

Piano prodigy Marlene Piper cannot afford music school, but finds work and love playing piano in a speakeasy called The Starfish. Through Prohibition and the Great Depression, she struggles to remain true to herself, support her family, and to keep on creating music.

Marlene's Piano

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# **Marlene's Piano**

**Jill Charles**

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## CHAPTER ONE

“You are not going to music school, Marlene.”

My mother’s words fell like stones on the waxed kitchen floor. My face burned in anger and disbelief. I fixed my dark eyes on hers.

“Dad wanted me to go to music school. He always said so.”

Her green eyes were sad but unyielding.

“Your father said many things, Marlene. He told Helen that she could be an opera singer and told Brendan that he could be an explorer.”

I put my hand on the puffed sleeve of her black dress.

“Mother, he promised me since I was four years old that I would go to a conservatory. I’ve saved my allowance and I have seventy-two dollars.”

She shook her head. Black strands of hair slipped from her bun like a veil around her pale face. It was four months since my father died, and she still wore black and prayed every day for the repose of his soul. Perhaps in her grief Mother had made an error, had not found the money set aside for my education. I wanted to believe that my father had some secret savings, but I knew full well he had never been able to save money nor keep any secret from Mother. She was always the practical parent, even now often holding the family’s ledger in one hand and her handkerchief in the other.

“Marlene, your father believed his children could do anything and I loved him for that, but you and I both know that he never put by a penny. I kept all the books while he was alive and now that he’s gone Joseph and I had to borrow money from your Uncle Luke to pay the mortgage on the house.”

She put her arm around me and said “Sure you have as much talent as any girl at Julliard but we haven’t the money to send you to a conservatory.”

“Mother, what if I could make enough money? I made plenty playing the organ at the Varsity Theater last summer and I could give lessons and find a band.”

Mother interrupted “Marlene, how many bands and orchestras do you know? Do any of them have a lady pianist? Or any ladies at all?”

I shook off her arm.

“I played in Laurel Catholic High’s band for the last four years and in church concerts since I was twelve. I have more experience than

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most men my age and I'm learning new songs every week. I don't ever want to stop playing!"

Mother was calm but resolute.

"You needn't stop playing, but do not expect to make a life for yourself on the stage. Your family needs you now."

"What do you need from me?"

"Your uncle has asked me if one of my children would be able to live at the farm this summer. I thought you would be the best choice. Joseph's plumbing business is doing well and Amelia is a full-time nurse now at St. Luke's. Brendan makes enough money from his paper route to pay his high school fees. Helen has her job at the silk mill."

I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

"Mother, I want to help. I do, but please could I work at the Varsity Theater again and teach some music lessons?"

This got her Irish up; the color rose in her cheeks and her Ulster accent rang out in her voice.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Marlene! What are you so afraid of? You're always going on about how you want to leave home."

"I wanted to leave Laurel, not home," I said, realizing how stupid that sounded.

"We have to repay your uncle," she went on. "You will earn as much as the farm hands but your work will be mostly indoors, canning with your aunt and boxing up the corn for market. You know that Aunt Josie could use help with the cooking and housework; Maud is always fainting or greensick."

"I don't know anything about harvesting or taking care of cows and hens." I said.

"Sure you'll learn it," Mother said. "Just like you learned to read and write and play the piano. Besides Aunt Josie will bring you home every Sunday when the Haydens come into town for church and on Saturdays while they're at market. Don't worry, Marlene. It's the hard times that teach us how strong we are and this too shall pass."

She hugged and kissed me and I clung to her, more tightly than I had since I was a little girl. Outside the kitchen window the blue hydrangeas nodded in the breeze, already waving goodbye to me.

I retreated upstairs to the room I shared with my older sister, Amelia. She was ironing her white nurse's cap and blue shirtwaist for her evening shift at St. Luke's Hospital.

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"I heard that you've been drafted for the farm," said Amelia. "Mother mentioned Uncle Luke's offer to me, but I didn't think they would need you until the fall."

I lay back on the bed, my brown hair spread out on the pillow, trying to look as tragic as I felt. I took off my round silver glasses and rubbed my tired eyes.

"This will be the worst summer of my life," I said.

Amelia brushed her chin-length black bob, the short haircut that scandalized my mother and showed everyone that Amelia was a modern, independent woman.

"Will you miss Robert Schumann?" Amelia teased.

"Robert Schumann never looked at me anyway."

Like me, Robert had graduated from Laurel Catholic High in May, Class of 1922. He sang in the choir and performed in almost every school play. I would stare up at him from the piano in the orchestra pit when he was Romeo or Julius Caesar. He never glanced down at me. For all four years of high school, I had been obsessed with his handsome face, his golden tenor voice, his wry smile and social grace and obvious - though not always academic - genius. In my underwear drawer, I kept a picture of him in a top hat and suit that I had found outside his locker. I thought of Robert whenever I played *You Made Me Love You* or any other love song.

Amelia sat on the edge of my bed and patted my shoulder.

"Cheer up, Marlene. Maybe the farm will help you forget Robert. It'll be good to see Aunt Josie and Sven and Isaac will be fun to work with."

Sven and Isaac Madsen were Norwegian orphans taken in when they were eight and six by my aunt and uncle. Their father and mother had died of consumption in a steerage bunk on their way across the Atlantic. Sister Patricia, a Carmelite nun and oldest sister of my father and Aunt Josie, had worked in a New York orphanage and asked the Haydens to take the boys in so that they would not be separated. Aunt Josie treated them like sons and taught them to read and write, but Uncle Luke insisted that they were field hands, and must sleep in the bunkhouse and eat separately from the family. Sven and Isaac were much kinder than my cousins Maud and Boyd. They respected my uncle, but when he wasn't around they called Aunt Josie "Mama".

"It's Maud and Boyd I worry about," I replied, sinking my face into my pillow.

