

WHAT THAT CHAIR DID TO HIM

With the orchestration, chaos returns. Too many instruments loved by too many for these dissonant themes. Even after the notes are complete. The patterns all formed. I catch myself questioning; where exactly is the melody? Where does melody meld into harmony? Which notes take the stage's fore? And which do I doom to sing behind the curtain?

She kisses my neck. My headphones shake off my ears with a jolt of my shoulders. I drag my fingers away from the plastic keys and smile up to her. My fingers turn soft, wrapped round the warmth of the green mug she hands me. Away, now, from the cruel uncertainty of those mockingly black-and-white keys.

Some part of me groans in quiet stress. Hungry and silenced. She looks at me with the most soul-shattering gaze. And the ark of my mind floods with misleading endorphins. As she asks if we can go blueberry picking.

Finger-wiped stains shade uneven lines into her light blue shirt. Black hairs bristle with the breeze. Brown eyes, struck by the sun, shine their light inner colors as she curls her tongue over her upper lip. The bucket, strapped round her waist, accentuates the peak of her frame behind it.

She doesn't necessarily seem happy. Slightly frustrated, really. But she grips firmly onto this calm focus, evaluating the curvature, density, and juiciness of each and every individual selection of the trees' offerings.

I lift my head from my narrow sightline through the thick bushes, one hedgerow over. As I look at the blue bugs on the green branches before me the voice in my head won't let me forget this morning. *So close. So close. The movement's end waits for me. Maybe the horns steal the harmony from the basses. Or the basses from the cellos. Or the violas pick up percussion with pizzicato – but everybody demotes the violas. And I don't want to be everybody. But I don't want to promote the violas.*

I pick up a blue kernel from my bucket and, from one hedge over, lob it into the blue sky. It soars above the green branches and glides into her general vicinity. I hear nothing. I select another at random from my bucket and throw it too, aiming a little more carefully this time.

“You're not funny,” comes the high-pitched, feminine voice.

“I think I found one,” I reply.

“Really?” Her voice picks up in clarity and tone. “One like I said?”

“Yeah. Just one though. It's blue – and round. Seems to be squishy. Definitely blue. Probably a berry. Unsure though. Have you found any yet?”

She doesn't reply. A cool breeze ripples through the hedges, flipping up the collar of my flannel. Perturbed by her silence, I nimbly stab myself into the hedges, berries and stems imploding off the branches.

“Any luck?” I ask once clear of the shrubs, my plaid shirt coated in berry blood and twig bones.

She turns to me with a look somewhere between motherly disappointment and sexual disgust. And it works. To soothe some deep, strange, masculine urge. To tell her that I need her without telling her outright. To correct me – to unbest me; me, too masculine for my own good. She shifts back to the hedges.

And with her turn it hits me again. Pangs me. As if it has gained ground. Asks me whether *I really want to be just average*. It begins to play music on the edges of my skull. On my mind's record player. Elgar's Cello Concerto. *Will I ever write my great concerto if I waste my days picking berries with people in my time?*

This melody. This haunting, gripping melody. He could not have written this melody, hummed by the passersby along the lonely bridges of England, had he wasted his hours in the minds of people in his time. Sacrificing his precious now, he lasts through future's folds, in the minds of those who, had they existed in his time, would have loved him, unloved him, hated him, turned from him in disgust, mimicked him in admiration – all of them, now, turning back with a shine in their eye, and a guilty glimpse of something like envy. And it could be me. Me, and them, asking me, how I did it? How I stayed focused? Rose above the average? Well it was not easy. I made promises to one side of myself. And sacrificed the other. I promised my dreamer's hemisphere to hope justly for the future. I fed its voracious appetite daily with sacrifice and pain. And I gave up the fleshly half. Gave up those present, ephemeral sensations like contentment, sacrificed upon the altar of hard work, for generations of awe – and just then my mind wiggles and the record pauses. Something wrong. I angle my body back to her. She smirks.

“You're so cute,” she says with upturned eyes.

“Shut up. Don't embarrass me.” I scratch my temple. “These voices. They write plays in my head. I know. It's just these voices. They're very loud. Shut up.”

Crisp polygrams of light break through the shade, angling shapes onto her relaxed face. As these shapes, swaying with the breeze of the hedges, overtake her eyes, a new, brighter color looks out at the world. Grips my soul somewhere deep within me. But to her it's just sun in her

eyes. And she throws up her hand and squints, opening one side of her mouth, scrunching her nose into the shape of a sea urchin.

