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### Song Without Words

A triangular slice of light beamed on the antique piano bench, hinting toward the first minutes of morning. Anything would have distracted David from his computer at this hour, though it was the piano in particular he found himself watching, as if it would begin, at any moment, to play itself. He began to envision where his body would be: his bottom sat hard on the smooth bench, back upright and parallel to the wall behind it, feet light but confident over the pedals, fingers curved exquisitely above the ivory keys. But it was too early for music; Nate was still asleep.

The studio doubled as a guest room, and the white futon, pushed against the wall behind him, was almost more tempting than the piano after an entire night in front of the computer screen. But he was getting nothing done, and so he would not allow himself the luxury of sleep. Ten years ago, he would have stayed up all night composing, but it had been a long time since he'd had that sort of energy. Now he wasn't high on his own art, delirious and frantic over sequences and time signatures. He was staring at a screen, willing words to write themselves. The cursor blinked in slow, measured time.

Words didn't always come easily to him, and Nina knew it, so he'd been wondering, since he received the call two months earlier ("We're not having a bridal party so we're just each asking one person to say something. Short. Sweet. Nothing crazy."), why she'd chosen him, of all the friends she must now have. A request for a song would have been more appropriate, with all the music they'd shared, and all the things unsaid.

They'd met waiting for the bus twenty years earlier, when she gestured towards his tote

bag, heavy with practice books and loose sheet music, and asked him what he played.

“Piano,” he said, to this girl with unkempt blonde hair. She shifted her weight back and forth between the balls and heels of her feet, hands in her pockets. It looked like an attempt to keep herself warm, even though it was early September.

“You play anything I’d know?” she asked.

“That depends,” he said. “What do you know?”

“Oh, I know lots of things,” she said. “We moved here from the city. My old school was very cultural.”

David looked out for the bus.

Another day, he asked, “You like living in the suburbs?”

“Sure I do. Clean air,” she said, taking a full breath, a serene look on her face, as if the oxygen filling her lungs was awakening something dormant inside. “Can’t beat it.”

David was the resident student accompanist at his high school. A very early teacher had discovered that David had perfect pitch; after a couple more years of lessons, he could play any piece of sheet music upon first glance. In childhood, music took its place as a point around which all the other components of his life circled. But this dedication left little time for anything else, and by high school, he noticed – in comparison to the crowded cafeteria tables, the wistful hand-holders, the uniformed athletes surrounding each other – how close his desk was to the front of each classroom, and how quiet his lunch table was.

As a teenager, he liked to be alone. It allowed for dedication, musicianship, and time in his room to reflect on the impulses that were manifesting themselves. He learned belatedly what “gay” meant – because someone called him a faggot from the back of a classroom, once, and he came home and innocently asked his mother the definition – and even then, he felt the word

neither defined nor confounded him. There was one couple in his English class who held hands with each other for the entire forty-two minutes – the boy’s arm back, behind his chair, the girl’s reaching forward – and he imagined himself to be either partner in the equation. It was the skin, the warmth of a clasped hand that appealed to him, not to whom it belonged.

“What do you know about the girl next door?” his mother asked one night over a rotisserie chicken, a couple of weeks after Nina and David first met.

“Nina?” he said. “Not much.” He wiped chicken grease from his mouth with the back of his hand. “She’s very nice. Friendly.”

“Use your napkin, David.”

“Pretty, too,” his father said, winking.

But he knew a couple more things: her eyes were cornflower blue, she loved foreign films, her mother was an oral surgeon, she never mentioned her dad. By Christmas, they were in the habit of continuing their walk into school after descending the bus steps.

“How come you don’t have anything up in your locker?” she asked as he pulled out books for his first period class.

“Dunno,” he said, considering. “What’s in yours?”

They took a walk down the hall, and she opened it and stepped aside to present the inside locker door in full.

“It’s how I artistically express myself in this prison,” she said.

Aside from one photo of the New York City skyline, they were all photographs of people David didn’t recognize.

“Who are they?”

She looked at him with an amused smile on her face, like he was from another era.