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“I wouldn’t worry,” said Amelia. “Maud spends most of her time in bed imagining she has a headache and Boyd sneaks out of the field every chance he gets to steal Uncle Luke’s whiskey and cigars.”

When Amelia left for her evening shift, my younger sister Helen came in. She had been embroidering silk handkerchiefs in the living room while Mother and I argued, and had heard the whole thing, no doubt. Too sweet and shy to interrupt, Helen probably sympathized with both of us.

She sat beside me on the bed, hugged me, and laid her beautiful blonde head on my shoulder. At fourteen, Helen still wore her hair in ringlets, but already had a sweetheart, our neighbor Edward Malone. Dad used to call her “Helen of Troy” and I envied her for being the prettiest of the Piper children. Helen worked six days a week at Stolfus Silk Mill, choosing a first job instead of attending high school as Joseph, Amelia, myself and Brendan had done before her. She told Mother she “was never much good at school” and enjoyed sewing clothes from extra silk and working with Edward and her friends Ruby and Rachel.

“I’m so sorry you can’t go to Julliard, Marlene!” Helen said. “I know how you always wanted to go away to school.”

“Thank you, Helen,” I said, hugging her. “I really do want to make money and help Mother. I just want to play piano too.”

“Maybe you can get a job at the silk mill after the harvest,” Helen suggested. “They won’t need you on the farm in winter. You could rent a room at a boardinghouse if you didn’t want to live at home.”

“I just know I can’t make a living at music in Laurel,” I said. “Not even if I play organ at the Varsity Theater and at church and teach piano lessons. I’ve got to get to New York or Philadelphia to some theaters or nightclubs.”

Helen’s hazel eyes widened with surprise as she asked “Would you play in a bar full of drunk people?”

Like Amelia and Mother, Helen was a strict teetotaler and believed in Prohibition, which I often questioned, though I never drank.

“I’d play in a bar, Helen. I feel like the music is alive inside me and I’ll go crazy if I can’t let it out. I’d play the piano for the Devil if he’d pay me.”

She clapped her hand over my mouth and said “Shhh.”

From downstairs, Mother called “Helen, some friends are here to see you.”

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Helen took my hand and squeezed it, like I did to comfort her when we were little kids.

"Ask God to help you, Marlene," said Helen. "And pray to St. Cecilia."

She rushed downstairs. Saint Cecilia, patroness of music, had sung for three days in a steam bath where the Romans tried to kill her with the heat, before cutting her throat with a sword. As a child, I prayed to her daily, but as an eighteen-year-old, I doubted the martyr would bless my ambition to play a piano in a nightclub.

I looked out the window and watched shy, red-headed Edward Malone take Helen's hand. Rachel and Ruby fluttered around her like chickens, giggling and gossiping on their way to the ice cream parlor. My little sister felt contentment I could no longer find in Laurel.

I leaned out the open window, slipped one foot out after the other, and carefully sat on the sloping roof. The shingles still held the heat of the May day and felt warm against my back. From the roof, I could hear everything in the yard and from the open windows of the house, while safely concealed behind the dense green leaves of the maple tree. No one could see me lying there in my nightgown, but I could catch glimpses of the yard and street below and watch the stars come out. The roof let me escape from home without leaving the yard. Mother always warned me that I'd fall and break my neck. I risked it anyway and taught my brother Brendan to climb out and sit there too.

A rustle in the maple tree below me caught my attention and I looked for a blue jay or squirrel. Instead, I spied Brendan's birds' nest of brown curls and his eyes blue as robins' eggs. He climbed up toward his window on the second floor.

"Hey, Brendan!" I whispered.

He looked startled, then climbed up to sit beside me.

"Where were you all evening? Mother was furious when you didn't come home for dinner."

"Don't squeal," he said. "But after my paper route, I rode my bike to Mill Creek to meet Isaac."

Our swimming spot, by the stone bridge at Mill Creek, was a mile from our house, but twelve miles from Uncle Luke's farm where Isaac lived and worked.

"Isaac told Boyd that there was peep show at the fairgrounds. When Boyd went into the tent to look, Isaac ran away. It was just a livestock tent and all Boyd saw were the rear ends of mules!"

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We both leaned back on the roof and laughed at our cousin Boyd, who had bullied us since early childhood. Lately Boyd called Brendan “a queer” and tried to slap my behind every time I passed him.

“What are you doing on the roof?” Brendan asked.

“I’m trying not to throw myself off it,” I said. “Mother just told me I can’t go to music school and I have to work for Uncle Luke.”

“I thought Dad saved money for you to go to a conservatory,” Brendan said.

I shook my head.

“Damn,” he said. “I offered to work on the farm during the harvest, but when Aunt Josie asked Uncle Luke, he said ‘I’ll get more work out of Marlene than that pansy.’”

“I hate him,” I said.

“At least you’ll be with Isaac and Sven.”

“I’ll be canning and boxing corn, not catching frogs in the creek like you do,” I said.

“We weren’t catching frogs,” he said softly.

“What were you doing?”

“We miss each other,” Brendan said, although he saw Isaac weekly at church and Sunday dinner at our house.

A sputtering motor interrupted us and we looked down to see Joseph’s Piper’s Plumbing van pull up in front of our yard. Our older brother took great pride in Piper’s Plumbing, the business he started, and his pale blue van.

Stubbornly independent and first-born, Joseph had enlisted in the Army during the Great War, over our Irish mother’s objections that “no more men should die for the British Empire”. When Joseph’s right leg was amputated below the knee in a French field hospital, he never wrote to us about it. When he married Katrina, a Belgian nurse, in that same hospital tent, he didn’t write to tell us. In 1918, they came home triumphant and the whole family loved Katrina for her cleverness, kindness and devotion to him. Mother had emigrated to marry Dad, so she understood Katrina’s homesickness and helped her with her English. Amelia pressed her for details of the battlefield, which Katrina spoke freely about, but Joseph refused to mention. We all thought that Joseph’s new stiff gait was a military step until Mother walked in on Katrina helping him bathe in her bathtub. When Mother saw the stump of his right leg and the artificial limb, she fainted.

