

Chapter One

Ten Years Ago

Her parents were world-famous biomedical engineers, constantly called to meetings, conferences, conventions, and major surgeries. When she was younger, they stayed at home more. Now they were absent more often than not. Usually, she returned home from school to the empty house. Silent. Devoid of noise. But she was content with that.

For an hour, she would sit at the kitchen table, consuming her usual snack of vanilla almond milk and wheat crackers while completing her homework. Homework was very easy, simple arithmetic involving nothing more complicated than the occasional long division or multiple-digit multiplication problem, simple reading comprehension, or mundane social studies worksheets on various topics. Currently, her class was studying the Civil War. Worksheets were based on the war uniforms of both the Confederate army and the Union army—the practicality of the clothing, the style, the level of protection it offered, and more unremarkable information.

After homework, she would retire to the spare bedroom—a small, closet-like space across from her own dormitory, where her parents kept their former college textbooks. Stuffed away on dusty shelves, the old texts were scarcely touched; after all, with the constant influx of innovative medical information, the books, published over a decade before, were severely outdated. But, she found interest in them. They were the only real, tangible reading material she could find, which refreshed her mind and awakened her conscious. The watered-down curriculum at her school was useless—her independent reading group consumed classic literature such *Oliver Twist* rewritten into simplified modern language and paired with pictures; her science workbook consisted of illustrations diagramming the transition of tadpoles to frogs and caterpillars to butterflies without further scholarly explanation. She was bored. Consequently, the anatomy and medical texts she discovered at home in the spare bedroom were rejuvenating. Who knew the human body had two-hundred-and-six bones? Who knew that kneecaps developed between the ages of two and six? Who knew that the tongue was the strongest muscle in the human body?

And yet, these facts were just the beginning of her enlightenment. She devoured countless instruction pamphlets on medical procedures. Accordingly, she learned how to stitch a wound and perform the Heimlich Maneuver. She compiled a homemade first-aid kit, consisting of adhesive tape, gauze, duct tape, cotton swabs, scissors, antiseptic alcohol, thin strips of cloth, and a sewing needle and thread, which she stuffed in her backpack and promptly carried along wherever she travelled. A burgeoning medical practitioner must always be prepared, she always reminded herself. Once her eyeballs were blurry from the small, black print of the texts, and her brain could absorb no more information, she descended to the basement, where an old Yamaha piano stood pushed against the far left corner. Inherited from her paternal grandfather upon his death three years previously, the instrument had been stored away and hidden for years, gathering dust. Over time, it became a shelf for knickknacks her parents collected from their myriad of medical travels. A Russian nesting doll, a flask of Canadian maple syrup, and a handmade bead necklace from India were only a few of the colorful collections her parents stored. But one fateful day, the piano suddenly gained use. On that day two years previously, her kindergarten music class took a field trip to the local performing arts center where they attended a concert by the Berlin Philharmonic. Almost two hours long, the majority of her classmates were nearly asleep by the second symphony. Truth to be told, she was also. There was almost an

audible sigh of relief from the young students when the finale was announced: Chopin's First Concerto in E Flat. A shining black, long-tailed piano was wheeled out and a guest artist strolled onto the stage. The audience went wild. Obviously, he was a well-known music sensation. Nothing happened for several long moments, as the pianist adjusted his seat and the conductor waited for the orchestra to arrange their music. Then, suddenly out of nowhere, came the gliding violin melody. The echo of the French horns. The gentle flute interlude. The grand chords as the pianist entered the music, his face intense with passion. She went from drowsy to positively adrenalized. As if each nerve in her body was humming with electricity. The entirety of the piece, her nerves were fireworks. After the concerto was over, after the kindergarten class returned to school, after she biked home, after she did her homework, and after reading the medical texts, the effects of the music still hadn't departed from her system. The voltage still coursed through her bloodstream. Then, she remembered the long-forgotten piano in the basement. Trembling slightly, she ventured downstairs and sat at the piano bench for an hour, gently caressing the smooth wood of the frame and dreaming of pouring out heart-wrenching melodies over the keys. From that day forward, nothing was ever the same. She cleared the knickknacks from the piano. Through countless online videos, sessions with her school music teacher, sonatas and suites purchased with her own allowance, she learned the piano. She strived to become an aficionado like the performer she witnessed on that momentous field trip. She dreamed of filling others with emotion and vigor, of quickening their hearts and minds. From that day forward, nothing was ever the same. Music or medicine never departed from her head. Medicine or music. Music and medicine.

