

Eimear Ryan

## The Recital

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It was one of those sleek, silvery wine bars: anonymous as an airport, the oversized glasses filled a third of the way.

“He’s in NAMA<sup>1</sup>,” Tim would murmur in my ear as we tended bar. “That lad there was before a tribunal.” Tim knew everyone’s scandal, had it boiled down to the absolutes. “Grace,” he’d say,  
5 “the tax evader wants another gin and tonic.”

Sometimes I wished he’d keep his voice down. I couldn’t help but like the clientele. It wasn’t just that they tipped well. They had presence – a tragic, shop-soiled charisma. They told great stories. They’d been powerful men, once.

I’d dropped my CV into the bar because of the piano that sat squat and dusty in the corner. I’d hoped they might hire me to play. When Tim offered bar work instead, I didn’t hesitate. I  
10 needed a reason to get out of the house, away from my sister’s reproachful looks.

Not that Jen ever let up. Often when I got in from work she would materialise in the darkened living room, warning me not to wake Ruán.

“Could you not get a different sort of job? One with more civilised hours? You know,  
15 something in an office.”

I thought of the early morning rush, of girls in pencil skirts and chunky white runners stalking grimly to work, their heels in their handbags. “No thanks.”

The piano, I soon learned, was little more than an expensive prop. I was forever running over to it with a cloth to wipe the sticky wine-glass rings away. The bar was fine as a stopgap, a “just”  
20 job – *And what are you doing at the moment, Grace? Oh, I’m just working in a bar for now.*

There was an unofficial free-wine perk, of which I made judicious use. And in slow moments, I watched the customers. There was a GAA<sup>2</sup> commentator who had a different accent to the one he used on TV. There was a judge who sat at the bar in full judge rig-out, her wig sitting neatly on her head like a vestigial brain.

One regular, Liam, bounded in at the same hour each night, always in a suit, always slightly dishevelled. He was forever getting into arguments about “funding”.

Tim explained. “He’s the local TD<sup>3</sup>, Grace. Ah, you’ve heard of him. He used to be Justice Minister. Resigned in disgrace a few years ago?” I shrugged, prompting Tim to sigh, “God, you’re  
30 young.”

I didn’t care about politics, but I watched with interest as Liam dealt with his irate constituents. [...] Women, of course – he was an expert at the hand to the small of the back, of the sincere hand-clasp – but men too he touched warmly in conversation, a hand on the arm, on the shoulder, and they were easy with it, pleased even. He listened patiently to everyone’s complaints, but invariably turned back to the bar – to me – with a dark grin and a generous  
35 rolling of the eyes.

It turned out I was doing better than most of my former classmates. I wasn’t on the dole, at least. As *Music Composition* graduates, we were not the most practical souls. [...]

Growing up, Jen had always been the better pianist. She’d made it – a successful stint with the National Symphony Orchestra, a score for a worldwide smash-hit Irish dance show. Then she  
40 had Ruán and devoted herself to motherhood full-time. She always insisted it was her choice, but I was sceptical; Ruán’s father was on tour in Asia, and there was no suggestion of *him* putting his career on hold.

Our father had taught us both – we’d compete for space next to him on the piano bench. I’d stare mesmerised at his hands, at the curly gold hairs on his wrists. And I was a hesitant player

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<sup>1</sup> National Asset Management Association

<sup>2</sup> Gaelic Athletic Association

<sup>3</sup> Teachta Dála, a member of the Irish Parliament

45 from the start. “Eyes up!” he would say. “Don’t overthink it. Skip, skip, skip along.” Dad never hinted at Jen’s superiority, and so made her determined to prove it, over and over.

It shouldn’t have surprised me that she would shield her contacts jealously. “I’ll put in a good word for you,” she’d say, “if I get around to it.” Then, when I reminded her: “Jesus, I’m already putting you up – would you have a bit of patience?” Other times, over wine: “I’m just not sure you’d *suit* the National Symphony Orchestra! All that rigid discipline? You’re a *different* sort of musician, Grace.”

