

**Chapter 1: All
Pianos Have Keys**



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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**Special Edition Serial Release
for IDRA's 50th Anniversary**

Chapter 1: All Pianos Have Keys

For many years my one and only claim to fame, notoriety, and achievement centered around a peculiar circumstance in my early life which seems to impress other people. This distinguishing characteristic was not that President Lyndon B. Johnson once invited me to dinner at the White House, nor that a school was named for me, nor that I was the first Mexican American Superintendent of Schools in Bexar County. My sole claim to fame appears to be that I was a student at the University of Texas at the age of 15!

For years I have heard myself introduced by admiring and sometimes envious acquaintances, as “This is José A. Cárdenas. He enrolled at the University of Texas at the age of 15.” Very frequently I hear the rebuttal, “I enrolled in college when I was sixteen,” but in all honesty, in my entire lifetime I have never heard one of these unimpressed pretenders who wish to undermine the significance of my accomplishment say, “So did I.” Therefore, I must conclude that my having enrolled in college at the age of 15 continues to be the tremendous achievement, seldom equaled by modern man.

The story behind the story of this unusual accomplishment is that, although I started school at the age of six and went through a 12- year program, I skipped the first, the sixth, and the 11th grades.

I really didn’t skip the first grade, I finished it in six weeks. This accomplishment has never received the notoriety of college at 15, mostly because at an early age I really didn’t understand it, and when I finally reached the age of wisdom, I felt it prudent to keep my mouth shut. It isn’t until now, as society is moving into the age of wisdom, and bilingual and multicultural education are becoming generally accepted, that I can tell my story.

As I stated previously, I enrolled in school like so many other children at the age of 6 without any inkling that I was to peak only nine years later. I wouldn’t have differed from so many other children if it weren’t for an inconsequential fact that was to change my whole life, namely, that all pianos have keys, or the converse, that all pianos don’t have keys. Little did I dream on that first day of school of the potential impact of this reality.

I still remember the preparation for the first day of school. I had been preparing for it for weeks, or rather I had been prepared for it for weeks. My father spoke to me about it with increasing frequency as the fateful day approached. Recent state legislation now prohibited instruction in any language other than English so that the fact that I didn’t speak or understand that language became of paramount importance. My older

brothers and sisters had attended school before the new law, so they had attended some of the many bilingual classes commonly taught along the Mexican border.

“Remember, your performance in school is indicative of your family background.”

“The performance of your brothers and sisters has always been exemplary; your performance must be exemplary, too.”

Polonius’ farewell lecture to his son Laertes seems pale in comparison to the weeks of indoctrination which I received.

As the first day of school approached, even my mother who seldom interfered in the manly subject of education joined in with some bits of advice.

The day of entrance came and went without making much of an impression of me. The teacher and many of the other students spoke only in English by state law, and since I didn’t understand much English, I withdrew into very satisfactory, self-directed and individualized activities such as drawing cats on my Big Chief tablet or conversing in Spanish about relatively non-academic topics with other children who shared my ignorance of the English language. If it weren’t for pianos, no significant trauma would have been induced by my cold turkey immersion into the English language.

Sometimes the affairs of the teacher and the English speakers proved to be interesting. I sometimes peeked at the instructional activities going on around me, although I must admit that my attention-span was limited, and I would again concentrate for hours on my cat drawings.

Lest the reader develop a false level of expectancy concerning my cat pictures and expect me demonstrate my artistic ability in depicting felines, let me hasten to clarify that the cats I drew were Mexican cats, or *gatos*, which consist of two parallel lines intersecting two other parallel lines at approximately ninety degree angles, or what the Americans call “Tic-Tac-Toe.” These drawings had value because you could either use them at the time or save them for recess when time which could be spent playing with cats was too valuable to waste drawing them. If a surplus developed, they could always be traded for *muertos* [hangman] or some other game requiring considerably more artistic ability than that which the good Lora made available to me.

