

SHELTER

Lydia Ondrusek

MY HANDS ACHE, ACHE, and when I look at them, I don't remember them looking like this. Maybe it's the skin, paper-dry and thin, like an old person's. Do my hands look like this? I puddle cream in my palm and work it in, wringing my hands. Polishing them.

Scales. I should be doing scales, I think, and go for a cup of tea. The problem is, I don't play the piano. And I don't drink tea.

I have it, though. Tea is good for stomach ailments, and I never know when I might have a stomach ailment. I fill the kettle, which feels much heavier than it did this morning when I boiled water for coffee. My joints are swelling with arthritis. As I watch, the fingers lengthen. I ignore the adage and watch the pot, which promptly boils, an alarm going off. *No time*, it says. *Quickly. Quickly.*

It is ten o'clock, time for the news, and the first item is the death of Maestro Isaak Feld, the great concert pianist. They are retelling his accomplishments, showing black and white photographs from his career. I gulp scalding tea and barely hear. My fingers have become long, still curved somewhat from arthritis but oh, they are beautiful hands, capable, with square nails. I stretch, experimentally. The voice coming from the television says Maestro Feld had an octave and a half of reach. I don't know anything about music, but it looks right, to me. Feels right. *Quickly, quickly.*

It doesn't matter that it's late, it doesn't matter that I have belted my raincoat on over nightgown and slippers. Where I'm going the night will be full of women who look like me. I grab my purse and head for the bus stop. There will be no safe place to park.

When I get to the mission, someone tries to talk to me. I look down, shuffle my feet, shake my head, hands firmly in pockets, stay silent. The piano—where is it? I spot it in the corner. She tells me she'll get me blankets, a pillow, food; that I should stay right there.

I can't. I have no time. Or—just enough.

When she goes I take the hands to the upright. It doesn't take musical knowledge to know it hasn't been tuned in my lifetime. I close my eyes and silently apologize for this ex-

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But they know what they need,
and they take to the keys
as if they'd never left them.*

cuse of an instrument. The hands deserve better. But they know what they need, and they take to the keys as if they'd never left them. Mozart, Debussy, Brahms, Beethoven.

I feel music running out of my hands like water. When it goes suddenly dry, I stand up to leave, but she comes back and catches me. "Who was doing that? Who was playing? It was so beautiful—who was it? Was it someone here?" I point mutely to the door, and begin to move toward it in a shuffling walk.

"He's gone?" I nod. "Wait—if you're going to go too, don't leave without these." She shoves the bedding, wrapped sandwich, and juice into my arms. "And don't forget—you don't have to be out there alone."

Her smile is kind, and I croak an answer. "Not alone. Never."

She hugs me, ebullient. "That's right, that's right!"

I go out into the night exhausted, and give the package from the shelter to a child. The bus doesn't run often, down here, and the night is cold. Without thinking I put a leg on the back of the bus bench, and stretch a luxurious ballet stretch; my hands, now my own, holding my suddenly knowledgeable foot. A passing local whistles, and I yank my leg down.

Not alone. Never.

I look down. My slippered feet are in first position. 🚫

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Lydia Ondrusek describes herself as a long-married mother of two busy writing her way out of a paper bag. Her fiction and humor can be found at Sniplits, Yankee Pot Roast, BURST Literary Ezine, and Flash Me, and she has work upcoming at Weird Tales. She releases her inner feline at thelittlefluffycat.com.

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