

The Piano Man: A True Story

Written for Ella Chatfield Stiehler

When someone tells you he/she is writing A True Story, it means that what is about to be written is so unusual, so strange, and so out of the ordinary, the writer is concerned you will not believe the story when you read it. The author anticipates that you will say, “I don’t believe it; you just made up this story; something like that could never happen.” And so I warn you, this is a true story even though you won’t believe it.

One day last April, a well-dressed young man, clutching a sheaf of papers, was walking along the seashore in the small town of Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey, which is located in a section of England known as Kent. To find Sheerness on a map of England, locate the city of London, follow a short straight line to the right until you find where the river Thames empties into the sea, then continue to the right but drift downward until you come to Sheerness, which sits at the very tip of the Isle of Sheppey.

The young man was dressed in a black suit, white shirt, and black tie. Some of the town residents who took note of him thought he was wearing a tuxedo, which is a very formal black suit, generally worn at weddings by the groom and his attendants or oftentimes worn by men attending expensive galas or formal high-society celebrity events. The few people who observed him did not recognize him as someone who lived either in the town of Sheerness or elsewhere on the small Isle of Sheppey. They took him to be a stranger to the area, perhaps from the city of London, which is an hour’s drive away.

Walking back and forth, back and forth, along the seashore at the edge of town, clutching the sheaf of papers as he walked, the young man drew ever more attention to himself. For one thing, he looked out of place because he was dressed in such formal attire, and for another, his walking seemed to have no destination, just back and forth, back and forth. But strangest of all, he was soaking wet from head to toe. Some people concluded he must have been swimming in the sea with his suit and tie and shoes on. For heaven’s sake, why would a person go swimming in a suit and tie? There must be something wrong with him, they said.

A person from the town approached the young man to ask if he needed any help, but the young man immediately sprang away as if he were afraid of being struck with a stick. He had a frightened look in his eyes and seemed to cower, just as an abandoned dog might look when a stranger tries to approach. The man clutched his papers ever tighter to his dripping wet clothes, turned away, and scurried off, looking back over his shoulder several times to make sure no one was coming after him. It was now obvious to those who witnessed his behavior that he was lost and confused and he needed medical help.

A local police officer called the Medway Maritime Hospital, located in the town of Gillingham a few short miles away, to request the assistance of a psychiatric social worker. Someone, the officer reported, needed to come straightaway and evaluate this unusual young man wandering about in Sheerness in a dripping wet formal black suit and tie. Within the hour, Michael Camp, a mental health social worker from the West Kent National Health Service and Social Care Trust arrived in Sheerness to take charge of this strange-acting young man.

Michael slowly approached the young man and in a very gentle and friendly voice introduced himself and asked the young man for his name. He did not answer. Once again, that frightened look came into his eyes, and he began to edge away. Michael asked him again for his name but was careful not to come any closer for fear the young man would run off. Still no answer, only the look of fright in his eyes as he turned his head to and fro, perhaps looking for an escape route. Michael realized the young man might not even speak English, so he tried using a few French phrases to see if there was any recognition. Still no response, only that frightened look in his eyes, and he began to tremble, whether from fear or because his suit was dripping wet, Michael could not say, but thought it likely to be both.

Much like an animal control officer who has been called to look after a stray dog said to be foaming at the mouth, Michael knew he had to take control of this strange-acting man. He needed to be taken forcibly, if necessary, to the mental hospital for observation and evaluation, and he needed to take off those wet clothes and put on dry ones, and for goodness sake, he needed a cup of hot tea and something to eat. He looked famished; perhaps he had not eaten for many days. When the hospital van arrived, Michael and the two paramedics surrounded the young man, took hold of him firmly, and as gently

as they could, walked him to the van. He made a whimpering sound, but he did not resist and he spoke not a word.

