

**SECOND PLACE
HIGH SCHOOL
9TH & 10TH GRADES**

**CANON IN D
◀By Rose Condon▶**

There's a song that Mommy plays every night, on the piano or on the harp. She calls it Canon in D.

It's the way things are, back in our little pretty house in the woods with no one nearby and a long, long driveway going up to the big road. But it wasn't till I was nearly nine years old that I knew why she played it.

Mommy and Daddy and I lived together in the little house, way back in the woods among the great white sycamores and the fluffy green pines and the bright gray maples and brown-gold oaks. Daddy worked a long way away, in the city, and he'd come home just before my bedtime each night, to play with me and kiss me goodnight. We had a great big dog named Thayn, with fur all soft and silky and black and white. He's a Malamute, Daddy's told me. And there used to be a little pet rat that Mommy'd trained to sit up and beg, and come when called, and her name was Misty. But she stopped living when I was five, and I don't really remember her.

So for as long as I could ever remember, right at sunset when the sky is pink and gold at the edges and dark blue-black at the top, or when it's purple dusk and the first stars are glinting, Mommy stops whatever she's doing and goes to the piano in the living room - or the harp in her bedroom - whichever's closer - and play the song. And I sit there next to her and watch and watch, as her hands dance all across the little shiny copper strings or the spotless white smooth piano keys. And always it's the same song, the same Canon in D, and Mommy's face gets all dreamy and her soft dark floaty hair sways around as she leans forward over the piano or the harp. She never needs a page of music and she nearly never makes a mistake. "It's so important," she says sometimes. "So important, Tallis...."

When I was not so little anymore, around six years old it must have been, Mommy would sit me down on the couch and give me my little harp. She taught me to play "Amazing Grace" and "Lightly Row" and "Ash Grove." And when I'd learned all of these well and pretty and could play them nice enough for her, she asked me one day, "Do you want to learn Canon in D like me, Tallis?"

Of course I said "Yes."

So she took me to where her big harp was, and showed how to put fingers on it for the notes, and I copied with my little harp. It took me nearly three months before I could play it well, and then I felt so proud and happy for doing it. I showed Daddy, and he was very proud of me too. "Soon you'll be playing it as well as your mother, Tallis," he said.

"But for a while I'll still play it myself," said Mommy, and put her hand on my head.

Time passed, and the years went, and I got older. When I was seven years old we got a new baby, a little girl that we named Christine, and oh, she was beautiful! "You're the cutest sister in the whole wide world," was the first thing I said to her. And she had such curly hair, as dark as Mommy's, not golden like Daddy's and mine. Her eyes were big and blue and she would blink up at me so wise and sweet, when I sat down next to her and played finger-games and showed her the mirror and the toys.

When I was eight years old Christine was walking, following me around all the time. Mommy taught me to play Canon in D on the big harp, because my hands were big enough then. But still, every night at sunset, she'd go and play it. And I'd stand and watch and hold Ris (for that was what we called her) up to see Mommy's playing.

Our big dog Thayn went off into the woods one Friday night and never came back. Daddy went out to look for him on Saturday and came back all sad-looking. He told Mommy something, and Mommy cried. "Where Thayn?" Ris asked and asked. But when I asked Daddy, he said, "Thayn's gone, Tallis. He stopped living."

And that made me sad because Thayn was such a big splendid wonderful dog, and so warm to curl up with on winter nights, and so soft, and he always loved to play with me. "I want him back," I said.

"We can get another dog sometime," said Daddy.

"But it wouldn't be Thayn." And I cried just like Mommy because I wanted Thayn back. "Things shouldn't stop living," I said. "Things should stay alive forever."

And Daddy picked me up then and held me on his lap and told me: "Well, darling, that's the way the world is."

"Will we all stop living sometime too?" I asked.

"Yes," said Daddy. "But we shouldn't be afraid of it, for when we stop living here we go on to live with Jesus, and that's much, much better than anything we can have here."

