

Full Circle

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“So, you coming to the game with us tonight?”

“Can’t. Need to practice,” I said.

“GOD. When will this thing end?” Brandi asked, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

“After the piano competition ends—”

“Which is like what—50 years from now?”

“I compete tomorrow,” I replied.

“Yeah, then you can get your life back,” Brandi’s voice was smothered in sarcasm. (When was it not?) “Well, have fun practicing!”

“Sure. See you later!”

“Bye-bye!”

Heaving a long, deep sigh, I set my cell phone down on the grand piano’s glossy frame. *Time to practice. Again.*

I didn’t just play through the songs either—oh no, life can never be that simple—I applied “deliberate practice.” Meaning rushing your homework at school, rushing your sleep in bed, and rushing your meals at home; meaning six, seven, eight hours a day thundering away in the same room, at the same piano, on the same seat; and meaning finding every single little mistake and searching for the “essence” of every note. *Every detail is part of the obsessive pursuit of perfection.*

Sigh. Tomorrow’s the competition. Played the Shostakovich Prelude and Fugue. *What am I gonna do?* Played the Beethoven sonata. *What if I go crazy?* Played the Mendelssohn variations. *I’m already crazy. Definitely.*

The next morning arrived all too soon.

I reached the university campus around 6:00, an I-know-I’m-dangerously-nervous-to-the-point-of-intoxication-so-why-am-I-smiling-look slapped over my face. Ironically, the campus was breathtaking: old English mansions situated on miles and miles of undulating hills, a brilliant cascade of fiery autumn colors, mellow breezes softly whispering of the past.

I was to perform second.

Backstage, I anxiously listened to the first contestant. *He’s good. Really good.* I watched my raw hands alternate between white and pink as I clenched and unclenched my sweating knuckles. I switched to rubbing my fingers neurotically. Stomach lurching, I swallowed throatily in an effort to not throw up. My heart pounded with an intense mixture of dread and fear. The boy finished; the audience responded with thunderous applause. *My turn.* I dragged my feet into the blinding light...

The hall was abuzz with excitement: the results would soon be posted.

“Coming through! Coming through!” A slender lady, chestnut curls a tumble, made her way through the crowd. She stapled a pastel blue sheet to the bulletin board.

Results

Please claim award and/or judges’ comments at front desk.

Aleksey Kuznetsov

PingPing Xiao

Annabelle Marie Jacobs

My heart dropped to the floor. I scanned the paper over and over, futilely expecting the name in big bold letters by the number “1” to magically change into mine. I turned numb. Completely numb.

Being numb made everything surreal. For the next two weeks, I flitted around as a ghost: pale, silent, and gloomy. Like in a dream, I watched a reflection, an empty shell of the real me occupy the space once called my life. That empty shell ate mechanically, worked mechanically, and slept mechanically.

I stopped practicing piano.

I began to measure time relative to the competition. Tonight was the thirteenth day after it. I glanced at the clock, now an obsession: 10:08. Time to sleep.

As I lay in bed, tucked under the thick blanket of a warm night, my thoughts drifted to that Saturday morning. My mind still wasn't used to the idea that I failed because I refused to think about it. Agonizingly slow, the details floated back...

Hundreds of expressionless faces stared back at me, the silence suppressing. My metallic footsteps vibrated in the echoing auditorium as I walked towards the polished Steinway. I glanced at the judges. One nodded blankly. What were they expecting of me? Miracles? Taking eight deep breaths, I began to play.

Falling softly on the keys, my hands smoothly began the velvety opening to the first piece. Fingers weaving an intricate embroidery through the milky white and ink-black keys, eyes tracing the chiseled hammers tapping on glinting, winking, teasing strings, and lungs breathing in the sweet, sparkling scent of maple and pine, I gently drifted away...drifted away...into that beautiful Eden full of passion and mystery the composers must have discovered through music.

I no longer played the piano; the piano played me, the instrument only a body through which my soul traversed. With each new wave of notes, my fervor increased until I finished on three tender chords. Bowing, I managed to stumble off the stage...

The flashback ended. My throat hurt, my head hurt, and my heart hurt. Everything hurt, but it was better than being numb. Anything was better than being numb.

Sunday morning, I awoke with a sharp jerk. Life seemed different today—more vibrant, more effervescent! I slipped quietly out of bed—it was only 6:27 (therefore, five more hours until everybody else woke up)—and stood in front of the bathroom mirror. *Oh God!* My face was a ghastly canvas of dried tears and coal black mascara. I hiccupped, then giggled.

As I made my way downstairs, I passed the room my piano napped in. The intense sunlight streamed in through the blinds, creating a quirky striped pattern on my piano's gleaming mahogany color. Abruptly, I felt an urgent need to walk in the room. I eyed the piano; the piano eyed me. Slowly, curiously, I slid back the case and rested on the bench. My finger lightly tapped the A. The note rang clearly in my ears. I remembered why I love piano...

"GO PANTHERS! GO PANTHERS! GO PANTHERS!!!" The crowd roared in unison.

Brandi turned to me, "So you're over the piano thing, right? I mean, that was like a month ago."

I nodded blissfully. Brandi, along with my other friends, was bundled up in an assortment of black and gold blankets covered with the school's mascot: a brooding panther, brown eyes sharply arched up, fangs glistening in the black background.

The piano competition had become a distinct memory from I often drew strength and courage. I had recovered, stood back up, and looked forward to life—LIFE!—again! The harrowing experience proved to be a valuable lesson.

Smiling, I glanced at my laughing friends and settled back into the blankets. I was happy. My friends were happy. The world was happy. Life is good. Still.