

BIG HANDS

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Every Good Boy Does Fine ... Every Good Boy Does Fine ... EVERY GOOD BOY DOES FINE! staccatoed the bursts of heavy brass-jacketed rounds from my turret-mounted .50-caliber machine gun atop our Marine Humvee. Deadly ammo burning through the sultry night in al-Anbar province at nearly three times the speed of sound, seeking soft targets within a clump of bulrushes.

“Fuck ‘em up good, Hands!” screamed Frankie Alzaretto into my earpiece, our driver, encased below me in door armor pillaged from the rapidly growing scrap pile outside the base. “Play that funky music, white boy!”

Funny, how I perceived this war as a *Danse Macabre*, or a wiggled-out piano concerto from my youth. Funny. Ha-ha. THUMP! THUMP THUMP spoke the angel of death as I sent another meat-eating burst downrange at some fleeing shadows, unlucky enough to be in the way as we continued our patrol. Then silence like a church I hadn’t attended in years, a fitting *coda* to another fine day in the neighborhood.

Thank you, Sergei Vasilievich, thanks a bunch for protecting us with your big hands ... ran my mind tape as we moved quickly toward Miller Time. *I owe you my life, man!*

I was christened Arnold Brzeszczak in Chicago. I know, that’s a messed-up handle for a kid to get, but my Polish-Jewish father laid down his request to my Latina mom. With a moniker like that, it was a sure thing that I would be different from other boys. I already was possessed of these very long fingers extending from hammy hands. But a boxer I would not be.

Dad’s people had been musicians, pianists mainly. Hence, I was enrolled early in Mrs. Sorensen’s piano school on the west side. At age four, I was given a cardboard chart to place over the eighty-eight keys to locate everything, especially Middle C. Everything revolved around Middle C. Then it was learning chord structures: Every Good Boy Does Fine was how you remembered the treble clef notes E, G, B, D, F. And don’t forget Good Boys Do Fine Always, G, B, D, F, A in the bass. Mrs. Sorensen had this wooden-encased metronome, with which she taught me time signatures like 4/4, 3/4. I excelled at the piano.

My teacher would often tell my mom that I was gifted, a prodigy which comes along every so often. “It’s his gorgeous hands, those wonderfully long fingers, that amazing reach he has: twelve inches or a thirteenth interval span” she would say with great animation.

My repertoire went quickly from *Teaching Little Fingers to Play*, to Scarlatti, Grieg, Chopin (another Polish pianist), and on and on. It seems that the more I practiced and performed in Mrs. Sorensen’s annual recitals, the more buzz I overheard from my parents after I had supposedly been fast asleep.

“She wants to take him to Texas. The Van Clyburn Tchaikovsky competition. Just to get him thinking about going pro.” *Pro ... me?* The downside of being a musical prodigy was

that I suffered relentlessly at the hands of west-side bullies and duplicitous girls. Saint Pauline's high school was a place of cliques, gangs, jocks and geekazoids. I, unfortunately, fell into this last category, the bottomless pit, the last place you want to be when you're sixteen. I sought refuge in my music. I was learning Rachmaninoff, the man with the big hands. Mrs. Sorensen loaned me vinyl LP's of his works. *God, he was wonderful!*

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, his two piano sonatas, several of his twenty-four piano *Preludes*, the lovely *Vocalise*. All were becoming my defense against withering social ostracism and rejection by females of every hue. I sought refuge within the big hands of Sergei Rachmaninoff. He was my idol, my big brother, my bodyguard, ... my *God!*

Just when you think you're safe ... along comes such a twist of fate that it seemed not even ol' Sergei could help me.

A particularly dangerous bunch of black guys had hatched a plan to rob the parish treasury. They needed someone to be their point man, someone who held the trust and overwhelming admiration of the school and parish administration. *That Pollock piano player. Yeah!*

I left my weekly piano lesson and headed on down to the L station. Out of the shadows of that Wednesday late afternoon, Orlando Pennington approached me from the shadows.

"Hey Arnold, how you hangin' man?" he spoke, menacing.

I continued walking, my music valise under my arm. No response.

"Arnold, hold up, I'm talkin' to you, niggah!"

I saw a cluster of pedestrians and made a beeline toward them, frantic at what Orlando might do to me if I stopped. Suddenly, I felt a piercing pain in my ribcage and someone's skanky breathing in my face. I was down, my music flying like tiny kites fluttering down into the dirty slush of a mid-January evening.

"He's okay, people, my buddy Arnold jes took a header, slipped on some ice, is all! I'll take him home! Come on, pal, put your arm around my shoulder. Home you go!"