"Is that how it was with Thayn?" I asked next. And Daddy shook his head and said he didn't know, but later Mommy showed me some Bible verses about the Creation waiting in eager expectation to be liberated. And I guessed that meant yes. Because if God took all the trouble and work to make Thayn so wonderful and splendid and pretty, I was sure it meant He would take care of Thayn after he stopped living. But I still missed Thayn.

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After Thayn was gone, Mommy seemed to get worried more. She'd do my schoolwork with me and play with us outside in the woods, Ris and I, but as it began to get to evening she'd be nervous and more nervous. Until she played Canon in D. When she played it she got all soft and happy again, and afterwards she would kiss us and tickle me and poke Ris on the nose till she laughed.

She'd taught me a lot more songs on the harps, both of them, and on the piano too. But my hands were very small, just like the rest of me, and I couldn't play Canon in D on the piano, not quite yet. It took so much reaching, that bottom part for the left hand. Mommy could play the bottom part or the top part, and sometimes she'd play the bottom part while I played the top. But I wasn't very good at it, not yet, and kept making mistakes and losing count with Mommy, so that it didn't sound like our lovely Canon in D anymore.

Then came one night, one night I remember so well. It was in winter, around February, and my birthday was coming up in April. Mommy had on a blue shirt that night, my favorite because it was all velvety and soft. I'd gotten to dress Ris, and I'd done it in a little red shirt with a round white collar, and her brown corduroy pants. I don't remember what I wore, except that the sleeves were a little bit too long and I had to fold them up.

Mommy was making dinner in the kitchen - chicken and potatoes, I think - and had just put it in the oven when she looked outside and it was getting to be dusk. Sunset came so fast that day, it seemed. She went to the harp (we'd moved it into the parlor downstairs by

now) and sat down. She looked all fragile and nervous as she began playing Canon in D, and just as she began to relax, there was an awful snap and the lower C string broke in two pieces.

"Oh, _bother_!" said Mommy, and she sounded as if she wanted to say a lot more. But she only picked up the string's pieces. "The spares are out in the car."

"You could play the piano," I suggested.

Mommy stroked my hair. "Tallis, I've done that all week. I want to do the harp. The extra strings are out in the car - I bought some a few weeks ago." She laughed and started to pull on her shoes. "It's light enough still."

A moment later, she went out into the blue dusk, out to the car. Ris woke up from her nest in the couch and yawned, looking around. "Mommy?" she asked in her little voice.

And that was when I heard the scream. Right next to the house, and very loud.

It sounded as if someone was really, really scared, and my heart went all cold. "Mommy!" I whispered under my breath. Something slammed up against the door, and I heard someone gasp for breath, then the doorknob turned and Mommy came in. She nearly fell down, but shoved the door shut again, leaning hard against it, and slammed the big metal bar down across it. For a second she stood there, as if holding herself up by it. Then I cried, "Oh, Mommy, what happened?"

She turned, and I saw that she held her right hand against her, and it was all bleeding and awful and torn-looking. Her eyes were dreadful, and her face was white and terrible as she looked at me and Ris. Then we all heard something scratch at the door, heavy rending claws, and panting breath like a huge dog.

Ris looked as if she might cry, but she was too frightened. I glanced out the back window, and saw a shadow darting there, something dark that waited and watched. Fear prickled up and down my back.

Mommy looked down at her hand as though she'd only just noticed, though bright red was dripping off it onto our floor. "Oh, Kyrie eleison!" she breathed, her voice desperate and small. "Stay right here. I'll be back - " She broke off and went up the stairs, her steps hurried.

I ran and pulled the curtains shut on the back windows, checked the lock on the back door, closed all the curtains. I switched on all the lights, as bright as I could make them. Then I sat on the floor in the center, clutching little Ris to me. Her blue eyes were huge and frightened, and she looked as if she might cry. "Oh, Baby," I whispered to her. "Oh, what's happening?"

Then I grabbed her up and ran upstairs after Mommy. I didn't want to be alone with Ris downstairs, not with the wild awful shadow-things outside. And maybe she'd need my help. But anyway I had to be with Mommy when these things were happening.

