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Mr. STEINWAY

By ROBERT BLOCH

From the macabre pen of Robert Bloch—author of Psycho and "The Pin"—a bizarre variation of an old theme: the Eternal Triangle. In this case a brilliant concert pianist, an infatuated TV starlet, and a rival with four ebony legs and eighty-eight gnashing teeth!

THE first time I saw Leo, I thought he was dead. His hair was so black and his skin was so white — I'd never seen hands so pale and thin. They lay crossed on his chest and, I suppose, concealed the rhythm of his breathing. There was something almost repulsive about him; he was so thin, so still, and there was such a *nothingness* on his face. It was like a death-mask that had been made a little too late, after the last bit of the living personality has fled. I stared down at Leo, shuddered a little, and started to move away.

Then he opened his eyes, and I fell in love with him.

He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the enormous sofa, grinned, rose. At least, I suppose he did. All I really noticed was the deep brown of his pupils and the warm, rich hunger that poured from them into me, the hunger

that poured and found a feeding-place somewhere in my heart.

I know what it sounds like. But I'm not a schoolgirl, and I don't keep a dairy any longer, and it's been years since I've had a mad, mad crush. I'd been going around for years, assured that I was emotionally mature. Until he opened his eyes and I fell in love with him.

Harry was making the introductions, now.

". . . Dorothy Endicott. She heard you play in Detroit last week and she wanted to meet you. Dorothy, this is Leo Winston."

He was quite tall, and he managed a little bow, or rather an inclination of his head, without once moving his gaze. I don't know *what* he said. "Charmed" or "delighted" or "pleased to meet you" — it didn't matter. He was *looking* at me.

I did all the wrong things, I

blushed. I giggled. I said something about how much I admired his playing, and then I repeated myself and tripped over the words.

But I did *one* right thing. I looked back. All the while Harry was explaining how we'd just happened to stop up and we didn't mean to disturb him but the door was open so we walked right in. And he wanted to remind Leo about placing the piano for tomorrow night's concert, and the ticket-sales were going good according to the latest report this noon. And now he had to run along and arrange for the puffs for tomorrow's papers, so —

"There's no reason for you to hurry off, is there, Miss Endicott?"

There was, I agreed, no reason at all. So Harry left, like the good little Samaritan he was, and I stayed and talked to Leo Winston.

I don't know what we talked about. It's only in stories that people seem able to remember long conversations *verbatim*. (Or is it long *verbatim* conversations? It's only in stories that people have perfect control of grammar, too.)

But I learned that his name was once Leo Weinstein . . . that he was thirty-one years old . . . unmarried . . . he liked Siamese kittens . . . he broke his leg once, skiing up at Saranac

. . . couldn't stand Chopin or Poulenc . . . he liked Manhattans made with dry vermouth, too.

It was over the second of these, after I told him all about myself (and nothing, unless he could read my eyes) that he asked me if I wanted to meet Mr. Steinway.

Of course I said yes, and we went into the other room, the one behind the sliding doors. There sat Mr. Steinway, all black and polished to perfection grinning a welcome with his eighty-eight teeth.

"Would you like to hear Mr. Steinway play something for you?" asked Leo.

I nodded, feeling a warmth far beyond the power of two Manhattans to inspire — a warmth born of the way he said it. I hadn't felt that way since I was thirteen and in love with Bill Prentice and he asked if I'd like to see him do a Full Gaynor off the high board.

So Leo sat down on the bench and he patted Mr. Steinway on the leg the way I sometimes pat Angkor, my Siamese kitten. And they played for me. They played the *Appassionata* and the *berceuse* from *The Firebird* and something very odd by Prokofieff and then several things by the two Scotts — Cyril, and Raymond. I suppose Leo wanted to show his versatility, or perhaps that was Mr. Steinway's idea. Anyway, I liked it all, and I said so, em-

phatically.

"I'm glad you appreciate Mr. Steinway," Leo said. "He's very sensitive, I'll have you know, like everyone in my family. And he's been with me a long time — almost eleven years. He was a surprise from my mother, when I made my debut at Carnegie."

