

Swan Song

by Angela Brett

"I need to relax," said Bob to the boy behind the counter. He couldn't have been older than than eighteen, but Bob was almost taken in by his efforts to appear more world-weary than Bob was. Spiked black hair, pale face, make-up embellishing a permanent scowl. He removed one of his earphones.

"Huh?"

"I need some music to help me relax. Can you recommend anything?"

"Nature sounds," said the boy, twitching his scowl toward the back of the shop, and replacing the earphone.

"Thanks," Bob replied, already heading in the direction indicated.

He flipped through the CDs. Whalesong, birdsong, swansong... that seemed interesting. He took the swansong CD back to the counter. The boy raised an eyebrow.

Not sure how to interpret the gesture, Bob asked, "It's relaxing, isn't it?"

"Given a lot of people peace, yeah." The boy gave a chortle just short enough to avoid looking happy.

Bob completed the purchase and went home, glad to finally have a weekend off. He made a cup of tea and put the CD in his computer to rip.

The moment he heard the first chord, his fingers slackened and dropped his tea into his lap. He ignored his scalded scrotum and

listened intently. The music was beautiful beyond all physical pleasure or pain. The end of the piece gave him a deeper understanding of the expression *la petite mort*.

While he was still recovering, the next track began. Some were songs, some were instrumental, some were spoken word, some were animal sounds. All were astounding.

One, 'Call of the Baiji' was at the same time so joyous and so sorrowful that the opposing emotions flattened his soul into a single thread, a single thread taking its place in the centre of the universe, searching vainly for another. And before he could tie it to anything, it shrank away with the music, only to be rebuilt by the next track.

When the playback finished, Bob felt the acute pain of loss; a pain not just emotional, but physical. The renewed awareness of his burns was at first a welcome distraction from the pain of losing the music, but soon became an excruciating addition to it. He took painkillers and attempted some first aid, but the whole time he knew that he was only treating the smallest of his injuries. He needed to hear more swan song. He yanked some dry pants on and went back to the shop.

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Bob almost collided with the music counter in his panicked run. "Hi," he said, breathlessly.

"You want more?" said the boy.

"Yeah. Do you know where I can get some?"

"Come with me. I think I have some in the back."

They entered a storage room at the back of the shop. Shelves of CDs and music equipment lined the walls. The boy riffled through a disordered box of CDs, pulling out not an album of swan song but a digital audio recorder.

"Do you sing?" he asked.

"Are you kidding me? I sound like a strangled labrador."

The boy looked puzzled. "No you don't. So what do you do? Write, play, dance..."

"Oh, I'm a computer programmer. But I write in my spare time, and I can... sort of almost play the ukulele."

The boy put down his recorder and pressed a button.

"Tell me a story," he said.

"What, now?"

"Yeah. You know that CD? I record them myself. I think you could be on the next one."

"Oh, I don't know... my writing's not that good. I mean that stuff was..." Bob searched for words to describe his experience.

"Everyone has it in them. You just need the right circumstances."

"The right..."

Bob was interrupted by the boy's sudden movement, in which he deftly unsheathed a knife from his pocket and cut a gash in Bob's shirt.

"Tell me a story."

"You don't mean... you don't want... what do..." Bob blubbered. But the soulless gaze of the boy told him there was no point in arguing. He tried to think of a story idea.

His mind went blank. Every time he tried to advance he would hit that familiar invisible wall which his ideas were not sharp enough to push through.

The boy came closer, and held the knife teasingly against Bob's sweating skin. Bob tried as hard as he could to remember what triggered those late night spurts of insistent inspiration. He found nothing, but kept pushing anyway.

As the knife pierced his skin, the wall smashed and let escape a thousand ideas; the ideas which he had rejected almost subconsciously before they had properly formed. His subconscious mind had nurtured these ideas into a thousand polished gems; he needed only pick the brightest. The light of inspiration chased away his fear, and he began to recite the story in a loud, confident voice.

His excitement over the story took over, and almost made him forget his situation. Despite his impatience to relate the brilliant ending, he somehow found the strength to continue telling the story at an even pace, with just the right amount of emotion in his voice, just the right pauses to enhance the drama. This was surely his finest work.

The buzz of revealing the final plot twist was so intense that he barely felt the knife plunging into his heart.

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Bob nonchalantly fingered the bloodless hole in his chest. "Am I dead?" he asked the boy, pushing his index finger into the hole and probing the smooth, motionless chambers of his heart.

"You're a listener now. Go listen."

Bob understood. A world of swan song was his to liberate.

The boy took a digital audio recorder from the shelf and handed it to him. "We can trade recordings," he said. "No need to waste'em."

With that, he led Bob back into the shop, and went through the charade of selling Bob the recorder.

