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The Piano Lesson

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Tete had imagined this moment many times in her head before but as she stood behind the heavy velvety maroon curtains of the stage, she felt her fingers stiffen and a maddening urge to escape. She could see through a sliver of opening in the thick fabric in front of her that the last of the guests invited to the piano recital were settling into their seats, voices hushing down and echoes of sounds meandering slowly into silence. This was the day she had been waiting for all her life but courage was steadily ebbing away as the pressure to perform overwhelmed her. Tete drew in a long breath, closed her eyes and thought of a girl called Khrieno.

It was the early 1930s in Kohima village in a remote forgotten town in the east of India when Khrieno was growing into a precocious young girl. Being the eldest of seven siblings and the most responsible of the lot, she was her father's favourite. Her father had recently found employment as a clerk under the American Reverend who had started a missionary school in the vicinity of the village. The Mrs. Reverend, as the children from the missionary school called her, was an accomplished pianist. And she was looking for new pupils to take under her tutelage. Before the Reverend and Mrs. Reverend came to Kohima, not one soul in the village had heard of this instrument. It made the residents of the village very excited. Khrieno's father was prompt to inform her on hearing the news.

That evening as Khrieno's family settled down in their kitchen after supper to sit around the fire and drink some black tea, Khrieno's father spoke to her: "Child, it is my desire that you learn this instrument that the Reverend calls piano, not one person from the village knows how to play it yet, and I believe you have it in you to learn."

Early next morning, Khrieno was outside the Reverend's bungalow eager to see and touch this object that could produce such pretty sounds. As she entered the house, she saw that there were five others from the village who were also there to take the piano lessons. She knew a few faces and the others she didn't. As they waited in the hall, they stood there silently, shyly appraising each other. Khrieno thought to herself, "I have to give my best and work hard or Mrs. Reverend will be disappointed."

From the other room, Mrs. Reverend called out to them, "come inside children."

As they shuffled into the room and stood before the Mrs. Reverend and her instrument, she said: "Our lessons will begin today. I expect discipline, hard work and punctuality."

One after the other they had to go up and sit near the Mrs. Reverend and she would lift the small right hand of each child on the ivory keys of the piano and press down each finger on a different key and say out loud, "do re mi fa"

The Mrs. Reverend added, "It is crucial that you learn to read music, the staff notation." As she spoke, Khrieno greedily tried to remember every little instruction that the Mrs. Reverend was giving.

And so their lessons began in earnest from that day. The Mrs. Reverend was a strict teacher and would not hesitate to lightly slap a hand or two if her students were slow to learn.

Khrieno would practice what little she had learned by imagining any flat surface as her piano. A wooden seat, her father's table or even the firewood she had to carry would provide her the surface she needed to tap her scrawny but nimble fingers on. The other kids would laugh at her at times saying, "Look at Khrieno, she has an imaginary piano!"

But it was not in Khrieno's nature to give up easily. There was a tenacity about her that would be easy to overlook because she was shy and quite.

Every morning by 7 am, except for Sundays when they had to attend church service, Khrieno and the other children would be there at the Reverend's bungalow and take turns learning their lessons. As the weeks went by, one child would stop showing up for the lessons and then another and then one morning Khrieno found herself all alone at the bungalow because the others had failed to show up. She sat herself down and waited for the Mrs. Reverend.

"Ah! Khrieno, there you are! And where are the others?"

"Mrs. Reverend, I believe they will not be coming back for their lessons anymore."

As she spoke, Khrieno shyly looked down at her feet and had a sinking feeling in her heart that the Mrs. Reverend would stop giving lessons because why would she give her time to just one pupil alone? Khrieno could feel something developing in her throat and it was quickly travelling up to her eyes.

"Oh well," said Mrs. Reverend, "come along then."

Khrieno knew this was the end of her dream of becoming a pianist. All the hours she had put into studying, memorising and practicing her notes ... all would be for nothing now. It would make her father very sad too. All these thoughts ran through her head as she meekly followed Mrs. Reverend who with a determined stride walked past the room and took her to a part of the house she had not been to before. They stopped before a handsome double door; Mrs. Reverend gracefully opened it and led Khrieno into the room. Before her was the biggest and shiniest grand piano gilded in a smooth black lacquer.

"Khrieno," the Mrs. Reverend said, "you have shown me great discipline and spirit by not giving up. So from today onwards you will continue your lessons with me in this room, on my very own personal piano." Khrieno's face broke into the biggest smile.

The Mrs. Reverend said, "your lesson today is a secret that I use when I'm playing or when I'm nervous playing in front of others, always wiggle your fingers before you play. 'Wiggle' your fingers even when you are not playing, even when you are doing chores at home, anywhere! It will keep your fingers always supple."

That was more than a decade ago. The Reverend and his Mrs. had returned to America. There were rumours of a war brewing over the horizon, stories of the Japanese army closing in on the borders, people preparing to leave their homes in the village to seek refuge in the jungles ... but as Khrieno sat down in front of the church congregation to play the very same piano that the Mrs. Reverend had owned and had given to the church on her departure, she blocked out everything from her mind and then paused for a moment to 'wiggle' her fingers.

"We're about to start ... 3 2 1," whispered the guy about to pull up the thick curtains that Tete was behind. Tete opened her eyes, walked gracefully to her seat beside the grand piano on the stage, paused and thought to herself, "thank you, grandmother Khrieno. Thank you for the best lesson you have ever taught me." And with that, Tete wiggled her fingers and began her recital.