They met on Father's Day. Relishing the days of early summer, she took a bike ride that evening around town to the neighborhood park. She chained the bike to the racks. The park was vast, with lush knolls, concrete walking paths, benches beneath swaying trees, and a miniature playground for the children, complete with swings and two swirling slides. Usually, the park was quiet at twilight; the young families who normally dominated the scene had long retired home for dinner and sleep. Her favorite spot was the uninhabited basketball courts, far enough removed from the general activity, but open enough so that she could sit under the dimming sky in peace and have the world hibernating for the night underneath her gaze. On that day, a boy who looked to be around her age sat cross-legged on the courts, clutching his hands in his lap and reading a book spread on the tar before him, his frame silhouetted against the descending sun. A slight jab of annoyance stabbed her as she trekked to the far basketball courts—how dare he invade her private area!—but nonetheless, she made her way to her special place, hoping to bypass the boy without connection. As she neared, the boy glanced up, and she saw a soft hint of Mexican features in his face and gentle brown eyes that looked out from ebony hair. For some reason, her annoyance flared at his kind, compassionate face.

"Hello," the boy said. His voice was soft and intriguing.

"Hello," she returned curtly. She now stood in front of him, unsure of where to settle. She gripped her backpack straps for stability.

The boy inclined his head to the blacktop to his right. "Come, sit."

Reluctantly, she lowered her body beside him, not yet taking off her backpack. "What are you reading?" She indicated his book.

"Oh." The boy's eyes suddenly opened internally, gaining a sort of deep brightness from within. "Langston Hughes. *A Dream Deferred*."

“Who is... that?” she asked. By now the annoyance had been replaced by genuine curiosity and confusion. The teachers had never mentioned Langston Hughes in school. She racked her mind for who he might be.

“He’s a poet.” The boy nodded enthusiastically. “*A Dream Deferred* is my favorite piece of his.”

She blinked. She had never heard the word “piece” being used to refer to a poem before—a “piece” was always music. The peculiar context instigated an uncomfortable itch in her mind, like accepting the fact that a tomato was a fruit. It was the truth... yet awkward in its application. But she swallowed her surprise. “Let me hear it.”

He cleared his throat, looking deep at the black words on the white page. Then, he spoke. ““What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore— / And then run?”...”

She interrupted, “What does that mean?” Though the vocabulary was simple, the words swam in her mind—words used abstractly and not concretely, like measuring the volume of an amorphous shape. She already missed the straightforward language of her medical books.

The boy’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “That’s the beautiful thing, isn’t it? You cannot be completely sure. No one knows what happens when you let go of a dream. It could wither and die... or grow rotten... or escape you.”

Her head already hurt from his metaphors. “Okay. But how can a dream die, or become rotten, or even escape? It isn’t alive.”

“But that’s the wonderful thing about personification,” he answered. “We give the dream human traits to make the prospect of forgoing a dream more heart-wrenching. You feel the pain so much more. If a dream truly died, there is no chance in returning to the past and pursuing an old life again. You go on... to the unknown.” They were silent for a while. The boy had not raised his hands once throughout their entire conversation to gesture or show her his poetry book. They lay tightly folded and buried in his lap.

“What is wrong with your hands?” she asked rather abruptly.

He laughed somewhat sheepishly and raised them, still clamped together. She gasped at the red blood caking both of his hands and the long gash running the length of his left wrist, still freshly leaking the crimson stuff. The wound was extensive enough so that she could see the bone.

“Let me take a look.”

Reluctantly, he unclasped his hands and she took his left one in her own. “I was preparing a Father’s Day dinner,” he said, “and cut my hand with the meat cleaver. I didn’t want my parents to worry, so I left the house after I was done cooking to wait the bleeding out. Once the bleeding stops, I plan to return like nothing happened.”

“You can’t do that.” She shook her head. “It’s not sanitary nor safe for you. You need to be properly treated. When did you do this?”

“An hour ago.”

She pondered. “Not good,” she murmured to herself. Louder, she said, “Are you in pain?”

“No. Not at all, in fact.”

