

# *Thicker Than Water*

Oscar watched his housemate Philippa's fingers move in staccato beats over the keys, each note prodded from the piano like a confession. All the same, he sang along.

Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques,

Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?

Morning bells are ringing! Morning bells are ringing!

Ding, dang, dong! Ding, dang, dong!

Afterwards, Philippa huffed a satisfied exhalation and said, "You know, I think I'm getting the hang of this. And it's all thanks to my wonderful teacher." Leaning across the piano stool she planted a perfectly moist kiss on Oscar's cheek. Then she stood up – "Time for work!" – and not a moment later was out the door.

There are three things you should know about Oscar Denning. Firstly, he played the piano. Had done for as long as he could remember; if not the piano, then the keyboard. It didn't matter if it was a Fazioli, a Steinway, one of those fabulous Viennese Bösendorfers, whenever Oscar sat down at his stool and felt the give of the keys beneath his fingertips, he couldn't help but revert to being that six-year-old boy with his brand-new Casio; theme tunes, nursery rhymes, sounds that were his alone. His mother had been intent on getting Oscar to Grade 8 by the time he started secondary school, thereby securing him the tag of "child prodigy" forevermore. She was disappointed, then, when forced to settle for Grade 6, and even rebuked Oscar's teacher – poor Mr. Kettersby – for holding him back.

As far as Oscar was concerned, no piano should have to be put to sleep for the night on Frère Jacques. So, once Philippa was gone, he flexed his fingers and let them fall upon the keys in short, sharp bursts of Rachmaninov's Prelude in C Sharp Major; in turns doleful and

optimistic, a complex little piece that spoke of a divided ego and built ominously, frantically to a false crescendo before descending into despair.

He thought of it as a first love, the piano. One that would never leave him and would always be requited. And while over the years his amorous tastes had diversified – become more base, some would argue – on some level, it was the truest love he could imagine, and certainly the truest he had known in his still young life.

The second thing you should know about Oscar Denning is that much to his mother's frequent and vocal chagrin, Oscar worked at Matalan. Not as a manager, not salaried, not as part of a grad-scheme. Just as your average dogsbody. Admirable in many ways, but to a woman like Mrs. Denning – whose son had been all but a musical prodigy, if you don't mind! – it was pedestrian, to say the least. "Those spangly knickers they sell," she'd said to Oscar. "They're about as close as you're getting to the lights of the Royal Albert Hall now." Which was to say a very long way indeed.

But it was honest work. Helping customers, sorting displays, up early during sale season, and back late in the evening. They'd till-trained him quickly enough, so it wasn't all just milling around the shop floor, standing guard at the fitting rooms; there was responsibility too. Still, at twenty-six Oscar had bigger ambitions than Matalan. If only he could figure out what they were.

Philippa worked at a pub in town called The Eagle's Eye, a place Oscar had never frequented until the pair of them had been thrown together in a chance house-share arrangement. Now he would go along every Thursday night with his friends for the quiz, and occasionally at weekends too. It was far from the most happening place in town, but for Oscar that was part of the draw. Tonight being Monday, however, meant nothing of note for Oscar's social calendar, and by the time Philippa arrived home around midnight, he was desperate for the company.

"Busy?" he asked, as she slumped down beside him in front of the TV.

"Nah, dead," she replied. "Thought he was going to let us go early, but hey ho. Have we got University Challenge recorded?"

A moment later the familiar sound of strings filled the room and, with them, the po-faced demeanour of Jeremy Paxman. It was a semi-final between Edinburgh and a Cambridge college neither of them had heard of.

"A starter for ten," Paxman began. "In the mid-1740s, engravings of illustrations by the Dublin artist Susanna Drury brought what geological formation to international notice, prompting Neptunist and Vulcanist theories of its origins? It's located close to the town of Bushmills in County Antrim."

"Giant's Causeway!" said Oscar.

An Edinburgh student buzzed in: "The Giant's Causeway."

"Correct," Paxman intoned.

"Woah," said Philippa. "Nice."

