

Walter Giersbach
Runaway Piano Player

Cindy always says, "Cooking's art, but baking is science." My wife Cindy's the one taking the rational side of things while I lean toward the intuitive, the artistic. That's why we avoid the pain of talking about losing Matty, dying of leukemia at age 12 before we ever found out if he might grow up to be a music lover or a baker. We couldn't agree on what our loss meant to our lives.

Partly to distract us back to reality, we opened a coffee shop in a storefront that had ridiculously low rent. She baked pastries and sold them along with a dozen kinds of coffee, while I lined the walls with bookcases and began a weekly reading group. My grandmother's Baldwin upright piano from the 1940s went into the back room along with some family sofas and upholstered chairs.

We'd get a dozen or so customers sitting around and another stream of regulars coming in for takeout pastries and espressos and lattes. The coffee shop was a living, or a distraction from living.

I missed seeing Cindy's quick smile. She was pleasant to customers and our friends, but it was like she was an actor, wearing a pleasant face like makeup. I knew the grief was twisting her insides because I felt the same way.

I really put my foot in it when I said, "Look, I'm sorry Matty's dead, but he'll be dead for a long time and we have to go on living." She slapped me and said, "Don't ever talk like that again!"

Guess she was right. The dead are never really gone until we've forgotten them, but dammit, we were too young to give up. I hurt too, but I wasn't going to let her wallow in her grief with some moral stick shoved up her ass so her misery made her superior.

And the days continued as I kept expecting each day to take off its costume and yell, "Surprise! Things are different now."

"Coffee and books. Two of life's necessities."

I looked up when a guy in his forties came in. He swept his hand over the counter and around to the shelves, as though introducing me to my own coffee shop.

I filled his order or a plain cup of American coffee, black no sugar. He carried it around the room, warming his hands on the cup before slipping into the sofa room. Minutes later I heard the most beautiful piano playing drift through the doorway. He'd found my grandma's piano. The notes were soft and slow, a kind of bluesy half-remembered tune that hovered just out of memory. I finally recognized the piece as a jazz version of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," a hymn I hadn't heard since we stopped going to church. I glanced at Cindy, whose head rose in a curious expression.

Then the tune segued into a kind of stride piano. I could visualize the man's left hand rolling quickly through a beat while his right hand punched out the melody.

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Customers put down their books and stopped keying their laptops just to listen.

Half an hour later, he came out. "You don't mind my playing? Piano reminds me of one I used to play downstate a few years ago." I took a closer look at his shiny pinstriped gabardine jacket, blue work shirt and jeans. The clothes were clean, but worn, like he might be down on his luck.

"Be my guest," and I stuck out my hand. "You're welcome anytime. Anytime."

"Name's Jackson," he said, then left. He was back the next day, wearing the same clothes. I told him the coffee was on the house if he'd play again. He smiled a bit as I put a cup in his hand. The music that soon floated out the open door was like to stop my heart. It was a simple melody, mindful of times gone by, of losses and loves, memories that wouldn't dim.

Jackson's appearance wasn't a regular thing, but one I hoped for every time I opened the shop.

Then we had another visitor, another stranger. This was a kid who would have been about Matty's age. Ragged as a junkyard dog, with a dirty, torn jacket in spite of the weather hovering around freezing. He just looked at the glass case with the pastry. Cindy put a sugar donut on a paper plate and handed it to him. "Milk?" she asked.

"Got no money," he said.

"Don't need any today, son," and she handed him a cup of milk. Jackson the piano man dropped in soon after. The music started with a slow, rolling beat that stopped and started again, riffing on a three-quarter waltz theme. The kid got up to follow him into the sofa room. I began to get all angry at life, thinking of what we'd lost and wondering where my passions had gone, the emotional heights I'd once enjoyed.

Jackson's playing was good for business, bringing in more customers, but bad because people just wanted to listen instead of eating and drinking.

The kid came out and Cindy pushed another pastry on him. "You play piano, young fellow?" I asked.

"Nope." His eyes didn't rise from the floor.

"Want to learn?"

"Yeah," he said pushing out a deep breath with gusto. "Like that guy back there."

When the kid left I asked Jackson if he gave lessons and would he teach the kid who had stood by his side while he played. He nodded. "But I can't read music none. Just remember it in my head and fingertips."

"You can try. That'll be enough. I'll pay ten bucks a lesson."

We didn't see the kid for two days, so I went looking. Our town isn't so big you can get lost. As the winter sun was setting I found him behind the Greyhound station, huddled in a corner by the dumpsters. I rousted him out and put my down jacket over his shoulders.

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"C'mon, kid. you need some hot food and a better place to sleep."

"Somebody stole my backpack. Only thing I had."

"We'll find you a new one, but first, you got a name?"

"Joseph Crutchfield, but it don't matter."

"Course it matters. Your name is your badge. It tells the world who you are."

He thought that was funny. "My dad's gone and my mother's a drunk, and Grandma's too old to take care of me, so I just ran away."

"Give it one more day. After a meal, warm place to sleep. Okay?"

That night, Cindy and I put him up at our place, In Matt's old room, which felt funny, but there was no other spare bedroom. Next day, Joey and Jackson sat in the back room and the music started out. You could tell when Joey took over because the playing was slow and uncertain, but the song had feeling.

Over the smell of pastry and coffee, I caught Cindy's eye. "We lost one good soul, but maybe we got a blessing in return. I'll call Joey's grandma and straighten things out."

"You see a blessing? Any blessing in all this?"

I said, "Remember when we opened, Riley the landlord asked why the hell I'd put a piano in a weird coffee shop bakery? Back then, I said I didn't know, but I do now."