

Silent Music

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ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD
3 Castle Yard
Richmond
Surrey TW10 6TF
United Kingdom
www.almabooks.com

First published by Alma Books Ltd in 2016

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Cover design: Jem Butcher

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Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84688-412-2
EBOOK: 978-1-84688-418-4

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Silent Music

FOR JONATHAN

PART ONE

1

As the long fingers of encroaching night crept into the stuffy little bedroom, the small figure on the bed would have been all but invisible had her tossing movements not disturbed the darkness with glimmering reflections of the dying light. Still wide awake, she kicked off the covers and, stretching her legs until they touched the hard end of the bed, strained not only her ears but every muscle in her body to catch the rise and fall of the argument which filtered up through the floorboards and through the open windows from the room below. She would have preferred not to hear her mother's outbursts, but an irresistible compulsion prevented her from pulling the bedclothes over her head and closing her ears and her mind to the domestic drama being enacted downstairs. Every word of her mother's studied performance was clearly audible, but the low, moderate tones of her father's replies as he repeated the same words over and over again were more difficult to grasp. She could imagine him shaking his head in anxious uncertainty as he spoke: "I really can't see how we can manage it, I can't see at all."

Shirley, her mother, the author of the outbursts, interrupted her husband in rhythmic crescendos of hysteria. Ruth, the silent audience of her parents' disagreement, alone in the blackness of the little back bedroom, winced at the injustice of the accusations bombarding her father.

"Well, come on, John! Here am I offering to work all the hours in the day, doing something I know I can do, to give us a decent income, and all you can say is 'I can't see how we can manage it'," shouted Shirley, mimicking his hesitant speech with caustic sarcasm.

He replied calmly, stoically hiding his distress, choosing his words carefully in an attempt to avoid further outbursts or

provoke his wife even more. “I don’t want you to have to work all the hours in the day. In fact, I don’t think you should have to work at all: it’s not right.”

“But I worked in the War, harder than you will ever know!” was her immediate, defiant retort. “It was all right for women to work then – they had to – so why shouldn’t they work now? Other women work even now, so why shouldn’t I?”

Searching for inspiration, she quickly stumbled on a wider cause, the truth of which was irrefutable, and she went triumphantly into the attack: “Men are afraid, that’s why; men are afraid of losing their power if women can do everything they can do. They’re afraid their supper won’t be ready for them in the evening and their shirts won’t be ironed. Well, I’ve had enough of that.” Ruth imagined Shirley flouncing round the table, doubtless hobbling with that strange limp of hers, pulling the cloth off and throwing it into a corner in a symbolic gesture of disgust.

John disregarded this latest challenge with its wide-ranging sociological implications as, perhaps unwisely, he was still concentrating on the previous, more personal, issue. “Anyhow, my pay is not that bad since I was promoted,” he volunteered quietly after some consideration. “Don’t forget I am the Deputy Manager of the office now and that means something!”

“Your pay means something! It’s not that bad!” she exclaimed, her resentment whipped again into a dramatic frenzy. “What do you mean ‘not that bad’? What does it mean? We haven’t got a car, we haven’t got a fridge, we haven’t got a television, and here we are in this pokey little house with no garden and neighbours on all sides.”

She stopped to draw breath and then raised her voice even higher, as if deliberately addressing the neighbours. “I bet they’re all listening, with their ears glued to the walls!” she shouted more loudly, as if inviting the said audience to listen in. She considered her next move, and in an adroit change of tactics and with an impeccable sense of timing, her voice faded in a plaintive diminuendo, as she moaned quietly in self-pity. Forgetting her anger she assumed the role of the tragic heroine.

“To think that people always said I was bound to be a ballerina or a film star!” Suddenly she raised her voice again. “You said so too, don’t you remember? And just look how I have ended up!” Having reached its highest pitch of pathos, her anger dissolved in convulsive sobbing, lending true drama to the awful tragedy of her plight.