Out of sight and down an alley, Orlando threw me down beside a Dumpster. My side was leaking blood. Strangely, I felt no pain, just the sound in my head of Rachmaninoff's technically most difficult Third Piano Concerto, lifting me up above my body like a ghost. I saw Orlando talking to me but there were no words. Just mouthing and fierce gestures. Then he left as quickly as his initial assault. Luckily, my hands and fingers had not sustained any violence.

I never spoke of this incident, or the ones subsequent, to anyone. Just tried to remain invisible in the halls of school and on the treacherous walk home. So far so good.

On a February weekend morning, all frigid, steam hissing from grates in the urban sidewalk, I heard this THUMP THUMP THUMP bass line coming from some car down the street. I clinched my fists, ready to run. And yet, I did not run, as Sergei bent down from some parallel universe and scooped me up in his big hands, a baby bird in a nest of skin. I felt this wave of calm come over me like never before, then this:

“Arnold, never be afraid. We are kindred souls, you and me.”

A battered Buick, passenger window ajar, rolled up to the curb next to me, some ghetto rap classic throbbing on its stolen disc player. THUMP THUMP THUMP!

“Hey, they’s my main man Ahnold! How you be, candyass?” Other voices laughed in the back seat of the car. Suddenly, the passenger door swung open and Orlando motioned with his pistol for me to take a little ride along Lake Shore Drive. I froze.

Next thing I know, these three big blacks are telling me that I am going to rob the parish office after Bingo Night. You know, be their front man, do their dirty work, while they waited in the evening shadows in the idling car.

I silently asked myself. *What would Jesus do? What would Sergei do?* I didn’t seem to have a choice. Oh sure, I *had* a choice but, how did Orlando put it?

“You refuse and we fuck up your pretty hands for good, ya dig, motherfuckka? No more of you showin’ off at assemblies an’ shit, with all that fuckin’ piano. No more, ya hear?”

What choice did I have? My parents were depending on me to be their classically trained gravy train in their retirement years. Mrs. Sorensen was depending on me. Rachmaninoff was depending on me.

The plan was this. On Bingo Night, after the till was counted and put in the safe, I was to approach Father Aurelio, asking him if he could vouch for me on my application for Julliard. Father Aurelio was entranced by classical piano, that much I knew, and he seemed more than normally entranced with me personally, the handsome hometown classical favorite, about to break out for the big concert hall. I felt sure he would go along with it, on the one angle or the other.

Orlando, Sonny Boy and Tyroneus met me outside my house the evening of the 23rd and we sped off toward the parish hall, gangsta rap deafening me momentarily. Soon, the Buick rolled to a stop behind the parish school, as planned. What I hadn’t planned for was the unregistered Beretta that Orlando forced into my sweaty right hand just then, with orders to use it if necessary to get the money. All of it!

I jumped out and walked hastily up to Father Aurelio's office, hallways dimmed after a big night of Couples Bingo and Pizza. There would have to be hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars in the till. Plus all the collection plate money from last Sunday's three masses. I knew that Father Aurelio made a bank run every Saturday, on his way to the music shop over near the L. Sometimes I could be found there too, listening to some "free classical listening samples" of Sergei's stuff, on the CD player in the corner of the shop.

He was there at his office desk, fiddling with papers and humming something from Verdi.

"Hi, Father! Sorry to startle you. I need a favor!" I put on my best affectation for the closet pedophile that I could muster, given the fact that the bulge in my pants was not my happiness to see him this night, but something far more dangerous.

"Oh, hello Arnold, what can I do for you tonight? I'm just finishing up here with the Bingo tally. Big night! Big night. The Bishop will be most grateful."

"Father, you know I'm applying at Julliard and all. I would appreciate it if you could put in a good word for me on this form here. You are a classical music lover and you know what I can do in that regard, right?"

"Sure. Sure, I'd be glad to help you out." And then, in his finest imitation of a heterosexual male, Father Aurelio notched things up a bit by saying "Why don't we grab some pie and ice cream at my house and I'll write it all up for you? I mean, for Julliard."

This priest was beginning to get on my nerves. I could see that he wanted way more than to write me a glowing recommendation. I could see the safe in his office closet. I needed that combination! Orlando and friends were growing impatient around back, me having nearly wasted fifteen of the twenty minutes they had told me I had to get the money and flee to the car.

Father Aurelio stood and walked around to me, putting a nervous hand on my left shoulder, squeezing my skin under my parka. I fumbled the Berretta in my right pocket.

Come on, priest! Don't make this any more difficult than it already is! My classical piano career is not going down in flames over this!

