

BARRY WEBSTER

A Piano Shudders

TO TOM THE ROYAL CONSERVATORY of Music looms like a castle, a battleship, a mortuary, a cathedral.

But the new teacher he's chosen is Mrs. Cho. At the sound of her name, his chest fills with air and he floats up into the sky. Mrs. Cho's face is a spheriform moon perpetually smiling, and when she laughs, light dances across her glasses, suddenly flits away when she pivots her head. Her hair's a labyrinth of twisting curls that bend like the stalks of plants in a jungle, and her suit fabric (usually cherry or vermilion) rises wave-like over her bosom and subsides into the swirling eddy-like pleats of her skirt. Her studio is Spartan, no rug, photos or distractions, just the grand piano standing in the centre like a lung.

Tom thinks: Mrs. Cho's one cool chick.

He views only what's before her outstretched finger targeting piano keys, his knuckles, notes on the page.

"My, you're a quick learner," she says.

She never asks about his former teachers, those ancient ladies blooming mould in suburban, death-shuttered bungalows. He senses he now has no past. He is sixteen years old. This is the start of his life.

His mother has become thoroughly distraught. "And now he's going to an *Oriental*," she sniffs. "Some foreigner we've never met or even heard of, when he could be seeing Helen." Helen, head of the Ladies' Auxiliary. Helen, teacher at the School for the Especially Talented. Helen, born to study, play and teach piano, whose fingers are as long and rectangular as piano keys. "Helen,

my own dear personal friend. I should never have given him a cheque but he's gotten so pig-headed, and I was sure he'd soon hate that crazy chink, right Arthur?"

"Sure," her husband says, pressing the channel converter.

First lesson Mrs. Cho tells Tom not to dig his fingers into the keyboard, clutching at its cliff-edge. "If you're afraid to fall, then fall."

Next she demands he slice off his forearm muscles and hurl them out the window. "Put your hands on the keys and lean into the piano, a tight muscle is a bloodclot between you and the instrument, you must flow to it, it flows to you, you and it are one and the same, I christen thee, Steinway."

She tells him to detach his eyeballs. "Forget the page and let your eyes drop, watch your fingers dance across the black/white right/wrong of the world and hear the harmony it all makes."

Finally she says to balance on the piano bench, one foot lifted in air, as his eyes fixate on the dust mote on the ceiling bulb. "Yes there are rules to be followed. But remember: phrases grow and die of their own accord. Strike and don't strike, listen and don't listen."

When he crouches and rams his fingers into the keys, they swallow him. The piano ignites, erupts, up through the loop of fire he hurtles, a missile; his head strikes—breaks through the ceiling to disrupt a fourth-storey violin class. Tom spits out plaster fragments while an old man brays, "You young scallywag!" He tastes carpet-dust on his tongue as he squints down at Cho's beaming face. "That was good," she says, "except your third finger stumbled on the B-flat."

Tom thinks: These lessons are friggin' incredible.

Next they select his programme. "One major work from each of the five musical periods plus a concert étude."

She ushers him through the Conservatory's library, its walls battalioned with leucous, peeling manuscripts. Together they scrutinize the hell-black eighth-notes hurtling along Beethoven's staff lines, the prissy-savage elegance of Mozart's claw-curved phrases, the devil's intervals trapped in Chopin's chromatic mazes, and then the whole system exploding into the falling pipe shards and thumb-tacks of the twentieth century. They forage, ransack, pilfer.

The result: Bach, *Italian Concerto*; Beethoven, *Sonata Op. 31 No. 2*; Chopin, *Fantasie-Impromptu*; Debussy, *La Cathedrale Engloutie*; Coultard, *Etude No. 2*.

“An intelligent program,” says Mrs. Cho. “The examiner will be impressed.”

Tom auditions for a concert, performs Beethoven’s Third Movement and reaps an A.

Tom thinks: Totally wild to the max!

Mother says, “With Helen you’d get A+.”

