

Intermezzo

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Intermezzo is an ekphrastic text that seeks to synthesize the painterly musical language of Claude Debussy's *Préludes* for piano in the form of a novel. This commentary gives some context to Debussy as a composer, offers a rationale for the elements of the music affecting a listener that seemed most pertinent for an apparatus against which to write a novel, and then a description of these with explanation on how they are transposed into text.

The *Préludes*, composed between and 1909-1913, comprises a set of twenty-four short pieces, written in two volumes numbered one to twelve. For clarity those in Book I are referred to as I-XII and those in Book II as XIII to XIV. Each is about the length of a modern popular song—averaging a little over three minutes in length each. They embrace, in part, a tradition of preludes in piano music, but are not written in all twenty-four major and minor keys signatures, unlike Bach's or Chopin's, and do not exhibit an easily discernible overall structure. Indeed, some pieces were intended to be enjoyed by the player, as if in some reverie on their own. Debussy never performed his *Préludes* as a cycle, and in their first public performance in 1910 Debussy played I, II, X and XI from Book I, and subsequent performances were of groups or individual preludes (Walsh 2018).

Each prelude is numbered on the musical score, but then appended with a title (listed in Table 1 on page 13), drawn mainly from literary sources, which provides a clue as to the image Debussy was seeking to evoke. The placing of the title at the end was to allow the listener to hear the music unaffected by a prescribed image or description. He had broad musical tastes, from music hall to folk, ballet and non-Western European influences (Bruhn 2010); his artistic milieu included poets, other composers, novelists, playwrights, poets, painters and sculptors, and his interests extended to film, illustration and photography and his interests inspired both his composition and fuelled the subsequent analysis by others of his music. (Walsh 2018) The titles are not included in the text of *Intermezzo*; this was decided on with consideration of the reader who might be distracted, misled, or confused by them. A similar thought process was

applied to choosing the musical elements for analysis; those which would only be apparent to music scholars with the musical score in front of them have been avoided. The imagery of the titles does have relevance to the analysis of the music, and where and how it affects the text is described in the section **Formulaic Openings**, below.

As a composer Debussy has remained popular in concert and film score alike for over a century, yet evades a single, concrete analysis of how the quintessential aspects of his music operate at the theoretical level (Trezise 2003). As I am not a musicologist, I am not seeking to offer a fresh analysis of Debussy's music, nor to translate the musical score to words, as if there were a correlation from one grammar to another, note-to-word, bar-to-phrase, or melody to sentence. This approach would be fraught with difficulties, not least because Debussy was French and I am writing a novel in English. Patel (2008) outlines a more modern study which utilises the normalised Pairwise Variability index, which is a measurement of the difference in length between one syllable and the next in language. Stresses from a set of English and French texts were compared against those in a set of English and French compositions and found the stresses in music correlated with the composer's mother tongue. English is stress-timed and French is syllable-timed. Debussy himself comments that Wagner's success was due to being able to write both music and words; that rhythmic prose are more easily matched to music, and that "real poetry has its own rhythms." (Jarocinski 1991: 111). There is no attempt made in *Intermezzo* to match the actual rhythms in the music to the text, although due care is given to making the text sound lyrical.

These preludes are not tone poems, although some have performance instructions that imply a dramatic action—to play the opening to VI 'like walking in snow', for example—there is no unfolding narrative, but a set of discrete musical images. While there is variation between the preludes, there are also elements that are quintessential to the composer's sound. The broad approach taken, akin to Mallarme's symbolist intention, is to write the effect of the music rather than an impression of the thing itself. It is an approach based on an analysis of effects of those

quintessential elements. The effects chosen to synthesize the text in *Intermezzo* are those which are readily identifiable by most listeners to Debussy's music, even if they lack the technical vocabulary to name their grammatical parts.

Each prelude is referred to by its number throughout this commentary, using Roman numerals (I to XXIV), and corresponds with a chapter of the same number in the novel. There is a Table of Analysis (Table 3) at the end which summarises how each of the twenty-four *Préludes* are represented. This commentary presents eight categories that inform the writing of *Intermezzo* Formulaic Openings, Scale, Octatonic Content, Dynamic Range, Metre, Tempo, Note Density and Emotion with data gained from analyses in various studies (Forte 1991, Gabrielsson and Lindström 2010, Hepokoski 1984, Pomeroy 2003 and Bruhn 2010) of Debussy, or from reading the score of itself. Before turning to these, the following section gives some context to Debussy and his music.

Colours and Rhythmicised time

Debussy's oft-quoted description of music as "colours and rhythmicised time", which Trezise notes as being said "in the context of rebutting formal stereotypes" (Trezise 2003: 233) touches neatly on three aspects of Debussy's art, two of which are immediately apparent to the majority of listeners: his use of *harmonic colour* and his *erosion of a sense of metre*. The third is his *rebuttal of traditional stereotypes* of musical form, underlined in his deliberate and vocal divergence from the traditional constraints of musical composition. It should be noted that he did employ traditional forms, such as tertiary (in prelude I), or rondo, and enjoyed composing dance (such as XII and XV), but many larger forms are imperceptible without a score, and therefore opaque to the average listener; or they are altered, such as the waltz in prelude I, which is surely too slow to dance to.

Pomeroy (2003) notes Debussy bemoaned the influence of earlier composers, such as Wagner and Beethoven, while admiring others, such as Bach and Palestrina. He departed from

functional harmony and introduced bitonal aspects to his music yet did not go as far as others, such as Bartok or Stravinsky, down the atonal road and remained “rooted in triadic consonance and the principle of monotonicity.” (Pomeroy 2003: 155) The high prevalence of chromatic, whole tone, and octatonic content—attended to below—does not mean that major and minor scales are retired from use, but rather used within a broad scalar palette.

Bitonality (outside of the scalar consideration) is most clearly depicted in preludes XIII and XXIV, where Debussy has the left hand on white keys and the right hand on black. This arrangement mimics the harmony of Stravinsky’s *Petruska*, and *Firebird* ballets, which Debussy quotes in XIII. In *Intermezzo* the bitonal scoring is interpreted as two simultaneous narratives arranged in a pair, much like a piano score. A pianist is familiar and comfortable with reading two lines of information at once, but this is a novel device for a non-musician used to reading only text. Several attempts to present this bitonal aspect were discarded. These included printing one narrative on the folio and the other on verso pages, but were found to cause problems in predicting the reading order of the story as a whole. Other textual layouts that involved something akin to the above, but with multiple voices, were abandoned—the question of how to read more than two lines of text (accepting that an organist, for example, can read three or four staves at a time) proved too vexing and ultimately dissatisfying to the reader. Other devices, such as symbols within the text were dropped, as it was difficult to predict how these were interpreted and could appear as gimmicks or prove frustrating. The text on the page alternates in font weight and spacing to allow the eye to scan the lines, or to attempt to read both together.

The schema that worked was:

This is the first line of text relating to the right hand

The left hand’s first line of text is written here.

This is the second line of text relating to the right hand

The left hand’s second line of text is written here.

Analysing Debussy using the language of functional harmony (i.e. tonic, dominant, sub-dominant) might have provided cues to points of plot tension and release: beginning at a point of stability and moving to a harmonic distance, then a tension and climax, then return. While these can be identified by musicologists through close analysis of a score (Bruhn 2010), it is the tonal colours and fragmented metrical dissolutions that are most apparent to a listener. Indeed, proficient musicians can struggle to provide structural meaning to Debussy's harmonic colours, even though they can detect their presence and describe their effect (Pomeroy 2003).

While within the emerging dichotomy of functional/tonal and effectual/atonal music Debussy might be viewed as a product of his times, it is equally the case that he fully understood the bringing together of the tonal and atonal elements of his craft and was seeking to find an aesthetic to present these together. This distinction is important because a musical work that is entirely atonal from beginning to end might evoke state of disruption throughout its duration, and a text seeking to emulate this music would be bound to emulate the same degree of disruptive feeling.

Viewing music in its broader context with other arts, we find Debussy was a contemporary of the Impressionists (Jarocinski 1976), but it would be a gross oversimplification to present a slideshow of Monet's *Waterlilies* accompanied by Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* and declare him to have the same artistic intentions. He was a friend of Mallarmé and wrote his opera *Pelleas and Mellisande* upon a play by Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian Symbolist who attended the same school as Rodenbach, author of *Brugge-la-Morte*. All these men attended Mallarmé's Tuesday group. Jarocinski argues Debussy was a Symbolist, not an Impressionist (Jarocinski 1976). With his literary associations in mind, prior to utilising Debussy's *Préludes* as the single underpinning structure for *Intermezzo*, Debussy's opera *Pelléas and Mélisande* was chosen as a starting point as it offered an insight into the type of drama the composer might be drawn to.

The dream-like quality of *Pelléas*, in both its subject matter and music, contains limited action and considerable dynamic restraint (it eventually rises to *ff*—very loud—in act IV); it murmurs, whispers and suggests, rather than declares, the characters seemingly motivated by unseen forces. The musical backdrop evokes emotion from the listener, analogous to Roland Barthes' writerly text, rather than presenting the plot to them in arias and Wagnerian *leit motifs*. The physical acting out of the work likewise provides sparse information—the initial performance was behind a silk gauze—and full of symbolic gestures. For example, Pélleas embraces Mellisande's hair as she lets it tumble down a tower in a gesture Freudians would take delight in analysing. This same sense of obfuscation and mystery occurs in *Brugue-la-Morte*, where the mourning Hugues seeks to replace his deceased wife with a lookalike. These doppelgängers are symbolic of each other, neither fully sign nor signified, but develop a resonance, where one is captured by the other. The two-way transmission has a harmonic resonance to it. Hugues kept a shrine to his wife in his home, one that is not to be disturbed. Preserved within it are her possessions and lock of his wife's hair in a case, perhaps as a token of affection, remembrance and grief, but also a symbol of control. This latter interpretation brings to mind John Fowles' lepidopterologist in *The Collector*, but more pertinently Alan Hollinghurst's Edward Manners in *A Folding Star* where he steals the underwear from Luc, the young man who is the object of his affections. Modulating and controlling the symbol is, for the abusive Manners, metonymic of controlling the boy.

Hollinghurst's writing (in *A Folding Star* and other works, such as *The Swimming Pool Library* or *The Line of Beauty* that carry a similar theme of stalking and sexual predation) has a florid and illuminated beauty which renders the dark elements all the more sinister.

Pomeroy (2003) draws a comparison between Debussy's artistic style and Art Nouveau, with its ornate and highly decorative figures filling the images, recalling the baroque arabesques of Bach and Palestrina and a descriptive, decorative music. In *A Folding Star* that duality of dark and light, beauty and horror, intensifies the reader's discomfort in looking through the tight,

distorted focus of Manners lens on Luc. In *Intermezzo*, it is the piano that is both totem and taboo, symbolising Mr Porter's far-reaching hold over Duncan, Harriet's aspirations, Muse's control, and Conrad's wealth and power. The symbology of hair is borrowed in Duncan's flowing locks as a young man and in Harriet's and Clara's; all three exhibit moments of musical freedom expressed in the movement of their hair. Here, it is worth noting that the symbols in *Intermezzo* are not tied to a single character, but are instead designed to provoke a recall of memory in the reader. An example being 'strawberry' which occurs in Duncan's piano lesson (Chapter IX) and then variously in a taxi with Lauren (Chapter XXI), or as the scent of Véronique's lip gloss (Chapter XVIII). The effect produced on the reader is not intended to be a rigid or prescriptive symbol of a single meaning, but instead, like Debussy's atmospheric backdrop to *Pelléas*, left open to interpretation and discovery.

Arthur Rackham's work perhaps appealed to Debussy because he sits on the cusp between high art and illustration, but also because his style— comprising lyrical ink drawings with watercolour washes— contains the rhythm of line and the harmony of colour. His art was the inspiration for at least three of the preludes (in XI: *La danse de Puck*, XVI: *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*, and XX: *Ondine*). Rackham's colour washes seem metaphoric of Boyd Pomeroy's (2003) chordal colour analysis of Debussy's music, his pen lines the monophonic lines in Hepokoski's Formulaic Openings (Hepokoski 1984). Both of these studies are utilised to synthesize the text in *Intermezzo* and are discussed below.

That Debussy loved pictures almost as much as music is well documented, less so is his view that film was the key to the renewal of music (McFarland 2004). This dialogue of image and music is underlined in a review Debussy wrote in the magazine *Gil Blas* in 1903 of a concert performance of Wagner: "It's disconcerting and not at all decorative... I would dare to suggest cinematography as a means of animation, we've seen in a recent *drame a' l'ambigu* how powerfully cinema can amplify the emotional content" (Smith, 1973: 66). In a reversal of how cinema functions today, Debussy is suggesting that the images accompany and amplify a

musical performance, in other words a 'filmtrack', rather than a soundtrack. Elsewhere, Smith (1973) makes a comparison of film to Monet's 'Haystacks' and 'Nymphéas', in the sense of rapidly executed series of paintings of the same subject in changing light conditions. Monet's other sequences 'Mornings on the Seine' and 'Rouen Cathedral' bring to mind *XIII* and *X*. These constructions, firstly a soundtrack with a visual elements forming a pause or fermata, or secondly a series of images requiring the viewer to pause and seek the subtle changes in light, have a similar construction to the pauses Hepokoski (1984) identifies in his 'Formulaic Openings' that arrest the onward movement of the music.

Despite the allusions to literature and visual images, Debussy disliked providing concrete narrative descriptions to his music, the risk being that they be taken too literally. His desire, expressed in correspondence, was to "sing his inner landscape" (Jarocinski 1976: 118), but this needs to be viewed in the context of another artistic cusp of the move from representational to abstract art. The abstraction between the musical text and that of *Intermezzo* is in the layer of experience. If Debussy's *Préludes* had been inspired by twenty-four poems, a method that ignored the listener experience would be akin to simply re-printing the poems. This layer of abstraction produces an ekphrasis upon an ekphrasis.

The titles are useful in gaining insight into how Debussy hears his own music, and can prevent a misinterpretation. An arpeggiating figure of five or six notes that rotates around a tonal centre, ebbing and flowing either side in a harmonic/rhythmic pendulum, could invoke the feeling of movement of a tidal sea; or the ripple of water; or the wind and moon on these waters, or the metronome, swinging in space that the composer used while writing. There is a danger that an image is misheard. The ill-reception of his orchestral work *La Mer* at its premiere being a case in point. The title clearly signified an image in the critics' minds that the music did not form a pleasing accompaniment to. Henry Krehbiel's review with his "daubs of colour" as a description for Debussy's harmonic gestures, was not a compliment (Leary and Smith 1955: 15). There is likewise a danger in writing a text which has layers of description and symbolism, as

experimental forms, that the reader can become lost, and this has been a constant challenge in the various versions of the text of *Intermezzo*. Yet the ambiguity also seems imperative to honour Debussy's music. As Walsh writes, explaining the title of *la mer*:

Just as festivities leave as certain platonic impression on our mental retina, aside from the specifics of the event itself, so music seems able to go directly to that retina without passing through the event, which may be attached to it afterwards as a kind of excuse or explanation. (Walsh 2018: 140)

This novel, seeking to interpret Debussy's *Préludes* as a novel therefore needs to perform the dual function of conveying the event and taking a direct path to the retina. The intention throughout is to have the novel follow a set of musical analyses. These have been reduced and refined in the course of writing to arrive at the list presented below, which is followed by a table of analysis (Table 3) and brief concluding remarks.

1 Formulaic Openings

These formulaic openings (shown in column two of Table 3) are simplified from Hepokoski (1984), a study which interrogates Debussy's music and presents a model to analyse the openings of his music. It also including orchestral works, but is pertinent to the *Préludes*. The reason for adopting this schema is that it is the opening gestures of Debussy's music that demonstrate the atmospheric quality of his music, and therefore a means by which the listener is drawn in to the effect of the piece as a whole. Hepokoski's analysis settles on three forms of openings, presented below in simplified form. An interpretation of how this is synthesized into text is presented afterwards.

A. The Monophonic Opening.

1. An opening silence, which may have a preliminary pedal point.

2. An unaccompanied melodic line. Typically a relatively long quiet initial pitch then a move to rhythm through non-metrical means. A weak tonic is implied through pentatonicism, chromaticism, modality.

B. The Modal / Chordal Opening.

1. An opening silence
2. Four quiet chords of “mysterious” quality

These chords Hepokoski relates to a quasi-mystical or uncommon experience. An effect of swaying or circulating is produced around an axis. He gives preludes I and X as specific examples.

C. Introductory Sequences / Expansions

A mixture of A and B that comes to a ‘blooming’ as follows:

1. Either A or B then
2. A fermata or pause with structural silence
3. A varied repetition of a second phrase (BB) followed by the effect of AA and BB growing together
4. Another pause
5. Contrasting material in more periodic phrases (the main narrative) OR the CC phrase, if it exists.

1.1 Implementing Formulaic Openings in Intermezzo

It can be seen from Table 3 that all the preludes except XII, XVIII and XXIII can be analysed with by this method. XII and XVIII rely on the imagery of their titles, while XXIII relies on its tempo and octatonic content to synthesize its form. The following is how these openings are incorporated into the text of the novel:

- A. Opens with a clear point of view from a single character, with reference to the **Scales** section, below.
- B. This analysis is correlated with Pomeroy’s notion of **textual thickenings** and interpreted as per the section **Chordal Colours**.

- C. A structure which switches between A and B. The pauses and fermata are implied by colouristic effects, as per the section **Chordal Colours**.

1.2 Chordal Colours

Pomeroy (2003) posits Debussy's "surface chord successions typically serve ends of colouristic effect rather than tonal-syntactical coherence" and that they other often act as "textural thickenings" of the melodic line rather than functional harmonic (preludes x and 2.i are examples) (Pomeroy 2003). In plain terms, chords are often decorative to the music, either as an elaboration between melodies, or as some doubling (in triads, fifths or octaves) of the melody itself. From Pomeroy's two textural options have been derived:

1. The **colouristic effects** that seem appropriate to use and are not functional to the narrative voice are those that are linked by metaphor or symbol to the subject of the individual prelude, or to the object the title represents. The titles are shown in the table below. (Table 1)

Book 1	Book 2
I. Danseuses de Delphes	XIII. Brouillards.
II. Voiles	XIV. Feuilles mortes
III. Le vent dans la plaine	XV. La puerta del Vino.
IV. Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir	XVI. Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses
V. Les collines d'Anacapri	XVII. Bruyères
VI. Des pas sur la neige	XVIII. Général Lavine.
VII. Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest	XIX. La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune.
VIII. La fille aux cheveux de lin	XX. Ondine.
IX. La sérénade interrompue	XXI. Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq. P.P.M.P.C
X. La cathédrale engloutie	XXII. Canope.
XI. La danse de Puck	XXIII. Les tierces alternées
XII. Minstrels.	XXIV. Feux d'artifice

Table 1: Table of Prelude Titles

These are represented in *Intermezzo* as descriptive or symbolic elements. In I *Danseuses de Delphes*, for example, the columns of the temple the title refers are figured in the trees,

the dancing statues in the location (the Rodin Museum), the queue recalling the serpent in the myth of Pythia, the oracle of Delphi. Because XII is musically related to I there is an echo of the Rodin images in chapter XII. Other symbols include the piano, the pinks of dresses, the colour red (used in the Spanish sections), the Top Hat (symbolising a controlling male figure), strawberry (an unwanted memory), Water (which obscures and separates), smoke (melancholy, memory or anxiety), traffic (a relentless, uncontrollable passing of time). Some pieces are written in specific musical forms, such as IX and XV that have a Spanish influence and this is brought out in the textual content with a flamenco guitarist in chapter IX and tango dancing in chapter XV.

2. The **textural thickenings** of the melodic motif are points where the metaphors and images are bound to the mood of described in the motions column of Table 3. These essentially relates to the mood of the content. For example the final chapter, XXIV, has anxiety and aggressiveness in the emotions column: this is a scene where Duncan destroys Mr Porter's piano, but also has Duncan's grasping at his memory of Clara, who in places fades from view in his mind, and Harriet's attempts to move on from her memories of Muse that are triggered in the lift of the Duncan's flat.

The next section relates to the second category.

2 Scales

Scales shown in column three of Table 3.

2.1 Whole tone scales (W)

These have no dominant tone ie there is no tone in the scale that is a perfect fifth above the tonic, or tonal centre, of the music. There are really only two versions each a semi-tone apart. (C D E F# G# A# or Db Eb F G A B). Whole tone scales therefore refuse the traditional harmonic drive towards a cadence and have an ethereal, timeless, quality.

2.2 Pentatonic (P)

This scale is made up of five notes. It is widely used in folk music and carries a simple, innocent, exposed feel to it. In not containing the fourth degree above the tonic, nor the seventh, it removes two of the pitches that create tension and require resolution in traditional tonic-dominant focused music. This scale is implied in a simplistic narrative voice, one which is a little magical and timeless through lacking the need to move forward through harmonic imperatives (the fourth and seventh).

2.3 Phrygian (Ph)

The **Phrygian** mode, often associated with Spanish music and sounds dark. The **Locrian** is least used and tonally darkest of the traditional modes owing to the difficulties of its root triad being diminished and the scale having a flattened fifth. The fifth distinguishes Phrygian from Locrian. Both feature in prelude IX.

2.4 Chromaticism (Ch)

Chromaticism is rife in Debussy's music. It is the effect of this that we are interested in. Simonton (2009) notes the correlation between the use of chromaticism to reflect inner turmoil, and not only in classical music, but in other forms, such as blue notes in jazz. The chromaticism listed in the scales column of Table 3 corresponds to preludes with **extensive scalar chromatic passages**, identified in Bruhn (Bruhn 2010).

To illustrate the notion of inner turmoil we might consider Kuzuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* and *The Unconsoled*, two texts that touch on music in different ways; though both have Ishiguro's deftly irritating unreliable narrators, *Nocturnes* is pentatonic/whole tone in character, a collection of short stories with romantic elements, such as Venetian vignettes of cafés and canals, and the voice of the text is simple and direct; *The Unconsoled* is chromatic, with a haunting narrator in the pianist, Ryder, and maintains an extreme, heightened sense of anxiety throughout.

Rodenbach's Hugues and Alan Holdenhurst's Edward Manners (In *The Folding Star*) share a feigned, put-on, kind of pentatonic innocence, as well as an other-worldly whole tone suspension of disbelief. Ishiguro's Ryder invokes a static refusal to move forward in his chromaticism, whereas Manners creates a cold chromatic creepiness in his. Ryder's turmoil is inner, Manner's creates the feeling in the reader. Both of these modes are employed in *Intermezzo*, where Mustafa, Conrad and Mr Porter resonate with Manners and Ryder with Duncan, Harriet and Lauren.

The **octatonic scale** is a special case and is dealt with in the next section.

3 Octatonic Content

The **octatonic scale** is formed by alternating semitones and tones. It is shown in column four of Table 3. A simplistic view might be that it takes the open nature of the whole tone scale and the closed nature of the chromatic scale. This scale "is everywhere in the music of the two volumes of preludes for the piano, almost always occurring at the [climax of] the music or in pre-cadential locations" (Forte 1991: 147). Forte goes on to give a useful list in the appendix of his study of the occurrences of octatonic material in Debussy's *Préludes* and these are presented in the table of analysis. The perception of atonal music is complex. Imberty offers the following conclusion:

In any case, it is clear that the perception and comprehension of atonal music remains more uncertain, or if you prefer, more and more open than the perception and comprehension of tonal music. The *role of the listener, with his past, his culture, his knowledge, is more important in this case*. After all, it would not be so bad to have been able to put forward a theory that is more essential to atonal music than its eminently formalist and combinatorial character: the part of the *creative imagination left to the listener in the psychological elaboration of the work*. (Imberty 1993a: 336, italics added)

The atonal nature of the octatonic content is represented by the treatment of memory in *Intermezzo*. There is something of Roland Barthes' writerly reader in Imberty's description, but also something of Heidegger's to-handedness whereby, like a learnt language, a set of experiences are used to interpret the musical sounds. In a simplistic sense, memory can be

described in two categories¹: **Procedural** memories are those we access for tasks such as riding a bicycle, shuffling cards, playing a scale on the piano, or opening door handles; **Episodic** memories are individual events, the iterations of which are subsumed into the make up of the procedural whole. They are akin to individual piano lessons leading to a cumulative experience. In examining an account of an event we might want to disentangle individual iterations of an event from the cumulative procedural memory.

The layering of memories, of remembering and forgetting, of creating memories, is brought to the fore in Duncan's learning how to play compound against simple time in Chapter IX, his 'Strawberry' is a symbol revisited at several points in the novel, the word aimed at triggering a memory not only in the characters, but also in the reader. In Chapter VII Mustafa essentially re-writes his first encounter (the episodic) with Harriet but also creates by repetition a new version of events, based on altered, fictionalized episodes; Mr Porter, in his final letter to Duncan, performs a similar act in his fiction of his 'relationship' with Duncan in XXII. In that chapter there is no octatonic content noted; it is Harriet who reads the letter, which was a conscious decision to avoid any sense of acquiescence to Mr Porter's version of events from either the adult or child Duncan, as is suggested in Mr Porter's letter. Duncan's confusion of how to act towards someone he admires is understandable; the outworking coming after he forms a relationship with Clara, the consequence of which is the smashing Mr Porter's piano², and in the process the destruction of his musical future (Chapter XXIV). Meanwhile, Harriet is re-writing Chapter VII as she ascends in the elevator.

A special case arose with prelude IV, which has an obscured metre and is also fragmented in its structure. This prelude is entitled *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*³, a line from

¹ I have extensive training in memory and interviewing techniques in my previous career as a police detective.

² This is, unfortunately, a very realistic trope, where an abused child turns to damaging property, setting fires or harming animals or other people.

³ The sounds and fragrances swirl through the evening air

Baudelaire's *Harmonie du soir*. The poem is written as a pantoum of sixteen lines. Chapter IV is written in sixteen sections of unequal lengths, with the repeated lines of the poem being signalled by repeating the opening sentences of a section. For example "They waltzed in the dark" or "It was a kind of music". The rhyming structure (ABBA BAAB ABBA BAAB) is indicated in the sounds of the words, where a higher density of darker sounds and the consonants 'd', 'b' and 'p' are chosen for A, while B sections feature softer 's' and 'f' sounds. This chapter is the first to feature the **octatonic content** where the past— Duncan with Clara— merges with the present. The rain and pink dresses act as triggers to flip between one memory state and another. We now move on to **dynamic range**.

4 Dynamic Range

Dynamic Range (column five in Table 3) was calculated using the score markings, with *mf* acting as the point at which a range is average; moving beyond *mf* into the other 'half' of the dynamic range would register a high range; staying to one side of the *mf* line indicates a low dynamic range. The dynamic range informs section 8, **Emotions**, below.

There are a number of studies on the emotional perception of loudness and loudness variation in music summarised in tabular form by Gabriellson and Lindström (2010: 384) These lists summarise their findings, with italics added:

Loud: excitement, triumphant, joy, gaiety, intensity, strength/power, tension, anger, energy arousal / tension arousal.

Soft: melancholy, *delicate*, peaceful, softness, *tenderness*, solemnity, fear, sadness, lower intensity, increased valence [emotional force]

None of Debussy's preludes are perpetually in the louder range. Seven of the preludes have a quiet (*p*) upper threshold (preludes I, VI, XIII, XIV, XIX, XX, XII). The corresponding chapters

discarded, such as symbols or changes in typeface, but the white space seemed a better indicator of the current narrative stopping and the next one beginning. It is utilised in line with the general notes made at the beginning, in that it is not the case that if there is a change in metre every other bar, this is not reproduced in the text as a change every other line. Switching in this rapid manner was trialled but found to be overly bitty and confusing to read, there seeming to be a need to have a much longer period in text to establish a metre and flow before disrupting it with the device.

The metre is used alongside the Octatonic content, in that it often signals a triggering of a memory, or that memory is of significance to the narrative at that point. This interpolation is not without theoretical basis. Julian Epstein (cited in Trezise, 2003) provides a version of musical time as chronometric time (the pulse and bars of music) or integral (the experiential quality of the rhythm). Chronometric time is mechanistic and automatic; integral time is unique to each work. This has been equated in *Intermezzo* with memory theory, where the specific memories also trigger a larger paradigm shift. For example, the remembered experience of a music lesson allows the shift into another experience, and this causes a shift in the procedural memory in that the narrative jumps from one place to another.

6 Tempo

The sixth category (Table 3, column seven), tempo, is a critical feature of music in establishing emotional response, perhaps because it is one of the most easily distinguished (Gabrielsson and Lindström 2010). It is, however, masked by such factors as perceiving the pulse at half or double the rate, or the note density rate.

Tempo is applied to the sentence and word length in the novel. The notion that longer sentences with many syllables are harder to read than short monosyllabic ones is employed to vary the relative reading speed; quick tempos mean shorter sentences and words; slow tempos the converse. An exception comes in XIX, which contains **chromatic** scale content combined

with longer sentences is construed using fragments, which while short, are more difficult to read. Adopting this approach also distinguished it from Chapter XX, which has a slow tempo and very long sentences.

7 Note Density

The seventh criteria is shown in eight of Table 3. Note density is used as a measure of musical complexity. The density of notes can also affect the perception of tempo, that is music may have a slow pulse but many notes and is one of the metrics employed in the study of Iberty (cited in Gabrielsson and Lindström 2010). In the Table of Analysis the figure presented is a simple average. I calculated the density using Excel to analyse MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) files⁴ of the preludes. MIDI is a method storing and transmitting musical events such as pitch, volume, velocity, and duration in individual note events. It is not a recording of the music, but more akin to the paper roll in a pianola. I converted the MIDI files to a format Microsoft Excel could open and from there the density was calculated by dividing the number of note events by bars in the score.

8 Emotion

The final category is emotion, shown in column nine of Table 3. A study of Iberty (not found in English translation but cited in Gabrielsson and Lindström 2010) was based on listener responses to Debussy's *Préludes*. He produced the following conclusions, relating the formal

⁴ These were obtained from kunstderfuge.com, an online repository of classical music files. These are not recordings, and the site uses a number of contributors, the two principal ones for the *Préludes* being Jeruen E. Dery and Dario Galimberti.

complexity of a piece with its dynamics, and mapping this to the emotional content of the music in table 2 below:

Formal complexity	Dynamism	Emotion
low	average	positive emotions
high	low	melancholy and depression
high	High	anxiety and aggressiveness.

Table 2: emotions, from Gabrielsson and Lindström, 2010, 372

The authors list the elements liberty measured in the study, which include loudness and note density per time unit. This set of rules has been applied to the **dynamic range** (column five) and **note density** (column eight) respectively in order to derive the entry for the emotions using the phrases cited of positive emotions, melancholy and depression, and anxiety and aggressiveness. As a reminder, the emotions are incorporated in the chordal colours section, above.

Table 3: Table of Analysis

No.	1	2	3	4			5	6	7	8
	Formulaic Opening	Scale	Octatonic Content	Dynamic Range			Metre	Tempo	Note Density	Emotion
I	B	—	—	<i>ppp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Simple Alignment	V. slow	25	—
II	A*	W/P	—	<i>pp</i>	<i>mf</i>	Ave.	Obscured	Moderate	14	positive emotions
III	B	P/W	—	<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Simple then Obscured.	Fast	27	anxiety and aggressiveness.
IV	B	—	21-3	<i>pp</i>	<i>mf</i>	Ave.	Obscured. Fragmented.	Moderate	20	positive emotions
V	C	P	24-27	<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Simple (metre changes)	Moderate	16	—
VI	A	W	33-4	<i>ppp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Simple.	slow	10	positive emotions
VII	B*	P/W	9-10	<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Obscured	Fast	39	anxiety and aggressiveness.
VIII	A	P	—	<i>pp</i>	<i>mf</i>	Ave.	Simple Alignment	Slow	14.6	positive emotions
IX	C	Ph	112-16	<i>pp</i>	<i>mf</i>	Ave.	Fragmented	Fast	9.32	positive emotions
X	B			<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Simple Alignment	Slow	19	—
XI	A	Do	82-5	<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Simple Alignment	Moderate	18	—
XII			—	<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Simple Alignment	Moderate	13	—
XIII	B/B	Bitonal	1, 29-30, 32-5	<i>pp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Simple then Obscured	Moderate	23	melancholy and depression
XIV	C		2-3	<i>ppp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Obscured	Slow	13	positive emotions
XV		Ch	66-74	<i>pp</i>	<i>ff</i>	High	Simple Alignment	slow	11	—
XVI	C	Lyd	58-66	<i>pp</i>	<i>mf</i>	Ave.	Simple Alignment	Fast	15	Positive Emotions
XVII	A	P	—	<i>p</i>	<i>mf</i>	low	Simple Alignment	slow	15	—
XVIII			31-32	<i>pp</i>	<i>ff</i>	High	Simple Alignment	Moderate	9	—
XIX	B	Ch	54-7	<i>pp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Obscured	Very slow	33	melancholy and depression
XX	C	—	46-50	<i>pp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Obscured	slow	22	melancholy and depression
XXI	B	—	—	<i>pp</i>	<i>ff</i>	High	Simple Alignment	Very slow	18	—
XXII	B	Ch	—	<i>pp</i>	<i>p</i>	Low	Simple Alignment	slow	14.5	—
XXIII	—	—	13,22,23	<i>pp</i>	<i>f</i>	High	Simple Alignment	Fast	13	—
XXIV	B/B	Bitonal	51,71,90	<i>pp</i>	<i>ff</i>	High	Simple then Obscured	Fast	31	anxiety and aggressiveness.

Table 3: Table of Analysis

Interpretation

It is difficult to escape the colour and precise but slushy metrics of Debussy's music when writing to it— a sense arises from listening to these *Préludes* over and over of a child excitedly grabbing at pastels to brighten the black and white image set before them. In places, the analysis presented in Table 3 is adjusted: for example, the two bitonal sections, XIII and XXIV, if following the schema, should have the line change device described in the metre section, but this was too unwieldy to navigate and the bitonal device dominates the score and sound of the music.

This novel brings new knowledge in forming an approach to synthesizing the text of a novel using methods of musical analysis. The method described here could be developed in future and opens up a number of interesting questions for future research, such as whether it is translatable to other works or other composers, or perhaps what might be created in other modes of writing, such as poetry or scriptwriting.

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I

Harriet walked in the cool conspiracy of trees. The morning was already intensely bright, and she sighed in the shade of the colonnade that made an astonished arabesque on the leafy floor. In the distance were benches arranged around a pond, unoccupied other than by pigeons scavenging yesterday's crumbs. A second avenue of trees paralleled this one and edged the other side of a lawn that stretched from the *Hôtel Biron* to the water's edge. The grass had the tired baldness of autumn, browned and yellowed; the polite notices had deterred footsteps in three languages, but not the insistent scrutiny of the sun.

She was meeting Lauren. Their monthly meetings here were documented on the surface of the water at the pond that reflected their laughter and took their fears into its rippled surface. These trees were friends that stood with tender leaves and nonchalant branches, witnesses to shared confidences and tearful hugs.

Harriet embraced these times when she waited on Lauren, and lingered in moments of mindless drift as if encountering a magical clearing in a wood. She recalled how they had joked with the staff at the museum about coming so often they should work there. The thinkers, sitting on benches reflecting by a pond in the grounds of the Rodin museum. Lauren now did occasional work there. A consulting tour guide.

Harriet touched a tree as if it might unlock another fond memory, her hand dusked and muted on the rough bark like the skin of some dark mythical beast that arched up against the skies. She continued with sloshing, rustling steps towards the bench where they always sat. The ochre ground was lit in splat-and-daubs of light its red and yellow scales would bask in thick drifts and in the warmth and trickling cool of the morning before the groundskeepers swept them up.

She sat on the bench with one leg folded beneath her, and rubbed the curve of her thigh as she fumbled in her pocket, taking out the smooth lump of beauty. It was a little figurine, a miniature copy of Rodin's *Danaïd*. She had a set of them from the gift shop, collected over the months she had met Lauren there.

The sun brightened again and her unfurled leg dialled time in its shadow on the paved floor. Harriet was touching the curve of a spine, the sweet nut of protuberance at the base of the neck, the shoulder blades that made shady alcoves for the finger, and down the silky powder of her waist to rest in the

cool alcoves of hip and haunch. The arms folded underneath the breasts and over the belly of its foetal form, protecting her dignity from view. Or perhaps it was Rodin that protected her dignity, or perhaps he had uncovered it — Harriet forgot which way Lauren had put it. In any case she carried water in a sieve or a cracked jar as punishment for killing her husband, the sin of her crime washed away in the leaks of her burden.

She stroked the little nude, the embryo of an artistic gesture seeking release, as if she might unfurl and fold around a finger, the entirety of her life able to fit in someone else's fist, carried around in a pocket and caressed at will.

The stone had a cool and clammy skin, as if it too had spent its childhood holidays on an empty beach between grey sea and off-white skies. They seemed to always go on holiday at the same time as the sun, for it was never there. She would be wrapped in layers that wicked the sea from the air; perhaps she was fated then to carry the sea back and forward in her clothes as punishment for never throwing anything for the dog. And it would bounce eagerly waiting for the ball — The ball! — to be launched seaward or skip over the smooth sands, to be retrieved and thrown again with the inevitability of tides.

Harriet would walk along the beach by the side of the sand dunes looking at the shapes made in the sand by the wind's fingers that sculpted ribs or hands pressed into flesh.

That was the time when she got interested in sculpture. She saw the curves of bodies in the forms of the sands. And the wind would blow and the arm, or leg, or back would shift and be blown around, the body lost and remade in a breath. If she found a clean, soft drift, she would fall into it and be a part of it, the body that it was and the body she became with it, and they watched the sea.

It was here that she listened to music. She had already begun to play piano. The first day had been disappointing, the wind and the sea rushing around the orange foam on her headphones, their insistent white noise in phase with the hiss on the tape in her Walkman. But then it stilled. The sonic sculpture that was mutable and blew or was blown by the sands. She would lie in the sand, alive and quite still and very sure of the still sky and the melody of the air around her. She wanted to tame the sands, to cast their sounds across the keys of the piano.

In a book on sculpture, perhaps from the school library or else one of those books at home that seemed out of place, a waif or stray that entered

unseen and sat between her mum's romance and her dad's war novels. It had pictures of work being copied using callipers — she had seen similar pictures over time at the Rodin museum, explaining some scaling exercise, perhaps it was of *The Kiss*, or else some other element of Rodin's *Gates of Hell*.

From seeing a sketch translated into sculpture she got the idea to reverse the process and render a sculpture flat on the sand — if it was possible to lay music flat on a sheet of paper, then to do it with an object on sand would be a piece of cake, she thought. The 'short leggings' as she called them then and now, she used to measure between the eyes and ears or knees and thighs or whatever she had to hand. A doll, or a piece of driftwood or rusted ordnance, found washed up by romance or war.

She conducted the sand to the music in her earphones. She used own legs as large callipers — and she opened them as wide as she dare, without falling and destroying her work with a bum-shaped crater — to mark out arcs on the wet sand with the edge of her trainers. Where lines overlapped and at points of intersection the perspective would shift, the lines punching or pinching the surface on the beach between them. It was like those tricks of the eye, the old woman and the young; the duck and the rabbit; the shapes moving in and out as she drew layer upon layer.

In her memory it was a Cubist sketch of sand and shade that put the temporary into contemporary art. A picture of sand and froth that never lasted longer than the time between tides. She imagined and re-imagined herself, made and destroyed in the light and dark of the day and the night and in the turning of the sea.

Years later, in her late teens and as an adult, she longed for that simple ability to make of herself a few lines construed on a beach that she could rinse away and start again. Failure did not even exist when creation and destruction overlapped those beautiful tides.

Lauren strode along the street, her thoughts metered by the swooshes and honks of Paris traffic, by the click-and-wince of her car-to-bar heels. The queue outside was already twenty minutes in length. She pictured Harriet inside; she would be experiencing some epiphany, managing to look uncontrived yet deeply artistic. She stumbled around the group of static flaneurs at a road-side café, then urban hikers in tweeds and dresses crumpled by rucksacks and fanny packs. The queue coiled down the wall of the museum, already fifty feet of flapping tourist maps, parents exasperated by their already bored children that demanded to know how long? How long?

She slipped along the queue, and felt the snaking length flex and twitch its faces in the piques and troughs of resentment as she walked to the front and past the security guard with flashes of her identification and her smile.

Lauren passed through the building and slipped past the café to the lawn. Slipping off her shoes, she walked barefoot across the grass, towards where Harriet sat at on a bench in the distance.

A man called “*Lauren!*” from over by the café, and she signalled a stop-hand of disobedience towards him. Harriet heard the shout and looked up, waving. Lauren waved back and continued walking. Too distant to make out, Harriet imagined her friend’s confident smile, and her arch eyebrow that would rise momentarily over her sunglasses.

The man called again. If anything, Lauren walked a little slower; the groundsman came to the edge of the lawn and, drawing up a hose, turned it on and casually sluiced the grass beside him. He made a silver arc, higher and higher against the unsure blue of the sky. Tiny rainbows and glitzy parheliions bloomed and withered in its spray.

Then the groundsman, the Parisian, *Manneken Pis*, trained his flow towards Lauren. A fleet fan of light and water formed a halo around her figure before a few drops landed. She was at the edge of his reach. She tensed, then paused to raise her arms as if to embrace the sky or call rain, and walked on towards the pond and Harriet in the distance.

Harriet’s mobile phone rang. It was Antoine, her boss. She answered as Lauren came to stand by her at the bench. Lauren heard the rapid canter of Antoine’s voice as Harriet held him away from her ear.

“Antoine,” Harriet interrupted. “Antoine! You manage one of the biggest piano stores in Europe. You have perfect English. What’s the problem?”

Another staccato rap of information brought a twitch of amusement to Harriet’s face. “Hold on a second,” she said. She put the phone under her arm and stood up to kiss Lauren’s cheeks. She told her quickly of Antoine’s dilemma. An English customer — a businessman, almost forty, Antoine had stressed — had gone to their London branch looking for a specific piano. He had produced a photograph of it. He had then burst into tears. After finding there was one in the Paris store, the man travelled over the previous night.

“He sounds like a one of those broken artistic types,” Lauren said. “I bet he’s single. And a complete basket case. What’s the problem? Sell him a piano.”

“He’s arriving at the store today.” Harriet had a mischievous grin.

“Oh dear.” Lauren knew Antoine from meeting Harriet at her work. She

pictured him in his navy suit, pale pink shirt, dark brown shoes and co-ordinating pocket square and socks; and his blushes when a woman held his gaze longer than an eyelash's flutter. "Antoine doesn't do emotion very well."

Harriet brought the phone back to her mouth. "Antoine, you'll just have to deal with it," she said. Lauren was surprised there was no let off for him. "Or tell him to come back." Harriet added, and regretted the suggestion as soon as she made it. "See you tomorrow."

She hung up and popped her phone back in her pocket.

Jane Porter took her phone from her pocket and turned it over in her hand. It was a warm summer's day, and the sun streaked through the blinds. She had found Duncan Innes's phone number easily enough in the internet, and sat rehearsing her words to him, her finger poised over the call button. The day she had first met Duncan was also in summer but twenty-five years previously. He had already been a pupil of her husband, Iain, for six years. He was a callow youth, a fourteen year old with prodigious talent for reading music at sight and staggeringly shy. Jane was a professional flautist, spending much time away as a jobbing musician.

She sat at the piano stool in their lounge and looked to the chaise lounge where Iain would — and did, that day — recline, with his grapes already crushed into red wine in his glass. His other hand would conduct the world to make way for his words in the air, or else it would follow them follow them, ushering his current ideas to whoever was listening. That day he sat looking at the flames and smiling, and as Duncan entered the lounge it was as if the family were complete: the teacher, his wife, his pupil and her — the piano.

At that time the room had the colour scheme of the colour blind or the artist. Deep purple sofas in velvet plush, woods of blonde and dark brown, a deep rug in red and curtains in thick gold. On the opposite wall to the piano, a fire — otherwise rarely lit — blazed in the inglenook. Jane stood up and went and held out her hands for Duncan's blazer. He removed it, giving it to her along with a look of suspicion that followed her as she went to hang it up.

"You did introduce yourself, Jane? Otherwise Master Innes may think you're the hired help. Or my daughter." Duncan looked past her in that distant way of his and stared at the piano, as if it were the first time he had seen it.

"I did introduce myself didn't I, Duncan?" Jane came into the room and

picked up her glass of wine. Iain glowed as if he had been much closer to the fire than he was now. "I'm just Jane. What else? I play the flute." She explained how she moved around, living out of suitcases in one hotel room or another. That she and Iain didn't really see each other much.

Duncan looked from her to Iain, his mind seeming to turn over a question. "Are you Mr Porter's pupil or his daughter?" He asked.

"Jane dear, did you put him up to that comment?" Iain asked from his couch.

"Not at all, Iain. You did say he was astute!" She smiled at Duncan, struck by his thick dark locks curling over his shirt collar. She was unsure at what age a boy becomes a young man and too old to have his hair ruffled; or if a woman touching a young man's hair was considered flirtatious; or if a fourteen year old knew enough to flirt with a woman by calling her younger than her years.

"I can see your scheme, Jane." Iain lifted the bottle and proffered it to top-up her glass. She blushed. He said something about her looking young. Or trendy and 'down with the kids.' He went on about their baby-bear's-bed of a marriage. An allusion she found a little facile. "But — how remiss — I apologise that Mrs P is not rehearsed in the ritual of the drinking pop and eating cookies."

"Perhaps he like wine?" Mrs Porter asked. Wondering if this would be as good a test as ruffling his hair to separate the man from the boy.

"No thank you, Mrs Porter." He looked again at the piano.

It shone magnificently and the reddish brown wood caught now and then a glint of the fire in its gloss. A spotlight set up to illuminate the music rack produced deep, long shadows along the gilt metal frame. The bright deep red of the felts and the coppery bronze of the strings cast myriad metallic lines on the inside of the lid. On the music shelf, the metronome had a home on the right, in front of where Iain sat. On the left was a small pile of music.

"What's on the menu this evening, gentlemen?" Jane nodded to the piano.

"We are tackling Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. Although the way Master Innes wrestles his way through it, we might call it 'judo'". He took a slurp of his wine. "However, with her newly regulated action, serviced pedals and other miscellany, Master Innes will be getting reacquainted with the lady. Discovering again all those ways to touch her and make her sing and shimmer, like —"

"Iain." Jane interrupted him. "Perhaps save this image for later. When he's twenty-one, perhaps. Stick with something less prurient?"

Iain never responded, but nodded slightly in the way he did now, lying

next door on his bed, dying quietly, and she pressed dial on the phone.

“Duncan Innes, Soundsculpt Acoustics, how can I help?”

“Duncan, it’s Jane Porter.”

Antoine perched on the edge of his desk — flicking a cuff-link with a manicured nail, a voyeur behind the tinted glass of the window, and making a glancing virtual cruise of the café opposite — but slipped off at the sight of a tall man carrying a leather music case and looking at the shop sign and then a piece of paper in his hand with the pedantic intensity of a child learning to read.

It had to be the crybaby.

He pulled his jacket straight and selected his brightest happy smile before opening the door. “Hello, and welcome to you, sir.” The man fought his case inside, running a casual hand over his bare forearm at the air-conditioned chill. It was him. Mr Duncan Innes. From London.

“You were expecting me?” He half-waved, concentrating on not starting to speak loudly in English to compensate for his lack of French.

“Of course, Mr Innes.” Antoine was suspicious at how normal Duncan looked in his rolled up shirt and slacks. Maybe it was a wind up — Did Harriet know? He would call her as soon as he could. The man had a little stubble as if he was unkempt or depressed or a drinker. Antoine caught himself: the guy was on vacation. “We had a call from London. They told us to expect you. I am Antoine.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak any French.” Duncan held up hands to his own claim of ignorance.

“Don’t worry, Mr Innes.” Antoine held his hands out too, as if to catch any tears that might begin to fall. “As it happens, we have an English assistant.” He smiled reassuringly, for himself as much as his customer, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Really?” Mr Innes looked happy. Perhaps he was manic. On the edge, thought Antoine. “A good sign.” Duncan kept smiling, feeling that the shop assistant was a little nervous of him.

“Yes.” An omen. The emotionally superstitious type. He wanted to say Harriet was who he wanted, but that she was not there. Antoine shrugged theatrically so it wouldn’t be missed. The box of tissues on his desk caught his attention.

“Oh, maybe I could come back?” Mr Innes looked past Antoine’s persistent charm to the room of pianos beyond. “I only really came to see the

one piano.”

There were other customers auditioning pianos, Antoine explained. He made a show of introducing an elaborate coffee machine and invited Duncan to sit with a magazine, perhaps. Antoine glanced at the table.

“There are some in English I think,” Antoine began. “Some with the pretty...” Maybe his lover had died, thought Antoine, and that was why he had cried. “You know, pretty things and holidays.” He gestured vaguely and added, “With pictures.”

“Can I have a look around?” Mr Innes began to walk towards it.

“That would be fine and dandy.” Antoine grimaced. Antoine added that he could always come back another day if he was tired after his trip and they could ensure he had privacy to make his deliberations. “What is it you do?” Antoine asked.

“I run an acoustics consultancy.”

“Yes! The acoustics. You must have a real cool head for mathematics and science.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it that way,” Duncan admitted.

“No?” Antoine opened the door to the first salon. “Give me a call if you need any more assistance, Mr Innes. Help yourself to more coffee. Tissues. Excuse me a moment.” Antoine looked at a glint in the glass of the door as if it were the hand of a customer beckoning him.

Duncan watched him scuttle off, the heavy doors huffing shut and muffling the exhale of breath from Antoine, who took a tissue from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead before walking purposefully towards the imaginary summons.

Harriet and Lauren walked arm-in-arm along the cloistered white of the exhibition space. Columns of beech were made from inch-wide lumber stacked vertically and coopered around their waist with metal bands, forming plinths for the works. Wooden board-walks rose and fell to alter perspectives and to compensate for the differing scales of the works.

Between the larger exhibits were display cases with sketches arranged in them. The more prudish visitors, faced with flaccid phalluses or energetically drawn labia that gaped back at them, looked around for the view of greenery, for any distraction in the blank-walled room.

Harriet rubbed her hands together, the white of the marble arousing her need to touch its exquisite smooth surface. She looked around for a shaded nook where she might run her hand over a cheek or flexed limb without

being seen. “How’s work?” She asked Lauren casually.

“You know Antoine will send that chap away.” Lauren replied. Antoine would tell him to come back when Harriet was there and she won’t complain. He would have said she is English so that he feels more comfortable with her. He might even say she was a fabulous pianist and staggeringly — what? Pretty? Individual. Beautiful? Quirky.

“I meant your work, sweetie, not mine!” Harriet steered Lauren around an Asian couple scrutinising the signage on an exhibit and talking loudly, with the confidence of the uninterpreted. *Fugit Amor* was set on a pedestal at head height; two pairs of legs kicked at one end, the female head and shoulders just visible; it was elevated, but the effect was of emerging from under the lovers’ bed as a participant, face full of sex, rather than a respectable voyeur of art.

“I know.” Lauren resisted giving any more information.

“Crying on pianos isn’t romantic,” said Harriet, as if making a point to something Lauren had said. She watched a young woman extend a hand and follow the line of a couple’s legs a few centimetres away from their surface. “It’s probably just unhygienic. You’re still giving tours, right?”

“Stupid tours to stupid tourists!” Lauren’s sudden blurt tickled them both into laughter. An older woman, powdered as the marbles, but with a colder expression, and wearing a kind of quilted gown and turban, turned from the sculpture, made a deliberate glance at Lauren.

“American?” She asked.

Harriet felt Lauren shrink, and wanting to avoid a scene that might cost Lauren her job, turned to the woman, teeing herself up as if to camera. “Sure! Did you know, Rodin often used two female models?” Harriet said, thumbing over her shoulder to *Fugit Amor*, her Boston accent learnt from a childhood spent watching *Cheers* on the television finally finding a use. The woman looked between the two of them, now seeming confused. “There’s some versions of *The Kiss* that are a little hard to tell who’s who. Or what’s what. If you follow me.” Harriet did her best sell-a-piano smile.

“Thank you. Very interesting.” The woman turned away and off down another boardwalk.

“You’re welcome!” Harriet beamed.

“Thanks.” whispered Lauren. “And thanks for asking about work,” her voice returning to normal as the woman moved to a safe distance. “Oh, look up there! An actual glass ceiling.”

