

Pianist Garreth Llewelyn is hugely-successful. His improvisations mesmerize audiences around the world. Listeners 'hear' sights, colors, smells and tastes. But for Garreth it's not enough. He seeks a different meaning for his life.

THE IMPROVISER

by Eric E. Wallace

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A Novel

THE IMPROVISER



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World-renowned pianist Garreth Llewelyn is about to improvise on the historic Steinway grand piano in the East Room of the White House. Garreth has no idea what his imagination will produce when he plays, but he knows that no one in the room will be immune to the effects of his strangely-mesmerizing, highly-original music. No one.

The Secret Service agents looked more at ease in their tuxedos than the President did in his. The Concertgoer in Chief, sprawled in his seat, fit the definition of rumpled. *You should fire your tailor, sir.*

Finally the President gave Garreth the beneficence of a brief, ambiguous smile and an unambiguous *I got my eye on you, buddy.*

Garreth moved to the piano bench and sat. The hall went into hush mode.

A low, rumbling trill. A high, light arpeggio. Garreth's eyes closed. His hands came together in the center of the keyboard. Magic coursed through the room. Strange, compelling chords. Sweet but unpredictable phrases. A constant tumbling of incredible sounds.

The Steinway's gold-leaf decorations flowed past, tiny impossible impressions of Indian ceremonies, Virginia reels, cowboy guitar picking, barn dances, and high-leaping slaves. It all was there, it wasn't there.

It gave way to melodic fragments, boldness moving to yearning to bounding to somber, wandering into a mosaic of the room's history, the lying in state of dead presidents, rites and rituals, swearings-in, treaty signings, weddings, funerals, dinners, receptions, even other musical evenings. Was that the odor of filet mignon and roast potatoes?

Was that the smooth, rippling sadness of a satin coffin draping? Was that Frank Sinatra? Duke Ellington? Yo-Yo Ma? Richard Nixon playing this very piano? Oh, Tricky Dick.

It all came and went, illusory, ephemeral, yet time suspended, the audience breathless, Machiavelli for once banished from this room.

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Chapter 9

Lord Byron may have swum the nearby Hellespont over two hundred years ago, but today Garreth settled for standing on a crumbling sixth-century brick wall in the Sultanahmet district of Istanbul, nee Constantinople, nee Byzantium, looking out over the bright, vessel-choked sweep of the Sea of Marmara, imagining the fierce pull of competing currents and eager waves, the gasping through wriggling schools of slimy mackerel, the gagging in cold, salty water, the straining, screaming muscles and agonized lungs, the downward pull of the imponderable weight of history, of Europe's dramatic mass on one side and huge, mysterious Asia on the other. Four impossible miles.

And Lord Byron had the nerve to spring from the frigid waters, shake himself off like a spaniel, gulp down a carafe of *retsina*, go on to write excessive poetry, bed innumerable woman and become a Greek national hero. When Garreth was younger, he'd thought of himself as a Romantic, but Byron had gone to extremes.

The high nasal whine of a muezzin chanting from a minaret a short distance up the hill made Garreth jump. He loved the calls to prayer, but invariably the first sounds startled him. He tried to guess the direction of Mecca. It was remarkable that at this moment hundreds of thousands of souls in this city alone were turning in one direction, each one yearning, each one a human compass needle swinging to the magnetic pole of faith.

The muezzin's calls, however, clearly did not belong in a piano improvisation, even if disguised, and the previous time Garreth had performed in Istanbul and the two concerts in Cairo, he'd had to forcibly will his subconscious to back off. He didn't want to initiate a holy war. His music, he believed, never mocked anyone or anything—on the contrary, it often was honoring and even reverential—but it was easy to inadvertently offend other cultures. He thought about this

again as he walked up the hill. *And I don't want to die by the sword.*

Despite the political unrest in Turkey, and despite a small dispute over visas between the State Department and RBZ Artist Management, here he was back in Istanbul. The powers drew the line at that city, though. Citing security and a battery of regulations, they rejected Garreth's request to visit the air base at Incirlik. His brief childhood at the base must continue to exist only in his memory. There'd be no chance to again play the vintage Chickering piano and take himself *back down the vista of years*, as D.H. Lawrence had put it. Aptly enough, Garreth thought, that phrase appeared in a poem about a piano.

For once, he was free of Trace, his stalker on this tour, always asking for an hour's interview here, fresh post-concert revelations there. Today Trace was off discovering local color with his current photographer, a tiny, grinning black woman named Alice Roosevelt—an ex-pat, once of the Bronx, now of Tuscany—who forever seemed buried under her camera equipment.

Alice's photos, however, were every bit as stunning as those of Bennett Lee in California. During the Venice performance, she had managed to frame Garreth through a small oval window and filigreed Murano glass, giving him a look of meditative otherworldliness.

