

Ruby Gerald was listening to Mendelssohn's Octet when she felt the first contraction. Her husband, Timothy, sat in his chair by the window, reading. He stood as her waters broke, and stretched lazily. Mendelssohn cadenced. The couple shared a loving glance as the needle bumped up against the inside of the record. Thithump thithump thithump. Before either could get up to flip the record, Ruby's insides contorted once more; this time Timothy noticed. Exactly 8 hours later Felix was born. Ruby hadn't set out to name her first born after a composer, but things just worked out that way; the melodious inauguration of her labor was too coincidental to ignore. If Timothy had known why her decision was coincidental, or that it was coincidental at all, he never would have consented; Timothy worshiped logic like the archbishop worship God.

- - -

Felix liked his mother more than his father, though he could never quite put his finger on why. The truth was, he knew neither of his parents well. He saw them at mealtime or on the rare occasions when they invited him down to be paraded around in front of company, but their relationship was that of formal acquaintances, never intimate family. The people he really knew best were Nanny P. and Scarlatti, his toad, but mostly Scarlatti. On one occasion, when Felix was four, Nanny P. told him that his mother had been a violinist.

"But she's Christian, like me!" Felix had insisted, concern kneading at his brow. At this, Nanny P. had laughed her rumbling laugh and bustled out of the nursery, only to return momentarily cradling a dusty photograph of a young woman, who looked very much like Felix's mother indeed, holding the long, curly tail of what Felix thought must be a wooden cat.

"That," said Nanny P. triumphantly, indicating the cat, "is a violin."

From that day forward, every time Felix saw his mother he pictured her stroking the wooden cat and making it sing like the "Heifetz" Nanny P. played for him on the gramophone that stood in the corner of the nursery.

- - -

On Felix's seventh birthday, Scarlatti gave him an idea while Nanny P. was off fetching his arithmetic book:

"Ribbit," said Scarlatti.

“You know,” said Felix, “you’re absolutely right!”

“Ribbit ribbit,” said Scarlatti. Felix thought for a moment. “Rrrribbit,” Scarlatti prompted.

“Well, probably not this year, but next year perhaps. I’ll ask mother and father at supper.”

And so it came to pass that for his eighth birthday Felix Timothy Gerald received his very own violin. Usually his mother gave him a record and his father gave him a book, but this year his violin had replaced a record. Timothy still gave him a book, and, as usual, it was decades above Felix’s comprehension level.

“Thank you, father.” Felix studied the outside of the essay collection with mild interest.

“Read it; a knowledge of classical physics is important. THAT is something that will get you places in life,” Timothy offered in response.

Felix could sense the condescension in his usually soft-spoken father’s tone, and it troubled him. Sure, he may have preferred jacks or a model ship, but he was just as pleased to receive this leather-bound volume. He welcomed any sign of affection openly. Why, then, did his father seem angry, even resentful?

Timothy’s harsh words were far from Felix’s mind an hour later when he locked himself in his room with his gifts and giddily lifted the lid that stood between him and the object of all of his dreams. With the delicacy of a surgeon, Felix lifted his violin from its velvety cradle. He ran his eight-year-old fingers down its smooth neck. He caressed its slim, curved waist. Holding this piece of wood felt like the most natural thing on earth to Felix. It was better than his mother’s goodnight kisses, sweeter than the aroma of his father’s pipe after dinner, and warmer than the tea Nanny P. brought to him when he was ill. He couldn’t wait to learn how to make music with this majestic piece of art.

Scarlatti had Felix hoping that his mother would teach him to play, but his illusion was shattered when he wandered into the drawing room on a rainy Tuesday afternoon and nearly ran into a new black chair that stood in the entry way. The chair twitched. Felix had never seen a man so grotesquely fat in his life. An image flashed through his mind of a seamstress drowning in the sheath of black fabric that stretched over his

immense back. As the man turned, Felix saw that he grasped a familiar triangular case in his sausage-like fingers. Felix's heart sunk.

"Felix, I would like you to meet Mr. Siegfried Austerlitz, he's graciously agreed to instruct you on the art of violin playing." Felix started at the sound of his mother's voice; he had not seen her behind Mr. Austerlitz.

"How do you do, sir?" Felix managed, still in awe of the man before him.

