

## **Sarah, Jake and his Pal**

One just-spring day several years ago (it's fascinating to think of these young characters now fully grown and out in the world on their own), I was invited to tune a piano at a nearby neighbor's place, someone whose duplex faced Powderhorn Park in South Minneapolis in the same orientation as my home a block away. The divorcee had two children, a very inquisitive seven-year-old girl, and a slightly surly twelve-year-old boy, anxious to join the ranks of the teens. Their mom greeted me at the door with familiarity—we had been occasionally saying hi in the park for quite a while when Patty and I walked our dog. She waved toward the piano as she headed through the kitchen. "You know where it is. I'll be out back digging in the garden. You remember Sarah..." Another hand gesture. I had tuned her piano once before, so I waved goodbye and made my way to a small side room off the dining room in the second floor apartment. The front room, where the TV, recliner and couch lived, really was a 'room with a view' overlooking the rolling greenery across the street, which led to the steep hillside that looms over Powderhorn Lake. The other rooms on this floor included a dining room, the jumbly kitchen, crowded office/music room and a tiny sun porch on the back of the house, next to unheated stairways both up and down. The three bedrooms for the family were in the attic above.

Sarah glanced up, nodded hello and continued to occupy herself with a big box filled with unidentified items on the dining room table. The piano resided across from an overloaded desk in a sort of mixed-up library, with books scattered randomly in piles on the floor (it must have been hard to find what anyone was looking for that way), with the majority of the tomes lying at odd angles within two very tall, dark bookcases. The titles suggested an educated and hungry-minded professional woman. Not many novels were obvious, but there must have been dozens of self-help books with wildly varying subjects, from, naturally, how to manage willful children, how to raise prize-winning geraniums, and how to expand learning power through zen, onward to how to lead a charmed life, probably. I cleared off the knick-knacks (at least one ancient Hummel included) and many very old black and white family photos from the piano top, a very common repository for rows and piles of the wildest things, and I was finally able to remove the front of the piano. Sarah drifted over to examine the piano's hammers, sighting carefully how the keys go through all those mechanical connections and moving parts to make the hammers spring to life and strike the strings. She watched for a little while as I set things up and started to tug on the tuning pins with my wrench. She asked a few observant and polite questions, and giggled a little when the sound of a string sliding up in pitch rang out. "That's just like a sound effect on a show."

She felt at home with me, which is always a nice thing to see. Some children hang by the doorway filled with curiosity but are too shy to come closer. Many kids are fascinated with the whole process, but don't understand why I'm doing it. "To make the piano sound better," I tell them. One four-year old had never seen a piano taken apart before and was deeply suspicious. He frowned at me, and even pointed at the damage I apparently was inflicting. "You better not do that," he told me seriously. Clearly this was

something that Dad and Mom would not permit if they had been nearby, and certainly he'd be in trouble if he himself had done anything like that to their piano.

Sarah went back to her box of things and I got to work, 'putting the puzzle together' the same way once again. After about ten minutes, Jake came home with another twelve-year-old friend. "Oh, hey, the piano tuner. All right." Jake was the most serious of the piano students in the house. As usually happens, I quickly became invisible. He and his friend, a good-natured kid from school, roamed the rooms, talking animatedly about an incident involving some other guys by the door after school. As they wandered past the dining room table once again, Sarah interrupted them with a note of excitement in her voice. "Wanna see my rock collection?"

Jake, in predictable big-brother fashion, was instantly annoyed. "Sarah, nobody wants to see your stupid rocks!" Sarah flinched, obviously crushed by the harsh rebuke, but with a heaven-sent natural kindness that was as easy as the breeze fluttering the curtains by the window, Jake's pal looked him straight in the eye within a second and announced, "Well, *I* do." Without raising his voice, admonishing Jake, or falsely humoring Jake's little sister in the least, he had defused all the tension in the room. He pulled up a chair and listened attentively--while Jake rolled his eyes and silently caved in --as Sarah, delighted to have an audience, carefully showed off her prized samples of bright red granite, quartz, white calcite, shiny black obsidian, and several others she freely identified without hesitation. Some rocks apparently had been donated to the collection by Grandfather, which allowed Jake and Sarah to reconnect with him in absentia, reminded of some of the sweet memories they will always share, and the bond they hold dear. Jake's friend mentioned his own grandfather, and the three young ones sat together in a quiet circle pouring over the big cardboard container in front of them, which included a collector's box of small rock samples glued in neat rows with the identifying names printed beside each one.

...A moment of harmony I was fascinated to witness from my nearby perch on the piano bench, adding my own odd background music to the tableau, the sound of three strings being drawn together, stretching towards each other and finally locking into perfect unison to form a single note, a note which I carefully added to several others in an arpeggio of quiet chordal unity, many notes making one common sound, forming beauty together. It was the least I could do.

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