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Theme

WHEN WAS THAT MEMORY FROM? I'm not sure.

I'd just learned to walk, so I couldn't have been much more than a toddler. Of that much I'm certain.

Far away, sunlight shone down, covering the world in its glow – cold, dispassionate, unstinting.

In that moment, the world to me felt bright, endless, forever trembling and wavering, a sublime yet terrifying place to be.

There was a faint, sweet fragrance mixed with the intense smell of greenery found only in nature.

A gentle breeze was blowing.

My body was enfolded in a rustling sound, gentle and cooling. I didn't know yet that this was the sound of leaves on the trees brushing against each other.

But there was something else.

I could see in the air a dense, lively shape that changed from moment to moment, growing smaller and then larger, constantly shifting.

I was still too young even to say *Mummy* or *Daddy*, yet I felt like I was already searching for a way to express something.

The words were in my throat, right there.

But first, another sound began to emerge, capturing my attention.

Like a sudden downpour.

It was powerful, bright.

Something – a wave, a vibration – rippled out.

As I listened, captivated, I felt as if my very being was immersed in it, and a calm settled on my heart.

If I could experience that moment again, I would describe it

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as the astonishing sound of a swarm of bees buzzing over the top of a hill.

A sublime, magisterial music that filled the world!

Prelude

THE YOUNG MAN TURNED around at the intersection, startled. But it wasn't because a car had beeped at him.

He was in the middle of a major metropolis.

The cosmopolitan city centre of Europe, the number-one tourist destination in the world.

The pedestrians were of all nationalities, all shapes and sizes. A mosaic of different races filling the pavements, the mixture of languages waxing and waning like ripples.

This boy, who, by coming to a sudden halt, had disrupted the waves of passers-by flowing around him, was of medium build, but gave the impression he would soon shoot up even further. He looked fourteen, perhaps fifteen, and seemed the picture of youthful innocence.

He wore a cap, cotton trousers and a khaki-coloured T-shirt, along with a lightweight beige coat. An oversized canvas bag was slung diagonally across his shoulders. At first glance he looked like a typical teen, but there was something strangely free and easy about him.

He had an attractive Asian face beneath his cap, but his striking eyes and white skin made him seem, in a way, unplaceable.

He was looking up.

Oblivious to the traffic, his calm eyes were staring at one fixed point.

A small blond boy passing by with his mother followed the young man's gaze upwards, until his mother tugged him by the

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hand, dragging him over to the other side of the crossing. The boy looked longingly back at the young man in the dark brown cap, before giving up to docilely follow his mother.

The young man, standing stock-still in the middle of the pedestrian crossing, finally realized the lights had changed, and walked swiftly across to the other side.

He'd definitely heard something.

As he adjusted the bag across his chest, he considered the sound he'd heard at the intersection.

The buzzing of honeybees.

A sound he'd known since he was a child, a sound he could never mistake.

Had they flown over from near the Hôtel de Ville perhaps?

He looked around, eyes searching, and when he spotted the large clock on the corner, he realized he was late.

I have to keep my promise, he told himself.

The young man pulled down his cap and ran off, his stride limber and supple.

MIEKO SAGA WAS USED TO being patient, but she realized with a start that she was about to fall asleep.

She stared about her, unsure where she was, but when she spotted the grand piano, and the young woman playing, she knew she must be in Paris.

Experience had taught her not to suddenly sit bolt upright and look around. Do that and people were sure to know you'd been snoozing. The trick was to gently place a hand to your temple, as if listening intently, and then shuffle a little in your seat, as if tired of holding the same position for so long.

But it wasn't just Miekeo who had trouble staying awake. She knew for certain that the other music professors would be feeling exactly the same. Alan Simon, beside her, was a heavy smoker, and to go for so long without a nicotine fix, while listening to such appallingly tedious performances, must be driving him mad. Very soon his fingers would surely start to twitch.

On his other side, she knew that Sergei Smirnoff, sour-faced,

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would be leaning his large frame against the table, not moving a muscle but thinking of when it would all be over and he'd be released to get to the bar for a drink.

Mieko was with them on that. She loved music, but also life and all its pleasures – cigarettes and alcohol included. All she wanted was to be set free from this painful trial so that, together, they could have a drink and gossip.

Auditions for the Yoshigae International Piano Competition were being held in five cities around the world: in Moscow, Paris, Milan, New York and in the Japanese city of Yoshigae itself. Apart from in Yoshigae, the auditions were all taking place in the concert halls of famous music schools.

