Beryl shook her head. Rarely did she dig her heels in but she was absolutely determined not to budge this time!

Her father had said, “No!”
Her uncle had said, “No!”
Bert had said, “No!”

Now here stood John trying to tell her the same. Beryl was having none of it, not anymore – it was just so unfortunate that the delivery coincided with John’s visit.

‘You don’t even play the piano!’

John didn’t know it, but they had all said that before as well!

Beryl ignored her son, ushering the delivery men to proceed. They placed the beautiful, black upright in its place and carried out her old sofa.

That had been the deal she had struck with Hank, the man at the music store, as he had said, “The charity shop is on their route back and they’ll have an empty van.”

John was still grumbling as she saw the two young lads out, they towered over her little frame, her gay, grey eyes twinkled with gratitude as she slipped a five-pound note to each.

‘You’re completely mad!’ John said.

Beryl turned back into the room, her new friend shined so invitingly on the other side, a red-faced John between them.

‘Tracey has always said it! Where are your visitors going to sit?’

Beryl shrugged as she thought, ‘what visitors?’

John was the only one who ever came, and that was only when he happened to be in the area on business. Before his dad’s ashes were cold, John had persuaded her that the bungalow was way too big for just her and he announced he had found her a “nice warden assisted place” in Eastbourne. “You and Dad always liked coming here,” he had said as they unpacked the last of her stuff.

Bert liked Eastbourne. She had always hated it, but what was the point in trying to tell John that.

Beryl went up to her son and took the customary bunch of white chrysanthemums from his hand.

‘I should have put you in a nut house, not a retirement home,’ he snorted.

Beryl looked at the white flowers. ‘Always white, just like his father bought – where was the colour in life?’
John read her look and decided it was time to go. She didn’t see her son out.

Having removed all obstacles, Beryl walked over to the deeply lacquered, ebony sheen. A beaming face reflected back to her as she caressed the silky surface, they were alone at last! Carelessly tossing the chrysanths towards the solitary chair left in the sitting room, Beryl sat upon the piano stool. Holding her breath, her fingers gently slid back the lid – “what need she for chairs, she had her piano stool!” The deliverymen had plugged it in, all Beryl had to do was click the little “on” button like Hank had shown her. Hank had shown her everything she needed to know on the model in the shop, by way of a free beginner’s course whilst she waited the three long weeks for delivery. She’d pop in every day and he’d show her the different things it could do. Hank had played away, he was very good, but Beryl always declined his invitation to “have a go” – no, she wanted to wait till she had one that was her very own. It had been Hank who had suggested an electronic piano, he called it by another name, but it was still a piano to her. Like he had said, it didn’t need the bother of tuning, and she could plug headphones in and play all day and night without disturbing the neighbours. That is exactly what Beryl planned to do, play day and night. She had waited over 70 years for a piano of her own, now she was going to make up for lost time.

Beryl mused on that thought as she went to the cupboard and got out the books she had bought from the little music shop and the “best in the shop” headphones Hank had sold her too. It was over 70 years since Mrs Jones had sat the infant Beryl upon her knee and shown her how to plonk out ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’. As Beryl rested a finger on one of the smooth white keys in front of her and the sun broke through the clouds, shining through the window, it bathed both Beryl and the piano in a warm, golden glow, like God himself was smiling down and giving her the thumbs up. Headphones plugged in and clamped over her ears, Beryl opened her ‘Beginners Guide to the Piano’.

By the time Beryl stopped playing, the sun had long gone to bed; the flowers lay forlorn and limp on the carpet, she now saw she had missed the chair. At some point she had popped to the toilet and turned on the lamp in the corner, but she couldn’t remember when. It was 3am! Beryl drew the curtains and very reluctantly turned off the piano; closing its lid, she bade it a fond *goodnight*. From the bedroom door, she paused and blew a kiss back to the handsome instrument. Beryl was very pleased with her first day’s efforts. As she got into bed she recalled how Miss Moody had written from school to enquire if Beryl’s parents would allow her to have piano lessons, as she had shown great aptitude. Beryl’s father had been very firm in his “NO!” and she remembered the emphatic “don’t ask again” ring it had to it. The war soon came anyway, thoroughly overshadowing any talk of pianos in Beryl’s world. Funnily, Mrs Regis’ piano was all Beryl could remember from being carried out of the rubble of their bombarded-out house in Acre Road. Mrs Regis lived over the road, all the houses that side had their fronts blown off, you could see clear into all their parlours. The pristine, mahogany upright was all Beryl could remember from being carried out of the rubble of their bombarded-out house in Acre Road. Mrs Regis lived over the road, all the houses that side had their fronts blown off, you could see clear into all their parlours. The pristine, mahogany upright was all Beryl could remember from being carried out of the rubble of their bombarded-out house in Acre Road.
back at her, across the street, to the mass of rubble where numbers two to twenty-two had stood. Beryl and her big sister Muriel had survived because their mum had put them in the cellar. Unfortunately, mum had dashed back to get the dog, she and Misty were “no more”, as the ARP man had put it.

