

La Fille Aux Cheveux De Lin

The Girl With The Flaxen Hair

by Eddie Caplan

The trustees won't be satisfied until we accept every idiot teenage piano player the admissions office throws at us. As if we could somehow cram all their greasy heads into our tiny classrooms. Well, we'll only take ten. And Margaret and I have already decided who the ten will be. So the kid waiting in the lobby had better be some kind of keyboard genius if he's going to have a prayer.

I rub my hands together trying to get some blood to flow. Christ, it's already April, but I'm still cold. The damn furnace in this old stone building turns off and on at random, and can't keep up. I opened the window halfway – it's warmer outside than in here – and perched myself on the radiator. Between the lukewarm breezes that occasionally come in the window and the sporadic bursts of heat from the pipes, I've managed to keep the frostbite off of my goddam fingers. Next time I'll wear gloves.

Margaret has been around this place for years, and she had the sense to wear a warm, thick sweater. Still, she's wrapped her arms tightly across her breasts; she's been around me for years too, and has often felt my eyes wander over her...

She shoves the kid's forms at me and sits, closed up, her legs crossed firmly at the knees. Her foot dangles down and insistently taps the air, making her whole body jerk to the beat of her foot. "He'll begin with Debussy," she says, "*La Fille Aux Cheveux De Lin.*"

“I can *read*, Margaret.” I glance at his sheet. His audition pieces aren’t difficult, just adequate. It’s a bad omen for our waiting genius.

Margaret says, “Collect him, won’t you?”

“Sure,” I mutter at her, and go out of the faux Viennese *salon* audition room. The trustees use the room to fleece wealthy donors. They reel them in with black-tie receptions, champagne, and string quintets. On cold days like this, the velvet-papered room has the added benefit of intimidating the young candidates and impressing their tuition-paying parents. I hate this place.

In the foyer, I call the kid’s name. It’s a meaningless formality since he’s the only teenager there, wearing an obviously uncomfortable “audition suit.” He’s arguing with a blond – his girlfriend, apparently. Their fight is quiet but intense; something about something childish and stupid, no doubt. I wait a bit, noisily clearing my throat. I wonder if I could get a smoke in while they bicker. Nice looking girl. Nice hair.

Their fight heats up loudly and she flees. This is the end of their romance for sure. High school’s over, kid, I laugh to myself. He calls after her but she’s already bolted down the marble stairs, her coat forgotten and her hair fluttering.

I wait for him. “Ready?” I ask.

After a beat, he says, “Yeah.” But he’s not.

He comes in, giving a quick look back. I shut the double doors behind him and take my position on the radiator by the window. Margaret heard the argument through the open door and dubiously looks at the boy. She pauses, then holds her reading glasses, earpieces folded, near her eyes. She takes her time examining his forms, her foot rhythmically pumping. Then she abruptly drops her hands and glasses to her lap and says blandly, “Begin.”

Dazed, the boy sits at the piano, hesitates, and begins to play *La Fille*. Debussy’s warm tones sound alien, a strangely sensuous presence in the room. The kid plays the opening phrase *con pedale*, letting the notes radiate in the hollow of sound made by the dampers

suspended over the strings.

He stops and jams his hands down, clutching the piano stool. The radiator pipes bang, coming to life. Then the boy, moving in a fog, slowly reaches out his right hand and plays the next phrase, flowing and bittersweet.

He's close to tears. He's thinking of the girl.

Margaret uncrosses her legs and silently sets her feet on the floor. She leans forward, her red hair and green eyes unusually soft it seems to me, listening with her lips parted, transfixed. I turn away from the two of them and look out the window, gently resting my forehead against the cold pane. Outside, the blond stands shivering at the edge of the fountain, grabbing the cuff of her sleeve in her hand, touching her eyes.

The five of us in tableaux – the girl and boy, Margaret and me, and Debussy.

I feel sick. Afraid, maybe. Innocent kids like this should be warned against delivering themselves into unfeeling hands like ours. Like mine. Until now he's managed to live in a cocoon, all snuggled warm with his girl and youth, with nothing to concern himself, except how to play dead composers' esoteric music. And yet, this absurd boy's Debussy is drawing me in...

Wait! That recapitulation should be *pianissimo*. But the kid plays a *crescendo* — louder, louder. What the hell is this child doing? I turn on him. He's clenching his teeth. Envisioning the girl? Chasing her in his thoughts? Then, the *inganno*, the deceptive cadence. I spin and look out the window, at the fountain. It's futile. She's gone. Gone.

The piece ends and the last notes scatter into silence. The boy grips his knees, the weight of his chest and shoulders pressing down onto his fists, his stare frozen on the floor between his feet. Margaret exhales and sits back in her chair, eyes closed, spent.

Nothing is said, and I think the boy won't ever raise his head again. Until, on his own, he looks up and gives us a pained half-smile. "Shall I play the Mozart now?" he pleads. Yes, I say softly,

and we somehow make it through the sonata, the Bach, and finally the Schoenberg. They're fine, I think... I don't hear them. My thoughts are overshadowed by *la fille aux cheveux de lin*.

Even before the boy leaves us I know we'll accept him.

When we're alone, Margaret and I don't speak or look at each other. The radiator groans and knocks, the heat turning off or on, whatever. Then through the open window I see the boy run out of the building. The girl is back, waiting for him. He's brought her coat and tenderly wraps it around her. And now she's hugging him, holding him close.

"Margie... quietly... come see," I whisper. Margaret opens her eyes, shining, beautiful. She glides over and looks out the window with me, her hand gently on the small of my back, her warm breath softly by my shoulder.

Outside, the boy pulls back from the girl's embrace, his voice rising. "I think those old hacks bought it," he smirks coolly. The radiator gurgles loudly, laughing at me, while the girl shakes her flaxen hair left and right, left and right, left... and... right...

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