

Mélodie Affreuse

A novella by Justin Ammerman

To my mother, for we are nothing but the great masterpieces of our mothers' entire lives.

Eyes closed, hidden behind the tapestry, Simone drifted through a room reconstructed live with sounds serving as the schematic. A piano melody coursed to her through the chaos of human hum; an emergent noise signal of voices swirling around her. Heels clacking, then muffled on carpeting, then clacking off into the background. There were stationary conversations that she could tune into and out of. Professionals on either side of a shift change; some were despondent with exhaustion, and some were decisive voices ringing out of fresh minds. Behind it all lay a field of reverberations that smeared away into saturation as they climbed the enormous space, tracing a towering wall with massive, elongated doors and transoms, scaling the strata of open balconies with glass balustrades stretching between soaring pillars clad in oak panels that bored into her memory to where she kept her anxious awe for colossal things. She saw the columns of the great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak Temple in Luxor, and they were arresting.

Disparate images in her mind revolved like celestial things, but the piano was the gravitational center of everything. Her impressions of that piano were well-established—she often fantasized about sitting at it, effortlessly working through her repertoire, hands moving over the keys in elegant glissades that fascinated passers-by enough to stop and watch. She could see the old Kawai baby grand in aged walnut, the grain's figure swirling with eddies of golden syrup stirred on a wood stove in an imaginary kitchen shrine buried somewhere in the snow. The featureless form of some man sat at it, and now the piano was truly singing: delicate arpeggi that sounded as if they came from that gentle, contemplative side of Liszt, gathering before exploding. She couldn't recognize the melody, though. She was all but certain that this was improvisation by a truly talented performer.

She felt a buzz from her right pocket.

"Tactile hallucination," she thought.

There was no intricate image of the pianist in her mind, just the way his hands crossed over with a sinusoidal fluidity and the way his fingers moved like the marching legs of a millipede. She rarely actually watched him play. In this way, he was but a vessel, and the sound of the Kawai spoke for him completely. To disrupt this would be to corrupt it. He was like an ancient sealed tomb, revealed by chance from the complexity of shifting desert sands. Every detail she gathered about him would be breaching and effacing that divine mystery. This thought had begun to eat at her since the moment she had stumbled upon him nearly two years ago: these oppositional facets of mystery and the way human nature negotiates it. *Buzzzz*. There are people who love to wonder about mysteries their entire lives, and there are people who are compelled to decrypt mysteries at any cost. She drifted somewhere between, with the lives and motivations of people being the principal mysteries in her life.

Footsteps paused with a scrape, then meandered away. Simone was in no way misanthropic or antisocial. She was capable of finding ordinary people and their motivations utterly fascinating. It was just that when they trained their eyes on her and began to speak to her and make facial expressions and shift postures, it was all a bit tedious. *Buzzzz*. The voices around her began to engulf the sweet, endless song of the pianist.

The tapestry was dissolving, and the light of reality was beginning to peel away her thoughts. In reality Simone was relaxing in a wide chair with plush cushions, with her head cradled by one hand spread across her face like a veil, but also like a crutch with her elbow propped against the arm of the chair, legs crossed with one toe pointed out distinctly. Simone was like a veiled statue. This posture served to dissuade strangers from approaching her. She could be a tired administrator on break, or the harried adult child of a cancer patient.

This was her favorite place to listen to the performance, and all the factors were considered. The comfort of the furniture, the fluid dynamics of the bustling people, the likelihood of being recognized or approached, but most importantly: the acoustics. Both ears engaged nearly equally with the most pleasant projection of sound from the Kawai's lid that she could manage. She had thought about where the perfect spot might be, but it was likely a place in the middle of foot traffic. She had considered one of the balconies, thinking that she could find a seat that felt and sounded like box seats at the symphony, but the piano was nestled in a corner beneath an overhang, and the room was not designed to be an auditorium. It was all wrong.

Buzzzzz-b-b-b-buzzzzzzzz. Buzzzzz-b-b...

"Oh for Christ's fucking sake."

She opened her eyes and uncovered her face, and all at once she was arrested by the world around her. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and swiped away a phone call with a flourish of disgust, like she was swatting away a fly. Her eyes darted around her. The piano was so small and insignificant now, and the place was crawling with people. She was slightly disturbed to see that an old woman was seated altogether too close, facing her, but silently reading something on her phone.

1 Missed Call. Brianna. 3 Text Messages.

"wyd"

"SIMONEEEEEEEEEEE WHERE ARE YOU???"

"she's ignoring me. SHE'S FED UP."

If there was one thing that visibly irritated Simone, it was being ripped away from contemplation by someone demanding her attention. She should have just turned off her phone entirely when she got here. This is a performance isn't it? Shouldn't she treat it like one and cut herself off from communication, focusing all of her attention on the music?

"What's up?"

Brianna was a coworker. A rare one that Simone had some type of investment in. If you were analyzing the two of them, she wasn't particularly compatible with Brianna.

"i'm bored. why didn't you answer?"

Brianna was apolitical. She never even voted in a presidential election. Simone thought there was something truly sick about that. Brianna spent a lot of time absorbed in the lives of YouTube celebrities, which was particularly revolting to Simone, but also fascinating in a way. There was something about the magnetism of personality and performance and the way some people were readily influenced by such things that was frightening, yet so curious to her.

“Can’t talk rn. You ok?”

“ugh..... why? where are you?”

Simone was often considered aloof and dreamy, and sometimes withdrawn. Brianna had a baseline manic energy that Simone loved to tap into when she was beginning to feel dull and laden in her life. Simone rarely let herself feel truly sad, but when she did, she was as dark as if she had slipped off the continental shelf into the deep sea. The dullness, on the other hand, felt like an allergy season where life became bland and nothing interested her. Living every day felt like going to Thanksgiving dinner nauseous.

“I’m at the store.”

Brianna was a kind of jangly dynamo that could pull Simone’s attention away from her brooding anxiety, but she could also spool up too fast and irritate her.

“you’re at the hospital aren’t you?”

Simone flushed and looked around. Instantly, she felt Brianna’s eyes on her from somewhere in the room. The stream of humans had begun to subside. She tuned into the piano for a moment. He was a little more lively now, playing a stride tune. What a different vibe. She liked it.

“let the record show your silence has been interpreted as a yes.”

“did you introduce yourself to the pianoman yet?”

“Mind your own business, Bree.”

“you go all the way there to watch him and you know when he’s going to be there.”

“what would any reasonable person think?”

“Reasonable persons don’t jump to conclusions.”

Bree couldn’t see the entire picture. Simone wondered if this was how the minds of all normal people worked. That everything was an intrigue motivated by some sweaty, hormone-drunk version of ourselves. Who’s fucking whom. If there were a desire in the mind of someone, was it every normal person’s priority to pick at it and dig for it like one of those street bum Macaques that will steal a cigarette out of your mouth? Top Ten World’s Funniest Monkeys. Click. Were all normal people such vampires for your business? Or was she just dealing with a particularly troublesome monkey?

Bree wasn’t responding. Simone looked up to the black dusk skylights reflecting the scene in miniature. The enormous hospital atrium was playing out up there, and she could barely make out the tiny pieces in motion. They were alive and they were moving in real time, but they were made entirely of light. The pianist. She glanced toward him and saw his barrel chest rocking back and forth along with the playful tune. He sure looked like he was having fun vamping and soaking up the smiles of the people passing by. She pictured his hands, and they were like a pair of gloves that she then pictured herself wearing. She was playing jazz to a room full of strangers and having the time of her life.

“Sorry Bree. I was just getting into the music.”

“say sorry again.”

“You are unbelievable.”

“say itttttt!”

“In your dreams.”

It was technically spring, but nights were still on the winter program, and it was dark when she got home. The streets were lit to a nauseating sodium sepia that made everything look like broth scum. The city was beginning to develop some kind of scent again. Before long there would be robins pacing the terraces like hookers. Snow was melting and revealing lawns with a winter’s accumulation of cigarette butts and dog shit, and the air smelled like a cold mineral gruel of mud and grease. Simone could hear meltwater dribbling into the storm drains, and it sounded like a strange chorus of metallic croaking. For a moment her mind followed the sound over the edge, down into the darkness, past lodes of oily rat bones and sawdust.

This time of year was always a brutal tug of war between competing forms of profound ugliness. Everyone was exhausted and stir crazy from long nights and bitter cold. Long gone were the picturesque days of watching fluffy snow fall onto the streets; scenes vignettted by crystalline halos growing on the windows. Simone couldn’t define the exact moment, but somewhere near the end of February the snow became utterly smothering. She would catch the right glimpse of the street filth that was rising from inside all the snow as it was kneaded with shoes and shovels, and suddenly the glamor was broken. The snow became this oppressive, groping horror, and she wanted it to stop.

You could drive through neighborhoods like this one during the day and see an occasional white-haired Sisyphus scraping the snow banks in front of his home, throwing shovelfuls into the street to expedite the melt off. It went on like this every day until the snow melted completely. There was a principle behind the actions of retirees like these which she could understand and even relate to—we all are tired of this hideous, lingering winter—but she recoiled at the thought of actively doing something so absolutely pointless. If she let herself think too long about it, she began to feel as if she were staring directly into the sun. Was it cabin fever? Were these old people on the brink of losing it? Was there some kind of enlightenment in the fruitless effort? Was she simply too brutish to understand? The sun was beginning to irreparably burn the delicate retina.

