

The Duet

As Rosena looked around her apartment, her eyes rested on the open space she had reserved for the delivery of her upright piano, a musical instrument she could never part with. She was convinced it saved her life when she thought back to how she was forced to learn to play and how playing rescued her from near death in Germany. Long ago she had to give up her baby grand, but this upright was sufficient for her now, as long as she had it tuned yearly.

She couldn't help but ask herself what she had gotten herself into. Would it even work? This downsized apartment with a water view in Oakland was a compromise she had reached with her daughter and son-in-law. It's never easy to clean out a home you have lived in for decades in another city. How do you decide what to take and what to donate to Goodwill? She only had two weeks to complete the decisions since this new apartment was highly desirable (or so she was told), and renters wanted in right away. She had no choice but to commit to it and leave her Brentwood home in the Los Angeles area.

Rosena wanted to be closer to her family and grandchildren, especially since she had started to rely more and more on them in ways she didn't want to admit to herself. Driving at night was something she was beginning to dread. Getting herself to doctors' appointments in a new city would be challenging, especially for one who was directionally challenged. This apartment was not far from Montclair, where her daughter and family lived. Yes, this was the only decision possible, and it would have to work out. She looked around her new apartment, #412, involuntarily letting a little sigh escape. Her favorite blue loveseat made it over here, primarily due to its petite size. She smiled at seeing her favorite paintings decorating the walls, especially eyeing the oil she had done of a lighthouse on a jetty against the pale blue sky and white-capped waves crashing on the deep blue ocean waters. This scene came from a photo she had taken in the Greek Isles on a trip with her husband, Adam, who had shared many decades of joy with her.

Her favorite black leather body-hugging chair had made it too – the one she was sitting in to take in the view of the picture window overlooking Lake Merritt. Also here were two purple mini-arm chairs, one on either side of the loveseat. It had been wise to settle on a two-bedroom apartment. She could continue painting if she turned one bedroom into a studio and have everything at the ready when the mood hit her.

Rosena Eiger's new apartment was in a building with a doorman, one with whom she would build a deep and rewarding relationship. Aldo was an older gentleman, the son of a German father and Italian mother, both of whom starred prominently in the stories he would

tell of his childhood and their influence on him. Aldo had retained his good looks and exuded friendliness. His honeyed-grayish hair matched his mustache, and his smart navy blue jacket with an insignia on the left breast pocket lent him an air of an official capacity. His efficiency, mixed with charisma, endeared him to all the tenants. He was a welcoming committee of one when he watched her move in and then knocked on her door, presenting her with a small bouquet of mixed flowers and a card of warm words and good wishes in her new abode.

At first, Rosena shied away from him, thinking him a bit too forward, and not fully trusting his demeanor and overly friendly approach. She soon learned he was trilingual, an immigrant to this country, just like her, and now, except for this position, fully retired from a career in ophthalmology. He once explained to her he needed to be around people, and this job offered him that.

On the day the piano was delivered, Rosena watched nervously as the movers fit it in the elevator and extricated it with care. She needed to conduct and choreograph their steps to ensure the safety of the piano. The movers smiled among themselves, understanding the sensibilities of people like Rosena about their musical instruments.

Aldo also watched. He was impressed with the many talents he was uncovering about Rosena.

Once the piano had been installed where Rosena indicated, she breathed a sigh of relief and sat down on the piano bench to reminisce about the melodies she had played on its keys. One stood out above the rest – Anitra's Dance. It was originally written as an orchestral piece and later revised for the piano. Someone, perhaps the composer, Edvard Grieg, was the one who also transcribed it for four-hands on the piano, a sort of duet. The duet form is the one Rosena had learned as a child and grew to love. Her best friend, Felicia, had shared the keyboard with her, and together they did justice to Anitra's Dance at their recital. And then at the camp, the forced times in the camp, when she was made to play this duet over and over as a teenager so the commandant's young son, Heinrich, could perfect his part of the duet. Someone was always with him, in the background, checking to see that he behaved and that, as Rosena assumed, she did her best as well. Heinrich was no Felicia, and he showed little patience for practice. She recalled that although she hated to be forced to play when they decided she should, she never grew to hate the music, which, in hindsight, saved her life.

The next time Rosena was leaving the building to go have dinner with her family, Aldo opened the door for her and smilingly said, “You know, you’re not the only piano player on your floor. When the time is right, you’ll find out.”

“Whatever do you mean?” asked Rosena.

“Musicians have a way of finding each other,” is all he would say.

While having dinner at Kaia and David’s home, her daughter asked her, “So, how do you like your new place?”

“Not bad. They have a lovely restaurant for those who may not feel like cooking. Maybe you could all join me there for lunch or dinner sometime.”

“Yeah, Grandma. We’d love to join you,” chimed in Simcha and Estee. “Can we sleep over some time?” Though they were now thirteen and eleven, they still loved spending time with her.

