

The Pianist and The Poet

Ace Anthony

Please note, this piece contains content related to homophobia and drug usage.



Someone had accidentally thrown a dark scarlet shirt over the lamp in the corner, turning the room into a dim, bloody haze. It fueled a sense of carnality that flowed through Orpheus' veins. His urge to take a bite out of the world to see what he'll spit back up. Orpheus was more determined than most.

The small table lamps were enamored with the smell of cigarettes; the pleated fabric had been stained a smoke-ugly yellow from too much absorption. Crude tobacco had been curling around his head for so long that it settled at the edge of every inhale Orpheus took. The room was slowly aging with an insipid composure as expensive cologne and hairspray settled heavily in the air amongst every other indistinguishable fragrance. Grime found itself in corners, courting fallen cigarette ash, but everyone pretended not to notice. Consistent humidity of the July night crept through the room like an animal. As the hours passed, it became sweltering; heat grabbed on to any and all exposed skin with hands hot enough to sweat and bruise.

The piano keys were the only cool things in the jazz club besides the drinks. Sweat slid easily into Orpheus' collar under the single spotlight that graced him like his playing was an extension of God. He felt the steady beat of the music through the floor as it licked up his feet—acutely shaking

his skeleton—all the way to his head. The draw and enchantment of the music humming was so fervid that the high Orpheus experienced was nearly unmatched. The only thing that came close was his gaze.

Orpheus knew that Eurydice's dark eyes were dutifully in the corner watching his hands. Watching Orpheus' calculated breaths he took in time with the notes because Eurydice had insisted on finding a mistake. Orpheus knew that there weren't any.

Orpheus could see Eurydice's fingers tracing the rim of his glass. It was a whiskey sour with only a lemon garnish because the bar was out of cherries. He watched the man swallow from across the room. Imagined how the cool drink settled at the bottom of his stomach, mixing with the other three whiskeys and that one sip of the daiquiri he had stolen from his girlfriend without her noticing. Orpheus determined that Eurydice hadn't looked at her in thirteen minutes—since his set had started. It had been the second time Orpheus played for the night and as his fingers graced over the keys, he felt proud in his ability to seduce a crowd nearly twice the size it had been previously. However, as he glanced up from the music at his stand, the way Eurydice shifted back assuredly into the shitty club chair with taut shoulders and a keen gaze made Orpheus feel like they were the only ones in the room. Orpheus got severe tunnel vision as everyone shrank into insignificant shadows amidst the red blur. His

eyes, that mouth; Christ, Eurydice could do that to someone.

Orpheus played some fused version of sultry and bluesy jazz music as best as he could on piano that was probably too funky for 1966, but the elite, rich money trash of Chicago were too drunk to care. Anne, Eurydice's girlfriend whom Orpheus knew he only occasionally dated and kissed even less, glanced at the pianist thrice during the hour and a half that he sat at the piano bench, and a fourth time when he finished. She stood and clapped, a second later than she should've, Orpheus noted, clearly too caught up in a conversation with the big-eyed, big-mouthed friend from the college all three of them attended. He thought it was pathetic.

Eurydice had that sharp gaze on him. Orpheus smiled when he noticed Eurydice was the only one who didn't clap, who didn't stand.

When Orpheus stood to bow, the way the room lit up into adoration and praise reminded him of sparks dancing in midair before exploding into flame. Orpheus went to the bar and ordered a drink so he didn't look so desperate—or so goddamn nervous, fuck—when he made his way to the secluded corner near the door of the jazz club. Another whiskey sour. Hands graced his wrists and arms from tables full of old balding men and women with too much makeup as he slithered through the mass; Orpheus thought he was being shot around like a billiard ball, crashing into eager mouths with too much conversation.

Orpheus managed to pry himself free from the sticky spider web of people craving his presence and time, and Eurydice's eyes were already on him as he approached. "You played well," he said, and even though Orpheus had received the same compliment from seven other people tonight, it meant more from Eurydice because he would be the one to know when he played well. Eurydice had seen Orpheus play more than anyone else

"Oh really?" Orpheus asked, pulling a chair

from the neighboring table and sat down in front of him without asking. "You didn't clap for me. I'm offended, truly."

Eurydice looked away smiling, his cheekbones flushed.

