

## **“A Peddler of Tears”**

by Yoko Ogawa

Eighteen was the last year of my life I made a living selling tears. At the time some of my best customers were a violin instructor at a music college, a clarinet player in the circus, and a guitar player from a flamenco cafe.

My tears were all the rage in music circles. They were seen as indispensable before a big performance, but sometimes things would go awry during a rehearsal and I would get the call and rush out with an emergency delivery.

“Damn, that hits the spot!” they used to say. “What would I ever do without these?”

The thing that set me apart was my flexibility. I went wherever I was needed, whether studio or concert hall, a city square or a music store, the musician’s house, his summer home, or where his lover lived. I’d even come over in the middle of the night. Three hundred sixty-five days a year, with no days off. You never knew when an instrument was going to go wonky. Changes in the weather were always a factor, but the balance of the stagelights, the temperature of the audience, and especially how the musician was feeling could easily make the tone go sour. That’s where I came in.

I had one customer, a renowned cellist, who asked for something beyond the ordinary dose. He thought my very presence was good luck. What he really wanted wasn’t tears so much as knowing I was there.

“I’m here,” I whispered, standing with him in the wings, and rested my hand on his back. The moment I did his tension slipped away, and he smiled, full of reassurance, and stepped out into the spotlight.

Even on the nights he didn’t need my tears, he paid me what they would have cost and then some just to stand there in the wings. But he played the cello so magnificently I could never stop myself from crying.

I wasn’t only interested in working with professionals. My tears were more than a commodity. If I walked by a child struggling with her recorder at the edge of a schoolyard or found a pedal organ abandoned at the transfer station among the oversized trash, I went over to the instrument and sprinkled it with tears. As long as I could be of service I gave my tears away

without flinching, even when there was no money to be had.

I'm not sure when, but at some point I realized that my tears had power over music. If I rub them on an instrument, its tone instantly improves. It doesn't matter what it is. A xylophone with its finish worn away or a triangle eaten by rust will start to sound like its notes are drifting up from the bottom of a deep cave. Once I fixed a broken music box. A few tears on the lid and its gears began to turn again.

I'm not sure why. Once a scientist came out from some institute and asked if he could study my tears to see what they were made of. I refused. What good could it possibly do? My tears were my own business, and no one had the right to tell me how to use them. I get goose bumps just thinking about being laid out in a laboratory, surrounded by strange drugs and devices, while total strangers glare down at me and siphon away my tears.

In the beginning I saved them up until I had enough to sell and brought them to an old man in the neighborhood who ran a music shop. But word got out, and people started asking me to sell to them directly, and on a regular basis. I began to take orders on my own, circumventing the old man, but I had no idea how cutthroat an operation he was running. When I told him I would have to suspend our relationship, he completely lost his head and set off on a mission to ruin my life. He stuffed spoiled giblets in my mailbox, left a dying crow hanging from my doorknob, and chucked sea cucumbers at my windows. Pranks like that. He was trying to get me to waste my tears on personal drama. My house became steeped in the smell of death, and the neighborhood organization sent me a complaint. I knew I couldn't live there anymore.

So I made up my mind to go out on the road. There was no other way to escape the venomous old man. Even if I relocated he was bound to track me down and visit with another rash of foul presents. As long as I had my tear ducts and my tear sacs, all I needed was my body. That gave me the freedom to roam. There was no problem left to solve. To sell my tears I would have to be a wanderer.

I once heard of a famous make of violin with human blood mixed into the finish. I guess every generation has its special few with an unlearned ability to mediate the instrument and the soul, just as there are those born able to effortlessly intuit the feelings of animals or hear the voices of the trees. Blood makes this last. Once it penetrates the wood, it can only sink deeper into the grain. But tears are different. Their lifespan inside an instrument is pitifully short. Just like sound, they're soon sucked up into the pockets of the air.

As long as the instruments want me, I'll be shedding tears until the day I die.

All of the mementos from my days selling tears I keep safe inside a candy tin, a pale peach ribbon tied around it in a bow. Postcards sent back from tours, a cassette tape recorded just for me, a sheet of music given as a birthday present. A broken string, concert programs, photographs, a handkerchief. The postcards offer glimpses of far-off cities, places someone like me would never have a chance to visit. In the corner of the sheet music is a poem, a confession of love. My initials are sewn into the handkerchief.

These days I never pull the ribbon from the tin. The memories I made with all my loyal customers have slipped into the past. I hate to say it, but if I opened the tin now I'd probably find wormholes in the programs, the cassette unspooled, what was once a sonorous melody now no more than a crashing stream of noise.