Ruth heaved a sad sigh in the darkened room. This was not a sigh of sympathy for Shirley’s misfortune, so poignantly expressed downstairs, but a sigh of despair for her father’s predicament. Although the entire neighbourhood might well have heard what was going on, without having to glue their ears to the walls, such rows were not of resounding interest because, whatever the cause, they always assumed the same predictable pattern, though this one was definitely the worst in a very long time. For Ruth, on the other hand, their impact never ceased to be harrowing. She wanted to rush to her father’s defence against her mother; she would shout back at her that there was no reason to attack Dad so viciously. He was kind and gentle, and it was obvious that he tried very hard to do his best for them. For all her problems, Shirley was spoilt and selfish. If only he would make a stand, put her in her place. Ruth wanted to run downstairs and hug him protectively, but she did not dare for fear of making matters worse.

On this particular occasion she had wanted to warn her father of the danger signals when he first set foot in the door that evening. As usual, there had been not the slightest opportunity to give him so much as a word of warning or even a signal to put him on his guard, so her good intentions had remained unfulfilled and this row was the result. In contrast to her father, who needed to have every nuance explained to him in fine detail, Ruth, with the instinct of a small animal, had perceived from the very moment she came home from school that the atmosphere was charged with an electrical excitement. As past experience suggested, this was sure to explode over her father’s head at supper time, as indeed it had.

Shirley had been involved in an animated discussion with Mr Farjeon, the elderly man from the newspaper shop, whom

they all called “Old Fargone”. The compulsive chatter was all about premises and rents, quotas and reps, licences and wholesaling, terms which meant nothing to Ruth and, since Shirley (she did not like to be called “Mummy” or “Mum” and certainly not “Mother”) had scarcely acknowledged her daughter’s arrival, Ruth had deemed it wisest to run straight through the house out to the little backyard, collecting a glass of orange squash and a biscuit on the way. Wondering what was happening, but mindful of Shirley’s dangerously tense excitement and conscious that her presence would not be welcome, she sat herself down on the back doorstep with her knees clasped to her chest and gazed up at the grimy London sky, relieved only by an apologetic hint of distant blue, a faint acknowledgement that somewhere far away the summer sun was shining brightly.

Noises assailed her from all sides as she sat puzzling over how best to warn her father of the build-up to the inevitable approaching explosion. He, poor thing, was so innocent he would be bound to provoke it – he always did – and there would be nothing that she could do to help him. One might have suspected that he had a blind spot for these crises, because he had never learnt to judge the emotional temperature or the state of Shirley’s moods any more than he could anticipate or dominate her bouts of manic tension, even when they had been building up for some weeks.

Sometimes she maintained control over these periods herself, but when they raged out of control, as was happening now, the outcome would be a tempestuous session possibly followed by a fall into the depths of depression, and then he would nurse her like a child with untiring love and patience. Tonight the storm would rage for hours, and in the end Shirley would be certain to get her own way; that was the time-honoured conclusion. At first she would rant and rave, then she would wheedle and cajole until Dad (at least Ruth had one parent who did not mind being addressed as such) was completely disarmed, his powers of resistance depleted, his mental faculties drained and his generous nature exploited.

So seriously was Ruth absorbed in these considerations that, for once, she scarcely noticed the invasive clamour of human and animal activity from the neighbouring houses: it ricocheted off the three tight walls of the little yard and the back wall of the house, adults scolding, children whining, wirelesses blaring, dogs barking, all against the incessant hum of the capital city. Suddenly a familiar and welcome sound sent a thrill through her hunched frame, interrupting her musings, leaving them momentarily suspended in empty space and drowning out all other noises. The sound was none other than the majestic panting of an express train, perhaps even the Flying Scotsman, as it ponderously heaved its way out of Euston station, echoing among the narrow lines of houses. It drew closer, gathering speed and whistling as it passed through the cutting at the end of the street, only half a dozen houses away.

