



**Shula Tas**

## **Where Songs Are Sung**

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*'If there were a red thread connecting me with all the generations before and after me, at this moment it would consist only of one tiny red dot. A lonely speck in eternity. A single note on an otherwise empty piece of sheet music.'*

When both her parents die within months of each other, a young conservatory student, Shula, finds herself unable to sing a note. She is ashamed of all kinds of things, including her Jewish background and her Jewish name, Shulamit, which represents death and perfection. She is ashamed of the clichés associated with the Holocaust. She tells her boyfriend that she doesn't want to reduce her family history to concentration camps and yellow stars. She doesn't want her story to hinge on her roots. She decides to go in search of her own voice. At first Shula avoids her past. She can't seem to get around to opening and sorting through the boxes in the attic, which contain tangible remnants of her parents in the form of letters, photos and books—it's all too confronting. And she shudders at the thought of engaging with the Jewish faith that her parents had chosen to renounce.

But after a seemingly innocuous question from her downstairs neighbor, an immigrant who is trying to find her way in a foreign country and a foreign language, Shula decides to pitch headlong into the depths of Jewish history and ritual. By facing her grief and shame, she tries to embrace her fate.

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# Where Songs Are Sung

## By Shula Tas

*Sample translation by David Doherty*

[pp. 9-18]

A friend has taken the liberty of coming backstage. She flings her arms around me and hugs me tight. “A triumph!” Her perfume makes me queasy. A showy bouquet has been plonked in a bucket on the dressing table.

“I’m so proud of you. Honestly, you were breathtaking.”

“Thanks,” I say, not daring to ask if she means it. My throat is tender, still burning from the notes that didn’t quite hit the mark.

“Come,” she says, “this is cause for celebration.” She hooks her arm in mine and marches me out through the wings, off the stage and into the auditorium.

I don’t feel like celebrating. I feel defeated.

“Was that the door?”

V.’s voice snaps me back to the living room and the grey Ikea sofa in the corner. Morning sun streams in through the big rear window.

Naked but for a towel, he stands there and shoots me a quizzical look. Fresh from the shower, by the look of him, shoulders beaded with water.

“Not that I heard.” I take a sip of coffee. Just the right degree of lukewarm. V. likes his scalding.

He wrinkles his nose, ruffles his hair with the towel and saunters off to the bedroom. Our likenesses are few. I see danger everywhere, he regularly forgets to look before stepping off the pavement. I come from a family of eight, he is an only child. He is tall and blond, I am slighter, darker. His parents are under sixty, both in perfect health. Mine are long since dead and buried.

Then I hear what I should have heard before. A knock at the door.

“Get that, will you?” V. shouts.

It's Mina, our downstairs neighbour. She holds up a tray bearing a silver teapot and two small glasses. She frequently knocks at my door. Since the day I arrived, in fact.

"Hey, Mina."

"Shula!" she beams. "I've made tea."

Four friends helped me move in. We thundered up and down the stairs, not always managing to spare her door on the way past. That afternoon, just as we had collapsed in a heap with beer and crisps, there was a knock at the door. I opened it, convinced I had managed to mortally offend the neighbours from day one, only to find a smiling figure who thrust a silver platter of tea and biscuits into my hands. By way of a welcome, she said.

Mina and I have been in and out of each other's apartments ever since. She likes to cook on a grand scale and bestows her leftovers on me. Deliciously fragrant Iranian food. All these years and I still can't bring myself to tell her I'm vegetarian.

When she knocked the other day she turned to me as I let her in and said "Never open a door you cannot lock." Then she burst out laughing. I grinned along politely.

We have a rather unusual friendship, if you can call it that. I print the occasional document and help her with her Dutch lessons. She provides the tea. I tell her what I'm working on. She tells me about where she is from. Our exchanges began as a flurry of hand gestures, accompanied by snatches of English, French and Italian. Now, a few years on, we converse in Dutch.

Mina is the inquisitive type, always wanting to know what I'm up to, where I'm off to. When I came to live here, I was still a student at the conservatory, training to be a singer. Back then, she would hear me pick out the occasional tune on the white piano. She often saw me dashing off to a performance or a rehearsal, dressed up to the nines. It's been a while since she saw me that way.

Last week, as I sat in her living room nursing a cup of achingly sweet Iranian tea, she looked at me and asked, "Why don't you sing anymore?"

Her question felt like a slap in the face.

"Sorry, Mina," I shrug in the doorway. "No time today."

Her smile barely wavers and I start to feel uncomfortable.

