



SHEET MUSIC

by S.C. Bayat

MOM used to hold a teaspoon over the flame of a Bic, then press the heated metal into her flesh to dissuade herself from gambling. She would moan—her fine-boned hand trembling until the spoon clattered to the floor—then cup her palm over the germinal welt as though she'd trapped a moth beneath it. *Play me something sweet*, she'd say. Before I gave up piano, I'd sit at an old upright in the sunroom—brass candle holders mounted on the front board and filled with flower petals, C. Bechstein in clean gold lettering under the rosewood fallboard, a gouge in the middle buffed smooth from my fingertip—and perform *Für Elise* as she ran a saline bath. My brother, two years older, waited until she'd sunk in and torment me as I

played: yank my hair as though it were a bell rope, jab my shoulders with his fingers, karate-chop my arms. He wasn't satisfied if I wasn't crying, wouldn't knock it off until he'd drawn Mom from the tub, naked and screeching, her chest flushed raw. She'd clobber him with her slipper, and as she swung her arm, the pink skin that mottled her thighs and stomach held the glare of afternoon. She'd slam the bathroom door after her as he wailed, and I would leave the wooden bench behind, sit on the floor by his feet, and blow on his toes until he stopped. We'd build a fortress out of chairs and blankets, its structure different every time. Mom would crawl in after it was done, bringing pillows, a lava lamp, and Neapolitan ice cream with her. We'd lie like sardines, our feet juttied between chair legs, talk nonsense, and watch the orange lamplight play on fabric until the real world grew impatient.



In her living room, there are photographs of us. Birthday candles in one shot, cotton candy in another, a first-place ribbon, a donkey ride—petrified moments. My brother and I kneel in neon bathing suits next to a

sandcastle, the foreground littered with plastic buckets and shovels. In Mom's cursive on the cardstock below: *Val and Plum, Gonzales Beach '82*. Each frame is tagged similarly. None of them date beyond our youth. I gather these and place them in a cardboard box, tape it shut, and set it in the middle of the room. Now that we're gone, this space could belong to anyone. It's as if I'm a voyeur, like I might be caught trespassing at any moment. Val walks in with a large black garbage bag, the stub of a Belmont pinched between his lips. Until a week ago I hadn't seen him in three years, and before that, it'd been four. At thirty-eight, he's thinner now than when he was a teenager. Bruise-colored crescents wane beneath his hazel eyes. His face is stained with stubble, inky hair cowlicked at his crown. He picks up a crystal bowl the size of his palm, bounces it in his hand.

"You want this?" he says.

"No use for it."

He smashes the lit end of his smoke into the middle of the bowl, replaces it on the coffee table. "What's that?" He points to the box.

"Pictures."

"You can have those."

"You want *anything?*"

He scans the room, his upper lip curled. “Sell the nice stuff, the furniture. Trash the rest.” He shakes the garbage bag, spreads it open on the floor like a black hole. “Aunt Janice wants the rabbit ears.”

The TV is the only thing not coated in fine dust.

“Since when?”

“The memorial.”

“Mom hated her.”

He shrugs, shakes his head a little.

“Did you see Tim?” I gather ancient issues of *Town & Country*, drop them into the bag.

“Who?” From the corners of his pinched eyes, fine lines spill over the shelves of his cheekbones.

“Aunt Janice’s son, used to pick his nose and chase us with a booger on the end of his finger.”

Val’s eyes widen and the lines diminish. “You screamed like a gopher when he got you.”

“Then you’d tackle him and slap his belly pink.”

“Looks like he ate a house, now.” He grins, tucks his lower lip under his front teeth the same way he used to—the Val of our youth.

I don't think anyone knows his nuances like I do. How he favors grapes but hates grape-flavored things, reads multiple books at a time, and eats the food on his plate in sections: all of the veg first, then the meat, and so on. It's the important things I'm missing. Like what he wants to accomplish, who he strives to be. I don't even know if he has a girlfriend, what kind of car he drives, whether he lives in a house or an apartment.

"What would you say at my funeral?" I ask.

"Why do you die first?"

"Because I wouldn't know what to say at yours."

He ponders a moment, then, "Tell 'em: 'Val was cooler than his name.'"

