

SHORT STORY

Calliope's Laughter

by Nikola Dimitrov



"Calliope's Laughter" by Ivaylo Dombi

The first time I saw her, she was sitting at the corner of Vitosha Boulevard and Slivnitsa Street. She looked like a cast-off toy, ragged and worn, yet traces of her beauty remained visible beneath layers of neglect. Her pale skin was cracked and scarred. Long blonde hair fell in dirty braids over her shoulders, their tips resting on the ground.

I slowed my stride and reached into my pocket. Empty. I had just tossed its contents inside the case of a violin player on the subway. Stupid. I still entertained the illusion that throwing coins at street musicians would somehow make music come alive under my fingertips again. Cursing under my breath, I stopped walking altogether. I could not feign ignorance. I could not dissipate within the stream of passive city cruelty, oblivious to the suffering of the innocent. Never had I seen anything so wonderful and yet so tragic. I untangled the scarf I wore around my neck and hesitantly extended my arm towards her. An elaborate woolen shawl the color of the gloomy sky above hung from my outstretched arm. She made no move to take it. I approached her slowly, tied it around her, stroked her hair, and wiped the frost from her cheek. For a short-lived moment, as I laid eyes on her before I went, my breath solidified and lodged inside my rib cage, my heart briefly paralyzed with sorrow for a world as lovely as it is unjust.

I was on my way to meet with a film producer, who wanted me to compose the soundtrack for his next project. Apparently, nobody had yet told him that moviemaking in Bulgaria was an endeavor not worth the investment. Nevertheless, it was a creative challenge; the type of which I had not dared face in over two years. Besides, I needed the money. An artist who is no longer able to summon the inspiration to practice his art does not get paid much.

I wore a debatably white shirt, which I covered with a brown sweater and my best coat. I had my scarf wrapped around the collar to conceal its worn edges, but now that the scarf was gone my shabbiness was visible from a distance. Overall, I was going for the slightly eccentric, middle-aged musician look. I could only hope my appearance did not give off my usual down-on-his-luck, crisis-stricken, muse-lacking ex-composer vibe.

“I have a reservation under Boyanov, please,” I said as I entered the oval atrium of the New Bulgarian Hotel. Enormous murals covered the walls and ceiling, depicting a peculiar mix of biblical scenes and fabled battles, both drawn in the distinctive National Revival Style. The place looked like the illicit child of a made-in-China Sistine chapel and a highly politicized historical museum.

“This way, sir.” The thin-mustached host led me from the reception hall straight into an elaborate show of luxury and extravagance. Priceless art pieces I had only seen in textbooks hung above the heads of elegantly dressed men and women as they drank wine and savored the environment. I was unsure of whether this was a restaurant, a gallery, or a dream.

We arrived at its center, where Vladimir Dimitrov-Maystora's "Girl with Apples" hung suspended from the ceiling on invisible strings. I remembered my Arts teacher talking about that painting for hours on end. He worshiped it; called it "The Bulgarian Mona Lisa". The host gestured towards the table directly opposite the painting and vanished. There, the producer already sat, sipping whiskey, smoking a cigarette in deep drags, and looking up at the artwork through a dense fog.

"It's marvelous, isn't it?" he said without lifting his gaze off the vibrant colors. He was younger than I'd expected, early thirties at most, his meticulously combed hair and spotless suit branding him as one of the restaurant's frequent guests. He was unmistakably comfortable amidst the extravagance of the place. "I do not believe that is the right setting for it though, do you? Dimitrov's post-impressionistic phase aimed to show the bare spirituality of the post-war villager. Its presence here feels almost... blasphemous."

"It's his most famous work. It has been displayed in Paris, Brussels, Rome, even New York. Were those improper?" I said with a polite smile. I was still standing next to the table and feeling self-conscious about the frayed edges of my coat.

"I am not talking about geographical locations. If anything, this painting is more at home here, amongst the people it depicts, than with the fuckin' Americans. No, it's the context that bothers me. When have you seen a painting of such immense cultural significance hanging in a restaurant?" he asked as he took another long drag of his cigarette.

"I have been thinking the same thing." I'd also thought the painting hardly depicted the people sitting in this restaurant, but I kept that to myself. Boyanov raised his hand and caught the eye of a waiter.

"What's your poison?" he inquired welcomingly as I finally took my coat off and sat opposite him. I ordered a whiskey as well and we discussed business for a while. The project he was working on was about an orphaned girl from a small Bulgarian village, who travels to Sardinia in search of a famous painter, whom she believes to be her father. Boyanov wanted the music to reflect the rich Italian tradition while keeping the authenticity of Bulgarian orchestral music. He wanted a unification of the two music schools, a symbiotic merger of irregular Bulgarian rhythms and Italian String Quartets.

"Can you have it ready by next Friday?"

No easy task, especially for somebody who hadn't written a single piece of music in two years. I nodded, hoping to convey silent determination. The thought of that deadline terrified me, and I knew a quivering voice would betray my lack of confidence.

