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The same dreams that held her aloft before sleep: dreams that promised in deep, seismic exhalations to drop onto a checklist, to launch by 8:00: these are the dreams that would embarrass her to shame the next morning. She'd forget them, willingly, but almighty they're smashed under the cool service of small tasks, and like us all, she's not to be blamed for dropping them altogether.

Handrail

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Though this day – her last – during her fifteen minute break, when she warms her fingers in a lavender scarf to keep them sharp for the job, she does remember one of the thoughts she had last night. She'd been minding the laces of a dusty web writhing in the wind of her ceiling fan, and a while before slipping unconscious she suddenly recalled a lecture spun to her last fall. The professor – thin, fiery, unconfident – had said that the phrase “the valley of the shadow of death” was first conceived in the Tyndale Bible of 1535, and so too was the adjective, “beautiful.”

She spent some time with this before falling to sleep. What word, she wondered, had people used before? What more suitable word is there since? And through what better word, even without attribution, is there to be gained such graceful immortality? She turned at that, rolling upon her stomach and warming her cheek's capillaries to the pillow, and wondered: a life dedicated to bettering just that one adjective should not be such a waste of living.

The wonder she felt – at the invention of a word so right for so many to justify the jagged peculiarities of an otherwise flat, idler’s life – is a wonder to match the wild sensations she sometimes felt at the thought of being merely and completely in possession of her self for the term of a lifespan; or to match the creeping awe of watching a film come to an unexpectedly symmetrical end; or the thrilling suspicion of reading her own story in someone else’s opus. It’s a wonder to overwhelm, comparatively, the ordinary curiosity she would feel later this night – at the wondering of who that man was pushing the keys of her piano shortly after closing.

Today was to be her last as a pianist at the Shriftwood Mall. A last day on the job: the type of day that promises a great reward for doing it again one more time, which is the promise that it won’t ever have to be done again. She’ll leave a little of herself in the work done today; that much she’ll do for spending all fall at Shriftwood.

Last spring she had graduated from Indiana University with all the holly befitting a prodigy of the half decade, and when she plucked this her second diploma from the apish clutch of her dean and demurely extricated herself from his unpolitical embrace, she thought that the ensuing applause came from something more than politeness. In fact, it smacked of something like climax, and when an hour later she skipped to her hatchback and sealed herself shut in the

silence of a small space, she wondered if she walked too fast across that stage. She wondered, too, how adulthood would seem in long, protracted resolution. Like trotting through the gates of heaven, only to sink into its lumpy sofa. For good.

The following week she returned to her childhood home – the left half of a brick duplex – and fifteen minutes into a family event that her mother insisted be formal. So it was that her uncles, her aunts, cousins, and nephews had to encore the formal wear of her graduation ceremony, redoing the ties and broaches that summon so dutifully for every wedding, baptism, and, before he passed, every one of her father’s birthdays at the Shriftwood Lodge (inside the mall). Present was the usual fare – vegetable rolls, buffalo wings, pho, rice noodles, and cubes of pig – along with the dependably new callers and darlings of all of her cousins: skin and clothes wrinkle free, they always sit on the fireplace just so.

To them all she was augustly introduced by her oldest uncle as the “piano player” – she half expected them to dive into their purses and pockets for a tip. The way her uncle said it, though – with the vowels deepened and delicate pauses – was an exaltation rather than a job title, the sweetest compliment from a man who would have to look for Fitzgerald or Langston Hughes on a road map. Her family, all of them, were craftsmen of the hardest order, or young apprentices to that class, and when they massed as they did

for her graduation in a presidential caravan of white Econoline vans, she might have been embarrassed if not for the pride and real admiration she felt for their bona fide hardship. “Pianist,” her mother corrected, and her younger cousins laughed and laughed until their Aunt Lyn dropped a jar of pickled beets.

