

# The Raphael of the Pianoforte

by

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## Foreword

The following three short stories were each conceived in relation to a specific piece of music by Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849). “The Mourner’s Face” corresponds to the op.17 no.4 Mazurka, “Though the poplar grows beside the rails” to the first Ballade, op.23, and “The Synesthete” to the first Scherzo, op.20. Such a statement immediately prompts questions—I will attempt to explain the relation of music to text in this collection, for the benefit of the reader.

First, and emphatically, I *do not* aim to provide the definitive exegesis of any of the three pieces. Chopin himself did not publicly suggest that any extra-musical significance lay behind his work, and this type of interpretation seems to me to locate meaning in music by impaling it and staking it in an already familiar location. The crude and brutal act of assigning a program in this case— fabricating a series of events supposedly “depicted” by music that claims to depict nothing—usurps any subtle or individual response by the listener, and claims a false and arbitrary authority for itself. Though highly popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and practiced by such musical luminaries as E.T.A. Hoffman, A.B. Marx, Richard Wagner, and Hans von Bülow, programmatic readings of non-programmatic works serve best for personal amusement, and as a departure point for more focused analysis and close-reading.

These three stories represent instead a personal and subjective response to Chopin’s music. The pieces each fill a reservoir of form, texture, technique, and affect. I have drawn from this reservoir in varying ways, creating equivalences

between select attributes of music and story. The following descriptions will be much clearer with a single audition of each piece.

“The Mourner’s Face” has a formal equivalence with the op.17 no.4 mazurka. Both are tripartite with contrasting middle sections, and recapitulate elements of the first section in the last. The tone of both piece and story evokes a melancholy, un-traveled-to setting, idling with only occasional displacements from the norm.

The op.23 ballade has a more general affective similarity with “Though the poplar grows beside the rails.” The solemnity and isolation of the opening waltz theme of the piece combines with the more assured second theme, flowing naturally into onrushing recapitulations, full of confidence and joy. This fluidity and continuity suggested a shy but well-liked character engaging in a passionate dialogue among equals. The driving teleology of the sonata-form variant Chopin used for the ballade is slightly subverted by lengthy transitions and harmonic meandering; similarly, the soldiers interact in a variety of ways, borne by steady progress onward.

The op.20 scherzo shares a biographical coincidence with “The Synesthete.” Chopin wrote the scherzo at the outset of his tumultuous professional life as a pianist-composer, a moment the story’s main character also struggles to negotiate. The feverish energy of the beginning and ending of the piece stems directly from Chopin’s incorporation of bravura arpeggiated figures from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century “brilliant” style, very much the popular music of Chopin’s time. These figures sound nervous and frenetic, as Chopin himself perhaps felt at the time of composition, being desperate for money and recognition but terrified of large concerts. The composer in the story approaches the necessities of professional life in a similar manner, drawing

upon its music readily but facing extra-musical requirements with extreme reluctance. The calmer and sweeter middle section, an excerpt from a Polish Christmas carol, suggests a brief time of sanctuary and respite, which the composer of the story finds conducting his expressionistic and violent orchestral premiere.

The three pieces of Chopin's, as I hope I have shown, are not the soundtracks of the stories. Listen to them on the included CDs at any point before or after reading the stories, and in any order, allowing each story to exist in its piece's context, and vice versa. There are many more correspondences and analogues between them than are listed in the brief synopses above. I have worked hard to ensure that the stories can stand on their own, without the music, if necessary. Ideally, however, the two will complement each other in a delicate balance, each serving to reveal details in the other, and neither claiming the sole right to do so.

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#### CD Track Listing:

1. Mazurka op.17 no.4 in A minor, by Fryderyk Chopin, performed by Vladimir Horowitz, *Vladimir Horowitz: Favorite Chopin (Remastered)*, Sony, 2004
2. Ballade op.23 in G minor, by Fryderyk Chopin, performed by Evgeny Kissin, *The Four Ballades, Berceuse, Barcarolle, Scherzo No.4*, RCA, 1999
3. Scherzo op.20 in B minor, by Fryderyk Chopin, performed by Yundi Li, *Chopin: Scherzi/Impromptus*, Deutsche Grammophon, 2005

The Mourner's Face  
by Gabriel Sessions

And in memory, here she was.

She walked along and was neither young nor old nor ever inside, within the houses out the windows of which everyone in the town would stare at her.

She dressed modestly, or under the guise of modesty. She wore the first few days a black dress that did not cling to her thin figure or show her breasts or her legs but restrained, modest, it was not. Everything about her appearance, wind-blown in the grey October, told plainly of grief.

After the first few days, she wore the clothes of someone unconcerned with her appearance who wants to stay warm. She pulled back dark red hair with an elastic band and her skin, her neck, was so white.

Castner, who saw her face the closest from the window of his shop, said she looked like a person who had just heard a piece of bad news. He was working at dawn in his shop, and so he saw her walk up the hill at the end of Main Street every day, except the weekends.

Castner talked very little to the other townspeople any more. He smiled when he passed them, on one of Ivoryton's small streets, and he kept up an air of being quietly busy. They did not mind. They knew his story.

His parents had died, his father a firefighter, his mother a cashier, part-time. His elder brother had moved out of Ivoryton eight years ago and gotten married.

Castner was thirty-four years old and had spent his life within two hours of where he now lived: Ivoryton, which had only a few businesses left, a sparse population among blocks of foreclosed houses, and a main street that appeared to tend to no one.

The shops had translucent windows, and torn away bills and labels left white patches on them. Nothing metal was undented. Paint flaked off small gouges in the wood. There was no need to clean up; no one was coming to be impressed. The townspeople knew Ivoryton as it stood.

Castner's shop was at the end of Main Street: a ground-level workroom with his lathes and tools, dark, dry, and a small apartment upstairs, which he owned, with a kitchen floor done in flowers of ivory linoleum on a yellow background.

In his eight years of living alone, Castner came to terms with silence at night, with a peculiar feeling of chill that came over him when, sitting in the evenings, he

had no reason to move, or get up, or speak. He learned to listen to the refrigerator door shut, the finality of certain sounds when he was the only source of noise around. A car would pass his window every half hour, or so.

He came to terms but he didn't have to come far. It never bothered him much to live as he did.

He would come home from the diner after talking a bit with Terry, an older man in his fifties who cracked a few jokes and let him eat for free every now and then. There were a few other patrons he would nod at, when he saw them.

It was to Terry that he described the expression of the woman whom no one knew, whom no one had ever seen before. It was Terry's significant expression that made him realize who she was.

In the blue light of another dawn he watched her walk by. Her face struck him, again. There were a few women his age in Ivoryton and Castner didn't, couldn't, talk to them. They reminded him of the stores on Main Street. Unassuming and flat. Reconciled to Ivoryton, to the routine they stepped into every time they moved. They paced without thought of exit.

He had awoken early that day for no particular reason. Castner was in the habit of rising at dawn, but he had no order to get started on, and only one

appointment later in the day. He had gone automatically to the window as he had for the past week but, today, for the first time, he felt guilty. He had realized treating her like a spectacle did not agree with him. Castner braced himself on two sides of a stained white sink, cold porcelain in his hands.

He looked down into the drain, looked up, and there she was. He noticed her face had changed, from sorrow to neutrality. She looked like her thoughts were elsewhere and nothing drove her tired features. She had settled. Castner moved to turn away, to pour another cup of coffee and return to the unfinished newspaper, but out of the corner of his eye he saw her stop, and look right at his window.

Hot embarrassment flooded him. She had noticed the motion. She knew she was being watched. From further within the dark shop, with neither its bare incandescent or fluorescent bulbs lit, where she could not see him, Castner watched her resume her path.

She continued on as she had before. Castner did not. In a sudden decision, unconsidered and uncharacteristic of his days, he walked to the door and left the shop. He wanted to apologize.

She turned when she heard the door slam.

Robert James Callahan had been buried two weeks ago, and he had left behind two daughters. One had moved away after high school to become either a doctor or a nurse, depending on whom in Ivoryton one asked. The other was less well-known. The established theory of Callahan's neighborhood had her haunting the railroad tracks by the outskirts of town in the twilight of her teenage years, accompanied, of course, by the type of wiry and rough-hewn juvenile delinquent that would have led her there. Some could put a name to that mean boy: Kyle Corrigan from Eddington, in his thirties now and living alone in a trailer grim even by Eddington's standards. Then she had disappeared, and all the raised eyebrows and polite coughs offered at this point in the story merely concealed the fact that no one knew anything. In their ignorance, they assumed pregnancy.

Her father had spoken to no one about her. His heart attack had come as a surprise, even though his brawny arms and tough, square features had wasted to fat. He had floundered after the Eddington paper factory closed, sank into the aging furniture of his small, beige house and spent his money on sweet sausage and Miller High Life from the Ivoryton A&P. Divorced, alone, Robert Callahan had become a man untethered, after existing previously solely in the context of his bonds. His body grew soft and formless as his presence did the same.

Castner had expected to stop one day in passing and realize he had not seen Callahan at the grocery store in a while, or to come across the obituary in a month-old paper while cleaning out his shop. Instead, the ambulances screamed beneath his window one night, and he read about the man's heart attack a few days after.

The specter of the bad daughter had lingered as the sole mystery in Ivoryton, filling a niche in a town mostly too empty to gossip. The other daughter, the medical student, was forgotten.

In an empty street in a small town, bathed in the soft light of the morning: in this surprising intimacy they stood and faced each other. Nothing moved. No wind blew.

He walked to her, to the end of Main Street and looked back for a minute, at the deserted gas station, lit with its lights off, pumps vacant. He didn't know what to say.

"You're the first one to come talk to me," Ariel Callahan said to him.

"Daniel Castner," he responded politely and too softly.

He repeated it less in his throat before her uncomprehending look. He paused.

"I wanted to apologize for spying on you."

He clipped his words like someone who does not believe his speech or himself to be desirable. He was out of practice with strangers.

She looked confused. "I just saw something move, in that building. You, I guess. But you've been spying on me?"

She looked wary now. Castner was shocked and even more embarrassed.

"No. I don't—I don't do that."

"You just said you did, though."

“No, I meant I work in the mornings and, occasionally, by accident, I notice you walk by. I don’t follow you or anything.’

He waited an agonizing second and shook his head.

“Look, I’m sorry to bother you. I’ll just—”

He turned to leave.

“So you haven’t been following me home?” She called after him.

He turned again. “No, of course not.”

“You’re going back inside to watch me walk away, then?”

He squinted.

“No, I wouldn’t, I just thought I should leave you—”

“I think the least you could do would be to offer to walk me wherever I’m going,” she said, sharp-edged, without arrogance, tired.

He cleared his throat, surprised, then nodded. “Of course.”

“Daniel?”

“Yes?”

“I’m Ariel.”

“Nice to finally meet you,” he said, with a quick smile aimed mostly at the ground.

Daniel soon figured out where they were going.

The Ivoryton cemetery stood at the edge of town, next to several abandoned lots that looked like the gradual resurgence of nature after the extinction of man.

Shoots of bright green grass and slender tapered leaves ornamented cracks in the pavement. Saplings rose through sections of fallen chain link fence and brushed delicate limbs against corroded metal. In a shade of a tree the undergrowth grew thick enough to obscure the gravel and loose stone beneath it, and throw into shadow the scraps of wood left over from inhabitation. A scrap of yellow construction tape sat in a rut in the grey dirt. Castner looked away from it, back at his companion.

Ariel, nearly as tall as he was, with skin that blushed with warmth even as it blued in the dawn chill, precipitated a very uncomfortable feeling in Castner. It came from the way she looked straight ahead without deviation, as if in the absence of meaning to her right or left. She seemed about to be overcome by a force invisible and great in number, a stronghold about to fall, even as her steady gaze pulled her onwards. Now he was with her, and he wondered if he would watch those final moments.

They arrived at the cemetery, and at Robert Callahan's fresh grave.

Ariel Callahan looked at him, finally, while he looked at her father's headstone and reasoned everything out. She was in the habit of talking first, when faced with silence.

"So you know who I am."

Castner looked back at her. She looked wary, still, beneath her exhaustion. Desperation tucked itself into the corners of her face, her head unbowed atop her straight spine, defiant even in weakness. Her appearance was stark, as he had seen. She wore no jewelry, nothing on the long fingers of her pearl hands.

"Yes, I've heard of you," he replied.

Her eyebrows twitched wryly.

“Probably a few horror stories.”

