

## Best of the short list

### Flight

By Leona Francombe

IT ALWAYS smelled of onions in Professor Morozov's hallway. Onions, and the sour, chilly tang of fear. When the massive front door swung shut behind you and echoed over the old tiles, you could feel the air cling to your skin, pungent with veneration and dread.

And yes.

Onions.

I can still smell them, thirty years later.

'The Russians are the only pianists,' oozed Amelia, my mother's impossible friend, during an afternoon tea long ago. She had come over with a gaggle of other diplomatic wives, all preening and jostling as they reached for the cakes. Their sculpted coiffures and garnished faces betrayed an intimate acquaintance with boredom.

'Now take young Walter here.'

I had slipped into the parlour after school to snatch a cake, only to find myself corralled by all that perfume and banter, blushing gracelessly.

'He plays well, doesn't he, Mary?' Amelia asked my mother, not, I thought, without a twinge of regret for the pianistic struggles of her own young Bertram. 'You really *must* try Professor Morozov. They say he is simply the *best!*'

She paused to pat her glossy lips with quick, stabbing motions of her napkin. 'That Moroccan boy takes lessons with him. You know, the son of that little man who cleans at the school.' Her nose wrinkled slightly. 'He really is quite good. What's his name again?'

'Kamal,' said my mother quietly, smiling as she handed me a cake. She was so unlike the others. Nobler, somehow. A wise dove stranded amidst shouting prize geese. I could sense the difference even then, as a freckled, unformed eleven-year-old. She had the gift of treading the narrow path between the Amelias of her world and the clean reaches of her own conscience so gracefully, that no one could tell where her heart lay.

'Kamal. That's him,' said Amelia, chewing on a tea sandwich. 'Anyway, Morozov, poor man, has a deaf child. Can you imagine? So sad, really, for a musician. And a strange creature she is, too. She was hiding under the piano when I went to arrange lessons for Bertram. Do you suppose he lets her stay there when he's teaching?'

'I have no idea,' my mother answered, suddenly intrigued. 'How extraordinary...'. Her voice drifted, musing, and she looked at me with a mischievous gleam. 'Perhaps Morozov keeps her there as a sort of *deus ex machina* for his students – like the

spirit of music in human form that he can summon at will.'

'Well, she never appears when my Bertram has his lesson,' said Amelia, without the slightest appreciation of my mother's remark. 'There is a large cloth draped over the piano. You know, some heavy Russian thing. You could hide a Siberian tiger under there if you wanted.' The allusion gave me a sudden chill. 'Bertram tells me that Kamal has never seen her, either.'

Kamal...

Ah, yes. My Saturdays would soon be haunted by that name, thanks to Amelia's persuasive efforts to find me a teacher. My mother had sensed, lurking in the otherwise vacuous words, a benign ripple in Amelia's plan that might stir the placid waters of my life. As always, her intuition proved to be correct. But she would never really know just to what extent that benign ripple would forever alter the direction of the tide.

At precisely 10:25 every Saturday morning, I arrived at Professor Morozov's door and lingered sheepishly in the hallway. The entry loomed around me, its distant ceiling carved in the manner of a classic old *maison de maître*. Staircases with ornate iron banisters rose into the stratosphere of the house. On the first landing, a window studded with yellow glass cast a warm, saintly light, and it was there, in those golden ethers, that music tended to gather as it drifted down from Morozov's studio.

Kamal took his lesson before me. His music, impossibly fine and weightless, hovered just out of reach as I started up the stairs to face my own fate. I am sure now that those moments on the landing, in that amber light, were my very first encounters with true beauty: that breathless feeling tugging at something inside of you and lifting you up as though you could fly, like racing over a grassy hilltop, or riding your bicycle down a steep, winding hill where you can't see the bottom. No material thing I ever possessed, before or since, made my heart soar like the music I heard there.

Saturday morning was in general one of diminishing returns for Professor Morozov. Kamal, the true artist, came first at 9:30. He was lean and devout and practised like a novice preparing for his vows. Morozov recognized the potent mix of poverty and talent and charged him no fee.

I came next, stuck in the limbo of mediocrity. I could play the notes, on a good day, but they were earthbound and without soul. The prelude I had been tackling for weeks still lay dormant under my hands.

And then, at 11:30, came Amelia's Bertram. Poor old Bertie. He batted around the great temple of music like a lost fly, helpless from the sheer majesty of it all. He barely managed to slide his



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chubby hands around a scale or two, then assaulted his pieces with gallant but doomed soldiering. I would pass him on the stairs after my lesson as he hurried up at the last minute. He was always perspiring and terror-stricken, and I felt deep compassion for his condition as I floated down, to the front door, joyously liberated, knowing that an entire week stretched ahead of me before my next lesson.

