

Making Piano Fun

W.M. Akers



“Come on, Angie. It’s time to go.”

“I’m not going,” said Angela.

“Please,” said her father. “We’re going to be late.”

“Good. I hope we *are* late. I hope we’re a million years late, and by the time we get to the music school, piano doesn’t even exist anymore. The people of the future will be smart. They’ll understand that mankind is better off without the piano. They’ll understand me.”

“Okay, sweetheart. That’s great. Please get in the car.”

“No. On no account. This is America, Dad. Didn’t you hear? Nobody can make anybody play piano against her will. It’s called democracy.”

“Angela? If you don’t get in that car right now, your mother is going to be very angry at me. And if she’s angry at me, I’m going to forbid you from using the computer.”

“For how long?”

“Until Christmas.”

Dad wasn’t joking. Angela got in the car.

As they drove, beads of sweat formed on the back of her neck, and her stomach started to feel like she had just swallowed a hockey puck. Piano-practice scared her to death. Her teacher, Mr. Poliakoff, was a hairy old man who talked with a lisp that made him nearly impossible to understand. She could never tell if he was saying “I see” or calling for a “high C.” Uncertainty made Angela nervous, and nerves made it impossible for her to play.

Not that she wanted to play, anyway. There was no music on earth more boring than Mr. Poliakoff’s sheet music. For three months, she had gone once a week, to learn famous compositions like “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”, “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and “Three Blind Mice”. As boring as those songs were, they were apparently impossible to play. Each time Angela picked up her fingers she was seized by fear. What if she played the wrong note? Would Mr. Poliakoff shout at her? Or, worse, would he simply shake his head in disappointment?

“Fear is the enemy of success,” he would tell her—except that when he said it, it sounded more like “sushshesh.” But when it came to the piano, fear was all Angela had.

“Timbuktu,” she said. Her dad looked away from the road to give her a funny look. She went on. “Antarctica. The Yukon. Kazakhstan. Borneo. Tasmania.”

“Yes?” asked her father, finally.

“I’m trying to think of places I’d like less than piano class.”

“Did you come up with anything?”

“Nope. Even the middle of the Amazon rainforest would be more fun.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve been studying your geography, at least.”

When her father looked away, Angela stuck out her tongue. That would show him.

As usual, Mr. Poliakoff’s music school smelled like cabbage. Angela did not know where he might be cooking the foul vegetable, but she was certain she didn’t want to find out. She trudged down the darkened hallway like her feet were made of rocks, glad her father wasn’t there to tell her she was going to be late. Not that he cared, anyway. He’d done his job, dropping her off at the building. He didn’t care if she actually made it to class.

Angela’s eyes went wide. She had an idea. She pressed her back against the wall and slinked away from Mr. Poliakoff’s classroom. She would have to spend an hour in the music school but that didn’t mean she had to learn any music. She tip-

toed down the dark corridor, fearful that her piano teacher might burst out at any moment and bellow, “You! Come here and practice ‘Ring Around the Rosie!’” But the door did not open. Mr. Poliakoff did not catch her. Angela was free.

She was sneaking her way to the front door of the music school, planning on passing the hour in the sun, beneath a tree or on a bench, when she heard a funny sound. It sounded like someone playing the piano—scales—but it sounded different than what she was used to. It sounded like the person playing was having fun.

She followed the sound. It was coming from one of the classrooms. She peered through the glass window and saw that the piano bench was empty. Feeling sneaky, she turned the handle and padded into the empty classroom. The music was coming from a computer in the corner. She walked towards it, dying to find out what it was, when she learned the room wasn’t as empty as she had thought.

“Hello?” said a voice that stopped Angela’s heart. It came from a woman with long, gray hair and a mouth that twisted up a little bit at the sides. “Can I help you?”

“No,” stammered Angela. “I, uh, I just heard the music, and—”

“Do you like the piano?”

“I *hate* the piano,” said Angela.

The woman started to laugh. “Well!” she said. “That’s too bad for you, since you’re in a music school.”

"No kidding."

"I'm Mrs. O'Hara."

"That's nice. I should be going."

"Hold on, hold on. You wanted to know about this music?" Angela was silent.

"Come on. It's okay to be curious. Do you know anything about jazz?"

"No."

"Well, here it is." She turned up the volume. The man playing piano tapped at the keys like a baby hitting something with a hammer. He sang like a clown, making strange noises and putting on all sorts of funny voices. The words he sang were even stranger:

"All that meat and no potatoes

All that food to the alligators, yes.

Hold me steady. I am ready

For all that meat and no potatoes."

"It sounds so silly!"

"Well, that's Fats," said Mrs. O'Hara.

"Who's Fats?"

"Fats Waller. The piano player. He's the one who wrote the song."

"A grown-up wrote this song?"

“A very talented grown-up. Don’t think about the silly words. Listen to the piano. What does it sound like?”

“It sounds crazy.”

“It’s all over the place, isn’t it?” Mrs. O’Hara was right. None of his notes were where they were supposed to be. He played fast when he should be playing slow; he played slow when he should be playing fast. In between lines, he would shout nonsense like, “Oh, stop it Thomas! You’re tickling early!” Crazy was the only word for it.

