

8/15

Attn:

Rebecca
VoneshFrom: Jane
Brewer

A SONG BEFORE SUNSET

BY DAVID GRIGG

David Grigg is the author of just a handful of stories, which were published between 1976 and 1985. This story, the first he ever had accepted for publication, first appeared in the anthology *Beyond Tomorrow*, which saw him sharing a table of contents with no less than six SFWA Grand Masters. In 2004, it was performed as an audiobook by Alex Wilson of *Telltale Weekly* (www.telltaleweekly.org), and is included in Grigg's story collection, *Islands*, which is available for free download on his website, www.rightword.com.au. Grigg has been nominated for the Australian Ditmar Awards several times, once in the short fiction category, twice as a fan writer, and once for editing the fanzine *The Fanarchist*.

Grigg says that the seed of the story was a line in Chekhov's "Three Sisters" where Tuzenbach says (of one of the sisters), "Fancy being able to play so exquisitely, and yet having nobody, nobody at all to appreciate it!" It was this sad irony of wasted talent that started Grigg thinking about how the very talented might cope—or not cope—once our civilization was no more. If, as Grigg says, culture is an epiphenomenon of civilization, without civilization, would culture be entirely irrelevant?

It took him three weeks to find the sledgehammer. He was hunting rats among the broken concrete and rusted metal of an ancient supermarket. The sun was beginning to descend over the jagged horizons of the city, casting shadows like giant gravestones onto the nearer buildings. An edge of blackness had begun to creep across the rubble that was all that remained of the store.

He picked his way carefully from one piece of concrete to another, skirting the twisted metal, looking for a hole or a cover that might make a suitable nest for a brood of rats, here and there using his stick to turn over a loose chunk in the vain hope of finding a can of food undiscovered after years of looting. At his waist hung three large rats, their heads squashed and bloody from his stick. Rats were still fat and slow enough these days to be caught by surprise with a blow to the head, which was fortunate, for his eye and his skill with the slingshot he carried were not as they had once been. He rested a while, sniffing at the cold wind. There would be a frost tonight, and his bones knew fear of the cold. He was getting old.

He was sixty-five, and the years had starved him. The flesh of his youth had

loosened and sagged, leaving his frame thinly draped and his eyes staring from his bony head like some curious troll.

He was sixty-five, and his hair, gray many years ago, now raised a white halo about his leather-colored face. That he had survived so long was a wonder to him, for his earlier years had not prepared him for this present world. But somehow he had learned to fight and kill and run and all else that had been necessary in the long years since the city had died.

The days now, however, were not so foul and desperate as they had once been. Now it was seldom that he feared he would starve to death. But in the bad days, like many others, he had eaten human flesh.

His name was Parnell and he had gone on living. The sun was sinking fast, and he turned about to go back before the dark could overtake him. It was as he turned that he caught the dull shine of metal in the corner of his eye. He peered more closely, put out his hand and heaved a sledgehammer up from the rubble. He swung its mass experimentally, weighed it in his hands, and felt its movement. After a moment he was forced to put it down again, as his arms began to tremble with unaccustomed strain. But no matter: given enough time, he knew this was the tool to realize the hope he had been hugging to himself for three weeks. He tied the hammer awkwardly to his belt and began to hurry home, fleeing the shadow of the city.

It was almost dark when he reached his home, a weather-stained stone house hedged around with the tangled jungle of an overgrown garden. Inside, he carefully lit each of the smoky candles in the living room, calling up a cancerous light that spread relentlessly into the corners. His door was locked and barred, and at last he sat in peace before the woodwormed piano in the main room. He sighed a little as his fingers tapped at the yellowed and splitting keys, and felt an accustomed sorrow as the fractured notes ascended. This piano had perhaps been a good learner's instrument in its day, but time had not been kind to it. Even if he had not feared attracting the attention of the dwellers in the dark outside, the effort of playing was more agony than pleasure.

Music had once been his life. Now his greatest aim was only to quiet the rumbling of his belly. Then he remembered—his eyes drifted to the hammer he had found in the rubble that day—and his hope came alive again, as it had weeks ago.

But there was no time to daydream, no time for hoping. There was time before he slept only to clean and skin the rats he had caught. Tomorrow he was to go trading with the Tumbledown Woman.

