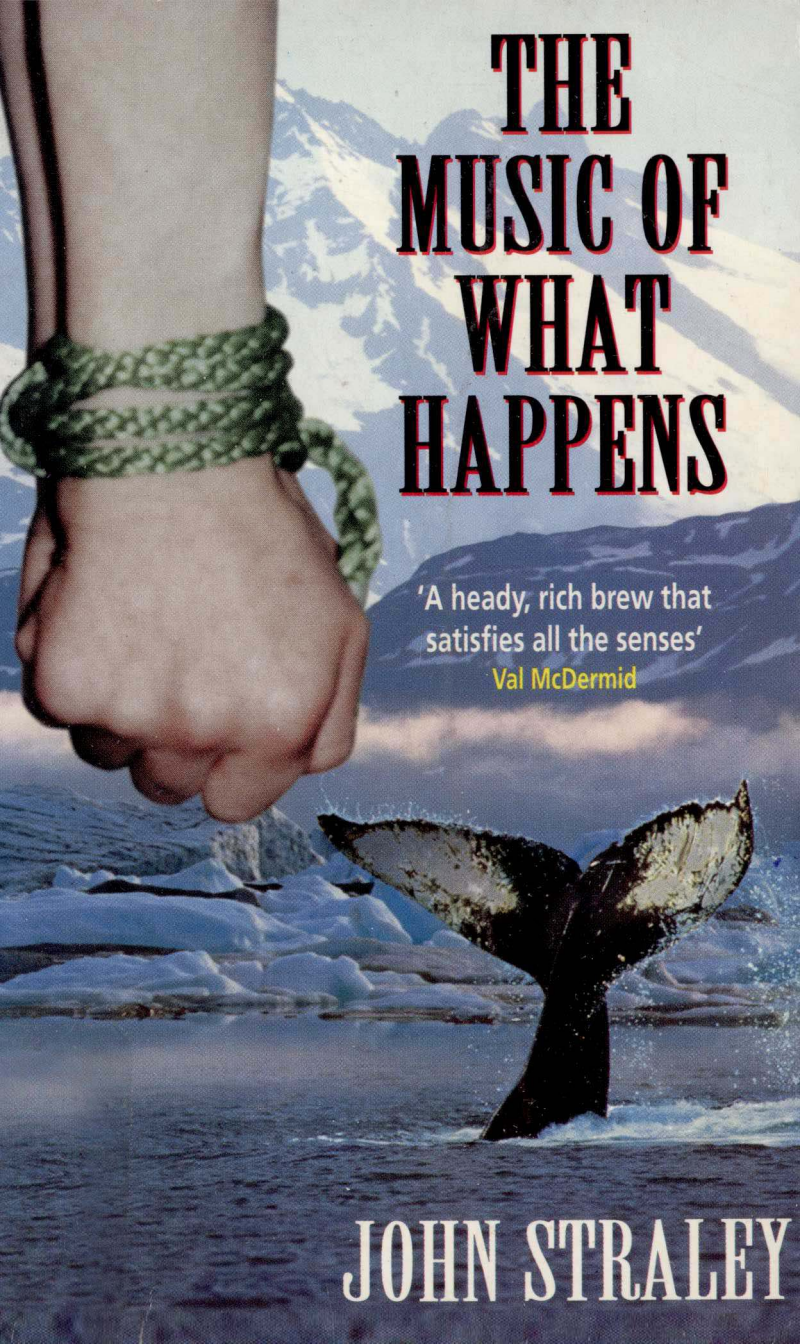
THE MUSIC OF WHAT HAPPENS
'A heady, rich brew that satisfies all the senses'
Val McDermid
JOHN STRALEY

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THE MUSIC OF WHAT HAPPENS

First published in Great Britain 1997
by Victor Gollancz

First published in the United States and Canada 1996 by
Bantam books

This Vista edition published 1997
Vista is an imprint of the Cassell Group
Wellington House, 125 Strand, London WC2R 0BB

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 575 60105 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd, Glasgow

97 98 99 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE MUSIC OF WHAT HAPPENS

John Straley lives in Sitka, Alaska, with his young son and wife, a marine biologist who studies whales. *The Woman Who Married a Bear*, his first Alaskan mystery, and *The Curious Eat Themselves*, the second in the series, are both available in Vista. *The Woman Who Married a Bear* was winner of the Shamus Award. The latest in the series, *Death and the Language of Happiness*, will shortly be available in Gollancz hardback.

