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Américo Paredes

OVER THE WAVES IS OUT

HE HAD always wanted to be a musician, but his father would not let him, because his father had once known the man who composed "Over the Waves." They had gone to school together in Monterrey, to a real gentleman's school. And then the man who composed "Over the Waves" succumbed to drink and women, which led him to a tragic end.

His father knew about the evils of drink and women, having investigated them in his youth. It was dangerous, besides being unnecessary, for the boy to do any exploring of his own. Besides, he was a delicate boy. That girl face of his wouldn't go well in a brothel. And that was the place for musicians, his father said.

But the boy did not want to play in a brothel. He would often lie on the grass of afternoons and dream he was a minstrel in the court of El Cid Campeador. Except that instead of a harp he played a piano, a shiny three-legged piano with a tail. But his father never could understand, because he had once known the man who composed "Over the Waves."

And there was another thing. In his youth, before he lost a finger somewhere, the boy's father had liked the guitar. Once, as he told it himself, he was playing at a funeral. His father, the boy's grandfather, happened by and broke the guitar on his head. The boy's father never played again. He ran away to Tampico, and when he came back he had learned to play cards. It was then that the grandfather stopped speaking to him.

It made it hard on the boy, because he wanted to be a musician. He would sidle up to his father whenever he found him seated close to a window on his days off, reading *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* or *God, Grand Architect of the Universe*. His father would sit there reading in his shirt sleeves, the cowboy

hat and the heavy pistol in the cartridge belt lying on a table beside him, the linen coat hanging on the back of a chair.

"Papa," the boy would say, "why don't you buy a piano?"

His father would jab a thick, freckled forefinger at the page to mark his last word and look at him over his glasses. "Eh? A piano? You've got a phonograph."

"But I just got to have a piano."

"That again." His father would shake his head. "So many things in the world, and you want to be a musician. Why not a carpenter? Or a mason? Or a merchant? Or a barber even; there's a clean, gentlemanly profession for you."

"No," the boy would say firmly, "I want to be a musician."

"Look," his father would say, "what does a musician make?"

"But I'm going to write music."

"Merciful God! Have you ever heard of the man who composed 'Over the Waves'?"

"Yes," the boy would say. "Many times."

So his father would steer the conversation into the technical aspects of music, the different instruments like the clavichord, the clarinet, the drums, and the trumpet. Then he would talk about bugle calls and drift into a story of the Revolution. Soon the boy was listening to a colorful account of how his father and Villa took Chihuahua City.

And suddenly his father would say severely, "Now run along and play. I'm busy."

And the boy would go. He was outsterted every time.

All he could do was dream; so he dreamed of the piano. At night, in his little recess of a room with its one window framing a patch of sky, he would lie awake in the dark, imagining he was a pianist with wild hair and evening clothes, and that he was playing the piano, playing, playing.

And one night it happened. Softly, so softly he could barely hear it, there came a sound of piano music. He sat up in bed. The house and the street were silent, still the piano sounds ran faintly

on. The music was coming from inside him! He lay back, breathless, and closed his eyes. His hands ran over an imaginary keyboard. Now he could distinguish the tripping runs, the trills, and the beautiful, anxious chords.

He wanted to shout, to sob; he didn't know which. But he did neither. He just lay quiet, very quiet. Something inside him grew and grew. He was lifted up in a sea of piano music which continued to pour out of him, churning and eddying about him in glowing spirals, slowly burying him in a glittering shower until he fell asleep.

Next morning he awoke with a feeling that the day was a holiday. Then he remembered and he smiled secretly. He tried to put away the memory in a corner of his mind, tuck it away where no one else might get at it. But as he dressed he kept trying to remember the music. It was there, in some cranny of his mind, where he could just barely touch it. It seemed that if he tried hard enough, reached down far enough, he could grasp it, a whole handful of it, and bring it shimmering into the light. But when he tried to do so it would slip away, just out of reach. He went in to breakfast, full of his rich warm secret.

