

At The Hotel Zanzibar

She disappeared on one of the two buses pulling out of the depot, while I was off getting some sandwiches with the fiver she'd pulled out of her sock. Just like that, my sister took off. Did it hurt my feelings? Sure. But don't kid yourself, I knew it was coming, just didn't know when. Soon as I figured out what she had done, I went looking for work, circling around block by block until I found a good bet. Why someone had named such a worn out dump *The Hotel Zanzibar* was beyond me, yet here it was leaning over the sidewalk in the middle of just another Midwestern town, two streets off the main drag. Heard a train not too far off. This town looked as good as any other, and they hired me, no questions asked.

After a couple weeks washing pots, I was settled in and doing okay. Had a tiny room upstairs over the kitchen. Worked with Al who ran the dishwasher and Sy who did most of the cooking. They looked out for me. Both of them had started working before they were sixteen. They showed me how to bus dishes and set the tables. On my morning breaks, I liked watching sparrows fly down for crumbs in the alley. Their squabbling seemed playful. Not like most people.

Didn't take long before I noticed the bar was never busy, so I went over to talk to the bartender before my dinner shift one day. Monica was about 40, according to Al and Sy, just a little younger than my Ma would have been if she hadn't run off and gotten killed in a car wreck with "that drunken fool Calvin," according to Pop.

"Hey Daniel, how're you settling in here? Guys treating you okay in the kitchen?"

"Sure bet. Been showin' me the ropes. I was wonderin' Monica, how come the bar isn't as busy as the dining room. Looks pretty comfortable in here, with a big window lookin' out onto the street. And a piano in the corner. But no one ever plays it."

Monica's face fell, sad just for a bit. Easy to miss if you weren't watching. Then she caught herself and leaned back.

"You might have heard about this. Maybe not. Anyway, just a few months before you got here, there was an argument in the bar and Ike, our piano guy, tried to break it up. Two guys throwing punches. Ike waded in to split them up, but one of them had a pistol. Ike took a bullet in his liver for his troubles. Lucky he didn't die."

"Holy crow, Monica. That's terrible. He's a friend?"

"A good friend, Daniel. To me, and everyone else. Ike has played here for over twenty years. I check in on him every week or so. He got out of the hospital over a month ago, but he doesn't seem to be getting better the way the doctor said he should."

"Sorry to hear that. Gotta be hard."

"Folks are a little skittish still, because of the shooting. Without Ike playing all their favorite songs, they've kind of drifted away. I think Stockman's, that bar over on First Ave, has someone playing."

Monica reminded me of Aunt Ruth, the way she looked right at you, thoughtful like, when she was talking.

"I sure would like to hear him play. My aunt in Poughkeepsie had a piano. She used to try to teach me some, 'cause Ma was gone, and Sis wasn't interested."

"Where is your sister now?"

"Dunno. She ditched me at the bus station. Ran off with some guy, had a guitar. Tired of lookin' out for me. Been doin' it for as long as I can remember. Our Pop wasn't much good with kids. Mind if I try playin' a tune?"

Monica glanced at the windup clock on the wall and said, "I think we have time before the dinner crowd comes in."

So we went over to the piano together. It was pretty dusty. Some faint gold lettering on the front said *Bush & Gerts*. Never seen that name before.

"Play me something, Daniel. Doesn't have to be bar music. Just something you like."

When I sat down and touched those keys it took me right back to Aunt Ruth, even though her piano said *Steinway* and had nicer keys. I pretended my fingers weighed less than a small sparrow, just the way she taught me to begin. I could feel the wooden levers moving inside. I

used to stand on a chair and lean over the open top of her upright while she played, watching all the parts moving, cushiony hammers hitting the wires, the air filling with sounds.

Monica was waiting.

I warmed up with some scales and then drifted off into something that reminded me of Aunt Ruth, her laugh when I went a little crazy and riffed with the keys.

Monica broke into my melody.

"What was her name?"

"Who?"

"Your aunt, who taught you piano."

"Ruth. Aunt Ruth. She was the kindest person I ever met."

Monica took a longer look at me. I could see her wondering about this tall kid with the long arms and quiet face.

"Why didn't you stay with her, live with her?"

I closed the piano gently, like I had been taught, and turned to face Monica, who had pulled over a chair while I was playing.