Anne and her big-mouthed blondie perked up at the sound of Orpheus' voice, "Well, well." She pulled out a cigarette box and a lighter from her purse. "Hello, Orpheus."

He snatched a cigarette for himself. He looked at Anne in question and silently begged for the lighter—for permission to sit and talk with Eurydice. She considered him then. Orpheus knew he was dressed simply for a jazz bar, in just a performance jacket, but everyone else had meticulously chosen their best suit or designer purse. Anne certainly was no exception, Orpheus noted. Eurydice had on that plain brown leather jacket that stank of stale beer and that shitty drugstore perfume Orpheus suggested he buy Anne for her birthday two months ago. It looked good on him—more than that.

Anne rolled her eyes and clicked to life her cheap silver lighter. Orpheus tried his best to appear grateful.

Orpheus then disregarded anything else that the two girls had to say and turned to Eurydice. His bronze skin appeared dark in the lack of light, brown hair turned mahogany under the smoky crimson. They immediately discussed the intimacies of their lives; they hadn't seen each other since Eurydice's graduation a few weeks ago. His voice was heavy and masculine like a sophisticated trombone that only knew low, liquid jazz solos. His hands were settled around his now empty glass, but occasionally Eurydice reopened the small journal he kept in his pocket—now at the table—to write down small lines of poetry; Eurydice had studied English throughout college despite the protest of his parents. After an hour, he gave Orpheus that dark look and suddenly he itched to leave the polluted, cloudy bar.

Orpheus then convinced Anne that he and

Eurydice desperately needed to get some air. She waved them off with a flick of her hand like she was merely swatting away a fly. In return, Orpheus stole her cigarettes.



Eurydice thought Chicago was bursting with energy, as if the city had been electrocuted. People flooded the sidewalks and streets like an ocean of moving bodies as chatter rang out in all directions trying to find an ear to catch. Cars inched through traffic in a perpetual state of start-and-stop; horns screeched out above yells from taxi drivers and distant ambulance sirens trying to catch tonight's overdoses. July's gentle breeze hit him like a car crash after so long in the heat of the bar. Eurydice ascended the stairs from the basement level door with Orpheus and, when the pianist looked back at him, Eurydice felt as if everything in him moved.

The brick of the neighboring building scratched the stiff leather of Eurydice's jacket as he leaned further into it. Orpheus stood next to him sucking the life out of the cigarette in his hand. Eurydice knew it eased him. Their shoulders touched briefly. Eurydice felt the slight pressure of Orpheus' hands the last time they did this, as if that was enough for heat to spark and crawl over Eurydice's skin like wildfire. Their fingers brushed as Orpheus passed the cigarette to him, but their hands ghosted over one another. It sent voltaic currents through Eurydice. It was the most they would allow each other; two queers in a dark alley was unacceptable. Despite this, Eurydice kept his hand over Orpheus' until the smoke started to burn his skin and he passed the cigarette back.

"Hey, I was wondering," Orpheus started, but cut himself off. Worry was etched into his pale face—his mouth turned downward just so.

Eurydice turned so that his shoulder rested against the wall and crossed his arms. Sweat perspired at Orpheus' brow and upper lip; the club

had been unforgivingly warm during the extreme heat wave that had recently conquered Chicago, and Orpheus had played all night.

"Tell me," Eurydice said.

"I was just thinking. About us," Orpheus admitted.

The corner of Eurydice's mouth curled up into a wry grin. "What about us?"

Orpheus paused, hesitant. He looked downwards and took a generous drag; then he found his valor and grasped their hands together. "What if we could go somewhere where we wouldn't have to hide like this? Where it could be just us and we wouldn't have to worry about, you know—" he nodded towards the street of strangers who dared to glance at them in passing.

Eurydice felt horrified, felt as if his heart was violently being pierced and his ribs shattered into a thousand pieces when he took a step back; Eurydice would have to tell him. There was utter ambition and optimism in Orpheus' eyes before his face fell dreadfully, almost panicked, when he read Eurydice's features. If only Orpheus could feel the shockwaves running down Eurydice's spine as his anguish already started to bubble in him. He scrambled to find his profundity.

"My parents are going to be here in a week to move me out of Chicago. They want me to start running the business now that I've graduated. But—" Eurydice hastily took a breath, "—once I marry Anne, I don't think we will see each other again."

