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THE WORLD WITHIN

Music is often called the universal language, but the same might be said of sculpture, or painting, or flower arranging ... in fact, many forms of artistic expression represent inner truth nonverbally. Does that include spirits?

Aria sat in the straight-backed chair and trapped her hands between her knees, waiting for the poltergeist. It didn't always come; lots of times when she wished it would show up it did nothing; but today her favorite seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Bridge, was having tea with Aria and her mother in their little third-floor apartment, and always, always, when Aria least wanted it to come, the poltergeist came.

"Sugar?" Mother asked Mrs. Bridge, who smiled and nodded. Mrs. Bridge was wearing a warm red dress, and Mother wore her violet company dress, faded from washing to almost gray. A hearthfire and smoke, Aria thought. The herbal tea smelled good; below its warmth lingered the faded scent of lavender.

Mother plopped two sugar cubes into Mrs. Bridge's tea cup and glanced at Aria, saw the trapped hands. "Don't!" she said.

Mrs. Bridge, a comfortably large woman, mid-spectrum middle-aged, with short curly brown hair and big red-framed glasses, glanced at Aria, eyebrows up.

Mother handed Aria the tea cup she had been fixing for Mrs. Bridge. "Drink this. Do something. Don't just sit there, Ari."

Aria loosed her hands and took the tea cup, gulped tea even though it was scalding.

"Excuse me?" said Mrs. Bridge.

"I'm sorry," said Mother. "She was about to have one of her fits."

"Her fits," said Mrs. Bridge. "Ah."

Had she ever had a fit in one of Mrs. Bridge's classes? Aria wondered. She couldn't remember one. What did Mrs. Bridge know?

Mother poured another cup of tea and dropped sugar into it. "Cream?" she asked Mrs. Bridge.

Why did Mother always invite her teachers to the apartment? It hadn't bothered Aria when she was younger, before the poltergeist came. Or, it hadn't bothered her much. She didn't really want teachers seeing how she lived.

Some of the teachers had felt sorry for her, she was sure, when they looked around this little room that was her and her mother's whole world: the Murphy bed folded into the wall, its underside decorated with a woven hanging; the narrow doors leading to the closet and the bathroom; the braided oval of rag rug on the floor; the round scarred wooden table they were sitting at, with its navy cloth placemats and the pink plastic vase where Mother always put a sprig of something -- even in the dead of winter she would find a twig with a bud on it, or a spray of holly leaves or pine needles; the book shelves beside the radiator under the windows, where a few dark and stained tomes, some from the old country, stood beside the space where Aria kept her library books, which changed each week; the slender selection of vinyl records in the shelf below the little white turntable with its attached speakers; the little black-and-white TV on its own tiny table, with a wire hanger antenna twisted into an eternal lazy 8; the counter against the right-hand wall that held the sink, the stove, the cutting board, and the dish rack, with hanging cabinets above, where Aria and her mother kept food and their few dishes; the little fridge in the corner, disguised with wood-grained brown Contact paper.

A small world, everything in it precious and cared for. Too small for Aria and her mother and the poltergeist, but the poltergeist didn't seem to care. Last year it had thrown a tea cup against the wall and frightened Mr. Piper, Aria's sixth grade teacher, right out of the house. The tea cup had broken, too; they only had three left now.

Aria drank more tea, hoping it would quiet Pell. She had never found a surefire method of making the poltergeist behave.

None of the other kids' mothers ever invited teachers home. At least, Aria had never heard of it. But then again, she wasn't exactly in the gossip stream at school.

She didn't think other people drank tea with teachers, either. She never saw television children drinking tea. When television people used tea cups, they drank coffee, except the ones on PBS.

"Cream," said Mrs. Bridge. "Yes, please."

Mother added a ribbon of cream to the tea. Aria watched it slide beneath the surface and then rise again from the bottom, billowing like a cloud just before Mother stirred it with a spoon and then offered the cup, spoon, saucer, and a napkin to Mrs. Bridge.

"Thank you so much for making time in your busy schedule to stop in and see us," Mother said to Mrs. Bridge.

