

*After all these long, hard years of keeping my memories hidden, keeping my promise hidden, keeping my past hidden, I decided to write my story, a story that shares my joyful, early life, the tragedy that shaped my future, and honors the kind people who made me who I am.*

*-- John Wellington, 92 years old*

I should probably begin with my first memory. I was sitting in the cozy lap of my father, enveloped in his large arms, sucking dreamily on a lollipop clasped in my tight fist. My mother's sweet-smelling coat was draped over my shoulders, and I glanced at her often to see her eyes closed, her long hair pulled back in a braid, with wisps outlining her face, as she nodded her head and slowly tapped her lean fingers against her thigh. In the background, notes smoothly flowed from a massive, black instrument. A man was playing the piano.

Late that night, my parents led me hand in hand back to our home embedded deep in the city of New York. Located near Central Park, it steered clear of all the honking cars and shuffling crowds, yet within a ten-minute drive were concert halls and restaurants. I crawled into bed, my father tucked the blanket over my music note-patterned pajamas; and my mother leaned down to kiss my cool forehead. As I fell into slumber, I remembered the beautiful sound coming from the enormous black instrument.

I begged my parents for more opportunities to hear music concerts in town. On my fourth birthday, they bought for me a wonderfully crafted, rich-sounding piano. On cold winter nights, my dad would start the fire in our spacious living room and the orange light made our quarters glow. He would stand over my small figure, directing me to the right keys. My mother stood, too, capturing my progress, though small, on her video camera. Class time was wasted on me. Impatiently, I stared at the clock, counting off

minutes until the final bell released me. With school over, I sped down the hallways and out the door. My pleasure would be waiting at home.

My childhood hobby grew into a serious passion; as I matured, so did my skill on the piano. My parents always beamed when they heard me play, and my mother would dial my grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, anyone who would listen to my expressive sound. My parents noted my talent and, one morning, they proudly announced that they had signed me up for a benefit concert. "It is for the physically disabled people of San Francisco. Music is an inspiring yet peaceful way to make them happy."

It was settled: for the first time, at the age of eleven, I would be performing before a large crowd. Well before the event I nervously pulled on the new tuxedo I would be wearing, my fingers shaking so hard that the shining buttons had to be done by my confident mom. "Son," she said, "smile, everything will be okay." She was mistaken.

I trudged outside, the cold biting at my cheeks and slithering down my back. Shivering, I climbed into the car and gloomily fastened my seatbelt. "Ready?" my dad asked, his sound cheerful and strong. "No," I muttered under my breath. Anxiety made me edgy and cranky. He started the engine anyway, and the car sped away through the fog. We passed through fields sprinkled with flowers, then raced between tall buildings black against the sun. What we didn't pass was the auditorium in San Francisco. We never got there.

\* \* \*

Dazed, I was awakened by a loud beeping. All white surrounded my body, and strange wires hooked through my arms and up my nose. A machine hung by my head, lines passing through the black monitor. Several times I blinked. Several times. Was this real? It was. When I tried to move, a sudden, sharp pang sliced my chest and legs, and a strange person rushed to me. "Shhhh," she comforted, laying her cold hand on my forehead. The throbbing subsided. I looked up, fearful of causing any sudden pain. As I later found out, I was in a hospital, rushed there by an ambulance. The only trace left of my parents was a single speck of blood on the corner of "Beethoven's Moonlight

Sonata.”

Two months later, after spending much time at the hospital on bed rest, I was allowed out of the dreary building and sent to my distant aunt and uncle, who lived far back in the country and were said to be kind and simple folk. I dressed and looked in the mirror. I smoothed back my hair, now overgrown and shaggy, and, yielding to a bad habit, bit off the ends of my nails, so they wouldn't click against the piano keys. “Not that I would probably need to worry about that in a long time,” I muttered, doubting I'd encounter a piano any time soon. Shakily, I boarded the plane, carrying all my belongings, mostly sheets of music bundled in a heap, and sat down next to a burly man. Throughout the flight, I stared out the window, tears welling in my eyes as I saw the familiar city, which aroused memories of the life with my parents, disappear.

Finally, the plane landed in a barren field full of black and white cows. I stood up, yawning and stretching my arms and legs to wake them up a little. Dodging past the line, I exhaled a sigh of relief as I left the airport. Having no way of knowing where my relatives would be or even what they looked like, I stood among the crowd, eyeing every stranger. In a few minutes, I heard a loud, braying voice drone “John!”

Wheeling in shock and confusion, I almost bumped into an extremely large lady. She wore a bright sundress, crisply ironed, and a battered hat shaped like a frying pan topped her straight blond hair. She smiled at me, her blue eyes sparkling. Behind her cowered a small, anxious-looking man; all the hair that should have been on his head was in his bushy beard. He sent a crooked grin in my direction and uncertainly waved hello. I greeted them with curt politeness and introduced myself, giving my age, grade, and all the basics I thought they would be curious to know. Striding towards me, my aunt embraced me in her large arms and kissed me on top of my head before bellowing “Come son! You must be starving. Our truck is parked right at that corner, and the drive to our farm is about an hour. I put some nice, fat pork ribs in the oven; they should be done pretty soon.” She took off, half dragging, half carrying me behind her towards the old truck. My uncle scurried behind us, keeping a safe distance from me as though I might suddenly turn and bite him.

