

## Eros and Thanatos

I was in Valdemossa when George Sands and Chopin wintered at the monastery, Sands with her pretty, down-turned lips and Chopin's hacking cough, the chill in the air far more crisp than they had hoped for. We wander through their rooms, Broken in a white muslin summer dress with a sprig of bougainvillea in her hair and Florian lapping at her heels, Lithe dressed more drably than the monks who once glided down these halls. By the grand piano covered in roses, I once touched Sand's dark ringlets, once sniffed Chopin's hands, his long white fingers alarmingly like my own. When Broken bends down towards the ivory and ebony—soft and round and yet unreachable, as though she were a peach encased in glass—I whisper in her ear:

“The people came to see if Chopin would cough blood up on the keys. That's what they came for: the blood, not the music.”

She smiles, I swear she does.

How could I not want her?

I had planned to spend a week in a village outside Minsk to recover from a hurricane in Bangladesh. How I love the little hamlets of Eastern Europe, the wooden houses with their sagging window frames, the dark, cobblestone alleys, almost too narrow for a single man. But, before I could arrive, I caught a whiff of Broken on the wind and chose instead to follow my nose. I found her in El Arenal, my flawed diamond, sparkling among the skimpily clad masses as they feast on *Currywurst* and *Döner*, paella

and fried Mars bars, downing sangria by the bucketful. When they're drunk enough, which is often, the crew-cut limeys pick a fight with the crew-cut krauts or the other way around, their women cackling from the sidelines.

Why on earth is she here?

In my files it says Broken is a singer, a dramatic coloratura soprano, a star that ascended quickly to the heavens: *The voice of a generation! A young Dame Joan Sutherland! The most inspired Giselle I've heard in years!* But she mistook opera for life and modeled hers after Callas's. In Vienna, when she came back to her suite after singing Violetta—*fresh yet thrilling! I sighed, I laughed, I wept!*—her lover, a Hungarian dancer, had cleaned out the room, taking everything but a diamond bracelet he had given her because it was only made of glass.

Is that when her eyes shattered, splintering into a thousand shards like an uneven glass mosaic? Or was it her voice that broke her heart? Mysteriously missed performances, that wobble in the middle voice, vocal nodes—all tell-tale signs of a once bright star crashing to the ground where it burns to a cinder.

It doesn't say so in my files, but I'd guess Broken is here to feel the perverse sting of just how far she's fallen.

Her sister Lithe is a cellist. In my files it says she had a shot at a solo career: *Such promise! Do we dare say du Pré?* But Lithe is eleven years younger than her sister and

both their parents are dead. If she didn't take care of Broken when Broken broke, who else would?

All high cheek bones and long limbs, Lithe is so thin she looks like a gust of wind would easily lift her off the ground. Could it be she is the more beautiful of the two? But it doesn't matter: Lithe is so fixated on Broken, she's nearly as invisible as I am.

Beneath the glass, Lithe knows Broken is held together by twisted string, yellowing tape and disintegrating glue. She's here to make sure she never comes undone.

But even she can't stop her sister's drinking.

At midnight, when Broken moves past cocktails to shots of whatever is cheapest, when she stumbles down the boardwalk, past the strip of beach littered with cigarette butts and dotted with stunted palms, the glass comes off around her body and—oh, the delight!—she's the ripest peach, her skin tickling your lips, begging you to take a bite. Men hover like a cloud of fruit flies to the boom boom of the techno and flashing colored lights.

“Fancy a drink, doll?”

*“Ey Süße, wie geht es dir?”*

They do not know I've beaten them to the chase: one hand around her neck, the other down her shirt.

But, before we can devour her, Lithe puts a hand on her sister's shoulder and—wham!—the bell jar slams back down over the peach. The men stumble off in a daze, and I let go with a roar.

But Lithe knows this cannot go on forever. She needs to find her sister a plaything, a shiny toy to take her out of El Arenal, a lover harmless enough to forever stay behind the glass.

Lithe chooses Florian.

*Ach*, Florian! The poet from Ulm, with his collared shirts buttoned to the top and stack of Reclam's little yellow books, reading Hölderlin and Kleist against the backdrop of the dirty Mediterranean. I do not need to guess why he is here: El Arenal is his opium den, his absinthe, his Syphilis, the place where he hopes to shed his *Bildungsbürger* skin.

He wants Broken as much as I do; he had already composed lustful verse about her in his leather-bound book before Lithe approached him. But Broken was his Laura; his Beatrice. He never imagined he'd actually feel the warmth of her hand on his thigh on a bumpy mountain road while his cock tried to push its way through the zipper of his jeans.

