

44 Tiny Secrets



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CHAPTER ONE

A TERRIBLE DISAPPOINTMENT

Betsy Bow-Linnet really wanted to kick something, just to make herself feel better. It had been a frustrating morning. But there was nothing in the room that she could sensibly kick:

Grand piano – too valuable

Rare and exotic ferns – too flimsy

Marble floor – too hard

Grandad – too alive

So instead, she took a very deep breath, which smelled of ferns. Then she put her fingers back on the piano keys and tried again. And yet again, it came out all wrong, with a rude kersplunk where the tune should have been. This time she did kick the piano – just a little bit. She wasn't wearing any shoes, so on balance this hurt her more than the piano.



“Ow,” she announced.

“Everything all right, B?” came her grandad’s voice from behind a fern frond. (There were an unbelievable number of ferns in the Bow-Linnets’ parlour. Her mother liked ferns, too much. You couldn’t sit anywhere without fronds waving in your face.)

“Yes thanks, Grandad.”

“It’s sounding very nice.”

Betsy knew that was a lie. Her playing never sounded nice. Her mother, Bella Bow-Linnet, was a very brilliant concert pianist. Her father, Bertram Bow-Linnet, was also a very brilliant concert pianist. Grandad was brilliant too, although not quite as brilliant as his daughter and son-in-law. It was only Betsy who was no good. But she needed

to become good – very good – before her parents got back from New York. That gave her precisely one week.

There was the rustle of a newspaper being put down, then Grandad got up from his armchair and his eyes appeared over the top of a fern. “Quick break for some biscuits, B?” he said.

“I’m all right, thanks.”

“Just a very quick biscuit,” he said firmly. “And a cup of tea.” He was zigzagging through the plants and heading for the door before Betsy could protest. “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Betsy turned back to the piano and tried one more time.

*Tinkle-TINK, tinkle-TINK,
tinkerSPLUNK&TT-SPLUNKle-splunkle— OW!*

The 'ow' was Betsy after she kicked the piano again. Harder this time. She rubbed her foot tenderly. It hurt quite badly, and since she had been practising all morning with no success, she gave in for the time being.

She hobbled over to one of the elegant armchairs in among the ferns and waited for the sounds of slippers and rattling crockery. Grandad could even make carrying a tea tray sound like music. He took forever, but when he came back he had Jaffa cakes, which were Betsy's

favourite. There was a pot of tea for him, and some lemonade for her.



“Now, Miss Betsy Bow-Linnet,” said Grandad. “Are you going to tell me what on earth you’re doing?”

Betsy nibbled a Jaffa cake in what she hoped was a carefree sort of way, and said, “Practising.”

“I noticed,” said her grandad. He always flapped his elbows up and down as

he talked – Betsy used to think that was how he

breathed. He flapped them accusingly at

her now. “To be more precise,

you’ve



been practising since seven in the morning on the first day of your summer holidays, when you would normally be in bed with a book until noon. So I suspect –” he poured himself some tea – “that you have some beans to spill..”

Betsy looked at her feet, partly to avoid looking at Grandad, and partly to see if she had a bruise coming on her big toe. It really hurt.

“So,” said Grandad. “Spill them. It’s just you, me and a small army of ferns.”

Betsy didn’t know what to say. She loved her grandad. Her parents were away so often that a few years ago he had moved in with them to help look after her. Betsy had always told him anything and everything. But just thinking about last night made her chest hurt, and she didn’t want to say it out loud. At last she said,

“I just want to be a better pianist.”

Grandad raised his eyebrows and elbows in unison. “Why?”

She shrugged.

“I’ve told you before, B,” he said, more gently. “You don’t have to like the piano. No one will mind if you don’t.”

That made Betsy’s chest hurt even more than her foot, because Grandad’s voice was so kind, but she knew that it wasn’t true. Her mother minded and her father minded. And she hadn’t even realized until last night. She had gone to their bedroom to say goodnight and goodbye. They were packing their suitcases for the New York International Classical Three-Fingered Piano Contest. As she was about to knock, she had heard her name, and paused.



