

*Cecelia Frey*

## **The Eternal Bachelor**

Arnold heard music, piano music, light and lively. Laurel was playing again, one tune after another, as though she would never stop. He stood beside her, at her shoulder. He felt light as the music.

His hand reached out. The cloth of her dress was thin. He could feel her small bones, her warm flesh. He felt her small flutterings of life.

“Northern,” said Meg, clamping her jaw square.

“Baltimore,” said Arnold, just as emphatically.

“You can’t say that,” said Meg. “You have to see its eye.”

The oriole’s head was turned away from them. It was singing, perched on a leafy branch outside the picture window of Arnold’s third-floor apartment.

“No, I don’t,” answered Arnold. “It doesn’t have a white patch on the wing.”

“It’s the light,” said Meg. “Go get your glasses. You can’t see anything without your glasses anyway.”

Arnold opened his mouth to say something equally rude, but then he didn’t want to spoil the bird’s singing. As though its life depends on it, he thought. And how can such a glorious sound come out of that tiny thing? And without thought or effort? It transports you, he marvelled. It simply transports you.

“Close your mouth or you’re going to catch flies,” Meg said.

Arnold closed his mouth quickly, without thinking. Then he wished he had kept it open just so Meg would know she couldn’t boss him around. He supposed Meg couldn’t help it. She was a nurse, a private nurse now, and had been bossing people around for thirty years. Still, he thought, even if she was good for him, as everybody said, he would never have married anyone like Meg. “I don’t know why you don’t marry that woman and get it over with,” his mother used to say. But his taste ran to dainty women, fragile women. And he saw nothing wrong with a bit of paint and polish. Meg, standing beside him in her grey skirt and jacket, her sensible shoes, was as solid and implacable as a

warden. He couldn't imagine two more different women than Meg and Laurel.

The bird flew off and Meg turned back into the room. Alone at the window, Arnold let himself go into a trance. There was something about the poplar tree. Maybe it was the new green of the leaves, or the way they shimmered. He saw a boy in the tree. It was himself. He had just climbed out the front bedroom window at the old house, onto the verandah roof and into the tree. He wasn't sure whether he was Tarzan or Errol Flynn. Whichever, he was about to leap onto the ground. But there was his grandmother, hands on hips, waiting for him below. "Oh shu! You great lunk of a thing you. What're you doing there now, clammerin' all over the roof and waking up your mother. Get away with you there."

"We're going to be late," Meg called from the door. "It's already seven."

Arnold checked the stove, the back lock, and the lights. He left two lights on, in strategic locations, so burglars would think he was home. His silent watcher approved these brisk, efficient movements, for whether it was setting his table, running laps at his gym, or computing columns of figures at his office, he always had this sense of audience and performance.

But then he couldn't find his glasses. He knew he had them on when he came home from work. He couldn't drive without them. As he quickly retraced his steps, bathroom, bedroom, Meg said if he wasn't so vain and would keep them on his face, he wouldn't always be losing them.

"I can't keep them on my face," he called from his kitchen. Nothing here; the counters were clear. The round table by the window was as it should be — in the centre, salt, pepper, a green plastic owl stuffed with paper napkins.

"I wouldn't be able to see if I did," he called. "It's distance I can't see." He had told her this a hundred times but she refused to believe it.

Meg spotted the glasses on the arm of the chesterfield where he had sat to drink his one cup of decaffeinated coffee. While he locked the door, she pressed the elevator button. He always took the stairs. This was part of his fitness routine, part of the reason he was still lean and wiry and proud of it. Meg always said she was fit enough. They met at the bottom. His spry dance darted around her paced steps to open the outside door.

They were on their way to a piano recital. It was a June evening, still day bright, the air warm and fragrant. As they walked across the thick springy grass between sidewalk and car, Arnold thought, what is so rare as a day in June?

“Did you remember the tickets?” asked Meg.

