Thud! Squeak! Thud! We could hear the footsteps coming down the stairs and the long golden fringe gently swayed as we scooted farther back to avoid an intrusion into our private world. It was a lazy Saturday afternoon in 1971 and Mikey and I were in our secret fort wearing the flared jeans and hippy beads that were all the rage. It was our place of refuge from which we could observe all and yet be as unnoticeable as a church mouse. In 1970, my grandfather passed away; he was my soul mate from the moment I was born and I had no idea he would still be able to offer me something years after his death. A year after my grandfather died, Grandma moved into a smaller apartment and there was no room for the baby grand piano that Grandpa had given her so many years ago on their first wedding anniversary in 1928. The piano would find itself the center of attention in our living room for the next several years but what it gave to me was worth more than any ordinary words my 8-year-old self could convey.

Dad had been a musician playing with Vic Damone as a young man so for hours we would sing songs from the 40’s from the old fake books he had stored away. He added to his collection with some new ones so I can remember wondering what a levee was and why would anyone want to drive a Chevy to it while we swayed together on that old piano bench. What in the world did it have to do with an American Pie?” Dad explained what all of these strange new vocabulary words were so that piano then. became a source of learning for this gangly redheaded girl. It was *our* fireplace smelling of old wood and leftover sticky furniture polish as we gathered around it and sang together creating a sense of unexpected family warmth and comfort.

Sitting under the piano provided hours of untold fun for my brother Mikey and me. We would be spies listening in to what we weren’t supposed to be hearing as Mom and Dad discussed the surprise upcoming birthday present. Shshsshshsh! “They’ll hear you...” Mikey mumbled as he scooted back away from the gilded cover that hung like a curtain from the graceful arc of the piano. It effectively hid us from all eyes unless one was squatting down to investigate the giggling coming from within the golden silky fringe. 18 months apart and often at war over who was right, the piano cave was Switzerland as we joined forces to hear what the adults were saying; partners in the forbidden eavesdropping, we found common ground and began to forge a friendship.

As the piano sat in the living room through the four seasons, we began to find new creative uses for our cave. It was not merely the elephant in the room that reminded me of a lost grandfather. Instead, it became a cave where we could squirrel away forbidden treats. Halloween was always a special occasion in our house. For weeks in advance, we would design costumes, and pour over pattern books, and finger fabric samples. Mom and Dad always insisted that they be made rather than bought; this year was to be the year of the headless horseman and the pilgrim. After the trick or treating was completed and the candy profits spread out like so many ants at a picnic, it was time to choose one to eat that night. In the days that followed, the candy was supposed to be eaten only in the kitchen or dining room but alas, that didn’t seem like any fun. After all, how did parents know that the bugs would cross the threshold into the living room? We would go into the kitchen, quickly grab a few stolen pieces of our sugar bounty, and then quietly disappear under the piano. When finished, I always stuffed my wrappers into my pockets but Mikey, the elder and wiser, had a better solution. “Let’s stuff them up into these little spots inside. Nobody will ever know!” He assured me. I believed in him and so for several years, that’s what we did whenever we had our Charleston Chews or Milky Way bars. Crinkle Crinkle Crinkle. Stuff. Smoosh, Stuff.

Fast forward to a later time and Mom wanted to redecorate the living room. I must have been about 12 or 13 and only sat beneath it once or twice a year now, usually retreating to lick my wounds after Dad saw the latest C in Spanish on my report card. My aunt and mom agreed to donate it to a worthy institution. She perused the phone book until she found a church located in the poorest section of Wilmington, De. “Would they like to have it? No, I am not looking to sell it,” she replied to the rather surprised and overwhelmed voice at the other end of the line. I was in the living room a few days later when 6 of the largest human beings I had ever seen turned Grandpa’s gift to Grandma on its side in order to get it out the front door. All eyes turned to me as my face approached the color of ripe strawberries for there on the floor had fallen about 100 old candy wrappers. “It was Mike,” I mumbled throwing him under the bus with a wonderfully developed sense of self-preservation for one so young. My mom’s face was redder than mine as these strangers all laughed and joked about the things their kids had done to ease her embarrassment. I believe it was my long red hair and giant brown eyes that made them gentle in their comments. Looking back, I think the moment shattered the seriousness of the occasion as she watched the symbol of her father’s love for her mother leave in the hands of these grateful strangers. Years after his death, my grandfather with wiggling ears was still doing so much for those around him. The church was blessed with something they could never have provided for their parishioners on their own. I feel like Mike, and I were the luckiest because we were able to do what most kids would like to but few can, for a few moments, Grandpa made us invisible in our piano cave. And I wonder if 30 years later, that old Waters piano is still helping, praising, and sheltering…