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## Fin, or A Thing Like Music

MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME that music can mean different things each time it is listened to. Sometimes a piece means all the same things it has meant before, but not always. It changes, she told me, depending on where you are in life. “Music is a journey,” she said. “There is a beginning. There’s a middle. There’s an end.” But music never really ends. She said that contradictions don’t always matter in music, that a piece can end and not end because it lingers in your soul and it solidifies into a part of the core of you even if the air you’re breathing gives up all of its vibrations. She told me always to listen to life’s greatest music, the kind that sits in your core.

She poured me tea and the tea was steaming while she said: “No matter what you’re doing, be sure to listen to the music.” She said it *means* something that’s difficult to say with words, that that’s why we have composers. They speak a different kind of language, tell different kinds of stories. She told me that they’re strange, composers. That music is strange, but to never forget to listen.

I’m her strangest son, she told me, so I must listen to the strange ones. I just might understand them.

No matter what I am doing, I must also listen.

It’s hard because I’m bad at multitasking.

I’M WALKING ALONE beneath the drunken sway of tree branches when I hear “Prelude” from Dmitri Shostakovich’s suite titled *The Gadfly*. Leaves fall in front of and behind me. The prelude gives new form to the tension of that falling, to that battle between where the leaves are and where gravity is pulling them, and I know that we are all falling leaves and that this music is speaking about all of us—but the falling of the leaves is easier to think about than the ways in which we fall, so I watch these leaves and I am silent.

The park is quiet except for “Prelude” from *The Gadfly* and the footfalls of people I don’t know.

There are people out walking, running, walking their dogs, running their children. *Faster*, one mother says, and her voice pierces *The Gadfly*

and the footfalls of all the others. *You will not beat your time unless you run faster.* I see her child run faster and I hear her footsteps. I wonder what her time means to the child, and what it means to the mother. I am sure the meanings are not the same.

The violins swell, close to a climax, and the mother is quiet again. The high strings are getting ready to meet God, but they can't quite contain the complexity of those implications. They're oozing with compassion and trepidation and smiles and teardrops. I look for the source of the music, but I cannot find it.

My heart is warm. It's beating.

The music gets louder, and I trip on a root. I'm unsure when it was I'd left the concrete trail, but I'm under a tree now, so I guess I had made that decision at some point. I land on my hands and pain shoots through my wrists. *Shit, I think. I need those.*

It feels like I landed on an acorn. I check my hands. I'd landed on an acorn.

"Are you okay?"

I look around. "Who said that?" I ask. "I mean, no, I'm not, but who said that?"

*La, la la laaa, la-la,* say the violins. They're swelling and they glisten. The violinists are asking God and the cosmos to give me happiness, special wellsprings of joy meant just for me. They are begging with their violins and I do not believe they will succeed, but at least they try. I feel honored that they try for me.

He's here, in front of me, the man who asked if I was okay. The music is so loud, but I'm almost not hearing it because I'm looking at him and I'm not good at multitasking.

He offers me his hand. I take it. The acorn falls away at his touch. It only leaves a small dent in my palm. His fingers would make him a good pianist, but I do not believe he plays. He does not have music in his eyes, in the rhythm of his breathing. His hair is the color of the leaves that are rotting on the ground, which is oddly a very beautiful color for hair.

He pulls me until I am standing, and he braces me for that beautiful and shifting half second during which the world is rolling about beneath you and you're discovering once more how to balance.

You've felt it before. You've balanced.

This is when we become friends.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN'S "Étude No. 5 in E Minor" from his *Études*, Opus 25 is playing while we drive to the coffeeshop. Fin is laughing about something I just said. I have no idea what I just said. I like seeing him laughing. I think back to the acorn falling when he took my hand in the park beneath the oak trees, and I smile. He won't ever know why.

His face creases when he smiles, and my heart creases in response. He smells like the pittosporum my mother sprayed with lemons and oranges the time I had a cough and there was really nice weather out.

I look at him and hear the notes clashing around maniacally. Listening to them I feel like I've been bitten by some strange, contagious clown and now I've caught its silly. I'm grinning at him. He sees; his cheeks redden and he looks away. I feel my whole face. It's all aflame. I'm happy.

I think I'm in something closer to love than infatuation, but that's exactly what someone who's infatuated would tell themselves. I know that. I don't want to know it, but I know it.

We get out of the car and I still hear the music. It doesn't leave me.

My heart is very warm. It's writhing and my chest tingles.