At night I lay on my back in the spare bedroom, sometimes woken by Ruán’s thready cries, Jen’s awards shadowy on the shelves above. I resigned myself to teaching children in their living rooms as pushy parents hovered in the doorway.

55 A slow night in the bar turned into a sing-song, and I found myself at the piano. It needed a tune-up, but I was able to work around that. I played one of Chopin’s trippier pieces, showing off, revelling in the looks I drew. It was so different from playing in draughty practice halls. I didn’t even feel like a pianist. I felt like a seductive starlet in an old movie, draped over the back of a baby grand in a puddled cocktail dress. *That’s right, and you all thought I was just a barmaid.*

60 Then Liam was prevailed upon to sing a ballad that had been written about his late father, from whom Liam had inherited a name and a Dáil seat. “I don’t think I can follow *that!*” he protested, but eventually he put his hands in his pockets, closed his eyes, and sang. It was more of a recital; his voice was nothing special. Still, it was mournful and deeply felt.

I said as much to Tim, who made a face. “He isn’t half the man his father was. It’s a good thing Liam Senior was long dead, God rest him, when Liam Junior resigned from cabinet. The shame would’ve killed him!”

“Tim, that makes no sense.”

He poured a pint, yanking down the tap handle. “Ah, don’t be smart. He’s an amiable enough man, but I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him, the arrogant hoor<sup>4</sup>.”

70 I caught Liam’s eye. He was looking at me intently, worrying his glasses in his hands. The weight of an admiring gaze was not unpleasant. He signalled for another whiskey.

“That was something else, Grace.”

I poured him more than was strictly a measure. “Thanks. You too.”

75 He swatted at the air. “I’ve no voice, but that song still gets to me. We didn’t always get on but that man was my idol. Hard to believe it’s twelve years since he died...”

I didn’t know what to say. “I was ten,” I said eventually.

He barked a laugh. “You’d hardly be expected to remember him so. Tell me something – what is it you want to do with yourself? Talent like that, you hardly want to stay behind a bar your whole life, working for *that* tyrant.” Liam winked at Tim, who scowled.

80 “I just finished a postgrad in music.”

He drummed his fingers along the edge of the bar, a parody of “Chopsticks”. “And how’s that sector doing?”

“Not great. Though I haven’t been very proactive, to be honest. My sister’s a musician too – well, was – so I’m kind of relying on her for contacts. Her name’s Jen – Jennifer Whelan?”

85 Recognition animated his tired face. “*That’s* your sister? I saw her perform a solo at the National Concert Hall once. Christ, she was amazing.” I must have looked crestfallen, because he added, “You’re exceptional, too. I mean that.”

90 I felt my cheeks darken, tighten. I hated the bitterness I felt about Jen’s success, and he’d picked up on it instantly. His restless fingers caught the back of my wrist, tapping gently. No ring, I noticed.

“A college friend of mine is a conductor with the Philharmonic Choir. He’s always on the lookout for young talent. I’ll put in a word for you.” [...]

Before leaving he kissed me goodnight. I closed my eyes, and the dry leaves skittered around our feet like insects. It was brief, and not quite inappropriate, but I could tell from the look he

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<sup>4</sup> a sly person (Irish slang)

95 gave me that he was surprised at himself.

There was a framed newspaper clipping of Liam in the bar. It was on the way to the women's toilets; I suspected he didn't know it was there. In it, a younger, slimmer Liam sat beaming at his new ministerial desk; behind him were portraits of his predecessors, including his father. The accompanying article was a long, thinly veiled warning: he'd better not let down the family name. It was after reading this that I decided to sleep with him.

100 I'd only been with young men before, and it was different. There was the paunch to be negotiated. [...] Afterwards we lay side by side, laughing quietly, and he held my hand at arm's length, examining my fingers, measuring, saying, "Oh Grace, I must get you a job."

I believed him. I fizzed with possibilities. I liked the way people looked when Liam would lean across the bar to kiss my cheek, or when he put his hand on my back, his fingers chiselling either side of my spine.

