

Evening Coda

By Pete Planisek

The second white stocking fell to the floor to join its companion. She crossed the room barefoot, pausing only momentarily to glance at her reflection in the long mirror on the wall. The patterns in the wallpaper behind it were faded, haggard as she looked. She adjusted the strap on her satin slip. Despite the rain now falling outside it was humid. Low rumbles of thunder could occasionally be heard beneath the sounds emanating from the street below. The rain popped and pinged in a rhythm only nature could create. She poured her cocktail, turned on the hi-fi, and sank mercifully into the embrace of the familiar couch.

The music relaxed her. The ice in her drink shifted as she fumbled to retrieve it from the nearby table. Her skin glistened in the soft lamplight when she replaced the empty glass on the table. She replayed the details of the day in her mind. He'd been there again in the elevator that morning, just as he was every morning. They rode it down together, speechless; to all appearances they faced the world as strangers. That was how it must be. That was how it always was.

The swish of the cat's plush tail against her leg summoned her from reverie. The cool eyes stared back into hers as she opened them. It was a stray she'd unofficially adopted that visited when its needs suited it to do so. She liked its coloring, the proud stance, confident eyes of the creature. Wordlessly she rose. It never wanted attention, not at first anyway.

The woman lit a cigarette, causing her reflection to disappear in a haze. The record on the hi-fi skipped as her steps reverberated through the worn floorboards. The remaining milk in

the icebox was not cool, nothing in it was. She sipped it before splashing the remnants into a saucer. The cat lapped it indifferently.

A prolonged rumble summoned her to the balcony. Here her scantily clad form was backlit by the lamp. The city below her vibrated in the rain's slow assault upon it; this place was a patchwork of unfinished hopes. She let the cold drops cleanse her as the last precious embers of her cigarette faded from existence.

Her eyes looked to the window across the building, two up, third on the left. It was dark. Was he watching her? Did he? She could feel the distance tonight, just as she had that morning in the elevator when he'd shifted minutely away from her presence.

Again the cat announced itself, protesting the idea of joining her in the rain. Where was he? She traced the paths of the dark forms moving below. They darted, weaved, and tarried among each other and the flicking headlamps on the vehicles on the street. A steady stream of water ran down her neck and back but she only moved when the record on the hi-fi ended and the hiss from the speakers filled the hollow apartment.

Water marked her passage to the stereo. She wrung the rainwater out of her hair before pouring herself another drink and removing the ring from her finger. It bore no place in her life now. Why did she continue to wear it? The man who'd given it to her was gone. She'd always known he'd leave; knew it before he did. The girl he'd fallen in love with all those years ago wasn't the woman reflected in the mirror and he couldn't stand that. She unconsciously rubbed the side of her face. Neither of them were the same. This city changed people. Her lips parted but no words returned from the reflection. She downed the second drink and made her way to the piano.

Her hands delicately rolled back the cover from the mute keys, the surface of which her fingers caressed. When had this become her voice?

The metal pedals were familiar, cool against her bare feet. Her husband never liked her going out to the clubs. This instrument was to have been her cage, a means to keep her here. He'd spent half their savings to buy it for her so there'd be no need for her to go out. She would learn to play it, be happy, and her doubts about their marriage would subside.

Her fingers hovered above the keys; monochromatic teeth in an obsidian jack-o-lantern. The affair had begun here. Ignoring the damp hair in her eyes she gazed out at the balcony toward that unseen dark window. The music had drawn them together.

The first night it happened she'd been surprised. Before that night he'd been a stranger; that man who made her pulse imperceptibly quicken in the elevator every time they rode it down to the reality of the street together. Sometimes his wife was with him, others she was not. It didn't matter. They never spoke. But he always watched her lips. Her thumb and middle finger began to trace the faint indentation on her ring finger.

The record finished. She was alone with only the rain, the crackle of the speakers, and the sounds of life far below as companions. She'd been playing for months when it began that night; pouring more and more of herself into the notes she played. Her husband rarely stayed to listen. She'd been alone that night too when her song began to echo back to her ears from across the building, from that window where the stranger played it for her. She'd stopped. Was he mocking her? She silently listened as he finished, closed the piano's lid, then wandered casually out on the balcony. He was there, framed in the window. Then she'd perceived his wife's presence as she entered the room and the man was gone.

She'd wanted to dismiss it, would have done so, but the next night it happened again. The tone and the tempo varied depending on the mood of each performer but night after night the wordless conversation continued. No, not wordless. He listened to her and her to him. Still, they never spoke in the elevator, only stood closer when they were alone.

There was a freedom in playing, a recognition of feelings and perceptions about herself she'd never known. It didn't matter that he was married, if they were or were not the most attractive people; only that someone else understood and that the conversation continue. This longing gave them something to share, protect, and treasure. It destroyed them but in the end led them to personal truths.

Her hands moved awkwardly to smooth her threadbare slip. Now her husband was gone. The man from the elevator no longer played for her. The job she'd worked at for eight years would be gone by tomorrow and she would be forced to move some place new.

The cat was studying her from across the room. She rose and quietly closed the doors to the balcony. She was stronger now. She austere resumed her seat before the stoic grin of the piano keys. And for the first time in her life she played for herself and held the last note until it faded into silence.

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