

Judy Dungey

NOTES ON THE PIANO AND HARP

This is going to be a short story. There's only a little bit of sex.

You see, what I was going to do was, I was going to write this book. It was going to be about a woman who sees a movie called *The Harp* and becomes obsessed by it. It was really about the movie *The Piano* — you know, the Jane Campion film that won all those Oscars. I'll tell you, later, why I made *The Piano* into *The Harp* and why it's so thinly disguised. Well, anyway, this woman goes to see *The Harp* and gets obsessed not only by the film itself, but by the leading man — no, not Sam Neill, the other one — Harvey something. The one who plays George Baines. You see, she sees parallels with her own life in the film. She is turned on by the fact that, in the film, George is the only one who understands this woman, Ada McGrath. Ada expresses herself through her piano — she's mute, you see — but her husband won't let her have the piano. He leaves it on the beach and then sells it and everything. George, however, not only buys the piano, he lets Ada play it. You can see her music soaking into his soul and he really understands her. And that's all any woman ever wants — to be heard. In my book, my character relates so much to Ada that when George and Ada finally get together on the screen she (my character) actually has an orgasm for the first time in her life right there in the theatre.

I was really proud of that bit in my book. It went like this:

... here hidden in the shadows, I watch. What I see is myself — a self I did not know exists. I hear the woman with my ears, but also in my heart. I see the man and he hears it too. I see the doors opening in his mind, as they are opening in my mind. I see him desire her — and I want her too. I feel what he feels. I hear what he hears. She is expressing me and he is hearing me. Their bodies merge and I merge with them. He is holding her, touching her and I am touching her and feeling him and knowing both of them. I am them.

See — it's great stuff, isn't it? Then there was all this "shifting in her chair" and white hot heat and that. She was moaning and everything. She wondered what had struck her, having such an experience for the first time at 45 years old and all.

Anyway, that was the introduction. What was going to happen then was that her obsession over the movie and this actor, Harvey Keitel, was going to begin to take over her life. She buys magazines and goes back and back and back to

see the film over and over (but she never has another orgasm). She thinks about *The Harp* all the time and drives people crazy by talking about it constantly. She even gets in line with 15-year-olds and buys *Dolly* magazine just because it has a feature on Harvey.

So, this goes on and she generally is behaving like any star-struck teenager. Yet she is supposedly "happily" married with two adult children of her own. Her husband is just like the one in the movie. When she tries to explain to him why the movie was so wonderful, he looks puzzled and says, "What — now do you want to have harp lessons?" So next time they go to bed, she imagines she's with Harvey and gets all turned on. She's never even fantasised about anyone else before, either, so now she's really got something to feel guilty about. She feels like she has mentally cuckolded her husband.

Now, this was a problem. This woman is so unbelievably straight and boring that the book was boring. But if her life hadn't been boring in the first place, she wouldn't have reacted the way she did.

I suppose you're saying that she is really me. Well, you're right in lots of ways — I think she's the me I was when I was about 17, and she's the me I could be when I'm about 70 — but she's not me now. No Sir. No way. I think.

I tried to give her a Uni degree, but that didn't work. I tried to give her an interesting job as a Lifeline Counsellor — one of the things I was going to do, to show how her obsession had taken her over, was to have her tell a suicidal caller that first he must go and see *The Harp*. So that didn't work either.

I gave her this whole gaggle of girlfriends to go to the pictures with. They were sharing all their innermost secrets with her. Actually, they were my *real* girlfriends and I just wrote down verbatim all our morning-coffee talk because I think people would find it quite shocking to hear how women really talk — they talk about sex and relationships all the time, in the most intimate detail. It's just as well my "Anna" didn't seem to fit in with them — she was just too boring — so all their talk and gossip and female revelations ended up in the waste basket. Except, I'll tell you this bit. (It's such a good story I hated to throw it away.)

One of the women, Ella, exclaims that *she* wouldn't have let this other girl's husband get away with how he treated her. There is a pause ...

