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“In Her Garden Nothing is Forbidden”
by Rachel Wojnar

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A Viennese Bonbon

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Los maridos y los gatos, son de la misma opinión,
pues teniendo carne en casa, salen a buscar ratón.*
(Husbands and cats, all share the same view, since
having meat at home, they go out in search of mice)
—Spanish proverb

Allegro moderato

The composer sat at the pianoforte, brooding. It was time for the composition lesson, though his pupil was often late. Time means little when you are seventeen.

He got up and started pacing his drawing room. “The rich have no manners.” Yet his mood changed as the student waltzed in, trailing behind a warbling cascade of greetings and excuses. She exuded beauty and grace, and her clothes were in the latest styles from Paris, though the composer had no way of knowing this. She was resplendent in a light pink silk dress with a low, squared-off neckline and a waist that was several inches above her actual waistline and fell just below the bust, an arrangement that emphasized the fullness of her young breasts.

There could be no sharper contrast than the one between her clothing and her teacher’s. He was, as usual, dressed carelessly in the manner of fifty years earlier, a cotton banyan like a dressing gown hanging over shirt woolen coat, vest, and breeches. Refusing to don a wig, he wore his hair long, brushed back from the forehead, and tied back at the nape of the neck with a black ribbon. On the streets of the bad part of town he might have been arrested as a vagrant.

“Good morning, Miss Gelberkopf,” he started.

“Please, please, call me Louise,” she cut him off. “I am only a girl.”

The composer harrumphed in disapproval, but continued: “Are you ready for today’s lesson, Louise? Did you do your homework?”

Louise set down the violin case and opened the satchel she had slung over her shoulder. “Yes, I tried to write a fugue using the theme you proposed, but it was hard.” She gave an embarrassed grin and handed over several sheets of manuscript paper covered with scrawls and scratched out musical entries.

The composer put on a pair of round spectacles and glanced up and down at the scribblings for a few minutes. Then he looked at the girl, who was leaning over his seated figure holding her breath. Choosing his words as carefully as he could, he pronounced: “Louise, this is a good start, but you need to flesh out the ideas a bit more. The phrases you put down here don’t flow harmoniously from one to the other, but are disjointed....”

The lesson was interrupted when the drawing room’s back door opened to usher a middle-aged woman in elegant street clothes. “Pardon for the interruption,” she said, turning to the composer. “Felix, coming back from the store I found at the door a messenger from your publisher. They need to talk to you right away; there is some problem with your score.” She then turned to Louise: “Miss Gelberkopf, can I offer you a cup of tea and some Mohnzelten?”

“No, thank you, Madame. I must watch my weight,” replied Louise, bowing respectfully.

The composer squeezed the lady’s arm. “Jill, please tell the messenger that I will go to the publisher’s office before noon. It cannot be that urgent. They probably can’t make out my scribblings.”

As the lady departed, the composer remarked: “Louise, did I tell you that my wife is an accomplished cellist? Perhaps the three of us can get together to do some music.”

“That would be lovely,” replied the young girl. “I’m not good, but as long as the violin part is not hard, I can probably handle it without embarrassing myself too much.”

“Well, we shall play one of Haydn’s piano trios. They are pretty but not too demanding.”

* * *

Soon after that conversation, the composer, Jill, and Louise started meeting in the late afternoon to play Haydn piano trios. The music was inconsequential, but ideal for the group, since the piano part was

predominant, and the composer was an excellent pianist. The violin had limited solo opportunities, and usually only played the melody in unison with the piano; the cello's role was mainly to support the low register line in the piano.

Since her part required little concentration, Jill was able to observe the interaction between her husband and the young student. Louise's regard for her teacher was growing into something like worship; both in playing and conversation, she repeated as the gospel her teacher's utterances and cast admiring glances at him when she could tear her eyes away from the score. The composer, whose demeanor was usually distant and somewhat inattentive, seemed to be warming up to his charge and even engaged in a bit of polite repartee with her. Jill was not alarmed by this change, but welcomed it as a sign that the genius she had married was finally starting to join the human race.