“You know, as we were working on the screenplay,” Boyanov began, his eyes fixed intently on mine, “one of my writers wanted to include a scene at the end of the movie, in which the father — after being reunited with his estranged daughter — suddenly finds his creative spark reignited. The movie, my employee insisted, should end with him sitting on the small porch of his house, with the sun setting over the Mediterranean Sea, as he paints a portrait of her. You know why I dismissed his idea?”

“No,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

Boyanov leaned over the table and came uncomfortably close to me. I could smell the whiskey on his breath. He looked straight into my eyes and said quietly, “Because inspiration comes from within.” He leaned back and resumed in his normal tone. “I ask you once again. Will you have my music ready by Friday next?”

“Yes.” I could hardly recognize my own voice. I sounded like a child being scolded. Worse yet, I had just made a promise I could not keep. Boyanov lit another cigarette, looking satisfied.

He kept ordering and we kept drinking as the conversation regressed into politics and the personal affairs of pop stars. I could not believe we were sitting amidst a large chunk of the cultural heritage of our entire nation, yet all his mind seemed occupied with was some bizarre accident involving a famous singer and a mafia boss. I was hardly listening.

My eyes kept straying to “Girl with Apples”. The portrait was in a deplorable state. A yellowish tint of nicotine slowly penetrated parts of the canvas intended as white. The paint was beginning to crack, leaving deep crevices on her cheeks. Dimitrov’s painting carried numerous traces of mistreatment. It reminded me of something, of someone... I was suddenly overcome with the urge to steal the portrait and make a run for it. How far could I go? The atrium? Then what?

Her vague familiarity heightened as I took another drink. I looked closer and saw my silent sidewalk girl on the canvas. Both the “Girl with Apples” and the “Girl on the Sidewalk” had eyes that carried a look of helpless resignation to the injustice of their misfortune. How long had that painting hung here, I wondered. How much time had she spent on that street? I looked back at Boyanov, hot anger building up inside me as I saw him clearly for the first time that night. What did he know about spirituality? About passion and inspiration? About music and art? About anything, really.

The night was finally drawing to a close.

I parted ways with Boyanov in the lobby and with my head spinning lightly, I took an unsteady step outside. The tiniest snowflakes had begun flying through the smoke-filled

street. My feet carried me hastily of their own accord. I had to find my sidewalk girl. I could do nothing about the portrait, but her I could protect. I needed to shield her from the cold, had to preserve something pure and unspoiled in a world which had turned its back on beauty, a world which stubbornly refused me the act of creation, a world which took priceless paintings and let them fade to yellow like old photographs.

She was leaning in the same spot I had left her, covered by a thin coat of snow. Underneath my scarf, which was wrapped around her, she was dressed in a light summer dress with a flower pattern. What I'd once imagined to be a pleasant mixture of red, green, and yellow, the dress was now mostly grey, and her skin, white as porcelain, showed from ripped patches. She was barefoot, and I could almost see her shivering. She sat like an ice sculpture, letting herself be engulfed by the tiny flakes of snow. I extended the same hand with which I had given her the scarf earlier and picked her up from the pavement. She was light as feather and cold, so I carried her straight back to the hotel.

The host of the restaurant approached me again as I entered the atrium.

"We are with Boyanov," I told thin-moustache aiming for an air of arrogant impatience, hoping the name would carry the weight of my improvisation. She was still in my arms, passive, immobile, gaping at the murals. His eyes darted from her ragged appearance to me, then back again.

"She is an actress," I blurted out quickly. A shadow of irritation clouded his face, but he quickly replaced it with a forced smile.

"Of course. Let us not keep Mr. Boyanov waiting. Have a lovely evening." He hurried off.

"Let me show you to our table," I said smugly and shifted her under my arm. I led the way slowly back towards the table I had vacated. She did not utter a single word, but I sensed her yearning whenever we passed a painting, so we took our time, stopping to look at each.

Now that I saw her in the dim light of the restaurant, I was struck by her delicate features, the tiny nose, and full lips, the way the frost still lingered on her cheeks and eyelashes. Entranced by the cold touch of her porcelain skin against mine, I remained quiet and led her tenderly through the dining hall. Between the tables of women in expensive dresses and heavy necklaces, with painted faces and hollow stares, she looked like an apparition. Ethereal and dreamlike, we glided from one artwork to another, feasting our eyes upon them, tracing the lines of the brushstrokes, living inside each painting for a brief eternity. The girl, just like the artworks, did not belong here amongst the puffs of smoke and unappreciative glares.

We came to “Girl with Apples”. As I gazed at it once again, I wondered what it must have been like for Dimitrov — coming home after the war to find his people worn thin, hunger-stricken, desperate. What tremendous power of will must it have cost him to hold the brush again, to attempt to reassemble the pieces of a shattered identity. To produce his greatest masterpiece. The ferocity of his strokes was tangible in such close proximity to the canvas, the dedication to his craft captivating. The cracks in the paint even more discernible. The resemblance between the two girls uncanny. My head started spinning again.

“Lovely.” Her voice seemed to pull me back to reality. It was quiet, hypnotic and possessed the same dreamlike quality as her movements.

“What’s your name?”