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Now Joseph strode confidently up the path to the house, and none of his customers or neighbors would guess that this plumber who crawled under houses and behind toilets had a wooden leg. He kept his brown hair short and his face clean-shaven. Katrina wore red lipstick and put her hair up in a neat French twist. She sang a French lullaby to three-month-old Harry, who lay half-asleep in her arms. They had named him Harold after my father, who got to see his grandson only twice before his last illness.

"Mother, where has Brendan gone?" Joseph called out like a drill sergeant.

With our father gone, Joseph tried to mold Brendan, like plaster, into "a real man" as the army had done for him. Brendan flamboyantly resisted.

"I'm not going in," said Brendan.

"Me neither," I said.

The stars all shone down on us now like diamond beads on deep blue velvet. Crickets chirped. At this hour, I would normally sit at the piano to play *Over There* and *Frere Jacques* for Joseph and Katrina, with Helen singing in her sweet soprano and the family joining in, one by one.

"Marlene, do you remember when Dad took us to see Eva Tanguay at the Franklin Theater?" Brendan asked.

"I do," I said. "That was when I knew I wanted to play piano onstage."

"That was when I knew I had to get out of Laurel," Brendan said.

We lay there quietly on the roof and remembered that night so many years ago.

It was 1914; I was ten years old and Brendan was eight. Usually our entire family went to plays or vaudeville shows, but on that night all the other Piper children were still sick with chicken pox.

Brendan and I had recovered, but Joseph and Amelia, (then aged fifteen and twelve) had more severe cases and were still spotted and itching. Six-year-old Helen had only a few spots on her face and hands, but wailed like a lost soul whenever she saw her reflection. Mother was at her wits' end, drawing oatmeal baths and smearing her children with calamine lotion. The whole house felt humid and feverish. She was scrubbing oatmeal out of the tub when Dad bent down to kiss her white neck and gently tell her we were leaving.

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“Aileen, dear, I’m taking Brendan and Marlene to the Franklin. We’ll get some sandwiches at Caprello’s. Don’t bother cooking anything tonight; you’ve worked hard enough today.”

Mother kissed him goodbye and didn’t even ask the name of the show.

We savored our provolone and meatball sandwiches at the Caprello Deli. The smells of aged cheese, salami and pickled peppers seemed much healthier than the calamine odor at home. The shop was busy before the show, but Guiseppe Caprello leaned over the counter to joke with my dad.

Mr. Caprello said “You’re going to see Eva Tanguay? She’s French Canadian, you know. Oo la la.”

Then he gyrated his thick hips in the silliest feminine way, and the customers chuckled.

“I’m just giving my kids some culture,” Dad protested, which amused everyone even more.

Dad led us through the golden doorway of the Franklin Theater, past the marble columns, up the red-carpeted steps and into the big balcony known as “peanut heaven”. Usually Mother bought one bag of peanuts for all of us kids, but Dad bought us each a whole bag of our own. During the opening acts, Dad showed us how to throw shells at rich people – like Mr. Howard Bainworth in a box seat on the side of the theater. Dad bounced a shell right off the part of his pomaded gray hair. Mr. Bainworth turned around scowling under his waxed, curled mustache, but it was too dark to see who threw the shell. I saw Audrey Bainworth, his only daughter, kissing a young man in the third row. She wore a black hat with white egret plumes; Brendan and I hit several others before finally striking her, but she didn’t even notice.

We sat in the very front row, with a terrific view of the jugglers, the dog trainer and the dancing girls with their twirling parasols and spinning crinolines. We were excited to see Eva Tanguay; Marco and Tony Caprello said she was the most beautiful girl in the world but their mother wouldn’t let them have a picture of her because she danced the “hoochy-kooch”. Eva was the headliner and danced and sang three different songs. She had bright brown eyes and curly brown hair, with a big smile and a sweet Quebec accent when she sang.

For the first number, she wore pink chiffon and sang sweetly about her mother. Next she appeared in blue velvet and sang a French love song, kicking her legs like a ballerina. Eva wore a white leotard with

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glittering pearls, tights and a tail of white ostrich plumes trailing behind her like some exotic bird-of-paradise. Her arms were bare and the tights made her legs look naked and showed off her hourglass figure. As she kicked her legs and swirled her hips, the men hooted and whistled and the women laughed and fluttered their fans. I really believed Eva could have flown off the stage if she wanted to, swooped over the crowd and out the theater door into the starry night sky. I had never seen anyone like her and the notes and words of her third song always stayed with me:

*They say I'm crazy, got no sense  
But I don't care.  
They may or may not mean offense,  
But I don't care;  
You see I'm sort of independent,  
Of a clever race descendant,  
My star is on the ascendant,  
That's why I don't care.  
I don't care,  
I don't care,  
What they may think of me.  
I'm happy go lucky,  
Men say I am plucky,  
So jolly and care free.  
I don't care,  
I don't care,  
If I do get the mean and stony stare.  
If I'm never successful,  
It won't be distressful,  
'Cos I don't care.*

The next day Brendan and I made Joseph, Amelia and Helen laugh by imitating the dance Eva did. Joseph was very jealous that we got to see the "I Don't Care Girl", but paid Brendan ten cents for the program showing Eva kicking her long legs. Dad bought me the sheet music to play on the piano. Mother was annoyed that he took us to see a "cooch dancer" but Dad insisted "The children should hear fine music. Marlene will play at the Franklin Theater one day."

Mother said "Playing piano? Yes. Dancing like a burlesque girl – no."