Years later, I realized how Bertie and I had squandered those miraculous Saturdays; how, drowsy with comfort like pudgy little pashas, we hadn't a hope of discovering music's intangible wealth. We were too young, of course. But even as adults we were victims of an unrecognized misfortune: namely, that the inevitable clamour of material things would overpower - and at last destroy - whatever air-born beauties still lingered from Morozov's Saturdays. And though Kamal struggled without means in a crumbling house near the seedy South Station, our misfortune would in the end turn out to be far greater than his.

Kamal's mother had long since drifted back to Morocco, lonely and broken-hearted, but his father was lucky and found work as a cleaner at the International School in Brussels. It was there that Bertram and I took our classes in opulent comfort. Kamal, on the other hand, led a parallel existence of which we had little knowledge and even less interest. His school was defined by grime and fear, and from its blank windows drifted the stale smell of resignation.

Yet something in his dark, driven eyes was always searching beyond the squalor. He hungered for a way out, a path leading to a wider universe. Music, it seemed, had found him a door.

I didn't give much thought to a wider universe. I had a new bicycle, holidays in the south of France, the latest digital contraptions. My life had reached a sort of hollow fulfillment in only eleven short years. Music lessons added a few fitting brushstrokes to the portrait of a cultured young man.

And even though my mother hoped that I might take with me something more profound and lasting from my lessons, for me it was still just a waste of a good Saturday morning. What did I care about music's wider universe, anyway? The universe, as far as I was concerned, had already come to me.

And as for Bertie. Well, his weak, fleshy existence was virtually



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spoon-fed. His father was the ambassador himself, after all. Music lessons with a famous teacher were something you bought and displayed, like an extravagant car. They might be a thorn in the side of the weekend, but as soon as Daddy and Mummy felt that Culture had left a tiny mark on Bertie, they would switch him over to golf, with social advantages far outweighing those of a hermitic pianist.

Perhaps, some day, I was destined to take up golf and join Bertie on the links; to stand beside him on that manufactured grass and chat with the glib enthusiasm of the newly rich of mergers and acquisitions, ski holidays and yachts, both of us sporting the expensive lacquer of privilege that rendered the sensibilities impenetrable.

Surely this would have been my fate had my pampered world not shifted on its perch one Saturday and slipped off, taking me with it and brushing me against life's quivering skin.

Kamal had finished his lesson, hurrying by me on the landing without lifting his brooding eyes or uttering a word. The silence that remained after *his* music was rich and replete and didn't need filling, unlike the relieved silence that followed my own ham-fisted efforts. I climbed the stairs to the studio. One of its great double doors stood ajar. Morozov expected you to come in and get settled at the piano without him, after which he would appear from the shadows, remote and watchful, as if by divine summons.

No one had ever seen him smile, although Bertie, ironically, had come the closest, only because (as we realized years later) his was the last lesson of the morning and the product of those onions we smelled cooking would soon appear on Morozov's table.

How can I describe this man who so haunted our young days? Imagine, if you can, a cross between Paganini and Stalin and you would come up with a fair approximation. Supreme artistry and ruthlessness combined in a single, carefully sculpted individual; the elegant, tapering build of the former melding so effortlessly with the moustache and steely gaze of the latter that you were never sure whether to play music or run for cover.

The studio was cavernous, with an immense grand piano at its centre. Heavy, faded brocade covered chairs and settees and hung in gloomy folds at the windows. An elaborate cloth covered the piano and spilled over its sides, almost touching the bare wooden floor.

Sometimes, as I neared the piano, I thought how tempting that dark, hidden space underneath it seemed. How welcoming and forgiving. Then I recalled Amelia's words about strange creatures and lurking Siberian tigers, and it didn't seem like such a wise retreat after all.

'Valter!' boomed Morozov, emerging from a dark corner. His great, Russian "V" managed to demolish my name in a single stroke.

'Vat vill you play today?'

I hadn't had a chance to warm up yet - at least he usually granted us that much, like water offered to inmates on their way to the gulag. I handed him the score of a Rachmaninov prelude with stiff, ice-cold fingers and he took it to the far end of the room, settling himself on a settee and crossing his slim legs with an elaborate motion.

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'This prelude *again*'?

And then, expressionless:

'Begin.'

My insides withered at the word.

We always had to play by memory, and at this point in the proceedings my mind would offer up a host of helpful thoughts, such as where Bertie and I would go on our bikes that afternoon, and whether or not his new Labrador puppy would be able to join us. Naturally, Rachmaninov's prelude Op. 32 No. 11 was so deeply buried in my stricken mind that it was the last thing to surface. Finally, I managed to remember how it began, and tentatively struck a few notes. They sounded muffled and forlorn in the yawning spaces of the room.