"You get three questions on misreadings and mispronunciations," Paxman went on. "Firstly, in 2014 a newsreader on Indian state TV made headlines for pronouncing which world leader's name as 'eleven'. I need the full name."

"Xi Jinping," said Oscar, neutrally.

"Kim Jong-il," said the Edinburgh captain.

"No, it's Xi Jinping," said Paxman.

"Holy shit." Philippa glanced at Oscar. "Feel sorry for whoever's got to face you on Thursday."

"It just popped into my head," Oscar told her. "The Roman numerals thing. It makes sense."

"'Ten' is a frequent misreading of the name of which Galilean moon of Jupiter, named after a priestess of Hera in Greek myth?"

"Io," said Oscar, quick as a flash. Onscreen the students were still deliberating.

"Io," they eventually agreed.

"Io is correct," said Paxman.

"What the actual fuck?" said Philippa, sitting up and staring at Oscar. "Hold on, have you already watched it?" Oscar couldn't help but laugh. She punched him softly in the arm. "You are actually a bastard. Well, I'm not just going to sit here and watch you cheat, so I'm going to bed."

"Oh, come on," pleaded Oscar. "We've got Only Connect to watch too."

"Yeah, as if University Challenge doesn't make me feel dense enough." She hauled herself off the sofa. "Any chance you've got my juice because I'm guessing I won't see you in the morning?"

Which brings us to the third thing you should know about Oscar Denning: he made and sold his own varieties of liquid or "juice" to go in e-cigarettes. It was difficult to say how he'd got started. Back in his late teens, he had been accosted by a woman outside Euston train station; she was working in one of those promotional pop-up tents and touting "electronic cigarettes" to anyone who would listen. Oscar had waved her away (electronic cigarettes, it'll never catch on!), but then he'd done some research (maybe the woman was onto something ...). Naturally, the first batch nearly choked him to death, but over the years he'd become a dab hand at the process. It was surprisingly simple. A mixture of propylene glycol (if you want a harsher hit) or vegetable glycol (for more vapour) with liquid nicotine (zero to twenty percent depending on your preference), all seasoned to taste – bubble gum, pear drop, liquorice, just plain old tobacco – using concentrates easily available online. The solution was a little thicker than water and

dirt cheap to produce. He could make the stuff for about one-fifth of the going retail price and sell it for a tidy profit.

As with any good home-brewer, he sampled his wares himself before distributing them to others. Not that Oscar was a smoker himself, although if you're thinking that he'd never partaken in his entire life, you'd be dead wrong. As a teenager, he'd smoked regularly at parties and gigs, but never alone and never as a habit. He even got stoned a handful of times, once so badly that his friends had wanted to call an ambulance, but fortunately, he'd pulled himself together just in time. These days he limited himself to the role of guinea pig, testing each batch for taste and intensity, volume of smoke versus the sensation in the throat, and always in e-cigarettes with freshly cleaned cartridges so that the new liquid was not tainted with residue from an older batch. All in all, he took pride in his work. So much so, in fact, that his friends often encouraged him to make a go of it as a business, a proper business on a larger scale, rather than just a fiver here, a tenner there. But somehow Oscar had never felt the call to enterprise; he didn't feel like a businessman and couldn't see that he ever would.

Beyond these three things, Oscar was a man in an unhappy stasis; he felt as though he were hovering, gestating toward some other, hitherto unforeseen, phase. Indeed, if you've ever wondered what a plant feels when it is photosynthesizing, you could do much worse than observe Oscar Denning in the hours outside of Matalan, piano, and juicing.

Perhaps that is why Thursday's pub quizzes at The Eagle's Eye took on such importance for Oscar. An opportunity to escape the humdrum, exist in a space where – for two hours at least – everybody was as uncertain as each other.

Philippa was behind the bar with a guy Oscar didn't recognise. His nametag revealed him as Chris, a lanky creature several years her senior who wore a scraggly goatee and a ponytail that accentuated the beginnings of a receding hairline. It reminded Oscar of a look he'd once strived for himself as a teenager, but surely in this chap in his early thirties, it had degenerated from classically adolescent to just plain creepy. By contrast, in her button-up black shirt and loose curls, Philippa looked a breath of fresh, effortless air. She leaned back and kicked a heel up against the window of a drinks fridge as the portly quizmaster took his seat at the end of the bar and greeted a handful of regulars over the sound system.

