

The dead have no choice but to listen . . .

THE QUIET ROOM



V. H. Leslie

“Turn the music down,” Terry said, standing on the threshold of his daughter’s room. Some unspoken rule forbade him from going in, especially without permission. It was different for mums, he imagined; no part of the house was off limits to them, they could tidy and snoop in equal measure, unchallenged. But for dads, a teenage daughter’s room was a minefield, a frightening place that only served as a reminder of how distant the days of childhood were. In truth, he preferred to stay outside.

His daughter, Ava, unaware of his presence, danced uninhibited to the music. The gap in the door allowed him to see more of her body than he would have liked, a body that had somehow grown overnight to replace the goofy child with pigtails and grazed knees. The clothes she wore seemed to belong to that younger Ava as well; too small and too tight, riding up to expose the body that had outgrown them, though Terry knew she’d bought them like that on purpose. Wearing as little as possible was the fashion these days and she was a dedicated follower, like all her friends. He should talk to her about that, about following the herd. But for now he just needed her to stop the music.

Terry rapped the door again. “Ava.”

She was deaf to everything but the synthesized wail reverberating from her speakers. Terry raised his voice. “Ava, I won’t say it again . . .”

“Dad!” Ava replied. Her voice was louder than Terry’s, amplified by embarrassment. “What are you doing up here?”

Terry was always amazed at how easily she could turn things around. Now he was in trouble for trespassing on her space. “Your music—”

“What?” Ava placed a hand behind her ear.

“It’s too loud. Just turn it down.”

She huffed as she walked to her stereo and turned it off.

“Happy now?” Her question was absurdly loud without the music to compete with.

“Yes,” Terry said quietly. A poster of a very young looking man, tanned and shirtless, gazed back from above his daughter’s bed. Terry pointed at it. “He’ll catch a cold,” he said, realizing as soon as he did how old he sounded.

Ava just raised her eyebrows, something she’d perfected to make Terry feel both chastised and insignificant. He wondered if she’d learnt it from Prue.

“You don’t think maybe you have too many posters up?” Terry asked.

“It’s *my* room, Dad.”

It was *his* house, he wanted to say, therefore it was *his* room. But there was no sense in being pedantic. It was important for Ava to feel that she had a place. He supposed it was a good thing Ava had become so territorial about her attic bedroom. The house had so many other good-sized bedrooms on the second floor, but she seemed to intent on having the smallest room, furthest from the nucleus of the house.

“It makes the room look a little crowded is all,” he offered. He avoided what he really wanted to say, that he didn’t like those half-naked men gazing down at his daughter. But there was no point rehashing an earlier argument; they’d already disagreed about poster-to-wall ratio and Terry had conceded. He couldn’t start telling her what to do now.

Ava shrugged in a way that said she didn’t care about his opinion. And why should she? He hadn’t exerted any kind of influence on her life so far. Why should she listen to him now? Terry realized he was hovering. “Dinner won’t be long.”

“Okay.”

Terry looked around Ava’s room one more time, trying not to be disappointed at how much it conformed to a typical adolescent space. As well as the posters of manufactured pop groups on the walls, piles of clothes and shoes crowded the floor. They’d only moved in a few weeks ago and already the room had the worn look of a teenage den. It wasn’t just the room but Ava’s choice of music he found so annoying. He worried about her taste. Those formative years when he’d been out of her life were responsible for shaping her in all kinds of ways. He couldn’t expect to change her overnight. But he wished she would listen to something else.

He made his way back down the stairs, conscious of the volume creeping higher again. It was clear now why she’d been so keen to claim the attic bedroom; it was so she could make as much noise as she wanted.

Terry walked through the old house, waiting for the pizza delivery boy to arrive with their usual order. It was a big house, bigger than it needed to be for just the two of them.

There had been few properties on the market so close to Ava's school and of those it was the most affordable, though bigger and more expensive than he would have liked. Terry still wasn't accustomed to so much superfluous space. He walked through the house now, opening doors to rooms he wasn't sure how to use, how to fill, moving around the empty spaces before closing the doors once more. It was becoming a habit, a nightly tour. He tried not to think of it as some kind of vigil.

Though the house was old, the rooms lacked period features or individual characteristics. They were uniform, bare, gazing back at him with vacant expressions. All except the music room. He hesitated on the threshold for a moment, drawn by what was on top of the piano. It was the first thing Ava had unpacked, the first thing she'd found a home for but Terry still wasn't used to seeing it. He just hadn't expected to bring Prue with them. The urn was much more plain than he would have expected for Prue. He would have imagined something more showy, more extravagant. But though simple in design, it still made him uneasy. He knew it was only ash and dust but it felt like he was facing an old adversary every time he saw it.

