

## Scenes from childhood

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Leona Hanson was an elderly woman who lived down the block from our family during my childhood years. I first saw her when, at age five, I accompanied my older brother on a brief visit to deliver a package to her home. I can't describe my first impression, other than that I was frightened by her appearance and manner. I recall that my brother dismissed my discomfort by telling me that Mrs. Hanson was a bit eccentric.

At age five, I had no idea what the word eccentric meant. I thought Mrs. Hanson was the scariest person in the world. Every several weeks, my mother would bake a cake or a pie and instruct my brother or one of my sisters to take it to Mrs. Hanson's home, and to deliver it to her personally. If anyone else answered the door, they were to make sure that no one other than she received the package. My turn as the delivery boy arrived at age seven. After unsuccessfully pleading with my mother that this was a job for my older siblings, I began my trip. Months earlier, I had counted the number of concrete slabs that made up the sidewalk between our two houses. On this day, I counted them again, pausing to carefully inspect each crack. Although Mrs. Hanson lived only half a block away, it probably took me twenty minutes to reach my destination, because of my apprehension over this encounter.

Even as a child, I was reluctant to believe in haunted houses or ghosts, but I was willing to make an exception for this house and the frightening woman who lived within. The wooden stairs to the porch creaked with every measured step I took. The drapes were drawn and not a hint of light peeked through the windows. I prayed that no one was home, but I knew otherwise. The house always appeared dark from outside. Mrs. Hanson was virtually never seen outside her home, so she must be lurking in the shadows inside. Why was my mother sending her treats, when we seldom had them at home?

I looked at the doorbell and hesitated. I gently rapped on the door. No answer. I rapped again without response. Maybe I should sneak back down the steps, race down the block and tell my mother Mrs. Hanson wasn't home. I knew I should ring the bell. I debated whether to leave the pie on the porch, ring the bell and hide in the nearby bushes to see if she noticed and recovered her treat or to simply dash back to my house. What if someone else came to the door? What about my mother's instructions? As I was mulling these options, I saw the doorknob slowly turn, and the door inch open. It was Mrs. Hanson.

I thrust the pie at her, hoping to race back down the steps as soon as she grasped it. But her large, cold, bony hand already had me by the scruff of the neck as she steered me into her inner sanctum. We entered a small foyer, and her hand propelled

me into a larger room, which was almost completely occupied by a grand piano. The room was lit indirectly by a tiny lamp in the adjoining dining room. Cigarette smoke had accumulated in the unventilated area, and my eyes began to smart and water as I searched for any potential escape routes. There was a stained maroon settee to one side, the back of which was covered with antimacassars strewn in a haphazard pattern. The small sofa was covered with papers, some of which appeared to be sheet music. An apparently petrified cat sat on the floor next to the piano. Was it a statue or a live cat, as terrified of this woman as I? The windows were covered with thick, dark, moldering drapes. A large painting of an older man seated at a piano hung on one wall. A quick glance into the dining room revealed a table covered with more sheet music and yellowed newspapers. A small bed or cot nestled in the corner.

She unceremoniously pushed me down into an overstuffed chair, the cushions of which had long since collapsed. Mrs. Hanson was a most unbecoming witch. Her wrinkled face was deathly white. Her unruly hair was dyed a brilliant red. Over time, I learned to assess her physical and emotional status by the length of the straw-colored undyed roots. She had a number of bruises on her face and forearms. Her two front teeth were slate gray. She wore a tattered black kimono, with a faded pink slip peeking out the bottom. A cigarette, two thirds of it ash, seemed stuck to her lower lip. She hunched over me, and I was convinced I would soon be covered with hot ashes. She put her index finger to her lips, and whispered in her hoarse monotone, "Quiet, so he won't hear you." Who was he? Did she keep a large ferocious dog in the kitchen? Could this creature have a spouse? Just the thought of her potential mate made me shiver; I bit down hard to keep my teeth from chattering.

"My mother asked me to give you this package," I finally managed to squeak. "I have to go home right away," came out a bit stronger. Not a chance. I was a prisoner in hell. The heat in the room was stifling. What had I done wrong to deserve this? She put her arm around my shoulders. There was a unique smell to this woman that I hope I never encounter again. I associate the smell with fear, but I know now that was a transference of my sensations to her emanations. Can an odor be old? Can it be stale? Young boys don't care much for perfumes, but the essences that permeated her clothing had been there a long time and had been altered adversely by smoke and tobacco; they had blended into an unpleasant acrid olfactory sensation.

She steered me to the piano, which was partially covered with a large crocheted cloth, upon which sat a number of faded photographs in ornate frames. The sepia-toned images were of a young woman; some showed her seated at the piano and others smiling while standing alongside a number of different, and obviously admiring, young men. Mrs. Hanson pushed me onto the piano seat, and slid next to me. Her nicotine stained fingers trembled ever so slightly as she began to play. I feared the music would be a funeral march, most likely my funeral. But the music



Illustration by Erica Aitken

was beautiful. Her hands quickly became more steady, and the expression on her face softened. Even her face lost its ashen hue. She seemed to be staring into space, as if seeing cherished memories. I glanced at the young men in the photographs, and wondered if she was playing for them.

She played her music for me for a very long time. I was certainly no judge of her ability, but I don't remember ever hearing a sweeter sound. At first I thought she was trying to bewitch me, but, as my fear abated, I relaxed and warmed to the music. Then she leaned toward me and asked if I enjoyed the sound of the piano. I'm sure I said yes, but I was still uncomfortable enough to say it with some hesitation. Mrs. Hanson said she would be willing to teach me to play and would eventually pay for my lessons as my talent exceeded her capabilities. A daily trip to this home was more than I could envision. My older sister had lusted to learn to play the piano, but our family's financial status precluded such lessons. I suggested that my sister Marie would be a much better candidate for her help. Mrs. Hanson finally let me go.

My sister took lessons over the next years from this unusual and eccentric woman. Marie is now a quite accomplished pianist. I did carry more pies and cakes to Mrs. Hanson's home over the years, but managed to escape her grasp at those times. Years later, I learned that Mrs. Hanson's husband was a sadistic alcoholic who physically abused her. Over the years, they had come to a truce: her domain was the piano room, and his the back of the house. Leona Hanson could barely walk because of the multiple fractures she had suffered at his hands. My mother was one of many neighborhood women who sent her food, and even did her shopping.

Leona Hanson outlived many of her benefactors, including my mother. At her insistence, our funeral cortege passed her home on the way to the cemetery. There she was on her porch, stooped over the railing, clad in a faded pink terrycloth robe, with the cigarette, mostly ash, dangling from her lower lip. She wept as she waved good-bye to a dear friend.

Whenever I hear Schumann's "Traumerei," I think about Mrs. Hanson. That was the first music she played for me. This piano piece, from the composer's *Scenes from Childhood*, is less than three minutes in length, yet invariably brings a tear to my eye, likely because of its simple beauty and its evocation of nostalgia for childhood. But maybe the tear is also for Mrs. Hanson, the tortured woman who struggled through her life, a tragic victim of domestic violence. I am sorry that I feared her and thought this troubled woman frightening. I often wish that I could sit at the keyboard and produce such beautiful music as she did. Would that I had taken her offer and learned to play the piano.

How many more Leona Hansons are out there today? How many live within walking distance of our homes? How many of their friends and associates are aware of the domestic violence? How many of these neighbors, like my mother, are empathetic and supportive, but lack the courage to intervene to stop this abuse? How many battered patients walk into our offices and clinics, yet find us oblivious to their problems? What is our obligation as physicians to end this scourge?

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