On the long journey to my new home, I learned about my guardians. My aunt's name was Suzie, and she was a middle-aged woman who had graduated from culinary school at the age of 30. She was my mother's sister, and they had grown up together in the city. Realizing that the polluted air was too much for her, Suzie had moved to the country upon marrying my uncle. He was an extremely timid farmer who had spent his whole life tilling the fields. From the age of nine, he helped his father at their small farm and now grew corn, potatoes, apples, and several other crops. The couple had met at one of my aunt's culinary travels on which she had cooked him a romantic supper. They married on the spot. Since then, they'd lived in their current home.

Feeling drowsy and sick from the long, windy drive, I began to yawn. No sooner had I closed my eyes, when the vehicle screeched to a sudden stop. I was jolted awake by the piercing barks and yelps of several dogs bounding up the drive and jumping into the truck, greeting us with slobbery licks. I undid my seatbelt and jumped out to survey my surroundings.

A broken-down farmhouse littered one corner of a wide, magnificent field. On the other side stood a roomy house, with a large, welcoming chimney. I sprinted up the steps after my relatives, and once inside their home, I stopped in awe. A cozy fire was crackling. Soft rugs covered the floor, and black-and-white photos decorated the walls. One thing was missing other than my parents: a piano.

Almost immediately, I started attending school in the morning and helping my uncle work the fields in the evening. My hands grew hard and calloused, and I kept imagining how angry my father would be. In the fields, my uncle and I worked side by side; neither of us said a word. In the beginning, I had tried starting conversations with him but soon realized it was hopeless. No matter the topic, he would give only a tight nod or small shake of his head. My aunt, though, I discovered, was warm and talkative, and I often found myself discussing many subjects with her over a warm batch of cookies or glass of milk. She sensed the longing in my eyes for my instrument when I

would look at the pianist playing in the church we regularly attended. I sat quietly in the pew, my eyes closed, as the notes floated in my soul.

\* \* \*

Winter snow coated the porch and grass: my birthday arrived. Sleepily, I trudged down the stairs and bumped into a dark object. Suddenly awake, I blinked several times to be sure it was no dream. Yes, yes, yes! I could not contain my excitement. Racing through the hallway, I yelled “Auntie, Uncle! Thank you, thank you so much! I can’t believe it!” They emerged from the kitchen, holding coffee mugs. Running back to the parlor, I undid the fall board. There, stood the piano, challenging me to play. My fingers danced on the keyboard. The notes became a blur of black and white, and soon I was playing several pieces from memory, feeling all the emotions from so much pain evaporating beneath my hands. In the doorway, my aunt and uncle stood, dazed, astonished at the beautiful sound flowing from the piano.

From then on, I had a mission. I would come home from school and sit at the piano, practicing endlessly. More and more often I noticed the presence of my uncle silent in the shadows. He noted my progress and even spoke up at dinner to comment on my success. He enjoyed the compositions I played, their beauty, their elegance, their difficulty. Sometimes, he would give me suggestions on how I could improve. Usually, he was right. Glancing outside through my bedroom window, I could see him with a lamp in one hand and a book on piano composers in the other, totally absorbed. Soon, he sat in on my practices as my father had once done.

After many years, when hints of a mustache appeared on my face, I decided that this would be the year. I pulled out from the dusty drawer the sheet music, untouched since the accident and stared at it. Then I put on my tight tuxedo, and my new family and I climbed into the old truck and drove many hours to the place in San Francisco where, several years ago, I was invited to perform.

\* \* \*

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to our 50th benefit concert! Today we have a special guest joining us, performing a composition dear to our hearts.

I welcome John Wellington.” I mounted the brightly lit stage and searched for my smiling aunt and uncle. They both waved to me confidently, my uncle especially vigorously, and I nervously walked to the shining black bench. I slid onto it, adjusted the smooth screws, and tested the pedals. In suspense, the audience waited. I lifted my arms and began.

I felt my mother and father behind me, cheering me on, helping me. My fingers trilled the high notes, evoking my old desire for life as it once was. Low notes mocked my inner voice droning on about common sense and how the past cannot be changed. Next, staccato notes teased me to give up. But there always followed the long, cushioned arpeggios, comfortable pillows on which I could lay all my troubles.

A thought struck me then, one I had never before realized. The piano was my connection to the world. It was like a diary. The notes were the words, my fingers the pen. Into my playing I poured all my emotions; the piano’s reply was deep, helpful, confident, offering bright chords for my future.

I was ready to start a new life, but the piano also offered a link to the past, letting me see into my old life, plain and simple, and my new one, complex and hard, both happy.

*Dear Reader,*

*My story ends here, but do not fear, my life does not. As the judge foretold, I became an inspiration to young musicians, traveling to orphanages across the globe to perform and donate pianos so children bereft of parents can experience the thrill of expressing themselves on the massive instrument. For a few years more, I lived with my aunt and uncle before meeting my perfect other half; we now live with our two sons and a daughter. Despite having a million excuses to give up the instrument inextricably linked to tragedy, I chose to remember my parents’ and my aunt and*

*uncle's pride in hearing me play...*