The entrance to her building was glass, and beyond the lobby glowed in a way that felt gentle and soothing to her like a hearth. She suddenly could smell cigarette smoke diffused on the fresh air, and it gave her the feeling of being in a winter huddle of smokers for a moment. She felt suddenly close to whomever was smoking out here. She couldn’t see them, but the scent was so fresh and distinct, and she knew it was a regular from her building. In the summer there was a group of retirees who would sit around on lawn chairs along the sidewalk and smoke and talk all day. There was an entire economy and ecosystem of cash transaction errand runners in the building that kept the pensioners appointed from check to check. She was vaguely aware of a semi-professional gopher that went by the handle Five Dollar Bill—allegedly his government name was Bill something, and he would run errands at the rate of five dollars per location. The guy apparently had hustle and his branding was impressive. This building was alive and crawling with people like Five Dollar Bill, even at this time in the evening. It was like a little wasp nest for the weirdos.

Simone lazily flashed her card to the reader and the lock buzzed alive with solenoids. Once within the enclosed space, the scent turned from sweet wind-wafted cigarette smoke to something foul. Hot lunch. Armpit. Beer tent. It was revolting, and it was cascading over her in different permutations of spaghetti with meatballs potluck to weed and fabric softener. She pictured Jupiter's swirling toxic clouds as she navigated the miasma to her door. With a jingly flourish she was locked away in her vault. The scent of bird dust and the shapes of the room in darkness had begun to sooth her already. She clacked her keys down on the table and stepped listlessly around the space like she was taking a reading. Joists creaked overhead and she could hear her neighbor's autistic child making this yipping sound that was oddly piercing. She smiled a little, naturally. It was a silly sound to her, playful. A TV barked a matrix of nonsense behind it. There was something about the liveliness of this apartment block that fascinated her endlessly. It was like an organism in and of itself. It was like the thriving communities of bacteria and coral and shrimp that play at the edges of volcanic vents deep within the Mariana Trench. In the depths, in the corners where you refuse to look, there is life and it thrives. In here it was like she had a jazz soundtrack for every day and that soundtrack was the chaotic din of her neighbors.

Simone was hardly concerned with the lives of the other tenants, but she relished the moments of quiet that were oftentimes catastrophically interrupted by their business. It gave her this strange sense of family, despite living alone. It's not as if she babysat for the child that she heard, or even knew her name. She felt an uncanny connection through those sounds, nonetheless.

She clicked on her big standing floor lamp which had a graceful arching post that suspended a light over her modest digital piano. She felt a void in her gut, but sat down regardless. Her hands approached the keys with such delicacy that could not be detected by human eyes. How close can you be before you touch something? Finesse that felt to her like the order of atomic scale. In her mind she pictured the electron cloud and her fingers began.

Intricate, precious arpeggi. Her own warmup etudes. Hands sculpted into a rigid form that played the same eight notes in different places along the keyboard, the key she decided to start with determined the color of the sound. She auditioned different colors next to each other to feel the vibe. She felt herself slipping away into a song almost immediately. She grabbed her manuscript notebook and pencil and began to mark the notes she liked for reference before she forgot and started fiddling with the next change.

Four hours contracted like nothing and she had nothing to show. Such intricate arrangements and nearly undetectable changes. It would sound repetitive and droning, wouldn't it? She was obsessed with subtlety, though. All of her feelings were lost in the subtleties. The melody was just a mask for the real intent. The sugar with the medicine. She could write melodies all day. What she was after was something deeper than melodies. She wanted to flick your heart strings with sound, but she couldn't quite figure out how.

From over her shoulder she heard a sweet, peaceful whistle like a tiny cuckoo clock. The tone said, "Hello?"

"Hey Schnitz..."

Her cockatiel Schnitzel craned his neck and bobbed his head once eagerly.

"Cuckoo."

"I know, it's bedtime, Schnitz, but I got bit by a bug."

He bobbed his head again.

"Cuckoo."

"Oh you poor little baby." She opened the cage and Schnitzel flapped up to her shoulder.

"Ok, teeth and then bed, Schnitz. Sorry. Tonight was show night. I'll bust you out of jail tomorrow."

Schnitzel looked at her like he was really listening. Simone squeezed a blob of toothpaste onto her brush and looked at herself in the mirror. Schnitzel was instantly enamored with the bird that he saw and began to make himself presentable. He puffed up and broadened his shoulders. She looked at him and he hissed at her angrily for cramping his style, he then turned back to the mirror and started making kissing noises.

"Schnitzel, you cad! Doff your hat like a gentleman!"

She chirped a little laugh to herself. It was time for bed.

II

I open my eyes and I am in the hallway of twilight with only one way to go. I know this darkling place because I grew up here, running through these halls before I knew their gravity. Halls without end for a child. These are the halls of a hospital, beneath the glow of twilight. Plastic molding climbing the walls, hardly even noticeable. White and beige with the seams and corners gently filleted away. No pores and no crevices to squeeze out insects. Clean and inert, only—without the typical mumbling of fluorescent light. That's odd. During this time everything glows with a color so rare, it pushes humans to question its reality. How that luxurious indigo patina changes everything, even the things we are most certain of.

The intensive care unit, the coma ward, Four South. My mother crouches down to establish a kind of profound eye contact with me which gives me a feeling I've never quite felt before.

"When we go through these doors, we cannot under any circumstances make noise. Do you understand me? Verstehen sie?" she says, and I solemnly nod.

I know that she's lying in a bed behind one of these walls, but really there are countless torpid bodies around me, hidden away behind the walls. I can't see them and I can't hear them, but I know that they're here. I know that around a corner there's an office redoubt where the charge nurse is dozing off. The twilight doesn't reach that place, but she's bathed in a different blue glow of electronic flickering and motion as sitcom reruns play silently forever on an antique tube television in the lobby. But it's silent here. Neither the Dick Van Dyke reruns nor the machines that keep those hidden human chrysalides pumping create the slightest sound.

Bodies: sometimes they're like a window to inconceivable beauty, sometimes a dirty cage, and sometimes a terrestrial anchor. I turn back from where I came and as I see the doors of hollow metal and glass, I can suddenly feel a bed cradling my body. It's not really there, though. I'm standing in this hallway, trying to see beyond the glass to make out some sort of feature or form of the world outside—so distant now that it has become a point mass of light. Polaris, calling me back. But even this begins to wobble and fade, just as I'm reaching for a rope dangling down from the light at the edge.

My periphery lurches and I'm startled by a woman on the floor, lying on her back with her eyes dull and staring off into interstellar space, but slowly slithering like a centipede toward the light. She is mouthing words I can't hear. I look up and there are polished white skulls of cats mounted all along the crown molding of this room. The corner is dark and when I look into it I'm drawn into it. And the sound comes rushing in, like crashing waves, like someone dropped all the pans on the floor in the kitchen.

A soft gasp and once again it was consciousness for Simone. She felt a slight, instantaneous pang.

She snapped her head left to her phone. 4:49AM, 5:00AM and the alarm began to shriek. She tapped cancel after half an alarm cycle.

"Fuck, it's only Wednesday," she breathed aloud to herself through curdled mucus.

She yanked herself to the edge of the bed and let her legs dangle, staring past them. She grabbed her phone and started tapping.

“Remind me to tell you about my dream today.”

Simone tossed her phone on the bed and slipped out of her underwear and into the shower with a fluid march. The noise and the warmth of the shower was like a cocoon, and for brief moments when her eyes were closed, she lost track of the bathroom and began to see flashes of the office and the coming day.

Simone and Brianna worked for a corporation that manufactured syringes. Simone sidled in for a job after a rudderless college career. Brianna’s grandfather worked for a previous permutation of this company that existed before a late nineties acquisition, but after the war. Without any guidance from her working parents, she picked the name of a company that just sounded familiar.

They were both order writers, which amounted to a data entry job. Neither was particularly invested in the medical devices industry, but this is where life had brought them. They were like the rest of the sales staff in this place, the offspring of local working class parents. Sharp people whose passions lay elsewhere, but whose glimmers of talent made them appear enticing to a recruiter. The management was sprinkled with women who had once blazed a trail and now fiercely defended their niches like nesting sea birds, pitting their hatchlings against each other to see who has the moxy to survive, and who will be left to starve.

This was a type of corporate manufacturing purgatory that played out across the country every single day. What do you do? We make the thing that fits some crucial niche in society. Pen caps. Brass casings. Calculator buttons. Nose cones for missiles. Food dehydrators. Highest quality. Best seller. Somebody is actually printing this chart and hanging it up every day aren’t they? I was going through your expense report and saw that you charged a dinner for three at a fancy burger place to your Diner’s Club account, would you mind explaining the circumstances? It was all part of an interconnected beige cubicle labyrinth set up to trap all the middling people; all of society’s burnouts. An emergent trap of our own design, because everybody burns out, don’t they? A sprawling house of cardboard chutes and baffles designed to lure each and every cockroach down their own private dead end, where you’re allowed to hang up a maximum of three posters, tasteful ones, nothing fringe or subversive. You don’t want to give off the wrong impression right? The best types worked their way up into the office from the factory floor. There was this true grit from them that was verging on defiance. They were raised with manners by their parents, yet somehow learned the most eloquent ways to say “fuck you” to managers. Where did they pick that up anyway?