“Now, now, kids. Don’t invite yourself over until Grandma is ready,” chimed in David. He generally interacted very little with Rosena, and he never called her by name. For him she was a third-party reference, such as grandma, or when speaking directly to her, she went unaddressed. Having no other in laws, she had nothing to compare his behavior to, but it did seem odd to her. Perhaps it was a sign of his discomfort having a foreign-born elderly woman who spoke English with an accent in their home. She had even invited him to call her Rosena, but he never took her up on it. She had to let it go not to make an issue of it.

“They are always welcome. I’ll even teach them to play a piano duet with me.”

“Sounds perfect,” offered David, Kaia’s husband. “The girls would love it, and it would give us a night out.”

“Let’s do it,” said Rosena.

On the day Simcha and Estee brought their sleeping bags to stay over at Rosena’s, Aldo insisted on meeting and greeting them and welcoming them with a gift keychain from the complex.

“Don’t forget to say ‘Thank you,’” reminded Rosena.

They complied.

“Is your grandma going to play the piano for you?” Aldo asked.

“Yes, I will – as soon as they’ve unpacked.”

The girls loved sharing the blue loveseat – perfect for them size wise. They sat attentively as Rosena started to play from memory Anitra’s Dance.

“Teach us, teach us,” cried the two of them after a round of applause.

“Every time you come over, I’ll teach you a new piece of the melody. Deal?”

“Awesome,” said Simcha.

And so it went during each of their visits.

Once, when Rosena was alone, she played the entire melody without the aid of another pair of hands. What she heard next grabbed her full attention. Through her adjoining wall came the part of the missing hands loud and clear, as if someone were sitting right beside her. She sat in awe as it was played, and when it ended, she started playing it again, only to be accompanied by the pair of hands on the other side of the wall. So closely in step with one another they played that Rosena didn’t want the piece to end. Who was this pianist? How many people even knew this altered piece?

Rosena made it a habit to play the piece every day at the same time, 11:00 a.m., and the other player did the same. You could set your clocks by them. Was this the only piece the other player knew? Would she ever meet him/her? Then it dawned on her she had two options. She could go over to the next apartment and knock on the door who see who lived there, or she could ask the one person she knew had the answers to these questions.

Down the elevator she went and was greeted with “Guten tag, Frau Eiger,” by Aldo during his German-speaking day. She never answered him in German. Other days he would greet her with “Ciao, bella.”

“Aldo, when you said I wasn’t the only piano player on my floor, I asked you what you meant. You were very vague in your response. Can you tell me more about this other player?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I have many questions. Are they an adult? A man or a woman? Do they live alone? What kind of piano do they have? Were they classically trained?”

“Frau Eigner, I may know a lot, but I am not a detective, and I don’t pry or divulge much about the tenants here. Might it not be better for me to arrange a meeting for the two of you

so you can ask these questions in person? I'm certain the other player wants to know the same about you."

Weeks passed without Rosena making a decision about whether or not to meet her duet partner face to face. She refused to bring it up with her daughter for fear of looking foolish and not being able to make up her own mind. What was she afraid of? Could she have met this person back in Germany? In the camp? What if it turned out to be a former Nazi? Could it be a survivor like her? Should she just stop playing the duet with this invisible partner?

Out of fear and dreading the potential answers to the many questions she had raised, Rosena had stopped playing Anitra's Dance at the fixed time daily. For the next few days, at 11:00 a.m., the other player played one part of the duet, but soon gave up. For her granddaughters, however, the lessons continued, but with less enthusiasm from Rosena.

Several weeks after she moved in, when she ate in the restaurant on the premises, Rosena looked around her, wondering if her musical neighbor might be dining there as well. She had just started to make friends among the diners in her complex, and as she did, she asked each of them what hobbies they had or if they had an interest in music. If they had an interest or skill in music, it wasn't on the piano.

On one particular Thursday when Simcha and Estee had slept over the night before, they were getting ready for their piano lesson when they heard Anitra's Dance coming through the wall. Their eyes went to Rosena who let out a small gasp.

"Grandma, grandma, did you hear? Someone's playing our music! Can we go see who it is?"

Without waiting for approval from her, they ran out of her apartment and knocked on the door of apartment #414. Rosena sat riveted to her piano bench, determined not to join them on their quest, but almost relieved that a mystery was soon to be solved. She heard them knocking several times, until a door opened and some conversation ensued. She could make out nothing of their words and could only imagine what was happening. One way or another, it would soon be over. They might never play again together or....?

After about fifteen minutes, the door to her apartment started to open slowly. Estee walked in first, timidly, then signaled to Simcha, who, holding the hand of an older gentleman, entered with him. Once in the room, Rosena and her neighbor did nothing but take each other in with their eyes, not saying a word.

Simcha said in a whispered voice, "Arvin said it might be like this, but he was willing to take a chance anyway."

"Arvin?" asked Rosena.

"Yes, Arvin Schneider. Pleased to meet you."

