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The Piano Book
About the Author
He saw me coming. After all, I was walking towards him. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking though. How does a 10-year old boy read the mind of a 40-something year old man? Some people have that gift, you know. But not me. I think he could read my mind. Did I already mention that he saw me coming? Oh, yes. He never took his eyes off me, like he was waiting for me, or something. I shouldn’t have gone to his house, but Mama had left me no choice. Or so I told myself.

She had forgotten to leave the house keys with Mama Peju, the woman who sold bread across the street. Till today, I cannot explain why Mama always left the house keys with a woman who sold stale bread. In my mind, a woman who sold fresh bread was trustworthy, but one who sold stale bread was a shameless crook. I mean, sometimes, the bread had mold on it. “You have to trust someone,” Mama was always saying. I knew very little about trust, and even the little I knew was on the verge of extinction. To me, trust was something adults talked about, but did not truly understand. Why else was Papa not at home? He had promised to come back within a few weeks, from his trip to London. Mama trusted him. Who could doubt a man who said “I promise” at the beginning of his sentence? No one.

We waited for weeks to hear from him after he was supposed to have arrived in London. Mama tried to call him several times. As it turned out, the number he had given us was fake. The man with the funny accent on the other end of the phone said no one with Papa’s name lived there. Then, she tried writing to him at his London address. I wrote my letters too, telling Papa all the things that happened in school, at church, and even about my friends who lived in our compound. I also reminded him of the toy car he promised to buy for me. But, he never wrote back. And the toy car never arrived.

Mama was worried but she kept assuring me that he would come back one day and live with us again. So every night before I went to sleep, I would tell God to bring Papa home and to remind Papa to buy my toy car too. You see, I trusted God too. It only made sense that I would ask the One who everyone referred to as “Our Father” to bring Papa back home. But slowly, the weeks turned to months, and months turned to years, and long lines of worry came to visit Mama’s face. She smiled less, and the lines stayed. They never left. And then one day, it happened.

Aunty Tolu brought back the news. Mama thought I couldn’t hear what Aunty Tolu was saying. I was supposed to be fast asleep on the couch, but I heard everything. Papa had travelled to London alright, but not for business. Well, not the kind of business we had imagined. He had married another woman – she was white – who helped him get a British passport. Mama did not say a word. She did not even make a sound. Maybe she was too shocked to voice any surprise. However, when Aunty Tolu got to the part where Papa’s oyinbo wife had given birth to triplets – all boys – Mama began to cry. I had never heard her cry before. It was her crying that roused me from the couch. Although I was just a child, I knew she was in pain. From that day forward, I would remember Papa as the man who made Mama cry. And he was never coming back home.

That was two years ago. I was in primary school then, but even now as a secondary school boy in JSS2, the pain was still fresh. My uncles were supportive, but none of them could
replace Papa. They were not supposed to, even though they tried. One of them paid my school fees, another one paid for after-school music lessons. According to the ‘music-lessons-paying’ uncle, a well-rounded education included music practice of some sort. I was surprised a third uncle did not volunteer to pay for football lessons. That, to me, would have made me even more well-rounded. Just like a football.

Mr. David, the music teacher decided what instrument I would learn, and he chose the piano. Not that I would have chosen any other instrument, of course. I often wondered what it would be like to play the piano at home, or at least closer to home. Mr. David’s music lessons were held in the school premises after classes. The piano was in the same room with desks, chairs and all the other stuff we associate with school. It was impersonal, and I wanted to play a piano I could make personal, something I did not have to share with all the other boys. Unfortunately, no one in the Kilo area of Surulere, where I lived, owned a piano. That is, no one I had actually visited. But then, there was our next door neighbor. I did not even know his name, and had never spoken to him, but like everyone in our neighborhood, I knew he owned a piano.

The thought of owning such a grand instrument in that residential area was ridiculous. For one thing, most people could barely afford their children’s school fees. And unlike Mama, they had more than one child. Owning a piano would have been a luxury. That was probably why it was such a well-known and established fact. Our neighbor was always playing the piano in that house. The same house he had inherited from his father. At least, that’s what people said. He could have given music lessons if he chose to, but he didn’t. Just like he could have rented the top apartment of the house, but he didn’t. It remained vacant, while just about every other house in the same neighborhood had tenants living in the top apartment. Typically, the bottom half was converted into a store, selling household conveniences like soap, milk, sugar, etc. But there was no buying or selling in that house. The man just spent hours playing the piano. And he was good at it. This man seemed to prefer his own company to anything else. And yet, it was to this same man’s house that I went that day.

