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To learn more about this month's featured author, Carole Rosenthal, see her website at <http://www.hamiltonstone.org/carolerosenthal.html>. The story included in this *Extra*, "The Concert Pianist's Flight" was originally published in PARASPHERES: EXTENDING BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF LITERARY AND GENRE FICTION (Omnidawn, 2006)

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**Carole Rosenthal**

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HAMILTON STONE EDITIONS

p.o. box 43, Maplewood, New Jersey 07040 [hstone@hamiltonstone.org](mailto:hstone@hamiltonstone.org)

# **The Concert Pianist's Flight**

*(for Tommaso Landolfi)*

## **Carole Rosenthal**

His wife liked him because his broad shoulders were soft, like a pillow, and so was his chest. His fingers when he probed her face, poking into an earhole or stroking her hair, yielded to the complex twists and folds of her skin, not pushing too hard or straight ahead, but resting upon her firmly with just the right elastic pressure. He was not a grasping person, but he was capable of producing from her throat a quick succession of adjacent tones, a glissando, and when it came right down to it she would admit that one reason they had such a good marriage, such a complementary relationship, was because he was definitely somebody she could trust. He was somebody a person could sink into, somebody who automatically bounced back from her emotional heaviness, her demands, without any sign of disfiguring indentations where her problems had lain. And he didn't make her feel bad about it. He could shape himself to her needs at the moment, without any permanent change in the integrity he felt in his own form.

But she began, finally, to resent the fact that she never left her mark on him. Since she first met him, he had not really changed. He was resilient, yes, and giving too, but impermeable in some way that hurt her feelings and that made her think he didn't care enough.

They were so different from each other, really. While he was in another room during the daytime, his back curved, practicing on the piano, worrying about phrasing, she would sit in the sunlight, her nose pressed into the cold window glass, squinting over the streets, wondering if he loved her. And if he did, did he love her as much as she loved him?

"Why are you so in doubt?" he wondered. "Maybe you don't give yourself enough credit for the wonderful qualities you have."

But her own fingers and body were filled with bones, clunky with sharp hard things right under the skin that got in her own and in everybody else's way. She had been like that as long as anybody could remember. Pretty, but vaguely unmanageable. Not right. An old movie of her second birthday party showed her clearly: coy, curly-haired, be-ribboned, splashing accidentally--elbows and knees and patent leather shoes--into a tub of ice cream.

He, on the other hand, was airy and constrained; effortless. Handsome. Some people commented, discreetly, that he was better-looking than she was--particularly when he went out to a concert in the evening in his dress suit, his jacket habitually unbuttoned to reveal a wide cummerbund wrapping, glistening, around his waist, his face smooth and shiny under the lights. But certain facts about him were not widely known. Only his wife, who was apt to be a bit reproachful, understood them. And this

understanding gave her a certain power that should have made her feel safer.

"I need you, I need you," he told her repeatedly. "Jesus H. Christ! How many times do I have to tell you? Isn't it obvious?"

It was obvious. She had to inflate him every morning with her praise and with her breath, and at night, when he came home exhausted, she had to press the day's tension out of him carefully, starting with his feet and working her way up, leaning into him with her body. He needed her all right. He needed her to listen to him obsess about how he thought he ought to be more famous than he was, considering his talents, considering his ability; he needed her to take care of him because he was a balloon.

Yes, there was no denying it. No *ifs*, *ands* or *buts* about it. While she didn't know the details of any other couples' private relationships, and for all she knew maybe one person or the other actually being a balloon was very common, how could she take those needs, the proof he always offered of his love, very personally? Couldn't he just as easily be anybody's balloon, not just hers?

She tried to get him to commit himself. He claimed he already had. He floated out of reach, abrupt, resentful. In a fit of passion that night, she kissed him too hard, frightening him with her urgency. He asked her to treat him tenderly, with more consideration: "Yes, I know you love me, it's just that you're so impulsive, you get carried away"; and, when she began crying, he said guiltily, sorry he'd brought up the subject, sighing, "No, I don't want you to change yourself. I love you, only restrain yourself just a little bit more, can you?"

But he began to feel as if he were stretching too thin from her outbursts, the give and take of daily living, daily rubbing. In danger. He accused her of being overinvested in him.

"What are you trying to do, honey? You put so much of yourself into me, what do you have left over for yourself?"

But for the most part they were happy, well-adapted to each other, more or less complacent.

"Do you love me?"

"Um-hmm, uh-hmm," he said, nodding.

They made love in strange ways. Often, she was in control, positioning him this way and that, twisting recklessly, blowing him up to the point she desired, sliding across him and crescendoing, then riding hard, pounding, ultimately flying, on his thick but diminishing thighs.

"Oh, that was fantastic. Do you still love me?" she asked.

"Um-hmm, uh-hmm," he always said.

Always? Then did it count?

Sometimes she got angry that he was too pliant, that he was never obdurate enough for her. But then she remembered--or he would remind her because he hated criticism, because it ruined his self-image, his practice, and his public performances--that his pliancy was also why she liked him.

"But maybe I don't excite you enough," she said. "There are certain risks you just don't seem to take."

After awhile, she began to brood about ways to change him, to make him love her better. She started jogging, and lifting weights, and doing aerobic yoga in the morning to firm up her figure, secretly spreading herself all over from face to toes with herbal

masques, cutting and re-shaping her hair, and letting her fingernails grow long, painting them rich, deepening red.

