



Plastic Soul of a Note - Cover Art by IotF Winner Luis German

The Plastic Soul of a Note

By [William T. Katz](#)

I stare at the pieces of flesh, detritus only given names like arm and hand because they're affixed to my worthless husk, and I am deeply ashamed. My gift, my reason for being, is utterly destroyed.

"Look at those people," Jessica says as our limousine slows near a crowd gathered before the ten-foot gates of the Institute. "Don't they have anything better to do?" I read two of the signs that rise above a line of policemen: *Each Human is Unique* and *Feed the Hungry First*. A blond woman, thirty-something with wild eyes, swings a baby doll above her head and screams at us, the words barely audible where I sit. An old, bearded man holds a poster with an image of me in a tuxedo, smiling, sitting on a bench in front of a Steinway grand. Around the portrait, he has printed in black letters: *We Love You John! Please Go Gently Into That Good Night!*

It takes a few minutes for the limousine to travel from the iron gates through a forest of hickories and oaks, leaves turning yellow, maroon, before stopping in a circular driveway. Jessica scrambles out first – always the eager employee – unfolds my wheelchair and offers her hand, which I ignore.

How did it come to this? It's a question I ask incessantly, but I never receive any answers, just condolences and false hope and unwelcome surprises like the jagged pain that shoots through my left shoulder as I force myself into the wheelchair. I'd have found some way to excise myself from this world years ago, if not for the tantalizing vision that Dr. Turnbull revealed to me. Now, I'm simply a living donation to science.

"How are you feeling today, John?" Turnbull asks from the lip of the ramp that ascends to the Institute's glass facade. His cherubic face seems misplaced on that gaunt frame.

"Miserable, as usual," I say as Jessica pushes me past the doctor. In my fantasy world – the world that I've

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been forced to live in – I'm Turnbull, standing there in a white lab coat, stethoscope around the neck, while a stream of even-pitched words spills from the decrepit, middle-aged pianist rolling past, the lilt in the tones like the falling scream of a train flashing by. I can only imagine an existence of sharp senses, dexterous fingers, fulfillment.

"Now, now," Jessica says in her best patronizing voice. "You should be excited. You've been waiting for this day." She wheels me into the foyer, seemingly all crystal and marble in a contemporary, opulent statement. In the middle, bathed by light filtering through a stained-glass dome, sits a circular, floating staircase that rises the full twenty feet to a second floor. We move to the right, down a long hall towards the main research lab before Dr. Turnbull passes us and punches a plate on the wall. Two large doors swing open and Jessica steers me into a bright room packed with whining computers. I see the donut again behind the thick glass at the far end of the room. Turnbull showed me a picture of it when we first met, his rosy cheeks doubly infused with color when he talked about his baby.

"It'll take a snapshot of your brain down to a few nanometers; that's exceptionally precise," he said back then, crowing like a newly minted father.

It looks larger than I expected – not the radius, because I knew my dwindling body would have to fit in the hole – but the mass, the solidity of the object is impressive.

"Without the active magnetic shielding, many items in this room would fly towards the glass," he says. "You'll

have to remove your jewelry and put on a gown over there.” He points us to a regular-sized door that is dwarfed by a steel and glass contraption – some huge, rectangular air lock – placed into the wall ten feet down.

Jessica pushes me into the changing room and helps me shed my clothes. I wear no jewelry. No need for a Rolex when you don’t care about time. No need for a wedding ring when you have nothing left to give, when you’re barely alive.

“This will be over before you know it, and there’s a batch of Stella’s great stew waiting back home,” she says as she wraps the long gown over my body. I feel the softness of the cotton along a stretch of my back, the left shoulder, the right hip. First, you only notice the senses you lose, then after years of decline, you relish the few you have, like some child nursing his last, precious bits of candy.

She steers me in front of a long board with an egg-shaped device mounted at its edge. Turnbull unlatches the egg along its right side and swings it open, the front half revealing a contoured space that appears to be customized for a narrow nose and prominent chin. That explains the plaster of my head they took a month ago.

“Let us know if you get claustrophobic in there,” Turnbull says. “We’re going to start with your head, then we’ll remove the head coil and do your spine.”

They lift me onto the board, the back of my head sinking into the gaping egg, and fasten wide, nylon straps across my shoulders and wasted biceps. “We’ll give you some play by your hands,” he says, and I cringe at the choice of words, “but it’s important that you minimize any movement.”

Minimizing movement is what I do best. I am a slab of meat served up on this long dish, and if they wait a few more years, maybe I won’t be moving at all.