Also by John Straley in Vista

THE WOMAN WHO MARRIED A BEAR

THE CURIOUS EAT THEMSELVES

Once, as they rested on a chase, a debate arose among the Fianna-Finn as to what was the finest music in the world.

"Tell us that," said Fionn, turning to Oisin.

"The cuckoo calling from the tree that is highest in the hedge," cried his merry son.

"A good sound," said Fionn. "And you, Oscar," he said, "what is to your mind the finest of music?"

"The top of music is the ring of a spear on the shield," cried the stout lad.

"It is a good sound," said Fionn.

And the other champions told their delight: the belling of a stag across water, the baying of a tuneful pack heard in the distance, the song of a lark, the laugh of a gleeful girl, or the whisper of a moved one.

"They are good sounds all," said Fionn.

"Tell us, chief," one ventured, "what you think?"

"The music of what happens," said great Fionn, "that is the finest music in the world."

—James Stephens, *Irish Fairy Tales*

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It was early spring when I was released from the psychiatric ward. In other parts of America the fruit trees were blossoming and the airborne seeds were letting go their pods, but here in Sitka, Alaska, the sticky leaves on the alder trees were curled like tight little fists into the limbs and were refusing to come out. A few gray whales had passed by the outer coast, and if I held my head just right out the window of the hospital's third floor I could hear the looping song of a varied thrush. But the shadows were long and the days still had that taste of winter, like the bitter iron filings that my medication seemed to leave in the back of my mouth.

My psychiatrist said, "Cecil, you've been through a lot. Maybe you'd better stay away from crime . . . as a lifestyle, I mean."

He stood in the window with the sun behind him. I was smiling as I looked at him, but I had no clue what he was saying. His lips were moving, the sun was shifting around his

head and I could hear the soft rush of his voice, but I couldn't, for the life of me, turn it into anything meaningful.

People say I'm not a very good private investigator, but even so, I should have been able to understand the words coming out of his mouth. I'm a defense investigator, meaning I help people accused of crimes, so by the time I get involved—weeks, sometimes years after—all that's left of a crime is words. In my own defense, I'm cheap and I'm loyal, which I suppose is more than you can say about most investigators. But I'm not much good at putting clues together. A woman I knew once told me I would never amount to much because I had no regard for the truth and floundered helplessly in a world beyond the literal. She was wrong, sort of. I have a high regard for the truth, I just can't find much agreement about what it is. As for the "world beyond the literal," I don't know what she was talking about.

My doctor leaned forward and for some reason his voice snapped into a pattern of words I could recognize: "Cecil, it's called a transitory ischemic incident. Just try and say that, if you feel something coming on again. Your head injury, probably coupled with your past substance abuse, created a stroke-like seizure and it affected your memory, at least temporarily. You had a fluctuation in your neurological function that caused a deficit in the area of your brain that delineates cause and effect. You're not crazy . . . well, you're neurotic and a drug abuser, but that's not it . . . really it's . . . it's just . . . weird brain shit."

"Weird brain shit? That's your diagnosis?"

My doctor smiled at me and scratched the bridge of his

nose. "Most of the things we used to call insanity are neurologically based. I could coo over you and prescribe some drugs but it would still be . . . weird brain shit."

