

## Sostenuto

He watches her find it. She thinks she's by herself but even so she keeps checking. She knows how it is. The house is little more than a rubble carpet but here or there is the sense of a doorway, a fireplace. Only one wall has remained upright. Weight-bearing, he guesses. It won't last long now there is nothing left for it to bear. Her fingers are delicate, picking at the plaster mounds, the passive remnants of a life left behind. Sometimes there is something there. Not often.

She pulls her breath in, freezes. Has she heard something? No; her attention is fixed on the space in front of her knees. He thinks of making a sound. A scrape of the foot would be enough to frighten her away. He has done it often enough. But there's something he likes about the manner of her excavation. He holds back. She reaches down into the space she has uncovered, right up to her shoulder, and pulls out an opaque plastic case. He can make out atmospheric controls on the top and wants to cry out as she opens the clips. She touches inside the box with one finger, then looks over her shoulder as she stands. He pulls back behind the angle of a wall. She doesn't even look in his direction as she leaves.

Polly is alone. She is good at not being seen. Like the others, she can trickle away like vapour through the cracks in the walls. They have all learned to make shelters, not homes, and to abandon them when the grey columns come. What is the point of laying out a blanket, a cup, a fragment of blue patterned tile when the space is likely to be flooded, flattened or occupied on return? There are no doors to shut here. Today her shelter is still here, and she crawls right to the back, into the shadow of the sign board roof. In her bag is a foil blanket, the sort they gave away at the beginning, and a plastic bottle. And now she has the player.

The player is vintage, obviously, and well-protected. She opens the clips on the box and slides it out from its velvet pocket, rubbing her fingers on the unfamiliar material. She saw a player once before, a lifetime ago, in the social history part of the museum. A touch and handle session.

‘Look,’ the curator had said. ‘They used wires to transmit the sounds, a motor to drive the disc around.’ The group had crowded round, wanting to try the earphones, to see the spinning silver disc. ‘Removable batteries were produced for specialist use well after they became obsolete in general life.’

Polly turns the player over, half expecting something to fall off, worried about her fingerprints damaging the shimmering blue surface. There’s a ridged square, a sliding cover. Inside, empty hollows with a coil at the end. She looks back in the box; in a separate section, four sealed batteries, just like she saw in the museum. They won’t work, she knows that, but she can’t help trying. When was the last time anyone heard music? It’s hard to keep track. She closes her eyes for a moment and remembers the rise and fall of voices, the buzz of feedback from a stage, the plaintive call of a violin from the mouth of the Underground. She slides the batteries out of their plastic and into their place.

She stops. Will playing the disc give off a signal that can be picked up? Her breath rushes to the top of her head, and her sight spins with dizzy colour. She is trying to forget the days when everyone stood and watched as computers and tablets and media players were thrown into the grinders, when instruments were burned, protesters tied to the barricades and beaten, some still managing to sing, after a fashion, as they died. She lengthens her inhalations as she has been taught. The player is safe because of its age, she thinks. She holds it in her hands. It is as perfect as an unbroken egg.

And the sounds are perfect in her ears, perfect and unbroken and pure. They rise and call and respond, transversing her brain, weaving themselves into a whole, shivering towards a height which she can barely allow herself to follow. The musicians take shape in her subconscious, forming a tight circle, contained within a transparent globe. They wear black and shining white, but she cannot visualise their faces, she just sees their backs as they spin away from her, arms travelling together in a smooth perpetual motion, out and in, the notes streaming out as they reach up and up and...

He moves in the way he has learned. He is insubstantial, a blend of dark shades close to the ground. At the opening of the shelter he pauses to prepare himself: it is better to avoid notice. He makes a single move and catches her scream behind his hand before it is born.

Polly fights, the shrill ring of terror colliding with the echo of the notes. The palm across her mouth has made a seal, she cannot find air. The hand bends with her movement, and she grabs skin between her teeth and bites. Tough skin. She slips, tries to regain purchase. Her head is turned, she is forced to look up. A boy. He opens his mouth wide, and she sees that he has no tongue.

The sight makes her stop fighting, for long enough to see that he is signalling with his eyes, trying to say that it's ok. The stump of his tongue is mollusc-like, framed with broken teeth. She thinks she knows how it happened. He lets her go, puts a finger to his mouth for silence, reaches for the player.

‘It’s stopped working.’ Polly finds the whisper hard to make. It’s been a long time since she spoke to anyone. He’s turning the player over, making the batteries roll in their space. ‘It played for a bit then it stopped.’ She wants to tell him how it felt, how the music filled her head and seeped out through her skin, escaping up into the sky, but she can’t remember the words. He points to the batteries, turns his thumb down, picks up her bag and holds it out to her.

He’s good, merging into the shelterland so that she struggles to keep with him. It never gets truly dark anymore, but there are enough night shadows to be confusing. He seems to realise, and pauses to make sure she’s with him, then leads her into the blackened remnants of a creosote bush. They crawl, moving so fast that she doesn’t have time to brush the dusty cobwebs away from her face. When they pause in openness, his eyes check that she is ok.