Leo stood up. He was very close to me, because I'd been sitting on the piano bench beside him ever since the *berceuse*, and that made it easier for me to see his eyes as he closed the black lip over Mr. Steinway's teeth and said, "Time for a little rest, before they come and get you."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Is Mr. Steinway ill?"

"Not at all — I thought he sounded in the best of spirits." Leo grinned (how could I ever have imagined him dead, with his incandescent vitality?) and faced me. "He's going over to the concert hall this evening — he has a date to play with me tomorrow night. Which reminds me, will you be there?"

The only answer for that one was, "Silly boy!" but I restrained it. Restraint did not come easy with me when I was with Leo. Not when he looked at me like that. With his eyes holding such hunger, and the long slim fingers caressing the panelling as they had caressed the keys, as they could so easily caress —

I trust I'm making myself clear?

Certainly I was transparent enough the following evening. After the concert we went out, just the four of us; Harry and his wife, Leo, and I. And then just Leo and I, in the candlelight of the apartment, in the big room that looked so bare and empty without Mr. Steinway squatting there where he belonged. We watched the stars over Central Park and then we watched the reflections in each other's pupils, and what we said and what we did are not meant for sharing.

The next day, after we read the notices, we went for a walk in the Park. Leo had to wait until they'd moved Mr. Steinway back into the apartment, and it was lovely in the Park, as always. As it must have been for millions who, somewhere in their memories, hold an instant when they walked in Central Park in May and owned it all — the trees, the sunshine, the distant laughter rising and falling as transiently as the heartbeat quickened by a moment of ecstasy.

But — "I think they're on the way over," Leo said, glancing at his watch and rising from the bench. "I really ought to be there when they move him in. Mr. Steinway's big, but he's quite delicate, actually."

I took his hand. "Come on, then," I said.



Bill Ashman



He frowned. I'd never seen him frown before, and it seemed out of character to me. "Maybe you'd better not, Dorothy. I mean, it's a slow job up those stairs, and then I'll have to practise. Don't forget, I'm booked for Boston next Friday, and that means four hours a day for the next week — Mr. Steinway and I must get our program in shape. We're doing the Ravel Concerto, the Left-Hand one, with the Symphony, and Mr. Steinway isn't fond of Ravel. Besides, he'll be leaving on Wednesday morning, so there really isn't too much time."

"But you aren't taking the piano with you on tour, are you?"

"Certainly. Where I go, Mr. Steinway goes. I've never used nother instrument since Mother gave him to me. I wouldn't feel right about it, and I'm sure it would break Mr. Steinway's heart."

Mr. Steinway's heart.

I had a rival, it seems. And I laughed about it, we both laughed about it, and he went away to his work and I went back to my apartment to sleep, perchance to dream . . .

I tried phoning him about five. No answer. I waited a half-hour, and then I grabbed the nearest rosy pink cloud and floated over to his apartment.

As usual — as was customary with Leo, whose mother had literally kept "open house" out on

the Cape — the door was unlocked. And I naturally took advantage of the situation to tiptoe in and surprise Leo. I pictured him playing, practising, absorbed in his work. But Mr. Steinway was silent, and the sliding doors to the other room were closed. I got my surprise in the anteroom.

Leo was dead again.

He lay there on the huge couch, his pallor almost phosphorescent in the gathering twilight. And his eyes were closed and his ears were closed and his very heart seemed closed until I bent down and blended the warmth of my lips with his own.

"Dorothy!"

"Sleeping Beauty, in reverse!"

I exclaimed, triumphantly, rumpling his hair. "What's the matter, darling? Tired after your rehearsal? I don't blame you, considering —"

It was still light enough for me to recognize his frown.

"Did I — startle you?" It was a B-movie line, but this was, to me, a B-movie situation. The brilliant young concert pianist, torn between love and a career, interrupted in his pursuit of art by the sweet young thing. He frowns, rises, takes her by the shoulders as the camera pans in close and says —

"Dorothy, there's something you and I must talk about."