Mieko was aware there'd been complaints about her and the other two judges being selected to oversee the Paris auditions, and indeed they had each manoeuvred behind the scenes to ensure this outcome. They were regarded among the cohort of judges as the bad boys, who loved a drink and were always ready with a scathing review.

But they still took pride in their ear for music. Maybe their behaviour wasn't the best, but they had established a reputation for spotting originality. If anyone was going to discover a bright new name among those who'd been initially dismissed, it would be them. Of this they were certain.

But even they were now beginning to lose their concentration.

Earlier on there had been two or three pianists who seemed promising, but the performances that followed had dashed all Mieko's hopes.

What they were on the lookout for was a *star*.

In all there were twenty-five candidates. They were now up to number fifteen, with ten more to go. She began to feel a little faint. It was at this point that the same thought crossed her mind again: being a judge was a new form of torture.

Listening to the endless permutations of Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, she felt like she was fading away.

She knew from the moment a pianist began to play if they

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had a special spark. Some of her colleagues boasted they could tell the moment a performer stepped on to the stage. Indeed, some young pianists did have an aura about them, and even if they didn't, it was easy to discern in the first few minutes the quality of their playing. Dozing off was rude and unfeeling, but if a performer couldn't hold the interest of even a judge who had developed extra staying power, that pianist hadn't a hope of ever bonding with ordinary music fans.

Miracles never happen, after all.

Mieko was certain the other two were thinking the same thing.

The Yoshigae International Piano Competition was held every three years, and this year was the sixth time it had taken place. In recent years, the reputation of the Yoshigae competition had grown. Winners were beginning to move on to scoop prizes in more famous contests. Yoshigae had quickly won a name as an event for emerging talent.

The winner of the last Yoshigae had actually failed the initial application screening. So there were naturally great hopes for the current auditions, as the entrants were well aware of the previous competition's Cinderella story.

But even this winner had come from a well-known music school, and had only been turned down initially because he was too young to have gained the requisite experience from other competitions. In reality there was seldom much of a gap between the application screening and the pianist's actual ability. If someone had, from a young age, distinguished themselves through diligent practice, and had been taught by a renowned teacher, they would rise to fame. The truth was that if someone couldn't handle that type of life, then they would never become a noted pianist. It was impossible that some unknown would show up out of nowhere and become a star. Occasionally some prize pupil of a doyen of the music scene would appear, but their pampered grooming only made it harder for them to fly the nest. A concert pianist had to have nerves of steel. The pressures of numerous competitions demanded enormous physical and mental strength,

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and without those qualities no one could survive the gruelling tours of a professional concert pianist.

But still scores of young hopefuls showed up at the piano, and there seemed to be no end to them.

Having a good technique was the minimum requirement. Even then, there was no guarantee you could become a true musician. Even for those who turned professional, that didn't mean their career would last. How many countless hours had they spent labouring over the keys at the mouth of that terrifying black monster, forgoing the pleasures of childhood, shouldering all the hopes and expectations of their parents? Dreaming, all of them, that one day they would be showered with thunderous applause.

'Your profession and mine have a good deal in common.'

Mieko remembered Mayumi's words.

Mayumi Ikai was a friend from high school who had become a popular mystery writer. Having grown up mainly abroad, Mieko had spent only four years of her childhood in Japan, and Mayumi was one of her very few friends there. Because of her father's career as a diplomat, Mieko had gone back and forth between Europe and South America, and so didn't fit in well in Japan, where homogeneity was prized above all. The only close friendships she'd made were with other loners like Mayumi. Even now they still met up for a drink every once in a while, and Mayumi would make a comparison between the literary and classical-music worlds.

'They're so alike, aren't they?' she said on one occasion. 'You have far too many piano competitions, and there are way too many literary awards for new writers. You see the same people applying for piano competitions all over, to gain prestige, and the same holds true for all these literary prizes. In both fields, only a handful of individuals are ever able to carve out a living. There are tons of writers who want people to read their books, tons of pianists who want people to listen to them, but both fields are in decline, the number of readers and concert-goers gradually shrinking.'

Mieko gave a forced smile. Throughout the world, fans of

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classical music were indeed ageing, and the profession's daunting task was to somehow lure in younger audiences.

Mayumi went on.

'There's all that banging away at a keyboard too, and the fact that, on the surface, both seem quite elegant professions. All anyone else sees is the final product, the polished pianist on stage, but in order to get there, we have to spend countless hours quietly hidden away.'