Thus, their concerts were placid and, like the music, only became vigorous at the coda of the fast movements, which usually ended with the main theme being played fortissimo by all instruments. At that point, the composer and his wife would thank Louise for the pleasure of her company, and this would bring another urbane get-together to a close.

Scherzo (Allegro)

"Dear Louise," started the composer. "You are not making enough progress. The music you write is lacking in fresh ideas, as if composing were a chore to be gone through rather than a source of joy."

"Oh, Felix," replied the girl, sighing. "As this point, I have no ideas left. I persevere because of my parents...and because of you."

The composer frowned. "Well, stressing out over your compositions is not going to help. Perhaps you should take breaks when you are trying to write. Go for a walk. Listen to music. Read a book. You may come back to your task feeling refreshed."

"I have tried all of those things. They don't seem to help. I'm still in a rut when I come back to composing."

"Perhaps you need a vacation."

Louise's eyes brightened for a moment, then sadness returned to them. "A vacation? My family would never allow it."

The composer uttered a strange, uncharacteristic small laugh, almost a cackle. “What if we made it a working vacation?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m in need of a vacation myself. Perhaps Jill and I could spend a couple of weeks in Hallstatt, renting a room in a hotel by the lake. You might come with us and spend your time whichever way you want, including writing some music. What do you think?”

“Oh, I would love the idea of spending time with you, away from the city.”

“Well, I’ll take it up with Jill and, if she is amenable, I’ll talk to your parents as well.”

* * *

Jill was not enthused by her husband’s proposal. Although she enjoyed traveling and had taken a number of tours of Europe and the near East, she was unimpressed with the idea of spending a couple of weeks in a rustic spot like Hallstatt, with nothing to do but sit by the lake. “I’ve been to Hallstatt a couple of times, and quite frankly, it’s rather boring. If we go on vacation, I’d rather go to Paris or even Venice.”

The composer was not expecting meeting resistance from his wife, who was normally quite accommodating, but recovered fast. “Darling, I’m beginning to work on a new symphony, and would like to go to a quiet place to let the ideas germinate. Also, I am thinking of inviting Louise to come along with us. She’s stuck on her composition studies, and the fresh air of the country might clear her pretty head.”

At the mention of the student’s name, Jill did a double take. She liked the young girl, and had appreciated Louise’s good influence on her reclusive husband. However, the idea of bringing Louise along kindled a small flame of jealousy that had been growing surreptitiously in her heart. Twenty-five years earlier, when Jill and the composer first met and ultimately married, Jill would have laughed at the idea of such an immature young thing being competition. Jill was then beautiful, polished and vivacious. No way her fiancé would even pay more attention to a half-baked teenager than to her, whom he called the love of his life. But now things were different. For one thing, she no longer felt beautiful...

After a long silence, Jill chose to give in to her husband's entreaty: "I suppose I could find things to occupy my time at Hallstatt. I still have not read Goethe's 'Sorrows of Young Werther,' and there are other books that I have been setting aside for future enjoyment. Also, Beethoven has a new sonata in A for cello and piano, and I want to study the score to see if you and I can learn it and perform it together. So, yes, let's go to Hallstatt. I hope we'll all have a good time."

The sudden relief that registered in the composer's face sent a rising scale of warning beats in Jill's racing heart. Outwardly, however, she smiled and started making plans for the upcoming vacation.

Andante cantabile, ma però con moto

The boat deposited them right at the lake level cellar of the ancient brewery and guesthouse. The composer turned to his companions and declared self-importantly: "When I made the arrangements, I ensured that we could proceed directly from the boat to our rooms at the hotel. It should all be very easy."

Jill worked hard at remaining impassive. As the practical one in the family, she usually made travel arrangements for the couple, and the interest Felix displayed on this occasion was suspicious. Anyhow, she had stayed at the Bräugasthof before and liked its romantic rooms filled with antiques and the outstanding views of the lake from the room balconies. She had no fault to pick with her husband's initiative.

They arrived too late to do any sightseeing and had to content themselves with a nice dinner at the restaurant, right on the lake. The following morning after breakfast they took a leisurely stroll along the town. They had lunch and were faced with the first decision: what to do next.

