

Witness Me

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First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2018 Young Writers' Contest
Bethesda, MD—Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart
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Claire was a box-woman. She lived in a little box, surrounded by all the other little boxes, and inside her box were more boxes, full of items that held an enchanting spice of adventure, to remind her that she didn't always live in a box. She had neat little boxes in her appointment book into which she dropped each date, job, and chore, and refused to let them bleed over the lines. She had a box where she parked her car every night, and a tiny box where she dropped her purse every evening as she pulled off her dark blue uniform. Her life was defined and contained by those four walls and four right angles.

The boxes were necessary, when she might return home a different person from when she left that morning.

As she walked home every day Claire looked at the faces of those she passed and attempted to see who was a box-person and who was not. The Witnesses in their dark blue clothing all had the same shuttered gaze that let her know they, too, lived in boxes. Collecting and fulfilling Patron's memories could disrupt your personality, your own memories, and even your life. A routine provided an immutable anchor, to keep yourself safe from the forgetfulness of the job.

She turned off the main street, following her routine as usual. She might have completed an assignment today, judging from her blank memory. Witness' memories belonged to the rich, dying Patrons who gave them their final desires, and were taken back as soon as the assignment was complete.

As she passed a darker alleyway, a moan of pain stopped her determined step. Fractal's security cameras swiveled to watch her hesitant approach. On the ground lay a damp bundle of ragged clothes that she didn't realize was a man. Slowly, he straightened, his body in the throes of pain and death. Claire rushed to his side.

"Oh my god. Oh my *god*. Stay calm, okay?"

The man let out a desperate wheeze, and looked at her with bloodshot eyes. She saw his gaze graze over the dark blue cloak which marked her as a Witness.

Suddenly, his gnarled hand shot forward. His eyes met hers as he dragged her arm towards the port on his wrist that would allow him to transfer memories to her. She shook and thrashed against his grip, but he had the determination of the dying. Just before they made contact, he managed to wheeze something. It may have even been an apology.

And then Claire was gone.

Fragmented memories poured into her, soaring through her body like electricity. His life had huge blanks, the kinds only Witnesses had in their memories. It was a necessary evil—the human mind could only hold so much information, and in return for receiving the Patron's memories and conveying that part of them to their final goals, the Witness always gave up a bit of his own memories to obliteration. On and on and on, the old man's dying breath conveyed sparkling moments, reconfiguring her brain into what he wanted. Once they were done, Claire swooned and fainted. And for perhaps the first time in her life, she had a dream.

She was in some old-fashioned dancing club, the kind she only saw in movies. She looked down at herself and saw she was a young man, with nervous hands and fashionable trousers. She looked to her left and saw Nona—not a name she remembered, but a name she knew. For a moment, Claire could see why this man loved her. She wore no makeup, or even a holographic skin, but had none of the conventional attractiveness usually associated with such a trait. Claire could feel his palms becoming sweaty as he tried to think of something to say, but thankfully she spoke first.

"Hey, Maurice, we don't see many actors down here."

Maurice and Claire blinked, finding his voice.

"Um, I'm not an actor, I'm a, uh, consultant for—"

Nona laughed easily.

“Relax, relax. Don’t you know Fractal’s eyes can’t reach us?”

Maurice looked around the nightclub’s walls and saw no cameras.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes.”

This did not seem to bother her. She leaned closer to him, and the memory included the scent of her lilac shampoo.

“It’s all in the name of art. You have to know if you’re here, right? There’s something in the imperfections of a real actor, something more important than the sum of its parts.”

“I—I don’t know about that.”

“Then why *are* you here?”

“I, well, I saw a couple of your paintings of this place.”

Nona’s eyes snapped to his, a mirror of his own fright a moment before. She forced a casual tone.

“And? What did you think?”

A few jumbled memories flashed through Maurice’s head, of dark portraits in his college’s halls slowly replaced by Fractal’s comfortable symmetry, of a show suddenly interrupted by inquisitive robots removing the artwork, never to be seen again. Maurice in the present swallowed.