“We don’t have cable,” he said.

There was a blonde woman with a severe nose and a black beret; a heavysset man with a bushy white beard and a turtleneck; a couple walking down a slushy city street, the woman, gleeful and cold, holding on to the man’s arm. They all looked artistic, significant in some way.

“They’re my icons,” she said.

The warning bell rang.

She closed her locker. “Whatcha doin tonight?”

“I have class.”

“Oh right. That fancy conservatory. What’s it called?”

“Kingswood Music Conservatory for Talented Youth.”

She laughed. It sounded hoarse, almost sickly, and David began to laugh, too, at her, and at the absurdity of the name, which he’d never had to say aloud.

“Ok, then,” she said when she was finished. “What do you do after you’re done being a talented youth?”

“Nothing really,” he said. “Just eat a late dinner. I’m usually done around eight.”

“Great,” she said. “There’s this film at the Bouchard that I’m *dying* to see. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

David didn’t know that a theater called the Bouchard existed, nor what kind of movies they played, but he stood outside of the conservatory that night at exactly eight and watched the other students leave while he waited for Nina. He had told his mother he wouldn’t need a ride that night.

“What?” she said. “Why not?”

“I’m going out.”

“Where? With who?”

“To a movie with my friend,” he said. “Nina,” he clarified, at her pregnant pause. A new male friend would have sounded the alarms he already knew were ringing dimly in her head.

“Well that’s exciting!” she said. “Dick, did you hear that? David has a date with the girl next door!”

Nina pulled up to the entrance of the Kingswood Conservatory at 8:05. “So this is where the talented youth learn,” she said.

“He’s a super famous director,” she said as she drove on the highway. “Really *avante garde* for his time,” she said, pronouncing “*avante garde*” in a French accent that sounded wrong to David, but he probably didn’t know any better.

“I mean, it’s not a new movie,” she continued. “I haven’t seen it. I saw a couple of his others in the city but just not this one. It’s supposed to be incredible.” She glanced over at him in the passenger seat. “Don’t worry, there’ll be subtitles.”

It was about two men who were deeply in love with the same woman. David found it awful how the woman seemed to flit so easily between the two men without much regard to their feelings, but it was a beautiful film, and he liked the feeling of a black and white movie, like time was somehow moving slower.

“God, Jeanne Moureau is so beautiful,” Nina said in the car afterwards. “And then she opens her mouth and sings and it’s just perfection.”

“Yeah, she was great,” he said, though he was mostly paying attention to the acoustic guitar in that scene, and forming the chord fingerings in small patterns on his lap.

“I think in another life I lived in France. The language and the culture just sing to me.”

“It is a beautiful language,” he said.

“I think one day I’ll move to France,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She pulled off at the Kingwood exit. “Do you wanna get ice cream?”

They stopped at Wally’s, a soft serve stand near the high school. They sat at a picnic table out back and ate their cones in silence. It was beginning to get chilly; the leaves of oak trees rustled against each other as a cold wind came through. David hummed the song from the movie.

“Hey Dave,” Nina said.

He chuckled. No one had ever called him “Dave” before.

“Hey Neen,” he said, smiling.

She leaned towards him. “Can I ask you a question?”

She was looking at him with intrigue in her eyes, like she knew she was about to intrude on something.

“What?”

“Are you...you know...” She searched his face, hoping the trailing off would be all he needed to answer.

“Am I...?”

Nina came from such a place of knowledge – from the city, where she’d surely seen it all – and she must have sensed in him the things he was sensing in himself. He’d thought about all of this, had actually envisioned conversations with his parents if the topic ever came up, how he’d never be able to answer for himself as it was still all one messy jumble of instincts, a tangle of push and pull thoughts and feelings that didn’t quite cooperate with each other.

“Gay?” she said, her voice lower.

Ice cream dripped down the side of the cone and onto his hand.