"Sir? No, sir will not do. It's Maestro. That is all. Maestro," he said in a thick German accent. Now that they were facing each other, Felix had a chance to take in all of Mr. Austerlitz. He wasn't outstandingly tall, but his enormous weight gave him the impression of being so. His heavily starched collar forced his neck into several rolls supporting his disproportionately small head. As if to accentuate its tiny size, Maestro's head was topped with an uncontrollable tuft of thick, ivory hair.

"Come!" Barked Maestro, "We begin now, no?" Felix scrambled upstairs to fetch his own violin as Maestro removed his from its case.

- - -

The first year of lessons was mortifying for Felix. He had never played a note before Maestro's dramatic appearance in the drawing room, yet Maestro seemed to expect him to be naturally dexterous. While Maestro's high demands and bombastic style terrified Felix, they also shaped him into a player of substance faster than Felix himself could notice.

At first, Maestro commanded an hour of Felix's time each week. Within two months, however, it was twice a week, and by the end of the year Maestro came by every day. When he was not with Maestro, Felix was practicing. Years went by almost unnoticed by the boy as he followed his regimented routine. Felix spent so much time playing scales that he hardly noticed the day that Nanny P. stopped coming. He brought it up casually to his parents at supper—he was twelve now, and zealously trying his hand at speaking without being spoken to.

"You're too old for a nanny now," said his father between bites of steak and kidney pie.

"She's gone to a place where she's needed more," added his mother thoughtfully.

So far as Felix could tell, they really meant Nanny P. was dead. Scarlatti agreed. This revelation didn't bother Felix as much as it maybe should have, but he was concerned by the fact that his parents had lied to him on the matter.

"I suppose it's alright though," said Felix, "I have plenty of time to prove I'm not a child any longer."

"Ribbit."

Felix awoke the next morning to find that Scarlatti had joined Nanny P. in the night. The death of his two real friends marked the beginning of a new chapter in Felix's life... named Charity. His conscience and his mother told him that he should use the passing of his companions as an opportunity to practice more, but his father was convinced he needed human company his age. Charity Bunting was the 14-year-old daughter of one of the Gerald's tenants, and she was the closest thing to a friend Felix ever had. Neither of them could remember just when they met, but from that point forward they were inseparable. Whenever Felix wasn't practicing, he was with Charity. He stopped eating inside and took picnics with her instead. He slipped out after dark to watch the stars with her. Charity was like no one Felix had ever seen before. Long, wild tangerine hair framed her speckled complexion, and her skin practically glowed. Felix was fascinated by the way her dress swished when she ran, by the sound her voice made in the wind—like the wings of an illusive dragonfly. She stirred within him something he couldn't name. It soon dawned on him that this was because Charity Bunting was the first thing he had ever *loved*.

- - -

Felix Mendelssohn was sixteen when he composed his Octet for strings. Felix Gerald was sixteen when he first made love. He'd never been so close to someone in his life—bodies intertwined like the two s's of a figure 8. It was music: the elation he felt, the whip of Charity's fiery hair, the rhythm of their combined breathing. It was the exhausting bow strokes of Firebird Suite, the roaring climax of Beethoven's ninth, the hauntingly sweet hymn tune of Finlandia. It was so much more. In that one moment, sweat glistening on his bare back and separating his blond hair into delicate strands, Felix finally felt fulfilled. The lovers lay separate from time, protected from the sun by the garden shed, drenched in sweat and covered in sawdust. Neither could have the

slightest inkling that, in that same moment, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was crumpling in Sarajevo, or that a new life would soon be stirring in Charity—a life that her betrothed would love as his own son without either man having any knowledge contrary to that assumption.

- - -

Despite Felix's desperate pleas, Charity was married on August 3rd, 1914—one day after her nineteenth birthday and a day before Felix's seventeenth—in the small county chapel. Felix knew as well as Charity that class would keep the two of them from ever being together, but he had pleaded never the less. He didn't want to lose love now that he finally had a hold of it.

Felix strangled the Bible in his lap, a boiling tear tracing its way down his melancholy face as, like dragonfly's wings, Charity murmured, "I do." If Felix had known those would be the last words he would hear Charity speak, he may have stayed after the ceremony to congratulate the newly weds, but as it was there was nothing Felix despised more than the thought of "forever holding his peace." However, knowing he was incapable of even temporarily holding his peace, and not wanting to ruin Charity's special day, Felix instead dashed out of the suffocating chapel as fast as he could.