“They’re meant to be felt.”

Nona’s face broke into a sunny smile.

“I knew you got it! To be *felt*—yes, Jason will like that.”

She put her hand on Maurice’s shirt cuff.

Claire suddenly felt awkward, like a third wheel at a date. The music began to get quieter—no, the entire dream was getting quieter. Nona said something, and Maurice laughed, but Claire couldn’t hear it.

Claire woke up with the taste of dirt and blood in her mouth.

She wandered the next few days in a haze. Only the anchors of routine kept her from losing her mind. She had a new assignment, but she only thought about Nona. She dreamt through her memories, piecing together what few details she could find, though most of it had long been lost to the obliterating nature of Witnessing. There were many years of that blackness. There was a wedding, full of folk dance and pale champagne. A coffee cup smashing into the wall next to someone’s head, and regretful voice messages. A swirl of panic as Fiona asked: *do you remember...?*

Do you remember?

Her search engine in Fractal was full of her obsession, *real paintings, human paintings, real painter Nona*, but they came back blank. Nobody she knew owned a human painting anymore. Actors, artists, and writers had faded from human life, and Claire had never noticed. Fractal could generate the most entertaining and most beautiful works of art imaginable—Claire had always been told that artists were just unwilling to face progress.

Finally, she found something, a small, coded advertisement for an art show. If Claire didn’t know about the underground artists from Maurice’s memories, she would never have seen something amiss with it. But as it was, she found herself using the earnings from her last Patron to purchase an overnight train ticket to the city.

The show was packed into a single apartment, but it wasn’t crowded, mostly because there was nobody else there. As she wandered the aisles between imperfect oil and poorly executed acrylic, it struck her just how much her life had gotten out of hand. She should be in the stream of society, commuting to her box, and yet here she was in a stranger’s city staring at human attempts to imitate Fractal’s perfections.

As she turned to leave, a pale portrait of a man with bloodshot eyes caught her eye. Claire wrinkled her nose—why would anyone paint a human being with such ugly eyes? But there was something so familiar about them—

Memories flashed through her mind, some hers and some Maurice’s. Staring at that man in the mirror, looking into his eyes as his hand grabbed her wrist.

“Hello! Hello, I need—”

She heard a deep voice call from another room in acknowledgement, and a middle-aged man in a beautiful sundress appeared. She saw his eyes graze over her unwashed hair and the dark circles under her eyes, and her face grew red. She tried to appear as dignified as possible, pushing back her flyaway hair.

“I’m looking for the artist.”

“The artist would rather be left alone.”

“I need to deliver a message to her. From—from the Bohemians. You’re Jason, correct?”

She saw surprise flash in his eyes, then he pulled her close to him, whispering into her ear.

“Don’t speak so loud! It isn’t safe here.”

He pulled her behind one of the cloth curtains and into a small, warm cubby. Claire saw a typewriter, a threadbare armchair, and some sort of insane device with wires poking out of it. Jason spoke in an urgent whisper.

“You can’t stay long. What’s your name?”

“Claire.”

“Claire, what is art?”

Her eyebrows drew up in surprise, but Jason had his head tilted towards her expectantly, as if this was fairly routine. She wracked her brain for the answer, hesitantly given.

“Art is...meant to be felt.”

Jason’s face split into a grin, and he clapped his hand on her shoulder.

“God, I hoped you were the real thing.”

Jason banged out a few letters on his typewriter. Claire stared at the tiny arms, fascinated by the ancient machine. He handed her a torn scrap of paper.

“Her address. Tell her... Tell her it’s been too long. I would love another of her paintings.”

Claire nodded once before she was shoved out of the curtain again. She noticed Fractal’s cameras swivel to watch her walk down the hallway, and shoved the address deeper into her pocket.

Fiona’s house, one of the few houses Claire had ever seen in her life, was extraordinarily difficult to reach. A mile of bramble from the nearest train, down a forgotten, crumbled road. She had never been outside the shiny, developed area Fractal maintained. Frankly, from the looks of the sagging house, she didn’t know if she wanted to again.