“You must be in shock.” She shook her head. “No, you must have damaged the nerves.”

“My hand slipped the wrong way when I was slicing the steak... It was my first time preparing meat and I should have asked for help, but I wanted it to be a surprise...”

“You fool. Fool,” she said. But inside, she wondered what it must be like to have a father to painstakingly prepare a meal for. “Do you trust me?”

The boy began to laugh, jokingly at first, but when he must have realized her seriousness, he stopped and met her eyes. His gaze, open and honest, spoke for his silent tongue. Without a word, she shrugged off her backpack and extracted her first-aid kit, nimbly popping open the plastic lunchbox which contained her necessities. Time seemed to slow to the speed of molasses as she carried out the healing process she had previously only read about in her books; nothing existed but her and the wound. She washed away the blood with water from her water bottle so that the cut was unobscured. She soaked a cotton swab in alcohol and dressed the split skin, making sure the disinfectant covered every square inch. She tied a tourniquet around his forearm. For some reason, Chopin’s Fifteenth Prelude was looping in her brain, a subtle force within her mind driving her actions. She sterilized her steel needle, threading the eye with the thin white thread and slowly, methodically, to the rolling tempo of the music, stitched the gash. The music centered her focus, and her hand did not shake once. He did not wince; his face was still as he observed her every action. When she was finished, she cut and tied the thread, disinfecting the stitched wound once more.

She met his eyes, her nerves strained, but electrified from the small deed. She had not felt this alive since the Berlin Philharmonic concert. His gaze reflected wonder and gratitude. They were bonded by something she could not discern.

“Thank you—” he began.

She shook her head. “It was no problem. Go home.”

He whispered his last words of the evening in wonder. “You healed me. You hold the power of healing.” He paused, raising his eyes up to the twilight. “The power of healing,” he repeated. He met her eyes. And then he silently departed to his Father’s Day dinner.

Day Before Yesterday, 17:00

Shaking, trembling, I lean into the final chords of Chopin’s Funeral March, the piano positively thrumming with the energy of the music. I am breathing hard, gasping, my face wet with tears that had begun to flow sometime during the performance. I do not lift my hands from the keys after having struck the chords; instead, I wait for the hall to finish echoing with the hum, which seems to remain for an eternity after the piece has reached its conclusion. I am frozen, locked in a stiff triangle with the lingering effects of the music, my emotions, and the piano, not ready to face stark reality just yet. Somewhere beyond the immediacy of the music, the audience waits in anticipation, the endless rows and rows of individuals who have come to view the final stage of the National Romantic Piano Competition. Ten finalists from across the country, chosen from the initial four hundred who had competed in the preliminary round nine months previously. Only the top three of the finalists would walk away with awards. At seventeen, I am the youngest. Swiping the back of my hand across my eyes, surprised at the salty moisture that it comes away with them, I turn my head at last to the anticipating audience, and slowly rise from the piano bench.

They do not miss a beat. Thunderous, deep applause bursts from every corner of the hall, the four corners vibrating with the bass of the praise. My legs are weak and boneless, although logically, I know that this cannot be possible. Even so, I grasp onto the side of the piano for support as I stand, and glance down at my legs. Clothed in nude stockings under the silky black performance dress that I donned, they appear deceptively strong and sturdy, held up by bones

and sinews and muscle. Encouraged by the concrete image, I lift my hand from the piano and bow, accepting the audience's praise and encouragement. Bowing, is humbling I believe. A heartfelt acknowledgment of others' time and patience spent invested in another's performance. Without an audience, an artist is lost—what is art without appreciation? I remain with my head lowered, then lift it graciously as the clapping dims. Clutching the hem of my dress for stability, I depart from the stage.

Backstage, the other nine contestants greet me with smiles and hugs. We embrace, the ten of us finalists locked in a unifying touch, bound together by the emotional surge of endorphins. No doubt, my fellow pianists were flawless, each of them expressing the music in a unique and rare style, different from one to the next. Hearing the Romantic pieces flowing from their fingers and into the hall, the amount of sensitivity and fragility occupying the space is, paradoxically, empowering. And we remain, still drawn into our embrace, not willing to release the moment, not willing to face the world yet. But, like the fleetingness of time, the moment dissolves after it is spent, and lifting our heads, we exit the temporary oasis of backstage and enter the reality of the bustling lobby.

