Contest

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NAN BLAKE stood up. Her brown eyes twinkled as she leaned around the piano to see how close it was to the edge of the stage. “It’s a good thing I don’t want anything but experience out of this contest,” she decided, “because this instrument should be consigned to a home for disabled pianos.”

She walked to the side, checking to be sure that the blue velvet curtains behind the piano weren’t too close to the raised lid, and turned to walk off. As she crossed the platform, everything seemed just like any other State Music Contest—big barny auditorium, hard, squeaky seats, an overrated piano, and a score of decided mothers charging up to the undecided principal to make sure that their frightened offspring had a chance to practice on the piano.

As she stepped briskly off the bottom step, she saw a small, dark-haired girl leaning against the back of the auditorium—minus a charging mother. Nan glanced toward the door, expecting to see the Missing One come dashing through to gather up her protege, but when no such thing happened, she picked up her old brown trench coat, smoothed her plain brown dress, and started back to get acquainted.

As she came closer, she could see that the girl was only a little over five feet tall, and wore tiny, high-heeled blue pumps which she was studying intently.

“She’d be a beauty, if it weren’t for her nose,” thought Nan as she fumbled in her coat for a stick of gum. Her red lips and
olive skin blended so well that you scarcely noticed her rather large, prominent nose. Her brown eyes, which should have been soft and clear, looked tired, with dark circles of fatigue underlining them. “Here, have a stick of gum,” Nan offered, thrusting out the piece that she had retrieved from her pocket.

“No, thanks,” laughed Genera. “I don’t care for any.”

Nan shrugged good-naturedly, shoved the gum into a nearby pocket, and leaned against the wall beside Genera. Partly because of curiosity, partly because she didn’t like silence, she ventured what she thought a perfectly harmless question and asked jokingly, “Are you down to wow the judges with your talents?”

Genera looked away, the muscles in her cheek swelled, and her fingers disappeared into her fist. “Yes, I’m down to wow the judges with my talents. Strangely enough, I’ve got to.”

The unexpected determination in her voice alarmed Nan, who replied quickly, “You shouldn’t take these silly contests so seriously. After all, they’re only—”

“Perhaps they’re silly to you, but the outcome of this contest happens to determine my future as a pianist,” Genera broke in, her eyes narrowing.

“What! Do you mean—?”

“I mean that father and I have an agreement which allows me a music major at Amstross College if I win this competition,” she said.

“And if you don’t?” queried Nan quietly.

Her lip curled. “If I don’t, I will undoubtedly end up a very well educated young lady with a very practical teacher’s certificate in my hand.” She looked up quickly, “Please don’t misunderstand,” she hurried on. “My father really means well. It’s just that he doesn’t think women have any business being professional musicians. He only began my lessons in the hope that an interest in music would hurry me through the tom-boy stage, but I guess it did more than he expected.” She attempted a light laugh, but the corners of her eyes glistened.

Nan’s hand went to Genera’s shoulder, where it rested for a moment, and then she said, too loudly, “Well, we’ve still fifteen minutes before starting time, so let’s go down in front and get an angle on the atmosphere.” The tension broken, Genera gratefully returned Nan’s grin and swung into step beside her.

“At least no one will have a chance to teach the piano any bad
tricks before I get to it,” she laughed, handing the program to Genera.

Their laughs became fewer, however, as the starting time drew nearer. The old feeling in the pit of her stomach—the way you feel when you go to a dentist's office—settled over Nan, keeping her from attempts at conversation, and Genera became increasingly difficult to shake from her reverie. Both slumped down in their seats, Genera staring at her blue pumps, tying her handkerchief into tight knots, and Nan, staring at her brown oxfords, her hands clasped over her stomach.

“CON-TEST-ANT-NUM-BER ONE!”

“Gosh, that's me,” Nan managed as she pulled herself out of the seat. Then she remembered Genera, and turned to wink. “Watch me and get some pointers.”

Nan didn’t play well, but she didn’t care. She kept seeing Genera's blue pumps; her heart wasn’t in her playing. Since no applause was permitted, Nan finished and walked easily across the platform. As she passed Genera on the steps, she smiled a little, whispering, “Nothing to it, really.” But Genera didn’t hear. She was walking to the piano as if in a trance, not even bothering to appraise the bench before she sat down. She began to play at once; her foot trembling uncontrollably on the pedal. Nan sat on the edge of her seat, but when the opening chords were clear and clean, she relaxed a little. She grew tense again, however, when a chord—a big chord just before a pause—jangled into the room in terrible discord. Every wall seemed to pick up that loud mistake and cry it out, magnified 100 times. Nan bit her lip severely. “It wasn’t noticicable. It doesn’t matter. Everyone makes mistakes, of course,” Nan rationalized, hopelessly.

Through at last, Genera crossed the stage and sat down, pale but steady. Nan nudged her, and smiled brightly. “It sounded great,” she said, and Genera smiled a little for thanks.

They made their escape at the end of the next number, but there was nothing to do but stroll around the deserted, locker-lined halls for thirty minutes—until the results would be written on the blackboard just outside the auditorium. They wandered outside to see if Nan’s mother and sister were there, since they were to come for her at eleven. Finding no car, they moved around among the little knots of people, Genera, white-lipped
and silent, running her hand along the lockers, keeping a careful eye on the blackboard.

At exactly ten-thirty, the freckled, red-headed messenger boy came running out of the officials' office, and raced up to the blackboard. A crowd gathered, and Nan was jostled behind a six-foot fellow who seemed a yard wide. Peering over his shoulder, she could see that the red-headed boy was slowly spelling out the ratings—Superior, Excellent, Good and Fair, one under the other. The she saw the boy write under Superior, CRESTON, FAIRFIELD. Nan waited, not daring to breathe while he let his hand linger over the letters, turned to grin at his spell-bound audience, and lowered his hand to write the Excellent rating.

Nan turned to Genera, taking her limp hand. She was searching for the right words when she saw her mother and sister craning their necks to find her in the crowd. She squeezed Genera's hand, and hurried back to her folks before she lost them in the crowd.

Nan meant to find the right words and to go back to say them to Genera, but the crowd kept pushing her away, toward the door. Just at the exit, she turned, hoping to wave, but Genera's back was turned. She was alone in front of the blackboard, head down, arms limp, staring at her tiny, high-heeled blue pumps. The funny red-headed messenger boy was staring quizically at her, wondering why that pretty dark-haired girl was crying.

Paradox
Charlene Fredrickson

When others said you were untrue,
I tried to close my ears.
Excuses that I made for you
Allayed their fears.

Strange that I could make them see,
That I would take your part.
I had no power to still for me
My doubtful heart.