“I do still wonder if we should have taken Betsy this time,” her mother had said.

“She’d hate it –” that was her father talking – “nothing but piano concerts from dawn to dusk.”

“Oh, Bertie,” her mother had said, and Betsy had heard a trembling sigh.

“Do you think she’s maybe just a late bloomer?”

“Bella, darling. No.

Betsy just isn’t a pianist.”

Then her mother had snuffled and said the words that hadn’t left Betsy’s head all night: “Oh dear, I suppose you’re right. It’s just such a Terrible Disappointment.”



*A Terrible Disappointment.
She, Betsy Bow-Linnet, was
a Terrible Disappointment.*



So when Grandad said that no one minded, her chest tightened and she breathed in so sharply to keep herself from crying that she inhaled a bit of fern and choked on a Jaffa cake crumb. The choking lasted about ten seconds, and then it half turned into sobbing, and she found herself telling Grandad the whole story from start to finish, ending with the bit where she would almost certainly never walk

again because she had broken her foot kicking the piano. Grandad didn't seem too worried about her foot, but his whole face melted and drooped when she told him about the Terrible Disappointment.

“Oh, B. I'm sure your mother didn't mean it,” he said.

“She did. She sounded like she was almost crying. But it's all right,” said Betsy. She scrubbed at her face fiercely and took another Jaffa cake for courage. Betsy Bow-Linnet might be a Terrible Disappointment but she was no coward. “By the time they get back, I'm going to be good at it. Really good.”

Grandad looked worried.

“I am,” said Betsy, determined.

“You know, Betsy,” said Grandad, “your parents love you very much. I know they love

their pianos too. But you matter much more – *people* that you love always come first.”

“What about Grandma?” Betsy asked.

As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. “Sorry, Grandad,” she said quickly. “I’m really sorry.”

Before Grandma met Grandad, she had worked, lived and travelled with the circus. She loved her old life, but she gave it up for him, and for Betsy’s mother. For a while. When Bella was seven, Grandma had left. Grandad always said that she couldn’t help it: she loved them, but she loved the circus more.

Betsy wished she hadn’t mentioned Grandma. She had said it without thinking. She was terrified that her parents loved pianos the way Grandma loved the circus – exclusively, untouchably, above all else. But it

was selfish to bring it up.