She cautiously opened the door. The house smelled old, like something someone had intended to use again and then forgot. Everything from the baseboards to the tables looked delicate. But most striking of all were the paintings; all over the walls, beautiful and terrifying, of storms and people, each portrayed in dynamic and restless states.

“Who’s there?” A tenuous female voice called out from the end of the hall.

Claire looked back at the door, but forced her feet forward. Inside, an old woman sat purposefully in an old armchair embroidered with roses. Claire studied her face, but it was her strong posture more than anything which convinced her this was truly Nona.

“Who is there?” she demanded louder. Her head didn’t turn, and Claire saw with a jolt that she had no pupils. Claire stepped a little closer, and it was Nona’s turn to be startled.

“Maurice...?” The word came out hissed, quiet, but laden with a hope and disappointment deeper than Claire had ever heard before. Claire finally found her voice.

“No, not quite.”

Nona’s wrinkled face changed into a soft, disappointed smile.

“I’m sorry, your steps sound just like his. Can I offer you some tea?”

Despite her blindness, Nona reached out perfectly and took a delicate china teapot, pouring them both cups. Claire took hers hesitantly.

“Can you tell me about your husband?”

Nona paused, her face pinching slightly.

“That’s a painful thing to ask. Do you need to know it so badly?”

“Yes. It’s about... art.”

“You’ve seen my paintings.”

It wasn’t a question, but Claire decided to answer it anyway.

“Yes, they’re—something.”

“How do they make you feel?”

Claire took a sip of the warm tea, comparing the dark portraits on the walls with the cheery art Fractal created.

“Happy?”

Nona frowned slightly.

“Be *honest*.”

“Well... Sad. Angry. Why do you paint pictures that make you feel angry?”

“Anger is more important than happiness. Didn’t Maurice tell you that?”

Claire shook her head.

“We had a rather brief meeting. Could you tell me a bit more about him?”

Nona nodded, curled her hands around her cup of tea, and spoke quietly.

“Maurice and I met through the Bohemians. He was an actor and I was a painter. Both of us tried very hard to resist love because, as you know, Fractal had mechanized the theaters and was creating brilliant paintings. A union between two obsolete artisans? It was likely to leave both of us on the street, or in jail, or worse.”

At this a small smile touched her lips.

“But he was... persistent. Maurice was the sort of man who believed that our fates were each other, and so he refused to back down. His passion was for acting, but he took up electrical wiring, voice synthesis, whatever he could get by. I survived by joining a firm for advertising and design. So against our better judgment, we got married.”

She looked down at her hand, and Claire followed her gaze, but there was no wedding band remaining—only, Claire fancied, an imprint where one used to be.

“And of course it was awful from the start. We argued when we were together and missed each other when we were apart. And in the end, he found money more alluring than art..”

Although the words had come easily before, now her voice began to shake.

“He started... selling... his mind. He tried to hide it but he...forgot things.”

“I had to get him to leave. He gave up acting, began to believe in all of Fractal’s drivel about aesthetics and happiness. He was a danger to the organization. He was a danger to me.”

“Back when I could still see, I painted him all the time, memory after memory. I think I’ve only ever sold one of those paintings. Never should have.”

Nona took a deep breath, as if the loss of that painting was the true tragedy in her story. Claire’s mind had fallen silent, but her body acted automatically on the protocol her job had drilled into her.

“I have a message.”

“From whom?”

Without thinking, Claire took her hands and pressed their wrists to each other, the links there sparking. The memories seethed against her mind like lightning, seeking the path of least resistance and pouring into the link. Nona’s body sat up straight, shaking slightly, as they transferred to her—the club, the dates, the wedding, the long despair. When she was done, Claire sagged in her seat. It was several moments before Nona spoke again.

“He’s dead, now.” It was barely a question, but Claire thought it deserved an answer.

“Yes.”

Nona pressed one thin hand to her forehead, and a few dry tears escaped her perpetually open eyes.

“He... he kept those memories. Thank you, Maurice.”