“I see. You should be curating something, not just showing people around.

You're way more qualified than he who can't be named."

"Conrad's an ass." Lauren said blankly. Harriet imagined her friend with a sieve of water running continually over her head to atone for murdering her husband. Then she recalled the hose on the lawn and thought Lauren would most likely shrug off the eternal punishment, or else plug the holes. "We're not talking about him."

"When are you working next? Tomorrow?" Harriet stuck with her probing. She had long wished her clever friend would feel a little more fulfilled. She was wealthy from a previous life in America, but had a beautiful eye for art and a crisp but engaging voice that bewitched listeners into believing they were making new discoveries for themselves. Of course, many of them were, just about themselves rather than the works.

"Day after." Lauren gave a resigned smile.

"Anything interesting?" Harriet touched

"I'm doing a couple of little things on Manet and Degas. Then there's a Rackham and Mucha exhibition." Lauren said, waving a hand that slowed in the thick realisation she sounded pretentious. She looked forward to both, though the second was novel to her and the venue, a converted cinema, appealed to her sense of space.

If only art could reciprocate her love for it and make representations on her behalf. Perhaps *The Thinker* might unfold from his pose to ask her a question, or applaud with big bronze hands her deep knowledge and insightful connections. Her lack of progress into a more demanding role meant she hid behind a cheerful resilience, but was chilled by the in-creeping frostbite of a poisonous hubris.

"I bet whatever you say will be hugely insightful and interesting," Harriet said.

"Thanks," said Lauren, suspecting the remark was only intended to lift her spirits. "For your encouragement."

"If I thought you needed shallow compliments, I'd say you have nice shoes."

"I'm sorry. Just feeling touchy," Lauren said.

"Me too." Harriet made a show of wringing her hands.

"Yes, I noticed you trailing your hand over the sculptures a few times. Miss touchy feely. Good job I'm not working."

"I can't help it. They're just so sensual!" Harriet enthused. 'And safe,' Lauren held back from saying. Safe from all but imagined palpations; from the elasticity of flesh that rebounds or accepts an inquisitive touch, the dust of risk

and emotional connection that lingers, unwashed, for days, weeks, or years.

Outside, the sun was high in the gardens, and the little café was doing a brisk trade. Shooing pigeons, chasing after children, and food *à la fourchette* ushered in the comfort of familiarity. Under a trellis, and shaded by a withering wisteria, tourists sat at tables and scribbled postcards. Or took selfies. The sensual stone made mutable, forgotten, and mute in the sanitising steam of the espresso machine.

II

Victorine Meurent was naked and her lips half-smiled, her white skin smooth and unblemished, her face rested on her hands that rested on the bent knee of her right leg, her left was cocked and lay on the ground so the sole of her foot was on the same plane as her gaze. A red flush crept up the back of the neck of the man in front as his eyes followed the line from her neck and down her body, along her thigh and knee and rested; perhaps on her calf muscle or on the curves of hip and back to her shoulders. Wide eyes, flecked with the art of her intense stare. No shadows marked time cast on the ground as she looked at him, her hair mulched in the background of dense dark leaves, blurring at her beginning and end.

Her eyes fixed and mouth still and she glinted in the spotlight, her astonished flesh a radiant peach against the grey hum of the gallery walls. A wooden floor connected each space, amplified the foot flick steps and constant click-schlops of cameras; a tumble-weed of unspoken, unclothed thoughts and self-conscious whispers made sound shades to hide from her silent, impassive stare.

Lauren stood in the *musée d'Orsay*, rehearsing her spiel in her mind. This important, this very important, this seminal work from Manet. Victorine eyed her, with fruit spilt obviously over her body and the basket in the foreground. Lauren wondered if she could be as brave as this, if she could stare down an artist while sitting naked beside two fully clothed men.

She smiled and drew a rectangle in the air, making a slow poster around Victorine's face, and mimicked her expression. She talked too fast sometimes, she had been told and so she rehearsed her pauses. She gave a few nods of the kind that normally accompany the consideration made when choosing a wine from a list or tasting it, the noise being essential to the confidence with which the verdict could be delivered.

Lauren knew she had a good figure. They both did: the naked Victorine and the American in her conservative suit. It had happened before that someone would compare more than just their faces when Lauren imitated Victorine's blank expression. She could be a model, a women had suggested. She probably could, Lauren had thought.

A group arrived together and arced in a loose amphitheatre, sitting on a low bench without a back or standing behind it: the efficient appreciation of art not requiring comfort. Lauren moved to the side to give them a

seemed to re-find his love for Harriet, like it was a remote control that slipped down the back of the chair. At his wife's house. He had forgotten to mention to her he was married. But he was charming, and a staggering musician and

Harriet listened to the sculptures, their music made or improvised in private, unrecorded except in the perfect uncontested feelings they recollected in their listener. Under the glass roof the air was bright and safe, she wondered if she might use her legs as callipers on the museum floor, draw out a bronze form in a dance on the marble.

Ignoring Muse in his top hat, Lauren returned to her imagined commentary. It was more likely Monet looked with a different view of the same scene. Or his painting was a precursor. Manet originally entitled this work *le bain* and Monet painted *Bain à la Grenouillère*. It could be both had more in common with Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* and there needs to be a comment on gentlemen and their hookers. No, thought Lauren. Young lady companions or escorts, not hookers.

Victorine smiled at Lauren. Better a nude model than a hooker, the smile said. But then what about *Olympia*, she allowed herself to be painted as a prostitute there, didn't she? Lauren waited for her answer. Others said Manet had her playing herself. They said the viewer was included in the reality, invited to partake in the action, in the moment. That this not a loose moralised objectifying representation of a woman, they say. It is precisely the opposite. Manet is lambasting Titian. Showing her as she is.

The men sat clothed, just as Lauren was. One man posing in the painting was a brother, of Manet. The likeness based on Eugène or Gustave. But the men were not so forthcoming in giving their real identities away. They were respectable, not like the nineteen or twenty year old Victorine. Eugène ended up married to Berthe Morisot, another painter and model. Victorine smiled at Lauren blankly.

Harriet looked away. On his perch, the sensible Icarus, the neck-less Balzac looked ahead, wings wrapped around himself to never open, to never see the nature of the flight between the fingers of the kneeling woman and the fleeing, spineless, contrary, man. In the sweep of bright glass and arches she shed two tears, one each for art and for her former lover, and they made her glad to feel, but pricked her pride.

Behind her, a man stared at the well-toned haunch of a crouching female, her delicate hands, long hair and an expression somewhere between elation

and distress. Perhaps ecstasy. Or cramp.

The beauty in guessing the silent reactions of others amused her. A gallery of views in each piece, circled around and crouched in front of or squinted at; stood over or beside; shadows deep and shallow making art of their lust and tears, lost in a blink. She remembered Lauren, taking in her fix of Manet and Degas on the top floor, and walked to the stairs in the corner of the building.

It was difficult not to see Harriet now in Victorine. One was an aspiring artist who modelled to supplement her income. Not just modelled, she took her clothes off. Still a long way from sleeping with the artist, or co-worker in the painting. Would Victorine have fallen for Muse? Did Harriet expect she would be Berthe Morisot to Eduard Manet?

Lauren had warned her away from Muse, had felt him wandering in the woods in his Top Hat as he looked at her. But Harriet was a real woman, not a flat image made in chalk on a slate, or in the sand on a beach, and she did what she wanted. With Muse, Harriet had become like an actress in a movie taking off her clothes when there is no script to tell her to do this. If Manet can paint a young artist as models as whores as goddesses, then Muse can play her beautiful friend as a whore, as his muse, as young pianist mistaking a leg over for a leg up. Lauren wanted to move away from the painting, to sum up Manet's view of women.

She had sensed a few groups come and go. Nothing unusual in that as some would stand and stare at a distance, others study the brush marks or glance sidelong at Victorine, finding that she still met their gaze. There was someone behind her. It would be like Harriet to arrive when she had been thinking of her, and she would have to disguise her thoughts, submerge them so they didn't leak out in a piteous glance or ill-conceived reference to Muse.

"You see that painting?" Conrad asked as she turned to him. His voice was deep and of the kind that could make the reading of a shopping list sound like an argument. He spoke overly-loudly, having taken to acting out a kind of parody of himself. "*Les raboteurs de parquet*" — well, you would see it if that man in his hat — who wears a hat in a frickin' Art Gallery? — gets out of the way. Don't look at me like that, Lauren."

"Why are you here, Conrad?" Lauren did, and to the man in the hat and wheelchair, and hoped he hadn't heard.

"It's not like it's cold, or there's a hailstorm. These guys on the floor," he

waved his cane towards the painting, Moses-like, as if a sea of opinion were about to divide he walk through it, drowning the Pharaoh in his chariot and hat.

Lauren liked the painting. The men scraping off the curls of varnish from the floor. Their bottle of wine resting on the floor. They were unlike any builders she had employed, their bodies young and lean and lit beautifully. None of them thought to look up and stare.

“It’s a French socialist thing — ”

“Connie! Do you mind!” Lauren glared, losing her thread. Condensed nature. Manet how he abrades his own paint, showing the bare canvas. Reminiscent of Velasquez’s technique in forming the brickwork in his *Medici Gardens in Rome*. Baudelaire had written *la Cigüe* on the canvas and wiped it off, leaving an impression only in the mind.

“You used to rehearse your spiels with me, Lauren. I’m not without some knowledge,” Conrad softened his tone. It was understatement bordering on humility. Lauren sighed and recapped her thoughts to him so far. He nodded here and there, raising an eyebrow at her top-hatted voyeur. “We can’t refer to Manet’s theoretical writings, as he had none, of course.”

“Does that matter?” Lauren countered. It was up to the viewer to decide the story of what they saw. Art was not, for Manet, the re-telling of the old, but of the now; not just of the subject chosen for him, but his subject viewed in his own way: dictating to his audience, like artistic news. “The painting is a mirror. And people don’t always like to look in the mirror, do they? Do we?”

“Is that like a fat joke?” Connie leaned on his stick.

“Connie! Please, it’s not all about you.”

“It’s not a mirror if it’s not about me, honey. It’s about a distorted me, a me someone else wants to project on me, and I’m not too sure I want that.” There was another man. He changed his body position, now and then and Lauren looked around casually. It was the man with the audio guide, the headphones now loose around his neck. Perhaps he was returning for a second look. He looked between her and Connie, then through them to the painting.

Lauren pulled Conrad to the side.

“I’m just riffing here,” Conrad continued. “Workers and then the dancers could come in and use the floor and that they were the unseen ladies, waiting in the wings. And then I see Degas down there and his dancers who were vivacious and loud and brash and I think I’d get on with them, don’t

you? Did you know Manet cut up a painting that Degas gave him because he didn't like how it showed his wife. They fell out over it, and the exhibition of *refusée* was partly Manet's refusal to continue to see art in a way that did not move forward, while the country had moved forward and belonged to the people its art had not, but remained the means of transmitting the patriarchal bourgeois view of society." Conrad stopped to take a breath and took out a handkerchief to wipe his sweaty forehead.

Lauren looked at the men and their curled torsos like the curl of their shavings, and the floor was made for them, or from them. Conrad was right. They were like dancers, lithe and full of motion, not thickset and brawny. They stretched, preparing like dancers for a show they'd never see. But lower than dancers: the unseen stage-builders. Lauren said, "I love that the varnished bits look wet, like they have been dancing and are resting."

"Can I ask a question?" The man spoke.

"Of course," Lauren answered, but the man turned to Connie.

"You're a Brit," said Connie.

"Yes. Do you work here?" The man asked.

"Me? No."

"That's a shame. Because I've got one of these things," he held up the electronic audio guide, the headphones tugging around his neck, "and I can't hear it over the sound of your voice. And I heard you commenting about that man's hat earlier and frankly you're just being rude."

Lauren felt a surge of panic and excitement. Connie blanched a little, seeming to consider his options before leaning on his stick, either to steady himself or appear more of a cripple. "Point taken."

"Hi, you two!" Harriet breezed in beside Lauren and Connie. "It's a little frosty here, what's happened?"

"Hello Harry," Conrad forced a smile and glanced at the man. "My fault. Creature of habit."

"She's your wife, Conrad. A little support might be more appropriate." Harriet looked to the man standing beside Connie and smiled.

"How's the prep going for your talk? Harriet asked.

"OK. Although, I've kind of lost my thread," Lauren's voice wavered as she remembered her thoughts of Victorine. Harriet looked like she had been crying; she was burdened, like the woman at the back of Manet's painting, the one bent over in the water, washing or being born, or about to fill a jar a water and carry it off for miles into her future. Lauren imagined Harriet being chased off by a guard for draping herself over some sculpture of

immutable charms; Harriet reached out and squeezed her arm.

“I can’t wait to hear it,” Harriet said. The man turned and began to walk off, leaving them to their conversation.

“Thank you,” said Connie.

“Sorry?” The man came back. Harriet detected the shift in atmosphere and looked at Lauren, who was thinking Connie’s tone might be construed as sarcastic and was only slightly ashamed to hold Harriet’s arm, indicating she stay back and watch.

“I was being an ass.” Connie said. “You brought me up short. It doesn’t happen often. I’m grateful. Conrad Golden,” Connie put out his hand.

“Well, it takes a big man to admit he’s wrong.” The man smiled. “And that wasn’t a fat joke.” he said, shaking his hand. “I’m Duncan. Duncan Innes.”

“You’re in Paris to buy a piano?” Harriet asked. It was him, the upset, tearful man. She and Lauren shared a moment of telepathy about these damaged goods; the man crying over a piano story, the Conrad-whisperer.

“Yes. English? Would you be Harriet?” Duncan asked.

“I still sound English? I’ve been here fifteen years. Harriet Claudel.” Harriet put out a hand. It was pale, with slender, long fingers and he wondered if she played piano too. The tips of her fingers were powdery, as if she had stepped from the Manet canvas in front of him. She seemed more the demure bather than the brazen naked one.

“Claudel? Like the —”

“Yes! Like the sculptor, Camille Claudel,” said Lauren. “It’s more like twenty, honey!” Lauren shot a broad smile to Harriet as she leaned in and shook Duncan’s hand. “Lauren Golden.” Her hand was warm and firm. “She’s like her namesake in more ways than one.” Lauren felt her artless comment escape before she could stop it, her musings from earlier escaping as thoughtless ether on her words. She looked to Harriet in puzzled apology.

“Lauren!” Harriet’s embarrassment was momentary.

“She’s a talented sculptor.” Duncan said. He found Lauren distracting. She had the same sassy, confident expression he saw in the naked woman behind her. She was clear, cool, around forty — his age — and seemed fun. Perhaps the American accent and Paris put him in mind of her with a cocktail, laughing with Harriet in a quaint bar of unfinished woods and candle-sparkled glass. Her husband, Connie, was well into his late fifties, dishevelled and disgruntled, locked in the internal *démêlé* of a sour Dorian Grey duped into keeping his younger, more handsome self locked in his lofty memory. The dirt in her martini. He had the air of entitlement about him. Of old money.

“Harriet, Antoine told me it’s your day off. That you’d see me tomorrow.”

“Did he?” The scheming little sod, she nodded. But then, she had expected Antoine would dump the guy on her. “I’ll see you there. Or,” she looked to Lauren, “Come to lunch with us? Why wait until tomorrow, I’ll take you back to the shop later. It’s only ten minutes walk from here.” Duncan smiled, with a rising feeling that he was having a somewhat magical encounter. He knew it was only a short walk — the flat he had rented for the fortnight was on a narrow street halfway between the gallery and the shop.

“That’s very generous of you Harriet. I’d like that. But lunch first. It will be on me, Conrad, if you’d like to join us?” Duncan asked.

“Or have you got a pressing engagement to dine alone with a bottle of Malbec and a plate of steak-frites?” Lauren added.

“I’ll take a rain check,” said Conrad. “But that’s not because I’ve been reprimanded.” Connie made a point of smiling and nodding to Duncan. “We can maybe do drinks tonight, or later in the week? You guys can organise.” Connie wondered off.

“*À plus tard.*” Duncan called after Conrad with uncertain pitch and the hint of a question mark. He waved without turning, as if hailing a cab as it passed him.

“Just learning French?” Lauren asked Duncan. He nodded. “Good for you.”

They walked out onto the flat roof and stood by the wall, the women putting their shades on in the bright sun. Lauren looked out over the Paris rooftops, Harriet saw her silhouette against the wall made more slender in its shadow form. The light skimmed across the terrace as it had through Manet’s trees and the colonnade at the *Musée Rodin*. Pictured outside the gallery’s frame, Harriet’s skin shone and she looked at Lauren’s beautiful smile that was broad and brassy, her voice floating off.

She rubbed her eyes. The sand of her life and the stone dust on her fingers getting in them and making them weep. She bent over, as sometimes people do when they have something caught in their eye, blinking frantically to make more tears. There was no grit Victorine’s eyes.

Duncan whipped a linen napkin from a nearby table and handed it to her as she straightened up. “Thank you,” she dabbed her eyes. “It’s just the wind.”

“Yes. I get that,” said Duncan as he looked across the Paris rooftops and the *tricolors* hanging limp against their poles.

III

In was a low-ceilinged loft full of sweat and frustration and grimy boxes that had been taped and re-taped, transferred from loft to loft and passed from hand to hand but not through a mind as they moved from house to house. A previous generation or two were strewn dusted and dormant in possessions the location and even existence of which was so far from the mind that not only were they forgotten, but even the lingering sense that one day they needed to be exhumed and sorted was forgotten too.

These objects in this loft were unable to conjure any magic other than a dark sort, no memories from a childhood that weren't dark or tricks and sleights of violent hands played out in shadows behind closed doors that kept the boy protected. There were only a few photographs, which lay as loose scraps, images that otherwise tumbled, crumpled, torn, faded, bent, despised, between the contents of a bathroom cabinet emptied hastily in a cardboard box, or a drawer of oddments and tools that never had a place. Here and there the teeth of pliers or blade of a screwdriver had pierced the pictures through-and through or chipped the corners on their frames; they had been thrown in the box as if the despised trophies of some light-fingered tradesman whose hammer was missing.

On some containers the descriptions were neat and plain — mum's clothes — but others had been crossed out several times, becoming general and increasingly vague as they dwindled in value and the hope of ever being opened. 'Unattempted Romantic' and 'Modern French' became 'piano music' and then just 'books'. It was the unwanted library of the disenchanted scholar, consigned in mind if not in substance to the skip.

It was a beautiful summer's day when Jane called to say that Mr Porter was dying. The dust was thick rose in clouds as he shuffled the boxes around in the loft. All this lifting was made more difficult by being stooped over in the dark. His skin either too warm when covered with clothing, or itching with the fibreglass insulation when he stripped off to cool down. It was sunny where she was too. The blinds were making shafts of light on the floor and yes, they still had the plush purple sofa.

He dropped a few boxes through the hatch to the floor. They landed and exploded as a toadstool might, with spores of the past flung wide over the carpet; future fungal memories waiting to be made from the dust of the past. He didn't want to speak to Mr Porter.

She preferred to think of him napping in a deathly kind of way. He was

forever hot. She carried water to him all day, she said.

A few loose leaves blew loose. They spiralled on down the stairs, their unrehearsed, colourless autumn falling silent to the hallway below.

Since Jane called he had built shelves. Simple affairs of smooth planks resting on bricks, in a room on the ground floor to take the books. His plan to buy a piano that had been spun out and reeled back in over the years.

She had asked if he still played. The idea of playing again had been taken up then wilfully put aside. The first box he opened had a green English Hymnal stuffed in the top. He had avoided settling down too. An eligible if undesirable bachelor. He had his own business and house and hair. These things seemed to matter in the personal ads he had read. He had never gone much past reading.

He flipped through the book: *Immortal, invisible, God only wise!* he sang as a boy in his audition to become a church chorister with the same thin, metallic voice that he still had, though lower, and disliked immensely. It had all the tunefulness of the uncoiled wrought iron gates of the cathedral's vestibule.

Both the idea of playing piano again and his singleness came to a head one boozy night the previous summer. After he cooked dinner for his business partner, James, and his wife, Liz, both gregarious South Africans who deliberately ignored his stonewalling. Duncan deflected. He would think about meeting someone after he began to play music again, which would be after he bought a piano. Duncan realised how good a negotiator James was. But it was Jane's call that did it. He would marry Jane if he met her now. But not Jane. Someone like Jane. She was around twenty years his senior, and he had always admired her, even if she was quite blind to Iain Porter's antics. Or he hoped she was.

Behind those gates that squeaked like a regretfully remembered boy's voice were twin brutish doors. They were stout and tanned timber with macho black metal hardware and portals set too high for a child to see through. There it was in the front of the hymn book, the stamp — *Not to be Taken Away!* They swung on heavy sprung hinges. Their brassy complaint not just a boy but a choir of squeaking beds from the neighbouring bedroom in a cheap hotel that increased in pace and intensity, reverberating down the flag-stoned floors and around the cloisters until they came to rest with an inevitable groan or a sharp yelp where fingers got trapped.

Duncan and several others from the Church of England primary school were marched two-by-two across the road and inside the Cathedral. They

sang in the choir vestry. It reeked of charity shops around the hanging rails of cassocks. And of old leather where it peeled off the bench seats. Along every wall were shelves lined and labelled with files of music: anthems, orchestral pieces, carols, masses, and oversized books. Perhaps books of liturgical spells.

The man leading the auditions wore a bow-tie and was neat and very posh, his voice as tidy and put away as the music in its boxes. The boys sniggered to each other as he taught them how to pronounce the words. A few were not too bright at reading. It was not Duncan's idea to audition. They got to be shown around the building and up in the vast tower with the promise of bats, so he went. He heard the bells deafeningly close in the belfry and in his gut and, he was surprised to find, in a tingling in his privates. They all got to lie on a grate to the tiled floor and pews in the nave below. When he let go it felt like he might fall. It was exciting. They looked at the view over the town to the fields that he knew were miles away. It was a fair trade to sing a bit of nonsense to be able to skive off school.

The organ shook the building. Duncan looked around for where it was coming from, the sound arriving off all the surfaces, the shimmering high notes disappearing like the foam on the waves at a beach, giving way to those deep dark notes that lingered, with the promise of more, ever more frightening waves to come.

The group of school boys walked through the crow's nest. As they passed the organ console Duncan lagged behind and stood mesmerised. Five manuals of keys and rows of knobs changed the sounds when pulled. There were pedals too. And that tremendous sound. The man in the bow-tie thundered away at it, eyes darting over the magical symbols of the music, his black wizardly cloak flapping over the back of the bench. He stopped. Turning on the seat. "Would you like a go on my organ?"

"Yes, please." Duncan wasn't sure if the offer was real.

"What's your name?"

"Duncan. Duncan Innes your reverended-ness."

"I'm Iain Porter. And I am, as you might find out, neither reverential nor reverend in the slightest. Come up, Master Innes!" He put out his hand to help the boy onto the bench. A colossal tuba bent the air and shook through the building. It was that feeling again. Mr Porter pointed to the pedal that Duncan was standing on. He patted the seat and then Duncan's bottom and the seat again and Duncan slipped onto it. The loud note stopped.

"Sorry." Duncan laughed. "You're funny Mr Porter." He leaned forward to

read the labels on the switches and slipped off again, sounding out another note this time.

“A quick learner, I see. Only another twenty to walk on and you’ve mastered the lot!” He slipped his hands onto the boy’s hips and pulled him back onto the bench.

“Sorry Mr Porter, I was trying to read the switches.”

“Of course. The switches relate to the stops, the ranks of pipes.” Mr Porter extended his arms this way and that as pipes. He explained the organ was jammed full of them and how many thousand there were. They were made from woods or metals. Lead and tin. They synthesized different orchestral instruments. The longer pipes had the lower notes. The ones that re-arrange the trousers. Duncan smiled at this. Mr Porter patted his leg. Nice feeling, wasn’t it? The shorter pipes are higher pitched, the same as strings on a piano, or bars on a marimba.

Duncan saw the symmetry of a row of pipes in his field of view. They were triangular. Like the roof of a building. The long low ones were in the middle. “The high ones are at the outside.”

“Very perceptive Master Innes.” The arrangement meant the notes alternated sides. Otherwise the sound would be all low on one side and high on the other. “If I told you this key,” he pressed the uppermost white note, “was the smallest pipe on the right, which note would the next lowest key play?”

“The smallest pipe on the left?”

“Well done!” Mr Porter looked genuinely impressed. “How old are you, Duncan?”

“Eight.” Duncan perceived some maturity was needed. “And a half,” he added.

“Show me the notes you would play to go from the smallest pipe on the left, the biggest pipe in the middle, then back to the smallest on the right.” He watched the boy look at the pipes, squinting as if trying to count them. Duncan counted the number of pipes from the outside to the tallest in the middle, then he looked at the keyboard and imagined which keys he would play, missing every second one. “Well?”

“Give me a minute, Mr Porter, I’m concert-ating.”

“Yes, I see.” Mr Porter smiled then shook his head, stifling a laugh. Such seriousness in a boy always amused him. Then, blank-faced, Duncan proceeded to play a perfect whole tone scale from the top down and back up the alternate side of the scale, crossing his thumb under naturally as he went.

“That was remarkable. A reward.” Mr Porter played a few notes on the

pedals that shook the seat and Duncan smiled at the tingling in his trousers. He closed and opened his legs as if a butterfly drying its wings in the sun. “Can you do it again?” asked Mr Porter. Duncan did. Again, there was a few notes on the pedals, but this time Mr Porter held a note as Duncan fluttered his wings. “TINGLES, DOESN’T IT?” Mr Porter shouted over the sound of his organ as Duncan fidgeted around. The sound and flapping stopped. “Have you had lessons?”

“We had our times tables this morning and then craft, but I can’t really draw.”

“If you were nine, I would think you were being droll, Duncan.” A low note sounded and stopped again and Duncan giggled this time.

“You’re doing that to make me have that fluttery feeling.”

“Yes, that’s true. It will be our little secret, I think. We can’t have everyone knowing you’re learning to play so quickly, I’ll be out of a —” another note sounded. Mr Porter looked and saw there was nothing on the pedal board.

“IT’S A CIPHERING NOTE. SOUNDS LIKE IT’S ON THE BOURDON. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE HOW THE ORGAN WORKS?” Mr Porter shouted. Duncan nodded and they proceeded back around a narrow passage following Mr Porter, who then clicked open a small door

almost invisible within the structure of the larger one, had been unlocked and he pushed it open, stepping inside onto the cobbles on the other side. The doors sealed off the front of an archway of a mews big enough to take an old fashioned horse and carriage with the driver sat on top. The building seemed to have once fronted a mews or hidden courtyard. Duncan had found the flat on a website and was drawn as much to the cloistered entrance as rooms themselves.

Gates that matched the front ones sealed off a short mews at its farthest end. Large glazed doors on the left and right allowed access to the flats above. Another electronic lock gave access through the glass door and into the hallway, floored in black and white mosaic tiles, and on to a tiny elevator. Harriet entered the dim magic, wondering why she was doing so as she did it. She was in a film, not turning the lights on. The street’s performance heard but unseen in the blankness, her mind searching for the click of heels.

Light clicked on.

The lift projected the building, its glass sedan carried vertically through a metal lattice and frozen moments of walls and doors, each floor projecting a different frame. The street soundtrack muted; the repeated architecture of

frames and passageways jumping like diverging train tracks beside a train.

A crying child and pram outside a featureless door; a woman shouting with the diction of a workman; a man's quiet voice, or a quiet man's voice, sinister and appeasing then out of earshot; bicycles mounted on the walls; and at the top, doors with brass numbers for tourists, above the anonymity of real life.

The high ceilings offered room to think lofty thoughts, or at least thoughts of things other than here and now. The doors were symmetrically arranged: two forwards, two left, two right. Two bedrooms diametrically opposed each other, as did the lounge and kitchen. He had taken the room to the front that had a window looking out on the main road, the same view as the lounge. He had sat for some time the first evening he was there, watching the lights go on and off in the apartments across the street, the late-night smoke had by an older man and the young lady next door, who leaned across their balconies to blow rings of words on how their day had been or maybe politics or how he wished he was still her age and how he would take her dancing if he was.

Below the young woman, a man of artistic shabbiness gave violin lessons; Duncan watched him teach a group of three students the previous evening, his tone the liquor to their crushed ice and cut glass. Just now, he taught a girl with Harriet's colouring. Duncan wondered how and where and when Harriet had learned her music. She wasn't forthcoming about who she was, but they were strangers.

The girl smiled as if her teacher had told her she had played well or was improving and it seemed an age since simple encouragement was simple encouragement and not a device for manipulation, or to pre-empt the truth of the matter. It was clear, through the open window, that her playing sucked. Perhaps it helped both of them not to mention it.

He turned to the wardrobe and took out a small roller-case and stood it on the simple frame of wood and canvas made for the purpose. He unzipped it, finding inside the carefully wrapped sheet music he had brought to audition the piano.

He sneezed, remembering the hours he had spent in the loft earlier that summer and of the boxes he had carried and dropped. Each one contained musical scores that formed an index of achievements and failures, of mastery and frustration. Each score bittersweet in either pure joy, its inked lines and dots translating into moments of intimate pleasure and ecstasy; or cold and shunning, a reminder of the girls he never asked to dance or coaxed out on a first date. He had laid them out on his bed, his previous relationships,

and despite careful handling they were friable or disintegrating, browned and ripped with age; some he couldn't remember clearly ever having, others had never known him.

He had re-boxed some of these almost immediately: the Scriabin and an untouched Rachmaninov were beyond him and were pristine, without a single pencil mark of direction or correction; innocent pages that had yet to form memories in mind or hands, or make connections with the other volumes of music in their box. These he had taken back

and ducked through into the darkness. Occasional bare bulbs lit grey twines. Dust coated the member of wooden frames. The mix of fluff feathers gave it the feel of giant nest. There was a constant hissing from below. "BE VERY CAREFUL. WALK ON THE BOARDS," Mr Porter shouted. "IT'S A LONG WAY DOWN." Duncan glimpsed down through the cracks, as if through the grate in the ceiling, but here were lines of cables, and big wooden chests with pipes in them, some as small as drill bits, others as thick as as a finger, arm, leg or body. It was the lair of a giant musical snake that played when prodded. The single note was getting louder.

"FOUND IT!" Mr Porter clapped a hand on and off the opening of a pipe that extended up twice a man's height. "Did you see a rag on the way here? I should have thought to bring it."

"Be right back." Duncan ran back along the planks that rattled under his foot and grabbed the two dusters that he had spotted in a bucket by the organ console. His grin broad inside the noisy beast as he ran back.

"Well done, Duncan," said Mr Porter. He lifted the pipe and signalled for Duncan to jam the rag in. Duncan pushed the rags in the air hole in the trunk. The pipe toppled, and in the ensuing scrabble to prevent it fall Duncan's hand was trapped beneath it. Mr Porter heaved on the pipe, keeping it upright and shouted to Duncan to get clear before lowering it again onto its muffle. "Are you alright boy?"

Mr Porter took his hand gently. He put Duncan's fingers in his mouth and began sucking them. Duncan, feeling the nerve-endings tingle and then pain return to them. Mr Porter stroked his neck as they sat in the organ loft, then both of them began to sneeze with the dust.

Mr Porter opened the door and looked along the empty street and closed it again. He checked it was locked for the third time that hour. It was a murder scene. His hand trembled and disturbed the surface on his glass of

wine. He tip-toed in slippers. A corpse had greeted him in his lounge when he returned from his perennial trip to the Church music festival in Norway. Lights on or off? The etiquette of the situation eluded him. Iain had never been the object of a crime of passion. Silence or sound? It would be silence. The solace of music had been ripped away from him. It had been a beautiful week, cold but clear, and the sea quite still for the time of year. The countertenor who sang in St Matthew's Passion had the most wonderful tone, a Dutch gent who had the deportment of a choirboy from a big cathedral. Iain sat beside his colleague and friend who played a delightful little chamber organ; Iain played a jewel of a harpsichord.

It was dual manual instrument with herringbone designs on the keys and inverted in its colouring so that it had darker keys where the whites would be. It had the most exquisite marquetry on the casework, a lace bodice surrounding her delicate strings that wrapped around the player somehow, giving the impression being cosseted, perhaps even corseted in the more expressive passages. Her arabesque designs had baroque scrolls, set around a central image. The swirls of the borders mirrored blonde and boyish curly hair of the angelic choristers and of Pan with his pipes painted plump and pink on the lid of the instrument. Iain loved the sombre black robe they gave him, the clerical coverall with its lace work ruffles that dripped white of his wrists.

His collection of vinyl records lay scattered on the floor of the lounge. It had been photographed there already, the corpse of music. Such an undignified death to be smashed and left broken, ten thousand phrases of exquisite recordings interrupted for all time, never to be resolved. Life in an eternal upbeat, never to experience their climactic *jouissance*. They would be swept up into the refuse bin. Like Mozart in his pauper's grave. Every black platter had been stood on or tossed against a wall, the little scrapes and dings they made now barely visible in the dim light.

He went to the window and drew the curtains before turning on the dimmest lamp, one that showed as little of the destruction as possible without him tripping. His black and white framed photograph of himself with an old John Cage and a large reel-to-reel tape machine stood framed and undamaged on the table. 'Cheap Imitation' was its title. What did it say of the miscreant, the vandal who had invaded his home that they smashed everything he held dear, but left this picture intact? He shivered at a whisper of cold air that found its way inside his dressing gown. He re-tied it, noticing the buttons of his creased shirt were not aligned. Fragments of the label

from Mendelsohn's Violin Concerto stuck to his faux felt slippers.

He could hardly bring himself to look at her. The whites had smashed into her face, the blacks bludgeoned clean off and scattered amongst the other musical wreckage. Her cheeks hung off, their reddish blushes now dulled and bloodied, the wood of them ripped and split from the rest of the casework. Along the curve of her waist, that sickle that recalled so many beautiful naked forms, were ugly gouges, distorted tribal tattoos that were so deep they would scar her organs. Letters were scored and re-scored in the lid, each word overlaid on top of the other so that her attacker's intent was rendered more obscure and his layers of hate and violence more pronounced.

Iain was scared. He peaked outside from behind the curtain. Two figures passed in opposite directions at the other side of the street. Then, as one passed under a lamppost he saw the silhouette of a dog. Just two people. His heart would bang in his chest for a few seconds more. The smell of pine and lemons and booze now nauseated him. It was the cocktail she had been forced to drink. A green slime oozed around and booze engorged the red felt inside her body. Her mutilated lips curling around the ripped-out strands of copper and steel that were her heart strings. Each and every one had been cut with surgical precision, the pegs that held them pulled out like fingernails that left gaping, chipped wounds. Yards of her were strewn in beautiful metallic straw. A spike or stake had made holes in her sound-board, her iron ribs hit until they cracked.

Iain leant on her and wept, his left foot subconsciously toying out a melody of lament on the fragments of her face and torso. He had a macabre thought, that perhaps it was the work of some poltergeist, the ghost of a composer of modern music he had long ago insulted.

He recalled those grotesque graphic scores composed to be played on prepared instruments — to make the perfect portrait of a woman one must first slash a her face and rip out her strings. This was music that, if a bottle of ink were spilled over the page between first rehearsal and final performance, the audience would be none the wiser, such is the inaccuracy, the Whirling Dervish of these composers' pretensions with their whorls and cartwheels that are like decorations on a cake or child's bedroom wall.

He longed for some music and remembered the little radio from the bathroom that he had bought for travelling with and had taken with him to Norway. He shuffled through to his bedroom his soles sticking to the sodden carpets and fragments of shellac and powdered piano.

Switching it on, he lay on the bare mattress — he couldn't bring himself

to even make the beds on his return — his face turned to the bright glare of his bedside light, as if in it there was nothing else evil that could hide and destroy the little music he had left. Clara Schuman. Here was some Chopin-esque fluidity, the reluctant ebb and flow in the left, the liquid melody of the right, the gathering of the power, then the throb as it tumbles, fountain-like. Could they hear it? Did they know they had failed to rob him of all his music! Those lush sprays of colour that darken. Here is Liszt. Heavy. Then the thickness of Brahms, and then this simple phrase ending, that could even be Mozart,

but also a touch of Beethoven. Duncan stood in the corridor of rehearsal rooms. A solo cello sang behind a badly fitting door that had been slammed too many times by careless students. The doors had tiny portal windows, like prison cells, so that inmates could be seen practising frantically for lessons or recitals. He peeked to see a blonde cellist who had her back to him. He walked in.

She turned around. Her look of annoyance, curiosity and amusement was one he would come to know well. To love her for.

“Are you lost?” she asked. “Don’t you knock? I’ve got this room for another hour, so don’t try it on.” She played in stocking soles with holes at the toes. Her blonde hair a frizzy mass that Duncan imagined she threw about when nearing a climax. He explained that he had heard her playing her cello. But he noticed that the piano accompaniment lacked intention.

“I’m Duncan,” he said and waved, as if she were across the street.

“How rude! That’s my cello teacher’s piano playing on the tape.” The disharmony of ill-tempered klaviers echoed down the narrow corridor and into their room. “I’m Clara.”

“You’re learning the Cello part, I take it.” Duncan glanced at the music on the stand.

“That’s a bit obvious, isn’t it. Are you a first year?”

Duncan leaned over and glanced at the score. His fingers already moving in response to the pattern of dots and lines on the page. Here, a rhythm; there, a phrase to be turned into beautiful sounds. Ink and paper metered into metered air; symbolic cymbals of sibilant sound, the notes of the first few bars already loading for playback in his head. He took the pages from the stand. As she began to protest he put the score on the piano, sat down, and began to play. After passing the point where the cello should begin he turned to see her tapping her bow against her hand like a riding crop. “Are

you going to play, Clara?”

“Seriously? Just like that?” He flicked his hair forward and back again in a way that she was maybe supposed to think was like a cool musician. He looked a little silly, but also a little cute. She shrugged and tapped the start of the score with her bow and then held it over the strings. In the arc of her arm and the slight furrow of her brow, Duncan saw a matador, and saw that her instrument allowed her a far broader range of gestures than he could manage at his. There was no chance he could take it off to some remote pier on a lake. Or a grassy clifftop by sea. Or

sitting by the window overlooking the street below the flat in Paris with a suitcase of music. The rain scurrying down the window as oblique watery dots sliding down a score. Duncan took out a postcard from his pocket. Caillebotte’s floor scrapers. The dancer shaped workmen toiling with unseen beauty. He had missed it too, until the American Lauren had pointed it out. She read paintings like he read pages of music, and he felt a connection. In the form of a spine or musical phrase, they both accused the world of beauty.

He lifted out a skinny volume. An edition of Debussy’s two *Arabesques*. He could hear them now, accompanying the pastel shaded ballerinas of Degas dancing over Caillbotte’s newly planed floor.

A photograph fell out.

It was from the concert on the last night of term. The one he never played in. It was his first and only year studying music. He looked pale and unkempt. His long curly hair springing out here and there, a little wet from the rain. They posed for the camera, her hand resting on the plaster cast on his right arm. Clara was in that lavish pink dress. She looked far younger than he remembered. Seeing her took some of the sting from his recurring regret that after that night he chose to never see her again.

IV

The drenched street was bleached in beams of white car lights and bright water blacked under red awnings at bars; the drenched pavement reflected canvas awnings sagged and red in rain; the drenched street bled in swollen drops and dragged arrhythmic fingers down windows and dripped down necks, drizzled off downpipes — dangled. The stopped-rain-air outside the souk-style café rippled vermilion in steaming lamps, the suspended sulphur censers lighting the damp descending hush. Under clouds of madder pink parasols rivulets drip-dripped off candelabras shaped as black tulips — leaded petals pooled in wax and slick with drizzle.

The pewtered chair backs slashed the light; the pewtered chairs made daggers of the silvered night; The pewtered chairs, still-limbed and rigid, were slashed with slits at its hips. The pewtered chair revealed its sitters in thin sliced pink pressed between the zoetropic slats with blackened dayless fingers clutched around their rumps.

Two young women, linked hand-in-hand giggled in pink dresses and yellow sashes at their table; Two young women donned mortar board hats in bright laughter that pinked the blatter and blot of the rain that blistered in odd drips beside them; two young women wedded the dark wet lead and red of the street to the pink perfume of their dresses.

Inside a bartender nodded and descended from a tall stool when the pink ladies waved and beckoned. The bartender pulled and smoothed her scrunched up skirt as she walked. The two women giggled, the three women laughed; a simple- sounded beauty that warmed the night; it lighted the café from pinked wicks to the red glow of the awning that blazed as a shade that flamed the night.

Students festooned in frocks and fancy footwear flaunted their costumes in excited sallying and sashays. Students in silk and sweet-smelling, in excited whispers and whoops, wheeled cases of instruments in all shapes and sizes. Students suave in suits and shirts and stuffy ties stood starched and sweating watching the girls and guys go by, and watched by the girls and guys that went by with little waves and nervous laughs.

She was there amongst them. Unseen. The strands of smoke from cigarettes swirled with fringes lit by the long orange of the evening sun and settled as if a mist of romance over some ancient lake or sugary sweet scene

of wild flowers.

Glass orbs suspended in foyer and galleries shone invitingly, as candles or flames might. These swayed in warm currents and cooling fans. The swaying from above was impatient and full of time, the upswirling swaying of the smoke was caught around the sweet smells, the excitement and ageless exuberance of youth. It would never disperse or float away. It was a night to run into. To taste and savour rather than store in the crease of two arabesques. It was a hemiola, this memory. The steady twos of the swaying lamps signalling its inevitable movement; the melancholy waltz of the threes playing over them. It was a different time. It seemed to him the beautiful boys were bright and brazen and slutty and sweet. The girls he hardly spoke to. Apart from Clara. He saw the red velvet curtains slide and doors swing shut to the auditorium, a light and ringing bell signalled the show was about to begin. Staff were ushering parents and students to their seats, performers to the stage doors. He coughed as he took in a lungful of smoke before it dissipated.

“Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir!” the one said as she stood and lit her cigarette in a cincture of fingers and blew a kiss over its embers; the other touched her temple, as if to say it was a clever thought or memory and lit her cigarette from the fire of her friend’s.

They were at the café apron’s edge. The one swished a slender hand across the scalloped skirt of the vermillion awning and sent silvery drops of water over her friend. Squeals ensued as on slender shoes, on shapely legs, with cigarettes sly and sultry between their lips, they chased about the tables flicking water. The flabby flounce of their cerise skirts slowing them, The one stood beneath the scallops and the other, springing off a chair, hit the awning and sent a flute of silvery rainwater, fluid and mercurial, pouring from the edge of the cinnabar canopy to catch the one on the nape of her neck. There was the flinch of ice or coals, the squeal then laughter of surprise. The other’s giggle sweet and infectious, the two sat as the bartender returned with two glasses of red. A moment’s silence passed where thoughts circled between them in the cinders of their cigarettes and sips of wine. Fluorescent sounds from cars, a distant clatter of plates, the trickle of water draining from the drying roofs, lit the walls and swirled around the scents that rose afresh of coffee and garlic and roasting meats, the evening air atomised between sips

of wine and pulls and plumes of smoke from cigarettes.

They waltzed in the dark. Man and wife mimed lateness on the steps that ran across the front of the hall and from the pavement to the door. The concert hall was fronted with canaliculated columns that echoed a Greek temple or grand railway station. Latin text with V's where U's should be. Both were tall and elegant, harried as they buzzed between his pockets and her handbag. Duncan stood in a phone box opposite. His fag crackled and cindered and he dragged on it wedged between the fingers of his right hand that was wrapped in a plaster cast. He talked to no one with the handset placed between his cheek and shoulder. He was pleased not to be seen.

It was a perfect night for the event. The red sky a mosaic in the panes off the windows, grand cross-framed monstrances with evening suns. He dragged on his cigarette, blowing veils, rings and plumes in the warm evening harmony, grey ash creeping with each burning suck of smoke.

He stood haloed in the doorway as she climbed the steps. Hands outstretched and taken they tripped inside, holding each other and tickets, as if dancers holding flowers during applause, ready to take a bow onstage.

Clara danced down the street in strapped spangled shoes; Clara tottered down the street balanced on her highest heels. One arm waved two wine glasses crossed at the stems. On her back the hard red case of her cello, bashed and abraded dropped or kicked when it bruised her legs or just weighed too much.

A wine bottle peeked from the pocket of her overcoat. Her friend was dressed in blue or grey. She walked bedside Clara with her small instrument case tucked beneath her arm. Clara lifted her arms to hug him and squealed as if cold water had poured down her neck. He held her. She kissed his cheek; he kissed her. She thought he would stay away she said. Her lipstick smudged on chin and stubbled cheek. Her friend looked sour in her blue or grey dress. Hers was the face of his pained regret at what had gone and what was to come.

Duncan stepped back and admired her. Touched the strand of blonde lock that curled around her face and stuck to her lip. She longed for them to play together again; he longer for them to play together again. She looked beautiful. She must have played well. Clara opened her coat and dipped bended knees in awkward curtsies, the bold pink of her dress flashed and covered again. She had played the Fauré without him. With a stand in. Her

friend beside her in blue, or grey was Diane, or Debbie.

Diane or Debbie was a brass of some kind. She had the blunt lipped mouth. Trumpet, cornet, fughorn, bugle horn. She said what she played in the concert. Something brash and brassy by Berlioz. Diane was Romanian — or the music was Romanian. Bartok's Romanian dances. Clara flapped her arms at her sides.

The air broke and dropped under idle clouds and rolled cold over their skin. It felt as if a downpour might come. Diane shuffled, then went. Duncan looked at the glasses and Clara winced and shrugged. The hall has hot and packed she said. He was missed. David, the hook-nosed third year with young-Daniel-Barenboim-hair played the Rachmaninov Sonata for Cello and Piano without him; Sian, whose violin wept over Mendelssohn's D minor violin sonata had cried when she heard he was unable to play for her.

Rain dropped slick and silvered, instant and insistent against the road. It bounced off bonnets on parked cars; it bounced in puddles; it bounced on Clara's sparkling feet and in beads on her coat; it bounced loud then muted, a static wave that washed the cheers and whoops and excited rush of dresses and dinner jackets from the street. The others were bland and blended in the black of the night, faceless and unknown until they were going and gone. There was an emerald green dress. And a white umbrella that turned inside out when the wind blew harshly. They stopped a girl; she took their picture.

His arm was wet. He opened her coat and put his arm around her waist. Or she opened it. Clara put her other hand around his shoulder so his plaster kept dry. He ran his hand down the pink silk on her bottom as she walked along. She giggled and tutted. She wanted to dance she said. To see him dance. They had jumped around to rock in boots on beer stained floor but never really danced. But we have time for that, she said.

Students festooned in frocks and fancy footwear flaunted their costumes in excited sallying and sashays. The two girls, the two women sat and sipped and sniggered and reminisced or sent smoke signals from their cigarettes into their futures that lit up the café and the street. The waiter seemed to congratulate them. The other seemed the serious French Horn type, the first he saw straddling a cello. Or they were students of literature or history or law and of the static, timeless airless performance.

She laughed from shock as it fell. The strap had snapped and they walked

with it between them, suspended and held in both their hands that touched; held in their hands when they paused and kissed and it was a child that swung between two parents. A flabby dub bass bounced across the street from the door of a club. They bounced at the knees as they walked and mimed the moves and forgetting the words even then; forgot them now. From behind a steamed-up Italian restaurant blared Sinatra singing *This Town*, music in a sharp black suit and bright white collar that had longed for a silvered rainy street to play behind with the noise of the water seeping across and through and along the rhythms of night. Inside the beautiful belles and bold beaux drank to their futures.

Clara cupped her ear and dropped the case and shook out her stiffened hand. She opened her coat and smiled, arms wide and jazz-handed. She wanted to dance. She was pink and curved and blonde and he loved her as she jumped and smiled in her spangled heels and dress that clung as if it knew that soon she would disappear and take with her all her words and the memory of her that danced and swayed and wilted like a flower. Beautiful black shadows bathed her curves in the pinked folds. She dipped and straightened.

They began their slow dance to the up tempo beat. A waltz against the four. His hand throbbed in one time and her body in another. He felt they were watched from the doorway where Frank sang with sassy blaring brass. They would have been beautiful, sounded beautiful, as they hugged in time to nothing in particular, sinuous and subsumed in liquid shade.

They waltzed in the dark. A ballet on the wall of shadows as they huddled and hugged and turned intense. The other touched the one's arm then her cheek, as if she had welled up and was being consoled. The other had been duped or dumped or else was sad to leave her friend, or it was a dumb moment of maudlin joy.

The smell of the air after the rain. It was their ritual; flicking their cigarette in a cadenza of cinder arcs then a spray of sparks that faded too quickly to black. They would sit on the only seat and lean out, or throw a leg out each in the sunshine when she sound wear shades and the shadow would cut deep under her high cheekbones as she sucked on her cigarette. It was as if there was nothing else to do but smoke and make music. She must have spoken. She tasted of cigarettes when they kissed; her laughter sunlit even in the night.

That night they shut the window and sat on the only seat in the shabby little room and shivered with a duvet pulled around them. His t-shirt clung and hung, wet and warm to his chest, and cool and flaccid off his midriff. He took it off. She found a mix tape, pressed play and it whirred. She lit a candle too. She always did.

She was under the cover, the satin of her dress smooth on the skin of his torso. They both exhaled chilled vowels in rings of smoke that wowed and fluttered against the hissing tape. Clara slid her hand on his, her nose on his cheek then her lips finding his. The scent descended and there remained only the silvered black of night at the window, the raindrops' shadowed patina on the duvet and on her face. Wisps of her hair wept down the hollow at the side of her neck. Maybe the candle glinted in her eye, maybe a smile had appeared before the final, lamentable, sad sour chord that hung in a reek in the smoke in the air.

She laughed from shock as it fell. The one dropped a glass that smashed and daggered the night in shards of light as it flashed as cinders across the pavement outside the café. The other looked across to where he stood and back to her friend and they laughed — it was how Clara laughed when she was embarrassed, when she skipped a bar on a page of music and sent it spilling across the floor, or when their eyes met when they touched each other and they had never practised for that.

The one peered in shadows as the waiter came and shovelled up the glass and naked notes and fumbled touches. The other looked again. The waiter moved back and forward in the light from the café window behind her, stepped forward and back against fragments of memory, merged and transparent, that dazzled and cut and scattered the past in the present and on into the future. There was a new glass in its place. Under cover, in the dim café, the iron lamps formed deep dark craquelure on their faces. The sky was dark and clear and devoid of clouds.

It was a kind of music. The applause rose with a few jeers and nervous laughter as she sat to play and her leg slipped from the pink of her dress. He sat up high in the concert hall, next to the follow spots that shone, that worshipped her smile and admired the flush to her skin. She rose and bowed and sat again. It could never be how they had played it. His replacement was too light in accents at the end of that first movement. But she was fluid and sure and intense. That night, he forgot the music when she was straddling

him and smiling. Her fingers were curling slow in the candle and in his hair.

“The smell of the air after the rain?” the one asked. Duncan had gone inside and spoken to the waiter. He was sitting beneath the red of the awning and a heater that glowed red. His gaze was off in the distance, her words another foreign sign, another sound that fell but smashed in silence on the floor.

“Sorry. Yes. It’s refreshing. Reminds me of — ” but there were too many things to list. Too few of those he wanted to say out loud; in the same way the naming of a fragile thing might make it fracture and fade, so too Clara was never named to anyone. She was a story he could never bring to tell, to admit how he had brought it to an end. “Home,” he added.

“The English weather.”

“Yes.” His coffee arrived and he turned away a little, and the one returned to talking with other.

A fresh downpour drowned all other sounds. She had taken off her dress and bloomed naked under the duvet’s down. His hand, warmed after it braced her with its cold touch, spanned the small of her back or rested at the rise of her bottom. He stared in her eyes like he had never done before.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“Only when I think of it,” he said. His hand flexed in its cast.

“How did you fall? Were you drunk?”

“Yes. Can we change the subject?” He slipped the other hand from her waist and inside her pants and left it paused on a buttock.

“Does your left hand work as well as your right? Do you need some trilling practice?” she asked and pressed her pelvis towards him. The first time they were together, it was the word she used for him to touch her, to pleasure her. She hid her face, smothered it deep in his chest or in a pillow, as if ashamed to ask.

He kissed her forehead. His hand lingered on her bottom and then slid to her hip. She looked up and her eyes were bright and as beautiful as any moon he had heard mentioned in a song, and her tears were like tiny silver waves that escaped when she blinked.