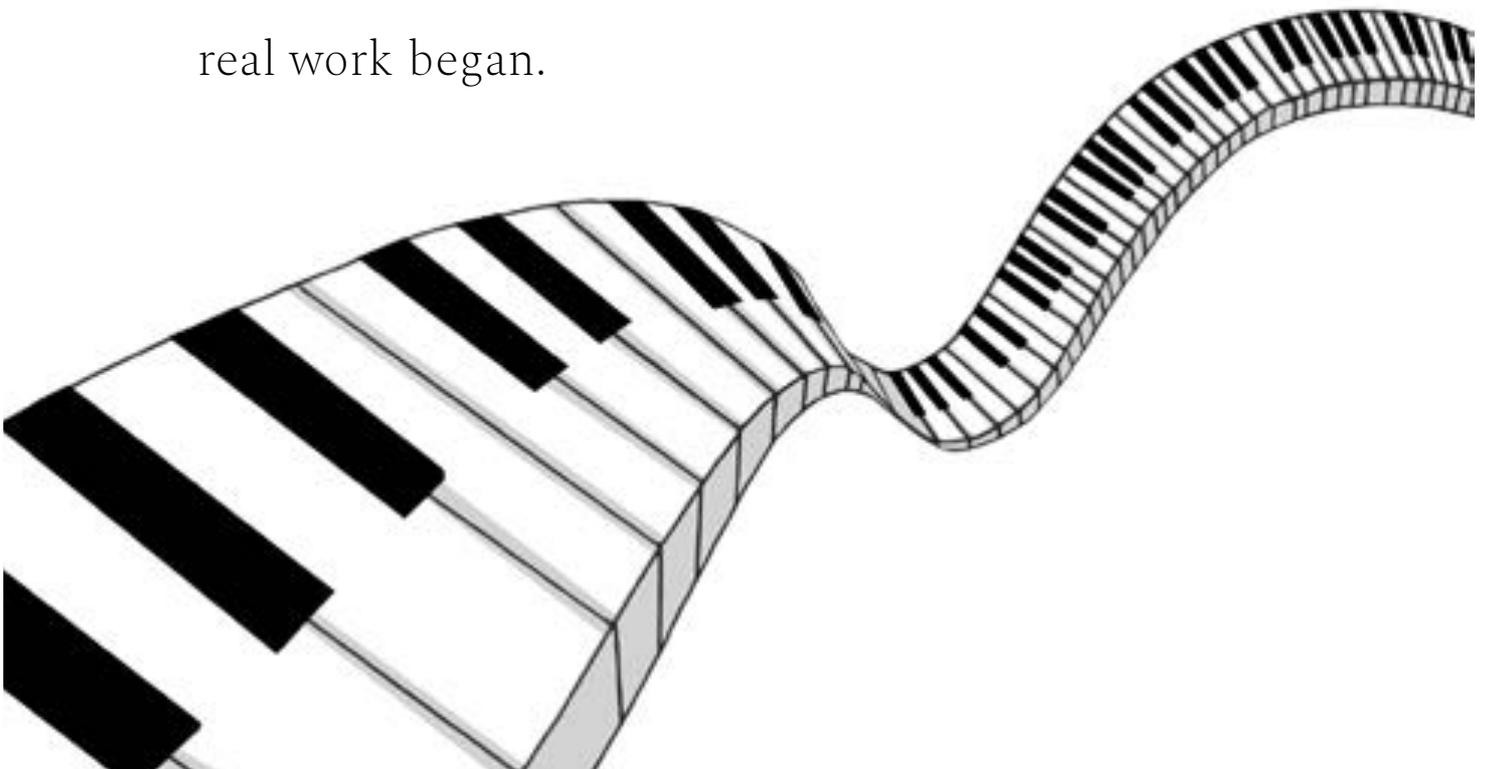
She glanced over at her grandad, whose elbows were very still now as he sat and thought. Whenever Grandma was mentioned, Grandad seemed to shrink a little.

“It’s all right, B,” he said finally. “It’s a good point. But your grandma was an unusual case.” He was thinking. Betsy could always tell, because his elbows would go perfectly still and he would stick his head forward like a turtle. She waited. After a few seconds he drew his head back again: mind made up. “OK, Betsy. I’m going to help you. This week, we’ll have a piano masterclass. But on one condition. If you’re not quite as good as you’d like to be by the end of the week, you mustn’t be worried or upset. Your parents will always be proud of you, whatever you do. Is that clear?”

Betsy nodded. She wasn't sure if she believed Grandad about the last bit, but she did want his help.

"I have two rules," he said. He held up one finger. "Rule number one: never practise anything at full speed until you can get all the notes right at half speed. Promise?" Betsy promised. "Good. Rule number two." He held up two fingers and looked sternly at his granddaughter. "Don't kick the piano."

And they both laughed, which made her feel a bit better. Then he gave her a hug, which made her feel a lot better. But after that, the real work began.



Grandad didn't mess around when it came to music. For the first three days, Betsy wasn't even allowed to play the piece she had been trying to learn. She was only allowed exercises.

Exercises for the left hand, exercises for the right.

Exercises at the top of the piano, and exercises down at the bottom.

Exercises to make her fingers nimble, and to teach her to go *ladiDA* with one hand and *TUMittytum* with the other at the same time.

Betsy hated exercises. It was hard to keep Grandad's second rule sometimes.

Then, with four days to go, she started learning the music. Grandad played it first, so that she could hear how it was all meant to fit together. He played beautifully, elbows floating with the rises and falls, and normally

Betsy loved to listen. But now, all she could think about was how different it was from her kersplunking version.

Lummittytummittytum, went Grandad.

Lummitysplunklebother, went Betsy.

