

Roger was anxious for his wife to leave. He would miss her, but the surprise he had in store for her return would be worth the few days apart. It was to be the most ambitious surprise he would ever conceive, but the unanticipated consequence would have a more profound effect on their future than any he could have possibly concocted.

“Got everything you need?” he asked, as they were standing by the car door.

“Yeah, I guess I’m ready,” she replied.

“Well, call me when you get there. Say hi to your mom for me. Drive carefully. Love you, Jujube.”

“Love you, too, Roger.” She wasn’t one to give endearing names to people or animals, and that saddened Roger.

They kissed as she slid into the driver’s seat and then he closed the car door behind her. He watched her back out of the driveway and turn onto the street towards the highway leading to her home town of Lerden, two hours to the south.

A moving truck would arrive in a few hours and he had to prepare a space in the living room for the present he’d bought her. Although married to Julie almost five years, he learned only recently that she’d taken piano lessons throughout her teenage years. A month ago, after a party at a friend’s house during which she consumed, uncharacteristically, too much wine, Julie spoke wistfully of her piano lessons and her teacher, Mrs. Winden. She remarked how she wished she could someday own a piano just like the one she learned on at Mrs. Winden’s home. She rarely spoke of her past, so Roger pounced on this rare nugget to help him choose a present for their upcoming anniversary. He had to learn more about pianos, and Mrs. Winden’s piano in particular. He knew Julie grew up in Lerden, so the Monday after the party he called directory assistance from his office and was connected to J. Winden in Lerden.

“Hello?” a female voice asked.

“Hi, is this Mrs. Winden, the piano teacher?”

“Oh, that was my mother.” There was a slight pause. “I’m afraid she passed away a few months ago.”

“Oh, gosh. I’m so sorry. Sorry for your loss,” Roger said.

“Thank you. Who is this please?”

“Oh, you don’t know me, but my wife was one of Mrs. Winden’s students and I was thinking about buying a piano for our fifth anniversary. She told me she really loved Mrs. Winden’s piano so I wanted to learn something about it so I could try to find one just like it.”

“Maybe I know her. What’s your wife’s name?”

“Julie. Julie Monsee. Well, she would have been Julie Werther back then.”

“Oh my God! I remember Julie! We went to high school together. It’s too bad we didn’t keep in touch. How is she? Can I talk to her? Tell her it’s Jennifer.”

“She’s fine. Great, really. Oh, but I don’t want to give away any hints about the surprise, so, Jennifer, do you mind if I have her call you after I get her a piano?”

“Sure. OK.”

“Can I come over and see the piano?” Roger asked.

“Sure. OK.”

They scheduled his visit for that Thursday at 10 A.M. and Jennifer gave him directions. He took a vacation day from work and drove to the Winden home without Julie’s knowledge. Jennifer met him at the door and after some small talk showed him to the piano in the parlor off the living room. He was surprised to see a grand piano, not an upright as he assumed it would be. The 5’9” long Chickering French Provincial in cherry finish would take up a lot of space in the small house he’d inherited from his childless uncle.

“You know,” Jennifer said, “your call got me thinking that I might want to sell the piano. I just never got interested in playing it. Maybe that’s because my mom was a piano teacher, huh? Well, nobody’s played it since my brother died about seven years ago.” Then in her best self-pitying tone she said, “And I have no prospects for finding somebody to share this big ol’ house with me, so I’ll probably sell the house too.” Roger was too intent on studying the piano to recognize his cue for an appropriately soothing reply. “I had an appraiser come by yesterday,” she said, after realizing she wasn’t going to get the sympathy she was fishing for. “He said it’s not

perfect, but I ought to be able to get \$2,300 for it, easy. Since Julie was a friend of mine and I know she was my mother's favorite student, I'll let you have it for \$2,000 if you want."

Anticipating that he would be making a major purchase soon, he had his home-equity-line-of-credit checkbook with him. But, unaccustomed to making such a large purchase without more intense study, he became slightly woozy and his hand quivered as he signed the check.