Arnold enjoyed the recital immensely. He liked all music, but he especially like piano music. This was because of Laurel. When he listened to piano music he always closed his eyes and saw her. The first time, he was peeking through the curtain of his room. She was out on her back step, in her bathrobe, taking in the milk bottles. Her dark hair was tousled, her robe loose at the top. She was not aware of watching eyes; she was completely abandoned.

She was in her kitchen. She and his mother were drinking tea and smoking cigarettes while he sat cross-legged on the floor entertaining Tony. Tony was little more than a year and he was thirteen, but he didn't mind. It gave him a chance to see what went on at Laurel's and why his grandmother disapproved of her. As he built great pyramids of blocks for Tony to knock down, he watched Laurel's slim fingers, the way they tapered at the tips. No one in his family had fingers like that.

She was in his grandparents' living room, sitting on the sofa, the one that was now in his living room. Her face was greenish-white, and all she did was stare, until she saw the piano.

Arnold deposited Meg in front of the San Palito Towers. She wondered if he wanted to come in for something to drink. She had ginger ale or tea. He said no, he was tired after the week's work. She said who was he trying to kid, no one works at the City. He said the finance department did.

It was true he was tired, but besides that, recitals always put him in a certain mood which did not include Meg. As he watched her make her way up the walk and into the glass-walled foyer, he had a brief pang of guilt. She doesn't mind, he told himself. One thing about Meg, he never had to worry about her being lonely or having her feelings hurt. She was too self-reliant for that.

At home, he made himself a cup of tea. He drank it standing before his kitchen window. As his eyes travelled beyond the white wooden balcony and stairs, they saw the parking lot below become a back garden of huge leaves and tangled vines. His mother was making her way through the shadows, through the wire gate and across the lane. He watched until she disappeared into the rectangle of light that was Laurel's open door, then he climbed into his bed, folded his hands across his chest and strained his ears to hear the kitchen door below, signalling her return. Usually, he couldn't stay awake that long. He fell asleep imagining the two women talking into the night. He heard their whispers and wondered about their secrets. In the same room, in another bed, his father was dying. He always assumed then that his

father was asleep those nights. But now he often wondered if perhaps he, too, had been staring into the darkness, waiting.

But that was on his mother's night off. The other six nights a week, she made up her lunch, had a snack, and went off to mend airplane wings. People said she was working for the war effort, but he knew that finances were low, that was why they were living with his father's parents, and that she was working for their effort, for him and his father. On those nights, he listened for the streetcar, a block over, that took her away. He pictured her stepping up, putting her ticket into the glass, taking a seat. As the streetcar jerked to a start, she settled herself sleepily against a window. Downtown, there was a special bus that took her to the airport, to where there were people, people who spoke and laughed.

Compared to night, day was boring. There was the piano, but its lid was always closed. No one ever played it, except Laurel that time. The only music in his life were hymns at church on Sunday.

The piano music was kept in a tapestry-covered wooden box tied around with thick cord. Once, he opened this box and was nearly smothered by the smell of dry old paper. He lifted his eyes to the photographs, yellow and faded, on top of the piano, aunts and uncles and cousins of his grandparents. He had never seen any of them. They might have all been dead. But their eyes were alive, accusing him. Dark coats hanging on a rack near the door shifted in disapproval. Quickly, he shut the lid and put everything together exactly as it had been.

Outside, there was only one other boy his age, a boy who for some unknown reason singled Arnold out as the object of a peculiar hatred. Whatever the motive, this boy would lie in wait for him to step out of his yard, then pelt him with rocks.

Until his grandmother put a stop to it, there was the escape game, from window to roof to tree. His mother often slept on the verandah, at one end screened with canvas and mosquito netting, especially when the days were hot. Her being there made the game more challenging. The object was to escape without waking her up. Once on the ground, he crept up the verandah steps, crossed the creaky floorboards, and pushed aside the netting. He liked catching her that way. She looked younger when she slept, a real picture, her face relaxed, smooth. But it was more than that. He couldn't exactly describe it, but when she was sleeping she was turned inward on herself, disconnected from the world. He didn't want to wake her up, because then her face changed. She suddenly looked old and tired. She scolded him. He didn't blame her. He knew that her life was a series of desperations.

