Name: _____ Date: _____

The Tuning Fork Door

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 1978 words

The hum began under the house in the week that Odalys Brandt turned thirteen, and for three days she told nobody, because nobody had ever believed her about sounds. It was a single pure note, lower than the refrigerator and steadier than the furnace, and it rose out of the cellar floor like water through a crack. Odalys counted under her breath when she was nervous, a habit her teachers called disruptive, and she counted now, and found that the note had a pulse: once every two seconds, slow and trembling. Her mother, an acoustics researcher, was on a ship off Greenland, listening to whales, and would not be home until June, and she had left behind a cellar full of tuning forks.

Her cousin Wick arrived on Friday, because the adults had decided that Odalys needed company and Wick needed somewhere to be while his parents moved house. He was eleven, and cheerful, and afraid of heights, which he mentioned within a minute of walking through the door in case it ever became relevant. Odalys took him down to the cellar without a word and held her finger to her lips, and the two of them stood in the cold while the hum filled the room like a held breath. "That is an A," said Wick, who played the cello, "and a very exact one. And Odalys, I do not think it is coming from the house."

They went next door, as the rest of the street always did, to Mr. Fennimore Ault, who had tuned the pianos of the neighborhood for fifty years and was deaf in his left ear, so that he tilted his head when he listened, like a thrush. He heard the note for a long while, and then he went very quiet, and sat on the cellar steps, and took a small brass tuning fork out of his waistcoat pocket and struck it on his knee. The fork sang back at the floor, a small, clear A, and the floor sang back at the fork.

"Your mother wrote to me, years ago," he said. "She had found a door under your house, made of one note. She never went through it, because she said it was a job for somebody with better ears and less sense, and I told her that it was impossible. I have felt rather ashamed of that ever since." He looked up. "Three pianos on this street have gone sharp this week. I thought it was the damp. I begin to think it is something else." He put the fork back in his pocket, slowly. "Would you like to see it?"

The door was not made of wood. It was made of the hum, standing in the air in the corner of the cellar like the shimmer above a road in summer. When Mr. Ault struck his fork and held it near, the whole thing rang back and hung there, thin and silver, the height of a tall woman. "Resonance," said Mr. Ault softly. "A note finds its twin, and holds it." The pulse was faster now, and Odalys counted her breaths, one, two, three, four. She thought of three pianos going sharp, and of a note that could not stop, and then she took a step forward, and another, and

she heard Wick say her name in a very small voice, and she walked into the sound.

There was no falling, only a long gold chord, and then a floor underfoot that was not quite a floor, and a sky the color of the inside of a shell. The three of them stood on a plain as flat as a drum, where the grass was strung in lines. Thousands of green strings ran to the horizon, each of them shivering and singing. "Unison," said Mr. Ault, holding his fork up like a lantern. "It is the same exact note as home, which is why we could come through." At the far end of the plain a stair of pale light climbed into the sky. Wick looked at it for a long, unhappy moment, and sat down on the grass, which hummed a mild complaint beneath him.

"It goes up," said Wick, in the voice of a boy composing his own epitaph. "Each step is an octave," said Mr. Ault. "Your mother worked it out on paper, from the overtones, and she wrote to me about it so often that I could recite the letters. When you double a note's pitch, you get the same note again, only higher, like a person standing on a taller step. Every octave is a new world built on that note, and the higher you go, the stranger it gets." He tapped his fork against the stair, and the stair rang. "I am afraid that we are going to have to climb."

The second world was a city of bells, hung by the thousand in the streets and in the trees and across the gaps between the towers, and in the market square they met the Choir of Thirds. There were a dozen of them, tall and bright and see-through, like figures made of stained glass, and when they sang the whole square seemed to lean toward them. It was the sweetest sound that Odalys had ever heard, so sweet that she forgot what she had come for, and let go of Wick's hand, and took a step toward them. "No," said Mr. Ault, sharply, behind her. "A third is one of the sweetest sounds there is, and you must not mistake it for the truth."

"We have been waiting a long time for a visitor who could count," said the lead singer of the Choir, with a smile as warm as a stove. "Our Tuner has gone quiet, and nobody else knows the work. Listen." She sang one note, and under it Odalys heard the hum, the same slow pulse, with a grinding edge on it now. "Stack twelve of the sweetest fifths, one on top of another, and they climb past seven octaves by a hair. A tiny gap. We call it the Comma. For a thousand years the Tuner shared that gap out among us, a little here and a little there, and since she stopped, it has been opening. We cannot close it ourselves."

The way to the Comma lay up through three more worlds, and Odalys remembered only pieces of them afterward. She remembered a bridge made of one long chord, strung across a gulf so deep that Wick closed his eyes the whole way and crossed with a fistful of Mr. Ault's waistcoat, whispering the cello part of a minuet so as not to think. She remembered the first time her cousin laughed afterward, high and startled, on the far side, and a wind that played the grass like a harp, and moons that rang like bells when they passed. The notes got higher, and thinner, and stranger, until they were climbing through air so fine that the stars hung in it like struck wineglasses.

