

Prelude in Valdemossa

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“Three cats stalk a tall, green wheelie bin. Elegant toms on a rain-washed street.

Suddenly one, thinner than the rest, leaps and dives in. He surfaces with his spoils – a bone over which they fight. It seems a poor reward for such a charming brigand.

I'd like to linger but the tour guide is strident: “This way please. Do not be separated. Follow me.”

Raising her umbrella in the air, she strides forward. Lethargically I follow into the winter gloom. Driven from the beach by rain, I'd taken the tour in the hope of finding the peace I sought. One or two people had tried to befriend me, but I'd brushed them off impatiently, I'd no desire for careless chatter as I nursed my broken heart –

“Don't be so melodramatic.” I told myself: “you're not broken, a bit battered and discarded like the rubbish around that dustbin, more like, but you'll mend.”

Still feeling faintly nauseous from the twisted silver road hung precariously on the side of a purple gorge, although the ache behind my eyes had been lifted by the wild beauty all around, pain threatens to sweep in again. Rounding a corner, I hug the wall to avoid the mocking wind. Garish postcards with their promise of summer sun intrude on my tired eyes. Hideous animal skins vie with bright scarves and sunglasses, tourist tat incongruous in the mountain chill.

There is a sudden whiff of coffee and I half turn, it's exactly what I need. “Could I catch up with you later, I - ”

But the tour guide's umbrella is insistent: “Come along!”

Herded past a dark, forbidding wall we enter a tall church, ornate in the Spanish style. Rich gilding sparkles light above, deep red porphyry spilled like candlewax oozes coldness at my feet and candles flicker. The air drifts heavy with incense that catches at my throat. Terracotta tiles that had once been richly decorated are mostly cracked and bare where endless feet have polished them away, but in one or two places their colours shine out so that I seem to see the floor whole and beautiful once more.

Our guide is holding forth.

Head pounding, I slip into a long arched corridor and let my feet lead me where they will. Stone windows open onto a green oasis where exotic foliage gleams in expectant stillness. It is much colder now. Shivering slightly, and pulling my pashima closer, I sink gratefully onto a hard wooden bench and close my eyes.

Wondrous music infuses the air. A tinkling, tantalising piano riff echoing the rain dripping from the trees. Hauntingly beautiful and somehow known, the music lifts my heart and propels me to

my feet. It breaks off, and begins again - hesitantly as though the pianist has forgotten the notes and is trying to reclaim them.

It draws me through a heavy oak door, set in a fat stone wall, and into a narrow passageway. Ahead, a huge wooden chair looms, well over seven feet tall. The only furnishing in an austere white walled cell. It hardly needs decoration, nature does that. Framed by the window and an arbour of grapes, a tall amber and blue mountain towers over terraces of olives and silver figs. Pomegranate, lemon and orange trees heavy with decaying fruit embellish the foreground. Beneath them, geometrically perfect brick paths hold drooping herbs in place.

Another room draws me in. A monastic bed lies under a sepulchre-like stone headboard. I wouldn't feel comfortable with that hanging over me in the night. Or with the religious imagery of those gloomy paintings on the wall. More conducive to nightmares than restful sleep. Four small wooden beds piled with spotless white linen and chintz feather comforters look out of place on the straw mats and creamy sheepskins that litter the floor, and the overstuffed sofa is hardly to my taste.

The music billows from a room to my left. The sound pulls me relentlessly on. Slipping through the half-open door, I stop bemused. A pot bellied stove puffs great clouds of aromatic smoke. Friar's balsam, reminding me of chesty childhood illnesses, overlays a hint of pine with something more dreadful beneath. The heat hardly touches the chill air.

The music demands my attention, or rather, the musician.

A delicate young man propped on pillows in a high backed chair. His aristocratic features finely chiselled, the transparent skin much too taut. The dark hair flopping over his eyes flies as though with a life of its own as his head beats time. His ruffled shirt, floppy bow tie and velvet tailcoat could be artistic licence, or foppish fashion. His right hand spiders delicately over the keys whilst his left scribbles notes.

The sound soars to new heights. Riff piles on riff, building to a great crescendo. Both hands on the keys now. So much vitality from such a frail form. It is as though all his life is in the music.

Abruptly he slumps, crashing across the keys, cutting off the spontaneous applause that has captured my hands. Alarmed, I move towards him. By his side there is a glass of greenish liquid. Sniffing it with distaste, I'm about to discard it when his hand reaches out. Raising his head I dribble a little between his lips. He grimaces, splutters and raises his head.

"Thank you" he gasps wiping his frothy lips. As I settle him against his pillows he murmurs: "A touch of bronchitis, it is nothing." Grasping my hand, his eyes bore into mine: "The music, I must get it down, before I lose it. I cannot seem to play and write at the same time. I do not suppose... do you, could you take musical dictation?"

"I could certainly try." Those childhood music lessons might come in useful at last.

He hands over thick, creamy manuscript paper. When he adds a steel nibbed pen and a bottle of sepia ink, fearing that I will never keep up I take a pen from my bag and wait, fingers poised.

Pausing a moment to gather his strength, he breathes deep,

And he's off, hands flashing across the keys.

So much joy. I forget my broken heart, my painful head. It builds to a climax and then the tinkling notes fall into silence. Laughing now, he turns from the piano.

"It is finished. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

He presses passionate kisses on my upturned face. Manuscript pages scatter across the floor as he pulls me close. Head spinning, I am in another world.

Which is abruptly shattered as a haughty, sloe eyed woman sweeps in, hand-rolled cigarette trailing smoke. Her long brown dress brushes the floor impatiently.

