

FIRST ANNUAL SCR FICTION PRIZE

First Prize: Melody Chan Graves

***The Final Bow***

The girls who want to be me stand at the stage door to Avery Fisher Hall. They want to be the one to hand you your water bottle, to empty the sweaty Kleenex from your tux trousers after a performance, to guard the four-million-dollar Strad crossing the German border by black sedan because violin cases are too difficult to carry onto planes. To explain to your manager, your publicist, why you haven't returned any of their calls or emails.

–Nathalie, we really need a decision on this—

–Like I said, I'm not his mother. He knows perfectly well what will happen if he doesn't make up his mind.

–But you're the only one who can pull the information out of him—

–Fine.

To listen to you go on and on at the dining table of your apartment about Melissa or Sophie or Jacqueline or Penelope, to

watch your face light up then dim just as quickly as you tell me how it didn't work out, how they couldn't handle you ... your lifestyle. To listen to you tell me intimate details about these women, the beautiful faces that follow you wherever you go. They are ghosts of an idea you have in your head. An idea you love. To watch you look straight through me and tell me how Sophie snores, and Jacky is a screamer, to watch you smile right past my frozen expression and say, Wow, it's getting late. Can we have our meeting in the morning?

–But you've put this off twice already. People need answers.

–Come on, Nathalie, it's not like you don't know where I live.

You walk to the refrigerator and study the skim milk, yogurt, orange juice, and eggs I've replenished.

–Where are my chocolate pudding cups?

–They didn't have any left when I went to the bodega—

–They're never out of pudding cups.

You look at me like I must have somehow not seen them.

–Can't you just—

–Fine.

It's only eleven o'clock at night. But I'll go find your favorite pudding cups, because that's what a personal assistant does.

Forty minutes later, you're sprawled on the couch in your pajamas, halfway through a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, toasting your Grammy awards on the bookshelf. One of Bach's Brandenburgs floats across the room.

–Bach makes everything make sense, you say with a slur in your voice. –Solves the eternal problem—

I think, *Of you being a royal asshole*. I slam the pudding cups on the kitchen counter, loud enough to make you jump.

–Jesus, don't break them!

–You'd better eat something, or you'll have a hangover in the morning.

–Whoops! you say, burping. –I think it's a little late for that.

I step over your suitcase in the middle of the living room and head toward the bathroom. Your newly acquired apartment is

much more spacious than the last one, with a private bedroom you've designated for me, so you won't have to put me up in hotels every time I come down from Boston for our "meetings."

-Hey, I haven't given you a tour of your new bedroom! You leap up from the couch, trip over the suitcase, and come crashing down on the hand holding the champagne glass.

My heart stops. You crouch on the floor, bleeding, holding your left hand.

-Oh my God, oh my god, oh my god. I pluck the broken glass from the floor, find the first aid kit, start dialing Dr. G-----'s home number.

-How bad is it?

-I don't know, you say, holding it up for me. Your eyes are wide now, sober.

-Can you move all your fingers? A red gash streaks along the outer edge of your palm, leaking blood all over the expensive rug. You press a bandage over the top, knowing what this could mean. I look away, trying not to cry.

Dr. G----- tells me we will not have to file a claim with Lloyds of London. The cut is deep but missed all the major blood vessels and tendons. The skin still needs to heal, but if you can stand the pain of playing, it won't do any harm. It could have been much worse.

-You are a very lucky young man, he says. -God continues to smile on you, no? He pats you on the cheek, like you are his son. -Shalom! Don't worry! Come see me in a couple of days and let me look at it again.

You're quiet during the cab ride home. I help you flop into your king-size bed, pull the black silk sheets over your shoulder. Your mouth hangs half open. The Vicodin Dr. G----- prescribed seems to have worked, but you reach out with your good hand and pull me back onto the mattress.

-I don't want to be alone, you say, and I think, *This is so inappropriate.*

But it feels so good to slide between the sheets and feel you next to me, spooning.

Your breathing gets deeper, and I think maybe I can sneak away now, but then your hand touches my breast, and a fire blooms between my legs.

You're just dreaming I'm Chloe, or Alessandra, or—

But you kiss the back of my neck, and the feather-light touch of your fingertips across my pubic bone makes me shiver.

—Fuck me, you whisper.

I immediately push away and slide out of bed, knowing you don't mean it.

—Come on, why can't you just do it for me?

I turn back to look at you, just a silhouette of shaggy hair and green eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

—You know why.

—Fine. And you roll over, sighing.

But back in my bed in the guest room, I think, *What if*. And I can't sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning, I have to help you pour milk over your corn flakes. I say nothing, waiting. Maybe you don't even remember last night. Maybe it was the Vicodin.

But when you glance at me, I know you remember everything, and you're still punishing me for it.

—So let's talk about your repertoire for the recital tour in January. Do you still want to do the Schubert, Franck, and Debussy?

—The Debussy just doesn't do it for me anymore. But there's nothing else I can work up in time.

—So the program is okay the way it stands?