I met Mommy coming out of the upstairs bathroom, her right hand and wrist all wrapped up, and she was tying it into a sling hung around her neck when I came. "Mommy, are you all right?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

Her face was awfully pale now, but not afraid anymore - still and set as ice. Her eyes were dark and flashing as she looked down. "Tallis, get the phone and call Daddy. Tell him I said 'I made a mistake and the warding is broken. Be careful when you come home.' "

I didn't understand, but I set Ris down and scurried for the phone. It was in Mommy's bedroom this time - we were always losing it because it was so small. Daddy wasn't answering, so I left the message on his voice-mail and ran back. All this time I was thinking

hard about what Mommy could have meant. The binding was broken? I'd heard of things like that in stories. But what mistake could Mommy have made?

Then, I suddenly understood! What had Mommy done every night forever, that tonight she hadn't? Why, she'd played Canon in D!

Mommy was sitting on the hall floor, with Ris in her lap, holding her tightly. She looked up as I came back. "Did you talk to Daddy?" she asked.

"He wasn't answering," I said. "I left a message." Then I blurted out, "Mommy, this is because you didn't play Canon in D, isn't it?"

For a shocked second we were all silent. Then Mommy began to cry. Bright tears slipped down her cheeks as she looked at me. "Oh, Tallis, I know it's my fault! If I hadn't been so silly and wanted to play it on the harp, if I hadn't gone outside, if I hadn't gotten attacked...."

"No!" I cried. "That's not what I meant at all!" I was horrified that Mommy thought I was blaming her. "It's not like that. It wasn't your fault. But is that what made it safe and made the - the binding?"

Slowly, Mommy nodded. "Yes. Oh, Tallis, We haven't told you the whole thing before because we thought you weren't old enough, but now - Tallis, darling. Our house - our woods - are in the center of a place that has been - different - for many, many years." She reached out with her left hand and put it on my shoulder as I sat down next to her. "We have to keep the binding 'round our house, else the death-dogs and the un-wolves and the nighthawks and - and others - will attack us in the night, after the sun goes down. It's their hour, when darkness reigns. And tonight I've broken the binding, and it won't be long till they - till they can get in."

I shivered and curled up to Mommy. "But we've got to do something!" Claws of cold terror grabbed at me. "How long till they get in?"

"The crosses will keep them out maybe another ten, twenty minutes," said Mommy. She meant our iron-and-silver crosses, with holly tied to them, that hung above the doors and windows. I'd always wondered why we had them, but now it made sense. "Tallis." She gripped my chin in her left hand and made me look up at her. That terrible hardness was back in her eyes, no longer teary. "Take Ris and go into the attic. Stay up there and don't make a sound, whatever you do."

"What about you?" I asked. Mommy's hand was hurting my chin.

"I'm staying to fight them," said Mommy. And as I saw her face there above me I thought "She is the bravest person I will ever know."

But then I stood up, as tall as I could, and for the first time I could remember I really purposefully disobeyed Mommy. "I won't go," I said. "I need to help somehow."

Mommy's eyes flared and for a moment I thought she would hit me. But then she shook her head. "Tallis, darling, there's nothing you can do."

"I could play Canon in D!" I said triumphantly. "Then everything would be all right."

For a moment Mommy smiled, sad and loving. "Oh, sweetie, your little harp wouldn't make any difference. It has to be on my harp or the piano - that's how the binding works."

"Then I could play it on the big harp," I insisted. "I could, really I could..."

"Not with a broken C string. Every note has to be played, or it won't work." Mommy kissed Ris and handed her to me. "Now _go_, Tallis!"

"No!" I cried. "On the big piano, then! I have to play it!"

Mommy got up, slowly, and put her left hand on my shoulder. "Tallis, no. You couldn't do it."

For a second I was about to turn and leave, but then suddenly an idea popped into my head. God sometimes gives us ideas that way, Mommy had told me before. And I guess that had to be where this one came from.

"Mommy," I said firmly. "You can't play Canon in D because of your hand. But what if you played the bottom hand part, and I played the top? I know how to do it. We've done it before."

For a second Mommy's eyes widened. Then she bent down and kissed me, right in the center of my forehead. "Tallis," she said. "Bless you. Put Ris in the closet, dearest, and then we'll go try."