I was right. Here it comes, I

told myself. The lecture about how art comes first, love and work don't mix — and after last night, too! I suppose I pouted. I make a very pretty pout, on occasion. But I waited, prepared to hear him out.

And he said, "Dorothy, what do you know about Solar Science?"

"I've ever heard of it."

"That's not surprising. It's not a popular system; nothing in parapsychology has gained general acceptance. But it works, you know. It works. Perhaps I'd better explain from the beginning, so you'll understand."

So he explained from the beginning, and I did my best to understand. He must have talked for over an hour, but what I got out of it boils down to just a little.

It was his mother, really, who got interested in Solar Science. Apparently the basis of the concept was similar to Yoga or some of these new mental health systems. She'd been experimenting for about a year before her death — and during the past four years, since her passing, Leo had worked on it alone. The trance was part of the system. Briefly, as near as I could make out, it consisted of concentration — "but effortless effort of concentration, that's important" — on one's inner self, in order to establish "complete self-awareness." According to Solar Science one can become per-

fectly and utterly aware of one's entire being, and "communicate" with the organs of the body, the cells, the very atomic and molecular structure. Because everything, down to the very molecules, possesses a vibration-frequency and is therefore alive. And the personality, as an integrated unit, achieves full harmony only when complete communication is established.

Leo practised four hours a day with Mr. Steinway. And he devoted at least two hours a day to Solar Science and "self-awareness." It had done wonders for him, done wonders for his playing. For relaxation, for renewal, for serenity, it was the ultimate answer. And it led to an *extension* of awareness. But he'd talk about that some other time. What did I think?

What *did* I think?

I honestly didn't know. Like everyone else, I'd heard a lot, and listened to very little, about telepathy and extra-sensory perception and teleportation and such things. And I'd always associated these matters with the comic-strip idea of scientists and psychologists and outright charlatans and gullible old women given to wearing long ropes of wooden beads which they twisted nervously during seances.

It was something different to hear Leo talk about it, to feel the intensity of his conviction, to

hear him say — with a belief that burned — that this meditation was all that had preserved his sanity in the years after his mother died.

So I told him I understood, and I'd never interfere with his scheme of living, and all I wanted was to be with him and be *for* him whenever and wherever there was a place for me in his life. And, at the time, I believed it.

I believed it even though I could only see him for an hour or so, each evening, before his Boston concert. I got a few TV leads during the week — Harry arranged some auditions, but the client postponed his decision until the first of the month — and that helped to pass the time.

Then I flew up to Boston for the concert, and Leo was magnificent, and we came back together with nary a thought or a word about Solar Science or anything except the two of us.

But on Sunday morning, we were three again. Mr. Steinway arrived.

I dashed over to my own apartment and came running back after lunch. Central Park shimmered in the sunlight, and I admit I shared something of its radiance.

Until I was in the apartment, and heard Mr. Steinway rumbling and growling and purring and screeching and cachinnating, and I hurried in to Leo and the piano stopped.

He frowned. It seemed I was developing quite a talent for making an unexpected entrance.

"I didn't expect you so soon," he said. "I was just practising something new."

"So I heard. What's the rest of it?"

"Never mind, now. Did you want to go out this afternoon?" He said it just as if he didn't see the new shoes, the suit, the hat I'd bought from Mr. John just to surprise him.

"No. Honestly, darling, I didn't mean to interrupt. Go on with your playing."

Leo shook his head. He stared down at Mr. Steinway.

"Does it bother you to have me around when you practise?"

Leo didn't look up.

"I'll go away."

"Please," he said. "It isn't me. But I'm afraid that Mr. Steinway doesn't — respond to you properly."

That tore it. *That* ripped it to shreds. "Now wait a minute," I said, coolly (if white-hot rage is cool). "Are we doing a scene from *Harvey*, now? Is this some more of your Solar Science, and am I to infer that Mr. Steinway is alive? I admit I'm not very bright, not overly perceptive, and I couldn't be expected to share your sensitive reactions. So I've never noticed that Mr. Steinway had an existence of his own. As a matter of fact, to me, it's just

another piano. And its legs don't begin to compare with my own."