Claire whispered her own name, but this unknown old woman didn’t seem to notice at all. The woman was crying—why was she crying? Claire had the sense it was something she did. She placed the tea back on the table, confused and shaken—but she left the room smiling.

Stickman

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Boonsboro, MD—Boonsboro High School
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The classroom was very dismal and colorless that day, as it was every other day. Each student sat at a sketching desk in neat circles around the room. Each circle had a still life that the students were to sketch. Everything was prim and proper, just as the professor saw it to be. He had one rule in his class: realism. To him, that's all there was, and that's all there would be. If anyone dared to draw a fantasy creature of some sort, their grade dropped to a zero, and they failed the class. He did not tolerate fantasy, and he refused to use any of these fables in his art. As the students sketched in their circles, the professor walked in. His hands were neatly folded behind his back and the steady clicking of his heels carried a perfect beat. But his steps were disrupted by non-uniform bumps on the floor, as if a child were fumbling down a dark hall. The professor stopped in the center of the room and pivoted to the side so the students could see a timid little girl nervously standing in the center of attention. Her backpack jangled as she leapt behind her father, trying to avoid the attention.

The professor walked the timid girl to an empty desk in one of the circles. She climbed into the seat as her father lowered the angle of her desk, so she could clearly see a victorian vase with bland roses poking out, standing straight as if they were marching in a parade. The little girl smiled as she pulled out a bright red crayon. It was so vibrant that it seemed to make the room more bland and colorless than before. She scribbled on her paper for a few moments before slamming her crayon down and raising her hand to call her father over to see. The students watched as the calm face of the professor turned into disgust and irritation. The little girl had drawn a vase made out of water that sprouted red cherries at the top like dolphins leaping out of the ocean. She smiled at her father, but drowned when she saw his unsatisfied face. He quickly unclipped the art and discarded the paper, moving his daughter to a new seat. She felt her heart sink at the dissatisfaction of her father.

She sat in a new circle with a new still art. It was a marble statue of a women with no arms facing the sky blankly. She cocked her head at the strange idea the statue's artist had, but soon began drawing with her crayons. The professor was pacing around the room watching his students when he saw they were all facing his young daughter. The students that could see her art seemed hypnotized by the designs. He bent over to face a horrid picture of a knight with no arms facing a winged beast that spewed flames in all directions. He grimaced and took her art, crumbling it up and throwing it into the trash. She felt fear as she saw the anger in her father's eyes. He then moved her to the final station. He sat next to her as if he were a coach, pointing to the final still life. It was three simple shapes on a table. A sphere, a pyramid, and a cube. The professor looked at the shapes and then back at his daughter. She made eye contact with her father for a second before launching for her book bag. She ripped out a rainbow of colors and began scribbling all over the paper. Her father's mouth gaped at the sight of three abstract designs on his daughter's paper. He could barely make out an ancient temple for the pyramid, a cube shaped fish tank with make-believe mermaids and fish inside, and a ball of yarn for the sphere that was dissolving into butterflies with the same color as the yarn. Her father stood, casting a dangerous shadow over her work. She slowly turned to see her father's angry face. He was enraged and took her work, ripping it in two and tossing it into the trash. He then took his daughter to a desk in the corner. He pulled out a piece of paper and drew a pathetic stickman and slammed it to the wall with tape. He held a stern finger at it commanding her to draw the picture and not get up until she did. She took a breath and reached for her bookbag when suddenly, her father snatched her backpack and threw it onto his desk, leaving the room and slamming the door behind him. She winced at the thunderous *bang* of the door

which sent shudders down her spine. She stared at her blank paper, embarrassed of all the eyes watching her. Hiding her face, she slowly picked up the colorless pencil next to her. It hurt to think about drawing with such a bland stencil. She stayed motionless for seconds...minutes...hours.

One by one, the students left the room and eventually left her alone. Her father wasn't back yet and she still hadn't drawn her picture. She finally managed to create a crooked circle and five lines for arms, a back, and legs. She saw the colorless piece of art and felt dissatisfied, throwing it off her desk beginning to cry. She folded her arms and placed her head in them, tearing up. She cried wishing she could make the stickman beautiful and colorful as she wanted, but her father didn't want that. It wasn't who she was told to be.

