There was something about him that was just... unreal.

Lithe and small, back against the mirror, legs slipping over the bathroom counter so easily, in a way that reminded inebriated Coda of running water spilling over the lip of a sink—too full. His feet fell from underneath him and his toes so delicately brushed the tile of the bathroom floor. He caught himself with almost intentional poise. His fingers curled over the edge of the counter. He pressed a cigarette to his teeth and locked it there. Smoke. White, feathery smoke almost like spider webs tangled around the loose locks of his nacre hair. The room was full of people, but this one—this one, Coda thought, was just unreal.

The lights were dim and murky in here, greenish in tint as though the bulbs hadn’t been touched in ten years and their wire cages were left to oxidize. Soap scum was crammed in the grooves of the faucets, handprints blurred the mirror in long smears, yellow water damage patterned the ceiling, and strange brown splotches covered the floor. Echoing inside the walls was the discordant, dissociated thrum of club music. They could feel the bass vibrating in the floor, throbbing in the walls, humming all around their heads. But this was not a crowd that cared. In this falling-apart bathroom existed an entirely different world, rocking back and forth in an almost impenetrable haze. Coda breathed and tasted a dozen different bodies: sweat, liquor, ecstasy, cut and chewed and burnt tobacco, dead saliva. He didn’t remember how he ended up in this upside-down, seaweed-colored world surrounded by obscured, unfamiliar faces. It was like a tea party in slow motion, a masquerade ball in a black-and-white film, the obfuscated fever dream of a deranged witch doctor. Coda choked on the thought that he was flanked by unknown bodies, tasting the exhales of so many complicated souls just like his—lost souls that had wandered all over the earth, wandered in and out of a thousand other lives, and somehow ended up here, with him, in gently swaying foggy evening silence. What luck. His head was full of cotton. What luck, that this one—this unreal man—be sharing his air.

Arden was an unreal man. He was murmuring something through light, puffy pink lips that were more like cotton candy than human skin in between drags of the cigarette he had clearly pawned off of someone else because no man that attractive ever bought his own addictions. Every one of his motions was smooth as the bars between movements in a symphony, which Coda could say for certain because he wanted to be a composer, once, when the world was still in love with classical music. And this man, Arden, was a delicate concerto; a perplexing cadenza; a white-clad, over-confident, very drunk but not too drunk to understand the line between himself and the end of the world, symphony. He was a lonely soul in a room full of
blurry faces, and he fit in so well he could have disappeared into the fog, but Coda saw him first. Coda couldn’t stop seeing him, and he did not necessarily know why.

As if by command, the pearl-haired man’s perfect features cleaved through the mist, and it was there that Coda saw them. Like two crystal snow globes on the mantel above a fireplace, the captivating smoky ring around the moon, the hue of the sky just before it kisses the horizon, the very first layer of waves as they peel away from the ocean, ghostly—his eyes were a pair of blue spirits, glittry as his white hair but so petrifying, pulchritudinous, incredible. Coda thought he was sober enough to keep his composure, but he wasn’t: his jaw fell on instinct. Arden gave a very small grin. Cigare...
tickle of smoke up the sides of his cheeks. Every
time he breathed his cigarette, white cobwebs
poured between his lips and wavered around in
the air. Coda could taste the exhales. They traced
around his chin and nose, dove into the belly of his
cupid's bow, coated his eyes in diffused fragments of
tobacco and made them burn. It was a very numb,
almost delicious burn. He forgot, for a moment, how
close he and his muse had become.

The air was hot, humming, very peacefully
buzzing like a dull throb of electricity around
their heads. Two oxidized light bulb cages. Two
fascinated souls. Two silent men, making invisible
music out of their shared and sudden heat. Coda
wished he could thread Arden's hair between his
fingers like rows of violin strings and play it. He
wished he could capture their fascination in the
maple body of a woodwind, and play it. He wanted
to press into Arden's skin the way he could press
into a piano, and make a symphony out of him.

But did he want it? Coda did not know. He
inched so close to Arden's lips that he could almost
taste them without touching them. And maybe he
didn't need to be intoxicated, because those eyes
made him feel so hopelessly high, like plunging into
ponds of blue syrup. He figured Arden tasted like
syrup, too. And sweat, and ecstasy, and conclusion.
Not that Coda wanted an ending. Not that he
wanted to let go, of course. Or perhaps he did.