It’s not that managers were fundamentally bad, though. There were rare shining examples of them—ones that played the role of guidance counselor—but they were like electrons zipping from industry to industry, scanning for life, then moving on to the next uninhabitable insect planet. The problem seemed more a function of the circumstances. Every step higher on the ladder makes one’s balance more precarious, and the higher you get, the more your eyes begin to deceive you, making the tiny scuttling things below you suddenly appear like food to the sharp vision that got you there. Funneled off into their own lanes, manipulating the little critters was but child’s play. One step up was all it took sometimes to begin losing crucial humanity. The cube dwellers thought less of the maintenance technicians and the custodians and the laborers on the assembly lines, even though those people earned more on overtime and probably owned a modest fishing boat or developed rich collections of precious things in their spare time. There were plenty of people willing to step over each other for a tidy salary—there would always be those people—but against all odds some people managed a white knuckle grip on their humanity and refused to let the ascendant C-suite types suss it away from them with their games.

Humanity. This world is crawling with humans and we're getting packed into our can more tightly every year. For all that humanity, things appear to be rather disharmonious. Fewer jazz ensembles and more niche concept noise performance soloists with stacks of modular gear and no groove. Fewer emergent flocks preening each other, and more solitary companion parrots sitting on a perch in front of their very own mirror seven days a week, nervously pulling out whole tracts of their own feathers for lack of the loving touch of another. A caged parrot can't feed itself anymore, it must rely on the benevolence of some higher order. You may want to blame an oppressive conspiratorial system, but we're also to blame for not reaching out, aren't we? Afraid of a little ugliness. There's a whole scale between sociopathy and codependency, but here we are honking out notes as hard as we can on one end or the other, missing out on the subtlety in between.

Simone's greatest fault? She was lost in subtlety. She spent her days in an exhausting ballet of body language and environmental disturbances. She could tell when someone was approaching her cubicle based on the doppler effect a human body had on room tone. It was uncanny. The cube dwellers often remarked that she had eyes in the back of her head, a quip that she no longer acknowledged with even the courtesy of a contrived laugh. To others' eyes, Simone was like a cat. Equal parts prickly and cuddly, sliding that scale in a way that was wonderfully chaotic. Keen observers could hear her jazz, but she certainly registered eccentric flags on the radars of most people. She was borderline weirdo.

"Are you gonna tell me about this dream? Spooky dream or cryptic dream?"

Bree was already spooled up.

"I'm not gonna detail my dream to you out loud in the office!" Simone woofed in a hysterical whisper. "Everyone can hear."

"Sex dream. Got it."

Simone flushed. "F—" The saliva sizzled on her lips with the sound, and she choked the word back down to a whisper. Her eyes darted, nervously shooting off oblique sparks. "Fuck you, Bree."

"Did the piano man tickle your ovaries?" Bree wiggled her fingers toward Simone's rapidly deforming face.

Simone began throwing the detritus of her cube at Bree's grin with intent to maim. Paperclip. Pen cap. Pencil. Bree's giggling became disruptive.

"Girls!"

They froze and slowly began to recoil from their antics.

"Sorry Bonnie." Simone bristled, emphasizing the capital B.

Bree glanced through the cubicle transom with a cringe to see a little old woman nestled in her cube like a daytime owl, round face staring up at her, in an unblinking defensive posture.

"Sorry Bonnie," Bree sang as she picked up all the projectiles.

"Where are we going for lunch today? I want bread." Simone's eyes glazed over and Bree had the strangest feeling that she was being turned into a loaf.

“Bakery bread or garbage bread?”

“Just bread. A hot dog bun between two halves of crusty french bread.”

“Bread sandwich?” Brianna’s face flashed a theatrical sort of concern.

“I’m ready to fuck up some bread. It’s the season.”

“What’s seasonal about bread?”

“It’s my season.”

“Oh. Simone season. I didn’t have that on my calendar. When’s Bree seaso—”

“Never.”

They both laughed.

The sales department was typically marked with the unearthly hum and chirping of electronic stuff. It sounded like a mausoleum for wealthy consumer grade robots. It sounded like the way too much coffee felt—like baby’s first psychosis. The scent was inert, except for the guy that smelled like a dog groomer and walked like he just had a vasectomy, or the lady that smelled like sloppy joes and talked to her mom loudly on speaker as she walked into the building every single morning. Aside from these particular criminals, the place smelled threateningly antiseptic. Simone couldn’t tell if it was the smell of real antiseptic or atomized stress hormones leaching out through human skin. Tension played the voices of the people around them with virtuosic ease. But why? These weren’t strangers, they were employed for the long haul. The livelihoods of their families were intrinsic to the way this machine performed, yet there was such a pervasive sense of dysfunction everywhere here.

“Is it show night again tonight?”

The chirping of phones became like the song of a solitary cricket at night—out beside a cabin—and there were dark mountains blotting out some of the stars. Simone could smell the minerals and the conifers and a distant hardwood fire being tugged like tiny filaments of taffy on the wind. Simone’s fingers danced over her keyboard, barely grazing certain keys spelling out words that weren’t transmitting.

“No. And if it were up to me, you wouldn’t even have any clues as to when and where it is, super snooper. If I knew you better, I never would’ve let that one slip.”

“I’m going to crack the code, Simone. I’m like Tom Hanks in that movie about weird Chr—.” Brianna caught herself.

“Huh?”

Brianna leaned in and mouthed “Christians” with an exaggerated breathy whisper.

“Why are we whispering?”

“Bonnie’s Seventh-Day Adventist.”

“Holy shit, like David Koresh?”

“The Branch Davidians were a subsect—or a branch if you will—of the Seventh-Day Adventists.”

Brianna’s whispers were making Simone drowsy.

“What are you?”

“I’m spiritual.”

“Of course you are, Bree. What a cop out.”

“Well what are you, then? A cop?”

“I was born in a laboratory.”

Brianna’s whole face curled up at the edges with the pressure of a gale of laughter that could rip the siding off a house.

She covered her mouth tightly, and galloped away like a racehorse turning the corner, losing traction. Simone thought she could hear a little whinny following her escape vector.

Simone smirked, quite pleased with herself. *Buzzz*. She looked down at her phone. 1 New Message. Brianna.

“can i come over and listen to records tonight?”

Simone began to tap, but Bree started first.

“that is, if you don’t have pianoman coming over to jump your ivories.”

Simone deleted, then began typing again. This time with vengeance.

“Omg you slut, I’m not banging him.”

“plzzzzzzz you have good music.”

“I have good acoustics.”

“Yes, I will allow you to come over.”

“Six o’clock P.M.?”

“no six O’CLOCK AM you weirdo”

Simone threw her phone into the corner of her cube and it skittered into a balancing tower of identical pens, razing the structure with a clatter. A shush hissed from the other side of the cube wall. Simone shushed back louder, longer, and more obnoxiously while giving two middle fingers to the wall.

“I heard that!” Bree shouted at a distance. “SHHHHHH!”

III

Simone was on her hands and knees with a toothbrush and all the contents of her refrigerator were placed on the floor like a battalion of half used condiment soldiers from different countries with labels in different languages, like some sticky glass French Foreign Legion. She noticed her oversized sweater was hanging down and touching the detergent residue, so she tied it off high with a potato chip clip, exposing her midriff. She had a sudden flash of memory to the week before Christmas when her mom cleaned obsessively, doing all the upkeep that should have been done daily for the last six months all in one fell swoop, all in overdrive, all to a soundtrack of the same scratched Mary-Chapin Carpenter CD on repeat, skips and all.

Gloria's Step was boppin' from her stereo, and Simone wanted to spin.

There was a knock at the door and she froze like a chipmunk, then started packing bottles into the fridge door like she was stuffing a suitcase for a hasty escape.

Simone opened the door and Brianna was standing there bundled in a herringbone car coat like a nutcracker, dangling a greasy brown paper bag threateningly in Simone's face. She glanced down and poked Simone's belly button. "Ding dong."

"Shit, If this is gonna be *that* kind of party..." Brianna dropped the bag completely and let Simone scramble to keep it from hitting the floor. "...I'm sticking my dick in the mashed potatoes."

Simone blushed, hugging the bag as the smell of burgers washed over her. "Mantan Moreland!" She chirped, and discreetly unclipped her sweater and let it fall down, brushing aside the embarrassment.

"Uh, Beastie Boys? Duh."

Simone rolled her eyes so hard she could feel the optic nerves tugging on her brain like a pull starter. She spun around, but Bree had already disappeared around the corner. Simone's eyes darted after her, but she was taken aback by..."

"Cuckoo."

Schnitzel was slowly sliding out from the doorway at eye level across the room, excitedly bobbing up and down to a Scott LaFaro standing bass solo, balancing on Bree's head which was fully turned sideways, revealing just her smiling eyes. She pumped her eyebrows at Simone like a classically-trained clown.

"It's Schnitzel!" She exploded out from the doorway with Schnitzel riding on the crown of her head now, flapping to hold on for dear life as she did the most embarrassing cha-cha. Simone laughed at her from deep down in her winding guts.

"Bree, how are we supposed to eat all of this?" Simone had already pulled the wax paper off one of the burgers and it was comically massive. She held it up in front of her mouth and opened her jaws as wide

as they could go, then slowly backed it up until it bumped into her nose. It was like parallel parking a horse trailer.

"Does babybird need mama to feed her?" Bree said with a smirk.

The image that came to mind made Simone feel a blush rising from her neck.

"Uh-hork...uh-huuuork" Bree was flapping her wings, pantomiming a bird barfing up food for her offspring. "I hope you're hungry, babies, mama's regurgin' a sturgeon."

Simone laughed. "Stop! It's making me nauseous!" She changed course and nibbled at her burger like a little rat, eyes glazed over with a certain gustatory ecstasy.

"He likes it! Hey Mikey!" Bree was feeding a french fry to Schnitzel, and he was on cloud nine, potato mushed all over his little beak.

