

Over the Rainbow

In the beginning there were scales and arpeggios. Then came études and rondos and giges. Every afternoon, as my mother listened from the kitchen, I would sit at my music stand in the living room and try to push my fingers ever faster over the keys of my clarinet. The living room was not where I wanted to be, and scales were not what I wanted to play. What I wanted to play was touch football with the older kids down the street. But when it came to music, my mother was unyielding. My two brothers and I

were dragooned first to the piano, then assigned the instrument she envisioned each of us playing in her imagined quartet. My older brother was given a trumpet; my younger brother accepted a violin. Mom played the piano.

Eventually, Mom's imagined quartet became a real quartet, capable, at least, of playing Broadway show tunes penned years before any of her children were born. At its worst, the quartet was something to be trotted out at my parents' parties, in public displays of familial harmony. At its best, it was a way for Mom to connect with her children in a place where words didn't matter. When we played "Over the Rainbow," as we did time and time again, we were, in a strange way, transported to a peaceable place where bluebirds fly.

Four decades later, my parents were in Florida, Mom's moldering old sheet music now resting on a sensible upright, not the baby grand of my childhood. For Mom, it rarely mattered that many of the pages were gone. Most of the music was in her head anyway, and if it wasn't, she would simply find the key and fake it.



One afternoon when she was just past eighty, we were sitting on the beach, watching the waves roll in. My mother abruptly stood up from the blanket and walked off. I watched her, standing alone on the sand fifty yards away, staring at nothing. When I took her hand to lead her back, she explained that she was looking for my father. But Dad had never left the blanket.

My brothers reported that conversations with Mom were taking unpredictable turns, melding the morning's trip to Publix with events that happened decades ago. It was about this time that

Mom offered her piano-playing services to a nearby home for Alzheimer's sufferers. She was trying to cheer up the old folks, she explained, but I suspected something else.

My mother had never been a religious person, but she was a devout believer in the karmic rewards of effort, and she was an inveterate deal maker. When she wondered aloud one day how God "could let that happen to those people," I could see the deal she was laying on the table: if she played the piano once a week for those poor people, God would see to it that she never became one of them.

Dad refused to acknowl-

edge the changes in her behavior. When a medical examination verified our suspicions of Alzheimer's, he stated with authority that the doctor must have got it wrong: after all, he knew my mother much better than the doctor did. "Why don't you go into the other room and play some music," he said. And so we did.

Last year, my father admitted it was time to move into assisted living. This time, the upright piano stayed behind, replaced by an electric piano that would fit in their crowded room.

Mom rarely talks now, and when she does, the words resemble the sound track from a dream that has been spun in a blender. On a recent visit, when it was time for me to go home, she told me that was good, because home was a good thing to have, and she liked to have good things herself and she didn't care if those things were white, black, or blue.

So we don't talk much, but whenever I visit her, I bring my clarinet. Mom sees it and smiles. She lays her fingers on the plastic keys of her electric piano and stares at the remains of the sheet music for "If I Loved You." In her lucid moments, she can still find the key and fake it. When that happens, I follow her fingers with my eyes, playing along until we meet, for a few minutes, in that place she first took us to a very long time ago. ■