"Ella had been married to an invalid many years older than herself. One winter's day, she had seated him in his wheelchair by the stove in the kitchen. She put some milk on to heat: she was going to make him a warm drink. Ella went off to attend to

something else and forgot both the milk and her husband. When she returned some time later, the milk had long since boiled over and had extinguished the flame. The gas had filled the room. Her husband still sat in his wheelchair, dead. The inquest had declared 'Death by misadventure.' Ella had been free. But there were still awkward pauses from time to time. Ella could be very outspoken ..."

Now, that's too good to leave out, isn't it?

Anyway, there she was — Boring Betty. (Actually, I called her Anna because it's like Ada, the name of the woman in *The Piano*. It's part of the thin disguise.) So, Boring Betty has gone to the movie, had a Profound Experience, and now she's hooked on Harvey Keitel. She's fantasising about him through her husband, and alienating everyone else around her with her endless perseverating on *The Harp*.

Now comes the crunch — the crisis, where the story really takes off.

She discovers that Harvey is coming to Melbourne for a personal appearance (actually, he's not — ever. I already checked). By this time she is so obsessed by him that she has convinced herself that this is no ordinary fixation. She's too old to be star-struck. She reasons that her passion is so overwhelming that there must be some deeper significance. She decides that she and Harvey have known each other in a previous life and that he is calling to her. His visit to Melbourne is fate.

She knows that if she can just get to meet him he must feel the same way about her. Get this — it's from my early notes:

"She realised at once — and it made her blush to think of it — that if Howard walked into the room at that moment she would offer herself to him immediately."

Not so great, huh? I think that was when I was in my Patrick White period. But I at least knew what I was going to mean. By the way, in my notes he was called Howard because that is like Harvey, like Anna is like Ada.

So where was I? Right — she has decided that it's fate and that she is destined to meet Howard/Harvey because they have known each other in past lives. I thought I'd like to spend a bit of time exploring the rationalisation people do when madness starts to take over — they are unhappy in their ordinary lives, so do all sorts of extraordinary mental gymnastics to prove to themselves that they should be happy in some other way — like, they are really Napoleon or the King of Spain or the gipsies kidnapped them at birth or they are a woman trapped in a man's body or all sorts of wild schemes.

She spends a fortune on clothes and having her hair done and all that sort of thing. She doesn't turn up at work for days on end while she prepares herself for what she sees as her tryst with Harvey. She imagines their eyes meeting across the heads of hundreds of his adoring fans. She can think of nothing but their meeting.

The reality is, of course, predictable. Everything goes wrong, she gets rained on and, standing in the crowd, she realises just how ridiculous she is. Nevertheless she is jostled to the front just as his car arrives. He looks right at her, then through her — and goes off to be surrounded by dozens of young autograph hunters.

She is devastated and overwhelmed by the truth of her situation as a "nobody." Worse than that, she is an ageing nobody, pathetic in her silly dreams.

I was going to send her home to sick children just then — children sick because of her neglect — but I think that's a bit over the top, really.

She starts seeing a psychologist — one of the counsellors at Lifeline, where she was to have worked (had that made it into the book, that is). He advises her to begin writing down all her frustrations: express herself.

So she goes home and sets up her own office. We know her obsession is only going to get worse because we find she has completely covered all the walls and the ceiling with photos and posters from *The Harp*, including one huge poster which takes up an entire wall which she has laboriously enlarged and photocopied at work on 56 A4 sheets. It is of Howard — naked and three times larger than life.

So, just like the woman in *The Harp/Piano*, she is going to express herself. Now, this is where the book was going to be really clever — really avant garde and post-modern (if you can be both!). She has decided that the only way to meet Howard is to become Someone instead of the nobody she is. Her idea is to write a book about a woman who gets obsessed by a film — thinly disguised as a recognisable film (ie *The Harp* instead of *The Piano*) and in her book her heroine writes a book about a woman who gets obsessed by a film star, the book becomes a best-seller and the heroine gets to meet the star when he is chosen to make the film about her book. So, she — that is, Anna, my character — writes this book and in the process changes her whole personality. She feels sure that fate has still decreed that she will meet Harvey, and as her book is so obviously about him she wants to be prepared when they make the film, starring him.

Do you get it? It's like one of those mirrors held up to a mirror where you can see forever. And the obvious conclusion when you read it, is that the author really wants to meet Harvey Keitel.

Get it?