"Dorothy, please —"

"Dorothy doesn't please! Dorothy isn't going to say one more word in the presence of your — your — incubus, or whatever it is! So *Mr. Steinway* doesn't *respond* to me properly, is that it? Well, you tell *Mr. Steinway* for me that he can go plumb to —"

Somehow he got me out of the apartment, into the sunlight, into the park, into his arms. And it was peaceful there, and his voice was soft, and far away the birds made a song that hurt me in my throat.

". . . so you weren't far wrong at that, darling," Leo told me. "I know it's hard to believe for anyone who hasn't studied Solar Science or ultra-kinetic phenomena. But *Mr. Steinway* is alive in a way. I can communicate with him, and he can communicate with me."

"You *talk* to it? It *talks* to you?"

His laughter was reassuring, and I desperately wanted to be reassured, now. "Of course not. I'm talking about vibratory communication. Look at it this way, darling. I don't want to sound like a lecturer — but this is science, not imagination."

"Did you ever stop to think what makes a piano? It's a highly complicated arrangement of sub-

stances and materials — thousands of tiny, carefully calculated operations go into the construction of a truly fine instrument. In a way, the result is comparable to the creation of an artificial being; a musical robot. To begin with, there's a dozen different kinds of wood, of various ages and condition. There's special finishes, and felt, gut, animal matter, varnish, metal, ivory — a combination of elements infinitely complex. And each has its own vibratory rate, which in turn forms part of the greater vibratory rate of the whole. These vibrations can be sensed, contacted and understood."

I listened, because I wanted to find sense and sanity and serenity somewhere in it all. I wanted to believe, because this was Leo talking.

"Now, one thing more, and that's the crux of the matter. When vibration occurs, as it does in all being, electronic structure is disturbed. There's an action sequence — and a record of that action is made on the cellular structure.

"Now if you record many messages on a single piece of tape at different speeds, you'd have to play them back at these speeds in order to understand the message as a whole. Inability to do so would keep you from knowing or comprehending these messages. That's what ordinarily bars our

communication with non-human life forms and gives us the impression that they have neither thought nor sentience.

"Since we humans use the development of the human brain as criterion, we aren't aware of the intelligence of other life-forms. We don't know how intelligent they are because we, most of us, don't realize that rocks and trees and everything in the material universe can 'think' or 'record' or 'communicate' at its own level.

"That's what Solar Science has taught me — and it has given me the method of entering into communication with such forms. Naturally, it isn't simple. But from self-awareness I have slowly proceeded into a more general awareness of vibratory rates. It's only logical that Mr. Steinway, so much a part of my life and a part of me, would be a logical subject for an experiment in communication. I've made that experiment and succeeded, at least partially. I can share communication with Mr. Steinway; and it's not all one-way, I assure you. You remember what the Bible said about 'sermons in stones' — it's literally true."

Of course he said more than that, and less, and in different words. But I got the idea. I got the idea only too well. Leo wasn't altogether rational.

"It's really a functional entity,

too, darling," he was saying. "Mr. Steinway has a personality all his own. And it's a growing one, thanks to my ability to communicate with him in turn. When I practise, Mr. Steinway practises. When I play, Mr. Steinway plays. In a sense, Mr. Steinway does the actual playing and I'm really only the mechanism that starts the operation. It may sound incredible to you, Dorothy, but I'm not fooling when I say there are things Mr. Steinway refuses to play. There are concert halls he doesn't like, certain tuning practises he refuses to respond to or adjust to. He's a temperamental artist, believe me, but he's a great one! And I respect his individuality and his talent.

"Give me a chance, darling — a chance to communicate with him until he understands you and your place in our lives. I can override his jealousy after all, isn't it natural that he'd be jealous? Let me attune our vibrations, until he senses the reality of your presence as I sense it. Please, try not to think of me as crazy. It's not hallucination. Believe me."

I stood up. "All right, Leo. I believe you. But the rest is up to you. I shan't be seeing you again until — until you've made some arrangements."