At the first Rome concert, Alice took a marvelous shot from the uppermost tier of the *Teatro*, showing not only the magnificent grandeur of the hall, but revealing how alone Garreth really was despite the thousands present. Garreth told Alice the image almost gave him a dreadful case of stage fright, something he'd been mercifully free of all his life.

So Istanbul, the huge, ageless city straddling two continents, was Garreth's for the day. And he needn't be a tourist buried in a map. During his earlier visit he'd explored Topkapi, the Blue Mosque, the Basilica Cistern and many other places. Today, he allowed himself to focus on impressions in the Grand Bazaar and the Spice Market, looking, touching, tasting, inhaling, and particularly listening. He drank thick, stand-the-spoon-up coffee and later

tried scalding, linden-flowered tea served in a slender, sensuous, gold-rimmed glass whose smoothness reminded him of touching Sheila. He wished she were here. But he thought also of Terese and suffered confusing twinges of guilt.

That evening, he went to two night clubs in the old town, absorbed local music and oriental dancing, puckered at the burn of *raki*, adding ice and watching the anise liqueur turn white to become what he was told was 'lion's milk,' and tried a *nargile*, a Turkish hookah, bubbling apple tobacco through a silver-edged water pipe. A few draws were more than enough. He didn't want a coughing fit on stage.

For a finale, he soaked up the atmosphere, literally, in the *Effendi Hamam*. Turkish baths were said to have been in this same location since the time of the Romans. Supposedly Emperor Constantine himself ordered the first baths built here, one of the secret spaces where he could continue his pagan practices while outwardly touting himself as a Christian. Secrets, thought Garreth, are the lifeblood of hypocrisy.

The *hamam* had three stories, a maze of marble-floored halls, a multiplicity of marble columns and many tiled baths, both large and small. It was a place of hushed echoes and whispers, sly gurgles, small splashes, trickling water. A place of surprising temperature and humidity shifts. A place of mists, twirls of steam, fleeing shafts of waning sunlight, somber pockets of gloom. The heavy air was perfumed with pine and sandalwood. And history.

Garreth went into the main hall, where, oddly, he was alone. The big pool, an Islamic star polygon, was edged by intricately-patterned royal blue tiles. Mists of steam and condensation swirled up from the dark green waters. Striated rose-marble walls climbed high to a pink alabaster dome. In the center, a large octagonal skylight framed a patch of darkening sky. He remembered that the Turks called that type of skylight a moon-catcher.

He remained in the hall for a long time. The heat and the moisture, the incense and the honeyed drinks eased him into a drowsy series of hallucinations, one with a naked Terese, her dark skin glowing, moving her hips in a provocative belly

dance. He managed one lucid thought. *Let's keep that out of tomorrow's improv.*

As he walked up a winding, cobbled lane to his hotel, he laughed, remembering that last night he'd suggested that Trace could conduct their next interview at a Turkish bath. Trace, squirming, had declined. He muttered about getting water on his equipment and there being no place for his pencil, then reddened when his possible two double entendres caught up with him. Garreth's suggestion wasn't the least malicious. But everyone, he thought, has to keep his shadow in line.

Three years ago, Garreth had given his first Istanbul performance in a small auditorium built on the site of a former soccer field. Although Garreth was not a sports fan, it was impossible not to know the importance of Turkish football. During his improvisation, his roguish psyche sneaked in some cheer-like phrases, along with a barely-disguised passage from the *İstiklal Marşı*, the Turkish national anthem.

His music was such a hit that, as the mayor's wife presented him with an enormous bouquet of tulips and crocuses, some wag bounced a soccer ball across the stage toward him. Garreth couldn't resist. With surprising agility, he turned and booted the ball deep into the delighted audience, where, fortunately, as his agent later pointed out, it hurt no one, no lawyers needed. The next day Garreth was made an honorary member of the national football team.

This year he was to play in the elegant and formal Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall, named for one of Turkey's 20th-century classical composers. When Garreth had seen the venue on his schedule, he'd chased down Rey's music. It was a fine mix of French impressionism and traditional Turkish melodies. If football could color an improvisation, Garreth suspected Rey's music just might want to insinuate itself. But there'd be no soccer balls flying afterward.

It turned out to be another of his astonishing performances, "with plenty of salivating and sweating in the hall," as Guy described later it, if somewhat inelegantly.

