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## Pi Day

We got to know Nathan from the recitals. Every few months our daughter's piano teacher set out the folding chairs in her practice room, parents arrived and nodded to each other and found their usual places, and Tess' students—from pre-schoolers to high-schoolers—arranged themselves on the stairway opposite, bottom-to-top in order of performance, clutching their music and moving down a step as each kid got up to play. Tess mixed age and ability, so the simplest of Waxman followed the grandest of Brahms. The room was filled with love—of music, of people—and we listened with our hearts in our throats. The kids were nervous, as were we for our own daughter, but the glory of children and music in such an intimate setting, among friends and family, overcame all. Even the mistakes, especially the mistakes, were poignant.

Each child prevailed in a different way: budding technique, sweet expressiveness, stage presence, stage fright, stubborn silence following an error (offending fingers clamped under armpits). But Nathan was off-the-charts different. His raw talent shone right from the beginning, powerful and assured and proud even at the age of eight. He was especially partial to Bach, blasting through long stretches of fugues and partitas with only periodic endearing hesitations and hitches, as if his fingers couldn't keep up with the infinite mathematics in his mind. We heard later that music was not his only passion; he loved math so much that he wanted to teach it.

Throughout his performances a little smile played on his lips, and at the end it broke into a wide grin as he turned to the audience. That was the extent of the emotion, musical or otherwise, he displayed. And yet, for those few years that we were privileged to hear him, we felt we knew him, a boy like many others in his obsession with technique and speed, a boy like no other in the infinity of his searching talent.

Sooner than we can now believe, our daughter left for college and stopped lessons—no more recitals at Pilgrim Road—but she kept in touch with Tess and told us that Nathan now studied with a famous pianist at the New England Conservatory. “Nathan's gone way beyond me,” Tess had admitted. Thus we lost the Robinsons.

Until a cold day in March, when we heard through third-hand email that Nathan Robinson, age fifteen, was dead, somehow succumbed to flu and pneumonia and the malignant complications of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Just as life makes little sense without death, so there is infinity at the core of the comfort of numbers. A few days before we heard about Nathan's death, I had turned fifty-eight, not any kind of auspicious occasion, nothing like men in Asia who turn sixty and overnight become wise and venerated. I was not wise. I've thought about things apocalyptic and philosophic most of my life, but never stooped to be conquered by any of their avatars. Music, for example, was usually present but the piano—the low spinet of my childhood, the tall uprights of my maturity—was never a talisman as it was for Nathan, and for Tess. For a brief shining semester in college, calculus had me skirting joyfully around the edges of numbers moving in mysterious ways, even in 8:00 am class. (The usual refuge of the puzzled, religion, was far too peculiar for my experience.) In the end I could never muster a fifteen-

year-old's faith in form and function. I was an irredeemable words man, sinking gratefully away into other worlds, nothing striking me to the bone except vague longings for peace and quiet, like a plain Jane without the Austen.

And 2008 was going to be my year. I would retire from the corporate world and start wrestling with life, I would tackle all kinds of compelling puzzles, like predestination, nature versus nurture, the vast stillness of a restless ocean, the resonating silences between notes of a fugue or the paragraphs of an essay. There was still plenty of time to be saved.

But then Nathan died and for a few days living seemed a sham. Something larger than a life had been snuffed out.

The auditorium at Newton North High School, larger than most college theaters, was nearly full for Nathan's memorial. We greeted Tess and her husband somberly. They sat at the very end of a row, near the exit; we moved higher up and closer to the middle, but I could still see her. We looked at the program with his picture on the front, a boy with glasses and braces and very short hair, head tilted in kind of a goofy way, his smile large and winning, his dates solemnly displayed, November 14, 1992—March 14, 2008. I nudged my wife. He had died on my birthday. He had been at Children's Hospital in a coma, gasping for breath and life, on the night we blithely ate Korean fish soup at Apgujung and jokingly honored Pi Day by stopping at the Pie Bakery for dessert. Too late: the math nerds had left only cookies and cake.

