

A SHORT STORY

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE GLASS

DES BRADY

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The Woman Behind the Glass



It was early when I first heard it. Thursday morning, as the rain streaked my window. 5.34 a.m. to be precise.

I'd been tossing and turning all night, sweaty sheets wrapped in knots around my legs. A cheap cotton Boa slowly constricting the blood to my feet. Ever since the 2 a.m. wake-up call by those damned Noisy Miners.

Will I ever get a good night's sleep?

That's when it first snuck unheralded into my consciousness. At first, I thought it was just the sleep-trance, that twilight zone between waking and the dim trenches of sleep. Then, opening my eyes, it dawned on me that I must be awake as the ceiling came into focus.

The sound was crystal clear, whispering me awake. Astounding.

Scales sung, ever so quietly, in perfect pitch. Only for a moment, elegantly rising and falling, then halting abruptly. Without reason.

Lying there, I strained to hear this morning songbird. And there it was again, a little quieter now, but it was a melody, not scales. Starting in a low register, it slowly builds to a mid-note, falling back, rising again. Backwards and forwards until, like a small miracle, it elevates to a high soprano range, jostling with higher, trilling notes. Then nothing. Not another sound, at least that I could hear.

Peering from behind the curtain, I searched for its source. Nothing. Just the massive wall of the building opposite, crammed so close to mine — like all of them in this estate. *Affordable housing, a vibrant community*, those polities blurted at the ribbon cutting, smug and self-satisfied. As if that made any difference to us. Slums with pretty glass, that's what I call 'em. Little boxes stacked high, crammed full, dripping with despair.

A few windows dotted the wall of this block, all glass obscura as they grandly called it, supposed to give us the privacy we crave. Irony. Even the name of this place is ironic. Paradise Estate. Paradise bloody lost if you ask me.

You might not be able to see through that wonderful glass, but you could certainly hear them all right. The lifers shuffling in circles mumbling incomprehensible phrases of hope. Boom box boy, coming in pissed at all hours. Influencers pre-loading mango-mambos and pingers. The alcohos, getting into the predictable fight, hurling abuse and the odd household ornament, a dull thud followed by whimpering through bloodied, broken lips.

And then this songbird arrives. Soft, clear, defying all the noise, a miracle floating over Paradise. Not every morning, though, as if the design was to lure me like sirens cajoling sailors to their watery demise. No—it happens randomly, like luck, surprising me, so I can't get to the curtains quick enough before the notes fall like

autumn leaves silently gliding to the ground. This happens a few times and I wonder if I'm turning into some deluded fanatic—the lonely-hearts club of notes. Yet it comes again, denying my sleep-deprived eyelids their reverie. It gets to the point where I force myself awake at dawn so I can jump to the curtains, working out which apartment she lived in.

But as I scan the desolation of that wall of delusion, it doesn't make sense. Where's it coming from? Not my block, that's for sure, it's usually babies screaming, doors slamming, the sound of toilets and showers going at all hours, and not-so-muffled expressions of ardour from above and below, walls banging like a windswept door.

I wonder at the clarity of the voice. Its purity. Yet, in its own way, debilitating — beauty this pure leaches resolve from even the hardest heart. But, more so, what is most astounding is the unadulterated joy wafting through this desolate estate. There are times when the refrain lingers, like she's teasing me as I lie there, jealously transfixed, hoping those sweet tones are meant for me alone.

Then, out of nowhere, as if this coup de grâce was designed to mark the end of my resistance, the sound of a flute appears. A few scales, rising and falling, soft as tissues, a short refrain, then silence. The singing and flute alternate sometimes, but other times it's only one of them. Maybe two, three days a week, never the same.

It is infuriating not being able to pinpoint this serenade, so I'm reduced to skulking around the bus stop opposite, semi-stalking this mystery woman. It is a waste of time and, of course, damned stupid. I gotta work and my amateur stalking skills might come to the attention of the local police if I'm not careful — not to mention the humiliation of becoming the bottom feeder of Paradise.

Then the breakthrough comes, like everything in my life, completely haphazardly. I'm on the bus after my red-eye shift at the Amazon distribution warehouse—another six hours of standing over conveyor belts, sorting through other people's mistakes—and a woman gets on near Wynyard station holding a small black object—a flute case. I watch her casually through sunnies thinking she's maybe Chinese. She sits alone, back straight as a board, earbuds in, sunglasses perched on her nose. Her own obscura to punish the world with indifference.