At the top, on a bare ledge of quartz, Mr. Ault sat down and held up his fork. "I have been

counting," he said, "and the Choir told the truth. Twelve fifths overshoot seven octaves by a little more than one part in a hundred, and that error never goes away. If you tune every fifth perfectly, one note somewhere in the circle must be wrong, a howl, a wolf. The piano tuner's answer is a poor one, because we cheat. We make every fifth a very little flat, so that no note is perfect, and every note is bearable, and the circle closes." He looked at Odalys with his head to one side. "It has to be done by somebody who is listening."

The Comma was a crack in the air at the end of the ledge, like a split in a plate. A howl was coming out of it, a wavering, grinding note that made Wick clap his hands over his ears and Mr. Ault turn his good ear away. It was the hum, but huge, and Odalys understood that this was what had been climbing up through her cellar floor. "A tuner needs a note to start from," said Mr. Ault, "and a voice to hold it. I can strike twelve forks, each of them a trifle flat, and I can show the Choir how to sing them. But the floor must be one clear note held steady by somebody who is not afraid to be heard."

He did not say any more, and he did not need to. The crack had widened by a finger's breadth while he spoke, and the Choir stood waiting in a ring of colored light, and Wick had gone pale, but he took her hand. Odalys had counted under her breath her whole life so that nobody would hear her, and she had mumbled through every school concert, and she had never once sung a note out loud. She opened her mouth, and found her throat as dry as chalk, and her courage nowhere at all.

She sang the A, and it came out thin and cracked and hopelessly flat, and she stopped, and her face burned, and the Comma howled. Behind her, in a soft, shaking, wonderful voice, Wick took up the cello part he had been whispering across the bridge, and then Mr. Ault struck the first fork, and then the Choir of Thirds came sweeping down the quartz ledge like a flight of birds. They sang, each of them a very little flat, as Mr. Ault showed them, and Odalys counted the beats between her voice and theirs, the slow wavering throb that told her how far apart they were. She let her note slide, a hair, and another hair, and the throb slowed and slowed, until it was gone.

The Comma shut like a mouth, and the howl dissolved, and in the quiet that followed, one clean chord stood in the air, every note a very little wrong, and every note, somehow, home. The lead singer of the Choir put her hand over her heart and bowed. "The Tuner will wake when the ladder holds," she said. "Perhaps she only needed to hear it done badly, once, by somebody brave." Odalys laughed, a short, startled laugh, because her voice was still there, and it was her own, and it had not broken anything at all.

They came out through the door in the cellar before dawn, with the hum shrinking behind them to the faintest thread. Wick sat down on the bottom step and was sick, quietly and with great dignity, and then announced that he was never going above the second floor of anything again. Mr. Ault, a man of routine in emergencies, went upstairs to put the kettle on, and on his

way past the piano in the front room he stopped, and struck a single key, and listened with his good ear. "Well," he said. "That is a mercy." The note was perfectly in tune.

On Sunday, as always, the telephone rang at six, and a thin, crackling voice came in across the ocean. "Odalys? You sound as if you are standing up straight," said her mother. "I am," said Odalys, and said no more. That night she carried the cello up from the cellar, because Wick had asked, and set it in the sitting room. He played, badly, with his tongue between his teeth, while Mr. Ault turned his good ear toward him from the sofa. And Odalys, after a moment, stood beside the cello, and breathed in, and began to sing. It came out a little flat, but nobody minded, and nobody said so, and the note went out through the old house and down into the cellar floor, where it was answered.

Questions

1. What first made Mr. Ault think that the hum was a real problem?

A. Three pianos on the street had gone sharp
B. His left ear stopped working
C. Wick complained about the cold

2. Why does Mr. Ault tilt his head when he listens?

A. He is deaf in his left ear
B. He is trying to hear the sea
C. He is shy

3. What was the trouble with stacking twelve perfect fifths?

A. They were played too softly
B. They climbed past seven octaves by a hair and did not close
C. They were too low to hear

4. What did Odalys have to do that she had never done out loud before?

A. Dance
B. Sing
C. Whistle

5. In this story, resonance is

A. a sound that is answered by another sound
B. a very loud argument
C. the end of a song

6. How did the singers close the Comma?

A. By making one note perfect
B. By each singing a note a very little flat, sharing the small error
C. By closing the door

Words to know

octave: double pitch
pitch: how high
unison: the same note
resonance: answering sound
comma: tiny gap

Answer key: The Tuning Fork Door

1. A. Three pianos on the street had gone sharp
2. A. He is deaf in his left ear
3. B. They climbed past seven octaves by a hair and did not close
4. B. Sing
5. A. a sound that is answered by another sound
6. B. By each singing a note a very little flat, sharing the small error