

Piano Lessons

“I met Frank Sinatra once,” Mother told me as we drove the half-hour freeway commute to my piano lesson. “At the blackjack tables in the Sands Hotel.”

It was hot and we had the windows down in her ‘58 two-toned Chevy Bel-Air. The dry Santa Ana wind buffeted her auburn hair and took its turn with mine. My head was tipped back on the seat and I was staring at the gold felt roof liner. I could still see the stains from the Coke that exploded in the back seat, one week after it was new. I thought it was the end for my sister.

Mother yelled for days about her beautiful new car and how she loved it so and now it was ruined forever. Chrissy walked around with her lower lip stuck out and her head hidden between her shoulders. After a week passed, Momma drew us both up in her arms and said, “Next time, could you make sure if you’re gonna spill, make it a Bubble-Up or a ginger ale?” Chrissy pulled her lip back in and quit walking around like a turtle. I figure that was the day she learned about Momma’s bad side.

I had learned about it the year before. I sassed Momma about how she could never cut my bangs right and I always looked like some retarded French poodle and she slapped me and started crying. I just stared at her, even though I knew right away it had hurt her to slap me. She had never slapped me before.

It must have hurt a lot because she quit talking to me and didn’t talk to me for a week. A week. Not at dinner. Not at bedtime. Nothing. Just silence. A silence that grew each day. At first it just sounded like the wind does as it switches from the typical soft ocean breezes to the hot dry Santa Ana wind off the desert, kind of a low moan instead of the usual soft whispers. But by mid-week, the silence changed; it whipped and swirled around my head, scattering those bangs into my eyes. At the end of the week, it was a loud rumbling. Like a thunderstorm that had crept up and gotten stalled in the foothills of southern

California. A rumbling that echoed. Reverberated. And followed me wherever I went.

After a week, it felt as if the silence had taken on a life of its own and was sitting like a fat cat on my chest trying to steal my breath. I couldn't take the punishment any longer so one night I snuck out of bed and found Mom in her chair, smoking and watching Jack Parr. A Jack Daniels on the rocks in her hand.

I stood there staring at her, waiting for her to at least shoo me back to bed or something. Nothing. By now, my whole body felt as if it was drenched with her silence so I started crying and the words fell out like macaroni from a torn bag and pretty soon she was crying and pulling me in and the smell of the bourbon and Viceroy cigarettes and Intimate perfume enfolded me and her magic spread all over me and I knew deep in my heart I would never do anything to make her mad enough to stop talking to me again.

So I turn my head and look over at Mom. She's humming along to Frank Sinatra singing "Come Rain or Come Shine" on the radio. Driving with one hand on the wheel, the other out the window, cigarette clenched tightly between her first two fingers, waving back and forth, she keeps time with her little finger on the top of the side mirror. This way the smoke stays out of the car. So she says. The song must have triggered the memory. She and Dad hadn't been over to Vegas in a while.

"When was that, Momma?"

She took a drag off her cigarette, snuffed it out in the ashtray and snapped the ashtray closed. "Let's see. Maybe '56 or '57. I was wearing that great black and white abstract-patterned sundress with the halter top. You know the one, don't you?" She glanced over at me and smiled, lips tinted with Revlon's "Love Me Red."

Some people measure time with a calendar or a clock. Others with a diary. Mom measured time and events by her wardrobe. Each birthday, anniversary, wedding, or funeral was marked and filed in her memory under a category marked *the dress I wore*. At thirteen, I wondered if I would ever have the kind of clothes to mark occasions by. Or look as drop-dead gorgeous as my mother did in hers.

“Which earrings?”

“Hmmm.” She paused and I swear I could almost hear those files dropping into place, sorted carefully, like the folded cashmere sweaters in her dresser drawers. “Must have been those black-petalled ones with the rhinestones that spray all over my ears...”

Of course. Those would have been the ones. While other mothers might have worn a single pearl, my mother served up her exotic looks with relish. I glanced over at her. Even just driving me to piano lessons, she looked great. Her hair with natural easy waves cut short, chestnut-colored eyes, red lips, she looked fashionable and classic, even in shorts and a cotton blouse.

“What was he like?” That she had met Frank Sinatra added even more to her mystery. A famous person. Not as great as meeting Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys, but it was definitely something out of the ordinary.

“Oh, I don’t know.” She changed lanes and looked for our off-ramp. “You know, they’re never quite like they seem up on stage, when you finally meet them. Kind of quiet. Serious.” She drifted off into an easy familiar silence. A silence that was safe, but untransgressable. I had a million questions that would just have to wait.

At least we weren’t talking about whether or not I had practiced enough for my lessons. I hated my piano teacher and hated the lessons. Loved playing the piano, but hated the hours on the hard bench with Czerny and Chopin when I could be with my girlfriends, listening to records, dreaming about growing up. But no. Mother wanted the talent she and my piano teacher agreed lay dormant in my fingers to blossom. *You have real talent. A way to make something of yourself. Not like me. You could really be something.*

Be something. How could I tell her that I wanted to be her? Out of all my friends, both male and female, Mom stood out. My friends’ mothers were a librarian, a kindergarten teacher, a daycare provider, a seamstress, and a stay-at-home mom who was a Christian Scientist. Be something? My mom smoked, swore, went to Vegas to gamble, lived for Friday nights and dancing with my Dad, never “lowered” herself to drinking beer, wore Chinese dresses, and vacuumed in her bathing suit. Now that was something all my girlfriends and I aspired to. She was the closest thing to glamour we would know for a while. And glamour was

what we dreamed about and lived for.

Before long, the silence settled in again and wrapped us in our own worlds for the rest of the drive. Mom pulled in behind the Belinfante Conservatory of Music and I dawdled while I gathered my sheet music together and prepared to go in and face Mr. Baaten, another week of mediocre practice behind me. I dreaded the hour ahead. Mr. Baaten was so weird. Always telling me not to drink milk, that income tax was evil, and that 90% of all college professors were socialists.

Mom turned off the motor, looked at me. “Funny thing, what I remember most about him is a nervousness. He had this funny way of taking his cigarette and playing with it awhile before he would light it. Kind of tapped it on the back of his lighter and twirled it between his fingers, before putting it in his mouth. You’d think I would remember something else, wouldn’t you? Like his eyes, the sound of his voice?” Her eyes grew dreamy and distant again.

A year later, I quit taking piano lessons. I had mastered Gershwin’s *Rhapsody In Blue*, and played it perfectly at what would be my last recital. Mom wore a bright red two-piece suit with a short Jackie-Kennedy-style jacket, beige leather gloves and heels and a beige silk pillbox hat. Despite her prayers and supplications, I was not destined to be the concert pianist of her dreams. I do, however, remember what I wore: sage green linen sheath with matching short jacket, trimmed in white piping, and white pumps.