

## The Recital

By: Caitlin Campbell

Slouched low in a red velvet seat, Grace folded the concert program into a little boat. It sailed bravely across the storm-tossed waves of her grey silk skirt, propelled towards a better world, which was somewhere in the vicinity of Grace's belly. But then a monstrous crane (crafted from the donation card) swept down, capsizing—

"Hah-ack!" The man coughed on Grace's neck for what seemed like the third time that minute. She startled, and her origami creations were lost. Groping the floor near her pumps for them, she wondered, what was *with* that guy? Was he consumptive? Was consumption something that people still caught? She would have to ask someone.

Grace gave up on bird and boat and sat up again, attempting to settle into a more comfortable position. She was a long girl—long neck, long arms, long calves—with surprisingly dainty fingers and teeth. She made a half-hearted attempt at listening, then began to drum her leg. Marta had better appreciate this. Her piano performance, the culmination of two years at Julliard and a short lifetime of obsession, had been stunningly beautiful. Grace had clapped and cheered indecorously but, during the oboe solo that followed, allowed her attention to wander.

She was greatly relieved when the oboist took her bow and the final student carried his cello onto the stage. He was a little soft, with brown hair and stooped posture. Good hands, though, noted Grace, who was a something of a connoisseur. His fingers were long and thin, but strong rather than loose-jointed. While she tried to calculate how much longer the concert might take, he sat and readied himself, one leg on each side of the instrument. He raised the bow, then sat motionless for ten, fifteen seconds. What was he waiting for? Was he steadying himself, or else visualizing how he would begin? When he finally did, it was quiet, so quiet that Grace sat up straight to better hear. The intervals between the first few notes were so small that it took all her concentration to perceive them. Slowly, the sound became broader, until it was much larger than Grace, than the whole auditorium. There was nothing theatrical or showy about his performance—he did not sway or throw his hair like some musicians—but she could read all his emotions in his face. When the melody was mournful, his heavy eyebrows arched up; when it became exultant, his lips parted, the corners rising into a smile. The sound was oaky and intimate, like murmuring. She felt uncomfortably, thrillingly close to the cellist. She could detect, she thought, the racing of tendons in his hands, the slight rise of his chest with the intake of breath.

Listening to him, Grace felt a yawning, a drawing inwards and upwards between her legs, which she crossed demurely. She searched for a name for this, but all the sex words she knew were dirty, clinical, or cheesy. This deserved a much better word, a lovely and seductive one. She felt resonant and gloriously hollow, like the dome of a cathedral.

Although a little dizzy, she tried to evaluate her options. She could sleep with him just for his music. Many girls did that, although she had not previously been one of them. Or she could abstain, and instead allow this feeling to wash her out into the city, which she would wander with delicate reverence.

Applause interrupted Grace's thoughts. The young man bowed and flashed a shy smile, and then carried his cello off into the wings. Rather than feeling glad that the concert had finally ended, Grace felt an acute sense of loss, which effectively made the decision for her.

Grace shadowed Marta at the post-concert reception, drinking champagne, strategizing, and watching the cellist from across the room. He was speaking to another student near the serving table, and Grace decided to get a better look. She turned to Marta, who was speaking with one of her instructors, lamenting every error and gushing over every triumph. "Wonderful job, love," Grace said, smacking a kiss on the side of her head, and then made her way across the room. Marta would understand; one could not be friends with Grace for long without accepting the intensity of her passing whims.

At the service table, she helped herself to shrimp cocktail while considering her next move. She bit off the flesh of a shrimp, deposited the tail on her napkin, and held out her hand to the cellist, forgetting entirely all of her strategies. More than anything else, she wanted to touch him, and trusted the rest to fall into place.

"Grace," she said.

He shook her hand, introducing himself as Simon. His handshake was tentative, probing. His fingers were so long that they enveloped Grace's hand completely.

"That was beautifully played. Very passionate."

"Thanks," he said.

"I thought it was sexy," she added. He turned a bit red. This wasn't, to her mind, part of the seduction. Grace enjoyed peppering conversation with honesty, finding it both rare and amusing.

"Well, Simon," she said, making his name sound slightly teasing, "now you've gone and made me care about classical music. Can you give me the CliffsNotes version of everything I need to know?"

Much to Grace's delight, Simon took her request seriously. He told her where to go in the city for the best and cheapest concerts. He explained how cellos were made, and how they were cared for. At one point, he even tracked down a pen to make a list of composers and performers on a cocktail napkin. He rarely paused to see if she was still interested, and at times his tone became condescending. Just a little socially awkward, she thought, having long since made up her mind about him.