After a few moments, the girl stood up and carried the paper to her father's desk. She placed it on the cold surface and went to leave when she noticed something...her paper was blank. Shuffling back, she flipped it over. Blank. She quickly gazed around the room wondering where her art went when suddenly, she saw a distorted stickman sitting on the shoulder of a painting on the far wall. She gasped and ran to the picture as the stickman leapt away, jumping from one piece of art to the next. The stickman ran across the paper, laying flat but moving forward, never coming off the paper, as if it were a window to another world that he could not pass. The little girl frantically chased the stickman, knocking over shelves of paper and desks of art. Pencils scattered and chairs flipped as she pursued the drawing. He was too quick and the little girl could not stop him, but she then had an idea and grabbed a pencil. Running toward the stickman, he looked up at her from a sheet of paper. She pounced on him and quickly drew a circle around him. He attempted to run, but the wall of the circle stopped him, that's when the door of the classroom slowly opened. The little girl sprang up and hid the paper with the stickman on it behind her back. Her father walked in with a cup of tea and gasped at the sight of the room. He looked at his daughter and gestured toward the mess, commanding her to clean it immediately. She nodded and miserably began cleaning. Once her father left the room, she pulled out the paper with the stickman. The stickman looked up at the girl. The little girl looked at the stickman and saw something missing. She pulled out a pencil and colored fingers on the stickman. The figure looked at its hands and bent each finger as if to feel them move. The girl then drew two beady eyes and a small mouth. The stickman felt his face and looked up at the child. She giggled when she saw the stickman make a goofy face as if he was trying to understand how to use it. That's when she slowly erased the circle so the stickman could move. He slowly stepped out of the smudged area and looked at the girl. They made eye contact for a split second when suddenly, the stickman disappeared. He ran across the room and the girl lost track of him. The door hung open, and she suspected he had made his escape. He was gone. Losing hope, she slowly stood to begin cleaning her mess.

The little girl quietly stacked papers and placed pencils in neat lines when suddenly, a green crayon rolled to her foot. She looked up to see the stickman on a piece of paper looking at her. She slowly raised the crayon and the stickman held his arms out, as if begging for a hug. She then drew a shirt on the stickman. She looked at it questioningly as if the Stickman was going to discard it like her father, but he leapt for joy. The little girl giggled as the stickman danced. The stickman then pointed to another student's drawing which pictured a man and a dog. She quickly drew wings on the dog and watched as it came to life. The drawing of the man threw a ball and the dog soared to the piece of art it landed in. The girl giggled and ran around the room coloring on all sorts of works of art and watching them come to life. Then, both her and the Stickman saw large rolls of paper, and that's when they had an idea.

The little girl taped the sheets of paper around the whole room creating a panorama of white. Then she and the Stickman created a jungle of mythical creatures. She laughed as she drew elephants with mice feet and cats with antlers. She giggled at the fairies she colored that fizzled around. Her favorite thing she'd drawn was a large bird with a pirate eye patch and a peg leg. Then, the peg legged bird took off and soared around the panoramic paper, causing a whirlwind to take place in the classroom. Papers flew and the little girl held her arms out as if she were flying. She shut her eyes and chuckled at the wonderful feeling of freedom. When she opened her eyes, she realized she was in her panoramic jungle and no longer in the classroom. She saw

the stickman nearby riding a mouse legged elephant made from crayons. He leapt to the little girl and they jumped off a cliff, landing on the pirate bird. She giggled at the sight of the world around her and squealed when she saw origami animals hooting and chirping at her.