—I don't know. Why can't you call Mom and ask her opinion? She used to pick out everything for me.

—That was twenty years ago.

—Whatever.

You cross your arms and pout.

I used to think it was cute at the conservatory, back when I still

had something to teach you about music.

–I’m not calling your mother. Finish your cereal and make a decision.

You start eating again, but I know it’s because you can’t stand soggy corn flakes. This time, I cross my arms, staring at you until you finally look up.

–Can we not do this right now?

–When?

–Later.

But later, you decide you want to have a dinner party for twenty people that evening, and can’t I just call the caterer and go down the street and get some ice and margarita mix?

I call your manager five hours after the drop-dead date for the program copy. She says it’s already gone to the venues with the original repertoire and your usual disclaimer: program subject to change.

After the party is over, and you’re so tired you can barely open your eyes, you jump up and start throwing clothes into your suitcase.

–Where did you put my tux? I have rehearsal in the morning and then the concert and then I fly out on the red-eye to, where is it again?

–I didn’t put it anywhere.

–Did you pick it up from the cleaners?

–Did you *tell* me I needed to pick it up from the cleaners?

You frown for a minute, then say, –I didn’t call you on Tuesday from San Francisco and tell you all my tuxes were dirty so I had the plant lady—what’s her name—drop one off?

–Maria, and no, you didn’t.

Thankfully, there’s still time for me to do it tomorrow when you’re at rehearsal. Sometimes you do that, have imaginary conversations with me. Then I find out days later that I was supposed to fax a request for additional passport pages or stand in line at the DMV to replace your driver’s license, and you get mad at me for not being a mind reader.

I break in my new “sensible” shoes by walking to the building near Times Square where your luthier and music shop are, say hello to the burly security guard in the lobby, sitting at his desk by the elevators. Today I come upon a bevy of petite blondes, about a hundred pounds each, dressed in various shades of Lycra, circle skirts, and character shoes. All of the girls wear white ankle socks, practice chaîné turns and pirouettes, blow raspberries in the air. There is a big Broadway casting call this morning, on the floor above the music shop. The tension is palpable. Everyone wants validation.

Ben, the music store owner, smiles when I ask for another copy of the Schubert.

–Where did he leave the last one? he asks.

–Reykjavik, Iceland. In the hot tub. Or so he says.

I’m supposed to get a new E string as well and drop off one of your spare bows to be rehired. But the luthier is closed (as I knew it would be, though you insisted I check anyway because that’s the spare bow you love, and the Tourte you’re using right now feels funny). It will have to wait.

You’re asleep when I finally make it back to the apartment. I tiptoe around, even though I want to bang pots and pans, blast air horns, and fire artillery cannons. You need your rest before a performance. It’s one of the unbreakable rules I’ve lived by since the first day I heard you play at the conservatory. Your mother was there, your older brother, your proud father, and I realized that you were a vessel of God and that the beauty that comes from your instrument is sacred.

You play brilliantly, but during your curtain calls, your eyes tell me you haven’t forgotten the Vicodin Incident. You don’t even really speak to me before you get on the plane, but I’m not the one who needs to make it all right, and you know that. Instead of a phone call on Monday morning, I receive a special courier

delivery while I'm tidying up the apartment for the housekeeper. A dozen red roses and a small blue package. Inside, a blue velvet box with a sterling silver bracelet from Tiffany's. The card on the flowers says, You know I can't live without you. -C.

I think, *This is so inappropriate*. But the bracelet looks good on me, and the roses smell divine. So I let you think everything's patched up, and your voice is cheery the next time you finally call me at one a.m. from a bar in Milwaukee.

-Nathalie, I forgot to tell you I'm flying to Denver instead of coming back tomorrow. I have a date with a woman named Krystal.

I haven't heard of this one.

-Who's she?

-Bartender. I met her after a concert about a month ago. We've been trying to hook up since then.

-But that's the day you're supposed to lay down some tracks for the new album.

-Oh. I forgot. Can you just reschedule it for the next time I'll be back?

-No, I can't.

I let the air hang dead for a moment, so you know this is nonnegotiable.

-Well, can you call Krystal for me and cancel, then?

-You're kidding, right?

-It's late, and, you know how to spin it better than I do. Come on, just this once.

-No way.

This time you let the pause grow, and I start to listen to the conversations of the people in the background.

-Did you like the bracelet?

Shit. I knew I shouldn't have even tried it on.

-It was very generous of you, I say, but my words have lost their power.

-So you'll do it, right?

-Fine. What's her number?

We're back in New York again, and it's gotten to the point that I don't even want to listen to you play anymore. It complicates things, makes me buy into the dream, forgive you. So I wander around the lobby, fret over my gray hairs in the ladies' bathroom, wonder whatever happened to the diet I started two months ago. I look so old now. Matronly, even. A woman saunters by in her high heels and sexy dress. I wonder if she understands what it's like to live in the shadow of greatness.

After it's over, I man my post at the CD-signing table. The line of young, pretty girls during intermission has grown longer than I last remembered. Some of them know my name, ask to pose for pictures with me, speak to me as if we're close friends and have exchanged more than one email in our lifetimes. It's not the kind of notoriety I used to dream about.