“Alright, we’re going to close it up. Don’t worry about the air supply or anything,” he says. “We’ve put redundant systems into the head coil, and there’s a mic and speaker so you can talk to us if you have to.”

I close my eyes as they swing the front half of the egg over my face; it’s warm and snug but I have no problem breathing.

“Can you hear me?” Turnbull’s voice is tinny.

“Yes.”

For some time, I feel the board bounce and imagine they carry me into the gaping hole of the donut, its inner, ceramic surface forming another cocoon around my head.

“We’re starting now. Try to relax and don’t move.”

Close my eyes. Relax. Visualize a peaceful scene. I see Carol in her opal bikini lying in the cabana, staring at the surf rolling in from the Pacific, pina colada on the small wooden table. I’m there, basking in the warmth of the sun and the refreshing breeze, listening to the surf while an attendant spritzes my hot face with Evian water.

“You’re going to hear some loud noises,” Turnbull interrupts. “Don’t worry. That’s the way the machine is supposed to sound.”

Almost immediately, thunder booms through the thin strip of space between my encased head and the donut, like railroad workers hammering steel rails with sledges, the haphazard beats offering no musical interpretation. I think this sound would bother me if my ears weren’t already less sensitive and wonder why the engineers couldn’t make the clangs into an interesting pattern, perhaps a syncopated rhythm. Add in some thumps at the appropriate times even if they serve no function other than making the donut’s occupant more comfortable, letting him listen to some perceptible rhythm instead of a senseless, mechanical insult.

But that’s usually the problem with engineers. They get the job done but the aesthetics, the form, aren’t a priority. Turnbull is different.

I saw that the first day I met Turnbull. He kept an elegant office with mahogany and green velvet chairs in front of an expansive, lacquered desk – a throne fit for the “king of his field,” as the doctor who referred me called him. Turnbull was dressed in a sharp double-breasted suit, a Brioni perhaps, and exuded more confidence than most of the presidents and prime ministers I’d met.

“I think we can offer you a solution.” Those were the first real words he spoke to me, and I liked his sense of directness. “We’re working on a system that can preserve your art. That’s what this is about.”

He talked about the accomplishments of bioengineers over the last decade: artificial eyes, substitute hands, figuring out how to hook them into the human nervous system. The *pièce de résistance* was his research, a way to take a snapshot of the brain down to the smallest detail and get it running on a computer. Of course, he didn’t say

it that way, and if he did, I might not have trusted him. Instead, he said they could perform “non-invasive imaging at a near-molecular scale” and the computers could “process the image voxels to construct a three-dimensional blueprint” of my brain. So I believed him. What could I have lost?

I had multiple sclerosis, a disease that stripped my nerves bare of an essential coating, and even among those who had MS, I had it particularly bad. At first, symptoms came and went – eye problems, tremors – but then there were fewer remissions and I developed “atypical symptoms” – that’s what the doctor called the pain that was present some of the time. The pain was the most delicious affront as if the devil himself wondered why I should not enjoy pain even as I lost all other sensation. The disease progressed steadily, unaffected by the experts, until I got on the one experimental protocol that worked. It halted the deterioration but, given the course of my disease, most of the doctors said I probably wouldn’t regain what I’d lost. The new steroid had stopped further loss of the coating, the myelin, but they didn’t think they could bring back the affected nerves. And so I cursed everyone for letting things get that far. Turnbull, though, offered me hope.

“The computer doesn’t care if your nerves have myelin or not,” he said. “When it simulates, it only cares about the way your nerves are connected.” After he finished describing the procedure, I pretended to reflect on it for a moment before signing the contract.

I’m thinking about this and it’s relaxing, maybe even more comforting than my memories of Carol and our honeymoon in Maui, because that day with Turnbull was the rebirth of hope. I have no children, no part of me that lives on past this closing movement. What do I have to lose?

Now the hammering sounds come in a steady cadence – thump, thump, thump – and I’m trying hard not to fidget. I decide to empty my mind, imagine space that’s vast, dark, silent. And at some point, the world just winks out.

* * *

“John!” Turnbull’s voice is vibrant, loud. “John, can you hear me?”

I feel like I’m being pulled from a wonderful dream by

a nagging alarm clock. “Yes... I hear you.” My words sound distorted, somewhat more baritone with a strange reverb.