“I had the strangest feeling we would never see each other after tonight,” she whispered.

He had said not to be silly. It was her nerves. Or it was the songs that played in the tape she had made for nights like these when they would drink

and smoke and then go to bed.

He loved her. And never said so. And she said he would leave her after that night, and he did.

It was a kind of music. He shook their slender hands. They faded in the shade as they passed from the the dim glow of the café, their fingers *asper-soirs* flicking water from the tables and chairs as they tottered and swayed past the seats their pink dresses strobed by the lattices of metal. They paused to wave again. They were intense again. The other brushed the one's hair back from her forehead and they embraced. Her face glowed in the hold and the painful beauty.

Glass chips glistened on the floor by his feet and Clara appeared in the flamboyant dust, in the image of a two young French women in pink dresses lighting cigarettes.

"*Bonsoir*," Duncan called. The young women left their scents and voices hanging in the evening air.

– His hand drifted
 "I love the pulse of that phrase," she said.
 – Listened
 "Reminded me of the Elgar."
 – Fingers circled.
 "The second movement."
 – She rolled over.
Louré. Hand bow
 – moved his hand
 Voicing chord.
 – Here.
 And he touched her
 – Just
 her face next to his
 – little
 and smelt her life beat through
 – circles.
 her skin and heart beat fast against
 – Here
 his nose and lips.
 – Eyes tight shut
 Her lashes slow unfluttered.
 – Finger

Touch. *Vibrato, en retenant.*

– Then wide open.

Tremelando. Serrez un peu

– Trill now

Animé. Lointain

– Faster

Marcatto. Dolce.

F –

Jouissance.

She wrapped her leg over his. Tight and warm and safe from the rain that battered on the window, the little dim bedroom the only light that shone for miles of darkness into the past and future.

A fresh downpour drowned all other sounds. It diluted to an unlit grey the livid café fronts. It dripped in the shadow it dripped in the shade. Rivulets ran as melancholy silk down the empty glasses and bottles, and loosed the shards of memories on the ground.

He stared at the glass on the next table, with its lipstick kiss on the rim, his eye traced its hip and in around the legs of wine that curved and clung inside and evaporated into sanguine grit.

Hold me.

Clara glittered in the smell of the rain and the flame of the candle that flickered in her room and on the table beside him in the café and left with the pink dresses of the two French women. He sat at a deep black Steinway in the concert hall. It was cold as he waited. The road was dark then lit with blue flashes in the distance. All the cars stopped to hear them play.

V

Blues and twos shuffled through the rain in the distance. They flashed past the cobalt splashed black and chrome macadam. Harriet and Lauren shared an umbrella, scuffing the slabs in matching boots, the hems of their jeans turning Prussian blue. Connie had suggested they all went out for dinner and persuaded Harriet to make the arrangements with Duncan. He then complained along the brief jaunt from the Métro and trailed behind them, his umbrella dripping, shoes tight, walking stick slipping. The siren of the ambulance covered his ramblings until they heard, “Maybe the museum could sell *The Kiss-me-quick* hats to go with the erasers and jigsaws and those gaudy T-shirts.”

“We’re nearly there, Conrad, so get all your jerk comments out of your system now,” Lauren shouted as much to the sky as to Conrad.

“Lauren sweetie, you’ll just make him worse,” Harriet said. Her jewel of a friend was desaturated and wearied by Connie’s blustering spleen spewing in the dark of the night. Lauren shrugged. Harriet squeezed her hand on the broly handle and twin trickles of rain ran up their sleeves; they both flinched and flapped their tweed jackets, releasing the warm musk of the wool and their two scents.

Across the street, two young women in bright pink dresses exited from the apron of seating at the café front. Lauren nodded in the direction of Duncan, who waved them farewell. She and Harriet fell silent as the two women passed by, as if to catch a snippet of their conversation.

“So, he stood you up today?”

“He had a work emergency,” said Harriet, but thought it might have been cold feet. She had seen it before, the romance of acquiring a piano turned later into a short-term rental, a try-before-you-buy. It seemed that to some they were fine instruments; to others they were magical devices capable of musical transportations and worlds differing time or place; and to others they were just symbols of wealth or talent they never had.

She had sold several pianos that were merely aesthetic pleasures, never opened or listened to, but there because they matched the library with its collection of pristine leather-bound books, or made the ideal visual foil to the yacht sails seen through the window of a harbour-side apartment. It felt sometimes like selling vintage wines; undrinkable investments that were sometimes commented on or dusted but otherwise merely filled a space in

a room or the racks in a cellar.

She flicked drips from the umbrella's rim towards Lauren, who blinked and huffed with mock irritation then flicked some back. Harriet looked over her shoulder to see Connie looking over his as the young women passed him. "Conrad, eyes forward!"

They crossed to the café and Duncan stood to greet them. He seemed distracted or just tired from travel and Lauren wanted to put him at ease. She held out her hand and he took it; both smiling and nodding as if forgetting where they had first met.

"Hi Lauren," he said. "And Harriet — dressed as twins this evening?" Duncan flashed a broad smile at their uniformity in tweed jackets, jeans and boots. The two women laughed politely. Harriet noticed the empty bottle of wine and wondered if he had drunk it himself or with company. Conrad arrived, Chasing up the rear and the two men shook hands.

"Were those two girls with you?" Conrad thumbed in their direction. "What's your secret — you've got to give me some tips, Duncan."

"Why would you need tips, Conrad — other than not attempting any kerbstones that are too high for you?" asked Lauren. She hated him playing the louche lothario, deluding himself he was some rakish rogue thirty years his junior. Ten years ago, he could have played the part perfectly, but never had; she was more undone that he played the part when she was there, as if it were a performance for her sole offence.

"I just met them. They seemed nice enough," and one reminded him of a girl the same age he had left without explanation, he didn't add. They were two pink pastel smudges in the distance, one with cello on her back. "What were they doing here, they were a bit over-dressed?" Lauren asked.

"I'm not sure," Duncan shrugged. Realising it was a strange time of year for graduations of end of term balls. And the one had held his attention, while the other had slipped away into the blue of Diane or Debbie. "They're the maids at a wedding reception. Or the witnesses I think it is, here?"

"You've been researching French wedding formalities?" Lauren put a hand on Harriet's arm, the other extending to Duncan's. "I thought it was just a love of pianos you shared!"

"Lauren!" Harriet said, clutching at calm and apologising to Duncan, who could see Lauren dancing in a pink dress in the rain. Harriet put a hand over her face then laughed graciously. Lauren had a devious chuckle. Even Connie lifted his face to smile at his wife's conjugal confection.

Lauren now linked Harriet's arm to hers in playful mime, patting her

hand. "One minute you're playing music together and the next..."

Harriet looked skyward, forced a fixed smile, disliking the turn the conversation had taken, and desperate to steer it away from her. "You do make me laugh," was all she could think to say and concealed her blushes with a delicate cough.

"Do you play an instrument?" Duncan asked Lauren.

"Are you suggesting duets? I'm an unhappily married woman, Duncan, I'll have you know!" Lauren said an extravagant quiff in her voice. She played it for laughs, wanting to make amends for her referring to Harriet's painful affair with Muse. Duncan reddened with embarrassment. "I can't hold a tune to save my life," she added.

"That's the truth," added Connie with a whistle. "Tone deaf. And she's not unhappy. Probably just peri-menopausal." Lauren exploded with a colourful melody of expletives and Connie looked past her, offered Harriet the slightest of winks. He thought her little smile conveyed a morsel of gratitude for his deflection of attention away from her. He suggested they went inside.

Duncan opened the door for them as they went inside, finding a table by an inglenook that blazed in colour and heat, the ceiling spattered in colour from the vibrant glass of the hanging lamps. The mood and temperature rose as a fresh fall of rain battered the windows and they took off their coats to thaw. It rose higher still ten minutes into their first bottle of wine. Connie said, "Harriet, in the rush to get here we didn't talk about your fabulous performance this evening."

"Performance?" Duncan was on Connie's left and Lauren's right, with Harriet on her left. Connie in striking distance of Duncan, Lauren in stroking distance of Harriet.

"She's a jazz pianist."

"Amazing jazz pianist."

"Astounding —"

"Amazingly astounding."

"Just great."

"So talented and she never says anything."

Harriet was comfortable with their praise that seemed neither the cheap encouragement given to an amateur friend, nor undeserved platitudes. She was clearly talented, virtuosic perhaps; he had mistaken quiet confidence for reserve. Now Duncan wanted to see her play and wondered if she was hiding her talent or he had just been too self-interested to notice. The menu

listed several things he didn't recognise.

The wine arrived and Harriet engaged the waiter, beckoning her with a hand to her ear, pointing and curling her finger into a whispered conversation. They both waved single hands as they spoke, conducting their nocturne. Turning to Duncan as they spoke, he became the annotation, the scribbled mark that made sense of their words. Both women laughed and Harriet's nod and couthie amusement by him had the air of a salute, or perhaps respect. He had the idea she wanted to know what had gone on with the two French women and was flattered at her curiosity.

"Is anyone else eating? I'm starving," Harriet looked at the menu.

"I love her playing. It does things to me. I was a real groupie when she played with Muse — Mustafa." Lauren saw Duncan readying a question and added that Harriet had been on several of his albums and it was time she had a gig on her own and that she would make an excellent teacher for someone.

"The beef bourguignon is good here," Harriet interrupted. So was the French onion soup, if he wanted something lighter, or just to get off the subject of Mustafa.

"You mean Muse Mouzon? The sax player?" Duncan asked and Lauren looked excited at the recognition; Harriet less so.

"The steak and chips is to die for," Connie said. Perhaps literally in your case, thought the other three.

"You have the steak Conrad," suggested Lauren. They pushed around menu options as if it were their food on a first date. Settling their choices, they called the waiter, who left them with a few lit candles as she went off.

"Duncan, I take it you're a self-made man?" Connie leaned on the table, swirling his wine in the light from hue to pigment at the turn of his wrist. Duncan explained he ran an acoustics consultancy and sound hire company with his business partner James, who was the brains of the outfit. He had turned to the technical side of music after he quit playing in his late teens, and now he was taking it up again.

"What prompted that?" Conrad asked.

"My piano teacher — " on a shelf beside them bottles were lined up with candles jammed in the necks and candles flickering in front of a mosaic mirror that tessellated blurred flames around the nearby walls, woven baskets caked in dripped wax and with dainty handles, the label with a picture of Capri on it.

"He's unwell?" asked Conrad and Duncan nodded. "That's too bad. I can see how that might prompt a rethink. Good for you. It's brave to make a go

of something you've given up on." He looked at Duncan, but somehow had managed to aim the words at Lauren.

"And you?" asked Duncan brightly, wanting to avoid anything unpleasant.

"Lauren and I own a couple of art galleries back in the States."

"Oh, I see. Hence the fabulous art knowledge." Lauren smiled and Connie swallowed whole an uncharitable comment.

"Conrad owns the galleries. It's more like two dozen! If you search online for Conrad Golden you'll find him talking about art somewhere or other. There's some stuff of him in the 70s looking like a cross between Jason King and John Berger, all flairs, hair and Ted Nugent shirts."

"And nowadays I'm more Burger King, hamburger, and chicken nuggets," Connie slapped his belly and they others laughed indulgently. "So, when did you last play piano?"

"Twenty-something years ago. I went to university to do music." Duncan broke off for a slug of wine. There was stilted nervousness to his explanation that made him seem either forgetful or dishonest.

"Why did you quit?"

"I broke my hand. It was in a fight. Then my mum died. And my piano teacher's piano got trashed so I couldn't get back into it." It sounded petty as he retold it, like there was nothing insurmountable. Harriet had a sense of the gamble Duncan was taking, not just the financial investment. She knew what it was to chase after dreams and have them dashed. Other guys bought cars or boats or, what was the word, companions, in their forties, whereas this one was buying a piano.

"I hope she was worth it." Lauren said, sipping a glass of wine. "The girl you got in a fight over." She smiled. "There's always a girl."

"It was a guy."

"Oh," Lauren remained composed. "I just presumed."

"I'm teasing," said Duncan, smiling. Lauren laughed, knowing that she had been right and he was deflecting and that she would get the story from him later. He went on to explain how he had found a job in the theatre doing follow spots and from there had become interested in sound reinforcement and that was how he started out. He had met James twenty years ago.

"Sounds like it was a tough time," Harriet sat up. The waiter came with their food and they sat in silence as she put it on the table.

"So you just gave up the music altogether?" Conrad asked as he lathered grape mustard on his steak. "Apologies, red meat and red wine make me

tactless.”

“Not to worry. It was a little more complicated than that,” he slurped his wine, Connie topping his glass as he put it down.

Harriet sensed his awkwardness and raised her glass and her voice, saying “To new starts.” The others looked at her and smiled at each other, raising their glasses.

“To new starts,” they chorused.

Duncan’s eyes met Harriet’s, a glance turned *tenuto*, and when he imagined Lauren and Connie were not looking he mouthed, ‘Thank you,’ and she, ‘You’re welcome.’

“And here is the new start,” Duncan flicked over images on his mobile phone, showing it to Connie and Lauren.

“Very nice. I love the colour.” Connie stabbed the remaining fries on a single forkful and mopped the sauce of his plate.

“Harriet you’ve seen it, of course,” Duncan said, “But you’ve not seen the original. My piano teacher’s piano.” He passed the phone to her.

“Oh, so you’re kind of re-treading you steps?” Lauren asked.

“I suppose so.” Duncan was fixed on Lauren. Harriet had swiped the screen accidentally and looked at what must have been a young Duncan, hair down to his ears, piercings, eyeliner and a gaunt expression. He sat with his back to an upright piano — a Yamaha U-series judging by the height and the case — and to his right was a tall blonde girl who was exceptionally pretty, perhaps twenty or so. She leaned against him with her head tilted to rest on his shoulder and a cello leaned and rested against her. She draped a hand casually on his inner thigh. “I suppose I want another shot at things. And that piano — I’m sure I’m being overly superstitious, or romantic — ”

“Not at all, do what you need to.” Connie said, Lauren agape at his candid encouragement.

Harriet had recovered the correct photo on the phone without giving her slip-up away. “They are almost identical in terms of the colouring and wood grain. Who’s the guy next to the piano?” She passed the phone back. And knew who it was as he looked off again in the distance. “Your teacher?” He nodded and put the phone away. “Sorry. Hard times.” She reached across and touched his hand briefly, aware the gesture was intrusive but felt it was safe in company.

“I’m sure you’ll join me for a little liqueur, Conrad?” said Duncan.

“And dessert.” Conrad had already put in the order for his almond flan

and lemon sorbet when the waiter delivered his steak.

“Amaretto for me,” said Duncan.

“I’ll have the limoncello.”

“Listen to you two! Like a first date. I’m sticking with coffee,” Lauren sat back to finish her wine.

“Me too.” Harried said. “Can’t afford a new wardrobe on what Antoine pays me!” Her face paled as she reached behind her. “Oh, I’ve left my purse in the shop. I was too busy talking to people after playing.”

“You were giggling at the shop?” asked Duncan.

“It’ll still be there in the morning,” Lauren said. She turned to Duncan. Antoine knew a good thing when he saw it — getting a classy player like Harriet to work in the shop and play for next to nothing. “Harry, sweetie, we’ve got you covered for this.”

“Thanks,” said Harriet, but she was off the next day and needed it. She looked at her watch, working out how long the trip would take her.

“I can take you. I’ll be getting a cab past there anyway,” Duncan said. “My flat is just along the road.” Connie and Lauren made eye contact and had a fit of the giggles.

“What?” Harriet incredulous. Then realised the insinuation they were making by Duncan’s comment about his flat. “Come off it, Goldens!” She laughed with them. “I’m not that desperate!” Her accidental slur made, she glanced to Duncan, who shrugged it off with a smile. “It’s nice to see you two laughing for a change.”

“Who would like something sweet?” The waiter arrived; the one liner from Connie didn’t. Duncan, fluent in French after two glasses of wine, ordered dessert and the drinks.

“How did you start up in the art business?” Duncan asked Connie.

“Oh my god! We’ll be here till sunrise!” Lauren sat upright in her seat. She summarised that Conrad was in fabric on the Lower East Side of New York and owned a warehouse, then sold up and opened a gallery on Van Brunt Street in Red Hook. Then others. She was twenty-five when they met, Connie was older. Lauren found a coy smile, and the brief tingle of the excitement she felt at being wooed by a handsome, wealthy businessman brushed over her. His sharp suits, wit and unwavering charm rushed her into marrying him after only knowing him five months. “Then I got a job in one of the galleries — ”

“The most beautiful thing in the place.” He raised his glass to her.

“You’ve had too much wine, Conrad,” her eyes playful and accepting of

his compliment. “He charmed me like this. Relentless. What girl wouldn’t give in to being told she’s beautiful day after day by a rich eligible guy?”

“And then I wanted to branch out over here, for reasons we’ll come to at another time. For now, the Golden goose is stuffed.” Connie threw down his napkin and adjusted his empty glass and coffee cup on the table.

“Do we need to go soon, Harriet?” Duncan asked.

“I’ll ask the waiter to call a cab,” she got up from her seat, waving her over.

VI

The spots of rain on the windows of the cab made dark little planets of shadow on her legs that changed their orbits as the car sped through the city. When they turned corners the entire galaxy folded and unfolded in her lap and she was distracted for a while matching the water on the window to their trajectory on her thighs — and in that summer the rain had fallen suddenly and violently, but the sun had been searingly hot before and after it. She and Lauren were in shorts and t-shirts and bright-brimmed hats out in the vines helping with the *vendange* and drinking copious amount of wine over long lunches. They had run from the vines to the edge of the garden where the large glasshouse was and shut the door on the rain. In the heat of the place they caught their breath and waited out the storm. Lauren had very blonde hair at that time, and it caught the sun as the rain stopped. That was maybe the time they talked about Lauren's move from the States, or they spoke about holidays the year before. It was the light she remembered. The light and the heavy drops of rain that clung or made rivulets down the glass. And she remembered the grape-pressing Lauren had insisted they try together in an old vat with grapes that were past their best and had ruptured on the vines. It seemed at the time a wasteful, ridiculous thing to do, yet doing a thing, sharing an experience stuck in her mind and touched her emotions deeper than any words they had spoken to each other.

The cab pulled up just past the corner where the shop was. Harriet turned to say goodnight, but instead said, "Do you want to come in for a bit?" She held up the shop keys and Duncan, looking a little road weary, agreed. Soon they were both inside with only the light at Antoine's desk shining.

Duncan remembered there were several salons, though only one was visible from the street. In the half light and the stillness the shop adopted the eeriness of a derelict theatre, the pianos ghostly actors brooding silent under dark cloaks. The piano seats reminded him of being in the gallery the day before with its bench in front of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and hearing Lauren and Conrad banter. Here too, art played out, was articulated while seated, with several feet of curved dark woods that reflected every gesture and stare, and her mesmeric beauty of dampers that rose and fell as the piano breathed, felted reds and whites dancing, pulling at metal heart strings — "Coffee?" Harriet said and held up an espresso cup.

"Yes, lovely thanks." He went to stand beside the machine. Harriet paused and turned on the lamps that hung over each piano in the other salons.

Through the glass doors they could see the spotlights. The silence was eery in a shop of instruments. Duncan had spent many hours in shops with every thing from electric guitars to drums and large sound desks. He was more used to signs banning the playing of *Stairway to Heaven* than pianos arranged as rows of gravestones for whispering customers who had already climbed the stairs and left the light on when they got to the top.

“Go and have a look around. I’ll meet you at your piano.” She glanced at the familiar white walls on the other side of the glass that longed for the colour and rhythm of music from the black slabs of pianos arranged around the edge of the salon. *Blanc* and blank, they echoed the slightly tense and serious man who walked as if he might at any moment hold his hands in front of him in for fear of crashing into an unexpected moment of joy or pleasure.

To his right, she knew, were several smaller practice rooms secreted away behind solid doors. On his left, a glass-walled vivarium held pianists in the day and in thrall to a monumental concert grand, intoning silent music through the soundproof doors in their rocking back and forward, hands flying high above the keys or with their hair — dishevelled, styled to obscure vision or swept sexily flirting with music — and voyeurs whose breaths she had to constantly clean from the glass. They played in brown brogues, in socks, in cowboy boots, with naked feet.

She recalled the glasshouse. Her trainers with melted snow running in them and between her curled toes. Her breath in front of her in the frosted air. She stood in a paw print patterned paddock, with pristine white fields beyond. She had broken off with Muse. Lauren had invited her to stay, to recover in the warmth of friendship.

She stood by the shed where they had dyed their legs sanguine treading blistered grapes in a half barrel. Guillaume’s dog, Lady, licked her frosted fingers and looked on. The wind dropped and the cold air stooped and draped its dense cool air as a scarf around her neck. A magpie landed, jumped through the silver snow with tiny footprints and made a sour rusted call. Lady chased the bird as snow fell in slow brittle parachutes that she snapped at as they landed on her nose. Her coat stood in fur-ice spikes, her belly soaked and dripping.

Harriet feigned a throw of the ball, sending Lady scuttling across the untouched field of snow looking for the ball — the ball! — as she ran and chased her tail. The coffee was ready and she popped the jade cups on a japanned tray that instantly doubled their beauty and walked towards

Duncan.

She knew that after not playing he needed to give himself a chance. To manage his expectations. After a break in playing she would sit and imagine how she wanted to play and who for. What to play was a late decision, or else or it took over everything, making all white and as impenetrable as a vast blank canvas.

She wanted to play something beautiful, or meaningful or poignant, but perhaps he didn't. But he needed to put a daub, a mark, a sketch on the keys, or else his journey to painting in sounds and colours again might end before it begins.

He had found the piano and sat at a bench. There were several strewn around that he seemed to have tried and discarded. Harriet perched on the edge of a second seat. Duncan gave a slight heave and sag of breath. He seemed to have measured his distance from the pedals and now flexed his foot so that as the strings became undamped and gave a little metallic sigh that came in time to his own breathing.

Her eyes flitted between the heavy red of the piano's wood and his hands lying clasped in his lap. "Coffee," she said and put the tray down on a stool.

"I'm so nervous about playing," he said, picking up the cup between finger and thumb.

"I didn't play for a few years. I bought every book of technical exercises I could find." Harriet said. She wanted to pace and talk, but sat on the other piano stool pulled up next to his. She tossed around some images in her mind: cooking, painting, sculpting, "We need a block of stuff to carve and mould." She thought of Rodin and his reported perseverance and gentleness. "The technical stuff comes from that; it's less important than just playing." She nodded towards the keyboard.

"I suppose so," Duncan said. He felt on the stage then a small boy in the spotlight, his lines lost somewhere in the dimness, turning hopelessly here and there, the prompt never coming. The house lights slowly come up and he sees the disappointment on the audience's faces, their disbelief reanimated in his frozen expression. "I've wasted a lot of years though."

"Or you've developed an ear for sounds that you might not have otherwise heard. I can't tune a piano, or voice one. I can't tell you anything about acoustics and how it changes my music, but you can." Artists spent years looking for their own unique way of doing things, and he would learn again, perhaps one hand and then the other. Then put them together.

"Think of this like your first ever lesson. You know nothing. And let your-

self be surprised at how quickly you pick it up. It's not about what you've lost or forgotten, it's about what you have." She took his empty cup and placed it with hers on a tray out of reach and sat on the piano stool next to him. "Pick a key." He looked at her in disbelief. "Any one will do. There's eighty-eight to choose from." He shifted around then reached forward.

A single key unlocked the silence.

She grabbed it with the sustain pedal and let the note push back the silent air around the room, let it ring until it faded to nothing with just the memory of it ringing in their minds, dispersed so thinly, he might have told her, that it no longer had the energy to vibrate the air, like thousands of butterflies that beat their colourful wings in frantic beauty, tossed about until they can land and stretch out their wings, drying from the rain in the sun.

"Again." He played a note. She played another.

"It's just a conversation. It's not music." A fist of notes broke the white. "Add colour." Florid wholetones. "Follow me." Foetal fingers. "Two notes."

"Listen." Two notes. "Now Gentle." Two notes. "You try." Two notes. Her slender fingers mirrored in deep red. "Again." In the crux of the lid: reflected felts; dampers bounced; strings aglisten. "Up one."

"Hum, too." A glance; tiny tensions — "It's fine." Louder; keys follow fingers follow her voice quiet and succulent, jazzy sweetsour and blue.

"*Ya-da*," she sang. Two notes. He played. "Now you hum and play what you hum." He began. Simple at first. Underneath she played tetrachords and fat fauvist fistfuls of notes or precise pointillist clusters.

"That's lovely," he said. He sang his colour over hers in that thin voice he hated but it didn't matter in the dark and in the orange and red sweep of her, of the piano.

"Play this." She circled around a phrase with her right, swooping the music around in clouded hues. He copied her instantly. "Not so rusty then. How about this?" It looked simple, a jagged duple rhythm, but then her thumb and index finger played in triplets against it. He knew it, it was Bernstein's America, but somehow convey on one hand. He tried.

"Missed it." A little smile; waiting for the current. She showed him again and he played it, then she added a fiendish vamp on the left that seemed to accent every five beats and there he felt that tingling, that exhilaration, the low notes playing out in the organ loft and he grinned at her. She showed him another little groove and they continued until he leaned too far and sent her sideways along the bench, his arm coming up quickly around her

waist to stop her sliding to the floor.

“Do you like it?” She slipped out from his hand and stood up, tapping the piano on its top.

“She’s wonderful,” he said. “Thank you for the introduction.” They both looked at their watches. It was time to go. She closed up the piano and took the cups back to the little kitchen, leaving Antoine a little note as to why she had come in so late at night. She called a cab and they waited outside the door until it arrived. She talked about Lauren and treading grapes and Duncan thought it sounded like fun.

The cab arrived and he thanked her again and walked on up the street towards his flat. She leant her face on the glass and she smiled as the notes trickled iridescent on her cheeks. Outside, the midnight blue sky was primed with powdered peach and raspberry. It was a long time since she had sat and played with someone like that; close but not close. She had felt his admiration in the way he smiled and in the way his hand lingered on her waist. He held her in the way she held memory of Lauren in the sunshine, or when she stood listening to jazz in the window of her favourite record shop.

VII

A little rumble, an intake of breath, and then Keith Jarrett's *The Wind* from his *Paris Concert* album. Perched on a bar stool inside a listening booth, Harriet had already given her self over to the music. Outside, the soaked street's cars goaded one another in the urban surf, a brittle mist needling the few pedestrians wearing collars turned up, skirts long and raincoats buttoned, their umbrellas blown inside out. Blues and greys, bare fifths and jagged dotted rhythms blown by work and wind.

The mesmerist, his seeping, searching, somatic touch transmitted over beats and rivers of sound, each drop a conveyance for emotion, a search for connection in blown-aboutness, standing in or by the storm together. Black hole rains and pacific calm; the hypnotic spinning disc a dense black prism of musical colour, its speed of rotation, its progress along a relentless dark orbit at constant odds with the music that pulled and pushed the stylus around in the groove.

Converted from old wooden telephone booths, the row of cubicles edged a mezzanine built along one wall of the store. Their vantage point had a dual aspect: over the shop floor that was partly taken over by a dais for small shows; and through the steel-framed windows on the other. The store had continued to stock vinyl to please their customers, not as passengers on the retro bandwagon, and had kept purists like her happy for decades. She was a vinyl junkie and enjoyed the act of lowering a stylus onto a record, of allowing the slow heartbeat of the dead wax before the music begins to cause that momentary, miniature flutter — the scent of an upbeat, a first kiss. Then changing sides. An interval, a chance to savour the performance, recharge a glass, catch a breath before flipping over, another hot groove to start the second half.

The turntable case was lacquered black wood, deep and glossy and, to her eye, as good a finish as any piano bought, she thought, when records were dead and the hardware dirt cheap. It exuded quality. The beauty of the thing raised expectation; it combined with the crinkle of the anti-static sleeves, the turning of the records and the isolating headphones to bring ceremony to listening. A practice of listening.

The platter was clear acrylic over a copper disc, the colour she had just chosen for her hair that morning. She examined it between her fingers, friable strands of wire, frayed by the rain. It was a change. The air slowed outside, the footfall on tentative increase as the melody opened out, high

and sparse octaves over a delicate arpeggiated left. A hopeful, sensual blues broke the sky blue in the blush and blirt parting of the clouds.

Some mornings she sat perched there for two or three hours. Less so since taking on the job with Antoine. Her beloved Yamaha had gone back to Mustafa's house when they parted ways; even this he made sound like the removal of an inconvenience, of helping her get over him, and he becoming emotional, as if moved by his own generosity and suffering of spirit. He told everyone it was here in this booth, eighteen

months ago he saw her through the door and with those big headphones pulling her hair over her eyes and staring outside into the music, her coffee cup pressed on her full pink lips. She wore that black and white skirt with the squares that went lozengey, sexy and tight around her derrière. Then, it was like magic, she flashed the cover of Herbie's *Takin' Off*, and opened the door of her booth.

She lifted her headphones; she was open already in her demeanour, already she knew they would soon be making love and music together. And he heard Freddie's trumpet licking her ear, then that little gap where she was going to speak and he, Muse Mouzon, sang to her as if he was giving her his horn. Him and Dexter both saxing her. And she smiled a little sexy, a little coy smile, and tapped her fingers and he thought 'oh, does she play music too?' It was like they had known each other for

years already. Harriet had enrolled in a summer class in business French at the Sorbonne, discovering the record shop and a handy coffee stop en route soon after. Perhaps she only heard every other word that first day, his savage musicality in such a confined space stole her breath, had her glance at her chest that beat visibly in excitement.

and he saw through in that black and white skirt that made her derrière so sexy, like a tight groove. And now he knew it was sexy to touch too. And she had on Herbie's *Takin' Off*, and he knew when she looked at him they were going to be lovers. And she had the hands of a piano player. Those slender quick fingers. So good at touching. And he heard Freddie licking her ear and he wanted to lick it too. That was how he, Mustafa Mouzon, and Harriet Claudel met. Fingers and horn. Him and Dexter and her. She flirted with a little sexy and coy smile. Her fingers tapped and his

touches and innuendos should have got him arrested and not what he ended up with. It remained raw that her booth, her retreat,

study and escape pod was now a shared space. Their meetings were melodies he played on, improvised, transposed, inverted; her feelings and flesh incidental phrases he took as his own, replayed and subverted. ‘Steal well, it makes you a better player.’ He became an indiscreet soloist, his drink-fuelled breaks, unaccompanied by reality, a flurry of fantasy where

months ago she saw him from a record booth and pimped her black and white derriere towards him. Played him, but how could he resist her. And she had these great hands. She had his album there, *Mustafa Mouzon: Blown Apart!* Fingers and horn, a match made in heaven. Sexy and coy and knew all the right moves. He was powerless, there was

then almost nothing that resembled the truth. Then, of course, she saw Eloise at the club and knew just from the way she looked at him, how she demurred and agreed and held herself against him that she was more than the friend he had pretended her to be. The truth that had she listened to her own soundtrack instead of his version of reality that became

months and years later she she still waits for Mustafa Mouzon in that record shop. A little older and plumper perhaps now. A grown up Harriet. And looking so serious. Maybe it is the rain, it makes her feel down? It had been so long —

“How are you my beautiful Harry?” He stood in the doorway to the booth as if the world were his and he had never broken every good feeling she had ever felt about herself.

“What do you want?” She wondered if he believed these stories he told about her, the ones where she is the mirror to his horny narcissism. He gawped at her as if she were a mirror, then regrouped and grinned his affable grin. She lifted the needle from the record.

“I’ve caught you at a bad time?” They would make their peace, he thought. She was somewhere else just now, perhaps? She looked great. “How can I not look at you when you’re here. I love this colour in your hair, it’s so passionate.” Her eyes illuminated the sky, or the room. Perhaps both. “You are like that Luis Ricardo Falero that we saw together,” at the gallery with her curvy friend Lauren and her rich fat husband The skin was all pale and white and her hair was a copper and orange colour, like metal but like the sun also. That is how she looked.

“I wish I could say it’s not nice to see you, Muse.” She had missed him, despite not wanting to. He leaned in to kiss her cheek and she pulled away,

patted his hand. "How's Eloise?"

"Shall I send her your regards?" He asked, the sparkle in his eye both the fizz of champagne and the glint on a blade. "We can all be friends. You two should do coffee. Grind beans. You would be good together."

She didn't like the constant innuendos. She liked it less that she didn't just tell him to fuck off. She made a little job for herself, taking the record off the turntable and putting it in the dust cover and sleeve, placing it on the listened to pile. "Suggesting a threesome with your wife is juvenile. It's not fun or romantic. You used me."

"We both got to play." He bowed slightly and pressed the palms of his hands together as if in prayer — a gesture Harriet now recognised his affectation, his mock piety designed to avoid a truthful confrontation. By the light from the window the red and copper of her hair was like Falero's naked witch. She was ravishing, just like

months ago when he saw her so radiant listening to Freddie and Dexter here and their eyes met and they both knew that they were going to be lovers and it was good. And her *derrière* looked so good there, and in her bedroom that night

"We both remember and both know it's in the past." No matter how many times he tried to stir and re-stir her emotions, it was done. She was not something he could conjure to rub his horn, a little lick or quote here and there, as if she was Salomé always willing to dance to his tune. "*Repeat to fade* is such a boring pop outro."

"You used to like my repetitive actions. You still don't dance? Eloise is very good. A tango would suit you with the red colour. With the passion. More fire in you. It's very attractive."

"When are you playing next?"

"Tomorrow night," He produced two tickets from an inside pocket. "Maybe you could bring your friend. It must be hard for you to not play since you have no piano now."

"I have options."

"Testing the stock. Such a sales woman. Antoine must be so proud of you."

The truth was she didn't have a piano since Muse took his back from her when he stopped sleeping with her. She had sold hers when he had moved his in. He held her cool gaze in the heat of his, but there was no sign of her melting as she had before. She tapped her nose with the tickets. "Thanks for these."

"Say Hi to your friend Lauren from me. She would look good in your red

hair too. Maybe better?”

He left. *Lauren*. Harriet checked her watch. She fired off a text, getting an instant positive response. It would take her forty minutes to get to *Rue de la Pompe*. Grabbing her pile of records, she headed off for the counter, placing them down with a wave to the assistant — who looked surprised she was done so soon — and out of the shop.

Harriet fell into the immediate comfort of the entrance hall, not just in Lauren’s hug that could surely pull trees from the ground and tend the most fragile of tender stems, but from the sun-brassed chevrons and honeyed herring bone of the parquet floor, the slender black metal bannister edging the sweeping stone stairs, their white marble taking the eye upwards to the floor above. Each broad step had a light fitting above it, the walls blank where there were usually paintings hanging; canvases wrapped in burlap were propped on each stair, as if waiting to be hung. As they closed the doors, the air thickened to spiced sweetness.

“Oh, is that cinnamon pastries and coffee I smell!” Harriet’s mouth instantly salivating, her eyes pooling with sudden gratitude and fragility. Lauren nodded, taking her friend’s face in her hands and wiping the tears from her cheek.

“Sounded like you needed them. And look at this!” She ran her fingers through Harriet’s hair, brushing it to the ends. “What a colour!” It reminded her of when Harriet went several shades of blue; the gorgeous ice queen that previous winter. Now she was autumn. “You’re like a model for a Mucha painting, all porcelain, and elegant and fiery red.”

“That’s what he said: fiery red.”

“Mustafa?” Lauren asked; Harriet nodded. “He’s a dick.” It was like him to be playing back the old tape of how it used to be, and playing her feelings. “Come on, let’s go eat too many carbs and get high on caffeine.”

They passed through to another set of stone steps that descended into the kitchen. Harriet loved the house, the eye for design and detail that, she had to admit, Conrad had. She admired the brick vaults in the old wine cellar ceiling.

Lauren took out a tray of pastries from the oven and tipped them into a waiting bowl. “He has an eye for a lot of pretty things, unfortunately,” she said with her uncanny ability to read Harriet thought.

“You’re freaky at that. Is he still buying paintings and forgetting to sell them?” Harriet picked up a spiced Danish, juggling it from hand to hand

as she transferred it to her plate. “Where are the huge paintings by Spain and Perez”

“Gone to Provence,” Lauren shrugged and bit into a croissant. Conrad had been talking about turning that house over to artists and photographers. “You saw upstairs, the re-ordering of paintings.” He had either become egalitarian, or else fancied having some more prettiness around the house to look at. “He’s hiring a new assistant, he says. Océana is her name. She’s a waiter just now, and pretty, although I’m sure she’s very competent.”

When Lauren spoke of Conrad, Harriet heard the checks and balances of pity and resignation, but still a residue respect in Lauren’s tone. For all his flaws, Connie had made a fantastic business, was generous, and had once been fun, handsome and athletic. He was, as Lauren put it, a self-proclaimed self-made man in the narrow way that any rich white American male from a moneyed family can claim genesis over genetics if he ignores all the education and privilege that wealth buys. Harriet asked, “Why look elsewhere, when he’s got you?”

“Oh, you know — ” Lauren batted away Harriet’s question with her hand and drained a mug of coffee.

“No, I can’t say I do. I can guess.”

“Conrad is a big man. I mean he’s real heavy. He’s not that fit. He looks terrible and he’s let himself go. I just don’t, you know.” She shrugged, picking at a Danish, a little ashamed at her shallowness, of how she now found him sexually repulsive, argumentative and a prig to be with.

“You don’t find him attractive anymore?”

“He’s still got a lot going for him. He is incredibly bright, and we can still find areas of commonality to traverse that are intellectually stimulating rather than combative.” She was struggling to lengthen the list of positives. “He’s cranky as hell with that bad leg from the motorbike crash.” Yet he had looked so dashing when they met, in his biker leather jacket and aviator shades.

Harriet recalled there had been a photograph, here, or by the pool in Provence where Connie and Lauren rode along a beach on big red hog that dripped with chrome, its white-wall tyres blurred and Lauren’s head tipped back in laughter with that luscious hair blowing behind. It remained luscious, blown behind and fingering a beautiful moment in the past. Connie was chiselled, dishy, a broad grin under his Ray-Bans.

“There’s nothing can be done for his leg?” Harriet asked.

“He’s seen loads of people.” He had been in London, in New York. “He’s

losing the will to fix it, I think.” The more he limped the more limp he became. She pushed another pastry onto Harriet’s plate, topping up their coffee and offering orange juice. “He’s been buying pianos too.”

“Pianos plural? Where did he buy from? He didn’t come to me!” Harriet recalled speaking to Conrad about his days at college, how he had seen some serious Jazz musicians in the 70s, but they seemed more a soundtrack to the countless varicoloured canvases he described in stroke-by-stroke detail than a real interest. They seemed to be just furniture to him.

“He plays accidentally if he dusts the keys.” It sounded like that fist cluster jazz that Harriet sometimes played that set her teeth on edge. “Sounds like musical Tourettes — stop me if I’m getting too technical.” They both giggled. “There’s three.” One was upstairs in the house. Two were in Provence.

“Matching?” Lauren grabbed her cup and Harriet’s arm, leading her back upstairs to the ground floor. With a light click the panelled doors opened into the lounge. Harriet loved this room, the sheer sheets of diffuse light from the elegant steel in the 1930s glazing that spanned a fourteen metre wall, the potted olives and bay trees and manicured miniature box hedges in the courtyard beyond. But new, in the corner, was a seven foot grand piano. It had its nose to her. The lid was raised and there was the glows of a buttery walnut wood inside. Gold hinges, flecks of red felt showing around the circular receptacles in the lid stay.

“That’s a Fazioli.”

“Yes, I know. Although I read the side. I know they’re expensive.”

Harriet nodded, her eyes widening to encompass the figure. From the keyboard, there would be a view outside, the ability to surrender to music and nature simultaneously. And no direct sun to meddle with the instrument. “It’s a stunner. The other two?”

“Both blue,” said Lauren. Harriet whistled as a tradesman might adding up a quote for work. She imagined the two pianos in the huge library at their place near Aix, with its Prussian blue panels, and diaphanous curtains billowing a sultry veil over the yellows and purples of the wheat and lavender fields in the distance.

“And Conrad wants — we want you — to be able to come here and play. We know you don’t have a piano now, so *mi casa, su casa*. We’ll get you a code or a blip thing for the —” Lauren was cut short by Harriet’s embrace, the two holding coffee at arms length and each other as tightly as they could. “we’ll get you some for Aix, too. In case you want to go swim and play.”

“Golden by name; golden by nature.” Harriet held on to Lauren. “Nearly a

million Euros on pianos, Lauren. He's nuts!" She produced the two tickets, showing them to her. "Do you want to come to see Muse play? I don't think I can go alone. He actually suggested, or rather requested you."

"I bet he did." He had requested before that she wear the same dress as Harriet. She knew his game. "I'm not sure I can make it Harry, it depends on if I've got a tour the next day. Still waiting to hear." She looked into space, a smile forming. "Take Duncan? It strikes me there's more to him than that blank expression."

"There is." Harriet smiled. She had forgotten the previous night already in retelling the story with Muse.

"He's just a customer, right?" asked Lauren.

"He's a bit fragile. I don't want to give him the wrong idea."

"It's just listening to some music, honey. He's here alone, you're just being hospitable. We don't even know if there's a Mrs Duncan?"

"There's not."

VIII

It was a dry evening, bands of clouds long and grey with slits of azure blue. Outside was empty. A couple of tourists ate quietly, amazed at the iron tables and the salt sellars, all of it foreign and hummed like a tune, sung elsewhere — the time we were in love in Paris; the meal we had with the waiter who was pretty and tired.

That summer just gone an old man would sit and read his newspaper and drop his cutlery from his table for her to pick up, he had left her a twenty Euro tip and four clues empty in his crossword. He had come to the café every night she had worked for those three months. He never spoke except to order his food and drink, except he touched her arm once, saying thank you as she put his plate down, but otherwise he just looked. And left twenty Euros a night.

She had fixed the washing machine and the skylight in her flat that had dripped for years and the landlord wouldn't fix it because she bent over in front of an old man. Some nights she felt that maybe she would take his fork and stab him in the leg with it; other nights, at home in her dry flat and not having to go to the launderette, she apologised to him in her head.

The American, Conrad, sat outside without his wife Lauren or her friend, Harriet, who always looked concerned for everyone and wore the same clothes, but in her appearance was always just so. Harriet's eyes sparkled when she smiled and wrinkled in beautiful webs at the corners. She was older than herself and so less upbeat in her figure, but chic and pretty. Conrad often came alone. Lauren would smoke in the toilets because she was a secret smoker, and came out smelling of smoke and perfume, and her lipstick re-touched. They were an odd couple in that there were often three of them, not just Conrad and Lauren.

The new couple; the young couple; the lovebirds; held hands now. She lit a candle for them and put it between them so they could see the glinting in in their lover's eyes. The girl had heavy bags beneath hers for one so young.

She used the skirts and blouses from her hotel job to waiter in. It made things easy for her and meant that for most of the day she would look the same. The bleach and cleaning chemicals made her nail varnish scab and bubble. She did not wear it anymore. Plain hair plain and no lipstick; sometimes a pale pink colour. She thought of herself as plain and liked it if

someone said she wasn't. She knew she had an attractive body.

"What's your name, miss?" The American had asked weeks before. "I've seen you here so many times. I'm Conrad." he had said.

Men in the hotel pinched her backside. She screamed once when a bald man with too-straight teeth and an impeccable suit slapped her hard on the back of the thighs as she poured wine. He made it look her fault, but left her a huge tip. She served him the next night. He regretted the tip, or liked to surprise a woman with pain because he didn't slap her again. Or give as big a tip.

"Océana," she told him.

He had his usual of steak and chips and a bottle of red wine. His name was Conrad, Or Connie, he said. Making coffee, facing away, she watched him in the mirror. He seemed to watch her as the steam screamed in the milk.

Conrad's glass had drops of wine left and he tilted it this way and looking through it into the street. Océana brought his coffee. He didn't look up and she stood quietly by him. Was he alright, she wanted to ask. Conrad would speak good French and a lot of it — If he used his other muscles as much as his mouth he would be much slimmer — but not tonight. His bloodshot wine glass was tired and she went to collect it, knocking a teaspoon on the floor and bending to pick it up.

The candle had blown out and the couple got the bill and paid on card and paid the exact amount. Clearly their new love did not overflow to giving Océana a tip.

Business classes where she was learning about music and art events were in the afternoon on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays and then she worked the bar in the evening and whole days in between. She had all Sunday and Wednesday evenings off. No time to meet a boyfriend nowadays and so sometimes she liked attention from men. But not often. She tried to practise her English on tourists, but the wives looked at her with suspicion, their husbands trying not to like looking.

He wanted another bottle and she brought it.

"You have had a lot to drink tonight," Océana said and rested a hand on the back of the chair next to him. He looked drunk. He would sometimes drift off in his wine and talk about art. He knew some things. She had asked him about galleries and hanging art. She held up the coffee pot and he shook his head, pushed the chair out with his foot, gestured for her to sit.

"Look at the lights over there," said Conrad. The place was empty so Océana poured out some coffee for herself. There was a projection from

a television that was so bright it cast a faint impression on the wall on the opposite side of the street. He and she turned round and looked at a window on the fourth floor. “Lovely effect. Light in jets or beams. Like in the cinema. Contrails from a stationary plane.”

“What are they?” She had asked.

“The steam,” he said, “that comes from behind an airplane. It is the trail that tells us where it has been, the memory of its journey written in the sky, if you like.”

One summer, a few years ago, her fingers traced the lights and two white stripes, nails that clawed the skin of the sky, the deep blue void filling her eyes, then his face over hers, his kiss eclipsed the sun. She lay in a poppy field in a floral dress and she was still special enough to him that her skin tingled, and he touched her like an expensive blouse in a boutique and not like old comfortable jeans. A little time — maybe he was nervous, she had smiled — and he rolled off her; breathless; the lines of vapours diverging in the sky and on the ground.

“No contrails tonight, Conrad. It is too dark for them tonight I think. Better against the blue skies. Lying in a field of poppies,” she said.

“That’s quite a painterly point of view,” said Conrad.

The summer sun was eclipsed by his torso and then full in her face as he lifted her head gently and took the dress she had been lying on as a pillow and laid it over her naked body and hugged her. There is another plane she had said. “We could fly again.”

“I like that they rise and rise,” he said, his hand holding hers and drawing her on top of him, her hair tousled and backlit by the sun.

“Do you see the images?” Connie asked. “It’s from up above,” he pointed. Océana followed his gaze, standing to find the pin of light in a window that projected to the wall a moment later. She went to sit but the chair was not as she remembered. She felt she was falling — the sun warm on her back; then cool — and swore. His hands were there on her, holding until she got her balance.

She noticed that Conrad liked to look — at the lights and sometimes at her when she walked past him — but not touch. His wife, called Lauren, Océana now knew, had come with him sometimes, but they did not touch

or kiss. He did not drape his hand down her buttocks or let it linger on her.

Perhaps this was how it was between them, Conrad and his wife, it was how it was with a man who looked so much at art and didn't touch but only looked between his food and wine.

"Are you OK, Océana? Have you eaten today?" Conrad asked her as she looked at the light-contrails again, hoping the memory of another old boyfriend might pass the time more quickly.

"Coffee too strong for you, Océana?" He repeated her name, perhaps to remember it, or to feel closer; Océana, Océana, waves of her name beating exotic in his jowly lisp.

"I used to have a washing machine that did that," she turned away.

After summer, after sex, and putting old grey underwear on in a hotel room, white and colours running, he pulled on his shirt and began to button it. She had slipped her dress over her head and was thankful that her face could not be seen inside it as she pulled it down over her. "I need a new washing machine," she had said from inside. "Or new underwear."

"Or just get to like grey," he had said and smacked her backside and she burned red with shame and so it was romance had died for Océana.

"You are upset about an old washing machine, Océana, or is it something else?" Conrad asked. He sounded confused at her tears.

"No," she wiped a tear from her eye. "It's nothing. I'm tired. I got a new one from my tips." Now he asked questions! At a time she wanted him just to speak let her hide in the air of his words.

"I like the lights." She looked at the projection again. More wary of it now, like sheets light from crystal ball she no longer wanted to gaze into. "It is fireworks. The dry water sprayed into the night."

"Dry water. I like that. Are you sure you don't paint as well as study the art business? Or perhaps you modelled for someone. You could I think."

"Model? Me? I am too full, not straight and petite enough," her hands running over her. The colours brightening against the wall. It was like water, its ripples and folds in the stone.

"Maybe you could work for me?" suggested Conrad. Then another customer called her away from looking into the light and the moment where she felt her life might go somewhere and leave contrails in the sky.

Océana climbed the stairs to her flat, went straight to the bathroom and

ran the shower. The pale grey blue of the morning examined every crack in the tiles and the broken skin on her hands. She climbed in, fully clothed. She watched the water turn her blouse from cold white to warm pink. The water was warm and sunny on her closed eyes. She folded up her arms and legs and collapsed like a spider in a plughole.

IX

His right pocketed hand strummed in practice. Practiced music; practised scales. Scales and arpeggios fingered correctly. Thumb flicked hard and staccato on the black note, on the open string on a guitarists frantic run; on flamenco strum. He was quick out of the gates. Out of the gates with two bags. The twins slipped past. Slip-running as they did every week. One twin violad and the other violin'd. A half quartet. Thumb, finger, finger, thumb under. They had pink cases and ribbons in their hair. There was their mum at the gate in her jacket and jeans and posh brown boots. Posh Brown boots with buckles and straps. Thumb middle, thumb, middle, thumb second. Boots pulled tight and the bun in her hair — the bun in her hair pulled tight. Ballet hair. Spanish hair. Phrygian thumb finger finger thumb. Buns and ribbons and boyish faces. One bag banged his leg, the bag on his back banged his bum where it slipped down, slipped down the scale pink fiddles in the boot of the four by four by far the biggest car and pulled away with the stereo on. Mum in the front and the ribboned buns in the back bobbing to the beats.

Thumb, two, three, five two thumb. Trousers too tight. It was under his fingers. A scale in triplets; a scale in duplets quint — sept — and sextuplets. Sexed-up-lets, Mr Porter said. He practised in his pockets and they kicked his bag. Practised past the pissed-in phone box. Fingers precise; *legato, staccato*, kicks on his satchel. Boys jeering: Poof-bag, girls-bag, wears his mum's trousers; fiddles in his pockets at the adverts in the phone box; sings like a girl, like a girl with a poof's — , like a poof with a girls bag, a gay-boy, flower-boy, marigold. Thumb-under-thumb-under. Chewing gum in the coin slots. Coins gummed in the chewed slots. He hummed and played. His bag kicked off his arm; his pony-tail pulled past the school buses with their rush to the back and the banging on the windows. Banging on his bag, the boys that spotted difference. Laughing. Two notes to a step, then three then four, the scales in his pockets swift and sure. Parting shots of pansy and poofter and girl-bag and bum-boy butt-boy and mum's-trousers. Here was a butt. Fag butt. Fag's butt. Goading. Faggot butt. Faggott. Infuriated. Six seven eight. Thumb finger finger, thumb finger finger finger finger. The kicks went. Sound fragmented. Fag. Fags. Faggot, Faggots.

Parents in cars and standing by for boys will be boys. Three-one, four-two, three-one, four-two in double thirds. The road he walked along faded into annotations on the score: Slow! Slower! Even Slower! Clean and pre-

cise; Concentrate! Play accurately and slowly; memorise it for next week! Memorise! Memorise!

Playing the piece, pockets throbbing. Car horn and shouting. Fingers making dots on a mind-stave. Mr Porter's door. Door bell, door bell. The entire piece recited. Traffic stopped.

Mr Porter. Coke and cookies. And Duncan's day? Coke and cookies and cocky boys and kicks and scales in his pocket. A handful of cookies. A handful of scales. Cocky boys can't play scales. His trousers weren't tailored. Thumb finger thumb finger. Just close-cut and fitted. Never mind. Thumb finger thumb finger on the nape of his neck. Boys will be boys. Not tight at all. Even Mr Porter's hand fitted in the pockets. Thumb finger.

Between the black tables and glinting glasses a guitar shimmered fleet and liquid as sequinned champagne, bubbled and sang to stone walls and cobbled square under their feet. The audience fluttered hands and fingers in miniature appreciations. Fingers waved well-timed in the rhythmic breeze or running around the rim of glasses. Long-heeled shoes dangled off elegant feet, toying in the twilit serenade. Heads prayed, maudlin, in sleepy nods, drinking and drunk on song.

