

Olga Kobylanska
IMPROMPTU PHANTASIE

Translated by Mary Skrypnyk

Every time I hear the exultant, grand peal of bells, I am reminded of years gone by and of one person, when still a child.

Tender, sensitive, like a mimosa, with mournful eyes...

For hours she would lie on her back in the grass and listen to the ringing bells of some ancient monastery—listen and weep until weak from exhaustion.

That is how it went on for some time.

And then at another time—she would once again be a passionate, deeply emotional being that reminded of young Arabian steeds: for instance when other children harnessed and drove her, as though a horse, before them. This was her most beloved play. Harnessed in rope she sped across fields and ditches as though under a lash, wild and in high spirits, willing to go on till death if her drivers didn't restrain her.

I am always reminded of this when I hear the exultant, grand peal of bells.

One gloomy midday, when the horizon had adorned itself with menacing clouds, she started out on the road to town to buy a thimble. The storm caught up with her, turned her umbrella inside out, blew her hat down the nape of her neck, yet with her face drenched with rain she bravely and courageously continued toward her destination.

"Aren't you afraid?" they asked at the store. "Stay here and wait till the storm passes, or it may blow you off somewhere, you little fledgeling! "

The small mouth curled proudly and disdainfully.

"No, I'm not afraid," she answered, and turned back into the storm, as she had come.

The small breast heaved with courage, and the mournful, wide open child's eyes were fixed somewhere into the distance. Did she want to guess at the movement of the clouds? Or to recognise in the wails of the storm some harmony, or melody? Did she see the unusual forms and appearance of the trees that bent under the gale?

Always I am reminded of this when I hear the exultant, grand peal of bells.

It was a sunny, hot summer day. She was spending her holidays in the village with her grandfather and grandmother. Lying over the edge of the pond, she gazed deeply into its depths, or across its smooth, mirror-like surface with nervous impatience. Millions of small insects danced and flickered over the water. Large, bug-eyed frogs raised their four-cornered heads out of the water, lying motionless, then flicking out their tongues for flies for want of something to do. Others splashed noisily out of the grass into the pond. These plunking noises remained in her memory as she tried to recapture the sound.

Blue-black swallows flew low-low over the surface, bathing their rosy-white breasts in their flight in such a reckless fashion that she laughed with delight. All of this she took in with joyous delight.

Not far from the pond stood a row of beehives against an imitation paling fence built especially for them. The hum of the bees was heard all around. They flew in and out of the beehives quickly, nimbly, humming—one after another, if you watched them carefully—but seemingly quite disorganised if glanced at only in passing.

She hummed along with them, lying on her stomach and leaning on her elbows, her chin in her hands. The sound was ever new, and unanimously they buzzed in higher or lower tones—to

her it didn't really matter what the tone...

Later, putting her head down in the grass, she lay silent, as if in deep slumber. But she wasn't asleep. The hum of the bees created visions in her imagination, filling her senses and emotions: dreamlike, fantastic, unbelievable—she wept from desolation caused by the unexplainable...

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Cursing and grumbling, the boys ran over the fields lying beyond the house and garden, trying to catch a colt that refused to be caught, and seemed to be mocking at them and making an aggravating game out of the chase.

Up to the moment that they were within a few feet of him he stood quietly, nibbling at the rye that reached up to his neck. But just as they would stretch out a hand to grasp the bridle that was trailing behind him, he shied away like lightning, kicking out with his hind legs so that his horseshoes flashed, then galloping wildly through the undulating grain, shaking his luxurious mane and trampling everything under foot like some sinister force...

Like a small kitten she bent over and crept to the frenzied animal, and in a moment when it once again stopped to graze, grasped the bridle unobserved...

The small heart pounded in terror and the little body trembled with fear! What if the horse should turn and kick out at her with its heels?

But the impossible happened.

He did not kick at her. He walked along quietly and, led by the tiny hand, followed obediently, like a child, until he was handed over into responsible hands.

Then she almost got a spanking for doing such a thing and for putting herself into such danger.

"You little fool! You could have been killed!"

But she didn't cry.

Fixing her eyes on one spot and biting her nails, she thought of God knows what!

Within, she was strangely, strangely agitated. She felt as if she was stifling, everything seemed so vivid, so overwhelming, something that conjured visions and passed into sound...