Mother fidgets, gapes at Father on the chesterfield, her eyes plead lonely as she cries, “Cousin Fred is not well I can’t find the right sofa covers Do you want me to put more cheese in your lunch?...” Father only stares blank-eyed at the TV screen. Mother’s head soon drops, an abandoned marionette’s, her body deflating.

But when the door slams and there’s Tom, her face radiates and she rushes toward the corridor. “What do you want for supper?”

On Saturday she seats him at the kitchen table and says, “I don’t know. Is this the best way? To get into university, you’ll need a good grade on your exam. Why did you choose the downtown conservatory, it’s so far away, one hour from here! And you practise all the time there—oh so they’ve got these big grand pianos, well ours is the one you grew up on mister, and you may think you’re so high and mighty, specially gifted and talented, but that little upright’s done everything for you.” Her mouth droops. “Billy and Tim, all the neighbourhood boys miss you and wonder why you’re not here.”

The subway train rocks, lurches, his knee pounds a pole, gas-smell intensifies, wheels whinny then screech, the metallic clicking accelerates to a shattering pitch, he’s on a rocket bulleting skyward, BAM he strikes the sun—euphoria.

Mother is to meet Mrs. Cho. Tom’s hands flutter outside his pants pockets as he shuffles along, face lowered. Mother’s head’s perched upright, the click of her shoes on tile as even as a metronome. Tom finds himself seeing things through his mother’s eyes: the archways with their fatuous loops and curlicues, the hanging portraits of lizard-faced professors too arrogant to smile. At the hall’s end, a petite, smirking totem: Mrs. Cho. They stop. Tom in-

hales, wipes his lips, ahems. His mouth, sandpaper. "Mother, this is Mrs. Cho—Mrs. Cho, my mother."

Then Mrs. Cho opens her lips but it is not her voice that emerges.

Tom glares, bug-eyed, as she disintegrates before him. "Good you got come here. Nice for me meet you. Tom ven good studen."

When they say goodbye, Mother turns, lips pursed as if tasting sewer water, and then a knife-blade flash in her eye, bright, knowing, and triumphant.

But in the studio Mrs. Cho speaks and Tom's sail inflates, her words are hordes of bees that encircle, lift him up, up, up, he plunges into the piano, blood blazing, his brain, lava, insane with the scent of lemon-wax—hammers crash and wallop, dampers pommel, *life* pounds through his bloodstream and as he nears Beethoven's fire-blasting summit, he lets out an exultant cry that shakes the conservatory walls. Mother is exiting through the foyer and a flake of plaster hits her nose. "Place isn't even built properly."

Tom thinks: Compared to Mrs. Cho, Mom's a gross-out.

The next seven months, Tom practises seven hours a day, twelve hours on weekends, scribbles schoolwork at midnight. The pieces must be chiselled into his fingertips, branded on his brain. Each night he collapses into bed exhausted. In his dreams piano keys flap like loose teeth.

Examination day is May 20 and its approach is the slow ascent on a rollercoaster. The seat-back gouges Tom's vertebrae, the sun spears his retinae, the rickety grinding of multitudinous wheels beneath his feet, at the peak there will be silence, then—the fall.

As he approaches the apex, the cries of "Helen, Helen" crescendo and finally he says, "All right, already."

Next week, a clean seven days prior to his exam, he'll visit Helen.

Mother's ebullient. "She'll invite some friends. It'll be a real recital, and she'll give a critique that's perceptive and helpful."

Cho's interpretations are safely rooted to all his interior organs.

The day is sultry, the sun cocked behind their heads. From the car, houses pass like gingerbread cutouts.

They halt at a dwarfish, stucco bungalow, venetians drawn.

Windows are closed eyes, the dun carpet slobbers down the front porch like a tongue.

Mother says, "We're finally here."

On the threshold, facial features. Chocolate-chip eyes, strawberry freckles, hoary hair in pigtails. Irma, Helen's housemate. Hitherto, she'd been Tom's Sunday school teacher.

She's unbarred the door and one hand snaps back and forth like a fish snatched from water. "Come, come, everyone's waiting."