He opens the door for me. I smile and the dissonance dissipates from the clashing piano keys and the pedal is pressed and Chopin's notes are flowing into and out of each other. The piece sounds like a glimmering river or a cake or gemstones, something really sweet and precious. I think this music would smell like sugar, if music could have a smell. I think it would smell like the kind that wouldn't give me a stomachache.

We tell the barista what we want. We both want coffee. We don't put much in our cups besides coffee. The things like sugar and cream are the things we don't need, because we've already got this music. They're basically the same things.

I'm not sure he has the music. I guess I don't know his reasons, why he's okay with putting so little in his coffee. He must have another source of sweetness. I'm not sure it's me. I doubt I am his music, actually. I tell myself I am okay with that, but if I could see myself I would know that I am lying.

The notes are flowing peacefully alongside one another, and there is no dissonance for the moment. The étude is lovely.

I look at our coffees. Steam is coming off of them. They're still scalding, but I sip mine anyway because I'm with him and my tongue can burn when I'm with him and I won't care.

He bought me my coffee. He never lets me pay, and I'm always awkwardly grateful, because I don't have a job right now, and I'm an artist, so I'm not fucked, really, but everyone thinks I'm fucked so I do, too, sometimes—and being fucked is stressful but coffee doesn't have to be. Not when it's a gift from a boy with dead-leaf hair. The boy who is not an artist and will never be fucked.

My father summed things up succinctly a long time ago: "Striving to be an artist," he told me, "is striving to be fucked." My mother didn't like this, and I hope that he's a liar. Sometimes I wonder if she feels like she's fucked, but I don't think she does.

The notes Chopin wrote start clashing again. They're bouncing around in the air and the clanging makes me remember why its nickname is "Wrong Note." There is a sprinting line of notes that will never allow these clashing moments to be quiet or feel any peace at all, not now, and not when they are only remembered.

"Are you hearing this?" I ask Fin.

"Hearing what?" he says. "The news?"

His eyes are like the coldest frozen rivers.

The television is on. People are talking about people with power and people who need power and people who think they have power. They don't spend much time on the people who need power.

His ice-whimsy eyes find the screen. "I'm kind of worried," he says.

I nod, yes, but I am distracted. The performer is making a gorgeous crescendo and then lets the notes die on their own. There is no mercy; she does not release the pedal.

I look around and cannot find the pianist.

"I am, too," I tell him. I am worried, but I don't think we're worried about the same things. Not in this moment.

I take in the sight of him. His stubble, the shape of his jaw, his lips, his eyes, the scent of him and the curve of his eyebrows. Each hair is beautiful, much more so than dead leaves. They've distilled all of the dead leaves' beauty.

What I am worried about is losing these pieces of him, and I'm not good at multitasking, so I can't worry about what he is worried about right now. It's just too much to worry about.

I'M WATCHING THE RAIN fall. Edward Elgar's cello concerto is reverberating through my mind. I no longer believe this music exists outside of me. Not as music. As a surge of lightning, maybe, it exists.

Or as a broken limb. A funeral. But the music itself is within me and now I am sure of that.

Fin is sleeping beside me. His curtains are open. His chest rises. The rain falls. His chest, I mean. His chest falls. I love the rain.

He rolls over, onto the frilly pillow that rests beside and then beneath his sparsely-haired stomach, and the pillow pushes his breath out of him. I think maybe he's waking up but he stays asleep.

I open the window and a gust comes in. It's cold. It carries flecks of rain that spatter my face and neck and chest. It touches the wooden floor and the green quilt on Fin's bed. It doesn't wet the frilly pillow, but it gathers on Fin's back and makes him sparkle and cold, turns him from flesh to an ice sculpture. It confirms my belief that he is, indeed, an art piece.

Thunder crashes and he shivers, clutches the pillow. I close the window. If I were alone I would leave it open. This rain is one of the kinds of beauty worth shivering for. The shiver might be part of the beauty, but I don't know. I'm an artist.

I take my raincoat. I take my rubber boots. I take my keys and I leave.

I am careful not to slam the door.

THE RAIN IS FALLING and pooling in the hood of my raincoat. I think about Fin, asleep in his bed. I love his house. It's so open to the world. I can see the rain so well when it's raining. Sometimes I can feel rain when it's not raining. His is a rainy house by default.

Elgar's concerto sounds like teardrops and longing, and I wonder why my heart plays this piece, and why it means such sad things in this moment.

