Dueling Pianists

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What had gone so wrong?

Barry Innes and Steve Glodowski grew up together, next door neighbors in an exclusive Arlington, Virginia, subdivision. Their fathers both worked in Washington, DC: Barry's at the British Embassy; Steve's in the State Department. The two boys - and Steve's younger sister, Amy - attended the same grade school. Both mothers insisted their children learn piano, carpooling them to the music conservatory once each week for lessons.

While the boys were skinny for their ten years of age, their bodies differed considerably. Barry had a large bone structure. Steve resembled a twig. Barry had a thick head of dark hair; Steve's unruly sand-colored curls hated the comb.

Yet, their relationship ran deeper than most brothers.

Until...

Amy made a random, joking observation in the back seat of Mrs. Innes' BMW on the way to the conservatory that May afternoon.

"How can Barry learn piano?" she quipped in her irritating eight-year-old soprano. "He has fat fingers."

Not exactly hurt, Barry studied his hands intently the rest of the drive. Indeed, his digits were thicker than Steve's spindly sticks, but they were just as long, just as nimble.

The boys could hear each other practice the requisite hour a day, their homes mirror images of each other, so their living rooms were only separated by about four yards of grass. Steve, however, liked to duck out on his duties in favor of sports, so he paid Amy half his allowance to play in his stead, while their mother occupied herself cooking dinner.

That's how the duel got started.

Amy improvised a combination of scales and trills, just for fun - being far more adept than her brother or his friend. Through the window, Barry heard and mimicked her. Amy grew more and more elaborate with the impromptu melodies and bass lines, but Barry kept up.

When she finished covering for Steve, she retired to her room, preferring books to outdoor play, Barry left wondering where his mate had vanished.

By his junior year of high school, Barry had composed the Sonata in E minor for Fat Fingers, proving his skill on the keyboard.

Steve, for his part, produced what he titled Sonata in G for the Perfect Pianist, unwilling to let his compatriot outshine his own talents.

At the school's spring concert, these pieces were included on the program, and merited acclaim from teachers, parents and students.

Within two weeks, letters arrived in Barry and Steve's respective mailboxes, offering each an audition at Juilliard in New York.

The journey via train was arranged, and accommodations reserved for the boys, their mothers and Amy, since her father was traveling abroad on business and Mrs. Glodowski refused to let the 16-year-old stay home alone.

Steve and Barry were, rightfully, nervous on what might be the most important day of their lives - except that Steve had scored two try-outs for the track teams at prestigious eastern universities, as well. He debated deliberately botching his performance, while not wishing to disappoint his traveling companions.

Fate intervened, nonetheless. While piling into a taxi for the drive from the hotel to the school, the cabby too eagerly closed the mini-van's sliding door, catching Steve's right hand in the gap. Within minutes, three of his fingers were swollen, probably broken.
Rather than upset his mother, he hid the injury behind a stack of music he
carried, pulling Amy aside as they waited for the elevator on the ground floor of the
lauded performing arts institution.

“You’ve got to play for me,” Steve whispered.

“I... can’t do that.”

“I saw the layout yesterday when we came over for our interviews. There’s a
grand piano in the hall, with another backstage. I’ll pretend to play, and you can do
it from behind the curtain.”

“That’s...”

“Cheating? Sure. But I don’t want Mom to be embarrassed in front of these big
shots. I’ll tell them privately after...”

“Promise?” she pressed.

He crossed his heart.

“Okay.”

Barry executed his composition flawlessly. When Steve approached the piano
bench, his mother noticed he continued to hide his fingers. Glancing at the dozen
instructors present, no one else seemed concerned.

From the angle of her seat, Mrs. Glodowski recognized her son’s fingers never
touched the ivory keys, though bass arpeggios accenting a mid-range theme filled
the chamber with intricate precision. She said nothing in front of these strangers, but
would have the truth...

The audition concluded, Steve rose and made a perfunctory bow, moving to-
ward the steps. The music, however, restarted.

Amy’s unrehearsed meanderings.

Barry, from his seat, grasped the truth. He rose and hopped on stage, repeating
Amy’s phrasing on the Steinway with glee.

After less than three minutes, the duel ended with spontaneous applause. Amy
emerged from behind thick maroon curtains, grinning mischievously.

Steve, incensed, stormed from the auditorium. Pursued by his mother, he
submitted to her demand he see a doctor about his crushed fingers - three of which
were severely fractured.

Denied a scholarship without being allowed to present his explanation, he
shunned pianos after that. Barry accepted his windfall, graduating from Juilliard
with highest honors. Amy, too, was offered admittance, heading for New York the
day after she graduated high school.

Touring together with a repertoire of serious and comedic music, the Dueling
Pianists eventually married.

Steve visibly absent from their nuptials - busy with his career as a college track
coach, according to rumors - he never spoke to either of them again.

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