“What,” she asks.

“I mean.”

“What. Why that face.”

“How – how much longer do you wanna be here?” I ask.

She throws her hands to her hips. Her face takes on a scowl.

“You want your blueberry crumble or not?”

“I do, I do! I’m – just wondering how much more of this, you, were, you know – you were planning, to do.”

She looks around herself, staring longingly at the infinite rows upon rows of fields and hedges around us. Then, more realistically, to the edges of our current section.

“Let me get to the end of these rows,” she says.

Behind us line at least three more hedgerows. Swaying quietly with the cool wind. I begin to do some mental math. Each row so far has taken her at least fifteen minutes. I pause, doing this math, purposefully slowly, keeping my body turned. Fifteen. Times three. Fifteen times three.

“The end of these hedges?” I repeat.

“You got a problem with that?”

“No – no, none at all. Let’s keep...” I approach the bush. “Hang on. Let me see if I can find... ah – yes! I got one. It’s blue, *and* it’s a berry. Yes. This shall go in my bucket, yes. This is good – great, and fun.”

She rolls her eyes, sighs, and returns, so easily for her, to judgmentally scrutinizing the blue trees' offerings. *Fifteen times three? How much time did she say? How much time.*

About an hour later I stare into the sun. The clouds begin to shift around the star's setting stage, gripping the spotlight of its rays, before the wind pushes them away from this borrowed sightline of mine – into another pair of eyes, no longer mine, staring up towards the fireball – *clouds like jellyfish floating on the sea's surface, and we, sharks, looking up through the reflections of light within their bodies –*

“Okay.”

I turn. “Okay what?”

“Okay I'm done.”

Burnt corneas reflect bright purples and greens over my vision as we begin the walk back to the car. You could almost miss it, what with all the eye-catching beauty of the rolling fields. But to our right stands a small house. Hand-built. Whose shingles point many different directions. Whose green, over-complicated gutter system suffocates its peripherals. Whose peach-painted wooden walls hang at awkward angles, blackened from time. Cutting through the bleakness rests a single white window, through which the foggy form of a gray-headed lady clangs pans together against a sponge.

In the garden before the house droop a few pretty flowers, curling with the early fall cold. A gray-headed man wanders slowly towards the home. A small trowel hangs loosely in his hand, almost threateningly, were it not for his slow pace, hunched shoulders, and gentle demeanor. From a distance it's hard to tell, but his head appears to twitch, every so often, into the safety of his shoulders. He steps on his left leg quickly, favoring the right. The sun just begins to paint the

sky's clouds yellow and red. I sigh, taken in by the beauty of the day. Contrasting with the house's – and the house owners' – decaying forms. And I sense words beginning to coagulate.

“For what is a cloudy day but a canvas for the sunset.”

I listen for a response.

“Okay,” I concede.

“What?” She asks.

“You didn't like that.”

“Like what?”

“What I just said.”

“Oh. What is that?”

“What is – it's a line. My line. A line I came up with.”

“Oh.”

A short silence.

“Well what do you think of it?”

“I think it's fine.”

“Fine?”

“Well. When days are too cloudy you don't get a sunset.”

“I mean.”

“So usually it actually is cloudy days where you can't see the sunset. So... but no, I mean, but I do like the way the words sound and everything.”

I watch my feet graze over the muddy grass.

“I mean – thank god I guess, that I'm gunning for a career in music. And not in writing.”

“That is a good thing.”

“It’s really my dream. It’s hard, though. Dedicating all these hours to a craft with no certainty of success. Not able to see the fruits of my labor.”

The tips of my shoes turn brown.

“My piece is turning out well actually. It’s just the orchestration that’s the hard part. I think the cellos should get the melody. Just need to figure out the viol—”

“Agh!” She shrieks.

“What?”

“Some big bug bit me.”

“Oh. Oh shoot. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

“Okay.”

I look but I do not see any bug. And she does not say anything. And I say nothing more. And in that way the conversation turns again to silence.

We walk past the rows and rows of pickable berries until we reach the wooden structure at the field’s mouth. The structure’s wood warps, black with moisture, its plastic overhanging drooping beneath the weight of yesterday’s rain, still pooled in its center.

“Thing looks old as hell,” she declares.

As we round its front, I am surprised to find nobody standing within it. A couple crumpled, yellowed pieces of paper shiver in the wind, crucified to the cracking wood.