He gives her a moment to recover. She’s picking dead twigs from her hair, and he can sense their shared adrenaline. He tries to make the air around them calm, there’s no second guessing what the sensors will pick up. She’s waiting for him to say what happens next. He gives her a small smile, and the skin around her eyes relaxes.

Polly follows the boy along the scorched path between the skeletal trees. There is a lightness in her feet, and a trickle of excitement rising in her chest. No-one, as far as she knows, goes into the scrubland, but this track has been beaten down by many feet. She tries not to think how easily they could be followed.

When they stop, they are by a clearing, the centre ground covered with a mix of sacking and the dull plastic which comes from the bales of food distributed at irregular intervals to the shelter people. The dirty yellow light comes sideways, leaving most of the space in the shade. She can

still feel where his hand last touched her arm, and she looks at him without moving her head. He is comfortable in his crouch, familiar with his position. She strains for noises, tries to escape the buzzing in her ears. His hand rests on her arm again. It's not a warning. His calloused palm spells out a message: it's ok, we just have to wait.

It's nearly time. The panels only work when the sun is directly overhead. He has become attuned to the moment; she is slow to respond, stands there rubbing at the front of her legs. He gestures that she should help, and she blushes pink under the dirt on her face as she limps across to tug at the coverings. The panels underneath are mismatched, some salvaged from solar farms back at the beginning of the destruction, some taken from isolated houses. He doesn't know how many of these clearings exist but there are others: he talks to them in brief flurries of code. Their times overlap as the sun moves; they never get long.

Even in the smog-dulled air, the panels glow with a deep blueness. Polly remembers how it used to look: every house angled to maximise the path of the sun, the light unimpeded as it turned towns into multi-faceted jewels. He is next to her again, pointing at her bag. She picks it up and follows him to the far corner, where a cluster of wires hang down from the panels. He selects one and points again to the bag, and she realises why he has brought her here. She pulls out the player and fumbles to fit the connector into the right hole. He digs, scraping aside dusty earth, tugging at a plastic box. The disc in her player begins to spin, but before she attaches the headphones, she bends down to brush his ear with an awkward kiss. He smiles at her, then turns back to the hand-sized transmitter he has taken from the box.

They arrive back at Polly's shelter at the darkest point of the night, the glow from the horizon a muted yellow smudge. It is only as they reach the edge of the bushes and he stops to survey the

wasteland ahead that Polly realises just how tired she is. The music, swirling around in her head, has kept her feet light, her body secondary to the energy in her brain. She heard it three times through, although each cycle finished prematurely, cheating her of the final resolution. He had taken the disc out, shown her the scratch on the otherwise perfect silver surface, and for the last few hours, she has been aware of her subconscious trying to complete that final truncated run. She has the player in her pocket still. He paused as he was re-burying his transmitter, but in the end gestured to her to hold on to it herself. This formed a low thread of worry as she followed him along the pathways. Did he mean to take her back again? Or was that it, one time?

She takes the lead as they emerge from the brushland, stepping silently across the jumble of boxes and plastic boards that make up the shelters. Just before she pulls back the hanging sack of her own place, she looks back for him, but he's gone. It's what she expected, but still the hollow space in her chest takes her by surprise. Through the blur of her tears, she sees bodies inside, usurping her space. She doesn't have the energy for this, can't face the thought of the endless search for somewhere new to hide. She collapses down, hides her face against her knees.

In the shadow of a strip of tarpaulin hanging from a post, he waits, struggling between what he wants to do and what he knows he should. It's not safe for him to stay here. Although the inhabitants appear to be anonymous, they are all aware of outsiders, and you can never tell who will pass on whatever they think they can trade. But when she stands up she wipes at her eyes with the heels of her hands and then touches at the lump of the player in her bag before taking a slow breath in. She is such a small shape in this landscape of indistinct contours.

Polly is using every bit of resilience she has learned to keep moving. She cannot afford to wish that he would come back. She's seen others give in to the temptation of relying on someone else.

It never ends well. She's done this before: she just needs to keep moving, stay alert. The fuzz of noise coming from the distance seems louder tonight, as if it's been set at a higher frequency. She tries to ignore it, to bring back the music, but she can't get past the first few bars. They circle around, in a tighter and tighter formation, rising to a note of panic which is about to burst when there is the barest hint of pressure on her arm. He's there, a brief shadow. Did she imagine it? But there he is again, and she follows as he leads the way out of her familiar territory.

The inside of the shelter he finds is brushed clean, as if it's been abandoned for a long time. It's older than Polly is used to, with a ridged aluminium sheet roof that has somehow escaped the attention of the salvage crews. She watches as he takes a final check outside and pulls the sacking across the doorway. He slides back towards her. With the lightest touch, he traces the angles of her face.

