

Draft 1  
Tony

An early October frost silenced Boston. Busybodies with slick SUVs took sick leave, preferring hot cocoa and blankets to the ice-and-antifreeze warzone. For who but a miserable wretch would spend a lovely indoor day outside? Boston Common is desolate today. Branches crack and strain to hold their icy veins aloft, while their leaves are trampled under a thin sheet of ice. One hooded figure trudges along the path, occasionally kicking a leaf or a pebble. He wears navy blue slacks with a ratty, dark-grey sweatshirt, the hood pulled tight over his face. His musty red Vans are faded and soaked through. Brown eyes gaze downward, slowly, methodically scanning every imperfection path the cobbled path. He whispers one word, over and over, lost in memory: "Leo."

"Leo! Fourth finger," she snapped, wood cracking down like lightning blasting rotted oak. Her slender hands bore the same scars as his, bruises blue-and-blackening out any imperfections. "Sit straight and tall, feet flat on the floor."

"Yes, Mother." Sharp intake. He meekly dropped into the first measure, delicately caressing a warm, lush sound, starkly contradicting his rigid, terrified body. His shoulders started to loosen as he swayed left and right with the scale.

"Yes, Leo! Play with your soul," she said with a wry smile, but it vanished from her face as he missed a grace note and she smacked him again.

His hands twitch in the linty pockets of his sweatshirt, recoiling at the memory of red-hot lashes. But how happy he was then to be the prodigy, the kid at the end of the ruler, the one who cannot play track or football lest he damage his dainty, spindly hands. He kicks another rock down the path, tracing its wobbly line over the canyons where the cobblestones don't quite meet up. Trees hanging over him like those insecure middle school bullies seem to try to block his path, force him back to the life he doesn't want to live.

"Leo Byrne," the professor called.

"Here, sir," Leo's voice cracked nervously. "Here, Sir!" he repeated. *One of the most famous names in piano, calling my name.*

"Welcome to Berklee College of Music."

"Thank you, sir," Leo's lips trembled. Fifteen years of etudes, sonatas, preludes and Bach still couldn't prepare him for a face-to-face meeting with a world-renowned pianist.

"What are you waiting for? Play for me!" Leo had played the song thousands of times. His fingers curled tensely over the keys. *Left hand soft. Sing with the right hand. Sit straight and tall.* Mother's word's like thumbtacks in his head, painfully pinning note-cards into malleable gray matter.

"Relax!" the professor's light voice interrupted Leo halfway through the song. "Let your body move with the music. You're playing scared. Play as yourself."

When Leo started playing again, he was transformed. He swayed left to right, cascading upward with the song's natural crescendo.

"Good, good!" he heard over his shoulder.

Eyes closed, he slips on the icy pavement but catches himself. His memory jumps back to private lessons with his professor and the constant pleas to "relax", "don't play scared". Sitting down on a bench, he shuts his eyes and lets the biting wind take him back.

There were the first lessons where he was introduced to Miles Davis, to Led Zeppelin, and told to let them influence his playing. *Mother wouldn't like this*, he thought, but the professor would take him instantly back to his work with a funny analogy:

"Leo, playing piano is like taming a wild dog. You have to approach it with patience and dedication, but also a child-like humor if you really want to succeed."

On the outside, Leo would nervously snicker, but on the inside was a roaring laugh and a newfound dedication to finding the fun in practicing his repertoire. He started to find the musical beauty, even in the scales and finger exercises he played.

He spent long hours mastering George Gershwin's raucous but light and playful style. He performed in the concert hall with the majestic grand piano centered, like a panther waiting to be tamed. There were Gershwin's three Preludes, perfectly executed, and the crowd instantly bursting from somber silence to a rambunctious frenzy. Then he saw his mother.

"What was that?" she struggled to keep her voice quiet. "Leo! What were the last pieces you played?"

"It was..." Leo stuttered. "It was a Gershwin Prelude. The beginnings of jazz music."

"I taught you for 15 years. 15 years of my life! And you throw away all of your classical potential, all of your form and technique to play this Gershwin piece?"

"The professor says it helps with classical music. It helps me relax and not to play scared."

"I don't want to hear it! Classical musicians play classical music," she slapped him hard on the wrist. He cringed.

"Moth-"

"I'm taking you out of Berklee. You must study with the best to be the best. I've talked with the classical professor at Juilliard and he's agreed to teach you."

"Yes, Mother," Leo said, glancing back at his beaming professor.

He looks at the red light and mouths the words he wants to say. *I cannot play classical piano any more. It's your dream for me, and not mine. Perfect. But what else can I do? This is all I've ever done. Mother always said that it was my destiny.* He paces back and forth at the light, trying to burrow down away from his mother, his decision, his life.

He ducks behind a tree as he sees her red VW beetle pull up to their meeting place. *You can do this, Leo.* He can't let her make him be miserable. *Maybe I can become a doctor, or a lawyer. Play music for fun! I have the brains for it. But what would mother think? Who cares? Mother cares!* Leo's mind jumps back and forth as he presses his shoulders painfully into the sharp tree bark. *It's my life.*

Walking briskly to the crosswalk, Leo stares at his mother across the street. His foot slides on the ice. He falls forward, throwing his left hand in front of him onto the street to catch himself. A bus comes barreling in, the driver unable to stop on the slick road. Leo hears a sickening crunch and looks down at the bloody, mangled mess that used to be his left hand. He briefly hears his mother shouting his name, then blacks out.

Leo hears a faint beeping and feels a dull, throbbing pain coming from his left side.

"Leo," his mother whispers. His eyes stay closed. "Leo!"

"Yes, Mother?" he looks down at his mangled left hand and almost vomits on the hospital bed. "What happened?"

"You could be dead! Your hand..." she trails off. "What were you thinking?" Leo's lips move, but no sound comes out. His eyes are both restless and glazed from shock and painkillers. They sit in silence as the doctor walks in.

"Ma'am, sir," he addresses them in turn. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but he will never be able to use his left hand again. We're going to have to amputate from the forearm down..." The doctor's voice fades.

All Leo can hear is the beeping and his mother's sobs.

"Merry Christmas," his mother chirps, like the birds on the cold morning. Leo unwraps a sweater, using his stump to support the present, and gives his mother a cheesy Hallmark card. She chuckles, giving him a coy wink. She's much more relaxed now that Leo's given up the piano.

"Leo," she starts. "I think it may be time for you to move back to college. I've found the perfect school for you, and-"

"No, Mother," Leo interrupts softly. "I've found the perfect school for me." He gives her another card.

She sighs, opens it, and nods. "It's your life, and I respect that." The oven beeps and she trots to the kitchen, inhaling the ham's salty aroma. Leo stares at the photo on the wall, left hand proudly lifting his first place recital trophy. His eyes water as he tiptoes to the dusty piano which he hasn't touched in months. He opens the cover and sinks his weight into a jarring middle C. His hands recoil as he sees his mother, petrified in the doorway.

Leo turns back to the piano and trickles down the scale. His chest flutters and the notes crescendo down until he hits a low C with the stump of his left hand. Momentum builds, and soon he's playing a Gershwin piece, using his stump to bang out roots and fifths. He sees himself in the booming concert hall again and closes his teary eyes. The song directs his fingers to all the right keys, ending with a quick scale and a fortissimo B flat.

He turns to his mother and hears her ecstatic applause, tears rushing down her face. Slowly, he rises from the piano, falling into his mother's arms. Leo starts laughing uncontrollably. His mother joins in, a harmony of sobs and giggles permeating the whole house while the Christmas ham burns in the oven.