

for da carey

by Marko Fong

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Do I call him mr cummings or ee, she wondered. After all, he was the second most famous poet in America and she was eighteen. Still, mr cummings sounded too formal for a man who didn't use capital letters. As she climbed the four flights of stairs to the flat, she sang to herself, "I carry your heart (I carry it in my heart)."

She wasn't worried about the melody. She'd sung in public since she was two years old and starred in the radio show, the Little Polish Princess. She'd sung, tap danced, and told the tri-state area how much softer clothes felt when moms used Amox. She had perfect pitch, but had no idea how she was supposed to sing parentheses. Should she change registers? Should she perhaps look away then look to the floor as she sang the words inside the parentheses? Should she improvise like a jazz musician and gauge the poet's reaction?

She wasn't the best singer at the conservatory in New Haven, but she was the only one who had been named "Class Poet" in high school. She knew who ee cummings was, but that didn't mean that she'd read his poetry. She'd been class poet, because she came up with rhymes for ditties. It didn't mean that she knew Auden, Pound, Frost. Who would expect the undertaker's daughter to know such things? After she looked at the poems she'd agreed to sing, she realized that she had ee cummings confused with Ogden Nash.

mr cummings sat in a wingback chair. He had big ears, was bald, and had a prominent narrow nose. Someone had given him a cup of coffee and they were passing a bottle to augment it. She still had her scarf around her neck. At the conservatory, you could always spot the singers because even on a mildly cold day, they all wore scarves.

The black concert grand by the window was a Baldwin. "They're brighter than a Steinway" she reminded herself. After she got her coat and scarf off, the accompanist, one of her teachers at the

conservatory, invited her to warm up. She checked the reaction of the two women and four men on the sofa and chairs before her.

mr cummings nodded and the cups of coffee and bottle disappeared. She started with "If you like my poems, let them walk a little bit behind you."

As she sang, she was especially aware of the way mr cummings's lines had no meter or rhyme. The sound of the lyric didn't resonate. They were too short for that, too spiky, more Bartok folk song than Schubert lieder. The settings were modal. Her voice was on pitch, but she felt like a very small voice in an enormous room.

At the end of each poem, mr cummings nodded and clapped. He was close to sixty, older than her father would have been. After the seventh of his poems, "Anyone lived in a pretty how town," they took a break. She slipped into the kitchen where she asked for tea with honey. She could hear the poet and his friends talk softly.

"Ed, is that the way you hear them?"

"They're definitely in your voice, Ed"

It occurred to her that one of the e's in ee could stand for "Ed or Edwin."

"Lovely girl," said one of the women.

"Lovely voice," said mr cummings.

She exhaled and smiled. Up to now, she wasn't sure that her performance had pleased anyone.

"I think," said mr cummings, "that some poets have a voice and some tap into the music of the universe. Some have bits of both."

"And which one are you, Ed?"

They waited to hear the poet's answer.

"I have a voice. I'm proud of my voice."

She peeked into the main room and watched his guests nod.

"They don't always come together. They don't always have to."

"Well are we ready to continue."

Her teacher touched her lightly on the elbow. She put down her cup of tea and they returned to the piano. She was ready to sing,
"seeker of truth
follow no path

all path leads where
truth is here."

But mr cummings cleared his throat, "Might I ask a favor?"

Did he want her to stop?

"You have such a lovely voice, young tall and clear, by chance do you know any Purcell?"

She nodded and whispered into her teacher's ear, began to sing Mad Bess, "From silent shades and Elysian groves."

The room filled with the resonance of Mars's lance and her voice. As she sang the 275 year old lyric, "my music shall be her crown," mr cummings caught her eye and nodded approval.

The applause at the end was noticeably more spontaneous and mr cummings asked her to sing it again. She obliged, then sang some Dowland, Mad Bess again, as the room basked in the marriage of voice and music.

Only the ring of the phone interrupted. mr cummings returned to the living room and apologized, "This has been lovely, but a friend of mine needs to be bailed out of jail. It's Bess of Bedlam for real I guess. They're rounding up us old lefties and questioning them for HUAC."

Before she put on her coat, mr cummings took her hand and kissed it,

"Young lady, in ways that I can only imagine, you are blessed."

She danced down the two hundred steps to the subway. Musician and poet separate and together, that's who she would be. She warbled his words softly, somewhere I have never traveled, gladly beyond.

