

Kristina Marie Darling

THE CELLO

On nights like this I would play my cello, the snow like tinfoil under a phosphorescent moon. Before I knew it, you were there, with your handkerchiefs and your melancholia. The light on my windowpane, a struck match all aglow. We would take turns cradling the instrument's long neck, its cavernous belly, watching the cold metal strings shiver and hum. After each chord you'd swallow glittering nerve tablets, whispering: *Be still. Be. Still.* Its sonorous voice faded with each blue pill. And when the snow eddied and slushed, the cello safe in its towering white box, I took up sainthood to pass the time. On winter mornings my teeth still ache.

THE HOMECOMING

Once he returned from a long trip and found dozens of dead canaries. They littered the terrace, his doorstep, every dirty windowsill, casting strange yellow light and tiny shadows. That night he tried to clear the cobblestones of their otherworldly debris, humming Dvorak and muttering to himself. A coffee pot rattled in the kitchen. Then he stopped, leaving feathers to drift in each corner, the old grey house still an homage to some other life.

DEAREST V.,

Halfway through a silent film, with its dark curtains and pale women, I start to think of the cello. Did a corseted actress say your name? Did she somehow mean *eclipsed*? Behind the stage, a piano moves to lower octaves, shuddering one note at a time. And as trolleys flicker across a porous screen, I can almost hear your white teeth glisten, like little bells. At that, the audience applauds.

THE PATRON

Come in, the cellist said, showing her up a flight of dusty stairs. She recalled the thin wooden railings from her last visit, when they found canaries nesting in a corridor. Tonight, their song waxes with her restlessness, ticking like a metronome into the dark blue night. At this the musician begins to stare. He brushes their pale feathers from his tuxedo, buttoning his long silk gloves. The woman rifles through her pocketbook.

THE ORCHESTRA

My instrument is a splintered viola that no longer sounds. And its strings snapped one by one, curling like vines into the greenish night. When the connoisseur left, with his gold pocket watch and unsightly bifocals, every concerto grew oddly dissonant. Our conductor wanted nothing but to count aloud. The dark blue hall still rings with the sound of his tally, a rapt audience humming along.

SAINT BRIGID

Or do I mean a mourning dove, rustling in the trees? Again, the harps are quiet. Ever since her miracles stopped, the sisters have wept and wept. And when the organ starts up, groaning under vaults and beams, light catches the dust in every window. Pews begin to glisten as though they were polished steel. A dark bird warbles in the nunnery while the hagiographers nod their heads, listening intently from the eaves.

THE SPECTACLE

It was the night of his first performance and the audience had arrived. Each of the gentlemen, magnificent in pinstripes and a red silk tie, seemed ready to bare his teeth. And while the men tapped their feet, waiting for a grandiloquent concerto to begin, even the arched brows of the women seemed to threaten. *Yet there is something inherently carnivorous about an audience*, the musician thought as the lights dimmed. He struck the first chord. The ladies, gathering their long blue skirts, were the first to rise.