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And There Was Silence

by

Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Music expresses that which cannot be
said and on which it is impossible to be
silent.*

Victor Hugo

When the music's over turn out the lights.
The Doors

No one who knew Garnell would have described him as eloquent, even articulate. He stuttered and his speech consisted of strings of poorly connected sentences, with irrelevant words dangling here and there as uninvited guests crashing a party. His friends and relatives had become used to extracting kernels of meaning out of his labored pronouncements, and in most instances managed to understand his general intent without comprehending all the details. They let him be, for his other talents made up for the verbal shortcomings.

For Garnell was an accomplished musician. At age three, he had taught himself to play the piano by watching his sister Kecia struggle with pieces she would never master. Two years later, Garnell would astonish his parents and humiliate Kecia by sitting at the keyboard and playing, impeccably and without the benefit of sheet music (which, in any event, he could not read), Chopin's devilish "Double Thirds" étude.

Garnell's family was poor and his father, a night watchman at a headshop warehouse in the outskirts of Chicago, could not afford to give

his son the specialized education his talent warranted. As a result, Garnell struggled through the area's public school system, progressing from year to year without learning much besides avoiding scraps with kids bigger than he and becoming expert at picking up tunes from the radio, which he would faithfully reproduce on the school's piano. He learned to read and write, but developed a distrust for the written word that made him eschew communicating in writing save for short comments and instructions.

In tenth grade, Garnell met two kids who would become his lifetime friends and colleagues: Jamal, a semi-competent tenor sax player, and Ando, who was a wizard at the drums. Soon the trio was performing, first for fellow students, and then as part of school events. Jamal was, by default, the spokesman for the group; Garnell's speech abilities were limited, and English was only Ando's second language.

The trio's first commercial performance happened one Friday night in their Junior year in high school, when they were called upon by the owner of a nearby cocktail lounge to fill in as an emergency replacement for a suddenly indisposed crooner. The performance was a big success but could not be repeated for some time, as all members of the "JAG Trio" (as they called themselves) were underage and the lounge owner had put his license at risk by engaging them to play even for one night.

Fifteen months later, Garnell was an unemployed high school graduate with no college prospects or significant employment outlook. It was then that Fate intervened.

The JAG Trio was jamming in the basement of Jamal's apartment when they heard a screeching sound outside, followed by a thud. They stopped playing and looked out the window: a black limousine, a rare sight in their neighborhood, had crashed onto the side of a parked truck. Out of the limo emerged a man in livery who wrote something on a piece of paper and attached it to one of the truck's windshield wipers. As he was doing this, the back door of the limo opened and an elegantly dressed, portly man emerged. He exchanged some words with the other man and walked to the front door of Jamal's apartment, and pressed the buzzer.

All three boys ran up to the front door, which Jamal opened cautiously. "Sorry, Sir, we didn't see nuthin'" started Jamal, but the man cut him off:

"Were you the guys playing '*Ruby My Dear*' just now?"

There was a momentary pause and then Jamal answered sheepishly: "Yessum, but..."

The man cut him off again: "Which of you plays the piano?"

"Da - da -- dat's me" acknowledged Garnell.

"Boy, you have cost me some money" said the man, his face opening into a smile.

"Wha, mm -- mee?"

"Yes, you!" the man accused, grinning widely. "We turned into this street by mistake and even from the corner I could hear you doing some wicked comping, driving up the chords

your buddy at the sax was playing. I've never heard such brilliant improvisations!"

Jamal cut in: "Thank you, Sir, but how did our playing cost you any moneys?"

The man turned to Jamal again and explained: "When I heard this boy's playing, I wanted to hear more and I told Winston to stop the car right away. The pavement was wet and we slid and hit that truck. Now I'll have to pay for the repairs to the truck *and* the limo!"

"Well, we is sorry, but that ain't our fault" replied Jamal defensively.

"Never mind that" dismissed the man. "May I come in and listen to your jamming for a bit? I'll make it worth your while."

Ando raised his hand as if he were in school and challenged: "Who you be?"

The man produced his wallet and took out a card, which he presented to Garnell: "My name is Lucius McArdle. I'm a Marketing Director for the Lyric Opera."

"Opera?" asked Jamal dubiously.