One day when I had been at school for almost six weeks, I interrupted my cat drawings to peek at the instructional activity. I wish I could say that I was captivated by what I saw and heard, but this really was not so. The teacher was conducting some exercise in

which a statement was made, and the students repeated it. I didn't find out until much later that this procedure is called "modeling" and is essential to language development or at least essential to English as a second language development. I wasn't impressed then because if I had tried to learn Spanish by repeating everything my parents said I would have been called a *perico* [parrot] or accused of *burlando* [mimicking] and would have never lived long enough to enter the first grade.

What did attract my attention was the use of the word I had never heard before, "keys." Such a beautiful word; little did I suspect the inherent treachery in this beautiful little word.

The teacher had said, "All pianos have keys," and the class repeated it. Again and again.

Every time that I try to tell this story it breaks down at this point when some idiot asks me why the teacher would want to use that phrase. I really don't know, nor do I see what difference it makes; you can write a book about all the phrases teachers use which don't make sense. At the time the word sounded beautiful; even the mouth looked beautiful when the word was pronounced.

"KEES." Just like a smile. Perhaps it was the closest that the teacher had ever come to smiling, I don't know, the word just seemed nice.

Understanding the rest of the sentence was no problem. I guess by then I knew what "all pianos have" meant. Certainly, pianos were no problem. It sounded just like Spanish *pianos* except maybe a little mispronounced.

But I didn't know what the beautiful word meant. I slapped the kid next to me and asked him. He must have been the kid who drew the *muertos* which I exchanged for my cats because he hadn't been listening to the teacher.

"Que?"

"¿Qué es 'keys'? ¿Qué quiere decir 'keys'?"

I guess the market and demand for *muertos* game drawings was good because he only half-listened to me and gave me a curt reply before returning to full production.

"Llaves, pendejo."

Herein lies the treachery of the word. The Anglos, unknown to me at the time, use the word “keys” to refer to two things, the black and white things which you punch down to make a piano play, which we call *teclas*, and the small thin instruments which lock and unlock things, which we call *llaves*.

In his eagerness to stack up on *muerto* drawings before recess, the kid had given me the wrong translation.

As the lesson continued, I mulled the whole thing in my head. The word “keys” lost its beauty forever as I put the whole thing together. “All pianos have keys.” Only a few months before we had run up and down the street as we awaited the arrival of our new second hand piano. Several of my aunts had pianos. One of them even had a “pianola” (player piano) which she let me use. I have always regretted my short legs because it kept me from learning to play the piano. I once saw in a movie George Gershwin learning to play the piano by putting his fingers on the keys of me playing piano as the music role depressed them. I figure that I could have learned by this same method except that my legs were so short that my feet would not reach the pedals, so I had to crawl under the pianola and pump it with my hands. That kept my hands occupied. While I played “Under the Double Eagle” more than a thousand times or until the paper wore out, I never learned to play the piano.

This goes to show you that I had no mean background in pianos; yet the ones I had seen could not compare with the glorious instrument made available at considerable expense to complement my sister’s music lessons. It wasn’t that we were getting fed up with her one year of *solfeo* [solfeggio], but the piano was really in itself a source of pride and joy. After a few weeks, I finally got my turn at the daily ritual of dusting and polishing the piano. How well I remember every inch of that instrument, including – no, especially – that little round hole where one should insert the key in order to lock the cover which fitted over the keys. The fact that there were no keys to lock and unlock it really didn’t matter when my father explained how in families with well educated, with well brought up children, locking the piano was a waste of time since he knew that our well brought up hands would never hurt it – Hurt it? We were even scared to touch it!

“All pianos have keys” then became a grievous error. How disappointing to find out after only six weeks of school that the teacher could err. How I wish I had been spared that terrible reality at least until I was old enough to know about the infallibility of books. “It is so because it is in the book,” can become a valuable security blanket for a child who has just learned that “It is so because the teacher says so,” is only a myth.

“*Caballerosidad*” was so much instilled in me even then that, although I didn’t relish it, I knew my duty was to enlighten that poor misinformed teacher, especially with my knowledge of pianos.

I can imagine after six weeks of industrious individual study on my part what the teacher must have felt to see me raise my hand. Even having to go to the restroom had not produced such behavior. Like most everyone else in the room, the translation of the Spanish, “*tengo que ir al...*” [I have to go...] was combined with the “be excused” which the teacher taught us, to produce, “I have to go to the beescues.” Come to think of it, I must have been in high school when I learned that “Beescues” was not an English word synonym for “restroom.”