He shook his head and smiled.

“Nothing? I’d wondered.”

“Only that you left.”

Ariel seemed to accept the lack of speculation about her.

“Let’s sit down, Daniel.”

They sat on a park bench near one of the small paved paths that ran through the cemetery. Castner sat with his back straight. She slumped forward, with her face in her hands and elbows on her knees.

“So, where do you, do you work?” he asked.

“No, I live off the Callahan family trust fund.”

Castner debated to himself whether she was joking.

“You really—I’m a receptionist in a doctor’s office.”

“Oh. Do you like that?”

“As much as I like being spied on by strange men.”

Castner coughed. The silence hung there and made him uncomfortable.

“It’s work, I guess,” she said, more quietly.

Castner nodded. “That was my shop.”

“That you came out of?”

“Yes. I repair things, A/C, small motors, not cars, though. I don’t have the facilities.”

“So, you’re telling me that shop you came out of isn’t a garage.”

“I guess I am.”

“Well, gee, Daniel, thanks for the heads up.”

Ariel Callahan rolled her eyes. Daniel, at a loss for what to do from the sarcasm, stood up to go.

“Look, Miss—”

She looked up at him. “Ariel, please.”

“Ariel, I apologized for what I did—I’d be happy to leave you alone.”

She took a deep breath.

“Please, sit down.” The words were sonorous and round where they had previously been edged.

“I’m sorry if I sounded rude, I didn’t mean to,” Castner offered. Ariel did not respond.

“Being here gets the better of me,” she said. “It’s eerie coming back, you know.”

She considered, then fixed him in a stare.

“Who was your third grade teacher?”

“Mrs. Hobbs.” He answered right away.

“Mine too.”

“We weren’t in the same class, though, or I’d have remembered you.”

“You sure?”

“Well, I remember Kyle Corrigan was two years ahead of me, and I didn’t hang out with his crowd—” At once he realized he was thinking out loud and quickly clamped his mouth shut.

Ariel laughed once and loudly.

“First time I’ve done that this week,” she reflected.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Ah, Daniel, from what I can tell you don’t mean to do a lot.” She thought.

“Kyle Corrigan. So that’s who—it makes sense.” She laughed again.

“As if it even mattered what you people thought.”

“Why do you still live here, Daniel?” she asked.

He took a long time to answer.

“I’ve been here my whole life.”

“Just like my father.”

“He and I ran into each other at the grocery store a few times.”

“While he was eating himself to death.”

Daniel wanted to reassure her, but he saw the look, a certain look between strangers thrown into heightened circumstances that demands truth-telling.

“I remember a lot of sausage,” he murmured.

Ariel sniffed and nodded.

“I hadn’t spoken to him in thirteen years,” she said.

Daniel thought of the sausage and rye bread, the mustard and 30-pack of beer and little else in the shopping cart, and Robert Callahan's stubbly jowls, his belly, and his uneasy glance. They had never spoken.

"You know, I'm not just confessing to you because you're a stranger and I need to."

Castner said nothing. Ariel rose abruptly from the bench and stretched, reaching with clasped hands down to her ankles. She walked a few paces before Castner followed her.

The wet chill that hung in the air soon made them both hunch over and fold their arms. They pressed them close to their chests to conserve warmth.

"This is the last thing I need," Ariel said.

"Of course, the loss—"

"I don't mean the loss. I mean this." A flick of her wrist summed up Ivoryton behind them.

"I don't follow you."

"I left. I knew I had to leave the first time, and the only difference from then until now is fifteen years' worth of paint chips flaked away."

"And you won't be staying," Castner ventured, tentatively.

Ariel looked him straight in the eye.

"I'm leaving today. Bus."

"Oh." And improbably, inevitably, disappointment welled up in him.

Ariel continued.

“I’ll sell the house, or put it up for auction. I can’t go backwards.”

She bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Look, Daniel, I’m sorry if I seem hysterical, but—”

Her voice broke and she heaved silently. Castner hesitated, watching Ariel shrink before him, her shaking back and bent neck. At last, he reached out to hold her. She let his hand rest on her shoulder without comment until she finished, barely loud enough to be heard:

“Thirteen years without a phone call, and I’m his next of kin.”

She sighed and brushed hair from her forehead, tears drying at the corners of her large and passionate eyes, grief and tension swarming in the bunches of her cheeks and the wrinkles of her forehead, and then they were smoothing, quieting, becoming fair. She breathed deeply, and her shoulders slumped.

They walked out of the cemetery. Ariel stopped and turned back by the first row of graves.

She stood there for a long time, gazing at an indefinite spot among the headstones. Their rows stretched over a hill, and obelisks and larger monuments stood out among the burials. The sky anticipated color high above, warming to peach by the horizon, behind the emerging green of a few short trees.

She listened to her breath enter and exit her body, aware of Castner beside her, and she marshalled the words that came unbidden.

“This will be the last time I’m here.”

Ariel looked him dead in the eye. He felt her measure him up.

“Leave this place, Daniel. That will give you what you want.”

A gust of wind, the first of the day, blew a lock of red over her cold ear.

“Go past Eddington, past my great love Kyle Corrigan, and get on the highway. Go somewhere. Be certain about it with every cell in your body and just go. Of course that’d be my advice, you know my story.” She gave one self-deprecating laugh and seemed to recover her equilibrium. He realized how much he actually did not know of her story, and feared he never would.

Castner had missed the spontaneous part of his life, as if he had missed a train full of the people he was supposed to spend it with, and was now riding a later one.

The sun was coming up, a milky disc growing in strength. Castner wondered why he felt like something was ending. Ariel touched his arm.

What she had told him to do skirted maddeningly on the edge of his comprehension and sent nothing clear to him. He could not tell what he wanted, at first. He looked at Ariel and her figure and her skin and her blue eyes, blue like the color that had faded from the sky and wanted her, aching, more the more he realized it, his thoughts as fuel, his purchase on his certainties dissolving. He felt a growing excitement in his stomach, like a child.

“Anyway, I want to get back to the hotel and shower before the ride.” He thought he could see she was bored, she had held up both ends of the conversation, and he, so nervous he had lost his chance, nervousness lunging inside him—

“Good to talk to you, Ariel.”

“You too.”

She set off, until they realized he had to go in the same direction to get back to the shop, and they walked together, silently.

By the time they got there he had the courage and he turned to her and said her name.

“I—look, I’m sorry if I was quiet, or tongue-tied, I just—there aren’t any women here like you, that I can talk to, I mean. And I’m not crazy, and I haven’t been spying on you, but there are none so beautiful, either, and really I’d like to talk to you more, before you left, or sometime, ever.” He finished crushed but relieved.

She fidgeted a bit. She smiled and he felt his heart sink because he knew it was a compassionate smile, not a reciprocating kind, although he had never truly seen one.

“You certainly picked an interesting time for me.”

She gave the name of a town.

“You ever take that trip, I’m in the phone book there. We can have that conversation then, if you’d like.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed. They shook hands.

Castner knew the walk should end this way. The proper course would be to turn from her now and be grateful, and to go home. As he contemplated doing so, Castner felt as if he could perceive each day of his thirty-four year life in sequence, each morning awakening and going to bed at night, these two actions repeated ten

thousand times, but the contents of the days between were indistinguishable shadows, lacking mass or a dimension or some quality that made them fixed and differentiated in his memory.

The weight of so much time bearing down on so little—the thirty-four years versus the minute or so he had before she left—exerted tremendous pressure on him, and he felt cold and horrified and immobile, as if the weight were a massive iceberg pinning him to the street, melting over his entire body— so great was the fear that he would add one more day to the shadow, to the husks of memories which amounted to nothing even in their multiplicity.

“I really should be going, though,” she informed him.

He agreed and let her turn her back to him before he said:

“What if you didn’t?”

He pressed on in a strangled voice:

“Stay with me. Don’t leave. Just stay an extra day. You wouldn’t have to stay *with* me, you could take an extra night at your hotel; I’ll pay for it.”

“I can’t do that,” she interrupted.

Castner clasped his hands together.

“We could take another walk; I could even take you to dinner.”

“I—”

“Another hour, just take a later bus.”

“Daniel,” Ariel began.

Her tone had been soft, and gentle, but he never would know what she had been about to say, because he began to shout:

“Look, I’m alone here! You’re going! What do you expect?!”

After she was long out of earshot, he called her name to her receding form.

“I’m sorry about your father,” he said, softly, and buried his face in his hands.

Castner wrote the name of the town down on a piece of newspaper and tacked it up on a bulletin board he kept in the shop. He wrote her name in capitals beneath it, then stepped back. The paper regarded him from the lower right corner of the board. He wondered what there was left for him to do. He would apologize.

He brewed another pot of coffee, and sharpened a chisel. He was strangely reluctant to throw out the cold one he had been drinking from when he saw her.

Daylight blanketed the street outside. Every now and then he would check, for no reason really, half-expecting to see her walk by, or to see her bus, her long red hair made grey by the tinted window, just for a second. He tried to stay close to the windows, just in case. He watched others on the sidewalks, and noted how their forms differed from hers, how they were not her.

He made himself a turkey sandwich, with lettuce and mayonnaise, at lunchtime. He drank with it a glass of milk and half-read a mystery novel, thinking instead of her profile in the dawn light, how she had looked when she faced the ranks of graves.

He put the book down, and went downstairs. He sharpened more tools, and helped a friend order a new band saw belt, his one appointment for the day.

The shadows lengthened.

He watched evening come, his hands on the porcelain sides of the sink as they had been that morning.

The street stayed empty.

The diner seemed cold at dinner. He didn't mention anything about the morning to Terry, who stayed mostly in the kitchen.

His guilt overwhelmed him.

He looked around at the other patrons conversing and eating—more people who weren't her. He watched Ed Brenner take off his jacket before sitting down to corned beef and potatoes, as he had so often, the same look of exertion on his face as he tugged at the sleeves, left, then right, and then Castner wanted to shout, as desperate as he had been with Ariel. He held himself back from screaming in shock and surprise, astonished by his sudden need to leave, immediately, at any cost. He quelled it hurriedly and ate in confusion, chewing mouthfuls in uncertain relief that it had abated so quickly. The chill stayed with him and he pulled on a sweater when he got home.

He watched TV as it got dark, the news, a bit of a baseball game, half of a movie with Clint Eastwood the name of which he couldn't remember. Finally he shut it off, and the room plunged into darkness and silence.

He sat there a little while within himself and wondered. He could not decide whether she would want to speak to him again.

Before going to bed, he found himself downstairs, and he switched on the light to look at the scrap of paper pinned to the bulletin board. He looked for just a few seconds, and he was unsure why. There was the town, and beneath it her name.

He lay in bed. Even if she would not see him—he suffered when he considered that—the town was not that far.

He did not own a suitcase. He would buy one tomorrow, or the next day.

Though the poplar grows beside the rails  
by Gabriel Sessions

The officer told them the journey would take two days and two nights. The morning of the third day would see them at the front. He said the word “front” and Sapieha thought of pulling a door to, behind himself. The end of the sentence and the curtness of the motion were the same.

The officer spoke to them impersonally. He wore a golden moustache and his arms bulged under his uniform shirt. His eyes did not speak. Sapieha, a patient of the army’s care for seven weeks now, knew that the military requisitioned buffoons like bullets and taught even them well enough to perform rote tasks under pressure. Still, he would have preferred the officer to have hardened his face, to have betrayed some emotive force acting within him. Sapieha watched him quietly, noting the details of his expression and figure. The thick lips, the red button nose, the shaven cheeks and jaw.

The men would ride in the boxcar. The officer would ride, Sapieha knew, in a furnished car he shared with another officer. It had a small sitting room with dark wood chairs and a table and a carpet. This arrangement would double as a dining room. The officers were attended by other enlisted men, cooks and attachés, but they did not mingle with the twenty-five in the boxcar. Sapieha had seen the officers’ quarters while he waited, estranged from the crowd of soldiers that had lounged on the platform before the train arrived. From his position, he had had time to observe before the second shout of the lieutenant—Sapieha knew enough French to laugh to himself at a title that meant “place holder”—brought him to a brisk trot.

The soldiers had filed, grumbling, into the boxcar, grimacing at the heat and weight of the still air. They were told to leave the door open, and the slipstream cooled them once the ride started. Sapieha told no one about the officers' car. He soon forgot it.

Brezynsky, boisterous, skinny and pimply, punched Sapieha on the shoulder.