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Whenever anyone made fun of Brendan or me we would sing or hum *I Don't Care*. We taught it to our friends and siblings. The song became our private prayer, a rosary against a world that never understood us. Now, so many years later, without our dear Dad, the song still sustained us.

Mother and Joseph came upstairs, from room to room, calling out "Brendan? Marlene? Where are you?"

Up on the roof, Brendan and I joined hands and sang, too softly to be heard:

*I don't care,*

*I don't care*

*What they may think of me...*

## CHAPTER TWO

On the farm, I felt like a failure at everything I did. No matter how hard I worked and how much Aunt Josie, my father's sister, tried to make me welcome, I knew I was a poor relation. I lived in a wooden room adjoining the barn, better than the bunkhouse for the field hands: Sven and Isaac Madsen and David Dunn, but plain and drafty compared to the two-story farmhouse where Uncle Luke lived with Aunt Josie and my spoiled cousins Maud and Boyd Hayden.

Every morning before five, Aunt Josie would wake me, opening my door and whispering "Good morning, Marlene" as sweetly as she could.

On my first morning there, I could not believe the hour and the fact that I would have to wake up before five every morning until November. As I washed my face and combed my hair into a neat braid, I tried to hurry, but moved like a sleepwalker. I resented the pink sun peeking over the horizon outside my window and the ugly whimpering cry of the rain doves in the barn.

Before we could eat, Aunt Josie, Maud and I would make breakfast for the men. I helped Aunt Josie brew the coffee, and cook the oatmeal and bacon. While I fried the eggs, my cousin Maud flounced into the kitchen in an immaculate white dress and apron. She wore neat blonde ringlets and a sour expression. She sat on a stool beside me, not working, but criticizing everything I did.

"Those eggs are going to stick, Marlene. Lift the edges. No! No! You've scrambled them. They're ruined now."

"Why can't you do this?" I asked.

"Marlene, you've got to learn. I can't believe you're eighteen years old, graduated from high school, and still can't fry eggs. What kind of wife will you be?"

"I'm not getting married," I said. "I'm going to play the piano."

"Don't worry," she whispered. "No one would have you anyway."

Neither Maud nor Boyd had attended high school and they both thought that Joseph, Amelia, Brendan and I were spoiled because our father had taught history at Laurel Catholic High and we got free tuition. At twenty and nineteen, Maud and Boyd could not stand the fact that I might know more than they did, despite being younger.

I carried oatmeal, eggs and bacon into the dining room. Uncle Luke, Boyd, Sven and Isaac and David Dunn sat around the table,

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eating their fill before going out to the cornfield to pick until noon. Uncle Luke scowled into his *Old Farmers' Almanac*, his face and hair as dull and tan as its worn pages. Boyd leered at me like an evil blonde cherub, his blue eyes looking me up and down as no one should ever look at their first cousin. The new field hand, David Dunn, ate silently without glancing up from his plate. Only the Madsen brothers, Sven and Isaac, smiled up at me, recognizing a childhood friend and not just one more worker. If Uncle Luke weren't in the room, I would have hugged Sven and Isaac.

"Look at the new field hand," Sven joked. "She's a sight prettier than David Dunn."

"Smells better too, I bet," said Isaac.

"You boys pipe down," said Uncle Luke.

As children, Sven and Isaac always played with my siblings and me. No matter what my uncle said, I thought of them as kin, not hired help, and admired the way they looked out for each other. Sven never learned to read very well and he depended on Isaac for that, while skinny Isaac depended on his big strong brother for protection from Boyd. Isaac had gone to the optical shop with me when we were six and five, to get our first glasses. He told me that anyone who called us "four eyes" should be called "no brains". We used to hide Maud's dolls in the pumpkin patch and frighten her with toads. As we grew older, it became obvious that Sven loved Maud, even when she called him "common and dirty" or ignored him outright. I pitied him and wondered what he saw in her. The feeling seemed as unnatural as an ox falling in love with a housecat.

When Maud set down the coffee pot, Sven smiled and said "Thank you, Miss Hayden," but she rushed past him without a glance.

"Marlene, have you met David Dunn?" Isaac asked. "Your uncle hired him for the harvest."

I noticed the third field hand sitting across the kitchen table from Isaac and Sven. My uncle occasionally hired extra hands when the corn was ripe, but I never got to meet any of them because they kept busy in the fields and stayed in the bunkhouse. This man was a sharp contrast to the sunny looks of the Madsen brothers and my blond cousin and uncle. His curly black hair was like a storm cloud and he looked down as he ate breakfast, keeping his thoughts to himself. His hands were huge and sinewy, his arms wiry and his movements precise as he cut his food. He dressed like an ordinary farm hand in

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tan pants and a round-collared white shirt, but something in his manner made him look cleaner and more intelligent than the Madsens. He looked up at me suddenly with eyes like two masterful sapphires. His black eyebrows relaxed and his wide mouth spread in a strange smirk.

"I'm Marlene Piper," I said. "Pleased to meet you."

I reached out to shake hands with David, who shook my hand firmly and said "Good morning, Miss Piper."

When I touched his hand, a shiver ran through me and I felt cold all over. My initial feeling about David was fear, though I could not have said why. My second feeling about him was a prickling curiosity, which I knew well enough to conceal. His accent was unmistakably Irish and I wanted to ask him what part of that country he came from and to tell him that my mother was an immigrant too. His dark hair and pale skin reminded me of my mother; they were what my uncle called "black Irish".

"Marlene, you're not to fool with the field hands," my uncle said sharply. "Get back in the kitchen and eat breakfast with Josie and Maud."

"And bring me some bacon," Boyd added, slapping my backside as I passed him.

I whirled around, horrified, and he winked one devilish blue eye and licked his lips. Uncle Luke had seen this, but ignored it. Isaac and Sven averted their eyes and David glared at Boyd, but no one dared to challenge Boyd in front of Uncle Luke. Slamming the door, I rushed back to the kitchen. My face burned with shame, although I knew that nothing Boyd did to me was my fault.

