

COUNTERPOINT

– 1 –

It was dark inside the tower. The girl did not know why she was imprisoned inside the stone walls. It was just how it was, the way it had always been.

Her favorite place was the windowsill. The arched frame held no glass, so the room was always open to the night air. Sitting with her back pressed against the stone window frame she would feel the warmth of the evening sun on her face, before it fell behind the castle walls. She would listen to the voices of the children in the castle courtyard. She had never seen those children, but she knew all their games, and each night, as the sun set, she would listen to their laughter fading away as they ran to their homes beyond the castle walls. Then, she would leave the window, sit by the fire, and sing her soft songs to the glowing embers.

On one of these evenings, as the last laugh faded and the heat bled from the stones, she heard the sound of a piano. As the notes echoed from the castle walls she closed her eyes and let the sounds enfold her. For a moment, the melody lulled her into a place of forgetting. The world, the tower, the reason for her imprisonment. All these things passed away, and as she slipped deeper into the music's spell, she began to hear a new melody among the notes; a voice.

The music stopped and the girl opened her eyes. The voice had been her own. The song had risen out of her unconsciously. But had the musician heard her? Is that why the piano notes had stopped? The thought filled her with shame. As if she had been eavesdropping. Invading the pianist's world, uninvited.

The soft piano notes drifted across the courtyard again. A simple phrase played only once. The girl smiled, recognising the melody she had just sung. Slowly, she stood up on the

stone windowsill and faced the empty space beyond. She hesitated, then she raised her head and echoed the melody into the night air, her voice timid and fragile. Immediately, the piano caught up the tune, introducing new layers behind it. First, twinkling arpeggios, then full-throated descending chords giving body to the music. Enchanted, she joined in.

At first, she simply repeated her own fledgling tune more confidently. But, as the piano responded, her courage grew. Like the courtyard swifts seeking out thermals to stay aloft, she found new flights of melody that the pianist would work into the texture of the music. And so it evolved; chords shifting, major and minor, tones changing, hard and soft. She had never felt so free. Then, as the tempo slowed and the tune relaxed into a gentle pulsing rhythm, the girl wondered if there was a question in the notes.

“Who are you?”

She couldn’t be sure. There were no words. It was the shape, the feel of the music, that brought the question to her mind. She closed her eyes and conjured a new melody. Something with a different shape, a different story: “I don’t know!”

They continued for a while, the voice and the piano, holding this truth in the sounds shared between them. Then, a new melody emerged.

“What do you want?”

This time the answering tune came to her as though she had sung it all her life.

“Freedom,” she cried,

And the music stopped.

The silence was more poignant than any note they had yet shared. It filled the space between them and calmed her like a friend. Then a different tune began: bolder, stronger, defiant. The meaning of it travelling along her bones.

“Fly upon the music.”

The girl shook her head. She felt suddenly dizzy. She put her hand on the stone jamb, slowly slid down onto the windowsill and hugged her knees. She had sensed a lightness as she

sang, yes, and she'd felt the pull of some ancient magic trying to lift her into the air. But surely that was just a feeling. A song didn't have the power to carry her safely from the dark loneliness of the tower? Had she really heard those messages in the music? Surely, the moment that she stepped from the window ledge she would fall? Nevertheless, for a moment she had believed. She had felt that after all these years she might finally be free. But that feeling had left her as the last notes of the piano had echoed above the courtyard. Now, in the silent space that remained after the music stopped, she leant against the familiar stones and wept.

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Dawn, the twilight before sunrise. The girl smelled the change in the air. Standing on the cold windowsill she closed her eyes and searched for the song. She knew it was there. It had to be. It had always been there. Her mind wandered through memories like a lost songbird. Then she began, her voice quiet, tremulous. It was an old strain of one of the melodies she had sung as a child. The music felt true, something that connected the past with the future she was beginning to believe in. She raised her head and sang out into the darkness. It was the song of her childhood. The music of her days playing alone in the dark tower, her evenings listening to the children's games.

Suddenly piano notes flew across the courtyard. A rising arpeggio mingling with her voice. She smiled. He was there then. Another soul was hearing her song. Now, as before, the music grew. The pianist's playing complemented her own, moulding her song into something new, something living. Chords changed, key and time altering, until the music became a web of interwoven melodies. There was laughter in the girl's voice as the music defeated the fear inside of her. The same laughter she had lost somewhere along the path of her solitary childhood. She welcomed it home now, this sound that she had long ago buried in the safest place of her. She greeted it like an old friend.

