

Source A: Taken from *Rememberings* by Sinead O'Connor (2021)

It's Christmas and we're at my paternal grandmother's house, the one that usually smells of cabbage (the house, not her).

5 The lights around the tree mean the other downstairs lights are off. The grown-ups are in blue shadow with their backs to the parlour, concerned with one another, running all up and down the stairs. I'm little enough that they won't notice me if they don't look any lower than straight ahead. My grandma's parlour is verboten for me without adult supervision. The Christmas tree is in there. I got away with sneaking in to feel the presents, but something else is what I really want.

10 Against the wall rests an old piano. The keys are yellow, like my granddad's teeth. There are echoes in the notes, a strange sound, like the ghost bells of a sunken ship. I sneak in here often by myself because the piano summons me. It makes the air around itself vibrate in huge waves with just the slightest suggestion of colours so as to catch my attention.

15 When I play the notes, it sounds so sad. The thing is desolate. Once, at dusk, I asked it why. It answered, *Because I'm haunted*, and told me to put my ear against its underbelly, the flat panel of wood that's in front of your shins when you're playing. I pressed my right cheek against it, and the piano said, *Now play some notes*. I played, stretching my left arm up so my face would stay where it was. Underneath the notes above, I heard a lot of voices jumbled together, all whispering over one another. I couldn't make out what they were saying, there were so many of them.

20 I shot up and said, "Who are they?" The piano answered, *History*. It said, *They're stuck. They can't get out if no-one plays me and I can't breathe with them all in here*. It said, *I don't mind if you play me badly, I just need to be touched. Play me very softly, gently, gently, only barely, because I am a very tender thing, and the ghosts are very sore*.

I said, "You still didn't tell me whose voices they are." It said it didn't want to tell me. I asked it why. It said, *Because of war*. It said, *A child shouldn't know about war*. It said, *People don't talk, so their feelings fly into musical things*. It said, *The ghosts are things people don't want to remember*.

25 In my parents' house on Christmas Eve we sang all the songs that make me cry. My father had to help me off my knees and up the stairs to bed. I couldn't walk right because the Christmas songs were in my body. They bent and twisted me so I couldn't stand straight. My father understands about songs making me cry. He doesn't think it's weird. I'm always worried it means I'm weird, that songs make me cry and be crippled and I'm only a child. He sings me "Scarlet Ribbons" when I'm all tucked in. His voice sounds very sad. He feels sad
30 a lot. Like me.

Lovely ribbons, scarlet ribbons

Scarlet ribbons for her hair

35 I'm mind-blown by the song. That there are such things as angels, and that angels left ribbons, and that children's prayers get answered. But it isn't ribbons that I want, I want songs to take me away to that other world. I don't like reality. I don't wanna find myself back in it after three minutes and have to hang around in it until the next chance comes to have it vanish.

Source B. Taken from *Enough: Scenes from Childhood* by Stephen Hough (2023)

Number 94 Chester Road, Grappenhall. Probably in 1966. Where and when I first touched a piano. It was at the home of Uncle Alf and Auntie Ethel. Alfred Smith had a Lancashire accent as flat in vowels as the cap on his head lacked a crown. His right forefinger was flat too, deformed into a spatula by an accident at work. He was kind and modest and back-slappingly cheerful, unlike his wife who always seemed to me rather sour. Or stewed perhaps, like tea steeped too long.

It was tea that brought us together, as we used to go to their house to drink it in their back sitting room. I was bored by these visits but on the right wall, in that back sitting room, stood a brown piano with yellow keys. A little boy aged four stood eye to eye with the teeth of those keys and gently, tentatively, pressed down some of the ivory tabs. My father said that I would play chords, not individual notes. Hammers hit strings, strings vibrated inside the box and the most amazing sounds entered my ears ... and my life. Nothing would satisfy me now but to have a piano of my own and to learn to play it.

“No, we’re not buying a piano. You’ll get bored with it and then we’ll be stuck with a useless piece of furniture in the house.” I must have mentioned it constantly (I can be persistent) and in the end my parents bought me a toy piano, smaller than Auntie Ethel’s tea tray. You can’t tuck a proper piano under your arm, or pick it up like a tin of biscuits. This box of tinkles and jangles was definitely not what I had in mind. It was a teabag to a real piano’s mountain plantation. So I destroyed it. Dismantled is perhaps a better way to describe the process. I fiddled with a screwdriver, poked around with my fingers, pulled and prised until it fell apart. “Please, please can I learn the piano! Please can we buy a proper piano!”

They got the message and one day a van turned into All Saints Drive and delivered a German rosewood upright piano with 85 yellowing ivory keys and brass candlestick holders. It cost £5, and another £25 to fix up. My mother opened up the Yellow Pages to “P” and on the same page as “plumbers” were “piano teachers”. Miss Felicity Riley seemed to live closest, one village away in Lymm, so she was booked and I began lessons.

Miss Riley drives up to our house, parks, and I stand at the window with feverish anticipation, eyes glued on the stationary vehicle. She is applying a smear of lipstick to her lips in the rear-view mirror. Orange. Bright lips that Emil Nolde would have been delighted to have been able to create from one of his more intensely vibrant tubes of paint. The car door opens and slams and a grey tweed skirt is propelled by the spindly legs of this wiry, powdery, elderly lady up the one-and-a-half-car drive, and through the 1960s glass front doors. I don’t remember much about the lessons but I do remember her Fiat 500 and especially its colour – powder blue.

“A glass of water please.” My mother would oblige and Miss Riley would plop in two fizzing aspirins (stomach trouble, perhaps?). After the 30-minute lesson she was paid and left, but as I watched her from the front window walking down the driveway, I would beg my mother: “Please can I have another lesson?” I’d already memorised the pieces Miss Riley had left me for a whole week’s worth of work, and I wanted her to retrace her steps from the car back to the front door.

Miss Riley came to teach me for about six months. I practised incessantly and had a small repertoire of children’s pieces, but she was a local piano teacher, used to dealing with reluctant kids and pushy parents. I, on the other hand, was swallowing the piano whole.