"My pleasure," said Mrs. Bridge, accepting a sugar-sprinkled butter cookie from the plate Mother held out to her. "I'm always pleasantly surprised when a parent takes an interest in a child's education."

"I have high hopes for Ari," Mother said, glancing at Aria, offering her a

cookie. Aria took one. There were only five. Two each for Mother and Mrs. Bridge, one for her. She had better make this one last.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Bridge. Somehow she sounded a shade less friendly than she had a moment before.

"She's doing well in school, isn't she? She doesn't tell me much about her days," Mother said.

Aria sipped tea and watched one of her library books slide slowly toward the edge of its shelf.

"I think that's a matter for you to discuss with Aria," said Mrs. Bridge.

"But --" said Mother. "She really doesn't say much."

Mrs. Bridge looked at Aria. She smiled. "What do you think, Ari? Are you doing well in school?"

The book jumped out of the shelf and thumped on the floor.

Mrs. Bridge, seated with her back to the windows, glanced over her shoulder at the fallen book.

"Ari," said Mother, her voice fading.

"I'm doing fine," Aria said loudly as the book stood on its end, then opened with a flutter of pages.

"That's right," said Mrs. Bridge, watching the book. "She's doing fine."

The book thumped over, playing dead.

"And your hopes?" Mrs. Bridge asked.

"Pardon me?" said Mother.

"You mentioned something about your hopes for your daughter," said Mrs. Bridge.

"Did I? I -- I -- well, I..."

"Do you have hopes, Ari?" Mrs. Bridge asked, staring into Aria's eyes.

"No," said Aria. She looked at her cookie. It was one of the pretzel-shaped ones. Maybe she would lick the sugar crystals from it one at a time. There were a lot of them.

"What do you think about your mother's hopes for you? Do you know what they are?"

"She wants me to be an opera singer," Aria said. She glanced at the record player on the bookshelf. Some of the opera records were so old and scratched Mother didn't even try to play them anymore. The skips interrupted the singers too often. "What do you want, Aria?"

"I don't know," Aria said. Books fluttered from the shelf, thumping on the rug, each thump a punctuation.

Mrs. Bridge turned and watched the books, which thumped down, jumped on end, thumped down again, stacked themselves.

Mother's hands were clutched so tight about her tea cup the knuckles showed white. Her mouth was open and her eyes stared, but not at the books or anything in the room. Aria had seen her go to this not-here place before, some evenings when Pell was louder and more irritating than usual. Never before with company right in the room.

"Who knows what you want?" Mrs. Bridge asked, watching the books. The books opened and clapped loudly in a chorus.

"Who cares what I want?" Aria said. Why was Mrs. Bridge asking questions? Why wasn't she screaming out the door as others had done before her? How could she just sit there and watch the books dance, as though she saw such things every day?

The books fell to the floor as if they had never been animated.

"I, for one, would like to know," said Mrs. Bridge.

What do I want? Aria wondered. She glanced around the apartment. The records -- all her mother's. No CDs here. No money for them, no desire for them -- at least, her mother had no desire for them. The fragments of tunes and songs Aria heard from other apartments in the building, from boom boxes and car windows and the windows of houses Aria walked past on her way to school, the "new music" her mother said was not music, all these scraps of sound called to Aria. Everyone else knows my language, music sang, and you, you are not allowed to hear and learn it.

She thought of sitting in the music room and pounding on a wood block while the other children had instruments to play. She had talked to Mr. Steel about renting an instrument. A clarinet, she thought, a tone like melted butter, a range from the stars above to the bottom of the sea. But her mother had only a little money, and none for things like instrument rental.

"You are your instrument," Mother would say. "Take care of your voice. Train it. Use it. Sing this chorus again." Sheet music from a thrift store, words whose meaning Aria did not know but whose sound she learned from listening to the records. She practiced half an hour every afternoon, when she came home from school and before most of the people in neighboring apartments came home from work. She didn't want anyone to hear her. She was afraid of her voice. Sometimes

when she sang it got loud. It got away from her. It soared, carrying the tune.

She would sing for her mother in the evenings, trying to keep her voice softer than it wanted to be. Her mother would listen and smile.