Nathan's father came onstage to introduce the tributes, and as soon as they started, we knew Nathan had indeed grown into something more than a normal adolescent boy. A parade of friends and teachers talked of a kid who was spontaneous, caring of others, over-organized, geeky, punctual to the minute. He loved his sister and parents, he was friends with girls, he was shy with no one, he excelled in school, especially math, and didn't care who knew it. Everyone said they couldn't believe he was gone, then related funny stories. "He would make us synchronize our watches," one said, "so we could meet exactly at 8:10 to walk to school."

And of course there was the music: Nathan on CD playing a Schubert Impromptu and his beloved Bach as everyone found their seats, his high-school wind ensemble, a violin-piano duet from Schindler's List, two sopranos singing "For Good" from *Wicked*, and the devastating videos of Nathan playing piano: a toy one at age five, picking out a ditty that apparently required little sister Nellie to sit next to him and clap her hands when he nodded his head; the old upright we had given the Robinsons when my wife gave me a new Boston on my fiftieth birthday; the baby grand Tess's daughter let them borrow; the concert grand at school on which he played a fast fugue and then lay on his back on the bench and played a two-part invention upside-down. Always that little smile, then the big one.

The celebration dealt with grief in the Jewish way, out into the open, tearfully, laughingly. For Nathan our community came together in joy, just as it did after September 11, and after a tragic school-bus crash earlier that same year. Protestants like me were not taught to deal with loss so outwardly; yet I will try to remember Nathan with a smile on my lips.

Except when I also remember that his mother did not speak at the memorial; that her eyes were red and brimming at the Shiva when she spoke to us poignantly about the piano recitals and the old black upright and the violin lessons she gave our second daughter; that Tess slumped at the end of her row with her hand to her forehead while Nathan's ghost played Schubert and everyone filed in and greeted each other noisily and laughed about their daily lives. Where is the anger at this senseless loss? For God's sake, he never got to take calculus, or play the "Appassionata" in concert, or escort his little

sister to her first day of high school. Why doesn't someone get up on stage and cry, and scream, and curse creation? How are music and math supposed to compensate? There is no order that I can see. I see only chaos, and helpless children joking about death.

In the usual way of things, despair fades, joy fades. The pianos and recitals in common with the Robinsons weren't enough and we did little about remembering Nathan, or consoling his parents. For a while I played a lot more Grieg on the piano, having discovered the tone poems and especially the piano version of his Holberg Suite in September 2001 when the planes hit the towers. The Air marked *Andante religioso* is doleful and inspirational at the same time, and it helped then to make sense of senselessness. But the memory of Nathan slowly dissipated until all that was left was a vague, selfishly stupid fear that when my birthday rolled around again, it would have changed, that I wouldn't be able to think of March 14 so frivolously anymore. It's now Nathan's death day too.

Then in November, I saw in the local paper that there had been an evening of Bach dedicated to Nathan's memory, in the First Baptist Church, just a few days after what would have been his sixteenth birthday. All my anger came rushing back. By now, his girl friends would have bowed out to a Girlfriend, he would have been measuring movement through calculus, he would have discovered the dark passion of Beethoven. All gone, destroyed, in the cruelest paradoxes: the child dead before the man, the son dead before the parent, the negation of the capability. That concert would have been the time for me, amongst the familiar Protestant pews and Bibles and altars, to stand up and rail at a mendacious God.

And like most things Protestant that would have been completely selfish and stupid. I'm glad I missed the concert and the chance to make a fool of myself. It's my problem, not the community's, that I can hardly bear to play Bach anymore. Music will prevail without me. Tess' students leave her, new ones arrive. The various pianos of my life and Nathan's live on somewhere, physically or not. Only because of death can we understand the chaos in the melodious heart of mathematics.

Nathan would have seen the humor. If we were to listen, he's saying right now, "Dad, Mom, I died on Pi Day!"