She looked stunning. He had missed her arriving as he sat tapping lightly on the table. Reaching out for his wine he found another hand wrapped around it. He guessed its slender form from seeing it play the night before. He then noticed the bright red of her jumpsuit, then bare arms, the trousers flared at the bottom, then Harriet's eyes — the gloss of the guitar notes in their cheekiness and sparkle. She unwrapped her slender fingers from the stem of the glass. "You look stunning," he said in the half-whisper people used at music performances. It surprised her. He found the weight of a compliment to pay a woman far harder to judge than even the precise valence of touch on a delicate passage of music.

A score, marked in foreign fingerings, hung as a muted canvas in Duncan's memory. The odd phrase, a slow strum written across two staves; the even decay notes from the guitar body versus the feathering pedal of a piano, articulated nuances he had missed two decades ago. And what of the bends and vibratos that now seemed so clumsy as *sforzandi* and *appoggiaturas*, startling and crunching the piano's notes? The music sustained and swelled against the stone walls and from the gut of the guitar, the player's fingers picking out light notes against the dark reverberant tail, like a bell's chime

ringing as he entered the gloom of an old fashioned shop.

“Thank you. Red’s a universally flattering colour, apparently,” said Harriet, quietly. She had surprised him with an invite to hear Muse Mouzon with her that evening, a saxophone player he had seen playing in a trio at the Barbican two years previously. He invited her to drinks beforehand at this café. “I need a drink.” She looked around for the waiter, waved to him, and sat. “You play guitar too?”

“It’s de Falla. I played a transcription of it for piano when I was a kid.” A harried young man took Harriet’s order. Duncan and Harriet joined the hushed spell of the other listeners.

“I missed out on a lot of classical stuff when I began playing.” Harriet whispered, her throat dried by the wine.

“I missed out on jazz. I’d love to learn it.” The music slowed, its melancholic heartbeat resting in the guitarists’ fingers. The final two notes flew upwards; two tired birds that fluttered between the walls of the opposing buildings and into the orange sky that drew blank eyes towards it. “I need to find a teacher. Fill in the gaps.” He said gaps and meant the chasms and wounds that had appeared in his music. His memory of it had been disfigured or mutated over time. So much of it had been rendered unrecognisable or unreachable by his fingers that flayed around in the murky past.

The guitarist unwrapped and wrapped his hair, pulling it in a pony tail then flipping it in a tight bun and wrapping it in a deep pink scrunchie. His long nails glinted under the light on his music stand. The audience seemed to recall the birds — to see they had flown free — and into the brief, exotic, silence they poured their applause. He had warmed to Harriet. Their time playing in the shop had haunted him. It felt beyond ordinary hospitality for Harriet to invite him. Or perhaps that was a hope on his part. Even if it was just to enjoy a moment of self-deception.

She clapped heavily, not with the delicate rations of those more bothered by the etiquette of the occasion than of showing appreciation. She had beautiful hands. “Beautiful,” he said.

“Yes,” she turned and smiled, still glancing to the guitarist. “I bet you never expected to hear that piece again, all these years later?”

The piano was a deep brown in the dim light and beautiful against the plump pillows and oak bench. Mr Porter ran his fingers along her length and she shimmered, and if she was a cat, Duncan thought, she would have curled and twisted in the sun, rolled her open lid and shown her golden

belly to everyone. Mr Porter then conjured Chopin from her. Duncan loved him — or at least wanted to know all that was contained in his beautiful hands. Duncan studied the silences between his fingers. He was learning how to think and talk in music. Duncan also loved Danny Brooks' Discman because his own cheapo personal cassette player only had a fast forward button had the tape had to be turned over to rewind it.

From then, inspiration and jealousy were bedfellows, sometimes within reach, other times distant and despaired of, huffing and panting with the frustrations of learning. Each time he saw Mr Porter play, the gap closed quicker, the synapse between observation and knowledge crackled and fired. This wasn't vinyl, or a bootleg recording of Horowitz, it was seeing the fingers move and the felts fly, the swift and smooth mechanics of hands, the organic flux of the wooden machinery. Duncan dreamed of being a piano, of feeling Mr Porter play him; all the notes, gestures, and whooshes of emotion would become a part of him; he would have his own wand to conjure music from her.

Sometimes he did. A scale tapped out on his legs. Up one and down the other. Knowing he practised his exercises in his pockets, Mr Porter would joke and look for them, rummaging around, "Are they here? Or Here? Where has he practised them?" Duncan laughed. Still a boyish laugh; his voice not yet broken.

Mr Porter closed her lid. He tapped on it, a steady march: one, two; one, two. "You try," he said, taking Duncan's hands and placing them on the wood. After a second or two, they were in sync. Mr Porter tapped a triplet against Duncan's two, and the boy adjusted, playing the same rhythm, but feeling, just before he did, a flutter of excitement in his belly.

Sometimes Mr Porter would speak, other times he would lean in a certain way that meant Duncan was to continue, or else he might say, 'yes' or 'good' and they would press on towards hands of teacher and pupil having the same notes contained within them. "Be confident!" Mr Porter was saying. "Harder!" He stopped, opening the piano again and playing a new piece.

It was French music. Lots of colour. "Some would say slippy, or sassy or sexy. It is not this — " Mr Porter kept strict time. Each colour was deep and saturated. Like a poster in a shop window. It was painting by numbers. Then he blurred the edges. "We want this." His hands fluid, independent yet choreographed perfectly. It was a ballet of the hands. "Some skinny, boney waif and a strong young man in bulging tights and taut muscle," said Porter — perhaps not exactly at that time, but he had said it. He flashed a

smile at Duncan. “Seurat painted with dots of colour.” Tiny dots. Like note heads, arranged in a picture. “He made people from notes. Some had tensions; others made releases.” His hands transmitted a tension to the music. Harmony and discord. The lines blurred. “The prostitutes in his painting were acceptable. The mistresses. You know about mistresses, Duncan?”

Before they went to the club there was something she needed to tell him. In the hubbub of the ten minutes while the guitarist took a break so told him under the cover of others conversation. It gave him other people to watch — he knew what it was to tell a stranger something that dropped all his clothes immediately to the floor and made him ashamed. He looked past her to the others in the crowd to allow her to remain dressed and keep her dignity and to avoid her embarrassment. Harriet and Muse had been together at some point. It was recent history judging from the way she moved her eyes around the courtyard as if from one memory to another, refusing to accept the ones that were too painful and report the ones she could stand to re-tell. It had ended badly. Painfully. He ushered his questions out of his mind. Muse had a long-term girlfriend he had forgotten to mention. Her name was Eloise and she was Antoine’s sister. Duncan might meet her later. She was telling him in case she reacted strangely, in case he thought he had done something wrong.

She toyed with her glass and he nodded. “You have beautiful hands.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“That sounded odd. I thought it yesterday when you were playing. Bad timing?”

“No. You’re not the first to say that about my hands,” said Harriet. Duncan thought of her with Muse Mouzon, his saxophone still strapped to him he stood next to her by a piano in Harriet’s shop and her hand rested on his pink suit, slipping down and under the jacket to check his pockets for scales. “Lauren likes my hands, too,” she added.

Duncan wondered how Harriet could not have know about Eloise. Or how Eloise did not know about Harriet. The winner, it seemed, was muse, happy in his lines of horizontal and vertical intrigue.

“Like polygamy?” Duncan felt he had to join in with the talking or the playing. He loved Mr Porter explaining music.

“Polyphony!” Mr Porter laughed. Duncan gave his half smile, the one he gave in case he was asked to explain the joke. “We can hear and read multi-

ple lines,” he said and continued to play, demonstrating his point. Duncan knew about lines read them in piano music, sometimes organ music and in scores when they looked at melodies in keyboard music that seemed to copy other instruments, like guitars or flutes. They had talked about synthesizers, which Duncan loved because of the bright lights and the exotic looking names and the sounds of them. There was no weight to them though; there wasn’t the buzz and tingle that he felt when the organ played low notes or when he thundered his scales.

“Other lines are more about the harmony. The vertical.” His right hand rose from the keyboard and came down to rest on Duncan’s thigh, pulsing to the music played by the other with its thundering low notes. And this was how a piano felt. Duncan smiled.

“Let’s talk about timing. How did this piece feel at the start?”

“A bit squirmy,” Duncan articulated. “I mean it wasn’t duple or compound.”

He was pleased to have used his music words. Twos and threes. Mr Porter crossed one corded leg over the other, his tan brogue contrasting against a red and purple sock.

“What’s an arabesque?” he asked Duncan. “What’s the etymology — the bits of the word — do you think?” Duncan paused, hoping the long gap and his clear uncertainty might mean that Mr Porter would feel the need to fill it.

“Arab is the first bit. And ‘esque’ is like ‘like.’”

“A Duncan-eque answer!” Mr Porter. “What is Arab-like music?” Duncan ran through the modes in his head. It was music with snake-charmers and belly-dancers. Ladies in their veils. Those buildings with beautiful walls. More ladies dancing. Castanets. Flamenco. Guitarists. Sour heat. Sunshine. Spiced. Hot. Fridge. Fridge! “Phrygian.” Duncan smiled. Elated his memory had somehow found the connection. “I’m not sure why it’s Arab.”

“You and many others a lot older and wiser than you, Duncan, so don’t worry.” Mr Porter was being kind, and Duncan knew he wasn’t expected to know everything, but he wanted to. Mr Porter played the first few bars again, his hands and the music cascading, “What does it make you think of?”

“Water,” replied Duncan. The music rose, went away and came back, away and back. Thumb and finger. Like Mr Porter’s, pocket checking. Or scales that rose and fell. “Or light. Ripples.” The patterns on water when a small person enters a swimming pool. The roof reflected in the water goes wavy and funny, with bright and dark bits. “Was that right?” His shoulders tensed.

“Duncan, that was a great answer. You’ll play better if you’re relaxed. You should be relaxed. Like after a good run of scales. Like you’ve just had an

orgasm.” His words passed as light that only lightly caught the edge of the shape of a thing. A thumb that barely brushed a key before returning to it later, more powerfully and with intensity. It was like metal that’s been cut out. “Think of the gates at Alhambra, if you know them, or on some other Moorish building. Those screens that women use to get undressed behind that let us see something as they hid her. Perhaps some pretty young men use them too.” Mr Porter paused. “Say *strawberry*.”

“What?” Duncan was blind-sided by jumps from water, to women then boys undressing behind behind an arabesque screen, to strawberries.

“Just say the word,” said Mr Porter.

“Strawberry.”

“Now with me.”

{ MR PORTER: “Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry”
 { DUNCAN: “Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry”

{ MR PORTER: “Straw-ber-ry 1----- 2---3- Straw-ber-ry”
 { DUNCAN: “Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry Straw-bray”

“Master Innes, It is a straw-ber-ry, not a straw-bray, nor a ‘strawb.’ What is our fruity rhythm?”

“A triplet,” Duncan was sure of this one.

“Excellent. So now what can we pair with out berries? We need something duple.”

“Cream.” Duncan said without thinking of the sound of the word, but instead matching up the food pairing. It needed another syllable.

“Too literal, Duncan. Think of the rhythm. What might we do with strawberries?”

“Sucking!”

“I suppose so. Let’s go with that. After 2, 1...2...”

{ MR PORTER: “Suck-ing Suck-ing Sucking Suck-ing”
 { DUNCAN: “Suck-ing Suck-ing Sucking Suck-ing”

“Great sucking, Duncan!”

MR PORTER: “Straw-ber-ry Two-and-a Three-and-a — ”

{ MR PORTER: “Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry”
 { DUNCAN: “Suck- ing Suck- ing Suck-ber-ry Oop!”

“Not to worry. And again.”

{ MR PORTER: “Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry Straw-ber-ry”
 { DUNCAN: “Suck- ing Suck- ing Suck- ing”

She sat in the instant regret of having disclosed too much. She had highlighted and compounded vulnerability to a stranger by explaining it. It was sweet he said her hands were beautiful. She turned them over on the cool air and the frantic rhythmic strumming and slapping of the guitar. He was lost in music. She watched his hands, drawn to look at them because he had commented on hers, and because they tapped lightly on the table.

She watched them closely. With no obvious concentration each hand made a polyrhythm. The left relatively simple. A hemiola, three over two: The guitarist darkened the melody, and Harriet felt it, shivering as he depressed in a flat phrygian fifth to locrian.

His right hand tapped five over three, both thumbs tapping alternately in syncopated stutter. It bore little resemblance to the music being played as if his mind, or his body were in counterpoint to reality. He had the count of Bernstein’s *Tra-la-la-la-la-la America!* in one hand and Shubh Saran’s *Slip* slipping counts of five in the other. The break — melt — of a glissando and resonant strum came and Duncan’s hand stopped.

“That’s very impressive,” she whispered as the cloistered chord made the most of its encore, echoing around the buildings. He turned to agree, ready to applaud. She made a deliberate nod and pointed to his hands.

“Sorry. I do that. Was it distracting?” Duncan ran his finger over the table and over the faint pencil lines, the suckings and strawberries and longed for Mr Porter to be with him, to show him how to play again after so many years hiatus. He looked past her to the applauding audience who were already summoning waiting staff and requesting drinks, summoning the tangible

to usher out the moments of thoughtful solitude.

“Not in a bad way,” said Harriet. She remembered the blonde girl sitting beside him in the picture on his phone. She was much prettier than him. But now it made sense. She had a glimpse of the depth of talent this man had in his youth. Having heard him play the day before, she could sense what he had lost. That he had died, or killed a part of himself he would rather was still alive. And she had given something of herself to Muse and he would never return it. She touched his hand, in the gesture the beauty of hers and the lost genius of his met.

“Another drink? We’ve got time.”

“I can smell strawberries.” Harriet looked around and then saw a bright pink cocktail arrive at a table, it had the colour of the dresses of the girls from the café two nights previous. She pointed and he turned and nodded, smiling.

“You want one?” she asked, her little why-not shrug and a smile persuaded him. The drinks arrived quickly and they sat sucking through straws.

“Why do you say strawberries like you do? Straw-ber-ries?”

“Did I?” He seemed to replay his words in his head, then nodded, as if in agreement with her. “Long story,” he said. Harriet knew not to pry any further, a little more vulnerable for having given trust and not having it returned.

“I saw a picture on your phone,” she said. “By accident. I just swiped as I took it. There was you with your long hair. Looking like the guitarist over there,” she nodded to where the guitarist had sat.

“That’s Clara,” he said. “Yes, my hair got several comments when I was younger.” And there his face became less placid, his mind’s eye turning inwards and resented the thoughts that presented themselves behind it. “She was my first musical equal.” Harriet stifled a laugh at the stiff way he phrased this. There was a huge dollop of arrogance, but such sincerity. She Had he had loved this girl — it was the only plausible reason to carry her picture? She was something of an expert on the joys and pains of remembering a lost love. She wondered if Clara’s picture was a rose to remember her by, or a thorn to be pressed in his own side.

“I bet that’s a long story too?” said Harriet. But his eyes were not for telling. Except in how they couldn’t meet hers as his had stroked the pink cocktail in an expression she recognised as regret and loss.

“Another day, maybe,” Duncan said. They sat for a few minutes to the shop in relative silence. Harriet offered a few comments here and there about

places he might want to visit when he was there; parks to walk around and burn off the calories from so much café dining.

“Do you dance?” she asked, the thought rising from his tapping that had returned.

“I’ve done some. I learnt a bit of Latin dancing. My piano teacher thought it would help my playing if I could learn to move my whole body to the music, to give in to it, as he put it. It helps relax. Like after — like after a workout.”

“Lauren and Conrad dance Latin. Or they used to. She looks great dancing,” Harriet said and imagined her dancing, thinking Duncan probably was too. “She came to see me in the shop today. She’s going to join us at the club tonight.”

“Oh, that should brighten things up,” said Duncan. “For you. You two enjoy a night out?” Harriet smiled generously and nodded in agreement. It felt like he had just flirted, although she wasn’t sure if it was with her friend who wasn’t there or her,

X

Earlier that day, a young man with a sleeveless T-shirt and a cosmos of tattoos skipped across the gallery at Centre Pompidou to take Lauren for her interview. His arms were sleeved with distant suns and moons, a zodiac that reached in threadless tapestries over the delicate cleft of his collar bone and became repeated, geometric flowers tattooed around his neck. He was lithe and moved with a dancer's grace and shook her hand by the tips of her fingers, as if he were about to lead her to take a curtain call. His skin was deathly pale, with bluish shadows and pale pink blushes on the muscles of his arms.

In those fleet steps of his approach she recalled two dreams. One at midday, in summer, the room bisected by the sun, the cold hard shadows casting across shelf after shelf of books of music. She had looked, or rather felt around for Harriet, feeling a rising panic that she was going to have navigate this unknown place on her own. There was a loud clunk. A piano complained in the heat. Harriet had told her about this before — the bi-metallic strings clanking, asthmatic, as they expand. But in the woody musk of the piano filled room Lauren sweated in the heat of the shop windows and the moment. Lying tense on the floor to cool off she had on overalls to look like a piano mechanic lying on a trolley with rollers she was half under it, bisected with shadow. She looked at the fabric underside of the piano and through the trellis of mechanics for the pedals. The underside was then wooden with parts of it open all the way through to the lid and the ceiling above it. There was a customer waiting with questions and she hid from him, panicked that Harriet was no where to be seen. The fabric was attached to the frame with brass studs that nobody saw to polish and she pulled a rag from the pocket of her overalls and looked busy polishing while the man asked whether he should buy a motorbike or a piano. The braiding with the studs in it looked like the cornice in the ceiling above her parents' bed where she had spent a summer making out with a guy that was too short for her, but had great skin. Their bedroom was double height and bright from the shafts of light that cut across it from the slats in the blinds. His name escaped her. He was a loner, not someone from college or a friend of a friend, but just a guy she had got talking to. So she had no index of faces to run through, no library of images of others using his name. They were never out with others in her mind; only in that bedroom or in a quiet street

on his motorbike.

He ushered her through the door and into the interview room. It was small and white, stark and sterile, a surgical cocoon of an office in the middle of the building. Her interviewers were charming and all dressed in greys. There were only chairs and no windows. The elision of colour raised her heartbeat. She found inspiration in distractions; would follow a peculiar shade of pink around the walls of a restaurant or even down the street because it unravelled a particularly tight knot of thought in her head. But these myriad reminders and prompts that came from the hues of skirts of tones of jackets and suits removed from the proceedings.

Lauren presented well on what she had been assigned. The slight man in his sleeveless T-shirt stood by the doors throughout; his own decor, with pallid skin and indiscernible expression, matched the ambiance perfectly. It was peculiar they wanted to hear about Manet, given the usual fare at Beaubourg, but she could see method in choosing a work not in their own collection. She managed to be fun and affable, to make them laugh here and there and to paint a context. The stiff, insistent palette of the room and the lack of context or reference to any of the permanent collections seemed a well-judged attempt at removing the context from the art, at re-casting a well known work on a blank canvas, the gilt-edged frames removed and the art laid bare. Victorine would be proud, she would be comfortable in this space — pale and painted and naked — or at least familiar the scrutiny of it. The waif at the door unfolded and refolded himself, slouching a little.

She was nervous of the second section, where she would be asked on something modern, or to talk about how she might develop an artists work into an exhibition. Here, she was delighted when they got up from their seats and disassembled the table they leant on to reveal that its top was several layers of wooden panels. Each one had a single image pasted on it. There was an Alphonse Mucha's *Evening Star*, Sanyu's *Four Nudes*, and one of Picasso's sketches from his study on Manet's *Déjeuner*.

It wasn't a test, they assured her. It was a conversation. One highlighted Mucha's use of flowers in repeated patterns to frame the image of the woman, then the foliage that framed the male conversationalist in the Picasso, then the block graphic green of the grass in Sanyu.

Lauren talked about shame. Mucha's model shied away in her dark blue, her hair autumnal coppers and bronzes threaded through with orange flowers. Her face turned away, the pearlescent skin of her neck and bared breasts exposed in the folds of her dress. She had none of Victorine's swag-

ger. Picasso seemed somehow to make more of the bathing woman in the distance than the foreground figure. The conversationalist reminded Lauren of Conrad. He looked not at his wife — Picasso featured himself and his wife in the other versions of the work — but at the bather. Sanyu's ladies appeared relaxed, as if they had stripped of to sunbathe in a park and had no idea the artist was there, but lay there naive in form, uncaring of their disproportion. There was another painting she had seen of his, with the same figures but shoes strewn about as if kicked off in a rush to lie on the cool grass in the heat of the day.

“What else did you say?” Harriet asked her. The only customer of the day had left just when Lauren arrived and the two sat and ate together perched on the leather sofas by the awkwardly low coffee tables on the upper floor. Below, a group of lively looking girls stood with their arms raised, fingers like stoppers in their ears and laughing at the intensity of the noise as a zephyr of motorbikes and scooters shot along the boulevard street, frying the air to crisp crackles syncopated with whoops, wheelies and horn beeps. A billow-and-suck dance of litter scattered under the parked cars as they rode through.

“Man, those guys are loud.” The girls removed their fingers from their ears. One faked smoking a cigarette with her fingers, blowing skywards as if she exhaled the sour two-stroke smoke that hung around them. A second group, leather-clad and riding chromed hogs and choppers thundered past.

“I don't remember much of what I said now.” She began to replay arriving for the interview and meeting the tattooed waif. “Hold on a minute.” She left her lunch and walked quickly across the shop to the nearest piano, kicked off her heels and lay on her back under it, examining the structure.

“I hate to ask.” Harriet had come over and was standing astride Lauren's legs as if she were about to hand her some tools. A couple peered through the window and Harriet gave her customary friendly wave. It might have looked like a buyer checking out the construction; or the sales person explaining something to a customer.

Under the piano, Lauren examined the lattice of thick wooden beams and the golden wood of the soundboard behind it. She was struck by the complexity of the layers of woods and the undulations and curves in the parts and how they fitted together. As she felt around it, she explained the part

of her recurring dream where she was underneath a piano.

“Why did it bother you that much?” Harriet asked.

“It stops me sleeping. I guess it’s my version of walking on a stage without knowing my lines.” There was something else in the images. In the recurring theme of Manet’s painting that haunted her, of how she saw herself in Victorine, or Conrad in the conversational man.

The something else crawled over her mind’s skin when she looked at a series of illustrations in the Pompidou after her interview. They were bright and garish and had a 1950’s American Dream or Dystopia theme. They all had court judges in them, with robes, wigs and hats. One was a pastiche of the comic strip, *Judge Dredd*. A Norman Rockwell style image caught Lauren’s eye — she was acutely aware that her physique had the hour-glass proportions much-loved by the illustrator, and others had drawn comparisons between her and this or that movie actress in the past. She felt increasingly self-conscious and uneasy as she walked down the lines of images, each seeming to use the previous one as an excuse for its tropes of abusive misogyny or infantilisation of women. The Rockwellian American dream suburban street of cute houses with white siding and perfect bright green lawns and shiny cars. And the shiny wife wrapped tight enough to burst from her red dress, her ample bust and backside both managing to appear on the same plane.

Her husband walked behind her in his braces and breaches, spanking her with a big hand as he passed, his other hand stuffed with wads of cash. His speech bubble, exiting past a cigarette perched on between his lips, read ‘I love America!’ He smiled towards the artist, looking for agreement.

The next was a Lichtenstein inspired series. It was set in the same street with the perfect, white-washed homes. One of these, entitled ‘*faux-llus*’ has a woman in a skimpy dress, but holding a child’s doll. She held a bottle of milk for the doll in her other hand. The doll itself was dressed in a skimpy dress and had an adult made-up face, and a sash from a beauty pageant.

The doll had an accentuated, adult bosom and developed hips under the childish clothing. The judges, along with the men on the street that stood washing their cars, or with their arms around their adorable wives; the photographer drawn with his press card in his hat and bulb on his camera firing; the older woman in her head shawl and long dress, were all connected to one speech bubble that said ‘*j’accuse!*’

Harriet reached down and tapped Lauren on the knee, offering her hand to pull her up from the floor. “Are you going to Muse’s gig later, did Duncan

want to go?” asked Lauren as they walked back to the seats.

“We’re meeting for a drink first,” said Harriet. “There’s a little place around the corner that usually has a duo or solo act playing.”

“Sounds romantic,” said Lauren. Harriet gave a half-hearted smile, then shook her head and put her hand to her mouth as if she were yawning, bored of the insinuations about potential new partners that seemed to come whenever any man even bought her a coffee or liked her music. She wasn’t in the mood to be teased.

“Sorry, I’m just frustrated,” said Harriet, not wanting to crush Lauren’s upbeat mood. She wanted to play live music again, and her confidence was often cowed by Lauren’s seeming ability to make things happen. There was never any malice or grandstanding; Harriet just came off worse in the inevitable comparisons she made with herself and her friend. Lauren was rich, intelligent, pretty, kind, generous, caring, ambitious, the list went on. She was pretty much tone deaf, and Harriet indelicately steered her away from learning anything about music, bluntly telling her that this was her one thing she was good at. It would be adulterous if Lauren were to have music fall in love with her.

“I had a call from Simon,” said Harriet. Lauren remembered Muse’s sharp-tongued, sharp-suited bass player. She was sure Simon knew about Harriet and Muse, that her playing in their group had been contingent on her relationship — the service and favours she provided was probably Muse’s honest view of the situation — no play in the bedroom; no play on the stage.

“You’re not cut out to be a sales clerk, even if you are a good one. You’re a musician,” said Lauren. She knew she was covering old ground. Both she and Conrad had offered her free accommodation with them. She sometimes felt a little uneasy at the prospect of bringing another woman into the house with Conrad, but equally he seemed to view Harriet like a favourite niece, or his daughter’s best friend.

“I know what you’re going to say,” said Harriet. The truth was that if Lauren were single, or if both her and Conrad were musicians, she might have considered living with the Goldens. She would have no privacy. She had no space to entertain in her tiny flat, even with the piano gone.

Lauren opened her bag and placed a ticket on the table for Muse Mouzon’s gig at *Le Cru Et Le Cuit* that evening. Harriet brightened. “You’re coming too?”

“It will be either celebration or commiseration for the job. I should hear about it by the end of the day,” said Lauren. She omitted to say that she

wanted to be there to support Harriet after her meeting with Muse the day before. She saw through his abuse of reminiscences, of how he recalled memories to get Harriet to replay and relive shared moments — often their sexual encounters — by seeding the conversation and therefore her mind with them. She recalled the *moules frites* bar around from Muse's club, where she and Harriet had sat and laughed so many times that they now recalled times they had sat and recalled other times. Their enjoyment of each other had moved from the things they did to those shared memories; those invisible photograph albums, that *parfumerie* of scents of off foods and places, the still frames from the movie their life.

Lauren knew something of the darker scents and sense her thoughts could take when she argued with Conrad. It was common enough, she knew, for couples to rake over the coals of slumbering angers, hurts and faults and throw the embers in the face of the other. But now her hands were burnt with unforgiveness, her mind hard-wired to jump into a recurring script with him of banter, bicker, bitch and derision. She had begun to hate him a little at times, but also curled her lip at her own bitter turn of phrase that had crept in and was turning all her memories of him sour.

“Have you told Conrad?”

“About the gig? He won't come. Too many stairs.”

“No, I meant the job. Will he not want to know how it went?”

“It would be like a second interview,” she said, but stopped short of explaining herself, feeling the curl in her lip. He would analyse every question, analyse her responses, give — declare, demand, lecture — advice on how she should have proceeded. He would be irritated if she had shared too many of his thoughts — the good ones were his — on Mucha. Debate on art was relatively safe, and she was relatively grateful they had discussed Mucha just a week or so prior, around the time Conrad first talked of hiring Océana.

“Are you alright, gorgeous Golden? You seem a little quiet.”

“It's funny you say that. My head won't stop talking. I'm tired of listening to myself. I might go and have a nap before the gig.”

She stood up to go and looked to the patch of floor where she had been lying and then thought to brush the fluff from the back of her clothes. She could have slept there, on the hard floor of the shop, knowing that if she woke up she would know exactly what the underside of a piano looked like and therefore know all of her lines, have no anxieties about the future. Her friend would be standing there waiting to extend an arm and pull her up

when she needed it.

She hugged Harriet and left the building, but took a cloud of thoughts and images with her that hung themselves on the day, the place, and sounds of the street as she walked along it. How sad it would be if Paris itself became a reminder of her failing marriage.

XI

Heat rushed at her — immediate and fragrant blasts of moist musk and arid spice — as they descended the steep steps into the club. The narrow passage pulsed with funnelled waves of arterial dub bass in chest thumping dollops. The left wall was undressed stone; the right covered in whitewashed render; both wore threadbare suits of rubric rugs that hung faded and frayed as friable frescos from metal curtain pole. Thick dark beams lumbered overhead, highlighted with thinner timbers painted pale green. The aromas of grilled meats, garlic, honey, mint, saffron and starchy rice were trapped where the rising hot air met the descending cold, a humid microclimate to whet the appetite. Oil burnt in coloured censers that looked like kitsch wine glasses. At the bottom, through the lemonwood screens draped with rugs and inlaid in pearl the shadows of diners danced in flickering light from giant black candelabras that projected them on ceiling and floor, through the sizzling steams and whispering smokes and across the black and white tiles where the waiters wafted silent, as if on velvet slippers.

Above the stage was a moulded relief of a grand piano, complete with roughed out keys and music stand. Its distressed and blistered plaster in duck-egg blue had *'The well-distempered Klavier'* written above, a line or two of Bach's manuscript etched in beside it, ornamented here and there with additional notes in daubs of dark blue or reds or yellows that suggested a colour to music.

She was greeted at a carved wooden desk by Dana — who habitually looked efficient and cool in her black trousers and shimmering top and hair pulled taut in a bun — whose tight-lipped smile broke into a grin. She came around the desk to give Harriet a hug, holding on as the two shared a greeting, then talked for a warm minute into each other's ears as their perfumes mingled in their minds with the beat of the music in the air. Harriet closed her eyes, listening to the inflexions in Dana's Arabic-tinged accent, the arabesque of veils and flames and sultry tears that it seemed all at once to conjure. She pulled her tighter, to hear her voice over the beat and savour the moment. They had missed each other, they both said; they would have to catch up; they were so busy but that was no excuse. Harriet felt the dry scale-like sequins of Dana's sleeve as she let her go, her eye drawn to their opalescent shimmer. Harriet looked so stunning in her red trouser suit, and her hair was fantastic; Dana looked younger whenever they met, and she looked magical, her green eye shadow and that dark eye-liner perfect with

her beautiful eyes. Dana looked past Harriet to Duncan, who was looking around the screens to the table beyond.

“Who is your — friend?” Dana smiled and raised her eyebrow in that way that Harriet had always felt was on the flirtatious end of inquisitiveness.

“Duncan,” said Harriet. He turned around at this and nodded.

“He’s English,” said Harriet. There were more people coming down the stair behind her and Dana glanced up at them. “He’s just visiting.”

“*Vous êtes très belle,*” said Duncan, sweeping his arm to guide their eyes across the candlit glow of the club and coming around to Dana, nodding at the decor of the room in appreciation.

“Thank you,” replied Dana in English. “Harriet was just admiring my eyes.” Dana kept silent for a few seconds then laughed as she picked up two menus from under her podium.

He went to speak again, but Harriet whispered to him to quit while he was ahead, and that Dana was likely to tease him mercilessly every time they met after this. A waiter came and Dana spoke rapidly to him. He wore a long white tunic and a tarboosh, his thick leather belt decorated with an ornate bottle opener and a pouch for his notepad. Another two waiters criss-crossed them, slow-spinning Dervishes carrying silver trays loaded up with *tapas* dishes and steaming iron sizzle pans, with a good-humoured joke shared in passing. Their waiter removed a reserved sign from a table at the front and gestured for them to sit.

The seating compassed the stage in a crescent, their table located along one of the horns that ended at the door to the back stage. It had no seats on its stage side, but a plush velvet bench on the other, the back richly carved and inlaid with lit glass panels. Tasselled cushions and the sensual light of the censers lent it the air of a boudoir or a harem. The opposite horn of seating led off to the a bar and rest rooms.

Duncan shuffled in behind the table, noting that Harriet would probably want to get out more easily to greet people she knew. The music had changed to something more playful, a sixties party groove. It had the kind of peppy snare drum and sloshy ride cymbals that recalled Nancy Sinatra just as Lauren came and stood in front of the table wearing platform boots and her bright blues hooded catsuit from the 1950s, and a cropped jacket over it that partially obscured the open weave of the material.

“I got the job!” She grinned and Harriet stood to hug her. Duncan put out a hand, but Lauren leaned over the table to accept a hug from him too.

“Harriet!” A shout from stage door was followed by “How aah you? So

nice to see your toady English face amongst all these little froggies.”

“Hi Simon! Still subtle.” Simon flung his arms around her, but at nearly two feet taller, hugged her neck and pushed her chin up awkwardly against his chest. “Killing me with the strangle hold!” Simon let go and slouched back, dramatically tilting his hip and turning to look at her as an artist might stand back to appraise a canvas. He ran a hand through his blonde spiked hair. “This is Lauren,” Harriet gestured, “who I think you’ve met.”

“Hello again, Simon.” Lauren took his hand, admiring the bold purple of his suit. The colour popped against the blacks and whites and dark and light. “She’s just got a new job.” Harriet continued, as if compering a pageant. “She’s an art curator — ”

“She’s art. You could have stopped there. Love the boots, lovely. All these gorgeous and clever people in one night.” Simon swatted a hand, as if in disbelief at Lauren’s beauty, his head bouncing to the bass in the slick slip and slap of electro Tango. He loved American accents, which is the same thing he said every time he met Lauren.

“This is Duncan. He’s a customer,” said Harriet.

“Times are hard. I didn’t know you’d entered the profession, Harry.” Simon laughed and then giggled, covering his face with his hands even as he finished speaking.

She walloped his back as a sister might her naughty brother. “Are you high, Simon?” He was being rude, even by his standards. “Duncan’s from England.” Simon’s bright eyes looked about, stoking whatever thoughts were burning in his mind. “He’s buying a piano.”

“I knew that. About the piano. How did I know that? I am — a little elevated. Not quite high. Sorry.” His hand extended. Simon was an acquired taste, but Duncan either had remarkable composure, or was used to dealing with Simon and his ilk in his line of work. Simon licked his lips and gave another giggle that erupted into a villainous echo around the walls. “Sorry! Sorry.” He held his hand still for it to be shaken. Duncan took it, staying silent as Simon looked poised to launch again. “I play the upright bass. I used to do my thing with Harriet.” He began to laugh at his next comment even as he spoke it. “Musically speaking. Then Muse did her thingy. Unmusically.”

“Simon!” Harriet and Lauren chorused.

“Oh yeah. Top Secret. Well, it’s lovely to see you. And you, lovely Lauren in your — I can see your skin through that — fabulous dress thing. And to meet you, Duncan chap. I’ve missed your touch, Harry. She has a marvel-

lous touch, Duncan. Just ask... anyone here. But especially Muse.”

“Get lost Simon! Love you. Bye.”

Simon waved and skipped off between the tables as a waiter came to theirs. The waiter held up three fingers to another who pointed, directing, parting the air in sharp, darting movements, conducting it here and there before stopping and pulling out their chairs. Another waiter arrived immediately with a tray and placed three glasses of ice and a bottle of water in front of them. She stood by them, head cocked in the manner of a person indicating they are listening.

“I’m celebrating. It’s got to be champagne You’ve got a Bollinger I think?” Lauren asked brightly. The waiter nodded, her eyes widening.

“It’s not cheap here, Lauren.”

“Conrad’s paying. It means he’s here in spirit, but not in voluminous drivell.” Hearing no further objections, Lauren ordered. The waiter whispered off across the tiles. The three smiled at each other, their appetite for conversation quashed by the fatigue of shouting over the music. They settled into people watching, enjoying morsels of conversation, or for Duncan, mimed vignettes with a Persian soundtrack.

The singer’s voice was round, her skin bronze in the mellow glow of the stage lights. The rear of the stage was washed in blue. The drummer, perched behind a tiny kit, was flanked by pair of guitarists.

A young woman, pregnant and ripe in a bright orange dress walked followed by a waiter carrying her drink on a tray. She lowered herself into a raspberry pink tub chair, the waiter fussing and putting a pouffe under her legs, her drink placed beside her. He said something and the woman laughed, her eyes flitting to a tall handsome man in a jade green suit. They caught each others’ eyes and waved. She ran her hand over the fruit of her belly.

The singer stopped and the audience applauded, their part in the conversation having been imaginary, sensory and mute, became the clapping of their hands and whoops and noises; the performance had been captured, experienced and returned as sensible, metered pulses of air that wiped out sounds lingering in the air, the miles and years traversed in minds to somewhere more or less pleasant and back again. In the applause, a vial of musical catharsis was broken, a deep blue oil that soothed and revived ecstasies, jealousies and desires.

“She was great,” Lauren said. “What a fabulous voice. I was miles away. In fact I was in the south of France. Getting away from the job I’ve not started

yet. A break from being joyfully busy.”

“You should go to Aix, to ‘Golden’s Manor’ before you start work,” said Harriet who had downed a glass of champagne already. She held her water glass to her cheek, already too warm. It dripped occasional drops up her sleeve; dropped drips of icy fingers that made her thigh flinch. She brushed at her trousers, their flared bottoms red sails over a geometric ceramic sea. The music began again. Something flamenco. The guitarists, arranged as if to be painted, hair flopping Fabian Perez-ily; they duelled, digging out cobalt calls and crimson responses, their notes fluid, bending, dripping, flowing over the jewelled linen on the tables, finding a kindred flickering in the flames of the candles. She fanned herself with the menu.

The man in jade waved towards Duncan, prompting feint recognition; Harriet stirred a non-committal hand. He beamed, walking quickly over, Harriet nudging Lauren under the table so that she turned to see his approach.

“Mustafa, hi!” Lauren stood up, giving him her best cheerleader’s smile.

“Golden by name and more beautiful than much fine gold. Your skin radiates through your dress, I see. Joy to see you Lauren.” Muse opened his arms as wide as his ego, and Lauren knew how easily a woman could fall for his crushing charisma. “Where is Conrad, still coming down the stairs?” Muse laughed, taking a burgundy handkerchief from his sleeve and wiping his face and hands.

“At home. I think.”

“Dinner time?” He took both her shoulders and pulled her to him, kissing both her cheeks in the way a hungry koi carp might pluck food.

“Harry.” Muse twitched slightly, glancing to the bar. Then extended a hand. “So nice to see you. Glad you could accept the invitation.”

“Thanks for inviting us. This is Duncan.”

“This is the English man who has come to Paris to buy a piano?”

“Nice to meet you,” Duncan shook Muse’s hand. “I’m pleased I could hear you play while I’m here. I saw you in London a couple of years ago. At the Barbican.” Muse double-tapped his heart with his hand, touched at being remembered. “How did you know? About the piano?” Duncan glanced to Harriet who glanced downwards, the tiniest shake of the head.

“Did you mention it?” Muse turned to Harriet. “We still bump into each other sometimes. It’s nice. Like old friends.” She shook her head more forcefully. “Maybe I confused you Duncan with someone else. I meet so many musicians and pianists are so common, like cheap sparkling wine, you

understand? Nice for a time and then it is flat and less sweet.” He looked across to the bar again. “And so I must go and mingle. Have a nice evening, I will have them send a bottle to you. I will send *Chateau Musar*, it is my favourite. You will enjoy it.”

“Very kind,” said Duncan. Lauren and Harriet made similar noises and Muse swept off, waving at various tables of people as he went over towards the bar. The champagne arrived but Harriet got up and excused herself, walking quickly towards the restrooms. “I don’t want to seem unkind — ” Duncan broke off as the waiter poured out two glasses for them, leaving the bottle in an ice bucket on a stand by the table. They thanked her and she went off.

“Congratulations,” said Duncan, raising a glass. “To you, on your new job.”

“Thanks. And to you on your new piano,” said Lauren. She raised her glass to his and Duncan looked around, noticing a man’s jealous look, and realised they might appear to others as a couple, perhaps celebrating an anniversary just shared attraction.

She had green eyes. He hadn’t noticed before. “You’ve got green eyes,” he said without thinking, then shook his head and looked at the glass with suspicion. They both laughed.

“Most people need a bit more alcohol than that before they start with the the truth telling,” she said. “You’ll be singing soft metal ballads next.” She took a swig of the cool champagne quench to her thirst. “He’s a fabulous saxophone player,” she nodded towards Muse, looking around in case she was about to be overheard. “And one of the most vile men I’ve ever met.” She emptied her glass. “I don’t know what Harry ever saw in him.” It was all hush hush and had ended two or three months ago. Muse had other commitments that he hadn’t disclosed. A waiter delivered the bottle of red with three fresh glasses.

“The woman in the orange dress perched at the bar?” Duncan nodded towards the bar. “Looks to have a prior claim, looking at her. That’s a healthy commitment.” Lauren followed his gaze then turning back to speak into her re-charged glass.

“That’s Eloise. His wife. I wonder if Harriet saw her. That would set her off.” Lauren spotted Harriet and Simon shaking with laughter in the distance, a bright cluster of red and purple against the dark and mint woods.

“Antoine’s sister. Handy for sourcing pianos for your club, especially with all the spilling of cheap fizz on them.”

“You don’t miss much do you?” Lauren watched Duncan look around the

room from green to orange to red and purple and finally to blue where he smiled at her, raising his glass.

“I miss almost everything in France,” he said. “It’s why I remember the few bits of English I hear.”

“I see you are enjoying the hangings. they have a rich meaning.” Muse lowered himself to sit at their table and pointed to the carpets hanging behind the speakers, their colour altered in the cool light. Others draped the edge of the short stage. The closest was bright orange and yellow at its edge, fading to deep russets and brown in the centre. White roses and Cypress trees garlanded the edge, with diamonds. “Those are traditionally the symbol for women,” he said. “Or men and women when they are in pairs.” He touched the familiar story, all pure and demur at the fringe, but vibrant and fecund at the centres.

Lauren felt a curl forming in her lip.

In the middle, picked out in golden threads, the man, the weaver held a serpent holding reeded *chanteur*. “I began on the mijwiz you know, before the saxophone.” He fingered the hem of it. A single arched bridge crossed a black moat of paisley pattern. Inside the moat, paradise birds and fruits. The bridge was made from the black notes on white, destruction on purity, tension on release, like sex and music. The red pomegranates had the weaver incorporated into their weave, so that they ran down and through him. White diamonds and tulips and brown and red serpents with the birds of fertility and blossoms formed a frieze in the rug’s centre. The male was eating of the pomegranate. “It is all very romantic, don’t you think?”

Perhaps all of life was jazz. Duncan watched Muse run eye and finger over the surface, then turn and question as if every phrase and note had been understood, because his articulation had been so perfect. “And those are camels?” Duncan pointed to them processing just inside the edge of the design. The processed in trains, like a means of transport.

“They are a sign of wealth,” Muse explained. Pregnant from the richness of his music. “But children come too, in the leaves and hyacinths. ”

“So instead of a snake charmer,” Duncan leaned forward to point, “where the snake comes out of a basket, this is more like a charming snake?”

“The snake he is like the fire in her — the drum.” The fires were lit inside some drums to change their pitch, to seal them for use, to make them tighter. “They are burnt also with passion, it changes their sound to become more responsive.”

Lauren forced a laugh nervous to clear her unease that lingered around

Muse's thoughts. "There's a great exhibition of art in the style of the 1950s American Dream. It's at the Pompidou. You would really identify with it." There are no dates in your rug," she looked at the tiny fruits. "Only figs."

"You see something in this?" Muse craning towards her, as if taking instruction, his eyes failing to meet hers.

"Figs are all about passion," she leaned away from him, closing her jacket sharply.

Duncan poured himself some wine and looked at the ingenious devices in the vaults of the ceilings. Stretched across wooden frames were segments of rugs. they were arranged as the sails of windmills or flowers of giant, woven petals. They had the look of an acoustic device, there to prevent the sound bouncing up and focusing sharply in the brick and stone parabolas. But they also moved very slowly, stirring the air as they did so. The effect of this, with Muse standing below them, was of a wealthy prince in his tent being fanned by unseen serfs. Muse raised an eyebrow, an impudent chin, a knowing smile to let Lauren know he expected a punchline. "But also about temptation and wisdom."

"I do like figs with American peanut butter, sweet and salty; and my meat I like with hot English mustard. Delicious. For a time. Having variety is in my blood. Jazz and *tapas*."

"And dates," Lauren added casually, "are about honesty and justice."

"I'm a musician, Lauren." He knew painters, sculptors, composers and storytellers, did not concern themselves with these things. People will look for them. They would look through the blue fabric of the open weaved dress at the skin of the beautiful woman. The sun might not like to be looked at either, then there would never be a painting of a sunset. Nobody wants honesty and justice in their art, they want it in their hearts and the real world. "This rug is just a thing. It means nothing. Just as you or you can be art in my reality. The rug. The sun. You. All are art to me. And mean nothing."

"But, you just told us the rug's meaning?" Duncan said.

"Just words, Duncan." Melodies and harmonies, some coloured threads woven together in time rather than threads that are fixed this way and that in a piece of fabric. All these rugs he had walked on, slept on or under, and this was just one of them. It was a single note, ciphering. "You know ciphering? Something becomes the centre, the key, the cipher, the central tone to a memory. They are the clues to the big mystery. Every colour means something different." People fell in and out of love, they themselves together, they become worn and thread bare and need new ones to make them whole

again. “There is Antoine. I remember now, he must have mentioned to me about you buying a piano.”

“Congratulations,” by the way., said Duncan.

“On what?” Muse asked.

“That is your wife isn’t it, the lady in orange? I saw you looking at each other.”

“Eloise?” Lauren turned to look. “She’ radiant. So beautiful. Congratulations Mustafa. You must be looking forward to fatherhood.” While she hadn’t expected misty-eyed sentimentality, his usual hand patting his heart in humility, Muse’s apparent surprise at equating pregnancy with fatherhood amused Lauren.

“It changes a man, doesn’t it?” said Duncan.

“You have children?” asked Muse.

“No, I’ve not had that privilege.” Duncan admitted.

“Maybe you are not sure about women.” He nodded to Lauren. “Her beauty is not for you. Maybe you prefer men. Either way, I think you are a rootless chord. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Pardon me?” Duncan unsure of Muse’s convolutions.

“You are lonely. I see it. A businessman with no friends, but acquaintances. Avoiding the dazzling colours of life. No man chooses grey. No man chooses loneliness. He can be a red fat man, like her husband, Conrad, or he can be a purple lunatic like Simon over there, but grey men have lost someone, something. Lost themselves. Loss leaves us lonely. Void. Fill that. Before,” clicks finger, “the time passes: First bar; last bar. No turnaround, no going back to the top. Just the static at the end of the groove. Think about it.” He stood up. “The wine is very good, yes?” He pointed to the bottle and walked off.

Lauren expected more of a cock fight. Duncan appeared unruffled. Perhaps Muse posed no threat to him, or he was blind-sided by Muse’s velvety charm dropping off to reveal barbarous antlers. Or he was distracted around his music teacher, or didn’t want to sour the evening. “Well,” she said.

“Food for thought,” said Duncan. The music soaked the place in pools of blue, restful and resilient, its give and stiffness rippling in subaqueous licks through the cellar.

“They’re about to start, what did I miss?” Harriet sat back down and poured herself — “Ooh nice” — a glass of Champagne. “I’ve ordered some baklava.” It was the only place she ate it. She sipped the champagne and

imagined the thick syrup and heavy scents of rosewater and orangewater.

“Duncan’s just had the full Muse experience,” said Lauren.

“He’s a great musician though.” Harriet raised her voice a little as the track changed to some frantic jazz, covering the noise of the stage being cleared for the next act. The air barely moved but buzzed like so much fizz in a bottle, a frenzy of trumpet, bass and ghosted beats making the metre of the room impossible to discern.

“Have you been sampling Simon’s fairy dust, Harry?” Lauren watched Harriet’s bright eyes darting around the room with tell-tale, upbeat animation. “And did you notice Eloise?”

“Hard not to. She’s like an enormous pumpkin.” Harriet waved to Antoine, who stood beside his sister. Both waved back. “That was mean of me. She’s irritatingly nice.” Harriet raised her glass. Eloise raised her glass of water, pointing to her pregnant belly, face and orange dress aglow.

Muse took his place. The music cut and in his opening phrase, hands froze mid-clap. The sax went from breathless rasp to scream in less than ten seconds, the beginnings of a melody, white and cool was fringed in blue and greens then turned brown and molten, hanging yellow then sliced red and penetrated orange, a single note searing for half a minute. Simon came in on the bass and the music shifted to purple, the piano giving shape, the drummer shuffling in creating an irrational fraction to the rhythm.

“He’s got some pair of lungs,” Duncan whispered to Lauren.

“Yeah, but we knew that already, right?” She winked. “He is phenomenal. Selfish, egocentric, narcissistic and unkind.”

Harriet looked across to Lauren and Duncan, putting a finger to her mouth, rapt in Muse’s playing with half a mind on the guy on the piano. Simon looked amazing, his chin jutting out, playing the bass at the the audience, the notes rhythmic weapons that he snapped with his crooked finger. Marcel on drums was dazzling in his white suit that reflected the hues of the stage lighting.

Harriet looked over to Eloise again, thankful she wasn’t the one waiting on Muse’s child; annoyed that she still felt more regret for their parting than for their joining. The music broke down for a solo, Muse unusually standing to the side and nodding to the piano guy who seemed to freeze, Simon stepping in to solo over the chordal comps on the keys and chatter on the cymbals.

The song finished a little abruptly. Muse wiped his face, puffing theatrically as the audience applauded, slow-clapping and banging the tables. He

held up a hand. “OK, so tonight I am going to do something I never do... If you can guess what that is, there is a prize.”

“Play a request.” Harriet said immediately.

“Of course you would know! Ladies and gentlemen, the fabulous Harriet Claudel is visiting us this evening.” There was another round of appreciative applause, the kind given to a song when it’s recognised at last. “The prize is that you get to name the song. And there is nothing between us is there?” Harriet stared at him. “We have not set this up, it is not a ruse?”

Harriet shook her head. “Anything at all?” Muse nodded, looking around the band. “Alright, let’s have *The Windup* by Keith Jarrett.”

“Oh yes. I heard Branford play this. Marsalis.” A few cheers came up. “Shall we make it more interesting?” Muse put a hand to his ear. “You want some cool stuff?” The audience clapped and banged on the tables, enjoying the musical stakes, the regular clientele knowing he had previously led congas around the club and out onto the street.

Duncan, preoccupied with Mr Porter, admired the showman in Muse. The language of his virtuosity, the palette of his technique and range of strident pigments proved verbose, prolix, lurid, ugly and offensive in his personality and spoken words; but through his saxophone, they were the unfading hues of humanity, their colours pitched perfectly on a vast emotional canvas. “The riff,” said Muse, and put his horn in his mouth. Against a blink and twitch of his shoulder he syncopated even the first note, the melody playing off a pulse he swung in front of and behind without even articulating it. He turned to Simon and Marcel. “You know this?” Simon played the riff, stopped, and laughed, spinning his bass. He turned to the drummer who gave a droll out-of-time drum roll then looked across at the pianist, who whispered something. Muse continued. “Let’s change it. We have two piano players. Monsieur Duncan?” Duncan waved and tried not to shrink in his seat. “Give us a new timing. Make it something to make us sweat. What have you got?”

“A Fibonacci sequence,” Duncan said, his voice suddenly animated. The room silent. “You can go up or down,” he paused, further taps. “But I’d suggest going down from eight. Eight, five, three, two, one, one.” Lauren saw behind the taunt a gleeful boy trying to please his teacher; Harriet remembered his hands tapping out polyrhythms while he did something else entirely. Muse nodded, touching his temple and pointing to Duncan then mimed using a calculator for the audience. They laughed. Simon was

playing the riff quietly.

“It can go? It works?” Muse turned and asked Simon.

“Yes,” Simon looked intense, excited. “But it will be fun!”

“Oh,” Muse said, finally catching up with the pianist. “We have a little problem. He is not too familiar with it,” Muse pointed to him and shrugged.

“Harry can play it!” Lauren shouted. Duncan expected a protest, but Harriet didn’t flinch, her eyes on Simon, who nodded slowly, marking out the riff as if to remind her.

