

## Sun Flower Slow Drag

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Monday morning, early spring, 1974. I'm 15, almost 16, zits, peach fuzz, all legs and elbows, toggling between sullen and hyper, with one desire above all others: a girlfriend.

And I have a plan.

It's the first class of the day, orchestra, and I'm there early, at the piano. I'm playing, softly at first and then a little louder, as half-awake students straggle into the music room -- tiered floor rising to the back, jumble of instrument cases along the wall, the funky smell of brass instruments -- trying to beat the bell. Every few seconds, I glance up to check if anybody's noticing me.



Which they're not.

I play louder, my fingers manic on the keys.

"You're playing that *way* too fast." This girl, Daniela, is looking over my shoulder at the music. It's *The Entertainer*, by Scott Joplin, popular right then as the theme from *The Sting*. I've already seen the movie three times, studying Robert Redford and Paul Newman, two smart, sexy grifters running the big con, and pondering how I might steal some of that glamour.

The plan I come up with is this: (1) buy a book of Joplin's piano music; (2) practice *The Entertainer* every day until its perfect, no matter how much it kills my wrists; (3) sit down at the piano as people come into orchestra, like I'm just goofing around, and casually toss it off; and (4) thereby amaze everybody with how cool I am, including especially Julie Revkin. She plays cello and has this curly hazel-blonde hair and once said she liked the way I play.

So here I am, as single-minded and hopeful as a bird in a meadow unfurling its chirps and whistles into the springy morning air.

And now this weirdo Daniela is messing me up. Who does she think she is anyway? She's short and a little stocky and kind of a loner. She has this long black hair and dark, almost black eyes, with these kind of thick eyebrows; people call her Browser behind her back. Even though we're both juniors and take a lot of the same classes, we've never said two words to each other.

I stop playing and turn to glare at her. She holds her violin in one hand, her bow in the other, and, as usual, has this very serious expression as she studies the music. "*Not Fast*," she says. "It's right there at the top." She points the tip of her bow at Joplin's instruction.

"Yeah," I say, batting her bow away. "Obviously. But it's more fun to play it fast."

"It just sounds like you're trying to show off," she says, and turns to go to her place. She's first chair violin and has been since the spring of freshman year. So she's good, obviously. But now she's pissed me off. I start to play the piece again, this time ridiculously slow, making it sound almost like a dirge.

"How's this?" I ask.

She sits down, scoops her hair around her shoulder, tucks her violin under her chin, and listens for a second. "Better, actually," she says.

The bell rings and Mr. Sodermeyer, the music teacher, comes out of his office. "Places everybody." He frowns over at me, still sitting there at the piano, and jerks his head for me to sit down. "You too, *maestro*." He gives that last word a fizzy, sarcastic spin, his specialty. I tuck the Joplin book under my arm and slouch to my place in the viola section.

Viola's my second instrument, after piano, something I picked up so I could be in the orchestra. I don't take lessons and hardly ever practice, but I'm good at reading music, so I skate by.

Piano is my main thing and, if I say so myself, I'm pretty good. I take lessons from a teacher in Berkeley and work on fairly impressive pieces by Bach and Chopin and so on. And I'm playing a Mozart concerto at the spring concert. In my little bedroom community of doctors and lawyers and executives, I'm considered quite talented. In fact, my nickname is Schroeder, after the kid who plays the toy piano in *Peanuts*.

But with piano you never have to look far to find somebody better than you, usually a lot better. I've been to piano competitions in San Francisco and heard the real prodigies. I know, although I hate to admit it, that I'm not one of them.

So Daniela's critique gets under my skin and I find myself looking over at her. She's pure concentration, stony-faced, except for a wince every once in a while as somebody -- usually the violas, I'm sorry to say, or the second violins -- utterly mangle something.

Never gonna impress her, I think. Not that I care.

And I don't, I really don't. Right up until that moment.