There's a crow on the branch of a tree behind Fin's house. It's staring at me and cawing. Neither of us mind getting rained on.

I think about Fin, how he wants to travel. He's told me a little bit about it. He loves Brazil. When he graduates he's moving there, after he works on a campaign. Gubernatorial. He loves politics and dogs.

I look up and feel the raindrops. They land on my lips: sky kisses. Elgar kisses. I empty the hood of my raincoat. It's gotten much too heavy.

The door opens, and there's Fin, shirtless, sporting the kind of bed-head that makes me want to smile before I remember that this beautiful God is better than me. I might lose him. I *will* lose him. If he were not moving to Brazil he would still be better than me. I imagine him

loving me sometimes and I laugh, because the thought is funny. It's ridiculous.

The impulse to smile does not last long.

I cry, and he cannot tell. I am not wearing the hood of my raincoat; it is being filled with water once more. Fin does not know me well enough to tell when I am crying when my tears blend in with the world. Perhaps he will never know me well enough. Perhaps the rain will always be my camouflage, for as long as we last together. It's so early for us. It might be too early to tell, for sure, how long we will be together—but it's not too early to guess.

He's moving to Brazil.

"What are you doing?" he asks me, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

I force myself to smile. He doesn't know me well enough to distinguish between my smiles. I am honest and smile the one that means I'm hurting, because to him it means nothing different than any other smile could possibly mean. I smile because there are daggers inside of me, and I have to respond somehow. There is no response that will fix the problem, so I might as well smile. It's as logical as anything else.

It almost feels nice, smiling, and I'm not sure if it's the honesty or the deception that's so pleasant.

"I'm standing in the rain," I say. "And thinking about Elgar." I'm not any good at multitasking.

He doesn't know what Elgar means to me. He's never asked and I've never told him.

My friend introduced the concerto to me during freshman year. I cried to it a few times. I thought it was beautiful. I knew so little about music; I still think it is beautiful. In it, sometimes, I hear growth. I hear joy like golden lights and sadness like the ringing of a death knell: I hear hints of the duality of emotions we can contain within ourselves. It's the concerto that taught me how to smile while I cry, which I appreciate, because it makes me feel like I can multitask.

I've learned that everyone's wounded.

I'm a Gemini. I should probably be much better at multitasking, because Gemini is the Twin constellation. There are basically two of me, according to God, or whoever came up with astrology if it wasn't Him, and I still cannot multitask.

*Be like Elgar*, the Twin constellation whispers at me, sometimes. *Act like a Gemini*.

Fin knows none of this, which doesn't surprise me much because

he's a Sagittarius so he doesn't need me to be happy. I'm left standing in the rain, alone save my second soul.

"Who do you see when you look at me?"—I will never, ever ask Fin. I will also never ask my parents. I am afraid to hear their answers, and I know them already, anyway. They don't see me. They see someone else who shares the same body.

The sounds in my head never make it past the first movement. They dwell on the opening chords of the concerto, and I shiver, but not from the raindrops.

WE'RE BARRELING DOWN the road at eighty miles an hour, on the side of a mountain, and Samuel Barber's *Cello Concerto in A Minor*, Opus 22 is sounding in my head and rattling my bones.

"Slow down," I say. "The road is bending."

These notes are wild. They are insane.

"The road is not bending," he says.

"Slow down," I say. I laugh to try to seem like maybe I'm joking and I'm cool and brave and reckless and wild. He knows that none of this is true.

The mountain expands and contracts. Barber's concerto pulses.

"The mountain is breathing," I tell him.

"The mountain can't breathe," he says. "It's a mountain."

"I swear to God!"

"You're an atheist."

Colors are not working. They're strange and vivid and dull, and I've never felt more conflicted about anything than I feel now, about these colors.

We miss the road and are barreling through the air and I scream "Fin!" and then "What the fuck!"

We land on the road again and Fin says, "Dude, calm down! How much did you eat?"

I pull my fingers apart and imagine the edible between them. I force the space between my fingers to expand and contract until the edible, I think, would fit nicely, but it keeps changing shapes, growing and shrinking—so I think it's working. It looks like it's breathing.

"It is a mountain," I tell him, because the edible breathes and the mountain breathes and so breathing things must be mountains. "How have we believed we breathe for so many years, Fin? We can't be mountains. We'd know if we were, right?"