The Tumbledown Woman and her mate lived in the midst of a hundred decrepit trams in an old depot. Why they chose to live there was a puzzle none who traded with her had ever managed to solve. Here she stayed, and here she traded. Her store counter was a solitary tram left on the rails a few meters outside the depot, its paint peeling away but still bearing pathetic advertisements of a lost age. While the outside of the tram offered far-away holidays and better deodorants, the Tumbledown Woman inside traded garbage as the luxuries of a world which had died. Inside, arrayed along the wooden seats or hung from the ceiling were

tin cans with makeshift hand-grips, greasy home-made candles, racks of suspect vegetables grown no one knew where, rows of dead rats, cats, rabbits and the occasional dog, plastic spoons, bottles, coats of ratskin and all sorts of items salvaged from the debris of oft-looted shops.

The Tumbledown Woman was old, and she was black, and she was ugly, and she cackled when she saw Parnell approaching slowly in the chill morning. She had survived better than many men through the crisis, by being more ruthless and more cruel than they had ever managed to be to her in the years before. She rubbed her hands together with a dry, dry sound, and greeted Parnell with a faded leer.

"Two rats, Tumbledown Woman, fresh killed yesterday," he opened without hesitation.

"I give you something good for them, Mr. Piano Player," she said.

"Then that will be the first time ever. What?"

"A genuine diamond ring, twenty-four-carat gold, see!" And she held the flashing gem to the sun.

Parnell didn't bother to smile at her taunt. "Give me food, and be done with your mocking."

She sneered, and offered him a cabbage and two carrots. Nodding, he handed her the skinned corpses, lodged the food in his bag, and turned to go. But he was carrying the sledgehammer at his side, and she stopped him with a yell. "Hey, piano player man, that hammer! I give you good fur coat for it! Genuine rabbit!"

He turned and saw that she was not mocking him this time. "When I've finished with it, maybe. Then we'll see."

His reply seemed to make her pleased, for she grinned and yelled again: "Hey, piano man, you hear the news about Ol' Man Edmonds? Them Vandalmen come an' kill him, burn down that book place Ol' Man Edmonds live in!"

Parnell gasped in shock. "The Library? They burnt the Library down?"

"That's right!"

"My God!" He stood, silent and bewildered for a long minute as the Tumbledown Woman grinned at him. Then, unable to speak further in his anger, he clamped his hands together in bitter frustration and walked off.

The sledgehammer was an awkward thing to carry. Slipped into his belt with the metal head at his waist, the wooden handle beat at his legs as he walked. If he carried it in his arms, his muscles protested after no more than a few minutes, and he was forced to rest. He was getting old, and he knew it. The slide to death was beginning to steepen and he was not, he thought, very far from its end.

In slow, weary stages he walked the distance into the heart of the corpse that was the city: Long ago its pulse had stopped. He walked past the rusty hulks of cars and along the dust-filled tram-tracks, through streets of shattered buildings standing in rows like jagged reefs. Long ago the lungs of the city had expired their last breath; the tall chimneys were fallen, casting scattered bricks across the road before him.

He came at last to the center and faced again the strongly barred and sealed doors of the old City Hall, half buried in the rubble of its long-crumbled entranceway.

Even if he had been able to break open the bars of the door, he would have needed to clear away the rubble to allow the doors to open. Such was beyond him.

But at the side of the building, the skeleton of a truck lay crazily against the wall, mounted on the pavement and nuzzled face to face with a tree that now made a leafy wilderness of the cab.

Parnell climbed onto the truck and carefully ascended until he perched with little comfort on a branch of the tree, close to a barred window. Three weeks ago he had cleaned away the grime on the glass to see the dusty corridors inside. On the far wall of the corridor was a direction sign, faded and yellowed, but still bearing the words: CONCERT HALL.

Once again, looking at that dim sign, he was filled to overflowing with memories of concerts he had given. His hands followed a memory of their own on the keys, the music spiraled and, after, the almost invisible audience in the darkened hall applauded again and again...

His memories vanished as he swung the sledgehammer from his shoulder, jarring it into the bars of the window. Dust showered and cement crumbled. The task looked easier than he had at first thought, which was fortunate, for the one stroke had weakened him terribly. He swung again, and the bars moved and bent. Somehow, he found the strength for another swing, and the bars buckled and came loose and smashed through the glass into the corridor beyond.

Triumph came to him in a cloud of weakness, leaving him gasping and his arms weak and trembling. He sat for a long moment on the branch, gaining strength and hope to venture within.

At last he swung his legs over the edge and dropped onto the corridor floor. Glass crackled. He reached into his bag and brought out a small candle and some precious matches. The box of usable matches had cost him ten ratskins at the Tumbledown Woman's tram two weeks ago. He lit the candle and yellow light flooded into the dusty corridor.

He walked along it, making footprints in the virgin dust. A memory floated back to him of telecasts of moon explorers, placing footprint after footprint in age-old lunar dust, and he smiled a grim smile.