It wasn't a difficult piece, really, although there were an awful lot of black notes that prickled like gorse along the way. I had had endless lessons on it, and still slipped around the keys like a hapless skater.

'No, Valter! Nyet. Nyet! This music should dance, not die!'

Morozov rose to his feet and waved the score in frustration. Strangely, at the last, commanding *nyet*, the piano seemed to resonate with the sound of it. I looked down at my feet and to my horror saw a small hand on the sustaining pedal, pushing it down. In an instant it darted back into the shadows cast by the huge cloth.

I froze. Suddenly, it seemed dangerous to continue, what with Morozov advancing menacingly and some sort of piano-dweller lurking at my feet. I vowed to take Amelia more seriously the next time she mentioned the odd denizens of Morozov's studio. Somehow, though, despite my quandary, I just couldn't help myself and ducked down by the pedals.

I caught my breath. There, a foot away from my face, was an elfin creature crouching on all fours like a primitive sprite. Her eyes gleamed hazel and gold in the dim light under the piano and her short black hair protruded in untamed tufts. I would have fled immediately out into the onion smells of the hallway, never to return, had it not been for her smile - her irrepressible, beckoning smile, and the way she brought her hands together with light, rhythmic motions. A specific rhythm, it seemed. Even I, a lowly altar boy in the temple of music, could tell that it was the same, lilting rhythm of my prelude.

'Leave Maya alone and get back to work!'

At Morozov's words, I shot back up and sat rigid at the keyboard. My mind seethed. How long had she been there? Was she there at every lesson? Surely this was Morozov's daughter, the deaf girl Amelia had mentioned. I tingled at this wondrous new development. In the sheltered den under the piano, the music must vibrate powerfully enough through the wooden floor for the girl to feel it in her body, even though she couldn't hear the notes.

'Come, Valter. *Play!*'

I started the piece again. My fingers had thawed slightly after the interruption. Morozov retreated back to his settee, checking his watch on the way. As I struggled along, I perceived an odd sensation on my foot, a gentle tapping that went something like: DA - ta DA - DA - ta DA - ta ta DA - ta DA - DA...the rhythm of my piece, light and insistent.

As I played, Morozov's grumbling subsided, and then he lapsed into something resembling astonished silence. The tapping on my foot stopped, too, but it had already unbound something within me, and budged an immovable obstacle in my soul. For a miraculous moment I rose, phoenix-like, out of my own mediocrity and had the eerie sensation of actually setting the music free.

'Good...good,' murmured Morozov, assessing me coolly as he stroked his moustache. The whole situation began to feel much less like a gulag and more like parole.

No.

More like liberation.

Like... *flight*.

A quick burst of movement from under the piano caught my eye. I dared not stop playing, not with this promising turn of fate. Without looking up, I sensed a small figure spinning slowly beside the piano. Her arms waved gracefully, up and down, up and down, in time to the music.

I peeked from the keyboard and saw the tiny creature with wild black hair dancing, hazel eyes aglow. But she seemed lighter than dance. Lighter, even, than sound. She was as weightless as Kamaf's music. But it was *my* music this time... *my* music that made us both soar.

...*the spirit of music in human form.*

How could my mother have known?

Afterward, on my way down the stairs, I met Bertie coming up, heavy-footed and grave.

'Gosh, Walter, what happened to you?'

Was it so obvious? Did it show, my brief excursion into an untethered world?

We crossed paths there, Bertie and I, like patients outside Morozov's celestial clinic, he heading up for treatment, and I... and I...

Well, I can only say that on that Saturday, the onions smelled sweet, indeed. ■

## SHORT-LISTED ENTRIES

CONGRATULATIONS to our readers who have made the short list.

The best of the short listed entries will now also receive a prize. This month, congratulations go to Leona Francombe, a concert pianist, writer and translator from Brussels. She is awarded a year's subscription to *Writers' Forum* for her story, *Flight*.

**The Mirror**  
by Lilian Chavert

**All God's Children**  
by Ivy Blyth

**Eric's Last Hour**  
by Matthew Jones

**Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe**  
by Catherine Osborn

**The Walk**  
by Marit Meredith

**Into The Night**  
by Jane Bwyne

**Listless**  
by Ruth Collet-Fenson

**The Stroke**  
by Malcolm Bish

If you submit a story which is returned, read the advice on your form. If it states the tale has potential, make the necessary changes then try re-submitting it as a new entry.

Please note that stories which have been short-listed and appear in this panel cannot be re-submitted.