“Oh, God,” he says. He laughs at me and I feel like the most betrayed mountain. He’s mining me, hollowing me out with that laughter. My existence is comedic and ridiculous, if I am really a person and not a mountain—and it’s even worse if I am a mountain. I’m still not sure. If I’m a mountain I’m truly absurd, the world’s grandest abomination. I cannot admit this to Fin.

“Maybe I’m a mountain, then,” I tell him. My arms are crossed over my chest, which moves but not because I’m breathing.

“Let’s get you home,” he says.

He drives off the edge of a mountain much larger than I am and we’re in the clouds and I scream and he slaps me, hard, and I’m not bleeding, but I wish I was, and I’m not crying, but I wish I was.

We land and the big mountain breathes to embrace us.

The mountain and I are the only ones who get the joke.

SAMUEL BARBER’S concerto is approaching the end of the first movement when we reach Fin’s house. The notes are still insane. Fin holds my hand and his skin is burning. “Ow!” I say. He just says, “Come on!” He doesn’t let go.

“Fin” means “end” in music. The composers never write out the rest of his name. Finniard, maybe. I can’t remember, this high.

He walks out of the room and then is there in front of me in the same instant. I hear him in the kitchen but he is staring at me from beside the fireplace. I look him dead in the eye while the music is thrashing about and breaking things like a naughty child and I ask him: “When are you leaving me?”

“What?” he says. He glares at me from the fireplace, and I hear him humming in the kitchen. He hates these questions, so I never ask him anymore, but I’m high, so I have a pass this time.

“When are you forgetting me?”

I wait much too long and I think he’s crying. I think I’m crying with him. Wisps of smoke are coming off of both of us.

“When will you stop feeling anything when you see my face or hear my name?”

His hand is covering his mouth and his eyes are red. His cheeks glisten and drops roll onto and off of them. I hate making him leak like this but I have to keep going and I’m glad he feels *something*. I was worried he did not feel anything for me.

I ask: “When will I forget the music you’ve brought into my life?”



The Fin who had gone to the kitchen walks into the room and I can tell that he is *solid*, he is the real Fin. The Fin in front of me, I see now, is smoke and ash suspended. He dissipates, disperses, floats off to Brazil. He is gone and he is happy there. A pile of soot and his memory are the only things he leaves behind for me, and I worry that this is the truest warning I will receive.

I gasp and stare at the Fin from the kitchen.

“You’re *really* messed up,” this Fin tells me.

“You didn’t hear me,” I say to him. “You heard none of it!”

He looks at me like I am still a mountain.

“That wasn’t you I was talking to,” I say to him. I am confused. Barber is confused. We listen to his notes, composer and I, two artists. We would both be fucked, but he’s dead, so I guess he’s reached his limit. I’m still finding mine.

I say to Fin: “I saw you and you were smoke.”

“What are you talking about?” he asks me. “I just went to get a rag to wipe your face with.” He dabs at me and my skin is frozen where he touches it. He says, “I wasn’t smoke. Take off your shirt,” and he starts dabbing me there, everywhere. I am dripping sweat on his pretty floor.

“You didn’t hear me,” I say to him. “You’ve never heard me.” A teardrop falls and mixes with my sweat and the dirt and dust. I imagine the splashing. My eyes are closed.

“Sploosh,” I whisper.

“You’re really fucked up,” Fin tells me, but he doesn’t need to be—because I’ve always known that.

Barber’s concerto makes dissonances that the composer never could have intended, unless he was going mad. I try to listen to the music like my mother told me to, but when I stop trying I hear it just as clearly. The effort does nothing.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me.

“I’m an artist,” I say. “And I’m horrible at multitasking.”

He looks at me for a second and I know that he’s confused but I say nothing to give him clarity. If I had clarity to share, I’d share it, but no one has ever given me any clarity, so there. I am silent.

I wish that I would bleed. I want him to slap me and leave me and let me be miserable because that’s what I am afraid of most, and I hate being afraid because fear takes up much too much of my attention, and I cannot multitask.

Barber's concerto wants to rip at my skin but I don't let it. *You're music*, I think at it. *Just be music*. Then I ask it, *How are you so good at multitasking?* because I think that maybe I can learn.

Fin is still dabbing at me. I am shiny and slick. He doesn't really love me.

SAMUEL BARBER PLAYS in my mind for days. The second movement, then the first, then a bit from the third, then back to the first. The order is sporadic and unpredictable, and I want to ask Fin again when he will forget me but I am not high and I do not have a pass.

He is not smoke anymore. He is flesh and bone, dead, rotting-leaf hair, and I cannot make this real Fin cry.