“‘Five dollars per quart,’ it says. And, I guess – here are the quarts,” she figures. “Just sitting here. I guess you measure it out yourself? And then this open jar here. Looks like – shoot, looks like only cash. But not everybody’s even paid in five’s.”

“So... it’s just an honor system?”

“Did you bring cash?”

“I got –” I reach into my pocket. “I got two one’s.”

“Yeah. I have no cash. Nobody has cash in this century.”

“Where did that old guy go?”

“Old guy?”

We look around each other, round the infinite fields, folding over one another, lifting here and dropping there, covered in neat rows of bushes and branches and berries. Then over to the dilapidated house. Now about five-hundred yards away. I scrunch my eyes closely. The woman that was once in the window is no longer there. And neither in the fields, nor anywhere noticeable, is that man.

“I mean,” I ask, “how many quarts did you pick, you think?”

We look down at her bucket, its straps carving lines into her hips. Then down at my fifty-or-so berries. She begins pouring her plump selection into the dark green containers. Some berries fall on the ground. We kick them under the makeshift stand.

“Shoot,” she says, looking down at three filled quarts.

“Well, I mean – I’m sure most people just don’t pay.”

“I guess. Can’t they at least leave a card reader?”

“I almost want to knock on their door and ask. For a Venmo. Although that man looked like he walked off the beaches of Normandy. Probably thinks Venmo is a new brand of pistol.”

“I don’t know. I’d like to think they set it up this way because they don’t really mind if people don’t have enough. They’ll go on growing blueberries because it’s what they love doing.

And if they make a profit from it, so be it – and if not, that’s good too. I guess. Why else would they not staff the payment system.”

“That’s some great rationalizing. This is what we get for wandering the woods of New Hampshire for blueberries. ‘Frederic Henry’s Blueberry Farm.’ Great Frederic Henry. The magnanimous anti-capitalist. Selling berries with no expectation of currency in return.”

“Shut up. Drop the two dollars. We’re thirteen short. It’s fine. We’ll come again in a year. And pay them back. It’s all good.”

I drop the two dollars in the bin. We take the three quarts and turn back to the flattened space of crushed grass upon which our car rests. An old, grumpy engine starts somewhere, from the direction of the crumbling house. Lost among the chirps of the birds. I take one last look at the sign. *\$5/quart*. So simplistic. Yet so complex. *Uncomplicate the melody?*

Dense evergreens lean their arms over both sides of the brown earth. Grasping towards one another. *Above the dirt schism man laid between them.*

“Uh oh,” she says.

“Jesus. It’s the bumpy roads. They’ll do it to ya.”

“No, it’s – I get nauseous. In the car.”

“Too many blueberries.”

“No. I get nauseous. In the car.”

“Some day you’ll grow out of it.”

The record player’s spun. The same piece. But this time just the first four chords. Over and over. Dissonance after the completed chord – four non-double-stop notes between the stacks – searching for harmonic resolution, *unable to find it.*

Ripping the heart out. Some day I'll learn the language of the heart. The "yes's" of being. But to know my own I had first to study the dialects of the greats. To recreate the shapes, to reproduce the sounds, to know by heart the patterns of my forebears. Only then could I turn to the vernacular within. And to wrangle the language within was to separate the wheat from the chaff. To embrace the death of the ego. Early mornings. Late nights. "No" to new friends. "No" to old friends. "No, not tonight, my love." Through the "no's", and only through the "no's" of my fleshly experience, could I learn the "yes's" of my true inner being. And then I... and then...

I sense my mouth moving. My face contorting. I ask my ears if they've heard me speaking. I straighten my body. I check my peripheral.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. Just a little nauseous," she says. "Please talk."

"Yeah. Okay. Well... I like you." I pause for a moment, listening for her acceptance or rejection of my proposed topic. "I like your face. And the way you talk and the way you look at me. And I like it when you scowl when I say something weird."

She exhales out of her nose.

"Uh, hm. I don't know. What to talk about. What to... been thinking a lot lately about my day-to-day."

A motorcycle guns its engine into dissonant harmony with our own.

"Just hard. You know. The early morning wake-up. Composing for an hour, alone in the dark. Then off to work. Offering plates of food to ungrateful people. Then to bed. Then all over again tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow."

The bike pulls around and fades into the accelerated distance. I roll down my window a crack. Cold, tree-cleaned air warms my face's blood.