We tried to put Ris in the big closet in Mommy and Daddy's room, but she cried whenever we set her down. So in the end we had to take her downstairs.

Downstairs was awful and cold for some reason. We could hear scratching and thumping outside, and then things howling and barking. I clung close to Mommy, but she was not showing herself to be afraid. She stood tall and though her face was all white, her eyes shone. I knew she would protect us, even if the bad night-things did come into the house. And I was so proud then of my brave, brave Mommy.

She set Ris down in her playpen, right next to us. I drew back the lid of the piano for her because she couldn't do it with one hand. Then we sat down next to each other. I tried very hard not to bump against her hurt arm, but it was hard not to because we had to sit so close.

"Christe eleison," whispered Mommy under her breath. Then, "I'm going to start playing slowly, Tallis. You come in when it's time."

And Mommy started to play the song. She did not listen to the noises from outside. She did not look at the shadows beyond the curtains. She did not even seem to think about her hurt hand. But she played the bottom part, and when it was time I came in with the top.

I was frightened at the beginning. But it only took a few moments before I stopped thinking of fear, and of dark things, and only thought of the song - of Canon in D, and of getting it right. And so for the first time ever it was `_music_`, what we did that night, Mommy and I working together.

The music was a binding. I could feel it settling into place as we played. We were laying the foundation in the first parts. Mommy played the weft of the loom and I played the warp, and I wove a circle of bright gold all around our house, around Mommy and Ris and I, around the little gray house in the woods that we were in. Nothing could pass it. We would be safe.

Then we started the faster part, and I got a little nervous, but since Mommy played her part so slowly, I could manage. It was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful - and this time, `_I_` was part of it too. It was the finish of the binding, where we took what we'd made already and made it strong and tight and better. My fingers tripped over themselves once or twice, but Mommy slowed down to let me catch up again, and we went on. Then Mommy and I both slowed our playing to a crawl, readying - and the two of us dropped into the last, the final chord.

We both let our breath out in a sigh. The house seemed warmer then. And Mommy put her left arm around me and pulled me close in a tight, tight hug. She kissed the top of my head and I curled up against her.

"Tallis," I heard her whisper. "You did it. We're safe."

"No," I said, raising my head to look at her. "_We_ did it."

Daddy came home in a little while, and we all had dinner, the four of us. And Ris turned her bowl over onto the floor, but no one minded, because we were too happy. "My brave little girl," said Daddy, when he'd heard the tale of the night from Mommy. "My sweet little musician."

"I had to do _something_," I said.

"So you did, so you did," said Mommy, from where she was feeding Ris. She smiled. "And so you did it. I daresay we'll have to do it for a while, until this hand of mine heals."

And Daddy went and put his arms around Mommy then. "When I think how close you came to getting killed tonight, Mallory...." he said to her.

"I was a fool," Mommy answered shortly. "But I managed to keep my wits when it jumped out. The un-wolves are getting bolder earlier in the night, Jim."

"Good to know." Daddy stroked Mommy's dark hair and then bent down to kiss her. "But thanks to our little Tallis we're safe - now, and until you're ready to play the Canon by yourself again."

I sighed. "Daddy! Mommy! You don't understand! It wasn't _me_ that did it. God gave me the idea, and Mommy played the bottom part, and - well - I only helped!"

"Yes, Tallis darling," said Daddy after a minute. "I suppose that's all that any of us can do."

I didn't understand why he said that. But maybe I will when I'm older.

I'm only just turned nine years old, and Mommy's hand is still sore and has scars all over it. We have a new puppy now, a little fluffy one named Diamond, and we all play with her and she loves us. And I love her too, even though I still miss Thayn.

And every night, right at sunset when the sky is pink and gold at the edges and dark blue-black at the top, or when it's purple dusk and the first stars are glinting, Mommy and I stop whatever we're doing and go to the piano in the living room - and play the song. And I sit there next to her and play with her, my hands dancing with hers across the spotless white smooth piano keys. And always it's the same song, the same Canon in D.

It's the way things are, back in our little pretty house in the woods with no one nearby and a long, long driveway going up to the big road.