My high heels clip-clip-clipped up the path. He didn't try to follow me. A cloud covered the sun, wrapped it in a ragged cloth, torn

and dirty. Torn and dirty —

I went to Harry, of course. After all, he was Leo's agent and he'd know. But he *didn't* know. I found that out at once, and I cut myself off before I said too much. As far as Harry was concerned, Leo was perfectly normal.

"Except, of course, you may be thinking of that business with his mother. The old lady's death hit him pretty hard you know what show business moms are like. She ran the whole shooting-match for years, and when she kicked off like that, he kind of went haywire for a while. But he's all right now. A good man, Leo. A comer. Thinking of a European flier next season — they think Solomon is such hot stuff. Wait until they hear Leo."

That's what I got out of Harry, and it wasn't much. Or *was* it?

It was enough to set me thinking, as I walked home — thinking about little Leo Weinstein, the boy prodigy, and his adoring mother: She watched over him, shielded him, saw to it that he practised and rehearsed, regulated the details of his life so he came to depend upon her utterly. And then, when he made his debut like a good boy, she gave him Mr. Steinway.

Leo had cracked up, a bit, when she died. I could imagine that very easily. He had cracked up until he turned to his mother's gift for support. Mr. Steinway

had taken over. Mr. Steinway was more than a piano, but not in the way Leo said. In reality, Mr. Steinway had become a surrogate for the mother. An extension of the Oedipus-situation, wasn't that what they called it?

Everything was falling into a pattern, now. Leo, lying on the couch and looking as though he were dead — returning, in fantasy, to the womb. Leo "communicating" with the vibrations of inanimate objects — trying to maintain contact with his mother beyond the grave.

That was it, that must be it, and I knew no way of fighting the situation. Silver cord from the mother or silver chord from the piano — it formed a Gordian knot either way; and I was weaponless.

I arrived at my apartment and my decision simultaneously. Leo was out of my life. Except —

He was waiting for me in the hall.

Oh, it's easy to be logical, and reason matters out coldly, and decide on a sensible course of action. Until somebody holds you in his arms, and you have the feeling that you *belong* there and he promises you that things will be different from now on, he understands, he can't live without you. He said all the tried and true things, the trite and true things, the right and true things. And all

that had gone before faded away with the daylight, and the stars came out and spread their splendour . . .

I must be very exact now. It's important that I be exact. I want to tell just how it was the next afternoon when I walked around to his apartment.

The door was open and I came in, and it was like coming home. Until I saw that the sliding doors to the other room were closed, until I started towards them, until I heard the music. Leo — and Mr. Steinway — were playing again.

I called it "music," but it wasn't *that*, any more than the sudden anguished scream thrust from a human throat is normal communication. All I can say is that the piano was playing and the sound came to me as vibrations, and for the first time I understood something of what Leo had meant.

For I heard, and understood that I heard, the shrill trumpeting of elephants, the slow groaning of boughs in the nightwind, the crash of toppling timber, the raw rumble of ore filling a furnace, the hideous hissing of molten metal, the screech of steel, the agonized whine of sandpaper, the tormented thrum of twisted strings. The voices that were not voices spoke, the inanimate was animate, and Mr. Steinway was alive.

Until I slid the doors open, and

the sound suddenly ceased, and I saw Mr. Steinway sitting there alone.

Yes, he was alone, and I saw it as surely as I saw Leo slumped in the chair on the far side of the room, with the look of death on his face.

He couldn't have stopped in time and run across the room to that chair — any more than he could have composed that atonal *allegro* Mr. Steinway played.

Then I shook Leo, and he came alive again, and I was crying in his arms and telling him what I'd heard, and hearing him say, "It's happened, you can see that now, can't you? Mr. Steinway exists — he communicates directly — he's an integrated personality. Communication is a two-way affair, after all. And he can tap my energy, take what he needs from me to function. When I let go, he takes over. Don't you see?"

I saw. And I tried to keep the fear from my eyes, tried to banish it from my voice, when I spoke to him. "Come into the other room, Leo. Now. Hurry, and don't ask questions."