"No problem," she says at last. "But make sure you get enough to drink. V. too. Here you go."

With the tray in my hands, I watch her turn and walk down the stairs. I step back, push the door shut with my foot and carry the tea into the living room.

Mouche, my little Greek mongrel, looks up expectantly.

“Sorry, Mouche... No meat today!”

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Since Mina asked her question, the static in my head has grown louder. Maybe static isn't the right word... Perhaps it's more of a silence, drowning out a tune that keeps eluding me. Like lying back in the bath with my ears underwater. An underwater world on dry land.

“Why don't you sing anymore?” The question has been haunting me all week. Whenever I try to formulate a response, all I can do is stammer. Disjointed phrases.

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There was a time when music filled my days. Music was family and singing was home. Singing was my connection to life at its purest. It was primal, brought comfort and warmth. When I sang, I could say a thousand things without needing a single word. Time was lost to me and I was lost to time.

“That's brave of you,” my father said when I told him I wanted to study at the conservatory. I had no idea what he meant. Did he know something I didn't about the rigours of the audition process?

After gaining admission, I could imagine nothing more pleasurable than making music for the rest of my life. I revelled in my first-year vocal sessions, the solfège classes and the lectures on music history. I was in my element, free as a bird.

During my second year, my father died. I kept on singing. The pleasure dimmed, but I was determined to finish my studies.

I made it through third year with room to spare and had the chance to sing at a festival. An audience member was moved by my performance and came up for a chat after the show. He asked what I did for a living. “Your day job, I mean. We all know there's no money to be made from this singing lark.” I didn't know what to say. Was this what my father meant? That love of music was my ticket to the breadline?

In my last year at the conservatory, my mother died suddenly. Final exams were looming. The culmination of four years of hard graft for every conservatory student. Somehow, I managed to squeeze out a few songs of my own. It was the last time I sang.

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“Ah, it was losing your parents,” people said with an understanding nod. But that wasn’t it. It wasn’t the grief. Not entirely.

Sorrow can give depth to a voice. Aretha Franklin sang in a voice that was drenched in sorrow. She channelled her depression into music that resounds with unparalleled power. *So take a good look at my face, you’ll see my smile looks out of place, if you look closer it’s easy to trace the tracks of my tears.*

Singing can console. But for me, music as consolation came to an end.

“My stuff will be here soon,” V. says, putting a plate of pasta down in front of me. “Will there be room for it by then, upstairs?”

We have been living together in my apartment for a few months. Some of his furniture and books have yet to make the move and he is itching to get them out of storage.

“Yeah, could be.”

“You know I don’t mind pitching in.” He gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze and sits down across from me.

“No need,” I reply. “It’s my junk up there. I’ll move that mountain myself.” I flex a bicep to break the tension. It works. He laughs.

The attic is groaning at the seams. A room it’s hard to keep shut but one I would rather not open. There were times when I took something up there every day, especially after my mother died. Deposit after deposit, but never a withdrawal. Box by box, pile by pile, I fed it fit to burst.

Only now we need that room. Without a separate workspace, living together in this small Amsterdam apartment will be impossible. The attic needs to be a place to which one of us can retreat for a while, where you can shut the door behind you. Yet I can’t get around to clearing it out. Perhaps I just don’t know where to start.

I used to climb those stairs once in a while to see what was up there. But these days there's no telling the trash from the treasure. I'm fast developing an aversion to the stacked boxes and bulging bin bags. They blot out the back wall completely and leave me barely a patch of floor to stand on.

The last time I took something upstairs – I don't even remember what – I stubbed my toe on an immovable box. It must have been months ago, but the ugly bruise under my nail still serves as an early-morning reminder.

V. plans to station his little desk in the attic. I fancy an easy chair, a reading light and perhaps a painting. But as things stand, I don't even want to set foot up there.

“Let's tackle it together,” V. said yesterday. The day before yesterday too, come to that. But I don't want to. I have no idea exactly what I will find there, but I know I have to do this alone.

Right before bedtime, I tiptoe up the attic stairs. On the narrow landing, I feel for the light switch. It's sticky to the touch and I can't help but wince. That's how long it has been.

Even inching the door open is enough to produce a deafening creak.

“Shul?” V.'s voice from below.

I click the light off, hurry down the stairs and hop into bed.

“Was that you?” V. asks when he appears in the bedroom minutes later.

“Was what me?” I sigh, pretending I'm half asleep.

[pp. 24-28]

Before written language existed, stories were not told but sung. My time at the conservatory taught me that melody is a great way to convey a narrative. A metre, a tune, a tale and you're all set.

