Nocturnes

by Kelli Trapnell

My daddy always told us kids not to play in the high grass out in the back pasture. Out there, by the broken windmill where the screech owls nest and swoop, through the high deer fence, you can see the Randalls' aoudad paw at the hard ground on their place. The Randalls are never there, but they're decent enough people for game hunters. Daddy always says its not the Randalls he's worried about. But he won't say what it is that bothers him. Maybe it's all the cougars everybody's started talking about. Maybe it's because that's where Momma's buried. Whatever the reason, the back pasture is definitely off-limits, and especially at night.

I guess that's why we all love the back pasture best. Well, all of us but Maisie. She's a pretty big scaredy cat for being the oldest. I don't get it. I've seen her kill a copperhead without a fuss, seen her run off the coyotes that venture too close to the yard. But Maisie won't set foot in the back pasture, not even during the day, and trying to sneak past her is even harder than trying to get past Dad. She always has to ruin everything.

Me, I go to the back pasture all the time.

For one thing, it's the most interesting part of our land—a few sloping hills, a small, leaf-filled pond, blackberry bushes, dense pockets of tall, thin trees that hush and chitter in the wind. The rest of our place is mostly rock and yellowing crabgrass, a few twisted trees here and there, just often enough that no matter where you stand, you can't see a red burnt sunset without the black stamp of a gnarled tree on the horizon. Daddy says he likes it that way. I don't. It makes the sky look like a warning.

I swear that there's something, I don't know, magical, about the back pasture, especially over by the pond. You go out on a night with

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no moon, when all the stars are flush in the sky, when all of everything, even you, is just a shadow moving softly, and I swear, you can hear it, if you listen hard enough. The music. It's like it's coming from under the ground. Even the crickets quiet down to listen.

Maybe I'm just crazy. My teachers all say that I've got an active imagination. Still, I go there on nights I can't sleep, nights when all I can think of is how momma's gone, of how daddy sits at the kitchen table late into the evening, smoking his pipe and looking at her letters, letters he won't let us kids read. Maisie says she's read them before, that she knows what they say, but she won't tell us. I think she's lying. I go to the back pasture when I can't stay in my own head any longer.

To hear Maisie tell it, momma always liked the back pasture best.

I didn't know her, not like the others did. Brad and Lacey, the twins, they were seven when she died. Maisie was twelve, like I am now. I was only just three when it happened. Three's not old enough to remember much more than blurs and voices.

And they all knew her before we moved to Uvalde, before we up and left Houston cause daddy had finally found a place with some natural gas on it. Momma was pregnant with me then, and the top pianist in the state. She'd had to come back early from Fort Worth, where she was performing in the Van Cliburn competition, to help Daddy with the move. It is the one thing I can remember about her, her music, her long fingers on the piano keys.

For a long time, they wouldn't tell me how she died.

Then, one evening, Maisie caught me on my way back to the house. I'd been in the back pasture again, listening for the music, racing through the high grass, my coyote teeth bared, my deer legs

swift in the growing orange dusk. Maisie caught me by the arm, hard enough to bruise, and dragged me, thrashing, down to the clipped grass of our yard. I wasn't ready to give up the freedom of the night yet.

“Ada,” she said, real serious. “Momma got shot down there. By the pond.”

The words cracked through me like a bullet. “Got shot in the chest,” Maisie said again, then told me the story. Her eyes were glazed blank, like the sunlight on the pond on a grey winter day.

There'd been a new hunter on the Randalls' place, a big important guy from the city, an oil man or a banker. He'd spotted his only aoudad all day in the late afternoon, when momma was writing new sheet music out by the pond, hidden in the high grass. The aoudad he'd wanted was a big thing, all shaggy, its wide grey horns curled almost twice around its ears. The oil man had tracked it all the way up to the deer fence next to the back pasture, creeping away from the hunting group, who'd decided to call it a day. When the big ram raised its head, he'd lined up his Weatherby Mark V, closed both eyes and squeezed the trigger. Momma caught the bullet in her chest, couldn't even cry out. The oil man panicked and ran back to the hunting lodge. Momma died right there by the pond. Daddy didn't find her until it was too late, until she'd drowned in her own blood.