She was learning Chopin's Mazurka in B flat. This is a very difficult and impressive sort of piece, but when you are a Bow-Linnet, you have to do something very impressive indeed to live up to expectations. Betsy learned it one tiny section at a time, at half speed as she had promised. Her fingers fumbled over the keys hopelessly, like worms on roller skates, but Grandad was endlessly patient.

“From the top, B,” he would say. “It’s sounding lovely.”

With three days to go until her parents

returned, Betsy could get it right from beginning to end about half of the time. The other half of the time she would still kersplunk somewhere in the middle. Whenever she did, she felt her chest tighten and all she could think about was what a Terrible Disappointment she would be.



“From the top, B. It’s sounding lovely,”
Grandad would say again.

And then the next time she would get it
right. And so on.

Her parents called every day, asking how
she was and what news she had. Betsy kept
her replies vague. She wanted it to be a
surprise.

When they called that evening, they told
her there was going to be a party the evening
they got back. They loved throwing parties.
They were enormously popular. Crowds of
elegant people would waft through the ferns
drinking champagne, while some of the
finest pianists in London took turns at the
piano.

With one day to go, Betsy could get it
right three times out of four. “I’m going

to play it for them at the party,” she told Grandad.

“Good idea, B,” he said. But he looked worried.

“Do you think I shouldn’t?”

“Of course you should. It’s sounding lovely. From the top now.” Betsy didn’t know if she believed him, but there was nothing else to do but start again.

That evening, Grandad wanted Betsy to take a break, but Betsy was too fidgety to do anything but play the piano. So Grandad sighed and went flapping upstairs to his study, then huffing back down again with a stack of music. “No more Mazurka,” he said. “You’ll drive yourself crazy. Let’s play duets.”

Betsy loved playing with Grandad. Her notes got swept up in his, and it was like

they were dancing together. And sometimes he would make up stupid song lyrics to sing as they played, and he would keep going until she was laughing too much to get the notes right.

Tonight she laughed and laughed and laughed, and it did help her feel less nervous – until they stopped and she went to bed, and there was nothing to listen to or laugh at. In the silence, she played the Mazurka with her fingertips against the mattress.

The next day, when her parents were due home, Betsy couldn't get it right at all. Grandad said it was just nerves, and that she'd be all right on the night. He told her to stop practising and help him water the ferns. They'd both forgotten about them all week and they were looking a bit droopy.

Betsy was just watering the last one – a small maidenhair fern outside Grandad’s study – when she heard the front door opening. Elegant heels tapped on to the hallway’s marble floor, followed by the *clippity-clip* of shiny leather brogues. Together, they tapped out a perfectly timed duet, brought to a close by the thud of large bags on the marble floor. Betsy’s heart thumped.

“Betsy, darling?” called her mother.

“B?” called her father.

The tapping feet came to a halt.

“We’re home!”



CHAPTER TWO

A TERRIBLE MESS

From above, Mr and Mrs Bow-Linnet looked like this:



When most people think of their parents, they picture their faces. Betsy always

thought of the tops of her parents' heads. This was the view she had when she stuck her legs through the spindles of the balcony on the top floor of their house and watched them leave for a concert, or welcome guests to a party, or come home late at night when she was meant to be asleep.

That's what she could see now, as they whirled about getting ready for the party. She had hidden herself up in her favourite spot by the balcony rails to avoid answering questions about how she had spent her week, and whether she had been good, and whether she was feeling all right. When her parents had first arrived she had gone downstairs to see them from the front, of course.

This is what they looked like from Betsy's height:



Bella Bow-Linnet looked remarkably like a fern. Her fronds of hair curled and her tiny smile curled and she curled her body around when she talked, swaying with enthusiasm. She even smelled like ferns – but then, that will happen,

if you live with so many for so long.