The corridor smells like mints, the walls freckled with photos of Helen. She stands fondling flowers or shaking gloves with conductors. In some she performs, her torso ramrod straight or curled over the keyboard like a comma.

Tom detects a murmuring and the squeaking of chair legs. He steps into a chamber jammed full of elderly ladies seated, holding teacups. In the centre, lofty, soundless, stone still, Helen. The whispering dissipates as her head rotates mechanically toward him. Her air of grand, uncompromising self-importance momentarily stuns Tom. Her eyes lock with his, then wander over the full length of his body, stare back into his face, one hand sensually caressing a stiff tulip stem.

Awe-struck, Tom steps forward nervously, "How do you do," and offers his hand. Her rigid fingers fold around his. Rectangular shafts of hair drop like pillars on each side of her horse face. Tom shifts uneasily from one foot to the other.

The corners of her mouth collapse, her gaze solidifies, pupils shrink to rifle-barrels. Abruptly she sits. "So what will you play for us?" Her dress is cut square as a box.

"My whole program if you don't mind. It lasts about one hour."

"Good." She nods her head. "There's the piano. You may commence when ready."

Irma sings out, "Wait a minute. I have to go to the bathroom."

Helen's head turns and she snaps, "Irma, must you do that now!"

"I need some water or I'll cough all the way through."

Helen's head jolts back, nostrils flaring.

"Maybe he should get used to that," says a turbaned woman. "He'll have to when he's a concert pianist."

Ladies purr agreement.

“Ah yes.” Helen shifts in her seat. “Coughs, paper rustling, even people tapping pencils all come to harass the already overwrought nerves of the concert performer.” She halts. “*I know.*” Her eyes bore into Tom’s head. “Once I was at a concert by Anton Kuerti where he was playing Mozart’s *Sonata No. 5.*” Her pupils flicker and Tom is enticed into the space between her words. *What goes on in her head?* He peers into an ebony chasm, half-terrified he’ll tumble forward. “During the third movement, Anton stopped and said, ‘Could the woman who keeps coughing please leave now.’ No one got up. Then Anton’s wife hollered ‘He said NOW!’”

Laughter ripples round the room as Helen’s eyes gleam metallic. A smile forms, congeals, and she hisses, “The woman had to leave.”

Irma reappears, stepping over people and saying sorry, and before Tom knows it, the piano is before him, keys glinting like knives in a tray as he inhales a mothball-perfume. In his cranium he performs the first bars of the *Italian Concerto*. Is he ready? Yes. Begin. His right index finger depresses F, his left hand creates a chord.

But the keys are rocks that barely budge and he must pound with clenched muscles, then tilt forward, propelling his body-weight into the keyboard. Sweat snakes along his hairline as somewhere a vacuum sucks the harmonies away. All his notes sound identical, his phrases, formless. His music’s an aged man muttering in monotone.

Between pieces, the ladies applaud while Helen scowls smugly. Tom plays on, feels he’s wading through tar, lost in a dream, a musical purgatory. He batters at the keyboard, thwacks the pedal to the earth, tries to wake the beast from its slumber, but the piano shudders. When Tom plays the final bar, it dies.

The fervent clapping of hands.

The ladies chatter. “Just beautiful” “Oh, he’s so talented”

Helen surveys him as if he’s a mountain-face she’s about to scale. “You are talented,” she blurts. “I don’t say that to everyone.” She sips her tea. “But I can’t help saying, your Beethoven, *The Tempest*, is a tempest in a soup bowl, not the real tempest at all.”

The room goes silent.

As Tom swivels round, the piano bench chirps. “What do you mean?”

“Where’s the guts, the fury, the storm in that piece? I couldn’t hear it at all.” Her voice is loud, yet she eyes him cautiously. “I’m reminded of Arthur Schnabel. Now *he*,” she says, “was a teacher!” Her eyes spark. “He said, ‘*The Tempest* is chaos and tragedy in three-eighths time. It demands a heroic sound on the largest scale.’ Tom, your *mezzo-forte* is too soft. Your *fortissimo* should just take the ceiling off the room. Not just with the Beethoven but in all your pieces, the tone level is too low—”

“I found this piano hard to control.”