Mama had not yet returned from work, and I had already been to Mama Peju’s shop. She did not have the house keys. That meant that I would have to wait outside the door until Mama came back. Today, that option was not-so-palatable. Waiting at Mama Peju’s shop was out of the question. I have already mentioned my displeasure at her ‘business practices.’ Besides, she was constantly asking me if I had heard any news from Papa. In case you were wondering, selling bread was just a front for her real talent: gossiping. Her shop was the original gossip headquarters in our neighborhood, and I did not want her asking me questions about Papa. Not that I could not say ‘No’ to her, but she possessed some sort of power over people, an unnatural ability to extract information from people under the guise of being genuinely interested in their lives. Remember I told you I can read people. Maybe that’s why Mama trusted her enough to leave the house keys with her every weekday. Or perhaps Mama reasoned that if there was ever a break-in, she would know who to accuse. So, Mama Peju’s shop was out of the question. That left the rest of the neighborhood.

Normally, I would have stayed with one of the neighbors in our compound, but on this day I decided against it. I wanted to visit this neighbor to satisfy my curiosity. I wanted to see the inside of his house, and most of all, play that piano. Finally, I would get to play a piano I did not have to share with another child my age.

I don’t know how he knew I was coming to his house. Perhaps it’s the same way one can smell rain in the air before it falls to the ground. You just know it is about to rain. Maybe I had
a peculiar scent that this man could perceive in the air. Or maybe, just maybe, I was destined to meet him that afternoon.

As I approached him, I got a good look at him for the very first time: he was a tall, skinny man with long limbs who seemed to be stuck in the ‘60s. I only say that because he wore flared leg trousers and a floral print shirt. This was 1997, and no one dressed like that anymore. Actually, I had never seen a live person dressed like that. The pictures I had seen at my maternal grandparents’ home were the closest I had been to anyone dressed in this manner. He had short, cropped hair that looked like it had been dyed every week since he could recite his ABCs. He was clean-shaven, however, which was a contrast to his bushy chest hair. I wondered if he had run out of shaving sticks before he could attack the chest hair. It was as if whatever he lacked in facial hair, he made up for in chest hair. I tried to remember if Papa ever had any chest hair when he lived with us. His face was becoming a blur in my mind. But perhaps, the most curious part of this neighbor’s face was his eyes: they were light brown and deep set, and seemed to have aged faster than the rest of his body because he kept squinting. Or was it the sun getting into his eyes? It was around 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon after all, so the sun was still high in the sky.

The first thing he said to me when I finally walked up to him was “How old are you?”
To which I replied: “Ten, sir.”
“I don’t want any children running around my house. If you come in, sit down and keep quiet. Does your mother know you are here?” Thankfully, he didn’t ask after my father.
“No, sir.”
He nodded, opened the front door and led the way into the house.
Nothing prepared me for the chaos that was the inside of this man’s house. He clearly loved to read, or at least collect books. There were books of different shapes and sizes scattered all over the sitting room, which was the room he led me into. Books were strewn on the floors, on the lone sofa and on a small wooden desk beside the window. In fact, there was no single bare surface in the whole room.

Pointing to the sofa, he watched me as I cleared a few books off a small part of it, and sat down there. As soon as I sat down, I saw it: a grand, black piano sitting quietly in an adjoining room. At least, I saw part of the piano. The door leading to the room housing the piano was almost completely shut, but it was cracked open enough to display a hint of the black instrument. The room was clearly a bedroom which had been converted into a music room. With no other tenants, he could use any of the rooms as he pleased. I itched to go and run my fingers on the keys, even if it was for just a few minutes. Meanwhile, my 60s-clothing-clad neighbor had been watching me the whole time. He pretended not to notice that my eyes were drawn to the piano in the other room. Pulling the chair beside the desk to face the couch, he sat down looking at me. This man was strange.

“So you read any books?”
I reeled off the names of books I had read, but he was not impressed.
“What sort of question was that to ask a JSS2 boy? This man clearly did not interact with children regularly, if ever.
“I read comic books, sir, like Archie, Batma--”
“Comic books! You won’t learn anything if you read those. You need to read books without pictures in them.”
I was glad this man was not my father or uncle. What a killjoy! Books without pictures indeed. Even textbooks had pictures, especially those integrated science books that had all those
weird drawings with labeled body parts. I wondered if this man could draw and label the parts of
the human eye. Kenneth, that boy in my class, could do it with his eyes closed. I had seen him
do it.