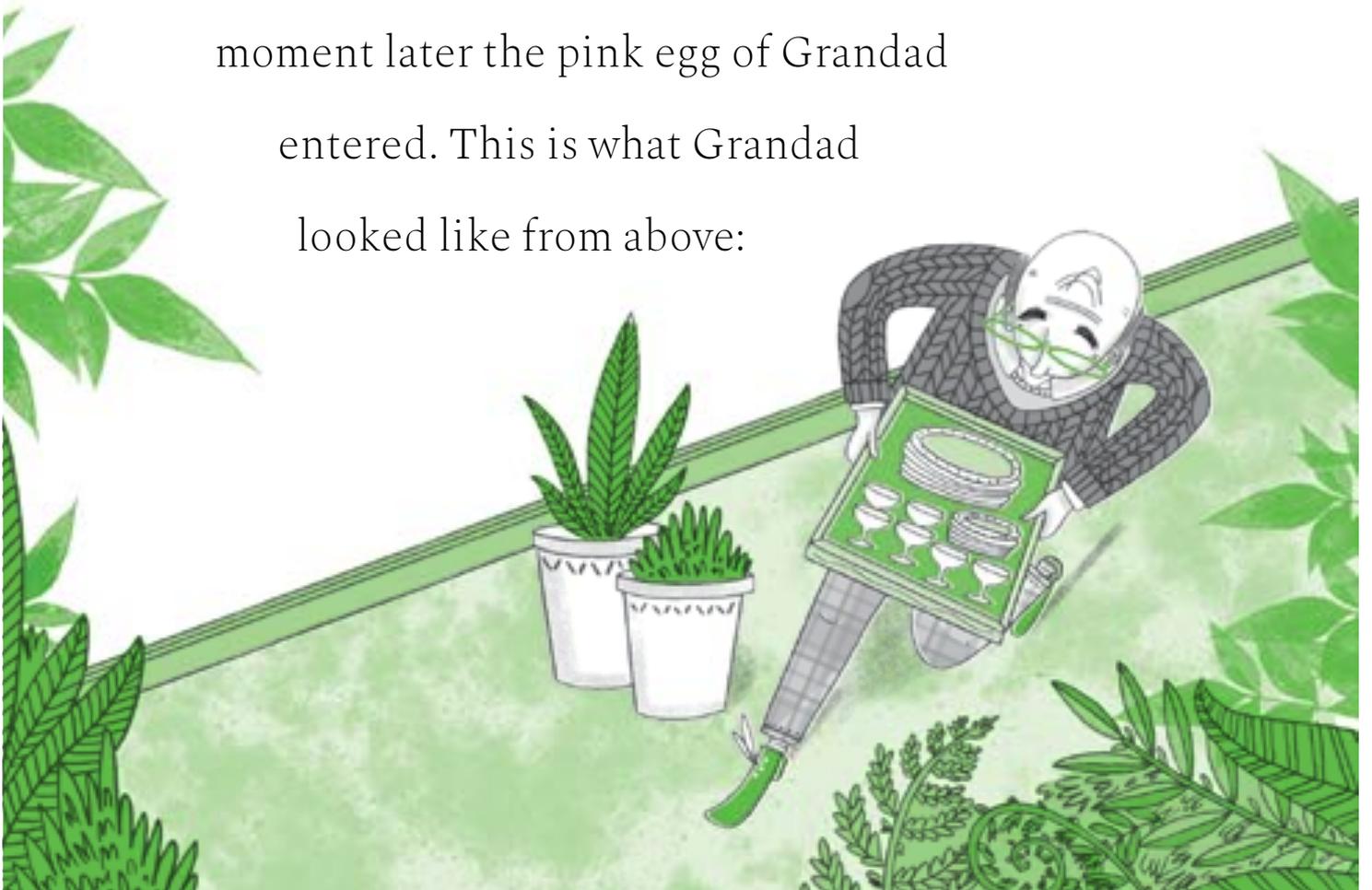
Bertram Bow-Linnet was as stiff and straight as his wife was curly. He always had a neat pocket handkerchief and neatly shined shoes, and he lived a life of mystery behind his beard. Betsy could never be quite sure what he was feeling.

