

A Blue Note – by Tom Afford

Excerpt

Chapter one

A pigeon flutters high in the rafters. A faded cross stains the wall. There are no effigies, only shadows. Dusty pews and lecterns, chopped for firewood, burn in a fierce conflagration. Speakers bark tired orders on repeat. A bell chimes the hour.

All around are sound-proofed containers. In each sits a child, scowling and sweating. A few flap their arms. Some bang their fists obsessively, holding weapons with thin wires and holes. They attack the air with gusto. Guards keep watch with batons unsheathed, poised to strike.

The inmates aren't mad; they're in the throes of a desperate rehearsal - striving for a perfection that evades them.

The Guards are all female. Dressed in cassocks, they peer through cracked panes, wearing headphones and willing their captives to fail. A few flex their striking arms, earnestly.

'Who are these poor souls trapped inside?'

We're the elite few, selected for our abilities. It seems like we're held captive... but they say that it's for our own protection. To shelter us from the madness outside. To keep us safe and sounding in impenetrable bubbles of music-making.

We're forced to practise under surveillance, every month. They monitor as we parp, toot and scrape. As we bang, wheeze and sweat. It's less a practice, than a trial! Skill and sensibility lead us here, but our abilities have trapped us.

One girl is exhausted and falls asleep. A Guard raps her baton against the pane. The girl rubs her eyes and starts again. But too late - there'll be a mark against her name.

Only the Organ remains from before. Perched high in the nave, it watches like a sentry. The front-pipes shine brilliantly. No more cobwebs. No dust. It's as close to the divine as we can muster. Only a few mortals can play the instrument. Fewer make it speak. And only two make it sing.

The Organ's raised high on a platform. Or perhaps it's a pedestal... We're forced to worship it, every week, in the Services. With all the stops out, it shakes the foundations of the College. It rasps for breath, in and out, like a fiend. It could destroy us, at any time, in our sleep.

A Guard peers inside my cubicle. I'm just sitting there, twiddling my thumbs! The Guard smiles and unsheathes her drumstick. Time for some payback. But I smile and make a circle on my wrist. The State sanctions five-minute breaks. It increases productivity. Twenty-five minutes on, and five off. You can keep going much longer that way.

Five minutes is not enough time to unwind. You can only stretch and jump around. You can't sleep or switch off. You can't relax!

Stood before me is a black coffin with a polished sheen. The lid is raised. I peer inside, expecting to see a corpse. But there are gizzards of taut steel, shimmering. They vibrate when I strike them. Weightless hammers attack at my command. Red velvet muffles twangs to a whisper.

Beneath my fingers are large teeth, jutting out. A devilish grin replete with black fillings. Brass feet blur the soundscape and drown you.

There's a metronome affixed on the top. It cracks with a harsh wooden snap; like Shakubyoshi, struck together. The metronome isn't Musical. Its beat is not *Music*, per se. It stabilises us; it keeps us on course. Wound daily to breaking point, it strains as it strives for perfection. It's like they want us to become metronomes ourselves!

An alarm sounds: my break is almost over. I stop rocking, stretch my fingers and yawn. My forearms throb. My veins pop, like an addict's.

The Guard's watching for the slightest infraction. I grin. I shouldn't taunt her. She'll only beat me even harder next time. She spins her drumsticks. Her hair bristles like hackles on a dog.

I count the seconds down, but she'll not catch me out. I've not survived for so long, by being careless. You learn how and where to take shortcuts. How to use everything to your advantage. For these days every second counts.

Three. Two. One... I play a chord right on cue. The Guard snarls and backs down.

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Aside from viewing panes, there are no windows. Our containers are sealed; to keep sound in, and distractions out. There are Students just like me, either side. But there can be no interaction during practice.

They tell us solitary confinement keeps us focused. Ultimately, it's for our own protection. And, in a way, they are right; that is true. Therein lies their power: these half-truths.

Instead of sat here in coat-tails, I wish I were in a park, enjoying the sunshine. Taking strolls. Feeding ducks. Eating ice-cream. But all that has gone; it's history.

The partition on my right rises up. Sound and light spill around me. It's a malfunction, for contact isn't scheduled.

I see a girl around my age, seated next door. She has glasses and dark, curly hair. Her arms draw in like a syringe, then shoot out, in a constant back-and-forth. Her cheeks strain like balloons, set to burst. Her pupils cross from the exertion. I hear a sliding; a parping sound. I splutter with laughter. I'm in tears! She laughs too and stops playing her Trombone. Guards rush inside and beat us.

'Keep going! No breaks!'

The girl's early twenties, like me. She's not stunning, but then neither am I. We're not here because of how we look. We're here because we're the best Musicians in the world...

The girl and I share a glorious moment, un-choreographed; the best moments often are. We sense our time together is already nearly over. I see the partition start to close. She winks and licks her mouthpiece, suggestively. I flick my tongue side to side and roll my eyes. She flashes her breasts and makes them bounce. I fumble in my trousers. When you're in trouble, you might as well go the whole hog!

We're beaten savagely. But it was worth it. For a moment, we felt human again. The partition slams shut. All I can hear is my metronome, ticking.

I have no friends. No life. And little romance. We're brought here by one thing - our ability to play instruments, to perfection.

Chapter two

People sit in a quiet, darkened room. A figure looms, arms outstretched, as if to strangle them.

Someone coughs. There's an explosion of spluttering. Eventually a silence descends again.

Sweltering spotlights cause beads of sweat to trickle down. Tight collars choke necks and rouge cheeks. The would-be murderer tilts her hands up, like a surgeon. Her scalpel hovers, causing panic in tired eyes, as she smiles the smile of a million despots...