Aunt Josie and Maud showed me where all the tools and dishes were kept and which fruits and vegetables were ripe. I weeded the garden and boxed up the corn. Sometimes I would feed corn to the chickens and slop to the hogs, hay to the horses and the cows. It would take me some time to learn to gather the eggs and milk the cows. My main work would be cooking and cleaning, but I soon learned that the kitchen could be as exhausting as the field. I would help Aunt Josie and Maud dust, sweep and mop every room in the house and wash all the laundry. My arms felt exhausted as I soaped and rinsed the clothes, pressed them through the ringer and hung them out to dry in the sun. How strange it was to handle the underwear of everyone in the house! I smelled the sweat on the men's cotton

undershirts, and watched their undershorts flapping on the washline like seagulls.

After the men went into the cornfield, Aunt Josie, Maud and I delved into the work of canning. Peeling, chopping and slicing vegetables and fruit, stirring pectin into jam, I sometimes felt as if I were trapped in a giant mason jar. Steam collected on the windows, even when we opened them in futile hope of a cool breeze. Beads of sweat rolled down my back and my green cotton dress clung to me like wilted lettuce on a greasy plate. I wiped the steam off my glasses and tucked my brown hair into a bun.

When Aunt Josie sent me down into the cellar to shelve jars of preserves, the coolness relieved me. I leaned my face against the wall and wished I could live in that dark, quiet place between the wash ringer, the huge sink and the old wooden chairs. All I would need was a cot, a water closet and my piano.

“Marlene, come upstairs, please.”

I sighed and followed Maud’s shrill voice up the creaking wooden steps.

“I can’t can tomatoes today,” she said.

Why not?” I asked.

Aunt Josie and Maud exchanged knowing glances then looked back at me.

“Tomatoes will spoil if you can them during your monthlies,” Maud said smugly.

She turned on her heel and began to skip upstairs, unburdened by any care or cramp. This time Aunt Josie saw through the clumsy lace of Maud’s “symptoms”.

“Just a moment, Maud,” she said. “There is no reason on Earth that you can’t start shucking vegetables for the chow chow.”

Maud stopped in her tracks, sighed indignantly and rolled her blue eyes. On the kitchen table, she lined up string and lima beans, corn, celery, onion and red and green pepper. Her thin pale hand moved through the vegetables as neatly as a seamstress cuts through cloth.

Meanwhile, Aunt Josie showed me how to slip the skins off hot tomatoes by plunging them into cold water. We canned seven jars of tomatoes and a big pot of catsup, and then helped Maud boil vegetables for chow chow. The smells of tomatoes and vinegar made me hungry and I nibbled a few fresh peas and carrot slices.

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"Don't eat between meals, Marlene. You're fat enough already," Maud scolded.

At one o' clock, we set both the tables for dinner: chicken corn soup with dumplings, cherries, snap peas, spinach salad and raspberry gelatin. The midday meal on the farm was always the largest. By one, the men had worked for eight hours in the field and the heat was unbearable. On the hottest days, they might take a nap after dinner, then go out to pick corn for a few more hours before supper at six.

Unlike Maud, I could never use my monthlies or a headache to dodge work. Unlike Boyd, I couldn't sneak off behind the barn with Uncle Luke's cigars or borrow the truck for a drive into town. My only escape from the farm was Sunday visits to Laurel for mass at St. Anne's Church and dinner at my mother's house.

Every evening after supper on the farm, I would go into the living room to play the piano.

Sometimes Uncle Luke would want to read his newspaper in silence and would bellow "Stop that darn racket!" Then I'd retire to my barnhouse and flutter my fingers over the tabletop as if it were a piano. I remembered the place of every piano key and heard the absent notes inside my head.

Luckily, Uncle Luke often retired upstairs to get ready for bed right after supper. Aunt Josie encouraged my piano playing. She and my father had played duets on her piano when they were children. She could still play by ear, though she had never been able to teach Maud and Boyd, who complained that piano lessons were dull and they would rather just buy records.

As I sat on the piano bench, I remembered Dad teaching me to play when I was four years old. He said "You have long fingers and slender hands. You're a natural piano player."

As I played, I remembered sitting on the bench with Dad before my legs were long enough to reach the pedals. He would pedal for me and my little fingers would follow his big strong hands over the ebony and ivory keys. On Sundays, after church, we would practice. He sat at the piano bench with me on his lap and guided my little fingers.

Plink, plink, plink. Plink, plink, plink.

*Heart and soul, I gave you everything.*

*Hot and cold, you've taken everything...*

Jill Charles

Dad had a rich baritone voice and he could have joined the church choir if he had not been so opposed to joining things. My voice was like a screech owl, but when I was four I didn't know this and I sang with him as loudly as I could.

"You play beautifully," Dad said. "And some day, when you are grown up, we will send you to music school. You can play at the Franklin Theater downtown and hundreds of people will come to see you."

Had Dad really believed that I would succeed, or only said these things out of love?

"Music makes people forget their troubles," Dad always told me. "Always remember that when you play. You don't just make music for yourself. When you play the piano, your song is for everyone."

Now in my Uncle's living room, I slid the lid back from the keys and began to play *Keep On the Sunny Side*. Uncle Luke and Boyd had gone up to bed. Aunt Josie sang along and Sven and Isaac joined in, sitting on the floor next to the Hayden ladies on the sofa. Sven nudged Maud, hoping to hear her pretty soprano voice, but she just shook her head and silently embroidered pansies on a tablecloth.

Sven said "Play *Shenandoah*; it's my favorite."

I played and he sang:

"*Oh Shenandoah, he loves your daughter. Away, you rolling river. He'll take her 'cross the rolling water...*"

I thought of Sven's love for Maud and how angry Uncle Luke would be to discover it. It was Sven's one secret sorrow and, though I couldn't understand it, I began to admire his devotion. Would anybody ever sing about me like this?

