

Young Writers Award - 1999 runner up

Deep Waters Seek Order by Carmen Leigh Keates

Sometimes, when he was settled, her father would speak of the old days when he'd sailed on whaling-ships, long before their life and its comforts. Many times he had nearly been thrown overboard. He'd lost friends in foul weather and he missed them as painfully now as he did then. At times he seemed to be there still, in his brain. He was a great reader of Melville.

"There are notes I hear when sleep is nearly coming to me;" he'd say, "the lowest notes on the piano. Sleep coming is like the tide and those deep notes give green tones and darker shadows. The notes are pure, but they are sandy also; if you listen."

Ivy saw small flecks of dune-grass in her father's dark, coarse beard.

The piano was black and dusty, never cleaned. It had a mind of its own, and it seemed that to clean it would be like approaching an elderly stranger in the street and combing his hair into a different style.

Her tiny fingers on the keys could not stretch far enough for chords, so in the meantime, she decided, while she grew, she would entertain a necessary minimalism. Her father would sit her on his lap as he played, her hands on top of his. She had the sensation she was a kind of sponsored genius.

She'd watch him out in the weather preparing a fishing creel. The sky was grey and the wind punked his hair so, and she would smile.

The hut where she sat seemed exhausted by the volume of matter it housed. Filthy and grand, there were blankets, fishing nets, bottles upon bottles, firewood stacked high in the corner, cuttlefish strewn everywhere from her numerous collecting tirades up and down the coast, and a vast array of crudely taxidermed seabirds whose eyes stared sharp yet empty.

Out of the windows on the left, at a distance, was the beach; white and deep like an earth scar, beaten by salt water and ill weather.

He father entered the hut, brawling with a door held fast by that same wailing, ever-present gale.

"No fish," he said, as if catching them was a whim and not his existence.

"None t'all?"

"No fish."

Ivy turned a cuttlefish over in her tiny hands. "Well, what will we eat?"

"Beans, pumpkin. There's plenty. Don't worry."

Her father touched her nose with the end of his finger. "You won't starve, missy," he said.

There'd been a crewmember who'd sailed with her father; a Spaniard. During a storm her father had been knocked out by heavy rigging. The Spaniard had dragged him below deck and saved him from being lost in the fearsome conditions.

A very battered sepia photo of the Spaniard sat on the ledge. He was beautiful with astonishing eyebrows and hair like black seaweed. Ivy was secretly in love.

He and her father had become great friends while on leave in some foreign parts and they found they had much in common, in particular the piano, with which the Spaniard was well acquainted.

His name was Franz and her father asked how it was that he ended up with such a Germanic name and the Spaniard, merrily drunk, simply shrugged and laughed.

It was there, thousands of miles from either of their homes they had their picture taken together, for it was still a curiosity to do so at the time.

Ivy and her father sat at the shack's only clean table and ate their orange dinners.

He asked her about the piano. "The other day I heard you picking out songs." He spoke slowly. "That was some Liszt you were playing. The Mephisto Waltz. Did you know that?"

"No. I think I heard it on the wireless. I didn't know its name."

"Have you learned it all yet? Can you play it all?"

"Sort of. Only with the one hand, but," said Ivy, wiggling her fingers on her right hand in the air, as if pressing keys.

"Liszt was an odd man," said her father. "He kidnapped a couple of rich women during his life. I think one of them was Wagner's niece. He had five children with her before running away. Then," he said, remembering, "when he was old, he went and became Abbey Liszt!"

"Abbey?" said Ivy.

"Abbey. A priest. A priest of the church."

She thought deeply; her pumpkin held mid-air, skewered on her tin fork. "How come we don't go to church?"

"This is my church," he said, waving the question away.

"How's that?"

"Sometimes I think churches are for people who can't find God in their own house. I don't need crosses and icons; I've got you," he smiled brassily.

"What about a priest?" said Ivy.

"What about a priest?"

"Don't we need one?"

"No."

"Well, if we don't need one, then what do they do, then?" asked Ivy.

"Oh, now," he said, searching. "They bless things, I suppose."

"Bless things?"

"Houses, boats. Children...they christen them. Um," he chewed and swallowed his pumpkin, "Other things. They give sermons."