“This is it, brother!”

Sapieha liked him, but said nothing, only smiled, faintly.

“Oh, you've gone all quiet on me, eh?”

Brezynsky turned to a crowd of soldiers and yelled over the rhythm of the wheels and the ties:

“This one misses his mother!”

But he said it lightly and Sapieha laughed, although he did not reply. The soldiers had trained together—what rushed training they had been given—and bore no enmity towards each other.

Sapieha turned to his two pieces of luggage.

One was a rolled-up green woolen blanket, with two moth-eaten holes near the corner. He put his thumb through them regretfully, then folded the blanket in half and spread it on the floor of the car. The other piece was a green shoulder bag with tarnished brass buckles, which contained clean socks, a change of undershirt, soap, a shaving mug, a folding straight razor, a canteen, a mess kit, a notebook, and two pencils. Sapieha withdrew the notebook and the pencils, took a drink of water from the canteen, then re-buckled the bag. He opened the notebook to a blank page and

took the pencil in hand as he leaned back against the wall of the boxcar. Brezynsky watched him.

“You write more than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

Sapieha smiled at the page. Brezynsky moved to try to read what was in the notebook, but Sapieha quickly pressed it against his chest. Brezynsky put out a hand placatingly.

“Hey, hey, don’t worry, I’m a farmer’s son. I can barely read.”

He turned to some other soldiers Sapieha knew—two brothers—and shouted again:

“Let’s be quiet, brothers, so our poet can write his love letters in peace!”

The two brothers, leaning on their elbows near the opened door, furrowed their brows. They hadn’t heard. Brezynsky took out a battered package of cigarettes and went to join them. Sapieha watched him leave. Then he returned to the notebook and started writing.

*Dear Beloved,* he began.

*I have boarded the train and now my comrades and I travel towards the front. I have not stopped thinking of you. I imagine I will not, for some time, because there is nothing to distract me except the others, and I have already had seven weeks of training with them. I’m sick of them! No, not truly, for I will rely on them soon, but nothing lives in my present thoughts nor in my memory as sweetly and as powerfully as you.*

Sapieha stopped. He didn't like that last line. It was clumsy, but he would change it later.

*I will treasure our few nights together as one thing which will never grow dirty, or frayed, or lifeless here. I anticipate much in the coming days. We will be at the front in two days—I can tell you no more about where we are. Know that I kiss you and hold you in my heart forever.*

*Your Jan.*

Sapieha looked at the letter. It read as if he were stumbling all over himself, but he had felt that way as he wrote, as if each word had driven a pin through a butterfly he would rather see in flight. He leaned his head against the wall and glanced skyward. He smelled sawdust and linseed oil. The ceiling was stained black with soot, from the fumes of the engine when the car was close enough to the locomotive to absorb them. They were too far back for the smoke to reach them now.

“It's good you write. I have to write my sister.”

Wojciech regarded him with the look of long-lashed passionate contemplation that made everyone glance at him a second time. He had trained as a pianist and everyone liked him. Sometimes, when he felt like it, Wojciech would bribe a waiter or a bartender to let him play, and, soon after, all the startled people in the café would turn, their gaze arrested by the sparkle of his music, their longing swayed by the efflorescence of the runs and the image of Wojciech, half-smiling seductively—he

was very handsome—his downcast eyes traversing the keys. His eyes, Sapieha noted, were very alive even when still, limpid and brown, never stale.

Sapieha nodded. He waited to see if Wojciech would continue.

“She’s ten. She cried for hours before I left. My father and mother cried too, but Agata, she wouldn’t stop. I told her I’d be home soon, that I’d write her letters, bring her presents, but none of it was any use.”

Sapieha raised his eyebrows in sympathy.

“Do you have any siblings?” Wojciech asked.

“None,” Sapieha replied, after a while.

“Oh, what a paradise your life must be, my friend.” Wojciech laughed. “No squabbles. No crying. And probably even a room to yourself, am I right, yes?”

Sapieha nodded.

“What a life,” Wojciech concluded. He heaved a sigh and fell silent. Then, abruptly, he spoke again.

“She used to bring me flowers. Whatever she’d find in our garden, Agata would be so excited to show me—listen to me! Talking like she’s gone. When we’re the ones who’re leaving.”

His voice trailed off and Wojciech stared into the space Sapieha supposed he saw beyond the wall of the boxcar. A sheen of sweat glistened on his cheekbones and bare forehead. They had been traveling an hour by then, two at most.

Sapieha looked around and saw the men anew. Their possessions were identical to his. They each carried a green blanket, although some hadn’t unrolled them yet, and a green shoulder bag as well. The contents, Sapieha reflected, were

probably all nearly the same too: some would lack paper, and borrow it in return for the pastries they did have, or the chocolate. Some probably had a bottle of vodka or wine hidden in their folded clothing, although spirits were strictly forbidden on the train. Some probably had images of the women they were leaving behind, or of their families. Sapieha thought of her again. He could never think of much else. His thoughts were tethered to her, and could not stray. He thought of her hair tickling his nose, and how, after she washed it, each strand was so soft that they all flowed together, and so when she shifted in his arms and her hair washed over him he felt as if he were lying in the shallows of a lake. He thought of what would come after that movement, her lips on his neck, the touch of her eyes from so close, and a pang of need so acute that he clenched his fist struck him. He wrote below his signature on the letter:

*I will return to you. I will. I must.*

The men stood in groups, smoked where they could, away from the slipstream, and let the motion and the rhythm lull them to sleep or to daydream. Sapieha looked out the open door of the boxcar. They passed through expansive green and golden farmland. White stone and plaster farmhouses with laundry drying on lines flashed by, infrequently. Old people stood by their doors, watching the train pass, uncertain looks on their faces. Packs of little boys and girls, shrill but barely audible even in their excitement, chased the boxcar, skinny knees pumping. Brezynsky and the two brothers waved, Brezynsky avidly.

The boys in one village, far from the tracks yet still just in sight, fired imaginary rifles into the sky, shouting war cries. In another, they fought each other with tree-branch swords as their grandmothers scolded them. Sapieha gradually realized that the only people they saw in the villages were very young or very old.

He was wondering whether the route of the track had been laid near the villages, or if they had cropped up after, when he saw the first young woman. She ran out of the house in a long white dress, her blonde curls tumbling around her shoulders, and she shielded her eyes from the midday sun with her hand as she watched the train. She was jounced from view in seconds, but there were others like her. They all ran outside, heedless of their appearance, when they heard the panting of the locomotive. Perhaps, he thought, it was boredom—perhaps they didn't even know it was a troop train—but the desperation in the way they scanned the cars, the intensity, told Sapieha enough. He noted the rigidity of their bodies, bracing themselves, along with the futility of their actions—there was no way for them to identify whomever they searched for. They searched anyway. After seeing one pair who had to be sisters come flying out of their plaster and stone cottage, tall and dressed in their slippers—after seeing them reach towards the hundred-meters-distant train with spread fingers as if they could hold it still, Sapieha felt the same need thoughts of his own beloved drove him to. The same pressure constricted his throat, and the potential for loss nearly overwhelmed him. He took pencil in hand but he hesitated, reread the last line of the letter, and decided it said enough. He put the pencil down. The sisters, long distant, stared in silence into the space where the train had been.

Brezynsky whooped and dropped into a crouch, tossing off challenges and cuffing an imaginary opponent with his hands. He circled the men in the car. A few of them laughed. One brother made a joke to the other one and he snorted and raised a fist to his mouth.

“Who can take me on? Who wants to try it?”

No one answered him, but Brezynsky continued his tour of the car, ducking and weaving like a boxer. He jabbed at Wojciech, who waved a hand at him in exasperation. Brezynsky could tell no one was truly angry or even irritated with him. He boasted:

“I’ll beat four of you. We’ve got two days but I’m ready to fight. I’ll even hold back on you lads, but they, oh boy, they’ll get the whole thing.” He swung a snappy right hook into the air in front of him.

Sierpinski, who was very tall, so that sitting he still came up past most men’s waists, shot back:

“Thanks for being so kind to us mates.”

“Oh, that’s just how I am. You can tell a Brezynsky by his sense of honor.”

More men laughed. Brezynsky hadn’t gotten Sierpinski’s joke; he was one of the youngest and always tried to pay rapt attention when some older recruits he deemed “important” spoke. His system of designation was enigmatic. Wojciech wasn’t important, but Sapieha was.

Brezynsky approached him now.

“Sapieha, something tells me you’re not much of a fighter.”

A few men whistled at the insult, but Sapielha said nothing. He seemed unperturbed and simply raised his eyes to Brezynsky's face from where he was sitting. Brezynsky added hastily:

"I mean no insult! I just think they'll put you farther back, in the artillery maybe, or with the engineers. You can tell a good engineer by his calm look and analytical eye."

"Can you, Brezek?" someone called out, and everyone chuckled at the diminutive of the name.

"Yes! You can! That's what my father told me and my brothers, and he was a soldier and so was *his* father! And don't call me that, you know my name it's—"

"Brezek!" a different voice called out, and now more laughed, eager for the distraction of the argument.

Brezynsky looked uncertain, a trace of hurt on his face. He peered around, saw several of the "important" recruits laughing, nearly all of them, and so he made himself crack a smile and retreat.

"All right, gentlemen, all right, let's not hear it said that I can't take a joke."

"Tell us more about the 'analytical eye,' Brezek," the same voice as before mocked him, but it sounded lonelier and less interested now. The men knew each other and, remarkably, none hated the other. The car was exceptional in that way. The officers had forbade them alcohol or firearms—both would be issued at the front, the milder one had joked—to avoid duels and bloody disputes, but, in this case, even that order had been unnecessary. Brezynsky would not suffer long, and anyone who went in pursuit of him would soon find scorn and mockery homing in on himself. Most of

the men came from neighboring suburbs and villages; Sapiiha was among those few conscripted who did not.

Brezynsky sat down next to him. The conversation shifted above their heads.

“I thought you said your father was a farmer, Marek,” Sapiiha asked quietly.

“He is. He fought a bit, too. I don’t know why I said all that in front of the others. I’m a fibber, that’s for sure.”

“But, evidently, he would call me an engineer?” Sapiiha gave a wry smile that Brezynsky eagerly returned.

“You? He’d call you a novelist based on all those letters you write! More than I’ve ever seen.”

Sapiiha shrugged.

“Are they to a girl?” Brezynsky inquired, suddenly, leaning in closer.

Sapiiha looked at the crooked teeth and the pimples dotting the thin face, and the locks of straight blond hair that fell over the forehead.

“How old are you, Marek?”

Shame washed over those features at once.

“Surely I’ve told you,” Brezynsky muttered, glancing away.

“Perhaps you have,” Sapiiha agreed.

He watched the sun begin to set over a great field, a field that seemed unbounded on all sides, an ocean, though Sapiiha had never seen one. He waited thirty seconds, a minute, but the field was still in view, still the same, the green of the unripe grain swaying, washed into texture with the distance, the golden panes of

sunlight enrobing the plants like a thin coating of liquid. The first night was coming. Sapiuha hoped they would leave the door open so he could watch the moon.

He thought of walking through such a field with her and laying down in a secluded place beneath the chest-high wheat.

Sierpinski had dealt cards and a few others—Jarowicz and Matuszinski, Sapiuha recognized—were playing a game. It looked like whist, but Sapiuha did not gamble and could not be sure. The four hunched over their cards. The remainder of the deck was weighted with coins to keep it from flying away. Their sweaty fingers pressed their hands to their chests. Sierpinski cursed as he turned over a card from a pile. His big frame was stocky and broad—some of the others had nicknamed him Maximus—and he held the cards like postage stamps. He looked like a gorilla sipping from a teacup. Sapiuha laughed at the image.

The wheels of the train began to squeal and the shrill whistle of the locomotive jarred all the thoughts from his head. The train was slowing. In the dusk Sapiuha could see nothing around them, only fields and a thicket with one tall poplar tree silhouetted black, against a sky that deepened from azure to cobalt blue. The poplar tree. He closed his eyes. They stopped, and the men waited.

A few minutes later, an officer materialized in front of the open door, a different one from before. He grinned with genuine enthusiasm, as if he wanted to

make a speech and address his dinner party, or a celebration in honor of a close friend. He was tall, thin and aquiline looking, with proud, upright posture. He had often been reprimanded for failing to show proper bearing in front of the men, but he was not thinking about that now. He was a genial maitre d' with a returning flock of regular and affluent patrons. He opened his arms wide and welcomed them:

“Gentlemen, if you will follow me please, in an orderly line, you will be served a banquet of the greatest culinary delights our army has to offer. For we have not only potatoes but dumplings, and, lo, there is cheese in the dumplings! And that”—he added, with a roll of his eyes at the pun—“is an order.”