My head isn’t in the egg any longer and I’m lying down on something soft and it’s not the cushioned board. I can tell because I sense the pressure behind my head and along my back and legs... *all* down my skin and there are no absences – *no* islands of sensation – it’s just all there and I feel like my heart should be racing because that’s what happens when I get a shock like this but there’s nothing, *nothing*, just an odd tingle instead of the jolt of adrenaline and there’s no pain – absolutely no wretched pain *anywhere* – I can’t believe it because my senses are so clean and so pure and completely unpolluted by the ache there or the throbbing over there.

“We’re going to remove the blindfold and you can open your eyes.”

I feel a cloth lifted from my head and there’s no period of adjustment I just see so clearly and there’s Turnbull standing over me, that beautiful cherubic face staring down with fluorescent lights overhead and two nurses in chartreuse surgical scrubs standing behind him, one next to a boxy grey gadget emitting a low-frequency hum with wires that fall in my direction and now I feel the straps on my ankles and wrists and arms and forehead and the only perception, the *only* sense that isn’t brilliant exciting breathtaking is the muted smell of the place.

“Calm down, John,” Turnbull says. He’s staring at a monitor down by my knees – are those my knees? – and I see the screen fill with crisp dynamic splotches of colors that dance frenetically.

“Rest easy,” he says. “I know it’s odd for you, so we have to tune things up. Bear with us.” I have an urge to reach up and hug him but the pressure from the straps tells me I’m not going anywhere. “We’ll just sit here for a while and let you adjust. Just listen to my voice... and don’t think about anything... listen to my voice.”

I try to relax, take deep breaths, but there’s no sensation of breathing. I’m not suffocating but no air brushes past the skin of my nostrils.

“Splendid,” Turnbull says as he leans over me again. I hear *his* breathing: slow, steady. “Splendid.”

I’m still a little disoriented. We’ve spent my first day

tuning or, as they told me in techno-speak, adjusting “the sensorimotor interface from the neural simulation to the neuroprosthetic devices.”

Now I’m slated for my first PR gig.

Three media crewmen scurry about the lab, fussing among themselves and adjusting the overhead lights. Occasionally, they peek at me before quickly averting their eyes.

Turnbull strides in, wearing an immaculately white lab coat with the words “Peter Turnbull, M.D., Ph.D.” stitched in red just above a chest pocket. After our initial interview, after I signed the contract, I almost never saw him with a tie, just a dress shirt underneath the lab coat. Today, he’s sporting a glistening, cyan silk tie and not a strand of hair is out of place.

“Let’s get ready,” Pham says. I’ve seen some of his interviews even though he reports on the scientific not the artistic scene. Pham wears a blue oxford shirt, khaki pants, and gold, wire-rimmed glasses that sit near the end of his flat nose. He appears quite comfortable. I’m not. I’m sitting on the exam table, legs dangling over the side, wearing nothing but black shorts, and thinking how I’m going to be broadcast through the entire Net as the naked patient.

Turnbull takes a seat next to Pham and a crewman places a sausage-shaped microphone above our heads. We are surrounded by six tripod-mounted cameras that look like coffee cans sprouting rectangular visors around the lenses, the equipment painted a disgusting shade of lime.

“Where do you want me facing?” asks Turnbull as he smooths the front of his coat.

“Don’t worry,” Pham says and points at the ring of cameras. “We shoot the entire footage and our editor reconstructs whatever angle she needs later. Shall we start?” Pham turns a few sheets of notes sitting on his lap and then focuses on Turnbull.

“I’m here with Dr. Peter Turnbull, the founder of the Institute for Neuroprosthetic Research,” he says then turns to me, “and the *new* John Neri who is widely regarded as this century’s greatest pianist.” I try not to wave, a small flip of my hand like the Queen of England.

“Dr. Turnbull, what was the biggest problem in building John’s new form?”

Turnbull strikes an exaggerated, contemplative pose.

“Well, I would say it was power. Evolution has created a fairly elegant solution. The human body handles every reaction – the molecular computations necessary for thought and control signals, the mechanical work of muscles – we do that using only the energy supplied by daily meals.” Turnbull starts wildly gesticulating as he gets into his rhythm. “Add the problems of distributing the energy source and disposing the waste, whether its heat or metabolites, and it’s a tough nut to crack.”

“The core operation of the human brain takes about ten watts,” he adds. “That’s pretty power efficient and better than any man-made equivalent before modern nanotube computers. So this was a problem we had to address in the design phase: how to design a mobile, self-contained system that’s very power efficient. In fact, an original design placed most of the computation out of the body, in stationary computers. Those computers could be as big as we wanted and draw as much power as necessary, and they got the sensory and motor I-O by wireless from the body.”