–She has the most perfect job on the entire planet, one of them whispers to another.

They look at me.

–Wouldn't it be so cool to really pick his brain about music?

–To listen to him serenade you every day?

–To go on tour with him and see all those exciting places?

Like my life is a vacation.

I have lunch with Belinda, an old friend from music school. You dated her intensely for about a year, and she was the closest you ever came to marrying, but things didn't work out with her, either. I don't know, maybe you never got over it.

Belinda's skin glows, and her face seems fuller. I notice she orders a cheeseburger and fries instead of her usual chicken salad with no dressing.

–So I have some news ...

–You know I don't like people who beat around the bush. Spit it out.

Belinda giggles, which she also never does, and something

inside me sinks.

–I’m pregnant.

I feel like I’m in your rickety elevator, lurching down to the basement. Mid-freefall, I manage to say, –Wow! That’s great news! Then, –I didn’t know you were seeing anyone special.

Belinda hesitates, clears her throat.

Something isn’t right. Something is very, very wrong about this.

–I’m not. I don’t really know where to begin but ... about three months ago, C----- called me up out of the blue and asked me to have coffee. We talked, caught up, and he asked me if I’d ever thought of having a child.

–Oh my God, you didn’t—

–Wait, let me finish. You know I’m turning forty-four this year, and I haven’t met Mr. Right yet. I really want to be a mother.

–But you decided that single parenthood on a music teacher’s salary wasn’t a good idea.

–I know, but, you know how persuasive C----- can be, when he turns on the charm.

–I wouldn’t let him get a *cat* when he asked last for one last Christmas.

–So anyway, when I said yes, I’d thought about it and still wanted to have a biological child, he said, Want to have a kid together? and I just blurted out, Okay. Can you believe it? I’m actually going to have a baby!

I can tell from her über-smile that she knows it was the wrong decision, but she wants this baby so much now, what can I say except, I’m so happy for you?

I try not to think of the logistics of the conception, but then it’s not like I don’t know the *logistics* of all your other girlfriends scattered around the globe. I simply close my eyes and make it go away.

You’re in the bathroom brushing your teeth when I storm in, carrying your spare bow. After stopping at the luthier, I walked

around the city for quite some time, trying to clear my head. Ended up at the children's clothing store near your favorite art gallery, scurried out like a thief when the sales clerk recognized me. Hid in the public library until closing, camouflaged behind a copy of *Strings* magazine.

-Where have you been? I tried to call you.

-Out, having lunch with Belinda.

-It's nine o'clock. We were supposed to have a meeting.

-Where are you going?

-I got tired of waiting around here for you, so I called some friends. We're going clubbing.

You have your black leather pants on, the ones I bought for you the first time you took me on tour to Italy.

-Did you hear me? I said I had lunch with Belinda. She told me she was pregnant with your child.

You stop primping, just for an instant, then carry on, talking to me through the mirror.

-Isn't that amazing? Can you imagine? I'm going to be a dad!

-Don't treat this like it's just another one of your whims. This is a human being we're talking about. A little person who's going to grow up without a father.

You wrinkle your nose and say, -Don't be silly. Belinda's only half an hour away. I'll see him all the time.

-When?

-I'll cut my concert schedule way back. I'll be home more often.

-Really? Isn't that what you said five years ago when the doctor said your lifestyle choice was giving you high blood pressure?

You look at me sideways.

-And what are you going to do when you're home? Are you going to change diapers, go to baseball games? What about on tour? Are you going to stop sleeping with random women all over the world?

-He won't know about them. How would he know?

-He'll know. Trust me. Do you really want Belinda to try to

raise this child as a single mother? Do you even have any idea how hard that is?

My voice gets higher and shriller. I feel like I'm coming down a roller coaster.

–She has good friends, like you, to help her.

I raise my hand, as if to push you away.

–Leave me out of this. I pace around the room. You're as calm as can be, fixing your hair and spritzing cologne.

–Why are you so upset? It's not like I asked *you* to do it.

And this is when I start to cry.

–What's the matter now? I don't understand what the problem is.

–Why can't you just ...

–Just what? What do you want?

You finally turn to face me, and your guileless expression makes me realize that I would still lay down my life for you.

–Screw it. I quit. Don't call me, don't send me flowers. I'm done.

I slam the door, forgetting my suitcase. Still holding your bow. But none of that matters now. I walk the two blocks to the parking garage, retrieve my car, and wind my way to the Hudson River. You keep calling me on my cell, so I turn it off.

I hurl the bow like a javelin over the railing, watch it arc gracefully and pierce the black depths of the river. The bracelet must go, too. I savor the heavy clink of metal one last time and chuck it over the edge, imagine the splash as it hits the water and sinks to the bottom.

I climb into my car and head back home to Boston. I watch the city lights fade to black.

The unfinished sentence in my head drills me over and over. *Why can't you just ...*

When I am clear of the city limits, I can finally finish it.