“Will you join us?” Muse put out a hand, his body gestures flamboyant, the genie rubbing his own lamp. Harriet got up from her seat, waved to a wolf whistle from the bar, and walked around to the piano. Muse picked up his horn from its stand, running over the jagged riff on the keys while listening to the three map out the timing. The noise in the room rose, the air thick with tension, waiters went around with jugs of water.

Eloise came and sat in Harriet’s place. “Hello,” she offered her hand to Duncan. “I am Eloise, you have charmed my brother Antoine. And met my husband. I am pleased to meet you.”

“This could all go badly wrong,” Muse smiled from the stage. “You heard it hear first. And maybe” raising his hand as if about to attempt an death-defying feat, “the last. Madmoiselle Harriet Claudel on the piano. Take us away.”

“The mark of good musicians,” Mr Porter whispered to Duncan as Harriet, crouched red and intense at the piano, laid out a tune in the left, a stuttering slam of cymballic rhythm in the right, “is that they immediately transport you, like great actors.” Marcel’s snare intense, insistent white cracks and flashes; highlights in and out of the groove. Simon’s bass, articulate and nimble, punctuated the air in a precise flurry of purple. “The music is the script. The audience need to be the director.” And then Muse, his entry almost falling over the others as it altered the balance of the air in the room, slopping green over the other colours, forcing a re-accenting of the timing, then allowing it to slip back with masterful control.

Harriet was sitting up, her head bobbing to a different time to the tap of her right foot that strayed back and forward to the right of the piano. “The pedal does not make the piano go, Duncan, it is not an accelerator you depress at the start of the journey and lift it at the end. A watercolour is not produced simply by pouring paint continually over the canvas, the results would be at worst a brown sludge.”

Muse dropped out mid phrase, picked up a few bars later, dropped again, Marcel and Simon following his syncopated crops. Harriet mirror-

ing Simon's whipped riff with her left, playing with Muse's horn in her right. The drums gunned and stopped, the room thick with music that cut — Eloise took a compact from her handbag, the mirror glinting across Duncan and Lauren — the rhythms just beginning to replay in sensory echos when the piano solo began. Muse wiped his sax, leaving off the first few notes of the riff, as if the music arrived late. Harriet stood, off her seat, met him there, a shared joke making both laugh and the audience too, desperate to be in on it. Marcel lifted the level as the main riff returned.

"I don't like jazz," Lauren whispered to Duncan, but then a fragment caught her by surprise and she and Harriet were swimming under the stars in her outdoor pool at Aix, the breath sucked out of them by the cold of the green-watered pool. "But I could listen to her all night." The sun a bright and yellow smile melting the ice in their drinks. "Quite the natural dancer, Duncan. Big feet though," Jane laughed and Eloise leaned to him. "Too many notes for my head," she said, her face set towards Muse. She had the look of someone who knew they were being watched, ignoring the other's stare. Her attention shifted now and then, distracted by Harriet's red figure writhing on her seat's edge.

"It's another language." Duncan cupped a hand and spoke in Eloise's ear. "We can feel outsiders when others speak it; like an Englishman in Paris."

"Yes I see," Eloise said. "We see some gestures and make sense of them." She ran a hand down to pat the chair. "I don't play. You are a musician too?" A harsh, jagged trill buzzed insistent at her ears until she looked up to Muse. His eyes briefly on her as he took a breath, then back to Harriet's full lips wrapping around his every musical gesture, shoulders leaning into the piano as if she massaged its chest, rocking on the stool, her red hair tumbling back and forward.

"Well, your little one will be getting an education," Duncan fished in his pocket for his wallet.

"The wonderful Harriet Claudel on piano, Simon Ronson on the double bass, Marcel Witts on drums, and on tenor saxophone I have been Muse Mouzon." Muse watched Eloise laughing as she rubbed her bump. The band came off for their thirty minute break. Generous applause was accompanied by chairs scraping back on the tiles and the background music fading in as well-watered guests took a moment to stand and move around. Duncan excused himself and made a dash for the rest-rooms.

"Just awesome." Simon kissed Harriet on the cheek. "Awesome Awesome." Then the other. They both landed heavily on the cushions beside Lauren.

“You were astounding Harry.” He looked around for her freaky friend with the genius sense of rhythm. “Fibonacci! Muse paused for at least half a second to work it out. A lifetime in Mustafa-land.”

“I enjoyed that so much. You and Marcel were so on it,” said Harriet. “Great rhythm. I don’t think Duncan even knew that piece.”

“Changing subjects,” Simon said as he leaned his head on her shoulder. “There was an en blanc dinner party tonight. My friend organises them. They hustle a few musicians into doing a turn for a few numbers, for ad hoc bands on the night. It’s good exposure, you’d make some connections.”

“I’m wearing red, Simon,” Harriet pointed out.

“Are you hanging on until the end tonight?” Simon asked. She had heard or played in Muse’s sets a hundred times. Harriet felt she couldn’t go along and take Duncan without Lauren. It wasn’t Lauren’s kind of thing.

“He’s just a customer, right? And a bit boring?”

“A bit dull maybe,” she whispered. “Even Eloise was talking to him.” Eloise had never been that chatty with her.

“Eloise doesn’t know Bill Evans from Bill Gates. That’s why Muse chose her.” A woman with no interests similar to his own. Which gave him the opportunity to pursue them without interruption. On the other side of the city. “So he could be with you. In your music studio-cum-lovenest.”

“Enough I think, Simon,” Harriet said. He always crossed the line between humour and being offensive. She wanted to enjoy her limelight a little longer. “I notice you value your place in the band too much to rag Muse about it. Or are you just jealous he gets what you don’t?”

Simon took out his cigarettes from his pocket and removed one, tapping its end on the box. “Sounds like someone needs a smoke.” He waved it at her. She went to take it and he leant in and pecked her on the cheek, whispering a sorry as he did.

“Want to come?” Harriet beckoned to Lauren. “Just the one?”

Simon offered Lauren the packet and looked up to see Duncan returning. Lauren declined the cigarettes. “Coming for a smoke behind the bike sheds, or will your mum tell you off?” Simon asked Duncan.

“I’ve missed something, right?” Duncan asked. “You go ahead. Loved the playing.” He admired their musicianship, how locked in they were, the excitement they generated in the transfer from mind to performance that quickly. “Wish I could do that myself.”

“Thanks, man.” Simon seeming suddenly uncomfortable in the light of Duncan’s honesty. “These things take practice. Time. Anyone can do it.”

Harriet dragged Simon off, their arms entwined in affectionate camaraderie.

“I don’t understand why she puts up with any of this. I can’t think anything is worth taking this amount of shit for.”

Mr Porter leaned over and began to play the phrase Duncan was struggling with; without words he indicated for him to mimic his playing and each time Duncan missed a nuance, and inflection, a detail in the timing, he stopped him, played, rehearsed, replayed.

“Simon used to joke I was a groupie,” said Lauren. “And that I had a crush on him.” She didn’t, and might not have seen Harry if not at gigs because she drifted away and didn’t call. Harriet’s tiny bedsit was only ten minutes from her place, but she never thought to just drop by when Conrad and she were having difficulties. Harriet painted a self-portrait of a scatty, arty air-head, knowing that she looks all fey and sexy with her hair blowing about in a creative breeze, but could also be like the selfish men that caused her pain, distant and uncaring.

“You two have a lovely friendship,” said Duncan and patted her hand, then sat back and looked around the busy room, the harried waiters delivering drinks and food.

“So, why do you think Eloise sat in front and centre if she’s not into the music?” asked Lauren.

“To powder her nose right underneath her husband’s.” He wondered if Lauren had noticed the mirror glinting across the stage and catching Muse or Harriet’s eye. Eloise had watched Muse with his muse and it was plain to see she wasn’t impressed and made it know. For all Muse’s obscure rug references, it was clear Eloise was not door mat.

XII

Four makeshift floats set on the backs of vans made slow passage past the door of the club. Each had a table or two draped in linen and upholstered chairs wearing ribbons on their backs. Merry groups sat and drank and chattered, enjoying the intimacy of their brilliant solitude. On the first wagon a giant white hand was placed like a seat, a young woman curled up in foetal pose inside it.

Harriet paced about in her head and on the street, striding off and turning and bobbing between rows of revellers dressed from top to toes in white. Some sang merrily, as if angelic football supporters whose teams played in the same brilliant strips, cheering gladly for the sport of it. She found a doorway to stand in, getting out of the flow of people and thoughts and looked back towards the club where her performance, like much of her life, was unseen, played out in secret, enjoyed by a hundred punters, her best friend, her ex-lover and his wife, and some bloke who was buying a piano.

The second group had at its rear a woman draped over a man's knee, both in skin-tight leotards and kissing between bouts of laughter and the gentle goading of their friends at the table. The third had a woman carved from plaster, another figure gyrating against it.

Simon reeled between the groups with fag and glass of wine, his purple suit recalling a clergyman's robe as he wafted incense from one hand and quaffed communion wine in the other. The fourth van had a figure covered by a white sheet, momentarily exposed by two attendants as Rodin's thinker. Harriet's head, thick with music and the buzz of the club, was too slow to catch any meaning. She clapped as they rolled past, a few diners at the tables lifting their glasses in response.

Simon found a gap in the angelic throng and he waved as he came to stand silent beside her. They inhaled the warm wisps of smoke. The plot of her cigarette unfolding and lingering with his, both whispering spooks against the navy sky.

Four young black men cut a dash in white tails and top hats. They wheeled a battered upright piano (painted white but distressed and peeling behind its candle-holders) down the street on wheels that looked like they came from a child's bicycle. One pushed; one pulled; both remaining elegant and erudite as if on a concert stage. A third sat on the stool — pushed by a fourth — trying to play. Their laughter and whoops congealed sweet along the parallel walls. A candy floss giggle floated from a beautiful young lady,

perhaps only nineteen or twenty. She lay on top of the piano, as if over the door of the Medici Chapel, her leg draped over the front, her knee around a candle-holder, foot tipping down to the keyboard. She waved; Harriet waved back, tickled by the joy of the moment and the aftermath of playing.

Simon loitered in his own thoughts. They stood silent but not in silence; their senses giving them no time to do anything other than sway and absorb the street. Harriet was desperate to remember the specific events, and therefore the joy of the night. She recalled her performance. The beginning she recalled, sitting at the piano, her memory of him these sands of a vast and silvery beach with waves that beat to her heart; of time that poured so quickly when love's tide came in and so slowly when pain was ebbing away; of grit and grain that crawled under her clothes and over her skin, of the orange glint of Eloise in the corner of her eye.

He was still on her skin. The edges of their intersection remained on the sand, reforming and refusing to be washed away in the waves of guilt and shame that continually filled *Danaid's* cracked jar. He was still on her skin, the scent of him, his music lingered on her red trouser suit and forever melded to her, the notes she played on the piano forever penetrated by those of his horn. He was still on her skin, as he eroded all there was of her before they met, drawn only on the sand as if on a rug; a piano, fecund figs and engorged pomegranates, her pretty face and naked body drawn flat, subjected to the ritual of his gaze.

The giggling girl began to sing, her voice a surprising, thick syrup. She was muscular too, her brown legs and shoulders emerged honeyed and honed from a white sleeveless dress, her body tensed to grip the piano as it rattled over the cobbled street, notes taut and unwavering on her controlled breath. Already Simon's solo had faded, the familiar animations of his face and neck, his purple plumage flapping around his bass, were printed as a stereotype on Harriet's recollection. His opening gesture remained, that energetic claw and pluck at strings that whipped flight into his every phrase. Talented talons.

In the distance, the piano rolled around the corner to Joplin, honkey-tonk and Doppler masking the little squeal from the singer as she slipped from its top, landing to a round of applause from onlookers.

"Want another?" Simon held out the cigarette packet towards her. Lauren would disapprove, wherever she was — perhaps sparring with Muse as a surrogate for Connie, or looking after Duncan. Harriet coveted his seeming ability to disconnect, to swim away from his emotional wreckage. She

clung to the junk of her relationship with Muse in the hope of salvaging at least her dignity, to rediscover her self-esteem as a player. Every note Muse played triggered the memory of another the two had played in private; the memories she treasured and retraced her fingers and mind around while standing watching a record spin a thousand revolutions and a hundred thousand notes; the memory of times she couldn't play a piano at all, struggled to breathe or put her fingers to the piano's keys without him being there. It was from these she wanted to set adrift.

Muse stood in the wake of the sea, made an avenue of trees with skin bronzed and barked, the sound of his saxophone glinting in astonished arabesques. "Ground control to Claudel," said Simon.

"Sorry, Simon." She took a cigarette and he held up a flame. "Already getting low. Must be a record."

"You need a regular gig; you've got the repertoire. You could do clubs, bars, even cruises if you fancy the travel and piss-poor money and a boat load of Conrads. Or just keep working for Antoine demoing pianos for the rich parents of *in utero* Mozarts. You could teach them when they pop out." Simon flicked his stub to the wall so it sparked brightly and fell with his spent ideas to the floor.

"Not sure I can teach. Not systematic enough."

"That's not what it's about and you know it. Most of your infatuation with Muse..."

"Simon." Harriet gave her best disapproving stare and sucked on her cigarette. "You've really been an arse tonight."

"Well, you are," he went on. "But most of it's his talent. I fancy him a bit when he's playing. So does your buddy Duncan the talking calculator." Harriet choked on her smoke. "Given he had Lauren one side, Eloise the other, both of which —" Simon gave a thumbs up. "And you at the piano —" He waved his hand in ambivalence. She elbowed him.

"Me, naturally, and then Muse. Who was he fixed on? Muse is just charisma with a horn."

"Your point is it's his talent I find, found attractive about him? Not about him."

"My point is it's about talent for everyone who wants to play music. Every artist. About craft. Seeing that something in what they do that you want. I mean, your name's Claudel. You could call him Auguste."

"Don't you start," said Harriet. She needed some words of encouragement, to see Lauren walk across the road with that beautiful, careless swag. She

would have brushed Simon aside and felt enough joy and happiness for both of them. “Lauren’s made that connection a few times.”

“Harry, I’ve know Muse a lot longer than you.” Simon cast his mind back over the decade of gigs he had played bass for Mustafa. “And yes, it’s about his talent; who is he without a sax? An obnoxious, misogynist arse like me.” He paused longer than necessary to form his next sentence, as if his drugs had been laced with a surprise dose of self-awareness. “You’re not the first pretty not-so-young thing he’s picked up and dropped.” She turned and walked away, fighting the urge to slap him. She marched past the club entrance, becoming a red smudge in the foam of white costumes. “Don’t be a bore, Harry!” Simon shouted after her. “You don’t need him to play.”

“Hit me, Duncan.” Eloise stared across the table. She was hot in the orange dress and waved her hand to fan her face. Lauren sat to her left, waiting for Duncan’s reaction.

“Sure,” said Duncan, sliding a card across and turning it over. “Jack. You’re on nineteen.”

“Give me a minute,” Lauren raised her hand as if about to ask a question. Duncan had a six showing; she had a pair of eights. She tapped two fingers on the table, then split the cards, putting another two pistachio nuts down. Duncan and Eloise both laughed, glad they weren’t playing for money. “You need to deal me cards, Duncan.” He flipped one over. An eight. “Hold it. I’m going to split again.” Another two nuts. “Now I have three hands.”

“I can think where that would be useful,” Eloise pouted and cupped her breasts.

“Absolutely!” Lauren copied her gesture. “Getting changed at the beach.” The two giggled roughly. “What to do with a fourth if it turns up?”

Duncan coughed. “Some gameswomanship going on here I think,” he said. Giving them both a teacherly look, they quietened down to the task at hand.

“Deal,” said Lauren. A ten. She waved to hold. Second card. “Deal.” A nine. Hold. “Deal.” A three. “Deal.” Twenty one. “That’s how we do it. You smell fabulous Eloise. What scent are you wearing?”

Eloise felt a tickle of amusement run up the nape of her neck and caught it with her hand, as if trapping a spider beneath a glass. “No, it is like this...” She beamed and Lauren thought again how ravishing she looked as she toyed with the hair at the side of her face and a coy flush warmed her cheeks. “I have been put off my perfume. This squirmy one — ” she pointed to her belly, “doesn’t like the musk and vanilla smells. But I was in the kitchen

stealing cocoa powder and butter for a snack, they were making Baklava with orange flower water and I felt a kick and so I put some drops of it here and here.” She touched her jaw either side, as if her finger were a dropper. “Then I realised with this dress I am like a big fat fruit waiting to be squeezed at breakfast. You are very good at blackjack.”

Lauren laughed, her joy veined with a guilt that she was somehow mocking Eloise by omitting to tell her the truth about her philandering husband. A sad still life. A big round beautiful orange in a bowl of deceit. “Conrad took me to Macau. I wanted Venice, he took me to the biggest casino in the world. There’s a canal in the hotel; it’s a Conrad kind of joke. Simply stunning. He gave me charts on how to play the odds and I learnt them on the flight, used a phone app to practice. It was fun.”

“You have a lot of hidden talents, Lauren.” Duncan beamed, pleased she had recovered from her sadness over Harriet and Connie.

“She does.” Muse had arrived silently by the table. He stroked the table, fingering it like a card sharp. “And one or two obvious talents too.” Lauren put a hand over her chest. “But Eloise has all the talents I need.” Muse stood back upright as he leapt up onto the stage and the house music dimmed.

Simon appeared at the table. Holding his hands up in surrender. “Lauren, Harry’s gone home.”

“What? She’s supposed to be staying at mine tonight. Is she with anyone?”

“No. She was a bit.” Simon, oblivious to his own culpability, held Lauren’s gaze and placed it on Eloise. “Upset.” He turned and leapt up on stage to join Muse.

“Great!” Lauren got up. “So much for celebrating.” It was a relief to be leaving, and she felt a rush to go before Harriet might return and she would have to stay. “She’s probably off on one of her wanderings. At least she’s not starting early tomorrow.” Duncan stood too. “Oh, no need for you to leave. I’m going to take a cab home. Do you want to join me?”

“No, thanks. You need some time to yourself. Maybe Conrad would like to see you. You could maybe crack open a bottle with him?”

“Or I might just go to bed. What will you do, will you get back alright?”

“I’ll just find the river and walk towards the Eiffel Tower. Can’t be that hard.

“Sure it can. Don’t get lost. I’ll let Harriet know I’m going home.”

Minutes later Lauren, assured that Duncan would find his way back home with the aid of his phone, dropped into the back of a taxi and waved goodbye, hoping Harriet had remembered her key. Folding her arms and leaning her head against the rain-spattered window, she began to doze off. She felt

her own finger — startlingly cold — where it penetrated the wave of her dress and touched the soft skin at her side. Her eyes opened occasionally, expecting to find the underside of the piano, but found it had been rolled away. The skinny young man with had wiry tattooed arms pushed it across the vast white gallery. Conrad stood at the other end of the room, making a pathetic shrug that showed he wasn't able to play it. They both looked at it. There was nothing to say about it, nothing to argue about. He stood silent then turned and left the room.

XIII

Duncan decided on a route that would take him via the right bank of the river A shower of rain fell as Harriet rounded the corner, finding the young **in order to see the city in another pose and to go past Notre Dame. There had** songbird and her suited, albino peacocks. They flapped and pecked at a **been a shower of rain and the japanned street glistened silent. He picked up** white plastic sheet, billowing it up and over the piano to cover it. Harriet **a burger and coffee at a fast food place. Walking as he ate, a surreal pleasure** moved to help, finding hook-and-loop loops that hooked around the cas- **of the mundane and recognisable in the new and undiscovered came across** tors at the piano's base. As the last one was fastened the rain stopped and **him. The simple pleasures of a flask of tea on cold windy beach, or a cool glass** they turned their faces to the sky and laughed or shrugged or slapped **of cola and a handful of biscuits on a summer's school-day.** a friend on the back.

A solitary cat walked along the bridge in front of him. They made a funereal "Thank you," the woman said. Her voice pitched somewhere between **procession; his cup steaming hot in the chill mists like a miniature cauldron;** the trickle of her laugh and the richness of her song. "I recognise you. **the cat weaving as if blocking his path, it's back arching now and then before** You know Simon Ronson I think?" **it stopped to rub its head on the stone of the balustrade and becoming one** "He mentioned a friend of his was involved in this *en blanc* tonight. **with the shadows.** I'm Harriet."

He sucked a drip of ketchup from his finger and flipped to his first meeting "I am Véronique Ronson. His wife." Harriet didn't have time to arrange **with Mr Porter. The flapping cloak and droll humour painted him as come-** her face. Véronique smiled, touching her at the elbows with her hands **dic Gothic villain, thundering away at the organ, as it rose through the floor** and kissing her on both cheeks. She could see he had never mentioned **of a vaudelville theatre, hand waving as he played to the audience, big broad** her and expected as much. "It is much easier for me to sing the songs **grinning pearly whites.** about being young and foolish if I am young and foolish." Her voice

Against the gloom of Jane's news, Duncan was optimistic, his steps rever- had no hint of malice or sequestered sadness, just a warm, factual blues.

berating off the pavement.

Harriet recalled Veronique's wave of her hand and realised it was for

"You cannot rush living in the music." Mr Porter was in philosophical Simon. "You were with Muse, weren't you?"

mode. The cathedral was sanitised by the plaza in front of it, and crippled as

Harriet winced at losing her dignity again, her eyes fierce and then

it lurched topless on its crutch of scaffolding. At the base of it, looking up, it cast low. A few white feathers from a costume were carried on silver

took on another form. He stood in solitude, in the misty dullness of repeating trickles that ran into the street drain. And with them the fledgling joy

a hard passage so slowly that no person, including the player, would know of her playing that evening. "Every time I try and push into my music,

where it was from or who composed it. For a moment it wasn't clear whose he is there; why is it me that feels like the slut?"

life it was he was standing in, as if he was the familiar passage of music under

"Muse and Simon have never been alone." Imaginations full of the

another person's hands, hummed on their breath that crept in milky wisps noise of girls and music, their eyes and ears full of lust and empty of

around the Gothic stones.

love. "They do not know how to be. They are sad and lonely because they

The permanence of the place irked him. Even in its vulnerable state of cannot be alone. But not us." Véronique pulled Harriet to her in a hug

rebuilding, it would be restored, bleak and bold and magnificent and of far so tight it brought a little gasp from her, then a giggle as she caught her

greater immanence that the lives that wafted around and through it like silken breath. They held each other and the comfort of the moment. Véronique

drifts of river mists. Mystical music — those drifts and washes of Debussy and whispered in Harriet's ear, "I was with him, too. We were both made

Ravel — had become places he dared not to walk through, an ether he dared sluts. I have walked these steps you walk now." Stroking Harriet's hair

not breathe. Instead, he buried himself in work.

with one hand, the other mimed smoking a cigarette. One of the men,

Business was financially good, but as nugatory as hours sitting in a café startled as if caught watching them from behind a twitched curtain, pro-

or the scripted weekends spent deconstructing his bachelorism with James duced a packet for her. She removed two, putting one to Harriet's lips.

and Liz. "The catalyst for becoming truly great," Iain said, "is a better prac- "You smoke?" Harriet took it as a carp might its food. A flame started

tice of practice.” That part he had said several times. It was like a preamble, between them and they smiled and lit up.

a clue on how to file the words that followed. “Failing in music — and failing

The men began to trundle the piano off down the street. They made
in life — can be dark and lonely, until the time we learn from our mistakes as slow progress, the piano catching on the paving slabs. Alongside the

quickly as we make them.” He never heard of Mr Porter’s mistakes, and as he men in suits, there were four others in medical coats, others wearing

was dying now, somewhere miles away, Duncan wondered what his regrets painters’ scrubs.

might be, what confessions would he choose to tell his wife Jane, or anyone

“Where are you taking this thing?” Harriet asked.

at all. Or was it all just as he intended, just as he practised it — the sounds of

“A school in Port Dauphine,” said Véronique. She knew a teacher

love and evil acts were always in his mind to perform.

there and arranged to borrow it. Her brother was due to collect her but

Rows of wooden deep-green boxes, the stalls of art, books and nik-naks his van had broken down. “He is at his friend’s garage just now, at this

castellated the wall that flanked the river. Where during the day art framed hour, trying to fix it for his little sister.” She struck a lightning pose, her

the river, at night the hidden art framed her. In glimpses of leaden waters fingers touched her lips as if she tasted honey and innocence. “He would

spooky trees were traced in light then sank beneath water.

do anything for me. I am lucky.”

“Practice with others is much better, a dollop of treacle that sweetens the

“I heard you sing in the street tonight. I love your voice.”

experience.” Beautiful mistakes shared with attention to feeling as much as

“Thank you.” Véronique accepted the compliment blandly.

detail. From this side of the river the other took on a beautiful silhouette

“Véronique — ” Harriet put a hand on her arm and stopped her. “I say

through whispering nebulous drifts of cloud against the sky. The first few birds that because I love your voice. Not to make you feel good.”

of the morning gathering on its ridges. His bird sang immediately. “We want

“Sincere. Intense. Honest.” Véronique clasped Harriet’s hand and they

it to realise that it has just flown, that it found a moment to sing.” It needed sky walked along together, the piano complaining over a set of cobbles. “I

to swoop in. “Let the note sing for a fraction, then introduce the trill or orna- heard those things about you.” Harriet didn’t want to ask from whom.

ment, a firework exploding silent as if in the dark of space otherwise how do
 “Muse already wanted you when he was with me. You flirted with him
we know it is an ornament and not just two notes of the melody.” One sound
 in a record shop?”

dominated, touched upon more often, the trill sounding as a casual caress
 “He’s such a —” Harriet was interrupted by Véronique’s phone ringing.
made in passing, accidental.

“You see how he makes us talk about him,” Véronique hated that
 “**Slow and methodical practice makes for free and easy playing.” They sat**
 his imprint would remain on their first meeting. She was an untamed

drinking chocolate. Or maybe wine. A pet talk before or in a lesson away from
 Firebird that Muse had tethered; Simon never knew where she was;

the piano. “Loose wrists, arm undulations, fingers sliding over the keys. All
 she had never found one who would look to the sky to see her fly and

these things we have talked about. It becomes about whether you want to be
 then wait with joy for her to land beside him. Apart from, calling now,

excellent, or whether you want to be just good, or average. Your hands lag
 “My brother.” She turned to block the wind from the river and put the

behind your ear, you need to teach your hands.”
 phone to her ear. She gave a thumbs up as she hung up the phone. “He’s

A flock of tiny black birds shot upwards; dipped in a dark pendulous arc
 coming.”

over the water; under the bridge they flew on upbeat wings to end their over-
 “Boys!” shouted Véronique, and caught up with the men pushing the

ture against the sky. Then turned tail at the pallid blue and returned for an
 piano. She explained the situation and they found a second wind with

encore, chirruping as the surface drew close — a metronome clicked left and
 the news they could stop pushing soon. Her brother would meet then

right. It was shaped as an obelisk or a pyramid, the slender arm throwing the
 at the next bridge.

weight at its top to the left. Each click and flight of looping birds marked a
 “They all say you are an exceptional talent on the piano. And so, I

fuzzed memory, inarticulate and incomplete, a beat dropped unrealised in
 wonder if you love my voice you might like to play with me?”

syncopated dreams.
 “I’d love that.” They had crossed and stood for a moment, reflecting on

He had been alongside the Louvre for several minutes, its scale as intimi-
 the inevitable flux of the river’s surface. A metallic cliché of watery light

dating as the Musée d'Orsay that was in sight on the opposite bank. A train rippled along the stone banks of her flanks. Harriet explained the story station turned gallery. His steps and tiredness grew heavier as the sun came of the piano she had been using, of how Muse had taken away her music. up. Art galleries grew like moss in derelict spaces, these stadia for intellectual "We can find a way," said Véronique. The reached the middle of the sports; palaces, power stations and warehouses re-upholstered in culture. bridge and stopped, turning to look towards Notre Dame. The men Here were the beautiful spaces, the cafés and art and high ceilings for lofty retrieved drinks from a clinking bag. They passed one for the women thinking. The practical stuff of nails and screws and food and baby buggies to share as they said their farewells with hugs and kisses and went on were miles away. their ways.

"You may be the last generation to bother with pianos, Duncan. They will Harriet popped it open and Véronique climbed up on top of the piano, go the way of the pipe organ, becoming the toys of the privileged few and kicking off her shoes and letting her feet feel the chill of the wind. the academe or museum. Almost every piece of music written for it has been Harriet sat on the lid, and they passed the bottle between them in silence recorded at least once, begging questions about the economic case for con- and watched the air and light and water that played in lucid, infinite tinuing to make instruments. Of course we will still have drums and guitars, flirtations.

for all the music now is written for tubs and scratch-planks, or else generated Véronique slipped from the top, through Harriet's arms and both tum- by synthesizers. How long before musicians too, become obsolete? bled to the pavement, Véronique on her back, Harriet landing face-up on

"But that is the pessimist's view. The dark side. The camera did not kill her midriff, her face grinning from her belly. Winded, they puffed and the painting, but made the form flourish and change, and they continue to laughed their beautiful laughs, as if making some childish pact of folly. diverge and converge now, as two hands playing the same piece. Perhaps that Harriet arm aloft, holding the unspilt beer that fizzed in celebration is how it will be with music, that recording will give way to hearing music over her hand and the shaft of the umbrella that she had shared with played together by people who dance and stamp their feet to it and move to Lauren a night — or was it two? — before. Véronique's hand reached and

its rhythms instead of just recording it onto blank cassettes to impress their clasped over hers; bronze and marble and snatched the bottle, Harriet friends with the size of their collection.” feeling her chuckle underneath her head.

He approached the end of the bridge as a group of young men came to “The dream in the fire.” Harriet said, now ready to sleep here on the its end, shaking hands and scattering in two or three directions. Along the pavement, more glad for meeting her new friend that for the fifteen bridge, visible above the masonry of the balustrade, was a white blanketed minutes playing on stage. Véronique’s skin, backlit against the halo of thing, perhaps a wardrobe or a workman’s tent. the sun, glowed from the shadows. An orange edge caught the mists that

A figure sat on top. Perhaps a workman. They jumped down and after a tumbled across the river. Each the other’s object, both altered in their moment a van pulled up and the thing, which now he could see was on wheels, stumbling reality, their skin all vivid mortality, Harriet’s head rising was loaded into the van. As Duncan rounded onto the bridge the worker got and falling to Véronique’s breath, the ends of her hair arterial red across in, followed a few moments later by a figure in red. pearl and skin.

He pressed on, the van zipping past him and turning with protesting “Did you say something?” Véronique mumbling tired. “Or just deep tyres, rumbling over the cobbles he had just walked beside. The morning thoughts?” Harriet made a sound in response, but was interrupted by was becoming bright and he felt that renewed optimism. Perhaps he would the sound of a van that pulled up abruptly. Two men in working overalls speak to Jane Porter later, see if Iain was up to having a few words with him, got out and opened its rear doors, unloading planks to make a ramp. perhaps share the news of buying this piano in Paris.

The piano was manoeuvred and rolled up in one speedy push. The doors He looked back to the Louvre, lit here and there in triangles of sun. In his shut, the men got back in. They left the passenger door open and revved mind and in the future there was a piano factory somewhere. It had long the engine slightly.

closed down and was in Hamburg or New York or Venice. There was a book- “I should go.” Véronique got up off the pavement, her arms and face shop, perhaps the fizzing of champagne and opening nights of exhibitions and glittered with the dust of the night. “My brother still has a day of work

music played through discreet speakers. The frames of pianos made convenient homes for canvases; sculptures of bright white marbles and dusky bronze

“Call me. Or I’ll call you.” Harriet said and threw her arms around sat on the tops of empty grand piano cases, the forms and figures reflected her. “You’ve changed my life already.” She was sad already to see hope in the polished tops. Around the walls, informative signs would describe the leave in a tattered van.

architecture of the place — here is where they bent the lumps of timber into The door closed and opened again and Véronique looked out. “He says curves; there is where the levers of the action, as intricate as eighty-eight inner we can’t leave you here to walk. Come and get in.” Harriet stumbled in ears, was assembled; there it was fitted with a heart, with strings tensed over it. tiredness and slipped into the van that drove off into the early morning sun.

XIV

Conrad cursed the air as his swept up leaves enjoyed a second fall, swooping and swirling back onto the courtyard floor, and he dropped his shovel to batter the floor in a clatter, shattering the quiet. He tottered and balanced against the wall, breath tugging harshly at the back of his throat on the way in as well as out, his shirt clung with prickling heat to his body. He lifted a foot to the edge of a terracotta pot that held a bay tree, rubbing his thigh muscle where it spasmed, but it cramped harder and tighter, making him lurch with pain. A thin trickle of sweat ran down his forehead and panic rose as his leg he stood on seized, too. He clutched the end of the broom, leaning down on it for support, the simple act of standing having become as precarious as walking along a high wire.

The sweepings waltzed, inspired in dead bright swirls across the flagstones, their delicate dance mocking his immobility, and he spat the taste of pain from his mouth, looking for his place of peace and calm: Dégas pastels, crumbled solid pigments in the art and work of his autumnal scene. Here was the sketch of an artfully posed cripple — not unlike the one with his bucket of water used to sluice down the planed boards of the dance studio — teased by powdery ballerinas in their wrinkled rust and diaphanous yellow tutus.

He rubbed his leg so often that his hand had carved in it the impression of his pain, gnarled and twisted as a vine. He dislodged a scrap of paper from his pocket; a note from Lauren, left on the kitchen counter. *Interview great. I got the job. Did I say I had applied? Pompidou. Ghastly exhibition. Afterwards with H, who played with Muse. D there too, 'pencilled' and 'pensive', as you said. Ghastly exhibition of a man (Muse). Back late. No playing Verdi until after midday please! L.*

It brought a moment's distraction, a relief from the pain, and he fixed upon it. Pencilled was how Conrad thought of Duncan's way of experiencing life; or rather of not experiencing it. A life drawn in tentative sketches that could be erased, replaced without commitment, or redrawn and reworked. To be a man of his age and to have only work and the desire to buy a piano, to have the death of a relative stranger — not even a strange relative — define and motivate his actions seemed as if he were one of some many leaves blown about by the wind. There would come a time when the paper was so greyed that he might have to draw the next lines with greater weight and boldness. While Lauren, and certainly Harriet, would balk at the compar-

ison, Muse seemed somewhat similar to Duncan in the devious execution of his lines.

He made these grand gestures that swept up and across other people's lives; except Muse used spray paint, permanent pigments, his actions indelible, insoluble to the sentiment or feeling of others, opaque and inscrutable in their application. His was an assault with colour and art that few could resist. He might be ghastly but he was a genius, so something had to be done with his art. Duncan was surely

felt a slightly excited tiredness. The music teacher over the street had a serious looking male pupil with him, both standing and swaying with the direction of their bowing arms. He opened the window to try and hear what they were playing, but it was impossible against the ricochet of traffic along the street. The fluid movements seemed contrived, a coquetry of syncopated waists, and swinging shoulders passed on by imitation from teacher to pupil. It seemed the same as pianists who thought the piano was hot, as Chopin put it, throwing their hands off the keys at the ends of phrases in dramatic gestures. There was a sneer in his assessment that he found distasteful, it was an opinion that had somehow been stored away, thick with dust and forgotten in the loft and then tumbled out, unbidden, to force itself on two strangers playing music across the street.

The news of Iain Porter's ill health had opened doors that were difficult to close. Once opened, the window let in trickle of cool air coming from outside that brought back those few Christmases when his dad was around and his mum could afford to give him presents. He was tired but happy; impatient to open them. He looked forward to unwrapping the day, even to his meeting Conrad and answer his questions about acoustics and performance spaces in galleries.

On the table by him were the scores of Chopin's prelude in E Minor and Bach's in C Major, both relatively simple — at least in their technical scope. They were battered and yellowing. Scribbled here and there with Iain Porter's notes, written as abbreviations of repeated lessons, 'leanin':

Mr Porter would explain the passages where the wrists were held higher. He leaned over to play them. "As if we are making the lightest of crumble mixtures for our apple crumble." His fingers sprinkling over the keys. At that time Duncan didn't do much cooking. "Start slowly," he always said "Start slowly." Finding the right shape for his hands on the keys was a movable feast as he grew, with fingers sometimes flat, other times arched, the

only unwavering constant was the nail joint should remain stiff. “One day, Mrs Innes will thank me for insisting on it.” He had to play from his chest, his arms; then, as the days rolled on more attention was placed on his hips, the spread of his legs that affected his pedalling; the correct way to breathe by tensing the diaphragm — “Yes, here; play while I feel how you inhale and exhale” — of tensing and releasing the buttocks to aid relaxation. “Tighter than that, Duncan. I shouldn’t be able to move it around.” Teacher to pupil. The constant touching and examinations of this or that part of him was as the constant as the repetition of a musical phrase. It was peculiar, but then playing any music was peculiar. Having longish hair and wearing oddly fitted trousers and being poor at sports and painfully shy with girls were all peculiar too. Which peculiar was he to filter out? “Think of rotation, like this, and a rocking motion, like this. Limp and lucid wrists are better than those locked in position. We don’t burn our fingers at the keyboard, so that they fly up the air as some pretentious performers do.”

‘Swimming’:

“Lead your hand and wrist, your arm should move smoothly, like you are swimming.” Swimming was not about scrabbling about, but a concerted, holistic movement of the body’s parts. “Use your whole arm to move you across the water, not just your fingers, or your wrists, or even your elbows.” Duncan’s hand would be on the keys, as if he was about to play. Mr Porter would tap his wrist until he let it go limp. “Like so — and your elbows here I think, and so rock from side to side. Now, if you feel my hands, they are under your sitting bones and I can feel you moving from one to the other as you play your arpeggio. So, begin to play. Yes, that’s it — up — and down. You can feel the difference?” He would leave his hands there to check on his progress. “Continue. How does that feel.” It felt like the low notes that played in the organ loft the first day he met Mr Porter, it felt like his own hand running over the small of Clara’s back.

‘Clara ♥ Duncan’:

Duncan rummaged his memories of Clara, but had no recollection of seeing this or of noticing her writing it. In the cute and sketchy heart, with had been hastily coloured in, there was fun and a little sentimentality. Some laughter too. But not a carefully etched, painstakingly coloured in love that had been maintained, pressed for years between two sheets of music in a dark and silent loft.

He had been curious enough to look her up with the advent of the internet. Just to see what had become of her. Then common sense made him

stop. The horror and fantasy of finding her in domestic bliss with seven children, or living on the shores of a Swiss lake or Norwegian fjord, playing her cello to the wind and the mountains with her blonde hair flowing, legs still showing as they had all those years ago in the music room persuaded him to not look any further

as pensive in his music as he was in life.

Conrad knew Muse thought him to be a fat man who was a critic of art and not an artist; Muse would point out, as Rilke had, that critics in general were not to be listened to, their opinion worthless.

Conrad was, to Mustafa Mouzon, a kind of fixer, matchmaker, a necessity for the artist for whom he introduced their paintings and sculptures to their lovers, to those who would hang them on their walls, place them on pedestals, witness their every gesture and as it changed from morning to night — just as Conrad had done when he first married Lauren and enjoyed the shadows in the triangle above her collar bone, or the dips of her hips, and how the light changed on her through the day, how she was so many forms and sounds and scents in the one person. A life of possibilities and endless preludes.

Certainly not the endless fugal pain a motorbike accident had brought Conrad. How had that piece read on Degas? Yes — artistically impotent. They meant unable to finish rather than unable to rise. The chivalrous Duncan wouldn't rail against working class women learning or bettering themselves in the way Degas had, but then he would have no need to hire a model to sit for him either. Duncan and Degas: one scribbling away at life, infuriatingly bland; the other all pen and colour, deeply anti-Semitic and abusive to his models in rants and physical assaults. Such pretty pictures too, but Conrad would have hidden his shovel from Degas, in case he turned it into a weapon. Conrad knew too well the dangers of a cultivating a skein of public sweetness to disguise a private bitterness that seemed to have been Degas' trick. By the same token, Duncan might prove secretly full of colour and interest.

By shifting his weight from one hip to the other his back began to relax; his leg slowing to a twitch every other second. He wiped his forehead on his shirt sleeve. He was overweight, cantankerous, and at times alarmed, or even scared at the rate of erosion of his health and the rise of his anger. There was a road he drove along in New England in the fall, just as a gales arrived and dropped the leaves in the space of an hour, the windscreen pelted with the jewelled leaves, the slushy red and gold of them lying thick

on the windscreen. Even the beautiful things in life seemed to find a way to clutter his view.

Lauren had mentioned the job at the Pompidou. He had not made comment. The last job he casually proposed to intervene on — a gallery manager position she would have excelled in — she lambasted him over his suggestion that he made a call to the owner. No! It was to be on her own merit. She was not a little woman. His point, put calmly — although admittedly these things are relative — that he would have put in a word for a male friend too, seemed to have entirely the wrong connotation for her. She hated the ad hoc work of filling in as a guide here and there, yet persisted in it.

He was going to write a note back to Lauren, but balked at it, knowing from business acquaintances that this was how marriages often ended — notes left between nights then weeks then months apart. Notes that say nothing substantial and therefore can be forgotten or ignored, their insipid content a repetition of the previous week's inane summary. Already he was excluded from her work life, her social life, unable to endure hard seats or steep staircases, to take her dancing as they had when they first met. In his daily reminiscences, they danced more frequently now, taking a turn around a nostalgic memory, than they ever had. Now he preferred instead to sit in the evenings, eat and drink until the end of the day rushed in and he could lie down and drift off until his leg woke him.

Trapped on the same sour page of life his pain would spill across it; a piercing ink so bright that it poured

and Duncan paddled at the notes, trying to move across the surface of them as quickly as possible, wanting them out of the way. The notes were not falling to hand but instead required leaps and awkward shapes of the hand to move from ripple to ripple. It was treading water he feared. The analysis, the repetition at different speeds and dynamics that showed up his lack of practice — Mr Porter had previously left a flower between two pages of his practice notebook to retrieve it perfectly dried the week after. When he heard it first it was heavy drops of rain on puddles, not reflections of light; then there were these chords that were now jazz, but then were just difficult to place. Like Mr Porter's hands — that arrived on his leg or arm or back or neck at strange points in the music, as if to distract him rather than make a correction to his playing or reinforce a point — these chords were touches for effect, colours that contrasted with or complimented previous ones, musical gestures that changed the nuance of the words being spoken. Clara would say she thought of Debussy like a

seethrough negligée, or mosquito screens that obscured glimpses of body or obscured what was happening. Like leaves on a windshield. The beauty of them hijacking not the vehicle, but the road itself. The flurry of colours landing all at once then blowing away. Clara in a negligée sitting at Mr Porter's piano with Duncan touching her leg or arm or back or neck, the reds and golds cluttering his progress, the road obscured

like the leaves he coaxed from the edges of the courtyard. The long bristles of broom made the work relatively easy. Guillaume had set Conrad onto this routine at his house in Aix. Not to sweep the whole acreage as that would be absurd, but to take a therapeutic angle, getting a little exercise and movement, distract himself, do a chore that might need repeating. Some structure. So while the leaves fell, he had left the paintings he was going to rehang sitting in their boxes and would return to that as his meditation when winter began.

Ten minutes later he had completed the boundary. It was late morning. He wanted to do something for Lauren. A fat bitter man with money and a wife of flourishing abilities and unmistakable beauty. There was a florist in Saint Germain — near his wine merchant, who was under the misapprehension Connie bought in bulk to cellar it — that she had adored since passing it with Harriet shortly after she began to work at the piano store. He would go and buy a dozen reds and perhaps some flowers.

On the other side of Lauren's note was Duncan's mobile number. Conrad thought of the bottle of Limoncello sent to him via Harriet and nodded in appreciation. He swept the leaves into a pile and lifted them in smaller batches, more pleased than he wanted to be that his strategy worked.

"Duncan, it's Conrad."

"Oh." Duncan mumbled, looked suspiciously at the brightness of the daylight, the flat that wasn't home, and to try and place the voice. "Hi." He remembered the walk. Lauren waving from the back of the cab. "Lauren got home okay? She took a cab..." He began defensively.

"Yes, still sleeping. Meet me in Saint Germain later. Brunch or lunch? It's on me. I need to do some errands. Take a walk. Lose half an ounce off my waistline." he wanted Duncan's advice, but was also curious to find out what made the guy tick.

"Let me put the laptop on charge for a bit in case I need to take a few notes or show you some ideas that might work. Lunch sounds good. How about

in a couple of hours? One thirty. I need to go to see Antoine later.”

Antoine would be after his money. “Big decision day.”

“How did you know?”

Conrad liked Antoine. An old fashioned salesman, polite and knowledgeable, but a bit of a schmooze. He suggested the café directly opposite the store where Antoine watched the models preen that came from the agency around the corner. Conrad used to sit there and wave at Antoine, pressing his buttons. Antoine was keen to hide their deal from Harriet, as if it might affect her. Conrad had sweetened it a little, made sure Harry got a little raise.

“I’ve know Antoine for a while.”

“You missed Harriet playing last night, at *Le Cru et Le Cuit* with Mustafa Mouzon. She was very good,” said Duncan, as if recommending one salad over another, rather than raving about the skills of a fellow musician.

“She always is. Knows what she’s good at, just needs a break, one or two people to fight her corner with her. She’s wonderful, don’t you think?”

“Yes, she is.” Duncan remembered her playing the night before, balancing precariously on the piano stool’s corner, her face peeking occasionally through the wisps of red hair.

“Got the hots?”

“I was thinking of her playing.”

“Sure you were! Are you jealous of her? Always a good motivator to learn something about yourself, is jealousy. Thanks for the Limoncello, by the way. See you in an hour!” He hung up and leaned against the kitchen counter, a thin trickle of urine seeping through his trousers. In the moment’s hesitation where he decided whether to hit or kick something, he did neither. He wasn’t going to wear diapers. Never. He went and changed his clothes.

Duncan stood against the wall behind the piano. Behind him was a photograph of a woman Mr Porter had cut from a magazine and stuck to the wall with a drawing pin. The woman posed in her thin, nothing of a dress, one leg folded in front of the other. Duncan was directed to mimic her pose. With Mr Porter’s help, his waist twisted back against the direction of her legs, his shoulders were opened out. Added to this, his buttocks and chest were pushed out, her chin tilted downwards and eyes to the camera, his set upwards and to the side. Beauty was not always easy to achieve, Iain had told him. It often required an awkward turn of the wrist that required slow repetition, being mindful of every nuance of form and movement to master the phrase. His thumbs often landed with too much triumph, as if he had

come to the end of a scale he had barely practised, pleased to have made it without technical mistake, but with little finesse or feeling. Duncan had gone red, still holding the pose.

Duncan's left hand was less fluid and acrobatic than his right. His right was a competent reader of almost any musical text, even if it did sometimes miss the nuance of the form — like the shape he made against the wall that bore little resemblance to the elegant woman he mimicked — but his left still had the feeling of reading every word and note, music reduced to syllables.

“Use your left hand more,” Mr Porter had teased him several times. He might have said it now, as he sat down to the piano after his odd posing. “When you do your boyish things. When you use the lavatory, use your left instead of your right. Try unbuttoning your trousers with your left hand. Go on, don't be shy — ”

The young woman in the flat opposite was standing against the wall with her hand flat on her abdomen singing long silent notes. The violin teacher placed a hand over hers briefly and then took it away. He lay on the floor on his back, singing too with his hand on his abdomen, his free arm conducting his and her voices.

He clapped his hands, at first to stop, but then in applause and the young woman laughed in that excited way Duncan recognised as having an a-ha moment, a personal breakthrough on how music was to be done, of how her own breath and body could make the sounds she wanted to hear.

He wasn't late, but felt the need to run. He took the stairs instead of the lift, clattering down them and turning the corners, down past the doors of the lift and into the mews and the street. He welcomed the noise of the street. It was a bright day. His phone rang as he walked.

“Duncan. It's Jane.”

“Jane. Hi.” Mr Porter would rearrange his lounge so that his pupils could give little recitals to each other. Sofas around the walls, piano central, a table set with coffee percolator and cups for the parents; juice and biscuits for the kids — after they played, not before. There were even printed programmes with the titles of the pieces and their strange opus numbers and the names of the students. Duncan's dad had said he should play well — “And don't think he won't know, even if he's not there” — the message passed on through his mum, the medium, her voice often softer and more distant when relaying

another spirit.

“Duncan,” a light dust already settling on the music in Jane’s voice.

“Action should be sacrificed to feeling,” Iain said. There was no story in music he had said. Just the feelings it left behind. It didn’t matter how or who it touched. Mr Porter brushed Duncan’s arms aside, kicked his feet lightly off the pedals. His aftershave was fruit and vanilla and almonds. A cake. She was beautiful, did he think, the woman in the picture in her pose? Duncan shrugged. She made him tingle. Like the low notes. But not scream, or feel the rush of the climax of a concerto. Not with his left hand, anyway.

“So soon, Jane?”

“The final fermata, he called it.” Her voice was squashed beneath the weight of the inevitable. Now it was the longest pause before the applause that never came, or was unheard. A pacific breeze blew silent and speechless against the falling leaves that fell along the treeless street. Her sob was quiet. “In the early hours of this morning.”

“I’m sorry, Jane.” He moved the phone away from his face as anguish knocked the breath from him. A faint tremor of strings; a car door opening and closing, footsteps.

He had arrived at the café and stood at its apron, looking across to the shop and the pencil drawing of his future while the vivid colours of page after page of his childhood crumbled to dust in a phone call.

“Hey, Duncan, sorry I’m late.” Conrad stood at the next table, panting and hugging a vast bouquet of flowers. Duncan, his face sketched in sorrow, put the phone back to his ear. “Pardon me.” Conrad recognised death when he saw it. “I’m just gonna...” He put the flowers on the chair and walked out of Duncan’s field of view, admiring the peeled back skein of his vulnerability.

“He wasn’t ready to go.” Jane had come back to what she wanted to say. “You need to know. He left something for you.” Duncan flipped through possibilities. Perhaps that awful photograph of the woman. Or the drinks cabinet. Some sheet music.

“The Steinway,” said Jane.

“That’s unexpected,” said Duncan. A solo chair, tall like a bar stool, was occupied by a suited man watching the news on a television, who looked from his cup to Duncan and back, shuffling in the discomfort of seeing a man grieve in public.

“Talk later, Duncan,” said Jane and hung up.

He sat, his eyes full of tears and the fire of her. She gleamed with her glossy

red lips, a pout to the empty fireplace, and blew a hot kiss. The air coloured red and orange and yellow, a fiery carnival that thawed in an instant, the flames of the fire catching reflecting along her flanks, her beauty held in curvature of her case and the bright, tight glisten of her strings. Singing silent notes.

She sat down opposite him, putting down a tray with two glasses of cola and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. He looked across with tearful eyes, the leaves blowing around and obscuring the road ahead.

“Harriet?”

“A little birdy flew over the road,” said Harriet. The street sweeper sloshed past, masking the music from the speakers in the café. It sucked up reds and yellows and browns from the gutter and the empty food containers dropped overnight. He took a cup in a shaking hand. Harriet reached across and took his other one. The noise passed and Chopin returned.

He cried.

“Chopin. Prélude in E Minor.” He pointed to the speaker then lifted his laptop and pulled the sheet music from underneath it. Duncan had walked on one side of the Seine and Harriet on the other, awake while Iain Porter died in his sleep. “Always gets me.” The cola was overly sweet.

“What’s your favourite duet?” he asked.

“Played solo most of my life,” said Harriet. “You too, I’m guessing.”

“Jane called,” he said. “No rush to get back home now.”

“I’m so very sorry, Duncan.”

.Conrad and Antoine watched from across the road, sipping espresso to the sound of a young woman decorating the black and white store with Oscar Peterson’s delicate recollection of *Autumn Leaves*.

Outside, the street sweeper was silent in the distance as the final chord rang out. The blustering colours had all gone and left the road a wide and vacant grey. Birds gossiped in naked trees, planning their winter escapes.

XV

Duncan descended wonky steps worn smooth by shoes and worn either side rather than in the middle, so one foot slipped and missed the beat — the second caught it. He watched his feet on the slick black cobbles, dancing with the door as he took its handle and passed inside. In the quaint little cellar he was greeted warmly with a handshake and directed to sit at a barrel with a tray of glasses arranged on it. The walls set out in racks and shelves of wine, arranged as dancers around the edge of a room waiting for the *milonga* to begin. Some were upright and alert, young fruit, eager to please, ready to drink, others supine on wooden cots, their deep sultry reds dusted over, their labels hard to decipher in the altered light of the shop.