On the left of the mantle is an ornate vase, been there so long that it lifts a ring of paint with it. It's decorated in blues, reds, greens, yellows, and white. At its center, the vase depicts a samurai and a geisha sitting near one another on a stone bench. I'd never noticed the careful intricacies of the blossoms that frame them, the crimson-crowned crane on the bridge in the backdrop, the movement of their robes.

"Junk," Val says.

"Mom wouldn't let us near it, said it's valuable."

“She also claimed relation to Elizabeth Taylor.” He tosses a chipped ceramic swan into the bag and it shatters.

“Do you think they’re lovers or siblings?”

He peers over my shoulder, “They look like strangers.”

Once he’s said it, that’s all I see. I replace the vase on the mantle, “For now.”

He raises his eyebrows—two thumb smudges of charcoal—but says nothing. Val has never needed words to make himself a heavyweight. We work on opposite sides, silent for the better part of an hour.

“Jackpot.” Val holds a rectangular porcelain box in one hand, cream-colored, save for the faded blue and pink roses on the gold lid. He digs through the contents with his index finger, smirks like he’s won *Jeopardy* from the comfort of his own recliner.

In the box are dozens of “Scratch & Win” tickets—*Set for Life*, *Pirates Gold*, *Crossword Super Ball*, *Lucky Lines*—the patches of opaque ink marred like a controlled burn. There are remnants of this metallic gunk on a quarter that clinks dull at the bottom.

“I knew it,” he says.

“Don’t.”

“I did, I fucking *knew* she didn’t quit.”

I snatch the box from him. The lid jerks down onto my thumb.

“What’s the point?” he says. “Defending her is a waste of time.”

“You’re a waste of time.”

He scoffs and picks up the garbage bag, which shifts and clatters as it’s hoisted. “We’re done here.” He maneuvers around boxes of relics and walks toward the kitchen.

I suck my thumbnail, try to pull the pain out.



A life left to chance made Mom manic. Bet a number at keno and double her money, lay it all on odds in roulette and lose everything. Usually, we’d return from school to find dried mascara on her cheeks, and she’d recount how the cards turned on her while the tea steeped.

“I got greedy,” she moaned. “Should’ve bowed out while I was chief.”

“Maybe next time.” I couldn’t stand to see how pitiful defeat made her.

Val kicked my shin, knit his mouth into a narrow line. *Don't encourage her*, the line said.

Sometimes she could go spells without acknowledging the itch. We'd spend afternoons together, watch *M*A*S*H* reruns on channel twelve, eat salt and pepper popcorn from a bowl the size of a sink. She'd kneel under the dining room table while Val and I did our homework, give each of us a pedicure while we found square roots and read about fur traders. She and Val would waltz, boundless, in the hazy light of the sunroom while I played *Sleeping Beauty* or *Clair de Lune*, our faces sore from joy.

But my brother and I knew this stability had a false heart, that it was only a matter of time before we lost her again. She would use variations of us for her bets—dates of our birthdays, the year Val learned to walk, the age I left diapers behind. Milestones borrowed and sullied.

“Valy won me big today,” she'd smile. “My lucky boy.”



Val recoils from the stench of rot when he opens the fridge. He closes his mouth, retrieves a can of Buck-A-Beer from a shelf cluttered with

Tupperware, then shuts the door again. He cracks the tab and chugs half, smacks his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“Tastes like piss,” he says. “A woman of distinguished taste.”

“You aren’t funny.”

“Tell me again why that Vaudeville Troupe didn’t pick you? Were you just *too* hilarious?”

“You try auditioning. You’d choke.”

“Then I’d quit and become a waitress.”

“I’m a *barista*.”

He takes another pull, watches me the whole time, and then belches. I stare back, hands on my hips, and he saunters over to a cupboard.

“You’re so sensitive, Sugarplum,” he says.

“The situation calls for it.”

“You look like Mom when you cock your head like that.” His mouth is drawn, shaped like the rounded edge of a shovel, and he burps again.

“She thought you were a real son of a bitch for sending her a Denny’s coupon instead of a birthday card last year.”

“She told you that?” For a moment he seems thrown, then smirks, “I am, in fact, the son of a bitch.”

He polishes off the rest of his beer and throws the can my way. It lands near my shoe. I whip the aluminum toward him and it rebounds off the cupboard behind, socks the back of his head. He reaches into the garbage bag, recovers a Kleenex box, and thwacks me in the arm with it. I reply with a roll of paper towels and it thumps him in the neck. We play war for a while, pretend it’s only a game. This is a moment Mom would have framed.