Take sacred stories, for example. Without song, without melody, we might never have been able to retell those age-old stories today. Without singing, they would have been lost to us long ago. But they have survived. And you can still hear melodies that go back thousands of years when you walk into a house of

worship: a church, a mosque, a synagogue. Melodies our ancestors heard and sang. And the reassurance that brings.

Music is at the heart of our desire to preserve, our urge to pass on. Music is the heart of culture. One school of thought – terror management theory – argues that we first began singing to ward off our fear of death. To cope with the unbearable reality of our own mortality. Our bodies will one day falter, but our way of life will go on. Our art will outlive us.

The same theory might also explain our fear of newcomers, with their own distinct cultures. They can be seen as a threat, not only to our way of life but also to our ongoing survival. They lead us to question our shot at eternity. We live in these traditions, these rituals, these melodies of ours. And their disappearance can feel like a death of sorts.

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When I sang, I could feel without words. There was no analysis, no outlook, no fear: just singing, pure and simple. Singing was a sanctuary. Like leaning into the curve of your lover's back and drifting off to sleep. Warm. Safe. Home.

Why don't you sing anymore? The easy answer is because I no longer found joy in singing. Only I don't think that is the whole answer. Perhaps not even half.

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V. and I are washing up after dinner. It's a habit I am trying to get into. I would much rather leave everything on the table until the end of the evening. To me, it feels like such a pity to have to spring into action after relaxing over a meal. V. knows how much this bugs me, how much I'd rather linger at the table together. There he stands, tea towel at the ready, poised to grab the first clean plate. "And we're in for another thrilling finale," he says in his best sports commentator's voice. "You can see the supreme effort in her face. Is she going to make it?"

Dishes done, I wipe down the cooker and the kitchen counter. "Mina asked me the other day why I don't sing anymore," I say, stacking the last of the plates and fetching a bottle of wine and two glasses. I pour his glass first, then mine. Another lesson from the school of V. At our house, it was always every man for himself. He nods briefly at the wine and his eyes say a thousand things. Things like "thank you" and "what we have is good".

I expect him to respond with some quip about Mina sticking her nose where it's not wanted. Or another warning about setting my own boundaries.

Instead, he asks, "And? What did you tell her?"

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The next afternoon, I watch V. staring at his laptop, lost in concentration. I should be doing the same. An interview is fast approaching and I have barely strung two questions together.

When he pops into the kitchen to take a call, I seize my chance and shoot upstairs to the attic.

Box 1.

The first stack is topped by an old supermarket box with a banana on the side. It's brimming with assorted papers. I no longer have a clue where it came from, but I can't bring myself to toss the contents unseen. I will have to pass judgment on each document. And when I'm done, there are at least another twenty-five boxes waiting.

I plonk the box on the floor and sit down next to it. It's dark and cheerless up here, with only the light of a bare bulb for company. The boxes are stacked so high that the daylight trying to peep through the skylight doesn't stand a chance.

Damn it. Why is V. in such a hurry? Wouldn't it make more sense to clear some space in the living room? There's plenty of stuff we could get rid of down there...

Just as I am about to head downstairs and put this to V., I take one more look at the box. On top of the pile of papers is an old postcard. I pick it up. A black-and-white print of a street scene with a vintage car. New York, maybe? The back is blank. Next up is a piece of paper so faded that I can no longer read what it says. It strikes me as an old prescription. Documents three, four and five are a similar shape and size. They slip through my fingers and I realise that I have already begun.

Soon half a box has been sorted. I'm up and running. I shuffle the bills and papers into a neat pile on the floor. Satisfied with my decisiveness, I stroll downstairs to reward myself with a beer.



[pp. 32-34]

Our small apartment is home to a few family heirlooms. The china cabinet, the neglected white piano, the mirror in which I watched myself grow up. These days I look into the same mirror and, against a different backdrop, I see my frown carved deeper.

The mirror is huge: two metres tall, one and a half metres wide. Classic French, complete with gilt edges and angels watching from the corners. It's sorely in need of repair, cracks and scuff marks galore. None of my brothers and sisters were willing to take in this giant, but I couldn't bear to see it homeless. These days it lends our third-floor apartment an allure it doesn't really deserve. The mirror is far too grand, too much of a statement. Besides, I am constantly afraid it will fall over.

In childhood photographs, it's the first thing I see. A faithful retainer, silently observing the scene. The mirror as a witness to it all. Sometimes I catch my reflection in passing and it startles me. As if I keep forgetting I have an outward appearance too.

