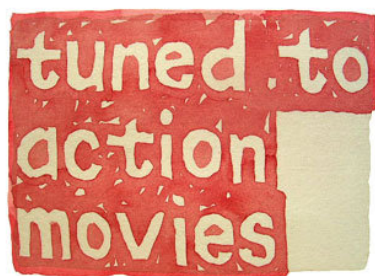


Story for performance #936
webcast from Sydney at 08:10PM, 12 Jan 08



Source: Craig Nelson, 'Sons hold out for day
'napping' Sharon awakes from two-hour sleep', Cox,
Guardian in The Age online, 12/01/08.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [disease](#), [music](#)
Writer/s: [Sam Grunhard](#)

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Aunt Sophie's in a coma. That's what Dad says, but I'm busy playing Beethoven's piano sonata in E flat major and I ask him to keep quiet 'til I'm finished the first movement. The bass line bounces in my left hand like one of those tiny rubber balls you throw off a wall and watch crashing around, knocking over a vase. Dad says I should really stop and hear what he's saying but I can't talk properly as I'm playing the tricky part where you have to make your right hand flutter like a butterfly so I don't answer.

My parents always complain about how much time I spend practising. Not normal for a twelve-year-old girl, they say. Should be roller-blading outside, or gossiping with girlfriends or something. I just ignore them. They don't have a musical bone between them so what would they know? My mother spends most of her time reading bad romance novels, and my father is permanently tuned to action movies. They keep saying they don't know where I get it from. Neither do I.

Dad walks away and I keep practising. This is one of my favourites, this sonata. I finish the quiet second movement, its final cadence leaving me feeling all serene. I look at the piano, at the light reflecting off the dark wood panels. It's my favourite thing, though it's a lot like our house: not old, not new; not expensive, not cheap. Nothing about us is special.

I take a breath, and I'm preparing to start the third movement when my mother walks in the room. She smiles at me in that way that only she can, that smile that says I love you so much that it's breaking my heart to even look at you. Sigh. So I stop playing and wait to hear the details. Aunt Sophie is Dad's sister, not my mother's, so I'm surprised she even cares, but she looks pretty upset. Even more than when she finishes one of her books with the gorgeous guys on the cover.

Jenny, she says, there was an accident. Aunt Sophie's in hospital. She's in a coma. Do you know what a coma is?

I roll my eyes at her and look back to the music open on the piano. The end of the second movement is still hanging in the air; the music is begging me to begin the third.

She's in St Xavier's, my mother says. We'll have to go and visit her. It's only a short drive. Your cousins are very sad, and seeing you would cheer them up, wouldn't it?

Parents don't realise when you've grown up. They seem to be always about five years behind the times.

Okay, I tell her. Just let me finish this.

And she gives me that half-glad, half-worried look she always does when I spend a long time at the piano. Like I'm some kind of alien child who hatched in the roof beams and landed on their plates during dinner one day.

I place my hands on the keys and attack the third movement. It's got a tense, minor key excitement to it, and my heart beats a bit faster as I play. I half-hear loud voices in the next room as my parents argue about something, probably me. If I had a brother or sister this might all be easier. I try to concentrate on the music but now there's Aunt Sophie's face in front of me instead of Beethoven's. I always try to think about the composer as I play. I've read about all the main ones in my music encyclopaedia and I think I know them pretty well. Beethoven's this slightly scary old man with huge hair and crazy eyes. I think we'd get on nicely. He listens to me when I play and gives me tips. Sometimes he's pleased, sometimes he gets a little fed up with me rushing, but he's always gentle. People would think it's weird that I can see Beethoven and hear him talking to me, but some of my friends can quote the lines from whole TV shows.

I start the fourth movement. It's beautiful, peaceful, with a lovely sweet melody repeating itself in different variations. The conversation in the next room has stopped. Maybe the piano is helping to calm things down. Though my parents don't really listen to music, they seem to enjoy it when I play. I keep going, nearly finished now, remembering to keep my wrists fluid like Mr Kucic says.

Right near the end, Dad strides in, coming fast. Because I'm just nearing the final cadence I keep my eyes on the music, but I can feel him come right up close on my right. His heat prickles my arm. I'm in the middle of this great arpeggio when he slams his fist on the upper register of the keyboard, mashing the white keys, making a horrible, high-pitched, out-of-tune mess. I freeze, my hands still on the keys. He's never hit me. He's never hit anything.

He looks down at me and doesn't speak. His face is red and grim. He lifts his fist off the keys, unclenches it and slowly lowers his hand to his side. I can hear his breathing. He turns and walks out.

I stare at the last few unplayed bars of the sonata and I have to force my fingers not to begin. I pull them back, slowly, shaking. It's hard to close the book of sonatas, but I do. Then I stand up. I close the piano lid and walk after Dad. He has the car keys ready, and my mother's gathering her purse.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sam Grunhard.