

Camel Travel

Volha Hapeyeva, tr. Annie Rutherford

Chapter 14: The paper piano

Mum and dad's divorce took a while, and during this time the way they communicated was peculiar. From their intonation and body language I understood that some kind of tragedy was playing out, and it wasn't exactly easy for me, so when they started yet another incomprehensible conversation, I was prepared to do anything to not have to listen. That was when mum asked me:

"What do you think, do you want to go to the audition?"

"Where?" I didn't understand.

"To piano. There are auditions today at school."

"I don't know... Sure, let's go." I wanted to get out of the flat as quickly as possible, it didn't matter where to.

Lots of children were already waiting with their parents in the assembly hall, and on the stage sat a woman whose blonde hair was swept up like a queen's. When it was my turn I climbed the steps to join her on the stage. She asked me to repeat the rhythms she tapped against the body of the piano. I repeated them. Then she asked me how many keys she was pressing down. Finally, the exam was over, and my name was called amongst those who were allowed to go to her for piano lessons.

At the start there were quite a few of us, we learnt musical notation, and I didn't understand much. This infuriated me. With time there were fewer and fewer of us, but for some reason I remained, although I couldn't say myself what kept me there. Perhaps the piano or the queen-like hairstyle, or the fact that I didn't want to disappoint my mum and always tried to be the best, in the hope that she would praise me and be proud. My friend, who also took piano lessons, had her own instrument – black and old and German. It sounded different to the one we practiced on in the assembly hall. I didn't have my own piano. We did have a red toy keyboard but the teacher ordered that we get rid of it immediately, *so as not to spoil my finger positioning*. For us "piano-less" children they had thought up a way for us to practice at home. The parents were meant to *make* a piano themselves. A life size one. Out of paper. Mama took a piece of wallpaper and drew the keyboard on the back of it, pencilling in the edges of the white keys and carefully colouring in the black ones. Every day after school I would unfold my keyboard on the desk and play, imagining how beautiful it sounded, carefully tapping out melodies with my fingers while humming them under my breath. My paper piano didn't fulfil its function, but achieved something much more interesting instead. It taught me to dream and to believe that anything was possible in the world of your imagination. And that no one could take this away from you. The neighbours, I suspect, will also have appreciated the silence.

One day I came home and there was a piano in the room, a proper one the colour of wet sand, with a sort of pattern like pairs of rabbit ears in the wood at the bottom. It was miraculous –

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when I had left for school in the morning there had been no piano, and when I got home, it was suddenly there. Now I too had my own instrument.

I did not, however, enjoy practicing. Always these scales, always these exercises and etudes. I much preferred playing tunes that I had heard somewhere or that I made up myself. I did this purely intuitively, we didn't learn that kind of thing from our teacher. She simply gave piano lessons; this wasn't the fully fledged course of a music school with choir, sol-fa and other subjects. When I travelled to my grandmother in the holidays, I missed my piano, and I regretted that I didn't play the violin or some other smaller instrument, which I could have taken with me. I only ever wanted to play when piano wasn't nearby.

The music teacher liked me and perhaps she secretly hoped that I would continue to take music lessons. When she found out that I'd be traveling to my grandmother in the radioactive zone for the holidays, she got terribly agitated and began to describe to me what horrible consequences staying there would have on my health. What she told me admittedly made me feel quite uneasy.

There were various composers in my repertoire. I liked Khachaturian, perhaps not just because of his music but also because of his beautiful sounding name. Best of all, I loved to play pieces in minor keys. Luckily, composers also seem to have a sense of melancholy, so I had plenty of choice.

When adults found out that I was learning to play the piano, they always wanted to hear one of the popular classics: *Turkish March* or Oginski's *Polonaise* or *Für Elise*. This irritated me. I felt sorry for the other tunes, which were less famous but no less beautiful.

Thus my journey on the margins began.

Chapter 18: Presents from the patriarchy

I never wanted to differentiate myself from *homo sapiens*, a classification which of course only applied to men, and to be sorted into the category of “woman”. In television, theatre, literature – no matter where you looked, it was made clear that womanhood was not something to be envied. I don’t know what calculations cause the patriarchy to try to seduce women with the roles of mothers and housewives. No one who isn’t hormonal, traumatised or mentally ill would fall for this. The idea that motherhood is honourable and the dream of every girl would perhaps never have become so pervasive if girls were informed about all the “miracles” of pregnancy and the process of birth itself, not to mention the first months of a newborn baby’s life, or the fact that a mother’s love for her child doesn’t arrive immediately (according to women who have shared their experiences of motherhood with me), but then, who speaks openly about all this? It’s taboo.

When the first signs emerged that my class contained women-in-progress, I was quite unsettled. The white bras visible through my schoolfriends’ white blouses depressed me. I was almost embarrassed for them, and I honestly couldn’t understand why they didn’t hide their femininity. I witnessed the boys teasing them, pulling the bra elastic away from a girl’s back for it to snap painfully back into place. The arrival of the bra might have gone down in history as an achievement for the female body, but what came next can hardly be described as progress. Underwired bras and synthetic bras are far more often pleasing objects for the male gaze than comfortable and ergonomic pieces of clothing. So I put off wearing this evidence of my apparent inferiority for as long as possible. I still had my leotards from gymnastics, and they did a wonderful job of hiding what had begun to grow on my chest. We also had elastic bandages at home and I wore these too in preference to a bra.

In this way I managed for a while to trick myself into thinking that everything was going to work out, but then I had a dream that someone had given me a puppy. Typical dream interpretation would predict a present. Instead, I got my first period. Apparently even dream interpretation had been written by supporters of the patriarchy. When I awkwardly showed my knickers to my mum, she said, “Well, you know what’s happening”. And I really did, without myself knowing how.

Later I would often think about injustice. My life was greatly altered, every month I was reminded of the woman in me – at the time synonymous with deficiency – which I stubbornly refused to accept. I did everything to hide my periods from others, and yet there were instances where, whether I wanted to or not, I had to acknowledge them. Everyone goes to the sauna, you don’t. Everyone goes swimming, you don’t. Everyone takes a bath, you take a shower. I didn’t go to church anyway. By the mid-nineties shops at least offered more or less decent options to make these critical days easier, but I empathised and sympathised with the women who came before us. Our singing teacher once told us that during her time at music college, girls who had their periods had to sit on a special bench during singing lessons and weren’t allowed to sing. What a humiliation. Everyone knows your cycle as clearly as if they could see into your pants. At school we were allowed to skip PE once a month, but I never made use of this option, as if hoping that in this way society would overlook my womanhood and treat me like other people (that is: like men). It goes without saying that this did not happen, and that many years later I had to fight my way free to my own body and my own

woman, who had always been missing in literature, film and theatre, who the patriarchy had so consistently hidden from me, but who I was luckily able to find and who I will never give up to anybody again.