He hears it from a distance, the rising tide of whisper ahead of the storm. He's not been asleep, exactly: it's more that the depth of her sleep has sent him into a state of limbo. He is curled around her like a shell protecting the inner kernel, but his warning system is insistent, he knows he must move. As he lifts his weight up on his arm, she moves upwards from the depths. She sits, and her face changes as she sees the expression on his. She grabs her bag and is ready to go before he pulls the sacking open.

Outside, the immediate surroundings are quiet. Polly catches sight of a face flashing around the side of a shelter and then gone. The buzzing in the air has been replaced by a dull throb, distant as yet, but she knows how fast they can travel. Already the dust is rising, making her eyes water. Usually when this happens, she does the same as the others: find a hiding place, curl up, wait it

out. Usually, her only aim is to escape notice. Today she feels the weight of her bag at her side. Today, she has something to save.

He is beckoning to her. They run. Disembodied voices from every side warn, threaten, order, ‘...*the use of electronic devices to transmit musical content is prohibited... decadence will continue to be purified...speak only from necessity...the raising of the voice in song is punishable by death...*’ They crouch behind the wreck of a wall. Polly keeps her eyes squeezed tight, feeling the explosions behind her back. Beside her, his shoulder is tense. He leans his head out to gauge the proximity of the ground troops, and she thinks of the space in his mouth, the enforced nature of silence. She seems to hear the notes of the music hovering over the boom and crash. They have a clarity which cannot be allowed to die.

The soldiers advance in close-formed waves, like the ripple of a shaken carpet. He gathers himself up for the next move. Never has he wanted words more. He turns to her, takes her by the upper arm, tries to tell her, *this is important, listen to me*. She is grave, still. He reaches in his pocket for the stone, its surface smooth and familiar, and shows her the numbers. Does she understand?

She doesn’t know what to do. Does he want her to take the stone? She reaches for it but he shakes his head, retracts his hand. There are numbers scratched into the surface, a pattern broken in groups of three. Another blast shakes bricks down around them. They squat, arms held over their heads, but no more comes, just dust and fragments. He leans out to pick up a shard of red brick, and uses another to scratch the same numbers into its one smooth surface, then wraps her fingers around it.

The thud of marching boots shudders through the ground, playing out a rhythm that would be punished in any other setting. He takes another glimpse around the edge of the wall. The column, a faceless line of grey, is going past them, some fifty feet away. He draws back until he has just a sliver of vision, and watches them move. He holds one hand behind him, telling Polly to wait, but be ready. One column is always followed by another, and they won't have much time to cross over the path before the second lot arrives. He turns to face Polly, his hands moving fast. He is going first, she is to wait for a count of five, and then follow. He hopes she understands. He takes a deep breath and runs.

Polly shuffles along so that she is in his place. She has no doubt of his instructions, and has reached four when the mortar explodes and the sheltering wall collapses. Without making a conscious decision, she leaps and rolls before the first brick hits the ground, and lies with her face pressed into the ground. How visible is she? Brick dust fills her mouth and she's finding it hard to breathe; she tenses in readiness for the boot in the back. Her mind provides imagery for the soundtrack of shouts, shots, screams of agony. More dust settles over her, until she is part of the destruction, buried in the remains.

Long after the last feet pass, she raises her head. There is no movement. The landscape has been reconfigured, new piles of wreckage forming hills and valleys. A body sprawls on the far side of the boulevard created by the march of the soldiers. For seconds her legs are too heavy to take her across. She thinks of staying where she is, letting the dust finish its job. But in the end she has to know. She will lie down beside him. The rulers have won: there is no music left in the world.

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The journey through the scrubland has taken her to the very edge of her reserves. She tries not to think of the chaos left behind, has become a walking machine, one foot, the other foot. A spurious peace surrounds her, in this place where every path looks the same. It's possible that she's just going round in circles, but she keeps on trying: she will come to the clearing in the end. Most of all, she doesn't think of the face. It wasn't his, that body lying in the dust. She crouched there, holding on to the stranger's hand and stroking his face before covering him as best she could and walking away. It wasn't him, but she had to go back more than once to check. It still could be him, on another rise, covered in the same dust. All she knows is that she has the stone.

She has held it tight in her palm for the whole way. When she wants to give up, the edge is sharp on her skin, the pain keeping her upright. The player bumps against her hip. The music is back in her head, slow now and laboured, matching itself to the effort of her feet. She is the only person left in the world with this music, this perfect arrangement of notes. She has to keep going because this cannot disappear from the world. If he is alive, he will have gone to the clearing. Faster than her. She remembers the sureness as he led her there and she asks him to help her, to get her onto the right path. He won't be there now. She knows this. But she holds onto her memory. They were in the clearing. She listened to the music and he had the radio. He was in touch with someone, somewhere. The stone in her hand is real. When she gets there, the numbers will tell her what to do.

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