The anticipation of Round One always caused a lull at the bar, and Philippa and Chris took the opportunity to engross themselves in what looked a humorous conversation. Noticing this, Oscar approached the bar.

"A pack of salt and vinegar, please," he said.

Chris turned languidly and stretched an impossibly long arm to his left and plucked a bag of crisps from the display. Meanwhile, Philippa punched the order into the till.

Chris slid the crisps down the bar towards him. "Teamwork," he said, looking pleased with himself.

"That's 80p," she said, smiling in Oscar's direction, though he couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't meant for him.

If there is a fourth thing you should know about Oscar Denning in addition to the ruling triumvirate of Matalan, piano, and juicing, it is that Oscar was deeply, infuriatingly, achingly, schoolboy head-over-heels in love with Philippa. To him she was beyond compare; certainly, you could hold her up to this or that – a flower, a sunset, a breeze carrying some sweet odour – but it would only constitute proof of language's woeful failure to capture perfection. For that is what she was. Perfect. Something to which no improvements could conceivably be made, and for which any addition, subtraction, or change would be tantamount to a crime against nature.

It should be noted, then, for the sake of completeness, that while there are no doubt many important things that you ought to know about Philippa herself, the pertinent one is this: she did not have a clue how Oscar felt, or if she did, she had a damn fine way of hiding it.

The quiz was a disaster. They had been in the running until the final round – the wipeout round, where a single incorrect answer resulted in a score of zero. Oscar had insisted it was Lady Gaga, but the others had insisted even harder that it was Miley Cyrus. But in truth, it was the blind leading the blind and Rihanna had them all feeling perfectly foolish.

The four of them nursed the ends of their pints and were preparing for the inevitable post-mortem, when Jared, an old friend of Oscar's from their schooldays, caught him off-guard.

"You do realise she's out of your league," he said, staring at Oscar, who in turn realised he had been staring in the direction of the bar. "As in, you're Rotherham and she's Chelsea." This despite Jared knowing Oscar's contempt for football. "Don't play dumb with me, mate. You know what I'm talking about."

He wasn't being cruel. Oscar's friends knew his feelings perfectly well. If anything, it was the obviousness of the statement that grated – of course, she was out of his league! But Oscar couldn't help watching Philippa any more than a match can refuse to ignite when struck, a twig snap when bent. It was unnatural not to do so; he had made a virtue of it.

Back at the house, Oscar was already in bed with a paperback when he heard Philippa arrive home. At first, he thought she must be on the phone, the way she was chatting and laughing, but a second voice, a male voice, quickly declared the presence of another. It was several hours later, around three in the morning, that Oscar heard the first sounds from across the hall, of bodies entwined, lungs straining, the noises of unbridled pleasure. He clenched his eyes shut and pleaded for sleep, but the sound of exhalations seemed to permeate the darkness like some dreadful spectre. He threw on the light in the hope that it might dispel the growing din, but somehow the glare only served to spotlight it, draw it into even starker relief.

For Oscar, it was a form of torture, albeit one for which he had developed a certain tolerance. Which is to say, Chris was far from the first. He didn't begrudge Philippa these acts; she was a beautiful woman, after all. Not that her beauty necessitated anything so bestial, but it would have been a shame were it otherwise, Oscar thought. Not quite like a classic car remaining undriven, more like a great work of art being unadmired. It would have been a waste. He only wished he was the one permitted to admire her. The first time it had happened, Oscar had felt something animal stir in his brain, urging him to partake from a distance, from across the hall. But he had succeeded in repressing the beast, the would-be third back, and now filled such minutes and hours with more utilitarian fare.

He opened his bedside drawer and removed a pair of rubber gloves, then reached beneath his bed and pulled out a plastic box. The lid clicked off and Oscar brought out one bottle at a time, placing them on his desk. First, the propylene glycol, followed by the vegetable glycol and the liquid nicotine, and finally the pink grapefruit flavour concentrate. It was Philippa's favourite.