Father put his arm around me as he pretended to glance at the Julliard form in my left hand. I fingered that waiting trigger.

His hand did a waving motion along my back, sometimes dropping below my beltline. I could sense that he was getting more worked up by the minute. Out of the corner of my eye, the wall clock struck 9:30. Zero hour.

Like a ninja in a Bruce Lee movie, I whirled around and knocked Father Aurelio to the floor. I drew the Berretta and pointed it at Father.

“Give me the combination to your safe, you pedophile! I mean it, I’ll shoot you dead right here, as God is my witness!”

Father looked up at me from his subservient position on the floor, something new for someone like himself, used to giving the directions and holding the sin card over us like he was better than us mere mortals.

“What, Arnold? What did you say?”

“Give me the combination to your safe right now or I’ll blow your ear off right here and now!”

“I don’t understand this, Arnold, coming from such a promising young man as you! This just isn’t you. It isn’t!”

I yanked his torso up by the arm and put the silver pistol next to his ear as we marched to Father’s closet.

“Give me the money. All of it! Now!”

Father spun the dial back and forth with shaking fingers, the gun stuck into his auditory canal.

And then with a satisfying “click” the safe door opened and Father busied himself in extracting the money. All of it.

He tried to speak but all I was hearing was a beautifully building *crescendo* within the First Piano Concerto of my pianistic Godfather, Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff. I could make out his voice ... saying ... *Never be afraid, Arnold.*

I fled down the hallway toward Orlando’s car, leaving Father Aurelio stunned in the locked closet. Never had to use the gun or hurt the priest after all. Just made him an offer he couldn’t refuse, like Marlon Brando’s *Don Corleone* did in *The Godfather*.

Thankfully, the waiting Buick was still there, its engine rumbling. I threw open the passenger side door and tossed the olive drab canvas bank-deposit bag into Orlando’s astounded lap. He hit the gas, all four balding tires screaming for their lives against the cobbled parish courtyard.

“Nice fuckin’ work, piano man! Looks like your hands are safe to play another day!” Sonny Boy and Tyroneus breathed a collective sigh of relief as we sped for a place for me to be dropped off, and for them to savor a night’s work by yours truly.

And now, here I sit, my Marine squad members and me in this Humvee, sweating out our fatigues in the tropical twilight. I had been given a clear choice by the judge in Chicago.

Lengthy incarceration for assault with a deadly weapon and theft of nearly \$3500, or else immediate enlistment in the Armed Forces in a combat theater.

I chose the Marines. Camp Pendleton. Machine Gunner, combat MOS 0331. I'm certain I could have made it as a Marine Musician, but somehow the judge wasn't in a joking mood.

Here's all these guys over here in Iraq, each with their own favorite kind of music. Country. Hip-Hop, Jazz, Bluegrass. Heavy Metal. And what happens?

Marines in my unit had learned early on that whenever we returned to our quarters after a long, hard day of patrolling or escorting convoys, that I would always recline on my bed with my iPod and zone out on classical piano music, Rachmaninoff, to be exact. At first they thought it was weird.

But soldiers are a superstitious bunch. And as the days of our tours wore on, the Country guys and the Heavy Metal guys began taking note of the casualties they were taking. Even with the Hip-Hoppers and the Bluegrass Marines.

"What the fuck?" they would say, at first individually and then as part of a groundswell of Marine troopers arrayed on the Iraqi battlefield, like players in some concert orchestra.

"This machine gunner from Charley Company, you know, the one they all call 'Hands?' He's some kind of mystic or somethin'. Fact is ... he's able to cover his own troopers with some kind of invisible armor. Somethin' about his channelin' this classical Russian pianist with big hands. Fuckin' no fatalities, not even scratches!"

"No way" said the Country fans, at first. Toby Keith was the man.

"No fuckin' way, man" asserted the gangsta rap crowd, at least not without proof.

And on and on throughout the musical genres and their individual fan bases.

But, like all mysteries of the unseen, especially those in the fog of war, no one could debunk the claims of Marines who lived and patrolled with Machine Gunner Arnold "Hands" Brzeszczak. You see, he communed nightly with The Man himself ... Sergei Rachmaninoff, the pianist with the big hands. Patron Saint of Geekazoids, on and off the battlefield.

The ninja machine gunner with the impossible last name, let rip yet another forty-rounds-a-minute burst from his, by now, mythical .50 cal., in response to a roadside IED explosion. Not a one of his brothers-in-arms had suffered a hair out of place.

Every Good Boy Does Fine!

OORAH!

