

# The Voice

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15

It took some getting used to, of course. It always did, having a stranger in your home, a new nanny. Grinning like scared chimpanzees, we tried to find a balance between intimacy and distance, between hospitality, friendliness and hierarchy.

The next time I asked Amal to take Sam to music school she turned up two hours early. When I opened the door Pol told me she'd been sitting in the garden for the past two hours, on a stool against the fence. Why on earth hadn't she said so sooner, I asked, but Pol wasn't too sure herself, she said. Jesus, Pol, I sighed, embarrassed.

Did I notice straightaway how musical she was, aside from the way she'd hummed that Mozart piece?

When I asked her about it afterwards she seemed surprised, replying in that breathless, funny way of hers, 'Ohhhh, is he really famous? What's he called? Mozart? I didn't know him!'

But when a teacher at Sam's school took me aside one day to tell me that Sam had real conservatoire potential – and was exceptionally talented – she added how nice it was that we let him practise with his nanny, that black girl, right? Sam had told her about it. That they sometimes practised together in one of the empty rooms. She'd never heard her, had I?

I gawked at her. Didn't I know that Amal sang? No, I said. No, I had no idea.

Looking back, I don't see how I didn't realize straightaway. With Sam, whose musical talent had caught us off guard only a few years ago, we should have had experience recognizing a type of auditory ease, the signs of perfect pitch, a pure

voice. The addiction to her iPod, those hidden headphones, humming along to Mozart, the look of blissful concentration on her face whenever she heard Sam playing something she liked, and the way she would then close her eyes...

What did I know about it? What kind of music did she grow up listening to? Had she sung as a child, danced? I'd read that in Somalia, where she came from and had been living before fleeing to Ethiopia with her mother and brothers, music was forbidden. Music was a vulnerable language that apparently only survived in a type of alternative *samizdat*.

Amal was amused when I asked her about that.

'Music? Our home was always filled with music!'

Sure, she'd had a strictly religious upbringing with the Quran as the only educational resource, but her home was always filled with wonderful music, blaring from first thing in the morning until last thing at night – it was the same all the way down the street. Somali music, romantic love songs, in a poetic but lively mix of styles.

'Later, when Islam became more powerful, I was told that music was the devil and of course I had to believe that, but I kept on listening to it all the same. Just like my aunts. Everyone on our street! Even though I tried, I really did, to be good! Obedient. Very strict towards myself, other religions, and heathens. I hated non-believers. Death to them all! Hahahaha.'

She saw my face. 'I don't think like that anymore, of course!'

Talking to her sometimes felt as if I'd only ever seen photos in *National Geographic* and was now looking through a View-Master for the first time, a 3D image popping up with every click. Not a film. The image wasn't that alive yet. Her story was still a bit too strange and abstract for that.

It was only much later that Amal told me the details of her past, when I was trying to work out how and where her musical development had started.

She didn't seem to have a distinct taste – she loved almost everything, she said, except perhaps hard rock. She liked her own Somali music, Latin-American ballads, funk, reggae and Britney Spears just as much as Handel, Mozart and U2. Or perhaps she was just saying that. I only knew a bit about classical music. The rest of the huge range of colours and styles in pop music, punk, blues, reggae and funk had always

been a tangle to me, a treasure trove waiting to be discovered. Every now and then I would stumble upon a gem and become obsessed with it for weeks or sometimes even months on end until its magic faded away, the happiness and fantasies petered out and the invigorating effect became nothing but a memory.

The lightness, the sensuality, the joy of modern music passed me by as a child. I wasn't educated in great pleasure like that, but Amal clearly knew such joy and learned as fast as the wind.

Was it her embarrassment or modesty that meant we only heard about her singing talent through the grapevine? Was it our uptightness that had stopped her from letting us hear her sing?

The heavens opened that day. The usual water punishment, I thought. The rain lashed down mercilessly, and literally nothing on the street stayed dry. Torrents of water gushed down the roads, and although I hadn't known Amal for very long at the time, I could imagine how frightening it must have been for her.

She had taken Sam to his after-school music class during a brief dry spell that afternoon and I decided to pick him up again afterwards in the car. He had piano and theory lessons. Amal had recently been picking him up, but it was out of the question that day. I didn't trust her with the bike in weather like this.

