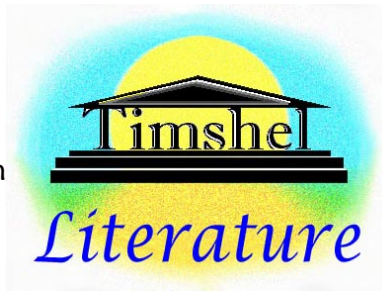


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## **An Unnatural Talent**

by Justin Katz

“This is it, Joe, I gotta get outta this an’ do somethin’ else,” said the younger of the two moving men as they sat, one on a rock, the other on a fallen tree, within earshot of a stream. The only other sounds were the soft underscore of early summer bugs, the blue sky salute of the birds in the green-leaved trees, and the occasional scamper of a forest rodent.

“Wha’s amattah with ‘is job? I been doin’ it fa fifteen yeahs.” Joe scratched his rough cheek and spit through his cracked lips at an ant on the ground.

The younger man didn’t want to insult Joe, for whom he held no small amount of admiration. “There’s nothin’ *wrong* with it. I just think I’ve done it, tried it I mean, and it ain’t me. Maybe I’ll go back t’school. Get myself a degree.”

“In what, Pete?”

“Don’t know.” Pete dragged a gorge in the moist ground with the heel of his work boot.

Joe spoke what little he could bring to mind by way of advice in this area of conversation, “Well, edjagation’s a good thing. Just’s long’s ya goin’ towahd somethin’, not away from somethin’ else.” And he had spoken.

After the forest had had a moment to swell its sound into the pause of the men’s conversation, a third man’s head appeared between the walls of high weed-grass that followed a narrow path over the small hill toward which the moving men had been heading.

“Okay, boys,” the man called down, poking his glasses up his nose. The glasses slid back down on a trail of sweat. “It’s just another hundred yards or so. Let’s get a move on; I want to get it tuned by dark.”

Pete watched resigned deference pass over Joe’s face as the older man began the groaning ritual of standing and getting back to work. When the moving men had lifted their burden, a wooden crate about four-and-a-half feet wide, eight feet long, and two-and-a-half feet high, from the ground, Pete complained through his gritted teeth, “As if we don’t know where it is. This is only the eighth box we carried out here. This sort ‘a stuff doesn’t bother ya, Joe?”

“What sort ‘a stuff?”

“Like this wacko havin’ us lug all these piano pieces a mile out into the damn woods?”

“I’ll still git home ‘n time fa dinnah. An’ ‘sides, this’s the last box.”

“Yeah, an’ it’s my last job. I swear to ya, Joe.”

Joe pursed his lips at the weight of the box as they began to climb the hill. He nodded at Pete in a gesture indicative of the ambiguous knowledge found mostly among folks of his age and station in life.

At the bespectacled man’s request, the movers helped him put together the larger pieces of the black grand piano that he couldn’t possibly lift and hold in place. When the work progressed to the point at which the movers would hardly have had less idea of what to do than if they were assembling a human skeleton, Pete asked the man, “Think ya can take it from here, Mr. Flegman?”

Mr. Flegman seemed not to be aware of the presence of the two sweat-stained men as he stroked the curve in the piano’s side. Then he muttered, “Yes. It’s all just fine. This is exactly as I pictured it.”

“Um, alright then. We’ll be headin’ back now.”

As the movers began the trek back to the house and their truck, Mr. Flegman tore open one of the boxes that they had carried. Pete turned at the top of the hill and looked back at the scene, breathing a sigh of pity for the builders who must have been called in to construct the strange gazebo-like structure. It sat on a fifteen-foot square bed of concrete from which four wooden posts protruded at the corners

toward the roof, which curved inward on each side's climb to the tip at which they all finally met.

The real ingenuity of the structure, however, was that, rather than being entirely open to the elements year-round, it had four walls that, weather permitting, could be swung out and up by means of a gas powered motor and braced open by the eight legs that folded out from them as they rose. The walls were all up as Pete shook his head at Mr. Flegman's apparent eccentricity, and at the center of each a large shiny padlock dangled on its open hook. Pete saw that the wall that faced the path had a window and a door and the other walls had one window each.

"Wackos will waste their money," Pete whispered to himself as he resumed his walk, letting the final image that he would ever have of Frederic Flegman be the manic look that the setting sun accentuated on the man's face as he drew a thick piano wire from a box with such an exaggerated stroke that he seemed to fancy that he was releasing a rainbow or some fairy dust.

It was well into the night when Frederic finished stringing the piano, and its untuned twang frightened the tree frogs into pausing in their chatter. He was beginning to realize that he hadn't known the extent of what he had undertaken by not having more of the piano pieced together by professionals, choosing instead to construct what he could by use of a few small handheld tools. In short, he hadn't expected the turning of a few screws and the stretching of a few strings to take so long. Nonetheless, he had exactly the feeling that he had wanted to have at this moment and, with a smile bespeaking complete internal peace, considered the extra time well spent.

Impatient to have the instrument playable, however, he shaped out a chord with his fingers and struck the keys. Even his ears, which had lost most of the sense of tonality that they had once had, could discern that the harsh sound that his motion had produced was far removed from the harmony that it would on a tuned piano. He scrutinized himself and realized, with some disappointment, that he was too tired to derive as much pleasure from manipulating the jangling wires into tautly vibrating strings as he intended.