Metal barrels rise obliquely, like ordnances. Thin saws prepare to cut through polished wood. Blow-darts take aim at the rafters...

The strangler's gaze falls on me. I'm tethered at the front, like a scarecrow!

Staccato stabbing begins to throb. I focus on my breathing and my pulse-rate; on the things I can control. I know this; I've got this. I've practised a million times, and a million more. Months of grinding and labouring: all for what? A messy one-night stand. A fleeting moment in the limelight.

I furrow my brow, as if I'm plagued by inner turmoil. It's my game-face; it's an act. I try to remain calm but feel fear taking hold. I could slip at any point, and then they'd kill me.

I glance at my arm. At my timer. I have one year and four months left to live. When it runs out, I'll die: I'll *Reset*.

I don't need the Score. The Music's already seared in my muscle-memory. I hear my cue - Rum tum tum... I raise my hands and press some Piano keys. But there's chaos. There's rioting and screaming. For I've made a single mistake.

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I awake drenched in sweat. My duvet's wrapped around me, trying to strangle me, like a python. I thrash it off and karate-chop it to death.

My College room is extremely small and airless. The sole window faces a red-brick wall opposite, with a walkway that runs underneath. The wall's a blessing, for it minimises distractions. Some poor sods have an entire garden to ignore.

The window barely opens half-an inch. There's little chance of intruders but little chance of escape. I hear footsteps above me on another walkway, pounding. I hear whispers erupting into manic laughter.

My desk lies littered with Music Scores. My Piano has some Bach draped across it. Even He has been revised. My Scores are shaded red, denoting pitfalls. Mistakes are forbidden; mistakes get you killed.

There's a constant ticking from my time-pieces. I collect them, like a hobby. I've arranged all the ticks and tocks to sound together. Ticks match other ticks. Tocks sound with other tocks. It took an eternity, but it's worth it - for the sense of order that it instils. As I listen, I sense one is out of kilter. I hunt the perpetrator, and silence it with my fist.

It's not just clocks; I collect all things that measure time. I have candle-clocks and egg-timers. Sundials and water-clocks. Even a cross section of a tree. I have things that record time passing by. Things pointing to time yet to come. I watch seconds building up or running out. It gives my room a fourth dimension. A reminder there's something bigger than all of *this*. That there are some things that we'll never really know. Like the celestial paths Music takes when it disappears.

I take out my prized possession and polish it: a gold pocket-watch, rumoured once to have belonged to Brahms. A present from a fan that I never met. I get

gifts, now and then. But few are as great as this. The pocket-watch folds in half. Its face is pale and plain. Its roman numerals have been scrubbed out, for resembling text.

Whether or not the watch belonged to Brahms, I still think that it's superb. I pretend Brahms sat and checked it as he composed lullabies. The watch no longer tells the correct time. The Ministry says a broken clock should be destroyed. But that's not the point. That's not its true value... for I sense Brahms' genius is still trapped inside.

I glance at the Regime flag pinned behind me. We're not allowed to take it down or cover it up. It's red, white and black. In the middle is a metronome, representing steadiness and work-ethic. Concentration and perseverance. A grinding and striving towards perfection.

'Efficiency will save us,' the Regime reminds us. 'It'll save us if you just comply.'

Behind the metronome is a severed ear; detached but always listening.

One emblem makes the sound; the other receives it. One is useless without the other. The ear hears all. The metronome ensures compliance. The symbols pop up everywhere, like salutes.

The Piano in my room is electric. All wires are safely stored inside. The Headphones are wireless too. There are no pull-chords, or shower curtains in the bathroom. To avoid 'confusion' or 'entanglement', as the College puts it. They look out for our welfare. There's no risk of getting shocked or sliced. Everything's engineered for our protection.

The Scores on my desk are hard copy; each is (currently) State-approved. Otherwise, all print has been forbidden. All text is banished. There are a few PCs. But no more books. They're considered distractions. Taking focus away from Music and efficiency.

Music and efficiency govern all. Our entire lives revolve around them.

A peal sounds six minutes to the hour. A forewarning to help us be on time.

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Coat-tails are my uniform. I have seven sets. Most are sweaty and need dry-cleaning. They have tide marks and always stink. I must call for the Cleaners to collect them.

I slam my door and turn the key. I check the door-Handel, and wander through a corridor of identical doors, save that each of them has a different ensign; a Musical note that's ours and only ours.

Mine is 'B natural', but some fool's etched a hash-mark at the end. A 'sharp' sign. A tired, inside-joke. Now instead of 'B natural', it says 'B sharp'...

B Sharp is of course – middle-C. They've Reset me; they've returned me to the tonic. Middle-C is the plainest, most boring note. The Guards have failed to notice, otherwise they'd erase it. I don't find it funny anymore. But mischief lingers, regardless.

The sun's out. Not that you'd really know. Brick walls obscure light, save for small patches which channel into courtyards. Walkways engulf us in a sea of red. There are red bricks everywhere. Not the stately calming sandstone of other Colleges. This College is often likened to a car-park; but that's an insult. It's more like a castle, or a fort.

The cement's washing out from between the bricks. Rumour says the cement is experimental. God knows why they used it. Stalactites drip slowly after rainstorms. The College is falling apart at its modern seams.

It's definitely a fort and not a car-park... It's designed to keep folk out. To keep Students safe and sounding, inside. All parapets have machine-guns. Rumour says they're only decoys, but no-one knows for certain. All I know is, I feel safer with them there.

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