The trio landed at the top of a waterfall where large cherries were bouncing around, like dolphins. They ran through the forest to see a dragon soar over them and land on a hill, blowing flames all around. The girl covered her face from the heat and saw a knight with no arms face the dragon. He ran up to the beast and instantly, they became companions, just as she had imagined in her picture. She watched as they soared over her and led her and the stickman to a large monument. It was an ancient temple with vines and plants sprouting in every direction. They climbed to the top and saw a square fish tank next to them full of mermaids and fish of all sorts; the fish leapt out of the water and splashed the girl in a friendly manner. She then watched as a large yarn ball rolled by them and exploded into a million butterflies that surrounded the girl and the stickman. She laughed with the stickman as she shut her eyes and felt the breeze around her.

When she opened her eyes, she saw she was back in the classroom. The last of the papers had hit the floor and all of her art was frozen. The lights were out and the only light that was on was in the back corner where the little girl had drawn the stickman. Without noticing the mess, the Professor walked in. He looked at his daughter before walking to the back desk. He picked up her drawing of the Stickman and examined it, making a disgusted face. It was a crooked stickman with fingers and a happy grin. He had a green shirt on and a satisfied look on his face. Upset with his daughter's colorful work, he tore up the paper into many pieces and walked back to his dark desk, tossing the shards into the trash. The girl gasped and dug for them as her father sat and turned on a small lamp on the far side of his desk. The little girl teared up as she faced the remains of her best friend. She held them close to her trying not to drop any pieces when suddenly, a wind gust caught them and they soared off as a group into the air. She stood to her feet chasing them, trying to catch them in her arms, but they were too quick, and eventually soared to the light switch near the door. The lights came on all at once and the little girl's father was awestruck at what he saw. All over the room were drawings and colorings of make-believe creatures running and soaring. The panorama on the wall of a jungle of animals amazed him as they stampeded in circles around the room. He had never seen such creativity. The papers all over the floor seemed to create a puzzle of art, a collage of detail. He was inspired. He had never been able to achieve such greatness in his life, and here his daughter was, creating work better than he could. When the animals slowly went back to their dormant state, the father turned to his daughter. He slowly walked over to her and lifted a finger to her. Expecting to be scolded, she braced herself, but a small green crayon rolled across the floor and hit her father's foot. The little girl slowly opened her eyes to see her father walk over to the panorama and color a make-believe stick lizard on the wall. His art used to be so perfect and realistic, and now it looked like kindergarten work, but it was different. It was *his*. All his life he had been creating what he had been taught in school and expected of at home, when really, *this* was the art he wished to achieve. He thought his daughter would succeed if she was shaped the way he was, when really, the way they *are* was real success. The little girl squealed and joined her father in coloring make believe animals all over the room. Color had entered her father, as did who he was meant to be. All because of one little sketch of a Stickman that inspired a little girl... All because of one little stickman.

BSFS 2018 Jack L. Chalker Young Writers' Contest

Honorable Mentions

"Terrestrial Sciences"

Rebecca Bracken
Havre de Grace High School
Havre de Grace, MD

"Don't Feed the 'Birds'"

Emanuel Faltamo
West Nottingham Academy
Colora, MD

"Mrs. Doris"

Stephanie Salgado
Fallston High School
Fallston, MD

Relinquished Melody

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Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2018 Young Writers' Contest

Poolesville, MD—Poolesville High School

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Round and round turns the carousel, starkly dreamlike against the euphonious, unceasing music-box strains resounding in my head. The delightful painted horses, silken-maned, wildly lovely creatures cantering in an infinite zoetrope. Their gold hooves fall muted, leaving no disturbance on the world.

A violin, an accordion? No, it's neither playing the strange, lively tune that doesn't stop repeating. It's a claret red melody, one that sounds of tainted joy. Like the pied piper's song, it draws me in, compelling and irresistible.

I can't recall exactly how I found myself here. Does it matter? That cloying, beguiling refrain keeps winding its way between every single thought. Even the faint, floating scent of smoke and cotton candy is overwhelming to my senses.

I can't tell what color the sky is here. But round and round the carousel turns. I'm mesmerized.

She's here somewhere, her presence beside me as I drink in this world like it's an abstract masterpiece. I can feel her otherworldly aura making the air shiver with energy. Isn't she the one who brought me here? That's right. But that's inconsequential.

