



PIANO SMASHING BLUES Stephen Moran

I was setting up for the steam circus in Gunnersbury Park last Sunday. It was a gorgeous spring day, blossom everywhere. The ground was dry enough and the weather was just perfect for smashing pianos, not too hot but bright. I had placed three black ones already and I was just manoeuvring an unusual oakwood one, with inlaid flowers and scrollwork, to the back flap of the truck. I jumped down and pressed the button to lower it.

‘You’re not going to smash that, are you?’

I wish I had a pound for every time I’ve heard that one. When I looked around it was a young black woman, not too tall, very dark, with straightened hair. She had curves to write home about. I’m fairly fit myself and not too far off her age, well no more than ten or fifteen years at the most, older. Even though I’m a white English aborigine myself, certain thoughts did cross my mind.

‘Fraid so,’ I said.

‘I bet you eat dead animals too,’ she said.

‘How do you know?’ I was about to lie, but hadn’t the heart. ‘Yeah. You’re right. I’m a barbarian.’

‘Let me have that piano. I’ll give it a good home.’

Its fate was obvious to anyone because the stall was already setup with ‘Piano Smashing Contest’ in big lettering over to our left. I had more than enough pianos on board, but I didn’t want the hassle.

‘Sorry, love, it ain’t for sale.’

When I went to get the trolley to move the oakwood piano, she lifted the lid and began to play fluently. *Für Elise*, it was, you probably know it. The most beautiful sound you could ever imagine, it was. Only a bit out-of-tune, like.

‘Shame, innit? It’ll be firewood in a few hours time.’

I was only joking, but my words sort of died, as if I really meant them, something very rare for me. Most things I say are just waffle, I never tell anybody what I’m really thinking, but sometimes an auto-pilot takes control of the old mouth and you never know what it’s going to say. As the music continued and rose, I felt it was addressed specially to me, and the words ‘commitment’ and ‘rapture’ came into my mind, without any explanation.

She stopped playing and stared at me. Without looking away she let her left hand vamp a bluesy sort of pattern. It sounded nicely familiar, and when the tune came in sharply on the right hand, she playfully half-sung the words. ‘If there’s any justice in the world...’

She gave me an artfully winsome look that reminded me of something, I don’t know what — my mother, probably (most things do) — and I thought, You bloody fool, Arthur.

‘Tell you what, give me ten quid and you can have it. It’s no skin off my nose, darling, I have a few spare ones there.’

‘Just give it to me. You shouldn’t let them smash a beautiful thing like this anyway. I have no money.’

‘All I can do is keep this back and if you win one of the contests you can have this instead of the prize. I’m robbing meself here.’

‘What you want me to smash another piano to get this one? I can’t smash no piano. Look at me.’

‘Sorry love.’

‘How about if I get somebody else to do it for me?’

‘Now this is getting complicated, y’see. This is why...’ I stopped and sighed.

‘I’ll be back later,’ she said, walking away. ‘Don’t take that one out and don’t start without me, right?’

‘Three o’clock we start, then it’s devil take the hindmost. Be there or not, it don’t make no difference to me darling.’

As she was walking away, she said over her shoulder, ‘My name is not Darling.’ Then after a pause, ‘Fuckwit.’

‘And my name is not Fuckwit, darling, it’s Arthur.’ Cheeky mare.

‘Jules. Byeeee!’

People think it’s abominable, as if these old crates were priceless antiques. What you’ve got to realise, your piano is not like your violin, it doesn’t improve with age. Unless Mozart or John Lennon played on it, it’s for the knackers yard anyway. I had one one time that used to belong to Colonel Pigeon, and it was smashed at the Keighley beer festival that year. A Russian geezer I met in the same line told me he’d demolished Elton John’s old Yamaha, but then you do get your spoofs everywhere.

Meanwhile, I was just murdering a hot dog and onions. There was a bit of a crowd gathering. It’s all subsidised by the Council of course, all the old steam engines tootling and organs hooting, and my services to entertainment. I only needed one more Billy Bunter and we were ready to start, with four people racing to be the first to comprehensively annihilate a piano with sledgehammers provided by yours truly.

A couple of fat geezers had paid up, tenner a go. They looked like they’d had about seven pints in the past two hours. Their faces were red and their eyes were like the eyes of sharks or horses. The third punter was a genial old geezer of about seventy, telling me he’d win because he used to be in the navy. As if they still climbed the masts. I assigned him the most woodworm-riddled crate.

Only one more place, and here’s a massive, military-looking hulk, with the

makings of three viable people, edging closer and about to open his mouth when Jules reappears.

‘Entry here!’ she says, indicating a younger male version of herself. He was in the advanced stages of a sulk.

A small laugh independently got up and hopped off my tongue, as I looked alternately up at the walking barracks and down to the scowling conscript, who looked as if it would be all he could do even to raise the sledgehammer off the ground.

‘How much is it?’ asked The Barracks, swaying under the effort of verbalisation, and checking to see if he had any pockets on the adapted marquee that served as his clothing.

I told him and took his tenner, and gave him a sledgehammer, while all the time being pummelled on the back by Jules, to accompanying sounds identical to a female tennis champion struggling through a difficult rally at match point. Her junior conscript now looked around with a combination of feigned nonchalance and nervous relief.

‘Ouch! Hey, hey, stop, I give up.’ I grabbed her wrists while her arms continued like pistons to lever against me. ‘Take the fffffff-flipping thing. Have it. Take it. You like it so much, and you want it. Just take it.’ I indicated the back of the truck nearby.