He already knew about Julie's upcoming trip to visit her mother, so while in Lerden that day he arranged for a mover to pick up the piano and deliver it the afternoon of the day she was to leave home for her visit. The next day, back in his office, he scheduled a piano tuner to come the day following the piano's delivery. He was proud of himself for secretly coordinating such a complicated sequence of events, culminating, he hoped, in a memorable surprise.

Roger rushed back into the house as soon as Julie's car disappeared beyond the corner. He planned to place the piano in the living room opposite the fireplace. He moved two chairs and the table between them out of the room to allow for the piano. The movers arrived right on time and had no problems maneuvering the old piano into place just as he directed them. They were in and out in less than twenty minutes. He felt a little more relaxed now as he saw the piano in place. He fiddled with the other furniture in the room, moving each item a few inches each way, but ultimately putting it back where it had been originally. He nudged the piano a little to get it just right so the elaborate, smoky-gold Chickering decal over the middle octave could be seen as one entered the living room from the foyer. He sat on the padded bench and rubbed the smooth, curved surfaces and admired the deep, reddish-brown color.

The electronic ringing of the portable telephone jarred him just as he stood up to look at the piano from another angle. Julie was calling in as promised. As they talked she told him she detected an unusual playful character in his voice and asked coyly what was going on. "Oh nothing," he replied, grinning, as he looked at the piano. But he couldn't resist saying "I have a surprise for you, Jujube."

"Well, I can't wait to see it," she said.

“See you in a few days, love you,” they said to each other. He had seldom in his life felt such a sense of anticipation as he was feeling right then.

The next morning Roger went to the garage to gather polishing supplies. He put on thin latex gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints on the finish he was so carefully polishing. To explore the piano in more detail, he raised the keyboard cover with both hands and settled it into its precisely-crafted compartment. He ran his fingertips lightly along the keys, so softly that the hammers did not strike the strings hard enough to produce a sound. He made a wet sucking sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth when he saw that one of the keys was flawed—like a chipped tooth on a beautiful smile. He raised the top and set the hinged support to the lowest height. Then he raised the top higher and located the taller support. He used a flashlight to illuminate the intricate, ornately-painted iron casting within the body of the piano. He read the cast-in-place patent numbers protecting the design of the mechanism, and he looked at the decals displaying the awards the manufacturer had won in competitions around the world. He marveled at the complexity of the apparatus beneath the heavy cover—the assortment of steel, wood, and wool components. He touched the felt hammers, precisely shaped and needled by piano technicians over many years to give the keys just the right bounce, the right feel, the right “voice” for the peculiar needs of the performer and piece. He observed the layout of dozens of strings and wondered why some hammers struck three, some two, and some only one string.

He also found an item the original craftsmen had not placed in the piano. Emerging from beneath the gold-painted, cast-iron framework at the far end of the case was one corner of a faded-yellow cloth bag containing an object about six inches square. The top layer of the cloth had sunk over the years to take the shape of the thing beneath it. He hesitated before he reached, then tugged on the exposed corner to draw the bag from its resting place. He lifted it carefully and cradled it in the palm of his left hand. He separated the folds of cloth at the bag opening and slid the thing out. Roger was stunned to discover a gun in the bag.

At that very moment the doorbell rang and Roger was startled out of the shock of his discovery. He was indecisive for a moment as to what to do, as if he had done something wrong or illegal and needed a valid excuse for his action. The doorbell rang again. He composed himself and walked towards the front door, still cradling the heavy bag in his left hand. He placed it in a drawer in the antique coat rack at the entryway. Through the glass in the door he saw the piano tuner's van in his driveway. Opporknockity Tunes was written in black against the white panel. He had chuckled when he saw the ad in the Yellow Pages a few weeks ago. It reminded him of the Ernie Kovacs sketch he'd seen on Nickelodeon about the piano tuner named Opporknockity who never got repeat business because—and here's the punch line—"Opporknockity tunes but once." Roger opened the door and uttered a stiff "hello" as he showed the tuner to the piano. As Opporknockity set up his tools Roger wondered what other secrets the piano might hold and whether the tuner would find them. At the Winden home the gun was hidden from the appraiser's observation, but the move relocated it to where Roger found it.