And I daydream. Is there something about her that's theatrical? The way she holds herself, her aloof demeanour. Performing, perhaps—being ordinary.

My stop comes and goes but still she remains. Back rod-like, the performance like a symphony. Finally, after at least 10 stops past mine, she quickly stands to leave, making me panicky, debating whether to get off. I didn't want it to be obvious, so I sauntered.

Christ, what am I doing? This is proper creepy behaviour, the kind of thing that gets a restraining order. But I can't help myself — that voice has become the only stillness amid life's endless calamities.

The Woman Behind the Glass

At the last moment, I slide forward, as if this happened every day, and fall in behind some small old fella with a walking frame. As she gets off, I almost trip over walking-frame man and eventually stumble in the other direction for as long as I can bear. As I turn to face the grimy shopping strip opposite, pretending I'm waiting for someone, she suddenly disappears into a crowd. In my rush to find her in that sea of misery oozing from the train station, I almost bowl over a blind lady with a cane.

Undeterred, I move up the road to where she vanished, stopping at a shop with Chinese writing on the front. Passing slowly by, I catch sight of her inside standing at the counter with the black box open, an old bloke opposite holding up a flute, turning it over in his hands.

Realising it's a pawn shop, I continue down the road, past the abandoned building lot where a few makeshift cardboard mansions have been set up, their eaves wilting after the last downpour. Languid dogs laze in the dust while the abandoned shuffle between them, desperately clutching their belongings in flimsy plastic bags.

Thwarted, I jump on the next bus home, licking my embarrassed wounds with the tongue of defeat.



There it goes again, the very next morning. 5.30 am. The flute. Again, a couple of minutes of melody, so very quiet, so soft, a lament that seems to carry all the sadness in the world. I jump at the first note, clutching at the curtain, quietly opening the window to see if I can locate its source.

Then, jarringly, breaking glass — a loud thud and clatter as something metallic hit the ground, accompanied by a tinkle of shards falling from above. Quickly pulling the curtain back and finding the window above, I gape at the yawning hole in the obscura. It wasn't any of the lifers or the other usual suspects. It came from well above them all. Looking down at the space between the buildings, my eyes widen at the sight of a flute sitting prone, surrounded by a war zone of shattered glass. This fragile, silver wonder sitting like a foreigner in that grey, concrete wasteland. Lying forsaken.

I was right, she lives there, she must, it's too much of a coincidence. It makes sense—the distance between our windows accounts for the softness of the song. Suddenly, there's movement below, as someone approaches the stricken flute. My god! That man from the hock shop.

He picks up the instrument, brushes it a little to remove any glass, looks up at the window with what might be anger, shakes his head, swiftly turns, and disappears around the side of the block.

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On the way home from another red-eye shift, I press the stop button and absentmindedly stand at the rear door of the bus, oblivious to all, absorbed in the Insta

world. As I step off, there she is. Glaring at me. Eyes afire, with no obscura to shield me from her death stare.

‘You following me.’

It’s not a question—more a heated statement accompanied by a finger pointed directly at my chest.

‘No, no. I’m sorry, no, no... I’m not.’

I’m holding my hands out defensively, trying to smile a little.

‘Why you at my father’s shop?’

This was more of a question, a little lighter now, not much though. The accusatory finger has not relented. Nor the tone.

‘No, look, yes. I’m sorry, I’m not creepy. It’s just...’

My hands collapse to my side as I stare down, ashamed.

‘... your voice is so beautiful.’ I can only hold my arms out in defeat.

‘What?’

Her voice is much softer now, yet still inquiring. Still demanding an answer.

‘I hear your voice sometimes in the morning, it’s so beautiful, so clear, like a songbird.’

‘Oh, okay.’

Comprehension. While the brow remains furrowed, those black eyes soften.

‘And your flute, you know, I’m no expert but the song you play seems so very sad. Like a lament.’

‘A la.... A what?’

‘Oh, lament. Umm...like crying, but more beautiful.’

‘Ah, yes. Lament you say?’ She squints her eyes, scrutinizing me. ‘Yes, it is crying.’

‘Are you sad?’

Her head rocks back a little, eyes widen, irises as dark as obsidian, glimmering.

‘Ah, sad? Yes, I sad.’

She looks at me now without hostility, with understanding, maybe even with regard. Up close she is even more beautiful than I’d imagined. Skin, taut and soft, a lightness that makes her complexion seem childlike. She is quite small, petite.

‘Why you ask?’

