

## RED

The echoes of my oxfords mixed in with the blaring car horns of Trafalgar Square. I could hear his voice all over again, those rolled r's, those blunt consonants, coming from that stout form, the protruding belly, the broad shoulders. His head had bobbed in unison along with the pacing of his loafers to the steady beats of the cross-rhythms. A slipped finger, a stiff wrist, and it was all over. I had sensed the sudden jolt of his head before I had even dared to give a quick sideways glance towards his silhouette in the direction of the curtains.

*Is it too much to ask for lenience?* I had thought, as his agonizing words hit me on the back of my neck, a sharp contrast against the tickle of my ponytail. I remembered his voice ringing louder, while I felt the lashes across my back, stringent lashes that tattooed the words of first-prizes and Carnegie Hall onto my skin, all the while, the walls echoing his shouts: “details! Mezzo forte! Molto doloroso!”

There is a gate I unlock, careful not to let the tendrils of my trench coat catch between the black, cast-iron curvatures. My instincts awaken as I look behind me, to the Indian restaurant, still open during ungodly hours like these. The lights to the restaurant are always on, the yellow glow breaking up the darkness, illuminating the interior, allowing me to see the four children, tugging on the sleeves of their father, the owner. I always stop mid-track and peer inside, imagining the conversations they might have at night, of overdue credit card bills, and monthly grocery budgets. A lone passerby brushes against me, and my heart pounding, I glance in his direction before patting my pockets.

I feel like a delinquent as I unlock the second door, slipping into the building, its decaying brownstone façade threatening to collapse over me at any moment. I suddenly remember that I am in fact a delinquent; I am breaking the midnight curfew, but what did it matter when I had a Dante Sonata to practice? I breathe in the musty scent of worn fabric couches and make my way to my favorite practice room, the dirty grey carpeting muffling the sounds of my footsteps.

For several minutes, I stand in the darkness of the room, my hand just grasping the light switch. Do I dare? Do I dare to end this darkness and risk my getting caught? The night attendant, that stout and surly woman with the gait of an army general, would surely report me to the academy head for breaking curfew. I would be sent back home, back to suburbia, back to minivans and white-picket fences. But my audacity wins out and my fingers flick on the lights. I am stunned by the sudden brightness, as if I have just come out of a cave.

The piano cover is heavy, and my hand slips as I open it, a bang filling the silent void. My finger has been caught between cover and ledge, but I dare not move, letting the sound of rushing cars streaming in from that crack of a window near the ceiling wash over me, spells of consistent waves matching my breaths. I collapse onto the bench, my legs dangling in every which direction. The wretched cover is now finally open, and I balance my Dante Sonata sheet music on the stand, letting its yellow spine lean against the sable base.

A flick of red accompanies the Liszt masterpiece, a smear of vibrance juxtaposed against the dull mustard of the sheet music cover. Trembling, I lift my hand up to run my finger down the smear. As I feel the dried cakey texture underneath my nails, exhaustion starts to settle in, and the black ants crawl from the edges of my vision to the center. I am no longer here anymore.

Just six months ago, during the dreaded heat of the New England summer, I had escaped to the cooler areas of Europe. I toured Prague and Paris first, with six other music students from the conservatory, ending at Vienna, where we were to meet and practice with several professors before giving a performance. I had merely hoped for an entertaining summer experience, a romantic departure from the monotony of my daily schedule: sleep-in, friends, Netflix, tennis. But soon, I realized that I had bitten off more than I could chew, and was fully disconcerted by the musical workload. I spent hours at a time in front of the piano, slaving away at Schubert, Debussy, Chopin, Grieg. When not in front of the demonic instrument, I analyzed late Beethoven sonatas throughout the night and into the dim light of the morn.

Across from my hotel, there had been a café which sold espresso shots and sachertortes at exorbitant prices. On my first day, I had cried with delight in discovery such a quaint little place, filled with those round tables with delicate curled metal legs. It was such a cliché, but cliché was different, different from the rough tumble of lawnmowers and the petty gossip of

housewives. Elated, I had read my book, eating biscuits and clotted cream with my cappuccino. I looked out the window occasionally and saw cobblestones and bicycles, beaming in the morning sunlight.

But that had been the first day. By the end of the third, I was rushing out of my hotel room with unbrushed hair and wrinkled dresses. I must have looked wild, flying out of the building, to a fruitless musical theory class, where the professor's lectures became one long stream of gibberish from dynamics to harmonization.

