

The Endless Variety of Unpredictables.

Okay, so anyway, it was wintertime and my visit to a home with an old grand piano revealed a couple of internal parts that had come unglued and started to foul up the works. Repairs required sliding the *action* out of its compartment. The action encompasses the whole keyboard, its bed, and the whole rack of all the moving parts, hammers, whippens and everything that moves when a key is pressed. It all comes out of the piano as one heavy, massive and unwieldy tray that must be maneuvered onto the piano top, or onto a handy nearby table.

The parts that had failed were going to require some standard wood glue to repair, which I had with me in the car. But. When I brought in the big box (30 pounds, I weighted it once), which carries much of my supply of repair tools and parts, the wood glue bottle was frozen solid. The guy whose piano this was, a part-time performing musician and music promoter, did not have any of that type of glue around. So what to do?

Then flawed inspiration struck him, and since he sounded like he'd done this before, and since I could not predict how this would work, I regretfully deferred to him. Flawed inspiration is a danger to be avoided in people's lives, and everywhere else, too, like within our government. He decided the quickest solution to melt the frozen glue bottle was the *microwave*. From what I hear, microwaves cook things from the middle of the food outward, and that must have played a part in this noble scientific experiment that went a little awry. I popped back into the living room to take apart the inner workings that were hungry for glue, and after no more than two minutes of the whirling microwave sounds, a huge bang rattled the windows. I raced back into the kitchen to witness an unforgettable scene of carnage: tiny yellowish globs of glue had spread everywhere within 8 feet of the microwave, due to the pressure inside the machine actually bursting the door open. The specks and goo had attacked the inside of the microwave, the nearby kitchen walls, curtains in the breakfast nook, the windows, the sweet hanging photos (luckily under glass) of the home owners, the salt and pepper shakers, the table cloth, even the dirty breakfast dishes, and everything else sitting around within range. Nothing had been spared the random spray, especially the guy himself still sitting right nearby the microwave. He looked kind of dazed and confused, and his hair, in the style of the times a globe of dark wiry strands shaped like a dandy lion gone to seed, was also plastered thoroughly. Little globlets dangled decoratively from his whole head. He was in the process of trying to wipe off the worst ones with paper napkins, when he looked up with not exactly a smile on his face, just resignation, and muttered, "Well, that was a super bad idea."

The glue bottle still lay on the carousel turntable inside the oven, somewhat distended, but whole, with the cap found somewhere across the room. The glue was mostly no longer frozen, so I retrieved my bottle and wiped off the outside, which was rather sticky. I looked inside the bottle whence the majority of the glue had recently escaped, and chuckled, "Yeah, this will be enough." I asked if he was okay, and he mentioned that some of the yellow-white stuff was a little warm, but no harm done. I started to wipe off the table with more paper napkins, but he said not to worry about it, he'd do the cleanup.

The microwave door still worked, and after a complete washing of the insides of the oven, it was more or less operational again.

At that point, the man's goal had become getting the kitchen back to the way it was before the explosion in time for his wife's arrival, toward 5:00 PM. As I completed my repairs (some of the wood glue was quite fluid), and took care of the tuning – finishing an hour and a half later -- I was able to check on the kitchen once again before I collected my check and headed out. It actually looked pretty good by then, and the man's personal visage was much more tidy following a rinse-off in the shower.

Important lesson learned: do not try to thaw non-food in the microwave, especially if it could build up pressure. I have never since then tried anything like that, and probably this has saved everybody a lot of trouble.

Another baby grand at an old house I had visited a few times previously had a history of things going wrong, but on every occasion I was able to diagnose what was needed and get it fixed. The instrument was an old family heirloom the couple wanted to keep operational. The main complaint this time was the sound coming from the bass section: a terrible rattling, grinding sound that emanated from the bass strings whenever anyone attempted to play them. "Something's really wrong with that!" the husband of the pianist complained. "Why is this piano always falling apart?" He looked like he was deeply worried about more dollars flying out of his wallet. I know the feeling.

I looked inside the piano to try to determine the cause of this awful noise. It did not seem like anything I could guess just from the sound, which resembled a really badly cracked soundboard. With one glance, the problem here was obvious. Something was sitting on top of the bass strings. I reached in and removed a foreign, thin, curved piece of wood about a foot long.

"Well, this is what's causing that noise, and I have no idea what it is. It has nothing to do with the piano." I held the item up to the concerned homeowner, and his expression completely changed. His mouth dropped open and his eyes gravitated up to the decorative trim above the window looming over the piano.

