Our Piano

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Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.

—Hebrews 12:15

Wash your hands first, please."

The words are coming to me through my self-taught defense system. I'm hearing but not really paying much attention. The distance is making mum's voice sound funny, anyway, bouncing around the walls like that.

"I know, I know," I reply, hoping she won't press the matter, but I know she will. I play a game where I try to predict the next thing she's going to say before she says it, but it's usually too easy to guess right and win the game, so I don't play it very often.

"I mean it, Aimes."

And she does mean it. She always means it when her voice starts to warble like that. It's hard to explain, just trust me. I may only be twelve, but I know my mum.

"I can't hear the water," she says.

I grumble but go to the bathroom anyway, touch the soap quickly to my fingers, sprinkle some water on my hands and run back to the door of our lounge.

And there it stands in all its wonderful aging splendour: *our piano*.

I'm not good that good at being descriptive, but I'll do my best. The body is made of a light-brown wood and has the word *Belforte* in gold letters in the middle of the back centre piece; the wood itself has quite a glassy look to it from all the wax mum uses on it. I can't really describe it like it is . . . you'd have to see it for yourself to know just what I mean. I do

know that it's called an upright piano and has eighty-eight keys. I know that because I counted them all the other day.

I walk through the door and instantly feel relaxed. I'm only going to sit down and hammer out *Chopsticks* and a few other ones I know, but it's where I go to get away from the strict home I live in. I'm surprised mum even lets me play it, so many other things aren't allowed.

The rules are like my dog: they follow me everywhere I go. Mainly to church, though, where my dad's the pastor.

We boys tease the girls because they aren't allowed to speak out in church. Of course we don't want to pray out loud and speak in the meetings, or even in Sunday school, but that's not the point. Teasing the girls makes the rules seem less . . . there.

To an outsider, our family is the picture of perfection. But the strangest thing is that my parents don't really act like they do at church during the rest of the week. Mum spends her days watching movies; dad lets the occasional bad word slip to name a couple of things. It's hard to describe, but it's as if the two worlds are completely separated and cut off from each other. Maybe that's just how God is—stuck in church like that.

"Don't be too long, the movers will be here soon." Mum's talking again, and I can barely hear her over me playing the very start of the *Für Elise*. It's the only part I know of Beet-what's-his-name's song.

"You haven't forgotten the movers are coming today, have you?"

"No, mum," I yell above the noise. How could I forget the movers coming and taking away our wonderful piano? Sure, they're taking it to our new house in Gore, but it just won't be the same having it in a lounge that isn't this one. Plus I don't want those guys getting dents in it or anything.

I think most of my paranoia about the piano comes from mum, I doubt I would be much fussed otherwise. She dusts it every single day without fail and sometimes I think she loves it more than the rest of us. She values the piano so much that she even stores her huge jewelry box on top of it, which sits on the big cloth grandma gave us. The cloth itself drapes down the sides and all the way down the back of the piano like a giant dress. Mum really likes the way it makes the piano look, but I just think she doesn't want to offend grandma by not putting it up.

I would much rather play games with Dad instead of playing the piano all the time, but he's never really home. He's pretty much out late all the time doing pastor stuff. Goes to old-people's homes, I think. That's what he tells us, anyway. He's always in a good mood when he finally comes home, so I don't mind too much. It makes a pretty cool change from him not saying much like normal.

"They're here!" Mum is shouting in the doorway. I turn around, ending my thousandth go of *Heart and Soul*.

"Why are you yelling, mum?"

"Because I've been trying to get your attention. Now, come on, shut the lid so the men can take the piano to our new house."

I go to close the lid, but she exclaims, "Use the rag, please, I don't need your grubby fingerprints on there."

"Sorry," I mumble.

She goes back out of the room to open the front door for the movers. I can hear their voices; they're really muffled, coming from our hallway. I'm sure God must sound like that when He talks to people . . . faraway and boom-y. I'd be much too scared to ever tread foot in Heaven for the footprints I might leave on the ground!

“Yeah, no worries, fifty is fine.” The voices are now here in the living room, and I quickly lift my head up as mum starts talking.

“Really? That would be wonderful! Thank you so much! We’ve been so strapped for money lately!” She doesn’t normally sound silly and gushy like that—only when she’s around strange men. She goes all . . . well . . . she pretty much turns to custard.

The men—there’s one, two, three, four, *five* of them, wow—walk around the piano and start tying pieces of spongy foam on parts that stick out and look like they could hit things and get damaged. They are working quickly, apparently quite at home and settling in to a familiar and routine job.

But one of them has stopped, and the look on his face is anything but routine. He has pulled grandma’s cloth away from the back of the piano and he must have found something that has made him concerned.

“What is it?” Mum’s voice again, but it sounds worried and much quieter compared to before. I think the man has found something bad about the piano. The movers have just pulled the piano away from the wall and . . . That’s really strange, there’s a whole bunch of what looks like machine gun holes or something in the back of it.

The man who pulled the cloth away takes a deep breath and finally explains his concern. “Borer,” he says. “The nasty wood-eating worms have gnawed through the piano and out the back here. That combined with the fact that this—” he pauses and lifts his hands as if lifting weights “—rather cold and damp room has probably never seen a dehumidifier in its life is probably why the wood is as damaged as it is right now. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a case this bad before, which considering my job is actually quite a surprising thing.”

Mum isn’t replying or even saying anything at all and I’ve never seen her look this pained before. But then again, I don’t think I’ve ever seen the only real bond between her and me—the love for *our* piano—crumbling away behind a pretty veil.

The man comes over and stands by mum. “I’m sorry, but there’s not a lot we can do. You could get the wood restored, but it won’t be cheap for an old timer like this one. And the wood is so perished I’m afraid it might be the wisest thing to just let ol’ faithful rest in peace.”

I can’t hold it anymore and explode in tears.”I don’t want to lose *our* piano, mum!”

“Its okay, Aimes, your dad and I will get it restored.” Her voice is shaking and wavering like it usually does when she gets upset, but this time something is different. She sounds strangely determined, and for a few moments I forget my tears and look up at her in wonder. She is looking down at me and something in her eyes and expression is just so . . . *changed!* I don’t understand who this new mum is that is looking down at me, or where she surfaced from, but I snuggle into her and hold her tight like she is holding me.

My mind vaguely turns over how strange it is that we have spent so long wiping the dust off and polishing the surface of our piano for all these years, only to have it eaten up and rotting from the inside out.

But I dismiss the thought because I don’t care . . .

I have my mum, and she’s way better than any piano.