Eventually he came to a set of double doors, barred and padlocked. Here he was forced to rest again before he could smash the lock with his hammer, and step into the space-like blackness beyond.

After his eyes had adjusted to the light of the candle, dimmed by the open space, he saw row upon row of once plush seats. Somewhere a rat scurried, and above he could hear the soft rustle and squeaks of what might be a brood of bats on the high ceiling.

The aisle stretched before him, sloping slightly downwards. Parnell walked forward slowly, kicking up dust. In the dark immensity of the hall, his candle was just a spark, illuminating only a tight circle around him and filtering through puffs of dust stirred by his passage.

On the stage, metal gleamed back images of the candleflame from scattered corners. Around him were the music stands and music sheets of a full orchestra,

filmed with years of dust. Here was a half-opened instrument case, and in it the still-shining brass of a French horn, abandoned by some long-gone performer in forgotten haste. And shrouded in white, topped by a tarnished candelabra, stood the grand piano.

Parnell's heart began a heavier, more rapid beat as he brushed dust from the sheet covering the piano. With an anxious hand he lit the candelabra with his own meager candle, and lifted it high as the light swelled across the stage. He could see other instruments now, long lost by their players: here a violin, there an oboe, cast aside by a time that had made their possession unimportant.

Placing the light on the floor, he carefully eased the sheet from the piano. Yellow light danced on the black surface of polished wood and sparkled in the brass.

For a long, long time his aged hands could do no more than caress the instrument with a growing affection. Finally, he sat on the piano stool, realizing perhaps for the first time how tired he was. The key, he saw with relief, was still in the lock. No doubt he could have forced it, but it would have broken his heart to have damaged that perfect form.

Turning the key in the lock, he lifted the cover and ran his hand softly over the white and black of the piano keys. He sat back, and with a self-consciously wry gesture, flipped his ragged coat away from his seat and turned to face the hall.

A full house tonight, Mr. Parnell. All of London queues to hear you. The radio stations are paying fortunes to broadcast your concert. The audience is quiet, expectant. Can you hear them breathe, out there? Not a cough, not a sneeze, not a mutter as they wait, hushed, to hear the first notes drop from your fingertips. The music trembles in your hands, waiting to begin—now!

Discords shattered the empty hall, and the bats, disturbed, flew in a twittering crowd above the deserted, rotting seats. Parnell let out his breath in a painful sigh.

The instrument would have to be painstakingly retuned, note by note. His goal had yet to be reached. But now, at last, he could reach out and touch it. Now, one by one, he began to realize the difficulties that remained. He felt his hunger and saw the candles burning fast. He could probably find pitch pipes in the hall, but he would need some kind of tool to tighten the strings of the piano. And he would have to support himself somehow while he spent his time in here and was unable to hunt or forage. He would have to go back to the Tumbledown Woman, and see what she would offer him in trade for the sledgehammer. It was no fur coat he would be getting, he knew.

Outside again, he opened his bag and took out the food he had brought with him. He sat on the truck eating pieces of roasted rat and raw cabbage, pondering whether there was some way he could net and kill some of the brood of bats within the hall. No doubt they would make curious eating, and perhaps their leathery wings might have a use. But all these schemes were impractical, and he dismissed them.

In the distance, over the broken buildings, a thin trail of black smoke was rising leisurely toward the sky. The day had become bright and cloudless, and the smoke

was a sneer against the blue. Puzzled, Parnell wondered what was burning. The trail was too contained to be a forest fire. Unless some building had spontaneously ignited, after all these years, it had to be the work of men. Unable to arrive at any more satisfactory a conclusion, he turned away, thrusting the question from his mind.

After bundling away the remnants of the food, he loosely replaced the bars of the window to make his entry less obvious to any passing wanderer. Heaving up the sledgehammer, he began the long walk away from his heart's desire.

The Tumbledown Woman had turned sour in the late afternoon, like a fat black toad basking in the last rays of the sun. She sat on the running-board of the tram; greeted Parnell with little enthusiasm. Her withered husband now sat atop the tram and glared menacingly at the horizon, an ancient shotgun beneath his arm, ignoring his wife and Parnell equally.

Parnell sat and bickered with the woman for nearly an hour.

She would still offer him the fur coat, but he wanted an adjustable wrench, candles, matches, and food in exchange for the sledgehammer, and these were expensive items. In the end, Parnell gave in and accepted her final offer, which was everything he wanted except the food.

The Tumbledown Woman hung the sledgehammer in a prominent position within the tram and gave him the items he wanted. She turned and looked at him with a bitter eye. "You crazy, piano player man, you know that?"