It was wonderful to have them home, and for an hour she had had them all to herself, and they had all eaten cream cakes (which were Bertram's favourite) while her parents told stories about New York. But now there was a party to prepare, so Betsy watched and waited above.

The parties always took a lot of preparation. It used to just be her parents' pianist friends who came to play for each other, but over time word spread and now all the stylish-and-

wealthy of London came to hear these great musicians. This meant that the house always had to be spruced up so that none of the stylish-and-wealthy would have to confront anything unseemly, like used teacups, or old newspapers, or dust. The Bow-Linnets' house was Bertram's childhood home, and it was a very grand London townhouse, but it wasn't always very tidy.

As Betsy watched from her perch, the grey egg of her father's head left the hall, and a moment later the pink egg of Grandad entered. This is what Grandad looked like from above:



Betsy hardly ever saw Grandad from above. It made him look fragile. He carefully carried piles of plates and glasses to the parlour for the party, whistling to himself.

There was a *thu-thu-thud*, like a gigantic pack of cards being shuffled. That was the sound of the folding door being pushed back between the parlour and the lower sitting room to create one enormous room, which was perfect for parties. When the furniture from the lower sitting room was moved to the side, you could fit a lot of people in there. Betsy gripped the balcony, her palms sweating at the thought of all those people listening to her play. She shut her eyes and tapped the Mazurka out against the wood.

Finally, every last corner had been dusted and every last fern had been extra-watered,

and the house was ready. Betsy was sent to put on her best dress.

Her mother came to do her hair. Betsy had inherited Bella's curls, but on her they were less like fern fronds and more like a gorse bush in outer space. Bella was the only person who could tame them. As Betsy sat in front of the mirror, it occurred to her that her mother must know the top of her head best too. She had never seen the top of her own head. She hoped it wasn't too untidy.

"Is everything all right, darling? You've been very quiet."

"Yes thanks."

"Did you have a nice time while we were away?"

Betsy thought no and said yes, which was uncomfortable. She never normally lied

about how she felt, and her mother was brilliant at making her feel better, curling around her in an enormous hug and talking everything over until Betsy felt still and calm again. But this time Bella was the problem – or rather, Betsy was – so she had to lie.

“Good. Betsy darling, you really must brush your hair every day. This is a terrible mess.”

Terrible Mess, Terrible Disappointment.

Betsy, seen from above.



With quarter of an hour to go, Betsy's father came to give her a flower for her hair. He did that every time she was getting dressed up for something. Her smart dress was nice – dark blue and swirly – but she liked the flower best.

“Is this the room of Miss Betsy Bow-Linnet?” he said gravely.

Betsy grinned and nodded.

“Would she do me the honour of wearing this flower in her hair tonight?” He bent down so that his eyes were level with hers behind his half-moon spectacles. “Beautiful, B,” he said, tucking the lily in place. Betsy thought that if he asked if she was all right, she might just tell him the truth. After all, he hadn't said she was a Terrible Disappointment. But he didn't ask.

With five minutes to go, they were all lined up in the hall, waiting for the doorbell to ring.

“Everything all right, B?” said Grandad.

“Yes,” said Betsy, a little too loudly.

Grandad leaned closer and whispered, “Remember that second rule. It’s very bad form to kick a piano during a concert.”

He smiled, but Betsy only had time for half a smile before the doorbell rang. Once it had rung the first time, it kept ringing. An endless river of people trickled along the hallway and flooded the parlour. Bella would hug them and Bertram would shake them neatly by the hand. Then it would be Betsy’s turn, and they would all exclaim about how much she had grown, and talk to her in silly syrup voices with silly huge smiles.

Grandad didn't have to hug them or shake their hands or be introduced. He hated these parties and, as usual, he was doing an excellent job of pretending to be a fern



and avoiding the whole situation. A woman in purple silk came in, and while Bella and Bertram greeted her, Grandad made a face at Betsy and looked like a fern harder than ever.



“And you remember Betsy, Vera,” said her mother to the column of purple.