Though it doesn't say so in my files, I'd bet Florian is a virgin.

On the road to Valdemossa, before Broken has had a chance to sleep with him, I see a flash in Lithe's eyes and I know: she wants Florian for herself. Yes, of course! Lithe with a cello between her legs, playing Bach and the elegy suites while he pens off his poems. Theirs would be a quiet love; a poet's love. None of this burning and yearning the Romantics got so wrong. I twist my head around the plush headrest and whisper in his ear, "Love Lithe." But it's too late: he already loves Broken.

Does anyone actually want happiness?

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Chopin is in his room, playing a Prelude in largo, the flowers in the garden withered and gray. He stops to cough into a handkerchief, bordered with embroidered belladonna, a spot of scarlet blooming across its silken surface. In the room next door, Sands buttons up her waistcoat, the young son of a farmer lying naked on the bed.

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At night, when Lithe goes to her room to lick the wounds of unrequited love, Broken and Florian walk down the beach far enough away from the bars to be alone. Weary of his eager tongue, she pushes him away and saunters into the waves, singing the Doll's Song from The Tales of Hoffmann. Though her highest notes are spread, the others are the clearest bell, the waters of an icy pond on the hottest day in summer. While she sings, one of the straps of her white dress slips from her shoulder, exposing a small breast with a large, dark nipple. I rush in and bite its tender tip before Florian gets the chance. But he has his revenge. When they reach his room, he slams the door in my face.

Sex and death. Eros and Thanatos. Always said together, as though the two were a couple. But it's so unfair:

I never even get to watch.

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Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom,  
In darkened leaves, gold-oranges glow,  
A soft wind blows from the pure blue sky,  
The myrtle stands mute, and the bay tree high?  
Do you know?  
This is what I want for us,  
Come, my love, o come!

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On the wooden train to Soller, while Lithe stares out at the citrus trees as if seeking Goethe, stretched out under the branches in his wide-brimmed hat, while Broken lays with her head in Florian's lap, her cheek caressed by you-know-what, I decide I've had enough. I stand up, my head raised high, towering in my tattered cloak.

“Broken, will you have me? Come with me and be made whole!”

She doesn't answer.

But I know she heard.

In the crypt at Le Seu, with Florian at her side, she backs me into a corner, turns around and tilts her ass into my crotch, moving it slightly up and down and oh-my-god

why does she tease me so? I may not be a man, but that does not mean I do not know desire. On the beach, she fingers my cloak, wrapping herself up in its folds as though it were an ordinary blanket and we sit for a while, flesh against bone.

I become so consumed with lust and longing I forget what it is I am.

(I hate it when this happens.)

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Chopin was mine from the first day that violent cough rattled through his lungs at twenty-one. Our hands, long lost twins, fused together while the doctors let his blood, his ribs and spine jutting through his skin, as delicate as paper. But his flesh would not give way. I lingered by his side for eighteen years, drifting in and out of time.

If this island reminds me of but one thing it is this:

for what I want, I do not like to wait.

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Forgetting myself, I start to wander. I glide down the halls of a hospital, eerie in their fluorescent glow, a metallic beep beep coming from many of the rooms. But I don't want to enter any of them. On the playground a young boy falls from a slide, his eyes rolling to the back of his head, and I come forth with out-stretched arms. But when his mother hisses *don't you touch him*, I shrink back.

Can't she see I was only there to help?

Time passes, but it does not matter. I am nameless. *Niemand. Keiner. Nichts.*  
Morning fog draping a hill, waiting for the mid-day sun to burn me off.

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Gladly sails the sailor home along the quiet waters,  
From far off islands where he has harvested;  
Home would also I return,  
if I but could harvest riches to contend with sorrow.  
You faithful shores who once did tend me,  
silence now my love.

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On the beach one night, while crabs do their sideways creep over seaweed that has washed up on the sand in a twisted stink, I see a woman in the waves. Her body is caught by the turn of the tides, bobbing up and down in the tepid water, and I rush out to her, my cloak billowing behind me like a ship lost at sea.

The woman turns to me, seaweed wrapped around her like tangled mermaid's tresses, her shattered eyes glistening like pearls.

*You've come*, she whispers. *My love, you've come.*

The glass is gone from around her body—did it finally break, or was it washed out here to sea? She is waiting for me, my overripe peach, pleading to be plucked.

I remember who I am and what I want.



And so I pluck.