Closing her eyes and holding out her arms in rapture, Ruth stood up to immerse herself in the clouds of warm, gritty smoke which filled the yard in a dense comforting fog, opening her mouth to gulp the sticky black smuts. They smelt and tasted of tar and coal, like that yellow soap that was Grandpa's favourite, and they conjured up powerful images of independence, of travel, of escape, of green fields and countryside, of the sea and of summer holidays. They brought visions of those carefree days when Dad and Shirley would talk happily to each other, laughing as they walked arm in arm along the promenade or the pier, while Ruth played on the beach and Nan, who always came to join them for that week, dozed in her deckchair in the sun.

Those times were a fleeting glimpse of the real life, of life as it should be lived. They happened only once a year, for only one brief week, but that week was the most important of the whole twelve months. In that week Shirley seemed to escape from a wicked spell: miraculously, she would suddenly try to be nice to everyone – to Dad, to Ruth herself, and even to Nan. You might almost believe that she did in fact possess some qualities of human kindness after all, even if at other times they were only occasionally perceptible.

She would laugh and cheer at the performances at the Pier Theatre, and afterwards, on the way back to the hotel, she would cling to Dad's arm, whispering and giggling in his ear and caressing his cheek till she brought a broad smile to his lips. She would even patiently spend ages before dinner trying to fix a bow to Ruth's slippery brown hair, and then, standing back to admire the finished effect, would remark, "You know, Ruth, one day you might be quite pretty after all." This concession was usually accompanied by a cuddle which, as they descended the stairs to dinner, made them appear to be the closest of mothers and daughters.

On holiday, Shirley would make a conspicuous effort to be civil to Nan; she would chat to her occasionally about nothing in particular, and had been known to give her a helping hand up steps. No one would ever think that a month or two earlier she had been fretting and complaining explosively about taking Nan on holiday, although it had been her idea in the first place. "It's my only week by the sea, and I have to spend it with your mother!" she would exclaim to Dad, stressing the "your" with recriminatory indignation, sometimes, if the situation got out of hand, even insisting that he should tell his mother not to come. Usually by the next morning the upset would have subsided and nothing more was said, so Nan came on holiday as usual, unaware that her impending presence had been the cause of a domestic disturbance.

As the clouds of smoke from the passing train began to disperse, Ruth was about to resume her seat on the back doorstep when, out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the flash of red claw-like nails, reaching out to grab her from behind. She ducked out of the way and escaped the claws but did not avoid the impact of Shirley's knife-edged tongue. "You naughty girl! What do you think you are doing out there in all that smoke? How many times do I have to tell you not to stand in the yard when a train is passing? That makes more washing! Don't you think I've got better things to do? Go up to your room at once!" Without daring to point out that Shirley did not actually do the washing because Ruth and her father did it themselves on

Saturdays, Ruth obeyed meekly, thankful to be out of reach of the red claws, but no sooner had she gone upstairs than she was called down again to lay the table for supper.

Shirley was busy clearing piles of official-looking papers away and taking them into her private domain, the front room, from which Ruth was excluded except on special occasions. Every shelf, nook and cranny in that room was full of Shirley's treasures – porcelain shepherdesses, china horses, glass swans and plaster geese, all conspiring to create so many hazards that Ruth was positively glad to be kept out. There Shirley entertained her friends, or rather held court, for it was generally accepted in the neighbourhood that with her blonde hair, her good looks, her slim, striking figure and her high heels, she was a cut above the rest of the street and, far from feeling resentful, her neighbours regarded it as an honour to be invited in for coffee and a smoke.

They doubtless still hung on to the faint hope, as she did, that she was a star waiting to be discovered. Perhaps they were secretly expecting their patience to be rewarded when, at some undefined future date, they would be there on the spot, ready to reap the benefits of a fortunate acquaintance. Though now, with the advancing years and little sign of any progress, they could be forgiven for having some misgivings as to the likelihood of these ambitions ever being fulfilled. Usually, by the time they left, there was little to choose in terms of tar content between Shirley's parlour and the backyard when a train was passing through the cutting. Ruth had also learnt the folly of attempting to point out that particular comparison.

