

Aravella Barrett and the Keys of New Beginnings

As Aravella Elizabeth Barrett rode down the street of her new town, she took in her surroundings. The 1893 Texas frontier was bustling with the new coming immigrants. Aravella and her family were from Boston, coming for the exciting new opportunities.

She rode behind her father and mother down the dusty street in their covered wagon, scanning the shops on either side of the street. As she did so, she spotted an old piano in the center of the saloon off to her right. Seeing that piano reminded her of the piano lessons she used to take back home in Boston, sitting in the parlor while the music teacher taught the classical masterpieces.

Her family rode past town towards the empty land that was available to be settled. She wished that they would've lingered a bit longer near the old saloon, thinking longingly about the piano and the life she had left behind.

Her family began their new life by building a house. Aravella and her twin brothers, Michel and Richard, helped their father when it was safe. The trees were cut, a piece of land was cleared, and the logs were stripped of their bark. Then the logs were stacked up to make a cabin. Most of the hard work was done by Aravella's father, John, while her mother Elizabeth tended to the baby, Satina.

Aravella was a quiet, timid young lady. She often kept to herself, daydreaming while watching the flowers and grasses sway in the wind or making the bread for dinner. Some in Boston even said "She only speaks through her music."

It had been several months after Aravella and her family arrived at their new place; it was time to plant seeds for their garden and hay, which they had planned to be their source of

income. When Aravella ran up to him, Papa was bringing the donkey Jezebel out of the stable to hitch up to the buggy (The animal was so named because of her bad temper. Well, that and because the boys had decided to name the barnyard livestock after Biblical characters the family had been reading of in previous nights.)

“Can I go with you to town, Papa?” asked Aravella, hopefully. “I haven’t played a piano in months. I am just dying with despair,” she finished exaggeratingly.

Papa chuckled. “It’s alright with me, but you know that I am not the one to ask. You need to take it up with your mother.” He had a twinkle in his eyes, but a somewhat stern expression shadowing his face.

“Thank you, Papa!” Aravella couldn’t stop smiling, thinking of the piano in the saloon, just hoping that Papa would let her play the piano. Then, she dashed off to find Mama.

“Mama, Mama!” She cried, running at full-tilt and smiling all the while.

“This is a welcome change.” Mama thought, surprised by the now cheerful young woman that seemed to possess her typically quiet, thoughtful, little girl.

“Papa said that I could go with him to get the seeds if you agreed. So may I? There is a piano in the saloon and he said I can play it!” Aravella’s mouth seemed to be running as fast as her legs had been.

“Yes, you may go with Papa to town,” Mama replied, still smiling. While it had crossed Mama’s mind that this could be a façade, Aravella was never a very talkative girl, keeping to herself at parties, school, and even church. There was no doubt in her mind that the change in Aravella was because of the piano.

“But, you need to milk the cows, feed the goats and collect the chickens’ eggs before you and Papa leave.” Mama listed Aravella’s chores, ticking off her fingers as she mentioned each task. Aravella thanked Mama and off she ran, again, but this time to the stable and chicken coop.

After she milked cows, fed a stubborn goat, and gathered up eggs, she dropped the eggs and milk off with Mama. Aravella sprinted off to help Papa hook up the donkey.

“Well, Aravella, did Mama say you could go with me?” Papa asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“She did!” Aravella vocalized. “I can go with you! Can we stop by the saloon so that I can play the piano? Please?”

“Yes, we can,” Papa chuckled. “In fact, I have to purchase rum for your mother to make her special extracts with, so you can play while I am buying it.” Aravella’s father was not a drinking man, but her mother’s special extracts would end up being a stable source of the Barretts’ income (although they wouldn’t know for some time).

Aravella and her father hitched up the donkey and set off to town, bumping all the way. As they rolled into town, she was surprised to see everything was the same. She wasn’t sure what she expected, but she thought *something* would change over time, just as her family’s land had. Instead, the only difference was a new tailor’s shop where the post office used to be, which now had its own building.

They pulled up to the saloon, and Papa hopped out. Aravella followed him. As they walked into the saloon, she felt the eyes of all the people turn to look at her, the strange girl walking into a *saloon* with her father. She hung her head self-consciously.

Of course, she thought, a girl my age probably isn't allowed in here. All this time I've wanted to play and they're just going to throw me out. She turned to Papa and whispered to him, "May I go play, now?"

"Yes, you may. I'll be over at the counter." He responded in a whisper loud enough for only her to hear.

Aravella could barely contain her excitement. Still, she walked over to the piano and sat down gracefully and determinedly, just as she had learned to do in Boston. Then, slowly, she started to play.

Her hands began to fly over the keys, playing song after song. She played *Fur Elise*, *Canon in D*, *The Blue Danube*, and more. Soon, she began to feel the stares again, but this time they were of amazement, not disgust. The beloved symphonies and concertos were quite a great comfort to their old friend, who had left them to go out onto the frontier.

"Play *Symphony No.5 in C minor!*" someone said, unbeknownst to her. Aravella quickly stopped playing *Four Seasons* by Vivaldi, and started playing the demanded symphony.

After the classical request, others started shouting out song requests, from cowboy ballads to church hymns and dancing tunes.

The bystanders were amazed at this little girl's musical abilities. Her father was sitting at the counter, watching her with pride and a grin reaching ear-to-ear. The bartender, who had called out for her to play Beethoven's well-known symphony, was thinking to himself how special and talented this young lady was – even if no one else knew it. The other people watching – the drunks, gamblers, saloon ladies, and even some errand-runners that had strayed from their original tasks – were amazed with Aravella's almost magical instrumental abilities. Towards the end of her "recital", people began dancing with each other in the saloon.

Aravella finished her final song, *The Waltz of the Flowers* by Tchaikovsky, with a flourish. The couples stopped dancing and turned to her, giving a roaring round of applause. They said how impressed they were with her musical abilities for a girl her age, and so on. Then, she walked over to Papa, who was still leaning against the bar, but was now talking to the bartender.

“Papa!” Aravella said breathlessly, full of joy, as she walked up to the two men.

“Well, missy,” the bartender turned to Aravella. “I am glad that you like the piano. I was able to get it all the way from Galveston. I am very impressed by your abilities, the likes of which I had only seen in people in their late fifties and older. Do you mind if I ask how old you are?”

“I am 15 years old.” Aravella replied, “I started piano lessons at 4. My grandmother, Maria Weston Chapman, paid for my piano lessons, and, when she passed away, left enough money in her will for me to continue with them until I was grown.” She recited this information as if she was giving short speech in front of a panel of judges.

“There’s a social function, held by the church, to fund the local school that is about to start. They have been looking for someone to play an instrument to entertain the donors,” her father mentioned.

“You are certainly qualified! You have musical ability surpassing those 3 times your senior,” professed the bartender. He continued exuberantly, “You see, I have worked with musical individuals for decades.” With each new piece of information, Aravella grew even more surprised that this person would be in the *frontier* land of Texas.

When at last he had finished praising her abilities and conversing quickly, she inquired, voice filled with awe, “What’s your name?”

“My name is Walter Damrosch, former director of the New York Symphony Orchestra,” he replied with a proud, knowing smile that was not undramatic.

Living in the Texan frontier, where just about anything could happen, Aravella Elizabeth Barrett had found her new hero, one in the most unlikely place, and her calling, one in the most pleasant of pastimes.