Leaning back in his chair, the neighbor did not speak for about 5 minutes. I took that
time to look around to see if I could find any pictures of family members, like the ones people
usually displayed on the walls of their sitting rooms. None whatsoever. Did this man fall out of
the sky?

After the five minutes had lapsed, he leaned forward again. I still did not know this
man’s name or what he did for a living. But I wanted to play that piano.

“My name is Alexander,” he said suddenly. “What is your name?”

The question came as a surprise to me. I don’t know why, but I expected this man to
know my name. He was my next door neighbor after all. I was so startled I almost forgot what
my name was.

“Biyi, sir. My name is Biyi, sir.”

“Biyi starts with a B.”

I wanted to tell him that ‘Biyi was not my full name, and that Adebiyi, which was my full
name, started with the letter ‘A.’ But I suspected that he did not care to know. So, here is what I
said instead, smiling as if there was a special prize for smiling when saying a person’s name:

“And Alex starts with an A, sir.”

Did I look like a boy who could not spell? I knew my ABCs alright. In English and
Yoruba. Mama made sure of that. I wanted to ask him if he knew what letter the name ‘Sola’
started with. Would he pick the English ‘S’ or the other ‘S,’ the one with the dot under it, which
the Yoruba teacher pronounced ‘Sh”? I wondered if he would say it with the same amount of
effort the teacher used to bark “Shut up” to the rowdy students.

“You can call me Uncle. Uncle Alexander. Never ever call me Alex, okay?”

“Yes, sir. I mean – Yes, Uncle Alexander.”

“What is your favorite subject in school?”

I saw this as my opportunity and took it.

“Music, sir. I am learning to play the piano, too,” I said, sitting up on the sofa and
nodding in the direction of the instrument that bore that name.

“Is that so?” he asked with an air of disinterestedness. I might as well have said that my
only ambition in life was to be a garbage collector by day and a Fuji singer by night, and he
would have had the same reaction. Annoyingly passive. Then, without warning, he switched
gears from passive to active.

He got up and walked over to the desk where he picked up a red book. It looked like the
same sort of book my music teacher, Mr. David, used to ask us to write down musical notes and
notations on. As he flipped through the pages, I saw that he had filled the pages with music he
had written – music notes and lyrics. He finally got to a section, looked up and asked me if I
knew the story of Oluronbi. I nodded affirmatively. He went further to ask if I knew the song
that came with the folklore, to which I also responded in the affirmative. My primary school
music teacher had all but drummed it into our heads. I knew the words and music by heart.

“You can play it on the piano then.” He did not say this like he was urging me. It was
more like a command that he expected me to obey.

Motioning for me to follow him, he led the way to the half-opened door that led to the
music room. As he pushed the door open, I almost ran back to the sitting room in horror. Sitting
on a black wooden piano bench, sat two men, fully dressed. One of them wore native attire,
complete with the agbada, while the other man wore a black suit. Both of them had their backs
turned to the door and sat facing the piano. They sat motionless as if waiting for me to join
them. This whole time I had thought that Uncle Alexander and I were alone. I was wrong.
“G-o-o-d A-f-t-e-r-n-o-o-n, sirs.” I stuttered.
No response.
Uncle Alexander didn’t miss a beat. He pulled another piano seat from a corner and sat
on it with his back to the piano. The two men were on his right.
“Let me introduce you to the other two Alexanders: Alexander the First, my grandfather,”
he said, pointing to the man wearing the blue and gold brocade agbada, “and Alexander the
Second, my father,” pointing to the man wearing the black suit.
Still, no response.
“You see,” he said, continuing, “all three of us share the same name: we are all called
Alexander. I, of course, am Alexander the Third,” he said half-rising to bow in mock salute.
I stayed put at the door. Part of me was still angry that none of these men had returned
my greeting. I just hoped they had heard me the first time, knowing how particular elders were
about young people greeting them properly. I wondered whether I should prostrate and greet
them a second time. Since they did not turn around to acknowledge my first greeting, I decided
that the second greeting would be a waste of time. I turned to my host for direction.
At this point, I wondered if Mama had returned home from work. I had not told anyone
where I was going. In fact, no one except Uncle Alexander knew where I was at that moment.
Should I go back home to check? I had still not moved close to the piano, not even touched it,
even though it was just a few steps away from me.
“Uncle, I was wondering, sir, can I go and check to see if my mother is back home? She
will be worried if she does not see me at home.”
“What sort of video games do you play?” He just assumed that I played video games.
I named a few of them, video games I had played in the homes of friends whose parents
could afford them. Mama did not buy me video games. “I don’t have money” was her usual
response whenever I asked.
Uncle Alexander pointed to a wooden closet in the corner of the room. It was closed.
“All those video games you mentioned, I have them. We can play them together after,”
he said turning around and placing his fingers on the piano keys, “we have played the piano.
Together.”
Although he said “Together” he did not invite me to join him beside the piano. Instead,
he just began to play.
“Mi, So, So, Mi, So, So, Mi, So, So, Mi, So, So, Mi, So, So …”
He never looked at the piano book, which was planted right in front of him. But, he kept
turning to his left, to look at the faces of the two men beside him. They did not sing along,
neither did they move from where they sat. You see, I expected them to move. Uncle Alexander
played for just five minutes, repeating the same line over and over again. It was the line in the
story where Oluronbi promised to give her daughter as a sacrifice. He never went past that line.
“My grandfather taught my father this song, and then my father taught me.” Pausing and
turning to me, he said: “This will be the last song I teach my son. It was the last song my father
taught me.” And then he resumed his playing again.
Something about the way he said “My son” made me uneasy. I had already looked
around the sitting room, and now this music room, and yet, there were no pictures whatsoever.
No wedding pictures showing Uncle Alexander and his wife - if he had a wife. No pictures of
Uncle Alexander as a child. No family pictures shot in black and white. No pictures of Uncle Alexander wearing a graduation gown, grinning and clutching a certificate, the pose I had seen replicated in many homes. No pictures of any children. No pictures of his son. And yet he had mentioned a son.

