



PALOOKA





Greg S. Johnson

Kasia

Our old piano, my first piano, the piano we have growing up in Krakow is *ogromny*, immense. It is a place of mystery, a fortress, a hideout. It is solid. I crawl underneath and around the elegant carved legs. I do not understand it but I respect it. I sit under the keyboard playing with the pedals. I love the worn polish of the brass. I do not know what they do or even how they move but I enjoy the smooth, round feel of them.

I hear Papa's footsteps, and then see his old beat-up brogues approaching, and stumble away from them in fear. He swoops me up and sets me down on his knee at the bench. He takes my hand and rubs it across the dark brown finish with swirls like chocolate. He sets my hands on the keys and lets them run across the yellowish ivory. They have hard edges, but it is the little divots and missing bits that my fingers find. When Papa's large hand comes in, it is like a massive bluff overhanging my tiny parasol on the beach.

The hand-carved walnut music rack has an inlaid harp. It only holds sheet music when Papa plays. At my birthdays he plays nursery rhymes like "A Man from Krakow," and my friends dance in reels and circles of laughter:

*I am a man from Krakow,
I am not a clown,
If you dare to mess with me,
I will take you down.*

He presses my index finger to the name, painting it around the formal gold letters. I will learn that it is pronounced Bösendorfer, that it is from Vienna, and it is very expensive. This is the piano of Schubert, Brahms, and Liszt. It takes the entire weight of my body to push down on those ivory keys. When I hear that noise, so loud and horrible, the first time I start crying.

“Ah-ha, my little pianist,” I can hear him say. “Not perfect, for sure, but nothing to cry about, Zali.” This is what he calls me—princess—since before I can remember.

When the sound fades I want more. I push again, wurrp, and again, zupppp, and now my entire hand down on two keys, clangggg. Papa doesn't try to stop me. Instead, he lifts my tiny fingers and brings them down to the far end so I can hear the difference in tone between the plinky, bright C, the middle tones, A and B, and then back down to the faraway deep-end C.

Later, when I ask him about it, he says that my love of the piano was quite accidental, that I was drawn to it on my own, but I have never believed him. I always thought he had a plan for me, a goal of some kind, a sneaky way of getting me to love it, and then love it some more. Soon I learn that Papa did not buy it. He could not have afforded it on his teacher's salary. It was handed down to us from my Uncle Peter who bought it at an antique fair in Brest for much less than it was worth. My feet are not yet touching the pedals, my hands are barely big enough to push down on one key, but I am playing. I am hooked like one of the sea trout that Uncle Peter brings over after a good day on the Vistula. I remember not wanting to eat them because of their dead eyes and their mouths hanging open, but my mother transforms them with a little butter and skill into something so tasty I forget what they look like. The trout is so perfect it melts on your tongue. My mother loves cooking and she has plans for me, too, but I am afraid I will have to disappoint her.

I play the piano for hours at a time, but soon realize that when I sit down to play my mother comes calling with a mysterious errand for me to run, or tells me it is time to do homework, or that I need to help with dinner.

“Learn something *useful*,” she implores. “You will only make a fine wife if you can cook for your man. Or will you cook him piano notes?”

So I become a secret agent of the piano. Whenever she leaves the flat I run to the piano and start playing. Every so often I stop and listen for footsteps, a key in the door. Sometimes I hear the barking of the downstairs neighbors' German Shepherd Kyciu, kee-choo, Kitty. Her barking echoes in the stairwell. I play louder and faster to drown out the dog and finish before my mother returns home.

I am ten years old and we are moving to Warsaw. I stand with my arms crossed. They cannot make me go. I will fight them if they try to make me. I do not want anyone's hands on my piano. It is *my* piano. I start to think of her as mine. I name her Kasia, ka-zhuah, Katherine, Pure.

All of the other furniture is gone, even the old carpets that mother beats for days before the movers arrive. My father comes in and kneels down next to me where I sit leaning against her on the floor.

“The men are going to wrap her up now,” he says, tousling my short-cut hair.

I shake my head.

“It will be okay, they are professionals.”

I shake my head again.

“Here, let me play you something.”