The tuner played some chords and intervals and looked beneath the top. He commented that it was a good piano but had been neglected. It was very flat and he warned that he might not be able to bring it up to concert pitch in just one session, and he'd have to charge for another visit if he had to come back. He'd see what he could do and hoped he didn't break any strings, as that would cost extra, too, to replace them. He invited Roger to watch but warned him it might be boring. Roger chose instead to excuse himself and, careful that the tuner could not see the contents of the bag, retrieved the gun from the drawer and took it to his bill-paying desk in the bedroom.

Roger knew nothing of guns and, in fact, was scared of them. What if it was loaded, he wondered, or if it had been involved in a crime? Maybe he should call the police, he thought, or maybe Mrs. Winden's daughter? With hands still gloved, Roger gingerly examined the pistol and tried to make a rational decision as to its responsible disposal, but the repeated dissonance reaching him from the living room began to cause him some distress. He was tortured by the cacophony generated by the strings as they were slowly tensioned to ultimately produce the

frequencies pleasing to the civilized ear. He couldn't concentrate, as the agonizing chaos seemed to grow louder with each hit of felt hammer on steel string.

Julie hadn't visited Lerden in four years. She and her mother had not stayed in very close contact since she'd gone off to college. After Julie called Roger to acknowledge her safe trip, she and her mother drank lemonade in the living room as her mother gossiped about the neighbors. Eventually she asked if Julie had heard that Mrs. Winden had died. No, Julie hadn't heard. "Such a tragedy with that family," her mother said. She reminded Julie about the shooting seven years ago, when Mrs. Winden's son, Charles, was killed by an intruder. "They never did find the murderer," her mother muttered, as she shuffled away from Julie carrying two empty lemonade glasses back to the kitchen.

Julie did not need to be reminded of Charles' death. She remembered every detail of that Thursday. She had arrived at the Winden house at one o'clock in the afternoon, two hours earlier than usual, because school let out early for graduation ceremony rehearsals, which Julie had intended to skip in order to practice for her lesson later that afternoon. Julie was having trouble with the fingerings in the Bach fugue she was to perform that day, and she wanted the extra practice time to avoid disappointing Mrs. Winden. As Julie's family could not afford a piano, Mrs. Winden had offered Julie a standing invitation to practice on her piano whenever there wasn't a lesson going on. Charles Winden, home sick, had answered the door. Mrs. Winden was out running errands and Charles' sister, Jennifer, was at the graduation rehearsal, as Julie was supposed to be.

Charles was a twelve-year-old brat. A pony-tail pulling, fire-cracker throwing, frog-in-your-purse little Puck who loved to torment Jennifer and her friends whenever his mother wasn't around to see it. He had come to the door with his mother's gun in his pocket. Mrs. Winden had bought the nine-millimeter, stainless-steel Smith & Wesson two years earlier, after her husband died in a car accident. The insurance payoff left the family well taken care of, but she felt she and her two children needed the protection that only a gun in the house could provide. Charles had

discovered the combination to the gun safe while snooping for change in his mother's purse several weeks earlier. Once Julie was inside, he told her they were alone in the house and asked if she wanted to see the gun he had in his pocket.

"No!" she said, astonished. "And you better put it away right now."

"Oh, don't be a chicken. I play with Mom's gun all the time when nobody's home."

"Well, I don't want to see it and I don't even want to be here while you have it."

"Well here it is anyway," he taunted, as he pulled it from the yellow cloth bag which he'd taken from his pants' right-back pocket. He had previously easily defeated the trigger lock. His right index finger was in the trigger cage to his second joint and during his handling of the gun he had unknowingly disengaged the external safety lever. He slowly waved the gun in front of Julie's mid-section.

"No, don't!" she cried, as she pushed it up and away. The geometry of their respective positions created a leverage such that her push easily overcame the high trigger-pull tension required for that particular pistol. The high reliability of this manufacturer's product made a misfire extremely unlikely. The gun fired just as the barrel became vertical.