"I did bring something that will take this picnic to the next level, though."

Simone's eyes faded back to reality. "What's that?" She asked through a mouthful of fries.

Bree pulled out a pen and twirled it along her hand from index finger to pinky and back like a pro. Simone applauded graciously with her greasy little paws.

"Do you want to get high, man?" Bree asked in a nasal voice.

"Does Pinocchio have wooden balls, man?"

"Ok, weed staring contest." Bree took a long, gradual drag, then passed the pen to Simone, positioning herself eye to eye with her.

Simone stared her down and took a huge honk, immediately coughing point blank all over Bree's face, then collapsing into a coughing fit.

"Like taking candy from a baby."

Before long they were laying in a mess that looked as if the cheeseburgers had actually exploded. It was a massacre. Simone looked over at Brianna who was occupied, trying to push in her distended belly, then letting it bounce back to its full pregnant glory, giggling to herself.

"Bro..I'm...stoned...to the bone. And...all this sweater..."

Simone held her hands up in front of her face, but the massive sleeves of her sweater covered them. The sleeves slipped and fell suddenly and her hands popped out. She shrieked in terror.

Brianna was grinning at her like Tex Avery's McWolf. Time to have some fun.

"Quick, stand up and move your arms and legs. You're gonna turn into a doll!"

"A...a doll? OH GOD...oh god no!"

Simone looked carefully at her hands and they glistened back at her like Barbie skin, and fear rose up in her eyes.

Brianna cackled. "Oh my god, I'm just kidding. But it will help if you move around. It's crucial for reality testing."

"...Reality...testing?" Simone was up slowly strutting around like a rooster, but like, *really* like a rooster.

"Do you...uh...practice walking like a chicken a lot? Look, Schnitzel's into it."

"Gross, Schnitz is like my son you pervert!" Simone said, flapping angrily at Bree while Schnitzel bobbed along.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"It's hard to tell with you sometimes, Bree."

Simone strutted over to the turntable that was sizzling and popping in a runout track like a skillet full of bacon. She fussed with a sleeve, then dropped the needle and an 808 beat rang out, all gated reverb, a lush, slow double synth stab, then plucked digital strings.

"Oh shit! Oh yeah!" Bree was on her feet and they were slowly boogying away from each other as the verse went on in Babyface's sweet tenor. Ten paces.

"Ready?"

"Oh I met my baby at the..." They sang together.

Simone pulled an imaginary Colt single action auto from her imaginary belt holster and fanned the hammer, firing two shots at Bree, whose face was screwed up like Yosemite Sam.

"BANG BANG, GOTCHA!" They screamed. "SHOOT 'EM UP MOVIES!"

Bree collapsed into death throes while Simone blew the smoke from her index finger, then twirled the Colt down into her holster like Doc Holliday. Great peals of laughter rang off the walls.

"Tell them...I said...something..." Brianna sputtered through gouts of imaginary blood, reaching one hand toward heaven, clutching her heaving chest with the other.

Simone was across the room on her side, kicking her legs to paddle in a circle on the carpet, laughing maniacally.

"Oh! Oh Jesus Christ I have a stitch!"

Schnitzel was puffed up with his beak buried in his back feathers, perched on the arm of the couch when the song ended, totally at peace with the scene. Bree looked at Simone and nudged her nose toward Schnitzel.

“Shhhhh. Baby’s sleeping.”

“Oh Schnitz, is it past your bedtime?”

“Schnitzel, you lightweight!”

“How dare you talk to my precious baby like that?”

“Aw, come on mama, I was just goofing. I love Schnitzel.”

She reached out her flattened hand for the delicate little bird to climb onto. Schnitzel hissed at her with an angry face. He wanted to stay here with them.

“Ahh, there’s nothing like singing in unison,” Bree said, staring out the window into the aether beyond.

“Really? Doesn’t it always end up sounding like an elementary school recital to you?”

“Who gives a shit? When everyone sings together, nobody is listening for just your voice. They’re just having the time of their lives. If everyone acts silly, nobody feels shame.”

Simone puzzled over this, looking at Brianna’s face and tilting her head like a dog watching someone blow up a balloon.

“Jesus Christ, Bree. Either I’m really stoned, or that’s shockingly profound.”

“You *are* really stoned, but it *is* an axiomatic truth, so these two ideas are mutually inclusive and you can take that check to the bank and cash it, baby!”

“So what, now you’re a Confucian scholar?”

Brianna gasped, feigning shock. “Were you snooping around my records in the office? How did you know my major?” She idly picked at a loose piece of bird seed on the carpet. “You should hear Bonnie sing karaoke.”

“Wait, WHAT? Bonnie sings karaoke? What the fuck? Wait, when did you hear her singing karaoke?”

“Uh, we go out every Friday night, bonehead.”

“Oh my god, you invite the other people from work to go sing karaoke with you? You traitor!”

“What, you thought I was asking you on cute dates, just the two of us, Casanova?” Brianna flashed her a sideways glance and a smirk. “You must be even easier than I thought!”

Simone blushed and felt the rising bile of embarrassment.

“Oh my god, I’m not easy, you skank!”

"I'm not a skank. I have refined taste. I'm like a championship poodle." Brianna sat up on her haunches, licked the back of her hand and brushed it across her forehead like a cat, looking down with an air of conceited disinterest, then continued licking her paw gracefully.

"You're an alley cat!"

"Well you're a rat...burger."

Simone was curling up into a corner of the couch. "I don't even know what that means," she mumbled. She could hear the ocean and it was getting louder. She closed her eyes and smelled gardenias. "Ratburger." Behind the tapestry, she could see a face, and it was very close to hers. Meanwhile, Brianna sat on the floor glancing around the room at everything. It was like one of those weird museums they make when they don't want to tear down something of historical value. Nothing looked particularly elegant or valuable, but everything was arranged like it was on display for someone to browse. A wall covered with shelves and shelves of LPs all individually wrapped like Japanese snack crackers. There was a fine antique table, but it looked like no one ever ate at it. There were stacks of notebooks on it, and the chair was out like Simone had been sitting at it. But nothing that resembled a place setting. It looked like a table at a library. There was a bra hanging from the back of the chair. Brianna blushed and looked away.

There was a dark corner opposite the living room, and the light barely reached what Brianna could make out as a compact digital piano. The kind they make for apartment dwellers without the luxury of space. It looked like an old framed photo was hanging in front of it, lower than it should be. Like it was at eye level for the player. Right above where the sheet music might sit.

"Simone?"

She was breathing rhythmically, and Schnitzel had crawled down to sleep on her chest, almost touching her lips, right where he could feel her breath on his feathers. Brianna's eyes were touched with sadness for a moment.

"...uh?"

"Will you play your piano for me?"

Simone breathed so loud right now that Brianna realized she had never heard her just idly breathing before.

"...uh...can't play for anyone. Only mom...have stage fright." Simone said dreamily, with eyes still closed.

"Where's your mom? Do you play for her often?" Brianna suddenly felt like the museum was closed and she wanted to snoop, but as her sharp eyes started to zero in on things she had the sinking feeling that she was defiling a chapel.

"mm...died last year..." Simone's placid face muttered.

"What? When? I don't remember you taking any time off from work."

Simone shifted, and continued talking from her twilight hiding place behind the tapestry.

“Monie, we take our tears in stride. That’s what she told me when Grandma and Grandpa died...then it was just the two of us.” She sounded like a little girl. There was a fragility Brianna had never heard in her voice.

“Oh no. You don’t have any family, Simone?” Tears were welling up in Brianna’s eyes.

“Mm...born in a lab.”

Bree laughed a bitter little laugh to herself, feeling ashamed, and sniffed up her snot. She grabbed a nearby afghan that was ratty and had constellations of bird seed embedded in its fibers. It was a deep blue that was fading with age. She draped it over Simone’s slowly pulsating body. She tiptoed through the apartment, picking up the litter of soda cans and greasy wax paper and french fry shrapnel. As she tidied up, she sang softly to herself:

“Ah...Ah...Que la Mère est belle...Ah...Ah...Que l'Enfant est beau...”

She presented a flattened hand to the sleeping Schnitzel and softly nudged his breast to get him to climb up. He did so without protest this time, off in his dream world, surrounded by other birds huddled to feel each other’s warmth in a tree at night somewhere in the Australian countryside. She rounded the corner into the kitchen and lowered Schnitzel into his cage and he sleep walked onto his perch.

“...Mom?” Simone called softly in her sleep. Brianna didn’t hear her.

The door clicked shut behind her.

“Yip!”

Bree yipped back at the neighbor child through the door across the hall on her way out.

“Yip yip!” The child replied gleefully, and Bree smiled to herself.

A surly, bearded man stumbled past her, too close. “Don’t encourage *it*.” He snarled, and the “t” in “it” ricocheted off the tight corridor walls like flak. His breath smelled like a dumpster at the county fair. Bree hurried away with a chill, hoping she locked the door properly.

IV

It's dusk now and I'm standing in front of Saint Luke's—a charming little Cream City brick cathedral, with a back lit glowing clock face on the front of the gothic steeple. I look up to see the clock, but it's not there. That's odd. The steeple isn't there, only the full moon where the clock should be, massive and imposing in the sky. I can hear it whispering to me. Something about how I should take some time off of work now. What does it mean?