Shirley retreated into the front room, leaving Ruth to assemble the usual Monday supper of cold meat, bread and pickles in the kitchen. With any luck she would be able to warn her dad that something was afoot as soon as he entered the house. Alas, the mere sound of his key in the lock of the front door was enough to bring Shirley bounding out of her lair, like a wild animal ready to pounce, bursting with pride at the ingenuity of the scheme she was devising. A swift glance from the kitchen told Ruth that her father was weary and hungry. His

face was sallow, beaded with sweat in the heat. He searched in confusion for an appropriate answer to Shirley's impetuous "You'll never guess what has happened!"

Predictably, his answer, when it came, did not in any way satisfy her expectations. "Let me take my jacket off and have a wash, love," he said, kissing her on the cheek. "It's been such a hot day and so stuffy in the office." He worked in the Rates Office at the local borough council.

This simple request was immediately interpreted by Shirley as a rebuff. Wiping the perfunctory but sweaty kiss from her cheek with the back of her hand in disgust, she glared at her husband, but summoned the reluctant grace to wait till he sat down before proceeding. "Might you take a little interest in what I have to tell you?" she enquired, her voice already hard and laden with scorn. Ruth, seated between the two contenders like an umpire at a tennis match, watched and listened with bated breath. "Of course, love; go on, tell me," John replied.

He then made the unfortunate mistake of tucking with ill-concealed relish into his supper, not giving his impatient wife the full and undivided attention that she required. Consequently, instead of suggesting proposals for mutual consideration as had been her intention, Shirley indignantly presented him with a *fait accompli*, which indeed had the required effect of interrupting his meal in an astounding fashion. He sat staring at her, his mouth open, his fork waving in the air, when she baldly announced, "We're going to move; we're going to buy or rent the newsagent's and set up in business." She smirked defiantly before continuing: "Old Fargone is retiring, and he has agreed either to sell or, for the time being until we can raise the money, to let it to us."

At last Ruth understood why Shirley had been so busy and preoccupied, not only this afternoon but every afternoon for the past two or three weeks. She had been preparing a major upheaval in their lives, and this was evidently the first that Dad had heard about it. She, Ruth, did not count; she did not expect to hear about things, holidays, moves and such, until they happened, but she was cross that her dad had not been

consulted earlier over such an important matter. Naturally there would be an almighty row. Shirley would feel slighted at having her plans questioned, for this was tantamount to doubting her ability: after all, as they and anyone else who cared to listen were frequently reminded, *she* was the daughter of a successful newsagent and knew all there was to know about the business. Dad, on the other hand, initially dumbstruck at the full seriousness of the situation, would want much more information, facts and figures, and time to investigate the pros and cons before coming to any decision. Shirley would be unable to restrain her impatience and Dad would retreat unhappily into himself. The forthcoming row was as easy to anticipate as night following day, but this one was different in that it was going to hinge on a question of considerable significance to them all.

Ruth ate her supper hurriedly while her parents glared in dull hostility at each other, each anticipating the other's reactions and preparing to counter them. As she finished her bread and butter, her father turned to her, his face a picture of doleful resignation, and said, "Ruthie, I think you had better go upstairs."

"Yes," Shirley snapped, in a deceptive display of agreement with her spouse. "You can forget about the washing-up and go to bed early tonight: it'll do you good."

The row which had been going on for hours down below was finally waning now that Shirley's well-rehearsed repertoire was finally exhausted. They had been through the gamut of her life history: her early artistic talent, the hopes of her devoted father, his paper shop, her successes at the dance school, the promise of a fantastic career which was certain to bring her fame, wealth and glamour, the experiences of the War – all frustrated in a dead-end marriage which brought her drudgery and poverty in a London backstreet. Dad had heard it all often enough, so had Ruth: he was entirely to blame for everything that had, or rather had not, happened to Shirley since their marriage.