"Felix! Wh—!" Timothy started as his son sprinted past him and across the churchyard. His wife touched his arm and they shared a knowing gaze. "Let him go." Ruby said, her eyes now torn away from Timothy's and lost somewhere deep in the past. She was transported back to December of 1896—that magical winter in that magical town—to a very similar glance shared with a man she loved. Leipzig was entirely coated in snow, so that every cobble sparkled white. She had been shipped off to stay with her aunt and uncle while her mother completed wedding plans back in England. It was there, in the middle of the worst blizzard of the decade, that she took shelter in a pub on her way home and first met Al. Both in their early twenties, the two talked for hours while snow piled higher and higher outside. He was studying to be a lawyer—her father's profession—and she was a musician, which he said ran in his own family. It wasn't until she mentioned her work on a particular piece, however, that Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy mentioned his famous grandfather. As the night wore on and the snow didn't stop, Ruby inquired for a room above the pub, but was thwarted

by the lack of vacancy. Al then looked into her eyes, as Timothy had just then, and told her he would show her to his room for the night, that he would sleep downstairs in the pub. She accepted, but she knew from their shared glance that Al wouldn't be sleeping downstairs. Ruby remembered the intensity of his brown eyes and the intentionality of his body as it joined hers in rhythmic and perfect unison later that night. When she woke the next morning and she studied herself in the cracked glass, Ruby didn't see the girl who had left her aunt and uncle's the day before to fetch bread, but instead an entirely foreign young woman. She felt the first kick as she pledged herself to Timothy, and prayed that her child wouldn't have those penetrating brown eyes that she longed to gaze into once again, but that neither she nor Timothy had. Eight months later when Felix was born, Ruby rejoiced to see his fair hair and green eyes. A few months ago she had seen a similar shift in Felix from boy to man, heard the maturation in his playing that she had noticed in her own seventeen years ago. Now Ruby could only hope that Charity's son or daughter wouldn't share her own fleeing son's golden locks.

"Are you alright?" Asked Timothy, peering with concern into his wife's vacant countenance. Then added, "should we follow him?"

"Fine, perfectly marvelous actually. What a wonderful ceremony! No, let him have his space, we'll speak with him later, how can one pretend to know the convictions of a young man's heart?" She laughed, "No, let's offer our congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Bunting and the happy couple."

Felix didn't stop running until he got to his room. Once there, he tore open his violin case, cutting his trembling right hand on the delicate latch. Blood trickled down the fingerboard as unstoppable tears burned hot trails down his cheeks. He didn't care. All he could do now was play. Maestro had returned to Germany two months earlier, leaving an unappeasable gap in Felix's life; and now Charity was gone too. Felix played. At first it was pandemonium: short, angry runs, snatches of lyrical passages, snippets of scales. Then, slowly, order came out of chaos and music emerged. Real music. Felix played as he had never played before, returning to his anchor piece, the piece that, even without the pulsating accompaniment, always seemed to give him identity: Mendelssohn's Octet. His bow soared effortlessly over the strings, his bloody hand danced gracefully across the fingerboard. He closed his eyes, hearing the dialogue in

the cellos at the beginning of the Presto. A door open down stairs and he could hear his parents' muffled laughter. Lifting his bow high, he began with new vigor—scratching out the fast sequential ideas with flawless passion. Faster and faster the music spun around him. His bow hand flew. Vigorous vibrato spattered blood onto the carpet. It wasn't until the recapitulation that Felix let go, however. He wrapped all of his emotions—his shattered trust, his anger, his isolation—into old themes as they came back, building toward the cadence. Every note held the weight of seventeen years in it.

Ruby stopped laughing abruptly and motioned for Timothy to do the same. What she heard was incredible. Never in all of her years studying with Maestro Austerlitz and touring Europe had she performed with or even heard the level of musicality that was echoing through the empty house now. Tears pressed at her eyes and she slowly began sinking to her knees. Timothy, alarmed, helped her to a chair—re-upholstered since she had sat there, listening to the same piece, as Felix began his entry into the world—and rang for the butler.

