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Highly Strung

by MaryPat Campbell

Nothing travels faster than the speed of light with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws. Like yesterday, when our piano tuner, Mr. B, walked in to our house and said, “your neighbour Mrs. K’s piano was in a very sorry state, badly in need of tuning, much too difficult a job for me.”

Mr. B’s face was flushed and his eyes popped, as he said this in a breathless way that didn’t seem as if it was all about climbing two flights of stairs.

Mrs. K likes to pass on news of the neighbours to us, and news about the piano tuner in particular. She likes to remind us that it was she who recommended him to us all those years ago and likes to hint that he and she are very close friends. Mrs. K likes to ply the piano tuner with tea from a real teapot and small cakes from the local bakery. I imagined her standing by while he tapped each note delicately and methodically, tightening or loosening and listening to each string, each note and chord, before finishing with a quick flourish of the last section of one of Chopin’s nocturnes.

Recently, Mrs. K has complained that Mr. B is getting too expensive, has put on weight, is divorcing his wife and, under her breath she whispers how she always knew he would.

“I feel sorry for Mr. B, I like to feed him tea and cakes to sweeten him up,” said Mrs. K coyly, from time to time. The previous time Mr. B came to our house I asked him if he would like some tea, he looked tired and said, “I’ve had five cups of tea this afternoon, a glass of water would be just fine.”

Mrs. K likes to open her upstairs window wide, leans on the ledge, looks out on the world at whoever is passing by to engage them in some delicious gossip about what’s happened to so-and-so along the road. She loves to regale whoever will stop and talk to her about her own and other neighbours’ troubles and bad fortune.

I heard her the other day talking about Mr. B as if she wanted her listener to think that she and he were lovers. It did make me wonder about what happens across the road in and out between the fine tuning and the tea and cakes.

Yesterday, there was a loud crash outside. I rushed to lean out my window to see what was going on. Mr. B was running out of Mrs. K's house at full speed. He tripped over a plant pot and it went flying, scattering soil and red tulip petals all over the pavement. Mrs. K shouted and cursed him, waving a pastry fork in her hand and calling him a stupid bastard.

"You stupid bastard, how could you do this to me?" she screamed. Mr. B jumped into his car, revved the engine noisily and took off down the road. I could see Mrs. K standing in the street looking like a small furious child, red in the face as if she was about to cry. She stared after the noisy disappearing car still prodding her fork in the air and shouting wildly before going back into her house and slamming the front door.

I thought that what Mr. B really meant was that Mrs. K was in a highly strung state herself. Something had happened between the tea and cakes and the tuning fork. What longings did Mrs. K have about the soon to be divorced piano tuner, who, when left to his own devices, carries out his work of tuning and piano repair with exquisite skill and ordinary dedication.