Illustration by Erica Aitken

The concert

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I passed the piano every day. Hidden on an upper level of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) hospital, it was always closed and covered—except when Dmitri visited.

I had been on my routine march through the building when the music caught me by surprise. I found a man playing the piano—talkative, taking requests, outwardly jovial. It was clear that he was no amateur. I paused to listen with other passersby, then lingered, captivated. Before I realized it, an hour had passed, and it was just Dmitri and me.

Dmitri shared stories of great pianists, and surveyed their works. What did I hear in this passage from Shostakovich? Something militant? It's the cadence of the galloping cavalry!

He invited me to play, and laughed at my simple, bouncy phrasing, and assigned practice exercises with the mien of a kindly Old World music teacher. He recalled his own teacher, a man whose death recast his future from conservatory to high school, and from concert pianist to electrical engineer. One would never guess Dmitri was anything but a professional artist.

Over time, Dmitri learned why I was at the NIH. I was a student, conducting research in between passages of medical school training.

I learned that Dmitri was there for his son Maxim, roughly my age, who was receiving an MRI for a metastatic ependymoma. As Dmitri phrased it, it was no longer a question of whether, but when. Faced with separation from his son—in these few hours of imaging, and in an impending, more irreversible future—Dmitri had sought out the piano.

While he played many pieces, the one that stayed with me was Brahms's *Lullaby*. We all recognize it—the singsong melody of "*Lullaby, and good night*." It has been played frivolously so many times to signify sleep in commercials, or on *The Simpsons*. Yet, Dmitri put its parodies to shame. "I used to play this one for Maxim. When he was just a baby," Dmitri explained. And with that, he fell into the opening notes.

The piece started with the sweetness of the simple lullaby. I felt the confidence of a father 20 years younger, promising his healthy son protection from harm. Swelling, louder, the music saw these promises realized in a young man, held for a moment, a fermata of pride.

The tempo began to warp; the slow horror of promises distorted, and broken, by the force of a dismal prognosis. That a parent may outlive his child defies natural form and progression.

Crescendo, accelerando—a flurry of consults and procedures, testing and travel—faster, faster. If only something, someone, somewhere could alter the inevitable.

A flight across the keys—a flight across the country—and the question stood taut in the tension of the strings. Felted hammers striking out the phrase: not whether, when. Not whether, when. When? Forte! When? Is it today, downstairs? Right now? When?

And suddenly, mid-measure, silence.

Dmitri sat and wept.

We were still for a long time. At some point, Dmitri faded into the solace of another song. I could not tell you the name or composer.

When Maxim finally called, Dmitri wished me luck and was gone. I resumed the afternoon, stunned and not entirely aware of the world to which I returned.

Weeks later, at my own keyboard, I struggle to process what had happened. As much as I want to share it, I know I cannot record Dmitri's music in words. The notes are already growing fainter with time. Yet, their authenticity haunts me.

Dmitri exteriorized the raw human experience of a man losing his son to brain cancer. His music did not just signify the illness; it was the illness, consuming the healthy baby and the sick young man, the father playing lullaby and the father playing requiem. It extended past the histologic diagnosis and MRI results, past clinic visits across the country, to a fearsome totality of human life intercepted by disease. In such experience, doctors are figures, interspersed; but a few bars show how vast the rest of it truly is.

I think of Dmitri, and his son, when I pass the silent piano. I hope they are able to find a measure of solace when the time comes.

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