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At this latest Istanbul concert, the alchemist who was Garreth Llewelyn turned his music not only into other sounds, like the murmuring waters of the city's ancient cisterns and the hissing sparks of its tram wires, but into tastes: ripe figs, fulsome cherries, fat eggplant; into smells: roasted chickpeas, creamy bergamot sherbet, damp cocoa-oak tobacco; into color: golden yellow saffron threads, coppery Byzantine tiles, purple hibiscus teas; and into shapes and textures: complex arabesques, wandering grapevines and Greek frets, coarse, handmade Anatolian rugs, the smooth, worn flagstones by the great Hagia Sophia.

If that weren't tour de force enough, the improvisation, with a blend of western and eastern tonalities, took the mesmerized listeners into a centuries-old baths at night and washed them in mystery and illusion.

They sensed the rhythmic lapping of silky waters. Wisps of embracing mist. Air charged with honeyed incense, musk and camphor. An almost-opiate drowsiness. Tufts of fog idly swirling, flowers slowly opening and closing, children's faces smiling, beguiling. Tranquility.

Abrupt silence. Then: dark waters rising possessively, spiraling shapes haunting the surface. A soft keening, a hint of pleading braided through a plaintive lament. Wraiths of suspended dust, rising vapors shaping themselves into pale faces and smoky robed figures, innumerable lost souls, slowly turning in perpetual sadness, sending down long, ghostly tendrils of supplication through the evanescent swirls.

A growing luminescence. A full moon, huge and gleaming in the darkened heavens, loosed a graceful shower of silvered radiance through a mooncatcher, over the diaphanous veil of ghosts and down onto everyone.

The last notes vanished.

The audience, stunned, enchanted, drenched, sat awaiting the spell to break.

There was a sudden, violent upwelling of applause. It continued for a very long time. And then they mobbed the stage.

Over and over Garreth was asked "*Bunu nasıl yaptın?*" How did you do that? He didn't know. It was deemed *bir*

mucize, a miracle. He was a magician, a wizard, a mystic. It took almost an hour before they reluctantly let him get to his dressing room.

Garreth sat at the rococo dressing table and breathed deeply.

It was strange to think that just a few hundred miles southeast of here, something had clicked in a bored four-year old, and now here he was, as some might say, on top of the world.

This evening's exertions had been impressive. As remarkable as a four mile swim.

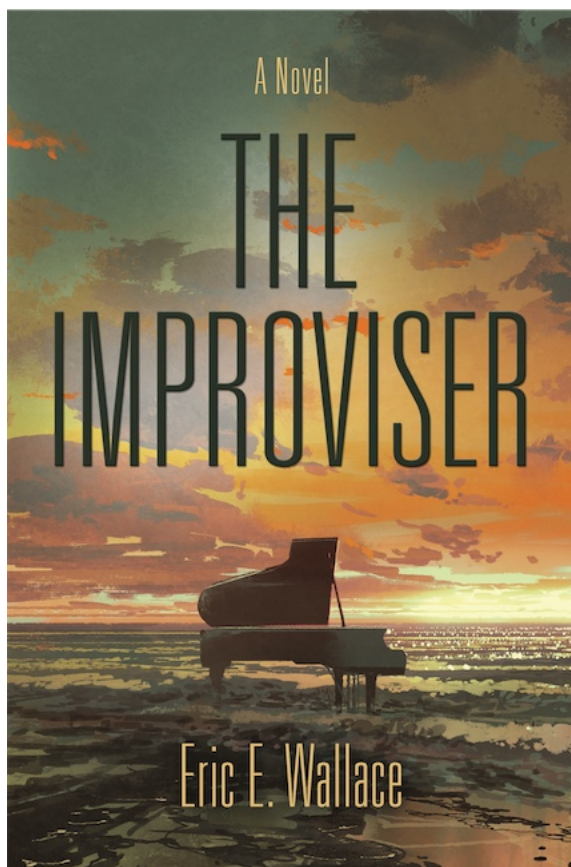
"Take that, Lord Byron!" he said, raising a mildly-clenched fist.

But the eyes he saw in the gilded mirror held more puzzlement than triumph. This had been one of the rare times he was aware of what he'd been creating. It was almost like a tape-delay. He'd disappeared into himself and played without planning, but moments later he could sense what his music was revealing.

He'd tasted the flowery figs himself, felt cool terracotta underfoot, seen large baskets of shining aubergines. This synesthesia, as Sheila had called it, was unusual, unreal, impossible. There had been very small hints of it in past improvisations, but it appeared to be increasing. He didn't know whether to worry or rejoice.

Tonight it wasn't only the sensory effects which puzzled him. It was the writhing, keening figures above the imaginary pool. In all that moonlit beauty, such enormous sorrow, such longing. He sat back. Was his music trying to tell him something? *Impossible*.

He heard talking and laughing in the hall. Guy was out there, keeping Trace at bay for now. Trace was forever probing, hoping, no doubt, to eventually uncover the secret to Garreth's sorcery. *Also impossible*.



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