You see, you should never, you should never. Never. I thought this as I drove down towards Stonebridge. Never ever ever. Jules and her brother were on the passenger side, and I jerked the steering wheel and everything in a dissatisfied manner as I drove around the North Circular. Never ever ever. Oh you bloody fool, Arthur. I didn’t even bother asking what floor it was on. Bloody idiot.

‘I’m not carrying it up no stairs, mind. You can get whoever, or whatever, a crane. I don’t care. My cat wants her dinner, and here am I—’

‘Your cat...’

‘Yes. She expects me to be home on time for her dinner at five. And believe you

me, I ain't gonna let her down, Julie.'

'Jules.'

'I could make a fortune driving on the ferries abroad and all, but she won't let me. Well I could never leave her.'

I could see her junior conscript not trying very hard to stifle a laugh, just looking away.

'Your piano strings is made out of their guts, cats,' he says.

'That's violins, idiot, and they don't use it anymore,' she corrects.

'Well Hitler hanged his enemies with piano strings,' I countered. 'And he was a vegetarian. Read any book you like from W H Smith's and you'll find I'm right.'

'There, turn there,' says she.

It wasn't too bad of a slum. It was irritatingly better than mine, I had to admit. Four storey walk-ups, with bright red stairwells and a lot of shining glass. Not one of the old concrete places, I had been expecting. Well they're all gone now, ain't they, demolished. Except for mine.

'Not bad, not bad,' I says. 'Now you'll be telling me you're on the top floor.'

'Yes,' they both said.

'Well tough titties,' I said in a special tone I practiced for the 'tough titties' expression, sort of low and precise, with a sing-song to it. I think it had the desired effect — it usually does; they both looked dismayed. She looked like she was thinking about getting uppity again.

'It's not for her,' Junior said. 'It's for our Nan.'

By the second flight I was completely drenched in sweat, and had to be careful not to shoulder the rendered walls and graze my favourite 1970's Hells Angels teeshirt. It wasn't retro, it was original; had been black at one time, now purple.

'Where are effing Laurel and Hardy when you need them,' I was still able to joke half way up the second flight, with the two of them taking one end and me taking the weight. By the middle of the third flight, I was displaying builder's arse and swearing like one as well. Like a builder that is, not like a builder's arse.

At the turn of the third landing, I started more or less wailing, which I had a way of doing without disrupting my normal personality, just an everyday thing, like my telephone voice. Anyway here was me, ‘Bombalurina! My poor Bombalurina. I’ve let you down, you don’t deserve this.’ Of course, I was snuffling like a tycoon and nowhere to hawk it out, and grit in my eyes and my arthritis playing up as well. ‘Don’t worry, Bombie, Arthur coming soon.’

With that, Junior collapsed laughing, caring nothing for the dead weight of piano buckling his torso against the sour-smelling concrete steps. He was just gone.

‘Get up!’ Jules screamed at him, but he kept chortling helplessly, till she sobered him with the toe of one of the kneeboots she was wearing. Though I was too stressed at the time to appreciate the spectacle, it was, you may say, satisfactory.

How we made it to the top landing, I’ll never know. I dried the sweat from my face, thinking bitterly that Bombie would be mewling for her dinner, and suffering dreadful pangs because the aroma of the lamb stew I put in the slow cooker for her, earlier, would be making her little mouth water. She’d be climbing up the walls by now.

Of course I had to go in and meet the Nan, and *blah de blah de blah*, and I’m looking at my watch. Can blind people cry, stupid question isn’t it? This one did, the Nan. She was blind and when Jules discombobulated her in her living room and had her grumbling and complaining at first, wanting to know what nonsense was going on, I thought you sorry so-and-so. Still looking at my watch and fretting about Bombie.

‘What foolishness and nonsense is this? I don’t need any furniture, I have everything — except my piano, which my dear father...’

‘Yes, Nan, we know,’ said Jules. ‘We’ve heard it a million times.’

She took her Nan and guided her to the piano, with Nan muttering all the way, and Junior got a chair, and Jules sat her down and placed her Nan’s gnarled hands on the gleaming lid.

‘This is a piano,’ says Nan, lifting the lid. At first she moved her hands and

fingers in feints at the keys, mumbling. 'I've forgotten...' That's when she started to cry. Then she played something, and it didn't sound like she'd forgotten, it sounded rather impressive. 'It's out of tune,' she said, brightening. Marvellous how a perceived misfortune can cheer people up.

'I have to go now. You're alright, yeah?' I said, edging for the door.

'Liszt...This is...No, Chopin...That's it...Who is this man with you?' she said, still playing, better and better, as she got into it. The notes tumbled out now, just that little bit out-of-tune, and it was the out-of-tuneness that set Junior whingeing. I just thought, you haven't heard of *wabi-sabi*, have you, little man.

'I'll tell you who he is. He's a cat-loving, piano-smashing, good for nothing streak of misery called Arthur, Nan... God you're good, Nan.'

Nan was belting it out now. 'Chopin's *étude* number — I forget the number,' she shouted.

With that, Jules started to sniffle. Nan was still weeping as well as walloping the chords out and ad-libbing in her croaky voice, *obligado*, and Junior started hammering the cushions on the sofa, crying like a baby. The gorgeous, wonky *étude* homed in on me like Jules' improvisation in the park, and all I could think about was Bombalurina, my darling Bombie, missing all this theme tune to her deprivation, starving while her casserole simmered, and I couldn't help it, I just joined in the wailing.

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