I didn't want questions, because I didn't want to tell him that I was afraid to talk in Mr. Steinway's presence. Because Mr. Steinway could hear, and he was jealous.

I didn't want Mr. Steinway to hear when I told Leo, "You've

got to get rid of it. I don't care if it's alive or if we're both crazy. The important thing is to get rid of it, now. Get away from it. Together."

He nodded, but I didn't want nods.

"Listen to me, Leo! This is the only time I'll ask it, and your only chance to answer. Will you come away with me now, today? I mean it—pack a suitcase. Meet me at my apartment in half an hour. I'll phone Harry, tell him something, anything. We haven't time for anything more. I know we haven't time."

Leo looked at me, and his face started to go dead, and I took a deep breath, waiting for the sound to start again from the room beyond—but his eyes met mine, and then the color came back to his face and he smiled at me, *with* me, and he said, "I'll see you in twenty minutes. With suitcase."

I went down the stairs swiftly, and I know I had perfect control. I had perfect control out on the street, too, until I heard the vibrations of my own high heels. And the sound of tires on the pavement, and the singing of the telephone wires in the wind, and the *snick* of traffic-lights, and the creaking of an awning, and then came the sense of the sounds *under* the sounds and I heard the voice of the city. There's agony

in asphalt and a slow melancholy in concrete, and wood is tortured when it splinters, and the vibrations of a piece of cloth twisted into clothing weaves terror from a threnody of thread. And all around me I felt the waves, the endless waves, beating in and pulsing over, pouring out their life.

Nothing looked different, and everything was changed. For the world was *alive*. For the first time, everything in the world came alive, and I sensed the struggle to survive. And the steps in my hallway were alive, and the banister was a long brown serpent, and it hurt the key to be twisted in the lock, and the bed sagged and the springs complained when I put down the suitcase and crushed my protesting clothes into its confines. And the mirror was a silver shimmer of torment, and the lipstick was being bruised by my lips, and I could never, never eat food again.

But I did what I had to do, and I glanced at my watch and tried to hear only the ticking, not the cries of coils and the moan of metal; tried to see only the time and not the hands.

Twenty minutes.

Only, now, forty minutes had passed. And I hadn't even phoned Harry yet (the black mouthpiece, the bakelite corroding, the wires nailed to the crosses of telephone

poles) and I couldn't phone because Leo wasn't here.

To go down again into the street was more than flesh could bear, but the need was stronger than the needs of flesh. And I went out into the seething symphony where all sound was vibration and all vibration was life, and I came to Leo's apartment and everything was dark.

Everything was dark except Mr. Steinway's teeth, gleaming like the tusks of elephants in forests of ebony and teak. Leo couldn't have moved Mr. Steinway from the inner room to the outer room. And he hated Chopin. He wouldn't sit there in the dark playing the *Funeral March* . . .

Mr. Steinway's teeth were spotted with little drops and they gleamed, too. And Mr. Steinway's heavy legs were wet. They brushed against me, because Mr. Steinway was rolling and rumbling towards me across the room, and he was playing and playing and telling me to look, look, look at the floor where I could see Leo dead, *really* dead, and all the power was Mr. Stein-

way's now, the power to play, the power to live, the power to kill . . .

Yes, it's true. I scraped the box and liberated the sulphur and released the flame and started the fire and let its roaring drown out the vibrations, drown out the voice of Mr. Steinway as he screamed and gnashed his eighty-eight teeth. I set the fire. I admit it. I killed Mr. Steinway. I admit it.

But I *didn't* kill Leo.

Why don't you ask *them*? *They're* burned, but *they* know! Ask the sofa. Ask the rug. Ask the pictures on the wall. *They* saw it happen. *They* know I'm not guilty.

You can do it. All you need is the ability to communicate with the vibrations. Just as I'm doing it now. See? I can hear everything they're saying, right in this room. I can understand the cot, and the walls, and the doors, and the bars and the ceiling.

I don't have anything more to say. If you don't believe me, if you won't help me, then go away. Let me just sit here and listen. Listen to the bars . . .

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