

# BONE MUSIC



She felt like a ghost. She woke in the night. What was that music? Some troubled beast? Some strange bird of the night? Some lost soul wandering on the moors? Just her dreams?

What wild and weird things existed here?

Sylvia got up from her narrow bed, went to the window, held open her thin curtains, dared to peep.

Nothing. Darkness everywhere.

Darkened street below, darkness of the undulating land, blackness of the forest at the village's edge, light of a farmhouse far, far off, pale glow on the southern horizon, immensity of stars above.

The noise softened, became more lyrical. Whistle-like, flute-like, bird-like. Her head reeled as the

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music came into her. She narrowed her eyes and tried to see.

Nothing.

It was like something she'd dreamed before, like something coming from inside her as well as from outside her, like something she'd heard before. But how could she have? She couldn't have.

*Stop being stupid, Sylvia*, she whispered to herself. *Stop being so weird.*

She widened her eyes again, looked at the stars, the galaxies, the great spirals and clusters of light. The universe, spinning and dancing through time. Why was it all so huge? Why was she so small?

What the hell was she doing out here in this empty ancient place?

The music faltered, became jagged again, a series of groans and squeaks, as if it couldn't maintain the sweetness in itself. Was that a dark swaying human shape, there against the darkness of the forest's edge? Was it moving back into the forest? Or was it just her dreams, continuing?

The music ended, left its weird rhythms in her. Some tiny star-thing drifted gently through the black and glittering heavens.

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Why had her bliddy mother brought her here?  
What weird stuff went on out here? What weird  
things existed here?

No answers.

She left the window, went back to her bed.

Checked her phone. No signal.

She yearned for the city again, she yearned for  
a signal.

*Stop it, Sylvia, she told herself. Calm down. It's only  
for a bliddy week or two.*

She closed her eyes.

The dancing in her mind faltered and slowed.

She slept.



‘Good morning, my lovely! Sleep well, my love?’

Next morning. Her mum, in the little kitchen,  
pouring muesli into bowls. Yoghurt and a bowl of  
berries on the table, a pot of coffee. She stirred the  
coffee then poured, then made a swirl of white milk on  
top. Steam and the delicious scent rose.

‘Ah, it’s sulky Sylvia today, is it?’ she said.

She came to Sylvia and put her arms around her.

Sylvia shrugged. ‘Aye,’ she muttered.

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She pushed the grains and berries round and round her bowl.

On the floor were the boxes of food they'd brought with them, a case of red wine. And her mum's sketchbooks and pencils and paints and brushes and knives and palettes and canvases. A couple of easels against the wall. A half-finished painting of a desert scene. A scattering of photographs.

'Hear anything?' Sylvia said.

'Anything?'

'In the night. Like music or something.'

'Nope. Slept like a babe, thank goodness.'

'Like a babe?'

'Maybe it's the darkness, maybe it's the silence.'

'Any news of Dad?'

'Nope. He'll be fine. He always liked a bit of silence, didn't he? He's probably drinking in some five-star hotel with his mates. Hold still a minute, will you?'

'What? *Mum!*'

Mum had a pencil and sketchbook in her hands. She was sketching, drawing.

'Chin up a bit,' she said.

'No!'

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‘I’ve got to get back into it, haven’t I? Turn to the left a bit, eh?’

Sylvia scowled.

‘Yes, that’s a good expression,’ said her mum. ‘Hold that a moment.’

‘*Mum!*’

‘Oh Sylvia, calm down. If there’s news, it’ll get to us. It’s not like we’re in Outer Mongolia, is it?’

‘Might as well be.’

‘We’re not even fifty miles from Newcastle! Anyway, what kind of music?’

Sylvia shrugged. ‘Dunno. Probably nowt. Must have been dreaming.’

She looked through the window. Pale houses across the narrow roadway, sunlight, the forest’s edge, a far dark hillside. A black bird, flapping past, then another, then another. Other birds, dozens of them, much higher up, swirling and spiralling. And sky, sky, bliddy endless sky.

‘There’s lots of music out this way,’ her mother said. ‘Pipers, fiddlers. Mebbe there was a dance going on somewhere.’

Sylvia sighed.

A dance? What kind of dance took place out here?

‘Think I’ll . . .’ she started.

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‘Think you’ll what?’

