Fugue

R P Vine

"Bee not forgetfull to entertaine strangers, for thereby some have entertayned Angels unawares."
– *To the Hebrews xiii*

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For Betty who loved reading.
And for Fran who read Fugue first.

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Prelude

London – Two Years Ago

TOM STRETCHES A shaky hand towards the door. He remembers it from last time, so he pushes it. But the door doesn't creak open – it collapses. Chunks veined with black rot fall inwards in a cloud of dust, leaving a gaping doorway. He steps over them, out of the rain.

Last time here, there had been someone else, someone with him. He vaguely remembers laughter, the camaraderie of discovery, the click of camera shutters. But that had been a different life.

Smells assault him – wet carpets, filth and burnt wood. Tendrils of dry rot creep up the walls. Elegant Georgian furniture lies smashed. Wallpaper droops in curls, Regency damask graffitied and glistening with damp. Coats and hats still hang on a rotting stand. Tom ignores it all.

Ducking through a sagging doorway, he finds himself in a library. He recalls the smell of mildewed paper from before. He scans the buckling shelves of blackened books, looking for something. At last he finds it, eases it from its shelf in a waft of dust and slips it into his rucksack.

He steps through into the once-magnificent drawing room. Rain falls past ornate ceiling mouldings in heavy drops. The only sound he can hear – syncopated drips. Wet pearls of sound. *Like notes.*

He nods to himself and moves towards a shrouded grand piano in the centre of the room, pulls back the dust sheet. The piano's stained marquetry and faded gilding gleam enticingly in the wan light.

Outside, beacons strobe shocking blue. Car doors slam. Icy torch beams blast past tattered velvet curtains, through the dripping

doorway. They flash over everything, over Tom. Men shout, coming closer. A walkie-talkie crackles.

He hardly hears, doesn't care. He sits on the filthy stool, opens the piano and reaches for the stained keys.

'Tom?!' echoes a familiar woman's voice from the hall. 'Is that you? TOM?!'

Movement from the doorway, more shouts. He pauses for a moment, then begins to play the first notes of the fugue.

They dash through the barrier to Platform 7 and run for it, just as the last commuters are climbing aboard.

'Come on, Tom, or we'll miss the train. It leaves in three. And if we miss this one, we won't catch our connection at Lancaster!'

Tom sprints off down the platform, long curly hair flying.

'Tom!'

'What?' He spins around, still jogging backwards.

'First Class!'

She beckons him back and climbs in. Tom leaps in after her, pushes her aside and throws himself into a window seat.

'Cool. But why first? We never go first.'

'Because it's a Friday. It'll be packed. And your old mum needs a break … It's been a tough couple of weeks, Tom,' she adds with gentle irony.

'*Friday*?'

'Oh, Tom! Do you really not remember anything? Nothing at all?'

'Nah, why? That bloke was asking me lots of dodgy questions though.' He frowns at his mum. 'At the hospital.'

'The psychiatrist, d'you mean?'

'Whatever. But like, what happened? And why are you talking to me like I'm dying or something?'

'Two weeks, gone, Tom. Two whole weeks,' she says softly. 'And where did you learn to play it? You couldn't play before, not really …'

'What do you mean? Play what?' he asks, glaring at her now. 'Dunno what you're on about!'

Tom reaches into his rucksack and pulls out a book with a warped, water-stained cover and gold lettering. He opens it and settles to read. His mum looks at it and frowns.

'Forkel's biography of Bach? Why are you reading *that*? And where did you get it, Tom?' Her eyes widen in horror. 'Did you steal it? From that house?'

Tom shrugs. Her eyes redden and she shudders. Rain dripping through the ceiling. The notes themselves, falling icy and infinitely sad. The familiar fugue, a ghost from her past. She never wants to hear it again.

She reaches into her wallet, takes out a photo of a long-haired man and looks at it. For a moment she'd thought it was him playing. She rips it to pieces.

It's late when they reach their little station by the bay. London was warm, but here a cold wind whistles up the hill. It smells of salt marshes and rain.

When they get home, Tom tries to push in first. But the front door jams on a pile of letters. His mum reaches in and tugs them free.

