

Encore for a Swan Song

Delaney Otto

There was a man at the hospital, in the waiting area of the first floor, and he was playing the piano.

His shoulders swayed as the notes rang out, the vibrations of the strings hit by hammers launching each note into the open air, soundwaves carrying up and up towards the high ceiling. There was no sheet music sitting before him, nor any memorized melodies in his head. What flew forth was simply blind, almost instinctual, a small thing that usually hid in the back of the mind, now leaking out, growing stronger.

His audience watched, all gone slack and still. Some were close to him, so dangerously close; if they took a few more steps and stretched out their hands they could touch him, could silence this haunting sound, this melody that drew such emotions they couldn't name into their bodies. But they didn't come any closer. They just watched him, watched the blur of his fingers on the white and black keys. Others stood further away, not wanting a single step to interrupt the moment. They just listened, held in place by their ears. The organic mechanisms in their ears went to work, sending messages to their tired, aching brains. They hadn't heard such sounds in a while—it was almost a foreign noise. But memories leaked in—at least, the obscured, smudged inclinations of memories. All stood, all leaned forward, a standing ovation before the song was even finished.

The man didn't care that their eyes were on him, undisturbed by their silence. At first, he was eyeing them all carefully, but as the notes grew more comfortable on his fingers, like a child that could finally ride a bike once the snow was clear and gradually remembered how to work the pedals, he grew more confident in himself. His body relaxed, moving

with the song he crafted on the spot, a seemingly unending thing. He poured all of himself into it. It was a farewell tour for an old musician, a grandchild singing at their grandparent's funeral, an open-hearted, honest, aching swan song.

He didn't notice his own tears until his fingers splashed in the puddles left on the keys. But they did not slip, and he did not open his eyes. He kept playing, and let his audience watch. His audience remained at their points, dotted along the floor of the waiting area, but no one was waiting. Everyone was sucked in, mesmerized, hypnotized, held still. In this moment, it was just the sound echoing through the open space, ricocheting off columns and chairs and tables, resonating. The only thing to accompany it were the stifled snuffles and hiccups of the man playing, and even that seemed to be part of it, entwined in the music as a form of accompaniment, meant to be there.

As the music soared to its finale, the man broke out into a sob, his shoulders shaking, his throat aching. His fingers found their final notes and he let them ride the soundwaves until they died.

He lifted his now sore hands. He set them in his lap, his head bowed, and listened.

There was nothing at first, just that old silence of a freshly finished piece, the small span of time between the final note and the first clap. He knew no clapping would come. Yet, when he heard the first steps behind him, his body, worn out and limp, still tensed. When the hand touched his shoulder, his body again stiffened, begging him to go. He had always battled with stage fright. But then there was a forehead, damp and clammy, against the back of his neck. The weight of an audience member's head sat there, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed weakly. Other hands joined this one, and those who weren't close enough to shuffle forward bowed their heads with his. He sat there, tears still falling, eyes stinging, throat a raw fire of grief and sorrow and, at the pit of it, wonder and relief.

After a time, perhaps as long as the song had been, the hands fell, and the audience backed away. The man straightened, looking around at the eyes that still lay on him. He rose, stiff and limp at the same time,

to his feet. He slung his bag over his shoulder and took back the folded up note he had set on the piano for his companions to find.

A few audience members, including one who had set their head upon his neck, escorted him out of the hospital, into the old music store nearby, waited as he picked out a few instruments, and stopped their journey when he passed the scrapped-together gates of his home. He looked at them and they looked back, before all bowed their heads and parted ways.

His companions flung themselves at him when he entered, one waving around a scrapped note he had thrown in the trash with tears in her eyes. They questioned the instruments, inspected him for bites, and kept asking the same questions: why and where and how? He sat them down and told them what happened, watching their eyes light up with disbelief, hope, and doubt. He set down the instruments he'd found, the ones that were the least damaged by weather and abandonment, and broached the idea of teaching them each to play one. The most cynical of the group laughed at the idea, but the one who'd found the scrapped note immediately reached for the trumpet in front of her.

Back in the hospital, the audience looked at one another, unsure of what to do. For the first time in a long time the remnants of their brains found some semblance of clarity, something near human thought, and it stirred a sort of animal fear in their hearts. One audience member, the one who'd placed their forehead at the man's back, walked towards the piano, one shambling step after the other, and placed a withered, rotten finger on a white key that sat close to the center of the piano. It was an old instinct, muscle memory, that ran through their body from when they were a child, sitting beside their piano teacher so long ago. They, like many students, learned of middle C when they began; it was the starting point, the first step in navigating the piano and all it could do. Once you could lift your fingers and place them lightly on the keys without much thought, and find your right thumb on middle C, you were on your way.

They, with a shake in their wrist that traveled up to their shoulder, pressed down, and a solid note echoed through the hospital. The audience members watched, all of their fingers radiating a phantom

sensation, an almost empathetic feeling, like they could imagine themselves pressing down on that one white key.

This would be a new starting point for them all.

Delaney Otto is a third-year student at UND with a major in communications and a minor in English. She's a fan of horror, fantasy, magical realism, and happy endings. Aside from writing, music and art are also very important to her, and she has a firm belief that anyone can create if they have the desire to do so.