

Rita König

Almost a Whole Life

Chapter 9: The Concert

The first thing to capture Paul's attention was a very attractive blonde violinist. She was sitting precisely in his line of vision. Paul caught himself gazing at the young woman's subtly drawn face when Birgit sighed gently. During the break, he got himself a beer and a glass of wine for Birgit. She was talking to a woman he recognized but didn't know, and he stood beside them silently.

For the last piece, a woman sat down at the cello and a young man positioned himself next to her with a violin. As soon as he began to play, he swayed along with his instrument as though wooing the woman. Paul felt transported into a film. It wasn't two musicians playing out there, the piano and above all the whole orchestra behind them; it was him and Birgit. He didn't know why – he couldn't even play the recorder, let alone such a complicated instrument with several strings – but he couldn't stop the film from running. Every note, every motion added another metre to the material. Birgit (or was it the woman on the cello?) was the one setting the tone, even though the high, bright sounds of the violin ought to have dominated. But no, it was the cello leading here, sounding like a challenge, and Paul (or the violinist?) didn't hesitate to accept it, stroking the bow as though his life depended on it.

When the middle section began and the orchestra's string section played a quiet melody, Paul sank down exhausted in his seat. His thighs trembled. He looked only briefly at Birgit, whose eyes were closed, her face beset by a peace he could not find for himself and feared he might never find again. He was sweating but he didn't dare to shift in his seat, for fear it might squeal or creak. He was trying to stretch his legs a little underneath the seat in front when the playing began anew. He vaguely remembered his music lessons; there were always three movements and the third one brings out the bells and whistles again – but that didn't happen on this stage. Once again, it was a kind of Spartacist comparison of strengths. The pianist seemed like a child trying to play along, repeating the theme, yes, that was what it was called, he remembered now, but what was going on down there concerned only him, him and Birgit,

and still nothing was decided, or was that just what he hoped? Again, the cello was far more prominent than the small violin, again the large instrument set out what the smaller was to play, although the small woman was sitting at the cello and the young man was standing by her side with the violin, looking at her, yearning, or was Paul imagining that? Now, yes! The violin surged forward, determining at last, and he straightened up a little, and yet the cello pushed to the fore, both fiddling as though at the final stage of a cross-country race, but I can't run, Paul thought, and then he had lost (or was it the violin?) and man practically ducked while the young woman smiled, assured of her victory. Other players distracted Paul for a moment by plucking their strings, but then the cello leapt in and together they swept everything that had come before off the stage and out of Paul, leaving him paralyzed after the final chord, only capable of clapping when Birgit nudged him. A perfect mirror, no, a distorting fairground mirror; he didn't play an instrument and neither did Birgit. He didn't want to go anywhere now, no, not a glass of wine somewhere, he wanted to go home, only home. Paul shivered, despite the mild late-summer evening. The moment they got home, he pulled Birgit into bed and took her. He had never done that before and she was too surprised to react; he came quickly, too quickly, and he remembered no more than that.

Birgit lay awake for a long time. They hadn't made love so hard for ages, nor so quickly either, but she felt good listening to Paul's snores. She didn't get up until a few minutes later to check on Markus, who was curled up in bed, snoring as well, only an octave higher than Paul. She had noticed Paul staring at the blonde violinist but he had reacted instantly to her quiet sigh and turned back to her. Yes, Paul was a good husband; she didn't need her mother's approval to know that. He gave her enough space, he still did everything for her. It was just a shame he didn't understand her at all, not any more; or perhaps he never had, she didn't know herself. ...