He had, in fact, been the headwaiter at one of the capital's finest hotels. He had presided over a vast dining room, done up in black and white tile and crystal, polished brass fittings and mahogany tables, and garnished with an occasional great fern and tawny leather armchairs by the door, where he would chat with the tuxedoed gentlemen who sat and smoked cigars and awaited their wives' departure from the powder room. And, of course, the headwaiter thought, there had been the straight-backed velvet-cushioned chairs which attended the tables, which he could withdraw for a lady and insert beneath her soundlessly, all with his head respectfully inclined towards the floor and two creaseless coats whisked gracefully into the arms of one of his colleagues. He had managed twelve other waiters, had known all their names and where they lived, advised them of curmudgeons' preferences out of the corner of his mouth and warned them vigorously in private against dropped platters and seduction by matrons. Admittedly, he had, in select cases, encouraged seduction by matrons.

His sommelier discussed Latour and Lafitte over glasses of both with him, the two alone in the cellar long after the rest of the staff had left. After serious comments, each man began to resort to progressively more outlandish and obscure metaphors to describe the texture and savor of the wine, in a verbal joust that ended when one of them could no longer keep a straight face and burst into snorts of laughter.

The officer with the moustache glowered at him from door to the officer's car, out of sight of the enlisted men. He snarled the word: "decorum" without making a sound. The headwaiter, obliged to become the second officer again, sighed inwardly. He assumed a stern expression. He assumed this was what the officer with the moustache intended by "decorum."

He would have loved to have made the soldiers laugh, then, with a *bon mot* or a covert impression of the mustachioed officer. But he had his orders.

"I said that's an order! On your feet!"

The men leapt, in groups of twos and threes, out of the open door of the boxcar. Some stumbled when they hit the ground, and cut their hands on the gravel bed of the railway, or pressed them to the soft cool grass and black soil of the countryside.

Minkowsky stood apart, watching them. When all were assembled he commanded them to form a line, mess kits in hand, and proceed past a trestle table with a battered white tablecloth, upon which two large pots were set: one full of boiled, peeled potatoes with cabbage, strained in a colander, and the other of

dumplings, soft and moist with creamy white cheese inside them. The officers would dine separately, of course, in their own car, after the enlisted men. In peacetime they would have meat.

Behind the table stood the cook and two assistants. The assistants were ordinary soldiers but the cook was fat and grumpy, beet-faced and perspiring. His forehead had a sheen in the August twilight, beneath a mop of curly blond hair. Yet when he ladled potatoes onto each soldier's tin plate, he met their eyes and gave a nod, forestalling thanks. The nod seemed to Sapieha to speak of his conviction. He, the cook, unimportant and no longer young, would keep these warriors strong. His jowls shook and were still as he plunged the ladle into the potatoes to find the perfect portion. He served Brezynsky, who thanked him; then the cook gave that little nod again, moistening his lips.

Minkowsky moved among the men, greeting them under his breath out of earshot of the other officer. He looked at them and thought of his twelve waiters, all conscripted.

“Take a little more, lads—we won't be stopping again until this time tomorrow, so save it for lunch.”

He touched Sapieha on the shoulder as he was served dumplings.

“You, what's your name?”

It was a crude form of address, but he made himself do it. Sapieha came away from the table.

“My name is Jan, sir,” he said, absentmindedly.

“Yes? Jan what?”

“Sapieha, sir.”

“I notice you keep to yourself among the men.”

Sapieha looked at the ground, then nodded.

“I do, sir,” he said, evenly.

“You will need each other, I hope you understand.”

“Yes, sir.”

Minkowsky cleared his throat. At once, he knew how to proceed.

“Sapieha,” he said, quietly.

“Yes, sir?”

“Come to my restaurant, when this is finished. The Hotel Parnasse. I’ll serve you *mignonettes de veau*, carpaccio, truffles, a *filet* with Béarnaise sauce—have you ever had a Béarnaise sauce?”

“No, sir.”

“You would adore it. It tastes like—it tastes like walking through the Old Town, admiring the carvings on the facades of the buildings on a sunny day. Have you done this?”

Sapieha smiled.

“I have, sir.”

“I see you enjoyed it.”

“Very much, sir.”

“You may speak to me informally. You will come to my restaurant, then?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Then until then,” Minkowsky said, and presented his hand. They shook. With a sigh, he proceeded towards the officer’s car, preparing himself to eat a joyless meal with Jaroslav, the two alone in the stuffy-aired dining and sitting room.

Sapieha had watched Minkowsky leave, his lieutenant’s epaulets riding his narrow shoulders next to his arching, distinguished neck. He noted the long silver hair kept strictly in good taste with just a pinch of pomade, difficult to obtain since rationing had begun. Sapieha thought Minkowsky would have made a better officer, if not a better man, in peacetime. The touch of his palm lingered in Sapieha’s own.

“Jan,” Wojciech called, from a spot of grass where he was eating.

Sapieha went over to him and stood a way’s off.

“What do you think of all this?”

Sapieha looked around.

“Of what, Pawel?”

Wojciech waved his hand.

“Man, you can sit, if you want.”

Sapieha sat, careful to keep his plate level.

“I belong in a café with a cassis on a thin little serviette”—Wojciech indicated the size with thumb and forefinger—“playing for more drinks.”

Sapieha laughed. After a moment, Wojciech laughed as well.

“You know, often, in the city, I was bored. I wanted something to happen, I wanted women, or to play faster in a certain part. I would prowl from bar to bar just to move.”

“We’re all bored on the train,” Sapieha said.

Wojciech shook his head. He had a beautiful, clean jawline, pronounced beneath his flushed skin, and a delicate slice of a nose that suited his fine-grained, smooth cheeks and thin lips. He gazed off and chose his words.

The air was warm and close around them. Soldiers ate and talked quietly in groups, stretching their legs, some strolling along the meadows alone. A few simply lay in the grass and stared up at the sky. Not a house or a building could be seen, just the scar of the railway on the land and the dormant, black engine, looming on the rails that split the pasture.

“No. That’s not it. What I mean is—already I would give much to be bored like that again.”

Sapieha could not think of what to say, though he understood. He fell, helplessly, in situations like these, into observation. Unless he could write them, his thoughts never seemed to fit into pronouncements, never seemed to have the sculpture-like quality to exist in a conversation, distinct even as they faded in the summer air.

They watched the soldiers traverse the gentle swell of the land. Some had ranged quite far away, but kept turning to check the train, careful not to stray from sight.

“Well, we’re both good shots. At least we have that in common, right?”

Wojciech joked.

He lifted his agile body from the earth and walked away, resting a hand briefly on the crown of Sapieha’s head.

Night was falling and the soldiers had finished eating. Sapieha looked up and down the train, saw several more box cars, but their doors were shut.

“Are we the only ones here?” he asked someone, indistinct in the dusk.

“We’re reinforcing a small garrison at Konstancia. It’s out of the way of the fighting, and it’s only had small losses.”

“What’s in the rest of the cars?”

“Our supplies, who knows—this is just what I’ve overheard. We could be on our way anywhere.”

The crickets chirped like the creaking of ungreased hinges. The air seemed unnaturally close and still after the constant wind of the train. Sapieha unbuttoned his uniform shirt. His sweat cooled on his chest and stomach as he walked. He gazed off into the far-lit corners of the twilight sky, the irregular shapes like water meeting a coastline that held onto light and color.

Sapieha paced, apart, and remembered their walk together, at sunset, through the woods that that surrounded his family’s home.

By the time they regained the train and set out again, Sapieha could see the North Star faintly hinting at its existence through the deep blue of the night.

Sierpinski was telling a story. The two brothers were in the audience. Sapiha half-listened from across the boxcar.

“So. My brother and I. We’re about as far apart as you two. Two years. And we’re at the house of these two girls.”

Sierpinski inhaled and rolled his eyes to let them know what kind of girls they were. He looked around, then reached into his open bag and pulled out a small bottle full of clear liquid. He unstopped it, took a swig, groaned, and handed the bottle to one of the brothers. The smell wafted by Sapiha. Vodka.

“The father was out working, they told us. He was only one of their fathers. The two girls are friends. One lives a few miles from the other, but both are very pretty. One is very stupid. That was unfortunately the one I was with,” Sierpinski admitted, shrugging, “but I am rather ugly, so I believe it compensates. She said she liked me, though. She said I looked like a man.” Something indescribable and very uncharacteristic of him flickered over his face. He went on hurriedly.

“In any case she was very pretty and she suggested we go swim in a lake. I could not refuse, of course. Even though whenever I go swimming with my family my mother takes half the day to dip her toe in the water, then declares it too cold. I on the other hand leap in at once to see how big of a splash I can make.”

He took a drink from the bottle, either end of which barely peeked from his hairy fist.

“She led me to a lake and went to change into her costume behind a tree. I was to use her father’s costume, which”—he made a face—“I am delighted to do. But imagine this,” he said, arraying his hands before himself: “I was in her father’s

costume, trying not to think of what parts of him were in it before what parts of me, and she came out from behind the tree. But she wasn't wearing her costume. She wasn't wearing anything."

A gasp came from somewhere the audience. Wistful looks began to appear.

"I stood as still as a stone and as dumb as an ox. Brezynsky could have pushed me over with one finger." He searched for the bottle of vodka, took it from the hands of one of the listeners for another long drink. The bottle was nearly empty.

"When I could move again, the first thing—well, yes, the first thing I did was take off her father's costume. She wasn't watching, of course. She had walked away from me, down to the lake, and had dove in. But before, she smiled at me. She let me know she knew I'd seen her. I was clueless. I hadn't an idea what to do.

So, I took off her father's costume. And I walked down to the water and dove in too."

The audience had gathered in closer. Brezynsky began to circle closer to listen, cigarette in hand. Sierpinski's face, his heavy jaw and broad, pronounced cheekbones, glowed red. Someone had lit two lanterns suspended from the ceiling.

"She had swum far, though. I stayed standing in the shallows, with the water up past, you know. She called to me. Her hair was stuck to her head and she waved, like this"—he demonstrated—"but quickly, because she was treading water. 'Piotr, come,' she said. I remember. So I started to swim."

"I bet you swim like a walrus," Brezynsky quipped, sticking his face into the group. Sierpinski half-heaved himself off the ground to take a swipe at him but Brezynsky danced away. "She should have seen *me* swim."

“The better for me she didn’t,” Sierpinski rumbled, to general laughter, “but that’s not how the story ends. I wish it was. I got out there—Brezek makes a point, I’m a mediocre swimmer and I make a lot of waves—and she was giggling, trying not to let me splash her, and I was breathing hard, red in the face from the effort. Then someone else shows up. A Certain Gentleman and his son, in their fishing boat, out from a little cove I couldn’t see. I’ll let you guess who the Gentleman was. I’m sure Brezek would like to.”

Brezynsky wasn’t paying attention.

“No? No one? Then I’ll tell you. Her father. It was her father. That made his son her brother. Two men have never been happier to see me. What a time I had,” Sierpinski groaned.

“I swam like hell. All the while, everyone was shouting. Her father and brother were chasing me in the boat—me, I was trying to out-swim a boat—and she was screaming at them to leave me alone. They were screaming at her, at me, probably at each other too. They were distracted. That, I think, is how I escaped.”

He finished the bottle of vodka and took another one, an old wine bottle half-full of spirits, from his bag. His face was bright pink.

“Anyway, they hit me with the oars once or twice. I ran, once I got on land. I ran naked through the woods. I didn’t even stop to collect my brother, the poor—the poor bastard,” letting the swear word slip in a gurgle.

“Thank God my family had gone into town that day. Her father and brother didn’t chase me far. They didn’t want to leave her alone for more suitors, I guess.” He laughed from his belly.

“I never did see her again. Very stupid, as I said.” He laughed again, shook his massive head, and took a drink.

“Piotr,” Sapieha asked—for he had left off transcribing his letter a while ago—“why isn’t your brother here?”

Piotr instantly stopped laughing. He cleared his throat.

“My brother is—he’s simple, like me, but more so. They don’t let people like him into the army.”