The cellist who considered me his good luck charm died ages ago. I heard he took his last breath in his studio, seated with his beloved cello in his arms. They say that when they found him it looked like he was giving it one last kiss goodbye. I can't help wishing that even a fraction of one of my teardrops still lingered in the cello when he did.

Life changed abruptly for a reason so simple it's embarrassing to admit. So simple I'm not sure how to put it into words. What can I say—I fell in love.

One day just before I turned nineteen, I met a man. I was on the way home from delivering tears to one of my regulars, the clarinetist from the circus. As I walked alone back to the railway station along the road leading from the sports complex where the circus had raised their tent, I began to hear a strange music. Strange is the only way to describe it; never in my life had I heard anything like it. I considered myself fairly good at recognizing instruments by their sound, but these instruments eluded me. I had to know what I was hearing; as if entranced, I walked in the direction of the sound.

I came upon a group of five musicians camped out below a poplar tree. At first I wasn't sure they were the ones making the music. It thought that it had to be coming from a radio, and they were only dancing to it. And who'd think otherwise? They were all half-naked, and they weren't holding any instruments.

Then it clicked: they were a body band. Every sound I heard was coming from some portion of the body.

The girl standing in the middle was whistling. She played lead. To her right was a guy wearing a thong, playing percussion on his butt cheeks; to her left another one blocked and unblocked his ear holes with his palms. A fourth member plucked his hair, its strands the length of his arms. Together they made quite the ensemble.

When I first saw him he was outside of the circle, dancing even more bizarrely than the rest. However odd the others were, I could basically connect their movements to the sounds they were making. But not him. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't zero in on the locus of his energy. All he did was flail around his joints like macaroni.

Only a few people had stopped to hear them play. Everyone was probably at the circus. Compared to a normal band they were bafflingly quiet, and to be honest they could have used a little flair. The few people who had gathered kept their distance and watched with unconvinced expressions, listening more out of puzzlement than appreciation.

The band finished the song, either something from a film score or a foreign lullaby. The light patter of applause only drew attention to their lonesome aura. You could see a few coins at the bottom of a hat set out for tips. There was no question they were pros. But no one went over to contribute. Without any comment, no signal whatsoever, the band began the next song.

The wind was up, so it took some time to figure out that the next song was . . . a jazz standard? I'd never heard such timid jazz in all my life.

I was hopelessly distracted by the man making his joints dance—I racked my nerves trying to make out what sound he was making, what part he was playing. It made me ache that even with ears so attuned to the character of instruments I couldn't hear him.

He whipped his hair around and sent sweat flying, possessed by the performance. He moved the joints of his ankles, his knees, his waist, his wrists and his neck in unthinkable directions. The pattern of the poplar leaves raked and heaved across his naked back and chest. It seemed like he was squirming from the shade's caress.

At long last my ears latched onto a sound—his sound—running softly underneath the melody. He was grating his joints together to the rhythm of the beat, playing them like castanets. This man was a maestro of the joints.

Without warning someone tore through the circle of musicians, gesticulating wildly.

“Stop it! Stop! You can't just set up anywhere you want. Go on now, get out of here.”

The man seemed in some way affiliated with the circus. Somehow he thought the band was interfering with their show. He chewed them out and prodded the joint maestro in the chest.

Caught off guard, the maestro fell flat on his butt. I rushed over and helped him up and railed against the circus man. When I see an instrument being handled roughly, I can't help but come to its defense.

“Enough with the fighting! What exactly are you so upset about? These people aren't doing anything wrong. They're only playing music. Quiet music. So quiet you can barely hear it.”

The members of the band were aghast at my intrusion, far more shocking to them than the circus representative's show of violence.

“We're fine. Thank you. Don't worry about us . . .”

The joint maestro's voice had the same reserved quality as his hidden castanets. This was the first moment that we shared.

After that I took up with the body band and went wherever they went. Since I couldn't make any music with my own body I never stood onstage. I worked behind the scenes, and tuned the others with my tears.

I had to give up selling tears to my old customers. It's not like my supply was endless. Even I had limits. I had no other choice. Since I didn't have enough tears to go around, I gave everything to the band (but really, if I'm honest, to the maestro). My tears could make a desperate man resort to tactics like those rotten gizzards, but the maestro was the only one who I would shed them for.

In order to find places to perform, the body band was always on the road. My lifestyle barely had to change. It was a just a matter of an independent contractor signing up full time.

“I had no idea that tears were this warm,” the maestro said to me, lying on his back.