Oscar assembled his pipette and drew out five millilitres of liquid nicotine and squirted them into an empty bottle, repeating the process with one millilitre of propylene glycol followed by twenty-five of vegetable glycol, and rounded the process off with roughly thirty drops of pink grapefruit. He was about to screw the nozzle onto the bottle and give it a good shake when suddenly the commotion pierced his mental quarantine once more.

Even from afar, Oscar had learned that Philippa wasn't what you would call a passive lover. But for her to be quite so verbose was unusual. He had come to associate her with a form of physical love that, while intense and free of inhibition, was intimate all the same, entirely devoid of the pornographic tropes so sought after by a certain class of man. And yet here she

was, her wails seeping through the timber and plasterboard like something downloaded, something purchased. Oscar felt his throat swell within his neck and thought he might be sick. After a moment the feeling subsided and he began to weep, a guttural purging festooned with reams of tears that overflowed his eyelids and poured down his face. To an unsuspecting onlooker he might have been in mourning, but to hear her this way, so manufactured, so plastic; to Oscar, it was a loss of personhood akin to death, the pristine Eve of Eden now expelled into the lowly dirt of the world.

It finished. An opening and closing of doors, a flush of the toilet from down the hall, and then silence. It took Oscar longer. He was sat doubled over his desk, handfuls of hair clasped in fists, cheekbones glistening in the lamplight. His whole body ached from tension. He opened his eyes and wiped his nose, blinked away the last of the tears. They fell to the desk and splattered on the lacquered pine with the rest. But then Oscar straightened himself and beheld the desk more clearly, for at the heart of these collected pools and droplets was the bottle containing the fresh batch of juice he had been working on for Philippa. It must have been positioned directly beneath him the entire time and he hadn't noticed. Worst of all, the top was still open. It was inconceivable that so many tears could constellate in this manner without a single one finding its way into the bottle itself. Had he spoiled the entire brew?

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The next day at work Oscar could think of little else besides Philippa and that man from the pub. Somehow every aspect of working at Matalan took on a new and tawdry significance. The folding of sleeves went from being a rote exercise to a complex, sensual entangling of limbs. Where skirts had once been inanimate things to be bought and worn, they were now a taunting half-layer to be removed, or else circumnavigated by an unscrupulous lover. Even the piled display cases of jeans and jumpers presented an orgy of cotton and polyester and denim, the muffled moans of Philippa buried somewhere within.

When five o'clock rolled around, Oscar was in a daze and had to drag himself from kitchenware where he had hunkered down for the afternoon away from anything conceivably erotic. Philippa didn't start her shift at the pub for another two hours, and as Oscar walked through the door she was there to greet him.

"What took you so long?" she said. "It's time for my lesson." She bounded back into the living room and took a seat at the piano.

"Two minutes," he replied. "Just to get changed."



Upstairs he shrugged off his scratchy zip-up Matalan sweater and raggedy black trousers – the same pair he'd sat his A-Levels in – and pulled on a pair of jeans and a black hoodie in their place. At his desk, he picked up the bottle of pink grapefruit and gave it a shake under the light. It ought to be fine, he told himself. Plenty of home-juicers diluted their product with distilled water – vodka too, he'd heard – so what was a teardrop or two?

"Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," he explained, taking his seat beside her at the piano, "might seem like a simple tune, but it's useful for developing dexterity in the fingers, learning to feel the music rather than simply producing the requisite sounds."

He felt a fool spouting such patent claptrap, but Philippa would only be annoyed to learn his heart simply wasn't in it today. How could it be? There she was, poking at the keys like a toddler prodding a dead animal with a stick; it was all he could do to prevent the storm of love and hate, bitterness and longing, of pure unadulterated angst, from churning to such a tumult that it would not only capsize the vessel they shared but surely drown the pair of them in the thick black waters of its sorrow.

Instead, he gritted his teeth, and half an hour later found himself singing along to her third consecutive broken, stop-start rendition.

As your bright and tiny spark

Lights the traveller in the dark,

Though I know not what you are,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

Philippa punched the air. "Third time's the charm." She stood up. "Okay sweetheart, that's me, time for work. You got a wild Friday night planned?"