The voices were quiet now. Ruth was sure she heard a faint giggle: that must mean that Shirley had won and that Dad had been forced to agree to whatever it was she wanted, presumably

going into business as a newsagent, whether he wanted to or not. She heard their footsteps on the staircase. The row was over, and they were going to bed, whispering to each other and stumbling in the dark. At last Ruth relaxed her guard, for the only sounds to reach her room from behind their closed door were the normal muffled noises of the night. She turned her face to the wall, yawned and closed her eyes. Maybe it would not be too bad, she thought drowsily; it might even be an improvement on their present circumstances. Shirley was right: their house was very small and pokey, hemmed in on all sides by other houses and other people.

The paper shop was on the main road, on the Broadway by the zebra crossing next to the post office. It looked more like a house that had once, a long time ago, been made into a shop with a large flat upstairs, and out at the back it overlooked a garden and the park at the rear. That much she knew because she saw it whenever she went to the park. Sometimes, on a fine day, old Mr Farjeon would stand at his back gate surveying the park and having a quiet smoke, while in the shop his wife grudgingly served the penny bull's-eyes and liquorice sticks from the sweet counter to homeward-bound schoolchildren.

Drifting into a reassured state of half-sleep, clutching a ragged old teddy, she reverted to a less complex world, one where she always felt at ease: the dream world of her early memories, particularly of her closeness to her grandmother and of everything connected with her house, with its enigmatic name, Haydn, engraved on the gate at number 10, Beech Grove. These were the dreams that came floating into her mind just as the last wisps of daylight had wafted into her bedroom hours earlier, and they were the dreams that often gave her refuge from her uncertain home life.

Nan rarely gave the impression of suffering from the unintelligible complications of adulthood that beset Dad and Shirley. Nan's outlook on the past and the future was only very occasionally tarnished with regret or sadness for what had been and might have been; she was sensible and unchanging. Although she lived so far away, her image, now

ageing, was ever present and reassured Ruth in times of domestic upheaval.

Inextricably linked with the image of Nan and completely at one with her personality, her house was the source of Ruth's most memorable impressions, impressions which she carried everywhere with her and which in their vividness would for ever condition her whole outlook on life. Dreams of that house offered her a secure haven from all the anxieties occasioned by a home life which was and always had been, by its very nature, uncertain. That house was also the guardian of her greatest secret, one that she shared with Nan, but not with her parents.

Dear Nan: if Ruth had any doubts as to whether Shirley, with her fluffy blonde curls, her green eyes and her neat, oval face, were her real mother, there were no such doubts about her relationship with her grandmother. Nan had the same straight hair – formerly brown, now plaited back in a greying bun – the same large, trusting brown eyes and the same broad face and darkish skin which Ruth saw repeated in her father and which she recognized in herself. Their features were distinctive but undistinguished, frankly not capable of great beauty according to conventional perceptions.

At first glance, most people would have regarded Nan as simply a kind and unassuming elderly lady. Ruth knew better than that. She knew that Nan had hidden powers and possessed a magical capacity for invention, for she told entertaining stories at night as she and Ruth prepared for bed in their shared bedroom on holiday at the guest house by the sea, just as she had done years ago on those occasions when Grandpa was still alive and Ruth was small and went to stay with them. Sometimes the stories were about the fairy folk at the bottom of her garden, who had endless problems with their families. Sometimes they were about Dad when he was a little boy and was constantly getting into scrapes.

Twice he had got stuck up the old oak tree in the Dell down the road, and the fire brigade had had to come and rescue him with their ladders. Once he vanished for a whole night until

they discovered him early the following morning, sleeping contentedly in the shed, shut in among his beloved tools – and once, when Nan and Grandpa were out, he decided, thinking he was being helpful, to colour the front door bright orange with some paint he had found on a shelf. The fairies' children indulged in the same sort of pranks, and their parents were forever coming to Nan to ask her advice on how to deal with them. Surprisingly no one was ever cross with their children, neither Nan and Grandpa with Dad, nor the fairies with their offspring. They all credited their children with the best of intentions even if the results of those intentions were not quite as they hoped.