'True enough,' Mieko agreed. 'We both spend hours banging away at our respective keyboards.'

'For all that,' Mayumi said, 'both professions have to constantly expand their horizons and bring in a steady flow of new blood, or else you'd run out of leaders. The pie itself would shrink as well. That's why everyone's always searching for that new face.'

'But the cost is different,' Mieko countered. 'You don't need capital to write novels, but do you know how much we musicians have invested?'

Mayumi was sympathetic. She nodded and started ticking them off on her fingers.

'You have the cost of an instrument, music scores, lessons,' she said. 'Expenses for recitals, flowers, clothes. Travel expenses, if you study abroad. And – what else?'

'In some cases you have to pay rental fees for the concert hall, and expenses for the staff. If you put out a CD, sometimes you need to pay the costs for that. Then there's the cost of flyers and advertising.'

'Not a business for poor people.' Mayumi shuddered and Mieko grinned.

'But there's one important part, isn't there, where you have it better than us writers,' Mayumi said. 'Music is understood wherever you go in the world. There's no language barrier. Everyone can share the same emotions. We writers have a language barrier, and I'm so envious of musicians for that universality of language and emotion.'

'You're right,' Mieko said and shrugged. It wasn't something you could explain in words. So seldom did the investment of time

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and money pay off, yet once you experienced that *special moment* you felt a kind of joy that erased all the struggles you'd made to get there.

Every single one of us is seeking the same thing – craving, thirsting after that magical moment.

There were five dossiers left.

Five more pianists.

Mieko had begun to consider who among the competitors she was going to allow through. Based on what she'd heard, there was only one she felt comfortable passing. And there was one other who, if the other judges recommended them, might also pass. No one else was at the level she was looking for.

What always threw her at this point was the question of the order of the competitors. At first, she might think a pianist had done a good job, but was that really true? If she heard the same performance a second time, would she still feel the same? In auditions and competitions, order was destiny, and had a profound influence, and while she tried to make a clear distinction between order and ability, it still bothered her.

There had been two Japanese competitors so far, both studying at the Conservatoire here in Paris, and both of them had excellent technique. One of them she wouldn't mind passing if the other two judges were of the same mind, but unfortunately the other performer didn't impress her. When the technical level was this high, what you were left with to make a distinction between the competitors was a certain ineffable *something* that tugged at you, that grabbed you, in their playing. Pianists with outstanding technique or an obvious, appealing individuality were one thing, but there was a fine line separating those who passed from those who didn't. Competitors you wondered about, those that caused a bit of a stir, that you couldn't take your eyes off. When she was wavering, she'd rely on these inexpressible, vague feelings. Mieko's criteria came down to this: did she want to hear this pianist again, or not?

As she opened the next folder, the name caught her eye.

Jin Kazama. **Copyrighted Material**

Mieko made it a rule not to learn much background info about any of the contestants before the competition.

But she couldn't help examining this dossier closely.

The documents were in French, so she had no idea which characters would be used to write his name, but he did appear to be Japanese. The accompanying photograph showed a young man who looked both refined and a bit wild. He was sixteen.

What caught her attention was that the CV was mostly blank. No academic background, no experience in competitions. Nothing. He'd gone to elementary school in Japan but had then moved to France. That's all that could be gleaned from the CV.

It wasn't so very unusual that he hadn't attended a college of music. In the music world, where child prodigies were a dime a dozen, many who debuted as children didn't go to music college; in fact there were many cases where they only attended as adults, in order to get more of a background in music theory that would enrich their performance. Mieko herself had followed the latter pattern, coming first and second in two international competitions while in her teens – she was seen as a budding girl genius – and attending college later on.

But according to this CV, there was no evidence that Jin Kazama had ever performed anywhere. All it said was that at present he was special auditor at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse in Paris. *Special auditor, or 'listener'?* Was there really a such a thing?

Mieko racked her brain as she considered this. The boy had actually passed the written-application stage, and would be taking an audition at the Conservatoire. She found it hard to believe this was made up.

But when she glanced at the bottom of the document, in the column showing whom he'd studied under, she could understand why, despite this joke of a CV, he'd passed.

Her whole body turned suddenly hot.

It can't be true, she thought, shaking her head.

Right at the start she'd seen that bit of the CV, but must have deliberately pretended not to notice.

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Has studied under Yuji Von Hoffmann since the age of five.