He hadn't, though the question seemed to assume as much, anyway. It felt disorienting, this constantly being made to feel ten-feet tall and then barely six-inches in practically the same breath, like a balloon being inflated and deflated again and again in rapid succession. Surely, he thought, it was only a matter of time before she grew tired of it too, her lungs burning, nauseated from the continuous exertion. But then, that was Philippa: effortless in everything she did, the same way the wind could flatten entire cities without breaking a sweat, without noticing the destruction.

"I've got your juice," he said, removing the bottle from his jeans. "Pink grapefruit, just like you asked."

She smiled and took it. "You're a star. My twinkling star! I'll get you a fiver later."

The door slammed shut and a Schubert sonata settled itself between Oscar's fingertips and the piano's keys, drawing the two inexorably together. For the next hour, Oscar did not breathe. His lungs did not swell and diminish. Instead, they floated with the rest of him, somewhere oceanic, where breath is mere air; elemental and unbounded by one's ending and another's beginning. It was ecstasy, an elegiac form of the mystical; not visions of thrones and clouds, but of humankind, viewed from outside all of space and time. A feeling of total unrequitedness, an aloneness so infinite it was no longer a rejection but an encapsulation, a sensation of being swallowed by pure being until he was the universe and the universe was him, and there was not a single atom's difference between them.

By the time he finally opened his eyes and the final notes drifted away, his entire body felt numb, as though stirring from a period of dormancy. Tears had wetted his chin and neck; the top of his t-shirt was darkened with them. He breathed at last and slowly closed the piano, concealing its music like a departed lover under a coffin's lid.

As he did so, another door came crashing open. It wasn't even eight o'clock, but Philippa was already back from work. She stood in the doorway, her face riven with streaks of mascara, her shoulders bouncing once, twice, faster each time as a tremulous sobbing took hold.

Oscar went to her. Held her. Guided her into the sitting room where she collapsed distraught onto the sofa. Oscar heard music, phantom chords ringing out, an ominous allegretto that built to a full-blooded frenzy of love and rage until it all had nowhere to go but to the surface.

"What the hell is happening!" she shrieked between deep hauls of breath. "What am I feeling? It's ... It's ... It's not me! They're not mine!"

Philippa pulled her e-cigarette from her trouser pocket and, in an effort to calm herself, drew deeply on the pipe. The room became filled with a thick vapour and a sickly-sweet scent that Oscar recognised as the same pink grapefruit he had created for her the previous evening. The cloud had barely had time to clear before Philippa was rocked by another wave of raw, inexplicable emotion.

"I don't understand," she whispered, collapsing into the soft cushions until she was foetal.

Oscar didn't know what to say. "Is it that Chris guy?" he asked, hopefully.

But Philippa's eyes had glazed over. Wherever she was now it wasn't here, it wasn't with Oscar, but somewhere else entirely. And he knew that for the time being it was a place to which he could not follow her. He covered her with a blanket and stroked the hair back from her face. She was fast asleep, her stores of energy devastated by some terrific and unforeseen exertion. It was only then that Oscar felt the curious stiffness in his own features, the flesh of his face and neck ever so slightly starched. The salinated glaze of tears left to dry.

When Philippa awoke several hours later she seemed clearer and restored. Oscar poured her a glass of wine and tried to ascertain just what the hell had happened.

"I can't explain it," she said. "I left for work and I was fine, was still fine when I arrived. Then I was outside having a vape with one of the chefs and out of nowhere I just felt ... I just felt ... everything. Like a tidal wave, but instead of from the outside in, it was crushing me from the inside out."

She twirled the e-cigarette between her fingertips as she spoke, all the while the curious compound swishing about its chamber. Oscar watched her draw it to her lips. There was the familiar hiss of the juice being warmed by the heating element, of all at once the chemicals being altered in their nature, their fundamental structures changed, atomized by some inscrutable alchemy. What would happen if some alien ingredient were to find its way into the mixture? There was no telling what the effects of ingesting such a substance would be.