The sooner Ava decided where to scatter her mother's ashes the better. He'd tried to persuade Ava not to put it off, that doing it quickly would help her move on, but really it was because he hated Prue being in their home. The last time they had been under the same roof was thirteen years ago and, with the exception of Ava, he had no happy memories of that time.

Ava couldn't conceive of keeping the urn anywhere else. Prue liked the piano apparently and was especially keen on Liszt. The Prue Terry remembered didn't know the first thing about music, classical or otherwise. Prue's sister was the musical one.

Without looking at the urn, he walked towards the piano and pressed his finger to one of the shiny clean keys, cold beneath his touch. It let out a puff of dust. Terry pressed it again and imagined the effort inside as the mechanics attempted to conjure sound. A second silent exhalation was all he got.

Terry didn't know a thing about pianos but knew this one was busted. He would have thrown it out but for the fact the house was left so vacant, almost unusually so, that its presence seemed all the more engineered. It was almost a relief to find something from its past, even if it was broken. It was odd for a house of this age not to have more relics, Terry thought; old fireplaces,

cornicing, fretwork banisters, any would have been typical of this period. The previous owners must have stripped it back to the bare essentials, purging it of its past with copious tins of magnolia. A blank slate.

Terry had moved a lot over the years and most of the homes he'd lived in had retained a few objects from the previous owners; mildewed white goods that were an inconvenience to take, unfashionable light fittings, the odd piece of furniture. And then there were the marks people didn't realize they left behind. Children's measurements on a doorframe, old photographs at the back of a drawer, a dent in the plasterboard from children play fighting too enthusiastically, or from grown-ups fighting for real. Terry liked to trace the narrative of the houses he lived in. The walls whispered their story through such scars.

But this house was silent.

Just like the piano. Terry pressed the key again, half expecting a clear shrill note to contradict him. But he only heard the click of the key as it moved and a whisper of air.

Terry sat on the stool. He wouldn't get rid of it. The piano was the only link to the building's past, a gift from the house. He spread his fingers over the keys, imagining himself a great pianist about to begin a concerto. He lifted his hands above the keyboard ready to bring them down in unison and glanced up at Prue's urn. A shrill electric note echoed through the room.

Terry leapt back from the piano, stumbling over the fallen stool. He hadn't touched the keys and yet a sound filled the house, becoming a tune he began to comprehend—"The Ride of the Valkyries," played on distant tinny notes. The new doorbell Ava had persuaded him to buy. Farcical, like the inside of a musical greeting card.

Terry rose quickly, closing the lid of the piano and hurrying to the front door.

Terry placed the pizzas and the dips on the table. He heard Ava bound down the stairs, surprised that she could hear the jingle of the doorbell over her music at the top of the house. She had a way of sensing food.

Ava piled her plate high, whereas Terry only took one slice at a time.

"You know we're going to have to eat real dinners sometime," Ava said with her mouthful.

"Why?"

"Because they're healthy. You're supposed to make sure I eat right."

"It feels right to me."

"Not for your cholesterol."

Terry, glancing at Ava's plate, thought it a little hypocritical. "Well, what should I cook?"

"Pasta or fish. Vegetables and stuff."

Terry nodded, suitably admonished. He was reminded of one of the last conversations he'd had with Prue, her concern that he spoilt Ava too much.

"What do you normally eat?" she said between noisy mouthfuls. "You know, when you were on your own?"

Terry was quite content with sardines on toast, or pub grub from the local. But he always ordered a takeaway when he had Ava. He saw her so sporadically, sometimes only every couple of weeks that it always felt like a victory. Prue had not made it easy, so he equated seeing his daughter with a kind of celebration. It still felt like that, even though he was well aware they were engaged in a complex renegotiation of their roles. He wasn't used to being a full time father yet. For him, seeing his daughter everyday had not lost its novelty. Though clearly pizza had.

She was still waiting for an answer.

"Oh, this and that," he said.

"Well, why don't we go shopping tomorrow? Get some healthy food in?" Terry smiled; when Ava wasn't being moody or answering back she was actually a pretty nice kid.

"I'd like that."

"I can make my chili surprise."

"What's the surprise?"

"You'll see." Ava smiled. "It was Mum's favorite."

Terry swallowed hard on Ava's use of the past tense but washed it down with his beer. He wouldn't have imagined Prue liking chili, too much spice for her bland palate. He was beginning to realize how little he knew about his ex-wife. They'd been little more than strangers at the end.

Terry smiled, taking the good mood to try to connect with Ava. "So how are you finding it? The house I mean?"

"It's okay. I like my room. But it's not very homey."

"No?"

"It feels empty. Even with all our stuff."

Terry thought about the piano room, the only room that felt occupied.

"Who lived here before?" Ava asked.

"No one, apparently. Not for the last twenty years at least. Just been sitting empty."

"About time we came along then." Ava smiled, helping herself to another slice.