Lessons

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by

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I sat on the couch waiting for my sister, Ann, to finish her piano lesson. I kept flicking off the piano teacher's dog, a bitsy Chihuahua rat, that jumped all over my lap. Pat Ann on the head once more and I'd kick the mutt. I was still smarting from my grade, a "below average, practice more" red star and the landslide of gasping and fussing over a few misplaced flats and ver-r-ry sharp sharps. It bothered me even more that Mrs. Biffle did so much cooing over Ann's exercises.

The little prissy. All she did was hang around the house playing pieces for Mom's lady friends and listening to gossip. No, she wouldn't play battleball or curry the pony. Ann couldn't even keep her spit in a glob. Just sprayed it all over me when we fought. Why, I could hang a louie across the drive if the wind was blowing right.

"Oh, Ann, that was so sweet. You've earned yourself another gold star this week," exclaimed the grey-headed teacher.

Ann smiled over at me but I pretended not to notice. I busied myself jamming books and music into a beat-up knapsack. Shoving my arms through coat sleeves, I scuffed to the door ahead of Ann who was fussing to get her scarf tied just so.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Mrs. Biffle called out in a voice like a strung-out guitar string.

"Oh yeah." I pulled the smudged and crumpled check from my back pocket and handed it to the piano teacher.

The thief. It seemed like Mom and Dad were always fighting about telephone bills and car payments and the price of groceries. Why'd they keep paying that old hag for music lessons? I hated the piano.
“See you next week,” the guitar string twanged. “Don’t forget to practice, Ellen.”

I squirmed on the merciless church pew. If God was so great why didn’t he put cushions on his furniture?

“Shhh.” Mom and Dad scooted together, wedging me tightly in between them. I glanced over at Ann.

She was sitting primly in her Easter dress, attention focused correctly on the minister. I detected the smug smile on her lips and looked down at the crumpled mass of dress in my own lap. I tried to smooth it out but bulky patch pockets blocked my attempts at tidiness. I could just hear Mom. “Oh, you always think you need pockets. They’ll look so silly on such a pretty Easter dress.” But I didn’t care. Where else would I put my hands when those old ladies started snatching at me after the service?

I stuck out my tongue at Ann, not caring if God or my parents saw.

I looked up from home plate and saw Ann and her friends across right field, staring over at the diamond where I played kickball with the fourth grade boys. I knew exactly what they were saying. “Is that your sister?” Amy Sue would ask in an appalled little voice. Ann would huff her shoulders with a dramatic “Tsk.”

I’d show those mother hens.

My turn up to kick. I booted the ball mightily. It sailed toward the target, clear over the outfielder’s head. The ball hit the ground, bounced into the huddle of girls, and smacked Ann on her stomach. The group scattered, shrieking and clucking at the intrusion. As the outfielder heaved the kickball home, I slid across home plate. Safe.

“Way to go! We won! All right!” Cheers filled the air as the boys slapped me on the back.

I beamed at Ann, who was brushing the dirt from the front of her jumper.

Plunk, plunk, plunk, plunk.

Maybe the bench was too close. I examined my fingers to make sure they looked all right. I brushed off every single key.
White ones first so I could seriously contemplate and mourn over all the tusks those poor elephants donated to such a worthless cause. Then the black ones. I wasn’t sure where those came from. I clumped down on the pedals. One, two, then all three together. I rearranged the music, repositioned the pencil and dirty Kleenex at the end of the keyboard, and reread the lesson for the third time.

"I don’t hear anything," my mother called from the kitchen, raising her voice an octave on the “hear,” then dropping back to normal on the “anything.”

“What time is it?” I called. Why would Mom want to listen to my hammering anyway?

“Never mind, time’s not up yet.”

Plunk, plunk, plunk, plank.

I planted my arm behind me on the piano bench and leaned back. I surveyed the room. All at once it seemed to me that the piano would fit much better against the wall with the window. Yeah, what a better place.

The piano was an old, blackish upright. The wood grain had now begun to crack like the tiny wrinkles on the back of Grandpa’s neck. There were no fancy scroll designs or curlicues on the arms, or pretty cutouts in the stand that held up the music. Just an old lug of a piano. Dad had said that it would work just as good as a fancy one. “Baldwin” was printed on the front.

I hauled the bench out of the way. Into an opposite corner I pushed the toy box and plant stand.

“C’mon you monster, it’s time for a move.”

I tugged and pulled and heaved at the piano. My cheeks began to hurt from the pressure of air they held as I struggled. “Ungh, ungh, ungh,” I grunted, each shove barely shaking the piano. Finally there was enough of a crack between the piano and the wall so I could wedge my body in between and fit my feet up against the wall for leverage. Now the gruntings were muffled explosions of force. It really wasn’t much fun anymore. One final boost and I would give up.

Oomph! The front roller caught the edge of the carpet and I could feel a gap growing between the wall and the back of the piano. I looked down. There wasn’t much of a dif-
ference in space from the bottom of the piano to the wall. But my feet and legs that had been folded up like Aunt Jo's accordian were now unpleating.

I flipped down onto my feet just as the piano gave way. In slow motion, "Baldwin" lurched to the floor. There was a thundering crash and horrible cracking and creaking of wood. The shattering chord of all sixty-six keys jolted at once yanked me into awareness.

I felt my face burning the red of stewed tomatoes. My eyes stung as if they had been flicked by our pony's coarse tail. I bit my lips hard to keep them from shaking. I felt sick. As all of the family rushed in, I knew no amount of spanking would hurt as much as the look of horror on Ann's face.

The house never felt so empty as it did the rest of that week. Ann acted like I wasn't even her sister. I tried to get her to come out and play ball, since now there wasn't any practicing to do. I promised to throw underhand. I brushed the pony and tied its tail in ribbons to take Ann for a ride, but she wouldn't look out the window when I led it up to the house. I even offered to play house with her one day—yeck. Nothing worked.

She told Mom I broke that dumb piano on purpose.

The new piano looked nice considering Mrs. Biffle got to put her two cents worth in when Dad went to pick one out. It was low, sort of squatty, and had "Kimball" written on the front. The top of the bench was as slippery as a slide rubbed with waxed paper. Mom draped a hand towel over it so the smooth wood wouldn't get scratched up. There were even rollers, like big, clear marbles, under the corners, so the delivery men pushed it over against the wall with the window. Not that it mattered to me anymore—I got to quit taking piano lessons.