He waited for the cloud to dematerialize, waited for her reaction. But she only turned to him and smiled weakly.

"After that, it was as though my legs had been swept out from beneath me and I was floating. Only instead of being a welcome feeling, this dreadful panic set in and wouldn't budge no matter how hard I tried. My boss sent me home." She took another drag on the pipe. "You know, my friend had a bad acid-trip once, the way she described it reminded me of how this felt. A complete dissolution of the self. It sounds dumb, but that's what it was. I felt spread so thin I wasn't me anymore, I was just a layer on the universe, wrapped around it like clingfilm so that if I pulled too hard I'd burst a hole and tear and become nothing."

Oscar sat and listened to every word, every image, and sensation so familiar it could have been his own. Was this what ecstasy felt like without music? Adrift in a terrifying, rhythmless void? Could it possibly be a coincidence? As one cloud of vapour after another billowed forth from Philippa's chest and vanished, Oscar couldn't resist the theory forming in his mind.

It was gone midnight when Philippa went to bed. "I could keel over with tiredness," she explained. "Oh, do me one favour though; if Chris drops by, would you send him up?"

Oscar, on the other hand, sat across the hall at his desk, scouring the Internet for some confirmation that he was indeed going mad. What was he expecting to find? Proof of some latent sympathetic magic in the structure of the human tear? It was absurd and he knew it.

Around one in the morning, there was a knock at the front door. Oscar opened it to a face full of angles; a sharp, beaky nose and jutting chin, a forehead flat as a shovel that sloped coastal-shelf-like down to a pair of dark, protruding eyes. It was Chris.

"I was just wondering if she's okay," he said, peering past Oscar and into the house. "Can I come in?"

"I'm sorry, mate," said Oscar, holding the door half-closed. "She's asleep and I really don't think she wants to be disturbed. Tomorrow, maybe."

"I know, but –" The door cut him off with a slow click of its Yale lock.

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The day that followed was an interminable one for Oscar. His duty manager stationed him on the returns desk so that he wondered if he wasn't being karmically punished for betraying Philippa's instructions the night before. He did not normally possess a penchant for the superstitious, but apparently, it was becoming a habit of late. So when a visibly strung-out mother explained in painstaking detail how her teenage son had managed to buy the wrong size pair of jeans, Oscar had to refrain from articulating with equal vigour the degree to which the cosmos simply did not give a toss about her son's sartorial woes. Instead, he did the next most indifferent thing; a full refund, no questions asked.

Philippa would be waiting for him at home, her delightful but musically inept fingers poised over the piano. But Oscar was no teacher and had no desire to be such to Philippa. All he wanted was for them to be equals. Equals in everything. So that there was no difference. A seamless joining of the two of them. It wasn't something he could reason into existence, a position he might persuade her of. What was needed was a sharing of experience; that was the heart of it. That's what had happened the day before, but it had been all wrong. It staggered him, the thinness of the line between trauma and bliss. He felt bad about asking her to relive it, but what other way was there?

He arrived home to find Philippa on the phone. She flashed him a wave from the sitting room. "That was my boss," she told Oscar once he had changed out of his Matalan uniform. "He doesn't think I should be going in, but I told him to eff off. Well, not in so many words."

"Philippa, there's something I need to tell you," said Oscar, holding his breath as he spoke. "It's about last night. You see, after you went to bed, Chris called round and wanted to see you, but I told him you were asleep. I'm so sorry."

She narrowed her eyes and smirked to the side. "And?"

"You said to send him up if he called round. I'm really sorry."

"Oh my god, Oscar. I was asleep. You don't need to apologise for every little thing. Now come on, are we doing this or what?" She sat down at the piano. "And don't tell me it might be too much for me, or you really will have something to apologise for."

He took a seat beside her, astounded by her as usual. "Okay, but I have a request." She raised a single eyebrow for effect. "For today's lesson, I play and you listen. I think it's important. You'll have to trust me."

"I trust you," she said, almost defensively.

"Oh, and one other thing, do you have your cigarette?" She reached into the pocket of her jeans and withdrew it. "I want you to smoke it while I play. I know that sounds weird, but it will help you relax. Because today is all about listening. Feeling the music."

