

The Metronome

This patient was late sixties, English, a widow. Liked chatting, the nurse had warned him. He took the stethoscope from around his neck as he answered her question.

‘I came to New Zealand with my mother in 1948.’

‘Oh, after the war, then?’ She stressed the ‘after’.

The day as a locum, standing in for young William, had been exhausting. A chat about the War he didn’t need. The lady continued.

‘It’s strange that my father probably fought your father in the War.’

The heartbeat was regular. Tick-tock, like a metronome; the war, the metronome, his piano teacher, the day his father left.

‘Bach needs to be played in a very regular rhythm, Johann. Here, I will set the metronome. Now concentrate.’

Johann’s seven year old heart was not with Bach. It was with his father.

Just before he left home for his piano lesson with the neighbour, his father had held him to his chest. He rarely did that.

‘If I go away, look after your mother.’

What did he mean? The War was over, his father was a policeman now. Why would he go away? Johann was not allowed to mention the war, or the Fuhrer, or ask his father what he did as Kommandant. No more marching or even praising the Reich as he had been taught at school. Germany had lost the war. The Fuhrer, everyone’s hero, was dead, but no one was meant to be sorry. Johann could not understand. In secret he and his friends would still march, salute and pretend they were soldiers.

It was only when American jeeps starting driving round the village that he began to realise. Their soldiers looked so pleased. They handed out ‘candy bars’ and spoke loudly.

At least Johann had his father home, except now his father was going away again.

‘Concentrate, Johann. Play the music.’

Tick-tock.

As Johann began to play the music to the strict ticking, he heard a jeep stop in the street outside. The music teacher casually walked to the window, and looked out towards Johann's house next door.

'Start the Minuet again, please Johann, and watch the timing after the first few bars.' His music teacher seemed distracted. From outside Johann heard shouts and doors slamming.

Johann began the Minuet again. He liked the trill but knew he was meant to concentrate on the timing.

'We will stop there.' The teacher held his shoulders between his hands. The metronome ticked on.

'You probably need to go back to your mother now. I think you will find your father has left home, and your mother will need you. I know it wasn't your father's fault. I am sorry.'

Now his patient was looking at him quizzically. Her heartbeat remained steady. He removed the stethoscope

'Your heart is fine. I doubt my father would have fought yours. He spent most of the war working in Poland.' He never ever mentioned where. As a child he remembered being so proud of his father.

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