

Con Amore

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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 spatters 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, glittery 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. Cigarette smoke tickled through his teeth. Coda watched it snake around his sharp but delicate jaw, in the hollow of his cheeks right beneath his high cheekbones, in between gaps in a button nose; dancing across skin as deliciously white as itself. His cigarette remained clenched between two fingers as he tapped his hand, maybe to an unheard song, on his knee. Then he brought it to his lips again, took a drag, and looked away. The spell was broken. Coda blinked quickly.

He could get addicted to that stare, he knew, if he let himself.

He nearly brought himself to stand, pulled toward the man by an almost tangible drawstring; but in this hallucinated realm, his legs were useless. When his hands fell to the floor, the tiles sank underneath his fingers like the keys of a grand piano. He tumbled through halls of increasing violent noise, brilliant throws of Liszt and Mendelssohn and Bach. He fell back against the wall, defeated. He looked up. Arden was watching again. He blinked, shifted those breathtaking blue eyes, and laughed. His laugh was entirely silent. Coda smiled back. What was he doing?

In fleeting exhales, he recalled how much

more composed he could be in clearer air. Slammed by intense rehearsals, teaching and reteaching himself the music for his upcoming show, wondering if anyone he knew would be watching him from the crowd. Would they care? These countless faces he had memorized, once—would they shift at the taste of his art? Would they hum, cry, applaud the way he moved between emboldened notes? Would he ever begin to impress them? Or would he stand there, making too much sense of such an abstract, antique thing as classical music, and they would grow bored and walk away? What was the point? Under the cloak of this underwater heaven, his efforts appeared so much more useless, rational, and complicated. But this green world was simple. Arden was simple. He was music in its clearest, crispest form. An exhale of gossamery focus, intense and wandering interest, violent intimacy, black and white brilliance, fortissimo temptation—it encircled his blue eyes the way nimble fingers encircle silver tuning pegs. Coda found the longer he stared into those eyes, the easier it became to fall into them. How could he ever fall that easily into music? It was an art, not a drug. Or was it?

Arden was not leaving him any time to decide. When Coda looked up again, he noticed the man was no longer on the counter, but approaching him slowly; his small, dark figure breaking the haze off into curls. He walked with delicate intention, the way a conductor walks to his orchestra, and found a rather close seat on Coda's left. Coda could feel his heat through the fog, even though the closer he became the less he seemed real. Neither man said a word. Coda knew they didn't need to. In music, and in this murky world, they only needed their bodies to communicate.

Coda discovered that he now had space to think. The haze had cleared just a little inside his skull and he took a careful stroll over Arden's features: sharp but hazy, spattered in pretty freckles like paint on a canvas, flinching so subtly at the

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.”