“Yes, Pepe.” (I was also in high school when I learned that my name was not Pepe.)

“No!”

“No, What?”

“No! All pianos do not have keys.”

“Yes, they do.”

“No.”

“Yes. All pianos have keys.”

With the help of a whole room full of helpful and extremely interested amateur translators, I compiled my next sentence; my longest one up to that day.

“We have a piano at home. It does not have keys.” (Heck, that was a paragraph, not a sentence.)

“Oh, but it doesn’t play.”

“*Que dijo?*”

“*Que no toca.*”

“Yes, it plays.”

“Look, Pepe. All pianos have keys. If you have a piano at home which does not have keys, then it is not any good, it doesn’t play. All good pianos have keys.”

Even today I can still remember that horror. Out of a sense of duty, out of a sense of *caballeridad*, which misinformed Anglo anthropologists sometimes call “machismo,” I had volunteered to help the teacher, and the help was not only rejected, but this was coupled with an insidious attack on the quality of our piano. After this day of infamy, Pearl Harbor several years later didn’t even faze me.

By now kids all over the room were in an uproar. I could hear them screaming, “*Tu mugre de piano*” [your lousy piano] and playing the piano in pantomime, although some of them played it upside-down, or from the bottom up, which in Spanish means something entirely different.

I imagine that during the years I have succeeded in repressing some of the experience because aside from being in the principal’s office I don’t remember much of what happened in school the rest of that day. That is, I don’t remember what happened before I got home. I do remember being home and trying to explain to my mother the difference between suspension and expulsion.

Try to place yourself in my shoes. Picture yourself at the age of six trying to explain to a hysterical mother that in spite of the fact that two brothers and a sister had gone to school for years without a single bad mark on department, the fourth offspring, the black sheep, had been suspended after only six weeks of school.

She cried about the effect this would have on the family, she cried about what it would do to my father, and she cried about what my father would do to me.

She cried over the possibility that my education was terminated even before I learned to read. I tried to reassure her by telling her I could already read and didn’t really have to go to school. I hated to say that to her because even if my brother had taught me how to read at home, and I could even read the newspaper, I knew that I could only do it in Spanish and therefore it didn’t count.

My mother finally had to call my father at work and break the news to him. He drove home within 15 minutes and by the end of another 15 minutes both brothers and my older sister had been called home from school. My little sister went to stay with relatives. The family discussion was followed by a trip with my father to the garage, which was followed by the entire family and half of the neighborhood. Several neighborhood *comadres* [extended family] cried over our misfortune and a few even expressed condolences to the family.

Just about the time that my father was about to start hitting me with a two by four, I decided to give it one more try. I looked at Dad straight in the eye and asked him to hear me out. My father's name is Justo and throughout his life he has used it more as an adjective than as a noun, so in fairness to me he decided to let me tell my story.

I told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Well, almost. I left out all of the stuff about drawing cats since I knew that my father would never accept the idea of one of his sons going to school to draw cats, which any fool could stay home and do.

After I finished my story, my father was undecided. Some instinct told him to whip me anyway; yet another instinct told him that maybe he should look further into the matter.

Two things saved me. One was my blessed mother saying, "A wise guy has always been, but a liar, never." The other thing was somebody suggesting that my father call his older brother, my Uncle Frank. Koehler's monkeys couldn't have demonstrated more insight than that which appeared all around. In the excitement nobody had thought of calling Uncle Frank. He had taken a law course through correspondence during the Depression, and few people in the family ever made an important decision without consulting him. He knew what he talked about. Recently I have had people tell me that they knew my "tío Pancho" really well, but I seldom believe them. If they knew him well, they would have known that considering his status in our town they wouldn't have called him "Pancho."

"Francisco" maybe, though usually "Don Francisco." "Pancho," never.