Val leans against the fridge, panting, and knocks at the freezer door behind his head. “Remember my twelfth birthday? She’d promised me an Optimus Prime cake but forgot to pick up eggs and flour on her way home from a bender at the casino. So she gave a room full of kids freezer-burned fruitcake leftover from Christmas.” He pulls stiff fingers through his hair.

“They called you Fruitcake all month.”

“All year.”

“I’m the one who started that.”

He nods, “You said it was Becky Larson, but I knew.” He takes another beer can and studies the lip, wipes it with his finger before he opens it. “I still hate fruitcake.”

A bluebottle flies helter-skelter around the room. It hits the window again and again before landing. The glass is fogged, the frame painted shut. I pull at the damp fabric that clings beneath my armpits, wish I’d worn a looser shirt.

Cans of baked beans fill the pantry. There must be fifty or more.

“Holy gas, Batman,” Val whistles, long and sharp.

“We’ll give them to the food bank.”

Under the kitchen sink, the garbage can is as rancid as the fridge. The sack clangs as I pull it out, its belly filled with empty Heinz cans.

“Is this all she ate?” I grope the bottom of the bag.

Val holds a plastic container from the fridge. There are beans, lumped and thick inside, and a small teaspoon left within. He uses his front teeth to tear a flake of skin from his lip. “I never thought to ask.”

“We should’ve come home last Christmas.” I scrape under my nails.

Pick, pick, pick.

“I live butt-fuck on the other side of the country.” Val watches my fingers at work and ruts form in his forehead, between his eyebrows. “It drove me gaga when she did that.”

I put my hands in the front pockets of my jeans, palms pressed into thighs. “Could’ve at least spent it with each other.”

“Heart attacks are unpredictable.” He pulls the pack of Belmonts from the cavity of his plaid shirt. “I couldn’t have known.”



When she won decent at the casino, Mom slow roasted a three-pound ham until it was delicate enough to crumble around a fork, the juices running between our teeth and into the valleys behind our cheeks and lips. She would pile her hair, dyed brass from a box, on top of her head and secure it with a pen she’d nicked from the post office, polish her pillowy cheeks with Pond’s cold cream, and put on Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. She’d bop her head as she cut slits into the raw meat, shimmy while she filled the sockets with garlic cloves and sprigs of rosemary from a pot on the patio, thrust her hips when she spooned honey over the top before putting it in

the oven. As kids, we'd delight in her movement and join her, too free in our childhood to be anything but brazen.

But as we grew older, so did our tolerance and we were soon restricted to rolling eyes, retreating to bedrooms. She'd turn M.J. up louder and cackle. *The neighbors'll join me.* Our names—Valentine and Sugarplum—became an embarrassment, and we avoided public places with her in case she used them. *They're special,* she justified. *Why would I want to call you something ordinary like Johnathan or Rachel?* Behavior we'd never before questioned became a sore on our need to fit in. She'd check the driveway for newspapers in nothing but a jewel-toned silk slip. Kept every empty yogurt container—lids warped from the wash—in a cupboard by the oven until it was crammed full, and eventually took to stashing them on top of the fridge, under the sinks, and on the countertops. She gardened in her old, hole-riddled underwear, and earned a wage as a masseuse from home but depended on support checks from a man we didn't remember.

She's so fuckin' weird, Val whispered in the throes of our teenagehood, turning sheet music for me while I played *Moonlight Sonata* and Mom sunbathed in a thong-bikini on the front lawn, cucumber slices over her eyes and an unlit tiki torch by her head. I bumped his shoulder with my chin, *No one will ever know our lives here like we do.*

Back then I'd write little notes about what struck me—the way sunlight made dust look like clouds of powdered diamonds; how the stiff curve of my nipple fit into the center of my palm; the drowsy comfort brought on by the quiet rumble of vinyl between songs; how that feeling an instant before laughter was the same as the taut swell in my chest when I walked onto a theater stage; Simon Hasket's cinnamon candy breath on my lips—and folded them between the Bechstein's keys. Once, I'd spent the afternoon reading outside and when I came in for some water, found her sitting at the piano. She had played a few hasty notes of *Chopsticks* when she'd seen me and then risen, insisted that she fix me iced tea and a turkey sandwich, and told me about the night she lost her virginity.