Later that night, upon discovering the figurine toothbrushes and the awful raspberry toothpaste her mother had kept in the bathroom these last six years, she too giggled.

A week later she applied for the Shriftwood position. Under “Entertainment.” She had polished and sent off her last applications to the finest music conservatories in the western world, and now it was time to drop down and press for cold cash. The rationale given to her for the lower minimum wage was all the tips she’d make, “like a bartender”; but while people pay out their humanity to quench the pity in themselves, only dull metal they’ll pass to slake the pity for others, especially for musicians who, frankly, ought to know better.

She brought sheet music to the interview. She did not want to seem snobbish or overqualified for the catalogue of masterpieces that she kept in the rotation of her wondrous mind. It didn’t matter. The boy who’d be on to better things, whose chore it was just to seat someone at that piano, simply asked his phone, “do you mind?”, scanned her

resume in the pantomime of literacy, and asked if she could do weekends, too.



Weekends, holidays, and midweek evenings she played Berlioz to mom’s pig-wrangling their outraged children, Ligeti to stoners lost in their own time, and Strauss to CPA’s recalibrating their lunch hours to the metronome of his waltz. They placed her high on a stage that looked like a ten-meter diving platform above the Princely Pretzel. Her piano, the same musical furniture that the man with raw fingers would claw at later tonight, was the best that fast food receipts could buy. It was a baby grand, absurdly white and biannually tuned, with keys insensibly cold: as cold to her purposeful fingers as would be to the slender appendages of his tonight.

Her last fifteen minute break expired to the sound of a lost child announcement. She commenced a long, falling rhapsody and while her fingers reanimated the soul of Brahms, she returned to wondering at the eminence of the adjective, “beautiful.”

Its profound utility was unparalleled. Consider its synonyms: she’d once been called “attractive” by a well-meaning friend, but to herself it seemed a forced and rather clinical term that falters awkwardly without the support of “very.” Besides, “attractive” is mostly limited to hearsay and business propositions.

There's "gorgeous," a proud declaration oft-used by the lustful and the desperate, but has by requisite some degree of artifice, by augmentation and geological layers of lip gloss and powder, limited in usage to night clubs and the linguistically bankrupt.

"Pretty," she thought, has become sort of barren, a little too sterile and polite; it's what mediocrity shoots for with a little careful revision.

She eased into Liszt's La Campanella and stretched her back to look down through the masquerade mask of a giant pretzel. From this height, it always appeared that the same people were eating in rounds at the food court. Circling about her were six floors of shops studding the balconies in a twisting kaleidoscope of high contrast adverts, with dark-whiskered models cast in the same deliberate stare, daring the living to wear their jeans skinny. In the middle of the atrium pretended to soar a clump of fake palms, with skirts of fake shag pretending to fall fifty feet below. Dust, in slow motion, descended in the filtered light, and off the six balconies hung perilously the arms and shopping bags of her inadvertent audience. Kids would spit into the volume and just miss; the bulbs of phlegm popping when they hit. A few times she's seen people drop phones, cameras, or video merchandise to explode like supernova across the marbled tile below her – the wreckage to disappear in the

shallow soles of a hundred shoes, as quickly to disappear as the people who dropped them, in a flash of embarrassment. The word "cute," she thought, is too short-lived, and everybody who's willing to smile at it is all too aware that its expiration is nigh. Cute expires in gardens of whiskers and has to be remembered in memorabilia. Cute can't last.

As she was finishing the last measures of Schubert's Impromptu in B, she wondered how these works would play in the Royal Academy. How might they sound again to people who pay admission to hear her? That lady over there, with the lacy handles of shopping bags cinching her flesh: would she applaud the same song when she sits on the hundred dollar pelt of a theater seat? And that curious acceptance letter: will she ever solo at the Barbican, as it promised? Does everyone get that letter?

