

1944

Alice threw the baseball with vigor, straining the seams of her yellow, perfectly pressed sundress. Her brothers smirked at their cheeky seven year old sister that was everything their mother never expected. Alice didn't love deciding if she should wear her white or navy Mary Janes with her Sunday dress, and didn't love serving her brothers lemonade on sweltering summer days. At every witty, insightful mark the seven year old made, her mother would yelp as if she were a cat who had gotten tangled in the feet of someone rushing out the door.

The only one watching her more closely than her brothers was Henry. He stared at her dreamily through a cloudy window that had never been touched with a rag and potent cleaning spray. He was only eight, not old enough to know that he lived in the house that everyone in the neighborhood was currently holding a meeting about a couple doors down. The upstanding mothers of Oak Hills were horrified at the state of Henry's ramshackle abode. They decided to confront Henry's father next time he was sober enough to comprehend their carefully planned out expressions of concern. They never got the chance. Ignorant of his surroundings, Henry was certain that his life would play out like the romantic comedies that served as nothing but a nice resting place for dust ever since his mother passed away. Alice, the girl next door, was bound to fall in love with Henry.

1953

Alice had just returned home from Young Ladies of Louisiana. She enjoyed teaching the twelve year old tom boys how to fold their napkins and where to place their forks. Her mother had broken her. The spirit she used to have for chasing dragon flies and bloodying her knees had been scrubbed clean by her mother's almighty demands and Alice wasn't even aware. Alice was happy. Not happy in the sense that she was bubbling over with joy, but rather her life lacked tragedy. She had been going steady with the same boy, Grant, for all of high school. Grant was intelligent and ambitious. He loved Alice with every inch of his soul.

Henry played piano every waking moment that wasn't spent counting the tiles on the ceiling in class. School was such a trite and futile way to waste away minute by minute. He

didn't understand the Pythagorean Theorem and Shakespeare seemed to write in a code that only teachers and over achievers understood. However, the way notes were strung together made sense to him the way Alice made sense to him. Henry never knew her, never spoke a word to her and maybe that is why she never failed him. There came a time when Henry gave up schooling altogether, determined he would be a famous composer similarly to his determination for a happy ending with the girl next door.

1962

Alice lived out the timeline that had been written for her all her life. Everyone had contributed to writing a small piece of it, beginning with her mother, then Grant. But now her children seem to scribble out her days of easy motherhood. They gave her warm sloppy kisses on the cheeks and left chocolate handprints on the lap of her dresses where they clenched her, begging to be held. That evening she gave up trying to scrub out the stains because she and Grant were going to a modest dinner to celebrate their 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary. That night they toasted to Grant's successful job as a music critic, their two beautiful little girls, and most of all the love they had shared. It was the most original cliché anniversary toast Alice had ever heard. When she got home she made a list on the fridge of the groceries she needed to pick up at the store tomorrow.

Everything sang to Henry. The bookshelf sang the stories of knights in gleaming armor and even the scientific discoveries of Darwin. The clouds sang the songs of the divine beings perched above. And Henry wrote them all down and banged them out on the piano. They were beautiful melodies, especially the ones the water sang to him. But Alice sang to him with passion, vibrancy, and richness. Alice wasn't a girl he knew; Alice was happiness. Henry had never felt the joy he saw in her eyes when she threw that baseball. She was alive in his mind probably more than she was in her own life. The music that Alice sang to him grabbed you by the back of the neck, pushed its mouth up against your ear and asked you if you were really living. It was the music that had launched his career as a concert pianist and left his audience feeling winded and satisfied. He picked up his black, ball-point pen and titled the stacks upon stacks of original piano pieces, *Alice's Songs*.

1963

Alice hummed a melancholy tune as she put away the lemonade she had made for her girls that sticky August afternoon and put the girl's Mary Janes in their closet. Grant was out for the evening writing an article about some emerging musician that was "shaking the world of classical music." She heard her girl's running their fingers down the keys of the piano in the foyer and she sweetly sang for them to get into bed. Alice wondered how long Grant would hold on to that piano before he came to terms with his complete and utter stupidity when it came to playing the music he so carefully critiqued. Alice went to tuck the girls into bed.

Henry bowed to his clapping audience and when he straightened out he was suddenly staring into a strangely proportional face. He recognized the man immediately as a widely acclaimed music critic. From the moment Henry acknowledged his presence this man slathered on the praise. He described how the music was the missing puzzle piece to his life among other worn out phrases. Henry was tired and the critic read it on his face. The man introduced himself as Grant and offered to buy him coffee and waffles as a diner right down the street. Henry obliged. As they pulled out of the parking lot Grant asked to see Henry's sheet music. Grant clutched the enormous stack of papers as if his life depended on it. He looked down at the yellowing stack of sheet music and was distracted by the fact that the title included his wife's name. He gazed the title a second too long and came an inch too close to the cars in the oncoming lane.

1966

Alice leaned back on the rocking chair as she watched her daughters sit side-by-side at the piano. They played the songs their father wrote. The same father that they no longer remember except from what they could deduce from photographs. Alice sat back and listened to the songs she had almost memorized. In the last two years, Alice had come to understand what all the famous poets had written about: loneliness, despair and confusion. Alice still never understood how Grant and kept his masterpieces hidden away, pretending he was incompetent

with musical instruments for so long. The songs Grant had written for her hadn't left her house since the night when she pried them from her husband's fingers at the scene of the accident. She didn't stop to check the face of the man lying next to Grant and she only knew that he was a musician of some sort. She was too startled by the flashing lights and soothing voices to focus on anything but the sheets upon sheets of music her husband must have slaved over for years. She thought about how Grant pictured her when he wrote them: tender and content. She had hired a teacher to teach the girls how to play the songs that carried her through the times when the pain twisted her insides. The pieces he had written didn't startle and thrill her as it seemed to do to her daughters and neighbors who had heard the music through an open window. The music was familiar to her. But she could never understand why she felt she had heard it in the back of her head and tugging at her heart for years.