I spent less and less time at home, devouring the normalcy of other families. Val used his room as storage, his bed kept cold and tidy each weekend. *Where have you gone*, Mom whined. *Where have my babies gone?*



Her bedroom is cluttered with kitsch. Lamps adorned with beaded shades, an assortment of empty perfume bottles, an oil painting of a cat wearing

an Elizabethan collar, bouquets of dried roses that smell like dust and honey, decanters filled with shells and sea glass, scented soaps wrapped in beautiful printed paper. The bed is musty, raisin-sweet, and its springs creak beneath me. Toenail clippings protrude from the shag rug beside her night stand. Inside the drawer is a picture of Brad Pitt circa *Interview with a Vampire*, cut from a magazine and kept next to a pink vibrator.

Val is in the bathroom peering into the medicine cabinet, and I slap Brad on the counter.

“You’ll never guess what I found with this.” My words tumble over one another.

Val picks an orange prescription bottle from the cabinet and holds it out to me. “Did you know she took antidepressants?”

Lexapro (a word I don’t recognize) is printed across the water-damaged sticker. I shake the bottle and the few circular white pills that remain rattle against the plastic.

“Could be for anything,” I say. “Menopause. Migraines.”

“They’re antidepressants, Plum.”

He closes the cabinet. Its mirror is coated in flecks of dried, milky saliva which make our reflections look pocked. We share the same thin

mouth and grey-blue eyes, but my nose is crooked from a field-hockey break when I was eleven, my hair the color of tree bark instead of black mulch, my face broad and full. *Like the moon*, Mom often said. *Like mine. A beach ball*, Val corrected, *both of you*.

“You look tired,” I say.

“Tired means shitty.”

“We’re both tired.”

He observes my mirror image, fixes on my eyes. “Don’t forget how tired she was, too.”

“She wasn’t all the time.”

He lingers on my face an iota longer and then picks up the clipping of Brad. “Sexy bastard.”

“Mom thought so.” My mouth puckers, tongue pushed into cheek.

It takes him a moment, but he understands. He drops Brad into the sink as if the picture is radioactive, and our duplicates crack and howl in the mirror until tears run.



When Mom had clients, we weren't allowed in the house. *Kids don't look professional.* She'd steer us through the back door and we'd play beneath the green curtain of our weeping willow for half an hour. Val taught me to duck-call with crabgrass by holding a piece of it lengthwise between thumb knuckles, mouth to the seam, other fingers spread wide and away. When I blew, the sound was spluttered and raspy. After a few attempts I tore the blade in half then threw it to the lawn, and was unsatisfied that it landed so softly.

“You didn't hold it tight enough.” Val stood behind me, rested a forearm on each of my shoulders so that his hands were in front of my face. “Trick is to keep the bottoms of your palms together, like Mom does when she begs God for luck.”

I cradled his wrists and blew through his thumbs, my breath transformed to a clean, loud note between his hands. We snuck pieces of grass inside, used them at the dinner table whenever Mom turned her head. She feigned bewilderment the whole meal, inquired which of us had gas.

A few years later, I duck-called from the front steps as Val crossed the driveway toward me.

“Can’t go in.” I pointed to a piece of lined notebook paper taped to the front door: *With a client.*

Val picked at a pimple scab on his chin. “I have an exam tomorrow.”

“Sucks to be you.”

When I called again he smacked my hands, swung open the front door, and was gone.

If he could, then I could.

In the sunroom, a man who wore nothing but a towel around his waist sat at the piano. His skin was greased, rounded belly flush with the keybed, and he ran thick, hungry fingers over the ivory, over scraps of paper stuck like food between teeth.

“Early 1900s,” he said. “Maybe an 1890, when Bechstein still lived.”

Mom wiped down the massage table, a cheap satin robe from Chinatown tied around her, face made-up with gold eyeshadow and rouge to make her blues bright. “It’s worth a lot. Sentimental, too—my dad left it to us when he folded.”

“To me,” I said.

“Sugarplum.” She placed a theatrical hand over her chest. “When did you come in?”

“The left pedal sticks. No one but me can play it.”