"I'm talking to you," his father said.

"Wha—yessir?" he said.

"No humming at the table."

"Humming, sir?"

"It's bad manners. Eat your breakfast."

He looked down at his plate again and gulped down a few more mouthfuls.

"What if he did hum a little?" his mother said. "You've made him miserable now."

"He will not hum at my table," his father said.

"Your table," his mother said.

"My table," his father said.

"Fine table," his mother said.

"Agh!" his father said.

"I think you like to see him look miserable," his mother said.

"He looks miserable all the time," said his sister.

"You hush," his mother said. "Keep your spoon in your own porridge."

He kept his eyes on his plate. The food he had already eaten lay cold and heavy on his stomach. As soon as he could he excused himself and left the table. He went out, dragging his feet. In the yard he hesitated, looking about him dismally. Then he smiled. He hummed tentatively and smiled again.

Night came at last, and he lay in bed waiting for the house to be dark and still so the music would come again. And finally it came, faintly at first, then more distinctly, though never loud, splashing and whirling about, twisting in intricate eddies of chords and bright waterfalls of melody, or falling in separate notes into the night like drops of quicksilver, rolling, glimmering.

His father left early the next morning, and he, his mother and his sister ate breakfast together. In his father's absence, he could not keep the question to himself any longer.

"Did you hear music last night?" he asked.

"No," his mother said. "Where?"

"A serenade?" his sister asked. "Someone with a serenade?"

He frowned. "Not that kind of music."

"When?" his mother asked.

"Last night."

"I was awake long after you went to bed," his mother said. "There was no music."

He smiled. He looked at his mother and smiled.

"Don't you feel well?" his mother said.

"You didn't hear it at all," he said.

"What was it like?" his mother asked.

He got up from the table, the secret look on his face. "It was heavenly," he said.

"Child!" said his mother.

"He's in love," his sister said.

He included his sister in his rapt smile and walked slowly out.

"Heaven?" his mother said, crossing herself.

His father called him into the living room. The boy came in and stood before his father. His father closed his book and put it down, took off his spectacles and put them in their case.

Then he said, "Your mother asked me to speak to you."

The boy looked at him.

"You're playing a sort of game with yourself every night, I hear," his father said. "You make believe you hear music."

The boy's face brightened. "I do," he said eagerly. "I do hear it."

His father looked at him sharply. "Don't lie to me now," he said.

The boy looked at his father, sitting in judgment in his soggy shirt and day-old beard, with his memories of Pancho Villa and the man who had composed "Over the Waves." And he knew he could never make him understand about the music, how it came from inside him, how beautiful it was, and how it made everything else beautiful.

"A game is a game," his father said.

The boy looked at the floor.

"Your mother's worried something may happen to you."

"Nothing's going to happen," the boy said.

"Not unless you keep worrying your mother," his father said.

"I won't talk about it anymore," the boy said. "Never."

"You go talk to her. Tell her you really don't hear anything."

"But I do hear!" the boy said.

His father gave him a hostile, suspicious look. "Don't lie!" he said.

"I'm not lying."

"You're lying this very minute!"

The boy directed his angry gaze at his own feet.

"You really don't hear anything," his father said, his voice becoming persuasive. "You just play at hearing it, don't you?"

The boy did not answer.

There was a short silence, and then his father said, "What does it sound like?"

The boy looked up quickly. His father was watching him intently, almost eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know," the boy said. "I couldn't tell just how it sounds."

"I once thought I heard music in my head," his father said. "I was in bed in Monterrey when I heard this piano. But it was only a friend out with music. He had a piano in a cart, so we went out and serenaded the girls. And then the mule bolted and—"

He stopped and looked at the boy.

"I told you I had a musician friend," he added.

"Yes," the boy said.

His father became dignified again.

"You mustn't do things like that," he said. "Think of your mother."

The boy hung his head. His father drummed his fingers on the table beside him.