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16.45. *Made any progress upstairs?*

V. has a habit of texting me questions he is wary of asking directly. He is sprawled on the couch, I am at the dining table just across the room. I chuckle, but don't reply.

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Grief does strange things to a person. It forces you to reinvent yourself, to discover who you are without the one you've lost.

Sometimes I stand in front of the golden mirror seeking signs I might recognise. Once in a while, I glimpse my father's freckles or the curve of my mother's legs. But as soon as I look closer, the resemblance fades. My reflection seldom reveals traces of my parents. Except when I am angry, then I look like her. Then I see in my own eyes the fire she could never put out.

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Five days pass before I return to face the contents of the first box. What's left is more of the same: useless paper. Letters from insurance companies, multiple editions of a tourist guide for motorists, yet more doctor's bills. Filler. When I reach the very bottom, something glints up at me beneath the edge of a box flap. It turns out to be an earring. A turquoise stone set in large silver triangle; it could hardly be more eighties. Jewellery from a time when my mother was still beautiful, still happy. A time before my own.

I poke around the folds and corners of the box but no... it really is empty. I slip the solitary earring into my pocket.

[pp. 67-70]

The smell of the hospital. The doctor's face as he spoke of "vital signs" and "a downward spiral". The air feels leaden, a weight we are straining to bear. We have just watched my mother breathe her last. A fall, less than forty-eight hours before. A stupid fall, at home, a trip on a step that had always been there. A fractured hip, then complications. Now she is dead. And we are here, her children. All five of us.

My twin brother cracks joke after joke. As she lay on her deathbed, already unresponsive, he blurted out "Hey, Mum! Keep quiet and it means I'm your favourite and you're leaving all your dosh to me." No answer, of course. "That's sorted then! Thanks!"

My other brother is silent. This is no laughing matter.

I am revisiting the clarity that came over me the first time I found her comatose on the couch. I was thirteen. It's a state that enables me to handle the painful conversations with the doctor. To focus on what needs to happen.

"Yes, she's on medication," my thirteen-year-old self told the paramedic. "Here's her medicine box. Twenty-seven pills a day. It took her twelve minutes to come round. Her speech was odd. Only spoke French to start with. She doesn't want to be resuscitated."

I'm sure there's a lot I've forgotten.

Nothing is more intimate than a deathbed. I sat with my father for days, watching. His body announced his dying in orderly stages, beginning with the little black patches that appeared on his feet. On the third day, I put on Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage*, a piece he loved. Not really believing he could hear me, I talked to him.

When I dared to whisper that we loved him and he didn't have to fight anymore, he seemed to wake up for a moment. As if it had just dawned on him what was happening. As if he suddenly remembered that he hadn't meant to let this happen. My father was ill-prepared for death. He once joked that he wanted me to have the words *Gone before his time, regardless* engraved on his headstone. By then he was well into his eighties.

In the end, we kept it simple: his name, date of birth, the date of his passing. I have never visited his grave. Nor my mother's, for that matter.

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A family is made of memories by the thousand. We go through the same experiences but take different things from them, look back through different eyes. In a family of eight it's easy enough to be lonely. The brushstrokes of memory are broadly the same but the devil, as they say, is in the detail.

The memories of my brothers and sisters rarely seem to chime with mine. If there is a common theme, it's our tendency to disagree on the way things were. If I remember an open door, someone will tell me it was always locked. And then there's Granny Frieda. How I wish I could have met her. But some of those who knew her say she wasn't very nice at all.

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Someone once likened memories to tiny people forming groups. Minuscule entities in your mind that are always on the move but occasionally come together, spark a memory and then scatter in different directions. But what good are your memories if they differ from other people's? If all they do is muddy the waters?

Do our memories jar because we are out of step? Have we come in at different points? Settled on another keynote? Or are we each playing our own small section in a grander, more complex melody?

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I used to think I knew which music was mine. That music itself was mine. But perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps I don't have what it takes to lead the life of a singer.

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## Praise

'Shula Tas sings of mourning—but not in a wry, cynical, humorous tone, like Tobi Lakmaker in *The History of My Sexuality*. Tas' style is searching, clear and moving; subtle and devoid of melodrama. In *Where Songs are Sung*, she sets out to find her own voice. It's safe to say she's found it.' – *De Volkskrant*

'An intelligent, subtle debut.' – *Trouw*

'A gripping novel full of contrasts.' – *Friesch Dagblad*

'A small marvel of luminous simplicity.' – *De Limburger*