“In my day, when I was a girl studying, not not studying, sacrificing my life for Arthur Schnabel—” He feels he’s being pelted with pebbles and dissolves with nostalgia, for she’s his past: direct, brutal, unassailable, not smeared with Cho’s vagueness. “He would shake me, slap me, almost throw me to the ground and say, ‘Helen, where is that sound?! I want to hear it, feel it, be assaulted by it. *Give*, Helen,’ he’d scream, ‘Give! Give! Give!’”

Jaw clenched, Tom makes a fist and strikes the keyboard. “Like that?”

With his first question, Helen’s face becomes torch-bright. She springs up, pushes her way through the two tall women in front, one of whom tumbles to the carpet.

Irma says, “Everyone, we have cake and cookies downstairs,” and the room empties. Tom’s mother calls back, “Helen likes giving lessons.”

Helen talks rapidly, eyes flaring, demands he commence from the beginning, stops him every few bars, makes him repeat, more tumultuous here, more sedate there, faster, slower, staccato, more pedal. Half-experimenting, Tom slips complacently into his old passive role as Helen sabotages his repertoire, hoarks all over his Chopin, calls his Bach bland and bloodless, says his Debussy is an empty box, and as for his twentieth-century Coulthard, “Nancy-pantsy. My grandmother could play better.”

Tom is mesmerized by her rock-hard certainty.

Her cheeks scintillate as he battles through Beethoven, not flowing but fighting with the music. Helen clucks approval, beats her hands together when he must accelerate.

Yet everything feels different:

1. The music’s shapes are now easier to see.
2. The sounds only take place outside him.
3. He sees the music has existed long before his birth. Also he has never written music.

4. Now he does not feel anything except the slight fear of screwing up.

5. He understands that musicians are assembly-line products, canned sardines with notes on the the packaging.

Suddenly it's like the days before Cho when piano pieces had nothing to do with you but were minefields to scuttle through while applauded by halls stuffed with sartorially-overwrought observers, their ears cocked, judging. He perceives Helen beside him helping control this monstrosity that could suddenly pounce, sinking its teeth into his jugular.

Her eyes glitter, hands uplifted, beige circles in her armpits. "Yes," she exclaims as he charges up the crescendo peak, "you have it, yes," and then she lets out a boisterous cry, the ecstatic shout made when you reach the mountaintop to see there are no higher mountains anywhere.

When finished, Tom huddles breathing heavily, his brain whirls. They'd only explored two pieces in detail.

Tom thinks: Are my other pieces crap too?

She sits, her lips arched, eyes dancing. "Oh Tom," she chuckles. "I've gotten you all in a snit." Irma's drumbeat footsteps up the staircase as Helen whoops, "He's upset!" then says, "But there's a solution. Play the new style daily and your fingers will get used to the technique." What follows is an intoxicating silence as Tom feels himself invisibly drawn forward towards Helen and that space between her words where something else is always being said but isn't, or is, who can say? Then she stands, leviathan, a resolute knife-blade figure against a murky horizon. "Come here again next week and I'll listen for the improvement."

Irma escorts them out, says, "Bye-bye," jerks back her head and shuts the door like a jack-in-the-box closing its lid.

At night Tom's bed is a spindly raft reeling on wave-whipped seas, his body gyrates, thrashes while empty horizons gape all round and demons hiss in his ear, "You'll fail the exam, not get to university and never want to play again." All day images slice his brain like razors and he shrieks "No!" at the songless future as Helen's face simpers like a gargoyle, Mrs. Cho's smile suffocates him with guilt, witches' claws clutch at his organs and pull in a thousand directions at once. Each day is a death-knell: Monday,

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday

He quivers on the piano bench, his hands hovering over keys that resemble piranhas. Condemnatory eyes sear the nape of his neck. Who is right?

Tom thinks: I better not start bawling.