'What the actual?'

'Two weeks' worth, Tom.'

'How come?'

'There's something here for you.' She hands him a small package with an official-looking stamp. 'Some more valves for that old radio you're fixing, I expect.'

Tom bounds upstairs to his room, three at a time. His mum goes to the kitchen to open a bottle. *God knows, I've earned this*, she thinks and pours herself a fat glug of Chardonnay, then another.

Tom sits at his desk in his attic room. A tabby Maine Coon with golden eyes slinks around the door and jumps onto the bed with a questioning trill.

'Shh! Not now, Tigs!'

Tom leans across, gives Mr Tiggles a quick pat, then rips open the package. Not valves. He pulls out a letter. His brow furrows as he reads.

Dear Tomas Andrews,

This is perhaps the strangest letter I have ever written. I should not be writing it at all, for it encloses museum property.

Where to start? Some weeks ago, a cache of misattributed documents relating to the composer J.C. Bach was found here at the Handel House Museum in London where I am the archivist.

Filed away amongst them was a letter addressed to you, care of the composer. Since Johann Christian died in 1782, I thought this a hoax. At first.

However, the letter bears an unbroken 18th-century seal. It is written on 18th-century paper with a Prussian watermark. The address is penned in oak-gall ink. In short, the letter is authentic.

I checked the census and was astonished to find you. Some mysteries are best left unsolved. The letter is thus enclosed, unopened.

I am most faithfully and bemusedly yours,

Charles R. Bickerstaff, Archivist.

Tom shrugs, puts the first letter aside and rummages in the package, takes out a second. But this one is ancient. It looks as if it has travelled the world and the ages. It is franked everywhere. Yellowed, foxed and stained, the thick linen paper is addressed in curlicued handwriting:

Tomas Andrews
4 Hazelmere Close
Flookthwaite
Cumbria
C/O
Herr J.C. Bach
Soho Square
London.

The paper is folded into a kind of envelope. It is closed by a wax seal, almost black, impressed with a crown. Gently, Tom breaks it. Wax crumbles into his lap.

He unfolds the paper, oddly ridged under his fingertips and so thick and stiff it crackles in protest. Holding the paper to the light, he sees a watermark of an eagle.

Now he sees writing on the inside, jet-black and sparkling slightly. He puts it to his nose. It smells of resin and a memory: rosewater. What is written on it makes no sense, but it tugs at his heart:

Tom! Help! Save me! I was wrong!
Instructions for the tunnel are overleaf, as you asked.
Come to me! I love you!

The letters are jerky and uneven, as if they were written on the move. His bedroom fades and Tom sees a yellow-and-black stagecoach bumping over a rutted road, a girl's pale face and black hair through the window.

Inside, the girl scribbles frantically, clutching an inkpot, quill scratching. Her curling letters gleam grey then bruise black. Tears glisten on her cheeks. There is an odour of sweat and wet wool from the lolling passengers around her; the tang of wet bark and leaves from her ink. A sudden jolt, a screech from the axles. The inkpot lurches; she steadies it just in time.

Does he know her? How? From where? Is she Wilhelmina's friend? *But Wilhelmina isn't real*, he reminds himself … Or is she?

Tom snaps back to the letter. Below the writing is what might be a signature, smeared into illegibility by raindrops, or perhaps tears. He can make out a capital 'S' but nothing more.

Tom turns the letter over. The scrawl there makes even less sense. There are notes on a stave, lots of them – a chord. Some kind of instructions about pipes and stops. A table with dates.

He turns the letter again, sits and stares at it. A girl is writing to him. Not Wilhelmina. A different girl, he's sure – her name starts with 'S' and her writing is different. *And she says she loves me!* Why? He has no idea.

He looks at the notes, the chord. Maybe he should try playing it. What will happen? One way to find out …

He bounds down the stairs and into the living room, where his mum is kneeling at the grate, starting a fire. Mr Tiggles lollops after him. The room smells of burning coal, but in Tom's memory linger wet bark, sweat and damp wool.