People always talked of Beryl’s jangled nerves after that. Her uncle said it would “jangle his nerves” when a piano was suggested for Beryl by a concerned teacher at her new school in Shropshire. Her uncle wasn’t an unkind man, after all he and Aunt Gladys had moved quickly to take his brother’s children in after they were left motherless and homeless – and fatherless, too, it turned out, once the telegram telling of his death in North Africa had finally found them in their new home.

Uncle’s Farm was a whole new world to the East End girls. Muriel hated the country and became ‘a right handful’ as her uncle had put it, once she hit her teens. Beryl just kept her head down and made the most of it. She liked the animals and the air was fresh and sweet. Muriel ran away when she was eighteen and was never heard of again. Beryl didn’t miss her, they had never really communicated after their mother’s death. Not long after Muriel went, Bert arrived. He was not much to look at, as broad as he was tall, but he took a shine to Beryl and was as patient as the day was long, he came to try and sell a motorised tractor to her uncle. Eventually, her uncle saw sense and ordered one, each time Bert visited, the smitten Beryl had made sure he bumped into her. After the tractor was delivered he continued to come, just to see Beryl.

She found Bert easy to listen to, he was caring and protective; he said she brought out the “good side” in him. He said “no” to a piano too, though he did once say “maybe”, but that had been when they were courting. After they were wed, it was a definite “No!” Bert went off and sold his tractors while Beryl stayed home – she cooked, she cleaned and she cared for little Johnny. That had been the routine of her life.

The weeks passed and Beryl spent all the time she could at the piano, daily chores – shopping, eating, sleeping – they all just irritated her now, all she wanted to do was play! Miss Moody had known her stuff, Beryl did have a “talent”, she took to reading music readily, quickly finding her ear could tune into just what note she needed and, after a couple of run-throughs, she had it all in her head, enabling her to play the piece by heart. The initial music books frustrated her with their simple, modern tunes, but soon she was playing the music she had always dreamed of: Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Mozart... Trips to the shops now always included a stop off to see Hank on her way home.

‘How’s it going then, Berry?’ he’d ask, cheerily, as she browsed the racks of sheet music for a new piece. She liked his nickname for her, it made her feel young and vibrant, not just old, drab, dreary Beryl.

Beryl would give him the thumbs up, and he’d wander over to look at her selection.
‘You sure you’re up to this?’ he would ask, suspiciously. To which Beryl would always frown. Hank would hold his hands up in surrender, ‘OK, Berry, the customer is always right.’

Beryl would then smile broadly and make her purchase. Every day was worth getting up for now; every day was filled with joy! Within the confines of her headphones, Beryl lost herself in a world that swam with beauty, the music spoke to her soul and made it soar. She stuck to the classics, pieces of music she had listened to on records all her life, awestruck. Now, these pieces were coming from within her, flowing from her fingers, translating her inner being through the notes – she was the music. Although the sound was well contained within the headphones, Beryl felt the whole of heaven could hear her play. Sometimes, she felt as if the room would fill with the spirits of those who had gone before, all the great composers, pianists and musicians... anyone who loved the music as deeply as she did, their presence drawn to come and listen to the living with whom they shared a passion.

Beryl jumped out of her skin and clutched her chest as the sound went all funny in her ears, suddenly John’s face was right by hers.

‘You stupid, stupid woman!’ he shouted, angrily, ‘I’ve been knocking for nearly half an hour! I had to go and get the warden to let me in. I thought you were dead!’

‘Hoped, more like,’ thought Beryl.

Mr Cuthbertson, the warden, hovered awkwardly by the door, twiddling his huge bunch of keys, ‘No harm done, eh. Nice piano, Beryl.’ he said, loudly, as if she was deaf, then he smiled and waved a hand in an exaggerated manner before heading out of the door.

‘They didn’t have white,’ John muttered, grudgingly handing his mother crimson chrysanthemums. ‘This is just not on, Mum. You can’t lock yourself away in here for the rest of your life!’ he said, tapping the piano angrily. ‘We’re going to have to look at a care home I think. I mean, just look at the state of this place!’

Beryl cast her eye around the flat, admittedly it was a little dusty and unkempt, the plate from her lunchtime sandwich still sat on the side and she hadn’t actually bothered to get dressed today. She had started work on Liszt’s ‘La Campanella’ early and had become so engrossed in the extremely challenging piece, in fact, she wished John would hurry up with his tirade and go so she could carry on with it.

John checked his watch, ‘I’ve got to go, but this isn’t the end of this, you need help, Mum, you can’t live like this!’