Mother watches him, her mouth an O.

One day she goes shopping.

Pallid-faced, Tom enters the living-room where the ground lurches and pitches like the floorboards of a ship.

“Dad, I have a question.”

Father turns, TV light fondling his cheek. He is maroon, then turquoise.

“Who is right, the young teacher I pay money to, or mother’s old friend, Helen? I need to know.”

Father stares across the coffee table that seems as immense, level and empty as an Arctic shelf. His forehead pleats. “Music teachers?” Question marks fill his eyes.

Tom thinks: You can help me Dad, speak!

Father turns, pokes the channel converter. “Who’s better-lookin’?”

“I guess, Mrs. Cho.”

“Well, take her.” Tom stares at his father’s ear, circular and beige like a rubber sink-plug. “*Bowling for Dollars* must be here somewhere.”

The TV set instantaneously blankens to a thousand, palpitating, salt-and-pepper speckles; an incessant SHHH.

Tom skulks back to his room.

But at night he remembers the void screen, recalls his first day in the Royal Conservatory’s office when he heard about Cho, a new teacher new in the country who played new music: his heart had banged like a fist against his ribcage as sixteenth-notes danced in joyful chaos across the empty screen in his mind.

As he relives it all, his body levitates. Is this what happiness is? He opens his eyes, falls back onto the soft mattress. All around him, pitch darkness. His room’s full of secrets.

On exam day the world goes mute. The steady ringing of silence envelops Tom as he boards the bus, subway, escalators, then crouches statue-like outside the concert hall. When it’s his

turn, he wanders onto the stage, regards the audience area, a black hole, an examiner concealed in shadows. A male bass voice. "Please begin once you're seated."

Tom sits. Keys phosphoresce beneath the spotlight and the piano lid slants skyward.

He closes his eyes, again wants to weep but stares at the triangle of empty space beneath the piano lid.

Tom thinks: Don't get ragged out.

Then he begins to play Bach. Nervously. The first line, second line, first page, soon he's halfway. Then somewhere in the development, he glimpses Mrs. Cho and Helen standing on opposite sides of the piano. Mrs. Cho grins, Helen scowls. Tom gasps, is instantly held locked in the terrible tension of two magnetic forces pulling in opposite directions and in one second his body will tear in half, his intestines falling into a messy heap on the piano bench.

"Go away!" he cries, then suddenly, "You're both useless"; and as he gapes at the blank space between them, something in him clicks, and the women finally transmogrify into two sky-high precipices as a salt-water wave rushes across the stage and he's lifted up, pulled forward. Wind ruffles his hair, the piano lid forms a sail and he flows between the cliffs out to the great glimmering sea beyond. Water-drops splash his face, salt-seaweed smells fill his nostrils while above, seagulls cry faintly as tinkling glass.

His own heartbeat is the ebb-tide wafting him forward; as his breath flows out and in, so his fingers step freely from white key to black, wander effortlessly over the keyboard's unthreatening topography.

The air is clear, diaphanous, and his own untrammelled feelings rise, collect, dissipate, rise, collect ...

Tom thinks: What the hell's going down!

Out of the corner of his eye he perceives a tree-lined shore so far, far away; he's unequivocally, invincibly, superbly *alone*.

Is there still somewhere a monstrous claw ready to clutch him?

Playing the final chord is simple as dropping a stone into water. Enveloped in a plastic membrane that could easily break, he turns, regards the black sloping wall of audience-seats, the examiner a lone star in a night sky.

The bespeckled man sits, beaming, fingers on tear-drenched face, as his pencilled hand dances across the comment sheet. Tom feels breathless, flushed, exhausted. From his bench, the examiner

seems brazenly unimportant, his words, lost insects spinning in the air.

So unlike pianos with their sheer, unchanging, weighted, stable, rooted, unconquerable *solidity*; Tom realizes pianos have been unjudgingly alongside him for years now. Before commencing the second piece, he leans forward and, positive no one's looking, gently kisses the instrument on its nameplate.