Sylvia scowled again. Aye, exactly. What *did* she think she’d do out here? Set off walking back to the town? She stood up and got her coat from the back of the door. Got her scarf. Held her hands out wide. Her mum went on sketching.

‘I’ll do what there is to do here, Mum. I’ll open the door, go out into the emptiness and then I’ll turn round and come back in again.’

‘That’s a good idea, love. You have a nice walk. You should put your boots on.’

The boots? No way. She pulled her pale blue canvas shoes on.

Mum put her arms around Sylvia again. Sylvia let her do so.

‘It’ll do us good,’ said her mum. ‘A few days away in a beautiful place. And God, to get away from those kids for a while!’

‘You love those kids.’

‘Aye, but I need a holiday from all of it!’

Sylvia clenched her fists and stood dead still.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I know you need it, Mum.’

‘Thanks, love. Now go on, off you go.’

Sylvia pulled the door open.

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There was a chill breeze. There was sky, going on forever.

She sighed and stepped out.

‘Don’t get lost,’ her mum said gently.

She put her hand to Sylvia’s back and guided her away.



This was it, the village. Two rows of narrow timber houses, most of them faded white, some of them painted in would-be jolly shades: yellow, orange, an incredibly ugly purple one. Each had a patch of garden, a low wicket fence. Some flowers dancing in the breeze. A few cars, a couple of pick-ups, a couple of white transit vans. A long-abandoned telephone box. A long, low timber shack with BLACKWOOD COMMUNITY CLUB painted on it. A fading poster with a crude picture of a fiddle and some pipes. Another poster headed:

### **REWILDING THE NORTH** **Should the Lynx Come Back?**

There was an artist’s impression of a lynx on a forest



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path, its ears pointed, its fur spotted, its head turned to look out at the observer.

She grinned at the graffiti that was scribbled across it: *YES! And Lions and Tigers and Bears as well.*

‘And wildebeest,’ she muttered. ‘And elephants and anteaters and kangaroos.’

She walked on along the single potholed roadway.

Came to a grey timber chapel with slipped slates, boards on its windows and padlocks on its doors. There was an ancient crucifix on the gable end. A battered Jesus dangled from a single nail through his hand. He swayed awkwardly in the breeze. A message was painted on the wall below.

### *He Died So That We Might Live*

At one end of the village, the roadway narrowed, turned into a track that led towards the dark forest. At the other end, it led to yawning light-filled spaces. She turned around and headed for the light. A few folk about. A frail-looking pale and ancient man in a white flat-cap sat in a deckchair outside his front door. He raised a hand in greeting.

She nodded back at him.

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‘You will be the Allens, I would say,’ he said.

His voice was accented, not from this place. European.

‘The Allens?’ she said.

‘Yes, I think so.’

And yes, of course, it was true. That was her mother’s maiden name.

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘We are, I suppose.’

He lifted a striped mug of something from the little table beside him and swigged.

There was a row of stones arranged neatly on his window frame.

‘I am Andreas Muller,’ he said. His eyes were kind and watery. ‘Welcome back to you.’

She didn’t linger. She didn’t want to talk. She didn’t think to tell him what her name was.

She walked on. There was a little swings park on a fenced-off cindery patch behind the houses. A boy or a girl was there, and an ancient rusty swing squeak-squeak-squeaked as they swung on it.

She thought of Maxine. She said she’d call. She looked at her phone. No signal. Of course no bliddy signal.

Some high birds whirled and screeched.

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She walked on. The roadway veered away through the empty turf and bracken across the moors. No traffic on it. At the village's edge a footpath sign pointed north into the emptiness. It bore a cartoon of a jolly walker striding on. She stopped. This was the furthest north she'd been, the furthest-flung she'd ever been. Heather, bracken, yellow gorse, a million scattered sheep. Stone walls, streams. A handful of ruined cottages that must once have been part of the village. A derelict farmhouse with herd of hardly-moving stocky cattle by it. The moors, the fells, or whatever the damn things were called, and black rocks and jagged crags, and all of them mounting higher, turning to dark lumps and bulges on the impossibly far horizon.

And over everything the empty massive sky.

And back beyond the village, the dark and endless-looking forest.

This is where her mum had been a baby. They'd told Sylvia about the place when she was a tot. She'd seen the photographs, she'd seen the paintings. She'd known exactly what it would be like. They hadn't brought her then. She was a city girl. Why bring her here now?

She closed her eyes against it all. She kept back tears.