He looked around where they sat. There was no one in the picnic area, just the girl working behind the counter at Wally's. If David were to admit or accept some underlying aspect of himself *to* himself, then he probably would to Nina, too. For some reason, in the short time he knew her, he felt like he could trust her. It was something about the way she didn't seem to judge him. Still, he knew that everything wasn't quite ready to rise to the surface. Maybe it would one day, maybe after he left Kingswood and went away to college and didn't live with his parents anymore and didn't feel the need to protect himself. But he wasn't feeling dramatic or courageous right now. Not yet, not when it was all this tentative.

He shrugged, hoping that would be a sufficient answer.

She looked at him, half-smiling again, like she was both amused and confused by his non-answer. He might get defensive if she pressed on. But then she nodded, and said, "okay," like that shrug was all she needed for her own peace of mind.

Nina started coming to David's house after he got home from the conservatory, which his parents loved. She had a natural way with them ("How's business, Mr. S?"; "Jolee, you really do look stunning in that blouse."). He suspected they thought that he and Nina were dating, and he didn't correct them. Later, when they learned the truth, he overheard his father say, "Well, can't say I'm surprised. She was always too pretty for him, anyway."

Soon she was there almost every night. She and David watched old reruns of *I Love Lucy*, and each time she croaked after a strangely-pronounced word from Ricky Ricardo, David would laugh at her, and the two of them would fall into mutual hysterics from their opposite ends of the couch.

David's parents went to lots of cocktail parties on the weekends, and he and Nina took

advantage of his father's well-stocked liquor cabinet. Nina always poured their drinks, vodka usually, and sipped it easily, like she'd been accustomed to the taste for years. David hated how it tasted, but didn't need much. When he felt loose enough, he'd play his compositions for Nina. They were the compositions he wrote at the conservatory (he would go early, walking there directly from school and composing by himself for an hour before any other students arrived). Some of them went on to inspire his college thesis, then his master's. But some were too melodic, too sweet, too *emotional* to ever go anywhere. These were the songs he only played for Nina, as he was slightly drunk, his eyes closed as he felt the keys with the instinctive intention of a blind man.

When he started to drink, he could play for hours, and sometimes did. Nina always told him how much she loved these compositions, and he once caught her wiping away a tear after a song. Then they'd go upstairs and he'd play records for her and tell her tidbits about each composer. In the morning they'd wake up fully dressed in his bed, on top of the sheets, arms and legs splayed across each other's bodies.

The Kingwood Music Conservatory for Talented Youth held an end-of-year concert, at which all of the seniors were featured. David wore his father's tux, which was too big for him, and played "Song Without (Good) Words" by Ives, which received a standing ovation. Afterwards, at the reception, Nina and his parents crowded around him, telling him, over and over, how good he was. He excused himself to get something to eat from the buffet table, when a boy from the conservatory began talking to him.

At the conservatory, there were the shy boys, like David, who kept to themselves and to their music, and the talkative boys, who obsessed loudly over music and each other. This was



one of the loud ones, a boy named Ian who drove forty-five minutes everyday to Kingswood.

“I wouldn’t touch Ives with a ten-foot pole,” he said.

David wasn’t good with compliments. “It’s not that bad,” he said. “I think you’d surprise yourself.”

“Doubtful,” Ian smirked. “But that was really incredible. I think you just exhibit a certain grace under pressure.”

David regretted having a piece of cheese in his mouth. He chewed quickly. “Thank you so much,” he said, swallowing.

As they continued talking, he saw Nina standing across the room, in her black dress that was too formal for the occasion. She was standing with David’s parents but looking over in his direction; when David caught her eye, she quickly re-engaged herself back in the conversation, but he saw it, briefly: a look of longing, of loss, as if David had been abruptly taken from her. He felt this to be absurd, and after speaking for a couple more minutes with Ian, he excused himself and walked back over to Nina and his parents, assuring her taciturnly – touching her on the arm, laughing at her jokes – that that could never happen.

Graduation came, and they went to small liberal arts colleges an hour away from each other. During freshman year, they visited each other every other weekend. David went to a Connecticut school with a strong conservatory; Nina was at an all-women’s college in Massachusetts.

