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La Môme Piaf

Eliza Newman

He sat hunched over a wooden table as Edith Piaf's husky voice flowed through the apartment, breaking up the quiet monotony of loneliness. He couldn't understand a word of French, but he enjoyed the vibrations of it nonetheless. Her rapid vibrato and urgency of pitch had always led Myer to believe that she must have been a woman of extraordinary passion and liveliness; he envied her for having escaped the curse of becoming so painfully old. Years ago he had even flirted with the idea of using time travel to get back to his happier days, but after a while he'd moved on to smaller projects—reasonable ones his boss had suggested. Now he mainly worked on acoustic micro-devices. He'd built cubes and spheres and tiny boxes from which music could flow, but he continued to struggle with his design for a singing sparrow.

He could only strain his aged eyes for so long; after a while the wiry resistors and capacitors would always blur together. Taking another sip of his gin and tonic, Myer tucked the little bird into the pocket of his cardigan and leaned back in his chair. He closed his eyes and let the walls slip away. He thought of the striped blue pajamas of his childhood and the way the coarse, velvet curtains pressed against his body as he watched his parents twirling around and around the living room. He could still feel his heartbeat accelerating with thrill of standing there, invisible, as the syncopated notes of Duke Ellington's piano poured out of their very own microphone. He heard his mother's long skirts swirling under the guidance of his father's strong hands and listened for the tap-tap of his strong, swift steps. His father was Fred Astaire and she Ginger Rogers, dancing together just for him. He had revisited that moment so many times that he no longer knew how much of the actual night remained and how much he had rewritten entirely. It wasn't a matter of senility, as much as it was a willful desire to rewrite what he couldn't change and reimagine what he could never return to.

The record sizzled and scratched as it came to its end, jolting Myer from his dreamy haze. "Lunchtime," he declared, making his way toward the kitchen, pausing only for a brief waltz with his mop. Dreary weather like this calls for tuna melts, he thought as he opened the door to the refrigerator. When he saw the clumps of blue growing alongside the orange and white strands of cheese, he realized that the must not have slid and sealed after his last tuna sandwich. He gathered up the silverware and the napkins and the ceramic plates he and Frieda had bought in Tuscany. He set it all out on the little coffee table by the window, even taking the time to fold the napkins into little triangles. After a moment in the kitchen, he returned with glasses and a bottle of the Morning Fog Chardonnay she'd always liked so much. He sat down at the table to rest for a moment, making a mental note of the empty vase at the center of the table.

"I'm going to the store to get more cheese. Need me to pick up anything while I'm there?" Myer asked. "Frieda?" Not hearing a reply, he assumed that she must be out in the garden painting.

He ambled back to the bedroom, using the nightstand to lower himself onto the too-low bed. He tried bending over to get his shoes, but he ended up using the claw grabber to dig the dirty loafers out from beneath him. After taking his cane out from behind the door and double-checking that he had his keys, he set out.

He took slow, steady strides on his way to the store, pausing only to listen to the intoxicating peal of childhood laughter as a young couple galloped past with their cackling son sandwiched between them. He felt around for the little bird in his pocket, and thought of his own daughter, he half-smiled as he pictured Lulu with her round, rosy cheeks and mischievous grin.

When he reached the grocery store, the florist's case crowded with candy colored tulips and pale purple freesias. The temperate June sunshine bred all sorts of blossoms, but it was a single burgundy peony cloaked in aruncus leaves that caught his eye. Frieda had been surrounded by conventionally lovely things all her life, and over the years he'd learned that it was only the puzzling, seemingly ugly things that could truly hold her attention. It was that conclusion that had allowed Myer to truly love her, for it was that conclusion that had offered the only possible explanation as to why she had fallen in love with him. After that, he walked around the grocery in a kind of haze, picking up the cheese and dish soap and few other things without really looking at them (his head was full of Frieda).

When he reentered the apartment complex, his sun-spotted skin was damp and his breathing uneven. He felt his body melt into the cushions as he sat down on the polyester couch. Most of the other residents avoided it because they assumed the palm-sized brown spot was blood, but Myer had been living at Deighton Apartments long enough to remember when a little paper sign appeared announcing the coffee stain appeared years ago. He scanned the lobby, noting the polish of the floor, the nameless mailboxes on the wall, and the vase of fake flowers. It all looked so calm, so ordinary; were it not for the couch stain and glaringly absent elevator, even he would have a hard time telling it apart from the lobby of any of the hundreds of other apartment buildings cluttering the streets of Los Angeles.