It seemed the perfect place to pick up a bottle for Conrad, who had called to invite him to a dance evening. There was a splash of red his glass. The shopkeepers — husband and wife — leaned in to get his opinion. They poured a smear in another glass, passed it between them, noticing this berry and that fruit, coffee, smoke, their eyes on the wine on each other's lips. Duncan tapped his fingers on the barrel table to the rhythm of their speech and the occasional whoosh of traffic that slipped around the door. There was a rumble from heavy goods vehicles, a tingle through his hands. She span to one side of the room and he to the other, finding another partner each and returning to the table. They drew their corks and poured, ushering a glass each towards him and laughing with him and towards each other.

It was refreshing to meet people other than through work. They had been there only a year in that shop, he learnt as he tasted the husband's wine first. Duncan had enjoyed the passing acquaintances he had made in the past five days. Conrad, for all his bluster, seemed to dislike himself more than anyone else did; Lauren was full of knowledge and bubbling charm, but also had a scything wit and playful barbs; Harriet seemed caught between having a fabulous musical talent and a refusal to use it — she was a bottle laid prone on a cot on the shelf, of exquisite quality and drinkability, yet her label was hidden from view. In the ruddy amber wood were echoes of the tones and colours in Iain Porter's Steinway. He wondered if Harriet was on commission and how she would be effected if he pulled out of buying.

The couple continued to dance between the bottles and he had two or three glasses in total before he decided on a mixture of a dozen bottles. They twirled and beamed, and he felt included and a twinge of sadness. There was an old cash register and he went over to it, but they giggled, produc-

ing something small and plastic from under the counter for him to settle up. They asked how long he would be in Paris, extolled the virtues of a few cafés and bars owned by friends. He was visibly moved as he left weighed down by three bags of wine, two pianos, and a death.

Around the corner from Mr Porter's house was the bow-windowed 'Bottle Shop', where Duncan stood peering through milky crown panes and around brown-taped cracks in the glass. The lanky licensee, wearing his lead-coloured apron over a knitted tank top and starched lemon shirt, perched on the second rung of a ladder, dusting bottles of red wine. The ladder was attached to the wooden shelves and moved from side to side on castors, conjuring vintner, librarian and janitor in several wooden steps and a single person.

Duncan dropped his fag on the pavement and scuffed it out with a casual shoe heel. He scooped his hair from his face to let it fall again in way he contrived earlier that morning in front of the mirror to give the impression his flowing locks were an inconvenience he had to bear. At the piano, he had adapted this hair flick, adding it to his Glen Gould style hunch.

The door's chime made the sound of a cup being placed on a saucer, muted as the hammer clung limply to the bell. As Duncan closed the door behind himself the man skipped down from his ladder, still polishing a bottle like an attentive barkeep would a glass. The dark wood of the place drew in the walls, shrunk it as if being inside a keg full of bottles and the sweet wooden smells of dried pulses and fruits, stacked with crates opened after years in lofts and cellars. Duncan gawped through his fringe.

"Yes, young lady, can I help you with something?" The man put the bottle on the counter. Duncan swept his hair back, let the man take in his pierced ears and eyeliner; he then made a quick survey of his chest and flicker over his crotch. "Pardon me, young man."

He was the type of man who lived with his mum into middle age and had never rejected the aesthetic quirks and fashions of her older generation. Wing-back chairs, orange corduroy sofas, a clock from the 1930s, a magazine rack by the chair angled towards the television, flying ducks on the wall and a John Osborne play on the radio.

"I need a bottle of red wine, please." Duncan peered at the hand-written labels in foreign languages, spotting a musical wine — (*dolce*, Muscadet). "I'm a bit of a novice at this." He remembered Mr Porter's advice 'flattery

gets you everywhere' and asked, "Could you give me some advice?"

"Oh, I'd be delighted to." There was no preen or ruffle, unlike the man in Burton's in the town who his dad said would measure your inside leg if you wanted a tie, but the vintner's duster feathered lightly over the nearest shelf as he spoke. "Is it for a meal, sir? Or to drink on its own?"

"I'm not overly sure. It's for a friend. Spanish —"

"How exotic. Does she have a lovely tan?" The man lit up.

"No, the wine." Duncan was unsure if the man was having a joke at his expense. "He prefers Spanish."

"Of course! Rioja, I wonder?"

"Can you show me?" Duncan asked. In a few steps the licensee had crossed the shop and returned with a bottle in his hand, presenting the label to him.

"That's it," said Duncan. It was the same label as the bottles that usually sat along Mr Porter's sideboard.

"Your friend — is he Iain Porter?" Duncan nodded and blew his fringe from his eyes. "He's my piano teacher."

"He and Jane are often popping in just before closing. Running out of supplies."

Duncan had never seen Mr Porter anywhere that was this far from a piano keyboard. Jane seemed never to be at home, so it was odd she might pop in at all, never mind 'often.' There was a girl at school who sat next to him in English. She had a friend, she said out of the blue, who also played piano. He had nodded, accepted the fact and continued his doodling. But now he saw something different in her seemingly random words. They had been a way of connecting. Pianos and the purchase of wine as social passing notes. Duncan was unsure if the man was claiming to know the Porters well, or being friendly or familiar with him. Wine was perhaps what made him tingle, rather than low notes on the organ, or — other things.

The man laid the bottle on top of a pile of white tissue paper, setting it a forty-five degrees and rolling up the bottle, finishing it with a layer of brown paper and a tab of Sellotape from a dispenser. He then rotated it ninety degrees, adding another tab of tape, repeating this another twice in quick succession and finishing with a tiny flourish of the wrist to shape the crumpled twist of excess at its neck. He removed his hand as if he had performed an *étude* by Chopin or Scriabin. The till, monumental and ancient with numbers that popped up in crenellations, had all the stops and keys of an arithmetic church organ. He fingered it with an air of apology, fearful of the inevitable noises it made as it clunked up the price. Duncan took

out his wallet.

“I suppose I should check you’re old enough,” the man glancing to the windows and door. Duncan fished out a letter from his back pocket, unfurling it on the counter.

“Duncan? That’s a good Scottish name. Have you got any Scottish in you?” he smiled, flattening his hair with the flat of his hand as if he were looking in a mirror. “I’m an eighth Scottish. Off to a music school then?” he passed back Duncan’s piece of paper. “I had a friend who played the piano. I guess that must make you at least eighteen.”

“At least,” said Duncan.

“Of age, as they say.”

“Actually, could I have twenty Marlboro red too. And a box of Swans?”

“Of course,” he turned to fetch them from the shelf, thinking how different this youth was from Marlboro Man, the rugged cowboy; he remembered Marlboro — moments of recalled trivia often amused his customers — were a ladies cigarette, with a filter on the end, that was made macho with a marketing campaign. Marlboro Man didn’t smoke, he just rested it on his lips to look like a smoker — who knew? Another organ recital at the till. “Anything else?” the assistant asked, hands poised ready an encore. Duncan shook his head and handed over the money. “Say hello from me,” the man added. He waved gaily with his duster.

Duncan flicked his hair and unwrapped the sealing strip from the cigarettes. “Allow me.” The man offered his cupped hands for Duncan to place it in. He pulled the silver foil and gave him that, too. “See you, then,” he smiled, tight lipped, and looked around for his duster. Duncan stepped out on the street and took one in his mouth; pulling back his hair to drape at one side to avoid it getting singed. He struck the head of a match and cupped it in his hands, the tell-tail puff rising over his face.

Jane Porter closed the door behind Duncan as she let him in. She brushed his hair from his face to kiss both cheeks and hugged him warmly. As she stood back, he surprised her by brushing her tumbling black curls from her face and kissing both of her cheeks, hugging her again, putting his arms around her waist. The bottle in his hand bumped against her and made her reach round for it. “Wine! You’ll be a hit at university. Congratulations on that too!”

Mr Porter came and patted his shoulder, holding out a hand to shake his. In the ten years they had known each other, Duncan struggled to remember

a handshake. He had known the man's hands on almost every other part of him in that time — his shins or armpits might have escaped notice — but this business of handshaking seemed to be for Jane's benefit. "Congratulations again, Duncan. Mr Popular!"

The hallway was unchanged, yet Duncan had never stood here for any length of time. There were rows of pictures on either side, the most important, going by its frame, was the one of Mr Porter with John Cage. On the left side of the hall were pictures of Jane. The one of her in a black evening dress on a bridge, flute to her lips and dark, Gothic rooftops, behind her the other figures were blurred out. There were three or four casual pictures of Jane with a black woman, all in different cities, the yellow cabs, tuk-tuks, gondolas and Routemaster busses giving context to the location but not the relationship. Another picture had Jane lying on a bed in a wedding dress, the flute laid next to her where her groom might have. On the opposite wall, Iain laid on a bed in a morning suit, a scarf patterned with a piano keyboard laid out on the bed next to him. "Oh Iain, don't tease him," said Jane. A photograph of a flute laid supine — enlarged to make the instrument five feet in length — seemed at first glance of like those Athena posters of saxophones with wisps of coloured smoke emerging from them, or pianos with helices of musical score spiralling from their lids. A closer look, in light of the images of Jane and her friend, showed reflected in the glint of the metal skin tones and the hint of black tumbling locks. Perhaps a bed, sheets, then a hint of dark brown skin, all bodies merged as if in a convex mirror used to catch a thief in a shop or to appear as someone else in a hall of mirrors.

"What do you mean popular?" Jane asked Iain. There were no photographs of the Porters together. Not even in the lounge. To enter their home and lives was to walk freely between them; to be welcomed by the one and then the other; to embrace the one and then the other.

Iain began to move to the door of the lounge, explaining he had received a call from a grateful music teacher in Newcastle, whose pupil's music Duncan found on the stand of the piano he performed his audition on. On his side were images of harpsichords, clavichords and chamber organs with the men who played them standing beside them and Mr Porter; or, like Jane's, they were images of him with friends, both of them standing by the instruments to give some location and context to the pictures.

"And also a call from the admissions tutor at the university regarding Master Innes's sight-reading test." Jane shot a look of concern, relieved when Iain smiled and continued. "Young master Innes, having introduced himself,

sat at the piano and presumed the music set in front of him.”

“I was quite nervous,” said Duncan, although he was far more curious who the black woman was and what instrument she played. It was clear what the men played.

“The tutor was interested to know if he had played *L’isle Joyeuse* before, as he ‘nailed it’ as she put it.” Iain omitted — savouring the detail for later — that his rendition was equal in places to the student whose audition piece it was and had left it on the stand.

“I only realised when I saw the fingering written over the stave.” He had stopped and asked if he could use his own fingering as that provided on the score wasn’t working for him. Jane swept his hair from his cheek and placed a kiss on it. Her kiss was the type some mothers gave their child, and Duncan wondered what a kiss was like from the kind of sparkly-eyed American or Australian girls that wandered around the television screen doped in love and — it was a concern that the piano was so static, no beach babe was likely to sit down beside him and find the rise and fall of his thigh muscles as he pedalled with great finesse those long, lingering bass notes of Debussy in the way Mr Porter did, his right hand swirling above with a repeated pattern that he could play a hundred thousand times in a row as if each was just a single note, recalled on a single synapse. Other boys could shoot hoops and kick balls, Duncan could recall a sequence of notes in a mind’s breath, like the numbers of pi, except the phrases would alter the geometry of the circle and unfold it into the overlapping sinusoidal forms of sound. That kiss, the kiss of a married woman that was warm and motherly on his cheek was the one he compared all others to. Whatever the number of kisses he had after that, it was this one that was the single note, the lips that spoke of all the memories spilling after them, full or bloomed or tight, loving, sympathetic, lusting or holy. If only Fourier had analysed kisses instead of waves — what did it mean, that kiss of Jane and her friend where their lips met, holding hands, the length of it equal to any bass note of Debussy’s in the photograph? — love would have been simpler.

“There, you see.” Iain continued. “That’s exactly the kind of charm that’ll keep you from your studies.” Iain laughed and Duncan eventually produced the blush that was expected to rise at their teasing, and took the bottle of wine from him. “I recognise the uptight hand of Mr Allen from the Bottle Shop in these layers of paper.” He continued to rip at it. “Gerald Allen should perhaps have been a baker, putting sheets of filo pastry about some butchered beast instead of torturing his jittery-fingered wino customers with

origami Rubic's puzzle. A nice Rioja." He made a show of examining the label again even though it was the same wine he drank every week. "Jane, do you remember the first bottle of this we had?"

Duncan had never seen so much of Jane as in recent weeks, her bandaged hand seemed the most likely cause. She had worn it the day before his audition, when she roasted a chicken for him, and packed him off with sandwiches made from the leftovers for his trip on the train. Mr Porter had bought his ticket, and two cans of beer for the journey home, not before. Jane had looked peculiar in an apron. It was as if she, who barely knew him, was setting out the terms of their relationship, being mother to him just as he was growing from child to adult. The distancing felt acute as it jarred with Mr Porter's affection.

Mr Porter walked across and picked up his bandoneon from the stand, uncorking it and letting it breath a sighing run of notes, the push and pull of them sad and red and coloured with longing; his fingers and the accordion's waist performed a perfect *octa*. Iain cleared his throat. "When you taught me to dance. You were the man, I think, at that time. Leading. Do you think you could take on another pupil?" He quizzed her with an eyebrow and, with a jerk on the bellows, by playing a quote from de Falla's *Hommage à Debussy*.

Da ka ka kan. Da ka ka kan. It seeped into the room. Heavy then soft, the sweep of a leg and the delicate angling of an angle; the flourish of an arm and the poise of wrist and fingers holding, finger-to-thumb, an invisible veil. Mr Porter moved to stand with his back to the piano, his accordion playing and wooing Jane into dancing. Ready to dance but not in her dress.

"Oh, I see." Jane smiled, then looked down over her clothes. "I might need to change?"

"Oh, yes," said Iain, "Duncan will like that. I'll get this wine open and you get changed. Find some glasses in the sideboard would you, Duncan?" He gestured in its direction and Duncan shuffled over, bending down to the doors of the cabinet. The first contained a stack of plates of various patterns, of a kind he had seen in the window of the junk shop next to the off licence. At the rear were coloured glasses in bright jewelled colours with clear stems. He took one out and held it up, "These?"

"Oh no," Iain recoiled. "Bloody awful things. Can you imagine how wine looks in them? There are some clear ones in the next section." Duncan pulled back the next door and carefully took out three, placing them on

the top of the cabinet.

“Good god Jane, what a transformation!” Iain said, his wife both smiling and shaking her head at him a little. She leant casually against the door frame, a red knotted skirt split mid-thigh and a sleeveless red top pinged against skin. With her dark curls and light tan she could have been a sultry Spaniard who swayed in a tragic dance on the evening air. She wore her hair up, a large plastic flower clipped on top of her head, the odd strand trickling down her face.

Duncan’s stared at the flames. Mr Porter played again. The music touted round for close companions or places, for the memories it has visited before. The melody sad and pensive, it flickered and puckered like a votive candle carried through life; running through the rivers and dark rains of the night; through all the real and imaginary places, then dropped into a hot *habanera* ghosting across the floor.

“You look beautiful, Jane,” said Duncan, knowing now the awkwardness other boys talked of when they found their friends’ mums attractive.

“Thanks, Duncan,” said Jane. She was intrigued at how he looked at her. She felt studied, which was understandable given she had just made an entrance in a dress designed to provoke a reaction, but his gaze was lighter, more measured, than she had expected. She caught him looking at her and then the picture of her saying, “That’s Mizzi. Yes, it’s the same dress, was that why you were looking?”

“You look very happy there,” said Duncan. The picture was taken as they sat at a table, with the black woman, Mizzi, in a very tight black and white dress, Jane in her red. The women clinked glasses together. It looked like an occasion, rather than a holiday snap. “Was it your birthday or something?”

“It was our — it was ten years since we met. I must call her later,” said Jane, looking at the other pictures along the hall. “We are partners. In crime. So to speak. I had a little repetitive strain in my wrist and so can’t play for a while.” She lifted her bandage. Iain handed glasses of wine to both of them, sensing Jane was on the verge of becoming upset. She put her nose to the glass, smelling her wine to pause the conversation. “How lovely!” she said, as if commenting on the scribbled drawing of a child.

“Congratulations on your entrance, young man. A toast: to Duncan.” They clinked their glasses and, amid continued teasing and joshing, got around to the matter at hand. “Dance tells a story,” Mr Porter said. Dance migrates, like music, loaded with symbolism, unburdened by meaning. To touch dance, one had to touch the dancer. Jane glared briefly over her wine. While a per-

former could recite a poem, tap or stamp a toe or foot in time to the nearest millisecond, true metaphors are made in the feelings they convey, in the myth that rises up within.”

“Come on, Iain, play us a tune. You’re keeping a lady waiting. And her skirt is held on with safety pins,” Jane laughed and adjusted her waistband.

“Will it come off easily then?” Duncan put down his glass. Jane wasn’t sure if the question was slightly risqué or made in innocence. With the lunging and bending and the wine she might end up undone.

“Will the matador drop her cape?” Iain asked. “I will act as juke-squeeze-box with the antiquated Wurlitzer,” he said, beginning the chordal pulse of the *habanera* and sat by the wine. They made a handsome couple. Duncan could borrow one of Jane’s hair toggles, the moody flick of his giving him the air of Spanish Lothario, or a gypsy girl about to learn a dance from her big sister.

She took his hands and placed them on her, instructing him where they should remain as she walked him back and forth across the room in time to the music.

“If I could dance on my hands, I think my timing would be better.” Duncan said, and stopped to undo and retie his hair and sip his wine.

“You’re taking to this very well, Duncan,” said Jane. Jane drank heavily from her wine, the room was warm and her face was flushed like a school sports coach.

“You both look handsome,” Mr Porter rested the accordion on its stand. Duncan seemed to take to dancing lessons with a commitment rarely demonstrated in his piano practice. “I could drive a bus between you two, You should be close enough that only a sheet of tracing paper can pass between you.” Or else held there, in the heat of the dance if it was being done right.

“I don’t want to embarrass Duncan, Iain,” Jane said and fanned herself with an LP cover picked off the sofa. “You make me sound like a brass rubbing.” She poured a little more wine from the second bottle her husband had made a sizable dent in. “I do admire your capacity to drive a bandoneon while under the influence, Porter.”

Porter — there was a dashing, daring edge creeping into her voice that Duncan found hard to place and also found attractive. It wasn’t the harsh, scolding tone his mother sometimes used when she wasn’t simpering with her boyfriend, it was the flourish of a phrase when Mr Porter played piano.

It was direct.

Jane glimpsed a maudlin shadow pass over Duncan's face. She smiled and raised her eyebrows, feet already tapping to the music, and extended her arm, a sign to approach her. He flicked his fringe then replaced his hand around her, fingers now curling a little, as if he was preparing to play a little phrase on her back in response to her flash of the eyes. "Thank you." She followed the flutter his eyes that landed on the piano, to his lover, his escape from — she was not exactly sure of his family situation, perhaps because he wasn't sure himself. He fidgeted in the way Mizzi did when she needed a cigarette, like Jane did when she kicked off the bedclothes on a too hot night. She unfolded herself from him and picked up his cigarettes.

"You look like you could do with one of these?" Jane smiled, putting them in his hand.

"Yeah, I'll just pop outside."

Duncan woke lying on the sofa of his apartment in the late afternoon a little hungover and the bottles of wine resting by his hand. He had left the window open, the pale sky not immediately giving up whether it was very early or later in the day and it was the sound of the traffic and the frantic passage of air that seemed to pre-empt the rush hour — like the air shifting along the platform of a Tube station before the train arrived — which reminded him he had accepted an invitation to go out that evening.

Conrad had explained several options: a rooftop dinner at the Arab World Institute; dancing at the side of the Seine with Lauren and Harriet. There was also a gallery launch. He wasn't entirely sure when that was, but it as to feature a Mucha and Rackham exhibition.

People often took a while to stay dead when they died. Duncan knew this from when his mum had died and, despite their differences, he would still have liked to call her to share a joke, or a memory that only she would understand, to provoke some pride or affection in the one person who was supposed to be best equipped to have some. It was years later when he would stop thinking to call her on Christmas day, or to check that he still knew the name of her current boyfriend — he had been caught out several times as a boy with that, mixing up names, his mother thinking he was being spiteful and undermining her; the men, their hands usually full of some part of her at the time, tended to agree with her, White Knights that they were. White until the inevitable collapse where the jolly tune flattened into a dark diminished corpse of discord and drink-fuelled name-calling.

It was why he disliked the dislocation that came from drink, and hid from it; he was surprised and often ashamed when it found him.

Connie and Duncan walked down the gravel path of the gardens towards the paved terraces where the dancing took place. Duncan felt at once revived, having showered and put on smells and lotions that reminded him of nothing more challenging than a day in the office, or his journeys to work or from the gym. Lauren spotted them at a distance and waved. They had walked down from the Arab World Institute, Conrad carried a leather satchel. Duncan had made an effort, wearing a sharp dark blue suit and a fedora with a white band on it, a look Lauren read as formal but fun. She perched on the edge of a statue where she had been chatting for twenty minutes to a Spanish girl, the double of Penelope Cruz, who was there because it was much cheaper than a club and she felt less exhibited on the informal dance floors.

“You scrubbed up nice,” said Lauren, running a hand over his suit. She wore her red dress, the one she bought when her and Conrad were going weekly to dances. It was ten years old and still fitted, which made her feel as good as any new dress would.

“Have you brought the dancing fuel?” Lauren asked.

“Of course,” Conrad lifted his satchel and looked at Duncan, “Vodka Martinis. To enable the shaking and stirring on the dance floor.” He looked at Penelope and then into the crowd gathering beyond. “No Harry?”

“She couldn’t make it. Off tomorrow though. She’s up for the gallery opening and for our trip to Aix?” Lauren looked at Duncan as if he needed to answer.

Conrad explained that they thought it would be nice for him to get away — even though he was away — but to take a trip with them for a day or two. To their place in the south. It would be much warmer. Conrad needed to swim to ease his leg, and Lauren could get a break. There was room to relax. Harriet could come too. There was a piano each for them, should they need extra space.

“Sounds great. I’ll buy some trunks. Wasn’t expecting to swim. Or dance. Hence this — ” He raised the fedora from his head. Duncan looked at Penelope, her dark hair and skin colouring reminded him of Jane.

“This is Paula. She’s from Spain.”

“Nice to meet you,” Paula said to Duncan, speaking in English. Duncan touched the brim of his hat and said hello. “And you too, Conrad,” speaking

to Conrad. "You are all American?"

"Just us two." He gestured to Lauren. "Are you old enough to drink, Paula?"

"Of course. You have brought the bar?" Conrad unzipped the bag, which unfolded to reveal four martini glasses and a stainless steel flask. Strapped beside it was a jar of olives, lemons, and a shaker. There were two bottles of vodka. He handed round the glasses and poured iced vermouth from the flask into the shaker. Connie attempted a Sean Connery Jamsh Bond impression. They all laughed. Lauren downed hers as it arrived, putting out her glass for a second.

"It is a race?" Paula watched Lauren, mesmerised.

"No, honey, I just can't dance sober. I get too self-conscious."

"What is that?"

"I feel like people are watching me. But when I drink I don't care."

"I see." Paula downed hers. "In that case can I have another for my self-conscious also?" Conrad waited to the side of the dance area. Paula had found her groups of friends and they danced with each other, but also mixed with a few Italian students who were lingering at the edge. He poured himself another, wishing he had brought pretzels or nuts.

The music started up, and was loud enough to get lost in, to not overhear others' conversations, but quiet enough to talk to a dance partner.

"You're good at this," said Lauren. She often felt nervous that she was going to get stood on, or end up in a heap on the floor. His hand was pressed firmly in her back, the frame of his arms reassuringly firm.

"You're not too shabby yourself." As soon as he touched her dress he felt Jane's kiss again on his cheek. It was Fourier again, now branching out into dress materials. "And you look very beautiful by the way. I won't say any more because I bet Conrad can lip read and he's watching you, admiringly." The vodka on her breath conjured Clara, and he looked over to Conrad, reminding his hand to stay fixed, that this wasn't the time to recall the odd turn of Debussy or half-remembered gesture made on Clara's skin when they had sat and shivered under her duvet.

"He's allowed to, I guess." She turned and she saw Conrad raising his glass. She gave a tiny wave by pulling her fingers free from Duncan's back. "Where do you dance when you're at home?"

"I travel a lot with work," Duncan said. Watching Penelope-Paula dance with a man while giggling with her friend who danced with another. They switched so the girls ended up together. Jane and Mizzi. The men paused before fluffing their feathers and strutting in faux campery. "I find dance

classes or meets to drop in on. Different venues in different towns. I guess it's a bit like gigging as a musician."

His way of finding people to dance with seemed at first brave to Lauren. It seemed especially bold for Duncan, who had the air of a musical genius but without the genius. A captive audience was quotidian in her line of work; the dress she wore now brought further attention. She could cope. But for Duncan, for her idea of Duncan, it was rash to turn up to dance, especially a dance as hands-on as this, with complete strangers. Perhaps it was his strange geekiness that made her imagine statistic and probability, of this dancing Duncan updating the set of possible Duncans. Maybe strangers were his ticket: the quick, charming, anonymous shuffle around the dance floor, or perhaps on to his anonymous hotel afterwards, then to the next town. "Did you meet anyone you liked when you were dancing around the country?"

"Of course." Her cheek had moved away from his, wanting to turn and face him, to give an interrogative look. Her leg hooked and entwined his, then loose and fluid. The song changed just then and Lauren let his abrupt answer slide. It was possible he was so literal: he danced because he liked music and to move to it.

"Conrad and I used to get lessons in the morning on this rooftop in Havana." She forgot sometimes that sharing her experiences could chime a hubristic note, rather than a grateful one. They had been there for a month. Conrad's business. "The teacher was as old as the building — very — but still flexible and supple. He described tango as 'an erotic pass the parcel with only two persons playing the game'. She paused, turning under his arm to face the same way, then unravelling again. "They said that there was to be no unwrapping of presents in class. "We usually got horny after a boozy lunch and had sex all afternoon. Others we danced all day."

"You still hanker for Havana and the boozy lunches?" He knew, this time, that Jane's skirt was held on with safety pins and he had asked how securely it was attached, but felt Lauren was prying too.

"Well, since Conrad's motorbike accident. His leg is smashed up."

Duncan thought of James, his business partner, who played every sport obscenely well. He was training for a triathlon and got knocked off his bike. Leg mashed. Pins. His spinal injury was missed. A trapped nerve with damage and infection. "He should talk to my partner, James. He's had a similar journey."

"That's thoughtful of you, Duncan." He hadn't put a foot — or a hand — out

of place while they danced. His sense of rhythm was impeccable, streets ahead of Conrad's or her own. And with Conrad watching on she felt able, perhaps even obliged, to whip her leg here and there, exposing her thighs from between the folds of her skirts.

The track changed and in the liminal cross-fade from one rhythm to the other they adjusted their grip. "Has it changed a lot for him — for James?"

"His wife Liz was really frustrated — in a lot of areas, if you get me —" Lauren patted him.

"I get it." Lauren relieved him from having to find a delicate form of words.

"She's enjoying a boozy post-dance afternoon or two now, I believe," Duncan said and Lauren stopped and laughed, realising the drink was loosening her tongue as well as her dance moves. Their faces touched as they came back together, his eye looking into hers as they turned in the music and neither flinched or looked away. They enjoyed the frisson of their non-flirtation, dancing around the intimate in tango and taboo.

"Need some refreshment?" Conrad had wandered through the dancers with two martinis.

"Are you sure you don't want to cut in?" Duncan turned Lauren towards Conrad. Of course he wanted to cut in. He wanted to cut in, cut loose, whisk her around the dance floor and then off miles away to the past, to that little rooftop in Havana — did she remember it? — and the hotel with the sexiest shabby walls and patched-up furniture. "Not tonight." He had walked too much, and then all the way up to that rooftop. Fresh air. He might go and grab a bite to eat. "You kids keep dancing. You look great, honey." He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. "Make sure she gets home safe. See you tomorrow for our trip down south." He slapped Duncan on the back and made his way back to where he had left his satchel.

"Do you want to go with him?" asked Duncan.

"No, this is kind of the pattern." They would come. He never danced. She took a drink of her martini, which tasted like neat vodka. He would go off and get drunk in his little café and then they would see each other in the morning. "And you will find out anyway — we have separate rooms. Suites. Like Lord and Lady Golden." His dressing room was as big as hers. "Come on, let's dance, you're looking all serious." He put his arms around her. "I've never met a man who's less nervous dancing than he is talking."

There was the lightest whiff of her perfume as they came together and he inclined his head, the scent familiar. One hand were undecided for a moment on her back, his other hand's fingers interweaved with hers. "You're

remembering a woman you danced with before,” Lauren guessed. Her feet were then less certain as her mind searched for a woman dancing nearby who would make a substitute in her mind for the one in Duncan’s past. “It is my perfume, isn’t it?”

“Possibly.” He was reluctant to say she was Jane and then Clara. The silk of dress the closest he had been to recapturing the feeling of dancing with a girl he had left naked and asleep in a cold flat twenty-five years ago and never returned to.

He tried to find something he could tell her, a token of reciprocation, but there was nothing he wanted to give up, nothing he felt could be made better for telling her it, other than to form a closer bond between them. “You dance fabulously. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Tango is not just a dance.” She had been to Buenos Aires, tasted a little of the culture. To move as you want to be moved, hold as you want to be held. She drained her glass and put it to the side. Tango was a passion that might be dangerous. There are so many layers. “The tango is jealous. It is memories without a future; fantasies we pretend we are remembering. It is a dance of touch and the untouchable.” The next few songs they danced without talking. Paula smiled a few times as she passed, the two women touching fingers lightly as if they were friends or sisters.

Duncan returned to the room to find Jane quietly humming a melody, her arms locked rigid with Iain’s as they dipped and turned and dusted across the carpet in their bare feet, she was demure and distant and he looking at her with longing. She was the music Iain was trying to decipher, to work out the most elegant way to play, find the least awkward fingering, the most authentic silence to allow her melody to be heard. He mouthed the *habanera* rhythm, its sound visible in the touch of their soles on the floor, in the touch of their souls that melted and mingled and beat as a heart in the movement of their bodies.

The bandoneon began wistful, then melancholic. Iain and Jane stood as they never had and waved the wind off the river that goosebumped the skin on Lauren’s back and Duncan ran his hand over it. There was affection, warm and welcome, and she kept her skin pressed to his hand, leaning into his leading, the drunken part of her ignoring the one that said she should stop dancing before she became intoxicated by the chase.

Lauren stopped, squeezing his hand. “Let’s walk and talk. Between the Russians, the French and my husband’s cocktail mixing, I’m done in.” They

waved at Paula, who came over and said her goodbyes. The night had passed in a blur of drink and dance and now balled up in her head in the back of a cab. The ten minute drive to his flat took a moment. Duncan kissed Lauren's cheek before getting out. Lauren asked the driver to turn up the heat, shivering in her delicate dress, feeling cold and impossibly lonely.

Back at the flat, Mr Porter was still dead. A faint bandoneon called out, looking for its lover, for her sultry eyes, black curly hair and intoxicating stare, and for one last stroll, one last dip and turn around the carpet in the lounge before the bottle fell empty on the floor.

XVI

Harriet found the little theatre halfway along a narrow one-way street. Towered over by residential buildings with mansard attics or bright awnings that flirted coyly in the wind, the entrance was entirely missable. Inside was a beautiful rotunda foyer with vaulted ceiling. Screens mounted in heavy pewter frames around the curved walls played video and interactive presentations when they were approached. These outlined Conrad's restoration project and conversion from theatre to gallery. Left alone, they reverted to present a single image. Now, all twelve screens displayed a set of Mucha's posters designed for Sarah Bernhardt. The walls had been rolled back to their Art Nouveau design, having been panelled and painted over as the building had become a cinema and then a strip club. The spirit of titillation lived on in the camp flamboyance of the decor.

The walls were decorated with gold-on-cream filigree of loops and swirls, reminiscent of Victor Horta's organic forms, or the hair of Botticelli's Venus. The original parquet flooring had been kept safe under carpets and was now buffed to a deep walnut gloss. Half a dozen Tiffany chandeliers hung from the domed ceiling, their gemmed glass harmonising with the Mucha images that the monitors in their heavy decorated frames defaulted to. Harriet's sad discovery was a front panel from an upright piano, mounted on the wall. The trophy of a hunter, the body discarded, perhaps because it didn't fit the space or was no longer serviceable.

Harriet recalled the waitress at the café Conrad always ate at — it had awful music, but the food was palatable — who could pass for her sister, or perhaps her daughter when the young woman was made up and Harriet dowdy after a week's work. Without fail he made the same comparison every time they were together. She had let it slide too many times to be able to correct him now — it had passed into the kind of standing joke that groups of friends shared, the kind of comment on her appearance that wealthy customers made with impunity: "talent and looks!", "great touch/lucky boyfriend", "those curves — and the piano!" There was a deeper comparison, the one of Conrad and Muse, and she disliked how similar the men now seemed. Muse had used her, but Conrad's obvious flirtation with this waitress felt like a precursor to him recruiting her. He had visited Antoine the day before, when Duncan had received his bad news and mentioned he was looking for a new assistant. The woman might be talented, and it might be Conrad's generosity at play. The invite for her to stay with them

in their house, the use of the pianos (why buy three!), the invite to Aix she had accepted for Lauren's sake, gave her the feeling of that listening booth where she first met Muse. All glass sides and open to see, like those comments from customers, and yet the walls were still walls, confined with nowhere to escape to.

She wondered how long it would be before Lauren was given the trophy treatment, the parts removed and mounted that Conrad wanted to display. A grotesque image of Lauren mounted in the gallery came to mind, like the piano front devoid of all its real beauty and stripped to a silent, functionless facade.

She reached out to run her finger over its surface and felt two arms slip around her waist. "What is it with you and touching exhibits," said Lauren and Harriet turned to greet her.

"You both looked good in the photos," Harriet said brightly. "Conrad sent them this morning." She whistled, remembering Lauren in her dress and Duncan in his suit and hat. They looked like a couple, with a bridge in the distance and other blurred-out dancers, they could have been on honeymoon. "You looked lovely."

"It was fun. He's a good dancer." Lauren seemed a little withdrawn, with a tight carefulness in her words that was either for her benefit, or else this was how she kept an appropriate distance with Duncan. She was in jeans and a shapeless jumper — comfortable, and less likely to invite flirtation. Since Muse, Harriet admired how Lauren managed any unwanted attention and saw she stood away from any shadow, real or metaphoric, where a careless caress might take place. Harriet admired her — it had to be tempting to toy with someone, or to feel the flush of being desired. The discomfort of her glass box with Muse, his removing the secrecy from his infidelity in order to make it acceptable and legitimate, was after all initially intoxicating. It was an escape through being confined; unrestrained restraint mistook submission for control.

"Where's Conrad and Duncan?"

"Working; and don't know," Lauren shrugged.

Harriet was reminded of Conrad's industry. Thinking for him seemed to always involve doing. An opinion had to be vocalised; a business idea drawn up, formulated, and decided on. Procrastination was alien to his mode of allocating his time. He invested in what could be capitalised on; he discarded the useless. Or at least he had prior to his daily visits to the café with that waitress — making it seem more likely he had ulterior motives.

“He was asking Duncan about some acoustics in a couple of our galleries,” said Lauren. “Maybe they got side-tracked.”

The auditorium was beautifully finished. The original seats had been removed years previously and the floor had been levelled. The walls were white-painted wood panelling. Sections were removed here and there to reveal architectural features, the impression was that it was a set dressed for the artworks and over time the building would take the starring role. The space was divided along the line of gilt columns that supported the circle above by large theatrical flats painted in colours from the palettes of the artists.

Harriet studied the floor plan, mounted on a lectern reminiscent of one that might hold a menu outside a street cafe. It struck her the room was arranged as a labyrinth, resonating with the former use of having a secret voyeuristic space, or perhaps the artworks turning audience to the punters that shuffled around it. The Mucha collection was arranged as if rooms in a garden. Times, Flowers, Portraits, Gems, Products and, at the centre, Sarah Bernhardt and a copy of his sculpture ‘Nature.’ Care had been taken to lead through but still allow choice and surprise. Limestone plates were mounted beside or opposite works, lit to highlight the shadows engraved on the surface.

“You had a hand in the design?” Harriet turned to Lauren. The caption painted on the wall read, Dying to make a living: Divine Sarah: Actor, Icon, Artist, Jew. Harriet remembered having a long evening with Conrad where he explained his family origins. Lauren never seemed to take hold of or reject any cultural or religious identity, but Harriet never presumed anything.

Sarah Bernhardt — Harriet recognised her from every other *bouquiniste* along the Seine that had yellowing Mucha print with her on it. It was his perfect representation of her, tall and slender, with flowing hair and porcelain skin that burned her image, if not her talent, in the mind. Like a red-haired pianist tossing her hair over her keys, or a black singer flashing her smile between phrases from her treacly voice. As well as full height images set high to show Sarah at her imperious best in a halo of flowers and gold, as if marked out by an eternal spotlight and stage, there were screens with black and white photographs of her.

“I added some balance,” said Lauren. The signage and graphics were presented with borders that echoed those Mucha’s decorative frames with bold floral and leaf designs in the colours of the image they referred to. The typeface struck an impressive balance between style and readability. These

details were the hallmark of Conrad's success. Harriet had previously seen him dress in similar clothes to an artist he was exhibiting. The photographs continued with Sarah playing the male lead in *Pelléas and Melisande*; then *Salomé*, which Oscar Wilde wrote for her having seen her as Lady Macbeth. The appeal of mad bad vengeful slut seemed as popular then as it was now. Sarah died her whole life. From childhood she was dying on stage. Who could resist the beautiful and dying.

"I love this display" said Lauren, who stood by a sequence of images on a long wall, some set in baroque arches, others framed in oval windows. "Mucha does great noses. Really cute." The heavy black that made the female forms pop off the backgrounds continued out past the frames and faded to the colour of the wall behind so that the whole sequence took on the look of a huge colouring-in book. Across the ceiling were symbols from mythical stories, and elements from the zodiac were painted or else projected from lights.

Rackham's work, according to the floorplan, was in that middle circle, including his illustrations for Wagner's *Ring*. Harriet knew Wagner was notoriously anti-Semitic, but wasn't sure if there was some occult symbolism in the way the gallery was laid out. Rackham seemed a more classical artist. He mostly did pen and ink, then layers and layers of watercolour. They've put the innocent stuff at the outside of the maze — Barrie and Carroll. Well, there's a shadow on Carroll. Then moved in to Grimm. A bit darker. Shakespeare, other Arthurian legend-type stories, and Wagner. So, yes, it could be relevant. There's a drama to the layout, a mystery.

The layout forced them into a set of narrower corridors. They still had a view of the high ceiling, but were set out in dark grey panels, the images lit with focussed coronas of spotlight. They came to a set of images filled with waterlogged waifs with their windblown hair that touched their own cheeks in fancy or fright. "Ugly and dying is not so romantic. Or is it more romantic?" Harriet asked the air as much as Lauren, who walked behind her.

They began to walk into the labyrinth. "Darker and creepier than Mucha, isn't he?" Nymphs bathed at the water's edge, their heads turned from their own reflection, dresses draped on and off as casual, pearlescent pelts. Gnarly-faced old men and gnarly-faced trees were wizened by wind, pale and paste under pewter skies. The lines of their bodies corroded black with wisdom and age. Branches trapped children and fairies, maidens. Knights hung dead in black and white in broad daylight. At the roots, goblins, devils

and columns gathered.

“Caravaggio in pen and ink,” Lauren said. “There’s a strand that flows from his dark, psychological images to the fantasy art of Rosa, de Goya and Luis Ricardo Falero, and of Arnold Buckland, Gustave Doré, Richard Dadd, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Maxfield Parrish even.” She reached out her hand, touching the glass that covered the image and fingering the dark lines. In this section, the shadows and light spilled out — the shadows hatched or filled, in black off to the edge of the dark grey boards, the mood of the images spilling from the images and into the gallery.

“I loved Peter Pan as a kid,” Harriet looked at Wendy.

“I didn’t read much as a boy,” said Duncan, who had arrived silently behind them.

“Of course you didn’t, twinkle toes.” Harriet teased. “I hear you spent all these years not playing piano and just danced instead. But where’s Captain Conrad Hook?” Duncan laughed.

“Conrad is upstairs,” he said. “In what was the dress circle, we’ve been here all morning talking shop.”

“Watching us?” Lauren looked up to the circle, but the angle of the lights meant that there wasn’t much that could be made out. She knew what was up there: the burgundy velvet plush benches and tub chairs; the thick oak floors scattered with rugs; the little coffee and champagne bar that she had insisted Conrad augment to include a few light snacks and the odd poster or two, despite his pretentious notion that it might attract — people like him — those who sat in cafés all day, sipping a cold espresso and watching Arte TV online to have some well observed remarks to make to their friends.

Otherwise, the white walls continued the theme of the downstairs with panels decorated in florid scrolls, but the rugs were deep and silent underfoot, the same rich red as the velvet plush seats. A row of flip-up chairs from the original theatre were installed around the balcony, giving a viewing point to see the labyrinth and the artwork from above. It allowed a further perspective, but also played with the notion of being hidden with the art, but being watched. There was a performance and voyeurism in the place that — though she never told Conrad when they were planning it — she found erotic. Now, unprepared as she was, and not having dressed to be gazed at, it felt a little seedy, perhaps even unsafe that she had walked around unaware of eyes being on her.

“Well,” Duncan began, noticing Lauren was agitated. He and Conrad had been engrossed in the plans for several other theatres that Conrad wanted to

convert to galleries. This one he wanted to re-instate the stage and have it so that music could be performed and seen and heard from the circle, but also from the floor of the gallery, amongst the images. It was quasi Wagnerian, to want painting, sculpture and music, and perhaps projected film images, all as part of one massive installation, the building becoming a kind of art theme park. Harriet and Lauren had come into view as they turned from the starry sky of Mucha to the dark enchanted world of Wanger. “I came down a couple of minutes after I saw you both.”

“I’m being silly,” said Lauren.

“It is an odd feeling,” said Harriet. “It reminds me of what you’ve said about that Manet painting.” It was now she realised the expression on Victorine Meurent’s face was as much one of familiarity as of impudence. Of resignation. Lauren knew there was a chance of being watched, and they were both clothed. The difference between naked and nude, private and public, admiration and stalking were lines that the gallery, rather than the art seemed to ask. Watching a person react to naked people — women, let’s be frank — seemed a voyeuristic act in itself. “I’m not sure I like being on stage when I don’t know I’m on stage. Shall we go upstairs, I’d like to see what I look like,” she laughed, a little out of nervousness.

It all sparkled and had the feeling of a the reception area of a high end restaurant or club. Around the walls were details of images by Rackham or Mucha, or else samples of abstract or pop art made in the same colours. There was an advert for the gallery itself, the figure turned so that the form of its back concealed the gender, the musculature borrowed from Michaelangelo with its masculine shadows, yet the line of the hips could be a Rodin, or neither. The border was figured with lavender and grapes — a touch of sentimentality from Conrad that reminded Lauren of their other home.

“What are the plans for travelling to Aix?” Lauren asked as she sat down with Conrad, who had a table strewn with architectural plans and papers. He winced, but not at her question. He took a moment to register the other three were there. Paul, the manager came them and offered drinks while they sat down. Conrad was keen to go in the morning, as he had work to do. Lauren wanted to leave that evening to get there and relax, and because her usual routine was to get up in the morning and swim, so she wanted to be able to do that. And their ‘man in Provence’, as they dubbed him, Guillaume would be more available in the evening to drive them.

Conrad remained non-committal. Duncan had already bought new

swimming trunks and was keen to see the pianos there. Harriet lit up at this, too, having only seen photographs. It was agreed the three would travel that evening and Conrad may or may not join them, but follow on tomorrow.

“Besides,” he added. “I’ve been looking forward to my steak and fries all afternoon.”

Harriet took her coffee and stood looking out over the gallery below. There were three sets of people walking around. A man and woman — perhaps a couple of art lovers — studied Mucha’s seasons, clearly loving being immersed in so much beauty; a lady in a shawl stood peering in at one of the Rackham Peter Pan pictures, her hand delicately mimicking the posture of a fairy’s. On one of the four benches in the centre of the gallery, a lone or lonely man stared up at the copy of Mucha’s sculpture *Nature*. She was taken back then to the benches at the Rodin Museum, the lines of trees and wondered who might have stood at a window, or at the other side of lawn and watched her wandering there, watched her and Lauren meet, saw her touch the bark of a tree or trail her fingers over a marble body and wonder what went through her mind.

What went through her mind now was that Conrad knew Lauren was going to be out of town and she wanted to know if that might change how he behaved with the waitress in his favourite restaurant.

XVII

In the Cab

Lauren was her mother's daughter and was playing matchmaker. She tossed the pros and cons like the clouds that had precipitated nothing except indecision on whether to rain. They were stubborn grey and purple. The sky bruised all day. She had brought some photos of Harriet she had taken herself. She had offered to collect Duncan on the way. She was that keen to set them up. There were practicalities, like living in different countries, but these were details. It was still fifteen minutes to the Gare de Lyon. Harriet would meet them there. Harry's playful, joyful side was not often on show. Prussian and ultramarine blues slashed the fullness. It was nice, it added a painterly sweetness to the sky.

She would monitor them on the journey down. There would be nothing to look at from the windows of the train — all black outside except in the stations. The high speed colours of day-time were dizzying in any case. She could prompt the conversation — ask them about pianos, get them to imagine playing duets. They might want to take a holiday there some time. The cab was filled with the combating smells of strawberry air freshener and the drivers cologne. He used it like Conrad, like many overweight sweaty men who sluiced themselves in scent; instead of just filling his seat he filled the entire cab. She popped her window open to get a blast of crisp, sour air.

And the pool. She had insisted Harry bring her bathing costume. The pool in Aix had particularly attractive light in the morning and she planned to show off Harriet's figure. The cab was on the opposite bank to *Jardin Tino-Rossi* where she had danced in red with Duncan. The water was now swollen and brown. She had enjoyed her dancing. She felt confident. Duncan just needed a nudge. Harry didn't wear a hair cap and often swam — very slowly — on her back, her hair floating off into a Pre-Raphaelite painting. She could see that going over with Duncan. That it was her husband that felt like the voyeur, the staring hanger-on, was a little worrying. His piano teacher dying was really inconvenient timing. On the flip side, Duncan might see his own life foreshortening, get a move on with things. Her life with Conrad stretched out into eternity. Duncan had made her feel confident dancing; she wanted that for Harriet. There was much they could do for each other. Her head touched the cold glass and had to dismiss the loneliness that had caught her by surprise on the way home the previous night.

More dancing, more music, fewer of those uncomfortable cab rides that took her away from a lovely time and towards a dreadful monotony — alone was fine but loneliness was unbearable. At some point she would have to open the window and let the cologne of Conrad escape.

On The Train

Neither Harriet nor Conrad had shown up at the station. She found Duncan. He was doing what she did while waiting, staring at the glass and metal of the roof. He was dressed smartly — obviously, he was expecting Harriet to show. Making an effort. She loved trains, but not for the dreamy-staring-out-of-the-window, but the permission to read a book, to compartmentalise a bit of life for the journey; perhaps consider leaving it behind when returning. Conrad would travel in the morning — he had made his excuses early in the gallery. The same sky seemed much blacker through the vaulted glass ceiling. And further away. Harriet's wafty excuse was a need to help Antoine to help Conrad, otherwise he might not make it the next day. The last time she had hooked up with Muse for a night, Harriet used the same vacant tone of voice to fabricate a story.

"See you tomorrow. You'll love the pool!" said Duncan, reading a message from Harriet on his phone. Lauren felt hopeful Harriet would show the next morning. She had Duncan wait while she collected the tickets.

"Conrad's paying!" She waved them in the air. He had insisted. He would feel the warmth of his generosity when he saw she had bought First Class tickets. She ushered Duncan across the concourse, her wheeled case nipping at her heels, to the train. He helped her board. His aftershave was subtle. As he put her case in the rack she realised she had lost her own scent. Smothered in the sickly strawberry of the cab's air freshener — with its overtones of strings of candy or vapes, so sweetly addictive — and the pong of the driver. And Conrad. Overthinking it, should she apply perfume now and would that say anything to Duncan? Three men choosing whether she put perfume on or not.

Duncan laughed out loud at the pictures she showed him when they were underway. She felt quite jolly, helped to a great extent by the pre-mixed martinis Duncan had brought. There was enough for a polite drink for four, or to get Duncan talking. Lauren felt sure — it was a strong martini — that if Harriet were there she would agree it was a valid experiment to show Duncan fun photographs of their first trip to Aix, that late August before

she met Muse and became his dirty little secret martini — unlike this one, which was hitting the spot so well.

Harriet was pinkish purple. Covered head to foot in grape juice, the sun perfectly central overhead, her hair matted and stuck to her face, her arms extended either side, mouth agape in a laugh or scream as a hose was being turned on her to clean the fruit off her.

“She looks so happy.” Duncan peered into the picture in the way the leading man did in movies when he was going to remove the speck from his leading lady’s eye, the precursor to the kiss. It was up there with the glasses-off-shaking-out-the-hair scene, or the unhappily married woman drinking too much and really quite enjoying the vicarious flirting of her friend with the nice-smelling man — vicarious flirting was a thing, she thought.

“I’m going to go just freshen up,” said Lauren, wandering off down the train with her handbag and some stray thoughts she quickly gathered, not wanting to leave them for Duncan to find. Her fuzzy head cleared for the challenge of the lock on the door of the toilet. Few things made her more anxious than these push button electronic locks. Someone had compared the buttons to those in an elevator and the image had stuck. She would sit — alright, hover over — the stainless steel bowl hoping that she wasn’t going to be interrupted by a group of executives on their way to the board meeting. She had seen these doors open unbidden at odd intervals, a commercial for their own facilities flashing all to nearby passengers. It smelt of the toilet on the yacht Conrad had chartered — but now was not the time for reminiscing, with executives potentially calling the lift outside.

“Nice perfume,” said Duncan. There were two coffees on the table.

“I was bored of smelling your aftershave,” said Lauren, then grinned knowing she had checked her teeth moment earlier. He took it well. Duncan could take a joke. Harriet could be quite cutting sometimes, so he would need a sense of humour. She took out her phone again and showed him Harriet posing in front of Mucha’s *Dance*.

“She looks magical.” Duncan sipped his coffee, flicking on to the next image. She could quote that later. Although was it Harriet or Mucha’s venus-haired levitating dancer in the sickle moon? She would leave some of the context out in her re-telling.

Duncan produced a little picnic. He was clearly used to travelling around with work and not wanting to rely on the food served on the train, which was now passing through flatterland, blackland, the windows like a sequence of Rothkos, Danto’s squares, dark glasses reflecting the insides of the train.

“When’s the funeral?” she asked. There was a beat, a pause, several breaths. Next he might tear off a strip of the black from the window and throw it over his head like a little boy, hiding from the question. She ate some nuts. If there was ever a silent movie on Kierkegaard, if Danish existential noir became a thing (or was it already?), then Duncan could be the poster boy.

“I’ve not heard anything since the news,” said Duncan. “Top up?” She put out her glass and posed her follow-up question while he poured.

“Has it made you think you might look for another teacher?” she asked.

“Say when,” said Duncan, eyes on the drink. “Not really.”

“The teacher you want has red hair and an immense musical gift.” Duncan looked confused. “Sorry, I meant Harriet. The change of subject was a bit unsubtle.” She was less certain now they were a good match otherwise. She wondered if could play well. If he could write music. “She could probably do with a pupil who would boost her confidence.”

“Is the pool heated at your place?” Duncan asked.

“I’ve offended you?” asked Lauren, unsure if his change of subject was a kind of riposte, or just poor change of subject like her own. If she had turned up smelling of her own perfume, then he might have had to go and freshen up, but then it was less awkward for men, with their back to the door.

“No, I just really fancy a swim,” he said as the train began to slow before stopping at Avignon.

Driving with Guillaume

It was Guillaume — Lauren said nothing — who asked, “And how is the lovely Harriet?” as the were driving from the station to the house. His driving was better when he didn’t talk, although not much. They were crossing a bridge over the canal that felt unusually narrow.