Lately, Pell had slammed doors while Aria sang for her mother. Mostly the bathroom door. Slam slam slam. "O, holy night," slam, "the stars are brightly shiiiiining," slam. Mother thought Aria could sing at school in the Christmas show; surely if she had a prepared piece, they could find a place for her in the program. Slam. Aria had never sung where anyone but Mother or Pell could hear her.

Slam.

Then there was paint. Mrs. Bridge taught English and art. She gave Aria poster paints and construction paper and Aria had spent whole hours stroking colors side by side onto paper. She swirled things. She got mud brown colors by mixing, and then she learned to mix for creamy orange and light purple and pale green. While other people did whatever projects Mrs. Bridge assigned each day, Aria sat with her colors in front of her and made pictures that didn't look like anything you could see when you looked around an apartment or a street. Just swirls and pools of color.

Sometimes she painted with her fingers. Sometimes she mixed up colors and pressed her hands into them and then slapped her hands onto the paper.

Aria rarely brought her pictures home. Mother didn't like them. "Can't you do a nice still life?" she had asked.

Mrs. Bridge liked them, though. She had asked to keep some.

Then there was science class, where Ms. Claire taught them the world in pieces and puzzles. Shake up these body parts and then assemble them into a body. There was a certain romance in piecing together a bird from pinions and down and muscles and organs and hollow bones and the lace of nerves and branching trees of blood vessels. Aria loved the language of science: thorax, abdomen, mandible, proboscis; style, stigma, ovary ...

She was not sure she would want to spend the rest of her life buried under such language, so many details. She liked them; she could build walls with them; but were walls enough, when she could have color or music instead?

Aria looked at Mrs. Bridge. "Any news?" Mrs. Bridge asked.

"What?" said Aria.

"Do you know yet what you want?"

"No," said Aria.

"Well, you're young yet. You have time to try different things."

"You know what you want," said Mother. "Your marvelous instrument! Your beautiful voice!"

The record player leaped high into the air, then smashed down on the floor, its casing broken, parts spilling from it.

"Pell!" Aria said. "No!"

The albums shot from their sleeves on the shelf, sliced through the air between the people sitting at the table, and crashed into the wall beside the entrance, shattered, fragments sliding down into sharp-edged rubble on the floor.

Tears ran down Mother's face. She cried without sound except a hitch in her breath.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry," Aria muttered, wrapping her arms around her head, elbows jutting out. "I'll be good I'll be extra good I'll be so good you don't know I'm here..."

"My music. All my music ... I can never replace those records," Mother said, her voice strangled. She sniffed. She patted the tears from her face with her napkin. "Never."

"Tell me their titles," said Mrs. Bridge. "I'll see what I can do about getting you replacements. I'm sorry. I feel responsible."

"How can you be responsible when it's Ari who does these things?" Mother said.

There it was. Usually Aria did not discuss Pell with Mother. Usually Pell did small irritating things and both of them pretended this was just some normal inconvenience that everyone had to deal with at home. Mother had never before blamed Aria for what Pell did. Not directly, anyway.

Aria, mired in guilt and the spill of sorties, rocked in her chair and hid her head with her arms. If only Pell would go away and never never never come back. Pell wrecked everything. Pell broke things. Pell scared people. Pell hurt Mother.

Mrs. Bridge touched her arm. "Aria," she said. She poured tea, sugared it, tugged Aria's arm down. "Here, sweetie."

It took Aria a while to stop rocking and scratching herself up on the inside. Pell had never broken something so important before. Mostly Pell thumped things that wouldn't break. But the tea cup last year, that had hurt a lot. Not as much as the loss of the records, though.

She managed to stop saying she was sorry. She took the tea from Mrs. Bridge and sipped it. The feeling of being a horrible evil person didn't go away.

She glanced at Mother's face, saw the lines of suffering. The music was one of the few things that made Mother feel better when she came home from work. How often in the evening Aria had watched Mother as Mother listened to the music, her eyes looking at something far away and beautiful, something that carried her away from a world of dirty dishes and steaming water and the realities of a vanished husband, few job skills, and a stack of leftover bills from a previous life.