Nonetheless, as this was a moment toward which he had known himself to be working for more than half of his life, he could not yet will himself to rise from the bench and “close up shop,” as he jokingly intended to phrase it each night when he lowered the walls and locked up his little studio. He plucked out a few more notes and was delighted to recognize that they had been meant to be plucked in that order in the form of a piece by J.S. Bach that he had been studying just before his decision to take a hiatus from music. He could not remember the accompanying chords to the melody, nor the notes that made up the rest of the line that he had begun, and both his skill and the tones of his instrument were too far from what they had once been for him to even attempt to match what he played to the tune that he could so distinctly hear in his head. But time and practice would remedy this problem; he even had his old copy of the sheet music, slightly yellowed and crumpled, with his now deceased teacher’s markings scattered throughout.

Yes, now that he had reached this middle-most point in his rigid life plan, he could at least take comfort in the fact that there was nothing but time between where his musical skill lay now and where he intended to conduct it. In fact, this very word, *conduct*, had been the pun that had caused a smile to spread across his tear-smearred sixteen-year-old face those twenty-four years ago when his father had told him how his life should be — how it had to be if he were to continue being his father’s son.

“These music studies are all well and good as far as hobbies go, boy, but don’t expect them to grow into something upon which you’ll be able to build a life,” Mr. Flegman, the elder, had said, leaning back into a cloud that lingered around him. His father’s motion sent the smoke into contortions and made it look like a writhing serpent pinned to the ornamental pipe, and little Frederic understood that what his father had meant by this relatively moderate (and undeniably true, to one way of looking at building a life) bit of advice had not been advice at all, but a command that could have been more concisely put, “Give up this nonsense, or I’ll give up on you.”

So Frederic Flegman had resolved, on that day, to put his music aside and dedicate himself entirely to those endeavors that led to what his father — indeed, most of the world — defined as success. At the

time, he had thought that this only meant a sabbatical of a handful of years: just until his work had put him in a position to escape his father's control or until his father died, whichever came first. But Frederic had underestimated his father's reign and health both, and it had been necessary to expand his plan.

"Fred, it's getting late. Come help Georgia and me sift through some old clothes," a woman's voice called down from the top of the hill.

"Coming, Sandra," Frederic yelled without looking at his wife. He ran his fingers over the keys of the piano, gently so as not to make the hammers swing against the strings. Then the motor roared to life, and the walls clattered down. Moments later, Sandra saw the shadowy outline of her husband standing in the doorway with his back to her, finally "closing up shop," as she knew he was calling it to himself.

The following morning, each note that Frederic managed to match to a tone emanating from a small electric tuning device brought him as tremendous a sense of accomplishment as had meeting his quarterly goals during his previous existence in the corporate reality. To be sure, a quarterly goal builds over the course of months, and there are but four per year, but the minuteness of Frederic's adjustments over the hours spent hunched over the piano's keyboard cranking his little tools to match the string's vibration exactly to the electronically produced sound waves made each perfect unison a prize earned. Moreover, Frederic reflected that tuning the piano was equal parts a rewarding end in itself as a job complete and well done and the means toward enabling the nearly endless series of goals that stand in line toward mastery of any specific ability. In brief, the pleasure that he felt through tuning each string represented an increased return on investment over his heretofore full-time "day job."

After the final tweak had been made to each string, Mr. Flegman struck that note in varying rhythmic patterns while bellowing in an off-key voice as closely to the pitch as he was able. Perhaps for fear that the man's singing might infect their own songs, the birds on the branches of nearby trees took to their wings one by one. Frederic himself was glad that no human audience manifested itself among the greenery to hear his sorely unpracticed voice; there would be time enough to prepare for his self-unveiling.

The sun was well into its descent to the horizon when the piano was ready for Frederic's pointer finger to plod its way up all eighty-eight keys in sequence, piling the notes octave upon octave with the sustain pedal down. Perhaps in a neophyte ode to the sun's journey, the soft and lanky finger paused at the highest note before beginning its descent toward the lowest pitch. His patience for the appreciation of this stage of his musical development exhausted, Frederic lay his hands in his lap and considered where to begin actually relearning to play.

Several brand new beginner's books were piled on top of his old, more advanced ones in a trunk under the piano. With many pants and grunts, Frederic managed to move the large chest out far enough to throw open the lid and stood staring at the pile of work that he had voluntarily accepted for the rest of his life. *Not work*, he corrected himself, *play*.

Fingering a blue book of easy, clunky modernist pieces based on colors for which he had always had a strange affection, he decided to take the time to relearn music from the beginning by rapidly going through a book of exercises designed to teach the dumbfounded beginner the written marks that corresponded to each piece of ebony and ivory before him. No sooner had he broken the binding so that the book would lay open on the piano's music stand, however, than his wife called down, "Darling, why don't you come wash up for dinner. I've made your favorite."

"My favorite," he mumbled. "Last night my daughter makes me give my favorite jacket to some poor slob I don't even know, and tonight I have to pretend that my wife's cooking can even pass for something that I could possibly call a favorite. I can't take all this charity. *I'll be over in a little while!*"

"All right, but don't be too long."

Frederic mumbled a dismissive acknowledgment and ran his hand along the music book to flatten it. His wife's form remained visible in his peripheral vision for a minute longer and then disappeared with a shake of her head.

Mr. Flegman didn't make it to his dinner table that night or many nights over the remainder of the summer. After a week, Sandra learned that going to fetch her husband would prove futile if he weren't going to come of his own accord anyway. A few weeks later, she had learned not to worry about his absence from their table or even really miss his presence there.

