

# The Piano Teacher's Pupil

By William Trevor

"The Brahms?" she said. "Shall we struggle through the Brahms?"

The boy, whose first lesson with Miss Nightingale this was, said nothing. But, gazing at the silent metronome, he smiled a little, as if the silence pleased him. Then his fingers touched the piano keys and, when the first notes sounded, Miss Nightingale knew that she was in the presence of genius.

Now in her early fifties, slender, soft-spoken, a quiet beauty continuing to distinguish her features, Miss Elizabeth Nightingale considered that she was fortunate in her life. She had inherited a house upon the death of her father and managed without skimping on what she earned as a piano teacher. She had known the passion of love.

She might have married, but circumstances had not permitted that: for sixteen years, she had instead been visited by a man she believed would one day free himself from a wife he was indifferent to. That hadn't happened and, when the love affair fell apart, there had been painful regret on Miss Nightingale's side, but, since then, she had borne her lover no ill will, for, after all, there was the memory of a happiness.

Miss Nightingale's father, a chocolatier, being widowed at the time of her birth, had brought his daughter up on his own. They became companions and remained so until his death, although he'd never been aware of the love affair that had been conducted for so long during his daily absences from the house. That love and her father's devotion were recollections that cheered Miss Nightingale's current solitude and somehow gave a shape to her life. But the excitement she experienced when her new pupil played for her belonged to the present, was fresh and new and intense: never before had she sensed genius in a child.

"Just a little fast." She made her comment when the piece she had suggested came to an end. "And remember the pianissimo." She touched the music with the point of her pencil, indicating where she meant.

The boy did not respond, but smiled as he had before. His dark hair, not cut too short, was in a fringe. The skin of his face was delicate, unblemished, as pale as paper. There was a badge on the breast pocket of his blazer, a long-beaked bird feeding its young. The blazer was navy blue, the badge red, all of it rather ugly, in Miss Nightingale's opinion.

"You'll practice it just a little slower, won't you?" she said.

She watched the boy reaching for the sheet on the music prop, standing up to do so. He dropped it into his music case.

"Friday again?" she said, standing up herself. "Same time?"

With an eagerness that might have been purely polite but which she sensed was not, he nodded. His shyness was a pleasure, quite unlike the endless rattling on of her more tiresome pupils. He'd had several music teachers before, his mother had said, rattling on herself, so fast that it was hard to understand why he'd been moved from one to another. In a professional way, Miss Nightingale had inquired about that, but nothing had been forthcoming.

She led the way from the room and handed the boy his cap from the hallstand ledge, the same emblem of a bird on it. She stood for a moment by the open door, watching him close the gate behind him. His short trousers made her wonder if he was cold, his knees seeming vulnerable and fragile above gray woollen socks, the blue and red of his blazer and his cap repeated on the border. He waved, and she waved back.

No other child was due that evening, and Miss Nightingale was glad of that. She tidied her sitting room, reclaiming it after the week's visitors, her own again until ten o'clock on Monday morning, when fat Francine Morpew came. Piano and sofa and armchairs crowded what space the room offered. Staffordshire figures of soldiers paraded on either side of a carriage clock on the mantelpiece. Pot lids and the framed trays of chocolate molds her father had collected decorated the walls, among watercolors and photographs. Daffodils in vases were on the sofa table and on the corner shelf near the door.

When she had tidied, Miss Nightingale poured herself a glass of sherry. She would say nothing to the mother if the mother telephoned to ask how the boy was getting on. It was a secret to share with no one except the boy himself, to be taken for granted between them, not gone on about. The mother was a foolish kind of woman.

When Miss Nightingale had sat a little longer, she turned on the electric fire, for the April evening was chilly now. Warmly, happily, it seemed that years of encouragement and instruction—offered for the most part to children without talent or interest—had at last been rewarded. Within this small boy, so modest in his manner, there were symphonies unwritten, suites and concertos and oratorios. She could tell; she didn't even have to think.

While darkness gathered, and when her second glass of sherry had been sipped away almost to nothing, Miss Nightingale sat for a few minutes longer. All her life, she often thought, was in this room, where her father had cosseted her in infancy, where he had seen her through the storms of adolescence, to which every evening he had brought back from his kitchens another chocolate he had invented for her. It was here that her lover had pressed himself upon her and whispered that she was beautiful, swearing that he could not live without her. And now, in this same room, a marvel had occurred.

