Havsmusik

Everything is still. For a few moments, I cut a perfect arc across the angry sky as if being dragged by a cruel puppet master. I remain silent, knowing how futile it would be to reason with him. He has already determined my fate without mercy. Instead of pleading to my superior, I devote my remaining strength towards the sole target of maintaining possession of the small box I clutch. The puppet master wrenches it from my grasp; the ornate carvings graze my palm, as if taunting me. I cannot comprehend its loss.

Loss. I have lost too many things in this life. My mother left me in the wetness of spring many decades ago. The resentment I had at the depth of her betrayal was matched only by the sorrow that I couldn’t join her. ‘We don’t need her,’ my father assured me, as he placed a strong hand on my young shoulder. I wanted to run. I wanted to run out and touch my mother again before she reached the gate at the end of the garden. But the quavering desire to move was quelled by the growing weight of my father’s hand. ‘It’s the fishermen of this family that put food on this table Jorma. Her fancy piano and music boxes aren’t worth the wood they’re made of.’ Despite the overpowering desire to erupt with words and finally castigate my father for the series of poor decisions that left my existence hollow of meaning, I spoke none. It would be unwise to protest against father. I knew what repercussions any such dissent would have; and above all I knew that father always knew best. When I joined him fishing for the first time, he explained that when I was older the boat which held our weight, the *Pålitlig,* would be mine. I would be the next in generations of Henrikssons to use this trawler. ‘But what if I do not want to be a fisherman father?’ I questioned once. I never questioned that again. The *Pålitlig* was his family’s past, present and future.

The salty touch of the puppet master plunges me into the dryness of reality. My palm burns as the salt creeps insidiously into newly opened cuts. I consider remaining silent, staying brave like life has taught me, but quickly deduce that any such nobility in death is futile; there is nobody here to witness my weakness. There is only the perpetual movement of the puppet master as he exercises his control over me. Only people from the shore say that they love him and note how beautiful he is. Anyone who really knows him learns to respect him. But no one truly loves him.

Love. I truly loved mother’s music. I was introduced to music from a young age and grew increasingly devoted to it. She was the one who taught me how to express myself through rhythm. As I progressed, it became apparent that my talent matched my musical passion, perhaps even to the extent that, with time, I might be able to pursue it professionally. In my youth, mother’s piano was a forbidden necessity. My craving for the musical drug was equalled only by my father’s disapproval. In the dry autumn, after mother had left, I found only a void, where my salvation from abandonment had sat. Father lit a tuneless bonfire in the village that night, with a smug grin etched upon his stubbled face. Although father and the *Pålitlig* provided the bulk of the family income, mother added a modest contribution by teaching piano to some children from Strömsbruk, the nearby town. She also fashioned some ornate music boxes, which captivated me in my youth. Although simple contraptions that needed to be wound to hear their melody, it was mother’s skilled hand that rendered them so beautiful. Mosaics of boats and carved dolphins danced across the faces of each box. The music provided my life with clarity and purpose.

The fall, which seemed to last for eternity, ends swiftly as I escape the clutches of the air. I am forced to take a last glimpse at the deck of the *Havsmusik* above me before I become consumed by the colossal power of the beast below. Panic engulfs me as the puppet master tosses me around in his hands like a paper ball. My feeble life is in his grasp, to do with as he sees fit.

Life. My life had always been shaped by choices. There were three other fishermen on my boat; but still I felt as alone as the day my mother left me. My insecurity sensed them whispering about me behind my back. Their words polluted the complex oceans of my mind. I was but an old man with aching joints and an unkempt beard, but my dignity remained intact. On return from a painfully frequent, fruitless voyage in the Baltic, Sven asked why I had renamed my family’s boat.

‘I do not understand your choice of name; music is for the women and children,’ he grumbled ignorantly, ‘Anyway, is it not bad luck to rename a boat?’

‘It’s worse luck to keep a name you do not believe in,’ I replied sharply. Often I wondered what path my life might have taken had I not limped along this one. Always, I coveted music and cherished the power it granted me to express myself. He snatched it away, chaining me to the life I led and leaving me pledged to a symbiotic relationship with the puppet master. It was as if the two conspired to prevent me from ever reaching true happiness. I danced as the external forces of my life tightened and loosened my puppet strings.

And at last I am in the deepest reaches of the puppet master’s domain. Until this moment, I had considered the puppet master as an equal. I had always respected but never feared. My perception pivots as I plunge downwards with no control of my movements and finally, he exerts his true dominance. We worked in harmony, the puppet master and I, although I now see how everything can change in an instant. The weight of my oil skins pull me deep, with the burden of regret pulling me deeper still. Vivid muffles and composed thrashing occupy my last few moments before a haunting image seizes my attention. A small box with ornate carvings, which had been in my possession little over a few seconds ago, spirals downwards in front of my eyes. Its comforting tune muffled by the silence of the ocean. The path I could have forged, had I possessed the courage, is now clear to me. My flailing body sinks with the tranquillity and anger of the sea but my mind is clear. The truth that has evaded me all my life is at last revealed. The puppet masters have finally concluded their show with a pinch of irony.

Tragedy. Only now do I realise that the strings were in my own hands all along.

Word count:1,168