Orpheus' face settled to a blank, empty look but his eyes were frightened. "You're going to marry her?" he sputtered urgently, almost like he was trying to seize any opportunity to prevent that nightmarish outcome.

Eurydice, the poet, nearly choked on his own words. "Well, I have to marry someone." In their short lived glance at one another, the unsaid implication smothered any possibility of elaborating on it.



“Christ, Eurydice.” Orpheus said, carding through his hair harshly and yanking through knots in determination. “You don’t have to tell your parents, we can—we can just leave. Tomorrow, yeah, definitely tomorrow.” Orpheus laughed at how desperate he sounded.

Eurydice opened his mouth but said nothing. His eyes searched Orpheus’ in anxiety. A police siren rang past, filling the empty space between them.

Orpheus tried again. “Your father’s company? Why can’t your brother take over?” But it wasn’t good enough. Eurydice’s eyes were vacant, his mouth set firmly. Orpheus caught the apprehensive look beneath the mask of Eurydice’s features; he was terrified to go back home, but Orpheus knew that as the son of a stubborn father and heir to a wealthy family-owned business, Eurydice didn’t have a choice.

Eurydice laughed and it sounded empty when it reverberated against the opposite brick wall and onto Orpheus—the impact feeling equivalent to being stuck. “Well, hey, it was fun while it lasted, right?” Eurydice’s voice sounded final and defeated like he had just suffered a great battle. He was hanging his armor and sheathing his sword before execution. “I mean, we both knew this couldn’t have been permanent.”

Permanent. It came from the Latin word, *permanere*, which meant to endure, to continue, or to stay until the end.

Orpheus was this close to vomiting.

He was struggling to breathe. It’s been over a year since the first time, since Orpheus fought tooth and nail to convince Eurydice to come back to his apartment, since they kissed side by side on the old piano bench he bought the first day he moved to Illinois, since—

Eurydice faced the open and awaiting mouth of Chicago. Orpheus watched as he lit another cigarette

with shaking hands. Smoke curled and trailed up from Eurydice’s silhouette, climbing with no direction into a black, desolate night. He didn’t look back as he walked out from the alley and under the streetlights that welcomed him with open arms.

Permanent.

Orpheus thought he was dying.

He didn’t go to the club for four days; they will probably fire him. Orpheus laid on his shitty flat mattress in his shitty 40s style apartment drinking his shitty whiskey.

Eurydice was leaving tomorrow. Orpheus was steadily drinking his way through his guilt.

The phone on the wall rang out for a fourth time that day, probably the jazz club. Orpheus pictured himself getting up and answering it, and imagined Eurydice on the other side.

Orpheus would say hello.

Eurydice would say hello back.

Orpheus would ask if there was anything he could do to make him stay.

Eurydice would stay silent.

Orpheus threw his shoe at the phone but missed. Fuck you, he thought.

It was when Orpheus had determined he was not going to just let Eurydice fucking leave without a proper goodbye had he flushed out an entire speech that would convince him tomorrow to stay. He had to make Eurydice understand. He had to stay.

Orpheus had chain smoked through a pack and a half before he realized he didn’t have any more cigarettes. That can’t be right, they’re around here somewhere, he thought. He got up and threw the blankets off his bed. Then knocked over the empty dishes on the nightstand. Where did he keep them again? He threw the framed pictures of himself from different stages of his life off the dresser—his parents at his senior prom, his first day at the jazz club sitting at the piano, a half-

blurred portrait of Eurydice. They shattered as they hit the floor. Orpheus went to the kitchen and checked every drawer, tossing silverware and butcher knives carelessly onto the floor, not caring if they chipped into the wood. He ravaged his fridge. Dishes exploded onto the floor like bombs. Whiskey and cheap wine pooled onto the floor like blood from a body—slowly. He burned books worth of sheet music. Then the letters of poetry from Eurydice that Orpheus selfishly kept and the journal titled ‘The Pianist’ he had forgotten there. Orpheus almost set his apartment on fire. He broke off one of the legs of the piano bench and raised it above his head like a baseball bat to strike down on the piano. For a moment, he saw the ghost of them there: shadows dancing against the furniture in desperation. Eurydice’s hands over his, guiding them. A distant melody sounded in Orpheus’ head but the keys glistened with dust from a lack of use. He pathetically dropped the damn block of wood.

Orpheus laid down in the wake of his hands and, after nearly a week, cried.