Despite the Monday morning disaster, my ragtime practice is not a total waste. My mother tells everybody at the Ladies' Tuesday Tennis League how I'm playing *The Entertainer* nonstop and Mrs. Stevinson decides that I would be just perfect for the 40th birthday bash she's throwing for her husband, seeing as how much he loved that movie. So I land my first paying job.

It's one of those early spring days when the East Bay hills are an electric green and the air buzzes and vibrates. The piano has been moved outside to a covered section of the patio and the guests mill around the pool or sit at little white tables set up on the perfect emerald lawn. Everybody dresses up in 1930s costume, the clothes their parents were wearing when they were born -- vests, suspenders, fedoras, belted dresses, slouch hats. They're all trying hard to show that even though they're middle-aged, with spouses and mortgages and important jobs, they can still have a good time. I dress up too, in a seersucker suit from my dad's salesman days and a Panama hat that maybe belonged to my grandfather.

I'm about thirty minutes in and it's going well, really well. Although I would never admit it to my piano teacher, I like this music. Learning these pieces, putting them together like puzzles, makes me weirdly satisfied. And even though nobody is listening, I'm enjoying myself. Actually, I'm enjoying myself *because* nobody's listening, so different from the nail-biting focus at a recital.

Best of all, the Panama hat, which I've set upside down on top of the piano, already holds a couple of ones and a neatly creased five.

But as I play I start to get that tingly feeling of somebody behind me, looking over my shoulder. I get nervous, flub a few notes, but keep playing and, as I get to the little flourish at the end, the person slides onto the bench next to me.

It's Daniela and I can see from her crisp white blouse, her black skirt with its little white apron, and the big tray tucked under her arm that she's one of the catering crew.

"Nice gig, Rob," she says, almost like we're buddies. She nods toward my hat. "Just tips or they payin' you?"

I'm a little tongue-tied at seeing her there, but I gather myself and say, gloating a bit, "Mrs. Stevinson's paying me twenty-five dollars."

"Twenty-five bucks!" She punches me on the shoulder. "*Plus* friggin' tips. You gotta be kidding me! I'm getting two an hour and forget about tips. And I'm working *way* harder than you."



"I guess," I say, giving her a cheesy grin, "it pays to be talented."

She looks at me, dark eyebrows gathered, and starts to slide off the bench.

"Yeah, Rob, whatever you say. And, for your information, that right there," she jabs a finger at the music, "that's an *A natural*, not an *A flat*. You missed it like *three times*. *Maestro*."

She shoots me a tight, angry smile, and walks away.

The next week we start rehearsing the Mozart concerto I'm playing for the spring concert. It's tough going and most of the time, I literally sit on my hands while Mr. Soda -- that's of course what we call Mr. Sodermeyer -- struggles with the orchestra. We're only performing the second movement, the *adagio*, often played by students, and the music, to be honest, is fairly simple. But that, in a way, makes it worse; there's nowhere to hide if you don't know your part or aren't in tune.

At the end of the week, Mr. Sodermeyer calls me and Daniela into his office. He tells me that we'll have to use most of our rehearsal time just to get the orchestra parts in shape, so he's asked her to help me separately with my part. He smiles at her, and she nods grimly, a soldier accepting a mission. He looks back at me and asks, "That okay with you?"

"I guess so." I shrug and try to hide my irritation.

I suggest we go to her house, but she says they don't have a piano. So we end up at my house on Sunday afternoon.

"Let's warm up with something," she says, after she's tuned. "How about *The Entertainer*?" I look at her in surprise as she steps over so she can see the music on the piano.

"But there's no . . ."

"Just play."

I open the Joplin book and start on the intro, extra careful with the tempo. She joins in on the melody, that famous line with its three syncopated leaps. The second time through, she plays it an octave higher, and it sounds so different on violin, at least the way she plays it. And then, on the next section, she starts to improvise, somehow weaving a counter-melody, lyrical and melancholy, through the jaunty tune.

"Wow," I say, impressed despite myself. "How did you learn to do that?"

She shrugs, blushes a little. "Just have a good ear, I guess."

"I guess," I say. "But you make it sound, I don't know, kinda sad."