The serenity is shattered. Fans descend upon us, showering us with compliments and extols, awed by the music as much as we are. But the process becomes a metronome, as it always does. Monotonous, cold, lifeless. My mouth soon aches from holding a smile, my hand recoils from completing the same scrawl of my signature on countless autograph books. The adoring faces blur into gray; the repetition of "thank yous" emitting from my lips become robotic and automatic. Just another product off the assembly line. Eventually, I indifferently navigate the throngs of people, ducking past the unceasing individuals who approach me again and again with praise. Faces bypass my memory; I am coasting above the experience, disassociated and simply focused on the light at the end of the tunnel. Escape. Finally, thankfully, I reach the bathroom and collapse into a stall, sliding down against the cool linoleum wall. The quiet and still atmosphere is welcoming. Here, I gratefully shed my stifling dress at last, slipping into conventional shorts and T-shirt. At the sink, I wash my face free of make-up and return my loose hair to its normal braid. Slowly, the mask of pianist fades and I return to myself once more.

I depart from the bathroom and I do not receive a second glance. Camouflaged, through strangely exposed in my unpainted skin and conventional clothing, I welcome the invisibility. Relieved, I walk past people who had hounded me just minutes before, full of admiration and awe, now blank and indifferent to the human passing them by. I weave through the packed hallway and find the exit, stepping forth into the bright afternoon sunshine. Momentarily, I am blinded by the startling light, the shockingly fresh and unrestrained air of nature. I shake the sensation off quickly, letting my face relax and loosen.

"Finally," I say, feeling the first genuine smile to adorn my lips since morning. I straighten, opening my face to the sky, allowing the sun to bathe my skin. I am alone, free, unrestrained. Shouldering my pack of performance clothes, I make my way to the back lot of the music hall where the bike racks stand. I unchain my bike—a red, scratched-up thing—and mount the saddle. There is a sleek, ebony bike locked to a different rack a couple paces away and I briefly wonder who it could belong to. I shake the thought from my head. Giving one hard push, I propel myself home.

Found in a neighbor's yard two years ago, scuffed, with a broken chain and flat tires, complete with a messily scrawled "free" sign on notebook paper flapping from the handlebars, I discovered myself curiously drawn to the abandoned bike. The neighbors were moving out of the

state and were attempting to rid themselves of old baggage. Just a week prior, they held a garage sale of obsolete records, ancient Christmas decorations, and antediluvian fashions. I did not browse the selections, but peering from the safety of my bedroom window, I watched as customers eagerly sought out items I would have described as junk. Neon Hawaiian shirts, baubles missing a hook, scratched Louis Armstrong tapes. As their faces lit up with eager expressions, I marveled at the inexplicable appeal of such unimpressive objects. What beauty—if any at all—resides in things so ugly, so distorted, from their original uniform and unflawed states? Nonetheless, I myself was likewise attracted towards that hopelessly broken bike, hardly believing that sign claiming that no purchase was required. At that moment, the neighbor happened to be taking out the trash and encouraged, if not insisted, that I take the bike, claiming he had no use for it. Afterall, I had long since outgrown my old bike, and this new contraption was practically a Godsend. Retrieving the neighbor's bike, I took it to be repaired—a costly job, for which I paid with winnings from a regional piano competition a couple months prior—and soon, it was practically a new bike. The only indication of its former life was the flaking paint on its frame. Otherwise, the new gears, chains, and tires practically purred against the pavement. And despite its previous broken, abandoned, and irreparable self, with just a touch of care, the thing could race as fast as it had been in its youth. It was then that the realization came to me with a start; maybe the worthless junk in the neighbor's yard held internal beauty only revealed through healing. Perhaps those customers dreamed of a new dye job, a new hook, a new program. Perhaps, that shirt, the bauble, and the record, could be restored, and then cherished with a full heart, having transformed from a dying and abandoned object to living again.

Nearing the turnoff into my subdivision, I veer onto the respective street, pushing down a lane of uniform, tan-paneled houses. Even at the dawn of spring, the estates sport clipped, lush lawns, vividly green from artificial fertilizer. Ducking past a sprinkler which drenches everything within a five-foot radius, I bypass several more identical residences and then reach my own. It shamefully displays a yellow, wilted lawn, almost vulgar in the midst of its perfect counterparts. Dismounting, I climb off my bike and leave it in the driveway. I head toward the mailbox, still shouldering my pack. There, I reach into the rusty box, my fingers closing around two slim letters. Once I am confident that nothing remains, I shut the lid, its hinges protesting loudly.

