

Piano

by Lori Lindstrom

I was nine, sprawled on my bed writing in my five-year diary when I heard the first five notes (alternating E and D-sharp) of “Für Elise” by Beethoven. Oh good, Cindi’s playing again. I opened my bedroom door to allow her music to enter, awestruck at the sound of her fingers flying across the keyboard, never missing a note, never missing a beat.

Lord, can she play. She even plays better than dad.

Cindi played the classics—Bach, Mozart, Tchaikovsky. But her favorite piano book—a red cover with a boy and a girl dancing on the fire escape stairwell—was music from *West Side Story*, a modern-day remake of Romeo and Juliet starring Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer. If she wasn’t playing show tunes from *West Side Story*, she was listening to the film soundtrack, flitting around the living room singing, “I feel pretty, oh so pretty/I feel pretty, and witty and bright.”

Like Natalie Wood, Cindi was a petite brunette, pretty enough to be a teenaged model at a local department store, popular enough to be on the student council, commencement and prom committees, and honor society treasurer. My sister was thriving despite her juvenile diabetes. Diagnosed at age thirteen, she did not seem to be affected by the disease.

I wanted to be like her when I grew up. Not petite—I was already the tallest in my class—but I wanted to be pretty, popular, adored by all.

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When I turned nine, I rushed home from school every Tuesday and headed straight to the piano. I played frantically, trying to squeeze a week's worth of practice into one hour, then slid my books into my black plastic briefcase and raced down the hill to my piano teacher's house.

Mrs. Cannon was skillful, no-nonsense, and popular with many of my classmates. Whenever I played a song well, she placed a coveted little gold star—sometimes two—at the top of the page, adding, “If you keep up the good work, you can be a church organist like me one day.”

I didn't want that. I wanted to play like my sister.

Half way through the first year, Mrs. Cannon held an informal recital at her house. At the end of the year, her students played in a piano festival at a nearby school.

On the day of the festival, I stared at my music, hoping for a photographic memory while my mother drove. When we arrived, my mother introduced me to a woman sitting behind a table by the stage, then wished me luck and stepped outside. I handed the judge my music, climbed three steps, and walked centerstage to the shiny, black grand piano. I sat on the luxuriously cushioned bench, aligned my feet with the pedals, wiggled my fingers, and began. After I played the first song, I looked at the judge. She nodded, I continued. At the end of the second piece, I walked off stage, wiping my sweaty hands on my skirt. The judge finished writing her remarks and handed me my music. “You play very well,” she said.

One week later, Mrs. Cannon presented me a certificate with an “Excellent” rating along with a gold pin in the shape of a piano.

That was how it went for four years, each passing year bringing me one step closer to playing like Cindi.

At age thirteen, the rules changed: the festival became a competition. That year, I played in a classroom before fellow pianists, parents, and a judge sitting at the teacher's desk.

When the judge called my name, I squirmed out of my desk and handed her my music. Next to the green chalkboard stood a worn, brown upright piano. I pulled out the hard bench, sat down, and aligned my feet. I turned to the audience and announced the name and composer of the song. I started strong, but in the middle of the song—the part where the piece turns in a different direction—my mind went blank. I panicked. I stared at my hands, willing them to continue, but they felt separate from me. Stiff. Uncooperative.

I looked to the judge for help.

“It’s okay. You can start again,” she said.

I took a deep breath, shook out my hands, and began again. Halfway through the song, my mind went blank at the same exact spot.

The judge looked at me. “It’s all right. You can go to your seat.”

Head down, I walked to my seat, avoiding my fathers’ eyes.

Why I didn’t run out of the room, I’ll never know. I’d never felt so humiliated. Instead, I sulked. The last student played, and the room emptied.

“What happened?” Dad asked in the hall.

“I don’t know. My mind just went blank.”

“Sorry that happened,” he said, patting my shoulder.

We entered the gym that echoed with anxious chatter. Dad spotted my teacher. “Stay here.”