"Can you play *The Foggy Dew*?" David Dunn requested.

He stood in the doorway, his face in shadow. I hadn't noticed him there, but I turned around on the piano bench to face him.

"I do know it," I said. "My mother is an Irish emigrant."

Although I disliked my weak alto voice, I sang all the words. David approached the piano and sang with me, his powerful baritone voice singing about how the Irish tried to rebel against Great Britain during the Great War, failing when the Germans never arrived with their promised weapons. It was a song my mother appreciated but forbade me to ever play in front of my proud veteran brother Joseph. Aunt Josie, Maud and the Madsens looked shocked as I played a song that made the Irish rebels martyrs.

*Marlene's Piano*

*“And I kneel and pray for you  
For slavery fled,  
O glorious dead  
When you fell in the foggy dew.”*

I am playing for David Dunn and for myself, I thought, and at this moment no one else matters to me. David leaned on the piano and smiled at me for the first time.

## CHAPTER THREE

As I tried to fall asleep at the farm, I prayed for my family and for my father. After my prayers I spoke to him. Sometimes I dreamed about Dad at night and woke up to remember, with a sharp pain, that he was dead.

“God, why did you have to take him?” I asked out loud.

Dad had been very sick in the flu epidemic after the war, and when he recovered Dr. Bauer told us that his heart was weakened. Dad pretended that nothing was wrong as he returned to teaching his history classes at Laurel Catholic High, taking his long, rambling walks and sitting on the porch swing reading Tacitus and Edward Gibbon and smoking a corncob pipe. It was in January of 1922 when he came home late from the library and gave his coat to a beggar woman.

“I wanted to be like Saint Martin,” he joked.

When he caught a cold, Mother gave him chicken soup and allowed him to drink hot toddies, although she was a stern teetotaler. I think she knew, even early on, that it would be his last illness. Mother had always forbidden drinking in the house, after seeing too many men consumed by drink in Ireland, including her own widowed father. Dad was Pennsylvania Dutch and considered beer *das flussige brot*, “liquid bread” and nothing more. He got around her rule against drinking in the house by buying bottles of beer from the corner bar and drinking them on the front porch. When she let him drink whiskey for medical reasons, all of us children began to worry about him.

On February 11, two days after my eighteenth birthday, I passed Dad in the hallway. He wore his red striped pajamas and a royal blue bathrobe. His face, hands and feet were pale as alabaster and the damp smell of sickness clung to him, so unlike his usual smell of clover and sweet tobacco.

“Dad, can I get you anything?” I asked.

“No, thank you, Marlene,” he said, and then he started to turn away. “But wait, maybe just one thing, dear. Would you go downstairs and play *Danny Boy* on the piano? I can hear it from up here. Go ahead now.”

I tried my best to play loudly and not to sink into the sadness of the song. My mother sang it in Gaelic sometimes; it was the first song they ever danced to when he was a traveler in Ireland and he took her to a village dance in Dungannon. I tried to think of his funny story of

### *Marlene's Piano*

how they met, when he broke a boot heel and she waited on him at her father's shoe shop, and crept out a window to go dancing with him that night. I pictured Dad as young Harold Piper the adventurer, eloping with his beautiful Aileen Dobhailen and bringing her to America. It hurt to hear him coughing weakly in the room above me. When I finished playing, Mother went upstairs to bring him his tea and could not wake him up.

Could Dad ever have imagined me living here in this wood shelter attached to my uncle's barn? Dad had worked his way through college to become a history teacher and scrimped and saved enough money to travel in Europe, his lifelong dream. His folks worried about him, and neighbors thought his wanderlust was crazy, but it led him to my mother. No matter how long it took, Dad would want me to find a way to play the piano on stage.

Sometimes, just after I said my prayers, I would speak to him, hoping his soul might listen.

"I won't disappoint you, Dad," I said. "I'll help Mother any way I can. I know you must be in Heaven now and not in Purgatory, no matter how ornery Mother said you were. I'll do whatever I have to do here and then I'll find a way to get out of Laurel and play piano. I love you, Dad, and I'll make you proud of me."

It was hard to feel proud of myself, as I sweated in the dusty barn, boxing up the corn for market. Boyd would bring wheelbarrows of corn in from the field and dump them on the barn floor, running away laughing while I picked up and dusted the pale green leafy ears. I neatly packed a dozen ears in each wooden box, and four boxes in each crate. I stacked the crates in a corner of the barn to prepare for market day.

Flies buzzed around the corn and the manure in the horse and cow stalls. The barn was shady, but just as hot and humid as the outdoors. I wanted to sit and rest, but Boyd would run to Uncle Luke and squeal on me. Uncle Luke would walk by, saying "Marlene, I don't pay you to lie around." If I fanned myself with my paper fan, he'd say "Too hot for the lady of leisure?" and spit on the ground.

During my first week on the farm, I asked "Uncle Luke, may I come into town with you on Saturday?"

"What would you do at market?" he asked.

"Mother said I could come into town with you on Saturday and see her."

*Jill Charles*

“The hell you will!” he said, reddening. “What do you think this is - a union shop? You work for me six days a week. Now get your lazy ass back in that barn!”

I never got to go home on a Saturday. Uncle Luke took Boyd, Isaac and Sven to market, but never David or me. The Madsen boys were good merchants; Sven conversed with every customer and remembered their usual orders and favorite foods while Isaac added up all the prices in his head, made change and kept a list of Uncle Luke’s profits. Boyd did nothing at market but lean against the side of the stall staring at ladies’ legs or sneak off to buy ice cream sodas. More and more often, Uncle Luke took the Madsens to market instead of his son. He told Boyd “I expect you to stay here and keep an eye on the micks,” but I suspected that he enjoyed leaving Boyd behind. By “the micks”, my uncle meant David and me, although I was only half Irish.

