

# A Small Price to Pay for Birdsong



**My** sixteenth concerto,” he said, smiling at me. I could just about see him. “In the circumstances, I was thinking of calling it the Unfinished.”

Well, of course. I’d never been in a condemned cell before. It was more or less what I’d imagined it would be like. There was a stone bench under the tiny window. Other than that, it was empty, as free of human artefacts as a stretch of open moorland. After all, what things does a man need if he’s going to die in six hours?

I was having difficulty with the words. “You haven’t—”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m two-thirds of the way through the third movement, so under normal circumstances I’d hope to get that done by—well, you know. But they won’t let me have a candle, and I can’t write in the dark.” He breathed out slowly. He was savouring the taste of air, like an expert sampling a fine wine. “It’ll all be in here, though” he went on, lightly tapping the side of his head. “So at least I’ll know how it ends.”

I really didn’t want to ask, but time was running out. “You’ve got the main theme,” I said.

“Oh yes, of course. It’s on the leash, just waiting for me to turn it loose.”

I could barely speak. “I could finish it for you,” I said, soft and hoarse as a man propositioning his best friend’s wife. “You could hum me the theme, and—”

K. J. PARKER

He laughed. Not unkindly, not kindly either. "My dear old friend," he said, "I couldn't possibly let you do that. Well," he added, hardening his voice a little, "obviously I won't be in any position to stop you trying. But you'll have to make up your own theme."

"But if it's nearly finished—"

I could just about make out a slight shrug. "That's how it'll have to stay," he said. "No offence, my very good and dear old friend, but you simply aren't up to it. You haven't got the—" He paused to search for the word, then gave up. "Don't take this the wrong way," he said. "We've known each other—what, ten years? Can it really be that long?"

"You were fifteen when you came to the Studium."

"Ten years." He sighed. "And I couldn't have asked for a better teacher. But you—well, let's put it this way. Nobody knows more about form and technique than you do, but you haven't got *wings*. All you can do is run fast and flap your arms up and down. Which you do," he added pleasantly, "superlatively well."

"You don't want me to help you," I said.

"I've offended you." Not the first time he'd said that, not by a long way. And always, in the past, I'd forgiven him instantly. "And you've taken the trouble to come and see me, and I've insulted you. I'm really sorry. I guess this place has had a bad effect on me."

"Think about it," I said, and I was so ashamed of myself; like robbing a dying man. "Your last work. Possibly your greatest."

He laughed out loud. "You haven't read it yet," he said. "It could be absolute garbage for all you know."

It could have been, but I knew it wasn't. "Let me finish it for you," I said. "Please. Don't let it die with you. You owe it to the human race."

I'd said the wrong thing. "To be brutally frank with you," he said, in a light, slightly brittle voice, "I couldn't give a twopenny fuck about the human race. They're the ones who put me in here, and in six hours' time they're going to pull my neck like a chicken. Screw the lot of them."

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My fault. I'd said the wrong thing, and as a result, the music inside his head would stay there, trapped in there, until the rope crushed his windpipe and his brain went cold. So, naturally, I blamed him. "Fine," I said. "If that's your attitude, I don't think there's anything left to say."

"Quite." He sighed. I think he wanted me to leave. "It's all a bit pointless now, isn't it? Here," he added, and I felt a sheaf of paper thrust against my chest. "You'd better take the manuscript. If it's left here, there's a fair chance the guards'll use it for arsewipe."

"Would it bother you if they did?"

He laughed. "I don't think it would, to be honest," he said. "But it's worth money," he went on, and I wish I could've seen his face. "Even incomplete," he added. "It's got to be worth a hundred angels to somebody, and I seem to recall I owe you a hundred and fifty, from the last time."

I felt my fingers close around the pages. I didn't want to take them, but I gripped so tight I could feel the paper crumple. I had in fact already opened negotiations with the Kapelmeister.

I stood up. "Goodbye," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't go blaming yourself for anything." Absolution, so easy for him to give; like a duke scattering coins to the crowd from a balcony. Of course, the old duke used to have the coins heated in a brazier first. I still have little white scars on my fingertips. "I've always been the sole author of my own misfortunes. You always did your best for me."

And failed, of course. "Even so," I said, "I'm sorry. It's such a waste."

That made him laugh. "I wish," he said, "that music could've been the most important thing in my life, like it should've been. But it was only ever a way of getting a bit of money."

I couldn't reply to that. The truth, which I'd always known since I first met him, was that if he'd cared about music, he couldn't have written it so well. Now there's irony.

"You're going to finish it anyway."

K. J. PARKER

I stopped, a pace or so short of the door. “Not if you don’t want me to.”

“I won’t be here to stop you.”

“I can’t finish it,” I said. “Not without the theme.”

“Balls.” He clicked his tongue, that irritating sound I’ll always associate with him. “You’ll have a stab at it, I know you will. And for the rest of time, everybody will be able to see the join.”

“Goodbye,” I said, without looking round.

“You could always pass it off as your own,” he said.

I balled my fist and bashed on the door. All I wanted to do was get out of there as quickly as I could; because while I was in there with him, I hated him, because of what he’d just said. Because I’d deserved better of him than that, over the years. And because the thought had crossed my mind.



I WAITED TILL I got back to my rooms before I unfolded the sheaf of paper and looked at it.

At that point, I had been the professor of music at the Academy of the Invincible Sun for twenty-seven years. I was the youngest ever incumbent, and I fully intend to die in these rooms, though not for a very long time. I’d taught the very best. My own music was universally respected, and I got at least five major commissions every year for ducal and official occasions. I’d written six books on musical theory, all of which had become the standard works on the aspects of the subject they cover. Students came here from every part of the empire, thousands of miles in cramped ships and badly-sprung coaches, to hear me lecture on harmony and the use of form. The year before, they’d named one of the five modes after me.

When I’d read it, I looked at the fire, which the servant had lit while I was out. It would be so easy, I thought. Twenty sheets of paper don’t take very long to burn. But, as I think I told you,

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I'd already broached the subject with the Kapelmeister, who'd offered me five hundred angels, sight unseen, even unfinished. I knew I could get him up to eight hundred. I have no illusions about myself.



I DIDN'T TRY and finish the piece; not because I'd promised I wouldn't, but because he escaped. To this day, nobody has the faintest idea how he managed it. All we know is that when the captain of the guard opened his cell to take him to the scaffold, he found a warder sitting on the bench with his throat cut, and no sign of the prisoner.

There was an enquiry, needless to say. I had a very uncomfortable morning at guard headquarters, where I sat on a bench in a corridor for three hours before making the acquaintance of a Captain Monomachus of the Investigative branch. He pointed out to me that I was a known associate of the prisoner, and that I'd been the last person to be alone with him before his escape. I replied that I'd been thoroughly and quite humiliatingly searched before I went in to see him, and there was no way I could've taken him in any kind of weapon.

"We aren't looking for a weapon, as a matter of fact," captain Monomachus replied. "We reckon he smashed his inkwell and used a shard of the glass. What we're interested in is how he got clear of the barbican. We figure he must've had help."

I looked the captain straight in the eye. I could afford to. "He always had plenty of friends," I said.

For some reason, the captain smiled at that. "After you left him," he said, "where did you go?"

"Straight back to my rooms in college. The porter can vouch for me, presumably. And my servant. He brought me a light supper shortly after I got home."

Captain Monomachus prowled round me for a while after that, but since he had absolutely nothing against me, he had to