"Why don't you get rid of that piano," Meg said. "It just clutters up the place."

"All those corners and curls," Bertha said. "You can't dust. Even the vacuum can't get into those crevices."

"It's not as though you can play it," Frank said.

It was bridge night. For twenty years the four of them had been meeting like this. Tonight it was Arnold's turn to host. They were onto the eats, tuna buns he had wrapped in foil and heated in the oven. Now Bertha was telling him that what he needed was a kitchen like Meg's, which was hardly a kitchen at all. And Frank was going on about the view at Meg's. As far as Arnold was concerned, Meg's view was a panorama of other high rises, and he would choke in her kitchen. No thanks, he thought. Not that he cared, if that was the way other people wanted to live. But why couldn't they leave him alone?

"The Arms suits me fine," he said.

"Oh, it's so shabby," said Meg. "All these things built in the late forties, right after the war. They depress me. I don't know why you want to remind yourself of that time. You had to wait a month for a phone."

"Lucky if you got one in a month," said Frank.

"At least I don't have to go outside to turn around," said Arnold.

"He doesn't want to leave his old things," said Meg.

"No sense keeping old things," said Frank. "What's the use of old things?"

"They belonged to my grandparents," Arnold reminded them. He patted the arm of his chair. "And besides, they don't make stuff like this nowadays."

"Just as well," said Bertha. "Who'd want things that last forever. Then you could never get new."

"It's all so dark," Meg accused. "And heavy."

Arnold let them talk. They had been at him like this for the last two years, since his mother died. Up until then, she had lived with him. Before she died, they used to tell him that was why he never married. He didn't have to. She did everything for him. This was proof that they knew nothing about him.

"But the cleaning," Bertha was saying. "Think how you could cut down on the cleaning."

"I don't know why you don't get someone in to do the cleaning," Frank said. "You wouldn't catch me cleaning."

"Oh, don't try to tell him," Meg said. "He doesn't trust his old things to strangers."

What do they know about me? thought Arnold. The truth was he like cleaning. Often, when he was vacuuming, he would lift up the lid of

the piano and strike a few notes. That was enough to bring it all back, as though the intervening years did not exist. Laurel was with him again.

When he was brushing his teeth, he thought, what does anybody really know about anybody else? The people we never see are sometimes the people we know best. Laurel had moved away at the end of that summer. He had not seen her for more than forty years. Yet he knew her as well as he knew himself. He knew every detail about her. He saw her hair falling forward around her face. He heard her voice, full of life.

"What is it this time?" she said to his mother who had just said, "Is she ever on her high horse." It was something about his grandmother, something about the war, one of his uncles who was in a minesweeper, something about his mother laughing at the funnies when there was nothing to laugh about in this world. He was not really listening. He was watching Laurel's high heels, her silk stockings, her red lipstick.

On the table was a glass ashtray. Between the faces of the two women, smoke curled upwards. Laurel offered the pack to his mother, but she said no thanks, "She'll smell it on my breath." Some days his mother either took the chance or didn't care. But this day she was cautious and upset. "Do we all have to stop living?" her voice suddenly burst out on a high pitch.

Tony started crying and Laurel took him up on her knee. "Run'n get me his soother will you? she said, turning her marvellous wide smile on him. "It's in the bedroom, just down the hall there."

There wasn't much furniture in the room, a bed, a dresser, a crib, but everything was neatly arranged. On the dresser was the teething ring, faded blue, lying just before a picture of a young man in uniform with his arm around Laurel. They were smiling at the camera. They seemed young. That was when Arnold thought how Laurel was really only a girl, not much older than he.

Laurel. The name leaped off the page. It was an unusual name. Arnold's eyes darted over the column, searching for details. Not Hendricks. The age, though. She would be sixty-one. And survived by sons, daughters, the oldest Anthony James. That would be little Tony. It must be her. She must have remarried. Of course she would have remarried, a young beautiful woman like her. It was only right that she should have remarried, should have had someone to look out for her, take care of her.