* * *

When she was ten years old a travelling piano tuner stopped by to tune the family piano. He was young, handsome and very aristocratic in bearing. There was some whispering going around that he was an immigrant and that he came from a noble family.

She sat in a corner all that time, directly across from him, gazing at him attentively and listening to the heavy chords he drew out of the instrument.

They were alone in the room.

He looked around for a clock, and seeing none in the room, asked her what time it was, and as he did so his eyes were turned on her in gentle regard.

All her blood seemed to rush to her face, her heart beat painfully and she couldn't utter a word. For some moments he looked at her in wonder and waiting, then when she didn't answer, turned again to the piano, allowing a melancholy smile to light up his face momentarily. She was so embarrassed that she couldn't move from her place.

The next day he came again, and she again sat in her corner, watching him intently.

He played, going through various chords, hitting the keys strongly and elegantly as only an expert can do it; tuning and then playing, doing one and both at the same time. Every movement of his hands on the keys and every animated motion of his electrified her and filled her with turbulent emotions.

At last he seemed satisfied with the instrument, for he started to play. At first, carelessly, as if amusing himself, and with one hand only, mostly "piano". The music emerged somewhat like constrained, intense laughter, the laughter of a woman, but not a happy laughter... Then— with both hands. And now the music resounded in a passionate, non-descriptive, almost chilling, beauty... That which he played was full of passion, but how he played—betrayed him as a man.

At the beginning she was chilled, but later—she didn't know herself how it happened—she began to cry. Quietly, but with her whole being. She was overcome again by that something that recalled visions, that became part of the music, and seemed to stifle...

Seeing that she was crying, he stopped playing and looked at her in astonishment. Then he asked her to come to him.

She didn't move... He came up to her... She pressed her hands to her face and sat motionless, as if lifeless... He bent over her.

"You're crying?"

Silence.

He pulled her hands away from her face gently and looked into her eyes.

"What is the matter?"

She didn't answer.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because..."

"Did you like the music?" he asked in a slightly changed voice.

"I... I don't know..."

"But you like to listen to music ... is that right?" he continued as gently as if he had a frightened bird before him.

"I... I don't know... Yes, I do, I do! "

"The piece that I was playing just now is called *Impromptu Phantasie* by Chopin. Will you remember the name?"

"Once I repeat it I will remember."

"When you start to study music you'll be able to play it, but remember—play it only after you've grown up ... only after you are twenty years old... You hear me?"

"Yes."

"Only then will you understand what every sound in the piece means."

Then he took her little head in his hands and gazed long into the big, mournful, tear-stained eyes.

An ineffably sad smile played for a moment over his lips.

"I think," he said, mostly to himself, "that you will be able to play it much better than I do, much better..."

He picked up her hands, looked at them, then kissed them.

"You'll allow me to do this," he said, "to future fame."

When she grew up she was almost beautiful.

She loved more than once, passionately, generously, almost with a wild love. But hers was a fickle nature—she didn't love anyone long. She didn't seem to appeal to men for long either—none of them wanted to marry her. She was intelligent, witty, and exceptionally versatile character. She tried painting, wrote, attempted with all she had within her to appease her insatiable longing for beauty.

Why then, was she never successful?

To answer this question would be as difficult as to answer why it was that no man loved her for long. Perhaps she did not have within her that which binds two ordinary people together for a long time. She was too original, too unusual; there was nothing of the plebeian about her.

But maybe it was something else?

Maybe...

She became only half of what she promised to become as a child.

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I myself—am that "unfulfilled promise".

I await good fortune every day, every hour.

I sense that life stretches before me, not as something sad, cheerless, difficult to endure, but as one beautiful holiday, pulsing hotly, attractive—a sweeping impassioned image, or like a sonata.

Yes, like music.

Sweet, intoxicating, mournful sounds. Teasing, impetuous, appealing, overwhelming... However! .. however...

I have never studied music.

I was never, never able to play *Impromptu Phantasie* myself! But whenever I hear it, my heart fills with tears. Why? Why is it that through all that brilliance that so richly moves my spirit... coils something like a mourning silk crepe? And that I, in spite of the fact that in my veins flows the blood of the future, have no future, have no mid-day in my life.

* * *

When I hear music—I am ready to die. I become madly courageous; become great, proud and loving...

All this becomes part of me, when I hear music! ..