I liked this guy. He looked to be in his fifties but he seemed much younger. He was an anarchist, a salmon fisherman, and finally a psychiatrist. He wore a red T-shirt under his flannel jacket. He had a blood blister under his right thumbnail. The first good feeling I had once I started making sense to myself was that this guy was trying to tell me something he, at least, believed to be the truth.

My doctor looked down at me trying to make eye contact and his voice was soft. "Do you remember your head injury, Cecil? Do you remember the events surrounding it?"

I leaned back away from him. It had been a simple thing. Priscilla DeAngelo wanted me to follow her son, who was in the custody of his father. Priscilla was an old friend. I had a crush on her sister in high school. I had known Priscilla when she, her sister, and I were children. But that was thirty years ago and Priscilla was now locked into a custody dispute that was as bitter and heartless as a professional dogfight. Priscilla had hinted that she wanted me to bring her six-year-old boy back from Seattle where her ex-husband had taken him. I took the hint and her expense money but made her no promises. There has been so much of this kind of child surveillance and transportation lately they have made it a new felony: child stealing. I wasn't into adding anything new to my rap sheet but I needed to get off the island so I took her money and the two-hour jet ride south to Seattle.

I looked up at my doctor and didn't speak. But I did remember, and the memory ran past my mind like a filmstrip: I was in the parking lot of a large mall. I had been eating frozen yogurt. I watched an empty shopping cart roll across the lot and hit the open door of a minivan. The tiny boy in blue overalls and a T-shirt was standing beside the van door and when the cart hit him, his nose mysteriously, or so it seemed to me, started to bleed. I took four steps toward him, forgetting that I was not supposed to be seen. "Young Bob," I whispered, and stumbled forward. His father saw me, and the cart, then rushed at me carrying what looked like a wine bottle in a paper sack.

From there everything went from music to noise. I remembered the parking lot. I remembered lying on my back and staring into a field of sparkling bits, like dust caught in the light. These specks floated aimlessly, and I remembered an urge to wave my hand and circle them into some sensible form. When I did, the image coalesced into a large white man yelling, waving a wine bottle in a paper sack, and puffing his chest out at some teenage kid in a green apron. The cart was on its side, like a horse thrown down on the ground, the wheels spinning, as if kicking to get up. There was yelling and horns, the rattle of iron wheels bouncing on the pavement. The little boy had blue-black hair and white skin. The blood ran down his coveralls in dark spots like eighth notes. He looked down at me in that instant before he started to cry, and his blue eyes had that blank stare of recognition as if he knew I too was about to disappear.

He was scooped up in the arms of his father. The next I remember it was dark and a security guard was yelling at me as

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I lay in the middle of a deserted parking lot. "Hey, you need a doctor? Hey, you need a doctor? If you don't, you gotta get out of here!"

"Yeah, I remember," I said to my doctor. Sitting in the hospital ward I had been nagged by the feeling that going crazy had been a disappointment. I had always expected a more dramatic purge, something along the lines of van Gogh at Arles, something full of passion and beauty rather than lying on my back in a mall parking lot with a boysenberry yogurt cone melting down my chest. The world was not an Impressionist painting but an ugly scramble of noise and dirty pavement.

My doctor looked at me with concern, glanced through his half glasses at his charts and then back at me. I watched his lips.

"Look, Cecil, you don't need the talking cure. Psychotherapy is a business that promotes the idea that your life is a story everybody knows, even before it happens to you." He looked around the ward. The kid with the shaved head and razor scars on his temples stopped spinning and stood still. The doctor leaned closer in to me and whispered: "But that's bullshit. This isn't a story. Your life isn't a story. No one knows how this is going to come out."

"Doesn't that bother you?" I asked.

"Me? Shit, no. I know it bothers you, but not me. I like talking to crazy people. But I don't really understand them . . . other than knowing that they are a little different."

He tugged his half glasses up to the bridge of his nose and looked down at my chart again. He had the stubble of two

days' growth of beard and his skin was pink from one of the windy days out in his skiff. He said, "So, listen, you work as a private investigator, right?"