She and Conrad owned a hobby vineyard. Four acres of vines. And another thirteen acres of land. The main house had fifteen rooms, the guest house had three bedrooms, the caretaker’s house, where Guillaume lived, had further rooms. There were two swimming pools, one inside, one outside. Guillaume ran the place. He did their hobby for them. “You’ll find out tomorrow,” she said brightly.

“You are her new beau, yes?” Guillaume asked Duncan.

There was a moment when Lauren thought Guillaume was referring to her, then a moment when Duncan must have thought the same.

“Harriet?” Duncan was weighing his response, Lauren hoped. If she was

single and presented with the presumption she was involved with a good looking guy that she was interested in, how would she play it? “Does she usually bring boyfriends here?” was a legitimate question, but Lauren had hoped he might give more away. Be a little flattered, or flustered.

“No, you just looked like her type,” said Guillaume. Lauren wasn’t sure what Harriet’s type was; she was doubly sure Guillaume didn’t. She turned to her usual window position, not to zone out, but to avoid being brought into the conversation.

By day, she could take her eye down rows of plane trees, over vineyards and lavender — in summer — in the distance; bright yellow fields with squat broccoli daubs of greenery along their edges, ridges shot with slender Cypresses. Rich and Renaissance and Roman.. The crickets chirrup and honeyed sunshine drips everywhere. It was a painting; a Corot; a beautiful place. Better in daylight.

“I’m curious,” said Duncan. Gotcha! thought Lauren.

“She is very lively, yes?” The car swerved as Guillaume looked in the mirror for Duncan’s response. There was a long pause while the non-rhetorical weight of the question landed. Lauren didn’t move.

“She is,” Duncan admitted.

“And quite beautiful, in her way, and you’re quite level.” asked Guillaume.

“Yes,” said Duncan.

“Then that ‘s it. She will cheer you up, you will call her beautiful and listen to her music, which is also very fine, and the rest you will work out in time,” Guillaume patted the steering wheel. He seemed pleased to have done this favour for Duncan so soon in the journey. Lauren wondered if he would have the same chat Harriet the following day.

Duncan touched Lauren’s elbow. “I guess that’s me and Harriet sorted? Good job she’s not here,” he laughed.

“Isn’t it.”

Getting on swimmingly

Guillaume came in with the bags and showed Duncan to the ‘circus’ bedroom on the third floor. Lauren thought he might like the bold colours and functional furniture. It was her favourite guest room. The walls had vintage posters of circus acts hung alongside original paintings: one was a large painting of an elephant’s face made up as Pierrot in ivory makeup. Its tusks removed to gory stumps, the over-sized tears on its cheek containing

the faces of clowns. Laced in the skin with silver were images of bull-fights, sharks, tigers, and gorilla, all glinting in the soft morning sun. The border of the painting had exquisite brushwork, a hyper-realistic frieze that mimicked carved ivory.

She went to the kitchen and began making coffee. The window black where in the daytime Guillaume would walk past the window with his red setter, kicking windfallen apples across the grass for it to chase. She was grateful he was around. It might have been awkward being alone in the house with Duncan — even Conrad had probably supposed Harriet would be there.

Before arriving in Aix, Duncan had told her the story of how he had met the mysterious Iain Porter. It felt a little uncomfortable. A bystander arriving part way through the conversation might think Duncan was talking about a deceased lover. It might have been that it was too recent, too raw. Iain had parented the boy. Muse — that's who he sounded like. Or maybe every man was Muse and Conrad. In his retelling of the tragic vandalism of Iain's piano that left both teacher and pupil without an instrument to hang their relationship on, some parts of his story became vague, the reasons behind the attack submerged. He had broken his hand, left a girl, his mum had died tragically young and left him homeless, aimless and without any of his life's loves. She could see how it was the kind of storm that could leave a guy wrecked, never mind just rudderless.

Duncan appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. "I found a spare robe, hope that's OK?" He had a towel rolled up under his arm.

"That's what they're there for." She poured out two mugs of coffee, passing one to him. "Drink this first. Then I'll take you down to the pool."

The pool room was slightly oval, with curved walls like the *Musée de l'Orangerie*. Lauren had wanted to see the sky and so Conrad had installed a glass roof with occasional mirrors that reflected the surface of the water and, she found later, helped to gauge her position in the pool when swimming backstroke. The walls were lined with reproduction paintings printed on aluminium sheets. These were bent into a form, as if posters on the curved walls of an underground station, the swimmer the train shunting back and forth. In three of the corners were obscure glass doors concealing showers, a sauna, and a changing room.

Lauren slipped off into the changing room and got into one of her bathing suits. With her cap and goggles in hand she dipped a foot in the water to test.

Duncan was admiring the pictures and the feel of the place when she

dived into the pool with a delicate splash. She had completed half a length before she surfaced, and was on her return leg before Duncan was easing into the water.

There was no reason to suppose Duncan would look like Conrad in his trunks, but it was also clear he spent time in the gym. She should be pleased for Harriet. He started with backstroke, maybe to look at the sky through the roof. The water was very warm. Could be the caffeine. His wash sluiced over her as he passed going the other way. They swam on in silence. Until she noticed Duncan pulling himself out of the pool. She flipped onto her back and watched him look at the pictures along the side in more detail, then the other doors, then he watched her. Perhaps he was unaware of the mirrors. She remembered him turning up in the gallery, an absurd notion flashing through her mind that Conrad had told him about the pool, was facilitating a voyeuristic streak in his new found friend. But he looked on like a sports coach. It was her that viewed him secretly. She got the end of the length and touched off at the wall, then stood.

“Are you done?” she asked brightly, pulling herself out.

“This is a lovely place, Lauren. I feel privileged,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

“You have great form in the water,” he said, picking up a towel and handing it to her.

“Thanks. I like swimming.”

“I played water polo in my twenties. Love the water.”

“That explains it,” she said, looking at his physique. “The desire for evening swimming.” She pulled off her cap and went off to the changing room. “Grab a shower and meet me in the kitchen. We’ll have a nightcap.” Getting re-dressed felt somehow more exposing than stripping for a swim.

By the time she arrived, he was already in the kitchen, showered and dressed and flipping through the pictures of a French art magazine. “Let’s have a drink and go and listen to some music.”

Lauren promised a tour of the house in daylight as they passed through to the snug that housed her and Conrad’s vast and eclectic music collection. After admiring the concealment of the room’s various acoustic treatments, Duncan put his geek away. She stabbed hopefully at a few buttons on the hi-fi. She suggested they took turns in choosing what to play. It was her favourite type of musical conversation, playing songs to each other.

He put on something classical. Violins. Then asked, “Does Conrad pretend to be offensive, or have you two always been quite fiesty with each

other?” Any other music, she might have had a chance to sing along. She could mention Iain Porter again, just to change the subject.

“We’re very different in some ways.” He hides. He eats and gets offensive when he’s hurting about life. She stares at paintings and out of windows. She could muster empathy for him, or any person, but it’s easier with art. Paintings and sculptures were immutable, but changed her self, and therefore the art. Like friends. Manet’s *dejeuner* above the toilet on the TGV would be fun. “He’s like a painting. He makes me happy sometimes. Other times he’s pretentious, obscure, clichéd, deliberately provocative. You get the picture.”

“That’s what the piano was for me. Is for me.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Lauren.

“Iain — my piano teacher — used to call his piano, ‘she’. He would talk about touching ‘her.’”

“Like a ship?” Lauren got up to change the song. It just came to hand. It was her musical cheesecake. Madonna’s *Immaculate Collection* played on random. *Like a Virgin* started up.

Duncan laughed. “Is this a significant song for you?”

“Don’t,” she laughed too. It was a moment of nothing and something. It was how she didn’t feel the need to crack the window open and let in the cool air of the real world, it was feeling sozzled and wearing just the right amount of perfume to know she was present, but not filling the room, it was a small dessert — sometimes she wanted something sweet, but just a little something — and she sang. With her tuneless voice. To her surprise he did, too, with his thin voice that sounded pitch perfect.

He stood and held out his right hand. She took it in hers. It was instinct. She span, jive dancing to Madonna for the first time. She remembered Conrad in Havana and missed him. Duncan was being fun and silly. It felt free. They danced alongside each other, rather than attached. There wasn’t the tension of dancing tango. The song changed and they slumped simultaneously into seats, picking up drinks.

“That’s what I love about music,” said Duncan. He was suddenly alive. “Every song has the ability to change you. Just like every painting. Every relationship. We’ll always dance to *Like a Virgin* when we hear it. And that’s fun, right?” He nodded as if persuading himself.

The flipsides were the dances that played out unbidden, life’s graffiti daubed on the gallery wall, the regrets of omission or commission, the unforgiven and the unforgivable. Sometimes the beat and dance went on.

Like a rite.

“Do you paint?” he asked. He was already less animated. Lauren imagined Harriet having her work cut out with him, having to keep him fuelled on dance and music.

“Is that a metaphorical question?” she asked. He shook his head. “No I don’t. We have great light here.” Conrad would love it. Artwork wife turned artist. I do words and ideas”

“Art makes artists,” said Duncan. It was the kind of pseudo-axiom that sounded better after a few drinks. “Musicians play what they listen to; we are what we eat; garbage in garbage out. Being recreated by art. Like a magical thing.”

“Music’s stopped,” she gestured.

“You choose, it’s more fun,” he said.

She put on a pristine vinyl copy of Portishead’s *Dummy*, lowering the stylus on *Glory Box*. Beth Gibbons demanded a reason to love, they both looked at each other and she put her head in her hands. “God!” They both laughed at her blushes and she stopped it.

Duncan sprang to his feet, concealing the next disc from her view. A boyish cheek came over him as he shimmied to the player. It was a glimpse of the child performer forced to grow up in a sudden crash of circumstances. He desperately needed permission to be himself. There was something attractive, even erotic in the notion that another person could be released — in a non-orgasmic way — from whatever held them. Harriet from Muse; Conrad from his dodgy leg, herself from whatever was holding her.

The 80s cheese of an electro-piano intro made her groan as Heart’s *Alone* started up. He played air piano. She drummed. They both sang along. Lauren got hiccups that turned to unattractive snorts when Duncan tried to belt out the high notes in a wailing falsetto.

The night ended many songs later with a perfectly posed rendition of Britney Spears’ *Toxic* where they both lambasted the poses from the song’s video.

In the morning

It was her favourite morning spot. The end of the corridor that came off the back of the gallery decked in huge abstract canvases in vivid colours, the dark green wood panels ending with a narrow set of doors and fanlights above. The effect was telescopic, a foreshortening, the distant landscape outside rendered sharper, more immanent on the eye for being framed in

the narrow field of view. Lauren sat on the floor across the doors, back to the wall, leaning with a cheek on the glass. Like in a cab. The perfume she put on the night before still lingered on her. Her head was a little thick.

“Morning,” he said, smiling — probably at the view. She looked up and straightened her robe. “It’s like that painting. The balcony one.”

“I see what you mean,” her voice soft and parched. “It’s a Manet. Am I to be Berthe Morisot? I should have Nadar resurrected to come and take my photo.” She brushed her face, checking her fingers. She had no makeup on.

“That Spanish girl from the other night had a touch of Berthe Morisot about her,” he said, looking out past her. She was irritated at herself because she wanted him to flirt a little bit. A little bit of dessert. Nothing serious. The view of the hills was beautiful, and he hadn’t seen it in the daylight. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?” he looked at her, surprised, but with that familiar restraint. It could become addictive, dancing and laughter. “I’m being a lousy host. Pull me up and we can make an assault on the refrigerator.” Guillaume had put some things there early in the morning. Or had he come late at night, curious about the blaring music? There was nothing to worry about. Nothing untoward. Guillaume’s car was gone too; perhaps he had been summoned to the station to collect Conrad. How should she interpret the sinking in her heart?

And on the piano

She waited until there was an appropriate silence. She was avoiding that tactic he had of diverting onto another subject when asked a straight question. “Do you play piano like you dance?” She meant — was he as good at it? She wondered — for her friend — whether he was ready to be given permission to be himself. “Have you ever composed?” Which was impatient, but Harriet wasn’t there to ask him. “Written a song?”

He laughed. “Which question first?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “Take your time.”

“I’ve spent a lot more time dancing than playing music. But the two overlap. There’s a physicality to music that’s sometimes lost in pushing buttons — I’m not a snob, I love some electronic music.” It sounded scripted. He must have been asked so many times about it. “I’m not a composer. I

hear music in my head. Never worked it out.”

“Not even a song for Clara — or someone more recent?”

“You mean a love song? I was a kid. I just did her a mix tapes. I don’t love anyone enough to write a song for them, if that’s the question.” He paused, holding the connection of their eyes as if there was something else coming. “Are you asking because you are trying to set me up with Harriet?”

“Will you play for me?” She paused, then got up and walked towards the door. She beckoned him with a sideways flick of her head and he followed. She touched the door as if it was his shoulder, running a comforting hand down it. “I don’t mind what you play.” She admired sketches or broken torsos or broken noses as much full figures. “Trust me.” Writing wrote writing; music played music. Without the process there was nothing. He needed to put his hands on her — it, the piano — and make some noises. “Do this for me? Please.”

He followed her into the music room. The blue Faziolis were bathed in diffused light. She walked to the nearest one, opened the lid and then slid her hands up and down it. “There. It works. No need to be scared. No blank canvas. I’m off to the pool. Find me when you’re done.”

He can play

Two hours later, her late morning swim already pointing her towards thinking about lunch, he came and sat by her in the kitchen, put his phone on the counter and pressed play on the recording app. He was nervous. It was a dance and a painting. Lauren felt discomfited, a little overcome. “You wrote this just now?” It was clear even to her, with very little musical knowledge or having heard him perform anything at all, that this was where his strengths lay. “Just made it up?”

“You like it?” Duncan asked.

Lauren paused. She recoiled from describing it immediately, or too intensely. Was this music for her, or about her? She couldn’t ask. And she knew little that would be useful for him, beyond platitudes. She could maybe dance to it, although it was a little slow for that. She was sad at her lack of understanding, realising she had grasped to recreate the scent of the previous evening. Conrad had taught her so much about art — his intellect still incisive when it wasn’t arrogant; his observations tender when they weren’t painful. She understood the draw of Muse for Harriet. There was a hint of a *habanera* in the music that came and went, intense, then sexy and demur.

She was moved, recalling Duncan finding her and Harriet in the gallery, her sense of his vulnerability as he stopped the recording palpable. “Beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” said Duncan. Or he might have said “Beautiful,” as if it were an unquestionable beauty. Probably just agreeing — probably just agreeing and that was why they kept looking at each other as a car drove onto the gravel outside and Lauren needed to go and check she had put away the compact discs and LPs from the night before, to freshen up, open the window, the scent of the music all sweet and deafening.

XVIII

Conrad had arrived. He got out in his mirror shades and waved his tangerine handkerchief and limped with his black-and-chrome pimp-stick towards Lauren and Duncan, like a gangster-suited Pissarro — red-ochre pinstripes on Peach-black; green-ochre shirt; felt fedora in vermilion; million-dollar smile glinting in the midday light.

Guillaume opened Harriet's door. Her laugh got out first, then her big-brimmed hat, then Véronique, who blinked in disbelief at the brightness of the sun and the size of the house. Conrad stood by Lauren, held his arm at the two women — impresario, pimp, and Lord Golden of Aix — then leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Lauren walked over to hug Harriet and her new friend. "Hi. Glad you could come. The more the merrier. You must be Véronique?"

Conrad liked her. She was full of beans. They had few drinks on the train. Her dad began playing the trumpet when they left Paris and by the time they got to Avignon, she had only just met Simon. Harriet was on good form, too — was she looking forward to seeing Lauren that much? Veronique's mum sang in the shower. Her brother had a pure voice as boy. He kept it when it broke. Sounded like a poor sort of home. Financially. The boy's voice lacked power, but still he had technique. He met other musicians. He found the clubs and the girls. He had to compete. He tried then to sound like others — imitation not innovation — like pop singers. Fame and immortality through talent. She knew it.

No questions. This girl didn't draw breath. Her brother despised his own talent. Lost interest. They talked — her and Harriet — about learning music and keeping making mistakes. Practising the wrong notes. It was harder to change. Life's like that.

"This young lady can sure talk!" said Conrad. They all laughed. He knew he was ridiculous. It was a fun persona. "We saw her. She did a montage of Nina Simone songs. It was a little club." She told a story about her grandmother.

"Oh yes," smiled Lauren. "You wore a bright yellow dress."

"You have a good memory," said Veronique. "I still have that dress." She turned, "Duncan, I presume?" She had heard about him from Simon. The eight, five, three, whatever nonsense counting they did. He looked a bit bored. Or boring. Like a waiter.

Then Harriet said, "You've met her husband, Simon," and Veronique

saw — nothing, not a flicker of recognition.

“The bass player?” asked Duncan. She nodded. “And you sing? But don’t perform together?” He felt racist for comparing her in his mind with Mizzi, Jane Porter’s friend. She had the same hairstyle. And was black. His mind made the connection between the two relationships knowing nothing about them.

“We make music better at a distance,” she smiled. “For now anyway.”

Conrad waved his arms, ushering them inside. He was keen to show off the house — had Lauren given Duncan the tour of the place? — to Veronique, to let Harriet loose on whichever piano she wanted, or both. They could play some music. But after lunch. Some years ago he met a Californian who had moved to Provence to paint — the light, the colours, wandering around backstage with the dancers, smelling the heathers and figs fresh from the trees that inspired her art — and run some retreats, but found her calling as a chef. She fell in love with the local produce, the simple, the complex, the meals she could make between putting coats of gesso on canvases or boards; the joy in slicing lemons slowly instead of with the gadget she had back home. Conrad had met her at a local market, both amused that their hands met attempting to pick up the same watermelon. She knew of him, of course. Had heard of his galleries. And paints? — No, that was a different Golden. They had a light lunch and sat sipping espresso and cognac at rough and ready table beneath a row of plane trees. People walked by, pleased to find a gentle breeze or dappled shade, flapping along like slow laundry. They sat for several minutes without feeling the need to speak, the sound of *boules* thumping lightly on the dry earth. Now he bought hampers of food from her.

“That’s a nice suit, honey,” said Lauren as she passed by him. A new suit used to cause her to pause, to touch, to check every detail and stitch. He would do the same when she bought a dress. It was a game. It was fun to take time touching and stretching this and that piece of material. He would tickle her, she would enjoy the breadth of his shoulders. He leaned on his stick. Close up, he was vanishing as he expanded. The older — the younger — Conrad, the fiercely bright force dimmed as his voice got louder and more vulgar, his appetite for self-destruction voracious.

It would have been better for him — for Lauren — if he had died when he came off his motorbike. Dying accidentally, tragically, somewhat heroically, taking risks and leaving behind a beautiful grieving wife — that made sense to him. He carried tons and yards of cloth in his arms doing deliveries as

young man. He made a hundred deals a day when he started opening galleries, buying paintings, schmoozing with wealthy customers, massaging the egos of fragile artists. And every day he went home to her with flowers — every day. She waited on the doorstep, not because he trained her to, like a dog that collected its master's newspapers, but because they sat and ate and dreamed of places to go and the life they might live, of dancing in Havana, lying on a beach in Mexico, having an adventure in Paris. They never had kids — his mother regretted that for them until she died, then the pressure eased.

Lauren was his greatest investment — all the others were made so he could invest in her. He had made time to speak to her in the most tender terms; she was the person, the thing, the idea he coveted most. But stepping away from what was, away from that distorted perspective, was the whole man as he was now — big and fat and bitter and out to complete the job of wrecking his own happiness. This wasn't the life he wanted. The investment had tanked.

"Did you go out for dinner?" Lauren asked. A flicker. "You just winced."

"Didn't," he said. His eyes avoiding hers. "This wine isn't sitting right just now. I have gallstones." Too much steak and red wine and cheese. He loved France. "Or something."

"That waitress thinks you've got a thing for her," said Lauren. "They're going to put your name on the chair you sit at."

"Does steak causes gallstones?" The pain in his leg a very long needle being inserted below his knee and rammed through the length of his thigh. He winced again. "Which waitress?" And again. "The cute one?"

"Conrad!" Lauren snapped. The others looked away. "Making yourself sick from dining out is nothing to gloat about." He was touched by her rebuke. Then sad. They were dining out on memories. Better times. Their last meal together had probably already happened. She danced with another man for him. He was a voyeur of his own wife. He found he window-shopped more, had become a sucker for eyecandy, for pretty girls. And real candy — he still loved those red strawberry-flavoured strings of sugar that smelt like the inside of a cab.

Business was good, better than ever. Lauren was flourishing, more beautiful now than when they had met. She was a force of nature. She cared — but her concern for him was like that of a daughter for her father, not that of one lover for another. He knew there was nothing attractive about him for her. When it came to it, money wouldn't be enough. He was already a lonely

old man destined to act out the part he had already begun to rehearse, waiting to be alone.

“What did you do to get up to last night?” asked Harriet, smiling at Duncan then Lauren. There was a hesitation. Lauren looked at Conrad, then to Duncan.

“We went swimming,” said Duncan. “Then listened to some music.” He was a straight-forward guy. There was no elaboration, no rehearsed story-spinning because there was nothing to cover up.

“Together?” Harriet asked, no doubt puzzled at the break in Lauren’s routine. Lauren always swam in the morning.

“It was long train ride,” said Lauren. “I swam this morning too.”

“I brought my costume,” said Veronique.

“Glad to hear it,” said Conrad. “No point having a pool and not using it.” Harriet seemed to have warmed to him recently. Helping out Antoine the night before, getting the train down together. Lauren treated her like a project sometimes, a slight edge of superiority creeping in. Harriet could be wafty and ditzy in her communication. Artistry and precision in one area often left a lack of practicality or indifference towards others. Other than dancing, Lauren, like him, was more of a voyeur, and at times seemed to want to direct Harriet’s talent and success, live it out vicariously. She had once gone as far as calling venues, sounding them out, having flyers and posters designed all without Harriet’s knowledge.

She looked relaxed around Duncan. She would no doubt be hatching designs on Harriet’s behalf there too, playing matchmaker like her mother did, who once organised a huge party in Aspen just to leave young man and woman stranded in a log cabin in the thick snowy pines. Their daughter — Aspen — was born a year later. Lauren’s mother was made Godmother.

Lauren had pushed back at that time against her mother’s playful interference, which she read as crude — the deliberate ploy to have a young couple get together and have sex was blown out of proportion, Lauren retold as a manipulation, rather than the gentle nudge it was.

She relaxed in Havana. The heat and the dancing. The alcohol probably helping. She sang terribly, but loudly and with a lot of enthusiasm, which was endearing and infectious. In his dressing room he had pictures from that time. Those tall colonial ceilings, drapes blowing in the breeze, the chromed up fenders on 1950s Cadillacs, the washed-out, crumbling walls were the same as in any one else’s photographs, but his had Lauren. She sat curled up in a wicker chair, the sunset out the window, wearing an evening

dress and fake fur and high heels, sipping champagne from the bottle. She had laughed and it ran down her chin; jumped at the cold on her skin. She got changed; he helped her. They finished the champagne and went out to a club. He wore a vivid suit in purple or electric blue and a fedora or a Panama hat. He forgot. His eyes had been on her and hers on him.

There was the pop of a bottle of fizz and Harry and Véronique made approving noises — she had been approving since she arrived, looking at the huge abstract paintings in the entrance hall, the myriad kitchen gadgets, then out of the window the view of the vineyards and the hills beyond. Conrad had some sparkling water and, perhaps because he had overdone it the night before, Duncan asked for the same.

“Shall we have a drink then split up?” Lauren asked Conrad. “Girls tour with me, boys tour with you?” She led the way; made the drinks; took the girls upstairs first to see the bedrooms.

It bothered her that they had separate rooms. The logic escaped him, that she was ashamed they slept apart when it clearly disgusted her that they might sleep together. Their laughter bounced around the stairs — Harriet never failed to pass comment on the paintings of tumbling, abstract nudes on the way up to the bedrooms, as if they announced a kind of transition into a land of flesh and fornication. They were there because they looked good. Conrad would announce their separate rooms at that point, prepare the tourists in advance. Lauren would whisper it as they entered.

It had been his initiative. A temporary fix following his accident. They had the rooms already — for those times when he wanted to get up early to work. It was often as early as four or five in the morning when he got up and looked out at the mists on peak and valley undecided on whether to blow away, clinging to the world, or float in chilling cotton fields.

She had an eye for decorating. She had learned the palettes of great painters — she had surpassed him in understanding the technical aspects of pigment and brush — and changed and honed the hues and shades of the rooms with taste and confidence. His weight grew analogous to her intellectual renaissance, but not because of it. The drinking slipped from social to essential.

She still kept a photograph from their wedding day in her dressing room. He would check it was still there from time to time, fearful one day it might be tossed in the wastepaper basket. It was of her, dressing before the big event, captured in a pensive moment of looking in the mirror, and of course the future, at herself. The rest of the room blurred out in reflection, all speed-

ing colours and cold glass, like a cab or a train with a face pressed to the glass.

“Alright, Conrad?” Duncan patted his back. “Strawberries? You smell them?”

“Veronique’s lip gloss,” said Conrad. She had put it on in the train and in the car and in the kitchen as she drank her champagne. It was sweet. Would Lauren tell them, as they walked around, that he was no longer attractive to her?

“This is you?” Duncan tapped a little square photograph pulled from an album of their trip to Havana. Conrad nodded. He had shades pushed up in his thick blonded hair, and a white suit with the sleeves turned up. “You look like Crockett from Miami Vice. You liked cars?”

“That’s a neat segue-way. Follow me.” They went out onto the veranda and across the lawn, and around a hedge and down a set of stone steps, Conrad descending them side on. On the terrace below was the outdoor pool, hidden by the drop in level and foliage from the house. It was covered over, due for draining soon for its seasonal scrub-down.

The pool house had a casual outdoor kitchen space by the pool, of a type they had seen in Brasil, In spring and summer the trellis and pagodas were thick with wisteria then clematis and honeysuckle that provided leafy shade. Against the yellow walls grew lemons; almond and fig trees covered an area set aside to play *boules* — a nod to their friendship with a painterly chef.

“This looks Arabic,” said Duncan.

“It was a laundry. You’ll see there are still the fittings still in the roof. This is my favourite space here. You’ll see why.” The roof had initially had a through-draft, similar to those spaces in the tops of houses that Gaudi designed for a similar purpose. Inside the first room was private and dim, the only light from a few fanlights high on the wall. The simple flagstone floor had drains along its edge. There were a pair of cubicles to shower and change in. Above were remains of the pulleys and racks, the filled in ventilators.

A bright shaft of light hinted at the vast windows in the next room, Conrad pleased to see Duncan’s jaw drop. “I didn’t expect this.”

Conrad began the tour, beginning with the Moto Guzzi he bought at auction in Milan, followed by a row of Harley Davidsons. He pointed to a poster on the wall of a young woman standing on the seat of his teal 1940s Hydra Glide. Duncan did a double take, peering at the younger, but pretty unchanged, Lauren. She was in her leathers, looking like a pilot with her helmet dangled from one hand with the goggles worn as a headband, her

scarf tied as a kerchief around her neck for the photo. Duncan glanced around the walls — looking for more of Lauren? — and listened with enthusiasm to Conrad's tales of their trips on his GoldWing.

Conrad came over all Jay Leno talking about his Enfields. He persuaded Duncan so sit on his Fat Boy custom, enjoying the boyish glint on his face when the hog flub-dubbed into life, the walls shaking like it was a cathedral to bikes, the pipes throbbing under the seat. They both grinned.

There were two Ducatis and the Africa Twin that Lauren squealed on the back of because it was so high of the ground, and then the Honda RC30 that nearly killed him, polished and gleaming. Conrad was sure the world of bikes was as alien to Duncan as pianos and acoustics and the like were to him. He seemed to recognise the pride of place of the Honda.

"I get the impression this one is special," said Duncan. "She looks a bit mean."

"I kept the wreckage. Then later I had it restored and kept it. It's a reminder. How I escaped." He went to pass it and the pocket of his jacket snagged the clutch lever. He was pulled back, dropping his stick with a snap on the floor. He lost his footing and collapsed in a heap, his fiery fedora rolling off down the row of bikes. Duncan collected the stick and helped him to his feet. Conrad was grateful he pulled him up roughly, as if they had been riding together and come off. Had a narrow escape. Rather than as an old man. "All this to look forward to. Ever read Hemingway?" Duncan shook his head. Conrad patted the bike. Imagined what it would be like to ride again, to ride as far and fast as he could on and on until he did it right next time, and the pain stopped and the stick no longer mocked him.

"I have a friend here who makes fabulous food," said Conrad as they walked back across the lawn to the house. "She wanted to paint before coming halfway across the world." Lauren had organised Harriet and Véronique to bring the food out from the kitchen. The sun laid out wide stripes of barley light across the patio. The hedges kept the wind at bay, making the day unseasonably warm. Conrad appreciated Duncan's looks of concern for him as they crossed and uneven patch of land. "You liked the Faziolis?" Conrad presumed he had at least seen them since arriving. In fact, knowing Lauren she had sat him down at one and ordered him to get on and play it. But Duncan was a project for Harriet, he was sure. Not sure enough to bet he would have a Godchild called Aix in twelve months. Certain they could help each other. Lauren had motivated him to work and

keep doing all of this, — he looked around at the house, the unseen buildings and years of work building the business — for her. For them. He was no Professor Higgins: Lauren was, and would be, eternally bright, except where the drink fuzzed the edges of his memory.

“Of course. I feel there’s something you want to ask, Conrad?” Duncan glanced back towards his collection of bikes, back towards his fall, towards the unused pool covered over and preparing for winter.

“Could you see yourself living here?” asked Conrad.

“Oh sure,” Duncan grinned; Conrad nodded. “Or do you mean — ”

“Move to France,” said Conrad. “Rent a place. I’ll lend you a piano. Learn the language. Expand your business. Or do something different.”

“I like it here.” Duncan smiled at him. Not taking the bait. “But I can do all those things in England. There would have to be a good reason.”

“Hey, you guys!” Harriet panted, having run across the lawn to them. “Lunch is ready.” She was on good form, putting an arm through each of theirs as they walked towards the house. “Duncan, a little birdy tells me you’ve been composing. But first, how cool are those pianos? Véronique and I thought we’d do a few numbers later.”

Conrad was growing into the role of benevolent uncle. Perhaps the Godchild would be called Fazioli.

XIX

A Fine Romance.

Up tempo. A heavy shawl of silence. Her hips sway gently. Syrup and fig voice. She liked the song. The walls moonlit from tall windows. They were virtual strangers. The light, dry sparkle of her silvered the walls. Bluish background, their faces glowed warm. A delicate touch, understated but swinging. Finger clicking. Hot tomatoes. Filmic lamps set artfully spotlighted her. Singing smile framed. Festoon bulbs on the terrace — imagine the dancers, tall with slicked down hair and dinner jackets and pencil-line dresses, confessing love or that her eyes were like this or that or he swept her here or there, bubbles of reality rising and bursting in their glassy, liquid, champagne of a dance — were strung from pole to pole like bow to stern. A little scat singing; the piano striding. The bulbs like the frame like a Hollywood mirror, a pier, a steamship, a restaurant by Canal Saint-Martin with a bottle of fizz and glasses, high heels clicking down the steps to the water's edge, the rickety pagoda in Havana wrapped in fizzing bulbs that flashed on and off slow with no particular alarm. The wind came in gentle, occasional wisps, breathing at the door. Her blue dress undone, the warm copper-blondes and bronzes-browns of wood and string glowing along her length.

I Got Rhythm

Count in: eight, five, three, two, one, one. Repeated notes — Oscar Peterson style — the slick licked foxtrot-ragtime with Upbeat Claps and giggles and more Champagne. Sliding in on old man trouble, her voice agile here, strong and pulsing there. A shoe dangling from a foot, the arch curling and toes pulsing to the beat; the long drapes in a syncopated sway stay one side longer, the tick tock flutter of the musical air — the variations in pressure that went on and on like an Amazonian butterfly's wings — that filled the room. More scat and the shoe dropped off with a whoop. Pimp stick tapped in time on the floor. It was difficult to separate the beauty of her sound from the beauty of her face as they played.

Fever

She moved to the window, perched on a bar stool, wrapped in the diaphanous drapes. Looked up bedazzled by the bright stars and slow

light, her voice alone, unaccompanied. He never knew how much she loved him. In her boots — not her first Rodeo — that dangled her feet over the edge of a smooth,

and short bright blue dress that fizzed and popped a cork, garnering applause from two young men on a boat nearby. Off the coast of Mexico. Rubbing her legs together at the knees. She was laughing. He was being funny. Always funny. She poured. The boat lurching. His hand moving his glass and hers. It was nothing — they were nothing, these bubbles that fizzed and popped and made her smile; these little weights of disappointment that dragged them down. They were nothing. Who would look and wonder how they kept afloat. Fahrenheit or Centigrade. Spills never mattered then, in the

timeless ebb and flow that came in the right hand. The big bass behind not leading; heavier, sweating, but filled with desire, touching the beat occasionally then letting it drift ahead. *Poco a poco accelerando*. Finger clicks synced on the off and the on. Rhythmic smudge and happy-sad bitter-sweet tears down a face turned to the dark side of the mooned room.

I Put A Spell On You

In the close pose. Tux and dress. Blue jeans and chinos. A thousand miles of slow — a thousand thousand miles of slow slow stoodstill dance, her face, his face, his hands, her hands, skin and scent and shimmering taffeta in the dreaming disco-ball turn of the stars in the sky on the roof and a sweet shuffle slipping off the edge of now. Her voice a horn; brass-bold; bent at the hip like a sax player and a sax being played, gritty pains and rude and rasping *digga dag dow!* A sinister pied piper in a bright suit. Her voice pulsed in rupturing jealous molasses. Her piano a relentless cage of locked-in grooves of pain that trapped with mocking trills the bird that couldn't escape, a hummingbird bright and blue and metallic battering its feathers on the walls and falling flightless to the floor. She had fallen for the witchcraft in the fullish foolish moon, the stabbing triangles on the wood-panelled walls and thick lush rugs underfoot, angular and cold and bitter, the shoe slipped from her foot. Held in the music's stare; no gaps in the quick-anxious eddies of anticipated regret to look away — “a moving performance, so moving,” she would say, if caught breathless and tearful.

Flippant and exuberant; delicate and saccharine; fingering light gestures under the melted, saxed-up vocal. A stubborn steel in her blue-note body,

in the questions they asked and the flinty frail answers.

A nervous, spontaneous applause blinked and cleared the tension. Lovely, lovely. So talented.

The One That Got Away

An arpeggio, a familiar Debussyan chiaroscuro from deep depths to brittle bell-like highs. Both sang, their voices married together, standing in the chapel, *a cappella*; Véronique's lush *arco* cello, a bow of pain thick with rosin across it; Harriet's voice in gentle, brittle harmony, a wet, wine-reddened finger circling the rim of a glass. They never meant to get them in that deep. Caught in the chase. Raw fifths. Hair in tumbling flames of rebuke and resented, remembered longing. Power chords thundered. Singing to each other, eyes far off and close in ooze of a tense myopia; quiet, and quieter, the whispering walls leaning in to hear them.

The air ripped and wretched in their raucous, triumphant release, their stamped feet and slapped black bruised blue notes from the Fazioli's case.

A nervous silence; their imaginations were caught miles from their conscious home, slipping back as if across the lawn and terrace, running now to arrive in time, to hold hands in front of their disarranged faces.

Lovely, lovely. So talented.

Untitled Musical Noodlings Volume Two

A needle of light crossed the keys of the one, the other was in darkness. New friends like old friends now; the memory rich and ringing in his ear, the new soundtrack to those places he went. But not there — not to Mr Porter, or Clara, or the past that stuck itself to every close, brief, or regretted encounter since — he flitted between the Harriet in the club and Harriet intense and moving with Véronique.

He took out his phone, put it on the top board, finding the recoding from the previous day. Thick and lumpen, his hands sounded uncoordinated, spastic then frigid, too placid then too heavy. He stopped it, tutting audibly in the air. The needle of light blunted as it fell on the floor, the rug refusing to give up another of Muse's secret fantasies. It started up again, his melody, but now much cleaner, the chords underneath filled out with colour. The

sound coming from the dark end of the room. He got up and walked over to the other piano, that turned his music over and over, finding in it new tensions and resolutions.

He stood by her and she shuffled along for him to sit. He watched her hands play his music. Their music. She stopped and took his hand casually, as if to place it on the keyboard, but then just sat. The silence teaching them.

XX

Harriet came to her café, but without Lauren, or her husband, Conrad, who she saw three nights before by the river with the English man and heard when she was with Paula her friend who they called Penelope Cruz in a nice kind of teasing way, and Conrad told her they were going to Provence — “Océana, he looked at me, you know,” said Paula, her eyes big and staring like Conrad’s did after his steak and wine — and they talked about him and his lovely wife and Harriet, who Océana knew to look at, and she sat at a table in the corner. Paula studied law and rode Arabian horses and danced the Argentinian Tango, she did everything well,

in the circus that Océana

went to in her childhood in some years and not in others but in orange and red stripes on the roof and the painted rhinos and elephants on the boards that enclosed the sawdusted ring and a big glass tank filled with water that was bubbled with streams of air and fake plastic plants that waved green in places and the people on the other side rippled and moved with the water as if they were paintings, as if they dissolved, the people on the other side like the ones on this, the reflection their disbelief that they wanted to suspend, for reality to suspend for an hour or a few minutes while they watched the acts that became normal over the years. The girls dressed in silver (and one man, once) twirled and span around in sequins and the air on the poles and bars and (with gasps) swimming in gravity, they would smile then, their faces shocked, one would plunge downwards (more gasps) and land ungainly in the water. Splashed with a sudden reality, the audience were on their feet, as if shouting ‘he’s behind you’ the long-bearded villain in a pantomime, cheering the truncheon that tenderized Punchinello, the bubbles now fierce in the water, the fake plastic weeds somehow thicker as they tried to find the fallen artist. But then a cable broke, another screamed and fell, taking with a friend who reached for her, both tumbling open-mouthed and shrieking into the water. One remained, clinging to her perch. Mothers covered children’s eyes, fathers appealed to the man in the top hat who shrugged then tapped his nose to some. The bubbles stopped and the three now mermaids swam around the tank, then elevated by some contraption, leapt high in the air, flipping as fish might, joyful in their tank. The final one dived, and, in the flutter of a fin, turned into a mermaid. This mermaid, the last one, the star of the show,

confident and carefree, Paula would always

find the pool and smile in the end. Océana worked before at *Le Cru et le Cuit*, the jazz club with rugs and waitresses instead of a striped roof and trapeze mermaids, and it had Mustafa with his saxophone instead of the man in the top hat and the ship and it had her best friend Dana and two other girls in Saint-Denis who studied events management and hotels and catering. They all swung in sequins so that one day they could emerge as mermaids from the pool.

Harriet had changed her hair, it was red now like it was when first she had come to the club and played on the stage with Mustafa. She played with strands of it and their eyes met and a smile fluttered and tickled the corners of Harriet's mouth then flew away. They made a pact in that look, they watched a couple kissing at a nearby table, he was a man from the offices along the street, he had a *pied a terre*

the clowns with big red noses and tufts of orange hair had the girls with feathered fans and boas in white and red and hummingbird blue queue to get in the tiny car that drove them, one by one, to the circus canon that fired them across to land in the unruffled and smiling in the net where they would preen and twirl over the edge to be caught by another clown in tartan trousers and big yellow boots with a klaxon he blew to make her flutter and skip and leap to join the queue again, her feathers dropped loosed by exertion, the clown picking them up, showing them to the cheering crowd.

and a secretary whose hair worked loose from the rest and fell to her cheek over her ear so that he replaced it. She had a new dress. It looked like a present. He had treated her and dressed her in his favourite colour, it was lucky for her it suited her, that she suited him just now. "My arms are flabby!" the woman said. He denied it. Next month it would be a different dress, a different woman, perhaps when he grew into the idea her arms were flabby. He always ordered the same thing but looked disappointed when it arrived. Conrad, the American with the big eyes and appetite, would order the same thing and be excited as if it was the first time to be eating it — an insane joke with the punchline his waistline, that somehow by eating and eating he would not be a fat man with a cane that should wear a top hat and work for a circus. She pointed to Harriet's glass and she put her hand over it. They shared a little smile, the look of rolling eyes or maybe a little nauseous. She could see inside their open mouths that they closed, ashamed when eating food, their lips like

shells that almost hid the mating, slimy, snails of their tongues.

She had an idea that she worked on between waiting tables and delivering meals and watching gastropods rasp secretaries with their thousand rapacious barbs. Part of it was to remodel those works of art that were left incomplete; she had visited Glasgow in Scotland — where it rained so much they left home with coracles instead of umbrellas so they could float home. Not really! She liked that joke — and Rennie Mackintosh's *House for an Art Lover*, built from his plans, her idea grew there. Taking unfinished symphonies, sketches made by sculptors, lines of poems, patterns or cut-out fabric; sequins or feathers scraps of blue taken out from behind their museum glass or where they were pinned to a manekin, waiting to be made something of. Unmade Dreams. Harriet beckoned her over.

"Hello, Harriet," said Océana. Up close, she was like the one who had fallen first, who had to let go and fall in the pool, her hair red and floating as a fairy or a nymph or the spirit of a river. She had stayed under longest, but she would leap and leave the pool in time.

"You know my name?" Harriet looked around for how this was possible.

"Yes, of course. You are a friend of Dana," said Océana. Harriet looked surprise and then smiled and seemed to take the idea of a shared friend and cuddle it. "I lived with her," Océana went on. "You want a drink. Are you eating? Where are your American friends?"

"I love Dana. I saw her just the other night."

"You played. Someone told me." There was surprise again on Harriet's face, then perhaps the tent closed in on her. She looked like she thought her arms were flabby; the clown, Muse, picking up her feathers and showing them to her audience. "I will come next time," Océana smiled. "Tell me when you are playing." The Mackintosh house had low dark passages and bright high ceilings. The space designed to show off the art was also the journey of the artist, the moment of light and genesis — but it was wrong in the greys of Glasgow. Why not the purples of Provence?

"Can you sit with me for a minute?" asked Harriet. She looked pleased to be able to ask in a natural way that flowed from a shared friend. "I wanted to ask you something about my friends. My friend. The American. Can I get a coffee, maybe?"

"Latte, as usual?" Océana asked. Harriet nodded. "I have a break soon. I'll sit with you." Harriet looked relieved. "Lauren — her name's Lauren, right?" Harriet nodded again. It made it easier that Océana knew Dana, not having

to tell everything, to have someone know what it was to be you.

She cleared a table and lived alone in a tiny flat. It was so small that when she brought shopping bags and put them on the floor by her feet in the hallway, she had no room to take off her shoes. Her bedroom in her parents home had been bigger than her whole flat. She was animated and excited and clattered the dishes into the kitchen, the glasses in the washer. Grabbed a cloth. The ceilings were lofty, the walls bare, the floors varnished wood and the scattered rugs matched the neutral and natural tones but clashed with each other. The bathroom had a curtain instead of a door, like a changing room in the shop her friend worked at. She could watch television while sitting on the toilet. Two skylights, each the size of a sheet of office paper, projected the sun on the wall in square hands that moved through the day and made a sort of clock. She wiped the table. There were only a few square metres of magnolia on her walls, but it took many hours for the light from the ceiling to pass over them. The time of real things in her life passed slowly in her mind and opportunities so quickly. She would cover the walls with willow twigs with little lights and photographs and postcards or ideas for her art plan like scraps of fabric and sketches of people or things. She ground the coffee, tamping it in the sump. In the café she could blink, a camera shutter, and miss a whole life sitting waiting on her.

She was cleaning the coffee machine when Lauren first came. Conrad had already eaten and drunk

She climbed the barrier just as the mangy monkeys rode the elephants from the ring, the chains around their ankles decorated with sparkling sequins, their red, blue, or yellow turbans feathered and raised by the cheeky chimps, and she fell in the sawdust but outran the clowns who tried to grab her as she got to the man in his top hat and screamed, pointing at a timid mermaid and he gestured to the crowd, shot a gun in the air and into the ring roared a motorbike ridden by Elvis, a hoop bursting into flames at the farthest end, and nobody was looking at her, his wife, as the top-hatted man had her led off by the clowns, who fell about, pointing to her as if she was drunk

a bottle of wine, already ordering his second. A glamorous and elegant woman, she was chic in her jeans and white blouse and never flash. She came into the cafe and sat for a moment at the table Harriet was at now before getting up, agitated and asked if she could use the restroom. Océana was still new then. With walking between tables and bending and lifting and wiping and washing made her calves

complain and the small of her back yearn for bed or a hot bath. She felt the dry skin on her knuckles and the lank greasiness of her hair. Her nails were chipped Lauren came out and she smelt of smoke of perfume. But Conrad, he often had on so much cologne, like an overweight taxi driver, the stench of sweet sweaty musk and strawberry air freshener. Lauren stopped to say thank you pressed what she thought was going to be a tip in her hand. “For your skin, sweetie.” The cream could have been alabaster jar of oil the way Océana felt to thank her. Lauren pressed her finger to her lips, as if Conrad might overhear the beauty of her heart and steal it for himself.

She had kept the jar. It was still amongst the few bottles of creams and lotions she had that were arranged around the back of her extravagant mirror with its heavy silver gilt frame — she was told she needed to know herself better by a man who jilted her, and so she bought the mirror to watch herself be beautiful and to laugh at him. It stood at an easel, her war paints arranged below in a wooden trug.

“Like the Folies Bergère,” Conrad had said to her in the café standing behind her as they both looked in the mirror behind the bar. It was as if he wore a Top Hat and her vacant stare was one of longing rather than tiredness. “Like a canvas, yes?” She knew it was Manet, the the model was Victorine Meurent, but why let him talk more as if he could teach her something, gift her a dress or a mirror then make her feel her arms looked flabby or tell her who she was. She gave him his bill and he paid in cash, with a show-off flourish.

“Degas beat his models,” she said. Or she wanted to. Pretended to be a womaniser when he was really a very dull snob. She took over Harriet’s coffee and sat down, taking off her pinnie.

“Here is your latte,” Océana smiled and rested her head on her hand, her elbow on the table. “You were going to talk about your friend Lauren. You know she was very nice to me several times?”

“No. I didn’t. She’s lovely to everyone. You know her husband, Conrad?” Harriet asked. Océana did. She knew Eloise too, of course. from *Le Cru et le Cuit*. A sweet lady whose brother was a *pierrot* even without makeup, a constantly sad and anxious face. Muse and Conrad wore the same Top Hat.

“This is between us?” Océana asked. Harriet nodded. Leaning forward. “He is an ass. He offered me a job.” Harriet went to speak, but Océana shook her head. “I would not work for him. In the same way that you would not, I think, work with Mustafa again.” She might have said too much because there was a glance of shame towards the ground. “You wanted to warn me,

I think?” Harriet nodded, looking angry at her own tears. There was no cream in a jar Océana could give her for those. “Drink, while it is warm.” She pushed the cup closer.

Harriet went to lift it and Océana took her hand.

“Thank you,” they chorused.

Océana was tying her pinnie back on when the business man waved at her to bring the bill, he was ready to take the secretary home. “When you play, bring in some flyers. People ask — tourists — for things to go and see.” She smiled, leaving Harriet alone with her coffee.

XXI

A thick and sticky chocolate ooze, the syrup rush, the smell of the roasting nuts and caramel-butter sauces, treacled coffee, those red Formica tables, two suited guys and two suited gals sharing a box of apple tart and laughing as if life had just begun and loosened ties and tongues with business done for the day. Harriet knew at least Océana and her best friend liked to hear her play, the city that excited rather than intimidated, was moody, broody, vibrant and edgy in its darkness rather than sinister and closed and lifeless. The soundtrack from a vintage-look radio played a mix of Rat Pack crooners — songs of lovers' moons sing with silver tongues — from the top shelf and played to the girls go by who slumped in a leatherette upholstered booth through the back with their shopping bags, their giggling gossip pouring over phones and photos, sometimes singing, othertimes tapping, pointing, waving menus, the whole of their short bright pasts projecting from their luminous presence with all the time in the world and no time for downsides, consequence or upshots, or even breathing between words but full of the imperative of youth to experience as much and as quickly as possible, all that was possible not yet rescheduled by sadness or doubt — she sent a quick impromptu text to Duncan, inspired to be impulsive, “Are you free just now? Can I come round? Just a social visit”; his response immediate and positive, “Social most welcome. See you when I see you”; she ordered crepes to take away — their conspiracy a shadowy *deja-vu*, an enchanted forest along the narrow street where she resisted the sad cycle, the self-talking, -deprecating, -abusive, -destroying, -mutilating, hopeless words of fear, to move past the past, be present in the present, the entrances all looking the same with their buzzers and doors in doors, that violin frail and lyrical on the wind in her ear, then gone, played for and heard only for her, or it was the melody of someone else's life, their upward leaps and downward tumbles, the music so faint, its past filled with the flotsam and fuzz of street noise and breeze, its future choked and silent.

A buzz-and-click, the cobbled mews still with the dry and damp of an inside-outside space, of bottled, unpassed time contained in the same stale air, a million piano strings left to ring to the sound of doors opening and closing, living diapasons, the traffic passing outside, the transient ins and outs of thousands of lives, after their crepes and cocktails in their loosened business suits, in their romantic fondles in the dark, the rattle of the prams and cries of their children, and late for work, their coughs, their feet stamped

hurried and cold in snowy winters and sighing in the cool dimness at the height of summer, the strings almost still, but when she touched the stone on the walls, like the sand of the beach where she made and unmade herself, her flattened form plucked by the waves of the sea, like the bark of the tree that gave up a serpent or dragon in its bark, like the surface of the pond's water that was rippled and made beautiful by the laughter of her friend, these walls still vibrated like a tuning fork struck and placed to excite the mind's eye — a second click and crackle from a speaker in a box on the wall. Glass doors swung open to the loud click-clack echo of her shoes on the tiled floor, and a tight glass lift shaft wrapped in a staircase, a helter-skelter that was all climb and no slide, the smell of crepes thickening with each floor in the tight space, her mouth watering, her unrehearsed words turning round in the butter and sugar and coated in sweet, sticky hope, and he opened the door on her thoughts of how an hour or two before Océana had spoken to her like a water nymph, a prophet, a seer that knew her and still wanted to hear her play, absolved in a cup of coffee, in a minute of understanding that lifted up her head and made her remember what it was to be young and eat desserts with friends, to hear familiar music in a foreign land, and she had returned to that unhaunted place and thought of Duncan feeling foreign, maybe a little haunted, so she was there, and hoped he had forks and glasses and something to drink.

The flat suited him, suited her idea of him, the uncomplicated walls with stock prints of Paris scenes, the high ceilings to think lofty thoughts or else fill with music — high levels, high volumes — and rustic shelves of vinyl records and dusty music books, a piano in the lounge, turned to look out across the lead and tiled grey of the rooftops, the vanishing point of inspiration as he got to grips with playing again, or worked at a desk, those multi-dimensional drawings of buildings and noise filling the screen of his laptop.

Several carrier bags of wine were lined across a wall of the floor, a brand new case with wheels by them — she laughed: they were persuasive and charming, these sales people of Paris. Harriet and Duncan spoke of the wine shop with its wooden shelves loaded with memories of fruit-stained legs and sanguine regrets or as yet uncorked romances with their serious, heavy, drunken love grown on the vines of vast estates or the light, arid soils of a hobby vineyard, and he poured, they ate, listening to Charlie Mingus's *Ah Um*, its up-front grooves and pleasant, insistent incessancy shuffling in

splashing cymbals, crass brash brass and hand-clap breaks.

Windows had open drapes or shutters partially open, people sat at dinner, or exercising, playing violin — Ah, that's where it came from! — a woman two floors down and three across looking straight ahead, a glass of wine in her hand, a large man standing behind her, a Conrad and a Lauren living in a different key but harmonising the same upward leaps and downward slides as Duncan came and stood behind her, the two couples could have raised glasses, a toast to the unwritten coded contract between the viewer and viewed, of voyeurs looking to catch the exhibitionist unawares, their guard down, the strip without the tease — “Nice drop” — her glass turning slow in her fingers as he topped her up, and he spoke about the teacher and his pupils, the good and the worse ones, and she laughed an easy laugh, and he wondered if he was much better than a child, his playing all disjointed, but her playing, he said, with Véronique was exquisite, beautiful.