The music school was in a big, old former bank in the centre of the next town. I couldn't see anyone inside, which was strange. It was usually lively and full of people, with voices buzzing in the corridors, fragments of music escaping from doorways, and the strict voice of a music teacher interrupting flowing notes with a keenly expressed correction.

Oh, how I'd hated that as a child learning to play the flute. Those corrective lashings hurt my ears and reminded me, each lashing anew, how even the ability to intoxicate was the result of effort, and that I lacked the talent to turn that much effort into something beautiful, something real, something magnificent. That the most beautiful music was the result of perfectionism, and the emotion was reserved for the listener. As a musician you need to keep your passion on a tight rein, clipped and contained, everything you loved about music disciplined. Perfectionism simply didn't tolerate competition.

In the end, I came to accept that I enjoyed listening more than playing, and I packed it in. And then Sam came along. Sam who played *Für Elise* by ear at the age of seven. His learning was playing, and he didn't think twice. He was his music, right from the start.

The silence in the building seemed strange, as if all sound had been extinguished, corrected and put away. I was late because I'd struggled to find a parking space. Sam wasn't waiting at the door, but he would often stay behind to overwhelm the teacher even more after class, so I dashed upstairs to his classroom. Past the walls with notices for recitals, adverts for private lessons and guitars, strings, plectrums, harps, violins, an old piano free to anyone who would collect it. A notice board filled with rows of ugly dark photos of recitals in the basement, featuring young musicians smiling foolishly, drowning but happy in that big black cavern between the curtains, tulips in one hand, instrument in the other.

The notices attached with drawing pins flapped to and fro in a startle as I rushed past, but I still didn't see a soul. I could hear something though. It seemed like a hidden tumult and it was as if a kind of warm glow was coming from downstairs, leading me almost automatically to the basement auditorium, where I detected the signs of something celebratory, a coming-together of energy.

When I opened the padded auditorium door a wave of sound washed over me, pure and fierce like an intensely emotional explosion. I heard a piano... Sam, that's got to be Sam. No one else played like that, not even back then. His young, virtuosic touch was unmistakable. Only he played with such fantastic fragility and the type of hesitation that would make you hold your breath, unsure whether it would turn out well... and then it would turn out well, and you would realize he had been misleading you all along, that the hesitation was merely a ruse. He knew exactly what he was doing, as if he was seeking the essence of the sound he wanted to render in his own heart, ears and hands. I didn't recognize the music at first, but it was melodic, moving, powerful.

A mob of listeners became clear in the dim light, standing in utter silence. I could make out parents, children and teachers, a good hundred people, clearly gathered together by accident, most still wearing their raingear, but not daring to move to keep their waterproofs from rustling or crunching. No one even cleared their throat.

The stage was barely lit, making it seem like there was a secret source of sound somewhere in the crowd, but when I looked more closely I saw that everyone stood frozen, staring towards a point at the front where the sounds of the voice and a piano were coming from – only without the spotlights such music deserved. Who was the singer? It was difficult to see. But I already knew before my eyes worked it out.

She was wearing a hijab and an abaya. Her powerful, sparkling voice, sweet and immense, filled the room, as did the sounds of the piano. What she was singing seemed vaguely familiar, but arranged differently, full of wonderful, vibrant transitions from high to low and sweet to harsh. The sadness and longing that resonated were so intense that tears started streaming down my face.

16

Meanwhile we referred to her as 'our Amal'. Not that I knew her so well in those days. She came around twice a week to lend a hand (for a fee): she took the children to and from their clubs, spent time drawing with Pol – but until then it was, to be honest, more like a work relief programme that gave me the sense of doing something noble rather than actually taking much off my hands. For her, those afternoons meant distraction and Dutch lessons. Bor condescendingly called it my charity project.

Nobody had said anything about a performance that afternoon. That this was her, that she could sing like that.

There she stood in her abaya. I had a better view of her once my eyes became accustomed to the poor lighting. Her head covered, her neck and body cloaked in austere dark blue, her figure formless. And yet there was no denying how overwhelming her appearance and her performance were.

I thought back to her first impression on me in the snow, but I also had to think of light, despite the dimness, and of electricity. Jessye Norman might be a powerhouse, but I'm not exaggerating when I say Amal exuded the same intensity

that afternoon, which gradually increased the more she sang, and with the same volume and grandeur. Only she was newer, wilder, younger, she amazed her listeners with a jubilant, pitch-perfect voice that made you completely forget her virtuous attire.