Frowning, I slowly examine the envelopes, taking in the carefully printed script on the fronts. It takes a moment for the words to register; once they do, my heart leaps in my chest and halts with a sudden stop. For nearly an entire minute, I simply stand like a statue, unable to comprehend the two sheets of paper clutched in my trembling hands. I converge into the letters; the world dissolves around me as I try to make sense of the unbelievable objects. I need to believe that this moment is real. That it has come; it is no longer a far-off dream of uncertainty, but now. Immediate. I must have begun to fold in on myself, for my elbow crashes against the mailbox and I thud onto the pavement. The jolt of impact awakens my senses, pulling me back into the current time, and I scramble to my feet. Though my hands shake, I shove the letters deep within my pack, crumpling them beneath the prior performance clothes and a textbook. Distracted, I peer at it, and investigation reveals it to be my biology book. Grateful for the reassurance of solidity, I grip the spine tightly and exhale, before releasing it and readjusting the pack around my shoulders. Taking a last lingering glance at my home, I decide that, no, I cannot remain here. My chest is tight, barely allowing even a glimmer of oxygen to enter my nasal cavity. To confine myself to the stifling house would mean imprisonment. The last thing I do is haphazardly switch on the sprinkler on timed mode, before mounting my bike once more. I

cannot exit the driveway fast enough.

The scenery makes no impact on my senses as I escape the confines of the neighborhood; the steady mantra of “get out, get out, get out,” pounds through my head. My breathing comes in short, noisy gasps, far louder in volume than on a normal ride. I am hardly conscious of where I am transporting myself. The once-familiar town fades into a blurred mess as I speed past stores, streets, and restaurants I’d regularly visited since childhood. They mean nothing. I systematically dodge pedestrians and parked cars, the thought to slow down or exhibit caution not crossing my mind. I only go forward, feeling just the steady bump of the pavement through my body, the whistling of the wind in my ears. Hours, or maybe only minutes later, I pull the brakes and come to a sudden halt, involuntarily drawn to the destination. An upward glance—as my eyes had been determinedly fixed on the ground since pedaling from the neighborhood—informs me that I have arrived at Calypso’s Coffee.

Even from outside, the heavy, warm scent of hot, caffeinated beverages greets my nostrils. Each inhale of the aroma leeches the firm tension from my body and internally, I sag into the comfort of this quaint, hospitable cafe I have spent nearly every evening at since I can remember. I revel in the dependability of the cafe-goers occupying their tables, working at their laptops, drinking their regular drinks. Once inside, I will be able to safely join the ranks of predictability and anonymity, blending into the steady beat of continuous, unchanging time. Regardless of the position of the sun, the place never relinquishes its rhythm of occupants. Even by early morning or by late night, I will never be alone and be deaf to my anxieties. Chaining my bike to a nearby parking meter, I enter the place.

Calypso, a young woman in her early thirties, raises her eyebrows as the bell tinkles upon my entrance. When she founded the cafe eons before, I was among her first customers, a small child who had not even experienced a decade of life yet, searching for an oasis from home. Consistently residing at the same corner following the final bell each afternoon, I completed my homework over a cup of hot chocolate. Calypso and I had come to know each other mutually and upon arrival, my usual cup of hot chocolate would be waiting. When I left, she always bid me good-bye with a wave and a kind word. I had come to rely on our dependable routine and eventually, I regarded the cafe as home. Yet, her questioning gaze, highlighting her startling blue eyes against her Mediterranean olive complexion, troubles me.

“Charlotte,” she begins, her heavy Greek accent thickening her speech. “You did not come at your usual time today. Why are you so late?”

Yes, I realize, she is right. I was due over two hours ago. Internally, I execrate the piano competition, having thrown the predictability from my routine.

“And,” she continues, “why are you so pale?”

I raise a hand and lay the palm against my cheek, surprised at the clammy coolness that emanates from my skin.