Despite my misery and declining sense of physical wellbeing, I had only one thing in mind: the Dante Sonata, arguably Liszt's magnum opus, his life's greatest work. I had first heard the piece, a brief flash on the radio, when I was a mere fourteen. The flash I had heard, the wailing of the souls in melodramatic D minor, resonated with my then ongoing depression. I had been in a semi-catatonic state in the car from, my head leaning against the window, until suddenly, the chromatic "wailing of the souls" theme quite literally shook me awake.

That summer, while I was in Vienna, I made a pact with myself, that I would learn this sonata, learn from the greatest musical professors in this city, and perform it for a competition in December.

However, the Dante Sonata was quite above my ability. I suppose it had been rather pompous of me to assume it was in my range, but I could not get the melody out of my head; it was all I thought of even as I played other pieces. One Wednesday, after my usual eight o'clock private night lesson, I had somehow managed to get my instructor in a good mood and convince her I was ready.

"But what about ze Beethoven?" she had said, tapping her finger on the light blue cover of my book. "You must play that for ze concert at the end of the summer. And don't forget about ze Glinka and Wagner."

"I'll practice everything," I said, my voice starting to plead.

"Are you not busy enough?" she said. "Ze Dante is *very* difficult, both technically and dynamically."

“I want to learn it,” I said adamantly. “I want to learn it now, early on, because I have a competition in December.”

“You will not be able to play it for competition in December if you start now,” she said. “Ze Dante Sonata could take a year.”

“Then I’ll just play it for myself,” I said. “Just for my own enjoyment. I don’t even want to perform it for anything. I just want to know the feeling...” My voice trailed off. “The feeling... of playing it.”

She looked at me sternly, balancing her glasses near the tip of her nose. Finally, she nodded, her graying curls bobbing up and down. “Vell I see you like it,” she said. “Ve can look at it together.”

I released my fingers, which had been tightly crossed behind my back, and clapped my hands together. I thanked her vigorously before grabbing my books and running out into the night.

“The Dante Sonata,” I said aloud. I clutched my books even harder, excited by the possibility. “The Dante Sonata!” I shouted. “The Dante Sonata!” And as I did a little twirl, my white dress, with the little flecks of roses printed all over, enveloped itself around me as I spun. It then occurred to me that I might buy the sheet music today, practice tonight, and have something to show for my obsession tomorrow, during my morning lesson.

I knew just where to go for the sheet music, the only place I knew of still open at this hour. I ran up the streets, slippery and wet after a rainy afternoon, and ducked into a little hole-in-the-wall shop with its name, “Leben und Musik,” proudly emblazoned in fading gold lettering on a dirty red awning. It was one of the stores overlooked by students until the night of a last-minute performance, and the sheet music could not be found anywhere else.

I had to take myself up five flights of stairs to reach Leben und Musik. But despite my heaving and chest spasms, I felt energized by the fifth floor. I imagined I was one of the poor souls in *Paradiso*, forced to trek my way up from Hell to Heaven, where finally I would be guided through the nine celestial spheres.

The room was stifling hot, despite the cool night, and I started to sweat while searching arduously for the Liszt compositions section. I was hesitant to use what little German I knew to ask the cashier to find the Dante Sonata for me; he was sampling several records on a phonograph, the twisted, experimental arpeggios of Stravinsky blasting through the little room, the music bouncing off the walls, being absorbed by carpet. I tousled my hair, feeling beads of sweat drip down my neck and bent down to examine the lower shelves.

Just as the Stravinsky hit a climax, several women burst through the door, laughing, hand in hand. The cashier looked up and frowned at them. I watched his eyes move up and down the length of their bodies, disapproving. *What for?* I wondered, utterly mesmerized by the way their hips swayed, making the various colored fabrics of purple and gold swirl about their curved bodies. I stood up, staring at them, watching the words form quickly on their tongues, the articulate movements of their lips, which had been so flawlessly swiped with red lipstick.

I heard one of them say “Liszt,” and I watched the three women move towards the opposite side of the room, diagonal from where I was standing. Moving discreetly towards them, I saw that they were flipping through the various sheets of music, until finally, one picked out the Dante Sonata, holding it triumphantly between long painted fingernails. The other woman took the small booklet from her and kissed the yellow cover, leaving a bright red lip stain on the cover. I nearly gasped aloud at her audacity, watching as she passionately clutched the music to her bosom. At that moment, a vision appeared in my head, a vision that these women were the modern-day reincarnations of the Countess D’Agoult, Liszt’s lover, with their swirling dresses, blunt elegance, and red lipstick.

After they had left, I purchased the Dante Sonata as well, the cashier giving me an odd look; two people buying the same music in a row was certainly a coincidence. But now, my mind was no longer on the music –it was on the women, their dresses, and that lipstick.

