

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

Aston Davies  
**New York Missy**

NEW YORK CITY WAS NEVER FOR ME. The towers soar miles above my ego and the reeking smell of Marijuana reminds me all too well of my childhood. A period of my life I have no desire to be reminded of.

It didn't help that the piano's unwanted presence consumed my studio apartment the size of a South Bronx deli. Its grand structure battled with the apartment's hip style. Instead of the antique lamps and the abstract city photographs I had scavenged from local thrift shops, the piano was now the center of attention.

"Wow it's...how did you fit this?" The initial amusement of first setting eyes on the piano turned to a more muddled look when they saw the sheer size of the apartment.

"The only grand piano in South Bronx," I would say as if it were some sort of marvel.

The piano was an unexpected gift, if I could even call it that. It started with a call from my brother. Going off of the past ten phone conversations we've had over the last ten years, I figured he needed money. Gripping the phone underneath my sweaty palms, I was ready to unleash my boiling anger. When I heard the click, I let go. "Greg! What is it this time? Money?! Cause I don't have any! Work like everyone else!" I was prepared to hang up the call when I heard an uncharacteristically faint voice.

His usual rasp from a decade of smoking was gone today. "M...Missy. Um...no, it's n...not money." The stutter that only appeared when my dad yelled had returned. After a brief silence, he continued. "It's dad."

"What about Dad," my tone had subdued but I was growing impatient. At least it wasn't money, but *Dad* was the only other thing we could talk about.

"Umm...Um...he's in t...t...he hospital. He h...had a heart at...tack."

To be honest, I wasn't surprised. I warned him about his health, but he persisted with his greasy bacon and sausage. I was surprised, however, by how soon it had come. At least a few more years I thought.

"How long ago?"

"H...h...he's been in t...t...there for two days."

"And you're just telling me now?!" My outburst elicited no response.

It was nearly a week later when Greg called again. This time, I didn't expect him to ask for money. I picked up and just waited. "He's d...d...dead." We sat silent for a minute. My brother cried, but I couldn't. I couldn't get myself to cry for my dad.

Two weeks after his death, I was walking back to my apartment when I was blocked from the front door by a large and obnoxious nuisance. Underneath a cloth tarp, its shape was so distinct and familiar. On top was a note:

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*Missy,*

*I can't take this so it's yours.*

*Greg*

The note was curt, just as our relationship had always been. Alone in the hallway, I stared at the curved shape underneath the tarp. I had to call a friend to help get it through my narrow doorway.

"Keep it straight!" We yelled at each other as we tilted the piano ninety degrees and squeezed it into my apartment. After rearranging furniture and removing two pots, I finally squeezed it in the corner, but a portion of the piano's curve extended above my bed.

I kept the tarp on for three months. Dust accumulated on top but I didn't dare remove it. I couldn't come face-to-face with another witness to my childhood anguish in rural Arkansas.

People would come over and ask what it was. "A piano," I would intervene. "I'm going to sell it soon." Not like I could though. I remembered what the piano looked like. Its lacquered wood and brass finishes no longer gave it its once grand and elegant appeal. My last memory of the piano was no different than the public pianos in the New York subways. Even then, however, the amount of graffiti on those pianos couldn't have covered all the marks and dents on mine.



I was lying in bed when I had a sudden urge. My hand wrapped against the tarp and my breath became short. Moving just an inch at a time, I began pulling the tarp off. The piano's edges were now visible. I gasped when I finally snatched the tarp off. For the first time in ten years, I saw the chips that scarred the piano's body. The black paint had faded and the at once pearly white keys were stained with grime and dirt. Its stale smell now plagued my apartment. I almost gagged. I kept the piano untouched in my apartment for another month. I didn't dare play it. I couldn't be reminded of its deaf sound.

To distract myself, I scrolled through the troves of messages on Facebook, encountering the usual remarks.

*Don't buy from this bakery! Their muffins taste like wood.*

*Has anyone seen my cat?!*

Hiding in the irrelevant messages was one that caught my attention.

*Looking for a grand piano. Budget 10,000 :)*

I glanced at my piano. *Could I get 10,000 for this?* I had been waiting for the chance to part with the piano. I immediately replied.

*I have one for 10.*

I received an almost immediate response.

*Send pics.*

I raised my phone. Then, I stopped. I couldn't send pictures of *this* piano. They would immediately refuse after seeing its scarred wood and dirty keys.

