**Learning The Piano**

So you know when you’re learning the piano?

It’s the fourth or maybe fifth (though realistically actually closer to the sixth or maybe eighth) in a series of very long days and you’ve decided it’s time to learn the piano.

There’s a piano, you always forget there’s a piano, in your dad’s house, the piano you never played when you were a kid, or maybe that you sometimes did, that you’d do “The Simpsons” or “Jaws” on, but you never *learned* it, per se. And you always forget it’s there.

It’s hard to learn the piano. You see all the people who can play the piano, see them on the television or in films or when you watch videos of bands, and you see their muscular, nimble hands pulling sounds out of this object, you see the muscles in their forearms and the bones in their nimble hands, and you think of how much practice they’ve had to do, how many hours of being shouted at by angry Swiss men in incense-scented practice rooms, holding back tears because it’s what their mother wanted, the time it would take, now, to be good at the piano, starting at the age you are now and not ten years ago, which, you think, is really when you should have started.

And then you think of all the people you know who don’t play the piano and the happy and full lives they seem to lead.

But imagine if *you* could? It would be really, really good if you knew how to play the piano. You could play at parties. You could play songs everyone knew at the parties you went to, and you’d go to parties at houses with pianos in them. You’d start playing and people would gather round the piano you were playing and sing the songs they knew, with you. If you knew how to play the piano.

The horizon is endless. You realise how many ifs there are in this life, and how much time there is to make them into realities, into whens, into nows. You realise how much control a human being has over the course of their lives and the nature of their fate. Time is your friend and possibility your ally.

So you decide you’re going to learn the piano. After all, it is the fifth, sixth, eighth day, and there is, after all, a piano in your dad’s house.

You’re going to learn “Martha” by Tom Waits, because it sounds simple; because it has a quality like it’s already being remembered by someone, like it’s somebody figuring out a memory from a long time ago, like it’s a secret stumbling out into the light that’s struck you as if for the first time, and because you get the impression that if you sang over it, it would probably be quite impressive and they might like you.

(They is the people listening to your playing, your playing and singing, of course)

So maybe you track down the sheet music online, if you can read sheet music, or maybe you find a video of someone playing the song, slowly, at first, with a camera only on their muscular, nimble hands, their disembodied voice quietly telling you what to do over the top; faces and upper bodies lost to the ether, their voices a helpful afterthought, their muscular and nimble hands the only sign that you are still in the realm of the living, the realm of hands and voices.

So maybe you read the music, if you can read music, and you translate the little black dots from the page into the air and you think there’s something they’re hiding from you, some heart locked deep within their inky circumferences; or you watch the hands and you listen to the voice until your hands are doing what their hands are doing, more or less.

It’s an E flat, then you play a D with the left hand, then it’s a C minor, and then it’s an E major in the chorus. And while the left hand shifts about a bit, that’s sort of the shape of the song, and you learn it actually quite fast.

You play it through once, stumbling, just to get the notes there.

You play it again, better, and start singing over the top.

You play it a few more times, until your muscles remember it. And you think of the future, when you can play this song on any piano you come across, to anyone who’ll listen. And people who know the song will join in. And people who don’t will go home later and look up the song and think how they liked your version better, because it had a rawness, the sort of innocent, vulnerable rawness that comes with someone playing the piano at a party and singing. You know that rawness, that raw and vulnerable rawness?

So you keep playing “Martha” by Tom Waits so that you remember it.

It is a song about a man ringing a girlfriend he once had. Well, he never calls her that. A lover, maybe. Maybe even just a friend, you suppose that’s possible. But it’s safe to infer a romantic context, given the intensity of the song and various other clues dotted throughout the text. But she’s married now, Martha, and so’s he, and he’s still in love with her but seems willing to consign it all to the past and just remember it instead. And tell it to you, the listener, of course, in this deceptively simple way.

And then maybe it’s the eighth time you’ve played it through and you’re starting to not have to think about it, you’re starting to let your hands do all the work, and you go into a line in the last verse of the song, where Tom Waits sings that he was impulsive and that what mattered in the past, primarily, was “that [he] was a man”.