“I know. Fresh tears are even warmer than the rest of the body. It's because you have to squeeze them out from deep inside.”

“They're so warm . . .”

I climbed on top of him and went over all his joints, blessing each with tears that I rubbed into his skin. All I had to do was blink and my eyes would fill again with tears of joy. I could touch him to my heart's content.

“All the tears I ever sold were cold. I could never make fresh tears like this for anybody else. What do you think that means?”

He didn't respond. Transfixed by the sensation of the tears, he couldn't hear a thing I said.

For someone who lived off physical labor he was surprisingly slender. I guess any extra muscle would trap the clicking of his joints inside his body. When my hands met his skin I had the vivid experience of touching bone, as if there were no skin or veins or fat between his hardness and my grasping hands.

His joints were masterfully articulate. Their movements were so intricate you could mistake each one for having independent thoughts. If you watched him up close during a performance, it was almost like you could see through his skin and watch the bumps and grooves of tiny bones mesh inside his joints and create fluid motions.

With each one he could make a distinctly different sound. The sockets of his thighbones made a subterranean rumble, while the first joint of his pinky finger was like a little bird letting out a sigh. They ran the gamut, and he combined them readily and endlessly.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” I asked once when I was worried.

“Doesn’t bother me,” he said, like it was nothing. “It’s not like I’m working my joints harder than anyone else. I just catch the grinding with my lymph system so you can hear it.”

I imagined lymphatic fluid vibrating throughout his body. These were sounds more beckoning and amorous than any instrument I’d ever encountered.

But how could any instrument be more reserved than the joint maestro’s castanets? The violinist or pianist strokes her strings or beats his keyboard in bursts of virtuosity for a grand display of sound, but the joint castanets are hidden in the body, betraying no definite outline, and resonate over an amount of lymph as meager as the tears behind your eyes. My tears were perfect complements to such a precious instrument.

His joints sucked up tears like sand. I could see them spread to the tiniest crevice, smoothening the motion of his bones and boosting the clarity of his lymph. At times I forgot what I was there for and wanted desperately to smother his joints with kisses. Curbing this desire proved exhausting. Pass over a stray breadcrumb, a piece of chapped skin, or worst of all saliva, and my tears would be unfit for use. I had to sequester myself.

When tuning was over, without saying a word, he made his joints sing just for me. He even used the one I loved the most, the workings of his left ankle. I hugged his left foot to my head and pressed my ear against his ankle bone. The sound of a single tear plinking into a spring in the deepest recess of a cave made it up into in my eardrum. This was my reward for all my unobtrusive service.

A body band can only perform in certain kinds of places. It was rare for us to play a proper concert hall. At best we got to do the roof of a department store, or a community center. But most of the time we were out in the open, like on the day we met.

If we were at a park or plaza, we made our preparations in the shade. The band stripped down, went through some stretching exercises, and talked over the set list. My job was over after tuning up the maestro, but that left the four other members to be tuned. The whistler, the ear gong, the hair harp and the bum drum worked together and rubbed each other with tears prepped for them in a bottle, already cool.

After passing off the tears I kept my hands to myself and retreated to a bench on the periphery, to watch them from afar. I claimed to stay away because I hadn't done much work with body bands, but the truth is I didn't want to touch anyone except the maestro. But he was a good man, and helped the others all he could. He cleared out the ear gong's ear holes, held up a mirror for the bum drum, and combed stragglers from the back of the hair harp's neck.

But the one thing I could not abide was when he rubbed the whistler's lips with tears. What made him have to be so nice to her? Couldn't she find her lips herself? Sure she was the face of the band, but it must be nice to play lead melody. And remember, those were my tears on his fingers! When I considered that the same tears were mingling with the maestro's lymph and soaking into the creases of the whistler's lips my heart began to race and I could hardly breathe.

I withdrew from the others and hid myself in the green world of the undergrowth. I crawled in there to cry. Shedding tears calms me down like nothing else.

I drew a custom vial from my pocket. An acquaintance at a glass shop had fashioned it especially for me. Its tube is curved into the letter U. Both ends plug up with rubber stoppers, and the space is exactly the width of my eyes. As long as I hold the bottle directly to my cheekbones I can catch tears without any leakage.

Given my extreme standards of quality, though, I rarely if ever collect tears standing up. The tears that run through eyelashes or the corners of the eyes get tainted with impurities, and this is unacceptable. So I get on all fours. That way the tears drip straight down from my eyes into the bottle.

I could hear the band readying their instruments outside the thicket. I pictured the maestro and the whistler working off each other to harmonize and intertwine the sounds coming from their bodies. Drop by drop, tears filled the bottom of the U. On my knees like that I must have looked like I was vomiting.