Chopin's Nocturnes. Oscar let the mood of the music settle itself over him, a gossamer blanket of potential sounds that prickled his skin and ran up his spine to his shoulders, down his arms to his fingertips. He closed his eyes and heard the opening notes, the sombre trill, followed by the low richness of the arpeggios, building in measure with the slowing of his heart until it stopped its beating altogether until the musician was dissolved into the music. Somewhere in his consciousness, Oscar sensed the sweet cloud of vapour emanating from Philippa, enshrouding the mournful music, becoming indistinguishable from it, from each of them, until all was smoke.

But while Oscar's fingers went about their dance, while the hammers struck the strings and their vibrations filled the air and took Oscar with them, his cheeks remained as dry as bone, as the ivory keys of Chopin himself. He concentrated, squeezed his eyes shut, urged his tear ducts into action. At first, there was nothing, but midway through Nocturne 7, he, at last, felt the tickle of sadness edging downwards to the corner of his mouth. He tasted it with relief. Beside him, Philippa would be feeling the same, mirroring his every melancholic pang, their sadness being transmuted into euphoria by the irrepressible magic of music and tears. How could they ever be the same after sharing such a height? How could their pitiable stasis hold in its wake? They would never be the same again.

It was towards the close of Nocturne 13 that Oscar felt the first intrusions into his reverie. Something external probing its way inside. He opened his eyes. Someone was calling his name.

Philippa was laughing next to him. "Oscar!" She shook him again by the shoulder. "Man, can you get in deep when you want to! I've been calling you for like five minutes."

Chopin broke off and the fluttering notes shattered like glass.

"Are you okay?" asked Oscar. He searched Philippa's eyes for signs of himself.

"I was trying to tell you," she smiled, "I've got to go to work. But that was really good. You're so talented. I'll see you later, alright?"

She pecked him on the cheek and before he could stop her she was gone. Feeling confused, Oscar wiped his face with a sleeve. Something had gone wrong. Why hadn't it worked? He stood up and felt suddenly woozy, as though he had been rudely awoken in the middle of a sleep cycle.

Upstairs he lay on his bed on the cusp of some wild, depressive state. The idea of going back, of resigning himself to their relationship as it was, as it had always been, filled him with despair. Defiant, he plucked a text from his bookshelf, a collection of essays on the philosophy of music. Surely if there was an antidote to runaway emotion it was a dose of clear, hard reason. He perused the pages, dense with text and cool rationality. Musical works are nothing more than concrete particulars, Oscar read. They are scores and performances, ink and instruments and players. *Deus ex musica* was nothing but an illusion for fools and Platonists.

So why couldn't he believe it? For Oscar, music had never been something subject to the whims of space and time. It was an abstract, transcendent thing. It was only the human act of making music that dragged it kicking and screaming into the world of objects, the world of perception, where it could be critiqued and disputed as though it were the music's own fault, rather than the barely civilized apes trying and failing to capture it.

As he lay there, Oscar considered how rarely music's essence had been understood and displayed in its full glory. Had it ever truly been done? Then a thought occurred to him. Of course, his union with Philippa hadn't worked! It was impossible to so manufacture such an experience. Music could not be manipulated towards any end other than its own beauty. Spontaneity was essential! It was the difference between a perfectly timed off-the-cuff gag that had a room in stitches, and the same joke carefully set up in advance, choreographed for effect. It was never the same. But how, then, could he possibly make Philippa understand? Was it even possible for two people to share an experience on such a level? One thing was for sure: the music would not be deceived or pressganged into Oscar's service.

He set the book down and slid the plastic box of juicing paraphernalia out from beneath the bed. One at a time he positioned the bottles of propylene glycol, vegetable glycol, and liquid nicotine on the desk then plucked a pair of rubber gloves from the drawer and snapped them on. In the bathroom, Oscar dug out an old first-aid kit that had come from God-knows-where. Inside, among the bandages and antiseptic cream was a clear plastic packet containing a needle and thread. Back at his desk, he set about concocting a new batch of juice, the same as before only with one crucial difference. Once the conventional process was complete, instead of shedding a tear into the bottle, Oscar removed the glove from his right hand and took the needle, pressing it into the tip of his index finger until a small red globe emerged. With great care, he squeezed the fingertip between thumb and middle finger over the mouth of the open bottle.