Parnell, leaning wearily in the doorway of the tram, cradling his candles, was moved to agree with her. "I suppose you're right."

"Sure I'm right!" she answered, nodding her head vigorously. "You a crazy coot."

"Must be crazy to come and trade with you," he said, but the woman just glared at him. Then he remembered: "There was a lot of smoke in the south this morning. Do you know what it was?"

The Tumbledown Woman grinned and winked at him. "Sure I know. Didn't I tell you this morning about them Vandalmen? Them Vandalmen coming all over this town now. Last week burn down Ol' Man Edmonds and his books. Now it's that picture place. Sure crazy, them Vandalmen." And she pattered around the tram, arranging and rearranging her goods.

Parnell's heart sank a little more. "The Art Gallery?"

"Yeah, that's what I hear. Limpin' Jack, he been south this morning, he told me. Them Vandalmen don't like them books or them pictures, no way."

Parnell's anger warmed within him, only to turn into bitter frustration for the lack of an object. Most of the things he treasured had been destroyed during the crisis. Now those that were left were going the same way, in senseless destruction.

"What do they do it for?" he protested, sitting down in an empty seat to stop himself shaking. "What point is there in what they do?"

"Who cares?" said the woman. "Can't eat them books, can't keep warm in them pictures. Them Vandalmen crazy to burn them, sure, but who cares?"

"All right," said Parnell, "all right." The answers he felt within him would mean

nothing to the Tumbledown Woman. All he could do was smother his loss and sorrow, hide it away. He clenched his jaws and wearily picked up his trades, placed them in his bag and stepped out of the tram. The Tumbledown Woman watched him go with a tired disgust. Her husband sat above, glaring, glaring, at the darkening horizon, his gun beneath his arm.

Parnell spent the morning of the next day hunting rats again in the rows of time-shattered houses that still stood in uniform lines to the west of the city. After a few hours of vain search he was lucky and found a rabbit warren riddling the soft earth in an overgrown and enclosed back yard. He caught two surprised rabbits before the others ran for safety. He spent the rest of the morning cleaning and roasting the rabbits and salting their skins. In the afternoon he was again within the dark hall, beginning the long task of tuning each string of the piano to a perfect pitch. Had he been a professional tuner, he would have been able to proceed with greater speed, but he was forced to go at a frustrating creep, making trial-and-error decisions as he listened to each string, hearing it in relation to the others he had tuned, listening to the pitch pipes, then tightening the string again with his rusty wrench.

He measured time by the rate at which the smoky candles burned, and left again before darkness fell.

Days passed in this way, until he could hardly trust his hearing and had to leave off for hours at a time before he could resume.

Every time he emerged from the hall to eat or to let his eyes and ears repair, there was smoke somewhere on the horizon. There came a day when he was finished; when he had tested the piano with scales and simple exercises and was sure the tuning was perfect. He knew then that he was afraid to begin, afraid to sit down and play a real piece of music on the piano. His hands still remembered his favorite pieces but there was a hollow fear in his heart that he would fumble and distort the music in some way. He had kept his hands strong, and his fingers limber by fighting the aged monster of a piano in his house for all these years, but he could not tell whether or not he still retained his skill. It had been a long time.

Parnell made his way outside the hall and sat, despondent and trembling, on the rusty, overgrown truck. It was early afternoon and, for the first time in days, there was no smoke to be seen in the sky. He ate the last of the rabbit and realized he would have to go hunting the following day. He laughed at himself for an old fool, gulped water from his bottle, lit his candle, and hurried back inside the hall, trailed by clouds of dust.

On the stage he had cleared the music stands to one side, leaving the grand piano alone and uncluttered. Now he dusted the polished surface one more time, buffed the brass lettering, raised the lid, lit the candelabra, and sat before the keyboard. The bats twittered tumultuous applause. He bowed his head slightly toward the moth-eaten velvet of the empty seats, and began to play.

He began with a Beethoven Piano Sonata, Opus 109. It flowed; it swelled; it poured from the strings of that magnificent piano as his hands moved and fell,

remembering what his brain was unsure of. And he knew, listening, that he had not lost his skill, that somehow it had been kept somewhere safe within him, sleeping through the years of torment. He wove a web of music, cast motion and light and harmony into the darkness, wrapped himself within its sound, and played on. And as he played, he wept.

The piece ended; he began another. And another. Beethoven, Mozart and Chopin were resurrected. The music expanded through the hours, a torrent of joy, of sorrow, and of yearning. He was blind and insensate and deaf to all but his music, insulated from the outside world by the castle of sound he was building around himself.

At last Parnell stopped, his hands throbbing and aching, and raised his eyes above the level of the piano.