And then maybe as you sing that bit and play those notes and think about going into the last chorus, you think of a time not actually that long ago, probably March last year actually, when you went to the theatre (or it might have been the cinema, or it might have been an independent bookshop near Charing Cross, but I’m imagining it’s the theatre right now) with a Glorious Person. It was a Person who at that point you considered a close personal friend, a Person you knew quite well by that point but you still had some secrets from each other; it was that point that you get to with another person when you’ve known them for a while, where you have kicked up some of their dust and you can see the gleam of fossils and the white shards of bone vaguely in the haze, poking through the cracks, but you’ve yet to grab your brush and shovel in earnest. You allow the air to clear and remember there are bones in the dust.

And as you play the A flat 7 chord that takes you into the chorus you remember that the Glorious Person fluffed out the back of their hair with their right hand when they laughed, and that meant they had tail feathers like a chicken for a few seconds while they tried to say something intelligent about the director of the play. (or it might have been the author of the book. Or the cinematographer of the film. But I believe it was the director of the play)

And you remember you bought the Glorious Person a rum and ginger beer before you went into the theatre, and the Person thanked you and said they’d buy you one afterwards, and they did a thing where they smoothed out the cuff of your shirt, which had become rolled up accidentally when you took your coat off. And within that small gesture you chose to see many, many worlds and time opened up before you like a big fridge door.

You go into the chorus, the first line of which is “Those were the days of roses, poetry and prose”, and in the original recording a choir even joins in at that point, behind Tom Waits. But you don’t have a choir, it’s just you and the piano. And you’re not Tom Waits.

But your hands are doing all the work at this point and you’ve stopped singing because you’re then remembering how during the play you felt rigid sat next to that person, almost fearing to move, like you might disturb something very delicate and airy, but also very full of electricity, and the play could essentially go and fuck itself because really you just wanted the person to buy you a drink afterwards like they said, and maybe neaten the cuff of your shirt once more, because the whole universe seemed to hinge on those things, at the time.

But memories don’t actually move like stories do they, from one event that happened to the next, they move like planets or like those little grey things that gather around magnets, they orbit around a big central thing, like the thing was always there, like the thing is drawing all those little things into it inexorably, and there was never anything you could do about it. And the shirt-cuff and the rum and the electricity are just the little grey bits, the little asteroids orbiting around the magnetic planet of when, for some reason you’re still not entirely sure about, Glorious Person’s dad arrived at the theatre because they work in the area or were meeting a friend or something, and Glorious Person’s father bought you a drink, and you said something about their father’s tie which went down quite well, and he shook your hand and then took his Glorious child home. And you had to get the tube back on your own, wondering all the way what Glorious Person and their father were talking about, and what they were saying about you, and whether Glorious Person was happy or sad that their dad had come to the theatre on that night. And wondering what the inside of their home looked like. And wondering what it’d be like to have a whiskey with the father at Christmas.

And occasionally reminding yourself that, yes, their *father* had come and picked them up from what you, at least, were calling a date.

And then you remember and remember and remember the smoothing of the shirt cuff. That one gesture of care plays over and over again in your mind like a screensaver and in the following weeks and months you train the hairs on the back of your wrist to remember their touch, and the nerves in your arm to remember the infinitesimal pull they felt as the Glorious Person smoothed back the cuff of your shirt, which had become rolled up as you were taking your coat off.

You feel that pull now, as you realise you’ve finished singing the last chorus, and your whole arm, your left arm, the arm that jumps about a bit, it seems momentarily to be made of a very thin kind of paper.

The last line of “Martha” by Tom Waits is “I remember quiet evenings trembling close to you”. Which is odd, because you think that it’s going to be the beginning of another verse, or that Tom Waits will at least add something, but he doesn’t, he just says he remembers it and the song ends. You saw the Glorious Person probably around last November in a really nice pub, but there were some other people around and you had to leave early to get dinner with your cousin. You didn’t even take your coat off.

Maybe then you stop playing the song. And your left arm feels normal again. Maybe your right hand hurts a bit because the intervals in the verses can be a bit fiddly to play.

Maybe you decide you’re not going to learn the piano today.

Maybe you decide your hands aren’t built for it, or that you have really poor coordination, or that you’ll learn the guitar instead. Or the ukulele. Or maybe no instruments.

But I wouldn’t know, I’ve never tried to learn the piano.