

Block

By Letty Wilson

He was a great musician, a pianist. Not a genius but a man quietly spending his life in creating perfect moments, one after the other. He had a muse, who helped him, no, who allowed him to make his music. He lived in his flat, with a piano and his muse, who had beautiful hands.

They were hands that could pull music out of the air with every movement. Long fingers willowed, ribboned with lines of glittering ink, black as dreams, bright as smiles. He used to watch his muse dipping its fingertips into bottles of ink. And then it would show him how to play, would lead him helpless through endless dances along the keys, dancing and dancing through whole nights, lit by moonlight, for he could never get up to light the room, could never leave those fingers for a second, they trapped him, and led him through the night in black and white of piano keys and ink and pale skin.

He would wake in the morning, slumped over the keys, woken by his own drowsing movements, and frantically retrace his muse's fingerprints, spattered and smudged like rain across the blank teeth of the piano. He would copy and play and write until notes hung clustered in the air in his cold flat, and then, exhausted, he would wipe the keys white once more, wash his hands, eat, sleep.

People worried, rung him and asked why they hadn't seen him in so long. He began to ignore the phone's cries (or as much as he could, for there was music there too, music everywhere, until it sang in his breaths, clamouring with every movement). He disconnected the phone, so he could at least sleep, only try to clean the ink away, only rest, and do the things that living creatures needed. People worried, came round and talked in quiet, careful voices, their eyes drawn to the spotted, smeared walls, the black fingerprints that smudged his face, the long, tempestuous spatters of ink that curled across the floor. They tried to clear up the broken glass and he shook with fear, sent them away with half shouted ramblings, and fell asleep on the floor, dreaming that his muse didn't love him anymore.

They argued, the pianist and his muse. That night it arrived, curling its fingers around his door and leaving fingerprints like a tiny blackthorn shadow. He was so tired. He could barely watch it dip its fingers into the ink, like a stork drinking; had to shut his eyes as the black ran in serpentine coils down those perfect, beautiful fingers.

"Couldn't... couldn't we just leave it... just for tonight?"

The fingers paused, absolutely still in the lowering light. A bead of ink ran down the inside of the

muse's wrist.

"I know- I know that tomorrow it might be different, things might not be so perfect. I know you have to catch these moments when they arrive, I know. But I'm human, and only that. I can't- I can't keep this up. It'll burn me up from the inside- I have to do normal things. Boring things. I have to rest. I have to talk to people- people other than-"

He couldn't say another word, for the hands had twitched, and now they slowly slid together, clasped and unclasped, so delicately, like the jaws of a deadly bird. The sun was sinking, gilding the pale skin and making the ink glitter. It pooled at the crook between thumb and forefingers, and was carefully dragged into abstracted spirals by an index finger. The movement was so reproachful, so calculated to inspire a new surge of guilt, to reignite the shame he already felt at neglecting it like this, that he found himself suddenly helplessly angry.

He leapt to his feet, and the stool crashed to the ground, but the angry wooden chord was already drowned by the rising shout as his words got out from under his control:

"You force me into this, it's inhuman! You don't understand that I'm fallible, I'm not like you; so perfect, so insatiably creative, everything you produce a masterpiece, effortlessly heartfelt, mysterious and always so much better than I can do! Do you not understand how that feels?! To know that nothing I create will really be mine? It's all yours, and every time I follow you on your wild dances I feel I'm giving you a little piece of my soul, for you to turn into something perfect, like tourists giving their cash to street hustlers, who fold banknotes into swans. Is it really so wrong for me to feel I'd like to keep some of myself to myself?! But no, you don't understand that, you demand so much, but you've never tried to understand me! You just ask and ask and you leave me empty, and the gifts you give me are fairy gold. They turn to fallen leaves in the morning and I'm left with nothing!"

He watched the muse, breathing heavily. It had bunched those perfect hands into fists, smudged black-grey, ghastly in the rosy light of sunset. They trembled at each other for a long, unspeakably angry moment, and it seemed that in that last roar of dying sunlight, the bonds between them snapped, one by one, in that tension. The door slammed. Afterwards, he could never remember if the muse had banged it shut as it left, or if he'd rushed over and thrown it shut as it slid out of the door. Either way, it was the last crashing note of their relationship.

He stood in the silence and the softening light of twilight, and it was agony. He stood there and found himself crying, in great ragged sobs that seemed to catch in his chest and tear him to bits as they left. His hands felt cold, and numb. Moments ago they had been hot and alive with passion. Now they felt like they

were made of clay, club-like, immovable, clumsy stumps. He fell asleep curled up on the floor next to the fallen piano stool, and woke with inky black tears sticking his hands to his cheek. Everything tasted of salt.

He cleaned the flat, wiping every smudge or spot of ink from the walls, the bed, the floor, but he couldn't bring himself to touch the piano. He felt the keys would bite his fingers off, savage with reproach. He went out and bought food, and brought it back and put it in his empty fridge. He took some out; bacon, an egg, cooked it, but couldn't eat more than a few mouthfuls. It tasted of salt, nothing else.

The piano stared at him from the corner by the window. It was a monster, with a wide maw of perfect teeth. It was the corpse of his muse, striped in snowdrop white and inky black. His hands were numb, and cold as if he'd sunk them in snow for hours. He found it hard to hold cutlery, fumbled awkwardly with pens. He found a pair of black gloves, for funerals, in his wardrobe, and slipped them on.

