy, Papa put the piano in the food pantry off the kitchen, and although the narrow walk-in would still serve to store canned goods, vegetables, and bread, it now served as Lucia’s refuge, and although long absorbed in the odors of potatoes and onions, overtime, the pantry would take on the added smells of cigarettes and stale coffee.

She started off playing like she’d never missed a day. The house came alive again. In the beginning, we were all acutely aware of everything she played, or if she stopped, for how long. We listened for those times when she would abandon the monotonous arpeggio-type finger exercises for something she had polished over the course of time. We could sense it coming like

the sun bursting through storm clouds. She'd warm up with two-handed chords, first ninths and an occasional stretch to grasp a tenth; then twelve scales forward and backward—, and then silence—, a minute would pass, followed by Rimsky-Korsakov, Mozart, or Rubenstein.

Then times were that the stretching of her phalanges did not reflexively lead a concerto, but the plaintive sounds of a mellifluous mezzo-soprano singing an Italian aria from Puccini or Verdi, which would float from the pantry through an open window, into the backyard, beyond the clothes blowing on the line, warming the hearts of the neighbors she so loathed.

Papa died after the war. The blow was too much for Lucia, but this time she admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital, where she spent five months among the screamers, the babblers, and the muted, while undergoing cold showers and shock treatment. When she was released she decided to travel to Italy and live with Uncle Giovanni in a small village in the Apennines.

Yet, Lucia did not escape the storms that stirred in her head. Depressed and angry, she had frequent run-ins with her uncle, and unlike home, no sheltering piano to turn to.

One afternoon she fled the four room house, ran down a muddy road that turned into a back trail, where the ridges were unstable and the gorges deep, a place where a clouded neurotic could easily fall or jump to their death. No one knows how Lucia ended up at the bottom of a hundred-foot ravine. Nearby workers discovered her close to death and transported her two-hundred kilometers to a trauma center in Rome. She had a fractured neck, broken hip and remained unconscious for days. Survive she did, but her music did not. Her left arm would hang partially paralyzed. With the good arm she would grasp a cane. In the Eternal City, she came to realize that all was not eternal, not victims of war, not Papa, and not her music.

After a year of rehabilitation, she returned to Maple Street. In time she found a job as a school janitor. Meanwhile, Seby had moved to Florida, but while on vacation up north, he went to where she was working. A clerk in the principal's office directed him to the gym.

He opened the door and saw his sister swabbing the floor with a mop unnaturally twisted beneath her upper arm, guided by her good hand. The other arm lay limp.

“Hey Lucia, *Como Sta?*”

She turned, startled. “Hey, Seby what brings you here?”

She laid down her mop and walked toward him, a big smile on her face. Lucia never kissed anyone, but she let him hug her. He had not seen her since Papa died.

“How have ya been?”

“*Bene*, good, good.”

“But, it's you. How's your leg.”

“I'll be gimpy now on, but,” she hesitated, “it's my arm and hand, hard to get used to.”

Seby looked away and through the large wired window that overlooked the school's lawn and beyond to the trees that lined the street, and then beyond, to the track of dilapidated apartments. He recalled Maple Street, when four brothers couldn't keep up with her curiosity, then unnoticed, she went from a talky six to a shy eight year old, to a withdrawn twelve year old, and finally to a recluse living in the confinement of a pantry with a piano. Where do these things start?

They spoke as he continued to study her. Then he asked if she could play him something on the piano that sat in the corner.

“Oh Seby, I don't think so.”

“Come on—, one time, for me.”

Lucia could never say no to Seby. She hobbled over to the upright, lifted its cover and sat down. “I haven’t sat down to a keyboard for a couple of years.”

Now in her mid-twenties, disheveled, embittered and immobilized by the fall and the schizoids of half a lifetime—, she sat before the ivories, mapping out the strategy for playing something resembling a melody with the good hand; and with the nearly atrophied one, plinking a bass note or a simple chord here and there. Haltingly, a few high notes pinged off the soundboard, then a burst of notes from the middle register followed, and finally, almost reluctantly, accommodated Seby’s request— “Some Enchanted Evening” from *South Pacific*.

The music echoed off the cavernous gym walls, leaving the siblings to each call upon their own memories of a time when two hands skillfully tamed the works of Ravel, which in reflection intimated the presence of a compulsive madness that lurked inside Mama’s yellow pantry.

Coming around the half hour, Amy asked, “Poppie, how much longer do I have to learn?” I’d said we’d made enough headway for one day, and proceeded to close the book of music from *South Pacific*, when a paper, in Papa’s handwriting, seen for the first time, fell out. It read:

Strange charm, spinning, charged mass, fragile Dresden glass, whose eerie harmony resonates, in the timeless way that young fingers join the echo to the chords that laugh or cry, but least expect to play sadness of the kind that lie in a strange charm, spinning, charged mass, Dresden glass—, that one night shattered our vales of silence with flat atonal sonorities and alas ended our strange charm.

Postscript: In the ‘60’s Lucia graduated from nursing school and then moved to a small town in east Alabama, where she supervised the night shift at a state psychiatric hospital.