"She got sick. Somethin' with her lungs. She used to work in a linen factory from when she was a kid. Lots of dust in the air she always said. So she couldn't take us in. It was the most she could do to have us over for part of a day. Then she got real tired and we would set her up with supper

before we left. She kind of taught us to cook, sandwiches and soup, tea, just by askin' us to fix her stuff late in the afternoon."

"She loved you."

"Yeah, she did."

"Can you read music, Daniel? Here, stand up a sec, let me get something out of the bench."

She opened the piano and placed a few sheets on the music shelf.

"I can't read that. But I can remember anything I hear."

"I see. Well, I like the way you play, Daniel."

I got a little restless then. Jumpy.

"Hey Monica, can you tell me why this place is called the Zanzibar?"

She cocked her head at me, but went on.

"My grandfather built this hotel after the Civil War and named it after a ship he served on when he was in the British Navy. He had run away from home in Liverpool, served as a cabin boy at first, and later as a cook's mate, I think. He died when I was young, so I only heard the stories from my mother."

That got me interested, so I played a few bars, humming along to myself, throwing in something about a sailing ship.

"I like the sound of that name, *Zanzibar*. Real different, but not too dangerous. Right, Monica?"

"It does sound exciting, doesn't it? The other side of the world."

Dinner shift had just started, so I went to check the tables had their salt and pepper shakers filled up before heading into the kitchen.

That night, I lay in bed listening to the trains rumbling in the distance, rolling through town, and imagined life on a sailing ship, rolling on the ocean, with this same moon overhead. In the darkness. Free, like the wind.

Next day, I asked Monica if I could play the piano in the afternoons.

"What songs would you play?"

"Dunno, maybe I could go over to Stockman's and listen to what they're playin'."

"Not so sure that's a good idea. We want to keep it friendly around town. Could you go visit Ike? Maybe he would teach you some of his songs. I think you two might hit it off."

Monica brightened up at the thought of this.

I worried Ike might think I was after his job.

Monica gave me the address. Not a huge town, so I could walk there easy. Screwed up my courage and knocked on the door. Paint was half gone, wobbly railing.

Door opened enough so I could see gray hair straggling around a face maybe too young for gray hair. Hadn't shaved in a while.

"What do you want?"

"Monica sent me. I wash pots at the Zanzibar and asked her if I could play the piano. She said maybe, if you could teach me some of your stuff."

Ike took in my clean shirt. My jeans had seen better days. I could tell he was wondering how young I was, peach fuzz and all.

"What's your name, son?"

"Daniel. Only been in town a few months."

"Come on in. We can sit in the kitchen."

He turned unsteadily and shuffled down the hallway.

"I heard you got shot. You okay?"

"Yeah. Just makes me mad, feeling so damn rickety. Here, grab a seat, there by the window."

I had to tilt a cat off the chair when I pulled it away from the tiny table. Ike slid a stool over.

"I bet Monica wants her piano playing again."

"Well, she didn't say that, Ike. But she misses you. Worried about you."

"She's a good gal. But you probably already figured that out."

"I don't want to make a grab for your job, Ike. Just wanted to play the piano, nobody was usin' it."

"Can you read music?"

"Nope. Monica asked me that too. All by ear."

"Well, let's try one song. It's a shanty. Know what that is?"

"An old run down cabin? My Pa used to say my uncle's place looked like it belonged in a shanty town."

"Nope. A shanty is what sailors sing. Did you know Monica's grandfather was a sailor?"

"She said he was in the British Navy and that's how come the hotel is named Zanzibar."

"That's right. So, let me sing you this one and you can try it out for Monica. It's one of her favorites. *Spanish Ladies* is the name."

Ike leaned over with a soft groan and got two spoons out of a drawer. Kept time with them as he sang. Never heard music like it before.

We'll rant and we'll roar like true British sailors

We'll rant and we'll roar along the salt seas

After an hour of back and forth and a cold glass of tea, we thought I might have it down.

"You want a song that'll get folks excited, to keep the booze flowing. So take this one back with you and see if Monica approves."

I was still going over the *Spanish Ladies* in my head, so I barely heard him.

"You're a good lad, Daniel. Must have taken a bit of courage to come knocking on my door, not knowing what to expect. Come back and tell me how it went."

I was out of breath with excitement when I got back to the Zanzibar. Must have run half way.

Monica put down a glass and towel on the bar, watching me with a curious look on her face.

Started smiling when I went right over to the piano, not saying a word. Soon enough, the *Spanish Ladies* were lining up at the bar with their sailors. I played with my eyes closed. My hands rolling up and down the keyboard just like I imagined sailors walking on a moving deck. I was still in Ike's kitchen, his feet tapping on the floor, the spoons flying back and forth.