Rosena scrutinized Arvin's face, but saw no traces, not even a hint of Heinrich, the young lad she was forced to accompany on the piano. She sensed he was taking in her face as well.

"Rosena," he spoke the name softly. "I remember you."

Rosena's discomfort grew. Was he a friend or foe?

"How do you know me?" she asked, hesitatingly, afraid to find out.

"From many years ago, in another country."

"Deutschland?"

"Yes."

"We're you at a camp?"

"Yes, I was."

"Simcha, Estee, maybe you two want to go in the other room to watch TV."

"Grandma, please let us stay. We brought Mr. Schneider to you. We are helping to solve a mystery."

Arvin's eyes went to Rosena's face, allowing her to decide. She felt the granddaughters had a valid point, but would she be strong enough to learn the truth? She nodded to them all to sit down.

"What a beautiful piano you have," remarked Arvin. "And you still play very well. I'm pleased to see you are teaching your granddaughters to play."

"Where are my manners? Would you like some refreshments?"

“None needed,” responded Arvin. “I’m here to see you again and explain our connection.”

“What connection? How do you know me?”

“Do you remember playing Anitra’s Dance with Heinrich at the camp?”

“I do, but you clearly are not Heinrich.”

“No, I’m not, but I was always in the room with him when he played with you. I was the one who brought him to and from the practice with you. I stood in the back, in case he became a problem.”

“I remember someone there, but never really met you.”

“I marveled at your ability on the piano and couldn’t help but learn the piece on my own when I had access to a piano.”

Rosena paused and looked at her granddaughters before asking the next question.

“Were you a Nazi?”

Arvin also looked at the girls before responding. Everything hinged on his answer. After what felt like an interminably long pause for Rosena, Arvin replied.

“I don’t know. I know they made me work for them. I had no choice, so maybe I was.”

“Who were your parents? We’re they Jewish?”

“I don’t know. I was raised in an orphanage. One day the Nazis came and took some of us to work with and tend to their young children. I was assigned to Heinrich and was to care for him around the clock, protect him. I know I am German, but never found my birth parents or their records. That’s all I know.

“I never expected to see you again, and let me say it is an honor to finally meet you formally. I still can’t believe it. When I heard you play Anitra’s Dance for the first time, I almost fainted. I had never heard it played anywhere but in that room with Heinrich. I immediately thought of you.”

“So, you can imagine how I felt when I heard your response through the wall,” said Rosena.

Simcha and Estee were smiling and started clapping their hands.

“And,” continued Rosena, “if it hadn’t been for these young ladies, I still might not have met you, fearful as I was.”

Simcha and Estee glowed with pride and took a pretentious bow.

“Are you sorry you met me?” asked Arvin earnestly and with dewy eyes.

“Of course not. It was *bashert* we should meet. Two innocent lives connecting so tenuously that one barely recalled the meeting – neither of us in control, neither with free will, but both relating to a duet imposed on us, haunting us, and bringing us together again.”

“*Bashert* must be a Yiddish word since I don’t recognize it. I do, however, understand its meaning in context.”

“‘Meant to be,’ but stronger than that,” provided Rosena. “I have so many questions to ask you, so many things I want to know about you, whatever family you had or have, any children you may have, and much more.”

“Rosena, I’m your next-door neighbor, and I’m not going anywhere. You can ask whatever you like, and there’s no rush. Why don’t you meet me downstairs in the restaurant for lunch tomorrow, and then you can ask away?”

“Deal!”

“But if you don’t mind, may I share your piano bench with you and invite you to play Anitra’s Dance with me, as it should be played?”

“I’d be honored.”

Simcha smiled and pinched Estee on the arm after catching her making a mocking flirty face. “Ouch!” yelled Estee as they settled down on the loveseat to listen to their grandma and Mr. Schneider play their duet. What a story they would have to tell their parents tonight, one that they helped shape!

That evening, while in bed, Rosena couldn’t stop thinking about how the day had turned out. It dawned on her that Arvin had first seen her before she ever met Adam. Although Adam knew about her background and the camp, she never felt comfortable detailing any of the emotions and feelings experienced there. And Adam never wanted to force her to. It became an unspoken tacit agreement that she would share what she wanted, and he would accept that. But now, how would it be? Would she want to share? Would he? Only time would tell.

The next day, on her way to the restaurant to meet Arvin, Rosena ran into Aldo, who addressed her with “Ciao, bella.”

“How are you, Aldo?” asked Rosena.

“As happy as you are,” he replied. “So glad you and Arvin finally met.”

“That just happened yesterday. How did you find out so quickly?”

“I just knew it was *bashert*, as you would say it, Mrs. Eiger.”

“Did Arvin ever ask you about me?” Rosena asked.

“Now, now, that’s private information, just as I told you before when you asked.”

Rosena couldn’t help but think Aldo had been involved somehow, but would never know for sure. He was too discreet to divulge anything more. And she came to admire that about him.