

Making Piano Fun

by W.M. Akers



"Come on, Angie. It's time to go."

"I'm not going," said Angela.

"Please," said her father. "We're going to be late."

"Good. I hope we *are* late. I hope we're a million years late, and by the time we get to the music school, **piano** doesn't even exist anymore. The people of the future will be smart. They'll understand that mankind is better off without the **piano**. They'll understand me."

"Okay, sweetheart. That's great. Please get in the car."

"No. On no account. This is America, Dad. Didn't you hear? Nobody can make anybody play **piano** against her will. It's called democracy."

"Angela? If you don't get in the car right now, your mother is going to be very angry at me. And if she's angry at me, I'm going to forbid you from using the computer."

"For how long?"

"Until Christmas."

Dad wasn't joking. Angela got in the car.

As they drove, beads of sweat formed on the back of her neck, and her stomach started to feel like she had just swallowed a hockey puck. Practicing **piano** scared her to death. Her teacher, Mr. Poliakoff, was a hairy old man who talked with a lisp that made him nearly impossible to understand. She could never tell if he was saying, "I see" or calling for a "high C." Uncertainty made Angela **nervous**, and nerves made it impossible for her to play.

Not that Angela wanted to play anyway. She thought that there was no music on Earth more boring than Mr. Poliakoff's sheet music. For three months, she had gone once a week to learn famous compositions like "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," and "Three Blind Mice." As boring as those songs were, they were apparently impossible to play. Each time Angela picked up her fingers she was seized by fear. What if she played the wrong note? Would Mr. Poliakoff shout at her? Or, worse, would he simply shake his head in disappointment?

"Fear is the enemy of success," he would tell her-except that when he said it, it sounded more like "sushshesh." But when it came to the **piano**, fear was all Angela had.

"Timbuktu," she said. Her dad looked away from the road to give her a funny look. She went on. "Antarctica. The Yukon. Kazakhstan. Borneo. Tasmania."

"Yes?" asked her father, finally.

"I'm trying to think of places I'd like less than **piano** class."

"Did you come up with anything?"

"Nope. Even the middle of the Amazon rainforest would be more fun."

"Well, I'm glad you've been studying your geography at least."

When her father looked away, Angela stuck out her tongue. That would show him.

As usual, Mr. Poliakoff's music school smelled like cabbage. Angela did not know where he might be cooking the foul vegetable, but she was certain she didn't want to find out. She trudged down the darkened hallway like her feet were made of rocks, glad her father wasn't there to tell her she was going to be late. "Not that he cares anyway," she thought. "He's done his job, dropping me off at the building. He doesn't even care if I actually make it to the class."

Angela's eyes went wide. She had an idea. She pressed her back against the wall and slinked away from Mr. Poliakoff's classroom. She would have to spend an hour in the music school, but that didn't mean she had to learn

any music. She tip-toed down the dark corridor, fearful that her **piano** teacher might burst out at any moment and bellow, "You! Come here and practice 'Ring Around the Rosie!'" But the door did not open. Mr. Poliakoff did not catch her. Angela was free.

She was sneaking her way to the front door of the music school, planning on passing the hour in the sun, beneath a tree or on a bench, when she had heard a funny sound. It sounded like someone playing the **piano**-scales- but it sounded different than what she was used to. It sounded like the person playing was having fun.

She followed the sound. It was coming from one of the classrooms. She peered through the glass window and saw that the **piano** bench was empty. Feeling sneaky, she turned the handle and padded into the empty classroom. The music was coming from a computer in the corner. She walked towards it, dying to find out what it was, when she learned the room wasn't as empty as she had thought.

"Hello?" said a voice that stopped Angela's heart. It came from a woman with long, gray hair and a mouth that twisted up a little bit at the sides. "Can I help you?"

"No," stammered Angela. "I, uh, I just heard the music, and-"

"Do you like the **piano**?"

"I *hate* the **piano**," said Angela.

The woman started to laugh. "Well!" she said. "That's too bad for you, since

you're in a music school."

"No kidding."

"I'm Mrs. O'Hara."

"That's nice. I should be going."

"Hold on, hold on. You wanted to know about this music?" Angela was silent.

"Come on. It's okay to be curious. Do you know anything about **jazz**?"

"No."

"Well, here it is." She turned up the volume. The man playing **piano** tapped at the keys like a baby hitting something with a hammer. He sang like a clown, making strange noises and putting on all sorts of funny voices. The words he sang were even stranger:

Oh your pedal extremities are colossal

To me you look just like a fossil

You got me walkin', talkin' and squawkin'

'Cause your feet's too big, yeah

"It sounds so silly!"

"Well, that's Fats," said Mrs. O'Hara.

"Who's Fats?"

"Fats Waller. The **piano** player. He's the one who wrote the song."

"A grown-up wrote this song?"

"A very talented grown-up. Listen to the **piano**. What does it sound like?"

"It sounds crazy."

"It's all over the place, isn't it?" Mrs. O'Hara was right. None of his notes were where Angela was taught they were supposed to be. He played fast when he should have played slowly; he played slowly when he should have played fast. In between lines, he would shout nonsense like, "Oh, I've never heard of such walkin'!" *Crazy* was the only word for it.

"Huh. Well, I guess I should get going," Angela said.

"You're supposed to be in class, aren't you? With Mr. Poliakoff?"

Angela made a face. "You're going to make me go back to class, aren't you?"

"I'm going to make you learn a little **piano**," said Mrs. O'Hara. "Because that's what your parents paid for."

"Can I play a song like this?"

"Not quite yet. Fats Waller spent a lot of time learning to play normal **piano** before he could start playing it crazy."

"He played 'Ring Around the Rosie'?"