Last summer Ruth had become uncomfortably conscious that she was getting rather too old for these stories. Sadly she foresaw that growing up would spell the end of such childishness. Her school friends would laugh at her if they knew about them, as they would if they knew that she still took her old teddy to bed with her. Nevertheless, she felt an urge to keep the magic alive, so in private she continued to encourage Nan to recount the latest yarn.

“How is poor Mrs Spindleberry and that boy of hers – his name’s Tig, isn’t it?” she would enquire innocently.

“Well, now you’re asking!” Nan would reply with a sigh of exasperation, and then would launch into the story of Tig’s latest escapade, so that you might have believed it was only yesterday that poor Mrs Spindleberry had come to plead with her to bring Tig down from the cherry tree, where he had picked all the cherries and then found that the basket – which had been empty and light when he had flown up into the tree with it under his arm – was much too heavy to bring down.

Nan was mildly irritated but not in the least bit angry with Tig because, she said, the fairies, even Tig, were such good company for her that she was happy for them to help themselves to the cherries and anything else they wanted. Ruth smiled to herself, for she knew that Tig was the rogue blackbird that ate all Nan’s ripe cherries. When asked why she did not shoo him

away or get a cat, Nan would reply simply that the cherries were small payment for his beautiful singing.

The tranquillizing effect of these stories lulled Ruth into a peaceful sleep. In fact, this diversion was a strategy which subconsciously she had adopted from a very early age to protect herself from the upsets of life at home. The pictures she conjured up were as endlessly reassuring as Shirley's moods were disturbing, for they helped her erect a barrier between the two sides of her life: on the one hand, the cramped bleakness of London, which was her home, and on the other, the calm, gentleness and clarity of Norhambury, the city where Nan lived, with its trees and gardens, its castle and cathedral, backstreets and alleyways – and, of course, its market. The differences extended to the people, especially the people in her own family. She herself was unable to reconcile the extremes of personality even among her own relations, nor were there any satisfactory reasons for their obvious incompatibility however much she wondered about them.

At breakfast next morning, apart perhaps from a slightly complacent smile which hovered over her lips, Shirley behaved with complete normality, so that one might be forgiven for thinking that there had been nothing amiss the previous evening. True to form, she slapped two charcoal-covered slices of toast down directly onto the tablecloth and splashed the dark tea over the rims of the cups into the saucers. Dad said nothing, his eyes fixed on the red squares of the tablecloth, apparently trying to decipher some extremely perplexing mathematical pattern contained therein.

Suddenly and as calmly as if she might have been predicting the day's weather, Shirley announced, "Well, it's all settled: we're going to move and I'm going to set up in business as a newsagent."

Ruth raised her eyes from her bowl of cereal. Unable to pretend that she hadn't heard such a loudly broadcast piece of news, all she said was "Oh" for want of anything better.

Untroubled for once by the lack of dramatic impact of her statement because she was too far carried away in her own

schemes and plans, Shirley continued: “Your dad will carry on with his work at the Rates Office for the time being. And oh, I nearly forgot: we’ve decided you’ll have to go and spend the summer at Beech Grove while we get on with the moving.”

Overcome with joy, Ruth maintained sufficient presence of mind to greet these instructions with another noncommittal “Oh”, lest too great a display of enthusiasm might have the wholly perverse but possible effect of changing her mother’s mind. The promise of spending the whole of the summer holiday – not simply the occasional weekend – at Nan’s filled Ruth with such excitement and anticipation that for the next three weeks, until the end of term, she found it almost impossible to concentrate on anything else, and certainly not her schoolwork.