“Also, isn’t today the first day of spring break—March first?” She motions to a calendar pinned to the wall behind her where a clearly Photoshopped sunset appears as this month’s image. The computerized glare of the sun over a glistening body of water is sickeningly artificial. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

I sigh, removing my palm from my face, willing the normal hue to return to my skin. “Resting would be nice. I had a piano competition after school today. That’s why I’m late.”

“Ah! Piano.” Calypso nods knowingly. “How did you do? Did you win?”

I press my lips together, her interest curdling my stomach unpleasantly. To recount the

experience of robotically maneuvering through the fans, to be forgotten like yesterday once shedding the performance mask, is unsettling, to say the least. “I did... all right. Results will be announced tomorrow afternoon.”

“Hmm, please do let me know.” She smiles and I struggle to return the gesture. “Anyhow...” Calypso points again to the calendar. “New month, new future, one could remark.”

“One could, I suppose.”

“Breathtaking this photo, isn’t it?”

“It looks fake.”

“Charlotte,” she says, sighing and shaking her head. “Always so realistic. No imagination. How do you play music with that systematic mind of yours?”

Despite her light tone, the comment hits me all the same. “Music is different,” I say too sharply. Yet, inside, I wonder why I cannot look past the Photoshop and find the picture beautiful, also.

“Easy, easy.” Her eyes soften. “What would you like today? Hot chocolate, I presume?”

“I think”—I swallow, my stomach tightening at the prospect of ingesting something so rich so soon after performing—“I’ll just have a fruit bowl.”

Calypso’s eyebrows raise once again, a smile pulling at her mouth. “What’s this? Such a big change from normalcy?”

“Tomorrow I will return to the usual routine again, I promise,” I reassure her. “I don’t feel like chocolate today.”

Calypso purses her lips as she extracts containers of sliced watermelon, strawberries, and apples from the fridge, which she scoops tremendous servings of into a standard Styrofoam takeout container. She places the food on the counter before me. “Don’t promise that,” she warns, typing the price into the register. “You do not know what tomorrow will bring. It’s disastrous to claim true to something so out of your control. Dawn offers a new start, a rebirth. It is only your choice if you reopen the prior day’s routine. Tomorrow is a new day. By the next afternoon, who knows what could happen to you. Two-fifty-six.”

I blink, slightly startled by the abrupt change in flow, before realizing that she is simply naming the bill. Counting up coins and bills from my wallet, I slide the money to Calypso. “Please.” I shake my head. “Everything will continue as normal tomorrow, this I am certain of. Nothing new. All the same. Change occurs so gradually—no one person perceives it. Change is”—I search for the right word—“like evolution. It’s natural selection, with the obsolete being vanquished and the optimal taking its rightful place in the succeeding generation.” Surveying the fruit bowl, I suddenly burst out, “Oh, take some back. You’re so unfair—I can’t accept your inordinate portions. This is nearly double the standard size.”

Calypso shrugs slyly. “Slip of the hand, I suppose. I’m not as nimble as I was when I was younger. I’m quite clumsy now.” Her face assumes a somber expression. “But Charlotte, dear, you’re far too young to judge change. Even I...” She sighs heavily, her eyes looking to a faraway place. Then, she shakes her head and regains focus. “Change does not have a precise formula. It cannot be calculated cleanly like some of the calculus stuff you do.” I make a move to counter argue, but decide against it, closing my mouth. “Just wait and see.”

I accept the fruit bowl from her, glowering darkly. “Sure. But I’m correct. You’ll see.”

“*You’ll see,*” she emphasizes, winking.

I turn my back and navigate the cafe to my signature table, a plain little wooden thing tucked in the far corner of the shop. Even as I approach, my mind eases, grateful for the solace.

Finally able to extract myself from the prying eyes of society, I sink into one of the two padded folding chairs stationed at either end of the table, and drop my pack on my lap. Leaning back, I shut my eyes. I tilt my head upwards to the dim hanging lamp and simply breathe, clearing my clouded head, my thoughts fixed determinedly on the letters, the prior performance. No audience here. No judgmental crowd. Just myself in a vacuum. And this is how it should be. Removed from society, able to breathe freely without condemnation.