- - -

The following evening, when Great Britain declared war on Germany, Felix had no question in his mind of his own course of action. There was nothing left for him in the place that he had called home for seventeen years—and beyond that, his countrymen needed him.

They all heard the announcement in the drawing room after supper. Timothy got up and turned off the wireless. All three of them sat silently. Tension hung in the air like fog in early spring. There had been no discussion about Felix's inappropriate departure or of Ruby's collapse the day before. Hardly a word was spoken over dinner.

Felix finally broke the silence: "When is the next train for London?"

"Tomorrow Morning, I reckon. But you'll need consent at seventeen."

"And will you..?" Felix detested having this conversation. War seemed like the best solution to his problems that could ever have come along, and he wanted nothing more than to leave right then and there.

"Felix..." Said Ruby, finally grasping his meaning.

"I'll sign the papers tonight if you really want this. But the earliest you may leave is the three o'clock tomorrow, am I understood?" Timothy was direct, but not stern.

“Thank you father, I—“ His mother cut him off.

“Felix you can’t. You owe it to your father and me to stay at least until you’re of age. Stop this nonsense. Timothy, talk him out of it.” Ruby implored, swaying on the spot.

“Ruby hush. Felix has a point. He is an able-bodied young man with an obligation to serve King and Country, and if that obligation is also a desire then all the better.”

Felix got up, shook his father’s hand hurriedly, and left the room. Upstairs he gathered a few sets of clothes, his Mendelssohn manuscript, and a letter from Charity into a small satchel, throwing himself down on his bed. He wouldn’t take his violin; he had decided that early on. Having the manuscript would be enough. It would have to be. Downstairs, Ruby sank into a chair, keeping her eyes down. She couldn’t look Timothy. Couldn’t look at the man who was unknowingly sending someone else’s son off to war, regardless of whom he thought he was.

- - -

Seven months into the war, Felix regretted his hasty decision to enlist more than ever. Despite his father’s wealth and influence, Felix was not able to attain an officer’s position and was instead assigned to an infantry unit. Every night he read Charity’s letter and studied the precious score. Though he stowed them carefully in his jacket, the documents didn’t go unharmed by the mud that devoured everything in the trenches. He didn’t bother writing home, because, as miserable as he was, he knew hearing from his parents would only make him more so. On March 10th, Felix and his unit followed commander Haig over the top of the trenches at Neuve Chapelle. As Felix tore towards the wire-clad German trenches, the Octet played frantically through his mind. He caught his breath as the head of a soldier to his left imploded, splattering him with blood. Felix suddenly remembered the blood on his fingerboard after Charity’s wedding, but quickly pushed the thought out of his head, pressing onward.

200 miles away, Charity Bunting Watson and Jeremy Francis Watson shared a loving smile. Charity’s insides contracted painfully. She gasped and grabbed his hand. Jeremy’s eyes grew wide with fear and anticipation. Kissing her forehead and gently laying his hand on her enlarged waist, he sprinted next door to alert Mrs. Bunting, who then telephoned the midwife.

Felix could see the whites of the German gunner's eyes when the blast went off. He felt himself suspended in mid-air and gasped as he was slammed into the fresh crater. In his mind the Mendelssohn had just reached the recapitulation, and in his heart he knew he was dying. Next to him laid a German soldier, killed from the impact, blood still trickling from his temple. Felix thought of Maestro. A sudden comradeship for this slain soldier welled up inside Felix, and he painstakingly dragged his wounded arm over to salute this soldier, to embrace him, to somehow show his gratitude. Exhausted from the effort of it, he let his arm collapse. It landed, parting the German's tattered uniform. A bundle of bloodstained papers tumbled out onto Felix's arm. By the light of the ceaseless eruptions around him he managed to read the label before the rain blotted the ink beyond recognition: "Oktett für Streicher von Felix Mendelssohn, Cello." The music still played in Felix's head. Finally, Mendelssohn cadenced. Heavy rains washed away ink, blood, and Felix Timothy Gerald's soul.

A world away, Charity and Jeremy Watson smiled at baby Cécile as the last light of day faded.

"She has your hair," beamed Jeremy. "But where do you reckon she got those beautiful green eyes?"

Charity smiled. "Didn't you say you had an Irish uncle? It must be from your side of the family."