What was it about singing? It was invigorating, the language recharged you. In Amal's case it was a language that seemed to speak *through* her, as it were; it evoked the hope, joy, lust, happiness, and melancholy about everything time did to us. This is it, I thought, when somebody could really sing. Then you sang people into the depths of a universe hitherto unknown to them, a place where they could rediscover themselves and where memories and emotions they thought they had forgotten or lost were brought back to life.

We had seen, appreciated, and respected her as she was, with her timid giggling, despite the awkward and flawed communication and the inequity of our financial and social status, but now we saw her for who she really was, and who she was meant to be. When she sang, she was the narrator of tragedies, of her lacerated history, of the stories of a country, a people I didn't know; when she sang, she herself became a huge, fascinating world. And a personality. When she sang she revealed how much love, yearning, melancholy, and wisdom was concealed beneath the timid outer layer. How serious and concentrated she was, despite the outward light-heartedness.

Looking back on it, I can say this performance brought her much closer to me—without realizing in fact how far she was singing herself away from us. That must have been the paradox that started it all, the need to take care of her, get close to her, bring her into our fold. Not only to understand *her*, but the entire mystery she brought with her, to unravel the secrets of a world that had always existed out of our sight.

Only once my eyes had become used to the dark did I notice the two older boys alongside her playing string bass and guitar. And then the pianist, my own little Sam, who, lifted by the musical explosion alongside him, was playing even better than usual.

I did not know many parents and teachers at the school, but the crowd that dissipated, chatting excitedly, after the cheers and applause, appeared just as bowled over by what had just happened here as I was.

The father of one of Sam's classmates, a stocky, rather self-satisfied television producer with whom I occasionally exchanged a few words, complimented me on Sam's piano playing. He had no idea that we knew Amal. From conversations I overheard, people seemed to think she was a well-known singer who the school had invited to perform.

After the performance, Sam seemed to be in a sort of trance, as though he had aged a few years, I thought, almost worried, with eyes that appeared inspired by a fire I had never seen in them before. I realized he was already breaking loose from me and had his own life, with dreams that were taking form far beyond my imagination.

I hugged him, in my urge to hold onto him, not to lose him – but cautiously, mindful of not embarrassing him in front of the older boys, alongside whom he looked so young and small. I had tears in my eyes when I hugged Amal. My emotion made her laugh, a slightly awkward chuckle.

'Aw,' she said, surprised and almost with pity, as I clumsily drew my teary face along her headscarf-covered cheeks. 'Aw, now...'. She felt strong and soft, and I thought it was strange to feel her covered body like this, intimate, almost inappropriate. I was unaccustomed to feeling this degree of admiration, I usually wasn't very good at it. I think until now I had regarded admiration as something that diminished my own abilities. Now, too, I heard how unbearably soppy my stuttered response was. But what else could I do?

Despite her subdued solitude, I had noticed Amal secretly glow with pride at the lengthy applause. She had become taller and more regal, her posture more statuesque, even though she gainsaid that regality with comic little bows, incongruous with the performance she had just delivered. Sam, for his part, seemed averse to the coarse cheering – he and Amal smiled at each other with a conspiratorial look that shut out the outside world.

From a distance I watched students, parents and teachers engage Sam in conversation, and look at Amal with almost timid reverence.

'Your son, right?' the man said. 'Unbelievable. He's going to become quite a pianist... How old is he again? He's got what it takes. You hear it instantly. He's got it.'

'He's nearly ten,' I said. 'Your mouth will eat cookies.'

'Huh?'

'Because of what you said: "He's going to be quite a pianist." It's an expression. Jewish. Means I hope you're right. And that you'll eat cookies, as a reward.'

But the man was on a roll: 'And who, who in God's name, is that woman in the burka? Masterly. Who was that? Was it a joke? Surely that woman doesn't belong in a burka? She's way too old to be a student here... Where'd she come from? Do you know her?'

'That's our... no... no idea,' I replied. 'By the way, it's not a burka. You could see her face.'