As Simon became more relaxed, whether from the conversation or the champagne, Grace gently prodded him with more personal questions. She did not care about the answers. The point was to establish intimacy, so that he could ask her back to his room with minimal embarrassment. It was not vanity, really, that made her sure he would like to sleep with her. It was simply a

knowledge of history, a capacity for gathering and analyzing data. If given the chance, and if unattached, most men would sleep with her.

As the crowd thinned out, a deep laugh boomed from the other side of the room. Grace and Simon snapped their heads around to look. Grace was slow to turn back, allowing Simon a long look at her ear. She had unparalleled ears, delicate and pale, nearly transparent. They were so lovely as to almost be a separate anatomical category from the ungainly, waxy things stuck to most people's heads.

Grace wore her hair short to show off her ears, and dark in the interest of drama. She had chosen to wear her golden mink stole to the concert that night. She knew it was rather precious, but it made her feel feminine and glamorous in a way girls were not anymore. It was a good conversation piece, and Simon asked about it.

"It was my Grandma Mimi's," Grace explained. "She died when my Mom was eight months pregnant with me."

"How did your mom survive all that at once?" he asked.

"And in August, too," Grace said, "It was pretty awful. But Mom always told me that all that sadness in that last month made me special. It's silly, but I feel close to Grandma Mimi, even though we never met."

"Like a passing on of life?" Grace took a second to evaluate whether he was mocking her. Every once in a while, her eccentricity failed to charm very smart, serious men. There was a risk that Simon might see her as an empty girl in a silly stole, but he seemed earnest, and genuinely interested in the story. She nodded.

"It must be nice," he said, lifting the end of the stole from her arm and rubbing it between his elegant thumb and pointer finger, "to have your own personal mythology."

She agreed that it was and, a few minutes later, they left arm-in-arm.

Simon took Grace back to his dorm room. The walls had that stale dorm room smell, and the light was overbright and unflattering. The blond wood furniture was cheap. He kept the room neat and spare as a monastic cell: there was a sink affixed to one wall, a bed, a desk, a dresser, a mini fridge, and a waste bin.

"Would you like some wine?" he asked, scooping keys and spare change, along with a few other items, out of his pocket and pouring them onto the dresser. It was clear that he wanted wine; he seemed perfectly sober in spite of all the champagne, and a little nervous. Grace suspected that he'd spent too much time practicing his music and too little with girls.

"I'd love some," she smiled, attempting to put him at ease.

He poured red wine into plastic cups. She took a sip and had to make an effort not to spit it out; it had gone terribly vinegary. Grace wondered how long it had been since the bottle was opened. She said nothing, reluctant to exacerbate his nervousness, but Simon realized his mistake.

“Shit! That’s awful, I’m so sorry,” he said, snatching the cup away and pouring its contents down the sink. “There’s a wine store just down the street, I’ll run out and get us another bottle.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, “It’s cold out, and I’ll be alright without it.”

“No no, I promised you wine,” he said, all in an embarrassed rush, “wait right here, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Grace did not object further, wanting neither to make a big deal out of it, nor to go back outside into the cold. She sat on the bed and hugged the stole around her body in pleasant anticipation.

She was enjoying the warm glow of both the champagne and her innocuous fantasies when she wandered over to the desk and looked at the items he had pulled out of his pocket. There, among the loose change and the tissues, was a small gold pocket watch, which she scooped up. She flipped it open; on the inside, it was engraved, “To SPR, with love, Mary.” She froze and, having unabashedly quizzed Simon about the most intimate details of his life, having fantasized about him naked and fucking her, it was only then, with the watch in her hand, that she blushed red. It had to be from a lover — she could not have said how she knew this, but she knew it deep in her bones. She glanced around the room, picking up each of the few photographs, but none showed a promising candidate. She then opened and closed each drawer in the dresser, gently running her fingers over the clothes, searching for the hard corner of a picture frame. If, contrary to her assessment, he habitually indulged in one night stands then he might have stashed an incriminating photo away, but Grace found nothing.

Who was Mary? A highschool sweetheart looking for a powerful memento? A romantic art student, with an anachronistic streak like Grace’s? Or maybe a much older woman, a Mrs. Robinson who showered him with lavish gifts.

It was heavy in her hand, and still warm from his body. Simon clearly took good care of it—she could only see one partial finger print on the glowing gold, and it might well have been her own. The face was of a subtly luscious milky color, and the hands elegantly shaped. She wondered if Simon always carried the watch, or only when he needed luck.

More than she wanted Simon himself, Grace wanted his watch. Stealing was not out of the question, she had stolen before. But those had all been small things—cherries at the supermarket, CDs she borrowed but “forgot” to return. She had stolen them on a whim, without much thought. None of them had meant something to anyone. That, she knew, must have been the seduction. It felt so imbued with some aspect of his life, so laden with memory she could almost smell it. It made her feel close to him, not to her idea of his physical presence or personality, but to something secret underlying all that.