"He must've really taken to you, Daniel. Gave you one of his favorites." Monica had quietly pulled over a chair to sit by me.

"You looked like you were floating above the bench just now."

As the weeks went by, I went back to Ike's kitchen whenever I could, listening and learning. One day, we sat talking a bit after working on some new tunes. I had questions saved up.

"I've been wondering about where you were born, what it was like for you when you were my age."

"Ah, well, my friend, let's see about that.

The kids in my stony little village, there in county Mayo it was, called me 'Pike' from as long as I can remember. I took pride in that name, thinking of the monstrous fish that ruled the lough and filled our dinner hungry bellies on the nights the families gathered. I was a fighter. Only me ma wouldna call me by that name. "You're Padraic to me and always will be" she'd whisper, like a knife, close by my ear, hugging me beside our hearth. And so, as I grew up thinking I'd be a farmer like me da, I kept this pride beating in my chest, right beside my heart. Two prides, truth be told, one noble and the other fierce.

One day, I got in a fight over a girl. Squaring off against a taller boy, I heard shouts coming at me through the haze. 'Pike Man' they called me, some laughing, some jeering, as I fell under the fists from above. What is this 'pike man' mixed in with the sweat smeared dirt that marked me the loser? And why did the boy who beat me mutter 'lobster' as he kicked me one last time? I took these wounds home with me, kept them bound up, until out in the field with me da, I asked him why they'd call me these names. "You're not to know, but I'll tell ya now. Your Nana who you never knew, she died when your ma was born, died cursing the english soldiers who raped her, the sweetest colleen in these parts." That fierce rage, dimming as he looked me in the face,

searching for something then. "So keep the name we give you, Padraic. Keep it close, tight inside your fist. 'Tis a stone from this field we stand in."

That's how I started out, Daniel. And I'll tell you, the reason you're hearing this, besides you asked, is because you've got more music in you than I've ever seen. I'm not so young as you think, seen more lives lived and lost, hard men mostly, so having you turn up at my door, from Monica, gives me pause. Brings my folks to mind, and my baby sister Mo, Maureen she is, a chuckling bright star last time I saw her. Left them all behind."

Ike seemed like he might go on.

"How did you end up here, then?"

"I had just turned seventeen when I signed on as a stoker on the *Haverford* out of Liverpool. Late summer of '22. After we landed in Philly, I headed west, working as a fireman on the Pennsy. Bounced around until the day I wandered into the Zanzibar to have a glass of beer. Chester, Monica's grandad, took a shine to me, especially after he learned I had shipped out of Liverpool, his hometown. By then, I was going by Ike, keeping my Padraic to myself, and dropping the sharp end of the pike. The old fish in me was resting in the deep waters, done with fighting, and I lighted on the shore of that piano you found. Chester was kind to me. He knew the meanness of big men. Might have been tall himself, but he never stood over me. He was the one taught me to play. Piano, spoons, hands and feet. He hired me on and gave me a place to settle down. I did anything Chester's hotel needed; carpentry, roofing, kitchen work, boiler, you name it. One day

in the spring of '28, he fell off a ladder, broke his back. They said later, a rib punctured his lung. The life just went out of him, so quick."

"What happened then?"

"Times got hard in the '30s, the place as shabby as the folks who drifted through. Stayed afloat somehow. Then the war, back to the boiler room for me, on the *Hammann*, until I got wounded at Midway. Lucky to have a home to come back to. They made me promise, Clarissa and Monica, when I shipped out."

"And Padraic?", I asked.

"Berthed in my bones."

I did not know it, the day Ike sang *A Sea Story*, standing, leaning against the wall, that this ballad would be the last. Turning away to look out into the street, Ike sang the last verse about two shipwrecked men and a raft only big enough for one of them.

Quietly

A man gives up his life for a man,

This day upon the sea.

"Thanks for coming by so often, Daniel."

It felt strange, like things were different somehow, him saying that the way he did. I didn't know what to say back.

In the months following Ike's funeral, I played more, and washed pots less, until I was playing all the time. Word got out.

At first, I had to borrow a jacket from Monica, who explained, "You wouldn't believe what folks will leave behind in a hotel. You'd think the place caught fire and they had to jump out the window."

Later, I saved up and bought my own, along with some nicer pants, and shoes that could take a shine. Tried to grow a mustache.