The hospital attendants took him to a small room on the first floor, instructed the young man to take off his wet clothes and change into the dry ones they brought from the hospital supply room. The young man did not respond. He gave no sign of understanding. He seemed paralyzed. Again, there was no choice; the attendants forcibly removed his clothes, took away the sheaf of papers he was clutching, dried him with large towels, and put the dry clothes on him. When they finished, Michael ordered some hot tea and sandwiches to be brought into the hospital room; he placed them on the table where the young man was now seated. But he only stared at the food placed before him; he did not eat.

Michael was puzzled. Even if he cannot speak, he must be hungry, he thought, everyone has to eat. He decided to leave the young man alone; if people were not staring at him, he might feel more secure, he might eat something. They gathered up his wet clothes, exited the room, and began to walk down the wide hospital corridor. Michael stopped for a minute, went to the front desk, gathered up a few sheets of white paper, found a pen in the desk drawer, and walked back into the room. He put both the white paper and the pen on the table. If the young man relaxes, drinks some tea, and eats a sandwich, Michael thought, perhaps he might write his name or even a few words that would provide a clue about his nationality, the language he spoke, or where he was from.

While Michael and his assistants waited in a room at the end of the hall to see if their experiment would work, they looked through the pockets of the suit for any clues about the young man's identity, and sorted through his papers. What they discovered not only created more mystery about their patient but troubled them, too. The identification labels – even the size labels – on the suit coat, the pants, the shirt, the tie, the underwear, and the socks were missing – they had been cut away. There was no way to tell from what store these clothes might have been purchased or even the country in which they were made. Well, what about the shoes? The same thing, they found. The size and brand name on the shoes had been carefully rubbed off. Perhaps there were clues in the sheaf of papers; no, these papers were little more than litter, which he must have taken from the trash receptacles along the sea strand.

This was no mistake. The young man, or someone on his behalf, had made the decision to come to Sheerness as a person unknown, anonymous, and from nowhere. Was it possible, they wondered, that he had been brought here by boat from another country and cast ashore here on the Island of Sheppey? If he had been thrown overboard close to the shore, that might explain why his clothes were soaking wet. Was he being smuggled into England? But why? Were the identification tags removed from his clothing so that the smugglers could not be traced? In 2005, how is it possible that a young man can simply appear one day in Sheerness and be from nowhere? Who was this person? Was anyone looking for him? They had no answers, only questions.

It was time to revisit the young man. Had he eaten, did he write down his name, was he ready to speak to them? When Michael entered the room, he was relieved to see that a sandwich had been eaten and most of the tea had been drunk. A good sign, he thought, we are making progress. But what was this? On the table, Michael saw one of the pieces of white paper he had left, but now it had been transformed into a pen and ink sketch of a grand piano. What is this, he asked himself, an artist's rendering of a grand piano? Is this man an artist? Amazing, amazing, he thought to himself as he examined the exquisite drawing. Here is a young man who cannot speak, who is frightened half out of his wits, and yet is able to produce such a work of art. How can this be? Who is this man? And why a grand piano?

The sketch of the piano is a clue, Michael said. Let's take him to the chapel, there is a piano there, maybe he is trying to tell us something. With one hospital attendant taking hold of each arm, they escorted the young man down the long hallway to the chapel. Inside, up close to the altar area on the left, stood a magnificent grand piano. Without hesitation, the young man approached the piano, sat down, and began to play. He played nothing but classical music, and he played beautifully. The more he played, the more relaxed he became, so much so that Michael and the other hospital attendants stood quite close to him and he paid them no mind. Piece after piece, he played. For more than four hours, he played the piano. He was unable to speak with words, but he could speak with music.

This is the true story about a mysterious young man who came to the Isle of Sheppey from an unknown country, unable to speak, and frightened out of his

wits. Yet he was able to draw exquisite pen and ink sketches of grand pianos, and he played classical music for hours at a time on the hospital chapel piano.

Do you remember what I told you about a true story? It is a story so unusual, so strange, and so out of the ordinary that most people say, “I don’t believe this story, you are just making it up.” Do you believe my story?