Frederic, by contrast, hadn't even taken as much as an hour to adjust to his new lifestyle. His enthusiasm for this strange direction of his life, which he chose to see as the beginning of his real one rather than the end that retirement usually connotes, was only strengthened by the speed with which his skill returned. He wasn't so naïve as to believe that it was either some unnatural talent for the instrument or a recrudescence of his former facility that propelled him so swiftly through his lessons; he knew that it was no more nor less than the many hours that he spent chasing the flicker of a newly budding ability. Even contending with the long days of summer, Frederic managed on many occasions to have the sun find him at his piano at dawn and leave him there at dusk, perhaps simpering as it turned its eyes from the pianist toward Asia.

Because of the zeal with which Mr. Flegman attacked his goal, the same zeal that had made it possible for him to retire comfortably at such an early age, by the time the leaves began to fall from the trees, he was able to mimic them with descending arpeggios and flitting trills. He still had far to go before he caught up with the younger pianist within him, but his practice had long since ceased to be the painstaking finger-by-finger plodding with which he had begun.

In fact, he would, from time to time (and much to his chagrin), attract an audience of young admirers, though the interest that they found in his performance was in the oddity of the grown up playing piano in the middle of nowhere and the jokes and jingles that it enabled them to create. Varying swarms of noisy children would flutter through Frederic's little valley and snicker and whisper among themselves. When he had had enough — and was at an acceptable stopping point in his practicing — Frederic would leap from his piano bench and chase away the young pranksters, sometimes even splashing across the stream or

leaping over large rocks. But in response to his threatening rebukes the children would fling back the pithy insults that only childish honesty and callousness can conceive and return later, undaunted.

After several such scenes, Mr. Flegman had a fence built around his property. However, the bulwark was finished too late to prevent him from earning a reputation as *the wild crazy piano man in the woods* among the local school children and any adults with whom they came in contact (most of the small town, truth be told), which is to say that he turned from a mere human into a shadowy local legend: the substance of playground jokes and insults, the threat in a flashlight-accented frightening sleepover story, and a dare for the older or bolder children.

The fence did help, as does any obstacle that increases the number of times a person, especially a child, must resolve to do something, but some children found, or created, ways to penetrate onto Mr. Flegman's property. These youths, however, arriving in pairs at most, were more easily shooed and bored quickly of the sport.

One neighborhood boy became a continual nuisance because he would crouch, or even sit, in some nearby bushes appearing to show interest but entirely disrupting the concentration that is necessary for effective practice with his incessant glare, which impeded Frederic as effectively as if the boy had sat at his side smacking his hands. The first time Frederic noticed the boy, he continued his practice, waiting for him to do something that would justify stopping the session. Within minutes, however, with no excuse other than trespassing presenting itself, the realization came over Frederic that a listener gives an increased import to each avoided error, and his hands began to shake and miss notes that he had never had any trouble hitting before. This revelation, being the fault of the viewer, was excuse enough for Frederic to fling the tennis ball that he kept by his side for just such a purpose.

Nonetheless, over the next few days, the boy proved himself either fawning or brazen and made such a pest of himself with his silent audacity that Mr. Flegman lay in waiting for him one morning.

When he had grasped the boy and turned him around, Mr. Flegman hissed in the frightened face



with a shake of the boy's shoulders, "What are you doing here?"

The boy could only stutter back, "N-nothing, sir, just listening."

"Listening to what? My mistakes?"

"No, sir, I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sure you don't," was the grownup's disbelieving response. Then, releasing the boy, Mr. Flegman told him never to come back or he'd lock him in a closet and call the police. This final threat was extraneous because the child had already fled out of sight into the underbrush.

Frederic tried to return to his practice but was unable to build any passable momentum. He blamed the youth for distracting him so thoroughly. The whole scene had set something in his mind to rattling, so he decided to go up to the house for a while and see if he could relax enough to resume his practice later.

Debating whether or not to lower the walls of his studio, Frederic had one of those moments that are inevitable to human life during which he marveled at the speed with which time was passing. The sun shone amicably through the sporadically leafed trees, but it didn't have the strength that it had even in the summer's shade. In fact, considering that his occupation required the use of bare hands, he was finding the climate less and less conducive to outdoor play. Especially since he would not likely be back until after nightfall, Frederic resolved to drop the walls even though it was possible that the move would signify the last time the studio would be open to the elements for many months.

As he returned to his home — really his wife and daughter's home now — he listened with an increasingly musical ear to the crackling of the leaves beneath his feet. He felt a nervousness, almost an uneven trill, in the woods that he hadn't noticed during the plush months. Something about the forest during the autumn evening hinted at an antiquity and magic that made him uncomfortable. He thought of the stories that he had read, been told, and, indeed, had read and told to his daughter himself that had served to make the fall a dark season.

It was very silly to be frightened based, he imagined, on the increased marketing of Halloween

merchandise and entertainment in the autumn as well as the imagery that events such as the Salem witch trials promulgated in the region. Frederic realized that there was potentially some reason that the creators of Halloween had chosen fall for such a spooky holiday, though he doubted that the weather had had much to do with the slaying of Massachusetts's midwives. Even so, the sound that the wind made through high dry grass and the flickers of floating leaves at the corners of his vision made him feel watched and blew away all of his pragmatism.

To remedy the feeling, he began to shuffle his feet through the unraked leaves on the path in rhythm with the breath that he blew through his balled-up hands with the joint purposes of keeping his body warm and his mind distracted. The feeling of eyes on him persisted, and he sprinted the rest of the way home.

The light came on in the refrigerator. Against the back wall, on a small plate with flowery print, sat a piece of cake that had been waiting to be eaten by Mr. Flegman since some celebration that, judging by the stiffness of the cake, had been quite some time passed. Beside the cake, similarly aged, were a paper box half full of Chinese food and a Tupperware container of meatloaf. Between the meatloaf and the open door lay several more plates and containers that had been aging on the shelf for varying lengths of time.