I wanted to make things special.

"How 'bout we put some candles on top of the piano? What'cha think, Monica? Might set the mood some. Or is that too smooth?"

"Maybe we ought to move the piano out of the corner, Daniel. Let folks hear it all the way into the dining room."

I soon learned that folks liked it best when I started with a song that most of them might have heard before, and then drifted slowly, playing off the notes, making stuff up as I went along. Always came back to their song in the end.

Sometimes I could feel someone approaching as I played, especially when my eyes were closed. "What's your fancy? If you hum me a few bars, I'll try to follow along." Once they got started, I would close my eyes again and smooth out their bumpy melody, thinking about sunlight over a sandbar.

"Where'd you hear this one before? Go ahead and sing it, real soft. No one will hear. Sing it with whoever sang it to you." And they would move in closer.

Most evenings ended with the *Spanish Ladies* or *A Sea Story*, depending on the mood. I would scootch over to make room for Ike and catch Monica's eye as she paused to lean on the bar and listen to us.

I came back from my studies to the Zanzibar during every summer break. One morning, I asked Monica to tell me more about her Grandpa Chester and Ike.

"To really understand, you will need to hear a little about my mother first. Her name was Clarissa, and she died a couple of years after Ike came home from the war. I never knew my

father. My mother said I did not need a father. Not that I didn't have one; I just didn't need one. I had a hard time, when I was younger, putting into words, that I wanted the person more than I wanted the relationship. But she wouldn't tell me who he was, or had been, not even his name. Somehow it was more her business than mine. When I argued with her about this, deciding for me whether I could know anything about him, she just clammed up. When I got really mad, I asked her who my mother was."

"Must've hurt a lot. Sometimes I wonder why my father was so useless. At least I have a face to be frustrated with though."

"It wasn't until later, just before Grandpa Chester died, that I realized he was more a father to me than he had been to her. This was confusing, though you'd think someone who grew up like me, in a hotel with people coming and going all the time, would be adept. But something nagged at me. How could he be so warm and affectionate with me, and not with her? The oddest thing to me was when he said to her 'you are my Clarissa' which was supposed to be affection, I think, but after so many repetitions began to seem like he was sleepwalking, or talking about something else. I couldn't figure it out and was afraid to ask him. Didn't want him to decide against me for taking up for my mother. Didn't ask her either. Damned if I was going to care about her father if she wouldn't care about mine."

Monica stopped herself, checking to see if I was shocked by her outburst. I nodded and smiled, so she went on.

I was on my own to figure things out in Grandpa's hotel. Until Ike arrived. It was as if the earth stopped dead in her tracks and took a turn to the right on the day he first walked through our doors. I was eight or nine years old and he was like a giant big brother from the moment he turned to smile at me. There in the bar with Grandpa. He had scuffed boots and big rough hands, but his voice was like music, soft and full of whimsy. He said he had a sister about my age, back home, far away in a place called Mayo, in Ireland. He called her Mo.

Ike and Grandpa took a liking to each other right away. They shared the sea. Sailing ships and steamships. I watched their hands a lot. The way they were still when they talked; the way they moved so silently when they worked together."

The wistful look in her eyes told me she hadn't finished with this love story.

"Ike was everything to me that Grandpa Chester seemed not to be for my mother. Interested. All the other kindnesses flowed from that simple gesture. If he was not whittling me some small plaything, then he was spinning fantastical tales that we both knew were only partially true and laughed together at his impish abandon. He taught me the Irish stepdance as best he could, but I was too often carried away and swirled my hands above my head as I ran off into the garden.

When Grandpa fell off the ladder that day and died so soon after, I was secretly terrified that Ike would leave us; his heart was so stricken. I know my mother asked him to stay, to help us keep the hotel; I listened through the door. The way he looked at me while my mother was explaining what they had decided, I think he stayed for me."

When Monica got cancer in the late 60's, I came back to help her sell the property. She opened a small drawer in her desk and took out a faded leather book.

"My mother's diary."

We sat together and took turns reading to each other. Some pages had been torn out, and others had been water damaged making them illegible.