And so it was that laughter was the music the girl used to fly. No longer afraid, and singing all the while, she stepped from the stone window into the night air, and left the darkness of the tower forever.

– 2 –

Susan McGrath opened the door to her daughter's room and screamed. Where could she have gone? She never left the room alone, not even to go to the bathroom. The bed itself had not been slept in. And why were the windows wide open?

"Katie," she called, "Katie where are you?"

No reply. Silence, except for the swish of a car passing on the road outside and muffled music from one of the neighbour's houses. Susan ran to each room in her house, all empty.

'She couldn't have left the house,' she thought, 'she's never gone out alone. Why would she?' Susan ran to the door and grabbed her jacket, noticing as she did so, that Katie's winter coat with the reflective strips and her stick were both still there.

Presuming that her daughter would not have attempted to cross the road on her own, Susan started to walk down the street, keeping a sharp eye for any sign of Katie.

Three houses down two workmen were chatting as they unloaded tools from the back of their van.

"Lucky we didn't kill her," said the first.

"Aye," replied the second, "in a world of her own she was, like we weren't even there!"

Susan ran over to them asking, "Are you talking about my Katie? Have you seen her?"

"Dunno," said the first man with a smile, "what does she look like love?"

"She's thirteen years old," said Susan. "long brown hair. Please, have you seen her?"

The men glanced at each other. "I reckon we might have," said the first. "We nearly knocked over a girl just five minutes ago. Just wandered over the road right in front of my van she did. Had to slam the anchors on. Singing her heart out she was. I blasted the horn but she didn't even look at us. Is she ok?"

"I hope so," said Susan. "Did you see where she went?"

"Aye, she walked into that house right there," replied the man, pointing a few houses back up the street. "Reckon she lives there."

Susan didn't waste time correcting him. She didn't know who lived in the house, or whether it really was Katie that the men had seen, but she had to find out.

"Thank you," she said as she ran across the road towards the house.

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Susan's knock was answered by a middle-aged woman taking off a pair of headphones.

"Hi," said Susan, "I'm from number twentyone, just across the road."

The woman sighed. "Is this about Eddie's music?" she asked. "I'm always telling him not to play with the windows open but he keeps doing it. We've had complaints from both sides now. I'll lock the bloody piano lid down if he doesn't pack it in!"

"No, it's my daughter," said Susan. "She's lost, and the men across the road said they'd seen a girl come here, and she's never been out without me before, and ...". Despite herself Susan began to cry.

"Oh darling are you alright?"

Susan sniffed and nodded

"Katie's my only daughter. I don't know what could have possessed her to leave the house alone. She's never done it before."

“Bless you,” said the woman kindly. “I’m sorry I’ve not seen her. Are you sure it was her that those workmen saw?”

Susan was about to reply when she heard the sound of piano music.

“That’s Eddie,” said the house-owner with a proud smile. “Good isn’t he? Can’t see a thong but he plays like an angel.

“He’s blind?” said Susan.

“Aye,” said the woman. “No excuse for playing so damn loud though, and always with the windows wide open. Eddie!” she shouted over her shoulder.

Susan didn’t know much about music. She could tell that the playing was accomplished and in an unfamiliar style, but she was anxious about Katie. She was beginning to turn when she heard a solitary voice rise above the piano. There were no words in the singing, just sounds. But the two parts together, made the music extraordinary, and the voice was beautiful.

“Who the hell’s that?” said the woman. “Is that coming from my Eddie’s room!” She turned and stomped back into the house forgetting Susan was there. Uninvited, Susan followed her down the hall. The voice in the house couldn’t be Katie’s. She’d not heard Katie singing since she was little

Rounding the corner Susan stopped and looked over the woman’s shoulder.

“Well I’ll be jiggered,” said Eddie’s mother, “Who are you?”

Sitting at a black baby-grand piano was a small, dark-haired boy of about her own age. His eyes were closed as he played and there was a white stick, just like Katie’s leaning against his thigh. Beside him stood Katie, barefoot and singing with a beatific smile on her face. The both seemed oblivious to the women’s presence.

“Katie!” cried Susan, pushing past Eddie’s mother and wrapping her arms around her daughter. “What are you doing? How did you get here?”

Katie opened her eyes. as if coming out of a deep sleep. She didn’t respond.

“Eddie!” shouted his mother. “Who is this girl? How did she get here?”

Slowly Eddie opened his eyes and smiled.

“She flew,” he said.