The audience fell silent. One or two glanced sideways at Sapieha, who quickly apologized, flushing with embarrassment. Sierpinski waved the apologies away and offered him the vodka bottle. Sapieha took a hesitant drink, but Sierpinski urged him to take another, so he did, swallowing and setting his throat afire. Sierpinski’s liquor was strong.

“So, Jan Sapieha, silent one, silent scribbler, you tell us a story now,” Sierpinski rumbled in his deep voice.

“Yes, do,” Wojciech chimed in, his shirt open and a bottle of red wine of uncertain origin dangling from his hand.

“And then you play us a song, Pawel,” someone else cried, but Wojciech shook his head.

“Would that I could,” he said, flexing his thin-boned hands in the lantern light, studying his fingers. “Would that I could, soon.”

Sapieha thought he had been spared but Sierpinski pointed a finger like a sausage at him.

“Ah, you don’t escape like that. Tell us something.”

“I have nothing to tell.”

“Sure you do! Who do you write all those letters to?”

Sierpinski gained animation and volubility when he drank. His eyes sparkled and he wouldn't stop talking.

“My mother and father.” Sapieha's chin twitched.

“So, a lover, you mean by that, yes?” Wojciech responded, leaning up against a wall, knowing, the wine bottle halfway to his mouth.

“Definitely a girl! It has to be!” Brezynsky pounded his fist in his hand.

Sapieha slowly turned red, then his embarrassment broke and he smiled and nodded. He wondered why his instinct had led him to hide. Sierpinski threw his hands in the air.

“The holy truth! Let's hear it, Sapieha!”

They crowded around.

“Well,” Sapieha began, “she made me promise to marry her, and I will.”

Cataclysm from the onlookers: “She sounds like trouble!”

Sapieha shook his head. “No. She isn't. She—I was the one who offered first, and then she made me promise. Marriage.” He looked around for something on the floor. Sierpinski handed him the vodka bottle. He had been looking for his notebook, to make sure it was safe, but he drank anyway.

“I am in love with her.”

He had never told anyone. A few soldiers cheered. Wojciech saluted him with his wine bottle. Sierpinski clapped his hands. The second vodka bottle was nearly empty.

“Music!” he roared. “Music for the wedding party of our friend Jan Sapieha! You”—he pointed to Wojciech—“sing us something and we’ll keep the beat. Sing the country songs and we’ll dance to them.”

Wojciech did. He sang with a warm, clear voice, and at first, as he sang the slow introduction to the song of the ripening of apples they all knew, they were silent. Wojciech’s voice glowed brighter than the light of the lantern.

They sensed the fast part coming, in the limited way a song one knows grants the power to see into the future, and they poised their feet to stomp. And it came, the words about a young man dancing among the apple trees, a spirit perhaps, amid the fragrance of the leaves and the fallen fruit, and they began to dance, leaping high to avoid the rotting apples, linking arms like couples, clapping their hands. The soldiers sang a ragged chorus with Wojciech barely able to guide them, dancing himself, the wine bottle poised at his lips.

“Look at me! I’m the best!” Brezynsky shouted, and they cleared a space for him as he leapt and ducked, astoundingly nimble and perfectly in time. Sierpinski made a face as if the spirit of his dead grandmother were walking among them.

“Look at Brezek! My God! He’s good at something!”

Brezynsky flung out his long skinny arms and twirled on one foot, never losing his balance, swooping around to land on his other foot and twist the other way, impossibly fast, as if a wound spring that powered him had been released. The soldiers formed a ring around him and clapped, swaying with the rhythm, singing the chorus of the apple-picking song again and again.

Some were crying. They had learned the song among the apple trees with their mothers and fathers, or their siblings had handed it down to them with old clothes and shoes, and they remembered and wished to be home. They wanted one more time through each memory—to live it fully and make it permanent it within themselves—now that they knew the future lay a day’s train ride ahead. These soldiers: what they would have done for a day’s leave to wander through time, to go back home, to see summers they would never see again.

Some broke off from the ring and the singing. The two brothers congratulated Sapiuha, shaking his hand and throwing arms about his shoulders. Brezynsky retired amidst wild cheering and hooting to wade through a thicket of well-wishing hands. They patted his shoulders, his back, his cheeks, and mussed his hair, and Brezek, pouring sweat, thanked as many as he could before he collapsed by the open door.

Wojciech and Sierpinski bowed to one another—Wojciech curtsied very primly—linked arms, and began to cavort in circles in the center of the ring. The soldiers changed the song. Now they sang a funnier one, about a boy who dreams he is frantically kissing a beautiful woman, only to awaken to find himself licking a tree. Sapiuha laughed pointlessly, leaning against a wall, watching them dance. He felt as if everything inside him had turned to champagne, and now it effervesced and bubbled up his neck and tickled the roof of his skull, his scalp, his hair. He sang the song. These were his brothers. He would be safe.

Sapiuha closed his eyes and remembered the blanket that lay on top of them. Their clothes in a pile, at the edge of the blanket. They lay on their sides, facing one another. The branches of the poplar tree danced overhead, and the moonlight fell on

them in a pattern like lace. Tatya had just finished telling him a funny story about her mother and her sisters scolding each other, in between kissing him, obviously nervous, and now she paused. Her eyes, the irises like pools of the color of the sky above him, dark blue like gems—Sapieha could scarcely believe they existed—looked into his, still and solemn. Her lips parted.

“You’ll marry me, won’t you?” she asked, abruptly, in a litigious tone.

“Yes, I will.”

“I want you, you know. I do.”

“So do I, Tatya.”

“But I won’t just give myself away. I need to know you’ll come back for me.”

He kissed her then, in a rush, and whispered he would come back and she relaxed into his arms and presented him, again, with the mystery of where their flesh was separate.

“I will marry you, Tatya. You are the only woman in the world I can imagine.”

She laughed and told him she was the only woman in the world he knew, and he pretended to get angry and rolled on top of her, wrestling, making faces, putting his weight on her arms as she laughed and pulled him closer. Then. Slowly, and gently, it continued. She held him there, her fingers cool on his back, in a kiss. Sapieha closed his eyes. When he opened them, Wojciech and Sierpinski had finished dancing and were resting by the door, Wojciech talking animatedly to someone within and gripping the jamb of the boxcar door to steady himself. The soldiers were still singing, but to themselves, or in groups, quieter songs. Sapieha approached him.

“You know, I think I understand what you mean, about your boredom.”

Wojciech’s eyes glittered as he smiled. Sierpinski looked on, amusedly uncomprehending.

“Oh, you do?”

“We haven’t any place to move to out here, as you moved, from bar to bar.”

Wojciech flung his hands in the air, in mock helplessness.

“We are not free,” Sapieha said.

“So there is something to him after all,” Wojciech said, playfully.

Sierpinski frowned, as if at a bad odor.

“Pooh. Enough of that.” A great finger of his made another appearance.

“We three. We have good heads. We’ll see it out, together. What’s her name, Janek?”

“Tatya. Tatianna,” Sapieha heard himself say.

Sierpinski nodded, satisfied, clammy with the sweat of dancing.

“It’s freezing in here,” he shouted. “Let’s close a window!”

He stood and grasped the iron handle of the boxcar door, and heaved.

Even a large man like Sierpinski didn’t have the strength to close the door fully by himself, so it bounced off the jamb where, to steady himself as he leaned into the breeze, Wojciech was resting his left hand. The collision smashed every bone in his hand. The roar of the door sliding to and fro sounded like a run, impossibly fast, down a massive line of piano keys.

Wojciech screamed.

Everyone looked up in alarm. Sapiha had watched it happen, aware too late of the position of the hand, now mute and transfixed with shock. Wojciech held his left arm at the wrist, staring at the crooked fingers as if they were devouring him. The blood drained from his face.

He turned his frantic eyes to Sierpinski's but passed him over, frantic and uncomprehending.

Sapiha could not tell which of the two men looked more horrified. No one moved. The orange light of the lantern turned Sierpinski's wide-featured face into a cavern-eyed tragic mask. He alone reached out towards Wojciech and took a step forward. They stood an arm's length apart, closer, and their eyes met in the hush, absent of voices. All watched. Wojciech seemed not to understand, nodding deliriously, until Sierpinski reached out to hold his shoulder. An aching, unbearable second hung in the thickening air, while the soldiers wondered what Sierpinski would say, their own eyes wide and faces poised in grief and astonishment.

The two looked at one another. Then Wojciech's face twisted. He bared his teeth and his brow furrowed into thick, ugly wrinkles. A gargoyle stood before them. His chest began to rise and fall. Sierpinski backed away and Wojciech shouted and swung the wine bottle at Sierpinski's head and missed, the bottle slipping from his

grasp and sailing up to smash against the ceiling, in an explosion of broken glass. He worked his features further into the demonic mask they now wore, heaving desperate breaths through his teeth, his face and entire body splattered with red droplets of wine. Then he began to curse, horribly, in a rasping howl, as if he wanted words to tear Sierpinski's ears apart.

“You bitch! You fucking syphilitic bitch! You whore's cunt! The devil in your mother's ass, Sierpinski! The devil—”

He gasped, opened his mouth wide, and collapsed forwards. Sierpinski had slumped against a wall, his face in his hands.

At once, motion and sound regained the other soldiers. Sapieha rushed to Wojciech, rolled him on his back, straightened the arm with the mangled hand. Wojciech was alive but unconscious. Someone began to pound on the walls of the boxcar, screaming for help, then another. Soon the boxcar was full of screams and pounding fists, each fighting to escape, pushing past one another, their shouts washed away and together by the enduring roar of the wind.

The dawn was unkind. Wojciech sat in a corner, swaddled in blankets. His hand was splinted, as best as possible, and bandaged. The doctor of the officers' staff was doubtful he would ever use it again. Wojciech had cried all morning, as the grey light intensified, blotted by clouds and rain the night had brought them unawares. By noon he was silent.

Sierpinski had not moved from where he had slumped the night before. A few of the soldiers conversed in low voices. The two brothers spoke, and nodded gravely.

Sierpinski would speak to no one. His heavy-lidded eyes bulged at the floor over the heels of his hands, the palms of which covered his face. He had draped a blanket over the top of his head. He looked like a monk, or a knight helmeted for battle.

Sapieha made himself eat two cold potatoes and a dumpling amidst the silence and the muted noise of the train. The door had been ordered permanently closed by the mustachioed officer, to avoid further accidents. As an added precaution, he now rode with the enlisted men, back against the wall near the door, scowling. He hadn't trusted Minkowsky.

A small port in the door was open, for fresh air. Sapieha stood at it for a while, until the mustachioed officer angrily commanded him away. Sapieha had had time, however, to watch the farmhouses. Though it had ceased raining, no one ran from them to watch the train.

They did not stop for dinner that night but no one complained. Brezynsky danced a few steps, flashing a lame smile, but no one paid attention. Enough time had elapsed that they were no longer thinking exclusively of Wojciech's hand.

Sapieha wrote one more letter:

*Dear Beloved,*

*A terrible thing has happened. One of us who was a pianist broke his hand in an accident last night. He will never play again, to guess from the way he wept. The weather is poor and now I am starting to be afraid. I can look out,*

*from the train, but I see no people. I wonder if they have evacuated, or if something worse has happened. We are less than a day from the fighting.*

*My dreams of you seem too beautiful to belong here. I don't know—I fear—help me, Tatya. I am sorry. I don't know what else to say. Please help me.*

*May your vision give me strength. I want so desperately to keep my promise to you.*

*Your Love,*

*Jan Sapieha.*

Sapieha read the letter and realized he could never send it. If he were Tatya, it would not be the kind of letter he would want to receive. He felt bitter and frustrated. He knew, with the total pessimism of his worst moods, that she would never see him again, or hear from him.

He thought of the dances the night before and drew further within himself. His head hurt, and as he thought of them he felt gullible.

The train stopped. The mustachioed lieutenant threw open the door. He had help from outside. It was well before dawn and he shouted to wake the men. Once they were on their feet, he said simply:

“We’re here.”

They could see nothing outside. On their way out the door, jumping in twos and threes, Sapięha caught Sierpinski's eye, and quickly looked away.

“Out!” The lieutenant shouted.

Sapięha leapt, softly, as he did everything.

The Synesthete  
by Gabriel Sessions

The paneling of Dr. Boyce's office was a rich stained brown, like G flat in a bassoon.