On the last notes of the Morceaux de Fantaisie she dreamed of an orchestra dropping their instruments to listen only to her. She'd play something she'd written herself, something that would have dropped onto sanctified scraps of paper from the primacy of her own imagination. Something to make the oboes drop and split along their damp columns, to break the clavicles of fallen cellos, and hard knuckle the floor with flutes and split clarinets. Something to still the harp and stand the cymbalist for his roll call in rapture.

Then, when the triangle drops to firm up the silence, she'd begin again something to stop the interruption of an

audience breathing, and numb them from the recall of too many of their cyclical days. She'd play something to displace their stock dreams with plots impossibly anachronistic, something unreasonably glorious. She'd play something to rob them at last of their good and sensible decisions. She'd play something higher. Something insensible. Intoxicating. Something to anaesthetize the wings off of angels, caught unaware.

She held the pedal down on the last note and sent it stroking to the depths of the food court. Then, in the stink of the soy sauce below, she finally began to write that earth-shattering score.

She flipped the music book to begin writing on its back cover. Full of plans to write something she'd only experienced out-of-body, suspended a hundred feet above the high platform, she finished in an hour something proficient. Something academically sound, commonly exemplary, rote and, in the end, something utterly uninspired. She turned to see the backs of the last shoppers of Shriftwood Mall. She blushed. Foolish for her dreams.

She gathered the music, mug and scarf and wondered if her uncle would take her to the airport tomorrow. She wondered if she should bring food on the plane. She wondered how she would get to the conservatory once she landed. She wondered if any of her family could ever take time off and hear her play.

She climbed down the steep steps of the platform like it were a ladder, holding the makeshift splintering handrail by her scarf. She walked the darkened circus high above the Princely Pretzel to the top of the powerless escalator, and slowly descended to the bottom floor. Past the Berry Banana where the bowls of limes are left to age to lemons, brushing through the tables left to bear the residue of countless aborted dialogues, clusters of reddened napkins topped with anticlimactic ellipses; she's always careful not to pop the dropped ketchup packets curled and aching on the floor. The mall is closed now, and all that's left are half-priced pictures of skirmishes, before the ghosts arrive to mop it all up and away. As if by the next morning, nothing happened here.



The security guard was born "Steve," but she calls him Steven, which is the principal reason he had surreptitiously snapped a picture of her with his cell phone tonight. He's a Jim Morrison fan and so can be forgiven for singing, "this is the end," even if he only thought it as she handed in her mall I.D. "You know," he said, "you are pretty good already. You think you have to study it more?"

"If I want an audience," she said, making sure to smile.

"What country is it again?"

“England,” she said.

“Oh, I’ve been there, when I was a kid, but I can only remember the pictures.”

She nodded, smiling, and rummaged furiously through her archives for the appropriate chatter, something off the top, airy, whimsical. She suddenly reddened self-consciously.

He had just opened his mouth to save her when the noise of a piano tapped distantly, high above them.

He looked at her impossibly, in wonder more than suspicion, and was fully in the arc back to his senses when he asked, “who is that?” She shook her head.

He collared his flashlight and marched to the sound, and she closely followed. Stupid, really: next morning when Steve had to file a report with the local police, he had to answer why she was permitted to tag along, and all he could muster was that “the piano was her instrument.”

They climbed the stairs together, twisting and canting their necks upward toward the high platform and the tapping of the piano. It was staccato – or could have been if it were notes on purpose. These, however, came from no scale, no design, no history, no divination or descendant of logic, but simply a flat and hard tapping. There was a discernible interval, but certainly no discernible relationship between

them musically – they fell flat, discordant, irritating, and increasingly louder.

They rounded the high balcony, and as they neared the platform they could see that the interloper had installed himself at the highest notes of the keyboard. He was small, thought Steve, while she would’ve called him towering: this discrepancy mostly blamed, as they came to see, on his preternatural thinness. He was fatally thin, and while she recalled Chopin’s Funeral March, Steve remembered pictures he’d seen at the Holocaust Museum.