Her heart began to pound – she could feel the blood racing through her veins.

Mieko couldn't figure out why it had shaken her so much, and that shook her all the more.

That one simple sentence was so very important, and she could well understand why the dossier hadn't been rejected at the initial screening of written applications. Yet he had no performance experience at all, and wasn't at a music school. The boy was neither fish nor fowl, as far as she could see.

Mieko was dying to talk to the other two judges, but managed to suppress the urge. While she normally ignored any background information on the pianists, Simon was the type who always gave it a quick once-over, and Smirnoff made it a rule to glean as much information as possible, so they must have noticed this. To add to the surprise, there was a stamp on the application form indicating that a letter of recommendation was attached.

A letter of recommendation from Yuji Von Hoffmann! Her fellow judges must have been blown away by this.

Come to think of it, at dinner last night Simon seemed to be itching to tell them something. They had a self-imposed rule never to discuss the competitors. She could still picture his expression as he held back what he was clearly dying to say.

Simon had, at the time, spoken of Yuji Von Hoffmann, who had quietly passed away in February. His name was legendary – highly respected by musicians and music lovers around the world – but at his request he'd been given a private funeral with only close relatives in attendance.

But it didn't end there, for two months later, to mark his passing, international musicians held a huge memorial service. Mieko had a recital and wasn't able to attend, though she saw it all on video later on.

Hoffmann had not left a will. This was very like him, since he wasn't the type to become attached to anything, but at the memorial service the place was buzzing because of the final words Hoffmann was reported to have said to an acquaintance of his.

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I set a bomb to go off.

A *bomb*? Mieko asked. Hoffmann was always seen as a mysterious figure, looming large in the world of music, but in reality he had quite an irreverent and mischievous streak. Even so, Mieko couldn't fathom what he'd meant by these words.

After I've gone, it will explode. A beautiful bomb for the world.

Hoffmann's relatives had asked him to clarify what he meant, but he had merely beamed and said nothing more.

Mieko stared impatiently at the almost blank documents.

Simon and Smirnoff must both have read Hoffmann's recommendation letter. What could he have written?

She was so worked up it took her a moment to notice the commotion.

She looked up and saw that the stage was empty. Staff members were moving around, tidying up.

So Jin Kazama wasn't going to turn up after all?

That had to be it – something was wrong with his dossier. And with the letter of recommendation. Just before he died, Hoffmann must have been quite weak. And it was in this debilitated state that he had written a letter.

A staff member in the wings called out:

'We just received a call from the next competitor that it is taking some time to get here and that he will be late. He will perform last today, and the other pianists will be moved up in order.'

The audience fell silent as the next pianist, a young girl in a red dress, made her way on to the stage, obviously discombobulated at the sudden change, her eyes panicky.

Gosh.

Mieko was disappointed. But at the same time, relieved.

Jin Kazama. What kind of performance would he give?

'HURRY UP!'

The boy had finally arrived at the audition office, where an official had torn his entrance ticket, and then he had rushed in towards the stage.

'I, um, would like to wash my hands.'

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The boy asked a staff member, who looked ready to grab him by the scruff of the neck and hurl him straight on to the stage. Instead he said, 'Well, fine, but hurry up, OK? You need to change, don't you? The dressing rooms are over there.'

'Change?' the boy asked, looking blank. 'You mean I have to change my clothes?'

The man gave the boy a once-over.

Not by any stretch of the imagination was he wearing anything fit for the stage, he made clear. Was he really planning to go on dressed like this? Competitors usually wore something formal, and if not that, then at least a decent jacket.

The boy looked chastened.

'I'm sorry – I was helping my father with his work and came as I am. Anyway, I'll go and wash my hands.'

He spread his hands wide, and the staff member did a double take. There was dirt stuck to the large palms, as if the boy had been digging in a garden.

'What are you—?' he began, but the boy had already raced off to the toilets, and had disappeared from sight.

The man stood staring at the toilet door.

Had the boy mistaken this hall for somewhere else? He'd never seen anyone about to play in an audition with muddy hands.

He glanced down at the entrance ticket, thinking it might have been for some other kind of certification exam. But there was no mistake. And the boy matched his photo in the application papers.

The man tilted his head in wonder.

WHEN THEY SAW THE BOY appear on stage, Mieko and her fellow judges were taken aback.

He's just a child.

That was the word that sprang to mind.