Dr. Boyce was a large man, with broad shoulders and a slight stomach, the result of the decay of the physique of his youth. His face stood strong with mature wisdom and a definitive nose, and quiet brown eyes looked out over a wide mouth and a lantern jaw. I enjoyed watching his face as we spoke. I struggled continually, however, to remember myself and my ideas, in the face of Dr. Boyce's quiet assertions, his firm, unshakable belief in his compassion, clinical assiduousness, and good instincts.

Dr. Boyce cleared his throat. I wished fleetingly that he were my father. He possessed that surety some men have, a quiet competence that seems to solidify the variable quantities in life, to invite allegiance and enthusiasm for what they suggest. He cleared his throat, humming a note unconsciously as he did. A whiff of chartreuse danced across my vision. Suddenly his eyes were fixed on mine, and the skin around his nose crinkled as he smiled.

“What'd you see just then?”

“Green. It came in a wisp, like a puff of smoke, briefly.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“What note did I hum?”

“B. But you weren’t quite on concert pitch.”

“I *have* been neglecting my scales.”

We both laughed. I would remember the moment. Dr. Boyce’s office was a marvel of symmetry. His desk sat centered before a bank of windows in an old style, with many small panes. The sun streamed through them, and the framed, glass-fronted diplomas and certifications on the walls of the office perpendicular to the windows were portraits of the sky in profile. The day was clear and cold and beautiful, and I watched the clouds labor along above him. The winter wind urged them on relentlessly, a wind as bright and sharp at midday as the nearly white sun.

“So, my agent tells me my book is almost out of the editing stage,” Dr. Boyce began.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“Four years,” Dr. Boyce replied, nodding evenly. “I don’t merely expect praise from you, of course. I need to speak to you about the book.”

I knew very little of the subject of the book, or of the effort made by Dr. Boyce to complete it. He had requested permission to excerpt my file, and I had granted it, not long after our sessions had started, won over already by him. He would

mention working on it in passing, at the beginning or end of our sessions, when a mood of sanctuary did not exist within the room.

“The book,” Dr. Boyce went on, smoothly, “is about creativity. I know I’ve mentioned some of this to you already, when you consented to be involved, but not in detail.

A few of my other patients, a sculptor, for example, and a museum curator, an executive at an investment firm, a math professor: they’ve each contributed part of their file to the book as well. I’m analyzing creativity through multiple examples from disparate fields, to explore its underlying modes of operation. It’s more of a survey, really, for a general audience.

They’ve each signed release forms, and overseen the editing of their section to ensure the degree of anonymity they want. Some don’t care, but some are extremely concerned with being unrecognizable once the book is finished.”

His grandiose manner seemed to befit the circumstances, and, strangely, I was not bothered. The idea of the book sounded vague, but Dr. Boyce—not even a doctor in the medical sense, but the appellation reassured his patients—commanded some influence in the therapeutic community. I had seen him since my enrollment at the conservatory four years ago. His name would propel his book as much as the well-known publishing house to at least minor success.

“Your chapter will focus on your sensory abnormalities and how they affect your work, but it may include conversations we’ve had, quotations from you, anything I deem pertinent.”

“Alright.”

“And may I identify you by name?”

I hesitated. Dr. Boyce kept a careful silence.

“No—no, I’d like to be completely anonymous.”

He nodded and made a note.

“I want any publicity to be for my work, not as a case study—no offense, of course,” I hastened to add.

“Of course.” He smiled at me. “Composers with your cross-innervation are a rarity, though. Only Scriabin—”

As I interrupted him to contradict this point, he caught himself and retracted it, and we ended up saying: “actually, he wasn’t” in unison and laughing out loud. Dr. Boyce had undertaken a large body of supplemental research after I began sessions with him, and he often referred me to titles, especially those about artists.

“The publisher tells me there’s no guarantee of perfect anonymity even if we do remove any identifying traits. People like to engage popular science books. A field they thought boring becomes exciting for them, and they’re avid to find out more.”

“So, how do we keep them from figuring out who I am?”

“Not many will try to figure it out. But many more, I’m sure, will wonder. You have a very flashy condition.”

I sighed.

“I know.”

Dr. Boyce tapped his palms on his desk and shifted his weight, signaling the end to our conversation and the beginning of our professional engagement.

“I’ll send you a copy of the proofs with your information removed later today. Once you approve them, they’ll go straight to the publisher. Now. Let me get out from behind this desk. You haven’t been sent to the principal’s office. Shall we?”

The committee of faculty that ran the Addison School of Music Young Composers series reserved the last concert for the pieces they judged best in all categories. They enjoyed a long-standing arrangement with the famous Kreger Hall, its tiered galleries and balconies filled to capacity to marvel at the ordinariness of our eight youthful faces as we took our bows.

The orchestra sat tense and ready under the lights. I had checked the audience. My mother and father were sitting together in the fourth row. My name was fourth on the program, and my picture and bio third in the notes. The time it had taken me to stand in the wings of this stage had telescoped, and all the mass and significance of the past year had condensed to fit in each second that passed as I waited, painfully aware, struggling to regulate my breathing. Thoughts of the Harcourt flickered in and out of my mind, even as I suppressed them. The hall manager leaned in.

“They’re ready for you, sir.”

He shook my hand.

A pipe organ the size of the world played an ultrasonic *vox celesta* that resounded in every cell of my body.

I walked to the center of the stage.

The sound of the applause seemed like a carpet spread all around me. The orbs of the lights hung in the distance. I kept my chin high and my back straight. My legs moved without thought. I swallowed. A thousand people, a mural, an entire landscape, from my perspective, continued to applaud as I bowed from the head of the orchestra. The first violinist extended his hand to me. He looked me in the eye confidently. We had rehearsed together, and he trusted me. My score was open on the stand: *Composition for Orchestra no.1*, by Julian Konigsberg. Beside it rested the baton.

When I picked it up, I could feel the memories of my life up until that point twist and change as they flickered aimlessly through my mind. Everything fragmented into a jarring succession of instants; I glanced at the strings, percussion, I noticed an oboist smoothing his jacket, the twitch of a flute. I took one last breath and resolved time into a continuity again. I raised the baton, swept my gaze over the orchestra, and began.

The opening of my composition was a *maestoso* theme with easily identifiable chorale chords, quickly diverging from its courageous tendencies and becoming a dissonant, lugubrious dirge, using the chords as semitone stepping-stones to different keys and ghostly harmony. The orchestra rendered them perfectly, and I, racing ahead of my pursuing thoughts, beckoning with my left hand and keeping time with my right, guided them. The rote of practicing emerged through the nervousness that accompanies performance and bore us all, and the colors came with the first triumphant shout.

F sharp major is golden. It shines golden like the burnished tip of a flagpole in the sun, recedes to a gold patina like a Baroque painting frame, textured and stained with age, with the cigar smoke of counts and rich bankers and the lamp smoke of a lifetime's worth of evenings spent dining and conversing in ochre light. Suddenly fulgent again like the tip of a spear on a bright, final beautiful day, like the leaves of a metallic crown it wreathed my head in flame. The chords quickly diverged from F sharp major, but the gold remained and shimmered into nothing. A cavalcade of swollen red and bruised violet sauntered by, in a brief, ostentatious interlude, as the majesty of the opening began to reveal the rot behind its gilt, as the first diminished chords, spurts of iridescent black, began to pull towards many keys—many colors at once—demanding too much and going unsatisfied, stacking up on top of each other as reiterations of want. Blue green and black like the deep- sea murk of a forest of kelp swallowed me, the bitter lament, the expressionistic brute-like inarticulateness of the passage punctuated with angry blood-red splatters of dissonance. Cerulean mist shapes dissipated and turned gray, questing shades, memories of details of the features of the dead that have grown irretrievable upon waking.

The dirge compounded upon its frenzy and it became a bachanalle, a crazed funeral march that became in turn a farce, a grotesquerie of mocked procedure, like tricks played upon a helpless old man. Crackling arc lightning in violet and green intertwined with itself as the tempo increased and two different sections of the orchestra played incompatible rhythms, sparking and buzzing in the air, flashes of chartreuse and lavender forming infinitely tiled patterns in three dimensions as they combined only for a moment. By now, my right arm had become loose and my shirt

soaked with sweat. I slashed the air with the baton like a saber but tried to limit my movement, to keep each gesture definite for the players, beckoning, forestalling and accepting with my left hand.

The bachanalle led into the transition that had generated the rest of the piece, a simple rhythm that had become transformed and transfigured. Voices dropped out like fighter planes banking out of formation, peeling off in droves, until only a violin and a viola danced and pursued each other in a two-voiced contrapuntal line of ardent fervor, embracing over the enticing *piano* rhythms of the timpanis, navy blue and lemon yellow, thick and wet like paint dripping over each other, splashed by heedless, passionate strokes into impasto textures melding and liquefying.

The wet blue and yellow deepened and solidified to sloping amber and cornflower, the middle section, broad and genial, naturalistic and panharmonic. Delicate thin forms like tall grass rippled and waved as the pulse changed to compound duple and the very air settled. A terrific expanse that was a range of amber mountains and the sky spanned the width and breadth of my vision, unconcerned with the walls of the concert hall or the musicians. Far off forms, possible clouds rippled and fused their boundaries with the periwinkle haze of the distance, the dulcet blue that seemed to glow with the rich siena and terra cotta beneath it. My left hand smoothed an imaginary roughness, placated, calmed; my right rocked back and forth, keeping the rocking counts, three, three, and again.

The motives appeared, all my caricatures, like figures on the plain. An improvisatory gestural scribbling in an impossible color scheme, and one of the free jazz progressions entered and exited, cool and understated. The tall grass turned

turquoise, and vanished for a moment then returned. A moonlight-colored primitivist-looking animal lost its legs and faded into the background. Augmented arpeggios gave way to a regularly leaping melody, wandering in polka-dotted circles until it too left. Each member of a menagerie like the Pompidou fountains made a solo leap and then departed, took an exposé before invisible curtains swallowed it, and its prismatic successor appeared.

The colors of the second transition, driving towards the apocalyptic coda, became more consistently impossible. Simultaneous combinations, colors at once green and orange, Sèvres blue and mummy black, sickening, unnatural, disturbing, fading into each other to the hue of vomit, flashed dizzily into others too fast for me to perceive. Occasionally the wide expanse of the middle section returned, but eerie and foreboding, its colors reversed or unstable. Lances of orange were slashing into soft-edged cream, red and black were flickering at the edges of my vision, the colors of magma and charcoal, the gathering energies, heralds of the impending coda. I gloried in it all the same. I could not stop.

I jerked my left arm upwards and reared my head back. Louder. The transition ended in a spiral, the undead motives from the middle section collapsing, whirled in a rose-red wind. I whipped my left hand in a staccato horizontal slash: silence. Abruptly the noise and color ceased.

I had written the coda at dawn after a night without sleep. It began with these several measures of silence. Then the entire orchestra would scream together, and scream again, the register descending until the cries would seem to come from a

beast, not a human being. Then the march-like rhythm I had been issuing the chords in would fail, and with it the block unity of the chords themselves. Filaments of notes in all registers would fly off like hairline cracks, complex superimpositions of rhythm over the dissolving massive edifices that broke like the falling columns of a great temple. Yet even as they broke apart the pitches would rise out of the bass, dissonant sonorities regroup and resolve, the tectonic smashing in the tympanis and double basses would lessen. The earth would cease to quake as violently. A lull in the upper voices would be broken only by the cautious drone of the bassoons, tubas, trombones, cellos and basses. Then they too would fade. The audience would breathe.

Triple *fortissimo* clusters voiced for a hundred instruments would smash the silence out of being. Built around a tritone-fourth-tritone-minor third-major third clash, a collection of intervals like the vibrating, red-hot gears of a seized engine, these towering volcanic chords resounding in irregularly-spaced groups of three would end the piece, the space between the chords diminishing over time. The last group would compress into one prolonged dissonance, agonizing, unbearable, and then cut. Then transposed and repeated, then cut. Then repeated, for the last time. I have only the greatest respect for Beethoven. He made his cadences into fortresses built of threes, and so would I. The colors of the clusters defied any name a color chart has ever given me.

I had written it yet I did not realize it would fragment so, not even in rehearsals, into the spreading fissures of a million protean colors that moved so fast.

The temple, its columns in great segments like pitted stone vertebrae, was crumbling and I flung myself from under stone after stone. I could see them fall as I held myself upright. Then it passed. The atmosphere settled behind me. Only my raised left hand looked ominous.

