

IMPROVISATION

BY

Emily Macdonald

*Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do,
I'm half crazy, all for the love of you*

Daisy watches the sky pinken. She couldn't sleep, yet again. The tune, relentless in its sugary appeal, plays in her head. She had answered yes, and it had been crazy. Seduced by sliding syncopation, trills, arpeggios, long fingers teasing the keys, the rhythm elastic as extended chord progressions yearned for climactic resolution.

Clive chose to improvise on recognisable tunes—nursery rhymes, catches and rounds, Irish ditties.

*But you'll look sweet, upon the seat
Of a bicycle built for two*

Daisy had been waiting while Ed went to the Gents', feeling light-headed in the crush at the bar. When she reached for their drinks, Clive sidled alongside.

"Ah that's a shame. Two drinks. I take it you're not here alone?"

The pianist, charming in his dinner jacket, was direct, appraising.

"Yes, I'm with someone," she'd said, returning his look. And then, surprising herself, she added, "I suppose I might be alone another time."

Clive gave a lazy smile. He threw back his drink—one, never more, before each set—she later found out.

"I play the first and third set here every Thursday. Perhaps I'll see you again?"

He turned and started to thread his way through the crowd pressing the bar then stopped, returned, and placed a hand on her arm.

"Your name?"

"Daisy" she'd said. "It's Daisy".

When he improvised on the tune that evening, Daisy basked in the sensation—she felt herself to be the entire focus of Clive's concentrated attention—the only audience member who mattered.

Poor dear, solid Ed enveloped in his cloud of cigar smoke, had been oblivious. He hadn't recognised the tune—even in its simple form before embellishment and distortion—or seen as it played, Daisy untethering herself from him, drifting away, summoned by Clive with every note, every bar.

*It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet, upon the seat
Of a bicycle built for two**

The wedding had been stylish, if modest. Daisy, breathless in her tight waisted tea-length dress, signed the register with a flourish, anticipating a life of spontaneity and adventure, access to a world more vibrant, more exciting than anything she'd known.

Clive owned a Pleyel grand—Chopin's piano of choice—he explained with reverence, famous for its light action and sonority of tone. He composed marking flicks on the staves, scrolling clefs, octothorpe sharps and hairpin crescendos. Improvisation—suggesting potent possibility—Daisy came to learn, also meant never-ending. Major to minor, dissonance and discord, the longed-for resolution stretched out of reach.

Daisy doesn't feel so sweet now. She is weary. The muse in Clive's head is no longer seductive. His supposed brilliance has not translated into any change in their situation. There's little spontaneity and no excitement or adventure in struggling to find shillings to feed the gas meter.

Clive plays in the same dim clubs. The dinner jacket is still a good fit but has developed a shiny patina. The drinks after the sets have increased in number. The discipline before and during his performance, she suspects, has also wavered.

*Have you ever been in love, me boys, or have you felt the pain,
I'd rather be in jail myself, than be in love again.
Tho' the girl I love is beautiful, I'll have you all to know
That I met her in the garden where the praties grow**

Daisy has heard every variation possible. The Irish song made popular in the 1930s, two whole decades before, is quaint but old-fashioned. When Clive plays, she escapes the house seeking distraction, any respite. Too often, the tune is still playing when she returns.

She packs her suitcase, telling herself she has been a good listener. But she, sweet Daisy, would rather have four wheels, not two. She wants a bed that doesn't sag, a warm coat and fashionable sling-back shoes. She is no longer impressed by a Pleyel being Chopin's piano of choice.

The Pleyel fetches far more than she expects, but she splits the cash with scrupulous fairness and leaves it in an envelope with her brief farewell note. The money will be more than enough to buy a small upright. A piano better suited—in her humble opinion—to Clive's actual potential.

Author Biography

Emily Macdonald lives in London, UK though she grew up in New Zealand. Fascinated by wine as a student, she has worked in the UK wine trade ever since. She began creative writing again at the beginning of 2020.

* Harry Dacre wrote "Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)" in 1892.

* John McCormack released "The Garden Where the Praties Grow" in 1930.