A massive jaw, in comic disproportion, his mouth unhinged, dropping below the knobs of his cheekbones. On the skin of his head fell a lock of hair that seemed translucent and frivolous, while both his knotty elbows dropped in ribbons of skin at his sides. Mobile, though, were his fingers, pressing. Randomly: the keys.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Steve, a frivolous request. Likewise the pronouncement that “the mall is closed,” which was both obvious and frivolous. The player was dead but for the tapping of the piano. “Sir, I’m going to ask you,” but as the security guard entered the depths of his protocol, his artificial etiquette fracturing under a swell of nerves and a surreal sense of crisis – and as he groped for his unused and polished revolver – she had already made it halfway up the stairs of the platform.



In the next day's police report Steve noted the lavender scarf she had used for the handrail. A detail the reporting officer thought was superfluous and inappropriately poetic. He was careful to wince when he wrote it, and thought that was enough to atone for that part of the report: "She clutched at the wooden handrail with her lavender scarf." This was handwritten in masculine block letters on the incident description portion of the police form INR-A. He used unnecessary quotation marks to further exculpate himself from that particular line.

Steve maintained that he called for her to come down "with a firm tone of immediate urgency," but in fact she had only heard the soft word, "please."

She had assured him, "it's all right, Steven." She had told him politely, firmly, to "please be quiet," and to back up into the dark alcove of Lia's Boudoir, but this too did not make it into the report, as neither would the tears he would shed presently.

Clutching the wooden handrail with her lavender scarf, she climbed to the top of the ten-meter platform. The man teetering on the piano bench seemed not to notice. Even when she sat next to him, he seemed to notice nothing.

She seemed not to, and didn't notice the lustrous skin on his neck, mannequin taut and smooth, the signature of skin that's had to grow back, nor the liver spots around his ears, nor the ears themselves: thin petals of capillaries, blooming into bruises. She didn't notice the hospital stink of bleach and muscle balm and the light vinegar twist, or his breath sucking over the volume of his mouth. It was lipless. This, too, she didn't notice, but perhaps she should have if she'd known what was good for her. But she was too busy with the notes he was tapping randomly on the highest register.

He suddenly turned to look at her – his grim notice, and if she were not busy studying his thin fingers tapping the keys, she would have noticed his shiny neck filling red.

The notes he tapped begun to soften. She set her fingers on the keyboard, and began to nod her head, her face creased in study. She was whispering.



From the shadowy refuge of Lia's Boudoir, all we would have noticed was the polish of Steve's shoes. We would not have noticed his one hand twisting down the volume of his radio, or the fingers of his other slowly precipitating around the horn of his revolver.

From Steve's vantage, he would have seen only the swept black hair of one head bobbing, and the polished bulb of

the other not moving at all. He would not have seen her fingers lightly moving on the tops of the keys, the movement of sea grass sensing the collapse of a distant submarine shelf. He would not have noticed the whisper of numbers or the parentheses of a smile upon her cheeks. He would, though, have heard the song that began to swell below the random notes. She was playing.

A song that came in swirls, fashioned in deep undulations of the loneliest octaves, and swirling up through the scales of her brightest invention. Her notes at once dropped – but lightly – into some fantastic creature’s private meditation, and then suddenly swooped upward to circle, and hold aloft the stranger’s highest notes.

Then, in the high apostasy of unprecedented, unmatched, original creation, the shrill randomness of his notes was, by her song, transmogrified into a lilt, a song that was for her sense always there.



She had called him Steven, and as the only audience ever to hear this improbable song, he couldn’t be blamed for calling it beautiful – such was the word he had been prepared to avow all that night, that kept his mouth open and steadied his breath all the march to the office of mall security the next morning. But with the boss masked and feigning draconian for the police detective coolly waiting for

answers, he couldn’t be blamed for his embarrassment at the affectation of that word, and instead offered up something else, something handier, something less.