While they talked, I wondered how it all went so wrong. Did I have less time than usual to prepare for the recital? Was I over-confident because I played well in past recitals? Was the new format the problem? Was I lazy? Had I played the song enough times—memorized—for my teacher? For my parents? For myself?

What was different that year?

That year was unlike any other. I could not focus on anything. Not even a piano competition.

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In eighth grade Home Economics class, my teacher read recipes aloud for us to write down. “Girls, at the top of your index card, write ‘Breakfast cake.’”

Long pause.

“Now go down two lines, and on the left side, write two cups flour. Use a little c period for cups.”

Another long pause.

“On the next line, write one cup sugar.” She listed the remaining ingredients agonizingly slow, reminding us again and again to “use a capital T period for tablespoon” and “a small t period for teaspoon.”

I hated being spoon-fed. It was like being back in grade school. I huddled with a few classmates, and together we came up with a plan. One afternoon Mrs. Manning stepped out of the classroom. Giddy with the thrill of doing something we knew we shouldn't, we ran to the window and threw it open. Grabbing fistfuls of spoons, we hurled them as hard as we could, howling at the shining silver pieces as they flew through the air, doubling over with laughter as they clattered on the ground two stories below.

I was summoned to the principal's office—a first. One glance at Mr. Blake and I wanted to bolt. He was a big, heavy man with a flat, grey crewcut; a flat, downcast face with jowls and heavy wrinkles; a thick, short neck and massive, broad shoulders. He looked just like a bulldog—the only thing missing were two incisors poking up from his lower jaw.

“Did you throw spoons out of the window?”

“Yes.”

“Don't ever do that again. Now get back to class,” he growled.

I stood and opened the door.

“Wait a minute.”

I stopped. What now?

“Are you Cindi Johnson's sister?”

“Yes.” Did he remember my sister after ten years? Boy, am I in trouble.

Mr. Blake had been a Guidance Counselor at Cindi's high school before becoming the junior high principal and likely remembered she was voted "the most studious senior." He shook his head, didn't say a word, but I knew what he was thinking: "Cindi would never have done that."

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Months before the competition, I woke to the sounds of distress and leaped out of bed. My parents dressed hurriedly in their room across the hall.

Moaning sounds came from the living room. Cindi, home for the weekend, was slumped in a chair, wrapped in a blanket, her head hunched over a trash can.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Ugh...get me a glass of water," she asked faintly.

Hearing this, my mother yelled down, "DON'T GIVE HER ANY WATER!"

I didn't know what to do. Cindi wanted water. My mother was likely following doctors' orders from similar situations. Confused, I did nothing. I stood by her side.

My parents came downstairs—bleary-eyed—and threw on their coats. Dad helped Cindi stand and slowly guided her, still shrouded in a blanket, carrying a trash can, to the car. My mother, upset over another night of disrupted sleep, huffed out after them. "Go back to bed," she said.

The next day, my teachers' lessons fell on deaf ears. All I could do was think about Cindi and watch the clock. She sure was lucky to be home visiting when she got sick. How long will she be in the hospital? Would she pull through this—she'd done so before—or would this time be different?

I rushed home after school and called my mother.

“Cindi’s feeling better. We’ll visit her tonight.”

“Oh, good.” I hung up the phone, exhaling fully for the first time that day.

After dinner, my parents, brother, and I drove downtown to Washington Hospital. Cindi was sitting up, watching tv, wearing a faded hospital gown, and attached to an IV. Her face lit up when she saw us. With her blood sugar back to normal, she was chatty and happy—a far cry from the night before.

“We brought you something to cheer you up,” my mother said, handing her a box. Cindi removed the lid and held up a two-piece silky, animal print pajama set. “I love it! Thank you!”

A few days later, my sister returned to her apartment in fashionable Georgetown. She resumed island-hopping in the Caribbean with her female roommates, taking and developing pictures of her many adventures. To give us a taste of her travels, she invited us to dinner and served Jamaican curried beef and rice and peas on square, hand-carved, wooden plates like those she ate from during her carefree jaunts. Cindi was on top of the world.

Then she wasn’t.