He inhaled deeply as he picked up his bags and approached the staircase. He knew that his 20-year-old self had wanted to die by some heroic feat of excitement before reaching this point of breathless debilitation—a battle with a bear or a mountain climbing accident perhaps—but such is life. “Tuna Melt,” he said aloud, “prepare to meet your master.”

By the time he was half way up the second flight of stairs, his breathing had become shallow and strained, even the promise of music at the top of the stairs failed to entice him. The steps before him grew increasingly steep as his mind gave way to some kind of hunger-driven stupor. As he neared the top of the third and final staircase, his worn-down loafer brushed against the top of the stair without gripping anything. His cane came crashing down and the grocery bag knocked against the wall, sending the contents down one flight and then the other. He lay like a marionette with its strings cut off. He had fallen down at least half a dozen steps and was now sprawled out along the stairs, the metallic clang of the cans still echoing in his head. Humiliation and powerlessness filled his body even before the pain. His whole body tingled, as if with sleep, then he became aware of a searing pain just above his hip.

He opened his mouth to call for help, but no words came out. Instead he heard a deep cry that sounded more animal than human. He didn't even recognize the noise as his until he heard it again—all the years of accumulated pain finally insisting on being heard. He thought of Frieda with an urgency that he was ashamed, but not surprised of. Just as his mother was forever Ginger Rodgers, so to did Frieda remain perfected. He didn't think of her as a 73-year-old woman with thinning white hair and house slippers, but rather as she had been before Lulu had died, before their little one had even been born. Myer thought of his head resting on Frieda's smooth, baby-less belly after she had pulled him out of the bed to make love in the grass under the full moon. He thought of her loose platinum curls flowing in the crisp Berkeley air as they snuck into the ecological gardens in search of the season's first plums. He thought of waking up to the sight of her lipstick-smudged face and long, ivory legs as she carried two mugs of black coffee into their bedroom on Monday mornings.

“Should I call 911?”

He squinted his eyes open, slowly adjusting to the dingy fluorescent light. His glasses must have fallen off, he thought, for he world around him was blurred and jumbled in ways that were not only impossible but unpleasant.

“Can you hear me? Myer?”

He realized that the nasally drawl could only belong to Stacy Goldstein. They must have exchanged pleasantries dozens of times in passing, but little more than the typical, “Sleep well,” “Take care,” “Make sure to take an umbrella,” type of thing.

He opened his mouth and closed it again.

Maybe, if he said nothing she would leave him there. Maybe he would never even have to leave the stairwell. The thought comforted him.

“You poor thing. Let me run to my apartment and call an ambulance,” she said, wedging her bright orange Crocs into the pockets of space remaining between Myer’s body and the railing.

“Call Frieda,” he said, but the words came too quiet and too late for anyone but himself to hear. He closed his eyes and slipped off again, thinking only of her—her airy laugh, her ever-rouged lips, her unmistakable scent that he could never really pin point. Falling in love with her had been his singular act of defiance, his one “fuck you” to the scientific laws of rationality that governed so much of his life. But when she smiled at him with her ever-so-slightly gap toothed smile, how could he help but smile back? How could he not delight in the way her long, piano-playing fingers would brush his own in the stacks of the libraries?

When he heard the clunking of sneakers, he tried to convince himself that maybe it was just tenants going up to one of the other apartments, but even as he was trying to concoct a story to explain the multiple pairs of footsteps, he knew it was too late. They were going to take him away.

The largest of the men scooped Myer up, holding the old man’s body to his chest while the two leaner ones set about readying the straps on the stretcher. They lugged him down the steps and into the ambulance, the tall, skinny one assuming the role of driver, while the other two climbed in back with Myer. The heavy set one began taking Myer’s vitals, with his strong, dark hands. Myer noted how ridiculous the skinny stethoscope looked against his massive chest. In fact, they all looked somewhat ridiculous—like boys playing at doctor. Myer could have been their grandfather, but his attention was too absorbed in the metallic clatterings of anti-music to care. In any other situation he’d try to crack a joke or at least a smile, but this time his body was stiff with a voiceless fear, and at the moment, making the EMTs feel more comfortable was ranking pretty low on his list of priorities.