Bob went by his ex-wife's house on the way home. He couldn't remember why they had decided to have children, why he had taught his seven-year-old son to play ukulele. But the reason seemed obvious enough.

"Heya, Tam," he said as she answered the door.

"Oh, hi, Bob. I wasn't expecting you," she said, adding awkwardly, "Is everything okay? You look ill."

"I thought I'd take Jason out."

Jason ran to the door, excited, but stopped and clung to his mother's leg when he saw his father's face.

"Mum, what's wrong with Dad?"

Bob tried to remember how to smile. "Nothing's wrong, Jase! Wanna come have ice cream? I'll teach you another song on the uke."

Jason perked up at this, and fetched his ukulele. He followed Bob to the car, looking back questioningly at his mother a few times.

Bob drove home, and led Jason into the living room.

"How about you play something for me?" he asked his son.

"Already? You said we'd have ice cream!"

"Sit there," Bob said, gesturing to an armchair. He headed into the kitchen.

He came back a few seconds later and set up his recorder on the coffee table. "Play something."

"What should I play? Do I get ice cream afterwards?"

"Just make something up. Do your best."

"I don't feel like playing!" Jason whimpered.

Bob stood behind Jason and put a hand on his shoulder. With his other hand, he held a carving knife at his son's neck.

"Play."

Jason hesitantly began to play. He took a while to find the right notes, but eventually found something he liked. He played it louder, and began to sing. It was a song about unmet expectations, a song about desire, but most of all, it was a song about ice cream. Bob could not remember the taste of ice cream, but he lapped up the emotions in the song. The song's end was unbearable; slitting his son's throat wasn't.

Jason's head lolled forward when Bob dropped it. There was no lust for swan song to keep it moving.

Bob's appetite was stronger than ever. He headed back to the music store to exchange his recording.

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"What is this rubbish? This stuff is weak. He can barely play."

"It sounded great to me."

"Maybe if you're still a little warm in the liver. Real listeners won't get any nourishment from this. There must've been ninety years left in him, squeezed out in these two minutes, but it's useless if he hasn't learnt what to do with it. This is waste heat."

Bob soon began to understand what the boy meant. As his body threatened to decay, mediocre swan song no longer filled him the way it had. He became an expert at picking performers. Old enough to have the technical skill to express their talents, but not so old that the execution was hampered by an ageing body. Old enough to appreciate life, but not so old that there was not much left of it to lose.

Humans had more appealing swan songs than animals, but there was nothing more satisfying than hearing the swan song of the last of a species. It was not easy to send a species to extinction by himself, but Bob soon came to recognise the listeners threaded throughout society, manipulating humans into destroying habitats or directly killing key animals. It was a silent teamwork; each working selfishly towards the same goal.

He experimented with more visual swan songs, but found that the buzz from a fine painting was too concentrated in the short time

after the piece was completed; a sharp peak of pleasure painfully piercing him, and leaving him even more desperate. Listeners were better off listening.

Eventually he could not obtain fresh swan song often enough to satisfy his cravings. He listened to other listeners' recordings almost constantly. They were not quite as fulfilling as live death; even on video, many subtleties could not be captured. But they kept him going.

His appetite gradually outgrew the steady stream of swan song fed into his ears. It became more and more difficult to concentrate on the steps needed to record new material. After one session, he realised that he had neglected to stock up on recordings to listen to. He sped to the music store with his recorder, not even stopping to listen to the pedestrians he hit on the way.

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"There's nothing on here," said the boy. Bob heard the recording he was listening to come to an end. He had no more.

"I recorded a successful blues guitarist."

"There's nothing on here. Did you press record?"

If he'd had any of his own emotions left to feel, Bob would have been dismayed by his oversight. Instead, he answered tonelessly, "I need more. Lend me some until I get you a proper recording."

The boy stared at him while his need accumulated.

"I have something," he said. He brought a single CD from the storeroom.

Bob took it without comment, and raced home.

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Bob fumbled as he put the CD into the slot. It was getting harder to fight the postmortem spasms. Finally he managed to press play, and he lay back in his armchair to enjoy his fix.

His own voice tickled him through his earphones. Muscles galvanised by the shock, he sat up straight and quivered at the opening lines.

The story faded into the background. He remembered feeling his heart pounding in his intact chest. He remembered feeling the cold knife on the cool skin of his still-warm body. He remembered breathing, and how hard he had had to fight to breathe slowly enough to speak. He remembered the fear, not evaporated but transformed into an intense enjoyment of his remaining minutes. He remembered the moment the last of his heart went into the story, and the moment the knife went into his heart.

After that there were no more moments, just time, in steady, emotionless motion. Only borrowed moments distinguished it from complete stop. He had become nothing more than a leaking human-shaped balloon, inflated with the fading remains of others' lives. As the CD finished playing, he punctured his hollow being and slumped forward. His story was over.

