

A Christmas ghost story

The Christmas concert was in three days and rehearsals hadn't been going well. A burst pipe had damaged the village hall beyond repair and the concert had to be moved to the rarely used venue of the time worn community hall. Ethel Carter the old music teacher wandered into the building the lights were already on in the hall so she called out to see who else was there whilst shaking off her wet mac and plastic rain hood. The weather was typical for early December a mix of snow and sleet, at least she thought it might clean off some of the grime from the dirty windows. There was no answer to her welcome as she clomped towards the old piano, and looking around the grubby dilapidated hall she remembered it in its glorious hey-day in the 1960's.

As she started to play Silent Night with her arthritic fingers on the old key board cold air rushed through the heating vent above the stage bringing the scent of moth balls from the musty Christmas costumes stored in the broken wooden grotto which lived behind the stage. The hall was cold despite the heating on full. As she started to play her sheet music fluttered off the stand revealing four bars written in faded blue ink on the sheet below. Mrs Carter took a breath, she immediately recognised the handwriting not seen in the hall since the disastrous Christmas concert of 1972.

Out of nowhere Tom the choir master appeared rubbing his cold hands, he noticed that the scouts had put the Christmas decorations up in the hall and decorated the tree but the hall still lacked Christmas cheer. Tom felt unusually unsettled by the creaks and grumbles of the old building.

"Evening Mrs C" he called out as enthusiastically as he could muster. As he gestured to the older woman to stop playing his thermos cup full of coffee and well laced with something warming sloshed about and spilled. Mrs C turned slowly almost falling off the ancient piano stall whilst avoiding the splashes of coffee and brandy.

"Aye ready to start?" she questioningly asked him. He nodded and as they both looked at the piano suddenly the notes on the sheet music appeared to pulse and a high F sharp played out followed by three more notes in B flat. Tom turned to Mrs C to moan about her once again hitting the wrong notes but her hands were resting in her lap. Mrs C's dentures clicked a couple of time, Tom pulled his coat around him as the temperature in the hall dropped even further.

A shadow appeared across the room revealing the ghostly figure of a tall slim woman, a hand pointing towards the piano. Tom dropped his thermos, it hit the floor with a hollow thunk as the piano screeched backwards on its own, the sheet music levitating slowly, the edges trembling before landing on the keyboard. A faint chord lingered and inexplicably there was the smell of lavender in the air.

Recognising the perfume Mrs C whispered “ Well you always did need to make an entrance Evelyn”.

The Christmas tree lights flickered and from the old grotto came three loud knocks, the mildew outfits swayed on their hangers as the Rudolph costume gently floated into the cold room from the grotto, despite the absence of a breeze.

The musical notes started to ring out again accompanied by the unmistakeable breath of cold air on the choir masters neck. He turned to see particles of dust in the light turn into a conductors baton hovering in the air.

Mrs C sighed placing her crooked fingers back on the keys “We will start it again Evie and watch what you do with that baton”. Tom looked around to see who Mrs C was talking to the hall was empty.

The temperature dropped again, frost appeared on the inside of the windows matching Evelyns lacey blouse that she’d worn on her very last Christmas concert in the hall.

From the pianos innards came the opening chords of Hark the Herald Angels Sing, the chorus tune rearranged by Evelyn for her solo at the 1972 performance. The frost on the windows melted leaving a stain on the floor resembling the shape of the door to the choir loft where Evelyn had been last seen adjusting her sheet music.

Tom’s spilled coffee began sliding across the floor in purposeful droplets arranging themselves into musical notes close to the piano pedals.

Mrs C chuckled “always showing off Evie with your musical notations” and flexing her gnarled fingers played Evelyn’s marked passage for the very first time and with surprising vigour. The baton dissolved into droplets landing on Tom’s flushed cheeks bringing the aroma of Evelyns peppermint breath. The costumes swayed to the beat of the piano music led by Rudolph whilst they settled on the floor in the exact semi-circle the choir had used in 1972. As the tune hit a crescendo a piano string snapped with the sound of a breaking candy cane. The remaining strings pinged and thrummed vibrating the dust from the framed photo of that disastrous concert which had characteristically hung at a jaunty angle for decades.

At that moment came the creak of a person leaning forward in the choir loft, just as it had done all those years ago when moments before Evelyn’s solo she was interrupted by the scaffolding collapsing, knocking her to an untimely death. The piano cracked like a spider web as invisible fingers rippled through the music of Evelyns solo, behind the costumes started to hum in perfect pitch with the old pipes of the hall, a sound that echoed in Tom’s head turning him a deathly white.

Mrs C’s sheet music flipped silently to the last page revealing a hastily scribbled post script that hadn’t been there previously. The handwriting slanted away as if being written quickly. It said “ watch the c sharp Ethel, you always...” the rest disappearing into ink blots. Down stage left where Evelyn always stood for her solo performances

the floorboards creaked under an invisible weight. The scent of burned wood and lavender pervaded the room, a smell that the witnesses remembered from the scaffolding giving way all those years ago. An eery silence shrouded the hall as Rudolph's nose shone one final time and the Christmas tree lights flickered brightly casting a shadow of a woman's hand poised over the piano keys.

In the sudden silence a whoosh of air like a satisfied sigh whistled past Mrs C and Tom. Several things happened at once, the room became warm again the temperature rising, the smell of lavender and burnt wood disappeared replaced with the fresh aroma of pine needles from the Christmas tree, the costumes led by Rudolph flew back into the old grotto behind the stage and for the first time ever the photograph of the 1972 concert righted itself.

Mrs C had been sad when she entered the almost derelict hall at the beginning of the evening but somehow now it appeared brighter and calmer. She looked at Tom and they smiled at each other they both knew now that this year's concert was going to be a success.

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