Standing before him was a Vandal. In his arms he cradled the sledgehammer Parnell had traded to the Tumbledown Woman. There was blood on its head.

The Vandal stood and regarded him contemptuously, all the time stroking, stroking, the shaft of the hammer he carried. He was dressed in roughly cured leather and rusted metal. Around his neck he wore a dozen metal necklaces and chains that dangled on his bare and hairy chest—crosses and swastikas, peace symbols and fishes—clinking gently against each other. He was dirty, his hair was greasy and awry, and on his forehead was burned a V-shaped scar. He stank.

Parnell was unable to speak. Fear had made stone of him and his heart flopped around inside him like a grounded fish.

The Vandal uttered a hoarse giggle, enjoying the shock on Parnell's face. "Hey, old man, you play real pretty! Tell me now, Music Man, how well do you sing?"

Parnell's voice was a rustle in his throat: "I can't."

The Vandal shook his head in mock sorrow. "That's too bad, Music Man. But I tell you, you're gonna sing real good when I'm finished with you. Real good and loud." He shifted the sledgehammer to bring out a long knife. It cast fiery gleams about the stage as its edge caught the candlelight.

Parnell felt as though he was about to be sick but, insanely, his old anger grew in him even in the face of his fear. "Why?" he asked, his voice trembling. "Why do you want to kill me? What harm am I doing you?"

The eyes of the Vandal narrowed in concentration and fierce humor. "Why? Why not?" And the knife flashed yellow at Parnell's eyes.

"All that you do... destroying all the beautiful things, the books, the pictures..." Parnell was becoming excited in spite of his fear: "Those things are all we have left of our heritage, our culture; of civilization, of Man's greatness, don't you see? You're no more than barbarians, killing and burning..." He stopped as the Vandal waved the knife toward him, his face losing its mirth.

"You're pretty with your music and pretty with your words, but you talk a lot of shit. You know what your pretty culture gave us? Gave us dirt and fighting and eating each other, man. You're nice and old, pretty man; you were old when the murdering and the hunger started. Me and mine, we were just kids then. You know how it was for us? We had to run and hide so as not to be food for grown-ups; we

had to eat dirt and scum to live, man. That's what your pretty heritage was for us, pretty man, so don't bullshit me about how great Man was, cause he ain't."

The Vandal was leaning over Parnell, breathing his foul breath hard into the old man's face. Parnell grew silent as the Vandal drew back and glared. "And you sitting here in the dark playing that nice music—all you wish is that it was back the way it was! Well, me and mine are making sure that it ain't never back that way again. Now you tell me, man, what good did that music, that culture, ever do, hey?"

Parnell's thoughts were tumbling. At last he said simply: "It gave people pleasure, that's all."

The Vandal regained his sneer. "Okay, Music Man, killing you is gonna give me lots of pleasure. But first, man, it's gonna give me real kicks to smash up this pretty music thing in front of you just so you can enjoy it too. How about that?" And, turning, the Vandal hefted the sledgehammer and raised it high above the strings of the grand piano.

Something snapped within Parnell.

He leapt up and grasped at the Vandal's arms. Surprised, he let the hammer drop. Parnell clawed at his face. The Vandal swung out a hairy fist, catching Parnell a jarring blow on the jaw and almost striking him to the ground, but Parnell's hands were about the Vandal's throat. Parnell's hands were the only part of him that was not weak and trembling—hands made iron-firm by decades of exercise on the keyboard—and his thumbs were digging into the Vandal's windpipe. The youth began to choke, and tried vainly to tear Parnell's hands away, but the gnarled fingers were locked in a murderous grip; they tightened with hysterical energy. For a seemingly endless moment the two hung together in a bizarre embrace. Then the Vandal crumpled to the stage, with Parnell on top of him, throttling the life from him, until the Vandal was dead.

Parnell let out a choking cry and retched violently over the edge of the stage. He crouched on his knees for some time, transformed by reaction and horror into a mindless animal. Eventually he turned around and stared with strange emotion at the body of the Vandal. Outside the hall, very faintly, he could hear the yells and shouts of the rest of the pack of new barbarians as they burned and looted. Inside, there was only the quiet of death and the soft twittering of the bats.

He crawled toward the piano where the sledgehammer lay. He stood, using the hammer as a prop for his trembling legs, then took it into his arms.

With one anguished swing, he brought the sledgehammer crashing down into the piano strings.

The shock jarred his whole body. The strings snapped with violent twangs and wood splintered, filling the air with jagged sound. The candelabra, toppling, plunged to the floor and went out, spilling darkness throughout the hall.

The silence seemed to last for a long time.