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That year, my twenty-three-year-old sister had lived with diabetes for a decade, using tools now considered archaic: urine tests instead of blood tests, long-lasting insulin instead of quick-acting insulin. She had difficulty keeping her blood sugar levels in a

normal range and was hospitalized with uncontrolled blood sugar levels so many times I lost count.

When Cindi received a ticket for driving the wrong way on a one-way street in DC, we were startled. Did she simply miss a one-way sign? Or was she having vision problems? She'd had eye hemorrhages in the past, but we didn't know how many. And we didn't know if they were affecting her vision.

One afternoon Cindi returned to her office holding a bag of groceries she'd bought during lunch hour, and someone called her name as she unlocked her door. She turned her head at the sound and cut her eye on the paper bag.

The eye doctor told her, "I have bad news. You cut your cornea. And..." he added, swallowing hard, "You're going blind—not from the cut—but complications from diabetes."

The next day I went to my friend Tina's house for a birthday party sleepover. A dozen girls played miniature golf, ate pizza, danced in the basement. I went through the motions, pretending to have fun, but my mind was elsewhere. Towards the end of the night, I couldn't keep up the act any longer, and I started crying, sobbing.

"What's wrong, Lori?" Tina asked. "Is it a boy?"

I shook my head, unable to speak.

"Turn off the music," Tina said to a girl. Girls with concerned puzzled looks gathered around me. "Come on; you can tell me," Tina said.

I wanted to tell her, but I didn't know how to say what was bothering me. I had never been in this situation before. After a few minutes of Tina's dogged persistence, I blurted out, "My sister is going blind!"

“Oh no!” The group tried to console me, but I was beyond consoling.

Soon after Cindi got the awful diagnosis, she sold her beloved baby blue VW bug, packed her belongings, and moved home.

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Cindi, somber and sullen, moved into her big, normally-bright corner bedroom; only this time, the shades were drawn. We tried to cheer her up, but we were incapable. Her situation was dire, hopeless, and there was nothing we could do to bring back her sight. We were all depressed.

All this happened around the time of my last recital.

I began to steer clear of the piano. I figured if I played, I'd be doing a disservice to anyone within earshot—especially Cindi. Playing would only serve as a reminder of all that once was. My talented, gifted sister—whom I looked up to—would never play the piano again.

Dad, a talented pianist, and accordionist felt the loss too. He was the only one who played anymore, but he rarely did.

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In the '60's, there was no technology available to treat eye hemorrhages. Laser treatment had yet to be developed. Cindi rolled the dice and had a risky, experimental procedure done on one eye. I don't know what the procedure was, just that it failed, and she went totally blind in that eye.

In another last-ditch effort to save her sight, she had yet another risky experimental surgery. Surgeons removed her pituitary gland, thinking its absence would reduce the pressure on her eyes, and she'd keep her vision. We held our breaths in the days and weeks that followed.

The surgery failed. My sister went blind at the prime of her life.

Conversations I never thought I'd hear became commonplace.

"Do you want to walk with a cane or get a seeing-eye dog?" my father gently asked.

"I hate dogs!"

I wasn't surprised. We'd always had cats—all named Smokey.

Cindi, distraught and resigned, packed her bags and headed to the Pittsburgh Guild for the Blind. After a few months, my parents, brother, and I visited her in the cold, dark city in the dead of winter.

Cindi greeted us, surprisingly upbeat. "Follow me." She tapped her cane back and forth on the long, tiled hallway, introducing us to staff and fellow students along the way. "Here's my room," she said, leading us into a room with six single beds, three on each wall. "You can put your coats here." She patted the metal footboard of her bed, then tapped her way across the room to a sink. "Check this out." She began filling a glass with water, and when the glass was nearly full, she turned off the water.

"How'd you know when to stop?" I asked.

"I listened to the changing sound the water made as it rose. I'm learning to rely on my other senses."

“Amazing,” I said.

Cindi sidled along her bed towards the nightstand and picked up a thick book. She opened to a random page, ran her fingers over the small raised dots, and read aloud. I gasped; dad wiped a tear. She closed the book, tapped her way across the room to a typewriter, and sat before it. She put a piece of thick white paper into the machine and hit the return key a few times. “Dad, pretend you’re dictating a letter to me.”