He sits down on the bench and slaps the wood next to him. I sit on the very edge of the bench with my back turned to him. He plays this from memory, something he knows well, no sheet music. I don't know the movement but the tune is familiar to me, something I have heard before. I drift away on it as if on a raft. Soon, I do not feel sad or anxious or angry anymore. I lean back against him as he plays, and he lifts his arm to let me in.

Filled with sleep, my eyes stutter open and I see that dawn is approaching. Early light creeps over the steel lake. I have fallen asleep in the big comfy chair in my bedroom that looks out at the water. Could it be that I have never seen the sunrise in Chicago? I watch and wait for the giant ball of warmth to peak over the horizon but dawn arrives hazy, much as I feel, and the soft blue promise folds into a grayish disappointment.

I give up on sleep and start the first pot of coffee. My passport is still Polish, I am not a citizen, nothing like that, but I notice in myself little changes. I do not care about clothes so much but lately I am shopping more and thinking more about how I look. I spend an entire Saturday looking for a dress, and when I can't find one to my taste I sit down on the dressing room floor, exhausted, like a spoiled girl of six, and start to sob.

Now I am an American regardless of what my passport says.

The Sunday paper lies in disarray on the parquet, and the caffeine has worked itself all through me so that I am incapable of sitting or standing still. I worry the stitching of my sweatpants where a hole is starting. God, I must look atrocious. I should shower or get dressed or do something. “Do something *useful*,” I hear my mother's nagging. I look out the kitchen window. This city so different than Warsaw, that moment so long ago I cannot let go.

I swing open all cupboards in my kitchen, panting and staring at my dishes. I don't know how I could possibly have so many. I have an urge to pull them all down and start smashing them. These dishes are useless, these pots and pans. I never cook so why are they here? I will never cook but now I will have to start cooking. All the little lies I told myself as I stood on the showroom floor. I will learn to cook, I will eat sandwiches, I will drink bargain coffee instead of the expensive kind, I will pinch and save so I can make the payment every month.

I walk around the kitchen table, the near side, away from the neat envelope with its formal linen stationary, the final bill of sale. I throw myself on the sofa and try to read the newspaper but there is absolutely no good news. There is nothing of any use at all in there. On the cover of the Sunday magazine is an old photograph of Chicago, as it must have been at

the turn of the century. I open to the story but cannot focus on any of the words. I just flip through and look at the beautiful sepia photographs of a time so long ago it does not seem real.

My mother is chattering away about learning the streets of Warsaw, and how we can easily connect to the bus that runs in front of our flat. She has a way of going on about nothing. We are in the kitchen. She is washing and I am drying. I am not listening to her. I am thinking about playing again. I am waiting for the movers to finish, waiting for Kasia. Even today that sound of heartbreak rings in my ears. The clash of strings and walnut and ivory meeting the street two stories down, a sound so loud and sudden that I drop the cup I am drying. The handle breaks off and it rolls into the sink. My mother halts mid-sentence. The moment is so etched in my memory that I remember everything about it: the half-unpacked boxes, the chintz of my mother's dress, the chip in the porcelain sink, the broken cup. Something flickers across her face, a subtle movement in her eyes. Is it delight?

I scream. She looks out the window but I head for the stairs. I take them two at a time and stand in the street before I know what I am doing. The moving men are smirking, smoking. I run at one with my fists out, ready for blood.

"Ayyyy, ayyy, *uspokoić*," he says, tossing his cigarette aside. Calm down. *Calm down?* The smoke fills my nostrils and also a sooty stench from his trousers.

"You damn oaf! You fool! I hate you, I hate you!"

I feel the heat on my face and I cannot control my arms. My fists pound at his sides, his stomach. His dirty blonde friend comes over and tries to restrain me. I turn on him in a moment and kick his knee. There is a solid snap and a howl. Thanks to God, he would never walk right again.

I throw myself to the street, skinning my leg on the rough cobblestone. I pick at a piece of the wood under the twine and heavy blankets. I hold the walnut chunk in my hand, now jagged along the edge like a murderer's blade. I squat there fingering the pieces of my former Kasia. I pick through the rubble, hoping the rack will still be intact. The rack itself is split apart but the harp is in one piece, mostly. One corner has been sheared off. I ferry the walnut harp up to my room and hide it. I feel someone will come for it. I feel as though someone will come to ask me questions, as though I caused this to happen.