"You think it's supposed to be all happy?"

I shrug. "Always seemed that way to me."

She tilts her head in thought. "This music makes me think of how people smile and laugh even when they're sad inside. Like that rich-people party you played at." She looks at me, raising her eyebrows. "But that's what makes it good, right?"

She is even more impressive coaching me through the concerto.

"The first violin and the winds come in here," she says. She plays the part from the copy of the score Mr. Sodermeyer gave her. "And now the winds take over, with this descending line in the flute and clarinet." And she plays that part. She plays the second violin part, the bassoon part, and the horn part. She even plays the piano part a couple of times, to show me how to shape a phrase.

This is super annoying, I tell myself, having her tell me how to play. I *know* this piece; I've been working on it with my teacher for weeks.

But the funny thing is, it doesn't actually bug me at all. I mean, if some being from another galaxy shows up at your house traveling at warp speed in their space ship, are you going to get all peeved if they offer a few tips on your physics homework? By the time we get to the very soft, pianissimo ending, and she sits for a moment, bow still poised over the strings, I'm holding my breath and completely caught up with her in the music.

"That was actually helpful," I say after she lets her bow down. I'm embarrassed at how earnest I sound.

She just nods matter-of-factly. "Even though the music isn't that hard," she says, "it's still Mozart. It's not like a typing test or something. You can't just be pushing buttons."

My parents have made themselves scarce, but the smell of brownies hangs in the air. We wander into the kitchen where my mom has left a plateful on the counter. Out of habit, I take a carton of milk from the fridge and fill two glasses.

"So, where do you live?" I ask, to break the awkward silence as we sit next to each other at the counter eating our snack.

She takes a bite of brownie and looks at me with a strange expression, wiping a crumb from her lip.

"Why do you care?"

"Just curious."

"Not in this stupid town, I can tell you that much."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, duh, I live in a different town."

"Like where?" I ask, and name a couple of nearby suburbs.

She shakes her head and I can tell she's not going to say.

"Then why do you go to school here?"

She snorts. "My mom's brilliant idea. If you can't afford to live with the rich people, she says, get as close to 'em as you can. So, she borrowed the address of one of her housecleaning clients and enrolled me here." She shrugs. "I guess nobody ever checked." I take a long drink of milk and consider this.

When I set the glass down, I glance over and see she's pulled a cigarette and a lighter from the pocket of her sweat jacket. "Mind if I smoke?" she asks casually, sticking the cigarette in her mouth and flicking the little wheel of the lighter. I stare at the tiny flame, horrified, and then look up at her face. She looks back with a polite, questioning expression.

"Um, I'd rather . . . I mean," I stutter.

And she lets me hang like that for a second, all flustered and confused, before she cracks up, pulling the cigarette from her mouth and doubling over.

"Oh my god," she says between gasping laughs. "Oh. My. God. You should have seen your face when you saw that cigarette. You about shit a brick. Man, oh man, *that* was funny."

After a moment, I start to laugh with her, kind of ruefully. "It's just that, if my mom ... "

"Yeah, I know," she cuts me off. "If your mom came into her nice tidy kitchen and smelled cigarettes, she'd hit the roof. No need to explain. It's just that, with the milk and brownies and all, it felt so freakin' wholesome, I couldn't resist. And you have to admit, it was pretty funny, right?"

"Yeah," I say after a moment. "You totally got me."

Her laughter winds down. "You know, Rob," she says, "you're actually a pretty nice guy. I'm sorry I'm so mean to you sometimes."

"It's . . ." I say, but she cuts me off.

"I guess it's partly that I'm still kind of jealous at how much they paid you for that party. But hey, if somebody offered that to me, I'd take it in a heartbeat." She pops the last chunk of brownie in her mouth. "Even if they did make me wear that stupid suit."

She waits a beat and then punches me lightly on the shoulder. "Kidding."

The following week, my playing is much improved. I'm listening for the other instruments, the parts Daniela played for me, and trying to show her that I'm not just pushing buttons.

