

Like Life

by Tess Liem

Francis Njoo accepted the young woman as his student after declaring that none of her habits were so bad that he couldn't break them. She had barely lifted her hands from the nine-foot Falcone grand piano when he held his hand up like a stop sign and said, "Enough."

"Why do you move like that when you play?" Francis held the desk in front of him, locked his elbows and moved his body around like a tilt-a-whirl. "When you play Bach dancing like that, you turn his music into a suit. You think it looks professional, but it does not fit, the material is itchy, so you dance to disguise the obligation you made to this suit. You do not have to play Bach, you know."

The young woman threw her shoulders back and said, "I like Bach. I've been listening to Angela Hewitt's recordings."

"I understand. Yes, of course. You want to be like her. You want to be a star." Francis extended the vowel sound in the word 'star' and put his hands up to make air quotes with all his fingers as if imitating a moose. "The worst part about that is while you are trying to be Angela, you do not get to be yourself."

Just then the young woman heard her phone buzz in her bag again. One notification might have displayed a breaking news story about a data breach; another might have been an update about the soccer team that had been trapped in a cave; another about fifteen inches of rain in two hours on the island of Shikoku; and another raising the estimate of children separated from their parents at the border. She had been given advice to turn these types of news notifications off and tried, but it felt wrong and too quiet.

Francis looked wise and calm, sitting on the other side of the classroom, like he had never read anything but music his whole life. His skin softly folded around his smile. One front tooth was a little more yellowed than the others. His hair was shiny and black as if recently dyed to remind you he was good looking when he was young. He signaled for the young woman to play

another piece. She had been working on the first movement of the Waldstein sonata for several months. She liked the idea that it was inspired by friendship but what convinced her to learn it was that the piece was sometimes called *L'Auora*. When the third movement opens, you could feel darkness lifting away, or at least that's what people said. She played reading off the score and under tempo, but Francis let her finish before he spoke again.

"Did something tragic happen to you?" He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk.

"I was trying to keep my body still."

"Yes, of course, but there is no joy now. This is a joyful piece, and you play like you are inhabited by the spirit of that sad donkey from those books for children. Especially your left hand." He flopped his hand around like a dying fish.

It was not the first time someone had told the young woman she was not displaying an appropriate level of joy. She knew what Francis meant, but asked, "Eeyore?"

"Exactly," he smiled. "I had a brother like that. You look a little like him, actually. He was 'depressed,'" Francis said and held up his air quotes again. "He was happy when we were children, carefree, as people say. We grew up and it only made sense for us to leave Indonesia, but he would not go. Even though he was the smartest in his class, spoke five languages and could have gone anywhere in the world. I left with my one single talent and not even two years later my brother disappeared. This was a tragedy." Francis said this as if he had said it ten-thousand times before. He then walked toward the piano, weaving through the rows of desks and tapped the young woman on the shoulder with the back of his hand.

"Move," he said. She sat on a chair next to the piano and he played the opening of the piece. "See?" he asked. She nodded, but she only knew the piano sounded different when he played. It was as if he summoned all the timbres of all the instruments in an orchestra. When she played it was just hammers hitting strings.

"Now, since you like to dance, get up. Dance." Francis played and the young woman moved around the room as if she were trying to catch a deflating hot-air balloon. She smelled her own body odour, sour like tomato soup. She stared at the sound panels covering the walls and wondered when the heat wave would break. Her gaze moved up to the fiber-board ceiling

tiles. She tried to figure out when her body had started to stink like this. Her arms felt heavy. When did it become painful just to hold up her arms? It was obvious she was out of shape, but it was too hot to exercise in the summer. It was too everything to do anything. Francis continued playing and she paused to look out the window. Way off in the distance kids were cooling off in a playground sprinkler while people all over the city were alone in their apartments, lights off, in front of fans, avoiding another record-breaking day.

“Hello?!” Francis called. “Earth to Angela!” he waved. “See!” he said again, “You do not even know when the phrases end.” The young woman turned to the piano and pointed at the score where one of the phrases ended.

“Yes, of course, you can point it out. You can bake a cake and know how many minutes it will take to bake, but without a clock you are clueless,” he continued, “Maybe you do not know what *you* want the piece to sound like. You can listen to how others played it before you, but you must figure out how you will play it. It is like life,” he said, “especially right here,” and he wrote *LIFE* on the score. “Sometimes it is very quiet right before it is very loud.” On the top of the next page, he wrote *count*. She could hear it. Life crackling, sharp in her ears without any discernable rhythm.

She moved on to a Chopin waltz. It was one of the only pieces her muscles remembered, but her right hand still tripped over itself. The air conditioning had her tensed while sweat did its work evaporating, leaving her body irritated and colder than she had been in days. She apologized and asked to start again.

“Yes, of course” he said. “You know, you don’t know what people are carrying. Someone’s child is sick, a family member dies, all these things, but they show up. You must show up prepared.” A few muffled, clashing sounds of instruments floated in from other rooms. At that moment someone passed out from heat stroke, the young woman nodded and counted to three.

Francis was not sure if she heard anything he said, so he went on, “Keep going when you make a mistake. The audience cares more about the music being beautiful than it being correct.” It was hard advice to take. He knew this, but it was what he told everyone. The young woman wished there were an audience, dancing to the waltz, but there were only empty chairs and desks, which felt harder to impress.

“A mistake is a moment of dissonance. Yes, of course, it is technically wrong. But there is dissonance in music, you must understand. It is in fact very important because it gives us a place from which to return. You get lost, you find your way, it keeps going like this,” Francis paused and lifted his arms up as if he did not know the answer to a question. “It keeps going like this until we die or the world ends,” He laughed and added, “Don’t take it too seriously.” Francis lowered his arms. He asked if the young woman was ready to work very hard and said his piece about bad habits. Then he stood up, letting her know the audition was over. She stayed on the bench until he opened the door, ushering her back out into the heat and the clamour.