

The Baby Grand

by Chris Cottom

In his green school blazer and cap, Colin walks home early, troubled by images of the ice-maiden upstairs. Lena lives with her husband at the top of his parents' large Edwardian house and, under the direction of Colin's mother, scours bathtubs, dusts dado rails, and buffs acres of parquet floors with a maroon and grey Electrolux polisher.

Lena is Austrian, speaks limited English, and is as lithe and petite as her predecessor Doreen had been big-boned and countryside-hearty. With her translucent skin and flaxen plaits, she's as mysterious to the thirteen-year-old Colin as a Martian. Sometimes, lying in his bed, a floor below their sitting room, he hears Lena and Jens bashing around or arguing in an muffled jabber, disagreements which often jerk into silence. On one unforgettable occasion the quiet was pierced by a cry of such startling intensity that Colin sat bolt upright in his bed, confused and sweating.

It's Lena's job to prise open the tin of beeswax and polish the Brazilian rosewood of the baby grand piano in the bay window of the hall. Colin's father had purchased this from the house's previous owner, notwithstanding that both he and Colin's mother were strangers to the keyboard and fully intended to remain so. The family's musical activities are limited to a Decca radiogram, a piece of furniture of impressive proportions which also features on Lena's polishing rota, and whose rarely opened record compartment contains six scratchy 78s and an LP of *Carols from King's*. Colin's musical education had stalled at age eight, when he'd missed out on a prize in an inter-school recorder competition.

Nobody plays the baby grand from one Christmas to the next. Then after lunch, Auntie Eileen will bang out *Jingle Bells* like some pub pianist, prompting Colin's father to remark how insufferably lower-middle class she is, and how disastrous it has been for the family since she married into it.

Today, after a sick maths teacher has meant Colin could abandon impossible equations and leave early, he scrunches across his parents' wide gravelled drive to the sound of muffled music behind the closed curtains of the hall. He steps over the low box hedge into the flowerbed, dispensing death to several perennials, and finds a chink in the heavy drapes. The room is nearly in darkness, with just the dim yellow light of a standard lamp. At the piano, facing away from him, is a slim woman in a backless black evening dress, with her fair hair piled high. She's absorbed in a slow piece of classical music which speaks to Colin of rivers and forests, of sadness and loss.

Colin retreats to the spinney behind the new houses, where he wanders amongst the bracken and silver birches for an hour before returning home at his normal time. Here he finds the hall curtains open and Lena at the piano. In her pink nylon housecoat, her hair in a ponytail, she is busy with the beeswax.