Someone snuck up on me and asked “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, no I’m fine. Don’t mind me,” I told her through my tears. “Hey look, that body band out there’s about to play!”

Not to brag, but the caliber of the body band’s music has gone way up since I joined. Their sound is more substantial, their rhythm more relaxed and forthright, and the general feeling of it all is more robust. Their faces are alive, even at rest. The atmosphere is brighter, and the number of coins in the hat has increased with the crowds.

The whistle girl swings her head and whistles, bright with confidence, convinced that she’s to thank for all these changes. The bum drum’s butt cheeks glimmer in the sun. The hair harp produces a vibrato so compelling honeybees come near, and the ear lobes of the ear gong have turned a rosy pink. But I know better. The band sounds wonderful because of the maestro. Because of the tears I worked so lovingly into his castanets.

But I’m not satisfied. One person’s tears can vary tremendously depending on what provokes them. Tears of happiness, tears of sadness, tears of distress, tears of regret . . . Each has its distinct flavor. When I first started selling tears I mixed them all together in the same bottle, regardless of variety, but soon began to notice they had different coloration, density, and texture depending on what had made me cry. Naturally this also alters the effect they have on instruments.

The cheapest tears are what you cry while cutting onions. As a novice I sometimes had to resort to this method when I was swamped. Just because I sold tears for a living didn’t mean that someone calling and ordering 15 cc of tears for a concert, delivered that same night, makes for an easy day. I always kept a few onions in my purse for these emergencies.

Tears from onions are the lowest grade a professional can offer. Good tears need to well up from deep within the body, near the center of the soul, but onion tears slip off of the surface of the eye, no more than a response to circumstance. Plus they’re adulterated with the onion juice.

What then, you may ask, are the highest quality tears?

The answer: tears of pain. Pain that drugs can’t touch. Pain that shoots right through you and makes you drop in agony. Pain you’d never revisit if you could avoid it. Nothing is as pure as the tears you shed in pain of this intensity. Tears of sadness or regret have a way of exposing whatever grime has stricken the heart, but the source of tears of physical pain is flesh itself.

Tears like this will only flow when the body is besieged. Their taste is free from calculation, jealousy, or favor. And the greater the sacrifice, the happier the instrument.

To my dismay I had only summoned tears of pain a few times in my life, and from a toothache or a migraine. Nevertheless, the work done by those tears was astounding. On the night when that renowned cellist was decorated personally by the queen, and played the greatest solo concert of his life, his cello had been tuned with tears that pain had given me.

I needed to have tears of pain for the joint maestro. The whistle girl and the rest of the band would be fine with normal tears. That was enough to satisfy them. Hell, even onion tears would do.

But the maestro was special. The music he played was so restrained. Who would be able to hear the rills of clear lymph deep within his body if it weren't for my help? Not the whistler, that's for sure. You couldn't count on her to do much more than stand there with her head in the clouds, puckering her lips while the maestro moistened them with my worst tears.

I resolved to sacrifice anything if it meant reaping the highest quality tears of pain. My tear ducts and my tear sacs were all I needed on this journey. I was prepared to give up everything else.

First I cut the pinky toe from my left foot. I could rub the maestro with my tears just fine without it. As he lay waiting to be tuned, I sat down beside him with a kitchen knife, took aim, and dropped it like a guillotine. To hide my moans I shot both hands over my mouth. I was happy to see that suppressing my screams made me cry even harder. I dripped tears onto each of his joints, taking care not to sully him with blood.

Next I took the pinky toe from the right, then the next toe from the left, chopping my way up both feet. The tears of pain were more orgasmic than I could have dreamed. The pain made my hair stand on end; I couldn't breathe and felt like I was going to puke. But my moist eyes narrowed with a smile. When I was done he was going to play his ankle for me, and its tone was going to take me to the brink of oblivion. It was getting harder every day to stop myself from kissing him.

Once my toes were gone I went after my lips. Without lips there'd be no kisses to hold back. No jealousy when he touched his finger to the puckering whistle girl.

I gave up my calves, my earlobes, my nipples, and my tongue. There were so many things to sacrifice, and knowing this gave me solace. I said goodbye to my ovaries, my vocal

chords, my cheeks, and my urethra. I nearly burst into tears of joy, and had to stifle myself to hold them back. The maestro was getting tears of pain and pain only.

Pretty soon there will be nothing left of me but tear ducts and tear sacs. But that's all I really need. What more is there to a wandering peddler of tears?