"Fryderyck, my darling, what are you doing? You will tire yourself. It is time you rested." Her voice is guttural, harshly accented. She ignores me.

He turns to me, kisses my hand, and says: "Thank you, my lovely amanuensis."

"Fryderyck, are you hallucinating again? I must speak to the apothecary." Turning to leave, she picks up the scattered pages and asks with sudden surprise: "Why is your manuscript blue?"

His reply is lost as an impatient hand plucks me away.

"The coach is leaving. Come on." Jabbing impatiently with her umbrella, the guide propels me out.

"But I can't go, I must stay...I..."

"We leave, now." There is no arguing with her.

Next day as I boarded the plane and the melancholy wind bit, I made a vow. I would return. In summer.

Getting back was more difficult than I'd imagined. I'd been so preoccupied that first time I hadn't really taken notice of where I was going, just got on the first coach. But finally, when I'd described the mountains and the monastery and mimed playing the piano to three different people, I was issued with a ticket amid a babble of Spanish that I knew translated into 'stupid tourist' and was pushed onto a coach as it was pulling away.

Tomcats still stalked the tall, green wheelie bin. Reeking now, it shimmered in dusty heat. The August sun was almost too much to bear as girlish excitement rushed me past the ubiquitous tourist tat, laid out now in greater profusion with insistent voices calling 'come, see'.

All winter I'd been haunted by that frail face. It had not faded with the spring. As soon as my divorce was through, I got on a plane. Was it foolish to hope? After all, she was older than he. And those kisses... My knees softened at the memory. If he would just let me nurse him. I'd bought medicines, I knew I could bring him back to health.

The tour guide's redundant umbrella was as imperious as ever: "Wait for your ticket." Too late, I was through the door, running into the blessed coolness of the church and the expectant cloister beyond.

"Fryderyk", I cried as I burst through the door.

And found myself looking at a woman. This one was older, blonde and fashionably dressed in bright red coat and short skirt.

"Are you alright, my dear?" she asked, hurrying to my side. "Is the heat too much for you, come and sit by the open window." She led me to a familiar overstuffed sofa.

As I looked around the room was subtly different. Last time, that sketch book, now in a glass case, had been lying carelessly on a bench as though that moment discarded by its owner. The mats are gone from the cracked yellow floor, which is much cleaner now. No sign of the pot bellied stove. Its cloying smoke swallowed by an expensive perfume. The small upright piano was pushed back against the wall. His chair was empty, pillowless and forlorn. Where was he, that impossibly romantic invalid who had caught my heart with his frailness and joy? He couldn't be... no... surely not...

"Where am I?" I asked, feeling foolish as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

"In the Chopin rooms in the Real Cartuja. He lived here with the writer George Sand in the winter of 1838, you know. He was ill and came to Mallorca to recuperate but our winter damp is very bad for the chest and he became much worse." She shook her head sadly. "The French physicians had said it was bronchitis but it was tuberculosis."

Chopin. Of course. The music should have told me. I had stumbled through his pieces as a teenager.

"But why did he come here?"

And when I wanted to ask, but could not face the answer.

"His party had to move out of their lodging further down the mountain because the local people feared infection. They took refuge, here in this monastery." Her hand took in the room around us.

"It couldn't have been comfortable." The thought of that winter cold made me shiver even in the fierce summer heat. It was so gloomy, hardly the place for creative inspiration.

"No. It was exceptionally cold and wet that year. We do not always have winter sun despite what the brochures say, although you would not think so now." She shrugged and pointed to

the harsh sunlight outside. "There was little heating in Chopin's day, just a stove that gave out much smoke."

"Smoke, surely that wouldn't have helped his chest?" It had been so cloying, so thick.

"In her account of their visit, George Sand says that they had to use gum-benzoin from the monastery pharmacy to counteract the vile smell from the stove. The apothecary gave Chopin couch grass for his cough. He really was very ill."

I looked at the small piano and remembered thin fingers vibrating it into impassioned life.

"This is where he wrote."

It was a statement not a question but she said proudly:

"Yes, in this very room on that piano, it is Mallorquin. His grand French piano didn't arrive in time so he used a local one. Look, here is a copy of his death mask - such a handsome man, women loved him you know - and a plaster cast of his left hand."

The beloved face, so cold and still, had no life left. But his hand looked as though at any moment it would spring onto the keys.

"And these are his manuscripts, see, below the hand."

Was it my imagination or was one of them written in faded blue ink?

Abruptly, a German tourist entered, muttered permission and, without waiting for a reply, attacked the piano. It was the same tune, but heavy handed. His fingers did not spider delicately over the keys.

And yet, there was something familiar about his face, something in the eyes perhaps, the way the hair flopped forward, was it him, had he recovered his health? But no, it was too bizarre, it couldn't be. Not when he played like that.

Shaking my head, I wanted to shriek at him to cease his desecration. Fortunately he was politely prevailed upon to stop and a CD slid into a player. Familiar riffs filled the air.

"Drops of Water," said my new friend: "Written here. Chopin saw so much rain."

"I think he found solace in his music." I smiled at the memory. "That's where his happiness lay."

Where, I asked myself, did mine lie? Perhaps I could uncover that old piano at home. Take a few lessons. Learn to play that prelude properly. After all, without me it might never have - as I turned to leave, that beautiful pale face shimmered and shone brightly, blew a kiss and was gone, but our music played on.

Outside the German was waiting: "Excuse me" he said apologetically, "but have we met before, I can't help feeling I know you?"

I smiled back: "If we have, it must have been in another life."

"Ah, yes, just so. Would you perhaps like to go for a coffee?" He proffered his arm.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

