

## My Recital

The walls of the Unitarian Universalist Church closed in on me as I squirmed on the cold, hard, pew. Trying to ignore the grand piano glaring at me from its spot by the pulpit, I scanned the recital program for my name. My nerves knotted while the place filled with the chatter of fellow students, their families, and friends. My wife, Dianne, squeezed my hand to ease my apprehension.

You'd think I'd be more relaxed after six recitals in the five years since I started lessons. Still, I asked, *At the age of seventy-six, do I need this shit?*

My inner seventy-one-year-old replied. *You've finally retired. Now, your priority is battling Father Time. You notched it up at the gym and started piano lessons for your vintage gray matter. "Go crazy and learn some jazz. You've been a fan ever since college."*

Our conversation was interrupted by dissonant guitar tuning and a clattering drum kit setting up in the background. My nerve knots tightened.

That young version of me had a point. Time and some indiscretions had taken many of my good brain cells, and I didn't want to lose the few that were left. So, I took up writing and piano lessons.

The writing was fun, except when words temporarily escaped me. Thank God for Google. "What do you call that thing under a turkey's beak?" A snood, that's it! Or maybe a wattle?

Easy.

The piano was not easy. I joined Duke's School of Jazz, paid a fortune for private lessons, and practiced for hours each week for five years. As hard as I tried, though, my old brain circuitry didn't fire like it used to. If I stretched my right pinky to hit a high note, my left pinky sympathetically went low. Plus, the limited hand speed. And the memory challenges.

I was listed on the recital schedule—an old white guy nestled between two jazz prodigies. I'd follow a thirteen-year-old girl doing her own ten-minute arrangement of Alica Keys' "Girl on Fire." After me, a seven-year-old boy was down for a twelve-minute improvisation of Ray Charles' "What I Say."

... and I was doing a two-minute intermediate version of "When the Saints Come Marching In."

My turn to perform charged at me like a rabid pit bull.

By the time the girl's two-minute standing ovation ended, even my hemorrhoids applauded. And my heart rate had doubled.

I was on. Dianne, who'd always accompanied me to school events, leaned in and whispered, "You've got this."

Feeling woozy, I stood and steadied myself against the pew in front of me. Its shelf was lined with gospel songbooks, a reminder that Duke played his soulful hymns here every Sunday. My controlled breaths, slow and deep, helped me pace the twenty-foot walk to the piano. It felt like a mile march to the electric chair. I waited for Duke, in his powerful baritone, to introduce me before lowering myself onto the piano bench and opening my copy of "Intermediate Jazz, Rags, and Blues."

I received polite claps while I adjusted the sheet music on the stand with an unsteady hand.

I took one last look and positioned my fingers on the piano, asking myself, *Do I really want to play a lame version of this great song?* That improvisation I'd come up with at home wasn't bad. Nothing too fancy—some simple blues chords and melody riffs that sounded pretty good. After all the great jazz I'd listened to over the years, some of it must have sunk in by osmosis.

I closed my music book and went for it.

Hands sweating, I played the song through once from memory. I looped through it again, a little jazzier this time, channeling some of the masters: Peterson, Hancock, Monk, Evans, Corea, Batiste.

Something magical happened. Chills passed through me as my fingers connected directly to my soul, and a solo improv came to life.

I closed my eyes, and the church transformed into New Orleans' Preservation Hall. The cocktail-clutching audience was properly buzzed, heads bobbing and toes tapping. Oldsters in suits, kids in cut-off jeans, and fellow musicians on break from other clubs all drifted through the open doorway and into the back of the hall as if in a trance.

I ran the keys, overlaid syncopated rhythms, found chords I hadn't known existed ... and did it all as fast or slow as I chose. Everything I tried sounded amazing. I thought to myself. *All you had to do was let go.*

Five minutes later, I opened my eyes and glanced at big old Duke, hoping he wasn't pissed. All two-hundred-fifty pounds of him stood, mouth agape, eyes raised toward the heavens—like he'd had a religious moment.

I felt bad for the kid following me and gradually slowed down for the last measure...Go-Marching-in.

As motionless as a Sphinx, Dianne had recorded my performance on her phone. I must have really done something special. The rest of the audience appeared to be mesmerized, too. Some were still shaking their heads to my groove.

More polite claps, longer this time, but no one stood. Must have been stunned.

I slowly rose from the bench. Duke came to my side and thanked me, squeezing my shoulder. The big guy had no idea of his strength.

While the last three students played, my mind raced through the highlights of my performance.

At the end of the recital, the aisle cleared for Dianne and me to exit, as if I were Moses parting the Red Sea.

As we left the church, Dianne chuckled. "What got into you in there?"

I grinned. "I just let go, and it happened."

She sighed as we got into my car and held out her phone. "Want to watch a replay?"

Before I could answer, the phone blared Duke's introduction. Impressively absorbed, I studied my performance. The standard part of the song was so-so. As I broke into my fantasy solo, my stomach lurched. Instead of what I imagined while playing, it was the worst noise I'd ever heard. A pair of feral tomcats fighting on the keyboard could have done better.

I pictured Steve Martin's awkward, rhythmless, poor black child sequence from the movie *The Jerk*. It was that bad.

So bad we broke into hysterics.

When we stopped laughing, I dried my tears, winked at Dianne, and said, "But it felt so good."

She kissed my cheek and whispered. "Let me buy you a drink."