

POISON SONG

The life of a young woman is magically transformed when a man with a piano stops at a remote petrol station

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It's not really a town since the post office closed. Just an intersection, with a pub and a petrol station. Less than two hundred live here, most are only passing through. Old farmers drinking on verandas, dulling the pain of lives lived in service to the land. Young families commuting to the meatworks and the cotton gin, earning enough to get by but never enough to do better. Truck drivers pausing to ease their backs and wet their lips. All of them sharing that sharp-eyed look of people living on the edge of something better.

Past and promise mix with the dust and the dirt and the flies, along the narrow road through the Plains. I've stayed longer than most. Pulled my ripcord on a city-life diminished by loss. I needed distance from other people, more time alone with myself. A stranger at first but now somebody I know, maybe even like a little. You can charitably call me careworn. Working bar. Lines holding the dirt in my sun-damaged skin. No matter how much I moisturise and scrub it seems the black soil of the Plains has become a part of me and always will be.

It was summer when he came. Out here, summers means molten morning skies, when the dry heat catches in the back of your throat and the air smells slightly burnt. The trees become brittle stick-figures and the melancholy warble of the magpies is strangely hushed. The man with the blue truck and trailer came out of the shimmering haze, pulling into the petrol station, his cargo strapped down beneath a dusty tarpaulin. Thin and tall and distinctively urban, his fine clothes pressed clean and cool. Bleached bone white and blond, a nervous smile stuttering at the edges of his mouth.

Odette spoke to him first, though we all called her Gull

back then, on account of everyone referring to her as 'that gal' or 'this gal'. Gull had a perfectly round face, ringed by wiry brown curls and wore a rainbow of singlets and three-quarter pants. The perspiration looked like broken glass on her black skin and her feet were always bare. Twenty-two, but already holding herself tight, like life's passed her by. Gull dreamed of the green light that hung over the intersection, where clouds of insects played at night. The green light to other places and better things. But she lived in a red light world, circumscribed by her community and the limited futures they could imagine for a shiftless, gangly girl like her.

The big-city look of the man pulling into the car park drew her out like a honeybee hunting nectar, her face splitting into a big white grin as she asks him: "Whatcha got under the sheet fellah?" "Burdens", he replies, "Eighty-eight keys, two hundred and thirty strings and an attitude. Wanna see?" "Sure", she says, dark eyes shining. She's naturally shy in that way of people who are constantly cowed, but the thrill of something new made her bold.

"My name's Welliver", says the man without smiling. "What's yours?" "Odette", she tells him. "Though most folks call me Gull."

"That's a pretty name", he says as he walks to the back of the trailer and starts loosening some straps, "Odette sounds like a great artist."

"Don't know nothin' 'bout that", says Gull shyly. "I never been great at nothin'. Don't find much great 'round here."

Welliver pulls back the tarpaulin with a flourish, revealing an old baby grand piano, the wood distressed and marked and stained by its journey across country. "She's travelled a long way to see you", he says kindly. "All the way from the Imperium Theatre. Did you see the papers? They tore out the plush velvet seats, smashed in the barrel-vaulted ceiling,



stripped its fixtures and fittings back to the brick walls, all in the name of progress. I couldn't save the Wurlitzer, only the piano. I used to play it you see, when they'd show silent movies and the organ broke down." He pats the piano almost tenderly. "Can you play?"

Gull had yet to discover any talents or skills. All she had was her ambition to leave the Plains and that outstripped them both. Truth be told her life had been little more than a series of unremarkable incidents, a shuffling bit player in other people's lives with little sense of her own. "Wish I did", she admits, with that hollow sound an echo makes, as if she's spoken these words so many times before and lived them more times than that. "But I've had no lessons and no cause to learn. Auntie says we don't have time or taste or money enough to be creative types."

"Nonsense", laughs Welliver, not breaking a sweat even though the sun is like a bright hole in the sky. "This is a very special kind of piano. Requires no skill to play it. Just an enormous will. An enormous spirit. You seem to be a person with enormous spirit Odette, would you like to give it a try?"

"Wouldn't know how", Gull says, her confidence fading in the face of Welliver's generosity. "Can't name the white notes, let alone the black ones."

"That's fine", says Welliver, real warm and friendly. "You come right up here on the trailer bed and try it out. I should've removed the legs and lyre and pedals before I loaded her but there just wasn't time, so she's all ready to go."

Colin worked the service station then, a man who asked nothing of life and received nothing in return. He joined

them in the car park, chewing his gum with a casual indifference as if the flavour offended him. Maybe he was worried the stranger might drive away without paying. Maybe he was worried he'd drive away with Gull. Or maybe he just saw his chance to mansplain something to someone and break the monotony of his day.

"No way to move a piano", he tells them, hands on hips. "My Dad worked removals for a time. Said pianos were the hardest to move on account of them being oh so heavy but oh so fragile at the same time. You shoulda disassembled it. Pianos have funky balance points. If they go even a few degrees off-centre they break real easy."

"That a fact", says Welliver, rolling up the tarpaulin. He flicks the lever on the trailer and the back swings down. "It'll require tuning", says Colin. "Probably a pitch raise. Pedals need adjusting. And some compressed air to clean away that dust."

Welliver offers his arm to Gull. "You just step up there and give it a try Odette."

Now Gull had never been the focus of much attention let alone kindness and she can't remember the last time someone called her Odette, so she finds

the overtures of this man from the city real welcome. She leans on his arm and swings one leg up and over to get onto the trailer. Then she approaches the piano almost reverentially, fingertips trembling as she opens the fallboard to reveal the weathered keys beneath. Welliver steps up beside her. "You need the full effect", he says, raising the lid of the baby grand and holding it open with the lid prop. "This improves the tonal resonance when you play, resulting in a clearer sound."