"Oh, yeah, that is my day job. I coordinate marketing activities for the Opera. But like everyone in Chicago, I appreciate jazz. This boy's playing reminded me of the Thelonious Monk version of that song, except that his improvisations are much different from The Monk's. May I please listen to some more?"

The boys looked at each other quizzically and Jamal responded: "I guess so... This way ... Watch out for the broken steps..."

Twenty minutes later, McArdle got up from his uncomfortable stool, walked over to the

piano, and shook Garnell's hand: "Man, you are a genius. Have you studied music?"

Garnell answered, confused: "I c... can read mu... music..."

"No, no, I mean have you taken classes in music theory, performance, musical history, any of those things?"

"N...noo s.. sir."

McArdle sighed. "I guess you'll need to start from ground zero." He took out a small notepad and a pen from another pocket and directed: "Give me your full name, address, and a telephone number at which you can be reached." Garnell did so and McArdle penned the data and turned to leave: "Someone will be contacting you soon. I hope you take advantage of the opportunity you will be offered."

Five years later, Garnell was sitting at his apartment studying the score of a Philip Glass étude he intended to perform at his debut recital at the Symphony Center. His concentration was broken when the radio started playing a familiar tune: it was Thelonious Monk's rendition of *Ruby My Dear*, the song that had launched Garnell on his path to fame. He had not met Lucius McArdle since that fateful afternoon and sometimes wondered if it had been just a dream. But it had all been real: his being offered a scholarship at a renowned Chicago conservatory; his years of remedial training, not only on music but on general education subjects he had missed or slept through in high school; his efforts to supplement his innate talents with an understanding of the deeper meanings of the

musical masterpieces; his tireless efforts to refine his technique so it was on par with that of the great masters of the piano. As recognition and fame approached, he realized that a major trade had taken place: as melodies, arias and musical passages filled his head, the frequency of his attempts at vocal communication had decreased.

Now, when his mother asked him a question, no words emerged from Garnell's mouth, and instead he trilled Mozart's variations on "*Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman.*" The melody sounded – to her ears – like a parody of "*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,*" filling her with confusion and anger. Or, when ordering breakfast at a cafe, instead of indicating his choice Garnell would rehearse Uberto's complaint from Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*: "*Son quattro ore che aspetto, e la Serpina portarme il cioccolato non fa grazia.*" Or, when his then girlfriend would whisper loving words in his ear, he would think of Dalila and hum back: "*Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix.*"

Of course, there were many circumstances in which he could not recall a musical passage that contained the words that would be appropriate to the occasion. For those instances, there would be melodies from his extensive piano repertory that matched the thoughts or mood he wished to convey; the tunes in pieces by Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Liszt, Ellington, and many others provided substitutes for the words he could have uttered. The meaning of the musical phrases, however, was almost never understood by his collocutors.

As years passed, Garnell's musical star continued to rise. His highly successful first recital was followed by other engagements to

appear as solo performer or guest artist in concerts by the Chicago Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, and other Midwestern ensembles, culminating in a sold-out recital at Carnegie Hall in New York and an appearance with the Philharmonic to perform the workhorse of virtuoso piano concertos, Rachmaninoff's Third.

Although increasingly famous, Garnell declined to sit for interviews and would only respond to questions posed in writing by the media. He was unwilling to expose his speech defects, and the explanations offered by his agent left the press and the public dissatisfied. Speculations whirled around regarding his private life and physical and mental health, culminating in an exposé in a gossip magazine, in which it was claimed that cancer was eating away at his vocal cords, presaging an early end to his life.

Jamal, who had become Garnell's de facto manager, insisted that the rumors were interfering with his artistic career and risking his forced retirement. "You must show that you have not become mute, but are just a man of few words." To which Garnell replied by humming one of his favorite musical quotes, the Gospel song "*Lord, Show me the Way.*" Jamal was familiar with Garnell's repertoire and replied: "How about shooting a short video of you playing the piano and singing something easy, like Frank Sinatra's "*My Way?*" After a long pause, Garnell nodded in resigned agreement.

Garnell's videotaped performance of "*My Way*" only lasted about four minutes, but

required over fifty takes and a lot of splicing. Apart from the stuttering, Garnell's voice was weak and lacking in resonance. As a demo tape for an aspiring singer, it would have been an utter failure. Yet, Jamal got it played in a classical music podcast, from where it bounced in all directions on the internet and became one of the top videos of the year.