“The bullet ripped clean through her right lung,” Maisie said. “The coroner said so.”

“What happened to the oil man?” I asked.

Maisie looked at me hard, then stood up and brushed the loose grass off her jeans. “What do you think? He got off, no real punishment. Had to pay a fine, do some community service.”

We were silent in the sun-warmed grass, she standing, me sitting cross-legged, picking at the weeds that had sprung up all over that summer. Down toward the pond, I could see the aoudad pick their way along the deer fence. Above me, Maisie sniffed, let out a wet breath.

“I miss her, too, you know,” I said. I looked up at her, but the setting sun behind her hid half her face in light.

“Just don't go back there again,” she said, and went back to the house. I stayed there in the grass until the crickets started whirring, until the moon was high in the sky. I tried to hear the gunshot, to see Momma collapsing on the grass. I wanted that proof of her being gone, dead, forever. But all I could hear was the subtle night music drifting up from the pond.

I waited almost six months before going down into the back pasture again.

Tonight the air is just right, crisp, nearly winter, which means early nights. It's cloudy, and there's not much of a moon, just a sliver of God's fingernail, as Daddy likes to say. Maisie's out on a date and the twins are drowning in homework, which means I've got a pretty simple task ahead of me. I've just got to sneak out unnoticed before Daddy sets the alarms, and remember to crack a window in my bedroom so I can get back in without causing a fuss. I've done this kind of thing a zillion times before. Piece of cake.

Still, I feel the rush of escape vibrate through my bones when I crack open the back door and rush out into the darkness. I know what I'm looking for, the rush of the wind in my hair, the feeling of wildness.

I streak across the clipped close grass of the lawn, my breath hot and tight in my mouth as I run across the white circle of light spilled from the floodlight. I plunge headlong into the blueing shadow. In a hand-leap, I'm over the fence and into the back pasture. Everything in me relaxes once I find my feet in the packed dirt, as my fingers brush the tops of the high grass. I run toward the pond, as fast as I can, dodging gopher piles and fallen branches. When I reach the water's edge, I slow to a walk, and circle the pond until I regain my breath.

Out here, the world is silent. The night is wide. The water shines.

And then the music comes.

It starts off deep, so deep you can barely hear it, and stringy, trembling. It seems to make the water of the pond shimmer with feeling. Like climbing a ladder made of broken rungs, it swings up and then slides back down again, less in time with your heart than with the heart of the thing inside of you which never sleeps, which curls between your ribs like smoke and threatens and croons, its teeth sunk into your throat, its tone inescapable. It sounds almost like a piano, but not, a drum and a whole symphony of rubber bands twanging. It is sweet but terrible, an impossibility. I want to come closer, I want to scoop it into my ears, my mouth, I want it to permeate my being.

I've always felt drawn to the water, but tonight is the first time I have the courage to reach out and touch it.

Even with just my hand in the water, I feel pulled to the center of the pond. The music washes up and over me, coaxing me further in. The song breaks and speeds up, whispering, demanding, the notes more insistent in my ears, behind my ribs.

I shuck off my boots, roll my jeans up. I know that there are water snakes, but the music is so insistent that I just don't care anymore. Then I step into the pond, and before I know it I am in waist deep. The music is stronger than ever, it speaks to me. If only I were closer…

I gulp the night air deep into my lungs and plunge my head beneath the water.

I open my eyes not submerged, but standing in a wide, spare room, with beige floors and walls, a gleaming white piano in the corner, a beautiful woman sitting on the bench. The music is much more piano-like now, and I think I recognize the melody.

“Momma?” I remember to breathe.

The woman at the piano stands up. The music stops. “Ada baby? Is that you?”

I only nod. For some reason, the words stick in my mouth. I stare.

Momma's wearing a white dress, the one we buried her in, the one with the high collar and the long sleeves that was her Momma's. A strange brown stain is spread across the chest. Her cheeks look sunken, her skin sallow. Still, I think she's beautiful. She reaches out to me, her long fingers curled, her smile a little cracked.

“Come here, baby,” she says. “Lemme play you a song.” She sits down and pats the bench next to her.