Mama would be very angry to find out that I had gone to a neighbor’s house without her permission. But maybe she would forgive me this once. I stuck my hands into the pocket of my shorts and felt something cold. I pulled it out – it was the house key! It had been in my pocket all along. I must have put it there that morning as I rushed to school, instead of leaving it for Mama to give it to Mama Peju. Well, if the key was here with me, then I had to go back home. I had no excuse for paying Uncle Alexander this unannounced visit.

“Come and play for me. I want to see how well you play.”

“Sir, I really need to leave now. My mother --”

“I will go back home with you and explain everything to her. She won’t punish you.”

I can’t tell you whether it was the promise of preventing my mother from punishing me or the allure of having someone invite me to play an instrument I had been dying to explore. Whatever it was, I found myself sitting beside him in front of the piano. Almost as soon as I sat down, he got up, telling me that he would watch me from the door. I placed my hands on the keys and started playing the song from the beginning. He stood by the door watching me.

Then I got to the part he had repeated over and over again. For some reason, I cannot fathom, I stopped playing and began to leaf through the pages of the red piano book. As I turned to Page 14, which was where Uncle Alexander had penned down the words and music to the Oluronbi song, something fell out of the book. I bent down and picked it up. It was an old newspaper story from The Daily Times, neatly cut out. The headline read: “TWO MEN MISSING – BOTH NAMED ALEXANDER.” A chill swept over me as I looked up from what I had just read.

By now, I was on my feet, still holding the piano book in my right hand. I turned my head to the left. In doing so, I faced the other two men in the room – the two Alexanders. For the first time since I had entered the house, I saw the faces of Alexander the First, and Alexander the Second. A muffled cry rose to my lips as I stared at their faces. The two men who sat beside me had grey, ashy skin. Their lips were sealed together – they would never sing again. They would never speak again. Their hands were folded across their laps, perfectly still. Their hands would never play the piano again. But, perhaps, the most fearful part was their eyes – they were gone. Empty sockets stared at me, as empty as the heart of the man who had extinguished the light from their eyes. I remembered Uncle Alexander’s own brown eyes.

“They are dead,” Uncle Alexander was saying, as he turned a key in the lock. Then he turned towards me.

“And if I had a son,” he said walking slowly towards me, “I would name him Alexander. Alexander the Fourth.”
About the Author

Sharon Abimbola Salu grew up in Lagos, Nigeria where she lived until she relocated to the United States of America where she currently resides. Her stories are mostly set in Nigeria, and she writes the kind of stories she would like to read. A professed lover of spicy foods, she loves experimenting with new recipes, to the dismay of non-spicy food lovers. Apart from writing, photography is her other hobby.

To learn more, you can visit her blog at http://sharonsalu.wordpress.com