"Your daughter embarrassed us today," she says to Papa when he returns from work later that night. She stands at the sink with her back to him.

He sets down his thermos and his briefcase on the kitchen chair as he always had in Krakow. "It's those men who should be embarrassed," Papa says, defending me.

"She acted a fool," mother scoffs.

“Irena, I think it’s completely understandable,” he says, coming up behind her. His hands hover above her shoulders.

Mother turns just before he can touch them. “She acts as if it’s a person who has died! Would she shed tears like that for me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says, rubbing both of her shoulders. “You know what that piano meant to her. Are you blind?”

She shivers free of him and takes a few steps away from the sink. She begins setting the table. “You will defend her no matter what she does. That worker is in the hospital.”

“Well, if she hadn’t put him there I would have,” he says, his voice rising.

“Sometimes I think I married a fool,” she says sharply.

“And who did I marry!?”

Mother drops the fork and knife she is holding and they clatter to the floor. She stares at him as though a stranger and starts to cry. She sinks to her knees and buries her face in the pocket of her arm. Papa winces. He approaches her and reaches out his hand, but she swings her back to him at his touch. It is not the first regretful thing he has said to her.

When he enters my room I have nothing left, no more tears. I am drained as our old porcelain colander.

“How are you doing, Zali?”

I shake my head. Then I burst into tears all over again. He holds me in his arms.

“We’ll get another. I promise.”

I know it is a lie. Maybe it is the first lie he ever tells me or the first one I can remember. There will never be another Kasia.

I stand on the sales floor, a concert pianist surrounded by some of the finest pianos in the world, but I do not feel worthy of them. Each of them is like a starlet, an actress on the red carpet dressed in her finest, twinkling black. And here am I, this little pauper girl from Poland dressed in rags. The sales floor is marble. The salespeople are dressed as if for a night on the town, suits and fine ties. I want to run away.

“Would you like to play one?” the salesman asks with his lilting Irish accent. His silk tie is a dark red, almost too pretty for a man, and his shirt is white as sugar.

I should say, “No thank you, just looking,” and move on. But that smile and that accent are too much. I let him lead me to one.

I sit down at a new Bösendorfer, a baby grand, *maly fortepian*. I do not want to touch it. He tells me about its features in that voice, so high he could almost be a countertenor. The features do not sound like a list of features. They sound like hand-spun creations he has knitted on a loom. I understand why he is so perfect at what he does, why he is the perfect man to be selling me this instrument. He does not know this yet but I do. He is playing me perfectly.

My fingers touch the white waxy surface of the keys. I hesitate as though I have not played before. I am not sure what to play. I start to play the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 but I stop. I stare at the keys for a long time. He must think me out of my wits. Then I start to play the first movement but that is not right either. He is uncomfortable. I can feel his eyes on me, my hands. I settle on Chopin's "Minute Waltz" because I do not want to play anymore, not here. The salespeople burst into applause when I finish. They gather around the piano. I hide my face in the music rack, and when I look up, into the teeth of it, I am a little disappointed not to see the carved harp there.

I turn down the regular delivery because it will take two more weeks. As I sign the papers for the loan, the salesman, Devin, gives me a list of subcontractors they work with. The men come to deliver her, the piano men, I guess you call them, and after they leave I treat myself to a night out, an expensive meal of mussels and steak and cabernet. I return late and a little drunk, and when I enter the apartment I do not expect to see her there. I have no language to speak with her, she is like an aunt come to visit, stiff and formal and superior. I turn away and go into the bedroom to read. I fall asleep only to return to Kasia.

From the kitchen I stare at her for a long time. She is a thing of beauty but almost obscenely so. This is not how I expected to feel. This piano does not feel like an old friend but rather an intruder. I do not know why I thought I could bring her back to me with a simple exchange of bank notes.

Now I am truly an American. I am in debt.

Eventually I work up the courage to approach her. I sit down on the cool black bench and slide my fingers across the polished keys. When we were moving from Krakow all those years ago, Papa played for me the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14, more commonly called the "Moonlight Sonata." Beethoven did not like people naming his works but as so often happens you lose control of what you create. I wonder what he would think of it being so familiar, so typical you can find it playing in the grocery store or the bank or an elevator. This is the sonata we share. Or shared.