“What’s your name?” asked the shortest of the men, his voice toneless as he stared at the clipboard he was holding, his pen hovering just above the paper.

“Myer.” The paramedic looked at him expectantly. “Myer Belinsky.”

“And how old are you?”

“Seventy seven—and three quarters.”

When they arrived at the hospital, the men lowered the gurney, wheeling him into the hospital with surprising speed. So this is why they keep the big one around, thought Myer. “We’ve got a faller,” called out the skinny one with the clipboard.

Wheeling him into the elevator, the big one hit the button for the geriatrics floor. “Poor guy. He looks as if he wishes he were dead already,” he whispered.

“Almost as if he doesn’t feel the pain at all,” added the beanpole, looking down at Myer with a sort of half-tenderness.

The next time his eyes came into focus, he was alone in a grey room—well almost alone; he could hear a man talking to a young woman, presumably his daughter, across the grey partition. He tried to concentrate on the ticking of the grey clock on the wall next to him. He couldn't make out the minute or even the hour hand without his glasses, but it didn't matter. It wasn't the time, but rather the reliability of the clock that assured him, the predictable way he knew all the dials and wheels and levers were working together.

"He's awake," he heard one of the nurses whisper from the hall.

A few minutes later, a young-ish looking doctor with dark hair and tortoise shell glasses stepped into a room. He paid little attention to the fancy medical-speak, waiting until she got down to the reality of his situation. It was "miraculous," she claimed. There was severe bruising to be sure, but nothing worse than that—no broken bones, no hairline fractures. She said that there was a chance they'd even let him go home that day.

"Is there someone you would like me to call?" Her voice had become tight, as if she'd had to repeat the question a few times already. He looked her in the eye for the first time since she'd entered the room. Her eyes were an indefinite grey, as though they might turn green given the excuse. He saw a deep crease in her brow that he assumed would probably become a permanent part of her face. Her lab coat hung limply around her skeletal body, as if she'd suffered some tragedy of her own. "A spouse or a child? A brother, or..."

"Frieda—hers should be the number on my emergency contact list."

"Well," her brow crumpled even further, pulling her eyes along with it. "We tried that number already and I guess it's been disconnected."

"Just try it again: (510) 732-8991."

She looked down at her clipboard and then back up at him, her face never losing its mask of professional detachment. "Yes, that's the number we tried. It looks as if it's no longer in operation."

She kept talking, or at least he assumed she did. Even as his eyes bore holes into the grey hospital clock, his mind slipped away to the place he had worked day in and day out to prevent it from going. He saw the monstrous life support machines with all the wires and tubes poking out of Lulu's grey little body. He saw the wild tears that had discolored Frieda's suntanned face as she clung to the lifeless doll inhabiting their daughter's hospital gown. He saw the pink lump of granite with their daughter's name on it.

"Anyone else?"

"No, no one."

After the dark haired doctor left, heading to some other room to check up on some other patient dealing with some other tragedy, Myer thought of the sparrow in his pocket. It was supposed to be Lulu's birthday present. He'd gotten the idea just before her fifth birthday—a little bird to sit at her bedside and sing to her during the nights when he and Frieda couldn't be there.

He'd been so close to finishing it when the doctors decided to unplug the machines. For years afterward he refused to build anything; he'd let his marriage, his career, everything just fall apart. It was as if he'd set out to see just how much could be taken from him, but giving up on the things he loved only made things worse. Eventually he began to build again, out of necessity more so than desire, and then, in time, he let himself dream once more as well. At first he had dreamed of them only at night, then they began to fill his days as well. Even though he'd

smashed little bird all those years ago, he was determined to build it all over again, for her 45th birthday this time.

If he had people, Myer thought, they'd have let him go. The doctor has said nearly as much, and he *did* have people. Maybe they weren't people in the medical way, but it didn't matter. He had a daughter with a birthday coming up and a present he had to finish. Myer used the nightstand to push himself up from the bed. He limped over to the chair where his clothes were resting. He took up the little bird in one hand and his cane in the other. The man in the bed next to his said something, but it didn't matter, not to Myer at least. He passed through the doorway, determined to get home and finish the bird. Soon it would be her birthday and this time Myer would have her present ready in time.