Above a plate of pasta, which was fresh and cooling and still had beads of moisture clinging to the clear plastic wrap that covered it, Frederic's spectacles hovered. His eyes scanned the shelves. He wanted something that fairly oozed summer to dispel the autumn feel. Here he took a cue from his internal dialogue, for "oozed" had been exactly the way he had put it to himself, closed the refrigerator door, and opened that of the freezer beside it.

He was reaching for a quart of ice cream when Sandra's voice wafted over the counter that split the dining area from the dimly lit kitchen, "I'm very proud of you, you know."

As if he had been a young boy caught sneaking goodies, Frederic positioned his body between his wife and his booty. "For what?" he asked.

“For keeping your eye on your dream and following through with your plan.”

Realizing that he had nothing to fear, Frederic removed the ice cream from the freezer and turned toward his wife in order to walk across the kitchen and get a spoon. In the autumn evening light, especially with the way in which it drew the shadows from her face, Sandra looked her age. She was still attractive, with long, striking, straight black hair dangling down in strands along her cheeks past sultry brown eyes. She was very attractive, Frederic reflected, but still, she was beginning to show her age. “Well, there’s never been anything else that I wanted to do.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t take a lot of courage to keep from getting sidetracked into a comfort zone. It really makes you a good example for Georgia.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“I just told you.”

Sensing that there was something behind his wife’s latest nonsense, Frederic responded, “What you just told me doesn’t explain why I would be a good example for our daughter.”

“Well, I just want her to learn to follow her dreams, and…”

“Be specific. I know you well enough to know that there’s something specific behind your comments.”

Sandra began to look nervous. She felt, no doubt, as if she were in the right, but her husband’s advance made her feel guilty. “You know how she’s been getting involved with that local charity and helping them collect winter clothes for the poor.”

Frederic hadn’t known, except inasmuch as among those winter clothes had been his favorite jacket, but he nodded dismissively anyway, “Get on with it.”

“The whole process is culminating next weekend in a trip into the city to actually distribute the clothes, and they’re trying to make it into a big event with news stations and everything, and of the several dozen volunteers, Georgia was picked to be one of the spokespeople. It’ll be a great learning experience

for her, but she has an exam the following Monday.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Um, well, I used you as an example and told her that she shouldn’t pass up the opportunity to work toward a dream simply for one silly exam.”

Frederic felt his cheeks warm. “One silly exam? There’s no such thing, Sandra. And besides, passing up my dream was never even an option for me, I just held it at arms length while I took care of all of my obligations. My silly exams, you might call them. Where’s Georgia?”

“She’s upstairs. Why?”

“Because I’m going to go tell her that she better damn well stay home that weekend and study for that exam instead of going off to the city to play a bit part in a charity spectacle.”

Sandra grabbed his arm as he walked past her toward the stairs, her face determined. “I think you’re wrong Freddie, and I’m not going to let you waltz in here after several months of fiddling with your piano out there by yourself and tell our daughter that she has to miss a chance to do something wonderful for the sake of one test.”

Frederic hissed, “Get your hand off me. And don’t call me *Freddie*.” For no apparent reason he told her, “Nobody ever called Chopin Freddie.”

Staggering in her resolve because she could read in Frederic that he didn’t give a damn how resolved or prepared she might have thought herself to be, Sandra stammered the first thing that came to mind, “His wife might have.”

“Chopin never married,” and with this final bit of trivia, Frederic stormed out of the room. Sandra could hear his footsteps mounting the stairs.

Georgia had been busily tapping on the keyboard of her computer as if rushing headlong through her essay were the only way to trick the words from her brain when the whirlwind of her father’s authority swept into her room, and her thoughts became so scattered by the abrupt way in which she was

thrust into an argument with no context that her father's words seemed little more than gibberish to her. She brushed a single disheveled strand of light brown hair away from her soft eyes and told her father, "I'm going to study," not sure for what test she was making the pledge but knowing that the statement was much more likely true than false.

"Not enough if you're going to be gallivanting around the city all weekend!" Frederic hissed sharply.

Her brown eyes, scrunched in an expression of incomprehension, found her mother arriving in the doorway, bringing the context that she had been lacking, as if that brief glance had been enough for her mother to transfer it to her through some secret bond. "I'll have time to study all Sunday afternoon," she explained honestly and with no hint of uselessly plangent objection.

With scarcely a stammer to consider whether this new bit of information was pertinent to his decision, Frederic wagged his finger at his daughter and told her that she didn't need the extra distraction and probably *did* need the extra study.

"But father," Georgia began, her disappointment beginning to tangle itself into the rasp of a teenage girl's whine around the edges of her voice, "it'll be an easy exam, and it's not a big deal anyway."

Stomping his foot for emphasis, Frederic asserted, "They're all big deals!"

"But I've been working on the clothes drive for a long time. It's really important to me."

"You don't know what's important to you. You can never prepare enough for things that might affect your future."

With this parental maxim loosed into the air, sufficient slack was given to the conversation to swing it toward the unspoken complaints that had been on all of their minds since the move.

"You're one to talk."

Frederic reddened, this being a topic close to his heart, and barked, "Yes, I *am* one to talk. I'm done; I've put in my time; I've finished my work. You can't just jump onto the tails of my success and expect to start at the finish."

“Success?” Georgia had inherited a little of her father’s temper. “You’re a joke all over town. Dad, the kids have a jingle about you!”

