

Sweet Contentment

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*A striking white piano sat patiently on the stage. The cavernous theatre it stood in reserved the instrument's sound only to those who entered. As the applause died down, the audience's focus shifted to the shimmering figure gliding across the stage. Silence crept in as the figure whirled around to face the crowd. It was a teenage girl draped in a silvery-gold, illuminated by the delicate beams of sun that dappled across the room. Before seating herself in front of the grand instrument, she curtsied as if acknowledging the audience's presence to which they replied with a wave of murmur. Gingerly placing her hands on the keys, she closed her eyes in an attempt to vanquish the nervousness tangled up inside of her and released her breath. A finger struck the first key-*

"Well?" a hand fell on my shoulder. I snapped back into reality in an instant, twisting around to see my sister's face peering into mine. Her eyes were glued to mine, as if expecting a reaction. I stared back at her blankly, then it hit me. A sign of remembrance must've flickered in my eyes, as she suddenly shoved her elbow against my arm.

"How do you feel Ms. First place?". 'First place' - it still took a moment to register the words that had just come out of her mouth. A few months prior, I'd entered a professional competition for young musicians. Available to all instruments, the competition offered winners the opportunity to perform at Carnegie Hall- a dream shared by musicians from all categories. Though it was a long shot, my teacher encouraged me to enter, promising me that in exchange for my hardest effort, I would gain a title in the music community.

However, juggling school, extracurriculars, an afterschool musical, and skipping music levels on top of perfecting an advanced song was something incredibly out of reach for the average middle-schooler to handle; winning seemed practically impossible. Still, I persevered, and as I finished tweaking every last note of my audition song, I began to feel more and more confident in the slight chance I had at winning third place. Never once in the countless weeks I'd spent preparing had I even considered winning an invitation to Carnegie Hall as a possibility.

In the weeks to come, my family and I prepared for the momentous event ahead. Scheduling flights, timings, and picking out an exact replica of the golden gown I'd envisioned. Before I knew it, March had arrived. As the date of my performance drew closer, I began to question whether or not I was truly ready to play in New York. Little did I know that that question would soon be answered.

COVID-19 - The worldwide pandemic that had crushed any chance I had at performing at the great hall. For weeks I sulked in my room, all tears and motivation drained out of my being; this was clearly the universe telling me it wasn't meant to be. Every night my mind became flooded with regret. I was trapped by my emotions; my biggest dream had slipped out of my fingers and along with it, my self esteem. Any attempt to escape only pushed me deeper into the abyss that absorbed any hope lingering in me. Any songs I hammered out of the piano were plagued with a melancholy timbre; my musical drive was lost.

"Sweet Contentment," a voice spoke from the glassy ipad screen. I glanced at my piano teacher, furrowing my brows in confusion.

"The last song in your book- try to play it on your own," she smiled warmly at me, "I figure you might enjoy it". The screen reverted back to a page filled with contacts, indicating she'd hung up. Grabbing the regal blue book, I flipped through its beige coated pages, halting at the sight of the title my teacher had mentioned. Intrigued, I decided to give it a try.

The movement of the base was instilled so naturally in my fingers as I stroked the keys, the treble notes piercing through the silence of my living room. As soon as I finished the first movement, I turned to face my teacher, who was staring at me in utter shock.

"That was," she paused, speechless, "flawless". Contrary to the soft expressions on her face and her huge collection of animal sweaters, Miss Connie was not the bubbliest person, nor the type to compliment her students without hints of constructive criticism. I considered her quite an eminent musician, so I was taken aback, to say the least, by her words of support.

"It's been years since I've heard such sweet playing - your expression is perfect. This is only the first movement and you've captured it beautifully!" her voice was genuinely enthusiastic, one might even say she was proud, "This is your song".

Miss Connie suggested playing the piece in the upcoming Carnegie Hall virtual recital, and instructed me to memorize it. Over the next few weeks, as I eagerly explored the following movements, something new surged through me. It wasn't like other songs I'd played before; it had no structure, no rules. I played it over and over again, mastering the doulcet pattern I'd created, weaving my interpretation of tranquility throughout its melody.

Soon, March was upon us, and with the arrival of spring came the return of many dismal events. A couple of lessons before the recital, to my surprise, Miss Connie pointed out a major flaw in my playing,

"It's too repetitive. It doesn't sound like sweet contentment, in fact, it feels more like a dead end". Nervousness began to sink into my mind. I felt as if with those few words, all of my efforts were suddenly erased. I became obsessed with perfecting the piece, trying to decipher her words. "Play from your heart," she advised the day before the recital, "tell them a story."

Before I knew it, the day of the recital had arrived, and I was still clueless as to what was wrong with my piece. My mind was teeming with flashbacks of the emptiness I'd felt after I'd lost my chance to perform in New York. The more I shoved the emotions down, the more they engulfed me. 'I can't do this,' I scolded myself, 'not today.'

"Are you ready?" my mother's voice pulled me back into the present. She stepped out of the closet; There it was. The one and only dress, glowing like the ocean on a warm summer's dusk, silver laced and breathtaking. I'd always pictured it flowing behind me as I entered the Carnegie Hall stage rather than my own living room. The minutes flew by, and soon, it was my turn to perform.

I was finally the girl in the golden gown. But instead of elegantly curtsying, the girl had to press an unmute button. Instead of a huge audience, there was an empty livingroom filled with only the girl's remorse. Instead of a girl capable of coaxing a masterpiece out of the keys, the girl performing was one who had succumbed to despair.

"Play from your heart". Miss Connie's words echoed in my mind. I took a deep breath, shakily positioning my hands on the keys. And I began.

"Tell them a story". The notes began soft, tranquility embedded in their tone as I'd always played them. As the minor key transition approached, I let my heart drive the music. I let go. Drawing out the colors of the base notes, I poured my soul into the core harmony of the song. I did the unexpected. I embraced my dark memories, playing as if I were piecing shards of myself back together again.

Each phrase of music represented a fragment- some notes so sudden and sharp as if piercing one's skin, and others smooth and lovely. As the song began to draw to an end, and the last few notes left my fingers, I finally understood what I'd been missing before. If the entire song embodied sweet contentment, then it wasn't truly sweet contentment. Without hardships, no true climax of the story - if it was all expressed as a happy ending, there would be no true happy ending. For the piece to retain its peaceful touch, for it to be a light in the dark, I needed to create the dark. My piece wasn't just about finding hope - it couldn't be. Without despair, hope isn't nearly as savorable.

My left hand cascaded down the keys one last time, the melody dissolving into the deep base scale. As my fingers pressed into the final chord, a warm sensation surged through my body. I had found my Sweet Contentment.