

An excerpt from *The Absent Woman* by Marlene Lee

(Virginia Johnstone has recently rented an apartment in a nearly abandoned hotel at the edge of Puget Sound, Washington state. In the first excerpt, she attempts to feel at home in her new surroundings. In the second, she's just been told by a person in town that there's a piano in one of the third-floor rooms.)

After several attempts, one of the split logs ignited. The flame smoked. The tin stovepipe began to creak and warm. I swept ashes from the cracked linoleum, put them in a bucket I found under the sink, and set it on the outside landing.

A cold, wet wind came off the Sound. Below me half a block west sat a long, one-story frame building. "Padilla Bay Lumber," it said in evenly spaced letters above the loading dock. A graceful dory rested in a scaffolding of two-by-fours at the front entrance. Beyond the lumber company, several old Victorian homes gazed down on the channel with proprietary interest. I faced north and saw Cypress Island, its steep, wooded hillside rising sharply out of the water. Beyond, Orcas Island was a blue-gray blur; a mountain peak lost in cloud cover.

I returned to the kitchen and acquainted myself with the contents of cupboards: crazed but pretty plates and cups, saucers and bowls. Not a matched set in the place. Still, a comfortable, flowered jumble. The shelves were clean enough. The floors were clean enough. I wasn't in Hilliard to clean or pass inspection of any kind.

But it was hard not to stand at attention to myself. I should be proofreading, practicing scales, improving my mind, volunteering for the less fortunate. Looking about me, I realized I *was* the less fortunate. Poor rooms in a deserted old hotel. Electric heat in the middle room only. Dead starfish underfoot each time I made my way up the double flight of stairs with a sackful of groceries, climbing slowly, the sound of my footsteps echoing in the chipped, high-ceilinged spaces.

Hilliard had grown away from the channel. Its malls, fast food franchises, auto parts stores were uphill and south of me; south of my hotel; south of the long-defunct cannery whose gray, ramshackle buildings were falling in on themselves, pilings broken off like

bad teeth; south of the old hardware store with its pine plank floor, office behind a wire mesh cage, inventory in heavy wooden drawers; south of the boatyard.

I made the bed with sheets and blankets from home. Across High Street, behind the low Bar Fly Tavern, they were building a boat. No, a ship. Vast skeleton of a vessel in the boatyard. The dark, muffled sky showed through its steel ribs. Like the little dory west of me, it rested in a knocked-together support, a scaffolding, an enormous cradle to hold its outward-bowing sides and keel bottom upright. A boom carrying a man in a bucket slowly moved along one of the ribs. The welding machine started up, the engine whined hard, the arc snapped, sparks fell.

I watched the man weld steel to steel; tack rib to keel. Then the boom lifted him to the level of the deck and I heard the welding machine go under its load again. Again the arc snapped. Again sparks showered. I watched it over and over, imagining burnt smell of shorted-out electricity.

I hurried back to the hotel. Instead of opening my kitchen door, entry to the apartment, I turned left at the newel post and worked my way down the long hall, throwing open closed doors.

The first room held mattresses, at least twenty mattresses piled on the floor. Chunks of ceiling plaster lay on the stained ticking. The next door was a bathroom, its long, claw-footed tub filthy. Then a cleaning closet. A door to a balcony that no longer existed. Farther down, a room filled with fishing net gathered into an enormous mesh pile soft as hair.

Finally, at the end of the hall, a circular room hanging over the street corner; bay windows letting in blue-gray island light, daylight as pure as a flute note. On the far wall, pushed against yellowed, still-flowering wallpaper, an old upright piano. I drew in my breath, thrilled. But I feared its tone.

Someone had closed the serpentine lid over the keys. I rolled it back into the piano, lid of a slow eye. I touched middle C. Clink. It clinked like a barroom piano. Which it

probably was. I heard the gyration in the note; the untuned, wobbly vibrato. I played a scale from C to the high notes, back down to the lows. Every key sounded.

As I walked back to my rooms, I marveled that the thing played at all sitting in that damp, unheated hotel for years on end. I would have it tuned. I picked up a straight chair from the absent woman's studio and carried it back to the piano. With my jacket on, I sat down and played everything I knew by heart. The pedal didn't work. Schubert sounded disjointed, but I could make up the sweet legato in my head. Bach and Paradisi sounded good. I needed more of this kind of practice to strengthen my fingers and teach me the real shape of the piece. Like the steel ribs in the ship, the notes stood out cleanly, each one alone and noticeable. No damper to muffle and blur one sound into another