He ventured out to talk to people. They received him with breathless relief, tailing off to a nervous concern when they spoke to him, and saw that he was still changed, maybe for the worse. They made a cheerful effort, took him to see films, to parties. Someone took him to a concert one night, and he left in the interval, ran to his flat, and cried like a child, curled up on the floor of the spotless room.

He had to write something, anything, be it the feeblest speck of dull glimmer he could drag from the world. He had to write something or shrivel into a skeleton here on this floor. His hands couldn't grasp a pen, couldn't manipulate paper. He couldn't take the gloves off – every time he looked at the clayish fingers he remembered the muse, with perfect hands so full of life. So he found a stick of charcoal, and knelt in front of a wall. He remembered wiping the long, graceful ribbons of ink from the white emulsion surface. He wished he hadn't now – it was terrifyingly blank. It glowered at him with a fierce indifference that made him shake all over, consumed with fear and insignificance. He would never make anything beautiful again, there was no way – he had never known where it came from when the muse was with him, and now he was lost, utterly alone in this cruel white wilderness, with no-one to guide him. Behind him he could feel the baleful stare of the piano, daring him to think himself special, challenging to find any fragment of beauty in the world that he was worthy of capturing, even for the briefest second. He stood up; the stupid, clumsy lump of charcoal trapped between his rigid fingers, and closed his eyes, shielding them from the mocking blank surface in front of him.

But he had to make something.

If he could just...

Maybe his muse would have him back.

He remembered those perfect fingers dipped in ink, and a surge of desperate sadness welled inside

him, so strong that he gasped. He lashed out at the wall, a gesture of hopeless defiance. The charcoal crushed itself between the wall and his gloved fist, a puff of black powder fountained up; a long thick arc traced itself across the blank wall. A scar. A rainbow. A frown.

And suddenly that was it. That great long line was the first note in the song. He found himself writing in great eely ribbons of notes across the walls, writing a song and singing it as he went, sounding the notes with hoarse, breathless voice, but hearing them loud and clear as bells in his ears. The light changed behind him, as he wrote, wore the charcoal down to dust and found more, etching great messy loops of wild, untamed music across the laughing walls. It was a song of fierce hope, of high sweet sadness that echoed sharp as shattered glass, of blood red chords that tasted of cherries and silk, of screaming notes that rang out titanium white, crackling with perverse joy, arcing like a great leaping fish into brightest blue, as a thousand voices caught the flash of happiness and filled up their lungs with it. Low, melancholic base notes sounded, so deep and lonely they shuddered up from the soles of the feet, tasting of blood and lukewarm water, pale orange and so sorry they hurt. The colours and tastes of the notes glittered in the air, the feeling in them drawn piece by piece into the charcoal notes that ran barefoot across the walls.

And suddenly, as suddenly as it had begun (though looking back at what he had written, maybe the first note had been the slamming of that door, he thought,) it was done, and the last note hung, hopeful, questioning, in the air, the golden pink colour of that angry sunset.

His gloves were caked with soot. He washed them, and ate, and slept. He half expected to see the hands before him when he woke, rising out of his dreams. He found himself reaching out to take them as he opened his eyes. There was nothing but the song, covering all the walls, like the footprints of birds left in snow. It was silent, now. Nobody had heard his song. He had to play it. He had to know it was real. What were these, these marks on the walls? The abstract scribbling of a madman. They meant nothing unless he could prove that they were music.

His gaze travelled to the piano. It seemed to snarl silently at him, filled with the hate that wild animals reserve for their captors. But he had to play his song. He stepped towards the piano, his footsteps sounding like black bullet-marks in the white silence of the room. The stool was still lying on the floor – he'd never been brave enough, hopeful enough, to pick it up. Now he righted it, sat on it. Lifted the lid, stared into the black and white maw. Lifted his numb, funeral-gloved hands above the yawning keys. He realised he was shivering, felt sick, scared half to death of these keys that seemed to smile mockingly and snarl threateningly, all while staying inanimate, even, implacable. The piano hated him, he was sure. It would refuse to make a sound when he pressed a key.

He hit the first note. It rang out loud and cruel as a slammed door. He shuddered, squared his shoulders. Hit the second note, white as silence, sweet as sudden teardrops. The notes were rising, now, like painful, bitter gasping sobs, and then suddenly they were changing, growing, pale hopeful refrains budding like tiny leaves from the grey despair. He played, barely glancing up at the notes written on the walls – this was his song, there was no way he could forget it, any more than he could step out of his body. His hands came alive, not hot but cool and bright as if they were made of glass, they danced, ran through the growing complexity of the song, weaving its conflicting colours and tastes and feelings together and bringing back the reason out of the centre, the perpetual truth, that rose slender and growing stronger every second out of the echoes behind, below it, soared and roared like sunset, like ink that flows through veins as much as over skin, like the beautiful moment that lasts forever in a breath, soft, hopeful, pinkish-gold as the last heartfelt notes of sunlight.

He stilled his glassy hands. The song was done. Maybe it was hollow and pointless as he'd feared. He found he couldn't remember. He was alone and the piano smiled at him, triumphant.

A small sound, behind him. He turned, saw the door pushed open. A hand curled round the edge, and sunlight glittered off ink-ribboned fingers. They spoke at once, with one voice, and the word blossomed like a last, astonishing chord in the room.

"Sorry."

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