

“Melodies” by Gracie Boyce

Ben felt like a fish in a tank.

People were making faces at him as they spoke, but all he could hear was a quick succession of eighth and sixteenth notes, all arranging themselves in complex patterns and rhythms like water dripping into the aquarium of his brain.

He could read their lips, but the deafening cacophony in the hallway, which sounded like a thousand violins all playing different concertos, made it hard to concentrate enough to do so. Besides, Ben often found that people tended to talk too quickly for him to tell what they were saying.

His friend Ryan stopped talking, one line of melody halted while the rest of the choir sang on. Ben signed, “Sorry, too loud here.” He knew Ryan would prefer speaking, but it was impossible to think in that hallway.

“It’s okay,” Ryan signed back. “I should have guessed.” His hands fumbled as he created the different symbols; he had never quite figured out fluent sign language, even though Ben knew he tried.

They walked past twenty or so teenagers standing at their lockers, socializing normally with words. But since Ben was born, he had heard music in place of most sounds. Most people saw him signing and assumed he was deaf, but the words just came out somewhat garbled when he spoke since he couldn’t tell what his words were supposed to sound like. He couldn’t emphasize the right sounds or pronounce the right syllables.

As soon as they stepped outside, many lines of melody faded to a *pianissimo*, practically unheard. Only a few lines coming from nearby mouths remained prominent. “You can talk now,” he signed to Ryan.

“You can read my lips better?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah. Hallways after school are distracting.”

“Just tell me if you want me to sign.”

Ryan’s voice created a gentle *mezzo forte* tune, one reason Ben was friends with him. Some people had voices like a kindergartener playing a violin ‘E’ string, while others sounded like a trumpet trying to overtake an entire symphony in volume. The mellow but not-too-soft voices were the ones Ben preferred to listen to.

“I’m good. Do you have basketball practice today?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, sorry. Coach gets mad if I miss. Actually, I’d better go put on my uniform now.” Ryan looked hesitant to leave.

“I’m fine, Ryan,” Ben signed. “Have fun at practice.” He walked down the sidewalk a little ways and sat down on an empty bench to wait for his mom to come pick him up. She was late. Her car finally pulled up to the curb after Ben had been waiting for twenty minutes.

“Sorry! My boss wouldn’t let me leave,” she signed as Ben opened the car door, an apologetic look on her face.

“It’s okay, Mom,” he signed, even though he was a bit annoyed. There wasn’t much for him to do while he waited except kick rocks on the sidewalk, hearing only the quiet *ding* they made each time one hit the ground, like a violin playing soft pizzicato.

They arrived home a few minutes later after not saying much in the car; Ben's mother couldn't sign while she drove or easily position herself for him to read her lips, so he mostly just stared out the window at all of the people they passed, talking and laughing. He went straight upstairs to his room and shut the door quietly before picking up his violin case and unpacking it.

Musical instruments were the only things he seemed to hear just like everyone else. He knew all of Mozart's melodies, every Bach sonata, each clashing Shostakovich harmony. Ben had heard them all a million times; on soundtracks, at concert halls, and in his own room as he played them, practicing for hours on end. It was the only time that he could control the melodies around him instead of being subject to them.

He sat down on his bed and just began playing, making up a tune as he went along. He crafted the soft, lilting tone of his mother's voice, passing the bow lightly over the strings. Ben created a gentle lullaby, at peace with the music. For once, it was exactly what he wanted it to sound like.

Ben practiced his lullaby for the next several hours, only taking a break to eat dinner and do a bit of homework. When he began getting tired, he played through his soothing tune one last time and packed up his violin before climbing into bed and falling straight to sleep.

He dreamed that he was conducting a huge orchestra that extended far past his vision. There had to be at least a hundred instruments in each section, but they created a seamless wave of sound as he led them through his lullaby. Each violin played the melody starting pianissimo, swelling more and more with emotion as Ben swayed in front of all of them, not even having to think about what he was doing. The beats flowed from his baton with effortlessly and the orchestra responded to his every command.

But suddenly, the sound disappeared. Blinking, Ben looked around at an empty stage. His orchestra was gone just as quickly as it had appeared.

He opened his eyes, now awake. Morning light was starting to leak in through his windows. He could hear birds chirping and his mother downstairs clanging with pans in the kitchen to make breakfast. Wait. He could hear them, not music notes. Actual sounds. Everything was so loud, he wanted to clap his hands over his ears but listen to every single thing at the same time.

Ben jumped out of bed and ran downstairs. "Mom?" he asked, his voice sounding strange and foreign to him, his mouth struggling to form around the word.

"Good morn-" his mother started, and then stopped. "Did you just speak?"

"I ... I can hear you."

His mother screamed and ran to hug him, dropping a plate of sausage. But Ben couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was wrong. He could hear; he should be happy. He could learn to be normal. It took him a minute to put his finger on what was bothering him. There was a cavity in his chest, left behind by something that went missing.

The melodies were gone, and he missed them.