The teardrop had been too weak. That was the problem. The connection between he and Philippa needed to be stronger. A more powerful ingredient was required. Oscar clicked the nozzle onto the bottle and held it up to the light. He gave the mixture a shake. He was worried the blood might have discoloured the juice, but he needn't have. It was sufficiently diluted that nobody would notice.

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Sunday opening hours at Matalan meant a lie-in for Oscar, but likewise, The Eagle Eye's Saturday night closing hours necessitated one for Philippa. As a result, by the time Oscar departed for work, they still hadn't seen one another since Chopin. Oscar left the juice in the kitchen with a note instructing her to give it a try.

Stood outside the fitting rooms, midway between the men's and women's, Oscar took receipt of armful after armful of discarded clothes. Pairs of jeans that were too long on the leg, too tight on the rear, or actually a much darker shade than they'd looked under the lights of the shop floor. Strappy tops that had looked fine on the rack but just didn't feel right once they were on. A blazer that felt more like a straitjacket, even though the same size had been tested in Next and fit just fine. Oscar smiled wanly and went about the laborious process of re-hanging and re-shelving each item in turn.

He shut out the regret that kept peeking its way around the doorway of his consciousness. Had he made a terrible mistake? When he thought about it the whole idea was ridiculous. Of course, his experiment with Chopin hadn't worked. But it wasn't because music itself had refused to play along. It was because tears didn't have magical powers! There had been no instance of cosmic sympathy between himself and Philippa, she had simply suffered a panic attack at work. The timing of it all was a mere coincidence. How could he have been so stupid as to talk himself into believing his own wishful thinking? He was smart enough to know that if something seems too good to be true, then it probably is. And now what had he done?



Deceived her into smoking his blood! Blood from the very fingers that brought music to their house in the first place! Was it dangerous? It wasn't as though Oscar had any deadly diseases or anything, nothing she could catch. But then there were always stories about people who didn't know they had a thing, and then suddenly it would rear its head in middle age and knock them sideways. All-day long he pushed such thoughts from his mind.

When four o'clock arrived, Oscar flew out of the store and started down the street apace. Maybe she hadn't touched the new juice. She might not even have noticed it there in the kitchen. And even if she had, she still had plenty of the previous batch to work through first before starting on the new. It would be fine, he told himself. Repeated it like a mantra.

He halted at the front door to catch his breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. But the breath caught in his throat. There was a sound coming from inside; familiar, yet new. He pulled out his key and opened the door slowly. When Oscar saw what was inside, the same tears that had been so reticent the previous day now welled up freely inside him.

The sounds that came from the piano were quite unlike anything he had ever heard before. Truly these were not the sounds of a human making music, but music itself, channelled through a human conduit of perfect beauty. A sound so iridescent, so sublime that Oscar felt his legs momentarily go from beneath him.

Philippa's eyes were closed, her eyelids fluttering with the impossible rise and fall of the notes in their flawless combinations, fluttering just enough for a steady stream of tears to escape and run down her face in delicate rivulets of light. Oscar put one foot in front of the other and approached. As he did so, Philippa shifted weightlessly to the side to make room for him on the stool. Removing his zip-up sweater, Oscar sat down beside her and stared in disbelief. Turning to him, and without disturbing the music's rhythm by a single beat, Philippa opened her eyes. They glistened. She was smiling, a sincere, sad smile that spoke of a happiness Oscar had wanted for her so very desperately. She looked from Oscar to the piano and back, beckoning for him to join her in eternity.

Oscar lifted his fingertips to the keys, felt Philippa's forearm resting against his own, and began to play. Not Rachmaninov or Schubert, not Chopin or Bach or Liszt. It was a music Oscar had never heard before in his life, let alone played. And yet the movements came to him without stress or strain, the harmony between the two of them seamless, so that the sounds were not many, nor two, but one.