"I'll talk to her myself," his father said. "I'll tell her the truth, and that you're sorry."

The boy was silent.

"Well, go out and play," his father said.

He was lying in bed, looking out his window at the sky, and listening to the music. He was hovering between sleep and wakefulness, floating about on the beautiful sounds, when all of a sudden he was wide-awake. There had been a dull, thudding noise, as though a distant door had been slammed shut.

He sat up in bed. There was a hubbub of voices in the street. He jumped into his overalls and ran out; people were running

towards a light. He ran towards the light too, and caught up with his father, who was hurrying along, buckling on his cartridge belt about his shirtless middle, beneath his flapping coat.

"At the bakery!" his father said to a man leaning out of a window. "Trouble for sure!"

There was anything but trouble in his voice; it was brisk and eager, strangely unlike his father's voice. The boy stayed just behind him, somewhat awed.

It was a bakery where the bakers worked all night making the next day's bread. As his father reached the place, a police car came squealing to a halt in the street.

An excited man in apron and cap shouted above the din, "He ran down the alley there! He's got a shotgun!"

A couple of deputies ran into the dark mouth of the alley, their cowboy boots clomping awkwardly on the pebbles, their pistols drawn. His father started to run after them, but then he saw the sheriff stepping out of the car and he stopped.

The sheriff smiled at his father.

"Stick around, de la Garza," the sheriff said.

The boy's father had his gun in his hand.

"Let me go too, sheriff," he said.

"No, de la Garza," the sheriff said. "I'll need you here."

The boy's father put his gun away very slowly. Then he said to the nearest man in the crowd, "All right, you! Move on!"

He pushed the crowd back.

"Go home to bed!" he said. "Move on! Move on!"

The crowd shifted, parted, and the boy, who had stayed beside his father, almost underfoot, could now look inside into the long shelves of unbaked dough and the glowing ovens. He came closer, trying to see the terrible thing he knew must be inside.

Close to the door he became aware of the piano music. It was bouncing within the bakery's thick walls in a roar of echoes, escaping into the street only as a deep mutter which blended with the mutter of the crowd.

The sheriff walked inside and yelled, "Shut that damned thing off!"

One of the bakers answered in a high, complaining voice.

"We can't," he said. "He shot off the whole face of it."

"Well, pull the string off the wall," the sheriff shouted.

The music was cut off abruptly.

The crowd had now retired a respectful distance, and the boy's father followed the sheriff inside. The boy edged closer to the door. He could see it now, a small brown box. It was pitted and broken by the shotgun blast.

"We was here, minding our own business," a big fat baker was saying, "when he walks in, and bang!"

"Maybe he thought there was a man inside," the sheriff said.

The other two deputies came crunching in as the sheriff spoke.

"Is there?" one of them asked.

"Don't be a cow, Davila," the sheriff said. "How could he make himself that small?"

"It cost me a lot of money," the fat baker said, "and I want to see him pay for it."

"Where is he?" the sheriff said.

"He got away, sheriff," said Davila.

The boy's father opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again.

"That's fine," the fat baker said. "That's just fine! A fine bunch of policemen!"

"Let's not get excited," the sheriff said. "You seem to be an excitable man. What were you two fighting about?"

"Fighting?" the baker said.

"Why did he shoot your place up?"

"How would I know?" the baker said. "Ungrateful dog!"

"He used to come here," a younger baker said. "He'd have coffee with us, and we'd always give him bread to take home."

"He'd play his accordion for us and we'd feed him," a third baker said. "And now this."

"So out of a blue sky he shoots your place up," the sheriff said. "I ought to take all of you in for questioning."

The fat baker pursed his lips angrily, but he did not say anything.

The sheriff yawned. "But I think I'll forget it this time," he said. He yawned again. "Let's go," he said. He smiled. "He's across the river by now."

At the door the sheriff stopped and looked at the boy.

"Yours, de la Garza?" he asked.

