

Tara Fox
Vignette

It was 1993. I was in the third grade, and I had just received my first pair of glasses. They had the misfortune to be very large, very square, and very red. Oh, how I once rued the fact that I grew up in an era dominated by the fashion instincts of Sally Jesse Raphael and others similar! Unfortunately, what worked (questionably) for Sally Jesse Raphael did not work for me, a little girl who didn't quite grow into her face until about three years later...

I stood in front of my bathroom mirror later that evening, my large, red glasses in hand. I took them on and off and on and off again, studying myself intently. First, blurry and familiar. Then, clear and unknown. And, to make matters worse, those darn glasses just kept sliding down my face. For the first time that I can recall, I wondered what people would think of me, this new me. Then I began questioning everything. Was I pretty? Ugly? Too thin? I suddenly became very aware that with the addition of my glasses, skinny might not be enough of a description. I thought of a new word that I had learned. Gawky. Yep. Gawky was the new me. It didn't matter how much my parents soothed me. Their assurances were expected, but not sufficient. It was the beginning of a childhood self-consciousness and an overt self-awareness.

A few months earlier, I had begun taking piano lessons with a woman named Mrs. McCook. She was in her sixties, slightly heavysset with graying hair. She taught out of her home, and the lessons were incredibly cheap by today's standards. Five dollars for thirty minutes compared to the eighteen or twenty-five dollars today. But she didn't need the money. She taught because she loved to teach and not just to collect some cash. Turns out, I picked up music rather easily, and Mrs. McCook lost no time in giving me more challenging material. I quickly moved from whole notes to half notes to eighth notes, then adding my left hand to the mix. My favorite song during these years was "Aloeutte," a French song that I later learned was about plucking the feathers off a bird. Thank heavens I didn't know it at the time. Sometimes, with an understanding smile, Mrs. McCook would indulge me and let me play the song as fast as I could, my little fingers flying exuberantly across the keys. Those were some of the moments I loved with her.

When I walked through the sliding glass door into her living room for the first lesson after getting my new red glasses, I was nervous. What would she say? What would her reaction be to this new, not-quite-improved me? She was important to me. After all, she introduced me to the magic held in those black and white keys. Her response would mean everything. I stepped tentatively, my John Thompson piano book clutched tightly under my arm. Mrs. McCook looked up from the piano bench and broke into a warm smile. I think I'll always remember what she said to me.

"Now you'll be able to see your notes even better!"

Relief began to creep over me and push down my insecurities. Maybe things would be okay, too-big glasses and all. I don't remember anything about the lesson itself, but just before it ended, something a little unusual happened. Mrs. McCook reached down into a blue bag next to the piano bench and pulled out a blank sheet of music, thrusting it in my direction.

"Write something," she said.

I looked at empty staves, now crystal clear, heralded by the treble and bass signs with a mixture of curiosity and wonder. She wanted *me* to create a composition? *Me*?

"Let's see what you can do," she said, eyes bright.

I remember feeling the thrill of exhilaration immediately followed by an overwhelming hesitation. Why would she possibly give me this?

Then I thought, maybe, if she thinks I can do it...maybe I can?

Finally, I smiled and tentatively took the paper, pushing my red glasses up on the bridge of my nose.