“Who’s Thomas?” asked Angela.

“I don’t know.”

“Huh. Well, I guess I should get going.”

“You’re supposed to be in class, aren’t you? With Mr. Poliakoff?” Angela made a face.

“Yes, I guess so. He’s not the most fun teacher, is he?”

“He smells like cabbage!”

“That too.”

“You’re going to make me go back to class, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to make you learn a little piano,” said Mrs. O’Hara. “Because that’s what your parents paid for. But it doesn’t have to be anything boring.”

“Can I play a song like this?”

“Not quite. Fats Waller spent a lot of time learning to play normal piano before he started playing it crazy.”

“He played ‘Ring Around the Rosie?’”

“And ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ and ‘Three Blind Mice’, and all of Mr. Poliakoff’s favorites.”

“But if I learn to play those...eventually I can play this? Eventually it won’t matter if I get the right note in the right place?”

“You got it,” said Mrs. O’Hara, as she sat down beside the bench. Angela put her fingers on the keys and prepared to play. Her fingers weren’t afraid any more.

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. What does Angela play?

- A** Angela plays the guitar.
- B** Angela plays the drums.
- C** Angela plays the piano.

2. What event in the story helps to change the way Angela feels about playing the piano?

- A** Angela's dad drives her to the music school.
- B** Angela tip-toes down a corridor at the music school.
- C** Angela hears a song by Fats Waller.

3. Read this sentence: "I *hate* the piano," said Angela."

What information from the story supports this statement?

- A** Mr. Poliakoff says that fear is the enemy of success.
- B** Angela does not want to go to piano class.
- C** Angela hears a song by Fats Waller.

4. What is an effect that hearing the Fats Waller song has on Angela?

- A** The song makes Angela less afraid of playing the piano.
- B** The song makes Angela less excited about playing the piano.
- C** The song makes Angela less interested in playing the piano.

5. What is the main idea of this story?

- A** A father takes his daughter to her piano class.
- B** A girl who hates playing the piano realizes that it can be fun.
- C** A piano teacher who smells like cabbage thinks that fear is the enemy of success.

6. Read these sentences from the story: "Angela put her fingers on the keys and prepared to play. Her **fingers weren't afraid any more.**"

What does the author mean by writing that Angela's "**fingers weren't afraid any more**"?

- A Angela will never stop hating the piano.
- B Angela will never be good at playing the piano.
- C Angela is no longer afraid to play the piano.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Angela is not afraid to play the piano _____ she hears a song by Fats Waller.

- A after
- B before
- C then

8. What is one of the words that Angela uses to describe how the jazz song sounds?

9. How does Angela feel each time she gets ready to play for Mr. Poliakoff?

10. Why does Angela's fear of playing the piano go away at the end of the story? Support your answer with information from the story.

Teacher Guide & Answers**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 560**1.** What does Angela play?

- A** Angela plays the guitar.
- B** Angela plays the drums.
- C** **Angela plays the piano.**

2. What event in the story helps to change the way Angela feels about playing the piano?

- A** Angela's dad drives her to the music school.
- B** Angela tip-toes down a corridor at the music school.
- C** **Angela hears a song by Fats Waller.**

3. Read this sentence: "'I *hate* the piano,' said Angela."

What information from the story supports this statement?

- A** Mr. Poliakoff says that fear is the enemy of success.
- B** **Angela does not want to go to piano class.**
- C** Angela hears a song by Fats Waller.

4. What is an effect that hearing the Fats Waller song has on Angela?

- A** **The song makes Angela less afraid of playing the piano.**
- B** The song makes Angela less excited about playing the piano.
- C** The song makes Angela less interested in playing the piano.

5. What is the main idea of this story?

- A** A father takes his daughter to her piano class.
- B** **A girl who hates playing the piano realizes that it can be fun.**
- C** A piano teacher who smells like cabbage thinks that fear is the enemy of success.

6. Read these sentences from the story: "Angela put her fingers on the keys and prepared to play. Her **fingers weren't afraid any more.**"

What does the author mean by writing that Angela's "**fingers weren't afraid any more**"?

- A Angela will never stop hating the piano.
- B Angela will never be good at playing the piano.
- C **Angela is no longer afraid to play the piano.**

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Angela is not afraid to play the piano _____ she hears a song by Fats Waller.

- A **after**
- B before
- C then

8. What is one of the words that Angela uses to describe how the jazz song sounds?

Suggested answer: Both "silly" and "crazy" are acceptable responses.

9. How does Angela feel each time she gets ready to play for Mr. Poliakoff?

Suggested answer: Answers may vary in wording, but students should recognize that Angela feels afraid when she gets ready to play for Mr. Poliakoff.

10. Why does Angela's fear of playing the piano go away at the end of the story? Support your answer with information from the story.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary, as long as they are supported by evidence from the story. For example, students may respond that hearing the Fats Waller song makes Angela more interested in playing the piano, so her hatred and fear of the instrument go away. Students may also respond that Angela feels more comfortable playing for Mrs. O'Hara than for Mr. Poliakoff, so she stops being afraid.