

# In Providence: A Piano in South Providence

He played me something on his piano.

“That’s not my best,” he says, “but it’s the one I like the most.”

His house is on the South Side across from a little neighborhood convenience store where he shops every day.

“I get the paper. I talk to the woman at the register. Sometimes she’s the only person I talk to all day.”

We first spoke via email when he contacted me about wanting to sell his piano.

I have a theater and he thought maybe I’d need one.

The truth was, everybody needs a piano, but I needed a story more. I told him I was working on a Man About Town column.

“I’m not your guy,” the response read. “I barely ever leave my house.”

I asked him why.

“You sure you don’t want this piano?”

The story goes like this.

“The piano was my mother’s. Back when people used to have prized possessions. My mother was a piano teacher and she taught me how to play the piano. She was a good teacher. Taught lots of kids.

Kids who could afford it and some who couldn't. And she didn't mess around. You took it seriously. I remember her telling me I could be a professional if I stuck to it. Kept practicing. I practiced, but only because she wanted me to. Never really had me as a real passion. I had other interests, but some things you don't forget."

He cuts up some apple slices as he's telling me this story and we go out on his porch. It's September, but lately that's just 30 more days of August.

Two kids go by on bikes. It's early evening on a Sunday. Some of the houses on his street have their lights on. Some have windows open. I wish there was music playing, because it would enhance the sensory details of this story, but I'm tied to non-fiction, so I'll stick to what's true as much as I can.

The only place he's gone in the past three weeks has been the convenience store.

To him, Providence is a state of mind.

"Losing Mom was tough," he says. "Sent me into a — a dark place. A place I really fought against for most of my life. She struggled with it, and that got passed down to me. She'd go into her bedroom and be in there for days. I'd practice the piano. Students would come by. I'd make up excuses for her. We didn't have the words back then for what she had. We didn't know what it was. Just that it was like being sick. It was sick. It was a sickness. And it was worse, because people told her to knock it off, like it was that simple. I knew it wasn't. Maybe because I knew I had it too. She used to say, 'Are you a fighter?' I used to say, 'Yeah, Ma. I'm a fighter.' And she'd go, 'Good. Because you got a fight coming.' She knew. She knew what was coming for me. I think ... I think she felt guilty she couldn't do nothing about it."

Kids would come to the house that I was at now. The same heavy red curtains covering up the living room windows. The same untouched china in the cabinet all along the dining room wall.

The piano that stands out like something timeless in a place otherwise surrendered to time. The entire house built around this one thing.

"It was her father's piano," he says. "I don't know if it goes back further than that, but it might. She could play it right up until the end. Believe it or not, she was teaching right up to the end. I would come by and she'd have a student here with her. I'd wait my turn like I always did, and then she'd have me sit

down — a 48-year-old man — and play. That's the god's honest truth. Every time I'd come by."

I asked him how often he visited.

"Not a lot," he replied, then stopped himself before continuing. "We had — Things weren't always so good between us. Things — things were said when I was younger. Harsh things. On both sides. Her and me. I blamed her for a lot. For a lot of what was wrong with me. Then I moved on over to where I was until recently. This place — well, two places — one was on Charles Street and the other was this really nice place on Gano. I liked the place on Gano a lot. But then, one day, my aunt calls me, and she says, 'You need to go see your mother.' That's when I knew all this was going to happen. That I was going to wind up back here."

Suddenly, it's dark, but we don't go back inside. From one section of the porch, you can see a little bit of what looks like downtown, but I could be mistaken. To put him and his past in the shadow of the city would be enticing, but I can't do it if it's not accurate. If it's not real. It has to be just the way it is.

"She fought me," he says. "She fought me every step of the way. Had a lot of pride in her. Too much pride to let anybody take care of her. But I had to do it, and — and pretty soon she understood that, and parts of her started to just ... go away. But the piano helped, I think. She would sit down and play even on her worst days. And I liked listening to her play. Meant she was still in there somewhere, like they say. A little part of her. That fighter. That teacher. Still there."

I asked him what it would be like when he finally sold the piano.

"First the piano, then the house, then I'm getting the hell out of here. I don't know where I'm going to go, but probably not too far. I like it here. And I think I can get a good price for everything and — and really make a life for myself finally. Really do something with myself. Right now I'm just biding my time, because I thought losing Mom would hurt like hell, but I didn't think it would throw me for a loop, so of course, that's exactly what it did. It knocked me out. Now I have to get back to — to taking care of myself again. That's what I haven't been doing. That's why I don't go very far. But once I get things in order, that's all going to change. I have some things I'd like to do. Some things I want to give myself to look forward to."

When I ask him how he's making money now to keep himself going in the meantime, he gets a little sheepish, then seems to realize just how good of an ending he's about to give me.

"I teach lessons," he says. "I started when she first got sick. Crazy, right? But that's what made the

most sense.”

About 10 minutes later, we'll go in the house, and he'll play me his favorite song. The one he's not the best at, but the one he likes the most.

While he plays, he leans forward, the way I've seen really brilliant pianists do. His eyes close. His mouth opens just a little. His hands seem to be pulling the music out of the giant instrument in a way that's sacred and malevolent at the same time.

At the very end, he leaves his hands elevated above the keys for just a moment, and his entire body freezes.

I want to ask him to teach me how to write about what I just saw. And what I can see him feeling right in front of me. About what it means to sit down at a piano owned by family you've never met, and cared for by someone you could never get close to.

But you can't ask someone to teach you something like that.

Some things you have to learn on your own.