I brought it down. The first cluster, and then the second. They merged into a tide of discord, frothing with noise and irregular rhythms before I cut their roar twice, and my composition was over, the audience on its feet, the first violinist pressing his hand in mine, and the delirious sense of fulfillment, so complete I could never sanely expect it, made concentration impossible.

A few days before the concert, before beginning my lecture, I had sat uncomfortably on the piano bench and remembered a story about Wilhelm Kempff. Kempff's biographers attested that the pianist could play any of the fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in any key, by memory. I had attempted to do the same, as I did whenever I heard of any musical challenge. Professor Karlsen beckoned and I coughed and turned to face the class.

“Now, Julian, whom most of you know as our TA, has written a long single-movement piece for orchestra for his senior project, which he will perform in the very prestigious Kreger Hall series this Friday, which you are required to attend. Tell us about your piece until the end of class, Julian.”

I guided them through a basic outline: the tripartite form, the contrasting tempi and rhythms, the quotation of found material. Karlsen interjected praise and clarification at various points, often defining facets of the piece in terms I had not thought of, or comparing them to the work of other composers I had not considered. When I finished, Karlsen laughed and proclaimed:

“Conducting the premiere of one of your own pieces is like undressing in front of the audience. If you’re lucky, if you haven’t too many other things to worry about, you enjoy the aptness of the exposure. You feel as if you have described something with the perfect phrase.”

Karlsen smiled at the class. The more perceptive members of Introduction to Compositional Methods saw the years of experience behind the seeming generalization; the lesser looked scandalized at each other and scoffed at the romantic old man with the funny Danish accent.

On their way out, several students congratulated me, and complimented my work with varying degrees of attempted musical sophistication. I thought of the Harcourt ceremony, a little more than a week in the future.

After the students had left, Karlsen and I sat in the empty room. I worked my way through the fugue I had begun to play earlier, while Karlsen stared out the window, at the view of the city from the eleventh floor.

“They are performing my symphony for winds in Saint Louis,” he said, brightly, turning to face the piano. The combination of wistfulness and exuberance sounded strange coming from a man of his years.

“Congratulations.”

By the time I was his age, I wanted four commissions a year. This performance in Saint Louis was the second I had heard him mention since entering the conservatory. He seemed cognizant, at some level, of his lack of notoriety, and unsettled by it, though he never spoke bitterly or seemed dissatisfied to be teaching.

“You will teach the class next week. Inspire them about sonata form.”

I nodded, and started the C major fugue over again in B flat major. Karlsen started, then chuckled.

“Why not simply play the B flat major fugue? I think there is one in every key, you know.”

He had winked at me, a gesture I resented but presumed to be a holdover from Denmark.

“Kempff did it.”

“Ah.”

Ill at ease, with my black bow tie hanging loosely from my neck, I watched Karlsen cross the Dorfmeier Hotel banquet hall, excuse himself past a tall young waiter with a laden tray Karlsen nearly upset, and hover, attentive and smiling, at the edge of a small crowd. The throng of people surrounded a short bored-looking bald

man nodding impassively and answering their questions. After an opening appeared, Karlsen darted in to greet the bald man, shaking his hand enthusiastically with a wild grin on his face. He produced a stapled stack of papers from the inside of his jacket, and presented it to the bald man with sudden deference, inclining slightly from the waist. They spoke for a few more minutes, Karlsen's expression alternately obsequious and ingratiating, before Karlsen used up the attention the bald man had allotted him and waved, once, nearly invisibly, before taking a hesitant step backwards, the gap in the crowd he formed quickly filled by another eager body.

Karlsen did not act so differently from the students a third his age. Directors of programming and representatives from the Endowment for the Arts, the Hadley-Ivanovsky Foundation, and several less-well-known sister institutions were known to approach students at these receptions. The atmosphere in the room was tense with activity. *Find someone*, I urged myself. *That man Karlsen was talking to. Introduce yourself.* I could not. I could not account for the revulsion I felt when I needed to sell myself, the discomfort and feelings of unreadiness I underwent. The bald man excused himself and strode over beyond the hors d'oeuvres table, and I lost sight of him. I knew it was necessary to make contact with the powerful men and women of my field, and I quailed with fear, and berated myself, and did not.

When I composed, I took dictation from the possible music, which I heard whenever I concentrated. The risks I took in doing so, and those I took when I

conducted, seemed necessary steps in the ascension to mastery and beautiful in their own right. My impulsiveness and daring did not escape the realm of my own mind.

I had managed to find myself alone at the reception with a glass of red wine. From time to time passers-by would approach me and shake my hand, offering complements about the piece or my conducting. The Addison School of Music Young Composers Series drew a crowd from the city, especially the final and traditionally best concert, drawing on the entrenched nobility who made a habit of Kreger Hall.

I realized, looking around, that “nobility” might be a misnomer. Classical, or, as I preferred, academic music had opened its arms wider than ever. The conservatory students joked about perpetuating the stuffy and inaccessible after-dinner entertainment of the decaying white bourgeoisie, and most of the audience tonight that milled around me was white and not young, if not elderly. It was a slim majority, however. Students my age and younger from other universities, in slim-cut dress shirts and skinny ties shook my hand and joked with me. A black mother and her family of four bewildered and surly young children had flowed around me as I left the hall, the woman smiling at me over her shoulder as I got out of their way.

The diversity of the audience only confused me. I had reconciled myself to studying a dying art because the idea that academic music was dying seemed true. The idea, like most cynicism, drew on just enough truth to justify its unpleasantness,

although I failed to see that. I did not want to make an idiot of myself by hoping without adequate pessimism.

Late in the evening, a week after the concert, my roommate Adam and I were preparing to leave our apartment. A composition seminar we both were in required us to attend a performance in the music school's concert hall. A moderately successful contemporary composer was presenting a short program of her works for orchestra.

I had only heard one of the pieces by the composer we were going to see, a string quartet excerpted during the seminar, and I bore her no dissatisfaction. The microtonally-warbling cello drone had seemed a bit overused.

We laughed as our footsteps echoed in the stairwell. The apartment was comfortable for two, but on the sixth floor. Adam and I had both been excited to find that each flight of stairs numbered eight in total. Stairs—*scala*—scale jokes, the natural consequence of such architecture for two perennially exhausted musicians, abounded.

We both pulled our scarves tighter when we reached the street. The snow fell against the night overcast sky, muddy yellow-brown with the light pollution of the city.

“So is she too disappointingly tonal for us, or what?” Adam asked. He brushed his long, curly blonde hair out of his face.

“Tonality doesn't disappoint me. I'm interested in texture more than pitch.”

“But it’s so constraining! She’s writing in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she has a duty to represent her time!”

“Adam, she’s writing string quartets. I think she has other priorities.”

“Archaic instruments don’t imply archaic music.”

Adam had begun his career writing computationally-based indeterminacy pieces. He had told me music is painted mathematics more than once. He rejected indeterminacy by his second year of school and switched to twelve-tone compositions in Pythagorean and other temperaments. That had lasted another year or so. His composition since then had been less unidirectional, and less focused. He talked about post-spectralism.

As we entered the lobby we passed a poster of Hideki Jun, the piano virtuoso, his hair spiked into cultivated disarray. He posed in black and white beneath an overcast sky, his face half in shadow where he stood in front of an unlit street lamp on a blandly Parisian-looking street, his shirt open to pronounced collarbones and his thin dark suit jacket unbuttoned. The poster advertised a performance of the Chopin nocturnes in flowing cursive.

“To think they made you wear a tux,” Adam observed, surveying it.

I grunted something and kept walking.

“He’s actually good, you know,” Adam called to me.

I stopped and returned to the poster.

“Why does it look like he’s modeling for Armani?”

Adam considered.

“More like for the Romantic era. You know, he’s cute, he probably could for Armani, too.”

I sighed. We continued on and Adam laughed.

“So when Franz Liszt throws roses to the perfumed ladies of the salon audiences, it’s part of the canon, but Last Tango-with-Hideki in Paris is offensive?”

“He’s doing it to make money.”

“Probably why he got into classical piano performance in the first place.”

“Maybe if he spent the time practicing and approached music with some dignity.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“I mean, you often sound like an old man.”

“Adam, what are you—”

“But never quite this much of an old man.”

“No—”

“With a belly. In an ugly sweater. Or worse. The bitter, middle-aged failed composer. Dying traces of the avant-garde still present. ‘Oh, the world hates my Sonata for Ridiculous Instruments, my Recombinant Epigraphs for French horn, xylophone, and tambourine, oh no, a poster of an attractive glamorous young musician, let me laugh at it patronizingly first to show I remember what it was like to be young and impulsive, and to imply, though it is entirely untrue, that I had that much talent and that much potential, and then just—turned it down, for the far greater glory of assistant professorships nowhere and snide intellectualism.’”

Taken aback, I muttered something and settled lower in my seat. I wondered whether Adam actually believed superficiality could coexist with quality in music. My stentorian response to the poster embarrassed me, and I realized it was not Hideki's appearance I objected to. Although the graphic design of the poster seemed tasteless in and of itself, what bothered me was the fractured, grafted-on sense of the image. I pictured an agent in consultation with the hall as he thought up a surefire gimmick for the ad, distorting the subtleties of Chopin's music into a tourist-shop smear, struggling to reconcile a product he assumed no one cared about with public tastes.

Ingrid Katzmann came on stage, striding briskly to the center in front of the assembled orchestra. She shook the first violinist's hand amidst the applause. She was taller than he was, and older-looking, with sharp, symmetrical features, her long blonde hair up and drawn back. The formal black dress expressed her thin body without being revealing or skintight. I watched her as she went to the stand, taking the baton between thumb and forefinger.

The jolt of Prussian blue, flickering to ultramarine, streaked with a color like the violet hems of the emperor's tunics in Rome, indicated to me a D flat major chord with a ninth suspension. Adam had been right about her use of tonality.

The components of her pieces were more relaxed in relation to each other than mine—she knew her own style better than I did, although my work was formally more intricate. I disagreed with her choices on several occasions: her harmonic language could become stilted and overdone, at times, too onrushing and cinematic, but her use of the orchestra supported it. Individual timbres glimmered beneath the swift current like gold in the riverbed.

She was good, quite good, I thought, and nearly completely unknown. One or two members of the class had heard of her, before our professor played us the sample of the string quartet. The Addison School concert hall, we learned from the program, from Katzmann’s bio bristling and defensive with accolades, was her first venue of this scale.

The poster of Hideki caught my eye again on the way out.

Adam apologized once we were on the street.

“You know I didn’t mean that you’d end middle-aged and disappointed, right? Not with the Harcourt Prize, anyway.”

I reassured him. We both turned when a voice called my name.

“Julian.”

Zoe Tan crossed the sidewalk and laid her fingertips on the shoulder of my overcoat.

“Hello, Zoe.”

Adam coughed and looked at both of us.

“Well, I’ll meet you at home later. Tomorrow. Wonderful as always to see you, Zoe.”

She smiled and said goodbye to him primly as he strode quickly away.

“How have you been?” she asked me.

Her long, onyx hair slid across her brow as she turned up her face to look into my eyes. I noticed how the sheen of the overhead lights stayed stationary even as the hair moved underneath. At once I felt a wave of longing so intense it seemed to pull me closer to her from within my stomach.

“Recovering.”

She bit her lip and nodded sympathetically. Her eyes were wide and intent, in her porcelain face. She wore red lipstick.

“I know, I really wanted to go, but I was practicing late that night.”

“I won’t tell Karlsen.”

“Thanks. I don’t pay attention to a lot of what he says.”

“Well, we lagged in the middle section, I think, but I’m happy with the performance.”

“When do they announce the decision?”

“Tomorrow. The fourteenth.”

She looked fascinated, as if she coveted my likelihood to win the Harcourt as an object separate from me, and saw it glittering there before her.

“When’s your recital?” I asked.

“April. I’m still nervous, though. Feel my palms. They’re soaked.” She mimed wiping her hands on the thighs of her tight black jeans. I watched.

“You’re playing Paganini?”

“Six of the Caprices. Plus some of my own work, and improvisations. You remembered.”

“Yes.” The composer, attended by one of my professors and a few earnest students behind, walked by. She was putting on a long white overcoat on top of the black dress. From up close, I could see that her height and straight back gave her a caryatid’s bearing and profile, made to tower over an orchestra. She caught my eye, and I hurriedly looked away. Zoe stopped her to shake her hand, and thank her. When I looked back at Zoe she was watching me astutely.