“I know I’m getting paid. I should be grateful. But the problem is pay doesn’t do much for me. Other than purchase food to fuel my brain. Which I need to work so I can compose. I don’t know. It’s all such an act. This work. How to put on a face of care and kindness when you’re on the floor. Holding it in until you’re back at the register. ‘Holy shit table four is a nightmare. Every special request you could ask for.’ Then your coworker asks you something about what they look like. And you tell them. And they start to develop patterns. Of thinking. A quick judgment of the clientele. Followed by a quick calculation: the expected value of their future tip. Because if they *aren’t* ready, their act will crack on the floor. But if you don’t catch yourself making these judgment calls, bringing them home with you, you’ll wind up eight years down the line, xenophobic and broken. Cynical. Voting for closed borders. What this work does to you.”

The road shifts from brown dirt to black pavement. The sun’s light fades, replaced by the dim lamp of the moon, ineffective against the dense forestry of New Hampshire’s obsidian wilderness. A pickup rumbles along behind us, its lights flicking into the rear-view with each unconditioned bump in the road.

“I return home and sit down at my plastic piano. And I can’t remember the difference between dominant and diminished. Just feels aimless. Sometimes. Subjective, too. I have no idea who my ‘target audience’ is. I write music for myself. And I don’t know why. It’s the only thing I can do where every piece of myself feels like it’s awake. Like I’m pulling on every string I can offer. Some people are lucky and that thing for them happens to be dissecting cells and curing diseases. Or cutting people open and replacing faces with plastic. And they come home in their Porsche’s, home to their ‘hot wives,’ and just lay down on the couch and crack a beer. And for them that’s enough. But for an artist it’s painful. And embarrassing. Most people think it’s

childish. And in some sense it is. To think, the irony. People who yesterday, came to dine, so they could step on me. And at night, I pull out my piano bench, sit down, and write *music* for them.”

She groans and burps a little, angling herself upright from her previously relaxed position. “I think you’re good at many things.”

“Maybe. But what other job would give me time to compose, you know.”

“Yeah. But. Could still be fulfilling if you do it on the side. Doing it for the art itself.”

“I mean – yeah, I *do* do it for the art itself, but it would be *nice* to get paid. Feels like such an empty phrase ‘for the art itself.’ Because the ‘art itself’ can’t grow if future artists can’t see what you’re doing now. And if the only way for them to see what you’re doing now is for you to get paid – that, plus the number of hours I’d like to put in each week – *need* to put in –”

She burps again. “I guess I was just raised by very realistic parents.”

“Yeah. I know. And I’m sympathetic to that. I mean, it’s not like my parents are stoked on their kid becoming a starving artist. They talk about it nicely. Nicely with this loving, dismissive air. Like it’s something I’ll grow out of.”

“Yeah. For us there’s no choice. Doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Hard, at times meaningless work, but on the other side, stability. Safety, and gratitude. That everything isn’t just always the hell that’s happening in the war-torn country they came from. A lot of people who grow up here – and no offense – take that for granted. Waste their time looking for the perfect job. As if there’s an expectation that a job *should* be perfect. And not just a thing done, *willingly*, because without it, you’d be in a village back home, with no hope for social or economic mobility, mortaring brick walls for a living. Choice is overrated. Okay I’m gonna stop talking now.”

She brings one hand up to her mouth and angles her head down, air pulling from her stomach up through her mouth. The headlights behind us fill our cabin, following us around the bumpy bend towards neighborhood roads.

“Yeah but...” I take a deep breath from the cold window’s crack. “There’s risk without choice. Say you earn this stability. But years down the road you find it’s stability in an unstable equilibrium. Like think how a mid-life crisis is no longer something to fear, but something to be ready for. All of us waking up one day and realizing, oh my *god*, I chose *stability* over passion, always telling myself I’d focus on passion later, later, later – and now it’s *past* later, and all I have is *stability* in this unstable equilibrium. Wouldn’t you rather take the chance of choice? Even if you fail, *then*, you can make the call, to embrace the miserable, high-paying job, to earn enough capital to best ready your kids to greet these same questions in their time, so maybe they’ll actually figure it out better than you could?”

She pulls the car into the gravel driveway. The headlights behind us angle away. She twists the key and the engine quiets. But she holds her hand on the key in the ignition. And she sighs. A smaller burp comes out.