The sound of the gunshot reverberated in Julie's ears for hours after the blast. Charles' eyes stayed open even after he fell to the floor. That fooled Julie into thinking maybe he wasn't dead. But, of course, he was—the bullet having entered his head beneath the chin and settled deep in his brain. He had fallen onto the overhang of a coffee table and that momentum caused the other end to catapult a heavy glass ashtray through the open doorway between the living room and parlor. During the lingering roar she heard the thud of the ashtray as it hit a piano key a moment after the actual explosion. That impact caused all the strings to vibrate and the sonic waves from the blast added energy to continue the resonation.

Julie almost immediately entered a dream state, a hypnotic trance in which she couldn't control her actions. As if instructed or following a script, she leaned down to pick up the yellow cloth and the warm gun still in Charles' right hand. She slipped the gun inside the cloth and then walked to the piano. The top was slightly open and Julie raised it to its maximum height. Then

she placed the bag under a horizontal iron panel at the far end of the harp-shaped iron skeleton and her fingers pushed the gun deep into the void. She heard a muffled clunk as the package fell into a crevice in the wooden base supporting the harp. She lowered the top to its original position. As she walked back around to the keyboard she paused when she saw on the carpet the irregularly-shaped white chip that the glass ash tray had knocked from the front of the D key two octaves below middle C. She picked up the chip and put it in her pocket as she ran out the back door and through the back gate to the alley. She walked quickly back to the high school and vomited in a restroom stall before joining the ceremony rehearsal already in progress in the gymnasium. She sat in her assigned seat; next to Jennifer Winden. Jennifer asked in a whisper where she'd been and Julie didn't lie when she said she'd been in the restroom with an upset stomach. As Julie spoke, she stared at Jennifer's face—the prominent cleft in her chin resembled her brother's—and Julie felt nauseous again. She bolted to the restroom stall to vomit some more. She didn't return to the rehearsal and made up excuses to avoid seeing Jennifer ever again.

Julie attempted to return to the Winden house at three o'clock—though she knew her lesson would be cancelled—but the entire block had been cordoned off by then. The police wouldn't let her past the barricade and she did not volunteer what she knew. She convinced herself that had she called the police immediately, she would have been seen as a victim herself. But she also realized that every minute of hesitation would cast more suspicion on her actions and jeopardize her future. She decided while still at the barricade that she would forever keep quiet about the incident. She was never questioned. Her mother sent Mrs. Winden and Jennifer a sympathy card, which Julie also signed. Mrs. Winden never gave another lesson. In fact, she was even considered a suspect as she had no explanation for the disappearance of her own registered gun, the same caliber as that of the bullet taken from her son's brain.

Julie moved to Planter's Glen—"PG" as the locals called it—two weeks after the shooting. She had a music scholarship at the college there and had made prior arrangements to spend the summer working at the music library and living in the dorms. She went to the piano practice rooms fourteen times that summer, but was unable to touch any piano keys. For about

two minutes every visit she held her fingers a half-inch over the keys which would sound a g-minor chord if struck, but she could not will her fingers to depress the ivories. As she wandered around the campus after each unfulfilled practice session, she read and re-read the notices on the campus bulletin board offering free depression screening and other mental-health counseling. She memorized the telephone numbers but, like the piano keys, wasn't able to depress the telephone buttons. By September she cancelled her classes. She found a clerking job and a room in town and lied to her mother about college life. She met Roger after a year into this deception. He really was a student, a business major in his junior year, working part-time in an insurance office. Julie had saved enough money to buy a car and walked in to learn about insurance. He was eager to teach her as he had only recently learned the subject himself. She declined his dinner invitations twice but accepted the third. Roger did most of the talking during their courtship. He mistook her silence for interest in what he had to say, rather than her just not wanting to talk. They were married in his senior year. He stayed on at the same insurance office after graduating and remained there ever since.

“Julie?” her mother asked as she returned to the living room with more lemonade.