“So why didn’t you go with that design route?” Pham asks.

“Our early experiments used that technique, but for the final product, our sponsors wanted a more mobile, self-contained body and –”

“Are you talking about the Department of Defense?” Pham leaned forward and cocked his head. “We saw that a fair portion of your funding comes from DARPA special programs.”

“Well, that’s true,” Turnbull says, looking like Custer’s scout at Little Big Horn. “But we draw funding from a lot of sources, not just the military, and DARPA has a track record of funding progressive work like the early Net. There are many applications that DARPA brought up: space exploration, disposal of hazardous waste, medical care in hot zones. So we’re certainly happy to work with a variety of research agencies.”

Pham smiles but there’s a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Will the androids have superhuman capabilities?”

“For our first attempt, we decided not to put in any sensors or features that were functionally dissimilar to human physiology. In fact, we purposely tried to limit everything and make it as similar to human analogs as possible, from a functional not a structural perspective. In

the future, we can augment parts in a very controlled environment, with people like John here as the baseline. The other reason we're sticking with simple human analogs is the power consideration."

The interview continues *ad nauseum* until Pham finally turns his questions on me. What is it like? Are you eager to start playing again? Has the prospect of immortality changed your thinking? The questions keep coming and I give pat answers. I'm glad he doesn't bring up any sexual topics, but maybe with the magnetic limbic stimulators on the market for the last three years, he doesn't think it's an interesting question.

"Final question... Why do you think you were chosen?"

The Institute had some unknown selection committee for the lottery of immortality and as expected, there was no shortage of volunteers. Ultimately, neither scientist nor politician was chosen; it was an artist. Clearly, the Institute, or maybe Turnbull, wanted to make a statement.

I know there are plenty of reasons for my selection. Turnbull claims he's a big fan, and I never question it, but that's simply fodder for the press. There's a huge public opinion battle between those who want the technology and those who fear what it could do to society. Turnbull makes great efforts to separate his research from the cloners, and that's a smart move. There's always something reprehensible about making biological duplicates; maybe people feel they could be replaced – nightmares of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Androids, though, aren't biological and certain groups, especially Turnbull's friends in Defense, thought the benefits far outweighed the problems. And who better to be the first android than a popular musician, especially one incapable of performing anymore, one of the walking dead?

"I think Dr. Turnbull was a fan and realizes how beneficial this technology would be for furthering the arts. Imagine preserving the next generation's Mozart or Michelangelo? I'm hardly the stature of either of those giants," I say, pausing just briefly in case he wants to object, "but I can help Dr. Turnbull work out kinks in the system. We'll see if this android body can reproduce nuances in performance art."

Afterwards, Pham approaches me, sheepishly, while his crew disassembles the ring of cameras. He gives me a DVD package emblazoned with my picture, head down

over the keys of a grand, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra filling the background. Under the title, I see my signature hastily written in sprawling, gold letters.

"I just loved your rendition of Beethoven's second piano concerto," Pham says and hands me a black marker. "I managed to get one of the signed copies. Would you mind signing it again?"

I smile and meticulously write "John Neri, 2nd Movement" at the bottom of the case. The new autograph is precise, and small.

* * *

"That's turning out pretty good," Turnbull says. "The electroactive polymers are functioning perfectly."

We're in an exam room and he's watching me flex my fingers. The silicone exterior looks natural, right down to sculpted fingerprints and skin pores. It's been two days since I woke in this new body and although I still feel off, the tuning has removed the weirder sensations. I shouldn't moan about the differences; the engineers have done an amazing job mapping the body parts into familiar sensations. After all, if I were still human, even small changes like swollen feet or sunburn would make me feel different too.

"How is he doing – the flesh and blood version?" I ask. "I thought he'd be at the interview, kind of assumed they'd want him there."

I've always been known as a perfectionist, a tough critic of all things musical and, according to my ex-wife, most things non-musical. So it's particularly ironic that after the interview was posted, the majority of e-mails I received were complaints: how I only saw the coming of androids as blessing not blight. None of the e-mails mentioned the old me.

"He's stable. He said he wasn't feeling well enough to attend."

"Yes, I can guess what he's thinking." I turn my hand over and look at the palm; there are a few creases but no life line, no health line. "Just how close is my brain to his? Do the thoughts happen exactly the same way?"

Turnbull scrutinizes my face, as if he's trying to decide how much of a prognosis to disclose. "Down to a certain level of detail, both of your brains operate

identically. But at the very lowest levels, there might be small discrepancies, the tiniest differences, since the computational mechanisms are very different.”