He sits at the yellowed ivories of their Victorian piano and freezes. He shakes his head to clear it, puts the letter in front of him to start working out the notes.

His mum comes up behind him and snatches the letter away. Tom whirls around. She scans it and goes beetroot.

'Letters from the past, Tom? Wilhelmina again?'

She gazes at Tom in despair. Her eyes fill with tears. This is how it started last time.

'Please, Tom? Not again!'

Tom frowns at her and blinks, as if seeing her for the first time. Her face is drawn and pale, eye sockets dark, blonde hair lank and greasy, as if she hasn't slept for days.

'No, Mum,' he pleads softly. '*Look*–'

'Not again, Tom! I can't go through the last two weeks again.'

'No, wait! Mum! *I* didn't write it!'

'Yes, you did, Tom.'

'Just look at it. Look at the paper! It's like *old*.'

'So this time you found some old paper at the junk shop. While you were ferreting for your radio parts? Well done, Tom.'

She screws up the paper into a ball. It resists, crackling. Tom screams in rage, tries to grab it back. She pushes him roughly away, throws the scrumpled paper onto the fire, stands in front of it to bar his way.

'And that piano is going to the *dump*!'

Mr Tiggles flattens his ears and scoots for the door. Tom looks at her aghast, then turns back to the fire.

The linen paper chars black and then slowly starts to burn. For a long moment, Tom sees the oak-gall ink still trying to reach out to

him through the flames. Through the centuries. Tears pour down his face.

Dresden – Winter 1769

Fredy fastens her scarlet cloak and hurries lightly over the cobblestones. A freezing wind bites at her from the gathering dark. Snow whirls down in dry flakes. They catch in the fur trim of her hood and the tangle of black curls escaping into the wind.

She doesn't notice the cold or the snow. Smiling a private smile, she still feels the glow of the applause. She still feels the touch of the heavy black keys under her fingertips, hears the twining melodies of the fugue. How the future might be: a taste, but she wants more, dares to plan.

'Thanks, Grandfather,' she says to the wind, her voice whisked away.

She feels today as if there might really be a little of him in her, as Father always said there was. And with the music she'd played, *his* music, she has a chance – to perform as he did, to make music *her* life as it had been his.

Reaching the inn, she pushes the heavy door. Smells of roasting meat and stale beer waft out to greet her. Laughter and conversation, the pewter clink of mugs, come with them. The warm, damp air blooms the cold skin of her face.

She is hungry. But for now, she ignores the inviting sounds and smells. She needs to talk to Father, discuss the day's events. So she runs straight up the tight wooden stairs. Her cloak brushes the whitewash and leaves little droplets of water from melting snowflakes as she goes.

Across the landing, with its views of the great Frauenkirche distorted through the bottle-glass window, she reaches the door, hesitates. From within come voices, muffled through oak. One voice is

light and cultivated: Father; the other is rougher. She thinks, frowns, recognises it but can't place it.

Her hand hovers over the worn brass of the knob. A voice from years ago, yes, from when she was little. But something about the memory has a flavour of sadness.

Now she places it, remembers. Tears sting her eyes, sad little splashes on the dusty floorboards. She smears at the splashes with her toe, trying to think.

A fluttery, miserable panic rises. So *that* is why they have come here, not to *perform* her grandfather's music, but to *sell* it. The chance to play the Silbermann had been nothing more than a sop. And she knows what Father would say: 'But you are just a *girl*, Friederica. You have no *use* for his music.'

Just a girl, then just a woman. Play pretty tunes for your husband and children, my dear. And to think only minutes ago she had allowed herself to believe.

The tears flow faster, stifled sobs. She feels small and powerless, a little girl again. Fredy holds her breath, presses her ear to the wood.

'Fifty, then?' she hears Father say at last, in a flat voice.

'Not a Thaler more, Wilhelm. And think yourself lucky. No one wants to play the Old Wig's fugues now. People want the *Empfindsamer Stil*, not all that dry counterpoint. Just ask your brother.'

'The Sentimental Style?' snorts Fredy's father in an undertone. 'It will fade like Berlin Blue …'

'Perhaps. But my offer is the same. Fifty. Take it or leave it, Wilhelm. I have an opportunity, a publisher. Ask me next week and I might not.'