The boy's father nodded.

"Fine young man," the sheriff said, and yawned.

"I guess so," his father answered, "except for him thinking he's got a piano inside his head."

"A what?" the sheriff said, almost waking up completely.

"A piano," the father said. His face glowed with revelation, and he turned to his son. "The music!" he said. "That radio thing. That's your music!"

"It isn't!" the boy said. "My music never came out of a box!"

"Now, now," his father said. "You know it did."

"Stop saying that!" the boy cried. "I'll—I'll run away if you don't stop!"

His father took his arm and shook it playfully.

"Temper," his father said, in high spirits. "Temper."

"It's all your fault," the boy said, shaking loose. "It's all your fault if I never hear it again."

"Best thing that could happen to you," his father said.

"But I don't want to stop hearing it," the boy said. "And now you've made it happen. It won't come back again, I know."

"Let's go home," his father said. "Your mother will be worried."

"Wait a while," said the sheriff. He looked thoughtful. "I see," he said, with the air of one who discovers a vital clue. "He thinks he hears music, is that it?"

"That's about it, sheriff," his father said.

"Why don't you get him a piano?"

"Well, I don't see how I—ha-ha, you're joking, sheriff," his father said.

"Tell you what," the sheriff said. "I'll see he gets a piano. We've got one at home, and the kids just play the damn—well, I think I should get them something different. One of them radios, for instance."

His father looked as if he had suddenly swallowed something unpleasant."

"Sheriff," he said, "we just couldn't impose on you like that."

"No trouble at all," the sheriff said. "Fact is. Well, I think I should get the kids something else. It's one of them player pianos, you know. You pump it with your feet and the music comes out."

When the sheriff said it was a player piano, the boy's father lost some of his sickish look. But he said nevertheless, "I just couldn't allow it, sheriff. It's just a silly idea of his."

"Stop being polite with me, de la Garza," the sheriff said. "I'll have that piano at your house tomorrow, and you'd better not refuse it."

"But sheriff," his father said.

"Let's ask the boy," the sheriff said. "Do you want the piano, sonny?"

"Does it play 'Over the Waves'?" the boy asked.

"No," the sheriff said.

"I'll take it," the boy said.

His father pursed his lips and sighed.

"Where's your breeding?" he said. "Say thank you, at least."

After the sheriff left, they went down the dark street, leaving the lights behind them. His father took out his gun as he walked, cocked it and uncocked it, sighted along the barrel, twirled it around and put it back in its holster.

"That Davila," he said. "He couldn't catch the scabies." He laughed. "If the sheriff had let me go, I would have caught the man. I remember once when I was young I ran down a Carrancista officer. We both lost our horses—"

"It was a Federalist officer," the boy said.

"Was it?" his father said.

"It was the last time," the boy said.

"Ah well," his father said. "Maybe it was, at that. It's hard to remember at times, it's been so long ago. So long, long ago."

He sighed, and for a few moments they walked together in silence.

After a while the boy said, "Papa, will you give me a dollar?"

"A dollar?" his father said. "What for?"

"To buy a book."

"A book? A whole dollar for a book?"

"A piano book. Now that we'll have a piano I think I should practice."

His father made a strange noise in the dark.

They walked a few paces in silence.

Then his father said, "You don't have to practice with that kind of piano. You just pump the pedals. Fact is—" His voice brightened. "Fact is, I think I'll try it myself."

The boy jerked his head toward him.

His father smote one hand against the other.

"By God!" he said. "You know what?"

"What," the boy said.

"I'll get me 'Over the Waves' in one of those rolls!"

The boy stopped in his tracks.

His father did not notice. He kept right on walking, saying, "I'll get it tomorrow. By God, I will!"

The boy watched his father disappear into the night. He felt very sad and very old and very much alone. Somewhere in the dark, ahead of him, his father was whistling in a very ornate tremolo,

"In the

Immensity

Of the waves, of the waves of the sea. . ."