



ONLY BEAUTY

by Matthew Duffus

- ONE -

When he looked back, which he tried not to do, he only remembered sitting before the Steinway with the astronomical insurance premium, preparing to begin the scherzo he'd spent years studying. His friend Evgeny had conquered it at fifteen, recording live in Japan, while it proved his Rubicon at thirty-four, on an April weekday in Flyover Country. At the final *piu mosso*, the home stretch, he went blank, stumbling over the triplets, muscle memory failing like the final engine of a distressed 747, ensuing chords unrecoverable, the black box of his mind malfunctioning, recording static when there should have been *stretto*

e crescendo. But what was there to *crescendo*, *stretto* or otherwise? He sat before the piano, hands hovering above the keys, positioned as he'd held them since he was four. Where was Mrs. Claiborne when he needed her? She would have hummed the note in his ear.

- TWO -

His therapist had warned him about the job, that it was too soon to consider something so dangerously adjacent to performing, but his money was running out, so he'd acceded to his friend's offer of a Guest Artist position, sublet his apartment, and moved south. He saw himself as a missionary from a more cultured place and expected to find the natives harmless and kind, uncouth but pliable. Instead, he confronted a room full of serious young women, each seated at a piano, backs straight, chins high. He half-expected them to rise at his entrance.

Incapable of sustaining a lecture, of offering tidbits about composers' lives or speaking of his own career, he prowled the room's perimeter,

adjusting an elbow, tapping a rhythm on the piano top, but never depressing a key himself. He felt exposed, a fraud.

- THREE -

Only one was worth his time. She played with force and confidence, struck each note exactly as directed in the score. But that was her problem. Like her teacher, the technique was flawless. Like her teacher, the lack of emotion would leave audiences cold. A reviewer had referred to his albums as *listenable but not re-listenable; everything is on the surface, with none of the depth one seeks in greatness*. It was unfair to pass down such a critique to her. Everyone from his manager to his piano tuner had heard him rail against said critic. How could he presume to say the same of this twenty-year-old?

He grew charitable over the weeks. Increasingly, he spent time playing recordings for her, urging her on with the sounds of his friends—Yundi and Hélène—sought to transfer the power of Argerich and Uchida aurally. She grew more emotive but less certain, as though she contained a set amount of ability that had to be apportioned among the two poles of

expressivity and technique. She made mistakes, missed flats in chords she had known by heart, became tangled in runs that she had previously dashed off with aplomb.

- FOUR -

One day, he arrived in the studio to find six young women in a semi-circle around the seventh's piano, where his star pupil hammered the keys like pistons inside an engine, the same sixteenth-note run over and over. Bach's *Keyboard Concerto Number One in D Minor*. He'd played the Gould recording for her a week earlier, noted the inconsistencies in the legend's interpretation but impressed upon her their lack of consequence, the fact that Gould's martial lyricism came through regardless. Now, she fired off sixteenth-notes so hard he expected the keys to fly off with them. The piano legs shifted against the wood floor. The piano top trembled. There were tears in her eyes and snot on her upper lip.

He cleared the room with a glance and sat next to her. He'd bluffed through the semester without pausing to wonder how he'd influenced

them. He'd implored. He'd cajoled. But what if he'd damaged them, as well? He covered her hands with his own, lightly enough that he could feel the tendons in her fingers, the brushing of her knuckles against his palm. He feared what would happen if he stopped her, so they remained, caught in perpetual, repetitive motion, until the sun set and the room darkened.

- FIVE -

The following afternoon, he was too preoccupied by his missed therapy session to notice her absence at first. He'd grown dependent on his video sessions, the only lifeline to humanity that didn't imply, or ask outright, the constant question, *when are you coming back?* It wasn't until the Bartók truly took off that he became aware of the absence of that sound, the lone improvement he'd grown inured by, the expectation that, week after week, she would develop as sure as the nights would grow longer. He frowned at the place where she should have been, as though disappointment might conjure her. When she did not arrive after twenty minutes, he released the

class into the late-afternoon shadows, blaming their lack of effort, though even they could see his verdict was half-hearted.

He did not know what to do, how to contact her, or where to begin. All he knew was that he would be lost without her. He sat at her piano, judged himself for thinking he could feel her presence there. He studied the keys she had played the last time she'd been there, the measures she'd repeated for two hours without missing a note or varying her tempo, not even when he'd placed his hands on her own, the most sensual gesture imaginable, he now realized. He placed his fingers above the keys, pressed the first one and then another and another. It wasn't perfect. It was only beautiful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Duffus is the author of two forthcoming books, the novel *Swapping Purples for Yellows* (Aug. 2019) and the collection *Dunbar's Folly and Other Stories* (Oct. 2020). He teaches and directs the writing center at Gardner-Webb University, in Boiling Springs, NC.

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