“Can... I don’t want to sound unsupportive. But what is the path? I don’t see the path, you know –”

“I can tell you the path if you’re confused.”

“No, I... I know the path.” She pauses for a moment. “I guess I’m just saying the path... it’s the odds of the path. And then – what’s your backup plan?”

“Yeah sure it’s not – this *is* my backup plan. This hell I’m going through day to day. Suffering through wasted hours. Exhausting myself, making profit for some asshole manager.

This is it. Channeling food to ungrateful stomachs for the slight margin they'll offer me on top of their fee. This is –”

Her eyebrows scrunch and her head turns backwards. My mind continues developing narratives to hurl in my defense. Warring against myself through words directed at her.

But I muzzle these thoughts' loud mouth to look behind us. To this strange source of new light. Flooding through our rear window.

I have to squint. To readjust my eyes. But it looks like two different lights. Two circular lights. Side-by-side. Pulled into my driveway. Behind us.

“What...” she says.

“Damn that's blinding.”

“What is...”

“I got it. Don't worry. Just some crazy New Hampshireite.”

The engine shuts off. The lights remain on. The door opens with a hard clank.

“No be careful –”

I open my door. I step out onto the cold driveway. I turn towards the lights, piercing through the blackness, scrunching my eyes to make out what they can.

“Excuse me?”

Through the open door's red window I watch a form stumble out. Then bend back in to grab something.

“Can we help you sir? You lost?”

I can't really see what with his blinding headlights and the pitch black dark. I hear her door opening and her soft feet stepping out. And I see him straighten behind the open red door.

And he closes the door. Revealing an object. Hanging in his right hand. A piece of wood with metal around its end. And a little peak of metal around the handhold. And a hole for a finger.

I dive over the hood of the car. She screams. I grab her. Squeezing her hand I sprint. Sure to keep the car between us and the figure I open the unlocked door. I throw her in. Throw myself in. Pull it shut and lock it. She heaves deep breaths in and deep breaths out.

“What. What the hell!”

“It’s okay, it’s okay –”

“What do you *mean* it’s okay?” She shouts, her voice ascending and descending octaves. “He had a – you’ve locked us in a damn *fish* bowl!”

I look around the one-room cabin. Just faintly lit by those headlights peering through the windows. The door rocks back. Wood splintering against steel boots. Two more kicks. Sandalwood fractures against malleable metal. A fourth. The lock snaps through the thin wood. The knob and its screws clatter against the floor.

His silhouette shuffles over splintered wood. His gray head twitches repeatedly into hunched shoulders. His steps with his left leg come quickly and carefully. His gun stares at the floor. His gravelly voice speaks.

“You owe...”

I move in front of her, gripping one arm on her sleeve.

“You owe me thirteen,” he grunts.

“Thirteen – thirteen dollars?”

His twitches worsen. He looks at the ground as his head pulls down then up, down then up. Black wood cracks over the barrel. Light glints off its rusty end.

“You owe...”

“You’re threatening us for –”

“Keep your head down kid. Keep your head. Keep your head down, kid. *Snap your cap!*”

He screams. His weapon hangs in the air. He pulls back the bolt and snaps it back into place.

Tucks his chin against the wooden stock and locks eyes with me through the sight.

“No!” I scream. “I have it. I have your thir– I have your money. Right over there. In my safe. Just put. The gun. Down.”

The barrel shakes as light blue, wet eyes stare into mine through the rusty metal.

“Head down.” His twitches slow. His eyes start to widen. The barrel begins to shake.

“Keep your head down.”

I hear a slight snuffle begin, her body shaking my firmly planted arm.

“Put – please, just. Put down the gun. I’ll get you the money.”

“Keep your head.”

“Anything. Anything you want. Just drop the weapon.”

His wrinkled, white-haired eyebrows scrunch. And turn. Up to the hanging antlers, the handmade bed frames in the corner, the small fireplace. Until they stop tracking. Lock onto something. And relax.

“If you can... keep your head...”

The twitches slow to a nodding pace. Holes poke awkwardly out the sleeve of his old gray shirt. Remnants of once-woven string ripped along their edges. He limps his hunched frame slowly to the object of his eye.

He pulls out the black bench and sits down. Lays his weapon on his lap and moves his hands over the plastic. Softly, at first. He plays empty thuds of unplugged keys.

