

The Professor and Doña Eleanor

“He makes you stay late. You can’t clean until he’s finished with his practice. I can move you to another building on campus. Nicer professors.”

Eleanor clasped her dry fingers and rubbed her palms. She crossed her arms, one hand tight against her side, the other gripping her forearm and considered the request of her young supervisor.

“Me gusta la música,” She said and refused to leave the music department with its erudite, if arrogant, conductor.

The sound of the strings wafted through the long hallway.

She gathered supplies and began cleaning and listening to music. The music, the wide arcs of the broom swishing, the faint creaking of the wooden handle, created a reverie.

Eleanor drew a quick breath, a slight smile on her lips, she prickled with anticipation. She knew it was a good night. The orchestra would perform *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* for the university audience in a few weeks, a little serenade for spring. A sharp tap on the metal podium rang through the practice room and down the corridor.

She lived in two worlds. In one, she cleaned the university music building. In the other, she remembered her father, a time before they moved to the north. Her father’s tap on the podium was magic to her. She sat next to her mother, close to the orchestra. The ambient lighting glowed from the stage, the music began, and the dream was made. She heard the patterns develop, the ascending themes of the first movement, then the lyrical andante. She imagined the dance of the menuetto and the brilliance of the rondo allegro. Each caught her soul as the concerto moved deeper and deeper into her mind until she touched the great composers of the past.

Suddenly, a side door swung open hitting the hallway wall. The sound muffled as two boys eager to leave their last class of the day rushed out. A stream of students followed, hustling through the door, jostling each other with their back packs slung across their shoulders. She moved to the side, making room for their hurried exit. The heavy double doors leading to the street banged opened then clanged shut after the last student.

Her mood interrupted, she arranged items in her cart, waiting for the humanities professor who taught the class to emerge. Soon, she was there. Her brief case in hand, she turned, fumbled with her keys, then locked the classroom door. “Good evening,” she nodded to Eleanor, not waiting for a return greeting, and hurried down the hall and out the door.

The gardenias that covered either side of the porch were in full bloom. Their fragrance drifted into the hallway before the doors banged shut. She stopped and stared at the doors, the spring night just out of her reach. The baton hit the metal stand, the orchestra played, and she turned to continue her work.

Midway through the first movement the music stopped. “Measure 14, again, march this,” the conductor lectured. “Think about what you are playing. Rocket theme. Again.”

Chairs moved. A hard tap to the stand. The music began.

Within seconds, “No,” he interrupted. “Think. Rocket theme. It must be fast, energetic.” He paused. “Again. Listen. The tempo does not yield.”

The metronome clicked. The slice of the bows on the strings began the movement.

He would do better to let them play through, she thought, remembering her father’s work with the musicians in his orchestra. “Let them play,” he would say to his assistant after several attempts at a correction. “They have to learn to feel it. Let them play.”

The students played the first movement and began the melody of the second.

“No.” The music stopped. “This must be slower, gentle, lyrical. Do you know what those words mean?” he yelled. “No sentimental blustering.” A pause. He adjusted the metronome. “Get out ‘Fur Elise.’ Maybe something easier will help. We can only hope, right?”

She heard students rustling through their music folders held on strict black stands. Finding the score, they straightened their chairs, scraping the hard wood floor. She again swept the hallway, arcing back and forth with her broom. The first notes of ‘Fur Elise’ floated down the hall and she stopped. She closed her eyes and listened.

She remembered her father’s last performance. Not a member of the elite orchestra, her talent on the piano good but not quite good enough, she sat in the velvet seats, frayed from the years of use then neglect, and allowed the music to enter her mind, then her soul. The flamboyant Mozart and the transitional Beethoven were his favorites to teach and perform. But in those last years, the pressure to leave, the military on campus, the assassination of the chancellor, weakened him. His physique thinned, his energy drained, he made a decision. “It’s not safe anymore,” he told his family. “There is no money. Soon there may not be a university.”

She often wondered if they would have disappeared, become part of los desaparecidos if they had stayed. We had no path, no choice but to leave, she thought. As it was, the move was too much for her already weakened father. A dark time, he died only months after moving north. Not alone, his family with him, but disenfranchised, away from his colleagues and his passion, he wasted away.

The last notes faded. Again, she heard the chairs move, the sheets of music rustle, the metronome reset. The clear click, click, clicking of the beat, the exact tempo. Then the muted voice of the orchestra conductor. He stilled the deliberate pendulum. His baton tapped the podium. She held her breath.

The beginning was crisp, the tempo bright. They felt the serenade, she was sure. “Let them play.” She mouthed the words.

She worked through the remaining few classrooms, dusting the shelves, emptying the waste baskets, sweeping the floor, and listening to the music. The cleaning dreamlike. She moved through her tasks mechanically, rhythmically. This one last time, the conductor allowed them to play through. Through all four movements to the coda. The ending always brought a gasp to her lips. Brilliant, she thought.

The session over, she heard the students moving their chairs, setting them in order for their morning peers. Sheaves of paper were tamped in place and put in folders, then on shelves above the openings designed for cased instruments. Parking her cart by the side of the wall, she peeked her head inside the full room. The conductor shook a sheet of music in front of a nervous student and pointed with a rigid index finger. “Here,” he said. “This is where the crescendo begins. Not two measures before.”

The student nodded.

“Practice. Think. Hear it in your head. Then do it all again.” A rasp of a smile raised his upper lip as he thrust the music back toward the young student.

Catching his eye, she said, “Clean?”

“No, no, not yet.” His lips pinched together. “In a while. Pocos minutos,” came the condescending answer.