She didn’t bother to see John out; instead she popped her headphones back on and got back to the task in hand...

Eric loved to visit his mother, at ninety-seven she was still as bright as a button, mentally, it was just her body that was letting her down.

‘Ach, these bones have lasted me well enough,’ his mother would say, her Austrian accent still thick even after over sixty years in England. He would help her
into the wheelchair, lovingly wrapping a blanket over her knees, then she would say, ‘Right, Let us go off and find an adventure!’

‘I wish I could spend more time with you, Mama,’ Eric’s usual lament as they walked up the path back to the home after a fun afternoon somewhere. ‘Our days out pass far too quickly!’

‘You give me enough,’ reassured his mother, patting his arm. ‘You have people to entertain all over the world. Me, I can wait till you come home.’ She smiled proudly; her son was such a great man in her eyes.

Eric suddenly heard the notes of ‘La Campanella’ drifting down from an open window; he smiled as his ears strained to see if he could catch a hint at the recordings performance. The music suddenly stopped, mid-flow, and there was a sneeze before the music continued from where it left off.

‘I didn’t know you had a virtuoso living in your apartments?’ He hung on every perfect note, he could now recognise that the piano was an electronic one, though it was still excellent playing.

‘That is coming from Beryl’s apartment, I think.’ His mother caught the refrain now, too. ‘Poor soul she is, her idiot son thinks she is insane but she is just a mute. Nice lady, keeps to herself, but a good neighbour.’

‘Was she a professional in her time?’ Eric pressed.

‘Not that I know of, though I have never passed much more than the time of day with her. She communicates with people by writing on a little pad, she always has one with her, tied about her neck.’

Eric insisted he must see Beryl immediately, rarely had he heard such talent. His mother felt awkward as her son rapped excitedly up on her neighbour’s door.

‘That’s funny,’ thought Beryl, ‘I heard the door that time.’ Then, to her horror she realised that John hadn’t plugged the headphones back into their socket. The whole neighbourhood could hear her playing! Nervously, she went to the door, surely it must be a neighbour, or worse, the warden come to complain. She was right, through the spy hole she saw it was the Austrian lady across the hall and her son!

Beryl, we are sorry to be disturbing you, but my son Eric here—’ her neighbour began as she opened the door.

‘I just had to come and meet the lady who was playing so brilliantly, that piece is not an easy one to play,’ Eric broke in, offering his hand.

Beryl was flustered, though very flattered by what he had just said. She reached for her pad and pen by the door and wrote ‘Thank You’ and added a smiley face, which wasn’t necessary as she herself was beaming at the man’s praise. ‘My name is Beryl, but I like to be called Berry,’ she added on the paper.

‘Hello, Berry— and, it is OK, my mother explained.’ Eric pointed to his mouth, showing he understood. ‘I was wondering, could we possibly trouble you to play for us?’

Beryl amazed herself, she didn’t hesitate. Inviting them in, she played and played. At some point Mr Cuthbertson wandered in, and through the open door more
residents came, drawn to Berry’s little apartment by the heavenly music. They brought chairs, some of them made tea and sandwiches and it became quite a party.

Before she knew it, Eric had told his friends in London her story, which Berry had recounted for him on her little pad. He declared that never, in all his years as a conductor and composer, had he come across such a great talent, nor one of such recent learning and, dare he say it, such senior years. She was a marvel, and rightly celebrated as such. Berry shone with all the attention. Her talent grew as Eric encouraged her to start composing. She began giving small recitals to his friends; these soirées grew and grew until Berry found herself the sell-out artist on the posters outside the Royal Albert Hall. The press loved her, they printed her miraculous story in papers and magazines all over the world, and chat shows could not get enough of her. That is how Dr Cassell got to hear about her. When he read that Berry hadn’t spoken a word since she was carried from the rubble of her blitzed house in 1941, he knew he could help, his speech therapy technique was highly successful with long-term selective mutism.

It was over a year before Berry had the time to see her son John again. She had finally sent him and his wife tickets to one of her London concerts, inviting them to lunch at her new flat before the show. They looked so very small and dowdy in the huge, bright London apartment.

‘Nice view of Hyde Park.’ John said, admiringly.

Tracey cooed over all the pictures of Berry with other celebrities and famous people.

‘Oh my God, that’s the queen isn’t it? John, look, that’s your mum with the queen!’

Berry was very proud of that picture, which is why it graced the top of the vast grand piano which dominated the living room. Though Berry hadn’t abandoned her first little piano, he was in her bedroom, it was upon him she always composed.

‘Wow, this is one amazing piano, Mum,’ John said, patting it affectionately.

‘Indeed, Son, it is,’ Berry smiled broadly.

She watched John and Tracey, both a little shaken for a moment.

‘Yes, John, your mum has finally found her voice.’

THE END