Eurydice’s apartment was an empty void of ugly orange wallpaper. The series of apartments was near campus and endured the pitiful, neglected treatment that all academic housing suffered. The dead moth in the corner was mocking him. Everything was regrettably being moved by his little brother and the renters company his parents had hired into the little white truck his mom was currently smoking next to. Eurydice blinked back tears and his ache. His parents’ black Porsche was parked in the front lot. It was a hot day to move.

Eurydice’s family was his own kind of personal hell. His father was adamant with upholding an image to business partners and buyers; Eurydice, as a gay man, wasn’t sure he was going to survive.

A small shadow moved out of the corner of his eye. Eurydice turned to the window and—there. He

strode over and whipped the window open, hauling a sly Orpheus crouching on the fire escape into the apartment by his collar. Eurydice saw his car parked where it always was: the spot that overlooked his window, where they would throw cigarette butts on top of his car and count them in the morning like souvenirs. The black fire escape was radiating heat in blistering waves. Eurydice turned bewilderedly to Orpheus quietly gazing at the hollow, pitiful room.

Eurydice couldn’t believe it. “What are earth on you—”

But Orpheus’ hands had already found purchase on either side of his jaw and kissed him there. Eurydice clutched tightly to the tweed jacket Orpheus had stolen from him four months ago. Eurydice was already out of breath. Orpheus set something alight in him, like some feverish poem that rhymed with hunger. Eurydice would let Orpheus eat him alive.

Orpheus pulled away after the sharp, southern voice distantly rang through the hall. My mother, Eurydice thought. Orpheus looked frightfully at him, urgency lacing his voice. “Eurydice, look, I don’t care what you think or if you—”

“Stop.” Eurydice began, searching Orpheus’ defiant yet alarmed eyes. He looked at him and it reminded Eurydice of the first time—across the jazz bar, his hands vehemently adorning the piano keys and that steady, dark gaze when he glanced up. September heat had been thick between them then. “I don’t know how we’ll make it work, but we will. I want to go. We can go.” Eurydice nodded, smiled, and that was all Orpheus needed.

He took Eurydice’s wrist and ran.



The fire escape shook under their weight and Eurydice laughed at how reckless Orpheus was being, but he didn’t care. He felt light and driven. Orpheus knew Eurydice’s family would now be standing in the doorway of the desolate apartment

wondering where their son had gone. Everything felt irrelevant compared to the immense significance of this moment. Orpheus' hands were shaking violently as he fumbled with the keys to his car. He could've cried. Fortunately, he managed to start the engine and pulled erratically out of the parking lot with his newfound sense of amazement. They drove further and further away from campus grounds and Orpheus' heart steadily returned to a normal rhythm—a slow jazz piece: dark and bohemian.

Orpheus' hands were steady over the wheel, the pedals thrumming underneath his feet as he accelerated before shifting. Eurydice's hand was over his on the gear shift and Orpheus let him do all the work.

Orpheus glanced over at him. Eurydice's eyes were alight. His mouth pulled back in a half-smile, defiance and astonishment set in his features. Orpheus felt dizzy and invincible, and he laughed out loud stupidly, because he was just as shocked. As Orpheus looked at Eurydice, he failed to notice the car who tried to slam on their brakes, as Orpheus ran through the red light, but couldn't stop fast enough. He didn't brace for the impact it made in

Eurydice's side of the car, nor how far it propelled them into oncoming traffic. He wouldn't remember the ambulance. The flatline that rang in a pitched Bb. Later, Orpheus would be numb to Eurydice's family tearing him apart limb by limb in court, claiming that he purposefully killed their son. He would become nauseous with guilt. He would break down after being asked to play in memory of him. Orpheus wouldn't play again for years.

But for now, in the car, Orpheus only thought of Eurydice, and the ease set across his features. His poet hands, which were lightly placed on his knees and fingering the chords Orpheus had taught him when he asked to learn piano six months ago. The easy exhale. Sunlight turned his skin to gold. They shifted into second gear. Eurydice started humming the song Orpheus had played the first night they met at the jazz bar—his favorite. Orpheus was forever waiting for the impact of the car.

There, persevering against all else, was love. This felt—permanent.

Eurydice asked what Orpheus was smiling at, and when he said nothing, Eurydice laughed—outright and boyish and pure.