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Only thirty minutes later, I was lugging a gallon of jet-black paint back to my apartment. I would paint over the piano's imperfections. I dipped the brush. Holding it just a few inches away from the piano, droplets dripped onto the paper that rolled out underneath.

I froze. I told myself to get it over with. The 10,000 dollars dangled ahead and I wanted it desperately. I could pay my rent for the first time in two months, maybe eat at a restaurant outside of South Bronx, or buy a new pot to replace the void that the piano's absence would create. I could do all three!

My body went limp and the brush slipped from my hand, splattering paint across the floor. I couldn't do it. The small puddles of paint on the paper turned into a lighter shade of black when mixed with my tears. They dropped, one after the other, rolling down my cheek. I couldn't paint over the piano. The scratches and nicks would still be hiding underneath, waiting to be seen. This piano would continue to carry with it the horrors of my childhood, even if I tried to cover it with a layer of paint.

I slid my hand over the piano, feeling its grooves and imperfections. As I felt a particularly large dent, I remembered the phone my father threw at the piano after hearing that Greg needed to be bailed out of jail. Peering inside the piano, the popped string from when I banged on the keys out of frustration still floated in the air. A storm of memories brewed within me, waiting to burst through a layer of paint I had been stuck inside.

Gripping the rims of the piano, I lifted myself onto the bench. Its unsteady legs creaked. I rubbed my fingers against the stained keys.

"You sound like the cat Missy!" I could still hear my father's shouts. "Get off!" He would motion from the kitchen.

I played. No one would now tell me to get off. My fingers raced up and down the keys. "We should just sell the thing." "It's collecting dust." "She'll never be good enough for the piano." My father's voice still rang in my head.

The C sounded like an A, the F was rather flat, and I probably did sound kind of like a cat, but I didn't care.

Then, my mind went blank. "Missy," I remembered her tender voice. I could feel her soothing hands brush against my shoulders. "You will always be my missy," her southern twang grounded me in my rural Arkansas town.

"Mom," I now mouthed. Tears splashed against the piano, casting a clear film above the yellow-stained keys.

I remembered her hands, frail from her cancer treatment. "Like this Missy," she would squeeze them over mine, molding my fingers into the correct notes. Her warm smile beamed underneath the sun's radiance.

My hands remained still over the piano. I stared blankly at the keys. I continued to play it. My mother's song. The one she played on hot Sunday afternoons when we had nothing else to do but gather around the fan in the living room. "Play the summer blues!" Greg and I often requested. The A seven-chord morphed into a half-diminished triad. Meanwhile, the left hand swayed between a series of sharps and flats. My hands trembled as I tried.

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There it was. That dissonant melody. The one that sent a satisfying chill down your spine. The syncopation, trills, fermatas. It all came back to me.

Then, I tucked my hand behind the piano, brushing against the smooth wood. *Where was it?* I traced over the etched name of the piano and padded my hands against the sides. I heard a slight rattle.

Gripping on the rims, I peered inside. A gold key was pushed into the corner. It was one of those old keys with a crown on one side and thick metal that extended a few inches. I cupped the key, admiring its lust underneath the incoming sunlight.

I wanted to know that it still worked. I wanted to know that the piano could still be locked. After closing the lid, I drove the key into the hole underneath the keyboard. Rotating my hand only a few centimeters at a time, I heard several clicks before the key had turned ninety degrees. I pried against the lid. It was sealed. Grasping the key in my sweaty palms, I took in its cool metal.



It was a muggy New York day when I returned to my apartment. The piano no longer bothered me as it did before. In fact, I had transformed the space to complement the piano's vintage appeal. I once again bought my flowers and pots and instead of crushing them in the corner, I set them on top of the piano's lid. It probably was slowly denting the piano, but one more dent would only blend in with the abused frame. The key was gone and the piano was locked. I had no desire to reopen the Pandora's box of childhood memories.

People even began to complement it. "Love it," some would motion with one hand on their hip and the other an active part of the conversation. "It's so...70's," their voice chic and nasally. They were the ones that made New York feel like the new LA.

Except for me, New York felt different now. It wasn't the grim city I had seen it to be. The piano grounded the apartment with a sense of rural life. I didn't have to play it to be reminded of my childhood. Its mere presence did that. The afternoon sundaes, the hot days in the pool, the hours spent feeding the farm animals, my childhood was a part of New York. I was a country kid just as much as I was a New York Missy.