



**STORY +
STUDY GUIDE**

TchaiCATsky



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Our cat got his name the day we brought him home. He plopped down next to a Wi-Fi speaker. It was playing a piece by Tchaikovsky.

For the next eight hours, our new cat listened to piano music. He rolled on his back and purred the whole time. He looked like a normal tiger cat. He screeched when I carried him away for dinner.

We called him Tchaicatsky.

I wasn't so crazy about piano music. But Mom made me practice every afternoon. Tchaicatsky sat by my side. He howled every time I played a wrong note.

"I want to quit piano," I told Mom. "Even Tchaicatsky knows I can't play. What I'm good at is baseball."

"You could be good at piano, too, Danny. You just have to practice."

That afternoon, I tried to sneak out of the house with my baseball and bat. Mom caught me. "Practice first," she said.

I stayed in the piano room, throwing my ball. When it rolled under the couch, I got on the floor to find it.

And then I heard piano chords—beautiful, beautiful piano cords. I thought it was Mom.

But my mother wasn't playing. Tchaicatsky was. His little paws zipped across the keys. His yellow eyes were shining.

I almost screamed for Mom.

But then I got the greatest idea of my life.

I went into the hallway. My mother was on a business call. I knew she'd stay in her home office all afternoon.

I locked the door to the piano room and slipped out the window. I could hear Tchaicatsky practicing as I headed for the park.

Tchaicatsky was still playing when I got back home. Mom was in the kitchen fixing a special dinner.

“Why the chocolate cake?” Dad asked. “Is it somebody’s birthday?”

“No,” Mom said, grinning.

“Okay, so you want to give me a hint?” Dad asked.

“Your son is a piano prodigy,” she said. “You should hear him play.”

“I can’t wait,” Dad said.

“He’ll play for you after dinner,” Mom said. “Won’t you, Danny?”

“Uh, no,” I said. “I’m too tired from practicing.”

I felt a little bad about using that excuse. But just a little. I mean, I did practice baseball for two hours. And I was tired from practicing.

I let Tchaicatsky play instead of me all week.

He got better and better at piano. And Mom got happier and happier with me. I ate the best meals of my life.

That was the good news. The bad news was . . . Mrs. Sherman, my piano teacher.

Mrs. Sherman was Mom’s piano teacher when she was a girl. Mom always said that Mrs. Sherman had a perfect ear. Mom was right about that. Mrs.

Sherman heard every mistake I made. When I hit a sour note, she screeched louder than Tchaicatsky.

I didn't know what to do about my piano lesson.

Then I got the second greatest idea of my life.

Saturday morning, I met Mrs. Sherman at the front door. I led her to the couch at the back of the piano room.

“Sit here,” I said. “I have a surprise.”

I sat down on the piano bench. I lifted Tchaicatsky onto my lap. He played the piano like a pro.

When Tchaicatsky finished, Mrs. Sherman had tears in her eyes. “Oh, Danny, I've never . . .” she sobbed. She stood up and hugged me.

At the start of each piano session, I led Mrs. Sherman to the couch.

Tchaicatsky never made a mistake. “I never...” she said at the end of each lesson.

So everybody was happy for a while.

Even the end of baseball season didn't make me sad, because Halloween was just a few weeks away.

But so was my piano concert.

I tried to get out of the concert. None of my excuses worked. Mrs. Sherman asked me to learn *October Song* by Tchaikovsky.

Tchaicatsky loved our new piece by his favorite composer. He learned to play it beautifully.

Now I had to figure out how Tchaicatsky could play for me at the concert.

And then I got the third greatest idea of my life.

My new Dracula costume for Halloween came with a big, black cape. I started wearing the cape everywhere. I wanted to get my parents used to seeing me in it. The cape was part of my plan.

I'd sneak Tchaicatsky into the concert in my backpack. I'd slip the backpack off before my turn to play. I'd wrap my cape around Tchaicatsky and me. Then I'd put Tchaicatsky on my lap at the piano.

The audience wouldn't see a thing.

But I forgot how much Tchaicatsky hated wrong notes.

The day of the concert arrived. We were sitting next to my parents in the concert hall.

The first student went to the piano. She played a bad note during her very first measure. Tchaicatsky shrieked. Everybody looked my way. I pretended that I was choking.

"Are you okay, Danny?" Dad whispered.

I nodded.

The second student made one mistake after another. Tchaicatsky corrected him each time. And I covered up with coughing fits.