"I guess. I suppose I may have some business left."

"You shouldn't get anxious. Anxiety won't help you heal. I want you to do something light, Cecil. Reading would be good. Review some files. But try and stay in a stress-free space for a few weeks. Can you do that?"

Stress free. As my memory came back over the past weeks I had remembered some of my cases. I had one sex case for a private attorney, but he dumped me when I missed the hearing deadline. I had an insurance find . . . locating a witness for an insurance company out of Portland. But that wouldn't take long since the guy they were looking for lived just down my block and his number was plainly listed in the phone book. I was going to have a hard time milking that for hours. The best moneymaker was the child custody case from hell, but I thought I had blown that ride.

It had started six years before on the day the baby's father mentioned death in the delivery room. The baby was Robert Carl Sullivan III. Everyone called him Young Bob, even before he was born. Old Bob Sullivan was the grandfather and Robert Sullivan II ("Don't call me Bob") had married Priscilla just after they both dropped out of college. Priscilla and Robert Sullivan had the requisite fun as a married couple who enjoyed their status as honorary adults conferred upon them by their marriage certificate. But a few days after Young Bob's birth,

Priscilla left the maternity ward in the rain and came to my office wanting me to help her arrange a divorce.

She stood in the doorway, the rain sheeting down from the edge of my broken gutter. Young Bob was curled in his hospital blanket, his tiny coconut head cupped in a stocking hat. He was as red and angry as a scraped knee. I invited them in.

She stood by my stove holding him in her arms as she spoke. She would only look down at Young Bob. Her voice was low. Her fingers played at the edge of the blanket near her son's mouth. "I thought I might die," she started. "It hurt so much and they were talking about cutting me open to take him out. I couldn't let them knock me out. So I pushed. I worked hard. I never felt anything like it. Then all of a sudden he was there. He was so heavy, so beautiful, even when he was all gray and waxy. The nurse thought he might not be all right. But I knew he was. He smelled so fine."

I nodded my head stupidly and offered her something to drink but she waved me away as she sat in the straight-back chair next to the stove holding her son.

"The baby didn't cry for a long time. The doctor and nurse kept fussing with him. Robert was standing by my head, squeezing my hand. After a long time the baby started to cry and Robert said thank you to the doctor and that made me angry. I guess I could understand that—in the heat of the moment, you know—Robert would thank the male doctor and ignore me. But then Robert did something I can't make sense

of. He leaned over me and he was crying, and he said, 'The baby looks dark, his skin, I mean, his features.' I asked him, 'Is there something wrong with that?' Then he said, 'This baby is going to die someday, isn't he?' Our baby was hardly breathing and he said that. Why would he say that? Why would he even think that?'' She looked at me for an answer. She looked across the distance of the small room and I could only shrug. Young Bob squealed, his tiny lips making a circle in his wrinkled face.

That was the beginning of Priscilla's need for a divorce. Something I could only guess at had happened in the delivery room, some boundary had been crossed on Young Bob's natal day and Priscilla wanted free of Robert because of it. At least that's what she said. She wanted sole custody with no visitation. That was the beginning of a marital jihad. There were lawyers and court dates. The judge tried compromises and efforts at reconciliation. Priscilla would have none of it. She fled the state with Young Bob the day after one judge had ordered supervised visitation and, worse, joint custody. Robert's hired detectives found her and the baby in a rented room above a Vietnamese grocery in Anchorage. This incensed Priscilla even more, so she had hired me to uncover the conspiracy in the Department of Social Services and the Legislature. She had lost her child. No simple explanation would do. In fact, after several years of fighting, no explanation would do. She really didn't want to know why the judge had given visitation to the father. She wanted revenge. After a point I think Priscilla wanted revenge more than she wanted Young Bob. I try to avoid kid cases but she paid my fees as I did the interviews and collected the