Vera Brick was one of Betsy’s all-time least favourite people. She beamed down at the air just above Betsy’s head. “Oh my,” she declared. “I wouldn’t have recognized her, Bella.” (She never talked directly to Betsy.) “Hasn’t she grown? Why, she’ll be taller than all the boys, if she isn’t careful.” She laughed. When Vera laughed, it was one single joyless chirp. It sounded so much like the doorbell that Bertram opened the door. He blinked at the empty doorstep, pushed up his spectacles, and shut the door again with a sheepish *ahem*.

“Still,” said Vera, “long limbs come with long fingers I suppose. When will she be dazzling us in the concert halls of London,





hmm?” And she chirped again. Bella laughed politely and steered Vera towards the canapés in the parlour. “Oh my, the poor ferns,” Betsy heard Vera wail. “They’re positively drooping. They can’t have been watered for weeks.”

Betsy and Grandad exchanged glances. Betsy decided that if she really needed to kick something that evening, she would just kick Vera.

It didn’t take long for the piano-playing to start. All of London’s best pianists were here, and quite a lot of other people who fancied their chances. Betsy noticed nervously that although everyone smiled and clapped ever so politely, they were all whispering reviews to each other afterwards.

“A rather clunking left hand.”

“My, how original to play the whole thing at one volume.”

“Well at that speed, a three-year-old could play it.”

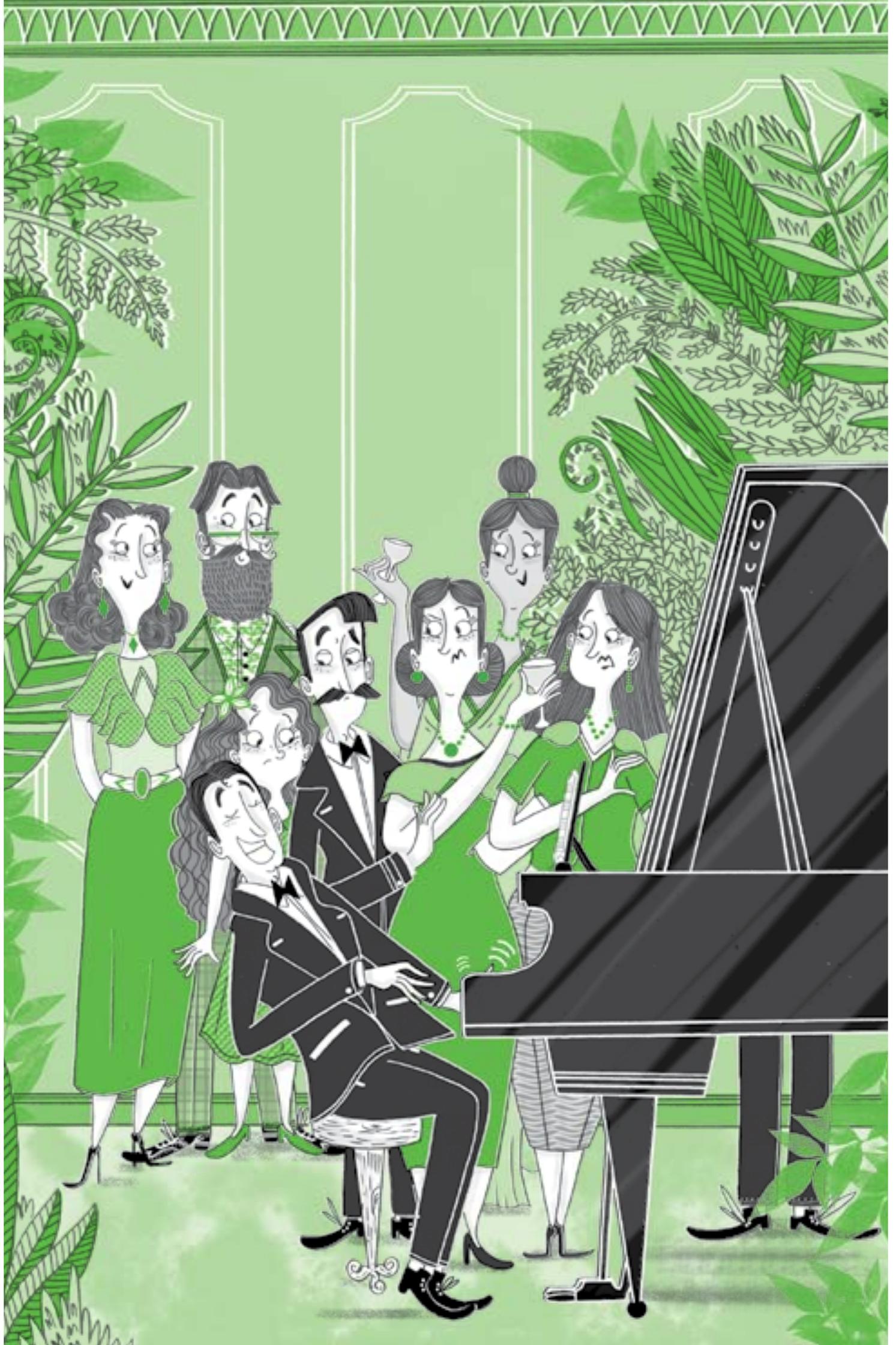
And so on.