Garnell re-emerged as a strong, silent type, a modern-day Gary Cooper whose few words, when uttered, would be replete with meaning. He continued to perform regularly and his recording of the Brahms Second Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony was described as "monumental" and went on to win a *Grand Prix du Disque* the year it was released.

By that time, however, Garnell had lost the ability to communicate verbally with anyone save Jamal, who somehow understood his friend's monosyllabic utterances. "You might as well be a mute" Jamal would comment, only partially in jest. But the rest of the world did not know, and seemed not to care, about the pianist's increased isolation. As an article in a respected music magazine would conclude, "as long as he can make beautiful music, there is no need for his declarations."

At Jamal's insistence, Garnell began carrying around a small notebook in which, like Beethoven, he would scribble notes to be displayed to those with whom he interacted. Garnell resorted to scribbling notes only as a last resort, when it was urgent that he convey his needs or instructions to others. After his death, people combing through the filled notebooks he left behind found virtually nothing of importance in them.

Years passed. In time, Garnell's manual dexterity started to decline. He gave a farewell recital on his forty-fifth birthday and retired from public performances. His humming of familiar tunes also became impaired, as memory lapses became more frequent. By age fifty, he felt isolated, having virtually no effective means of communicating with others. Jamal, who had become his de-facto guardian, hired Ella, a live-in nurse who would take care of Garnell's daily needs. Ella proved to be competent and attentive, and she soon became Garnell's main link with the world.

Ella was in her forties and had managed to retain much of the freshness of her youth despite being married and divorced twice and having raised a daughter who was now away, attending college. Her maternal instincts were transferred to her new ward, and she bestowed continued attention upon him. Garnell was unaccustomed to being fussed over and at first resisted Ella's ministrations but finally succumbed and started reciprocating Ella's showings of care.

Romance had seldom been part of Garnell's self-contained life and the novelty of the situation baffled him, but he adapted to it. One evening, as they sat in front of the television set watching a soap opera, Garnell grasped Ella's hand and haltingly emitted the first words to come out of his lips in a long time: "I ... love ... you."

They married soon thereafter and, thanks to his love with Ella, Garnell discovered

there were other means of expressing oneself non-verbally, through kisses and caresses, and these provided a sufficient outlet for his emotions.

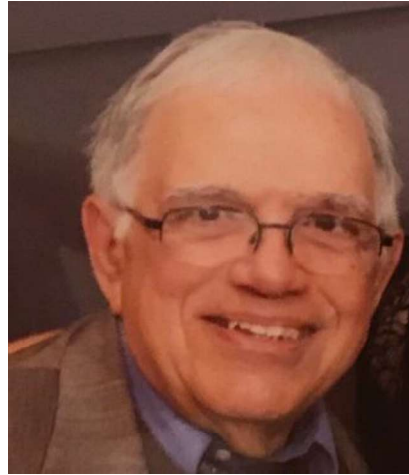
The marriage lasted a few happy years, and only came to a close when Ella died from a sudden heart attack. Having lost his last means of communication, Garnell folded into himself and withdrew from the world. He barricaded himself in his mansion, a bird trapped in a gilded cage of his own making.

One morning, the groundskeeper found Garnell's fully clothed corpse floating on the swimming pool. There were no signs of violence, the autopsy revealed no health upsets that would have caused Garnell's collapse, and no poisonous substances were found in his body. Also, no papers presaging his death were found on the person of the deceased or anywhere in his mansion; his half-filled last notebook was found atop the kitchen table and the last entry in it were directions to the housekeeper to purchase cleaning supplies.

The official cause of death was reported by the coroner's office as "unexplained accident" and subsequent investigations into Garnell's demise led nowhere, so press inquiries petered out after a while.

Sometime later, Jamal and Ando got together to make music and share memories of their friend. Ando recalled Garnell's mysterious death and wondered what had really happened

to him. Jamal did not hesitate to provide a theory: “Poor Garnell. He always had trouble expressing himself, and at the end must have decided he no longer had anything to communicate and no means to convey his feelings. So, he just gave up and somehow willed himself to die. I bet he went in peace.”



Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and seventy of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.