

# THE BOY WHO PLAYS MUSIC

*By Dylan Brenneis – December 17, 2018*

*This one's from back when I was about thirteen or fourteen.*

The automatic door swept back in its track with a whoosh as Mom, Grandma and I stepped in from the biting wind outside, stomping the snow off of our boots as we passed into the lobby. Carla was working at the front desk; she looked up and recognized us immediately.

"Oh wonderful! She'll be so glad you're here! You can set up over there by the piano," she said, gesturing to the battered old upright in the corner as she got up from her chair and circled around the desk, "I'll go and see if I can find her."

I shrugged off my coat and set down the trumpet I had borrowed from the school band storage-room when no one else was around. You weren't supposed to have them out over the holidays.

"She's been asking about you, you know," Carla smiled, "about 'The Boy Who Plays Music'." She swiped a card across a panel on the wall next to a wide metal door. The door was painted white, and had a small rectangular porthole window just at eye-level, the glass meshed with wire. With a buzz and a click, the door swung open and Carla disappeared inside.

Mom started arranging my sheet music across the piano, pushing strands of tinsel and garland out of the way to make space. I opened up the trumpet-case and passed the frozen mouthpiece from one hand to the other to warm it up; I probably should have put the trumpet in the cab instead of the trunk on the way here.

"Well they've certainly made this place look festive," Grandma said, sinking deeper than she expected into an over-stuffed sofa. Paper snowflakes were taped to the windows haphazardly, and uneven loops of silver tinsel hung from the ceiling, with alternating red and green plastic balls dangling from them. A small wire Christmas tree stood in the corner, the weight of its star tilting it slightly to one side. A silver-haired gentleman slumped and sleeping by the window had tinsel weaved into his wheelchair spokes.

A while later the big white door buzzed and clicked again, and Carla emerged with a wispy-haired woman in a brown pleated skirt and tan knitted sweater. "Hi mom," Grandma said, lifting herself out of the sofa after one or two tries, "Merry Christmas, how are you?" Great-Grandma looked both confused and delighted as Grandma guided her toward a more supportive seat than the one she had picked out for herself. We all sat and talked for a short while, but when the conversation began to circle back to introductions for the third or fourth time mom suggested, "Would you like to hear a little music?"

"Oh, yes, yes very much," Great-Grandma exclaimed, her chestnut-coloured eyes wide and brimming with excitement. She had always been especially fond of music, and had learned to play the trumpet when she was in her sixties, joining the Tuesday group of the Cosmopolitan band.

By this time my trumpet had warmed up sufficiently, and I jiggled each of the valves to make sure everything was running smoothly. It was quite dented and scratched from years of abusive students, but still managed to put out clear, brilliant notes—if a little off-key. Usually, there's something about a single trumpet played without accompaniment that rings out a lonesome, plangent sound. But it didn't that day.

With the braying of the battered trumpet reverberating off the white-washed walls, Great-Grandma swayed side to side, her slippered feet tapping out a rhythm on the cracked linoleum. At the end of every song, no matter what it was or how poorly I played it, she lifted up her hands and clapped, saying, "oh, you could just dance to that one!" In her eyes, wet and shining, she was dancing. I played for quite a while, and when I ran out of songs I knew, I went back and played them again. She didn't seem to mind.

Eventually, it came time to leave. As we packed up my trumpet and sheet music, Carla took Great-Grandma back behind the heavy white door, and the electric lock clicked shut after them. Great-Grandma turned around to wave goodbye, standing on her tip-toes to see out of the wire-mesh port-hole window. Her bright, sparkling eyes only just came above the bottom of the frame, and she never stopped waving goodbye to us until we had completely left the building.

She passed away a few years later from the effects of a stroke, and her old trumpet was passed on to me. I take it out and play it every now and then, and even though there's no accompaniment, it doesn't really seem so lonely.