Arnold dropped the newspaper across his breakfast dishes. He was transported to the old house, the front room. It was evening. His grandparents and his mother were reading the newspaper. He was

reading Dickens' *The Life of Our Lord*, a gift from his grandmother. Every hour on the hour his grandfather turned the radio on. Then the air became tense. At mention of certain strategic locations, his grandparents leaned forward and woe betide anyone who made the slightest noise or movement. He knew this was because his uncles were off fighting the war.

When the news was over, sometimes a few bars of music escaped from the box before his grandfather reached over from his armchair and clicked the button. Directly after the nine o'clock bulletin, the old man stood up, the signal for everyone else to do the same. He switched off all the lights. Arnold was sent to bed. The adults went into the kitchen to prepare things for the next day, his grandmother to soak the porridge, his mother to get ready for work.

Near the end of that summer, one evening was different. They were sitting reading in the living room as usual, but then a knock came at the back door. It was a terrible moment. Fear etched every face in that room. Arnold could see that. It was a time of death, and no family was safe.

It turned out that the death was connected to Laurel. Her husband. She stood in the open door, clutching Tony in her arms. His mother took Tony and got Laurel to the living room. They couldn't get her to speak. For the longest while she sat there staring into space. Then she seemed to become aware of the piano. She got up slowly, went over to it, and lifted the lid. She sat down and started to play, without sheet music, mournful tunes at first, but then the rhythm changed into something lively. It made him think of those snatches of music on the radio. She played and played, one tune after another, as though she had to, as though she dare not stop.

That was when he went and stood beside her. And after a moment, she looked up at him. Her face was dry and hot looking. "Come on. Sing," she said.

He stood there, stricken. He did not know how to sing.

"Sing," she said again. "Sing."

Arnold's mother remembered the words. She joined them at the piano. The two women sang together as loud as they could. They almost shouted. The room seemed to burst. He would never forget.

Arnold wished now that he had discussed that evening with his mother before she died. There were things he would never know. He wondered what his grandparents had thought. He wondered what mystery of his mother's life allowed her to know such songs. And his ghost of a father, upstairs. Had he heard? What had he thought? Had he ever known such songs? Now he wished he had asked her whatever

had become of Laurel. Well, it was too late. They were all dead. Now all the people who had ever really known him were dead.

Arnold came back to his newspaper. He wished he could turn the clock back five minutes and skip the obituaries this morning. He thought how he had just about gotten through his whole life without knowing.

It was Saturday. On weekends Arnold always enjoyed lingering over his breakfast and the paper. Then, he would get busy. Sundays it was a brisk walk, Saturdays his housecleaning. This morning he sat longer than usual, staring at the print. After awhile, he supposed he should get moving. He took the vacuum out of the cupboard. He kept stopping, as though uncertain about what to do next.

He sat down on the piano stool and lifted the lid. He struck a few keys. He played the C scale and chord. The notes quivered in the air, harsh and discordant, horribly distorted. Why had he not realized before that the piano was so out of tune. Even then, when Laurel played it, it must have already been out of tune. He wondered if his friends were right.

The funeral was Monday. He had to go, he couldn't help himself. Afterwards, he was surprised that he had felt no premonition of disaster. Looking down at that bloated colourless figure nestled in its satin bed, he wondered that she could have changed so radically.

There was a man shaking hands with everyone. He turned out to be the right person "I used to keep you amused," Arnold explained. "Babysit, I guess you'd call it."

The man was not unfriendly, simply detached. "I'm sorry I don't remember..."

"You were a baby," said Arnold. "You couldn't possibly remember."

They spoke a few minutes longer. Laurel had died of a stroke, high blood pressure. She had been on medication for some years. Looking at the face of this man in his early forties, Arnold could not recall his other face. Every time he tried to think of little Tony, Anthony Hendricks intervened.

That week he missed one of his fitness classes. He just didn't feel up to it. He tried to get out of bed. "I think I'm coming down with something," he said, "a cold maybe, the flu."

"Doesn't do any good to stay at home feeling sorry for yourself," Meg said over the phone. "We won't let you breathe on us. And would you pick up a carton of coffee cream on the way over?"