“I guess it hasn’t been that long since we saw each other last,” she said, at last.

“No.”

I remembered, too vividly, the circumstances: my apologies blended with her unconvincing reassurances. In that situation, the worst part is the excruciating consciousness of being abnormal, of being contrary to expectations based on youth and sex. I remembered with unfortunate clarity that I had lied and blamed it on drinking too much at the party, when it had had nothing to do with drinking. I had not even been positive I wanted her, yet now I was overwhelmingly positive.

“Listen, would you want to come have a drink?”

She rested her weight on one foot.

“I don’t know, you could tell me more about your recital, Adam—my roommate—is out, until tomorrow, I guess, we wouldn’t be disturbing him.”

This, I believed fervently, had to get easier as I got older.

She shifted her weight to the other foot. She laughed.

“Sure. Let me get my purse.”

We paused, panting, after we had stripped off each other’s clothes. I held her in my arms, the lights off in the apartment, the faint glow from outside leaving half her body in shadow. Supple, smooth muscle clothed her everywhere. But for the warm resilience of her skin, she looked as if she could have been made of marble.

“So this is what I’ve been waiting for,” she said softly, her muscles loosening as she did. The remark hung in the air. How could she be so at ease, I wondered, as she stroked my arm. The touch of her fingers resting so lightly on my skin was perplexing, but only for a second, until I realized they felt as good as I had imagined. I hadn’t fantasized about her specifically; rather, they felt as soft and insistent as a woman’s hands could when I lay alone and dreamed of them. I wrapped my free arm loosely around the small of her back and pulled her to me before my intellect could divert me any further.

I felt my age, mulled myself over in the lambent warmth that followed the intoxication of Zoe’s skin and mouth and bones and body. Her head lay on my chest and she gazed off into nothingness, peacefully, her lips twitching as she thought. If she thought. Maybe she simply lay there.

The next morning I awoke and looked at the ceiling. The clock by my bed read five to one. The results would be in.

Zoe awoke and kissed me. She smiled, but neither of us said anything, our faces close, wondering. She bent her head and breathed against my neck, then whispered:

“Go check.”

I looked at her, her sleepy features already avid.

She raised herself up so she was kneeling on the bed. The covers fell away from her shoulders.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom. You go check.”

I nodded. As she retreated naked from the room I recalled a figure from the concert that had been achingly beautiful, had gone from verdigris green to copper as if a hundred years had been stripped away in an instant with one ascending half-step.

Street sounds, muted by the altitude and the walls, and the hum of the refrigerator reached the bedroom.

I wrapped a towel around my waist and walked into the living room. My laptop was there and I signed into my email. The subject heading was in bold, signifying it was unread.

### **Harcourt Prize Decision**

I opened the email. There was no name in the block of text I could immediately read.

*The Harcourt Prize is the Addison School of Music’s most distinguished award for original composition. Endowed by the family of Professor of Composition*

*Ezra Harcourt, class of 1912, and supplemented by gifts from recipients and other alumni, it is awarded not necessarily every year by a panel of faculty and experts in the field of composition to a student of truly outstanding ability and promise—*

I scrolled down—

*—honor Winston Hannah, composer of “Refractions and Diffusions,” which premiered last Friday in the final event of the Kreger Hall Young Composers series.*

*Hannah shines—*

Zoe returned, still naked.

*—be funded as a Hadley-Ivanovsky “Artist in Residence,” while he completes the commission—*

She perched over my shoulder for a moment, her eyes on the screen. I said nothing and glanced down, at the keyboard, pointlessly.

Zoe took her hands off my shoulders and began picking her items of clothing off the floor one by one. She turned to me in her underwear.

“I’m really sorry, Julian.” She resumed dressing.

I walked over from my computer and sat on a chair, the towel still gathered around my waist.

I heard her pull her jeans on while I studied a pattern in the grain of the wood floor.

“Hey.”

I looked up. She was clothed. With her hair up and her lipstick gone, I could look at her without the pang of want I had felt in the aisle of the concert hall.

She fixed the white collar of her shirt over her sweater, and crouched down to look me in the eye.

“You’re still good. Don’t worry.”

She patted me on the knee with a significant expression, and walked out the door.

I entered the office. Dr. Boyce, as usual, rose from behind the large mahogany desk and shook my hand, inquired how I was, how the concert had gone. Our professional relationship, he explained, had kept him from attending.

Once we had settled he asked me about the proofs.

I assured him his editors had done a good job, and I had changed nothing.

“Good. The dust jacket is nearly finished; I can show you an advance copy if you’d like, at our next session.”

“Did you design it yourself?”

“No, the publisher hires a graphic artist. I don’t have a lot of say.”

Dr. Boyce folded his arms comfortably and sagged back in his desk chair. He looked at my chin, then my mouth, my nose. When he reached my eyes he said, offhandedly:

“Would you mind telling me why you put your initials in the proofs?”

Part of me was not even surprised.

It had begun with a telephone call from my mother, whom I spent a long time on the phone with the day of the Harcourt decision. At the end, after we had talked, she mentioned that she had received another email from Tomas Sokol.

Tomas Sokol had been my piano teacher from age five through thirteen. He wore a heavy grey beard, laughed easily and long, and could span a twelfth on the keyboard with his right hand. He had introduced the story of *Metamorphosis* to me at age twelve as: “one of the finer works from my country,” mesmerizing me with the sudden appearance of giant insects. His heavy lidded blue eyes closed often when he spoke, the shape of almonds in his broad face.

He became much gruffer during lessons, but as methodically as a carpenter sizing beams, he taught me to play the piano, and impressed me with a certain soulfulness that I, as a child, loved to imitate. To conclude each lesson, he would play me an excerpt or an entire movement from a Beethoven sonata and pause at the end with an unselfconsciously blissful face, his eyes shut and his bushy eyebrows arched high in the air, holding it for a few seconds while the music died. I began to make this face on purpose at the end of every piece I played for him, until he realized what I was doing and told me I mustn't fake it, ever.

“I'm still on his mailing list, I think. It's so sad, he lists these performances: Kentbury Memorial Library, Farrington Community Center, First Congregational Church.”

“You picked a great day for this, Mom.”

“Oh, honey, no, you can’t compare yourself—”

I cut her off: “does he still give lessons?”

“He has to, I think.”

Sitting at my desk in the light of the early evening, I imagined Tomas Sokol as I never had before: stuck in the suburbs where I had grown up and struggling to make a living. His house had been small and his furniture secondhand, and the Steinway in the living room undoubtedly the finest possession in the house, but he had never complained or even joked about it to me.

After I hung up with my mother, I ran through my piece in full on my computer. I leaned back in my chair and stared out the window, as the MIDI previews from Finale ended. The sun had just set. Faded rust and ochre glowed before my eyes, a closed whole tone chord built on A flat. I decided to take a walk.

Past the facades, the gathered brown and black shadows of the buildings without electric signs, the dark disinterest of railings and basement entrances, I wondered if it were possible for me to live as Tomas Sokol did and be happy. I decided it was not.

When I returned I went to the proofs. I had entertained the idea since my last meeting with Dr. Boyce. In several inconspicuous places, I changed the pseudonym

initial to mine: J.K. The Kreger Hall series was prestigious enough that someone in the publishing house might be tempted to leak my name. The Marvelous Synesthete was a better choice than nothing.

Now, I debated what to say to him. I thought of Tomas Sokol playing to an empty public library. I thought of Ingrid Katzmann at her first large-scale debut. I thought of Winston Hannah.

“I thought you weren’t going to go over the proofs.”

“I didn’t. The proof files are set to track changes. It presented me with what you did as soon as I opened the file.”

“But you said you were sending them straight to the publisher.”

“Well, I did send them—Julian, do you really think I’d submit a chapter of my book without looking at it one last time?”

My embarrassment increased.

“Why did you do it?”

“I have every right to do it. It’s a chapter about me.”

“You do,” Dr. Boyce agreed. “I only ask because you did the exact opposite of what you said you wanted to.”

“What I want can change, can’t it?” I hated the childishness in my reaction.

“Julian, you just lied to me.” His exasperation began to show through.

I didn’t respond.

“You ought to know, I changed them back. Your section is anonymous again.”

“You did what?”

I felt strangely outraged and barely stopped myself from rising to my feet.

“Those were my edits, you can’t just delete them!”

“Julian, in my office, I would ask that you not raise your voice to me.”

“And I would ask that you not go behind my back to change my work.”

“I changed your work,” he said, evenly, “in accordance with what you, on record, told me you wanted.”

“I changed my mind.”

“No copy editor would allow a case study where the same individual was referred to by two different sets of initials. If you changed your mind why didn’t you change all of them to J.K.?”

I had nothing to say to that.

“Julian, feeling anxiety over your future is natural.”

“Yeah? You’re old! You’re a success! People respect you, you work in an office, you get a book deal.” I ran out of trappings of success to enumerate to him.

“Some might see that as all the more reason to trust me,” Dr. Boyce said, smugly.

“But it’s a joke! It’s luck! What if you had nothing? Would you still offer me that advice? What if, despite all these degrees and your study and your goddamn—self-assurance, you were a guidance counselor somewhere?”

“Well, I’d be a terrible guidance counselor if I tried to squelch your dreams, wouldn’t I?”

“That’s not—”

“Do you think I don’t know that some people work hard all their lives with no luxury or prestige to show for it?” Dr. Boyce asked me.

“No.”

“I didn’t always work in this office.”

“No, of course not.”

“I certainly didn’t always counsel the people I counsel now,” he said, and sighed.

This note of dissatisfaction in the genial and balanced Dr. Boyce distracted me from my anger.

“What do you mean?”

“This is in the strictest confidence.” Dr. Boyce looked me in the eye. He waited before continuing.

“I wrote this book, Julian, because I’m sick of counseling—present company excluded, of course, which is why I’m telling you.

I wanted to use my mind a different way. Study and writing helps me face my work afresh, to establish some point to all this consoling and coaching.”

He shrugged.

“The reviewers probably won’t compare me to Freud or William James, but I don’t work in any capacity to be like them. I work to do my job and to help.”

“It seems so arbitrary.”

Dr. Boyce’s expansive face settled into a creased beatitude.

“You mean who gets the rewards and who doesn’t?”

“Exactly.”

“It certainly helps if you look for them. Directly.”

I looked away.

“Dr Boyce, I didn’t get the prize.”

“What, the Pulitzer?”

“The Harcourt prize. The school awards it.”

“Oh—you know, I think I’ve heard of it. In a biography, someone who graduated from there won it.”

“Some other kid with a piece with a gimmicky name who worked the system.”

This petulance was only partly true. Hannah could compose very well; he had been in my seminar and we had discussed “Refractions and Diffusions.” I knew I could do better. Hannah, however, could play the part: I had seen him interact with professors and important people and he always seemed to have the right key. With the slightest effort, they were on his side.

Dr.Boyce looked at me.

“Julian, life goes easier if you come to terms with a more expansive idea of reward. I love music. You have spectacular gifts which make you ideally suited for it, synesthesia aside. A day as you, spent in an armchair listening to recordings, would be priceless to me.”

“But—”

“But you want to be Beethoven, and have twenty thousand people come to your funeral because they all revere you.”

“Hah.”

Dr. Boyce cleared his throat.

“Forget about the proofs. We can talk about the proofs later. You want fame, Julian, for whatever reason.”

I agreed.

“Well, then, the system, as you put it, awaits you.”

“But it seems so sordid to engage with it, it has nothing to do with my music, with anything.”

“Then do not expect to become well-known.”

I sighed. “I sound like such a weak little child.”

“On the contrary. In this area, at least, you are on a par with others your age.

And you have far more agency in the here and now than you believe.”

Far before I had even begun writing my first composition for orchestra, at the start of my fourth year, I had gone on the Addison website to look at the archives for the Young Composers Series, to see if I recognized anyone who had graduated before I enrolled. I had read extensively, and familiarized myself with Douglas, Ude, and most of the other composers at work both in the city and abroad. Out of the thirty in the five-week series from five years ago, I had recognized three. Then the year before that, one, and two years prior, zero.

I wondered how Hideki Jun had felt when his agent had proposed the black-and-white poster idea.

“Conducting the premiere of one of your own pieces is like undressing in front of the audience. If you’re lucky, if you haven’t too many other things to worry about, you enjoy the aptness of the exposure. You feel as if you have described something with the perfect phrase.”

I remembered the end of my concert, and I wondered.