“Does that mean I don’t think the same way?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, we don’t know. We ran simulations and the outputs looked great as far as we could tell, but we don’t know if the differences accumulate over time. Maybe there’s a divergence between you and your human form. But that’s just the brain simulation algorithms. There’s plasticity in our nervous system – we adapt. Experience shapes what we think, how we think, and you two are certainly having dissimilar experiences these days.” He grins and writes something on a digital notepad.

I think perhaps that’s not such a bad thing: to have some uniqueness.

“My perspective has certainly changed – maybe it’s being able to feel, being so mobile again. Before the brain imaging, I was all wrapped up in a blanket of grief. That’s probably why I didn’t – I mean why *he* didn’t – show up to the interview. To him, I’m just a wild shot at a living legacy.”

Turnbull listens intently, cradling the thin, aluminum notepad with his arms. “So he doesn’t think this will work?”

I try to choose my words carefully. “He doesn’t have much vested in this. I do. He thinks if the experiment works – fine – but deep down, he doesn’t think I’ll be able to play.”

It feels incredibly odd to confess how I felt about some *thing* that would be created from my body but knowing that thing is now me. I am a virtual mirror into my own self-centeredness, and it’s an ugly sight. “

“And you,” Turnbull asks, “what do you think?”

“I don’t know. I’ll do everything I can to make it work.”

I want to tell him the truth, that I have serious doubts. After the brain imaging, the path of our thoughts split apart, but we saw things the same way until then. Old biases don’t disappear.

“Follow me,” Turnbull says and we leave the exam room and walk down a hall, arriving outside a curved, wooden wall decorated with vertical grooves. The words *John Neri Hall* are engraved on a gold plaque to the right

of four oak doors.

He opens a door and waves me in. “I hope you like it.”

We pass the threshold and the ambient noise from the hallway nearly disappears. The auditorium is warm, personable, stunning: unmistakably designed for performances, not only scientific presentations. Stylish patterns of dark and light wood veneer cover the walls of the triangular space as it slopes downwards, drawing all eyes to the oak parquet stage. The seats, upholstered in black velour, are arranged on terraces that descend to the orchestra level like a tenderly manicured vineyard. Resting on the stage is a glorious Bösendorfer 290 Imperial grand with its top propped open, the black high polish softly reflecting.

“What do you think?” he asks and breaks my reverie as we reach the piano. I don’t answer but run the tip of my left finger along the rim.

It takes about eighteen months of demanding, hands-on work to craft this instrument – a process that hasn’t changed much since 1828 when the new Bösendorfer factory got an endorsement from seventeen-year-old Franz Liszt. The acoustics are shaped by parts made of seasoned Italian spruce gathered from thick forests in Val di Fiemme, the valley where Stradivari handpicked wood for his violins.

“It’s beautiful,” I say. I hadn’t been specific in my requests for a piano and was pleasantly surprised at this development. “How long has it been here?”

“About four weeks, it’s fully acclimatized.” Turnbull grins. “We actually started inquiries on decent pianos after you signed on.”

“Yes, it’s a decent piano.” I can’t help but smile, overtaken by a rare giddiness. “Has Bösendorfer sent a technician?”

“He just tuned it yesterday. You’re set to go.”

I quickly sit on the bench, glide my fingertips along the cool ivory of the full eight-octave compass, and admire the exquisite workmanship. With my first strokes, a powerful, singing tone fills the space as I revel in the sounds, letting it flow through me and for a moment, the world resonates with iridescent beauty.

* * *

There's a pristine courtyard in the middle of the research complex, complete with wooden benches, dwarf fruit trees – cherry, apple, plum – and a variety of ferns and azaleas surrounding a koi pond that runs the length of one side. A Japanese rock garden, its plane ruled with snaking furrows, lies on the far end of the pond.

Even though I practice day and night, I carve out a little time at noon to sit in the courtyard and watch the fat, vivid koi swim around their restricted world. I hardly need sleep. When I go into the lab to rest, the technicians speed up my internal clock and let the sleep simulations pass in a few minutes, unless they're recharging my internal batteries.

Today, when I enter the courtyard, I see one of the technicians parked on a bench by the rock garden, a paper bag in one massive hand. Nate is a bear, black with giant barrels for arms and a glossy, smooth head as wonderfully bald as mine. I sit next to him.