But she had liked him so much and had been looking forward to sleeping with him until the watch invaded her mind and elbowed him out. Could she sleep with him and then take it? She could, but that felt wrong. She did not make notches on her bedpost, or keep a list of the men she hooked up with. It was, on its own, worth taking, not as the spoils of conquest. Would he be able to track

her down after? Would she get out in time? How long had he been gone? If she were going to take it, she would need to do so immediately. She dropped it in the little pocket on the side of her skirt and headed towards the door.

She paused for a moment with her fingers resting on the knob. She wondered if she was really going to do this, really going to take something of great value from a sweet and, from the looks of it, not particularly wealthy young musician on the night of his thesis recital.

She twisted the knob and pulled. The door came at her fast and hard, striking her in the face and knocking her to the ground. Simon stumbled in. He needn't have gone for wine, she reflected through the ringing in her head and the splotches of yellow and red that burned across her field of vision. Clearly, the champagne from the party had finally hit.

Shocked, he stared at her for what felt like a minute. "Oh, Jesus, are you all right?" he slurred, hunkering down next to Grace.

She sat up slowly and brought her hands to her face, but could not bring herself to probe her nose to see if it was broken. Instead, she placed her fingers on her chin, and felt wetness. Looking down, she saw blood in a growing blotch on the golden fur of her grandmother's stole. The thrill of power she had felt stealing the watch seemed to pour out of her nose with the blood, leaving her empty again, but not holy. She felt collapsed, like a bird who has careened into a window and broken its hollow bones.

Simon helped her to the bed, then grabbed a box of tissues from the dresser, not noticing the absence of the pocket watch. He gently tipped her head back, and guided her to pinch the bridge of her nose with tissues. He then proceeded to pat ineffectually at the blood stain on the stole. Just stop, she wanted to tell him. In the silence that followed, all the noises in the building and the room seemed amplified. She heard music and voices from a party at the far end of the hall, the flushing of toilets in the bathroom a few rooms down. Simon began to vomit in the garbage can, his drunkenness and his guilt having caught up with him. Although he made obvious efforts to muffle the sound, it was unendurably loud. Grace felt like she could hear every little wretch and gag, even the hiccup of his vomit-distended esophagus, and the pop of his joints as he sought a more comfortable position on the floor. Grace wondered how much blood had drained down her throat, and if she should vomit, too. The bleeding seemed to have slowed, so she tilted her head down. She went to his dresser to look into the mirror. As she'd surmised while pinching her nose, it was not broken. The skin under her eyes looked dark and bruised. A blood vessel had burst in her left eye. It was vibrant red against the white and spider-shaped, with strands radiating from the central clot. It did not hurt, however, and she knew it would fade. Her lips and chin were caked with blood, but this could be washed away. The only lasting damage was to her grandmother's stole, which she knew could never be completely cleaned.

And then, taking in the bloodied stole, she made her mistake: she let it mean something. The idea struck and then swelled until it filled the hollows inside her bones and the space between her cells. This was a punishment. She

had brought the pain, the brutalization of her face, the bloodying of her grandmother's stole down upon herself.

She turned away from the mirror, reached discretely into her pocket, and pulled out the watch, then tucked it onto the dresser behind her back. But she kept her hand over it, not quite relinquishing it to Simon's room. It abruptly seemed to her that, while she had craved it before, only now did she really need the watch. It would be her new talisman, again born of someone else's loss, to ensure the easy luck she had enjoyed for so long. This time, however, it was not just bequeathed to her. She now knew sudden violence, and she knew what it was to be ugly, and she rejected that future.

Grace launched herself away from the dresser with a sharp push. The room spun, but she made it to the door.

"Wait! Is there anything I can do?" Simon gasped, his chin streaked with vomit.

Grace froze for a moment, staring at him wide-eyed. He was so, so kind.

"Thank you," she said sincerely, "but you should just take care of yourself."

She slipped out into the garish light of the hall, pushing the door closed behind her, and walked as quickly as she could towards the exit. Little shocks ran up into her calves and knees as her shoes came into contact with the uncarpeted concrete of the stairs. She savored these trivial pains, which drew her attention from the great and howling ones. She threw the door open and stepped out into the night. It had grown colder. She skimmed along the pavement, occasionally breaking into an awkward trot. She kept her face down as best she could, but the late night crowds stared. How could they not? She looked like something out of a gothic novel: specter-pale with a gruesome face, bloodstained stole, and an antique pocket watch clutched tight in one surprisingly dainty hand.

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