Aria would not forgive Pell for this deed. "How could you?" she whispered. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Bridge said again. "I think I asked the wrong questions."

"I can't bear it any longer," Mother said. She looked around their room, their world. No place was distant from any other place. Every place was in view. "I must go."

She rose, grabbed her purse and jacket, and rushed out.

"Oh, Aria," Mrs. Bridge said, "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"It's not your fault," said Aria. "How could it be? It's my fault, isn't it? I don't understand it. I don't see a Pell on television very often. I never see a Pell at school. Am I the only one who has a Pell?"

"No," said Mrs. Bridge.

"I mean, I know Pell is a poltergeist. There's a word for it. I just don't know anyone else who has one." Aria rose, got the trash can. She went to where the records lay in pieces and picked them up, wondering if she could glue them together and bring the music back to life. The pieces were too small and many. She didn't know if she could mend things with Mother, either.

"You don't seem surprised by this," Aria said, putting the pieces in the trash carefully, as though there was anything worse that could happen to them.

"Surprised? By the Pell, you mean?" asked Mrs. Bridge.

"Did you know about Pell before you came over?"

"No. Not exactly. I knew there was something different about you."

Aria sat back on her heels and looked at her teacher. "Different?" She couldn't remember ever being different. Most of the time she was silent, but there were a number of other kids in school who were quiet too. If she raised her hand, she never raised it high. If she had an answer, it was a boring one. If a teacher forced her to participate, she was subdued. "How could you tell?"

"The pictures," said Mrs. Bridge. "The things you paint."

"Things? But I don't paint things."

"You do. You paint things people don't see with their normal eyes."

"I don't understand."

"I don't think I can explain it any more clearly, dear. The things you paint are visions seen with something beyond sight. I've seen such pictures before. I came to visit because I wanted to make sure you don't lose those visions unless you are ready to let go of them. I know you don't take your pictures home. I've found them in the garbage before. So I suspected your mother wasn't very supportive of your art."

Aria sat with chunks of broken record in each hand and looked up at her teacher. She saw that Mother's abandoned tea cup rose from the table. "No!" she yelled. "No, Pell, not another one!"

The cup flew at the wall above where she crouched. It splashed tea on the wall, then drifted back to settle sedately on its saucer on the table.

Aria looked at the wall. There was an explosion there in pale brown against the white paint.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bridge, as Aria jumped up and got a sponge out of the sink. "I don't know if your hopes include painting, Aria. If they do, I would hate to see you give it up."

Aria wiped some of the tea from the wall. "Her hopes are more important than mine," she said in a low voice. "She has suffered so."

"I see," said Mrs. Bridge.

"She takes care of me."

"Yes."

"She hates her job."

"Ah."

"I don't know where she just went. She doesn't really like the neighbors. It's cold out."

"She'll be back," said Mrs. Bridge.

Aria got the whisk broom and dust pan and swept up the final fragments of records. "I don't know when she'll forgive me for this."

"Give me some paper. I'll write down the album titles and see how many I can

replace."

"Why? Why would you do that, Mrs. Bridge?"

"Because this world is so small, too small for two people when one won't forgive the other. And because I am glad to learn about Pell. I thought perhaps you needed a champion. I'm glad you already have one."

"A champion?" Aria said. She thought of all the annoying things Pell did, the trouble Pell caused. Sometimes Pell made the bed jump when Aria and her mother were already asleep. Sometimes the lights went on and off even when Aria was reading. Sometimes things disappeared in a pair of earrings, the house keys -- and couldn't be found; hours later or sometimes days, the things turned up right where they had been before they disappeared. Aria had never seen a pattern in the haunting. It had just been one long chain of annoyances.

"Pell won't let your heart smother," said Mrs. Bridge. She went to the bookshelf, pulled out the album covers and brought them to the table.

Two sheets of lined paper shot out of Aria's school notebook and drifted down in front of Mrs. Bridge.

"Thank you," she said, smiling, and pulled a pen out of her purse.

"You're welcome," Aria whispered. She looked at what was left of the tea splash. Some kind of vision. She could almost see a forest. Trees, anyway. She studied it a little while before she wiped it away.