When I was a child at Saint Luke's Catholic Elementary School, my mom worked second shift as a nurse at the local hospital. I never knew my dad, but my grandparents babysat me a lot, and most weeknights I would sleep there so they could have me ready for school in the morning. My grandma was a nurse too. My grandpa...he was an enigmatic figure. Loud and boisterous and jolly, but sometimes I saw flashes of something bad beneath. My mom would pick me up from their house in the mornings, where I would be all spiffed up in my dress and tights, hair brushed, teeth brushed, transfixed by Donald Duck on the television; holding my knapsack on my lap quietly while grandpa told stories to grandma. Stories she'd obviously heard thousands of times, because she would fill in the blanks where he paused, before he could exhume the details from his withering mind. Sometimes this would cause him to snap back at her. Sometimes he would just continue talking over her as if she weren't there.

Wait, why am I remembering this? Oh yes, my mom would go home to get as much sleep as she could before her shift started. I didn't get to see her as much as I wanted. I loved her more than anything in my little world. Certainly more than other children, and the nuns, although the nuns were generally kind to me. She loved me more than anything too. I knew this because she spent our time together asking me questions. She wanted to know how my little mind worked. She was convinced she had created a genius and she always told me so. She hung up every scrap of paper I ever drew on, it seemed. She spent her weekends listening to me play the piano with rapt attention, sometimes with tears in her eyes.

Why am I here? On Wednesdays the nuns would march us down the block to the cathedral and we'd have mass. Just the faculty and the school children. The rest of the town was busy at work. I knew as soon as I heard the pipe organ lift us to our feet with the Kyrie, I'd look over my shoulder and I'd see my mother in the last pew on the right hand side. She would rush here after work, just to see me. And Sister Donna would let me run out right away after the dismissal. And she would be leaning against her rusty little Pontiac Sunbird, in her favorite color, turquoise, serene like the lake, and she would have Patsy Cline playing softly through the open window. When she saw me running, her face would explode into a grin and she would crouch down to catch me as I bum rushed her for a hug. And some days she had tears in her eyes.

*I hear the wind on the lake roaring, and at a distance I hear bits of her voice singing *Un Flambeau*, Jeanette, Isabelle.*

"Mom?" I call out to the night street from where it came, but it disappeared. I look up to the moon and I see the bricks of the steeple falling slowly into place from heaven. It is incredible, like nothing I have ever seen. I want to stay and watch the phenomenon, but I suddenly feel raindrops on my face. I think the pipe

organ is playing from inside the church, I can barely make it out. The Kyrie? No, it's not that. The sound has a different color. A curious sound. I have to hear more.

I try the massive door and it swings open effortlessly. I hear the melody of the pipe organ now, and it's climbing. It sounds heavenly, yet still curious. The foyer to the chapel is dark, and I hardly recognize the shapes anymore. I try to get my bearings, looking around desperately for something familiar, but there is only the melody. I pause to listen, holding my breath and realize it's coming from my left, so I walk slowly toward it, arms out like antennae. I feel a wall and I follow around a corner to find a staircase that's dimly lit further up. I can barely make out red carpeted stairs that look vaguely familiar. They appear to be spiraling with such a gradual curve, and the melody is lilting down so gently from above, that I am compelled to climb toward the dim light.

The melody is andante and it's lifting in elegant variations. I can see images of Jacob waking up to see the angels climbing from earth back to heaven. The walls that hemmed in the stairs have disappeared and the space is massive now, and I have a growing feeling of vertigo, but I continue on. I need to find the source of this song. I can't see anything in the darkness beyond, but that dim light is shining down from above, only obscured by the continuous spiral staircase which appears infinite from here.

I stop to look into the darkness off to one side, straining to make anything out, to understand where I am. It's the cathedral, but it's alive in a way that it shouldn't be. I can't see anything, but I picture massive censers like wrecking balls just beyond my senses in the dark, swinging with an unsettling pendulous motion. I hear a bustle on the stairs below, back where I began and my heart begins to race, and I start to climb the stairs two, three in a stride. The melody has climbed as far as it can and it is shrieking, begging me to find it. Only I can find it now.

Suddenly the stairs end before me, and I stop just short. I look forward and the light is there. It twinkles like a dying star and the melody is fading to resolution now, so I step off the edge and reach for it, but I freefall. I can feel the tiled floor of the chapel rushing at me.

A door slams shut in the hall and Simone's leg kicks out, wrenching her awake with an incredible gasp. She heard a brief bustle in the hall, but that's not unusual at any time of day or night. She stopped to listen. Nothing but the neighbor's television yapping in a strange river of artificial human voices and the contrived reactions of studio audiences. She listened for the familiar noises of the neighbor child, but there was nothing but the television. She tapped her phone. 12:34 A.M. Thursday. They were most certainly asleep now.

Simone was still on the couch. She looked around for Bree instinctively, but the room was still. She heaved a weary sigh and stood up to stretch. The soft arm of the couch had twisted her neck a little. She looked into the niche where her piano sat in darkness. Suddenly traces of the cathedral and the melody began to rise from the base of her spine toward her ears.

"Oh my god, that melody. I need to remember it." She grabbed a fresh manuscript book and pencil off the kitchen table, hurried off to her piano, and switched on the floor lamp. She sat and looked at the wall of keys, racking her brain. "Think, Simone, what was that? It was like Erik Satie's Gnosienne No. 5 in the way it revolved and iterated its way into heaven like..." She closed her eyes and images sprang forth. The angels climbing back to paradise. "Jacob's Ladder!" She began scribbling furiously.

"Cuckoo."

She looked up and the light from the lamp was shining into Schnitzel's cage where he was trying to sleep, but now he was wound up and wanted to come out to play.

"Schnitz, not now. Mama has to write or I'll lose this forever. This is a matter of life and death."

"Cuckoo."

"I need to concentrate." She slipped on a big pair of over the ear headphones and plugged them into the piano.

"Cuckoo." The tone was touched with disappointment.

Simone laid her fingers across the keys, and tried to recall the dream. Red carpeted stairs in dim light. It was so soft and distant and curious at first. Questioning phrases. What are you doing here? What do you want from us? What was the sound of a question? She auditioned a chord, and then another. She blended them, and transposed them. She added upper structure until she was on the verge of losing it, then lifted it. That was it. She had to climb the steps, and she had to seduce the listener to climb into the darkness with her. She paused and scribbled, then continued.

Schnitzel was watching her attentively at the corner of his cage as close as he could be while still locked away.

She was playing the same chord over and over now, in a sort of trance. Her eyes were seeing the lobby of the hospital. Enormous cedars of Lebanon holding up floating terraces of glass, leading up into the sky. There was no skylight and no walls. The massive oak doors and transoms were now shining alabaster gates. The tiers of balconies and stairs spiraled off into the clouds above, out of sight. She knew they continued on forever, though.

The enormous face of a lamb with seven eyes was there, staring down at her while she played droning elevator music to heaven's lobby. The angels were on their way to work in their office towers. She looked at their serene faces and wondered what each of them did for a living. Which one was the overachieving sales rep? Which one was the soft spoken project manager that you could barely understand? Which one was the sycophant to the archangels? Which one unabashedly ate a TV dinner in the break room every single day? Did they have TV dinners in heaven? Of course they did. TV dinners were obviously some dead person's favorite thing to eat in the entire world, and if heaven wasn't filled with our favorite things, what was it good for? Did everyone just sit on clouds all day watching the affairs of humanity like voyeurs? Wait, is it a sin to be a voyeur? This was suddenly getting very confusing. Yeah, there were ten commandments, but those dusty things didn't say shit about sneaking a glimpse of the waistband on Brianna's underwear when she bent over.

"Focus, Simone."

They were yellow with a gossamer scalloped edge, by the way.

"FOCUS."

She began to scribble her findings into the grand staves in her manuscript book. One page turned into two dozen. Towering stacked polychords studded with ornamentation climbed the page like caterpillars. Her alarm shrieked and she swiped it away with total disinterest. Another iteration was necessary. She

needed to be ready for the change that was coming next. She put her headphones on for one more pass. Outside the dawn chorus had begun softly and Schnitzel was bobbing. He waddled over to his water dish and plunged his head in, but hit bottom. He came up licking his beak. He stuck his head in and licked the residue of moisture from the corners of the dish, but he wanted a proper drink.

“Cuckoo.” The tone impatiently said “Hellooo? I’m thirsty here.”

He bonked his beak on the water dish rhythmically, but Simone wasn’t listening. An hour later she threw off her headphones, and sprinted for the door, snatching her keys from the table as she passed.

V

Simone wanted desperately to turn around and retreat to her piano. The hum of the fluorescents was mingling with a grumbling drone of voices and it felt like she was being watched from every corner. She wanted to hear Bree's voice, though.

Simone wheeled around the corner into her cube to find Bree sitting in her chair with her feet on her desk.

"Hey lazy."

"Come on, Bree! What are you doing here? Are you snooping?"

"We are here to inflict zee punishment." Brianna laid a fist down over her leg, presenting pens protruding from between each finger like a sinister spiked knuckle duster juxtaposed against the field of stylized cartoon daisies on her tights.

"Ugh, Bree, that voice gives me the creeps."

"What? You don't like zee German torture officer? It's such a wholesome character."

"You're straight out of Kafka's worst nightmare."

She held the array of pens up in front of her face thoughtfully and tested the tip of each one with her other index finger. "You see zis machine, it tattoos zee prisoner's soft flesh..."

Simone grimaced and shook her head in disgust.

Brianna kicked off and pirouetted in the chair. The pens went skittering across the desk beyond her and when she came round to face Simone again, she had a new kind of sadistic smirk, and she was rapping a ruler against the palm of her hand.

