

The Piano Man

The day Sacco and Vanzetti got the electric chair, I found out my mother was a fraud. It was the summer of 1927, a time of Bolsheviks, labor strikes and bombs, and radicals in a frenzy over unfair trials. I made my way to an address scribbled on a scrap of paper. A boat horn blew an eerie note from the harbor. Aside from the click-clack of my footsteps, the streets were hushed and still as a hurricane's eye. I located the townhouse and ascended the stoop, humming a Bach *cantata*, entirely innocent of the bombshell that was about to drop.

Still humming, I lifted the knocker and rapped. No response. *Was Marie not expecting me?* Marie had been recommended by my professor at Boston University. Her piano instruction was acclaimed in Paris. I glanced at the address and rapped again on the door. I paced. The wait seemed endless. My fingers fidgeted with a button on my shirt, then reached out and drummed the railing. The *cantata* in my head faded and even the harbor grew quiet. The clicking of a lock brought me to sudden attention. The door flew open. I had expected a frail, elderly matron.

"My Conrad," the young woman in the doorway exclaimed as I got a glimpse of girlish ivory cheeks and too-red lips. "So sorry for you to wait." Her French accent was as lush as her perfume. She turned and motioned me inside and to the parlor. I followed behind, watching her flapper skirt sway and her black bob give little bounces. She led me to the Steinway and patted the piano bench, an invitation to sit. Then she sat on the bench beside me, scooted close and peered into my eyes.

"I am Marie." I could tell from the lines on her face that she was a tad older than I, thirty perhaps. A bit taller too. And beautiful, in an odd, painted sort of way. "So nice meeting you," she said. I sat awkwardly, my hands seeking pockets. "The professor told me much about you." She reached to my face and tossed aside that wavy tuft of dark brown hair from above my right eye. "Yes, you do have that 'Beethoven tuft,' just as the professor said to me. With your pressed trousers and buttoned up shirt, I see your hair is the one... how do you say... the one unkempt part of you." I leaned back and gave her a nod. "Okay, play for me something," she instructed. "What have you brought?"

"Wagner." I placed a Wagner book on the music rack and opened it to the opera *Tannhäuser*.

Marie sighed, as if encountering a new thought. "The professor, he brags for you. And you, so handsome. He did not tell me that." My fingers hovered over the keys, waiting to begin. "And such dark eyes. Of course, dark. Like theirs."

"Dark?" I asked, perplexed. "Like theirs?"

"Oh, Conrad. You know." Marie laughed, then dropped her head in her hands and let out a soft moan. When she looked up, her blue eyes were moist. She dabbed at them with a handkerchief. "The Italians."

I began to wonder if Marie was a bit daft. "Perhaps I should come back... tomorrow... when you're feeling better." I stood up and closed the Wagner book.

"No, no. You must stay. I so need a friend today." Marie grasped my arm and pulled me back down to the bench.

"So sad, no?" she continued, her eyelashes fluttering. "About *Monsieur* Nicola Sacco, and his dear friend, Bartolomeo Vanzetti? Such an end for those fine Italian fellows." She shook her bob. "And you, certainly, should care."

I should care? I shifted on the piano bench and stared at her, her fingers still gripping my arm.

“After seven long years,” Marie went on, “of trials, and more trials. And then refusing food—they rather to starve than be killed by the false evidence.” Her tears began to dribble anew. “They did not rob that bank. They did not shoot those men. I know this.” She sucked in a sob. “They were... how do you Americans say... framed.” She snorted and sniffed. “False evidence. They were... *goats*... how do you say... *escape goats*.”

It occurred to me that Marie spoke of politics as if she were wearing trousers. True, the ladies could vote now. Her views, of course, were soft and unschooled. I let her go on, though the talk was unbecoming.

“And Nicola Sacco’s dear wife, Rosina,” she continued, “with those two darling children.” Marie took my hand and cupped it in her palms as if to console me. My hand felt stiff as hard wood; however, I let it remain. Her skin was surprisingly tender, smooth. She opened my thin fingers and gave each a gentle stretch. The sensation was not... disagreeable.

At university, I had come to tolerate foreigners. College life does that. One had to admit the superiority of the German composers. And the French, though tied to the Pope, were at least clean. Like Marie.

She reached for the handkerchief and dabbed at her nose, her face as painted as a cathedral. My Grandfather Markham used to rail against the Catholics—he was descended from pure English stock—a nearly straight line from 1630, the first Puritans in Salem. Had he been alive, he would have been appalled at my free thinking. However, even I, with my modern views, was horrified at the rabble pouring in off the docks from places like Sicily, Slovakia, and God knows where.

“To honor those poor dead men,” she went on, “why don’t you play a Scarlatti sonata, my dear.” My face flushed at the word *dear*. It sounded so superior. I retrieved my wooden hand from her grasp and flipped the Wagner sheets back to the prelude. My fingers began to move over the keys. She listened a moment, till my hands muddled two notes in an intricate measure. Then she leaned toward me.

“Conrad, did you know,” she lowered her voice as if to share a bit of gossip, “that Sacco’s father asked to Mussolini—*Il Duce*—to save his son’s life?” I closed the Wagner book, crossed my arms and let out a sigh.

“Why should Mussolini care about a couple of anarchists?”

“Well, perhaps because they were innocent.” Marie’s red lips pursed together in a pout. My arms crossed again more tightly. “You immigrants certainly stick together.”

Marie gasped. “We immigra—?”

“Yes,” I declared, standing up from the bench. “All those immigrants mobbing the newsstands last night, way past midnight. I supposed you joined in.”

“No, I did not,” she declared, her arms akimbo.

“*The Boston Globe* reported it all—the fainting, the weeping, the rending of garments.” I yanked at my shirt in mocking imitation. “Even the Jews came out. For Christ’s sake, for a couple of Italian anarchists?”

Marie frowned. “Well, some of these, as you say, *anarchists*, are not like you think. Some only are joining to the unions to make better—”

“Unionists, Wobblies, whatever. If they come here to throw bombs, they get the chair. I’m sure Mussolini would do the same.” I sat down again, hard. “Now, let the lesson begin.” I jerked open the Wagner book and began to beat the notes to the *Tannhäuser* prelude.

After the fourth measure, Marie turned and looked at me with those innocent blue eyes. And that’s when she dropped the news like a bomber from the Great War.