

Mikhail and Chopin Save a Life
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Mikhail and Chopin saved a life and never knew it.

Mikhail's mother was relentless and indefatigable. Nowadays, you would call her a tiger mom. For Mikhail, getting straight A's in school was not enough. No! Once Mikhail got home from school, he had to play the piano for two hours. For three years – from ages 5 to 8 – Mikhail hated the piano. He wanted to play sports and games. He wanted to run around and have fun. He learned to stay at the schoolyard after school, but his mother soon caught on and waited for him at the front door of the school. Mikhail then escaped through other school doors, but his mother caught on to that trick and was brazen enough to ambush him right outside his classroom. He had no escape.

He had no escape, that is, except for his character and because he began to love the piano. After some unpleasant confrontations, he made a deal with his mother. He would play for 3 hours each day and his mother would let him play after school as long as he wanted.

Mikhail got really good at the piano. He began to play concert pieces. Along the way he learned to play rock, and also fell in love with Scott Joplin, though he never developed a feeling for jazz. He began to play at primary school assemblies. He loved showing off.

Deshawn also loved to show off, but he was a troublemaking loser from the other side of the tracks – one more neglected, poor kid. He joined a gang and remained one of its peons because he was neither big, nor strong, nor shrewd. The gang was the sole culture in his life.

Mikhail and Deshawn entered high school the same year but the two remained in two different worlds. Deshawn made up for his lowly gang status by being a leading disruptor in school. Mikhail had come to hate the attention for his piano exploits as an adolescent and had stopped performing in public.

Both joined the baseball team. Mikhail grew tall, strong, and fast despite his mother's wishes and joined the team despite the potential damage to his fingers. Deshawn grew quick and was highly coordinated. Both were good players. But though both were teammates, sharing the same dugout and the same locker room, they remained in separate worlds. Deshawn spoke only with the other Black players and Mikhail stuck with his own buddies.

Deshawn's grades turned out too low to qualify for varsity, so he quit the team. After that failure he became even more disruptive in school. He stayed in the gang though he grew miserable about it. The gang was into selling drugs and turf wars. This scared Deshawn. But he saw no way out.

Mikhail and Deshawn were never in the same class. Most classes were segregated by academic performance. But in the junior year, both were placed in the same music appreciation class even though Mikhail knew all that stuff. They noticed each other, and Mikhail said hello to Deshawn once without getting a response, so he didn't try again. Deshawn continued his disruptive ways, sometimes mocking the teacher and sometimes mocking the music the teacher played. Mikhail

kept a low profile so only a few kids knew about his piano exploits. But one of them told the teacher on the sly. Some days later the teacher asked if Mikhail would play something.

Mikhail deferred but the kids in the class began a chant they wouldn't stop until he agreed to play. He agreed under the condition there would be no applause and no comments.

The teacher asked Mikhail to name what he would play and say a bit about it. Mikhail began.

“I will try to play Frederic Chopin's Etude Opus 10 #3. Chopin was a delicate man who wrote some of the most exquisite piano music. He fell in love with a famous woman author but she would never marry him and he never did marry. He died of tuberculosis in 1849 when he was only 39. Etude means study in French, so this is just a piano exercise but Chopin considered its melody to be the most beautiful he ever wrote. I love this piece. It took me hours and hours and weeks and weeks of work to play it halfway decent. Before I begin, please let me warm up my fingers.”

Mikhail turned to the piano and began with a few scales and arpeggios. He started slow but picked up the pace. That struck Deshawn. How could this guy, who was a good baseball player also play the piano and move his fingers so fast? It made Deshawn feel jealous so he tried some buffoonery to divert attention to himself, which the teacher scowled at but Mikhail ignored.

Now warmed up, Mikhail sat still for a moment and then began the Etude. It starts in slow motion and its melody, somewhat like a metronome clicking slowly, is gentle and soothing, yet yearning. Deshawn was so taken by it that he unconsciously stopped his tomfoolery. Staying slow, the piece got crashing loud then soft. After a second or so of silence the melody changed, remaining beautiful, but the pace picked up and it turned powerful. Then the beauty vanished as the pace and sound grew crashing. A momentary break and the crescendo culminated in a demonic series of sixth chords in both hands that lasted a mere ten seconds, but that seemed to last forever to Deshawn. It was as if the beauty that could be his life if he could only see how to clutch it became the rushing, unmanageable chaos of the life that swirled him about. Then, before Deshawn could quite grasp it, the music slowed and relaxed imperceptibly as if by magic, somehow transforming back to the original gentle, yearning melody. It showed there is a shining way out of life's chaos. Deshawn buried his head in his hands and began to sob – huge heaving sobs he could not control. Feeling shame for his outburst and wishing to be invisible, he bolted from the class and ran out of the school building.

That day, Deshawn quit the gang. He told them he just couldn't do it anymore and bore up under the abuse heaped on him by his comrades. After some days they left him alone. In the next turf war several of the members were shot. Three died. Deshawn might have been one of them. But he wasn't.

Deshawn stopped being disruptive in school. He began to pay attention, to try. It wasn't easy. He didn't know where to start to learn. He didn't know *how* to start to learn. But change came to him bit by bit and Deshawn felt it because he was for the first time in his life armed with a vision that there was something more out there and that he had a hope to get a piece of it.

After that day, Deshawn nodded to Mikhail when he entered the class, though he never did speak to him. His grades improved enough so that he qualified for the varsity baseball team in his senior year. He still spoke exclusively to the other Black players, yet somehow Mikhail felt that Deshawn liked him. After the baseball season and graduation, they each went their separate ways and never saw each other again. Mikhail's life went well, as might be expected, and Deshawn's life turned out OK too, which was more than could have been expected.

Years later Deshawn happened to hear Chopin's Etude #3. His eyes teared over and he recalled Mikhail's playing that day in music class. He regretted that he had not had the courage to thank Mikhail for saving his life.

Mikhail never thought about Deshawn after graduation from high school. Neither did he ever have the slightest notion that he, together with Chopin, had saved Deshawn's life.