He cleared his throat and said, “Okay. January 21st, 1969...”

She typed as if she were typing on her beloved portable blue Remington. This time when she hit the return key, instead of black letters, the paper revealed row after row of raised dots.

After several months, her smiling face appeared on the Guild’s newsletter front page, and below was an article describing their stellar student’s graduation.

She returned home a different person. Not upbeat and chipper but resigned and accepting of her fate. She strived to be independent using her new skills, yet there were times she needed help, times she needed our eyes.

We explained the location of food on her plate as if it were on the face of a clock. “Chicken is at three o’clock, potatoes are at six, and a salad is at ten.”

I filled her syringes with insulin and read her the labels on prescription bottles. I looked for spots on her clothes to see what needed washing or to be dry-cleaned. I read to her, and if something wasn’t intended for my eyes, she snatched it out of my hands. When she bought two pairs of shoes of the same style, but in different colors, I sorted them out. If conversation ceased in the middle of a TV show, she asked what was happening, and I told her.

My heart broke watching Cindi walk with a cane, a cane that folded up. The elderly walked with them—my grandfather walked with a wooden one—but my sister was twenty-four. I grappled with Cindi's losses, and I wrestled with our reversed roles. I felt like the older sister.

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After a long absence, Cindi returned to work. No longer able to read detailed contract clauses, she switched from the Procurement to Personnel department. Our father, then retired, helped her transition by reading aloud the Office of Personnel Management's manual, from nine to five, for months.

Dad did everything in his power to help his legally-blind daughter. He drove her for lab work and doctor appointments and took her shopping. If she didn't answer his call on a weekend, he'd drop everything and go to her apartment. More than once, he found her passed out on the floor from low blood sugar and revived her. He spent more time with her than my mother, who was still working. I grew accustomed to seeing Cindi clutching Dad's bent arm, Dad guiding her path as they walked. And I grew used to Dad spending more and more time with Cindi and less and less time with me.

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While Cindi adjusted to her new world, I adapted to mine.

I became aware of things I could do, but she could not. I could see my parents' worried faces, differentiate subtle colors, scan a room and find something I misplaced. I could glance at a clock or a watch to check the time. I could set the oven temperature and the timer and tell if food was moldy. I could read books, letters, newspapers, recipes, and entries in my diary. And I could read sheet music.

But I had no desire to play. I felt guilty I could play, and Cindi couldn't.

A few times, I worked up the courage to play. I got out my piano books and opened them to a familiar song. My hands hovered over the keys, about to play, when in my head I heard Cindi playing “I Feel Pretty.” I couldn’t play.

Another day, feeling brave, I took out the piece I choked on. I closed one eye and squinted the other. All I saw was one big blur. I moved my head up and down, left and right; nothing helped. The music sat right in front of me, but I could not make out the clefs, the lines, the notes, the sharps, the flats, the rests, the dynamic, the accents, the octave marks. I bent my head down towards the keyboard. I couldn’t find middle C. Then I opened my eyes. At the top of the page was the prophetically-titled recital piece: “First Loss” by Schumann. Next to the title were two tiny gold stars.

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My first husband’s father was a gifted pianist, as were all five of his children. My husband said his mother set a timer for thirty minutes every day that he and his siblings practiced when they were young.

When his father heard I took lessons, he grew animated. “How many years did you take lessons?”

“Four,” I gulped, knowing my husband’s lessons lasted years longer.

“Four? That’s not enough. You should have taken lessons for longer than that!”

I was taken aback, not yet used to his direct manner. While I stood there thinking of a reply, it all came flooding back. I thought of what I wanted to say.

But I didn’t say anything. There was too much to explain. And I wasn’t quite ready to tell the story.

"I wish I had," I said instead.

Lori Lindstrom rekindled her love of writing after retiring from a thirty-year career in financial management. She is currently working on her memoir, which, when finished, will include "Piano." Her work has appeared in *Potato Soup Journal*.