documents. I read them to her over long luncheon meetings in a waterfront café. One guardian's report noted that Priscilla displayed "erratic boundary setting." This upset her so much she threw a cup through a window. She destroyed a tape machine after listening to one of my interviews, so I began to edit the tapes just so I could keep her calm. The truth of it was, I made up a lot of my reports. I know I shouldn't have, but Priscilla had been eighty-sixed by all the therapists and counselors in town so I was the only one left who would talk to her about "the case." The counselors were tired of "the case" and were waiting for her to start working on why she was so upset by her ex-husband's existence. But Priscilla never adopted the tone they were looking for. Therapy was only a strategy on her part to get Young Bob back. Priscilla had no intention of opening up. She spoke to the doctors only as a general might talk informally to the reporters in the war room: congenial but always formidable.

Robert Sullivan II had stayed in the Seattle area, working as the shop steward in the longshoremen's union. He had smart lawyers, so there was not much of his voice in the record. But the lawyers were eloquent. They characterized Priscilla in the code words for feminine excess. She was "shrill" and "unreasonable." The judges, the doctors, and all of the decision makers were, of course, "reasonable." They were also men. Priscilla began to see large-scale cultural prejudice in this. Eventually she saw a darkly shaded and labyrinthine conspiracy.

Whether Robert loved Young Bob I could never say. I had only seen them together briefly in the parking lot on that day of

the bloody nose and the wine bottle on my head. They looked happy then.

My doctor spoke and my body jerked as if drifting off to sleep. "Anyway . . . stay away from trouble, Cecil. If you really want something, just come and see me. I'll give you one prescription and one refill. That's it. But don't get used to it. Once it's gone, it's gone." He stood and smiled down at me like a guy going fishing. "The drugs just make it so you're dopey and crazy. See ya."

He was out the door.

For some reason the psych ward didn't make you ride a wheelchair down to the front door. This was also a disappointment. I had been looking forward to the ritualized hospital departure where I could take my first emotionally oriented steps away from my wheelchair into a waiting taxi as if I were bringing a brand-new baby home. But that was not happening. The doors opened with a soft whoosh and I had about a two-mile walk home through a blustery spring day.

I wasn't depressed, which was also kind of a surprise for me. But my mind was relaxed and untethered like a lumbering zeppelin floating awkwardly in the fast-moving clouds. I reached into my pocket and took another Xanax, then another, just to be sure. I made it out to the road and up onto the bridge across the channel to town. Wind etched faint straight lines off the tops of the whitecaps, but the sun was out and clouds were light and hazy off the horizon. A group of oldsquaw ducks floated in the eddy behind the fuel dock. I began to reappraise

my feelings about insanity. I was perfectly at home in this little island town: the fishing boats looked clean and well-painted, the cars were driving slowly without honking their horns. I could see down the street to the backdrop of the green mountain dropping to the sea, from the old post office to the Russian cathedral, from the retirement home to my favorite bar. The sunlight sparkled and seemed to bind the whole vision together, like a lively tune or the manic scattering of sun in van Gogh's paintings of the orchards. I had remembered being unhappy in the past, but here I was walking one step in front of the other, breathing in the salt air thinking, "What could I have ever been unhappy about? How could a person be sad in a world as lovely as this?" This was excellent medication.

Once off the bridge I walked the waterfront down the other side of the channel toward my house. I was humming a bouncy tune and waving to people I owed money to, for I now knew my insanity would be like Elwood P. Dowd's, in the movie *Harvey*, walking to his sister's house with a six-foot rabbit beside him and a pocketful of business cards and plans to have dinner with everyone he met.

When I opened the door Toddy was crying and Priscilla backed me up against the coat pegs. She held a broken-off dental probe to my nose and screamed: "I oughtta fucking kill you! I oughtta jam this thing up into the spongy part of your brain! You didn't bring him back and you let him get away!"

The veins in her throat were distended as if she were being held underwater. Saliva flecked off her lips as she screamed.