

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

*Jennifer McGaha*

### **Beef Stew and Beethoven**

I associate all the pivotal moments in my life with food. M&M ice cream, lasagna, and wine coolers remind me of my senior year of high school. Ginger molasses cookies remind me of my wedding. Cannoli brings to mind the summer I was pregnant with my second child. Chicken stew and broccoli salad with dried cranberries take me back to the day of my grandfather's funeral. And when I recall the first time I realized that my intellectual gifts fell a bit short of my brother's, I think of Devil's food cake baked inside hollowed out oranges.

Mrs. Britain, my piano teacher, baked those for our recital one year. I was fascinated with them, like some people are entranced by those little ships in bottles. I was ten years old, and it was 1977, years before mixing chocolate and cherries became fashionable and just before baking cupcakes in ice cream cones took hold. I remember how I tilted my spoon to scrape all the chocolate cake from the peel, releasing a wonderful chocolaty citrus aroma. It was exotic, like chocolate wasabi truffles or chocolate cayenne bars are today. And it was the only thing I liked about piano lessons.

Mrs. Britain lived in a huge old house built around the turn of the century. It was painted canary yellow, and it was full of wide, creaky rooms with high ceilings and wooden floors covered with rugs in muted yellows and golds. The windows were covered with heavy curtains, and the rooms were sprinkled with stiff-backed chairs. It was the kind of house Ms. Havisham would have lived in—staid, full of diminished elegance, and stale-smelling even at the height of spring when all the windows were thrown open.

In keeping with the color scheme of her house, Mrs. Britain had cream-colored skin and fine, blonde hair, teased high on her head. She taught piano lessons in her sunroom, which was filled with potted plants. Green vines cascaded down the piano, and giant ferns blocked the sunlight which otherwise would have poured from the windows onto the keyboard. I had my piano lesson first, and then it was my older brother's turn.

During his lesson, I sat in Mrs. Britain's yellow living room and listened. As with most things he attempted, my brother was the ideal student—eager, attentive, and disciplined. As with most things I tried, I was disinterested, distracted, and, well, just not very good. I didn't mind the theory workbook so much. I was a visual learner, and I had a track record of success with workbooks. I liked the fact that the spaces spelled a word and the lines made a sentence, and I liked to see all the red pen marks Mrs. Britain made in my book. "100," she wrote, and I felt gratified, gifted even—until it was time to actually play the piano, that is.

"You just need to practice," my mother told me.

So back at home in our living room, I sat on the oak piano stool and turned on the metronome. That was my first problem. I found all that clicking and ticking and rocking back and forth to be wildly distracting. I just stopped and watched in mute fascination. Four four. Tick, tock,

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tick, tock. I turned it up. Two four. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Then further up. Eventually, my cat came in and stretched across the top of the piano next to the metronome. Together we watched the frantic pitching.

"I thought you were practicing!" my mother called from the kitchen.

Ticktocticktock.

"I am going outside," I answered.

That was precisely the right thing to say to my mother. The only thing she loved more than children who were disciplined in their studies were children who wanted to *play outside*. From where I stood on the sidewalk outside practicing my cheerleading moves, I could hear my brother's flawless rendition of "Rhapsody in Blue" drifting out the living room windows.

"S-u-c-c-e-s-s. That's the way we spell success!" I chanted, twirling and throwing my right leg into the air.

Unfortunately, this was an indicator of things to come. I was fun, sometimes even funny. My brother was *accomplished*. Then, one day, after a particularly grueling lesson during which I stared out the window, listening to Mrs. Britain extol the values of hard work and dedication, I made a decision.

"I'm sorry to say that I won't be taking lessons any more after today," I told her as I gathered my books to go.

"Oh?" she said.

She paused and tilted her creamy chin to one side.

"Are you sure? You are making such progress!"

"Yes," I said. "I'm sure. I've really enjoyed it and all, but what with my cheerleading taking so much of my time and all, I just won't have time to practice piano anymore."

Of course, Mrs. Britain understood, and she hoped I would continue playing on my own. I assured her I would. However, when my mother picked me up from piano that day, I neglected to mention my conversation with Mrs. Britain. It wasn't that I *planned* to not to tell her. I was just that I had no plan, and so I chose the path of least resistance: I decided to carry on as if nothing had happened. The next week, when it was time for our lessons, my mother dropped my brother and me off at Mrs. Britain's house as usual. We stood in her driveway listening to the new student play while we waited.

"Mom's going to find out," my brother said.

I ignored him. When it was time for him to go in for his lesson, I played in the backyard under Mrs. Britain's old oak tree. When my mother came, my brother and I walked to the car together as usual. This went on for weeks, mom dropping us off in time for both of our lessons, me standing in the gravel drive holding my piano books and tracing patterns

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in the gravel with my toes. Then one afternoon when I got home from cheerleading practice, my mother was standing in the kitchen, waiting for me.

"Jennifer, I need to talk to you," she said.

She was barefoot, one tanned hand resting on each hip.

"I saw Mrs. Britain at the grocery store today."

*Oh.*

"She said you haven't been coming to your piano lessons."

*Oh?*

"She said you *quit*."

Her voice was not raised, but high-pitched, like someone was squeezing her vocal chords. She stared at me, her lips slightly parted while she waited for my response.

"Uum...uuh, huh..." I managed, looking at the floor.

"You *quit* without even telling me? And I've been paying for those lessons all along? And you didn't even tell me? How could you do that? You can't cheerlead for the rest of your life. What are you going to do when you're *old*?"

I don't remember the rest of the lecture. It went on for awhile. I do know that my mother never made me go to piano lessons again, so, in my mind, I had won. While she was talking, however, my brother slid across the kitchen linoleum in his sock feet. He threw an "I told you so" grin my way before he disappeared into the living room. Moments later, through the louvered kitchen doors, I heard the ticking of the metronome. And then came the piano strains, wafting just over my head and mixing with the smell of dinner simmering on the stove—beef stew and Beethoven.