

THE BOY WHO WAS DIFFERENT

By Tamaso Lonsdale

Sheng was different. Not just because his skin was a different colour and his eyes a different shape. It's true, they were, for he looked like his mother but Sheng was different in other ways, too.

First of all, he liked to read. He liked reading better than watching television, or playing computer games, or football, or cricket. He did not like it better than swimming on a hot day but if he could not go swimming he liked to sit in a cool bath and read a book.

Another thing about Sheng. He liked music. Not rock, heavy metal, new wave, pop, country and western or bush music, although he thought some of these weren't too bad. No, Sheng liked classical music. In fact, the only thing that could take his mind off the book he was reading was to hear Mozart, Beethoven or Bach on his Ipod.

Of course, the kids at school thought Sheng was weird. They did not mind the colour of his skin, or the shape of his eyes. After all, lots of kids had different coloured skin and funny-shaped eyes but most of them liked cricket and football, or playing computer games, or listening to decent music.

So Sheng didn't have any friends. At first, some of the kids had tried to be friends with him but they gave up when they could not find anything to talk about to him. Sheng didn't mind. He would rather read than talk, anyway, although sometimes he thought it would be nice to talk about books and music with someone.

He couldn't even talk to his parents. His mum liked television and his dad liked football. Neither of them could understand why Sheng was so different. So Sheng read books.

One day, Sheng was walking home from school reading a story about Mozart's childhood when he heard some beautiful music coming from the house at the corner. New people had moved into this house just last week but Sheng had not seen them yet

even though he lived only two houses away. He had not been interested in meeting them.

Now, however, he stopped to listen. Someone was playing a Bach sonata on a flute. Sheng quietly opened the gate and crept up the pathway close to the house. Then the musician played a wrong note and stopped playing. Sheng held his breath as the player tried again and again to get the note right.

Suddenly, the door opened. A big lady with a mass of bright red hair popped her head out. She was wearing a long purple dress with a necklace of green shiny beads and ear-rings to match. Her arms were covered in bracelets which jangled as she moved. Her fingers sparkled with rings.

‘Hello,’ she said in a loud husky voice. ‘You want something?’

Sheng felt embarrassed. ‘Oh! Sorry!’ he said. ‘No, I was just listening to the music.’

‘Oh! Come inside then. You play?’

Sheng shook his head. ‘No, but I listen,’ he said as he followed the lady into a wonderful room filled with musical instruments. A young girl with fair hair and violet eyes was playing the flute.

‘I,’ said the red-haired lady dramatically, ‘am Natasha Petrovski. And this,’ she went on, with a jangling sweep of her arm pointing to the girl, ‘is my daughter, Verushka.’

‘Oh, Mum!’ laughed the girl. ‘Nobody calls me that here!’ She turned to Sheng. ‘Hello. I’m Vera.’

‘Hello,’ smiled Sheng. ‘I’m Sheng.’

‘This boy, he was listening to you playing’ said Natasha waving her arms around. The girl smiled.

‘I’m not very good,’ she said.

‘But you are!’ protested Sheng staring in amazement at the piano against the far wall, a cello standing in the corner and a violin lying on a shelf together with a couple

of flutes and piles of sheet music. The bookshelves were crammed with books on music and the walls were covered with pictures of musicians.

Sheng could hardly believe his eyes. 'Do you play all these instruments?' he asked the girl.

'No, but my parents do. I play the piano a bit. And the flute.'

'So!' Natasha growled throatily. 'You like music, eh, my boy? You sit! We play for you!'

She sailed majestically over to the piano, sat down and arranged her dress, flexed her fingers and nodded to her daughter.

'Verushka, my darling! From the beginning!'

They began the sonata and Sheng sat entranced, wrapped in a cocoon of sound as the glorious notes cascaded around him.

He did not notice the time as the two players went from one piece of music to another. Then, as one piece came to an end he glanced out of the window and saw that it was almost dark. He had not been home from school yet! His mother was going to be mad!

Quickly he thanked his new friends and hurried out the door.

'Come again soon,' said Natasha with a noisy wave of her arm.

At home, Mum certainly was mad at him.

'Where have you been till this hour of night?' she demanded.

He tried to explain but that only made it worse. 'You've been in that crazy Russian woman's house? She looks like something out of a circus! I don't want you going there. Understand? Keep away from those people!'

Sheng sighed and opened his book. But, inside, he smiled. Let Mum rave on, she'd calm down later. He knew he'd be seeing his new friends again. Nothing could keep him away.

The next day he went straight home from school even though he heard Vera practising her flute as he went past the house.

Mum was very excited when he walked in.

‘Sheng!’ she laughed. ‘I saw your Russian lady on the TV today! She's a famous concert pianist! And she lives in our street! How wonderful!’

Sheng hugged his mum. He knew now it would be okay to visit Natasha and Vera whenever he liked.

EPISTEME

Bio

Tamaso is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book *Skye's the Limit*. She has recently finished a trilogy comprising the first book, *Brothers? Uncles! Sister? Aunt!* the second *The Missus* and the third *Beyond Darkness*.

Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for 24 years and has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. She now edits the literary magazine *Beyond the Rainbow*