One hot Saturday, I had gone to the pump to refill my big mason jar of water. Through the poplar trees, I could see the blue shining creek and almost feel its tempting coolness. Leaving my jar by the pump, I dashed toward the creek. As fast as I could, I unbuttoned my dress and kicked off my shoes and socks. Wearing only my brassiere and underpants, I raced into the cool, thrilling water. I ducked my head under and dived as deep as I could, feeling smooth rocks and tiny waterweeds against my kicking feet. Floating to the surface, I did a lazy backstroke for a few minutes. It would be easy enough to remove my wet underclothes, put on my clothes and go back to work refreshed. If anyone noticed my wet hair, which the boys probably wouldn’t, I’d say I stuck my head under the pump and give them a good laugh.

When I turned to glance at the shore, I saw Boyd sitting on the log where I had left my dress. He narrowed his eyes at me and rubbed my dress against his lap. He buried his hands in the cloth, but focused on me. My breasts, white belly and thighs floated above the surface of the water and my underwear was sheer with wetness. I was so embarrassed to see Boyd that I dipped my legs underwater and struggled to a part of the stream where I could poke my head above water, but hide the rest of me.

“Boyd, what the hell are you doing? Give me back my clothes!”

“No! Come out and get them, you lazy bitch!”

*Marlene's Piano*

I stood up, covering my bosom with one hand and my crotch with the other. I felt angry at Boyd, and ashamed of my cousin seeing me wet, lazy and mostly naked. The rough rocks hurt my feet. Boyd jerked my dress frantically in his lap.

"Give me my damn clothes!" I screamed, pulling on the dress.

Boyd covered his privates with one hand and squeezed my left breast with the other. I fell backward, horrified. Boyd laughed at me for an instant, but then cried out in pain. David Dunn had punched him in the face.

"Let her alone, Boyd!" yelled David

David came out of nowhere, like a summer storm, first punching Boyd from the side, then leaping in front of him and knocking him off the log onto his back. Boyd scrambled backwards on his hands and feet, like a terrified crab.

"You black Irish bastard! I'll tell my father!" he gasped. "You'll both get fired!"

David calmly said "I'll tell Marlene's brothers. You'll get killed."

David spat on the ground as Boyd dashed off through the trees. I awkwardly put on my dress, socks and shoes.

"Are you all right, Miss Piper?" David asked, holding out his hand.

I took it and held it.

"Please call me Marlene. I'll be all right, thank you. Boyd has always teased me, but never like that. Maybe now he'll learn his lesson."

David squeezed my hand and said "If Boyd ever interferes with you again, you let me know and I'll wring his neck."

"Will you help me box the corn?" I asked.

David actually smiled and said "I'd be delighted."

I went to my room to change my clothes, then took David to the barn with me to box up the corn for the rest of the afternoon. It was our first chance to have a real conversation. I had been curious about him and I trusted him now.

"Where are from, David?" I asked. "I mean, where were you born? Where is your family from? I can tell that you're Irish, but I wondered."

"I was born in Kildare," he said. "I have no family anymore."

"Are they deceased?" I asked.

"My father died when I was seven and my mother and stepfather had no use for me. I was the eighth of nine children and I was farmed out to my uncle in Longford when I was twelve. My stepfather hated

*Jill Charles*

me and my mother told me to my face that she never wanted me. When I was fourteen, my grandmother died and left me a little inheritance, enough to get to Dublin and onto a ship."

"My mother came from Dungannon," I said.

"Northern Irish," he said, unimpressed. "Is she a Protestant?"

"Hell no!" I said. "Her maiden name was Aileen Dobhailen and most of her family were Fenians."

My swearing embarrassed me, but made him chuckle.

"Don't pretend to me that you're Irish," he said. "Your father and your aunt are Pennsylvania Dutch and that's what you are, ain't?"

"That's not all I am," I said. "The Irish is part of me too even if I can't speak it. The music and the stories my mother told me..."

He stacked the last crate of corn and we sat side by side on milking stools. I sat on one next to him.

"How long have you been in America?" I asked.

"Six years," he said. "I'll be twenty on January 17. Before I came here I worked in the coal mines in Wilkes-Barre. The pay was better than with farm work but my lungs started burning inside, so I had to leave. I've been on farms for two years now."

I loved the sound of his brogue; he didn't try to hide his accent as my mother did. I wanted to keep him talking.

"Do you like America? Do you ever miss Ireland?"

"Do I like it here? You're the only person in six years to ask whether I like it here. I like the hot summers and the chance to travel where no one knows me and find work. I have no one to miss in Ireland, but I miss the places sometimes, the green fields and the Shannon, the peaceful silence. I don't feel that in America, even on a fine evening like this in a field of corn. I know it's all for sale, for profit and not for beauty."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I've never wanted to sell anything. What I want to do is play the piano."

"Are you working here until you find a husband?" he asked.

"I'm not holding my breath for that," I said.

He chuckled. I noticed the faded but beautiful leather of his black boots, with a sheathed knife in the left one. I had never seen him take it out or whittle sticks like Boyd did. David never fidgeted; he sat calmly observing everything like a bird of prey. Even now, he looked at me out of the corner of his eye, as if disinterested.

*Marlene's Piano*

"Uncle Luke and Aunt Josie wanted me here for the harvest," I said. "But I think they really hired me because my father died this winter and my family needs the extra money. In winter, I'll look for another job. I don't want to stay in a place where I'm not needed."

"I know what you mean. Sure I do."

Slowly he turned toward me and took my hand. Lightning raced up my arms, but I smiled serenely. I wanted to clasp his big warm hands, but he turned my hand over in both of his, studying it instead of holding it.

"You have nice long fingers," he said.

"Thank you."

"You should be a spinner at the silk mill. I'm going to apply at Stolfus Silk this winter. I could take you with me."

