

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Secondary school section

Highly commended: Christina Hitchmough, Culloden Academy

The Silent Musician

It was a grand structure moulded to the centre of the stage; all shiny, pitch black until the pianist in the bowler hat began his song. And then the row of pure ivory keys marched into movement. They shimmered in the sparkling spotlight as if they were the moon on a starry night.

Oliver Rouvier sat alone. His fingers danced. His eyes reflected the kind of magic that you would never wish to see. He always adored the blackness of the stage in the Palais Garnier opera house.

That night the streets of Paris were filled with praise for Oliver Rouvier as the opera house emptied. At twilight, he walked home alone.

As the grandfather clock chimed at the half hour, I heard the door click open. It was my father. His hefty footsteps revealed all. With a sigh, I lifted myself from the bed and my bare feet touched the icy marble floor.

Out on the landing, the paintings on the wall seemed to mock me with their pale, motionless faces. My hands fell against the mahogany banister with the same grip with which the artist would have held his brushes.

Looking down through the darkness, I could already see my father walking into the music room. He'd sit every night after his performance, and let his hands flow over those keys. The music never stopped. It had consumed him, just like the flames had consumed her. Tragic words had echoed through the Parisian streets that October; the musician's wife was now nothing more than a memory. The pianist never spoke, not even to me. He only played. His eyes were glazed with a kind of dark sadness, the kind that made the stars fall from the sky.

The shadow of my father in his bowler hat disappeared behind the walls. I waited until the grand piano echoed through the house once more. It was the Fur Elise, the pianist's favourite. I found myself lost in the house that once seemed to dance in harmony with the music played from within its walls.

Step by step I made my way down the staircase. The blue silk of my nightgown cascaded down behind me with the swiftness of a waterfall. My bare feet were silent on the edge of the stairs. It reminded me of the masquerade balls that my mother threw after another stunning performance from Oliver Rouvier at the opera house. Beautiful women dressed in sparkling dresses and expensive pearls would be showcased on the marble stairs. I remember how I had longed to be one of those women laced in diamond.

"One day," my mother had said, "one day you'll be the northern star everyone admires."

Then her smile melted into screams as the flames roared. The guests fled, and I followed out of cowardice. My father was the soldier that battled the element, but it was too late. He never spoke a word to me. I thought it was grief. But I saw the raging storm in his eyes, and it was beyond anything I could fathom.

I continued my descent down the stairs, my blonde locks falling across my shoulders. Glancing up and out of the nearest window I saw the street lamps illuminating the eloquent buildings, the moonlight giving a soft glow to the rooftops and chimneys.

I took another step.

And froze.

It was silent. No chime of the clock, no footsteps, no music. Silence. My breath faltered. Oliver Rouvier's music never died, the essence of it was always there, always lingering.

Another step. Nothing. I felt my fingernails silently scrape against the wood of the banister. The stillness in the air frightened me. It was as if the world was suddenly devoid of colour. Words had died here, people had died here, but never the music.

I hesitated at the door of the music room, wondering if my father would show himself with those fiery eyes that bore down on me, diminishing my soul. Silence. The door moved to reveal an empty room, empty except for the grand piano in the centre. Oliver Rouvier was nowhere to be seen. It was cold, the window was always left open. This was the room where she died a year ago, the room from which the devil took her.

Moving closer to the centre, I noticed the candle sitting on the top of the piano. The candle's wick, once whiter than snow, was now charred pitch black, and underneath it sat a folded piece of paper fluttering in the midnight breeze. The house was still eerily silent. I lifted the paper, its texture harsh as I straightened the fold.

Only one word was visible. "You" written in blood across the entirety of the page. The paper dropped to the floor.

Time hindered. My heart crumbled. Something smashed behind me but I hardly took notice for the intense heat that was spreading through the room. Out of the corner of my eye was a shadow; a tall humanoid figure in a bowler hat. He was there. And then he was gone.

The flames burned with the wrath of a titan, the rage of the devil. In panic I ran to the door, pulling and wrenching at its handle.

Locked.

Fear quietly eroded my soul, consuming me even before the fire. What was it like? Breathing and knowing that it would be the last time. I didn't know anymore. I knew nothing. To him, I was nothing.

Screams echoed from the fifth storey window and through the neighbouring streets, but the city was already asleep. No one stirred until dawn broke and news of the tragedy spread like the fire itself. It was only one November night when Oliver Rouvier returned, overwhelmed with condolences that he never appreciated. The pianist played on. But the sound of his music never reached the darkened ruins of the house where a frightened girl had called for her father, who walked away from her and never returned.