“Julie?” her mother asked again a little louder, this time releasing Julie from the flashback that has visited her every day since the shooting. “What are you thinking about, dear?”

Julie returned home from visiting her mother three days after she left. Roger intercepted her in the garage. He asked that they walk in through the front door as he wanted her to see the surprise from that angle. As Roger held the front door open for Julie she was looking at him and commenting about his unusual behavior. She froze when she turned her head towards the living room and saw the piano. Her first thought and wish was that this was just another piano, certainly not Mrs. Winden's. But as she moved closer she observed the familiar ornate Chickering decal and the cherry finish with the wood grain barely perceptible through the satin glaze. The wooden keyboard cover was extended and she slowly lifted it out of the way. She looked toward the upper registers first because she didn't want to look at the D key two octaves below middle C. But her

gaze was drawn as if by a magnet towards that key, and she saw the distinctive shape chipped off the front edge of the ivory. It was the same shape she heard being formed seven years ago, and it was the cavity into which would fit perfectly the small ivory chunk she carried with her in her purse every day since.

“It’s Mrs. Winden’s piano, isn’t it?” she asked, her voice cracking as she barely pushed enough air from her throat so that she could make the words.

“Yes! Isn’t that great?” Roger was beaming with glee that she recognized the piano. “You said you wanted one just like it and you can’t get any more like it than the real thing. Happy anniversary, baby!”

“It’s wonderful,” Julie lied. “How were you able to get it?”

Roger explained the entire operation in detail, proud of his success. “And Jennifer says ‘Hi.’ She wants you to call her and catch up on old times. Well? Come on. Play it!”

“No!” she exclaimed, louder than she wanted or expected. She quickly smiled to counteract the surprised expression she saw on Roger’s face from her outburst. “Not right now, I mean. I’m tired from the drive. I think I’ll go lie down.”

“OK, and while you do that I’ll go for a jog.”

As soon as Julie heard the door close behind Roger she rushed to the piano to look for the gun. She remembered exactly where she’d put it after the shooting. It wasn’t there. Maybe it had shifted due to the move, she thought. She searched every crevice she could access, to no avail.

Roger childishly insisted that Julie play the piano for him later that day. She eventually sat at the bench and held her hands over the keyboard. Her fingers trembled as they approached a g-minor chord. She could sense Roger’s anticipation, and she felt an indescribable rush of relief as she actually made contact and then pushed down on six keys with enough impulse to cause the system of levers to ultimately motivate six hammers to strike their corresponding strings. She played a few more chords before she excused herself for being “rusty” and said she’d probably

regain her proficiency eventually. She had no answer and simply shrugged when Roger asked why she stopped playing when she was younger.

“You know, I found something really unusual in the piano when I first got it home,” Roger said, three days later as they were driving to their anniversary dinner.

“Oh? And what was that?” Julie asked, as nonchalantly as she was able.

“A gun. Can you imagine that? A pistol in a piano, wrapped in a yellow cloth. How could that possibly have gotten there?”

“Really? A gun?” Pause, pause, pause. “And what did you do with it?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I called the police and they came over and picked it up. Pretty quickly, actually. They asked me where I got the piano and how long I’ve had it. Stuff like that. Pretty weird, huh?”

Julie was able to produce a faint smile, but said nothing as she stared at the white dashes repeating before her in the road as rhythmically and unrelenting as a string of eighth notes in the Bach fugue she was to play for Mrs. Winden on that fateful day.

Four hours earlier and 235 miles away in the State’s forensics’ lab, a technician confirmed that the distinctive striations produced on a bullet he test-fired from the gun found in the piano matched those of a bullet taken from the victim of an unsolved homicide. A few minutes after that, Julie Monsee, née Werther, became a “person of interest” when a national database matched a partial thumbprint from a flat surface of that same stainless-steel pistol with the digitized thumbprint from her file at the driver’s license bureau.

