



The performance took place on a cool spring evening on the first floor of Odesa' palatial "House of Scientists". We sat close together on folding chairs, one hundred souls plus the pianist, in an elegant oval room with a broken chandelier. The only light came from two candelabras and a small lamp placed inside the grand piano which glowed like lava against the red wood of the soundboard.

The event was a fundraiser for the Ukrainian armed forces, and we were there to see Igor, a charismatic young performer from Kyiv. He played lovely ethereal sonatas of unknown origin and brought tears and smiles to the audience with soft-spoken anecdotes I pretended to understand.

For ninety minutes we watched his gifted hands draw beauty from the keys, mesmerized by the music, and fused by a shared sense of unambiguous good. We pushed aside the knowledge that the grand building had been hit by a Russian missile last year. After all, what were the chances that would happen again? Still, twisted metal littered the grounds and the windows remained boarded up.

Earlier that day, in another building, not in the least grand, friends and I went through our Saturday morning ritual of delivering fruits and pastries to the patients at the Odesa Psychiatric Hospital. It's a place filled with melancholy and madness, but also sometimes with humor and joy. Mikhail embodies the notion that one can keep ones soul safe in such a place. His hands were amputated years ago when, after a

bender, he fell asleep outside in the winter cold. He will of course never again tie his own shoes or brush his teeth, let alone play a piano. But he remains an unabashedly ebullient man, who exudes his own kind of music, one of light, cheerful notes in a place and time when darkness can come calling.



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