"I would rather return to our room and read," said Jill. She was starting to feel in an elegiac mood, the weight of years and the strangeness of the situation bearing on her shoulders.

"Fine," replied the composer. "Louise and I will go check the shops around the market square."

"Have fun," replied Jill, and smiled, though she felt tears starting to choke her inside.

* * *

The following morning, over breakfast, they discussed how they would spend the day. “I hear you can tour the salt mines, supposedly the oldest in the world,” proposed the composer.

“How do you get there?” asked Jill.

“I am told it is an hour hike up the hill to the main entrance,” replied her husband.

“I think I will stay in town,” replied Jill. “Drink coffee, read, and maybe have a schaumrolle at the pastry shop. “But you guys should return soon, so that Louise can do some composing.”

“We’ll do,” replied the composer.

They stayed out until dinner time. The composer looked exhausted, but offered no complaints.

* * *

The following morning, Jill suggested that they stay in town and get some relaxation. Louise had a different idea. “Yesterday, at the salt mine, someone suggested that we should visit Rudolf’s Tower, which is supposed to offer stunning views of the village. Emperor Rudolf had the tower built way back in the 13th century to protect the village and its salt mine. It should be interesting.”

“Is it easy to reach?” asked the composer doubtfully.

“I imagine so,” replied Louise, sensing the older man’s reluctance.

“Well, I guess I can use the exercise,” the composer replied, squaring his shoulders.

After the couple left, the older woman sat on the balcony of their room, looking without seeing as the sun rays drew silver ripples on the surface of the lake. She started to cry.

“Is she going to steal him from me? What can I do to stop her? Am I going to turn into another abandoned wife?”

She agonized over her choices all afternoon. Finding no easy answer, she buried herself in the different, but not dissimilar, woes of young Werther.

* * *

The composer had a restless night. He woke up often, assaulted by a sense of guilt that he did his best to suppress. Yes, he liked the young girl. Just as much as he had liked his wife, all those years before. But now things are different. Jill is turning into an old hag, Louise shone like a young, unbroken colt. What was wrong with wanting to have both? Can a man love both a dog and a cat? His time to have fun was running out, and before he knew it, he would be in an old men's home. Wasn't he entitled to one last fling?

On the other hand, his sense of morality kept raising its puritanical head. A woman is not a dog or a cat, and the love you swore to your wife should come before this infatuation.

On the other hand, Louise was so beautiful, and so available!

On the other hand...

* * *

The composer was almost too tired to go down for breakfast the following morning, but Jill prodded him out of bed. "You need to get some nourishment, and then spend the day resting," she cautioned.

As they met Louise for breakfast, the girl was already making plans for the day. "The man at the front desk told me that there is one hiking trail that should not be missed, called the Salt Brine Trail. The trail runs from Lake Hallstatt all the way to Lake Traunsee, and the views of the entire lake area are spectacular. Should we give it a try?"

Jill could no longer restrain herself. "Maybe we should all stay in town. Felix is looking very tired and is showing his age. Men in their fifties should not be trekking around, particularly if they are out of shape—"

The composer cut her off: "Darling, I'm still not an invalid. Louise, let's take that trail and see where it leads us."

Jill realized her mistake and bit her lip, dropping into a stony silence.

* * *

An unseasonable fog blew across the lake the following morning, the fifth of their vacation. The composer stayed in bed until the breakfast hour was almost over, and Jill had to prod him to get into his

breeches and escort her to the restaurant. He ate almost nothing, but downed cup after cup of hot tea, saying that he felt chilled to the bone. Louise, who had come down earlier and was having a leisurely repast by herself, joined them at their table and placed a sympathetic hand on the composer's shoulder. "Is there anything wrong, Felix? You look rather pale."

Jill started to make a curt reply, but the composer spoke first. "Nothing, dear. This fog has gotten into my bones and made me chilly. It's reminding me of my years."

An uneasy silence followed. Finally, the young girl shook her head and replied airily: "What years? You were with me on three hikes, and held up rather well in each instance. Just rest today, and tomorrow we'll figure out what to do."