19 November 1910

I am my father's only daughter. His son despised him and ran away to seek his own fortune. He joined the army, according to the letter that came in the blazing heat of summer to tell us of his bravery. We had not heard from him in over five years. My father seemed more angry than bereaved. I thought men were supposed to care deeply for their sons, especially their first-born ones. But then, my father was as unpredictable as he was unforgiving. He did not name my brother after himself, as if the mite would never measure up. Instead he let my mother name him. "Earnest" she said, ever the romantic. She never blamed her son for leaving her behind. Instead, she simply revered his memory, as if he had died the day he left. My mother's name was Elaine. My father's name is Chester. Why they named me Clarissa I have yet to divine. My mother took that tale to her grave, and my father to this day simply says "You are my Clarissa." I marvel at the distance they put between themselves and those closest to them.

27 October 1925

Our Irish godsend arrived on a dusty hot August afternoon, neither thin nor tall, more like the chestnut timbers in our tiny barn, seasoned and smoothed by time and work. Ike appeared on our shores as a whole man, and no one's son, complete and capable. Asked for a pint of beer. I adored him immediately, this brotherly presence, so uncomplicated. My father soon became "Chester," a friend and mentor to Ike. The difference in their ages was overcome, I think, by the similarity of their younger years, in service on the seas. That the British Empire had colonized Ireland did not come between them. I chalk this up to the wide open expanses of their new America.

We celebrated Monica's ninth birthday not long after Ike began working for us. He gave her a tiny rowboat carved from a limb fallen from one of the basswood trees beside the kitchen garden. Something to float in a horse trough. He is kind beyond his years and wistful at times, but does not talk much of his home in Ireland. His attention is largely turned towards my father. There is a hunger there. On both their parts.

12 August 1928

We buried Chester today. I wish he had confided more in me. It was as if he could not tolerate anyone who was too close, his immediate family. The women, he put on a pedestal, and left them there. Once he had married my mother and fathered all the children he could endure, he just put her aside. I watched her dwindle and fade, helpless. I was hardly ever more than 'his Clarissa' whatever that meant, despite his hearty insistence. And his son, you might think he would be glad of a male heir, someone to carry his name on, but it was as if his name held no value. Hard to tell

what he truly valued, until Ike arrived. Then, some long buried spark found air and flourished. Music and handiwork, almost a joy in being alive, literally flowed out of him. Some floodgate finally opened. Monica benefitted. A granddaughter, distant enough, and somehow acceptable as a continuance of whatever idea he had of himself. Such a contradiction of coldness and warmth. I had grown so used to his distance that I almost forgot he was my father, just this man, this anchor in the life of this hotel he named after a ship. Who knows what happened on that Zanzibar?

5 May 1929

I decided early on to do everything in my power to give the best of my father to my daughter. When he was alive, I made myself invisible, and let them find each other. When he was invisible, I made him whole for her, drawing the hidden elegance of the man forth for her. How this disturbed the wounding loneliness I had felt as a young daughter!

I began writing in the night, upstairs in my room over the kitchen, at about the same time I became an evening regular on the piano downstairs. Mostly a private conversation with a yet unmet companion in life. The sense of relief I felt in having a place to simply be as I moved closer to the end of my second decade of life, a long life, I felt, for having been so tumultuous and uncertain, this sense of relief was food and sleep and shelter to me. I found that I was eager to engage with solitude.

For the first time in my life, I had a room of my own. As the seasons rotated under the stars, the roof over my head remained the same. The two brightest planets in my sky were Monica and Ike. As the years progressed, I began to take the measure of the constellations of my history. Retracing my steps to my present, I revisited my birthplace and birth family, peering through the dusty window panes of recollection, recasting the players in the softer light of my newfound home. I was able to own them as my kin, in all of their enormity and poverty, I think because of the consolation and confidence afforded me by those who honored me with their interest and witness, more than any need to shape their own story with mine.

I was not alone. Quite often, something almost physical approached as I sat in my small room at the Hotel Zanzibar. Late at night, with a single candle alight, everyone else asleep, I waited. It was a time I favored, when the moon peered in through the small triangular window above my bed. I would awaken after a few hours sleep that I took at the end of the workday, wanting the easing, attentive, quiet. Sometimes as the wind shifted over the roofline, I could hear timbers creaking, a shutter banging somewhere, and I imagined I was on a ship, this beast with canvas wings stretched across its crosstrees. A living, breathing, warm-blooded animal that surrounded me and carried me up and over the crests and troughs of a cold world that knew little about me. This presence was not strange, not other, not familiar. It approached me, settling, seeking my breathing, as if to share the air coming up out of my chest, my nostrils, my cheeks blooming with light. A hunting cat, yet kindly as the scent of apple blossoms. I knew then, with an assurance that surprised me, I was loved.