"Alright, pledge, it's hell week." Her voice was deep, dripping in a twisted pleasure. "Assume the position. It's time to take your medicine." Her eyes were locked onto Simone's like a cobra. Simone's guts coiled like a twisting forkful of spaghetti and she dropped her bag involuntarily.

"Oh my god gross! That's even worse! Make it stop! Please tell me you weren't one of those awful sorority girls, Bree!"

"Let this be a lesson to you: never cross a drama kid." She poked Simone with the end of the ruler, but her eyes were glazed over. "We've lost her, doctor. Time of death: 9:17 A.M."

Hearing the time snapped Simone out of it with a jolt.

"Come on, get up. Vamoose!" she snatched the ruler away from her, then jiggled it in the air overhead. "Ah? Ah? Come on Fido, uppies!"

Brianna lurched to attention—all lolling tongue and exaggerated panting, and she yipped. Something struck a sour note inside Simone's ears and for a split second it felt like she was falling, but she wasn't. She continued.

"Ready? Poodle championships. Now...fetch!" Simone launched the ruler over her shoulder with reckless abandon and it landed in someone else's cube.

"Hey!" A man's voice rang out with irritation. "What the hell?"

Brianna galloped away, yipping into the distance, her voice turning into a melody—turning into *the* melody. Simone brushed aside a growing sense of dread. She had work to do, tout de suite.

"Sorry Matt!" Bree sang.

Buzzz. Brianna.

"why are you so late, sleepy?"

"Bit by a bug late last night."

"ew does your apartment have...bedbugs?"

"GET THEM OFF ME! THEY'RE CRAWLING!"

"Nah, I got a song in my head and had to write it down before I lost it."

Simone had the feeling that her words were inadequate to explain what that felt like. She began to imagine what it would be like for her to compose with Bree around and a low chorus of voices began to tear the image apart. How could Bree possibly understand her creative process? She was like a hyperactive child that never stopped long enough to reflect. She simply *liked* songs without drilling down into them to see how they were constructed to affect her. It seemed as if she was more than willing to sit back and let someone else curate the music of her life. She sang karaoke...with Bonnie. These thoughts began to make Simone's bile rise, and Brianna seemed to be taking a long time to respond. Simone found herself staring at her phone with a sense of panic.

"i was thinking that since you won't do karaoke with us tomorrow, you should seriously make a move on the pianoman"

Simone's stomach dropped. She felt like she was falling in earnest now. Dread voices were rising in a long crescendo—defiling her precious images of Brianna, gleefully worming their way in and pulling out the stuffing. She felt utterly powerless to stop them.

"What makes you say that?"

Brianna wasn't saying anything.

"Wtf makes you say that?"

Simone could see herself sitting on the porch at her mom's house, watching an ambulance drive away.

"imagine having someone in your life who you could play for"

"and they were the perfect fit for you"

"theyd push you and drive you to get better"

"and you could talk to them about your song and theyd understand"

Bree was nudging her little fledgling to the cliffs so that she might fly, but Simone couldn't understand. It was as if they were always on parallel tracks.

Simone was shaking. She swiped the text. Get it off me. She kept swiping until the thread was deleted. She was spinning now, and she could hear the melody changing. She could see the enormous golden censers hanging from intricate chains, beginning their awful pendulous motion out there in the darkness. She sat there for a beat then looked down at her phone like she was standing before an ancient sealed tomb. She knew herself too well, and all this time she had kept herself from defiling this particular mystery, but her fingers were moving on their own now. She was searching for Brianna's socials.

She swallowed hard and began to scroll through photos of Brianna smiling in different places, surrounded by different smiling people. Simone didn't know any of them. There were men and women. So many arms draped so brazenly over her shoulders. Simone could count on one hand the amount of times she had touched Brianna, and most of those were out of sheer clumsiness. How close she had been. It seemed like the distant past now, staring at all these strangers and feeling minuscule. The moment was dilating and everything made perfect sense. Of course Brianna wanted her to meet the pianist. This particular parasite was only good for buffing her ego and padding out her diverse social life, and its usefulness was fading. The censers were beginning to gain momentum. She knew that there were living things trapped inside them, and they were beginning to burn alive as an offering to that lamb's horrible face. Their ecstatic voices were beginning to mingle with the melody, and the smoke that was belching out from their immolation was getting in her eyes.

Tears welled up as she tapped her way to Brianna's contact in her phone. She tapped her wobbling picture. It was Brianna standing right here in her cube on the first day they met. She was doing a curtsy in a striped midi shirt dress in navy blue that made her look so sophisticated, towering over her while Simone felt like a little chipmunk that had wandered into the cage of a lioness.

She is everything I wish I was and have never been.

She blinked her tears out and blocked the contact, then grabbed her bag off the floor and made a break for the exit.

Somewhere in the æther, a text ricocheted off Simone's phone into oblivion.

"or yknow we could have a sleepover :)"

Moments later, Brianna came storming around the corner. "What's the big idea? Now you're too cool for a slumber par—"

She looked around quizzically. "Simone?"

By the time work was over, Simone had been sitting at her piano with her headphones on for hours, hands working back and forth, gaining momentum and climbing subtly with each iteration. In her mind she was sitting on her mother's porch in a trance. The tears wouldn't come. She wondered if there was something wrong with her. From the corner of her eye she could see a police officer approaching her.

"Excuse me, miss. I am required to ask this, and you are in no way obligated to, but..." He paused like he was about to perform a deadlift. "...would you like to see the body?"

Those were the magic words. Simone could feel bile rising and images were racing through her mind in a vortex. She caught her breath in a series of perforating gasps for air.

"Yes," she said, gulping down the remaining dregs of sang-froid.

She could hear Satie's Gnossienne No. 4, but it played only for her so as to deflect the sound of the coroner bantering with another police officer. She was led through the dirty kitchen. A broom and dustpan were leaning up against the oven, and a pile of crumbs and hair were still sitting there. Had she been tidying up, expecting Simone to visit? The carpeting in the hall smelled vaguely like cat urine and she swallowed back a wave of shame. In her mind she practiced saying to herself, "I wasn't raised like this, I'm sorry for the state of this place."

He stopped. One side of the hall was her mom's room, and directly across was Simone's childhood bedroom. She began turning for her mom's room, but he stopped her and pointed her the other way.

"You found her in here?" Simone asked in a way that was pleading for him to say no.

"Yes, it appears she had been sleeping in here when the episode happened."

"Thank you."

Simone turned the corner into the room and felt the ceiling fan running. The breeze felt so very cold. She saw her mother's tiny form curled in front of the piano like a sleeping cat. The tears began to roll down Simone's face now and she was breathing in heavy, syncopated gasps. She wished there was no one there. She would scream out "Mom!" but she had to seal that away in a canopic jar, deep down inside the hidden chambers she kept within her, behind the walls in her heart.

She knelt down at her mother's side and wiped tears from her eyes. The light of morning was shining in through the window, and her mother's skin took on a pale blue color. It looked slightly waxy. Her mother always wore a long, immaculate braid to cover up a rare bald spot on the back of her head, but now her hair was loose and the fan was blowing it over her face. Simone had never seen this aspect of her. She imagined her mother on a lovely windy summer day in her youth with her whole life ahead of her.

She reached over to brush the hair away and she touched the cold skin of her forehead. She remembered kissing her forehead as she woke from a coma two years ago. Her mother was so happy to see her face as she came back to life that day. It was a chorus she repeated nearly every time Simone came to visit, and she hung a portrait of Simone next to her bed so that she could remember that feeling every time she woke up. She grabbed her mom's hand and held it for the last time. This was a new world now. She was no longer a child, and there would no longer be mercy for her.

"I'm so sorry, Mom. I'm so so so so so sorry."

She gripped her hand tighter and felt a handful of beads—a rosary. Her eyes drifted toward a dresser and saw her own First Communion bijoux box on its side with all the trinkets of her childhood scattered across the floor. She saw her mom's old battered flip phone lying on the ground. She reached over to it and flipped it open, but it was dead. Pieces in her mind began to arrange into a terrible scenario. Her mom had been cleaning for Simone's weekly visit when she was seized with a sudden springtime asthma attack. She ran to her phone to call 911, but it wouldn't turn on. At this point it was too late and she knew she didn't have the strength to make it to the neighbor's house for help. Resigned to her fate, she grabbed Simone's old rosary and prayed her own Last Rites while she suffocated alone.

Her mother was a fiercely independent woman—Simone owed everything to her—but when she came home from her prior coma, there was nothing Simone could do to convince her to move into an assisted living block. She worked so hard to own a home, and she wanted to live out her days there. In some twisted way, this is what she wanted.

Someone knocked at Simone's door and the sound made it through her headphones, but she mashed the volume higher to make it go away. She had no time for distractions anymore. She was onto something this time. The pieces of her dream were coming back to her rapidly and what she had in front of her was a work of universal genius. This was her fate. She was alone now, and free to throw herself into her composition.

Schnitzel heard the knocking and quickly climbed down to his water dish and began bonking his beak on it in imitation. He just didn't understand what was happening. Was he the runt that was being left to starve? He kept bonking and bonking, but no one answered.

“Cuckoo...”

VI

It was Friday, and somehow Simone was back at her desk, but really she was adrift in the ocean. Jetsam floated all around her, yet she sat still and stared into the distance beyond her cube wall. Her computer wasn't even powered on. Her hair was a vision of chaos, and she smelled faintly like ammonia. Her skin crawled with a profound filthy feeling that she wanted to scratch violently, but her arms were useless. She couldn't look at her hands. They reminded her she could be at a piano instead of sitting here, attempting to save her career. The growling of her stomach and the constant hum of voices had her nerves feeling like bare wires, sending awful jolts through her brain intermittently. She felt like the subject of a lab experiment. Somehow it felt easier to imagine that she wasn't doing this to herself.