"Don't know what's gotten into you, Rob," Mr. Sodermeyer says as I'm leaving class on Friday. "Must be eatin' your Wheaties."



"Thanks," I say, and then add, surprising myself, "It's actually 'cause of Daniela. She's awesome." My voice kind of cracks as I say this and he looks at me, amused.

"She is indeed 'awesome,'" he says, mildly mocking me. "In fact, Daniela might inspire more awe than any student I've ever had."

I nod and surprise myself again. "Mr. Sodermeyer, I've been thinking. She's the one who should be playing a concerto. I mean, she's ... " and I pause, trying to think of some word besides awesome, "she's amazing. Compared to her ... "

Sodermeyer holds up his hand. "Music's not about comparison."

"But . . . "

"But, you're right. And that was the plan, for next year."

The past tense sinks in. "What do you mean, 'that *was* the plan?'"

"I thought she would have told you. She's leaving the district."

I find Daniela at lunch, sitting at a table alone in the courtyard, the Hemingway we're reading for English propped in front of her.

"Hey, Daniela," I say, as casually as I can, suddenly sweating. "Can I, do you mind, like, if I ask you something? Or if you're busy ... ."

"About the concerto?" she asks, gesturing for me to sit down.

"No," I say. "Well, kind of." I wonder suddenly why it had felt so urgent to talk to her, but there's no stopping now. "I heard that you're not going to be here next year. And I guess I just wanted to know if it was, like, true and everything."

She bites her lower lip, nods. "So much for my dream of being the homecoming queen." She gives a little laugh.

"But why're you leaving?"

"Remember how I told you I don't live here? Well, I guess somebody finally checked."

"Shit," I say. "That sucks. Isn't there something you can do?"

She shakes her head. "But it's not a big deal. I'm actually glad to be outta here. I'm kinda sick of all these stuck-up rich kids."

I must look startled, because she goes on, "Don't look all surprised. I know the shit people say behind my back." Her dark eyes shine and her tone grows bitter. "And don't feel sorry for me either. Believe me, I won't be sad if I never see this place again."

I'm stung by her words, her sudden emotion.

She flips her book open. "Now if you don't mind, I need to finish this before class." She starts to read.

"Okay," I say after a moment, and stand up. "Sorry to bother you."

As I walk away, my heart races and my feelings are a jumble of disappointment and anger. Despite her harsh words, I wish I could help her, or at least make it up to her somehow. But I don't see anything I can do. I cross the

courtyard and head to the music room, hoping that nobody's there and I can maybe play some piano.

"Today we're going to do something different," Mr. Sodermeyer announces on Monday morning. "I've asked Daniela to try conducting the concerto. And I want you to really watch and listen to her, okay?" He looks around sternly at everybody. "Not like you do with me. Better than that."

Daniela stands up, hands her violin to Mr. Sodermeyer, and steps in front of the orchestra. I can tell she's nervous but not surprised, so he must have discussed it with her beforehand. She picks up the baton from the music stand and looks over to see if I'm ready. I glance at Mr. Sodermeyer, who's now in the first violin chair, but he's watching her, so I look at her and nod.

She flicks the baton through the air, setting the tempo for my solo introduction, and says to me, as if she has been conducting for years, "Whenever you're ready."

Mr. Sodermeyer is a good musician and, despite -- and partly because of -- his sarcasm, my favorite teacher. But there's something mechanical about the way he conducts, a little like a wind-up toy, as if he learned a certain way to do it and practiced in front of a mirror until he got it right.

Daniela, even her first time, is different. It's like the music is dancing in her head, swaying, tiptoeing, skipping, gliding, swooping, bowing, turning, leaping, whatever. And with the way she moves, her facial expressions -- and, yes, those dark eyebrows -- she somehow makes us want to help her get it out into the world.



The violas are still out of tune, of course, the cellos still come in late, and half the time I muff my trills. But the music starts to come alive. I glance over and see Mr. Sodermeyer smiling so hard that I think he might bubble over.