When she opened the door to her dorm room the first time he visited, he felt an immense sense of relief. He had no complaints about the music at college – it was wonderful to be around musicians all day – but he felt intimidated by the dating scene. Straight, gay, it didn’t matter – people at his school were open about it all, and some of them, thinking they knew what he

wanted, were not shy in trying to involve him. The overt, flirtatious glances during rehearsals; the invitations for beers, coffees, going to the movies – he felt intrigued, certainly, but never so much that he wanted to act on it. He missed Nina, and the way she understood everything unspoken about him, even the things he himself didn't quite understand. She didn't see him as a paradigm of anything. He was not just a musician to her, or gay, curly-haired, Jewish, suburban. The things that anyone else would have defined him as upon first glance – these were things that meant little to Nina. She loved the actual David: himself, as is – the David that no one else knew yet.

He realized, upon seeing her for the first time in her dorm room, after just weeks of being away from her, that she would always remain the only person who knew him, who truly knew him, during that delicate, in-between stage. He was still in it, in many ways, though he knew he was coming out of it slowly, that being with other musicians all day helped his music become stronger, and helped him grow into a more assured, aware version of himself. Still, nothing would take away the friendship they'd shared during that tentative time. She was his companion, his comrade, as he figured it all out.

That night in Massachusetts, after some vodka, he kissed her, and she didn't stop him. They kept kissing for hours in her twin-sized dorm bed while her roommate was out sleeping with someone new. In two weekends, she visited him, and then he visited again, and this kissing and falling asleep together continued throughout the semester. They spoke everyday on the phone. They said, "I love you" in a way that seemed heavier with meaning than when they'd said it previously.

Christmas break was a month of inseparability, one in which they'd yearned for each other's forms like they had yearned, surprisingly, for a return home. In fact, David had realized

they'd become one in the same – home and each other – which explained the slow explorations, the unspoken bristles and tracings and jabs in the dark, the eventual, ultimate act of love, the fast release, the holding on tight.

David felt a scratch on his head. Half-awake, he smelled Nate: baby soap and aftershave. David looked up with bleary eyes to see Nate skimming over the words on the open laptop. David sat up immediately, and slammed it shut.

“Whoa, tiger.”

“It's not ready.”

“Well,” Nate looked at his watch, “It better be ready soon, because we have approximately forty-five minutes until we need to leave.”

“Fuck!” He stood, put on his glasses, and rushed out of the studio.

One hour later, they were driving south on 684.

The wedding was taking place in the backyard of Nina's childhood home. She didn't want a fuss, she'd said on the phone last year, when she called to tell him the news. David realized, while exiting off the thruway, that they hadn't seen each other in three years, since his own wedding.

David turned down Mamaroneck Avenue, the familiar trees allowing shadow and light to play in leaf-shaped patterns across his face. He drove into his old neighborhood and saw rows of cars parked behind one another in the side streets leading up to Nina's house. After parking, they walked toward the yard, where some hundred people in khakis and bright shawls were standing with cocktails in hand. His mom was talking with her hands to one of their neighbors when she spotted David and Nate mid-sentence.

“There are my boys!” She came rushing over to their side of the driveway, carrying a glass of rosé, a bright pink shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

“How are we?” she said, giving them each two kisses on the cheek.

“Hi Jolee,” Nate said, all smiles, touching her affectionately on the arm. “You look beautiful.” He had a genuine way of making people feel like they were important.

“Nate!” She playfully slapped him on the shoulder, then stage whispered to her son, “Hold on to this one.”

White folding chairs sat in rows on the freshly mowed lawn facing a Birchwood altar, ivy and lilacs wrapped loosely around it. A lone cellist off to the side played Bach while the guests chose their seats. David and Nate sat in two chairs off of the aisle, David closest to the inside.

The music slowed and “Pachabell’s Canon” began playing from out-of-sight speakers. Nina appeared in a lace dress, her skin clear now, her smile broad. When she spotted David, she held his eyes for a few full seconds, and her smile – he swore – dimmed. He was sweating; his heart pounded through his damp shirt. He held her eyes, begging them to stay, but she moved on, smiling at the others as was appropriate, and finally looked to Joseph, standing expectantly at the altar.