Betsy waited patiently. There seemed to be two ways to get your turn on the piano:

1. Squeal “Me, me!” and run over madly.

Be sure to wave your champagne glass to remind everyone that you are tipsy, and that you would never push yourself forward if you weren't.

2. Wait for someone else to bray your name. Refuse for approximately 2.3 seconds, look awfully embarrassed (as if you couldn't possibly), then graciously accept. End up playing five pieces until eventually one of the squealers shoves you off the stool.



Betsy lost track of how many hours she spent listening to waltzes and minuets, nocturnes and etudes, squealing and braying and wicked whispering. After what seemed like a few weeks of it, Grandad stopped pretending to be a fern and came to stand next to her.

“Do you still want to play, B?”

She didn't. But that was neither here nor there. Betsy Bow-Linnet might be a Disappointment, and a Mess, but she was not a coward. So she nodded.

“You could always play for them after the party.”

“I want to play now.”

“That's my girl.” Grandad squeezed her shoulder. And when the next piece had marched triumphantly to a halt, he bellowed,

“Betsy! Let’s hear Betsy.”

A murmur of surprise rippled around the parlour. Everybody clapped, and joined in calling her name, because nobody had ever heard the youngest Bow-Linnet play the piano. Across the room, Betsy saw that her parents’ smiles were frozen in horror. She tried to smile encouragingly at them, to let them know that it was going to be fine – that she was a late bloomer, after all. She wasn’t sure the smile had worked though. They didn’t look as encouraged as she’d hoped.

“From the top now, B,” Grandad whispered in her ear.

Betsy tapped across the marble floor to the piano stool and sat down. For one awful second, she couldn’t make any sense of the piano keys. Then her fingers decided to get

on with things without her and she found that they had put themselves in the right place.

Well done, fingers, she thought. Now what?

This, said her fingers. And they began.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Bishop spent an entire childhood reading fiction, dreaming up stories and pretending.

Now she writes her stories down for a living, preferably by lamp-light with tea. Her first book, *Erica's Elephant*, was published in 2016. She has since written two further titles for young readers, *The Bookshop Girl* and *A Sea of Stories*, and two middle-grade mysteries, *The Secret of the Night Train* and *Trouble in New York*. Her books have been translated into sixteen languages, including French, Dutch, Russian and Japanese.

Find out more at sylviabishopbooks.com.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ashley King is an illustrator working in leafy Warwickshire. He has a bachelor's degree with honors in Illustration and Animation. He skillfully hand draws all his creations with humour and emotion mixed with a digital twist.

Ashley is the illustrator of many children's books, including the *Witch for a Week* series by Kaye Umansky and *The Magical Adventures of Whoops the Wonder Dog* by TV chef Glynn Purnell. This will be the third book Ashley has illustrated for Sylvia and he is over the moon to be embarking on this new series together.