The night of the concert comes and the parents dutifully file in and take their seats in the stuffy auditorium. My concerto is the second-to-last piece on the program. I count the minutes until it's time to walk to the piano, a prisoner about to be hanged. My hands are sweaty, trembling, and I wonder if I will even be able to play.

"The next piece," Mr. Sodermeyer finally announces, "features Rob Davis on piano." And he says a couple of nice things about me as I make my way to the front, drawing chuckles as I almost knock over a music stand.

And then he introduces Daniela. He goes on and on about her, saying "gifted" it seems like half a dozen times and how honored he is to have her as a student. "And so," he wraps up, and I think that there are tears in his eyes, "without further ado, let me bring Daniela up here, so you can see, and hear, what I mean for yourselves."

The parents seem a little stunned, but a few of them tentatively clap as Daniela steps up on the podium. She calmly acknowledges them with a nod. And then she turns to me and, as she sets the tempo, gives me a wink and mouths, "Not fast."

I can't help but smile and a calm comes over me, a focus I've never felt before, and my hands relax and I'm playing.

A couple of weeks later, on the last day of school, I find Daniela at her locker and ask if she'll sign my yearbook. "Of course, dork," she says. "But only if you sign mine." I fill a page with how she is a great violinist and conductor and how much she helped me with the concerto and how the orchestra will really miss her.

"You write a novel?" she asks as I hand her book back, and I blush, shrug, and start to turn away. "Oh, and Rob," she says, "thanks." I give her a puzzled look, but she sees right through me. "Mr. Soda told me it was your idea for me to conduct."

I look down at my feet as they scuffle around, then smile up at her, unable to hide how pleased I am that she knows that. "It just made sense," I say, all aw-shucks. "I mean, you knew the music so well and everything."

She wrinkles her nose and smiles. "It was a very cool thing to do."

It's the last week of the summer and I'm playing my biggest gig yet, a glittery reception at the country club. It also looks like it might be my last; once again ragtime is going out of fashion.

I've finally admitted to myself, now that it's too late, how much I like Daniela. I wish for the thousandth time that I'd written something in her yearbook to tell her straight out how I feel. Just so she'd know.

I've read and reread her note, trying to find something to show that she likes me too, but it's disappointing:

*Maestro Rob, It was great to work with you on the concerto—you did a really good job!. Though I think—and don't take this the wrong way—that you might be better at playing Joplin than Mozart. Anyway, keep practicing. (God, I'm boring!) And remember: Not fast! Have a great summer, Daniela.*

No x's or o's. Not even a heart or smiley face.

I play through my list of tunes as the country club members laugh and drink around me -- *The Entertainer, Pine Apple Rag, Sun Flower Slow Drag, The Easy Winners* -- and remember what she said about the sadness beneath the happiness. She was definitely onto something.

And then, I start to get that tingly feeling and I know, even before she's sitting on the bench beside me, who it is.

"Daniela," I say, stopping mid-phrase.

"At your service." She smiles at me, then looks down and smooths her apron. I look at her and wonder if I'm not dreaming.

After a moment, she laughs at my dumb gaze. "I see I'm distracting you," she says, "I guess I better go before I get you fired."

"Daniela," I say, reaching out to touch her arm as she starts to slide away.

"Yes?"

"When can I," my voice barely squeaks through my throat, "you know, see you again?"

She gives me a funny look. "Next week, dummy. At school."

I look at her blankly.

"Didn't Mr. Soda tell you?" she says. "Turns out some muckety-muck was at the concert and decided, I guess, that I'm worthy or something. So they're letting me stay for senior year after all, if I want."

She narrows her eyes and looks away. "I was gonna tell 'em to go screw themselves, but, you know." She shrugs and gives me a sly smile. "I thought about orchestra, and how certain people might miss me. Plus, Mr. Soda said he wants me to play a concerto. So."

She looks at me appraisingly. I have no idea what she sees. Incomprehension, surprise, joy? All three and more? Whatever it is, she leans over and kisses me, gently, meaningfully, right on the lips.

Pretty much exactly the way I planned.