The man removed his hands from the keyboard, body twisted my way, but let his eyes wander to Mom. She smiled at him and shook her head. *Kids these days.*

Later that week, the smell of roast ham stopped me at the front door. Val must have heard it open because he met me in the hall.

“You’re gonna shit.” His grin was lopsided, bottom lip bitten.

He led me to the sunroom. There, the rectangular outline of dirt and dust on the hardwood like band-aid residue, where the Bechstein had been.

“The thing was old.” Mom stood in the kitchen and shaped her long, pink nails with a file. The sound was hoarse. “Its pedals stuck.”

I stared at her powdered face, wanted to fell her with a look.

“I’ll find you a newer one. A better one,” she said.

“Mom got a five-pounder.” Val slapped the oven, his face lit up like a senior’s birthday cake. “Smells *de-licious*, doesn’t it?”

“Valentine agreed that we should.” She picked under her nails with quick fingers, the file forgotten on the counter. “We need the money.”

He pinched the plump of my cheek, “You’ll understand when you’re grown up.”

I kicked at his shin and he leapt backwards, gleeful.

“Valentine is gracious enough to sell his Nintendo.”

“He hasn’t played it for years,” I said.

“Sugarplum, don’t be so selfish.” She put pristine hands on her waist, voice shrill. “Put your family before some silly hobby.”

Val stood behind Mom and flounced his hips in her likeness, pressed his palms together and blinked heavenward.

I walked coolly to my room. “Fuck the piano.”

Later that night, I woke when she crawled beneath the duvet and lay behind me. She kissed the side of my head and swept hair from my face, but I pretended to remain asleep.

“I’m done being crooked,” she whispered. “I’m done with all of it. I love you, mini-moon. I’m sorry. I love you.”

In the morning, I climbed carefully from under her arm. Her limb fell heavy to the mattress, but she gave no indication that she’d felt me leave.



In the sunroom, Val lights a smoke, tilts his head back as he sucks it in. The light is waning and he's silhouetted against an apricot sky. The airy room seems diminished now, restricted. The hardwood is heel-dented, the varnish worn away in craters. The massage table, ripped and yellowed, is pushed against the windows and covered in a jumble, coated in neglect.

"Let's hire people to clear it," he says.

"We can do it."

"We haven't gotten anywhere." He moseys around the clutter, "There's too much shit."

"It'll be good for us."

"This isn't a Dr. Phil exercise."

"We should spend more time together." My voice catches and I nip at the inside of my mouth.

Val exhales, heavy and slow. Tendrils of smoke rise between us and the air is dense, but light of sound.

"Thought you'd want to know what my apartment looks like." Blood pulsates in my ears and down my neck. I feign interest in the willow tree outside, keep him in my periphery.

Val paces in an arc, batting at things. He knocks a small paperback to the floor and it lands so that the pages are bent beneath the spine. His knuckles knead into puffed-up veins along his temples.

Protest is perched under my tongue, but I only push fingertips into the base of my skull, let the nails etch crescents into my scalp.

He picks up the book, stares at the cover a moment, and tosses it onto a chair piled with papers. He looks out the glass wall toward the willow, branches bare and bronchiole-thin, and takes a long pull of his cigarette, then motions to the space once occupied by the piano—still vacant. “Dicked that she bought a ham afterwards.”

I snort, roll my eyes.

“You were a beauty on that thing.” He stamps the Belmont out. “Didn’t think she’d actually do it.”

“Never got myself another.”

“You should.”

I pull a wicker chair from the corner and take a seat in front of the Bechstein-ghost, feign opening a book of sheet music—*Swan Lake*—and begin to play. It takes long seconds of slow fumbling before muscle

memory kicks in, and each note resounds triumphant in the well of my mind.

“Turn the page, Val.”

He’s at the massage table against the adjacent wall, rooting through the clutter.

“Turn the page for me,” I say louder.

He picks up a lava lamp and angles it upside down. “If this works, I’m taking it.”

The music halts and I lower my arms. My chair mewes as I lean into it. Val plugs in the lamp and whoops when it glows amber. He sits on the floor and lets it warm up, waits for the show to begin. He stretches his legs, kicks a basket of blankets out of the way, and I lie next to him like a starfish, imagine the ceiling is now the floor. The room isn’t any smaller. We’ve only outgrown it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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