"What the heck? How did that come down?" On the window frame there was a piece of wood *missing* from the trim that was shaped exactly like what I had in my hand. Sometime during the last week that chunk of wood had detached from its place and landed unseen inside the piano, where it created an ungodly, non-musical racket whenever the bass strings were activated.

I handed the trim piece over to him and played some of the bass keys again, which now produced beautiful, clean and clear bass notes, just as they always had before. Relief and amazement filled his face. I suppose if he had looked into the piano himself he would have found the impediment, but that did not occur to him, since the whole piano 'area' was a bit of a mystery to him, to be left to the experts. I was happy the fix was so simple.

My role as visitor to people's homes sometimes leads to unexpected human interactions among the residents that probably would not have happened had I not been there. Once, before I even got started on the piano, the apparent 'father' of the house wanted to introduce me to the 'family' (two other people), which led to an awkward moment for a teen-age girl, who poked her head around the corner at the wrong moment. I gathered the guy was not exactly part of the family yet. When he introduced her as his 'daughter' she reacted oddly, with an expression of unhappiness and distain that was surprisingly rather touching. The girl's mom was there too, smiling tolerantly, but I figured out that there must be more going on here than usual. This was different than the way a natural family's daughter would react. The man must be the new 'father-to-be' in this household, and the 14-year-old girl apparently was not entirely on-board with this plan. Having her become his step-daughter must have been an aspiration for the guy, and he wanted to express his devotion to her by honoring her this way.

I smiled, said 'hi,' and moved on as cheerfully as possible. The girl's mom surprisingly kept quiet, except she said, "Well, our piano is right over here..."

The girl disappeared in a flash, but I could tell she was upset with the whole charade. I hope that she, the main pianist in the household, ended up liking the way the piano sounded after I left, and that the reward of playing music on a nice-sounding instrument was enough to help her feel better. I never returned to that home, so I never found out about the final outcome.

More than once, I wondered what the true lay of the land was whenever I walked into a home and witnessed the odd interactions of the people there. In a fashion similar to the father-to-be introducing his new 'daughter', a man well into his middle age -- who had been living alone the first time I tuned his piano -- had changed his living arrangement the second time. A new person was with him, a woman about his age who seemed to feel quite at home already. Several feminine items now decorated the table surfaces and piano top, giving the place a more cheerful feel. The man appeared to have lifted spirits this visit; last time he had seemed a bit lost and withdrawn. He almost gushed that 'Roberta' had become "part of the household now." She smiled demurely and put her arm around his shoulders, which seemed to appeal to him immensely.

They came across as true lovebirds, where love is new and radiating from their faces for the first time in a long while. At least that's the impression they were generating to me. The fellow glowed in a way he never exhibited at my first visit. He appeared to be fully on-board. However, I got an odd vibe from the woman. She was going through all the motions, gestures, smiles and cozy physical-touching steps that were expected of her, but something (from my standpoint) seemed off somehow. She put up some red flags in my mind; something devious.

I never learned the details, but when I visited again nearly a year later, she was no longer on the scene, and the fellow seemed just as downcast as when I first came. I hope his dreams were not too shattered, and that some financial compromise was not the downside of his adventure.

This situation reminds me of another guy, a young, nerdy character living in a smallish apartment in a four-plex who had a lot on his mind when I came by the tune his piano. Right from the beginning he was pissed about something and was not reluctant to bring up the 'why' of it with me. He was ready to get into the whole story with only the slightest nudge. Once again I became the sounding post for a flow of descriptive prose, this time about events I saw as a learning experience in this guy's life. I don't remember how his tumble of words began, but it was unstoppable once it started to spill.

It may have started with the fact that this young lady liked to doodle on the piano. But his five-minute rendering of the whole sad saga can be capsulated with the phrases, "She was really pretty, but I had rocks in my head. She was just a body to me, really... I didn't know her at all. She seemed like a honey, but after she was here about a month, I came home from work one day last week and all her stuff was gone, along with my entire stereo system, and some silver forks and spoons my grandma gave me long ago. And some other stuff. She'd asked me about my bank account, but luckily I never told her anything, like the account number or password. I guess I can consider myself lucky; it sure could have been worse. What a dope I was. I doubt I'll ever see her again—the bitch is probably too sly for that."

Thank you for sharing. And I'm glad that never happened to me. I hope you like the way the piano turned out, and I hope you find that some helpful music therapy results from playing it. Maybe a sad and insightful original song will find its genesis.

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