'Whatever... I've got no clue what all those things are called. But she's incredible,' he said, looking at me intently, almost hungrily. 'It was like a flash mob, don't you think? We've just been standing here listening to some or other exiled foreign star. Don't you think? Has Sam ever played with her before?'

I shook my head. 'I don't think so, no,' I said.

'Unreal. I can't have been the only one in that damn auditorium full of stinking raincoats that didn't know her! Or was I?'

He stood there gaping in my direction, his eyes bulging, but he did not see me, his thoughts had already drifted miles away. It was as though I was looking at the face of a calculator in full operation – it made me think of Kienholz's *The Beanery*.

'So Sam didn't know her,' he repeated, redundantly.

I gave up. I did not like this man.

'I've never heard her sing before,' I replied, truthfully. 'Sorry, I've got to go find my son.'

The man nodded and from a distance I watched him, with the same voracious look on his face, pounce on a teacher from the music school. By now, Sam and Amal were nowhere to be seen. I was just about to go looking for them when Mrs.

Kloekjes, the head of the music school, emerged from the crowd and approached me, warm and excited.

Mrs. Kloekjes was a stout woman of a certain age with glasses and short, copper-coloured curls. If she didn't think they could win she wouldn't say this, Mrs. Kloekjes confided in me, but would it be an idea to send Sam and Amal to that TV music show? They would be a smash hit!

The brilliance of the moment was too great for here and now, it shouldn't be limited to just this afternoon, this deserves to go viral!

The TV producer had tramped further, bending everyone's ear over the miracle he had just witnessed, as though he had discovered it himself, and manoeuvring himself ever closer to the phenomenon in order to inveigle himself into something lucrative with her, but Amal, it seemed, had already made her way backstage with Sam for cookies.

The idea was born here. Without any help from the producer.

I had only seen *The Voice* once. The concept was dead simple. A competition. Guaranteed identification. Singing is already something wonderful for the person doing the singing, but it only becomes real when others listen to it, the way books only exist once they are read, and theatre and film only come to life when there's an audience to watch them. Singing needs spectators – celebrity, or even better, fame. That was the programme's premise.

People love to swoon over fame and talent. They yearn for it, they fantasize about it, and if they can't be famous themselves, then they want others to be, so they can admire and idolize them. With singing, everyone feels something, everyone identifies with the singer, has an opinion about them, the mystery of exceptionalism fascinates even the most diehard misanthrope. Within a few weeks the show became wildly popular. Despite, or maybe because of, its popularity, it was seen as a tad vulgar, also because of the competitive element and the suspicion of the whole thing being fixed.

I remember how, after my initial enthusiasm, I had my doubts about the plan. How ethical and desirable was it to want to share Amal's talent with the world at large? And would I be damaging Sam in the process?

Or were we doing mankind a disservice by keeping her to ourselves? Were Sam and Amal's gifts too unique, too uplifting, too tremendous not to share them with everyone, too beautiful not to enlighten the poor sods who had missed out?

I was reminded of the boulevard in Tel Aviv, where people congregated, evening after evening, to take pictures of the incredible sunset. Literally no one left their camera in their pocket while the sun disappeared into the sea like a diva making her exit into the wings.

We no longer tolerated the horror of impermanence; sensations were too good to allow to fade over time. Everything that was the least bit unique seemed to beg to be shared with the world. We had all become messengers of joyful news – priests, minstrels, door-to-door salesmen. Strange, how I used to keep things that I treasured to myself. I wrote them down in diaries, and the tangible things, even my most cherished cassette tapes, were hidden away at the bottom of an old cigar box I'd got from my father.

In retrospect it was no surprise that I did not want Sam to participate. But Amal? Amal, who had absolutely nothing here, and everything she once was, she had to leave behind in her homeland? Amal, keen to learn the language, who had said she would do anything to build a new life here? What an idea, what a golden opportunity, what a gift. Perhaps it was a kind of generosity, that swell I felt in my chest, the desire to shout it to anyone who would listen. The excitement and enthusiasm at discovering a talent that no one else knew existed. Wouldn't it be fantastic to give her something of ourselves, of our country, our admiration, our people? And that we would get to know *her* world? I wanted it, badly and right now: to make Amal famous.

Or was it about annexing her, appropriating her?

Without realizing it, Mrs. Kloekjes' brainwave had sealed Amal's fate. And ours.

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