They knew something was wrong with him. They thought it was his work. "You always like a challenge," said Frank. "You must be getting old."

Arnold supposed Frank was right. He was getting old, and he may as well admit it. He gave up his hair conditioner. He started wearing his glasses all the time. He found it more and more difficult to drag himself out to the gym. He was often stiff. When he stood up it took him a moment to straighten his back. Meg commented, "It's only natural," he said. "Next month I turn fifty-six."

He took to long periods of sitting. When he went for a walk, he would find a bench and stare at the river, the grass, whatever fell into his line of vision. One day he thought, what does it matter whether I sit here or stand or walk. There is no one to see me. There was no one to admire his still flat belly, his still thick hair, his agile step.

Another day, he came to the sudden realization that Laurel had never seen him. Because he saw her so vividly, he had assumed that she saw him. He had been performing all his life for someone who was not there.

It's over, he thought. In his apartment he sat for hours, a book open on his lap, without turning a page. His mind was a blank. He couldn't remember anything any more. When he tried to think about Laurel, she flickered on and off in his brain. He tried to touch her but he could not feel. He tried to listen to the music but he could not hear.

For his vacation that year, he and Meg had planned to drive to the Coast. He begged off. She went by herself on the bus. She came back and told him she had had a great time. He spent the three weeks in his apartment, shuffling from the back window to the front window. He turned on the TV but he could not concentrate on the story or what the people were saying. He sat in front of the set for hours, watching the movement on the screen. He turned off the TV and went to bed. He climbed between his sheets. They felt cold. His skin flinched.

For three weeks he didn't shave. He wore the same clothes every day. He ate anything, whatever was easiest, cold canned spaghetti, half-baked frozen french fries. He knew he should clean up the place but he didn't have the energy. The garbage bags piled up at the door. One morning he looked down and noticed something green and hairy growing on top of the tea bags and soggy bread scraps. He stared at it for a long time. He couldn't decide what to do about it.

He knew he was finished, but in September he realized that even if he was finished, he had approximately twenty years to go. The conditions of life had changed, that was all. There was nothing he could do about it. He must simply go on. He must go to work each day. He must go through the motions. Nothing specific happened to make him come to this realization. It just occurred to him.

His friends thought he was back, or nearly back, to normal. The pressure was off at the office, the flu symptoms gone. His looks had

changed. He knew they had changed. Nothing you could put your finger on, not thinner, not more lines, something less robust perhaps, something diminished, some permanent mark of experience, some boundary crossed to another point of no return.

Well, they were all changed. Arnold looked at their faces. He scarcely recognized them. The set of Meg's jaw was becoming more stubborn and unyielding every year. Her hands were getting larger as arthritis set in. And Bertha, the way she stuffed her mouth with those pinwheel sandwiches she had concocted. She looked like pink cream cheese. And Frank, his hair was thin, almost white. Brown splotches were spreading on his face and hands.

He thought of Laurel, not in the old way, but in the new way, as a name, a word in his mind. What had happened was not her fault. She was only human. A human being could not stay in the state of an open wound. He had put too great a burden on her, to carry his imaginative life for so many years simply because at a particular moment, perhaps the most vulnerable moment of her life, he had seen her, or thought he had.

Still, he thought, I did know her for that moment. He was sure of it. No one had known her as he had. Maybe to know another person completely for one moment was all one could expect of life.

He thought of the boy who had listened to voices in the night through floors and walls, a boy who had looked for light through windows and cracks. That boy had felt that adults were luckier than children and that when he was an adult he would suddenly be happy. He had known that adults could be lonely too, but they had ways of escaping, they were in control of their loneliness. Adults were free to go to where there were voices and light. Except for his father, but that had been a special case, much like his own. He knew now that such freedom was an illusion and that for it he had given up everything, what most people called life. Still, he would not have done it any other way. He had been happy! What do they know? he thought fiercely. Any of them? What do they know? He had no regrets. He had had a good life. Surely, with Laurel, no one had been happier than he.