I reminisce on my earlier performance at the National Romantic Piano Competition, reflecting on my other nine fellow contestants. Four boys, five girls, between nineteen and twenty-three years old, all of whom currently study music under prestigious professors across the country. Music is these nine individuals' life, breath, and sustenance; music anchors them to the earth. Music reflects their destiny, a secure future etched in stone, determining decades ahead of playing, performing, sharing. A life without music is unimaginable for them. What other interest would they passionately hold to their heart as music once was? What would come of them, if music was abruptly snatched from their hands? If their talent was completely stolen away? They would have nothing... Or else forced to pursue a life without meaning.

I question what life would be if it had no reason. I think about the long days of spring and Christmas break, when I am huddled behind the front door of my home without an upcoming test or project or competition to occupy myself with. It is during those days that I am most afraid that I will lose the ability to function, for my vacant mind reflects the blank, simple, flat walls of my home. I shudder to imagine the possibility if those dark, dreary days stretched on for the remainder of my existence. I would surely die. It is already difficult enough to find one's calling in the multitude of seconds, minutes, days, weeks, and years sprawled ahead of them. Where is meaning found, anyway? Does it manifest itself? Or must one relentlessly seek and chase a passion to discover meaning? I wonder at myself. I, who was the youngest of the ten finalists. The odd little girl who has never stepped foot in any conservatory her entire life. Even lessons are beyond reach for her. Instead, through countless online tutorials, instruction books, and experimentation, she has learned piano. She plays with an untrained hand, brashly slamming keys, producing rugged, unseasoned sounds. To have made it as a finalist in the country's most competitive music competition is sheer fortune. Yet all along, I had not practiced Chopin's "Funeral March" with the vision of becoming a finalist branded in my mind. It simply *happened*, and I am living with its repercussions. I do not know that if this is enough to conclude if piano is or is not my purpose. Surely, I would not be as empty as the other finalists if music were eradicated.

Sighing, I ease myself to an upright position and banish the competition from my mind, vowing to avoid dwelling on it until afternoon tomorrow. I busy myself with extracting the biology textbook from my pack and drop it onto the table-top with a clatter. I pause to swallow a piece of watermelon, then open the book to a chapter I've previously marked, and engross myself in the information. Momentarily, I cease driving my mind insane with thoughts on purpose and meaning that circle around and around with no end or beginning...

The human digestive system. What a perfectly engineered machine designed to rid a man's body of waste while simultaneously absorbing nutrients and extracting poisons. The complex harmony of the gallbladder, liver, intestines, simply working in flawless tandem without aid nor dictatorship. Without even the need to prompt, the body is already a step ahead of the human, poised to process and analyze every input. I greedily pour over the information, the text flowing through my mind as naturally as the blood in my veins. I find solace in the

concrete, unquestionable facts, planting my feet firmly down upon the knowledge.

Vaguely, I register a faint jangle announcing a customer's entrance. I shrug off the disturbance; after all, countless of individuals come and go, establishing an unceasing pattern of arrivals and departures. Overhead, I hear Calypso burst into a pleasant laugh and the customer mellowing her soprano timbre with steady, alto tones. The customer must be male, I presume, as he places an order. Even so, I do not glance up. I push their presence to the back of my mind where it lingers, but not distractingly. The pair of them fade into the general background hum. I return to biology, anticipating the next precious morsel of knowledge which awaits me.

The customer pays for his order and casually leans against the counter, patiently waiting for Calypso to prepare his item. Soon, Calypso hands him a hot, lidded beverage, and he busies himself at the condiments station, adding whipped cream and a dash of cinnamon. I fork a piece of fruit into my mouth, the cool burst of sweet juice rejuvenating my senses. I refocus on the text, only to be jerked from my solace by a screeching disturbance across from me. The chair, which has never seen an occupant in all the years I've enjoyed Calypso's cafe, is noisily drawn out, rudely pulling me from the comfort of my textbook. I meet eyes with none other than the male customer who entered the shop a moment before. He appears to be around my age. He offers a small smile before placing a hot chocolate before me, prepared perfectly with cream and spices. Momentarily disorientated, my mouth falls and I gape at this stranger, whose presence fills me with an odd nostalgic ache. His gentle eyes, his soft smile, his smooth, tanned complexion. Yet, in all that I can remember, I am certain that I have never seen such a person before. Who is this boy, who knows my desire for hot chocolate, who dares to interrupt my private space? I can only watch as he seats himself across the table and fixes me with a searching stare.