“Like me,” she laughed, and then looked away when he agreed, and unexpected heat from the moment and the wine, finding the cool glass of the window with her forehead, seeing down further than before, there was a piano in a large flat, a man sitting playing, dapper in smoking jacket, all Noel Coward with a young man stand beside him swaying, perhaps singing and Duncan leaned over to see, pressed the glass with his forehead too, his hand resting on her waist and she neither moved away nor towards him, they both wondered what the two men played. The alternate Conrad and Lauren sat with arms around one another on a sofa, the light of a television playing on their faces, and he let his hand fall away, moving to another window and peering at the street below, hands flat against the glass, the street now leafless, still-aired and grey and she smiled at distant passers-by protesting against the coming cold with bright-coloured coats and woolen hats in brazen purples, reds and yellows of summers past and future.

“What will you do about the pianos?” She went to follow his gaze, to see what he saw and he moved away. She knew the look, the descending grey, the déjà vu, and felt guilty for having brought back a memory he had sent away, for breaking the spell.

He had — he paused a censoring pause; a pause that looked at the past through a cataract of well-chosen words — a dilemma, about buying a piano, and she thought he perhaps wanted not to, and how awkward would that be to announce while they ate dessert and drank wine and he touched her waist, both of them with their noses in the glass of romance, of wine and chocolate, waiting for a first sip, neither knowing what happened next, but

he might mean what to do with the other piano, the long-gone recently-dead piano teacher's Steinway whose scent, like the sickly sweet strawberry of a taxi-driver's air freshener, carried through years and remained in his nose and fingers and eyes and in the way he grasped life or let it pass by with a light, brushing touch, desire at fingertip level or where it can be carried away like sounds on the air, or trapped and diffused, locked between two doors of a mews that let nothing in from the outside, nothing exit from within, memories blowing back and forward to resonate and merge and die in the space — no kissing in doorways, no need for prams left on landings, or walks on cold winter days or finding the place cool in summer. A life drawn on the sands of a beach that are washed away on incoming tides.

She put down her glass and went to stand beside him at the window, wishing there was a piano for them to play in the moment. She wanted to blunt the horns of his dilemma over the piano. Duncan looked across the street to where a late-night lesson unfolded between the young teacher and pupil whose perfume might have carried across the street to them in the way she shook her hair and checked her reflection in the window, blind to the world outside of music and her teacher, reality dissolving as she rubbed rosin on her bow while the teacher was out of sight. Harriet laughed now — they should walk to the shop; he should play; they were barely tipsy and able to play, and Duncan took an envelope from his inside pocket and put it in her hand with a weighty, macabre gesture.

This would explain the dilemma, he said, the private and sealed off placed in the open, the curtains flung wide, recluse turned performer and exhibitionist, and it was the unlocking she had wanted to see, but not in this way, she had wanted to recreate the intimacy of their playing in the shop, in the blue panelled room where they held hands in the dark, but she sat in a chair and opened it as Duncan slipped out of the room.

It was a letter Iain Porter sent posthumously.

Hasn't life gone past so quickly. I am Daedalus, who sent you too close to the sun, to burn and fall. [What a funny image: Pretentious, moi?] Forgive me, Duncan. You will remember her, of course, my Steinway. She's been overhauled again since you last played her. I am leaving her to you, Duncan. Jane knows and could not bear her to be with anyone else. No one ever loved her as much as that young Serse, singing to the tree that shaded him with music

and from whatever harsh realities you endured at home.

He sounded quaint, this old man who spoke of pianos like they were women, but there was a tenderness, as if it was his own daughter he was leaving, giving her away in her lustrous gown of polished woods and bright, smiling keys.

I know that you are on a different path now, but I urge you take her back, find how to touch and look after her, to let her teach you. But also, find a good teacher, one whose playing you love, and I hope one who loves you a little. Or perhaps a lot, as I do.

They had seen different things through the window, looking at the young violinist preen and pose, the confusion she knew too well of wanting to please too much, of drawing too many dimensions at once — Harriet had mimicked a teacher in buying the brand of lip salve, the precise weight of paper in her leather bound notebook that her teacher had. Lauren had hinted Harriet might teach Duncan, but logistics aside, she still wasn't sure she had what he wanted.

Perhaps I am mistaken and you play the piano regularly. (Do you remember that man you bettered when you won the all-age class in the county music festival? The one the judge said played Shostakovitch's A major prelude so it sounds like the obnoxious jingle of an ice cream van. I saw him recently — he was selling ice cream can you believe! Of no relevance. Jane would be scornful.)

So he was that good. She smiled, wondered how long ago that was — surely before university, a teenager. She imagined him, assured and confident, but somehow with a laptop and a glass of wine.

Sorry I didn't manage to take you back on to teach you those years ago. I was in a real tizz with the piano being smashed up. Still a mystery after all these years.

It was a mystery now — who has the strength and patience to smash up a piano? Or enough hate and time or blind fury. There had been a piano brought in to the shop that had slipped from a failed sling as it hung from

crane, hoisted through the window of a fifth floor apartment, the legs broken on impact, the wood splitting around the soundboard and rim.

Perhaps it was a fellow student of yours, jealous of our love if they found out about it. Certainly, Jane has never guessed how intimate we had become. I think your mother, bless her soul — such a gentle woman — might have guessed at the truth: that we were lovers from the start.

Oh! — Lovers! — it was the casual, agreeable tone he used, the persuasive illusion that there was collusion between man and boy that sickened most. The need to continue the show — a maniacal compère in Top Hat standing in his red and orange tent, watching the little boy spin and turn in the air in his sequined suit, perfumed and tossing his beautiful hair at him, the taunt of rosin on his bow, and falling down and through the nets and landing face down and sore on the sawdust floor. The clowns coming quick to cheer him, the show going on, the promise of bright lights and being recognised in the street — perhaps by a waitress in a café who had seen the elephants and monkeys or the circus before, and to find enough sweetness in that moment to swallow all the bitterness that had to come before.

The age gap was a little difficult, and perhaps I let myself go a little in the end? That and the distance of you being at university. You might have written at least once — out drinking and smoking instead, no doubt. I was young once too! What's your hair like now? It was lovely long, the way it hung over your shoulders. It was down to your nipples I noticed. I'm not disapproving.

I am flying a little close to the sun myself — I know you'll be concerned, you were always so tactile, or touchable — feathers already dropping off, the sea fearsome and plangent, then stilled; a soothing slough metronome, counting out the last of my days on whispering windy fingers. This is figurative; I believe I have more than ten days as I write this!

I wonder if you have found a Charlotte to your Werther. For all the signs I chose to ignore over the years, Jane insisted she had reason to think you preferred ladies. Perhaps she felt something of you when you danced together. I know I felt jealous watching the two of you, it made me think of you every time after. I even hid the dress Jane wore (sorry Jane!) as it had the smell of you, of the cologne I bought you to mask that horrible reek of cigarettes. I

never liked the taste of them.

She lowered the letter and went to the windows, opening one to gasp at the air and remove the nauseating stench of Iain Porter, her heart beating hard, feeling she would quite like a cigarette, especially if he hated the taste of them.

Twenty years on and I still can't find words of sufficient depth and colour to convey how ashamed I am that I didn't look after you. We might have still been together – Imagine that! I am Tristan and my caesura, my beatless pauses the mark an overture of my own fate. I hope, whatever you decide to do with this, you will consider Jane. If our love affair were to come out, there are some who wouldn't understand the mature feelings you were capable of, the purity of your affections. You will argue, angrily I suspect, that I have no right to make demands of you; that I never considered Jane's feelings overtly while we did what we did (I will spare Jane's blushes, she's not one for hearing accounts of intimacies) and that I cheated on her, but remember she had her Mizzi. She will understand I had needs too. We're not so different after all, she'll have to agree. I did admit to her, she will remember, that from time-to-time I felt towards you something beyond a filial love, but left off the details of where that penumbra of eros cast its shadow on our bed. Such memories! You remember you said you wanted to play me like a piano? So delicious.

I will be dead when you read this. I really should have tried harder to stay in touch and look after you and your musical gift. But my conscience is beyond punishment; a whisper on the wind, the draft of a few fugues blowing the cobwebs out of the old organ. You remember it? Where we met properly. You were so beautiful with your little finger. I hope none of this will tarnish my reputation – I would hate to be thought of as a teacher who didn't fulfil his obligations to his students.

Have you a partner now? I'm feeling jealous. Do you play duets? And dance beautifully? I hope that isn't too insolent – I never did like crudeness.

Much love,

Iain Porter

Duncan came in the room as she put the letter down on the table. She took it up again and folded it gently, putting it back in the envelope, as if it

was the blanket that had wrapped a dead child and its father stood in front of her, looking for an answer as to how this might have happened, and she wasn't sure of why he told her, or what he was asking, and thought in the moment of Océana wanting to bring comfort to her, to make a form of words that made an ointment for the soul. They had looked out of a window together and he had touched her waist as they drank wine; she liked to hear his music; they played music in the dark when he came and sat beside her at the blue piano where she had taken his hand like she took his hand now and shook her head — “I'm so sorry for that boy” — and let him look away and shrug.

She had left the window open and the sounds of the street and the dark starless milk of the sky were permeated with the roar of a distant motorbike. “Do you still smoke?” She asked.

“Only when I get really drunk and eat curry and talk about music into the small hours of the night.”

Harriet picked up her bag from the chair, looking across the street, where now a different set of windows were lit up, some still bright and others dim, each a note on a piano keyboard, the floors the different octaves and the rows the various pitches. The music teacher's apartment was in darkness — the lesson over, or perhaps just beginning, unseen. “Open another bottle. I'm going out for cigarettes and curry.” She went and hugged him, pecked him on both cheeks. “I'll be back soon.”

XXII

Earlier in the day, while they were all still in Aix, Conrad had gone to kiss Lauren's cheek. He leaned in through the open window of the car Guillaume had packed up for them and she had turned away as if to speak to Harriet beside her on the back seat — in Milan he saw Caravaggio's Holofernes beheaded by his Judith, her expression one of disbelief that caught his attention and he stood three metres or so away and a man came and stood directly in front of him, ignorant of entering his gaze, unconcerned as to why Salome would look away from John the Baptist's head, but perhaps it was shame, and he wasn't sure if he would prefer Judith or Salome to carry out the deed, to have a macabre fascination or a casual, morbid regret, so he patted the roof of the car and made small talk with the men who sat in the front, Duncan looking tired from having a secret, late night, assignation with Harriet in the music room — the two of them sitting in pitch blackness, the lightest, most delicate notes had caught his ear as he padded back to his study with a plate of cheese and fruit, the bottle of Yamazaki already had his mind whispering secrets to itself, and stopped by the door but didn't want to go in, not wanting to interrupt them or his enjoyment of whisky. She would be a handful, fiery and a little unpredictable with her artist's temperament. He had theory on whisky and engineering: the Scots had nice roads and bridges, the prettiest distilleries, but had never made a motorcycle; the Americans made rough and crude spirits and huge Harley Davidsons; the Japanese made the best crafted whiskies and motorbikes — but Duncan seemed to have some steel and determination, a stoicism that fought with an inner creative, and they could form an interesting couple, much like he and Lauren had when they found they dreamed the same simple dreams, albeit simple dreams that required substantial financial means to see them through, they could teach each other things.

As the car crunched out over the gravel he tried to list the things he had learnt from Lauren, or been prepared to learn, because it seemed now, when she was driving away from him, that in dealing with others she had a relentless dynamism — her championing of Harriet in her music had promoted him to match, to try and better her generosity. He had been shamed into acting even though it was well within his means to do so, and he done it far more keenly to buy back his wife's affections than to help her friend. His friend. Lauren possessed an intellectual curiosity and capacity for kindness and tolerance of others that astounded him, where time and time again she

had gone to pick up the pieces of friends' lives. They once played Snakes and Ladders in a hotel room in Goa while it rained outside. It was early in their marriage and they looked like a catalogue couple with their floaty white clothes and polished skin. She gasped and consoled him when he landed on a snake, apologised for all the ladders she climbed, the dice clearly bewitched by her caress as he had been. Now the only rolls were those of the fat that hung over the tops of his trousers, that connected his chin to his chest and moved around like sloppy pendulums strapped to his slimmer self.

He rode the A82 in Scotland south from Inverness having bought the Honda from an old coot — Jock, of course — who had raced for years on karts and bikes and travelled down and up to Knock Hill. Jock was a canny engineer and negotiator, he knew every nut and bolt of the Honda, had kept meticulous records of its foibles and odd vibration, talked him through the changes in the engine note as the V4 warmed up, told him about the very long first gear. It was tiny, the size of a 400 or 250, and fabulously light and Conrad eyed the 500cc GP bike he wanted to buy too, talking up the obvious skill of the man in looking after his machines, who was unmoved by his patter, seeing it for what it was, and so the deal was done, cash handed over and the man shaking his head in disbelief that Conrad was going to ride it to Glasgow — “Take it easy laddie, that road makes widows” — and his warning was taken the same way as any other advice. If he rode a bike again, Lauren later advised him, she would leave him without looking back.

The corner, when it came, followed a widening of the road to three lanes to allow a turning off. He wasn't distracted, despite the reddish browns and butterscotch on the hills, the sun was bright and warmed the tarmac in a way he knew drew out the speed demons, the likelihood of a crash rising with the temperature and level of idiot in the rider. The scenery was devastatingly beautiful — he would have brought Lauren to see it, and was glad later he couldn't have on the single seater — and the thought passed through his mind, either there, or in the endless replays the crash performed in his mind in the following months and years, that this was the perfect experience of art, to ride something so exquisite in its function and form through this place. It was drinking Japanese whisky in Scotland. The idea might have been tossed as he rode on, cast off to make room for savouring the rub of his cheeks rubbing the inside of his helmet as his grin broadened further.

He missed the tell-tale signs of debris and sawdust blowing at the side of the road, his tinted visor doing its job and filtering out the tinsel and glit-

ter of roadside flotsam that could ruin a day or a life, but hid that a recent crash left a patch of fuel closer to the corner. His back wheel lost traction momentarily, which he held, then it bit the tarmac, snapping out the rear and highsiding the bike, throwing him in the air to land, fortunately, down a banking, the Honda spinning along on its side. The life flashing past mainly featured some moments from his trip with Lauren to Cuba, and the old man shaking his head in a way that never happened, with a told-you-so gesture.

Few people would feel the tragedy of throwing an RC30 up the road. The first on the scene was a paramedic on a motorbike, who was as concerned for Conrad's bike as he was.

The old coot came into his own when Conrad eventually plucked up the courage to call him. There was no gloating, just a frank assessment of the work and the costs and the bike restored. Sitting in his study, he poured a dram of Yamazaki in memory of the Honda, and poured over the plans for a new gallery. He wondered if Jim also did marriage counselling, he could imagine cautioning him to take it easy, to lay off the booze and lose some weight, or else risk making a widow. But it was mothballed, on display and beautiful to look at, but he rarely even polished it now.

After dinner — he cooked it himself, his *dauphinoise* potatoes, with bacon-wrapped venison and white asparagus — he remembered the bike again when the alarm was triggered in the poolside garage. The lights had come on but there was nothing on the security cameras. He pulled on his biker boots just because they were to hand in the closet and went out into the night, flashlight in hand.

The doors were all secure. He opened up and went in to reset the alarm. The chrome teased him, the place had the feel of a showroom, a toy cupboard and he was a bored child. A tick-tick caught his ear, then a flash of electric blue. Against one of the large plate glass doors, a tiny bird — did they have hummingbirds in France? — tapped and flapped, panicked, against the glass. "It's alright! Calm down." The bird took no notice of him, turning its face away and clamouring for freedom.

He slid open the door, careful not to harm the bird as it fluttered out and off into the darkness.

It was only going to be a little run. The gravel path at the back of the pool house continued to a farm track in one direction and just next to the outdoor kitchen in the other. His helmet was a little tight around the jewels, so he left it off for the short test run. The Honda fired up first time, and after a

little huskiness, the exhaust note settled. He sweated a lot pushing it outside. The task was made harder as his jacket, that would never do up, pinched at his podgy arms, so that he had the appearance of a seal about to clap.

It felt smaller this time around, his added girth making the bum-up position even more uncomfortable. He took it gently, the headlamps not as bright as they could be. Just before the farm track he manoeuvred it round for a second pass.

The sound of it carried for miles as he took his short runs back and forth, the chaffing of his clothes a small price to pay. On a return run, he opened the throttle, then a bright torchlight hit his face and he swerved off — perhaps there had been intruders after all, who had waited for him to open up — and around the side of the pool house, a flutter of blue passing in front of his visor just before he lost control and plunged into the water, the pool cover wrapping around the bike.

Guillaume shone his torch on the pinking water and had the forethought to drop his phone in the dry before leaping into the pool, taking hold of Conrad's bloodied head and heaving him to the steps.

XXIII

Back in her bed in Paris, Lauren — listless — listened to the click-click-clack. The hot-cold radiator cooling in her bedroom. Its water-metal stutter arrhythmic tick-ta-ticking; a torturous clock. It landed only once or twice in time to the beat of her heart, to the sound of her blood that swooshed in her ears. Her breath paused now and then, conducted by the click-click-clack baton: in — holding the upbeat and causing her to panic; out — a little gasp that halted her dream for a moment.

They leapt as firebirds on a stage. Dressed in red feathers and making pastry in her kitchen in Aix. Her and Harriet and Véronique. Harriet would turn to break separate eggs into a bowl then be playing a piano keyboard that appeared to replace the worktop; Véronique wore a flour-covered apron and stood drinking orange juice from a carton; the fridge open. Both came to her, their hands a sticky mess, and placed them on her, laughing and singing *Wicked Game*, the song she danced to on a Cuban beach. Conrad watched in his linen suit then walked into the sea. Sing, sing, they said, pushing her out in the lights when she didn't know the words. She felt parched, in the stifling heat, hearing her feet tap on the sand but in the flour on floor of the kitchen.

On stage, en pointe, *en croûte*.

Her duvet was as tightly tucked as a cargo strap, neck stiff. They ran from kitchen to pool to cool off, to clean off. Duncan sat at the edge in his trunks. He looked over his newspaper as they jumped in, looked at them in the mirrors in the ceiling. There was applause. They swam in red suits, doing eggbeater kicks, her leg out from the covers, goggled and wearing feathered head dresses. Ballet turned synchronised swim. His paper's headlines all in music, Harry and Véronique singing them, their voices honking and thin in their nose clips, looking to her to join in. Her hair engulfed her face — where was her cap? she always wore a cap? She floated up and out of diving prone in supine sleep. Then sunk. The pianos were now at either end of the pool. Harriet swimming to one, Duncan putting down his paper and walking towards the other. They should sit together, make them sit together she implored Véronique.

She worried they would get splashed. She threw off the covers, the radiator silent. Connie was fixing his Honda and wearing his old denim shorts. He was slim again. The tool was noisy, ringing out across the water. The water was heavy and filled with a flock of fattened red geese, warm and

plump. Her phone buzzed merrily on the lamp-stand. “Guillaume?” It was four in the morning.

“Lauren, you need to come back. Conrad is in hospital.”

“Is it gallstones? I told him. Or his leg?”

“He drove his motorbike into the swimming pool.”

“What?” There were too many options. He was drunk. He pushed it outside and lost balance. He need to move it and didn’t have the strength. A moment’s madness. Attention seeking. Ending his life. “How is he?”

“There is a flight from Orly to Marseilles at six fifteen. I can pick you up there.” said Guillaume. Usually matter of fact, he lingered on word choice. “He’s not conscious, Lauren.”

“He’ll come round,” she said, The brittle brightness in her voice made it sound like she was smiling. “He wouldn’t miss having the last word.” It was less than an hour to the airport at that time of day. She sat on the edge of the bed and melted, caught off guard by sudden tears. She brushed them away with the back of her hand, like so many of his demeaning barbs. She wished him dead sometimes. Either figuratively through divorce or actual, had fantasised about meeting someone else, or no one at all, maybe living with Harry and other friends, without the complication of a partner. She wished most of all the younger Conrad would return.

They swam together at first in Aix, often leaving their bathing suits on the side and nothing to the imagination. She would lie sometimes on her back as he stood beside her. His arms would slip underneath her, they would look up at the mirrors. His broad brown chest and heavy shoulders would be firm against the rippling azure blue. Their flesh tones warmed by sun or shadowed by the moon; the water lapping at her ears so she only caught every second word of all he said she was to him — but that was still enough. With every sense she knew he loved her, would never let her sink or float away. He chased her in hours of excited words, in miles of dancing and walks along beaches, in presents and giving all the freedom to do what she desired.

She had enjoyed him in those days, but as much for his reliance on her, where he would seek her opinion, or involve her in decisions. It all now seem a ruse, a pretence of devolving responsibility that allowed her to flirt with ambition. Perhaps the cantankerous Conrad, with his weaponized wit and anally astute mind was the real one. The Conrad that thought nothing of belittling her in public or in front of friends, of holding her head under the water. At least there, if drowning, she no longer heard his loveless words. It was only spite she saw reflected when she thought of him while floating in the pool.

And regret. Perhaps the hospital could amputate his bitterness. She was selfish, self-pitying, or just tired. Many wives wished their husbands would change; she wished hers had stayed the same.

She craved orange juice and tip-toed down the cold floor to the kitchen to find some, and to stock up on carbohydrates before grabbing a case and heading to Conrad's dressing room. It seemed too much to ask Guillaume to find and pack clothes from his room in Aix. Inside, tacked to the frame of the mirror were pictures of the two of them: their holidays, honeymoon, gallery openings, and several he had taken of her where she posed exposed and candid. It was a shrine to her, like an altar where he died to self. Or else it was how he preferred her: a silent pin-up. She was gallery of pretty images amongst so many other clothes he wore. Why closet her away? Who would see? Who did he bring to his bedroom that would find the sight of her offensive?

She nipped to her room and threw on jeans and a sweater, grabbing her passport for the flight. The case complained at being bumped down the stone stairs, tipping this way and that, the doorbell then ringing and she went off into the dark and the waiting taxi.

Conrad was in bed. Silent and striped with sunlight from the window blinds. The shadows of raindrops in the glass made sad pearls on his forehead. He would hate this place when he came round — the surgical green paint and peach paint of the walls, the electronic beeps and lack of vibrant colours or shelves of books. Two nurses were in and out, writing down numbers on charts, checking the various tubes and cables. He would look around for a desk to work at, a pen to write with, a phone to make a deal on.

He would make a joke — when he eventually came around again — about how he had lost weight lying there unable to eat. All the equipment seemed to breathe for or with him. His bed inflated and deflated in sections, lungs that massaged with unvoiced words, mechanical and unpoetic; the kind he disliked, the necessary words that kept life going; words of times and appointments and deadlines and doses and tests. His life reduced to a set of numbers and statistics. He despised accounting, despite his way with money.

The sun came and went in intensity. Its bitter-sweet effect was that of a fire on a winter's day, in a cabin in Aspen. He skied well, although not often. He had great balance. She drummed her fingers on the metal of the bed, a sound she knew irritated him, hoping in the moment he might sit up and yell at her. His skin was grey and grim against the white sheet that looked

the kind they pulled up over someone's face when they died.

The window ledges were high — she had read of patients with failing lungs leaning out so far to get a breath of air they fell to their deaths. Riding a bike into a swimming pool was so much more rock and roll than that. So much dumber. The sky would look even more wide and blue and portent, from his bed, the buildings and the ground out of sight. Life reduced to slats of blue sky and a room. There was grass and a courtyard below. Two patients in gowns playing *boules* with orderlies, their wheelchairs set beside each other, faces laughing, fists that clutched at life.

Guillaume came to take her out for lunch after the doctors came with clipboards. He was stable, they said. “Go and eat, he would eat lunch I am sure,” one said.

The little courtyard café under the trees was being swept out when they arrived. Guillaume pushed in her chair as she sat and made encouraging noises about Conrad's health that stopped short of promises. He loved this place. The simple menu with only a few items — beef cooked just so, potatoes fried in dripping, salad leaves snipped there and then from the garden by the kitchen, local cheeses and fine wines that were the muses of grand thoughts. She took out her phone and put it beside her on the table.

Guillaume picked up her hand as if it were a tool and held it. “Wait to call people. Eat lunch. Go back. See how he is. If you tell people now, you will be telling them you know nothing for the next few hours.” His mother had passed away the year before. She took his advice and didn't rush lunch. He was easy to be with and, perhaps because he worked alone so often, was happy in his own thoughts. She thought of Duncan and his quiet ways, wondered whether there was enough in him to coax Harriet into all that she could be, or perhaps catch Véronique's effervescence instead, along with her happy-go-lucky charm and apparent lack of ambition beyond the next song to sing, or beautiful smile to make.

The rain came. Lauren waited under an awning while Guillaume went to fetch the car and save her from getting wet. The world was rain spattered and fogged with breath. The street half-familiar, the smear of years of memories that whizzed by unrecognised or merged together. She wiped at the condensation, tapping on it to make the rivulets clear faster on the other side, feeling a childhood pleasure in the simplicity of the

act. In the control she had over a small part of nature.

It was cold when Guillaume left her in the hospital. They had talked about the clearing of the gutters, the pruning and tying in of plants to be done and fixing of fences before winter. All simple, honest, tangible things that could be grasped with hands and bent and forged by sweat and a persevering will.

The machines beeped and the bed breathed and sighed. There was a tiny twitch that came and went on his little finger, the click-click of the radiator. How typical he chose the most irritating rhythm to come alive to. She sat at his side, putting one finger then the other by his ticking pinky, stroking the back of it now and then.

Not knowing what to say to him, she told him the story of a couple that left their busy lives behind and set off to dance on beaches and look at art in galleries in beautiful cities. She was, of course, terrifically beautiful, he was averagely handsome, and — she broke off as the nurse came in.

There was a leather *chaise longue* under the window and she laid down, the nurse appearing with a blanket and a promise to rouse her if there was any change. She thanked her and dozed off.

More rain tapping on the black glass woke her up. It was late. She had several messages from Harriet, who was sitting in Conrad's favourite café, then eating crepes, then at Duncan's flat. She went to stretch her legs and go out to the corridor, wanting to find someone who could bring Conrad back, who could fix the past and not just the present. The nurse came with a drink and a sandwich for her. She touched his little finger again and sat and ate and resumed the story of the adventurous couple. His heartbeat pinged across the screen in rapid blips.

He would wake up soon and say he hated sandwiches.

XXIV

It was a beautiful cigarette. The first from the pack she bought at the little tobacconist a few minutes from Duncan's men's bar. The Cat's Whiskers: Two entrances; two bars. Carpeted lounge; spit-and-sawdust old Young and cool; old man, Marlboro; Woodbine. Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, Axl flat and from work. It was on a side street of Rue du Bac Rose, Kurt Cobain; Ruddles County, Theakston's Old Peculiar, Frankie Valli, Frankie and the sound — tabac off bac, tabac off bac — tickled her. Valli, Frankie Valli, Frankie Valli — in four seasons.

There was a song there, or a drumbeat. The cheap lighter Cool cats needed to be their 'own dog' (the dEUS track: *Fell off the Floor, Man* — 'it's pucker-flucked its gas, the flame glowing and shrinking in like a James Brown thing'); mongrels tied to the leg of a bar stool. Black walls, etched spurts. It was irregular, unpredictable, like a wet wick on a mirrors, big jukebox, tiny dance floor; nicotine-yellow fingers, nicotine-yellow walls candle. "Be more like that candle. You're too tuck-tuck, tuck-and Joan Collins postered in a Martini advert.

tuck," Miss Garden had said when she was teaching Harriet Clara was in the lounge; Duncan fed the old man's dog Scampi Flavoured Fries. She to swing. was frugal, brought a sandwich; he ordered a giant Yorkshire Pudding with beef, gravy

Her parents rented a farmhouse and put the music room and — "Can I have one, though?" — chips, she found him at a sticky brown table with off the back of the kitchen. It had a cold flagstone floor and brown sauce and mustard napkins that often clogged the avocado basins in the wash was reminiscent of an outhouse or larder. When they first rooms late at night, or the loos when the paper ran low. He found her first in the music moved it was the alternative lounge in summer. It had an room with her cello; she found him second in the old men's bar.

inside-outside feel and they played board games and read "Can I have a pound for the juke box?" she asked. An early lesson in business: spend books to each other and listened to thousands of miles of someone else's money. Ten songs for a pound. (Pearl Jam's *Ten* on loop). It had its own records on her dad's odd turntable with its little tray of liquid lift; the Jukebox. A lift for CDs. Retail experience. She wore ripped jeans and a Sonic for the stylus to float along. Wine and song flowed out into Youth T-shirt she bought in Freshers' week. It was how he had seen her and therefore the garden in the evening — they grew their own vegetables how she was, not with a witty quip, or a turn of phrase that revealed a poetic, lyrical train

before it was fashionable, before having queer shapes and odd of thought that was analogous to her sinuous lines on the cello, or her thoughts on the colours was coveted. It was the era of the drum machine and interpretation of Dvorak. She had those, but not that day when she wore ripped jeans the beginning of McMusic as her dad called it. He played sax and ate his chips, her fingers around a glass of snakebite and blackcurrant.

and clarinet professionally in the pit bands of the West End She must have smiled; she always smiled. She wore ripped jeans and the Sonic Youth musicals, and taught private pupils from a rented room in a T-shirt for *Dirty*. She often danced to *Drunken Butterfly* spilling her drink all over the London music school. He made good money. tacky dance floor of beer-slicks and fag-butts and singing "I love, I love you, I love you"

He was her first piano teacher. towards him; towards everyone. She had cut off the sleeves, the arms gaped wide at the

The room was long and narrow and kept cool for the sake sides.

of the Yamaha upright that was kept regulated and tuned The black-painted woodchip walls pasted with gig flyers and posters had mirrors every other month — her dad had perfect pitch, which was below waist-height around the dance-floor — legs of dancers and spilled drinks would sadly not hereditary. Her mother was a teacher in the local run over them, lit up in the cheap three-bulb disco lights. The lounge was kept dim, the primary, the house often filled with piles of paper, or trays windows blocked out all around with black wooden slats.

of seeds, experiments with paint and glitter and packets of She smiled at a song — one he chose or one she chose. He remembered the feeling he gold stars. Every child got a little gift at Christmas, either had when she smiled, rather than remembering seeing it. She would lift her head up drawn, or baked, and wrapped with the same attention she from her score and look at the tiny window in the rehearsal room door and he would gave to her own child's present. have his face pressed against it, watching her deep in thought for a moment or two before

Her mum was a keen gardener, and contemptuous of fash- she seemed to know his eyes were on her, and she would smile or laugh, sometimes look ion, often in wellies and a baseball cap while she dug in the surprised — was he really so straight-laced? — at him pulling some goofy expression. Her herb garden, or tapping on the window and pulling faces at face would be bright and beautiful. It felt like that when she smiled.

Harriet as she drifted off into space instead of practicing. In Ripped jeans and a Sonic Youth T-shirt and the Juke box. The walls ran with cracks summer sun the keys would catch a healthy sheen of bronze, from the bolts of the speaker mountings to where Clara had a drink sloshed down her in winter a pale hue of moonish blue. back by a guy in Valentino denim. It was a Friday lunchtime – the first Friday of the

It was a warm and ordinary childhood. Crumbly in places, music festival in Norway that Mr Porter went to every year with his friends, the ones in like the walls she hit her tennis ball against with a racket, the pictures in the hallway of his house that looked smilingly towards the ones of Jane and a little lonely, stuck a mile or so from the nearest bus and Mizzi, the photographic guard of honour; wife and husband welcoming their guests. stop, and an hour from her school friends. Then they had a The pictures were façades presented to family and friends who would never understand. new piano stool bought, the one that wheezed out its stuff- But Iain's were at another level of deception and remove. He had convinced Jane he pre- ing – a tell-tale sign of not practicing – all over the rug ferred the company of men, but neither the outside world nor his wife knew his secret. beneath it. She later learnt to lie underneath it. bisected by “You can't teach an old dog new tricks: give me a puppy any day,” he would say when the bright sun from the window, she would pole at the fabric teaching Duncan a particularly difficult passage.

underside and into the mechanism that raised and lowered Getting in early to the lounge meant bagsying a seat, having a place to people-watch it, pulling out the stuffing as she withdrew her finger. Her from, put a glass down, fill ashtrays and gain control of the juke box: nights out could mum laughed and took her to a mirror, showing her where be made or broken by allowing poor taste to be chosen over good, and there wasn't the chips of wood and straw were caught in her hair. much of it. The time delay between paying money and hearing the chosen music, often

A new piano teacher arrived after the new stool. Miss an hour or more. They squabbled, her pushing the buttons quickly while he wasn't Garden. Her dad making three or four times the hourly rate looking, having memorised many of her favourite songs. It was what they did. Life was it cost to someone else to teach her. And a heavy throw going to keep happening for them, there was no need to think serious thoughts or do appeared to keep Francesca warm when Miss Garden was serious things. She was music to him; they played it together, chose it together; almost

around. Francesca was her dad's music stand, a figurehead, every song from the two hundred albums that went up and down on those neon lifts and member of the family. She was brass and held a part of and whirring arms that took the compact disc from one place and carried it to another, the prow of boat on her back, the sheet music resting on making theatre of playing some music but also wasting precious seconds, the unheard her arms that stretched behind her. She was similar to those sound of discs changing the soundtrack nobody noticed. He couldn't remember what eagles that held books on their backs in churches, except Clara wore on her feet with her ripped jeans and Sonic Youth T-shirt. Almost all those that Francesca was naked, except for the purple felt hat and songs reminded him of her. They would lie in bed and listen to music for his or her class, bright pink feather boa and Harriet's mother had draped over laugh at experimental electronic music, or else find in it a groove or melodic device that her to preserve her dignity. Francesca was made up, and her was unique and plan to do something with it. They daydreamed of living somewhere body dressed in pegged-on dresses. They talked about her hot – playing in bars around Australia or America.

and then for her, giving her an accent that drifted between She liked his makeup. "How are things with your piano teacher?" she asked. They French, German and American, depending on how they were had probably sat down. It was later.

casting her in their impromptu dramas — "I zink zer haz been "Julia?" Duncan struggled to think of something positive to say. He had missed seven piano praciz todaiee," her mum might say in wandering eral lessons with her and found the way she walked around while he play off-putting. vowel then smile. The gentlest of rebukes. He had patted the seat a few times, coaxing her to sit. Julia was nervous, questioned

They had some sheet music, often in pristine condition his breathing technique that he had practised with Mr Porter for hours and hours. She owing to her dad's superb memory for music where he could jumped when he played a scaled across her leg. Then they had lessons with the door read and retell the story of the score after putting it away. She hadn't seen them for a while. When she left home, a change came over her mum, a resentment bloomed darkly. Perhaps

at being left alone or no longer feeling like a friend.
open, the blinds not drawn. She dressed plainly, never a scrap of makeup.

Tuck-tuck had become tuk-tuk in her mind since her holiday with Lauren in Thailand. The smell of two-stroke and
“The other one. Back home.”

“Mr Porter?”

half-remembered sound of motorcycles merged Lauren’s visit

“Yes. Do you keep in touch with him?” she asked. She might have looked off, already

to her work the other day, with her now lying under a piano, bored of his answer before he gave it, or maybe she lit a cigarette while he thought of an

picking out the stuffing from under it, laughing with a cock-answer. “You’ve got to go home and get your tux.”

tail on Phuket beach.

Duncan had forgotten about that. The concert only two weeks away. They were rehear-

In a movie the cigarette would have been slender and white
ing the Ravel every day, Clara already had her dress, “Is that why you’ve only had a few

in a long black holder, or put to painted lips then lit by
chips – your dress fitting?” She punched his arm playfully.

the flame of his – always his lighter, because ladies never

“I just thought you could pop in on him,” she shrugged.

thought to carry them. She lit her own. It was a simple, incor-

“He’ll be away just now. In Norway,” said Duncan. When he called in a panic to find

ruptible moment, the first puff after a few days without.

his tux, his mum had said Iain had called few times to ask how he was, did he have a girl-

The world brightened in nicotine thoughts.

friend, was his new piano teacher any good – “If your Mr Porter was a female teacher I’d

In her twenties she had enjoyed smoking more. She would
be worried she wanted her wicked way. Like a toy boy” – and there were several postcards

wake in the morning and wave off whatever she wanted to
for him to collect, from Iain and from Jane. “Jane will be in America. They always do

forget. She was twenty-seven when she began lessons in Paris
the same thing,” he said to Clara. He remembered going to the house while they were

with the brilliant Morgan. There was something she loved in
away. They kept a key under the gnome in the overgrown greenhouse.

Lauren now that was Morgan-shaped. Perhaps she had looked

“Odd couple,” said Clara, her mind had clearly been spinning. “They’re like my aunt

for her in others now – at the time Morgan was the last piece
and her partner. He just used her address to have his stolen goods delivered to. He paid

of the jigsaw. Both had unwavering encouragement and frankness. They never had sex or anything. She's not really into men. Nice though."

ness. Both held bold pens to write their own lives. Morgan He started emptying his pockets of change, putting the coins in piles. She would knock teased, "Life is not a rehearsal; practice makes perfect, right? them over. The cigarette machine was fussy, the Juke Box less so. It was a ritual, the closest Well honey, it quite often is, and nobody's perfect."

he came to financial management was to look at what was left and decide how to spend Harriet had let Lauren down before, taken her for granted. it all. "I'm out with the girls tonight, remember, we're going for food then on to a club

She had let Morgan down too, not returning her calls when to have our bums pinched at the bar while shouting over the dance so-called-music."

she met Muse. "Many hands make light work of spoiling the "Is that tonight?" but his mind was already linking together Clara and a trip home, broth," he said. Her soup was to be his for the stirring. and the Porters' house being empty, and picking up his tux and getting back before being

Smoking allowed Harriet to hide to fidget and wave her missed. "The good thing with dance music is that, although it is awful, it is also so loud hand around, often not even putting it to her lips but con- that it gives you hearing loss," owing to the continually high sound pressure levels - per- tinually tapping the end against an ashtray while she was haps he added that later, when he ran the night over and over in his mind.

chatted up or flirted with. It was a nervous, gestural stut-

ter. If he was dull or grey or vulgar — some rehearsals were Few students travelled on a Friday because the fares were double and the beer was

shorter than others — she would wash away with the smell of cheaper in the Union bar. Saturday morning trains were full of students with hango-

yesterday's smoke, all the whispering confusion trapped in vers, the smoking carriages littered with ash and poorly aimed cigarette stubs, foil tabs

the sweet-smelling shampoo and taken off down the drain. and cellophane and, later in term when funds were low, Rizla papers and crumbs of

Then there was that ritual, the first cup of tea of the day, sit- tobacco scattered on the plastic tables. The rugby types would sit at a table with slabs of

ting in a clean and pressed dress or a pristine white T-shirt. beer cans set out like the manliest of wedding cakes.

Perhaps in a window in sunlight or listening to a song on the The train was quite empty and Duncan went straight to the buffet carriage. It had

radio. The first bitter draw became hot and sweet, the paper been a regular ploy, to appear to have been on for a while and therefore need refresh-browning, blistering and puckering as it turned to ash and embers, the ticket inspector would often pass behind him going to the next carriage, black. Smoke was her cloak of emotional invincibility, a sign and he would walk in the opposite direction, sit with his food and feign sleeping. He all those fiery emotions had been burnt up. Muse, being a had once stayed past his stop when he saw guards on the platform. He saved his travel sax player, banned her from smoking around him. He was the money. spending it instead *The Cat's Whiskers* on several hours of music and pints of beer. These economics he learnt from his dads, the men who dossed with him mum

Morgan was American too, and in her soft South Carolina and drank her benefits and ate takeaways with her the weekend after her Girocheque accent taught Harry to sit and breathe. "Breathing, food, arrived, then left for two weeks. An occasional night in between meant Duncan was language and music. These are the essentials of all cultures," encouraged to make himself scarce, to go out and play on his bike, riding between the she would say, as if rehearsing her own axioms. Even then garages and half-hearted attempt at a BMX track that was strewn with broken bottles and she was only just realising how much a pupil mimics their carrier bags yellow with dried-out glue – "have you been sniffing glue?" his mum asked teacher, when she found herself sneaking a look at the label with every spot that appeared on his teenage face; she had been deeply affected by an of an electric blue pashmina Morgan wore that draped with episode of *Juliet Bravo* – that had become the childhood symbol of an unemployed and nonchalant elegance while she played, and seeking it out in hopeless youth. He threw stones with the other boys, chapped the letterboxes or rang a shop, only daring to wear it when Morgan was out of town. door bells and ran away before the door was answered, let down car tyres, stole sweets

She was a modern teacher and used a mirror and Polaroid from the shop owned by a funny Bangladeshi man and never had any real friends. None camera to show Harriet her posture. "You scrunch yourself who looked out for him. Not until he met Iain Porter.

when you sit." Morgan demonstrated a caricature of, her chest His mum worked for two hours over teatime every Friday and Saturday night at and bottom thrust out, shoulders to her ears, head tucked the local fish and chip shop, paid in fried food and frozen Pukka pies that they would

downwards, then sat, hunched, arms drawn up short and reheat through the week. It was dark already and he slipped in his latch key. She had waving like an overturned beetle. “Just bend your knees.” She tidied – dumped in a large box behind the sofa – all his stuff, so that all that remained stood and demonstrated. It was about unlearning. of him was a picture of them taken the summer before. They had been mistaken for a

Harriet found the restaurant-cum-takeaway. It was covered couple a few times. She was only seventeen when he was born and would turn the heads in ornately carved panels on the outside. She had never been of people his own age. She looked straight at the camera, hips turned this way and shouldered there but was greeted like an old friend. It felt Thai as well ders the other as a model might on a photo shoot; Duncan, dipped head and rounded as like a wooden Taj Mahal – she hadn’t been there either. shouldered, wore his hair in his face, the hint of a glint of his eyes. They could have been The doors and walls were heavily carved in architectural lin-sisters, her boyfriend had said, and all the men laughed their raucous laughs that echoed gerie, a kind of scrollwork, lacey, *jaali* lattice of dark and from those days being kicked at the school gates, their jeering when he appeared in the light. The benches and long thin walls made it cozy and clois-local newspaper with his music trophies, the hounding name-calling – “Marigold, Pansy, tered. Apart from the elephants, monkeys and hexa-handed Poofter, Queenie, Bender, Elton, Bum-boy” – of the bullying, drunken pack, and she females, the smell of slightly smoky spices and men in long laughed at the teasing of her son.

dress-type clothes reminded her of being dragged to a cen- He found his tux balled up in a bin-liner moved to the kitchen. The canvas tool-bag ser-swinging church. was kept in the cleaning cupboard and he checked the rusted contents: wire snips, gloves,

Her mother was raised Catholic, but threw a boa and felt tape measure, two screwdrivers, a bit-and-brace, short wrecking bar, and a hammer. He hat on that too, except when times were hard and she went wrapped the black plastic bag over the top and left, looking out for familiar faces along to confession. It was a last resort, sitting in a box and telling the littered street.

an unrelated stranger how things had gone wrong or become He passed his old school, black wool hat pulled down hard on his head and a scarf up difficult. Harriet bestowed a priestly function on Lauren, around his face. This part of the road, lined with the shouts and kicks of childhood, had

telling her what had gone wrong after ignoring her for weeks grown up, had lost its grip, the theatre that played out so often had gone, like when the on end, never thinking to call or check how she was. lights were turned on at closing time in *The Cat's Whiskers* and juke box went silent and

She had sent a message to Lauren earlier; a picture, in all around were vacant drunken stares and a ringing in the ears, the feeling that some- fact, with her cheeks puffed out and holding up a crepe to thing had happened, was happening, would happen again; the drunken performance the camera, giving a thumbs up. Then later, another picture of a drunken rehearsal.

taken sneakily of Duncan as he looked out of the window
The little gnome was particularly ugly. Having tapped at the windows at the secluded of flat. It might have been a photograph of the moment he rear of the Porters' house, he went to the greenhouse to get the key and went in. He turned decided to share the ghastly truth of who his teacher was. on the lights then turned them off again, thinking he would make a particularly awful Who he had been. burglar. All the curtains and blinds were closed, which made things easier.

How would it have been if the priest had bought her mother
There were a few ready meals in the freezer and a bottle of gin on the side. He sat on curry and got her tipsy, bought cigarettes and sat down with the toilet with the lid down, the windowless bathroom the only place he safely put lights her. Maybe squeezed in beside her in her side of the little on. He was down five or six cigarettes and half the bottle when he made his first attack. box on her side for a while, opened up a bit.

Duncan opened the lounge door a crack, sending a dim shaft of light from the bath-
She was grateful for the waitress whose name she must have room across the reddy brown wood. He put on his gloves and took the wrecking bar known but had forgotten already. The one who sat down with and swiped the pictures and lamps off the top of it, hitting one or two of them on the her in her side of the box. Muse would often call around this floor where they landed. He peeked out behind the curtain at safe suburbia, the two-car time. He might be about to go on stage at a gig and want her driveways and buttoned-up houses with porches lit and doors closed, not a soul in sight. at his flat afterwards; his other flat; the one his now-preg- He lifted the lid and put the steel to the keys, smashing them across the way, knocking nant wife and unborn child didn't live in. He would rub his them off with surprising ease so that they pinged across the room or hit the wall and

lamp and she would be summoned and would arrive.
dropped to the floor. They rattled like the wooden blocks played with by children, or the

Perfectly practiced.
cheap hard-headed beaters used for glockenspiels in schools, hollow and tuneless piles

“Love and sex are not optional in life. They are like breath
of ebony. The whites smashed off like tooth enamel, the hammers sounding against the

and water, like waters that mix together not to be parted,”
strings sounding clusters of notes now and then – Making a Messiaen! – so that he

Muse would say. It was Lauren who had first waved divin-
stopped and looked out again at the street to check.

ing rods over his bullshit. The waters were proving hard to
All clear.

separate.

A cigarette and drink later, he put two pillows over the strings, at first to mute them,

The kitchens were noisy. The clang of a metal pan rang out,
but then remembered the cutters and went along and snipped them all clean off, pleased

Spoon on metal. Tan-ta-tan. Three Four. Tan-ta-tan. Oscar
to have avoided their tension whipping up in his face. He pulled the pegs out cleanly,

Peterson’s *Tin Tin Deo*. The muffled tap of a foot and the
then shifted to the wrecking bar, bending them over with cracks and groans, the wood

steam-train-Afro-Cuban-shuffle of the drummer’s rimshot
impossibly hard.

and brushwork. Simple octaves. Variations in the repeated
The inside was dusty – “Dry, young Master Innes? Perhaps a little drink to get you in

phrase. She ordered and was invited to sit for a drink while
the mood” – so he fetched a bottle of red from the cabinet and broke its end off with the

she waited. Sparse and simple, a melancholic moon scared
hammer, pouring it over the felts and into the holes left by the tuning pegs. The strings

of its own reflection. Holding a pose was alien. One of her
pushed roughly aside, the soundboard was uncovered, now just a kind of expensive

teachers had her stand as a puppet, wrists limp; or would lean
wooden drum skin. The bit-and-brace had an inch-wide auger bit fitted, and, pulling

gently on her shoulders to stop her raising them. “Forearms
up a chair, he set about drilling a series of holes, each fettled out with the wrecking bar

to the fallboard and the wrists will raise.” The mini beer they
to split the fibres of the wood and send splintering cracks along its length.

gave her free was not too bad. Oscar played on to the tan-ta-
There was a rattle at the letterbox. He moved quickly across the room and through to

tan. Tuk-Tuk. Tan-ta-tan. Tuk-tuk. Her foot swung-shuffled. look at the front door, ready to escape out of the back door. After a few seconds more, She would be a sculptor's nightmare. A poor model, her he went to look, finding a leaflet for a local curry house.

hair tousled in the bronzed mirror behind the bar. Midouri, He finished the gin, knocked a few photographs from the wall, and wandered into Campari, Tia Maria, After Shock, Bezique — they still made a bedroom. Opening the drawers he smelt Jane on the clothes. He felt for her as he that? tipped them out on the floor, giving the impression of a mindless burglary, kicking of

The food arrived and she popped in some ear-buds before the fronts, or breaking the hinges on doors. In Iain's bedroom he found envelopes taped heading outside. Duncan was probably hungry. She sent a on the underside of drawers. They contained photographs. He looked at the first one message to say she was on her way. and knew what they all were — young naked men in awkward poses. He took these and

The second cigarette had also been surprisingly good. She ripped open the envelopes, scattering the images on the dark floor of the hallway with tended to develop a cough and the cold air would irritate her the unopened post. He half-hoped Jane would return first and find them.

throat made arid by the smoke.

Back in the lounge, he set about scoring deep gouges in the lid of the piano. the top

The Db7 flurry of comes like the flutter of bird's wings, first, then the underside, which proved far trickier. As he came out from underneath it, Oscar's whiny-hum thin and reedy and buzzy behind the clear the stay slipped free and it snapped shut, trapping his hand between it and the rim. He bell tones of his right hand. The chords in the left subtle and cried out, then covered his mouth with his sleeve, like having a bullet removed in the tightly grouped.

movies where they bit on a stick, or were muffled with a pillow. He lifted the lid with his

Morgan would tell her to stand by the stool, but not to sit. other hand, the pain rushing in with the blood.

To resist sitting, to feel in herself all the possibilities that And there he was, lifting his boyish hand in his, stroking it as it throbbed from being could happen other than sitting. Displace her tensions. trapped under the organ pipe, taking it up and into his mouth and sucking it better. There

She switched to her 'head bounce' playlist, with tracks she it was: the hand on the back of his neck, the hand of music and comfort and coercion as

played loud and made her skin fizzle and sizzle as she walked he stifled another cry of pain and heavy sob, his face pressed in the pillow pulled from with in quick strides in time to the beat. Shubh Saran, Ghost-the heart of the piano.

note, GoGo Penguin, Phronesis. She wanted to play, to drop His hand was already swollen, his thumb and index finger immovable. He rummaged

the food at Duncan's and head off, sit at a piano. Lose her in the freezer for a bag of peas to numb it. His only option was to return to university

lost self. She worked in a piano shop and her mum told her early the next day and arrive, looking the worse for wear. It was still quite early, and a few

not to buy food when she was hungry. She passed the tobacconist. car doors slammed outside. Neighbours returning from a night at the pub. He would

Tabac off *bac*, tabac off.
wait for the street to go quiet.

Duncan looked out at the lights going on and off in the apartments across the street, cradling his hand as if it still stung.

The riff grew in her mind, untainted by another person, unperformed except for herself. It was a photograph she saw once of the Seine lit by the moon shared and then deleted, the colours of it failing to capture the moment. He leaned out, breathed in the cool and present air, still and soundless other than lowing of distant traffic. He had stared at pavements up and down the street for several minutes before he knew he was looking for Harriet in the penumbra of shadows cast by parked cars and coronas of street lights, and in her energetic, intelligent playing and her deep and tender teaching. She looked along the street and up at the lights and the window where she saw him leaning out looking for her. The door buzzed open as she put her hand to the button.

Her face was reflected in the lift's door and in the wood and glass of the booth in the record store. She stood and played the same records over. Knowing that she was unlikely to forget the mistakes by playing them over and over. As it rose the muffled scuffle in its shaft was the sound of the needle in a record's groove. The smell of curry was hot and sweet in the glass box. She could have taken the stairs, she could have walked away when she found out he had a wife. "You play so well. I wish I could!" Eloise chirruped and shone and made Harriet ashamed. She would gulp at her drink or look away and hang her head. "Lift your head," Morgan would say. Or else she might bang into other people's lives without knowing she was there,

bound up in staying invisible. She would coil in her mind, a little Danaid, in the palm of her own hand that she tickled and teased at, longing for her to unravel. And Muse would find her, lift her face with a gentle finger under her chin and put his lips to hers. A torturous kiss that wounded and healed.

It came to a stop as Duncan propped open the door of the flat, the wine in his hands. The door and she remained still. There was that same silence, the one that accompanied their playing together in the shop then in Aix. An unspoken invitation into the space of the other that both were as nervous to accept as they were to give. He stepped into the lift and swapped her wine for the bag of food in her hand. She took out an earphone and held it out to him. They shuffled around to sit in on the lift's floor. The doors closed and they rode up and down in it, heads touching in the conspiracy of music as they nodded and swayed together in present beats and silent pasts.