"I hope I'm not intruding on your down time," he says, the voice an impossibly deep and resonant boom that would fall in the lowest octave of a piano's register. Nate removes from the paper bag a thick double-decker sandwich that seems tiny in his hand and gingerly takes a bite. I marvel at the dexterity of his hands, the poetic motion, for someone of his size.

"No, I appreciate the company and," I say with a sweep of my synthetic arm, "it's not like this courtyard is mine."

Three blue and orange-painted koi swim by us and create an audible stirring of the water.

"You ever play football?" I ask. Nate must be well over three hundred pounds and almost none of it in fat.

His throaty laugh lifts my spirits and scares the koi away.

"No, sir," he says. "I get asked that a lot, due to my size and all. I do a little lifting but stayed clear of the football field... maybe it was my mother's influence. She was a teacher."

He takes a bite and the sandwich disappears, quickly replaced by another from the bag. "Yeah, I spent my time in the library – no long football practices for me – and that sure was tough growing up in Alabama."

I notice a worn copy of *How to Read an Unwritten Language* lying next to Nate on the bench. "Does your

mother still live in Alabama?"

Nate's joviality diminishes and his deep voice returns more softly. "No, she died a few years back," he says, looks plaintively at me, and taps the left side of his broad chest. "Heart attack."

I nod but with a strange feeling of guilt, as if I am unworthy of this new body. I watch him take another bite and an old tune fills my thoughts, which I soon recognize is the beloved's theme in *Symphonie Fantastique*. When Berlioz wrote the piece, he used a thematic device, an *idée fixe*, where the memories of his love keep recurring in the form of a melody, although it's transformed each time. Unfortunately, instead of the charming tune at the beginning of the symphony, I hear the grotesque, vulgar dance of the Witches' Sabbath – the melody of the beloved twisted into the warbling clarinet in my mind.

"What's that?" Nate asks.

I look up, slightly puzzled, until I realize I'm humming the tune. I stop humming but the rest of my thoughts keep going, creating links between faint memories and present worries.

Since the changeover, the time I've spent in front of the piano has been a study in escalating frustration. My new body works. They've designed hands that look like my old ones, a head that passes as my mannequin, feet that handle the pedals appropriately. But I don't *feel* the same about my music; there's some subtle difference that I can't figure out.

I get up and walk to the edge of the pond and lean over to see my reflection staring back: a somber, artificial portrait of an artist. "I think I made a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?"

"Not really considering the consequences." I stroke my hairless jawline. "The world *is* going to be very different."

For a while, we silently watch the koi swim. I move closer, scraping the stone edge of the pond with my sneaker, and the koi stream towards me – strings of green, orange, blue, red, shimmering through the crystal water, each converging into a tiny grotto, waiting for the food that I didn't have.

Nate lifts himself from the wooden bench and walks over to me. "It always comes down to people. It's human nature to explore, and the technology that comes out..."

well, each of us uses it how we see fit. It's free will."

He puts his large hand on my shoulder. "And you have it too."

Nate ambles away, pausing by the door to say, "Have a nice day, John." When he's gone, it occurs to me that for most of my life, before my new body, I haven't *genuinely* talked to people outside my insular musical world.

* * *

The trace of notes lingers in the open space of the auditorium after I pause to review the phrasing of a run. It's been over a month, and it still isn't right. Sometimes, I feel the breath of the composer's ghost on the back of my neck. Even now, in this body with synthetic skin, I feel the breath and sense Chopin's intense, brown eyes staring from its position astride a finely curved, aquiline nose.

I remember my mother, a supremely gifted pianist, pacing about our family's cozy music parlor, floor-to-ceiling shelves spilling over with sheet music, the fresh scent of flowers by the Steinway blending with the musty trace of leather-bound volumes. She made me listen to recordings of the masters, and now and then, she frowned during a passage. "You see. This piece was well-played, very nice," she said, "but it is dead. There is not a single note that is alive, so how can he expect us to appreciate?"

One day, she told me how she breathed life into every piece she played. She said that the creation of music is like the dance of two lovers: the performer uses her techniques, shaped by her own desires, while still paying heed to the subtle and occasionally forceful cues relayed by the composer. The balance between individuality and subservience shifts over time with the whims of the cognoscenti. Some years see the performer as merely a trained concubine to the force of the score; others see the pianist ignoring the pleas of the ghost while she sates her own needs. It is in the middle ground that art, like love, is made more fulfilling to everyone.

I chuckle when I remember my answer to her poignant lesson. "But mother," I said, then a strapping sixteen-year-old, "I'm a man and most composers are, well ...". She grunted and narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. "Honestly," she said, "why do I bother?" She stormed out, only to return an hour later, lured by my attempts at

apology through a Debussy prelude. As these memories return, I think of Nate and try to imagine a world filled with immortal mothers.