“Oh yeah?” he said, unable to hide the gleam of pride that this news apparently gave him. “Sing it to me,” he demanded in a manner entirely taunting on the surface but only half so inside.

A little ashamed, Georgia told him, “I don’t know it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you don’t. But who cares what a bunch of kids say? They’ll all end up bums, anyway. And who cares what a bunch of bleeding hearts think, too! That’s exactly the problem with this charity: nobody important cares. Look at my career; maybe some insignificant people didn’t like me, mostly out of jealousy, but the people who paid my bills — our bills — knew I never once handed in a proposal late or made a sloppy, unprepared presentation.”

“Like uncle Joseph did?”

“First of all, he wasn’t really your uncle...”

“I always thought of him that way.”

“... and second of all, he made the decision to choose his son’s silly play over making proper preparations for a presentation for very important clients.” A thin mist shot from his lips with each of his consonants. “It was a good thing I was able to make the presentation in his stead.”

Under her breath, Georgia repeated what she had heard her mother intimate in a thousand indirect, and probably subconscious, ways, “You could have let him use your work.”

“What?” Mr. Flegman asked, though he had heard. The blood visibly permeated the skin of his face until his forehead looked about to burst from the pressure of stress and anger. “What did you say?”

Cowed a bit by her father’s obvious rage, Georgia held strong, resolved to finally release this observation, hopefully to her advantage. “He was your friend.”

There was no advantage to be gained. “That’s not the point! Not the point at all. He shouldn’t have let himself slip up like that. He tried to succeed at more than one thing at a time and wound up failing at

them all. And what if I got promoted over him for it, huh?” He sneered at a look that he imagined on his daughter’s face. “Oh yeah, I know that’s what this is all about. Well what of it? He made his choices, and I made mine. Do you think you’d be living like this if I hadn’t done what I had to do?”

With her father nearly panting from emotion, Georgia would not, could not, do otherwise than hold her silence and look toward the floor.

“Do you think I’d be anywhere near as happy now?” Frederic’s eyes flared. “Huh? Do you not want me to be happy? I want *you* to be happy; that’s why I’m not going to let you make a mistake that you don’t even see before you. Concentrate and succeed and forget all this silly philanthropy until you’ve done so!” Without allowing the muscles on his face to change shape even the slightest bit, he congratulated himself for finding relevance in the tangent they had taken.

“Alright, father,” Georgia said, realizing that even if there were something to be done it would best be done later, and subtly.

Mr. Flegman stood there for a moment longer, nearly shaking and feeling as if there must be something to better cement his point. He blew a snort of phlegmy air through his nose, nodded, and left the room, leaving the opening for Sandra to make whatever conciliation was necessary and possible while she and her daughter listened to him rustle around in the linen closet for a blanket and pillow and utter a mildly triumphant “aha” when he found a pillowcase.

The back door swung open and squealed shut. He was headed for the studio.

When the air turned sufficiently cold to make his fingers sluggish in their striking of the keys and then to cause them to dry and chaff painfully, Frederic had an electric heater carried out to his studio and hooked up to his little generator. The introduction of this new piece of equipment to his daily routine at first annoyed him because the constant noise of the generator was a distraction, but with languorous quickness the hum became such a constant part of his environment that it seemed to be only an audible

inflection of the heat. Therefore, the hum was not just easily ignored, but also a beneficent harbinger of an atmosphere that allowed him to extend his practice long into the frigid night.

Having become acclimated to late hours of cozy practice and facing a shivering hike across adamant, ankle-bending frozen soil should he desire the comfort of his bed, Frederic took to locking his shed from the inside and curling up beneath his piano to sleep. On the last of the first half-dozen times that Mr. Flegman spent his entire night asleep in this fashion, he convulsed out of slumber with the violent shakes of his usually coddled body being exposed to the harsh reality of moonlit December. After discovering that his generator had burned all of the fuel that he had on hand, Frederic staggered to his house, his heavy blanket coiled about him and flapping in the breeze, in such apparent anguish that the deer that he aroused with his loud vibrato moans of discomfort might have bethought themselves of a gothic miser struggling to keep his cape about him as he struck out through a harbor town in a cold-winded hurricane.

By the next afternoon, after a restless repose, a very hot shower, and some necessary errands, the pianist was back at his instrument feeling a new sympathy with the protagonist of Schubert's *Die Winterreise*, whose part he did not sing, however, while providing the accompaniment to the baritone in his head. Over his shoulder, alongside the generator, was a three-tiered shelf that, though brand new, sagged on each level with the weight of gasoline canisters. Thus equipped, Frederic watched (rather, he sometimes noticed indistinctly) the onset of full-blown winter with mild disinterest.

Considering the cold to be the only real obstacle of the season, Frederic gave the weather no more thought. When he woke up one morning with the light through his studio's windows unnaturally bright, however, Frederic peered through the glazed glass and saw snow lying along the path and drifting off into the woods. The white cover hung against the same side of every tree, jutting boulder, and the manmade studio, the other sides of which still revealed the dullness of fallen brown foliage. A few rows of angled lines crisscrossed the white sheet where birds had sauntered over it.



In the morning stillness, with the freshness of the frozen moisture still clinging to the air, an incongruous rattle and grunt preceded Frederic, wrapped cocoon-like in his heavy blanket, plunging into the winter as he finally managed to overpower the pile of snow that had braced itself against his studio's door. Something in the scene struck him as slightly unusual for the time of year, though it was — he had a vague sense — appropriate for some reason or other. He stood for a moment in the open doorway before spasming with an exaggerated “brrrr” and spinning toward his exhausted generator with a flick of his wrist to close the door.