"And 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,' and 'Three Blind Mice,' and all of Mr. Poliakoff's favorites."

"But if I learn to play those...eventually I can play this?"

"You got it," said Mrs. O'Hara, as she sat down beside the bench. Angela put her fingers on the keys and prepared to play. Her fingers weren't afraid any more.

Learning New Things

by ReadWorks



"But I don't want to go there!" insisted Billy. He kicked at the ground with his foot, twisted his body around, and looked up at his mother with tears in his eyes. Billy was angry. His mother was a nurse, and she had a new job at a senior **center**. "Old-folks home," Billy called it. "Senior **Center**," his mother corrected. Billy didn't like the seniors. He didn't like the senior **center**. He thought it was boring.

Billy's mother wanted Billy to come to the senior **center** every day after school. Billy wanted to go to see his friends or play video games at home. Billy's mother wouldn't let him. "I don't have a babysitter for you," she said.

"And you can't go to a friend's house unsupervised every day." The senior center was across the street from Billy's school. "Come meet me at the **center** at 3pm," his mother directed. "You can stay here until my shift ends at 4:30."

So it was decided.

Every day after school Billy said good-bye to his friends and walked over to the senior **center**. "Hello, Billy. How was school today?" asked Curtis, when Billy came in. Curtis was the building's security guard.

"Hello, Curtis. School was okay," Billy said.

Every day at the senior **center** started like that. Billy would then go to the nurse's station where there was a quiet room. He would do his homework, then sit and stare at the walls. Billy would try to look as bored and as miserable as possible, in the hope someone would notice and convince his mother to let him go home. He would sit and think of his friends, home playing video games. He thought of the worlds he could be creating and the monsters he could be slaying. If only he were playing video games, too.

Billy's mother didn't appreciate any of this. "You're being ridiculous," she said. "Why are you acting this way? The senior **center** isn't torture. There's a lot you could do here. I don't understand why you're being so **dramatic**," said Billy's mother, exasperated. "Why don't you help me or Curtis?"

"No, thanks," said Billy, who would go right back to looking miserable.

After a few days of this routine Billy *did* start to get bored. His plan wasn't working. His mother wasn't giving in. Billy was going to have to get to like the senior **center**.

The next day after school Billy went to the senior **center**. He said hello to Curtis and went to the nurse's station. He did his homework. This time, for a change, when Billy finished his homework, he decided to go exploring.

Billy left the nurse's station and turned right down the hallway. He had never seen the rest of the facility. The building was huge. Every hallway looked the same. Billy followed the hallway until it came to another hallway.

After a while, Billy was lost.

Billy sat down in the hallway and tried to remember the way back. He didn't want to ask directions. He wasn't supposed to be there. He didn't want to get in trouble. So he sat and tried to remember the way out.

He heard something coming from the door nearest him.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Henry," said a woman. "You don't look anything like a Knight of the Realm. You look more like an elephant."

"An elephant! If I look like an elephant, you look like a peacock," a man's voice replied.

"They must be residents," thought Billy. Curious, he crawled over and peeked inside the room. He saw something he had not expected. The woman who was speaking had on a pink track suit and an even pinker feather boa around her shoulders. The man she was speaking to was sitting in a wheel chair, holding a shield and sword, and wearing a helmet. The shield, sword, and helmet were made of paper and glue. They had begun to droop a little. Billy supposed this was why he looked like an elephant.

Billy was starting to laugh when he saw the woman in pink looking at him.

"Well, don't just sit there spying. Come on in," said another man.

This man was speaking to Billy.

He walked in.

"Who are you?" they asked.

Billy explained that he was waiting for his mother, the nurse. The seniors introduced themselves. The woman in pink was named Mildred. The man with the shield was Harold.

"Pleased to meet you," said Billy. He asked them what they were doing.

"We're rehearsing for the talent show," said Mildred.

"You have a talent show here?" asked Billy.

"Of course," said Mildred. "We're the Senior **Center Dramatic** Society. We always perform in the talent show, and we rehearse even when there isn't a show coming up. Sometimes we make up our own plays."

"It's important to be **creative**," said Harold. "It keeps you young."

"Would you like to help us?" asked Mildred. "We need an impartial critic."

"My mother told me I'm **dramatic**," said Billy.

"Great," said Mildred. "You'll fit right in."

Billy agreed to help. He helped them read their lines and fix their costumes. Afterwards, they took Billy back to the nurse's station where his mother was waiting.

"Did you have fun?" his mother asked Billy.

"Yes, I did," Billy answered.

From that day on Billy spent his afternoons at the **center** with the **Dramatic Society**. The seniors weren't boring at all.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Use the article "Making Piano Fun" to answer questions 1 to 4.

1. What happens to Angela each time she picks up her fingers to play the piano for Mr. Poliakoff?

2. How does Angela feel about playing the piano at the beginning of the story? Support your answer with information from the text.

3. What happens to Angela when she picks up her fingers to play the piano for Mrs. O'Hara?

4. Have Angela's feelings about playing the piano changed by the end of the story?
Support your answer with information from the text.

Use the article "Learning New Things" to answer questions 5 to 8.

5. Why does Billy try to look "as bored and as miserable as possible" at the Senior Center?

6. How does Billy feel about staying at the Senior Center in the beginning of the story?
Support your answer with information from the text.

7. What does Billy do to help the Senior Center Dramatic Society?

8. At the end of the story, Billy says he had fun at the Senior Center. Why have his feelings about the Senior Center changed since the beginning of the story?

Use the articles "Learning New Things" and "Making Piano Fun" to answer questions 9 to 10.

9. How are Angela and Billy similar? Use details from the text, including their feelings and actions, to support your answer.

10. What effect can learning something new have on a person? Use information from both stories to support your answer.