One night when the lights were out and she felt the air thickening around her while they were making love, she grabbed him passionately and scratched him with a long fingernail, making him shriek with pain. He became almost instantly limp. The next morning he seemed pinched, suffocated, collapsed. Crumpled and forlorn. She couldn't revive him. He refused to go down to a rehearsal with a violinist--"What's the use?"--or even, by afternoon, to sit in his own music room and play. Depression. Humiliation. Both his and hers. It was evening before she located the tiny puncture over his left shoulder in the area where ordinarily one would find a wingbone. Glumly, trying to seem cheery--what else could she do?--she patched him back to near-normal, apologizing. Sorry, sorry. Smiling. Her teeth. He flinched.

The accident left a deep puckering cleft in his back which could be hidden under clothes. But the uneven striation of tension interfered with his playing until he got used to the pull of it. And the emotional scar was never completely accommodated, not even after he regained his confidence and his dexterity, that particular buoyancy of touch that had earned him his limited renown.

"I don't feel like you trust me anymore."

It was hard for him to trust her. Where he had always had a secret phobia about accepting her intimacy, about letting her fill him up with her admiration and her energy, afraid that he would stretch too vulnerably, beyond his capacity both inside and out, he seemed even more suspicious of her now; cautious, feigning indifference as she crouched by him in the morning, ashamed.

He began to withdraw. It affected the way he responded to his audiences, too, during his performances. No more magical expansion of sound and body, flaring larger than life with excitement. Recognition? Love? Applause? They seemed too dangerous. He didn't want to take the chance. How could he know when his wife and when his audience would cross the delicate boundaries of separation, giving him not just as much as he wanted, not just as much as he needed, but more. What *they* wanted. Forcing their way in. Until he had no life of his own. The only way he could perform now, he confessed to his wife, was by pretending that he was alone.

She was grateful for the confidence. Thoughtful.

"But that's such a compulsive over-reaction," she counseled him a couple of days later. "I hate to see what's happening to you. You haven't even achieved your full potential. How can you be afraid of too much when you've never experienced enough?"

He said he didn't know. She urged him to take a chance. He shrugged: "Why not?" The issue was crucial.

That night, after an unusually good recital, after some brilliant bravura moments, he forced himself to listen hard to the loud appreciation of his audience, the blast of breath, the exploding hands, rushing to enhance him.

"Bravo!"

"More!"

The air vibrated through the high hall. He found himself thrilled and moved. His wife smiled wildly from a seat in the front row. *Do it! Do it! Trust!* He smiled back at her. He opened his lips. *Yes!* They entered him all at once, but with the greatest ease. He swelled, even and obvious, to his full, true form. He barged upwards and outward,

elated. Curved and translucent with exuberance, his satin lapel shining, arcs of light from the ceiling reflecting joyfully on his face, bobbing his head in acknowledgment, up and down. Then he grew larger, still magnanimous, globose, as if he were about to lift off the ground. He was beginning to float, a little too gasily.

The clapping went on.

As long as he continued to expand, the audience continued to applaud, amazed.

"You're overdoing it," his wife shouted.

Too late.

He could no longer stop himself. He was afraid he was going to burst, swollen as he was with inner greatness. Glaring, sublime. He listened for the explosion, the violent end of selfhood, trying to pull himself down, lower, lower, resisting.

Then suddenly, he heard a noise. A rip.

*Pbbhh-flappbhh-pbbhflappbhh-pbbhhhhpp . . . .*

No, more like a fart. All the air going out of him at once. At first the audience just kept right on clapping their approval. Then they noticed that he was growing thinner, receding right before their eyes. And they heard the loud razzing noise . . . .

*pbbhh-flappbhh-pbbh-flappbhh . . .*

Crude, unmusical--was he making fun of them?--as all their stored up exhalation released fast, very fast, so fast that he just took off.

He flew up into the air, sailed around in circles, awkward unpredictable circles, jagged rag-tag ellipses--you couldn't call them circles even--high above the stage. A smattering of resentment rose, unarticulated. People left, denying anything untoward. Didn't see, didn't hear. No. There was no glory in this flight.

He landed, deflated, on the dusty overhead light rail. He stuck there, draped over the flat black fixtures, overlooking the stage. Obscured.

His wife couldn't find him. She went behind stage into the wings, then into the dressing rooms and got the stage manager, who referred her to the custodian, who considered the matter of missing husbands none of his concern. "Probably he's drinking it off somewhere, if you want my opinion."

Finally she borrowed a ladder and searched the ceiling, and, on her hands and knees, the pit. Until she was forced to the conclusion that her own daredevil subjectivity, stepping into the breach of her worst fear, had taken over in an hallucination. He had actually left her. She didn't know why. But he couldn't have loved her to begin with, could he have?

Because he never came down from the light fixtures they never had a chance to discuss it, to talk out their differences. Afterwards, she was always very bitter.

His fate was that he had to listen to all the performances ever given in the concert hall, and most of them were very bad indeed, which made him wonder gloomily why he hadn't become even better known, and if he was really as good as he thought he was. Her fate was that she had to live with a terrible guilt and embarrassment about being forsaken so abruptly when she'd been pretending theirs was such a happy marriage.