She felt her way through the gloom to the light switch by the door. Enriched with echoes and with memories, the room would surely also be affected by this afternoon. How could it be the same?

But when Miss Nightingale turned on the light nothing had altered. It was only when she was drawing the curtains that she noticed there was a difference. The little snuffbox with someone else's coat of arms on it was missing from the window table.

The next Friday, a porcelain swan went, and then the pot lid with a scene from "Great Expectations" on it, and then an earring she'd taken out because the clasp was faulty. A scarf, too delicate to be of use to a boy, was no longer on its hall-stand peg when she looked for it one Saturday morning. Two of her Staffordshire soldiers went.

She didn't know how he did it. She watched, and saw nothing. She said nothing, either, and so unaffected was the boy himself by what was happening, so unperturbed by his own behavior, that she began to wonder if she could be mistaken, if it could be one of her less attractive pupils who was light-fingered, or even if she had only just noticed what might have been taken from her over a period of time. But none of this made sense, and her flimsy excuses all fell apart. The rose-petal paperweight was there when he began to play his Chopin preludes. It was gone when she returned from seeing him out.

She wasn't a teacher when she was with him, because there was so little for her to teach, and yet she knew that he valued her presence, that her being an audience of one meant more to him than the comments she contributed. Could it be, she even wondered, that before he left he helped himself to what he thought of as a fee for his performance? Such childish fantasies were not unusual: she had herself been given to make-believe and pretending. But that, too, she dismissed, sensing it not to be true.

At night she lay awake, her distress and her bewilderment afterward mercilessly feeding vivid dreams. In them, the boy was unhappy and she wanted to comfort him, to make him talk to her when he had finished playing his pieces. In endless repetition, she tried to say that once upon a time she had taken a chocolate from her father's special box, but she couldn't; and when, awake again, she lay there in the dark she found herself prey to thoughts she'd never had before. She wondered if her father had been all that he had seemed, wondered if the man she had admired and loved for sixteen years had made use of her affections. Had her father's chocolates been a way of buying good behavior? Had his devotion later been an inducement to remain with him in his house, a selfishness dressed up? Had the man who'd deceived his wife deceived his mistress, too, since deception was a part of him, lies scattered through the passion that there was?

In the dark she pushed all that away, not knowing where it came from, or why it seemed to belong with what was happening now, but always it came back, as if a truth she did not understand were casting its light over shadows that had beguiled her once. Was theft nothing much, the objects taken so small, and plenty left behind? If she spoke, her pupil would not come again, even if she said at once that she forgave so slight a misdemeanor. Knowing so little, at least she was certain of that, and often did not look to see what was no longer there.

The spring of that year gave way to summer, a heat wave of parched days that went on until the rains of October. All that time, on Friday afternoons, the doorbell rang and he was there, the same silent boy who left his cap on the hall-stand ledge, who sat down at her piano and took her with him into paradise.

Miss Nightingale's other pupils came and went also, but among them only the boy never requested a different day, a different time. No note was ever brought by him, no excuse ever trotted out, no nuisance unrecognized for what it was. Dull Graham talked about his pets to delay his unpracticed piece. Diana wept. Corin's finger hurt. Angela gave up. Then, smoothly in the run of time, another Friday came to take its place as the halcyon afternoon at the center of Miss Nightingale's life. Yet each time after the boy left there was mockery in the music that faintly lingered.

The seasons changed again, and then again, until, one day, the boy did not return. He had outgrown these music lessons and his school and now was somewhere else.

For Miss Nightingale, his absence brought calm; and, as time accumulated, its passing further quieted her unease. If a lonely father had been a calculating man, it mattered less now than it had when the thought was raw. If a beloved lover had belittled love, it mattered less in that same soothing retrospect. She had been the victim, too, of the boy, who had shown off to her his other skill. She had been the victim of herself, of her careless credulity, of wanting to believe what seemed to be. All that, she sensed, was true. Yet something still nagged. It seemed a right, almost, that she should understand a little more.

Long afterward, the boy came back—coarser, taller, rougher in ungainly adolescence. He did not come to return her property, but walked straight in and sat down and played for her. The mystery there was in the music was in his smile when he finished, while he sat waiting for her approval. And, looking at him, Miss Nightingale realized what she had not before: that mystery was a marvel in itself. She had no rights in this. She had sought too much in trying to understand how human frailty connected with love or with the beauty that the gifted brought. There was a balance struck: it was enough. ♦