We heard Sven and Isaac walking back from the field, pushing each other and laughing. David dropped my hand, stood up, and went into the house without so much as a backward glance. I dashed off to the kitchen before Sven and Isaac could see me. If they saw me talking to David, or to any man, the teasing would be merciless.

Later that evening, I roasted corn in the brick oven behind the kitchen and made potato salad with egg and sliced celery. Blue crabs had been on sale at the market, and Aunt Josie had steamed ten small ones. Maud and I set the table on the front porch for supper, because it was too hot to eat indoors. Aunt Josie's face glowed with sweat and Maud fanned herself.

"I feel faint," she said. "Why can't Marlene bake the biscuits?"

"Because she'd burn them," Isaac teased.

"I would not!"

I kicked Isaac under the table when we sat down, but he just laughed. Sven defended his brother's long skinny feet and pressed his dirty boot on top of my shoe.

"Stop that now," said Uncle Luke. "You boys don't fool with Marlene."

"Excuse us, Miss Marlene," said Sven.

Isaac made a mock bow and his smile almost cracked open with laughter.

Boyd sat down next to me and snatched the butter plate just as I was about to dip my knife in it. Uncle Luke didn't seem to notice.

"Where's David?" asked Aunt Josie.

"He went for a walk," said Isaac.

*Jill Charles*

“Why would he go for a walk at this hour?” my uncle complained.

Then, for reasons I have never fully understood, Isaac leaned toward me and whispered in my ear “David is down by the creek.”

Perhaps Isaac had noticed my love for David. Isaac quietly absorbed everything and I always wore my emotions on my face like a rash. Even better, perhaps David asked Isaac to tell me where he was. I had my own plans now. All I had to do was say:

“I’ll find David.”

I stood up and rushed down from the porch before anyone could object.

Uncle Luke shouted “Hurry back!” as I scurried through the kitchen garden. The fresh delicious smells of tomato plants, basil, mint and peaches lingered in the air. The tall brown farmhouse shrank behind me as I rushed into the cornfield.

I caught a firefly in my hand. I looked into my fist and saw my handsome prisoner, his body striped black and red, his posterior glowing green with phosphorus. Dad had once said that fireflies had the only light without heat in nature. The firefly looked less mysterious up close, but just as interesting. He crawled around desperately in my dark, hot hand. I thought of all the fireflies that Boyd kept in Mason jars until their lights flickered out in death and the ones Joseph and Brendan released in the Varsity Theater. Suddenly I felt sympathy for the little insect. I opened my hand and let him find a mate.

I wove my way through the cornfield like a shuttle through a tapestry of green. My feet remembered the quickest way to the creek. Sure enough, David was wading in the creek, his tan pants rolled up above the knees. His calves were pale but strong and covered with soft black hair. I kicked off my shoes and socks, hitched my skirt up and waded in after him. He heard me splashing along behind him, stopped, and turned around.

“Marlene!” he said. “What brings you all the way out here?”

“I... it’s ... it’s supper time,” I said. “Did you hear the bell?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t hungry.”

“Oh, you should eat anyway. Aunt Josie would be so hurt if you didn’t eat with us.”

“Oh, would she now?”

“Yes, and so would I,” I said “Have you been swimming?”

“What if I have?”

“Do you swim fully dressed?”

*Marlene's Piano*

"No, Marlene. I swim as God intended, in my skin. I don't wade around in my underclothes like you do."

"Were you spying on me like Boyd?"

"Sure I wasn't, but I was amazed that you could swim so well. You looked like a selkie."

"My mother told me about selkies. They slip off their sealskins and turn into women."

"If a man steals the sealskin from a selkie, then he can marry her," David said.

Without noticing it, we stepped closer to each other. He trailed one cool, wet hand up my arm and stroked the nape of my neck.

I tried to joke with him "Did I look like a fat brown seal?"

"You looked like a beautiful woman," he said. "I should have stolen your dress and kept you that way."

He smiled at me. He had beautiful clean white teeth. Uncle Luke and Boyd had called David a dirty foreigner, which only proved that they had never really looked at him. Dark whiskers made shadows on his face, but he was entirely clean.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and we kissed each other. We clung to each other's mouths like drowning people gasping for air. I had wanted to kiss David for so long. My knees quivered and I rubbed my wet ankles against his. What had I been so afraid of? I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed. The bell rang again but David only held me tighter. He pulled my hair out of its slovenly bun and ran his fingers through it. The water rippled around us and crickets chirped in the distance. It wasn't a dream and it didn't have to end when I opened my eyes.

When David finally ended the kiss, my lips felt swollen, almost bruised.

"Promise me something," he whispered.

"Yes," I said.

"Never, ever bob your beautiful brown hair."

"I promise I won't bob my hair. Now promise me something, David."

"Yes, Marlene?"

"Promise to take me swimming with you."

"Tonight," he said, and kissed me again.

We walked hand in hand through the cornfield, both of us looking left and right in case anyone saw us.

*Jill Charles*

“We mustn’t tell anybody, ever,” I said. “Sven and Isaac wouldn’t tell on us, but they’d say something by accident and Uncle Luke would find out. He’d fire you and maybe me too.”

“Don’t I know it. If he knew that a mick field hand was sparking his niece, he’d reach for the shotgun.”

We let go of each other’s hands as we neared the house. Aunt Josie glared at us as we walked up the porch steps.

“Where were you, David?” she said. “The crabs are getting cold.”

“I like them cold,” he said, settling down and cracking one.

Only Boyd paid any attention to me. He leaned over and whispered, too low for anyone else to hear him.

“Marlene, who let down your hair?”

Piano prodigy Marlene Piper cannot afford music school, but finds work and love playing piano in a speakeasy called The Starfish. Through Prohibition and the Great Depression, she struggles to remain true to herself, support her family, and to keep on creating music.

Marlene's Piano

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