

The Piano Talks
by Karolynn Pargo

Awarded 1st Place in 2013 Short on Words Competition

Like a puppy in footed pajamas, Brian padded beside his daddy, looking up to him donning well tailored suits. When Steven returned home he would lift Brian up to hang the day's silk tie in the precise spot on the tie rack. Brian neither expected nor received praise for hanging the tie perfectly. Perfection was expected. This lack of praise was the base line for the father/son relationship. Steven was quick to scold whenever his son failed his potential, and was often exasperated by Brian's insolent lack of explanation for his failures. Brian could not explain in words, He did not think in words.

Brian's thoughts were in shapes and symbols he called glyphs. These had to be translated into words, which took concentration, effort and time. Usually Brian could not comprehend what he had done wrong let alone formulate words of explanation. He tried to communicate by drawing glyphs for his parents. Occasionally one of his glyphs would be considered cute and get posted on the family fridge. But none of them created understanding. Brian loved his Mom and Dad. They were good people, and were always right. So punishment meant that he was bad and it was his duty to figure out and correct his misbehavior. This always sent the glyphs whirling out of control as he tried to comprehend the world around him. And within him.

It was easier for him to be alone reading his science books and drawing pictures. At night he would sneak out of the house to spend hours in the huge tree house his dad had built for him. Watching the rising constellations he heard music in the stars and was at peace.

One Sunday after church service Brian climbed up on the bench next to the pianist. For all of his ten years he had watched her with fascination, and was thrilled to be this close to the source. She invited him to play He tentatively touched the keys with one finger, then another. His fingers spread out, and he began to play all the hymns he had heard that day. Then onto the hymns from last week and several songs he had heard on the radio. The music flowed unfiltered from his memory. He was unaware that everyone in the room, especially his mother stood stunned by this miracle.

The next week a piano was delivered to their living room

His dad objected saying the piano would take away from his studies. But in the evenings, when Brian was allowed to play, Steven would sit in the living room, his face obscured by the Evening News. One evening as Steven was leaving the room he said; "You should play Moon River". The glyph of Steven was strong and angular and could not be blended with the emotional image of Moon River. It was the first time Brian heard the sound of the whirling glyphs crashing

Every evening for two weeks Brian included Moon River in his songs, but Steven made no comment. Desperate for any kind of response, the next time he played the song; he stopped in mid tune, and left off the last 5 measures. Aware of being challenged, Steven said nothing. Brian repeated this version every night for over a year, and with each playing, became more detached from a need for approval. Brian formed a new personality for himself; one that was the polar opposite of Steven.

Because Brian carefully studied those around him, he was able to understand and display emotions in a socially acceptable way. He was very adept at fitting in with others by the time he entered the University of Michigan. He had not been asked to choose a course of study. He was to study electrical engineering and follow his dad's dream. Because the school of engineering was near the schools for performance arts, he found himself in the company of others who were creative and quirky. His new friends accepted him and gave him time to process his thoughts. One of his new buddies, a music major, introduced Brian to the Dean of Music. Enthralled by his marvelous talent, the Dean bent a few rules and allotted piano time to Brian. It was not long before Brian was asked to perform with various musical groups on and off campus. Audiences were swept away with his fresh highly emotional performance. It was as if Brian could make the instrument speak the music. After he flunked out of engineering school, the fees from performances supplemented his income as a graphic designer for a local ad agency.

He visited home monthly and maintained a loving relationship with his mom and a civil relationship with his dad. Brian tried to explain that he had learned that his brain wiring was not like theirs and that he did not function in words. His dad erupted. "Not function in words? You have been reading since you were two years old. We know you. You can't scam us. You have always avoided any attempt to live up to your potential. I will not listen to your fabrications, lies and excuses anymore." The conversation was over.

Years passed. Although he had successfully insulated his new personality from pain associated with his dad, it was Brian who first noticed Steven's vitality ebbing. His mom denied any sign of decline until Steven was unable to walk down the driveway to get the evening mail. She nagged him into going to the doctor, who said the cancer was too advanced and advised them to prepare for life's end.

Brian moved back home to assist with Steven's care. He was determined to reach a loving resolution with his dad. But the barrier between them was solid. The impending death did not open the doors long bolted shut.

After the funeral Brian unraveled. The personality based on being the Anti-Steven no longer had a foundation for existence. The glyphs whirled incessantly, their howling louder than any music. He lost touch with most of his friends, his mother, his words, his music, himself. Months would go by without speech. He maintained a tentative hold on his graphic design job by sporadically working from his computer at home. Sometimes a friend would stop by his apartment to check on him. Eventually they did not even attempt to speak with Brian but would just touch his shoulder and leave him alone.

Days and nights flowed together. The howling roar would drive Brian to bed only to wake him up confused and dazed. He would stay up several days in a row, seeking to ease the roar with stimulation from unconscious walks for hours on end. Other days he would hide from stimulation by sitting on the floor in silence; rising with muscles cramped and pants soiled. There was no distinction between rain, sun, night, day, summer, winter. He did not feel hot or cold or tired or awake. Eating and sleeping became animal instincts without thought or pleasure.

Brian was obsessed with trying to examine every detail of every exchange with his dad to determine how he could heal his memory and allow the glyphs to settle in serenity. His only remaining fully human function was dressing in a shirt and tie whether he arose at noon or midnight. It was his last painless connection to his father, and he clung to it with tenacity.

One day while wandering aimlessly about town, he stumbled and fell into the back stage door to Hill Auditorium which had been propped open for a flow of fresh May air. The hall was empty, save a few folks working on a set. Brian entered the familiar space, and robotically approached the piano on stage. He sat at the baby grand and for the first time in 5 years his fingers felt the freedom of the keys.

With eyes closed, Brian played chunks of Bach, the Beatles, Mozart, Bob Dylan, and then into music as it was being created. The auditorium was filled with the essence of a violent storm at sea surging and crashing with discordant ferocity. The sounds began to mellow, become gentler and then eased into the last 10 measures of Moon River. Brian sat silent for several minutes before he opened his eyes and walked back to the open door. As he stepped into the brilliant sun, he blinked, and realized he was aware of the breeze on his face..