She continued down the hall to the next classroom. Humming as she cleaned, she again heard the movements of Mozart’s little serenade playing in her mind, moving from the first lyrical movement to the coda. Over and over she heard the movements and saw her father, tall and straight, the black tails of his tuxedo moving up and down, side to side, his arms punctuating

a flourish, his hands encouraging more feeling to flow through his musicians, as he guided the orchestra through the piece.

Soon, she was finished with the last room. She headed back down the hall, through the double doors and stopped at the open door of the practice room. He was still there, his back to her, sitting at his desk. He stroked the metronome with his fingers as if it were the skin of a lover and unhinged the pendulum from the hook. The sound of the quick click-click sounded in the room. Moments later, the professor fastened the swinging lever and opened the music score.

“Clean?” she asked quietly. She did not want to upset him. There are parrots in the field, she thought, her father’s frequent expression during those last months, urging them to be watchful.

A long sigh escaped his lowered head. His slumped shoulders were suddenly erect. He stood up quickly and picked up the papers on his desk. “Of course,” he said without looking at her. “I was just leaving.” He stuffed the papers into his brief case and grabbed his navy sweater. “Still chilly out, I guess,” he said, not expecting a reply. He walked past her not noticing her shy smile. “Evening,” his perfunctory salutation, as he left the room.

She waited until she heard the outside door open and swing closed, the sound echoing down the hall. Inhaling deeply, she wanted the odors of the leather cases, the resin of the bows, the heaviness of the sheaves of music to envelope her. She began to clean, first dusting the shelves, then sweeping through the arched circle of chairs, taking care not to move them from their places. Last, she came to his desk, slowly dusting the open spaces, careful not to disturb the piles of papers strewn around the periphery.

She brushed the unyielding metronome, pendulum clasped in its center place, the whole apparatus void of dust or fingerprints. Moving it carefully, she glanced underneath and found no

dust footprint. As she slid it back in place, the clasp of the movement came undone, and the allegro beat clicked in the quiet room. She clasped her hands on the front and back of the metronome to stop it. She moved the instrument toward the back of the desk, warding off any further movement with open palms, the duster clasped under one thumb, as she backed away.

Brooms and rags stored away, she pushed her cart into the hall. She reached to close the door, paused and gazed at the chairs and music stands set precisely in the intricate arrangement. Once again, she felt the ambient lighting lower and the closeness of the audience. Once again, she heard her father's orchestra begin the music of the little serenade.

Drawn to the podium, she stepped up and faced the empty chairs. She picked up the slight baton and tapped the podium, the metallic sound loud in the quiet room. Her left arm raised, her right hand extended, she held the baton between fingers and thumb as she had seen her father begin so many times before. A quick downward stroke and the first movement began. She played through the ascending rocket theme and moved flawlessly into the second graceful variation. The intimate and tender strokes of the strings in the second movement entered her brain.

Entranced by the music in her mind, she did not hear the outside door open and close and the quick tap of the professor's shoes as he came down the hallway toward his room. She moved into the third movement, the menuetto, and heard nothing except the music, the baton in her hand moving in small circles encouraging the dance.

He stopped before the door. Astounded. His mouth gaped open. He saw her turn the pages of the music on his stand. Then he watched, intrigued. Yes, he thought. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. His hand began to tap the rhythm on his leg, immediate and precise, as he watched her lean forward into the rondo. Her face in a dreamlike smile, her eyes closed, her body

staccatoed along with the movement, encouraging the individual voice of each instrument, her head bobbing, her hands sweeping through the coda.

His hand came up to his waist and struck down as if he were conducting the coda instead of her. His arm was tense, exact, striking down at the precise moment before the imagined sound. Her arms flowed making the last sweeping movement that enveloped the violins, cellos, violas, basses, ending with an exaggerated open palm, fingers stretching toward the empty chairs.

He heard her huff out a last breath as she lowered her hands, eyes still closed. Placing the baton on the podium, the clink of wood on metal brought her from her reverie. Opening her eyes she arranged the music as the professor had left it and turned to leave.

The professor backed out into the hall before she turned. Putting his hand on the wall, he walked toward the outside door, his quick stride gone. Quietly opening the door, he stepped through the short entrance out to the porch. He slipped, striking his thigh against the cement balustrade. His hand landed on the rough slope of the wide ledge. He slumped against it, shoulders drawn forward, head down. A bird flew from beneath the gardenia bush startling him. A strong gust of wind tossed the blooms dropping white petals on the ledge and the stairs.

The wind settled and he leaned against the building and felt the bricks mark his back. He again saw the graceful movements of the cleaning woman, arms moving, hearing the imaginary orchestra. Yes, he thought, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. She heard it, conducted it, note for note.

Suddenly, the door opened, and the cleaning woman stepped out on the porch, her purse clutched under her arm, her shift done. “Profesor,” she said, surprised by his presence. “You are here still. Buenas noches,” she said as she stepped down the stairs.

“Buenas noches, doña...,” he paused, wishing he hadn’t spoken. He didn’t know her name.

“Doña Eleanor, Profesor,” she replied. “Buenas noches.”

Swinging her purse over her shoulder, she began her walk home.

The professor stared after her. Her quick step, the rhythmic sound of the heels of her shoes sounded on the sidewalk.

He sat on the cement ledge, the fragrance of the gardenias thick in the air. In the stillness of the night, he leaned his head against the brick, propping one leg on the ledge for balance, the other dangling over the edge. He heard the music. He felt it pulse in his mind. His fingers kept the tempo opening and closing, feeling the crescendo and the coda.

A brisk zephyr stirred the tops of the trees. The rustling of the leaves came in bursts, one followed by the other. The dream broken, “Doña Eleanor,” he murmured.

He swung his leg over to the steps, putting his hand on the façade of the building to steady himself and peered into the evening, down the sidewalk, stippled with gray sparkles.