The following morning, Detective Eleanor Leonard opened an e-mail with the subject line “CN97-023, New Evidence.” She remembered well that number and the details of the case. It was her first as a homicide detective and her first of several unsolved cases. Though the lack of closure bothered her for several years, she’d learned since then that patience and luck would become her best friends. Critical evidence would inevitably surface, as it had now for Case

Number 97-023. The e-mail told her that the murder gun had been found in a piano recently moved from the crime scene. She remembered that her team had searched that piano, but obviously they missed it, she thought to herself. She met with her boss for the appropriate approvals and then called the P.G. police department notifying them that she would soon be visiting the Monsee house.

It was Saturday morning when Detective Leonard came to call. Roger answered the door.

“Mr. Monsee?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“I’m Detective Leonard of the Lerden Police Department and I’m investigating the gun that you turned in last week.”

“Oh yes, right. Come in.”

Detective Leonard walked through the foyer and immediately saw the familiar brown grand piano in the living room.

“Do you want to see where I found the gun?” Roger asked proudly.

“Yes, please” she said, as he lifted the top and pointed.

“Uh huh, uh huh. Is Mrs. Monsee home, sir?” she asked.

“Julie?” he asked, surprised. “Why do you want to see her?”

“Just some routine questions, Mr. Monsee.”

“Well, sure, OK. She’s in the back yard. Just a minute, I’ll get her.”

Through the living room’s sliding-glass door, Detective Leonard could see the back of a young lady on her knees pulling weeds in a flower garden. She couldn’t hear what Roger said to her as he approached, but saw her very slowly stand up and pull off her gardening gloves as she and Roger walked back to the living room. The Detective observed no immediate threat, but nevertheless, by the time Roger and Julie entered the room, she had discretely unlatched the leather tab that restrained her gun in the holster at the small of her back.

“Mrs. Monsee, I’m Detective Leonard of the Lerden Police Department and I’m investigating the gun that your husband found in this piano. Do you know anything about it?”

Julie was eerily calm as she sat down at the piano bench as if preparing to play. She was silent for about five seconds and then said “Yes, I hid it here after it went off and killed Charles. I told him to put it away. I told him to get it away from me. But he wouldn’t. He kept teasing me and teasing me with it until I pushed it away. That’s when it went off. And when he fell, he knocked an ashtray that broke this key, here, see?” Julie pointed to the D two octaves below middle C. “I hid the gun in the piano. I still have that broken piece from the key in my purse. I didn’t want Mrs. Winden to know I killed her son and broke her piano. I didn’t want to disappoint Mrs. Winden. I couldn’t disappoint Mrs. Winden. Do you understand? You do understand, don’t you?” Then Julie’s torso twisted to the left and her glassy gaze moved back and forth between Roger and the detective. “Don’t you?”

Roger watched and listened silently and incredulously as Julie spoke.

“Let’s go on back to Lerden and straighten this out, OK?” Detective Leonard said as she slowly pulled Julie’s arms behind her back and gently affixed handcuffs to her wrists. There was no resistance.

“You should probably get a lawyer and meet us in Lerden, Mr. Monsee,” Detective Leonard told Roger as they were passing through the foyer.

“Yeah. Right. OK.” Roger replied, still stunned

Julie’s explanation resulted in a finding of Excusable Homicide for the shooting. The County declined to prosecute the then-juvenile Julie for fleeing the scene. Jennifer might have forgiven Julie for the accident if she had come forward at the time, but she could never forgive her for the subsequent deceit, which Jennifer blamed for her mother’s relatively-young demise: Certainly Mrs. Winden’s son’s death from whatever reason would precipitate her sorrow, but the absence of answers—and even being suspected of the shooting—kept her in a permanent, deep depression that undoubtedly hastened her death.

By the time Julie came home from the psychiatric hospital three months later, Roger had sold the piano, at a steep loss, to Opporknockity. He'd included the piece from the broken key, which Opporknockity glued on before selling the piano at a handsome profit.

Julie had finally been disabused of the tremendous burden of being alone with the truth about the shooting of her piano teacher's son. Although unintentional, that was the greatest gift Roger could have ever given her.

The End