Not noticing that a fallen clump of snow had stopped the door about six inches from closed, Frederic unscrewed, with shivering difficulty, the plastic cap from a jug of gasoline and poured the liquid into the gaping mouth of the generator, which protruded like thirsty lips toward the spout of the jug. When the beast was full, Frederic placed the empty canister in the neat row with its predecessors and started the machinery.

Rasping against the cold air, one of the generator's rubber belts gave out a series of short whines before catching, and Frederic, his red ear now better trained, recognized the pitch and the rhythm. Shuffling like a geisha to his piano, he poked an arm from his wrapping and played the rhythm on the *correct* note. This example of his progress gave him a rousing sense of accomplishment, so, as the generator powered the heater which, in turn, warmed the air around him, Frederic sat on his bench and plucked out music that warmed him from within.

In no time at all, the atmosphere was such that he could lower his blanket and devote both hands to his play, leading Frederic to not notice a dark shape slip through the door and sit on its haunches watching him. Even when he did catch the sight, it was merely a shadow in the corner of his eye, not quite sufficiently distinct for his brain to disrupt the pleasing, meditative music. Yet, on some level, Frederic realized that he was playing to an audience of some kind, so he turned his head, with a childishly proud smile, to allow his eyes to fully see the raccoon at last.

Frederic gasped and leapt onto the closed piano's roof. The raccoon regarded him quizzically with its head tilted, as if questioning why he had stopped making that congenial noise, and then waddled, giving no impression of hurry, back toward its duty of putting patterns in the raw whiteness of the ground.

Frederic recovered from his fright enough to persuade his feet to lower to the ground, standing in place for a moment as a nearly bucolic thought swelled from his breast to his lips. "Imagine that," he whispered to himself and to the natural surroundings of which he now felt more a part than he ever had. "I'm quite the Mother Nature's Son," he mused, slipping into his place at the piano to plod through a muddy performance of Beethoven's Pastoral Sonata. Just as the last note faded into heater's hum, Frederic noticed the raccoon timidly poking its head into the room. "Come on in," Frederic all but whispered to the animal, turning back toward his piano to play the same piece over again for the creature's benefit.

While absorbed in a particularly difficult but moving passage of the sonata's final movement, Frederic did not take note of the raccoon's departure and gently closed the keyboard cover only when he had come to the end of the piece.

Rather than begin another piece of music in his now empty and, for the first time, slightly lonely studio, Frederic resolved to trudge to his house for a hot shower, breakfast, and a change of clothes. In his frame of mind, the coldness of the air was hardly able to seep its fingers into his consciousness, and the wind bit futilely at his ears as he revolved his head looking for his friend, the raccoon. In this fashion, with the snow crunching beneath his feet and the vague sense that he ought to shovel a path for himself at some point, Mr. Flegman returned home.

Upon crossing his threshold, Frederic immediately had a sense of displacement. It was not that the house seemed barren of life, Sandy and Georgia had to go out simultaneously on occasion, but spread about the entire interior he noticed festive decorations. He recognized some articles that Sandy had bought by Sandy while in his company and indistinctly understood their import, but not in any cognizant

way. They looked strange to him, not just because they were in his house and he hadn't put them up, but because they were joyful decorations that looked deserted.

These thoughts, however, only touched his mind glancingly, without raising any degree of worry or melancholy, and he prepared a bowl of vegetable soup and sat at his kitchen table as if his mind were entirely elsewhere, perhaps playing Brahms's piano sonata in f-minor to a Carnegie Hall filled with dulcified wild animals. When his fantasy whisked itself away by eliciting a soundless chuckle and smile from its author, Frederic noticed a small sheet of folded paper standing like a placecard by his plate, his name, Freddie, written on the front in Sandy's neat script.

With his tongue ineffectually poking at a bit of string bean that had slipped between two of his wisdom teeth, Frederic picked up the note and flipped it open with his thumb. There he found the succinct sentences, "I'm sure you won't be overly surprised or concerned to learn that Georgia and I have moved across town at your expense. The requisite papers will be delivered by my lawyer's office after the holiday. Sandy."

Letting the letter drop to the table like a thing forgotten, Frederic directed his eyes through the sliding-glass door between the kitchen to the patio though he discerned neither the unhomey interior of the structure that he called home nor the forbiddingly bleached yard nor the naked forest beyond, but directed his attention inside of himself. "On Christmas Eve," he said out loud, and anyone listening might have interpreted a note of despondence in his voice.

His pensive look gave way, however, to a broad, self-satisfied smile, and with elated wonder Frederic shook his head and spoke to the forgotten holiday decorations, which his soon-to-be-ex wife had hung on the walls and placed on the furniture, "A raccoon on Christmas Eve."

The winter, as it drifted and dispersed into the new year, was uneventful. Although Frederic had waited expectantly as a forgotten lover might wait — going about the daily humdrum of life, but always with a portion of his senses reserved to detect signs of the hoped-for arrival — he did not attract any

more wildlife, let alone his raccoon. In fact, he had made it a habit, even while the air outside was still frigid, to leave the door of his studio open a few inches and had turned his piano around so that he might see the little noses of his audience poking in and sniffing the harmonious air. The only game that his “trap,” as he whimsically thought of it, caught, however, was Sandy’s lawyer, who had come to serve him the official divorce papers and who left, a surprised smile on his face, with all of them signed, Mr. Flegman’s only stipulation being, “Just leave me the house and enough money to get by.”