105 Tim didn't like it. "Have you got daddy issues or what?" I suspected that he wanted to bar Liam, or fire me, or both.

I was making a spectacle of myself. I was arriving in the real world.

110 One particular night, Liam said an early, lingering good-bye. He was attending a business breakfast – whatever that was – in Naas the next morning, and would be expected to "work the room", he told me, making deadly serious air quotes. I didn't mind. I had taken to pulsing Bach through my headphones on the walk home and the quiet afterwards seemed like something precious. I wanted to go to bed in that quiet, not be confronted by a frazzled, sleep-deprived Jen. But I could hear Ruán crying from the corridor.

115 The apartment was dark, except for light under the toilet door. I tiptoed into Ruán's room, picked the furious bundle up. I shushed him, rocked him. I was good with him now. The first time I'd held him, in the hospital, I'd been a wreck. Instead of enjoying the moment, I'd thought of the cold tiles flooring the ward, of his breakability should he slip from my arms. I remembered touching a hesitant finger to his cheek, feeling the slight give of his skin, realising how rough my own hide really was.

"You're home late," said Jen, from behind me. "This fella's been kicking up all night, haven't you?"

125 Jen took the baby from my arms; something about this transaction still made me anxious, and I tended to hold on too long. This night, however, I felt warm and happy, and I ended up telling her, through Ruán's cries, about the night of the sing-song; how the charming, if borderline alcoholic politician had promised to help me find work.

"Wait," said Jen, "wait, this isn't Liam Kelleher we're talking about? You do *know* his story, right?"

130 "Yeah, he got chucked out of government. So Tim says. Whatever."

"Do you know *why*?"

My buzz was slipping away. "Does it matter?"

135 "He shagged his secretary. Got her pregnant, for fuck's sake. She was really young, like your age? The wife left him. It was a total circus, it was all over the papers and Vincent Browne and everything."

The news hit me like a drenching. "Well, he... he wouldn't be the first politician, I guess."

She smirked. "Ah, he's hardly Clinton. It wasn't glamorous. He was after refusing to bring in a civil-partnership bill, banging on about the Constitution, about *family values*. And then the secretary broke her silence. Yeah, he was a bit undermined after that. He had to go."

140 I nodded slowly, my throat thickening.

"God!" said Jen, jiggling Ruán on her shoulder. "What kind of creeps do you *get* in that place?"

"He's not the worst," I said, and Jen laughed lightly in my face.

Google gave me more on Liam Kelleher than I really cared to have. I loaded up my iPod with

145 podcasts and took long walks with his voice in my ear, by turns manipulative, defensive,  
reasonable. [...]

At work, I tried to pretend everything was normal, but I couldn't do it. We got bad at the  
kissing. The timing was off; we even started missing each other's mouths. It was only later I  
realised it was because he was drawing back. "Oh, that was a one-time thing, Grace," he told me  
150 eventually, as if I'd tried to use expired coupons.

One night he came in with a man who could only have been a conductor, which is to say he  
looked like a maths professor and used his hands a lot. I tried not to look at them. Liam's voice,  
to my ear, rose above the rumbling din of wine-bar conversation. I could sense his confusion at  
my distance, the sidelong way he watched me. I let Tim serve them. When I had no choice but to  
155 walk past them to fetch a bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Liam seized my wrist.

"I want a word with you."

I couldn't look at him. I focused instead on the triangle of white shirt beneath the lapels of his  
jacket – the skin underneath, I knew, was almost as white.

"This is Kevin, my old college friend. Kevin, this is the girl I was telling you about."

160 "Jennifer Whelan's sister, my my," said the conductor, smiling in a way that made me wonder  
how much he had been told. "You'll have to give us a recital, so."

I backed off, feeling Tim's stare on me. But I knew, whether he fired me or not – whether I  
had an audience or not – by the end of the night I would be sliding onto the piano's polished  
bench like I was taking cover. It was all I was good for; it was my way out. I would flex my fingers,  
165 skim them along the surface of the keys. Eyes up, don't overthink it. Skip, skip, skip along.

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