Fredy can't see her father's nod of assent, but she pictures it. She hears steps towards the door, steps that will lead to the Frauenkirche, to another sale and the end of her dreams.

She pictures the bundle of precious manuscripts – preludes, arias, suites and fugues – where she left them, imagines his hand

reaching for them. Then they will disappear like the others. Into oblivion.

'No! I won't let you do it again!' she hisses at the door, anger rising now. 'I won't! His spirit is in me, not you! You know it! You fear it! His music is *mine*!'

Then she runs.

Fredy's scarlet cloak flaps like a banner as her long legs stretch over the cobbles again, her feet swift and sure.

Just a few others are braving the winter evening. A couple step out, braced against the gusts, her skirt hem brushing the snow as he tries to shelter her. A lone carriage clatters over the cobbles. The couple hang back to let it pass. Fredy sprints past them through the spraying slush.

Now the wind whips Fredy's hood off. It is snowing harder, eddies and gusts. The tears freeze on her face. Snowflakes whiten her hair like old age. But still she sprints. Faster.

'Come ON!' she screams at herself.

Ahead, the Frauenkirche rears up, a great bell-shaped shadow in the gloaming. The towering windows are darkly forbidding now, the candles for her recital already snuffed. The moon, almost full, appears between black clouds and glints off the snow for a moment. Then the clouds snuff it too.

She rattles the main door. It is locked. She glances back again with frightened eyes. No one following … yet. So she scuttles around looking for another way in.

She finds a side door open, slips inside. The wind and snow stop abruptly, locked outside. Now the sandstone walls wrap around, protecting her. Her heart and breathing slow.

It is dark inside. A single candle burns steadily on the altar, reflected dimly off gilded cherubs and heaven's clouds above. Beyond, the vast space of the church's nave smothers its light. She only senses

the great domed vault above her. Its velvety dark smells faintly of beeswax and bibles, a holy smell.

Fredy tiptoes past a few lost souls praying in the darkness, shadows among the curving pews. She gropes around for the door, finds it with a little sigh of relief and slinks through.

The narrow stairwell up to the organ gallery is winding and unlit. She has to feel her way along the stone, almost takes a wrong turn halfway up. She hears her own breath, heavy in the muffling shaft.

At last she is out on the gallery. She ducks down to pass a huge window with a vertiginous view of the Dresden night, as if someone might see her shadow.

The organ gallery is still and silent. A lone candle held by a gilded cherub lights the three tiered manuals. The flame trembles, disturbed by her approach. Above her, pipes tower into the darkness to where a company of angels trumpet from golden clouds.

The vast machine, the Silbermann organ, has a presence beyond pipes and keys, linkages and wind chests. Silbermann had been a family friend. Her grandfather had played the inaugural recital, more than thirty years ago.

Out of habit, Fredy slides onto the polished wood of the bench and feigns a run up the heavy keys. But the bellows are still, the stops pushed home. The organ only clatters. Still, her fingers find a silent melody. A moment to savour and remember. She swallows back tears. She might never be here again.

She'd been afraid to find the carved music desk above the keys empty. But her grandfather's music is still lying where she left it – reams of curling manuscripts messily stacked. She relaxes, touches the precious paper as if reassuring it.

On top is the last fugue she'd played: waves of notes in the familiar hand, rolling across the page as if he'd been singing. The notes sing again in her mind, icy and meditative.

More than forty rosewood stop knobs rise in columns on either side of the keyboards. Her right hand slides from one to another.

Labelled in a curling script, each stop is a different musical instrument, except for one …

Gedeckt

Quintadena

Sesquialtera

'Ahhhh! There it is!'

Rauschwerk

She pulls. The stop slides out with a hollow rustle of wood on felt. Out pops a secret drawer below the keys.

How she had laughed when old Silbermann had shown her that. But does her father know? Did Silbermann show *him* his uncle's clever joke? She doesn't think so. Maybe no one else knows. For he had gone home to Strasbourg soon after, kind old Silbermann who smelt of wood shavings and solder.