Excepting the lawyer, Frederic had been left on his own through to the warmer weather of spring, and his practice sessions had been extended to the point at which he might as well have given his house to his ex-wife. As soon as the temperature beyond the walls of his studio had risen to a point at which his tender hands could handle it, Frederic raised the walls, which groaned and squealed at being displaced.

Even thus, his music free to wander out between the trees as far as its own strength might take it and any listening ears free to float toward the source of the melodies, Frederic played to no audience, at least none of which he knew, though the bugs and birds might have given his art a cursory listen. Even the children who had so tormented him the previous year could no longer find jest enough in returning.

The lack of an audience, though it had lent Frederic’s practice sessions a melancholy homogeneity for the first few weeks of the year, did not continue to bother him. He felt simpatico with his piano and needed no witness to the comprehensions that passed between the two of them. In fact, without being encumbered by the expectations of another soul, Frederic felt free to take risks in his playing, to push himself beyond what he might have done even if he only practicing but in preparation for an eventual performance. As a result of his risk-taking, Frederic felt himself improve by leaps and bounds in his facility, and he was brought to euphoria with each new feat with which he surprised himself.

While lost in the space between his fingers and the piano’s keys, letting his mind play audience to the seemingly instinctual performance of his body, Frederic felt, mostly in the form of a ripple in the gradually warming serenity of the late spring day’s atmosphere, a new presence. He heard a faintly

threatening sound that seemed to have been made in direct response to the rhythm of the music at his fingertips, a sound that seemed to cause the very branches on the nearby trees to lift and curl in upon themselves ever so slightly. Turning on his bench, Frederic's eyes confirmed what his ears, and, perhaps, his skin, had already told him: it was a rattlesnake.

He leapt spasmodically away from the snake and onto his piano, pounding some keys jarringly with the palms of his hands. His mind began shuffling scenarios and actions in quick search of the safest, but, as if offended by the noise that the man had made in his retreat, the rattlesnake slithered quietly away.

Panting a bit, Frederic spoke to himself, "There aren't any rattlesnakes in this part of the country." But hearing no confirmation from his surroundings, he qualified, "I don't think."

That evening, Frederic rummaged through the drawers and closet of the room that he had given the somewhat inappropriate title of "my office." Sandy had apparently adapted the room to easily accessible storage space. On the desk were piled a spare set of dinner plates and silverware. The desk itself was full of pictures, catalogues, and even a couple evidently unpaid bills. In order to get to what had been left to him of the closet, meaning the far back, Frederic had to move stacks of boxes, some of which made him question Sandy's ability to lift them up by herself or even with Georgia's assistance alone.

He had finally reached a box labeled in black marker, "Reference," when he heard somebody enter the room and his daughter's voice behind him, "What are you doing, Father?"

Without rising from his knees or even turning his head, Frederic asked, with a hint of impatience, "Georgia, do you know what I did with that wildlife almanac that your mother bought me for no reason?"

Perhaps astonished that this would be her father's greeting to her after such a long time of separation, Georgia stuttered, "N-no, Dad, why?"

"Well do you know if there are supposed to be rattlesnakes around here?" he asked, as if she ought to at least make up for her ignorance of the book's location.

“I don’t think so, Father, but I couldn’t say for sure,” Georgia responded, and she thought she heard Frederic, under his breath, ask the dust in the closet, “Well then what good is she?”

After a moment of silence, during which Mr. Flegman occupied himself with looking through the “Reference” box, Georgia spoke, “Father, I came here to see how you’re doing; we haven’t heard from you in so long...”

“I’ve been very busy, Georgia, as I imagine you and your mother have been as well, what with hiring lawyers and saving the poor.”

The young lady cleared her throat nervously but trudged on in the face of her father’s comment, “... and I want to invite you to a special dinner that the charity is holding in my honor.”

Still without turning, “What are they honoring *you* for?”

“Um... I guess they think I’ve helped a lot of people or something. It’s mostly to present me with a scholarship... you know, for college.”

At this, Frederic paused in his search, but only briefly, “I bet you’re pretty proud of yourself. Let’s hope that you haven’t let your real work slide too much to get into a good school.”

“I’m already registered at Harvard,” she informed him, her tone seeming to imply that he might have been informed of this already.

Pulling his hands from the box and turning, not rising from his knees, however, Frederic looked up into his daughters eyes and opened and closed his mouth a few times before uttering, “That’s... well, that’s great, Georgia. I’m...” Frederic trailed off. Georgia listened for the word “proud,” but her father’s features darkened, and it was as if his face sank ever so slightly on the bones of his face, “... very busy, though. I’ve got to keep moving on my practice if I want to ever be ready to” he returned to his box, and his thought petered out in the word “perform.”

This last word having opened the door to a subject that she had wanted to bring up even more than her reward, Georgia smiled and told him, “Oh, I didn’t tell you: I asked Betty, she’s the one organizing

the dinner, and she'd love for you to perform after the awards are given out."

Though she could only see his back, Georgia could hear in his voice that Frederic's face had tangled into an expression of confusion, "Perform?" Without any crescendo, he jumped to his feet and shouted at her, "How dare you go out and promise that I'll perform when you know I'm not ready!"

Georgia, surprised, tried to explain, "I-it's not for a few months."

"A few months or a few years, it'll completely upset my schedule," he informed her, his anger unabated. "Do you know what it takes to prepare for a performance? Do you? No, you don't. It's takes hours upon hours of work, and it'll completely take over my practice sessions. No. I can't do it, and you should have known not to ask. Did your mother put you up to this?"

"No! I..."

"You what? Felt bad for your crazy old father and thought you'd play the agent? Well I don't need your help, and you can tell your mother that I told you so."