Brianna peeked around the corner. "Damn, Monie, you're looking pretty dapper today."

That voice. It stirred an intense nausea.

"Monie? Where'd you hear that?" Simone's head snapped toward Brianna like a cornered animal. "Were you snooping around my apartment?"

"No, you just said it while you were zonking out. Don't you remember?"

"I thought I told you to mind your own business, Brianna." Her voice was dull and cold as she looked away with disinterest. Her chest felt like it was caving in on itself.

"Is everything ok? You had me worried. You're not building a conspiracy wall are you?"

"Conspiracy?" It felt like Simone flicked out a stiletto when she looked at her this time. Her eyes looked like they were on another planet.

"Damn, sorry Simone." Bree backpedaled. "Something about this place must be getting to you. Sometimes it just sounds like the way too much coffee feels, y'know?"

"Huh?" Simone's ears perked up and Brianna could see the muscles along her jaw transform into loaded steel cables. She was clenching her teeth behind her lips.

"It's like...it smells threateningly antiseptic. It's like I can't tell if it was the smell of real antiseptic or atomized stress hormones leaching out through human skin. You know what I'm saying Si—"

Simone launched out of her chair like a jaguar and pinned Brianna against the cubicle wall with terrifying strength. Lips almost touching her ear. The air she whispered tickled the sensitive organ. Brianna gasped and her knees felt like they would buckle if Simone weren't holding her with her claws digging uncomfortably into her shoulders.

"Listen up, you bitch. You're in my fucking head, and I want to know how you can hear what I'm thinking." Simone scream-whispered.

Brianna's eyes flashed with terror and she stammered. "I...I...I didn't...I...don't...kn...kn...kn—" Her voice was racing to the edge of a sob, and tears were running down her cheeks.

“GIRLS!”

Simone let Brianna fall to the ground like a marionette, and wheeled around on Bonnie. Her nails dug into the palms of her hands and her mind felt sharp for the first time today.

“You have a death wish, you little creep? Mind your own fucking business if you know what’s good for you.”

Bonnie swooped down over Brianna as if she were defending her child. Before she could say anything back, she heard Simone slam through the panic bar on the office door. The room was a mausoleum again. Bonnie was on her knees, trying to comfort Brianna. The eyes of all the little lab rats were peeking nervously over the maze walls to see what happened. There was a quiet, emergent terror rising in them all. A chyron they’ve all seen hundreds of times in their lives, something about an active shooter or a rampage.

After a brief interview with human resources, Brianna was sitting back at her desk, staring at her phone. She was never at a loss for words, and it felt so alien to her. She felt like she was alone at sea, watching the flotsam of a wreck float by after she had failed to rescue a drowning friend. She began to realize that she had never become so close to someone like Simone before; someone with such an intriguing personality and depth to her character, but whose depth also concealed some kind of terrible darkness that appeared to be crushing her from within. Brianna was hardwired to see life as some sort of perpetually mysterious beauty. Of course bad things happened, but to her they were a necessary piece of the beauty of life. To Brianna, life was too precious to waste, and she would naturally move away from cycles of negativity, but now she began to wonder if she had been inadvertently isolating herself. If the tenaciously happy people only moved amongst their own kind, what about the people in misery? She thought of Simone’s eyes, and how often they appeared hurt or disappointed, and her heart ached. She thought of how many of their sparring words had only served to repel each other. She wasn’t any closer to a conclusion or even a direction in which to move.

Simone was sitting in her car, staring at the monolithic hospital through the rain. It was as if all her drifting had brought her to some towering Lemurian ruins in the deep sea, scarcely touched by the light. She knew the pianist was inside, playing already, yet here she was staring at the hospital in a trance. It was like she was barely in the present anymore.

Rêve plus fort...encore plus fort...puis tout disparaît...

In her mind she was rushing through the halls, trying to maintain her composure. Room 238. Room 240. Wait, other side, room 237. Nurses and aides were working the room like line cooks on a Friday night. Between passing bodies, she saw glimpses of her mother, worse for wear, decked out like an astronaut prepping for launch into space in a full-face BiPAP mask. Pressurized air was hissing rhythmically.

One nurse saw her out of the corner of her eye and said “Simone?” She nodded silently in terror. She heard her mom’s voice and it sounded like she was inside a fish bowl.

“Simone, come here, baby.” She reached a hand out and the nurses made room. Simone practically leapt forward to catch her hand and squeeze it. “Mom, it’s going to be ok.”

One of the nurses put a hand on her shoulder. “Simone, I need to talk to you about the situation. Your mother had a very bad asthma attack and we are having difficulty getting control over her breathing

enough to raise her O₂ levels back to normal. This means that we will need to sedate her and place her on a ventilator.” Simone’s head was swimming as she turned to look toward her mom, trying not to telegraph the fear she felt inside. She had never seen her look so scared before.

“I’m right here, Mom. I’ll be here when you wake up, and I’ll make sure they take good care of you.”

Her mother’s smile was one of bittersweet pride, and the fear in her eyes seemed to fade a little.

“Are we ready?”

Her mom nodded. They already had a syringe piped into her IV and her hand went limp in a matter of seconds. Simone’s composure was starting to coil tightly into its own structure. And the nurse by her side squeezed her arm.

“It will be about an hour before we have her situated and fully stabilized. There is a private waiting area just down the hall. Or if you prefer you can walk around or leave the building to get some fresh air. Just stop in at the nurse’s station and the charge nurse will give you an update.”

“Thank you,” Simone said with a crooked smile.

She didn’t dare sit in the enclosed space of the family waiting area with the other lost souls. That would only make things worse. She was going to wander the hospital like she did when she was a child and her mother would bring her to work to meet her coworkers. She was so proud of her, and the nurses all loved to have her around. It was certainly something you couldn’t get away with anymore.

She wandered away from the eerie stillness of the intensive care wing, following the signs wherever she could. She found a niche with a vending machine and bought some juice, then wandered toward the atrium through a long hall, and as she drew near she could hear a distant melody that immediately began to soothe her frayed nerves. It was a piano. No way they could have a live pianist on duty. It had to be muzak. She could hear it in the acoustics, though. It sounded alive and brilliant ringing through the hall. She picked up her pace.

For two years now she was coming here, and it had become her special place, particularly after her mom died. Any time she needed to drift away from the world, this did the trick. If she hadn’t mentioned it to Brianna idly one day when they were stoned, no one would know about it. Brianna had no idea about her profound connection to these performances. Neither did the pianist for that matter.

The pianist. Simone decided that this was it. She would meet him and that would show Brianna. She would have her own life and her own friends. She didn’t need to sing karaoke with terminally dull paper pushers to wring meaning out of this life. The pianist would hear her melody and he would foster her talent, just like Brianna had said. Musicians were of some higher order of gifted humans, and she belonged with them.

She walked into the atrium and sat down in the nearest chair. Acoustics suddenly felt irrelevant. She was scanning the moving faces of people in rapid succession, searching for one. The voices were frenzied now. They had tasted her from miles away and now they had found her and were circling her methodically in gradually constricting rings. They were reciting her thoughts in mocking voices. She desperately wanted it to stop.

She reached out to the sound of the piano. In this moment it felt like the only thing she had left in the world. The pianist was playing slowly, in subdued tones. An appropriate vibe out of respect for this most solemn day. It felt borderline ambient. It may have been Mompou's *Musica Callada*. She heard the melody within it, just out of sight. She could see the light fading at the center of the darkness, and she knew she had to run to it. She stood up and walked directly toward the piano; eyes trained on the form of the pianist. She was crossing the foot traffic lanes with an oblique line, cutting people off and bumping them aside. The voices were screaming bloody murder now and she couldn't even hear the piano. All she could see was the pendulous motion of the pianist's barrel chest rocking back and forth so slowly as he played.

She was close now, and her steps became tentative like a deer crossing the road. She crossed an invisible line and she was assaulted with the scent of layers upon layers of stale cigarettes, aroused by a walk in the rain. Smoke was rising from the censers and they were burning trash now. They lit the darkness around her spiral stairs with tails of whistling flames and sparks chasing them like they were meteorites. The heat inside was making them glow. She could see now that there were five of them positioned in a circle, swinging and issuing clouds of acrid smoke that were obscuring the star that once lived at the center, the source of the melody. Where was she? This wasn't heaven.

She stepped closer and it was clear that the odor was coming from the pianist, and it was truly revolting. He smelled like a tavern garbage can. It was too late to turn back, he had noticed her out of the corner of his eye and he was turning, but as he did so he coughed involuntarily, sending twinkling drops of spittle across the air like a warning shot. He didn't miss a beat on the keys, though. He looked her in the eyes now, and he looked like a slaving dog. It didn't last but a second before his eyes drifted down, assessing the shape of her body, stopping at her tits as a grin spread across his stubbly face.

"Hey babe, wanna lesson? Come sit next to me."

Simone's chest tightened and she recoiled, backpedaling.

"Ooooh you're shy. I like the shy ones."

She was running for the exit now, crashing into people who were yelling at her. Their voices were hysterical screams in her head. She was in the rain, sprinting to her car and before long she was turning into the parking lot of her apartment complex. She felt like she was hallucinating now, there were people everywhere, lined up under the sidewalk canopy. There were squad cars and an ambulance, and she felt like she was sprinting toward her mother's house, praying the ambulance wasn't there for her.

