

“The Pianist’s Hands”

A short story by [Katherine Wikoff](#), with ChatGPT assists

“I dare you to tell me the truth,” she had said to her teacher once, fingers curled over the edge of the practice bench. “Is it the hands?”

She was eleven then—earnest, stubborn, and certain that every scale she mastered brought her closer to the moment the world would have no choice but to sing back. It was only a matter of discipline and time.

Her teacher, an old man with gnarled fingers and little patience for questions, gave a short nod. “You have the pianist’s hands. So yes. You are lucky.”

She studied her hands as if they were talismans. “Then I will be great?”

He frowned and tapped just below her sternum. “What does that matter—if you can’t feel it?”

But she *could* feel it.

And she played.



The first notes of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 rise through the concert hall, a dark swell of sound carried by the orchestra before she enters, her fingers pressing into the keys, shaping the sound from within. The music vibrates through her hands, traveling up her arms and wrapping her entire body in warmth. She feels it all—the tension in her shoulders, the electric pulse of the piano beneath her hands, the way the lacquered wood shines under the stage lights. The scent of polished mahogany mixes with the faint metallic tang of hot circuitry, the burnt ozone scent of stage lights warming above her, as the conductor, standing just a few feet away, guides the orchestra’s ascent into the next movement.

She closes her eyes, not to shut out the audience but to deepen her presence inside the music. It moves through her, the way it always has, like breath, like blood. Each note is a choice, a risk, a revelation. She tastes the dryness of adrenaline on her tongue, hears the intake of breath from the front row when she takes a passage just slightly slower than expected, stretching time until the release.

By the time she reaches the final movement, her body is drenched in the kind of effort that feels like flight. When the last chord lands, the hall erupts. She stands, bows. The applause thunders and reverberates inside her chest.

Then, backstage, the offer comes—a chance to record and perform in Paris with one of the finest orchestras in the world. A dream. The dream. She tries to act surprised, humble, but she has been preparing for this moment her entire life. Finally. At fifty-seven, just when she'd begun to fear it never would.

For years she has watched opportunities pass—like doors swinging open a beat too late, her name echoing after they'd already closed. A prestigious competition lost by a hair. A spot in a touring ensemble given to someone younger. She built a career—respectable, admired—but not the one she had imagined at eleven, when she believed in fate and talent and the inevitability of greatness.

She cannot let this chance slip away. Not at this age. Not now.

“You talk like you’re climbing Everest,” her agent jokes, trying to coax her into taking a night off. “Do you even remember what oxygen feels like?”

She laughs. But the metaphor seems apt. The final push. The thin air. The death zone where even brilliance can’t survive for long.

She practices harder than ever. Social invitations go unanswered. Calls from her sister, her old friend Marta, even her grown son, are met with brief, distracted responses. There will be time later, she reminds herself. Once this is done.

Then, the pain arrives. It starts as a whisper, a stiffness in the mornings, a slight hesitation in her left hand when attempting rapid runs. It worsens suddenly, like wind shifting before a storm—warmth vanishing, air gone sharp, her body bracing without knowing why. Sudden, searing pangs shoot up her wrists, the pain slow to fade even after she has stepped away from the keys.

She remembers a similar injury from overuse years ago. She conquered it then—ice baths, physical therapy, rest. But she cannot rest now. She cannot afford to stop. This opportunity will not wait. And neither can her body. This is the final ascent. The last high note. She has no breath left for another attempt.

Desperation leads her to the doctor. An experimental treatment—a neurological dampening procedure that eliminates the brain’s ability to interpret pain—should allow her to continue playing, free from pain and fear.

But the cost is steep.

As the doctor explains it, the procedure may also erase the pleasure and emotional feedback she gets from performing. She will play beautifully but no longer “feel” the music. No longer live inside it.

Without the procedure, the pain will worsen. Paris will be off the table. She won’t be able to practice properly or make it through the performance. With the procedure, the full-body emotional sensations may vanish along with the pain. Her fingers will move, fast and flawless, but the notes will be hollow, drifting, uninvited.

It is a difficult choice, the doctor reminds her, but it is *her* choice.

She imagines Paris. The lights, the ovation, the recording. She tries to picture herself mid-concerto, arms lit with fire. Then she reimagines that same scenario, except her hands flow effortlessly serene across the keys.

One version is excruciatingly alive—flawed, raw, pulsing with pain. The other is chillingly flawless—cold, gleaming, sealed in marble.

One choice saves the music. The other saves the performance.

And after Paris? The memory returns unbidden: her teacher’s finger pressing just under her ribs, demanding she feel something. *If you can’t feel it, there’s no point*, he used to say. At the time, she believed him. Maybe she still does. She touches the spot now, not to stir feeling but to shield it.

No matter what, something is lost.

She chooses to be remembered. The risks are clear, but part of her believes—needs to believe—that the music won’t leave her. Not entirely. Not forever.



Recovery is swift. She resumes practice. Her hands move with precision, fluid and capable. The pain is gone.

But something is off. She knew things would be different, that her joy in playing might be tempered. This is worse. It is as if someone else is playing through her. She waits for the old spark to return, for the shiver in her chest when a phrase lands just right. But it doesn’t come. Only silence, where something beautiful used to live. The music is there, but she is not.

She tells herself it's nerves. Temporary. There's too much at stake to waver. The Paris concert looms ahead.

Marta calls. She lets it ring.



The night arrives. The hall is packed, the anticipation electric. She is poised before the grand piano, the orchestra ready to follow her lead. The conductor nods. The first notes sound.

She plays.

But it is different now. The music moves, but she does not move with it. She wonders if this is what ghosts feel: adrift in someone else's music.

The hall around her feels muted. She does not notice the scent of the piano's polished wood, the gleam of light on the lacquer, the hush of the audience leaning forward. The world that once burned bright around the music now feels faded, as if she's playing from behind glass.

When she finishes, she lowers her hands and feels the silence. The audience will cheer. The critics will praise her. The performance will become legend.

She stands at the summit, alone in the rarefied air of greatness.

She holds onto that moment as long as she can, surveying the view, taking it all in. Her arms filled with roses, she bows, acknowledging the applause. But at last the curtain closes.

Backstage, she listens to fading echoes. Perhaps this is enough. Or perhaps the reckoning waits below, when the costs are finally tallied. Climbers say the descent is where the real danger lies. She doesn't yet know whether the moment she crossed into greatness was also the moment she slipped beyond return.

Then life rushes in like an avalanche: her sister is laughing with her son near the dressing table, and her oldest friend is making plans for the after party.

Disoriented, she feels herself dropping away as voices rise in congratulation. She forces herself to focus. Even gratitude takes effort, careful steps on rocky ground turned slick. It's hard to tell whether she's finding her footing or already in free fall, lingering in that space between triumph and vertigo. Only gravity can say which way is down—and whether the mountain lies behind her or still ahead.