He slices an orange, eats a piece. He offers me some but I am busy noticing the way the room is cold but my lips are not, and I am wondering if his lips are warm or cold in this moment. I almost have the gall to find out, but I know where I belong, and it is not pressed against his lips.

HE IS ON TOP of me, kissing my neck like I matter. I am arching my body and I hope that it's beautiful. I did ballet for a year. I'm afraid it wasn't long enough to learn beauty or grace, to make myself adequate for him. But that's as long as I did ballet.

Barber is spelling words that make no sense with Fin inside of me. Not much makes sense when he's inside of me.

*When will you find someone who deserves you?*

I am too afraid to ask him. If I had a pass I still would not ask. I am afraid he hasn't realized exactly what I do and don't deserve. I am afraid he will realize that I don't deserve him.

*Who do you think you love when you think you love me?*

One string on the cello plays uncomfortable dissonances with another as the music expands. It glints, solid light, flint rock sharpened to a deadly point and gleaming.

Fin is rocking his bed through me. His body tenses. He gasps as he finishes. Kisses me one last time. Pulls out of me and gets off of me. He walks to the bathroom. He leaves the door open and whistles and I can hear him pissing.

I lay there, with a new part of him that he left behind still inside of me.

After he finishes, we're done. That's how it works. He asked me, the first time: "Do you want to finish?" I said no. He hasn't asked me since

then, and I wouldn't tell him if I changed my mind. I'm not one of the people finishing is meant for. There are stations we can occupy in this world, varying heights in a hierarchy in which we belong, and my place is much below his. I do not deserve to finish. I do not deserve him.

I tell him none of this because I am terrified.

That first time, I had smiled and pushed him off of me, stopped his lips from finding a new place to kiss, and asked him if he wanted pasta or a sandwich. I cooked us pasta because he didn't want a sandwich.

Lying in his bed, I can smell him everywhere. He's in the sheets, on the pillow. He's on my neck. I'm covered in his scent and the music in my head is changing. The minor melodies are growing still and quiet. Barber is dying.

"Do you want pizza?" I ask him, because we have one, frozen.

He makes a face from the bathroom. The face means "No," but he squints like he's sorry, so I assume that means he wants me to prepare something more taxing than frozen pizza. I ask him what he wants to eat but I don't hear his answer because the music in my mind is morphing into a ferocious symphony by a composer I've never heard before, and then it's almost the quietest nothing I've thought of in a long, long time.

"Do you hear that?" I ask him. "It's finally getting quieter."

He says, "Hear what?" and I can hear him, every movement he makes, his breathing, I can hear the beating of his heart, because the notes are far away, the melodies distant, quiet.

"Never mind." I knew he never heard the music.

I ask him to tell me what he wants to eat once more, and I get out of bed, carrying that new piece of him inside of me. I walk to the pantry then hide my tears in the boiling water, and I have to smile while they fall—I learned this from Elgar—because these might be the only pieces of me he retains. I imagine my tears merging with the pasta, becoming sustenance for Fin, becoming a part of his flesh. I imagine him carrying them forever. Long after he's forgotten all about me, he will have my teardrops.

I know that the tears will evaporate as steam in the heat, or descend into the sewer when I drain the pasta. He'll be left only the salt of my brokenness, once the rest of it, the substance, is gone.

That is all I could ever really have hoped to give him. I've never managed to give him any other piece of me. I could never make him hear what I hear when I see him, when I am near him. I could never

show him any semblance of the melodies he's given me. He's not an artist, he isn't fucked, and yet he's graced me with so much that an artist strives to give.

And here I am, an artist, and I can't give him a thing like music. I can't make myself deserve his attention.

The music has stopped sounding and my heart is no longer warm. I look up from my pot of pasta and diminishing teardrops and I try to listen, but even in this break in the music I cannot hear any sign of Fin's presence.

It is a silence that destroys me.

THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME I missed Fin's music. I miss it often, but I am glad I can think of new things now.

My mother told me that music is never-ending. I suppose that was a lie. She did not prepare me for this silence. It hurts, sometimes, it's so quiet—but it is a good thing, the silence. I hope it is a good thing.

Silence is what we need to feel the grooves carved into us by sound. In silence we can see who we've become in response to life's music. I am still not sure if I am better or worse after Fin's music spent time inside of me, but at least I am getting to know myself.

It's too hard to know ourselves when life is singing in our ears.

We're too distracted.

We're all so bad at multitasking.