

Dissonance

I worked on a boat once. One of those grand cruise ships with the ornate decorations and the big money all coming in em and all. I'd wash dishes from the folks' dinners, and often try to imagine the life that each person led from the scraps of food left on the plates—it's really the waiter's responsibility to clear plates before bringing them back to me, but just you try telling them that—or by the patterns that their meals left in the sauces. I could tell a picky eater from a pig any day of the week, just by looking at their plates; I was real good at what I did.

Oftentimes after work me and the kitchen crew'd go back to where we'd had a small section of the ship closed off from the rest of our paying customers. It's not that we'd much to keep from em, it's just that they didn't like to see us. The luxury of the boat was well and good, so long as they didn't have to remember that they was sharin' it with us and all. We'd spend a lot of time belowdecks.

At night while folks was asleep it was good to go updecks and breathe the cold air, and while the hum of the engines pushed back against the blanketing sound of the waves, I could think of the empty plates and pretend that I was one of them folks eatin' the meals. Crabs legs and fancy cuts of beef and all that. O'course, I was well sick myself of the sea, just the smell and the sight of the damn thing, let alone the thought of actually eating from it. When you've been surrounded by it as much as I have, you'll understand how the taste of crab ain't so much a joy. But on those nights I wasn't me; I was some well-off kid, some rich widow, some successful businessman. On those nights I'd long for the taste of crab, and wish I could know the sea better.

As it were, belowdecks weren't so bad. We'd our space just below the dancehall, and if we'd listen closely we could hear the piano playing out its lovely musics underneath the stepping of the rich feet. We'd got to know the songs that she played—darling Lucida on the keys—and for our favourites, we'd stop our conversations and listen; a whole kitchen's worth of ears all lost in whatever private thoughts the music would bring the each of us.

It came about one night when we was all catching our breath after a particularly busy night that some one of the folks on the boat had maybe a drink too many, or maybe they didn't and just let the yearning for the sea take over em. By the time the crew'd realized someone was missing, it was well too late and no number of the boats we dropped down over the side were able to find anything.

There weren't much we could do really, so we paid our respects, and let it be and went about our lives as usual, and for the rest of us that weren't Lucida or the fishes or the crabs, we forgot about the drowned body.

Some things just stick with you; for no one reason or another. They ain't much to talk about, there's not even much thinkin' to be done about em, but they stick in your head anyways and they grow and grow and grow until you can't think of nothin' else.

I figure that's what happened to her.

That night, we heard a missed note in her playing. Not enough for the dancers above to notice, caught up as they were in their dancing, but for us who'd spent so long hearing her play without a fault it was something that caught us all by surprise.

Over the next few days, more notes dropped out, and they started to rearrange themselves, showing up in places where they neither belonged nor were wanted. We'd hear it mirrored in the shuffle and bite of the dancers' footsteps, as they lost their rhythm and dropped their dances.

And so it went, and her songs changed and filtered and grew ugly; ringing crass in our ears. The sound of the dancers faded, and as people stopped filling the hall we could hear the music ever more clearly.

The room upstairs must've been entirely empty, but down here, down in our room below, we'd all pack in and hush up real quiet. A whole kitchen's worth of ears, sitting in rapture, listening to the dissonant torrents pushing their way through the ceiling above us.

In those moments, listening to her play, we were all thinking the same thing.