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Dolce e con Affetto

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Author Bio

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Dolce e con Affetto

MADELEINE M. NEIMAN

Perched on the edge of a piano bench, a young woman extended her arms. Above her, rain pattered softly on a skylight, the gray afternoon muting the already pale walls of the studio. A dimly glowing lamp, set atop the upright instrument, ensured that the young woman could see her sheet music, her hands, and the exact moment that her knuckles knocked loudly against the keyboard lid. She winced. A tug on the back of the bench brought her attention to a young man seated on the folding chair beside her.

“You’re a little too close,” he said.

“Right.” She shoved backward, her ears objecting to the scrape of wooden legs on linoleum tiles. Abruptly, she turned to him. “You don’t have to do this, really. I can wait until Mrs. Shelley’s feeling better. I’m sure you have better things –”

“You’re here, so we might as well –”

“Right.”

She raised her arms again. Two fingers, not her own, pushed gently on the underside of her right wrist. With a sharp breath, she adjusted so that only her fingertips balanced on the keys, her hands arched as if palming identical apples. Straightening her spine and forcing herself to ignore the way the young man curved his own as he relaxed in his seat, she reread the first line of the music before her. Six beats per measure. Two sharps: F and C. Key of D Major. Tempo: *dolce e con affetto*. *Dolce*? Was that singingly? No, sweetly. And *con affetto*? With emotion. Affection or fondness, maybe.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

She began. Her left hand held a steady chord tied between measures by sweeping black lines on the page. Her right climbed up the keyboard with smooth, unhurried eighth notes. She trilled between a high D and C sharp, then glided downward again. The valley between her left pinky and ring fingers ached as she reached for a wider chord. Her right hand floated off the keys at the end of a phrase and – he coughed. She fumbled the next bass chord, her middle finger crashing onto an erroneous black key and spawning a sour sound. She paused.

From the corner of her eye, she watched him reach for a water bottle by his feet, the movement bringing his head close to her hip.

Water sloshed inside the metal container as he lifted it to his lips. Outside, rain drummed heavily against the ceiling's glass panes. The young woman swallowed. With steadier fingers, she fixed the bass chord and played the following two phrases softly. Determined to withstand further distractions, she focused on the tricky rhythm of the next measure and the flat she tended to forget in practice, the long crescendo that made her think of a rising tide and the back-and-forth pattern that reminded her of a heated argument and the swirling section that conjured images of tornadoes, the brief uptick in tempo and the notes that she needed to remember as she turned the – their fingers collided at the corner of the page.

“My fault,” he said and dropped his hand. “I thought I’d help.”

“Oh.” She dropped her hand, too. “I usually do it myself. Mrs. Shelley never wears her glasses, so she can’t tell when...” She gestured to the unturned page.

He nodded. “She’s the same way at my lessons. That’s why I thought I’d turn it for you. If you want.”

“No,” she said, then, at the closed-off look on his face, forced herself to gently add, “thank you. I can do it myself.”

“Of course.”

He reclined back in his chair, and she reset her posture on the bench. Her toes bumped into the pedals before she locked her feet in place. Scanning over the last few lines of the page, she searched for a place to pick the melody up again. For a moment, she could see only black ink on off-white paper, nothing of the notation that spelled out a language she spoke with her hands, nothing that told her what to say. But then she blinked, and the pages contained symbols and letters once more. There, maybe, she could resume after the left hand lost the fight and before the wind kicked up dust in the storm.

The young man’s voice rang out with the first note she played.

“This is awkward, right?”

Her fingers slid off the keys in surprise and sudden relief. When she glanced at him, he had a slight smile and raised eyebrows, a cautious invitation. She sighed gratefully and accepted.

“Super awkward.”

He laughed, and her soul warmed at the dearly missed sound. “I really thought I could make it through this.” His fingers combed through his hair, tumbling it into disarray. “Do you want to just stop here? It’s not like you need my help. You’re Rachmaninoff compared to me.”

“Sure, if Rachmaninoff played with drooping wrists,” she said jokingly, brandishing her right arm at him. She pretended that she

couldn't still feel the press of his fingertips on her pulse.

"You would've fixed it yourself eventually." He shrugged, but his grin became unrepentant. "I saw an opportunity."

The lilt of his voice quieted some of the tension that had thrummed within her from the first sight of him in the instructor's chair. Some, but not all. She imagined part of her would always feel a little out of tune around him, her nerves like strings stretched too tightly.

"I think I'd rather be Clara Schumann than Rachmaninoff," she said, letting her fingers brush along the keys. The instinct to grab her music and run had faded to a faint suggestion.

"We still have twenty minutes." He pushed his seat back until he seemed less the scrutinizing teacher and more the attentive audience member. "I promise not to try and turn any more pages for you."

Smiling as she positioned her hands at the starting notes, the young woman felt unmistakably brighter. Heavy clouds still dimmed the room, and the lamp's golden radius hadn't grown. The change, she realized as her eyes traced the familiar story tilting and swooping across the page, came from the music itself. Swelling tides sounded more like flowers, blooming en masse under warm May sunlight; harsh arguments seemed instead to be the gentle teasing of a friendship tipping into something *maybe (could it be?)* more; and spiraling tornadoes rather resembled dancers, twirling until their heads and hearts were light and fizzy with the endlessness of a moment, of being caught up in a song.

Or maybe the music hadn't changed. Maybe her interpretation of it had.

"Whenever you're ready, Clara."

She began again. Sweetly with affection.