"I dunno", says Gull. "I'm not sure I can play anything." "Then play what you feel", Welliver tells her. "Play how you waited, loitering in this car park for someone interesting to come along. Checking numberplates. Imagining living anywhere else — and what it might take to get you there."

She turns away, suddenly ashamed. "This is life noticing you", Welliver says gently. "Take the moment, just for you." Gull looks up uncertainly. But "taking", she understands. "Taking" has been a constant in her life. People have always been "taking" from her, starting with her name.

She stands beside the instrument, stretches out her fingers and places them over the keys. The ivories are warm to touch, as if the piano is filled with some sort of power, as if she is completing a circuit once she touches the keyboard. A jolt of energy runs through her and her fingers dance like spiders across the keys, intuitively making rhythms and finding tunes. And the piano responds as if it has been waiting for her. As if it is an extension of her and her of it.

She plays a poison song, a sweeping symphony of pain and regret that reverberates through the gumtrees and wattles. That echoes out across the Plains, summoning her neighbours to their stoops and fences, to take faltering steps along the road to find the source of this uncommon music. Though they do not know these melodies, the symphonic echoes of Liszt and Tchaikovsky I recognise from mornings spent with Classical FM, some parts of the poison song speak to them still. To their frustrations and complications and how one can lose sight of what once shone so very brightly but has gone dull, somewhere in the pace of living.

For many of them this will be the first time they really see the girl. Standing in the back of a trailer. Playing a baby grand in the car park of a petrol station. Revelling in her prodigious talent. And oh, for Gull, it must feel like her mind is expanding, racing, connected to a knowledge and beauty she always suspected was out there but never knew existed until this moment.

Then just as suddenly as it had begun it was over, the stirring notes of the piano dropping away. Gull, desperately exhausted, leaned against the side. Dripping sweat. Arms aching. Mumbling softly. "What is it?" asks Welliver. "More", she says softly, looking up at him from beneath her fringe. "I want to do... more..."

"Of course. It's a beautiful thing to be part of something bigger, isn't it?" says Welliver. "But art always requires sacrifice. Before it came to the Imperium, this remarkable instrument belonged to a music teacher with a very 'regimental' approach to instruction. She would place a row

of pins along the edge of the keyboard to make sure her students kept their wrists raised and if they made a wrong note, well, she would strike them across the back of the hand with a metal ruler. Ever since I discovered that, I've found this piano runs a little better on some blood..."

Chasing down dreams is hard. Losing one when you've held it, so much harder. To her surprise Gull hears herself ask him: "How much blood?" Welliver unbuttons the cuff of his shirt and rolls back his sleeve, revealing a lattice work of little white scars along his arm. "That depends on how great you want to be Odette."

Gull nods and without hesitation bites deep into the palm of her hand. Blood spatters the ivory keys like morning drizzle. This isn't bleeding, this is sucking out the poison that's been running through her veins all these years spent waiting for something better.

There is a dozen or more people gathered beside Colin in the parking lot of the petrol station, blinking against the light. They've never seen anything like this. Spectacle is uncommon in the Plains, this type of spectacle rarer still. Gull plays again and the tone is richer, the melodies more intense. Pieces of Beethoven and Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev, Gull soaring across the changes in tempo, time and key, an empty

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vessel filled to overflowing. Raised up by the beauty of the music, carrying her far away and beyond the Plains.

Each piano key is attached to a small, felted mallet. When the key is pressed the mallet strikes the three wound steel wires running from the tuning pins to the hitch pins and the vibrations turn into sound. When the music abruptly stops for a second time, there is a strange wildness to Gull, like she is vibrating faster than those strings. "What can I do?" she asks Welliver and her eyes are as dark and pitiless as a seagull's pecking at a clam. "Serve the music", he tells her. "I am just the piano's servant. But I cannot maintain her alone."

Maybe it's a trick of the light but all of a sudden the exposed

piano strings seem to ripple like ears of corn in the breeze. And in that deathly silence of audience expectation there is a snapping, as each one of those strings breaks free of the piano casing, one after the next, reaching for the sky. Two hundred and thirty hardened high carbon steel and copper wires that seem impossibly long. Waving and undulating like the tentacles of some ancient beast. Reaching out over the sides of the piano, to whip around the legs and arms and waists of the men, women and children who've gathered to watch Gull play. And as they run, as they scream, as their brains reluctantly process the madness of what's happening, the strings become more frantic, thrashing, tearing flesh, gouging skin, taking eyes and fingers, leaving the car park wet with blood and limbs and matter.

Their screams are mercifully brief, ending in desperate, guttural gurgles of blood. Until all is once again still. Then the strings slowly withdraw, back into the body of the piano, making bloody lines on the concrete, winding themselves into place so the beautiful music can start all over again.

Gull plays surrounded by carnage baking under the hot sun. Maybe she simply doesn't see them anymore, the way they never saw her. And when she is done Welliver extends his arm, helping her down from the trailer.

"Where will you go next?" she asks him, hot and flushed and hungry.

"Quite a way to go, before we're home", he says. "Would you like to join us?"

"I'd love that", she tells him. She helps secure the tarpaulin and gets in the passenger side of the truck, almost skipping through the remains as if she can still hear the piano playing. As if she is dancing to its tune. As if she always will.

I guess sometimes the path out of a bad situation can be so much worse than the situation itself. In that sense, Gull must have been fierce brave to walk it, whatever was left of her by that point. They vanish into the outback like so many who've passed along this road.

I often wonder why I survived it. Maybe I didn't want to leave enough for the piano to notice me. Maybe I couldn't feed it like the others did because I'd come to terms with my pain. Maybe I was scared, or maybe I was smart, or maybe I just like hiding away in a small country town.

But then I guess it's not really a town anymore, since the post office closed.