* * *

By mid-morning the fog had lifted, and the rest of the day promised to be warm and bright. The composer suggested: "Maybe we should take a boat tour of Lake Hallstatt. I bet we can get beautiful views of the town from a different perspective."

Jill was opposed to the idea, but the composer brushed aside her objections. "I feel fine, and staying indoors on this beautiful day would be a shame. Let's go."

The hotel arranged for a boat to be hired and the trio boarded for a two-hour tour. They were barely half an hour out of town when things began to go wrong. The composer's breathing became agitated and he started sweating, even though it was a cool afternoon. "My chest hurts," he complained.

Jill wasted no time and got the boat to turn around at once, and had the composer escorted to the town's small infirmary, where they carried out a bloodletting and administered some dubious tonics. Luckily, the crisis abated on its own and the composer was discharged not much worse than upon admission. Jill then made a quick decision: "Let's take you back home. If you are going to die, let it be on your own bed."

On the boat ride from Hallstatt, Jill and Louise took turns hovering uncertainly next to the cot where the composer lay. For the moment, they were united in their grief and their hope the man they

cherished would recover. Little by little, the composer's breathing became more regular and, by the time they were able to return home, the crisis had passed, but its memory would linger for a long time.

Allegro moderato

The months that followed went by rather quickly. The composer had been left enfeebled by his heart episode and remained at home, working on his symphony. Louise excused herself from further attempts at becoming a composer and concentrated on improving her skills as a violinist, a calling for which she had real talent. She gave a well-attended recital in the Fall and met there a young nobleman from the provinces by the name of Franz, who was no musician but had an eye for beautiful girls.

Jill cared for her enfeebled spouse and concentrated on running the household and the publication of the composer's works, which were slowly being recognized and gaining acclaim all over Europe. Throughout this period, she was accosted by misgivings about the happenings earlier in the year. But for the heart attack, would Felix have cheated on her with a girl who could have been the daughter they never had? Even if no open transgression occurred, was there any doubt that he was taken with Louise and might have divorced Jill had fate not decreed otherwise?

But Jill's chief doubts were about herself. Had she been too weak, too accommodating, too willing to let the incipient affair progress before her eyes without doing anything about it? She had never mentioned the matter to Felix who, insofar as she knew, had no idea that his wife was aware of his treasonous desires. Should she have done so? Should she dismiss him now, as not worthy of her affection?

At the end she concluded she had done the right thing, whether by design or through pure luck. Her husband was weak, but most men were. His infatuation with Louise had been an act of defiance at the inexorable march of time. He probably did not deserve her fidelity, but often marriages survive by the acceptance by each party of the other's foibles. Besides, he was a man of genius, and posterity would likely judge him benevolently. Shouldn't she?

Late in December, as the year 1811 wound to a close, the composer was sufficiently recovered for the three of them to have dinner

at one of the finest restaurants in town. There were multiple reasons for a celebration: his new symphony, now at the publishers, would receive its world premiere in the spring, with the composer at the helm health permitting. Jill had launched a new career as a soloist, and was sought after by orchestras through the Empire and beyond, thanks in part to the scarcity of accomplished cellists in those times of war and turmoil. And Louise had become engaged to Franz, with a wedding scheduled for the coming Fall.

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As they downed a final glass of obstler, the composer remembered something. Turning to his companions, he announced excitedly: “My publisher says that Beethoven has just submitted the manuscript of a new piano trio in B-Flat. If it is as good as his other work, it will be quite difficult to play but wonderful. I have a mind to purchase the score as soon as it is published. Would you two be interested in learning it so we can play it together?”

Louise gave a non-committal shrug. “I’d love to, but Franz is very possessive and may take umbrage at my spending too much time learning to play it.”

“What a pity,” replied the composer, trying to hide his disappointment. “The world will miss what could have been a great performance by the three of us.”

Jill smiled and took a last bite of her after-dinner candy. Like the confections from the Demel pastry shop, the story of her husband’s failed romance with his student was a Viennese bonbon, sweet chocolate on the outside concealing perhaps a bittersweet surprise in its heart. It would never replace a full meal prepared by an expert.

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Born in Cuba, MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ (he/him) migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was published in February 2023.