My father called "tío Francisco" who listened to the entire story, lit a store-bought cigarette, and sat down to smoke it and think. Nobody said a word. Nobody dared speak while my uncle thought. He knew all there was to know about bullfighting and had made many trips to the interior of Mexico to see bullfighters who seldom came to the little border town across the river. He also knew the batting average for everyone with the New York Yankees.

Finally, he spoke. "*Te voy a decir una cosa, Justo.*" He then proceeded to enumerate many observations he had made concerning schools. For one thing, teachers seldom married which was not normal behavior. But the real clincher was the story of the perpetual vests. Some kids that he knew had attended an American school. When looking into this program in school it appeared that about the only thing he had learned was a song about some perpetual vest, or "*Chaleco* forever." The kid's father had consulted my tío Francisco about the wisdom of teaching a child about a vest forever.

My uncle had finally figured out that it was part of a song he knew which ended with the words “America’s voice shall echo forever.”

“Such misunderstandings happen,” said my uncle, “perhaps the boy is right. There’s no telling what gringos will do, so I suggest that you go over to the school and talk to the principal before you whip that boy.”

Once my uncle made a decision the decision was final. In those days there was no court of appeals and, having consulted my uncle, one was bound by his decision, and anyway it was inconceivable to insult him by questioning the decision.

So my father and I proceeded to the school to speak with the principal and, if necessary, with the teacher. The principal received us rather coldly, which was odd, considering that my father had once fixed his papers so that he could visit Mexico. He sent for the teacher and the confrontation began. It may have lasted a long time, except that the teacher was so sure of herself that she cut her own throat.

“Pepe says that you have a piano at home, that it does not have keys, and that it plays.”

I wish you could have seen my father’s face. I had already unknowingly torpedoed the teacher by having told the story in Spanish using the troublesome *llave* instead of the elusive *tecla*.

In the excitement my father had carried the two-by-four into the school. Silently, he lifted it to his shoulder, grabbed it with both hands and in a cold, authoritative, and even fear-inspiring voice, he said, “Look, I don’t know what is going on in here. (I almost said, “what the hell is going on in here, but I knew it couldn’t be so. My father never used curse words in front of children. He was too much of a “macho” to do a thing like that.)

“Look, I don’t know what is going on here. I am going to say something, and I’m going to say it just once. We have a piano at home, it does not have keys, and it does play.”

My father just waited for someone to say something but knew that no one would. Any question about what he said would be the same as calling him a liar, and any person who called my father a liar would have to shoot it out with him at twenty paces. Besides, he was still holding the two-by-four.

Finally, the principal, a little pale, said, “May we be excused?” and in the company of the teacher left the office. I kind of wondered why and how both of them were going to do it at the same time, but I got distracted by overhearing a piece of their conversation.

“You will!”

“I will not!”

“You will!”

“I will not take him back.”

A lot of things I didn't hear, but at the end the teacher went back to the classroom, and the principal came into the office smiling.

“I finally figured out what the problem is, and it appears we solved the problem. It is evident that Pepe has finished the first grade and since he already knows more than the first grade teacher can teach him, he is ready to go into the second grade.”

It was nice to find out what the problem had been, and both my father and I ran all the way home to spread the good news. I have never seen so much relief and happiness all over the place, except perhaps the day I enrolled in college at the age of fifteen.

My mother made *champurrado*, *buñuelos* and all kinds of other goodies. My father said he had to go back to work, but I've always suspected that he just wanted to go back to spread the good news. He sure was proud to have a son who finished the first grade in six weeks. Even my oldest brother never did that. His department was a lot better than mine, but it took him a whole year to finish the first grade.

Being a humble and charitable family there was a lot of talk of trying to understand the poor teacher, who obviously had not been brought up around pianos. Everybody agreed that Americans were funny people and by the time that the janitor delivered the two-by-four we had left in the principal's office, the entire affair was water under the bridge.

I started the second grade the following day, and had little difficulty finishing it by May, mostly because I gave up drawing cats and tried to help the second grade teacher just like I had helped the first grade teacher. Word must have gotten around about my accomplishment because even though I have always been tone-deaf, as long as I was at that school, I always got straight A's in music. I guess all the teachers respected my knowledge of musical instruments in general, and pianos in particular.