Now I rushed out of the Leben und Musik in pursuit of an entirely different shop. I saw a drug store, recognized by the word “apotheke,” down the street. I ran through the automatic doors, the harsh lights hitting my eyes immediately.

The makeup section was off to the side, the same location as in American stores. I spotted rows and rows of lipstick, dizzy with all the choices and shades of red that awaited me (Should I

pick the ever so prim schon rosette rot –lovely rose red –or the seductive kirsche begehren – cherry crave?). But in the end, I chose the priciest classic matte red I could find, enclosed within a silvery purple tube, in which I could almost make out my reflection.

After plunking down a good twenty-seven Euros for my new acquisition, I carefully opened the tube. The perfume from the lipstick struck me immediately, struck me as a gentle Chopin nocturne would, the delicate hibiscus scent filling the air as I applied it to my lips, smooth and gliding.

“I am the Countess D’Agoult, and the Countess D’Agoult is me,” I sang, with the tube between my fingers. *Now* it was time to practice the new sonata. I strolled to the practice rooms, taking my time, imagining how elegant I must have looked to passersby in my new lipstick. I pushed open the door, a door surrounded by two white marble ionic columns, a door I had grown all too familiar with these past few weeks. It was nothing like the old rotting wood with the horrible peeling grey paint of my usual studio across the ocean, nor was it the condescending oak of London; it was white to match the columns, with brass knockers, like a palace. Its foreboding presence never required that it be locked, so I entered easily, as usual.

There was but one other student in the building. I heard the violin coming from upstairs, playing what was undoubtedly Mozart. I frowned at the sickly sweet melody, and then thought with pleasure, about my Dante Sonata. I sat down at the piano bench and began. Just as I had expected, it was difficult and well beyond my level, but I pressed on, hoping the chromatic theme on the first page would only get easier. What was that note? I leaned in closer, the tip of my nose touching the music. It must have been a G#. But wait, hadn’t there been a natural sign at the beginning of the measure...?

Soon, I was distracted by my own reflection in the mirror hanging off the door. *Is that really me?* I thought. From the top half up, I could have passed for one of those women, maybe if I was wearing those purple and gold dresses. I stood up mid musical-phrase, my hands still on the keys. In a prim foot-ahead-of-foot fashion, I had brought myself in front of the mirror. I noticed the corner of my bottom lip was looking a bit pale. Now, practicing had completely slipped my mind, as I swiped on another layer of that godforsaken lipstick.

Finally satisfied with my appearance, I heaved a large sigh and went back to the piano. I pressed my head against the music stand, watching as my right hand practiced the progression over and over. Soon, exhaustion settled in, and my eyelids felt like lead.

It must have been midnight, when I had finally succumbed to sleep, head against the stand, ruby lips pressed against the music leaving that touch of red on the booklet. I awoke with a start well past noon, my heart pounding. I knew I was supposed to be somewhere, but where? I looked at the clock and realized I *had* a lesson today. It was long past that time, though, and now there was only one thing to do. I raced to the conservatory.

Nothing had ever felt as bad as the pain of my feet pounding through the hard cobblestones. I blushed furiously, my ears even turning red, as people stared. I nearly crashed into a bicycle, the man riding it swearing furiously at me in German while a little girl in a pink dress stared at me with round blue eyes, gleaming in the light.

I was immensely relieved upon arriving at the gates of the conservatory. I ran to my instructor's usual classroom, but found the room empty, except the two old Steinways and scattered music.

I found my instructor another floor up, standing with her legs crossed, leaning against the wall with a mug of tea. I could smell the verbena scent from the hallways, and I was drawn to her, like a moth to light. I feared her anger, I feared that glare, but all she did was sigh upon seeing me with the smeared red across my upper lip. "I suppose you are not ready for ze Dante yet," she said. Her cool demeanor was worse than if she had simply shouted at me, or even slapped me. She took a long sip of her tea and then ignored me. And then I was down the hallway again, my head bent down, my toes pointed towards each other, my eyes wandering about the place, looking for anything to distract me and keep my cheeks from flushing. But although I could maintain some semblance of normalcy to the pedestrians just outside the conservatory, there was no denying that feeling of shame as I left the building.

Bitter, I felt the best course of action was to go for a long walk. I started to roam the streets again. Maybe, just maybe, I thought, I could distract myself by returning to last night's thrilling scene. So I started to return to the neighborhood of Leben und Musik, of the apotheke, of the women, of the Countess D'Agoult. The cobblestones disappeared from beneath my feet as

the streets curled and became more narrow. A man in a bowler puffed some cigarette smoke into my face, leaving me to cough. In a dim haze, I saw a sign advertising “Hure Zeigt” in flashing neon lights. It then just occurred to me that I was standing in the red light district of Vienna.