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## Breaking the Metronome

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## Breaking the Metronome

The time it took Anna to ascend the staircase of the funeral home was equivalent to 7 metronome ticks. She kept the count in her head like a ceaseless timeline, or some kind of wicked, ongoing math problem.

When she graduated from Oakvale Middle School, the principal shook her hand for 2.5 ticks; the superintendent took 1 tick to place the gold lettered scroll in her hand; add it to the quarter of a tick she spent tripping across the gym floor stage, and her graduation glory lasted a full 3.75 manic ticks. The car ride to her childhood best friend's house lasted 1,178 ticks; 1,023 if dad drove. Her first recital at the civic theatre was 2,030 ticks of which 274 consisted of her own hands playing along to a real life metronome in the center of the piano.

After the 7 ticks, she reached the top of the stairs and let her eyes scan the old attic. The grand piano was directly to her right, in the corner of the shadowy room. A heavy blanket of dust coated the whale of an instrument, and she was Captain Ahab, charged with ridding the earth of such a monster. She ran her hands along its edge and thrust her hip into its side, barely causing an inch of movement. It was beached and musty. She couldn't move it on her own, and scoffed at the thought of wasting precious ticks on asking for assistance. Who would help anyway? I need this piano moved downstairs so my dead teacher can be laid to rest in it! The thought of asking another human being that question was enough to make her entire body cringe.

Mr. Calcip was going to be buried in a piano, not a coffin. Anna could picture his soft eyes wrinkling up as he laughed the first time he told her that. He said it a million times, a million ticks. He swore he was a musical vampire and that it was only appropriate for him to be laid to rest in a piano. A Steinway grand with shiny black finish and gold trim; the Cadillac of keys. Clearly, it was a joke. Yet to Anna, this was indeed a fact that needed to be respected.

Anna told the undertakers over and over that this was the only option for the funeral. "Mr. Calcip will come back from the dead if you don't!" No one listened.

Two weeks following the funeral, instruments at the high school started

to go missing from the band's storage closet. Sheet music mysteriously disappeared from the folders of the theatre students. It went unnoticed by nearly everyone. Until the ivory keys began vanishing one by one from the baby grand belonging to the choir teacher. Anna knew. She found herself daydreaming in class, seeing Mr. Calcip's lanky, crooked body stumbling through the dark hallways, busting open lockers and tearing through backpacks. She wondered if he would ever stop and play music with the instruments before stealing them away to his grave.

That was when she decided that she would find out for herself. If Calcip was going to play a show from the underworld, she would be the one to hear it. Better yet, she could tell him about the piano she found at the funeral home for him.

She knew she had to do it soon because the more nights he spent in his coffin prison the more likely his fingers would be too decayed to press the piano keys. The image of Calcip's body slowly rotting beneath the soil was enough to make Anna tremble. A 28-year-old virtuoso should be composing sonatas, not decomposing in a dirty box 6 feet under.

The Friday bell rang and Anna was nowhere to be found when the buses roared away from the curbside. The east wing janitor's closet, which she decided would be the ideal hiding place, smelled like wet dog and Play-Doh. Sitting between the vacuums and mop buckets, she wished she could lose track of time; she wished she could escape the ticks that unwaveringly informed her of the passing seconds. 5,018 ticks slunk by as she waited. She could have lived without knowing the exact amount of time she spent in that dirty old closet, but her brain disagreed.

It was midnight when she came out of the closet and started for the music room. Her stomach tightened when she took the room key out of her coat pocket. She had snatched it from the band teacher's desk that morning. The key slipped into the keyhole silently, and Anna held her breath as it turned. The sounds of the lock clicking sent a chill up her spine. For a moment, the clicks overlapped the ticks in her head. She stared at the lock, her hand trembling as she removed its silver teeth from the hole. There was a thick heavy silence, interrupted only by the faint noise of her inner metronome. Her grip on the key loosened and it fell to the linoleum. It chimed like a high note when it bounced on the tiles. Anna was about to bend over to pick it up when she heard the same note again. She froze. It rang out once more, this time sharper. Her eyes were fixed on the key that lay still and flat on the floor. She recognized the notes. It was the baby grand.

She reached for the door knob, and it seemed to reach back. Then the music picked up and she recognized it as a Chopin piece. It was electric. She could feel it shocking her through the door. Every note resounded inside her, smoothing over every curve of her mind. She pulled her hand away from the doorknob and stood still in the hallway. Time passed under her nose and she didn't blink. The piece was flawless. It flowed as a river does, babbling over minor pebbles and slinking around major bends. Her ears were the only organs that existed; their drums thrummed to the beat of each pressed key. She heard this waltz a thousand times over, yet it was rendered unrecognizable in her mind by the crispness of this performance. Something was different about this melody, about how it entered her body and echoed through her limbs. As the final notes rang out, her mind descended back to its normal resting place, still reeling from the high of live piano. In the seconds following the song, there was a great bellowing laugh from behind the door that made Anna gasp.

Mr. Calcip was in that room. She felt his presence in the music and heard it in the maniacal laughter that concluded the performance. His trademark. He said if a piece was going well he'd hold in his excitement like a deep breath until he finished playing, and then, he'd let the pent up joy explode from his belly in oversized guttural laughs as he bowed to whatever audience he mustered.

She realized that her hand was on the doorknob again. The silence returned but this time it was unabbreviated. The metronomic ticks that had polluted her thoughts since childhood were silent. In this new stillness, Anna decided that Mr. Calcip didn't need a visitor, that he didn't need to know that he had an audience of one, that he didn't need to know that she could bring him to rest in the piano coffin he always dreamed about. She withdrew her hand from the cold metal and spun around on her heels, feeling like a silent tornado. She walked down the hallway and for the first time since she learned to play, heard nothing but the scuffs of her shoes on the linoleum. She wondered how many ticks it would take to walk home and smiled because she knew she wouldn't be able to find the answer.