Coda studied him again, but found nothing.
Not a wrinkle in his skin, no scars, no imperfections.
He was fuzzy at the edges, like a hologram. Barely
real. But Coda could touch him. He lifted a hand to
Arden's face and ran his knuckles across his cheek.
He was so cold. Cold enough that, if Coda closed his
eyes, he could picture the polished keys of a grand
piano sitting right underneath his fingers. Cold
enough that he almost gasped at the shock, because
it cleaved through their intensifying heat and
made his heart race. The curtains were rising. The
instruments were tuning that one perfect middle C.
The composer was lifting his hands. Ten, nine...

Coda's hand fell onto Arden's chest.
Through the layers of clothing, he felt his heartbeat,
like a coarse vibrato across his rib cage and along
Coda's knuckles, forcing his exhales to become
uneven. The smoke was puddling all around them,
curling all around them, tying together their blurry
edges. Coda was beginning to forget where his
body ended and Arden's began. The green air was
pulsating. Lights were flickering. The stage was
waiting. Five, four...

Arden smelled of cold dust and fresh brass
strings. Arden felt like holding a brand new cello,
like the hot skin of a passionate virtuoso, like the
chills of performing for the first time after so long.
His white hair brushed against Coda's forehead. His
blue eyes closed. Coda grasped his clothes like a
conductor's baton. Three, two...

The lights went out.
One.

The performance was over. He waited
for the last G sharp from the violin soloist to drift
off into the air, like dissipating mist, until there
was nothing left. A silence—a silence so heavy,
bottomless, like the gaping mouth of a monster—
greedily consumed the air. Coda clenched his breath
between his teeth. He lowered his baton and closed
his eyes, trying to picture a bathroom full of bodies,
a bathroom full of clouds, where no one need
applaud because he wasn't putting on a show; where
he could bask in his fluttering anxiety and bitterness;
where he could wait, forever, for the first set of
hands to meet. Coda opened his eyes. The audience
erupted with applause. Maybe he expected it.
Maybe he didn't. Maybe it made his heart race, just
a little, when he realized he was no longer dreaming,
and this was it.

He finally let himself exhale, so slowly.
The green overhead lights gently faded to yellow.
He turned to face the crowd. They were all on
their feet now, cheering. He counted the number of weeping faces, the grins, the fallen jaws that meant he had done something spectacular. But it was him. Him—the snow-haired angel of wavering wonderlands and endless incantations—among the audience that caught Coda’s eye. He had been there the whole time, watching. Marveling. Smiling, so beautifully. Coda had finally performed his first original symphony, and yet, for an instant, it didn’t even seem real. A very soft chuckle escaped him—he couldn’t hold it in. His lungs were throbbing with uncertainty, but also, perhaps, exhilaration. He bowed. The curtains closed.

“How do you feel?” Arden was waiting for him outside, when the crowd had eventually left, the stage had been cleared, and it was official—everything Coda had been wanting for his entire life was his.

“You aren’t allowed to smoke in there, you know.” Coda pulled his jacket on.

“Answer the question.” Arden puffed his cigarette in dissent, and smiled. “How does it feel?”

“A bit like a hangover.”

“Like the best high of your life?”

“Like the first and last.”

Arden laughed at that. He hooked his hands around Coda’s arm, leaned into him, and they began to walk. Rain peppered the street outside the theatre, reminding Coda of mourning tears, or the storm during a funeral. Not that music had died, of course. But that, perhaps, he came here to put it to rest.

“I might just compose from now on, by myself. Does that make me a terrible person?”

“No.”

“Am I the death of classical music?”

“Of course not.”

“Thank you.” Coda hid his red cheeks by turning down his head. Water fell from his hair. “For getting me here, I mean. I never would have done it without you.”

“You would have.” Arden grinned. “But I made it better.”

Arden always made it better. Coda wrapped an arm around his partner, and squeezed him, hard, to remind himself of that. Arden was unreal.

“So, what will you write next?”

“An ode, I think.”

“An ode to what?”

Coda looked over at him. They locked eyes. They were close enough that he could taste Arden’s cigarette, the dripping blue from his oceanlike eyes, the strung-out heat between their fluttering chests. Green light made the bathroom hazy. Ancient grime made the tiles sink. Distant club music, like a patient ghost, hugged them close, and they stayed there for a very long time, in the fog.

“That’s for you to figure out.”