‘Well, umm...’

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I'm starting to stumble but decide to go with the feeling.

'Look, your song woke me one morning. I thought it was a dream. A beautiful dream. I thought I wasn't here in this horrible building but in a beautiful place. A beautiful island of sand and song. It made me feel very peaceful.'

'Oh, you, umm, you go to a good place?'

'Yes, very much.'

She smiled for the first time, then something surprising happened. She extended her hand, and we shook.

'I am Shulin. Please to meet you.'

'I'm Mark, very pleased to meet you. Your voice is as beautiful as a songbird.'

Shulin blushed deeply and gave me a glorious smile, but it quickly faded as a harsh voice boomed from across the street. Unintelligible, yet furious in tone. That much was translatable. Shulin's smile quickly vanished as she turned towards the old man and, in a low voice, responded briefly in Chinese. Even from this distance, I could see the resignation in her shoulders.

Turning back, a quick smile transformed into a worried look.

'I go. My father, very angry.'

'I'm sorry, can I ...'

'No, must go.'

With that, she shook my hand again, gave me that beautiful smile and quickly crossed the street, reaching her father's side, his stern look carried on her back like a heavy burden. They both disappeared into the tower block. Haphazard. That's my life.



A week passed without the angel's magic. October mornings were milder, but the silence chilled me more than the bleak winter that had just passed. The obscura had been repaired but there was no sign of the old man or Shulin.

For a while I kept the 5.30 vigil anyway, force of habit, staring at the repaired obscura like it owed me something. It didn't. Paradise never does.

I walked slowly to the newsagency, scraping coins together to buy my 'misery liberation' lotto ticket. I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. Turning around, there she was. Smiling sweetly. No father in sight, thank god. She was wearing a yellow jacket. I remember thinking, nobody in Paradise wears yellow.

'Hello, Mark.'

'Hi, Shulin, how're you?'

‘All good. Look, sorry about the other day. My Dad’s a pretty cranky old man, doesn’t like me talking to the laowai. He’s very wary.’

All of a sudden the heavy Chinese accent and staccato delivery had disappeared, replaced by an almost proper English accent. What?

‘That’s OK... wait... you’re speaking really differently.’

She smiled and laughed softly, looking down then directly into my eyes, flicking her dark hair from her face.

‘Sorry, it’s a bit of a defensive thing, you know, keep the creeps away.’ Another smile as she shrugged. ‘I’ve been here since I was twelve.’

Suddenly everything about her seemed... different. More real. Possible, even.

‘Sorry to pry, but what was the flute out-the-window thing? Freaked me out a little.’

Shulin’s look turned more serious.

‘Oh, god, sorry. I didn’t practice properly and he blew up. Wrecked the flute.’ She paused, glancing back toward the estate. ‘He saved for months to buy that one. He used to be a concert flautist back in Shanghai, you know? Now he fixes watches and sells people’s broken dreams.’

She looked directly at me then, as if making a decision.

‘Look, I must go. But want to meet up for a coffee sometime, just talk? I really need someone nice to talk to. Dad’s a bit too much at times.’

‘Sure, would love to. What about tomorrow? Café next door, say 10?’

‘Great. See you then.’ That beautiful smile. ‘I’m looking forward to it.’

With that she left. Haphazard. That’s my life.



But I never saw Shulin again. The songbird had flown, spirited away by the angry father I supposed. No more scales. No more laments drifting across the courtyard. Even the hock shop fell into silence, shelves stripped bare, as if the whole episode had never happened. Maybe the old man stayed. Who knew? Some people are rusted solid. No amount of luck shifts them.

But mine shifted. Randomly. As always. My ‘misery liberation’ ticket came through. Not the big gong, nothing headline-worthy—just enough to loosen the bolts holding me to Paradise. A few hundred grand. Enough for a small farm down south I’d found in my endless trawls on the web, looking for an escape I could only ever dream of. Scrub and fencing mostly. I’ve never farmed a day in my life. But after long days of hard work things looked up. I even got a crop of tomatoes on the rise.

The Woman Behind the Glass

Sometimes, standing on the porch of a house that still feels foreign, I think about that voice rising through the early morning rain. Sometimes I stir early, dreamily awaiting the songbird that never sings.

But that doesn't matter any longer. It's the light coming over the ridge, the sound of currawongs in the evening rather than a flute, the weariness from a day spent productively. That's what matters most. That's its worth.

Luck, like music, arrives from somewhere behind the glass.