

SYMPHONIC ECHOES

“Papa, I wanna sing. You play piano...”

I’m throttled back into reality as a velvety and slimy object slides across my rugged cheek. Large whiskers tickle my parched lips. My eyelids flutter open, confronted by two amber orbs.

Her favourite colour.

Its fur resembles the vibrant shade of withered autumn leaves.

Her favourite season.

It gives a soft purr before gracefully leaping off my frail frame, sunken into the stained leather couch.

Why didn’t I hold your hand?

“Move on Paulo, it’s been three years,” a woman utters hoarsely, her words accompanied by a croaky sigh.

I sit up, my limbs and arms responding with a sluggish reluctance. A relentless drumbeat has taken residence in my skull. The texture of my throat resembles coarse sandpaper. The pungent odour of sweat, infused with spoiled and sour grapes, lingers through the room. A collage of food stains adorn the wrinkled surface of my white tee. I think it’s a Saturday.

“No more bottles till you start playing again. You hear me?” she grunts as she gestures towards the piano with her wrinkled hands.

The pink doll house is pushed up against the wall and enveloped in dust. It looks lonely. A sharp vibration and buzz awakens on the coffee table. She points to the piano once more as she cradles the phone against her ear, her footsteps gradually dissipating.

“Tick tock, clank.”

The clock emits a soft cough as if clearing its mechanical throat, before resuming its duty with a quiet insistence. My toes tap impatiently as my hands helplessly scavenge through the leather couch. The tall lamp beside the couch flickers and snickers — a silent spectator, mocking me. Mother really did take the bottles.

“Papa????”

The heater hums, a chill lingers. My throat yearns for the elusive warmth, craving solace — another swig. I lift myself off the couch, my body responding with a slight sway as I trudge urgently towards the piano. Another swig. Nestled by the open window, the piano is bathed in the gentle glow of the morning sun. The once-lustrous wood has mellowed into a rich patina. Dust settles in the crevices of the keys.

“Paapaaa????”

Her shadow persists. An unwelcome echo. The yearning intensifies — an ache for the sensation, the fiery trail down my throat. Another swig. I sink into the embrace of the stool’s faded fabric. My shoulders slump beneath the oppressive weight of its looming presence. The

ivory keys cradled beneath my fingertips mimic her smooth youthful skin, the ebony keys as sleek as her silky black hair. God, I hate how the instrument looks.

"Another swig," I mutter.

I press my index finger down mechanically, a distant sensation stretched thin. The piano sighs, carrying echoes reminiscent of her dulcet tones...

"Sleep in heavenly peaceeee," she sings.

My eyes dilate and widen involuntarily. A surge of instinctual fear grips me, her shadow fully unfurling. It creeps along my spine, causing involuntary tremors to ripple through my arms and limbs. Numbness envelops my throat and my eyes shut frantically as the internal thumping intensifies. Beads of sweat form on my forehead as I gasp desperately. A swig won't do.

"TICK TOCK TICK TOCK TICK TOCK."

The clock hyperventilates. My hands plunge into a frenzy, a sense of urgency to escape. My left hand moves rapidly and spontaneously along the keys, matching the throbbing beat of my internal metronome. It rampages on with low dissonant chords that groan gutturally - I hit a dead end. My right hand moves instinctively across the higher registers through screaming staccato bursts. Each G and A trill possesses an eerie screech - another dead end. My eyebrows furrow. My lips quiver. My eyes still shut. The maze, infinite.

My foot slams against the damper pedal in a burst of desperation. Both hands now navigate the labyrinth through lingering legato phrases. A B minor chord — I turn right. My fingers deftly traverse to the adjacent keys, shaping a C minor chord — another right.

They continue to dance along the registers. The clock seems to have stopped ticking. A left — no dead end.

Another left — no dead end.

One more left.

One more right...

With a gradual decrescendo, the delicate major arpeggios cascade like the soft patter of raindrops. Each note tiptoes away, echoes dwindling into a fragile silence. A trickle of saliva moistures the aridity in my throat. The air carries a profound lightness.

I'm out.

I open my eyes. My gaze meets a little girl peering through the window, her face illuminated by a wide grin. She holds a notebook tightly against her petite frame. Her black silky hair looks just like hers, shimmering with the rosy glow of the evening sky...

"Papa?"

I can hear her voice again. Her shadow falls once more. It embraces me — hugs me. A faint smile tugs at the corners of my lips.

Dear Diary,

Today I met a man.

His music made me smile.

I want to learn to sing, so I can make Grandma smile as well.

She hasn't smiled since the day Dad got into that crash.

The one with the little girl.

I hope her father is doing alright.

I think that was almost 3 years ago.