"I'd like to hear a sermon," said Ivy.

"You wouldn't like it."

"How do you know? How do you know I wouldn't like it?"

"I didn't like them as a child. The language is very thick, you know. A lot of what's talked about in church is for what comes later on in life. Children haven't got the experience to understand a sermon. It's nobody's fault. It's the way it is. People go to priests for guidance in hard times. I have done without that guidance and I am not lost."

Ivy tried to find something else to say, but she could not. She looked at the floor, thinking. She took out a handkerchief and blew her nose with great feeling.

The next day was one of the clearest they'd seen and they went down to the beach to pick oysters off the rocks. Ivy's father warned her to be careful with the oyster knife he'd given her.

Her father wandered up the beach and found things in the sand; small coins and beautiful shells. Some he put in his pockets, while others he discarded.

After a while he went over to her to check how many oysters she'd collected. He knelt down and counted under his breath. "Seventeen! We'll come back tomorrow if we want anymore."

He sat back on the platform of black, volcanic rock and watched the water. Ivy tormented soldier crabs with the oyster knife.

"Dad?"

"Mmm?"

"Do your dreams mean anything?"

"Oh, yes," he said heartily, but grew pensive, "Yes, but nobody knows exactly what."

"What do you think?"

"Well some people have said that the mind is simply beyond our own comprehension. When we are awake we think our waking thoughts, but there is an enormous quantity stashed down in the vaults of memory, like a shipwreck beneath the waves, invisible, forgotten; not so forgotten. So much to which we are oblivious - that means it's like we're sleep walking and can't see things," he said, for he knew she would ask

"Some downgrade visions to being psychological phenomena, as if that explained them or as if that made them less beautiful, or further from God," he said.

Ivy's brow furrowed deeply. Her father went on.

"Some say that everybody already knows everything and that is why we sometimes dream of the future. It is also said that in the mind we have taken stock of all we do and since all is observed carefully on some level, it is not difficult to say what is going to happen next."

He did not look at her but at the sea. "What did you dream about, Ivy?"

Ivy told him of her dream the night before. Of standing in the hut, holding a cuttlefish. She told him how she had seen him in the dream, as she had seen him the while still awake, come into the hut and say that there were no fish. She told him how in the dream the piano began to fill with water and how while watching it in astonishment she had cut her hand on the cuttlefish. She said how the cut grew large and soon poured with seawater and she wrapped it in a piece of rag to stop it.

While holding her hand palm up she had bent one of her fingers inwards and from it a piano note had sounded. She bent her finger again and another note sounded, a lower note. In the dream she saw him stifle a yawn which he sniffed back, but then another yawn came and then another, each re-grouping until he stood there trapped in one continuous oral inhale.

In the dream she then saw through the window the Spaniard come riding to the hut on a horse. He rode inside. The horse was very tall and where the Spaniard sat on top, the ceiling altered to admit him as he moved about.

The animal was grey with small white circular patterns mottled all over it like the stars, like the cosmos reproduced in its coat.

The Spaniard's eyes were shiny and wet and black, like enormous single caviar eggs sitting under his heavy lids.

He moved his horse over to the piano, hooves clocking on the floorboards. She noticed he was wearing a very severe, old black suit. With great skill he made the horse kneel in front of the piano whereby he opened the cover over the keys. Taking an intense glance at her father with those grand black eyes he, with great deliberation, struck the lower notes.

He stood there, rigid, watching; her father still in the yawn. They were twin statues, odd icons. With the notes the yawn ceased and her father's ballooned chest fell like a boat's sail; gently, but totally.

Her father thanked the Spaniard and spoke of how he hadn't been able to breathe. The Spaniard paced the horse over to him. He leaned down and touched her father's shoulder and traced a shape there with his finger. He then nodded to them both and left.

Ivy's father was still looking at the water when she finished telling him. He pulled up the sleeve of his jumper and showed her the tattoo of a horse he had on his shoulder and Ivy stared at it, amazed.

"I've never seen that before," she said.

"You probably have but it didn't stick in your mind until you dreamed," he said.

He looked at the waves. Ivy shook her head. She couldn't remember seeing it.

"Does this mean I know everything?" she said.

"It wouldn't surprise me if you did," said her father.

He hummed a familiar tune.