Spinning tires throw loose stones against our walls as another pair of headlights fill the small room. The keys continue to thump. Notelessly. And I realize the thumps. *The thumps do not come randomly. The beats. I know them. The patterns.*

Another gray-haired apparition floats through our open doorway. The clean air fills with the scent of mothballs and potpourri. Runs to the side of him and grabs the weapon off his lap as sirens wail into the quiet night. *The time. The keys.*

The woman tosses the wooden metal out the door. She places her hand on his shoulder. *Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.*

She speaks, softly.

“Don’t worry darling. I’m not afraid. Just a bitter trick.”

She draws her hair over his head. And the thumping slows. Replaced by patterns of whimpers. Old ducts flooding through long-unused drains. The sirens grow in pitch.

She shifts her head against his. Pats his shoulder. And thumps her mouth, silently, to us.

“So – so – sorry,” as flashing reds and blues sparkle into the dark room.

Weapons drawn, justice yells as it steps through the broken wooden door. Three officers command everyone to their knees. Hands behind our heads. Everyone obeys. Save for the man at the bench. They yell louder. The man does not move. Then the officer in front squints his eyes. And he begins to laugh. And lowers his weapon.

“Long time no see! Colonel Blueberry.”

This strange, dust-baked scent of nostalgia wafts into my subconscious. Through the mangled, open door. Topographic maps hanging bluey off the walls. Trails I longed to climb.

Old wood panels I tugged with my brothers. Hoping one day we'd be strong enough to pull them off. *Cracking scores of music. Decomposing in our library.*

As she slides herself into the back seat of the cruiser, the gray-haired lady catches herself on the open door and lifts a finger to stern justice.

She shuffles slowly towards my love and me, standing outside the dark cabin.

"I know it means little," she says in her quiet, sweet voice, "to say it after the fact. But I am sorry."

She looks at the shattered door. Heavy lungs heave a deep breath.

"Anything I can offer you." She turns, into mine, her green-gray jewels of eyes. "I can't promise much with these withering hands. But anything. At least for the door."

"Please," I say, "we're even. Shouldn't cost more than thirteen dollars."

She forces a laugh. Wind sputters out her mouth. And she has to clear her throat.

"As they told you. Everything else has left him. Everything, either left, or taken from him. By his own mind. Even me."

Her eyes make a sad circle of my face.

"The berries and the farm. It's all there to give him something. He doesn't watch the stand. He watches the hedges. The small moments they bring people. Young people. Hashing out disagreements, recalling lost memories. The loud voices in their heads quieted by this singular task. Leaving room for their emotions to speak. Once this was us too. This was us too."

She licks her dried lips. My love pulls closer to me.

"He was to be a concert pianist you know. But he was never sure. And when he opened the letter he told me he felt lucky. With tears in his eyes he told me he felt lucky. With the draft he no longer had to choose."

She breathes deeply. My love wraps her arm around my lower back.

“He wasn’t athletic. Being a musician. So they stuck him in a chair. Where he wouldn’t have to run. Told him just sit and wait for the planes. And if he ever learned how to run they’d shoot him. He barely hears anything now. Then the bladder cancer. The dementia. What that chair did to him. Thirteen of them. Musicians, artists, thinkers – not warriors – drafted to man those stationary guns. Aimed towards the sky. Invisible specks of raining death. By the end of it all, three left. Including him. In his moments of clarity he’ll tell me he thought I had died in childbirth. In the Swiss Alps. And I have to remind him that I’m here. Then he forgets, just like that, who I am. And I must wait patiently for the next catastrophe. When he’ll be shocked into memory of me. Such a way to end a life. Looking forward to catastrophe. The very monster I spent my whole life running from.”

She licks her lips once more. Pulls her eyes towards the impatient officers. Then back to me. Then to my love.

“There is one thing left. One thing that has not yet left. One thing that can’t be taken from him, even without those once-perfect ears. In a world that’s otherwise, for him, utter nonsense. One permanent piece of sense. But I guess I can’t quite –”

She drags her reddened eyes away. To the cruiser on the gravel, the gray-haired form twitching quietly in its backseat. Tears start to drip down her dry, wrinkled face.

“I just can’t quite make sense of it. Maybe you can tell me. You, with your plastic piano.”

She angles her jade eyes, sharply, into mine. And I feel a sense of hostility.

Her voice cracks as she opens her mouth. So she closes it. Then she opens her mouth and tries again.

“Why he remembers Beethoven. Before he remembers his love.”