Anyway, in the book — that is, my book that I didn't write — it all comes true. She writes the book and her personality is so changed and positive that the book indeed gets published and is a runaway bestseller. It is full of steamy sex and passionate scenes which scandalise everyone who knows her — especially all the girlfriends, whose secrets she has revealed (you remember Ella with the husband and the milk). The psychologist puts down the book after reading it and starts rifling through her file to see what he missed.

By the way, in my notes the working title was *Faerie Story* — because that's what *The Piano* was, a dark fairy story. Anyway, because of that I could make all this dream-come-true stuff happen. I had a great time writing that bit — she gets to be on Vizard and has book signings in Myers. She does radio talk-back and Bill Collins interviews her and so on and so on. In the meantime she has left her husband and become an altogether together person — she's not boring any more.

Finally, it happens. The film rights are sold and Harvey Keitel (however you pronounce it) is signed to play himself. The publicity people naturally seize on the idea of introducing them to each other in a high profile meeting, because this will bring the book-within-a-book full circle — and make great copy.

This was how it happened in my notes:

She is now very much changed: confident, in control. She has left her husband and children. Her life is focused on Howard Keenan and their future together. She knows once she meets him this time that there will be "a blinding flash of lightning and thunder will roar in his ears and he will know what she has always known — that they were meant for each other."

The big day comes and they at last meet. Everyone holds their breath, expecting sparks to fly (as they did in her book). They sit together on a sofa while the press interviews them. They laugh and say predictable things about how nice it is to meet after all this time, how much he has admired her work, what was it like reading about himself like that, how much she had admired his work, did she ever think she would really meet him, what did she think now ...

And I found myself writing:

"He has nice teeth," she said, and knew that it was true.

So the rest was inevitable. I couldn't do anything about it. They had their own ideas.

This is from my notes:

They wind up back at her place. She shows him the photographs and posters lining her office where she wrote the book. She laughs and points out how ridiculous it is in a woman of her age.

There is a silence. [That's a line from *The Piano*, if you didn't recognise it.] They stare at one another. The moment has arrived.

"We didn't meet in a past life, did we?" she says in a flat voice.

"No."

"You are a very nice man and a wonderful actor, but you're not the man in *The Harp*, are you?"

"No."

"We are not going to recreate any of my steamy love scenes, are we?"

"I guess not."

More silence. They continue to stare at one another.

"Maybe in the sequel," he jokes feebly.

"Perhaps," she says.

They kiss. He leaves.

She moves to the desk. She removes some of the posters from the wall.

And she picks up her pen and begins to write and what she writes is this.

Now, that's where the book is supposed to finish, so you really get the idea that "what she writes" is the story you've just read — the sequel. I thought that was *really* good, and way up there with Elizabeth Jolley and even better — real ground-breaking literature. I mean, to write the sequel before you've even written the book, now that's good! I was so delighted with myself that I poured all my creative energy into the book — worked at it for months. I couldn't think of anything else — just beavered away at this idea.

The pictures and posters on my wall started to sag and fall down after a while, so that Harvey Keitel only had one eye where one of the A4 pieces fell out. The whole office was a shambles. But I didn't care — I had the book by the teeth now, to mix a metaphor.

It was funny. During six weeks or so of solid work, I hadn't been to see *The Piano* more than four or five times. I'd stopped dreaming about men with tattooed faces and I'd given up the piano lessons altogether.

So by the time I'd got to the end of my first draft, the characters didn't fancy each other any more. I couldn't get them to relive my sexy bedroom scenes.

My psychologist only laughed when I told him what was happening. I think he knew all along how it would end.

I did miss Harvey, though. He and I were so right for each other. But he wouldn't be fooled by such an ending. He's made of sterner stuff than that. Just because the characters in the book didn't want to do it, is no reason he and I must forego our desires. There had to be a way to get through to him. I wondered again, how do you reach someone like that? Think of Hinckley and Reagan and Jodie Foster. Think of *Taxi Driver*. Think of all the people who start sieges so they can be on *Willesee*. Harvey, I'm here! I still wanted to shout. I gave up the book. There had to be another way.

So I picked up my pen and started to write, and what I wrote was this.

28