I thought Mom was going to call an ambulance.

"Why don't you get some water," Dad said.

I left the room. Mrs. Sherman had put me last on the program. She always saved the best for last. So I had time for a break.

I took a long walk. I was three floors up when Mom called.

"Are you okay, Danny?" Her voice echoed up the stairwell.

“I’m fine,” I shouted.

“You’re up next.”

We raced into the concert hall.

Mrs. Sherman’s next-to-last student was playing her last note. And her last note was terrible. But nobody heard Tchaicatsky’s screeching. The audience was already clapping.

The girl sat down. Mrs. Sherman announced my name.

I was shaking when I reached the piano bench. I had practiced putting Tchaicatsky on my lap with the cape around us. It took me twice as long as usual. I heard the audience whispering.

And then Tchaicatsky began to play. I moved my head, my back, and my hands in time with the music. It looked like I was doing all the work.

Tchaicatsky finished playing.

There was silence in the room. No applause. No nothing. Something was wrong. But what was it?

And then the clapping started. It kept getting louder.

I looked across the room. Everybody was on their feet. They were giving me a standing O.

I could see my parents. They had the biggest home-run grins ever. Mrs. Sherman was crying. I felt like a star.

Before I knew it, they were screaming. *Encore! Encore!*

And then . . .

Everything got really messed up.

Because I'd forgotten about the most important character in this story.

Tchaicatsky had been sitting patiently on my lap. But there was this beautiful Grand Piano in front of him. All he wanted to do was play it. And that's just what he did.

Meanwhile, I was still waving at the audience. My hands were high in the air. It took me a minute to catch up with what was happening.

By that time, everybody was looking at the piano. It seemed to be playing on its own.

Finally, a little girl in the front row shouted, "It's a cat. A cat is playing the piano."

I heard the word *cat* repeated over and over.

And then the audience got quiet. They were all watching in amazement. The genius playing the piano was not a boy but a cat.

And Tchaicatsky? He threw his tiny heart into *A Little Night Music* by Mozart. He played the *Shepard* song by Beethoven. He finished the pieces that I was supposed to learn. Then he kept on playing.

The audience would have listened all night. But Tchaicatsky was tired. He wrapped up Debussy's *Light of the Moon*. Then he dropped his little head in my lap.

The audience went crazy.

On the way to the car, my dad patted me on the shoulder. "My son the piano prodigy," he said.

Mom shook her head.

Of course I was punished. My parents took away my Dracula costume. I had to stay home on Halloween.

A story about Tchaicatsky came out in the paper. *The Every Night Show* wanted Tchaicatsky on their TV program.

But Mom said going on a TV show was too much for a young cat. Tchaicatsky should stay out of the limelight.

Mom also told me that I could stop playing piano.

I shocked her when I decided not to quit. I had learned a lesson from Tchaicatsky. I knew I wasn't a genius like our cat. But at least I could practice more like him.

Story Questions

(Possible answers are in parentheses.)

1. Who narrates, or tells, the story? (Danny tells the story.)
2. What is this story's point of view called: first-person, second person, third person, or omniscient? (The story's point of view is first-person.)
3. *Gullible* is a word that means "easy to fool." Which character do you think was the most gullible? (Answers will vary, but some students will say that Danny's parents or his piano teacher were most gullible.)
4. What words best describe Danny? (Possible answers: Danny was smart, sly, clever, tricky, interesting, creative.)
5. What were Danny's three great ideas? (His first idea was to let Tchaicatsky play the piano so he could play baseball; his second idea was to tell Mrs. Sherman he had a surprise, so he could get her seated on a couch, while he held Tchaicatsky and let the cat play the piano; his third idea was to wear a cape to hide Tchaicatsky during the piano concert.)
6. How does Danny's mother react to hearing music from the piano room at first? (At first she is terribly excited and believes Danny is a genius.)

7. How does Danny's father react to her excitement?
(He is skeptical, or doubtful, at first.)
 8. What problems did Danny have at the recital?
(Tchaicatsky howled each time another student played a wrong note; while the audience cheered, he waved and Tchaicatsky started playing again.)
 9. Do you think Danny's punishment was fair? Explain.
(Answers will vary.)
 10. What lesson did Danny learn? (He learned that you can only develop a new skill through practice.)
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Activities

1. Research Tchaikovsky or another famous composer mentioned in the story.
2. Draw a comic strip about the story.
3. Listen to one of the piano pieces that Tchaikovsky played.