Her hand reaches inside the drawer to rummage. Empty. Good.

She hefts the untidy bundle from the music desk, so much she can barely hold it all. A score escapes, wafts away; she catches it. Then Fredy stuffs and shoves. She manages to force most of it into the deep drawer, designed to hold a brandy bottle and a glass, but not all.

Suddenly she freezes, listening. Footsteps! Footsteps in the nave far below. Footsteps she has heard echo up a nave a thousand times before. Father.

She flips the drawer shut with her knee. It blends perfectly into the scrollwork, invisible again. Holding her breath, silent as a shadow, Fredy grabs the rest of the manuscripts, edges back to the stairwell and jinks in.

Her feet skitter down the stone spirals. But then she hears the door at the bottom open with a creak. She stops dead, listening again. Footsteps start up.

Like a frightened mouse, Fredy bolts – down a few steps and off right, through a shadowed archway. She sprints quietly on soft feet, along a passage and down another stairwell, a deeper one this time. She

feels her way on the smooth stone blocks of the wall with her left hand, still holding the precious manuscripts with her right.

Round and round she spirals, footsteps echoing off the steep stone corkscrew. She comes to a solitary candle smoking from a rusty holder leaded into the wall. Beyond, darkness. Her footsteps falter. *Only so much bravery in Fredy,* she thinks. But with nowhere else to go, she continues – down.

Another turn of the stone corkscrew. And another. Still she steps, down and down. The walls of the stairwell turn damp under her fingers, the stone rough. The air is damper too, thicker and warmer. And there is a faint odour. Fredy wrinkles her nose. As she steps down and round, the odour becomes a stench – cloying and rotten.

She comes to a passageway. The floor here is raw earth. The toe of her boot finds a fragment of bone. Dressed for the winter night far above, she shrugs irritably at her thick cloak in the close air.

The passageway ends suddenly at a door, a heavy, crude door with a big iron lock and rusting studs. The door is ajar: the source of the smell. She gathers her courage, pulls it open and walks through.

She finds herself in a low, vaulted chamber barely lit by tallow candle stubs, smoky and smelly. The candles are set atop objects around the walls, massive shadows that gleam darkly. She stops, puzzled.

Her eyes gradually adjust. The objects, she sees now, are great bronze vessels, set on lions' feet. She frowns, still can't make out what they are.

Her eyes flick over ring handles, wreaths, crosses, heraldic shields and Latin inscriptions. Now she understands, almost wishes she didn't. Tombs. The objects are tombs, massive bronze ones. She shudders and shrinks away.

The air smells foetid, terrible. Not just burning tallow, but sweat and raw plaster and something rotten.

Now she sees more shadows, ones that move – grotesque shadows of men, burly men in shirt-sleeves, holding crowbars and hammers.

One of them is heaving something shapeless and sagging into the candlelight. Something flops out: a hand, but black. She sees a gleam of gold as one of them twists something off and pockets it.

The stench is suddenly worse. Fredy gags, covers her mouth and staggers back from it. One of the men looks up, sees her. He wipes his brow to leave a dark smear.

He grabs a candle and an iron bar and advances. Fredy backs away through an archway, gripping the music to her chest. She expects her heel to touch the bottom step of the spiral. But the touch never comes.

The man stoops low, comes in after her. She looks for an escape, but she's in a tunnel now, somehow. Nowhere to go but backwards. She retreats, deeper and deeper into darkness.

A single word cuts through her fear: *catacombs*. Was this God's punishment for taking the manuscripts – condemned to wander the tunnels forever?

She stumbles on. Still he comes at her. She can see his face, lit by the candle, shadowy and brutish. She glimpses voids off to the side: niches and vaults full of coffins, she knows.

Something in her mind crumbles like rotten masonry then. She turns and bolts, runs at the inky blackness. Cobwebs on her face; bones clattering to the floor; low arches, more niches, damp walls, damp air and the stink of death.

She stops for an instant, still hears the man's footsteps behind her, his heavy breathing in the confining tunnel. She runs on, on and on, until she is alone, swallowed whole by the suffocating dark.