The twisting melody, the merry-go-round. Round and round and round.

It's been 12 years. Why do I still hear that mysterious tune in my head when the world is quiet? Why does that place return to me every time I close these weary eyes?

When I was little, I would sit engrossed at the piano for hours, fingers dancing through the works of Chopin and Liszt and Debussy. My mother was the one to enroll me in lessons, but she never had to nag me to practice. I loved the music, and I loved the challenge. I was constantly improving; those sleek ivory and ebony keys were the playground of my childhood.

Years of practice ingrained into my muscle memory every sonata and nocturne and rhapsody I played. Even now I still remember how to play distinct sections of my favorite pieces. But those are no longer the pieces that I am interested in playing when I lay my fingers on the piano.

The unforgettable pied-piper melody I heard those 12 years ago refuses to drown in my memories. It whispers tauntingly while I experiment with notes and chords, unable to recreate its achingly unique sound. All of my attempts fall flat, leaving me frustrated but obsessed nevertheless.

I don't think I'll ever find the right notes to play that song. Perhaps those notes don't even exist in this world.

The smoke and cotton candy have gently shifted to the crisp scent of apples and sunset. The carousel is gone, but the music persists. There's a tall man wearing a gaudy silk hat, and he is consumed in juggling an beautiful assortment of razor-sharp knives, of all different types. I watch each blade as it's tossed spinning into the air: silver; bronze; jagged; smooth; gold; rusted; jewel-encrusted...

Suddenly it's raining. The rain is scarlet like it's caught the light of a lurid sunset, falling in a violent storm of blazing sparks. I realize there's a figure crouched at the heart of the downpour, breathing liquid flames into the sky.

Through the scintillation, in a dazed shock I notice the figure's indeterminate features contorted in agony.

"Does it hurt a lot?" I whisper. My companion doesn't answer, but I feel her piercing gaze settle on me.

It's only then that I realize there's blood dripping from the juggler's hands.

I competed frequently in piano competitions when I was younger. My mother was proud of the awards I brought home, but she knew it was my passion she loved most. I know she was disappointed when I became a teenager and stopped playing as often.

It broke her heart when I finally left to study design instead of pursuing music.

I had always pretended not to notice when she held those black-and-white photographs tenderly in her broken hands, and saw in me the girl in those pictures. It broke my own heart a little knowing that she wanted me to live her dream in her place. The dream she had nurtured ever since she gave her first recital as a child and my grandfather chuckled that she would become a world-famous pianist.

I couldn't gather the courage to tell her there were other things I wanted to achieve while I had the chance. After all, time always passes much faster than we expect.

There are statues hanging from the sky, in all elegant colors and graceful lines. I can't detect any strings from which they are suspended, yet they appear much too heavy to be floating. Each is striking, and as abstract as any particular sentiment.

I find myself fascinated by a tall cerulean sculpture of lively slopes, intricate edges, and poignant valleys. It's a creation that breathes vivacity and overflows with the depths of an ocean.

For a second, I think I spot the melting features of a human face concealed in its blue folds and ripples. But it's gone in an instant.

"Do you like that one?" asks a velvety voice.

I blink, realizing I had unthinkingly reached a hand out to touch it. I turn toward the voice and see her beside me. The faery.

Her shocking, diamond-white irises glint with flecks of light and shadow. I nod, but my focus has dissipated. Suddenly I hear the music again, that dark yet cheery tune, winding its way around my thoughts, suffocating.

She's speaking. I watch her lips move without sound. The haunting melody is all I can hear.

Everything about the faery is unnaturally lovely. Her hair a wild, vivid red, falling in silken locks around pointed ears, brilliant eyes like full moons.

What is she saying? A question, a spell? The music is fading now, lifting like a curtain over my ears.

"You have been here long enough. You are nearly a part of this world," she says.

How much time have I spent here? I can't comprehend the meaning of her words.

"One year has passed in your world," she answers my silent question. "Time works differently there."

I don't understand.

She gestures before me, and I realize the statues are gone. In their place is a beautiful grand piano intertwined with emerald ivy. I feel myself drawn instinctively to it.