A dry cough breaks the silence and I turn to see Turnbull in a seat almost obscured by darkness. "Please don't stop on my account," he says.

"No, I'm having problems and could use a break." I push away from the piano and hear the scraping of the bench on the stage echo through the auditorium. "Sometimes I forget that I don't fatigue, so my usual six-hour practices keep going and going."

"It sounds amazing, like your recordings a decade ago."

I'm irritated by his analysis, his inability to see the flaws so rampant in my playing. "Thank you," I say.

"I have a question. I didn't want to ask it while you were ill."

"Go ahead."

"What's it like?" Turnbull asks and he hunches forward. "How does it feel to be a top concert pianist?"

My first thought is how he used the present tense in his question: how *does* it feel. As if I am a top concert pianist. Then I recall that glorious moment when I felt the weight of a gold medal around my neck, the winner of the Tchaikovsky competition, a young man who had so passionately rendered Rachmaninov's Third.

"It feels good to have climbed the heap," I say. "There's maybe four hundred international competitions churning out new talent, but there aren't enough venues for performance. The supply is so much larger than the demand, especially here in the United States." As I'm speaking the words, it occurs to me what my existence will do to the equilibrium. What will happen to those children, the ones like me, that dare to accept the challenge and find their lives inextricably drawn into music?

"I actually came to ask you if we could have a recital," he says. "Just a short one to kick the tires, nothing long."

"How many people will be in the audience?"

"A handful of dignitaries. Ones that were instrumental in making this research a success."

"I'm not ready, you know."

"When do you think you'll be ready?"

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready.”

“Don’t you think you’re being overly critical?”

“I’ve always been hard on myself. That’s how I am, but *I know* when playing is great and when it’s marginal.”

“Well,” he says, drawing out the word, “the few people coming are fully aware this is a work-in-progress... and some outside opinions might give you a little perspective.”

I sit there on the bench a few feet from the Bösendorfer. Turnbull is asking me, but he doesn’t have to ask. I’m fairly sure it’s in the contract and my memory, at least, has never been better.

“How long has it been since you’ve given a concert?” he asks.

“A little over five years.” I think for a moment and add, “Vladimir Horowitz used to retire now and then. He was gone for twelve years once, and when he came back, he gave an amazing concert at Carnegie Hall.”

Horowitz created magic when his fingers touched the keys, giving every piece a unique character. I look down at my meticulously sculpted hands and suffer a rush of panic, a hollow sensation in its wake. How could I invoke his name when discussing my absence, as if the two of us have any similarity?

“It was a stupid thing to mention,” I whisper.

I am just a minor echo of my own talent, a machine. Tantalus made real by nanotechnology. While I can execute with precision, faithfully reproducing the composer’s intention like a billion-dollar music box, the result is mechanical and musically uninteresting, so very different from the completely human interpretation of Horowitz *or* the twenty-year-old Neri.

“What did you say?” Turnbull asks. His expression reminds me of my ex-wife’s as she watched me receive the initial diagnosis over the phone.

“Schedule the recital at your convenience,” I say and exit the auditorium. I’d been so cavalier with this experiment, so blasted egocentric, as usual, that I never thought about anyone else, *even me*, now trapped in this fresh, plastic shell.

* * *

The day of the recital, I wander about the center, eventually drifting into the lab. Nate is sitting in front of

two flat panel displays, and I watch with amazement how he touch types with those massive fingers.

“How’s the practice going?” he asks while continuing to type.

I sigh and it sounds real but I know there’s no air behind it; I have no lungs. All my vocalizations seem like they have air behind them, even if they truly do not: sounds without substance, like my playing.

“I feel... artistically bankrupt.”

Nate stops and studies me. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“I think maybe two days ago. It’s harder to keep track when you sleep only a few minutes.”

He nods. “Let’s get you set up.”

The sleep station consists of a bed, which I lie down on, and a tall, steel rack filled with blinking computers stacked like pizza boxes, fibers leaking out the back. I pull the right side of my sweatpants down slightly and draw aside a tiny flap on my hip, baring two circular ports. Nate deftly inserts transparent fibers into the holes and moves back behind the displays. I hear a few mouse clicks over the steady buzzing of the rack-mounted computers.

“You see *Groundhog Day*?” he asks.

“No. They celebrate that in some town in Pennsylvania, right?”