“Calliope.”

“Would you like to have dinner with me, Calliope?”

She shook her head almost imperceptibly and without lifting her eyes off the painting she said, “Not here.”

I led the way out of the restaurant and through the lobby, where I wrapped my coat around her, adding more layers to protect her from the cold. That should do it, I said to myself, then paused before we went out the door. I couldn’t let her walk the streets of Sofia barefoot, not while it was snowing. I quickly went to the reception and asked them to phone for a cab.

“Calliope, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but... do you have a place to stay tonight?”

She was expressionless, silent. Expectant. People were crowding the atrium, dragging suitcases behind them, shuffling to and fro. Their loud, meaningless voices rose in a chorus and deafened me. The spinning in my head increased.

“You can stay with me...Please, stay with me.” My words and their pleading tone took me by surprise. Now the spinning came to a point where my surroundings became blurred. I tried to hide, to escape but I couldn’t move.

She spoke, and the world came into focus again.

“Yes,” she said simply, warmth spreading through my body. The cab was waiting outside. I lifted her in my arms. She was so small, paler and more pristine than the falling snow. I placed her gently in the back seat, closed the door and circled around to take a seat next to her.

I lived in a studio apartment on the 23rd floor of an old communist flat on the outskirts of the city. By the time we plowed through the lazy traffic of the city center, she was already

sleeping soundly. Her body seemed to emanate no warmth as we navigated the narrow streets of downtown Sofia and I was worried she might still be cold, despite my efforts. I asked the cab driver to crank up the heating. We took a sharp turn at an intersection and her head shifted to my shoulder. I sat motionless as if a butterfly had landed on me, fearing it would take flight if I moved. As soon as we arrived, I grabbed the last banknotes left in my wallet, handed them to the driver without counting, and went to open the door for her. She was still sound asleep, so I carried her out and up the stairs.

It was approaching midnight when we entered my apartment. I had not expected guests, I never did, so music sheets containing the works of generations of Italian composers were spread across every available surface: the coffee table, the couch, the piano, even the kitchen counter was buried under stacks and stacks of notes. The script of the movie lay forgotten somewhere beneath them.

I lifted a stack of papers off the couch and gestured towards it. "Make yourself at home. Would you like some tea? I'm sorry about the mess," I said uncomfortably. "How about some dinner? I think I have..." I glanced back to see her still lingering at the door, exactly where I had left her.

She didn't make a move. Her eyes stubbornly refused to stray away from the piano.

"Do you want me to play for you?" I said, already knowing the answer. My fingers longed for the touch of my instrument.

Her silhouette was outlined by the moonlight streaking through the door frame. "Girl with Stars," I thought vaguely and gave her a half-smile. Spellbound, I sat with my back to her, facing the keys. The piece sitting on the music desk was Domenico Scarlatti's Sonata in F-minor. I took a breath and laid my fingers on the piano.

As soon as I began, I knew. The notes rang hollow and insincere. The sound was stale, almost rotten on my ears. I stopped halfway through bar 16 and bowed my head in resignation.

"It's been like that for years now," I said, longing for the time when music had come to me effortlessly.

"Try something new," came her voice from behind me. Or from within me. I could not be sure of anything at this point. Perhaps there was no girl at all. The more I try to recall that night, the more slippery my memory becomes. I do not remember opening the window, but I recall the moment when a sudden gust of wind came through it and sent music sheets flying in all directions. Like heavy, rectangular snowflakes the paper danced clumsily around us. She laughed with a sound sweeter than anything my fingers could ever create. I concentrated

on it and gently stroked the keys again.

A G-sharp, followed by an F-minor, then a gentle D-sharp major, melting into minor. I broke it down in arpeggios, let the progression sink in and started an impromptu melodic phrase. It began simply, then changed. The music started flowing through me, became at first a stream, then a river, then a waterfall of notes. The composition gathered strength, built momentum, then subsided. It crashed into me like waves. I syncopated the notes and they rang with a newfound intensity. I was hardly aware of my hands on the keys, the music simply poured out of me. My mind was a fury of images. “Girl with Apples”. “Girl on Sidewalk”. “Puffs of Smoke”. “Her Head on my Shoulder”.

I went into a minor progression. I transposed into a lower key, capturing the icy pinch of snowflakes on her skin. I was slowly building a crescendo. A world, cold and unfair. A castaway. Tarnished beauty.

The music no longer emanated from me; It took on a life of its own. I hit a dissonant note. Then another. The music became eerie. It transitioned to fortissimo, my head spinning wildly again, the urge to burn, to shatter, to tear, seeped into the melody. I wanted to devour, to rupture, to mutilate the people who walked past her. Those blind to the wonders of creation, deaf to the harmony of existence. I was pounding at the keys like a madman, each note ringing true and furious. My sorrow erupted out of me as I reached the climax. Breathing heavily, I tamed the melody. I let its bare skeleton ring out into the darkness. Silence fell again.

The ragged doll I had found on the sidewalk, with her porcelain skin and golden hair sat in the door frame, her outline graceful and haunting, wind and moonlight stroking her faded dress.