I walk over, feeling numb. The closer I get, the better I'm able to see her, and the piano. I bite my tongue so that I don't cry out.

Momma's skin is translucent, pocked in places with wormholes. Her long brown hair is maggoty. Half of her upper lip is missing, as is the tip of her nose.

And her piano! From top to bottom, the instrument is built out of bones—femurs and tibias and humeruses for the legs and frame, feet and hands for the three feet. It's shaped like a grand, but it has no top. On the inside, shoulder blades and pelvises make up the soundboard, teeth the notches, vertebrae the hammers. And the strings—cat gut, probably, or maybe something worse. The keys themselves are rectangular and polished, carved out of I don't want to know what.

Momma wraps her fingers around my wrist and pulls me down on the seat next to her with surprising force.

“That's better,” she says. She leans back and cracks her knuckles. “I've been wondering when you'd finally come on down and see me! How about your favorite?”

She starts in on a familiar melody, lilting and slow. I close my eyes, try to imagine her as she once was, try to quell the rising panic in my chest.

“The most beautiful of Chopin's Nocturnes,” she says, over the music. “Number nine. The only one that would get you to quiet down. The most difficult of my babies, you were. Even with the twins.”

I'm almost lost in the melody again, in the memory, when the music staggers on a high note. Something hard falls into my lap and Momma quits her playing. I open my eyes. One of the vertebrae has fallen out of the piano and onto my legs. I leap away from the bench.

“Damnit,” she says. “I'm sorry, baby. Don't worry, I'll fix it. Just gimme one sec…” She stands and crosses the room to a bloody pile of human remains. I swallow, and watch as she tosses an arm out of her way, pulls the torso of a man wearing an orange and camoflauge hunting vest out of the pile. I feel like I'm going to puke.

“Momma?” I say.

She shoves her hand into the rotting flesh, roots around. I look away. “Hang on, Ada,” she says. “Almost done…” With a grunt she rips a vertebrae out of the man's back. “There.”

Momma comes back over, wiping the bone clean on the hem of her dress. “It's a nasty business, this, but I gotta keep my piano together!” She smiles brightly, plinks the vertebrae into the space of the missing hammer, starts over.

“So, Ada,” Momma says. “Tell me all about school. How's Daddy doing? And Maisie and the twins? I haven't seen the twins for about a month now… They tell me that Maisie's afraid to come visit—I guess I wouldn't blame her, though, after that first time.”

I look up at the ceiling, which is clear and wavery, and shows the night sky far above us. I am beginning to feel lightheaded, and my chest feels tighter than normal. I take a deep breath, but that only makes it worse.

Momma looks at me with concern. “Oh, no, honey don't do that,” she says. “Not unless you wanna stay. We are underwater, don't you forget.” She smiles in a way that I think she intends as sweet.

I frown, but she just keeps on playing. Underneath the music, though, I can hear a strange sound, a sort of low rumbling, coming from somewhere far off. I guess Momma can hear it too, because she

starts playing harder, louder. I think she's trying to drown whatever it is out.

“Let's hope he goes away,” she says, looking a little nervous.

The growl changes to a kind of hiss now, a heavy breathing that makes the hair on my arms stand up. Another vertebrae hammer falls out of the piano, but Momma doesn't notice, just keeps pounding away at the keys. She looks scared.

“Momma?” I ask.

The hissing stops and now it sounds like a scream, a woman's scream. There's only one animal that can make a noise like that…

“Ada baby, you gotta decide now,” Momma says, a little frantic. “You wanna stay with me, right honey? He's too close now for you to run.”

The screaming turns into a full on snarling roar. I look to the ceiling again at the patient, distant sky.

“Baby, now stay still,” Momma says. “It'll all be over in just a minute.”

When I look back at her, she's holding a knife by the hilt. Just as she lunges at me, I jerk back, out of the room, out of the water, and into the night. I am standing in the middle of the pond, shivering in the cold breeze. I can't hear any music now, only snarling.

About twenty feet to my left, two eyes glow green in the darkness. With a final scream, the cougar lunges at me and I feel my body slam into the water once more.