His wide face expands into a powerful grin. “It’s a movie, Mr. Artiste,” he says. “It’s about a not-so-nice guy trapped in a single day. Every morning he wakes up and the world is the same as the day before. At first, it gets to him, and he tries to kill himself – lots of times – but he keeps waking up on the morning of *Groundhog Day*, the same as always.”

Nate’s shiny head bobs as he slides his rolling chair over to a black box and throws a few switches. “Then the man decides to deal with it and starts to work the system. He uses the time and learns all kinds of things like French poetry and jazz piano. By the end of the film, he’s a real Renaissance man, helping the town folk and making that day something special.”

“Does he ever break free of that day?” I ask. “How does it end?”

“How’s it end.” The bass pitch of Nate’s voice drops with each successive syllable in mock incredulity. “It’s a Hollywood film, man. There’s always a happy ending.

Now get some shut-eye.”

I close my eyes, welcoming the onset of the sleep simulations. For a few minutes, I dream of groundhogs and free will and men with the gift of infinite time.

* * *

Those who truthfully dedicate themselves to an art don't do it for money or glory. In the end, they do it because they must; it's a palpable, visceral need that must be satisfied. Writers must write. Painters must paint. And pianists, they must play.

As I stride to the Bösendorfer, I hear no applause and try to clear my mind of doubts, particularly since I have chosen to perform Chopin's difficult cycle of Preludes: twenty-four ingenious compositions that are linked but exist as separate pieces at the same time, each with its own spirit. I'm sure that some would question my selection, my impetuosity for starting with a work that will reveal any faults, but if I'm to be exposed, I'll go out with drama.

And so it begins with the first prelude in C as my hands glide, effortlessly, over the beckoning keys, creating a pulsating, agitated texture. The first prelude gives way to the forlorn, sluggish second and then the delicate melody of the third with its light, rippling figure for the left hand.

One by one they pass as I move from vigor to cheerfulness, a rain of sadness to tranquility. My beloved has returned, gleaming and whole and slyly transformed, all the sweeter from her absence, lent power and voice by my polished instrument.

My spirits soar as the intensity builds in the last prelude, the tension finally dispersing in a burst of double chromatic thirds and octaves, and it is done. I withdraw from the keys and soak in the very last remnants of the sound, relishing the gift.

After a moment, I stand and peer into the auditorium but there is only silence – a void – absent any signs of life save a rustling in the middle of the auditorium where my audience, hidden in darkness, must be recoiling. Doubt then loathing intrudes on my bliss. I am imbued with artificial hubris, hearing majesty where there was only mechanical precision.

The lights over the audience brighten and there is only one man in the audience, wheelchair bound. I see he is

young, in his late thirties, despite the slow, halting movements of an octogenarian, and I move to the edge of the stage. His unruly, sandy hair sits on top a handsome face with piercing blue eyes, a fine patrician nose, and strong chin. We are together for the first time since the imaging, and my view of the crippled, young man through distant eyes is starkly unlike the sub-human images of his, and my, memory.

I want to shout at him, force his colored perceptions, his idiocy to wither away in an onslaught of words. What did he expect? Did he actually think some man-made artifice would suffice? Did he ever stop to think what life would be in this android body without our music, or was the imaging procedure too short, too simple *not* to do it?

I'm sure he'll judge me, now that I'm trapped in this immortal body. This exceptionally flawed critic, who accepts no faults in music, especially from me, will deem me unworthy and retreat into the tepid embrace of his grief. Despite the half-buried instinct to address the outrage sweeping through me, I will not lash out. I will not sift my memories to find some insult, some club to bludgeon this man.

We watch each other, a reunion of talent lost and promise unfulfilled, until I see rivulets fall down his tired, human cheeks.

I nearly walk away, to deprive him of yet another target, when I notice the most peculiar event. He begins to smile, not a mocking grin or a disguised scowl, but a heartfelt, welcoming gesture so infrequent on that cynical face that its presence compels me to stay and stare. Then slowly, passionately, he lifts himself to a standing position and claps, shouting with as much force as he can muster, “Bravo! Bravissimo!” While I numbly stand on the stage, he applauds for a precious eternity before collapsing back into the wheelchair.

“Jessica!” he says. Jessica enters the hall, smiles at me, and strolls to the wheelchair.

I want to talk with them, return to our warm, antique home, let him know what it's like in this new body, but I see his proud astonishment has been replaced by an overpowering melancholy. I know he wants nothing more than to leave this place... and me.

“Thank you,” I say, unable to find proper words, and watch them disappear through the closing doors.