It is simple and beautiful, and it does indeed make you think of moonlight on still water. It has touches of melancholy but it is also uplifting. When you hear it you know you are going somewhere. Then as it moves forward, it gathers strength, and by the third movement the water moves faster and bolder, it is like whitewater.

The day I leave for the conservatory, I play for him the third movement. He sits next to me on the bench with his hands in his lap. His hands look older, so much older than I can ever remember. His face, too, is older, lined with regret. I should play for him the first movement but I find it trivial, childish. I want him to see how far I have come. I play for him instead the third, which is a mistake, but I do not know it yet.

I know they cannot last. Their fights are extreme. It is all there in the

coursing flow of Beethoven's genius: the small, petty ruptures, the rocks, the sudden, violent whirlpools. I am so happy to be leaving that I do not consider his feelings. He has to stay and sort out his life with this woman, now a stranger. Their lives are one, and now he has to somehow un-one them, split them apart, go away from her. I am abandoning him even though I am only moving across town.

I dance away from her, straighten the newspapers, clean up the kitchen and close all of the cabinets. I sit at the kitchen table and make a list of all the things I need to do in the coming week. I tuck that crisp white envelope with that number, all of those crooked digits, 42,349.75, deep into the back of the drawer where I keep extra candles and lighters and manuals for stuff I already know how to use. I go to the bedroom and make my bed.

When there is nothing left to sort I turn off all the lights. Windows of the neighboring high rise apartments float outside. People are watching television and eating early dinners and relaxing. A red light on a tall building in the distance winks in the twilight. I stand near her and stare at the lights reflecting off the perfect glossy finish.

I sit down on the floor and lean back against one of the legs. It is not so intricately carved but at least it is solid. I worry the hole in my sweatpants. After some time I move the bench out of the way and curl myself underneath her. I hold one of the pedals as though I am shaking hands.

"I am Natalia," I whisper. "Who are you?"



Greg S. Johnson grew up in suburban Chicago and earned a Bachelor of Journalism from the University of Missouri. After spending one too many years inside the Beltway as a researcher for Time-Life Books in Alexandria, Virginia, he packed his bags and headed to Asia. As an English teacher in the 1990s, he traveled extensively, living on thin mattresses, rice beer, and ginseng supplements in South Korea, Thailand, China, and Malaysia. He currently lives in Chicago. “Kasia” is his first published fiction.

Winnie Khaw is an ambitiously petite and plump young person of Chinese descent who becomes sadly older every year—a misfortune she malevolently shares with everyone else in the world except Halle Berry. Winnie indulges herself in scribbling fiction and poetry and mixing both, to admittedly bewildering but possibly amusing results. An obsessive reader, she indulges in an amateur student’s study of Western European and East Asian history and literature. Having presented at the Honors Program/Sigma Tau Delta regional and national conferences on her creative work, she hopes her writing is not wholly without merit. Either that, or the judging committees were in an odd mood. Very recently, Winnie has begun to look at publication outside academics and has succeeded in having short stories featured in *The Daily Satire* anthology, the Kung Fu Action Theatre audio podcast, and elsewhere. She aspires soon to be a successful published author and perhaps incidentally to change the world. For now she would be content with financial independence.



Bo McMillan was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, but now lives on the west side of London where he watches his favorite soccer team, Chelsea, play every week. At least that’s what he wishes. In reality, he lives in Richmond, Kentucky, which is still pretty great even if it’s not London. Bo is a graduate of Eastern Kentucky University with an MFA in creative writing. His favorite part of grammar is the Oxford comma, despite what the naysayers think. His hobbies include reading, photography, spending too much time watching sports, and wandering the earth. His life dream is to one day own an alpaca farm in New Zealand.

Shira Richman recently ran into the steel stem of a street sign while peering into the windows of a chandelier bedecked room. As a clumsy person who is an inferior prizefighter, she is happy to call *Palooka* home. Her other homes have been or will be the *Los Angeles Review*, *PANK*, *Third Coast*, *Knockout*, and *Willow Springs*, among others. She currently runs into signs in Nuremberg, Germany and teaches creative writing at gymnasiums throughout Bavaria.