Inside she turned the corner into her hallway and the door across the hall from hers was open. EMTs were talking to police officers, and she saw the property manager standing with Five Dollar Bill at a safe distance, talking nervously. Bill heard her footsteps and turned to face her. His hardened eyes and rutted cheeks were glazed in tears, and he stepped listlessly in her direction.

"Simone. It's so terrible."

"What happened, Bill?"

He looked like he was fighting anaphylaxis as he gathered his voice.

"Therese and her little girl." He choked, and he looked like he could vomit. "He killed them."

“No...no no no.” In her mind she heard their television droning on day and night. No yipping. Just the horrible sounds of canned laughter and commercials. “When...” She knew the answer—she had always known the answer—but inside she was praying that she was wrong. “When did this happen?”

“Bill stop. I told you this in confidence.” The manager said, but she could see he didn’t really care.

“She deserves to know. She needs to stay safe.” Bill waved him aside, and the manager walked a few steps away. Bill turned back to her. “It was Wednesday night around midnight. It was Therese’s boyfriend. They saw him on the security cameras. He was the last person to leave the apartment.”

“No no no no no.” She leapt into Bill's arms and hugged him so hard, and the two of them cried silent tears together. Her legs felt like they were beginning to buckle. She let go and staggered toward the door to her apartment. “Please Simone,” Bill called through tears, “lock your door, they still don’t know where he is.”

The manager spoke to the police and they made way for her to enter her apartment. She couldn’t look across the hall. She could hardly see anything. It was like there was a movie playing in her mind and she couldn’t make it stop. She swung the door open and stumbled forward toward her piano niche. She saw her mother’s face smiling down on her as she collapsed into a pile on the ground. Her chest was caving in and she couldn’t breathe. She knew what was coming. Her eyes were wide open now, but she couldn’t see her apartment anymore.

In her mind she was standing in front of Saint Luke’s at night. The steeple was assembling itself before the full moon and she heard voices coming from inside. She tried to make her body stop, but it was moving on its own now, trying the door. The door swung open with ease. The voices were barely intelligible and they were questioning, accusing. She followed them in the dark to the corner and poked her head around to look up to the dim stairs. She could hear them now and make out what they were saying.

“What are you doing here?”

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” She could hear venom in the man’s every word. The tense silence that followed said that the answer was no, but a menacing presence was preventing the word from being said.

“What do you want from us?”

She heard a bustle from below her on the stairs, and she knew she couldn’t stop what was about to happen. She couldn’t keep herself from hearing it. She wanted to stab out her eardrums, but she couldn’t move.

VII

The front door of a little red brick house in the suburbs swung open into the twilight, issuing a warm incandescent beam and a cacophony of happy voices. Brianna emerged and lingered in the doorway a little.

“Love you, Bree! Give Simone our love too! And tell her she has an open invitation for dinner here anytime. We’ll cook for her even when it isn’t a holiday.” The voice of a man called from within like a song ringing out to the sidewalk.

“Love you too, Dad! And I’ll be sure to tell her.”

“Wait! Wait wait wait!” From inside someone shoved an unreasonably large plastic container covered with aluminum foil into Brianna’s hands. “I hope there’s enough ham there. Simone likes ham, right?”

“You’ve never seen her eat, mom. It’s like a natural disaster.” A peal of laughter and goodbyes rang from all the people inside. “Bye everyone! Love you!” Brianna sang, then she hopped down the stairs, her face quickly deflating, giving way to dread. She jumped into her little car and started it. It was rusted ever so slightly at the seams and it drove like a crusty little fishing boat—diesel engine grumbling everywhere she went like a boat motor. The stereo kicked in with the momentum it had when she left it, a jingly little drum machine beat and a driving synth bassline.

I remember a soldier sleeping next to me...riding on the metro.

It was Sunday evening and Simone hadn’t answered a text from her since Wednesday. After their violent encounter at work, Brianna’s heart was broken, but she had put on her best smile to fight through it. It tore her up inside, though. She wanted to know what she did, and she was so worried about what Simone might be going through alone. All she could think about was holding her and smelling her hair; finally breaching the walls she had spent so much time trying to negotiate. She felt like this was her last chance.

Brianna turned into the parking lot and saw an unusual amount of people gathered. Something wasn’t right. People were usually zipping around with a purpose. There was a squad car parked adjacent to the entrance. She saw an officer talking casually to Five Dollar Bill. She parked her car and jumped out of it, abandoning the leftovers. Her stomach was curling. It somehow knew before her brain.

She broke into a jog inside the building. Up the stairs, around the corner, and the hall was so quiet. It couldn’t be this quiet. No TV, no jazz music, no piano. She rushed to Simone’s door and knocked frantically, but only hit once. The door gave way and swung lazily open. This isn’t right. The door had never even been latched.

“Simone?” She called tentatively. No this was wrong.

She pushed the door and her stomach felt like it was collapsing into a singularity. Simone’s body was curled up on the floor in front of her piano like a sleeping cat.

“Simone!” She cried out, tears welling up in her eyes, making the whole room tremble. Brianna ran to her and knelt down. She grabbed her arm to roll her over and it felt stiff. “No, please not Simone. Please.”

Simone’s lips were moving and she was staring into the distance with glossy eyes. She was muttering to herself, staring into the distance. Her voice barely registered a hoarse whisper. “This is a nightmare. This is a nightmare. This is a nightmare. This is a nightmare.”

“Simone. It’s me, Brianna.”

“Bree?”

Brianna could hear tapping from the other room.

“Quick! Uppies! Move your arms and legs. It’s back to reality for you, young lady! You’re a chicken, now start acting like it!” She said, her commanding, motherly voice giving way to tears. The tapping continued, and as Simone gathered herself, Bree rushed to the other room.

She saw Schnitzel, exhaustedly bonking his little beak on his water dish. All the feathers of his breast were gone, and the soft pink flesh was visible. His body looked so tiny and pathetic without his plumage.

“Cuckoo...” It was the softest sound she had ever heard. The tone said, “Please...help me...”

“Oh god, Schnitzel!” Tears were streaming down her face now. “My poor little baby, let’s get you some water.”

Schnitzel climbed feebly into the palm of her open hand like an elderly gentleman getting out of a car. She held him in both hands.

“Cuckoo.”

She turned on the faucet, checked the temp, and held him next to the dribbling water. His eyes smiled with gratitude and he stuck his whole head into it, lifted his beak, and sipped. He looked up at her, all wet and pitiful and shirtless, but the sparkle was coming back to his little eyes.

She put him on her shoulder and flung open the cabinet, rifled around and found some oyster crackers. She quickly pulverized a little handful and held it out to him.

“Cuckoo.” His head bobbed, and he leaned in to taste the cracker meal tentatively, then went to work burying his face in it voraciously. Coming back with crumbs adhered to his beak.

“Whoa, don’t go ham dude, you’re going to hurt your little stomach.”

She burst through the door into the room where Simone had pulled herself half up to the couch.

“It’s Schnitzel! Look, Simone!” She wiped the tears out of her eyes as she bobbed up and down with Schnitzel on her head.

Monie, we take our tears in stride.

Simone began climbing to her feet and Brianna rushed over to lift her up by the armpits like a child. Simone tilted forward into her open arms, collapsing like a marionette. Her head fell on Brianna's neck and she breathed in. She smelled like flowers. Her nose and lips were so close to Brianna's neck, it was as if the electron fields of their skin were beginning to intermingle.

How close can you be to something before you touch it?

"Brianna, I love you." Simone said in a whisper that tickled her neck. "Please don't leave me."

Brianna pushed Simone away just enough so she could look into her eyes, and she held her there with both hands, gripping her tightly by the shoulders.

"What? Are you putting me on?"

"No, I love you more than anyone else in this world, since the day we met."

"What about the pianoman? I thought you had a crush on him."

"I never once said that. You did."

Brianna's eyes lost focus and shimmered.

"I love you too, Simone."

"Say it again."

Brianna blushed and looked away.

"Brianna, I need you. I don't want to be alone."

She could hear Simone's voice regaining some strength. She turned back to look into her eyes again.

"Simone, this whole time I—"

Simone kissed her—*andante très expressif*—and she couldn't stop. It lasted so long that Schnitzel wandered across from the top of Brianna's head to the top of Simone's.

"Cuckoo."

She pulled herself away. "Oh Schnitzel, I'm so sorry, my poor little boy. I promise to never do that to you again." She presented her hand and Schnitzel jumped into it. She brought him close to her face to make little kissing noises to him. Schnitzel joined in with her, craning his neck to touch her cheek.

"We need to nurse him back to health, and you too, my dear. What happened to you? I want you to tell me everything now. I want to know everything about you."

"I want to know you too, Bree. Will you stay with me?"

"Yes I will, you silly girl. I'm never leaving you alone again. How else will I ever get you to play for me?"

Simone's heart raced. She kissed Bree gently again.

"I will someday, but I need you to sing along."

Épilogue

“Monie! Look! Bonnie’s singing!”

“Jesus...I didn’t know she had it in her...”

“Oh no I can hear it in her voice...she’s gonna blow the high notes in the chorus.”

“People think they can sing “Kiss From a Rose,” but they underestimate how truly dynamic Seal’s voice really is—”

“Shut up nerd! Quick, let’s jump in and save her!”

Bree yanked Simone to her feet and dragged her across the little dive bar like a pissed off donkey, all the way up to the little stage just in time.

“Ready?”

“BABY!!...”

The whole bar hollered the chorus along with them in delight. They were all having the time of their lives.

Fin.