

Melody of Melancholy

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Creative Writing

This short piece tells the story of a school-aged, developmentally delayed child and her Papa. Her Papa's love for music and his self-sacrificing spirit inspire her, but they also frustrate her, as she lives in a world that refuses to understand either one of them.

After writing a story dedicated to my mother, I wanted to write one for my father. His passion for music and his willingness to give it up for a stable life have always struck me as tragic. I wanted to draw from his experiences but create a situation that emphasized just how much of an impact broken dreams and an ignorant world can have.

I originally started writing this piece in the first-person perspective, but somewhere in the middle, "I" became "you." When I caught the error, I considered changing everything back to first person. I ultimately realized that using second person helped the story to feel more personal. It is not just one person's narrative; it is many people's, and they often cannot tell their own stories.

Fiction has always been a fantastic way to relate to and empathize with people different from ourselves. It has been my way of explaining my worldview to others and of learning how the people around me—or even people in faraway places—experience everyday life. Though I cannot say that this story is identical to my own, I have put bits and pieces of myself into this character. My hope is that, in writing this story, I can begin to show others the importance of familial love and unending compassion.

Papa has magic in his soul.

Most people say it flows from his fingers when he plays the keyboard or the guitar. You see the truth, though. You know where it starts, and it's not in his hands, or even in his heart. No, it starts in his core, in the place just above his stomach and nestled in the bottom threads of his rib cage. From there, at the slightest hint of music—the tap of a new boot on the worn pavement near Date Street, the slap of a slipper against a stone wall, a split second of a song that wriggles out from a half-open car window—the magic rolls outward.

You can only ever listen to his music. Everything else is far too loud. The sounds that blast from speakers, the teachers' voices when they yell at misbehaving students, the mynah birds that perch on the wire fences and scream, they're too loud. You crouch down into a ball and rock back and forth, your hands over your ears and your eyes squinched shut. People say that isn't proper behavior for a young lady. People say a lot of things. They think you don't understand. They think you're stupid. Sometimes, you think so too, and that's all you can hear:



A year has passed since the last time I was lucky enough to be featured in *Horizons*, and though I am still the same bookworm, I have now graduated from college. I have taken a temporary position as a Library Assistant at Hamilton Library, and I look forward to seeing what comes next. I want to thank the *Horizons* team and my family for their unending support. Da, this story is for you. I hear your music.

What a dumb child.
whisper whisper
You can't say things like that anymore. "P.C." culture, you know.
whisper whisper
Her poor father. Raising a dis—a differently abled child.
whisper whisper
I heard her mother just couldn't handle it.
whisper whisper
Well, her mother wasn't all there in the head either.

Papa used to be a musician. It's how he got Mama. That's what he says when he tells you bedtime stories. His brother once said there was no point in doing that when you couldn't get any of it into that little head, really, but Papa kept telling you stories. On the hardest days, if he isn't too tired from a long day at the office, he still does.

Today is one of those days. Today, on the last day of the school year, the seniors decide to break into the Gifted & Talented classroom and hide in the lockers. They leap out all at once in a somewhat respectable demonstration of coordination and scream at Bobby Lu until he goes red in the face and socks one of the boys in the jaw.

You don't see the impact. You're reaching for your headphones, which are always, always in your bag, but your hands won't cooperate. Tragic, isn't it? That your fingers can't collaborate as well as a bunch of high school delinquents? You have to use your palms instead, clapped over your ears, but you hear it all anyway. You feel that your ears are bleeding, but you can't remove your hands to check for blood.

You're on a white bed now, the sheets starched but forgiving beneath your uniform. Voices tell you that the seniors have been expelled—such a massive screw-up on their last day. You aren't sure if the voices are real, at first, but you feel they are. You wouldn't think of the words *massive screw-up* on your own.

Papa comes to get you. He must have left his office job to pick you up, but he isn't mad. He carries you in his arms, even though you're not a baby anymore. You can feel his callused hands on you, the roughness telling stories of a new song that he has learned on the guitar, a new riff or chord or melody. The strings sting his skin, but he never seems to notice the pain.

He starts the story on the drive home: *Once upon a time, there was a beautiful, beautiful woman who walked into a jazz club...*

The words are a little different every time. Sometimes, he calls Mama *beautiful*. Other times, Mama is *breathtaking*. Sometimes, the venue is a *jazz club*, and sometimes, he calls it by its name.

He isn't done with the story when he pulls into the parking lot of the cramped apartment he rents for the two of you. He parks the car and goes silent, right in the middle of telling you how happy he was when he found out that Mama was carrying you. You almost think he's asleep, but you see that his eyes are open. He takes a breath but doesn't continue the story.

You wail. You want to hear about Mama. You want to hear about how, when you cried for the first time, Papa thought it sounded like music.

You wail. You wail, wail, wail because Papa isn't saying anything. Your noises hurt your own ears, but you keep going.

Papa covers his face. You stop.

Papa uncovers his face. You stay still.

Papa has tears in his eyes. You don't know what to do.

I'm so tired, baby, he says aloud, but he isn't looking at you. *And I'm so worried. What if you had gotten hurt? You can't defend yourself. This world is too scary for you, and I can't always be there to protect you from it.*

You close your mouth.

I try so hard. I want so much for you. I gave up all that I could to make sure that you're okay, but things like this still happen. And I'm just so tired.

You open your mouth. You want to tell him that you're sorry. You want to tell him that you know he does a lot for you. You want to tell him that you love him. And for a moment, you're sure you can. You can feel the words in your throat, working their way upward, outward. You're sure that you can do it, that you can make him smile, that people will stop calling you dumb and stop pitying Papa. You open your mouth wider.

aaaaahhh, you say. *aaahhhhhh*.

When Papa cries, it sounds like the saddest song you've ever heard.