"Dad..."

"Go on home and tell her! Go on! Get out!"

With a burst of tears, Georgia ran out of Frederic's filthy office and sent the dust twirling off the handrails as she leapt down the stairs. Frederic followed her as far as the top of the stairway, teetering on the edge in irresolution as to whether to chase after his daughter farther.

Before he returned to the closet and his box, Frederic lowered his head, letting the words sift out in subdued whispers, not even knowing himself what they were supposed to signify, "If you'd come listen some time you'd know what I mean."

The heat of his studio so oppressed him that Frederic, almost literally, sweat out the conclusion that it was time to overcome his fear and raise the walls again. From the outside, it looked as if the heat caused the walls to shimmer. Then they rose as if pulled by invisible ropes toward the clouds, and the early summer sun first overspread Frederic's worn and filthy shoes, then, climbing his equally worn and

filthy jeans and shirt, it ascended to his haggard face.

He had taken to wearing a beard, or, rather, had been driven to letting it grow by his jealousy of his time. The graying strands eked out from his cheeks and his chin in a mangled mess of kinks. Where the hair crossed the deep depressions of his undernourished cheeks, overshadowed by his high, bony cheekbones, his face looked like a crooked image of a New England valley, the trees all dark or gray and barren, the peaks of the mountains sallow and dull.

He sat back at his piano and picked out some notes with his skinny fingers. He was procrastinating. For some reason he hadn't felt like practicing all morning. He was tempted to blame it on the improvement of the weather, which, though it had been especially gradual that year, had still seemed like sudden good fortune — as does the final congealing of decades of hard work toward some goal. He was tempted to blame it on Nature, it is true, but he felt as if he were insulting himself to suggest that he might be affected thus.

Despite his lackadaisical mood, Frederic was so resolved to do his minimum's worth of practice that he lowered his head and stared at the keys beneath those varicosed hands, the tendons of which protruded like bird claws through the skin. Out of frustration with himself, his playing was temperamental. During fast passages he raced, as if daring his hands to falter, to the point at which the keys could hardly recover from each blow before he was striking them again; during slow passages, he would play loudly enough to turn tender melancholy into the wails of an infantile brat.

A shuffling from behind startled him out of his musical tantrum. Scanning the edge of the concrete on which his studio had been built, Frederic Flegman saw masses of animals, some of which, he was quite sure, weren't indigenous to this continent. As if their seating had been assigned, the larger animals — bears, deer, and even, though he refused to believe it, a full grown male lion, its mane undulating in the breeze — stood at the back. Next closest were wolves and other dog-like creatures of various breeds



and large cats. Spilling onto the concrete were all variety of smaller animals, from snakes to rodents, including *his* raccoon. Scratches on the ceiling suggested that it, too, overflowed with wildlife.

Frederic froze in a terrible blend of fear, awe, and indecision. Feeling this in himself, he sought to remedy the only restraint that seemed malleable enough to give him some leverage to his body: he breathed in deeply to bolster his willpower and forced himself to make the decision to move as slowly as he could in a — any — direction.

No sooner had his bottom lifted from the piano bench than some barely perceptible shift in the disposition of his audience led him to sit back down. Out of nervousness, he stuck his hands into his armpits and may have sat there in that position forever, as if trying to out wait Nature herself, but there arose in the crowd a low growl, and the scratches on the roof sounded with more agitation. He pulled his hands from their dank sanctuaries and had moved them just far enough that they were in view before him when by some mixture of sound and body language the animals conveyed, as a master somehow conveys his first attempts at training a pet across species, to him that he must do something with his hands. He spread his fingers before his eyes and stared at them, wide-eyed, and rasped when he had figured it out, “You want me to play?”

Again something intangible conveyed to him that he was moving in the right direction. His hands shook as he held them over the keys. He took a deep breath and pressed down a chord. The animals relaxed perceptibly. Slowly, irresolutely, he began to play a Schumann suite much under tempo. With only the first dozen measures played, the entire mob of animals sank into repose, and Frederic noted, across the piano, a black bear shift onto its haunches, then its belly, then its side.

Then the pianist entered that state of hopeless persistence in which a person under duress finds that every other moment brings the resolution to cease, come what may, but every moment between carries an argument for continuing. Frederic sat at his piano in this frame of mind for several hours, noticing,

through the sweat that filled his eyes as if in substitution of tears, that, though they came and went, the number of animals never diminished.

He played on because he could think of nothing else to do and because the decision was not left for him to make if he valued his life. At the end of those first few hours, it occurred to Frederic that he was running out of material, and he feared that this soothing charm might lose its magic if recycled. A daring attempt to throw a book of music on the stand and sight-read a new piece elicited a general raise in the pitch of anxiety.

The afternoon sky deepened into purple and then blood red as the sun went off toward Asia. Frederic played on, and darkness seeped from the ground up the trees to their tips and then pitch-blackness sank back down toward the crowd around Frederic so at least he was relieved of having to see them all and trying to avoid their eyes. Slowly, as his mind began to falter from exhaustion, a terror slithered into every thought, and he recognized that he was becoming very hungry and vaguely tired. For the first time in months it occurred to him that he would not be able to continue his playing indefinitely. His eyelids drooped, and he shook himself to attention. He could feel years of bad posture emanating out from his spine to his lower back. He glanced around him at the animals, then at the generator and cans of gasoline across the piano from him, finally bringing his eyes back to his hands. A clicking that was made by his left middle finger each time he used it to press a key reminded him that he had forgotten to clip his nails and became the only sound, sickening in its repetition.

“If only I’d had more time to practice,” he thought.