"The faery realm has made a place for you."

I want to play the instrument, but a thought keeps nagging at the back of my head.

"Play, talented human."

I lost a year of my life to the faery world. During that time, the human world forgot that I existed. It was the year I was to enter ninth grade. It was also the year my mother fell ill.

The disease that had impaired her hands began to damage other parts of her body. Her doctor had predicted it would happen. What the doctor hadn't predicted was that it would be so severe.

When I returned to the human world, my mother had already been hospitalized for four months. I never knew how much grief could hurt until I cried my eyes red for hours after hearing the news.

If I were a better daughter, I would have spent every day at her bedside. But I tearfully heeded my mother's request for me to properly attend school.

It was as if the world reconstructed the memories of everyone who knew me in order to erase the gap of my disappearance. I attended tenth grade and struggled to maintain decent grades after having missed the preceding year. My friends seemed not to remember that I had ever been absent.

Strangely, memories of the faery realm didn't begin to haunt me until a few years later.

The piano is sleek and cool beneath my fingers. I'm playing a piece I know, but I can't hear my own playing. The entrancing pied-piper melody is repeating in my head again. It's a familiar sound, yet I'm just as mesmerized as I was the first time I heard it.

Looking down at my rapid fingers, I suddenly realize that the keys I'm playing correspond perfectly with the notes of the music in my head. My brow furrows. I want to keep playing this song; I could probably play forever without tiring. But a single quiet, insistent thought refuses to cease its nagging.

Through a monumental effort, I tear my hands from the piano. The twisting melody vanishes at that instant. In a shock, I notice that the ivy entwining the piano has begun to wrap around my legs and waist in ominous green swirls.

I feel myself becoming trapped, as if the faery world is swallowing my very being. Panic sets in.

"What's wrong?" asks the faery, her diamond eyes cold.

I shake my head desperately before finding the words to speak. "I can't stay here. Let me leave."

Her eyes narrow. "I enjoyed the music you played. Why should I let you leave?"

"I heard that song played here several times before I played it. I'm not the only one who can play it," I argue.

A hint of amusement lightens her gaze. "What you heard were echoes from the future, silly human. You were the one playing all along."

At my disbelieving expression, she says, "Time works differently here, remember?"

I'm weary of the strange ways of the faery realm. "Will you let me leave?" I ask simply.

She seems to recognize the resolve in my eyes. "Give your song to the realm as a gift, and you will be able to leave." Her lips form an almost-smile. "But remember that once you leave, your song will remain here, and you will no longer be able to play it."

I often awaken with dreams of carousels and statues and twisting ivy dissolving into the daylight. Occasionally, I'll catch a hint of a particular scent of smoke and cotton candy on the breeze, or of apples in the evening coolness.

Sometimes I wonder what would have become of me had I stayed in the faery world. My only guess is that I likely would have lost all sense of self and become a mere extension of that piano. Like the painted horses, cantering as the carousel spins on, or the juggler, forever catching and tossing his sundry knives.

In a way, I never truly escaped the faery realm. The time-bending melody I played returns to me in every moment of silence, and strange scenes from faery torment my eyes from behind closed lids. Perhaps the reason these memories are unable to fade with time is because they are from a world in which time behaves altogether differently.

Even if that's the case, I find that time is far crueler in this world. The memory of my mother hangs by fragile threads, already eroded by the seven years that have passed. My tears have long dried, but my heart still mourns. It seems that grief and photographs are the only things time cannot consume in its endless hunger.

And now, here I sit again, before my piano. I should have given up this endeavor well before I began it. Yet like a thousand times before, I find myself pressing on worn keys, trying to capture that frustratingly familiar melody. And like a thousand times before, the song eludes me, like a ghost that isn't quite there.

It's a useless and meaningless struggle. That music has found its home in faery. No amount of determination will reclaim the gift I gave freely. So why do I still try? I don't quite understand my own compulsion. I suppose the more worthwhile question to ask is, will I ever quit? Only time will tell.