When the ceremony began and David sat, he realized the immense height of the man in front of him. He twisted his head between open crevices, determined to see the whole picture.

The spring semester, freshman year, felt different for David. Maybe it was because he was no longer a virgin, and was seeing the world with newer, more mature eyes. Maybe he felt better going back to school and knowing the faces he’d see. He began to like the flirting more, and he began to flirt back. He began to imagine things – what sex with them might be like, in

comparison to sex with Nina. Sex with Nina was beautiful and loving and full of life, because he did love her, and her cornflower blue eyes, and fussing up her long hair, and everything else that she meant in the scope of his world. But he knew, and would never say, that sex with Nina was only half a step toward what he really wanted.

As he felt himself ease into the after-rehearsal beers, the pre-class coffees, he answered the phone less. He asked Nina if they could put the visits on hold for a bit, citing a spring concert series and its heavy rehearsal schedules.

At some house party in the spring, a boy in the conservatory said to David, “You have no idea how talented you actually are.” David did not hesitate, in the combination of beer and flattery and overdue action, in wrapping his hands around the face of this boy and kissing him.

They stumbled to David’s room. It hurt but also felt reassuring, as if David was beginning to color within the lines of what he’d been missing.

In the morning, there was a knock on the door.

The boy stirred. David didn’t need to ask, “Who is it?”, because he realized at that moment – though had forgotten until that point – that it was the second weekend in April, the one weekend he’d agreed to have a visitor.

“It’s me.”

“Hey Neens,” he said, too cheerfully. “Gimme one sec.”

David woke the boy and told him to get dressed. “What’s the big deal,” the boy said, groggy, and pulled the covers over himself to hide his naked body.

“You have to go,” David said.

The boy groaned. Nina knocked.

He clasped the boy's hand. "It is a big deal."

"All *right*," he said, rubbing his eyes, and getting dressed at a comfortable pace.

David opened his ground floor dorm room window.

The boy looked at David as he buttoned his shirt. "Seriously?"

"I'll explain later," he said, and, putting his hand on the small of the boy's back, led him towards and out of the ground floor window. The boy jumped and landed feet-first on the soil, then looked up incredulously at David before heading into the quad.

David checked his hair in the mirror, put on his glasses, and opened the door.

"Hi!" he said, pulling Nina in for an oversized hug. She let him do it, though her arms only gestured around him in reciprocation.

"So good to see you," David said. "How was your drive?"

"Fine," she said.

"Good," he said.

She looked at his messy bed.

"Did you forget?"

"What?" he said. "Forget what?"

She looked at him straight in the eyes. "Did you forget I was coming?"

"No!" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat and continued in a deeper register, "Of course not."

She cocked her head to the side. They knew each other well enough to know when the other was lying.

"I did know you were coming," he said. "I just forgot what time exactly."

She walked toward the window. She sat down on the windowsill, pulled her knees to her

chest, and looked out. David could see, beyond her, the boy talking with someone in the middle of the quad.

“Are you mad?” he asked in a softer voice.

“No, David. I’m not mad,” she said, without turning around.

He would be mad if he were her. He wouldn’t feel hurt if Nina had slept with someone else – in fact, he’d feel happy for her – but he knew that that feeling was in no way reciprocal. David had always offered Nina a glimmer of romantic hope, never having said the words out loud that she desperately needed to hear (“yes, I’m gay”). Sleeping provided even more evidence that work in her favor. Now he might have ruined their friendship because of it. It might have been the most selfish thing he’d ever done, and he didn’t know, if it came to it, how he would defend his own actions.

He walked over and touched the top of her head. He thought she must have been crying, but when she looked up at him, she smiled.

“So,” she said, standing and turning up the sheets on his bed. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?” he said. “Who?”

“Where is he? Is he in the closet?” She opened it and looked inside like she was playing hide and seek. “Under the bed?” She peered underneath, where there were only cardboard boxes filled with David’s stuff.

He smiled. “I pushed him out the window.”

She leaned her head back and burst into that huge, hoarse, croaking laugh, which David may have loved about her most. “You’re kidding me!”

“No,” he said, laughing.

“You’re crazy,” she said. “I wouldn’t have cared.”

“Okay,” he said, pretending to believe.

“I just want to know about your life,” she said, touching his shoulder. “I want the nitty gritty details.”

He didn't really want to tell her about his life, honestly, because he knew that the existence of this boy, or any others, meant the existence of an entirely new world. He feared that she'd feel cast aside, her imaginary perception shattered, their friendship coming to an untimely halt. It did, indeed, fade, with a whimper instead of a bang, a natural growing apart in the way that many young friendships do. But that weekend, they didn't acknowledge that anything was going to ever change between them. Instead they grabbed a blanket and sat in the quad, and he let himself tell her all about his life.

At a nearby reception hall, David and Nate sat with the friends from the high school musicals and the college girlfriends. They all drank too much wine and talked too much about getting old. The college girls took a particular affinity to Nate – adorable, charming Nate – and David watched them, his husband dipping these beautiful women as he smiled at David over their shoulders.

Nina and Joseph sat at a small table by themselves in the center. Guests rotated around the couple throughout the night. Nina was a wife now, her straight posture seemed to say, receiving guests with the grace of a grown woman. Much as he tried, David couldn't stop looking at her. David kept catching Nate looking at him playfully from the corner of his eye, and David would look back and return the flirtatious glance, then take another sip of his wine and look back to Nina.

In the space between dinner and dessert, he caught her getting up from the table,



smoothing her dress, walking towards the restroom. David excused himself quickly and, a little bit drunk, made his way around the back of the hall.

As she turned into the carpeted corridor, she saw David standing there.

“David! God. I haven’t had a moment to breathe tonight.” She went over to him and kissed him on the cheek. “Are you having fun?”

“I am, yes.” He touched her wrist, traced the bones with his rough fingers. Then he said in an almost-whisper, “Are you?”

She laughed. It came out loud, hoarse, and it was unexpected to him, even though it shouldn’t have been. “Of course I am.”

“I miss you,” he said, touching her hair: blonde, shining, entirely untangled.

“I miss you, too,” she said. “But what can you do?”

“You can call me more, for starters,” he said.

She smirked. “Phone works both ways, my love.”

“I know,” he said. “I just want to talk. I want to hear about your life.” He pushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

“This isn’t exactly a good time,” she said. “I’m looking forward to your speech.”

“About that,” he said, dropping his hand to his side. “I could kill you. I’ve been up nights trying to figure out what to say.”

She shrugged. “I just wanted you to say something nice at my wedding, is all.”

Before he could respond, she walked towards the ladies room and touched the door handle. She stopped, turned, and looked at him. She looked like she was struggling, like she was trying to come up with the right words to say to him, but then decided against it and, with her bejeweled left hand, waved some invisible hope away.

“See you out there,” she said quietly, and went inside.

“One of Nina’s oldest, dearest friends,” David heard Joseph say. He took the microphone. He said some words about old friendship, dear friendship. “But I’m a musician, and the piano is really the best place I can express my love for Nina.”

He climbed the stage and sat on the bench. He positioned himself, curving his fingers in that familiar, comfortable fashion. He began to play.

The song didn’t have a title. He was playing it by memory, stumbling over notes. He couldn’t even differentiate this piece from the other emotional, Nina-laced songs that he’d written twenty years earlier. He’d played them all for her on those nights in his house in Kingswood, and this was the first time anyone else had heard one. It wasn’t his strongest work, but it didn’t matter, because it was perfect for the occasion, perfect for her – slightly sad at first, rising slowly in the middle, then landing, with hope, on a point of quiet beauty.

Most of the time he played, he kept his eyes closed. But when he opened them, and glanced, briefly, at Nina’s joyful, marital, tear-stained face, he could tell, as she swayed arm-in-arm with her husband, listening to David play her song, a song forever bound to her youth, forever bound between them, that this was exactly what she wanted.