He seemed totally out of place, partly because of his unkempt hair and his casual outfit, a T-shirt and cotton trousers, but also because of the way he gazed so intently around the stage. There were young musicians who deliberately adopted a punk

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look as if to provoke the austere world of classical music, but this young man in front of her wasn't that type. He appeared entirely natural, and spontaneous.

He was a lovely boy. And it was a loveliness entirely unaware of its own appeal, without any hint of self-consciousness. And his lithe young figure, sure to grow even taller, was also quite beautiful.

The boy stood there, looking vacant.

Mieko caught the eye of the other judges – they were at a loss for words.

'You're the last to play. Please begin,' Smirnoff said impatiently into the microphone.

They had a mic set up to address the performers, but Mieko realized this was the first time today anyone had actually used it.

The boy stood up straight.

'I'm very sorry for being so late.' His voice was more confident and more charming than you would have expected.

Dipping his head apologetically, he turned to face the grand piano. It was as if he'd only just noticed it.

An odd buzz rippled through the hall, like an electric shock.

Mieko felt it and noticed that her fellow judges had felt it too.

The young man's eyes seemed to sparkle.

He reached out a hand and walked over to the piano. Almost as if he were approaching a girl he'd fallen in love with at first sight.

He settled himself gracefully down on the stool in front of the piano.

The boy's eyes looked joyful. Certainly transformed from a moment ago, when he had been standing there looking so lost.

Mieko felt as if she were witnessing something she shouldn't see. A chill ran up her spine.

What am I so afraid of? she asked herself.

And that fear intensified the instant the boy's fingers touched the first few keys.

Mieko's hair stood on end. The two judges beside her, the staff in the wings, indeed everyone in the concert hall, shared the same fear.

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The atmosphere had been slack, and lax, but with those first notes there was a dramatic awakening.

The sound was . . . different. Totally different.

Mieko didn't even notice that the Mozart piece he'd started playing was the same one she'd heard all too many times already that day. The same piano, the same score, and yet—

Naturally she'd had this kind of experience before on numerous occasions. Where an outstanding pianist could play the same instrument as other pianists and yet produce a sound no one else could.

True enough, but this young man—

This sound was fierce, frightening.

Both confused and deeply moved, Mieko greedily took in the tone and timbre of the young man's playing, unconsciously leaning forward so as not to miss a thing. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Simon's fingers had suddenly stopped twitching.

The stage looked bright.

The spot where the young man was communing with the piano (that was the only way to put it) shone softly, colours seeming to undulate, to flow out from beneath his fingers.

When anyone plays Mozart's refined music, they try hard to raise themselves to that degree of elegance, opening their eyes wide in an attempt to express purity and innocence.

But this young man had no need to put on any sort of show. He simply drew out its essence, staying relaxed, completely natural.

There was both an abundance in his playing, and also a hint at untapped reserves. You could tell this wasn't his absolute best.

Before Mieko knew it, he was on to Beethoven.

The brilliant colour of the piece was transformed into something else, its drive and intent ebbing and flowing.

She couldn't quite express it, but it was as if that unique vector found in Beethoven shot out like an arrow from the boy's very fingers, the sound filling the concert hall.

And now he was playing Bach.

What is this? Mieko thought.

The boy had seamlessly woven together the three pieces,

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without a pause. As if unable to hold back the torrent once released, moving on to the next piece as naturally as taking a breath.

The young man controlled the entire hall, the audience giving themselves over to the notes pouring over them.

A powerful sound, Mieko thought vaguely.

Who would ever have imagined that this piano – muttering woefully until now – could emit such an astonishing sound?

The boy's large hands danced over the keys, easy and relaxed.

The music of Bach seemed like some sublime edifice looming over them.

Those fearfully elaborate, meticulous patterns, the layering of melodic lines making up an architecturally perfect whole, had closed in on them all.

He's almost devilish, Mieko thought.

Terrifying. Horrifying.

Mieko was truly shaken, but gradually she acknowledged something else rising up inside her – fury.

THE BOY GAVE A QUICK little bow of thanks before vanishing into the wings, and an eerie silence fell on the hall.

After a moment everyone came back to themselves. They burst into applause, their faces flushed.

The stage was now empty.

The audience exchanged glances. Had it all been a dream?

Smirnoff sat up and yelled, 'Hey, call him back! I have a few things I want to ask him.'

'I just don't believe it.' Simon fell back in his seat.

The concert hall was in uproar.

'Come on! Bring him back!' Smirnoff bellowed.

There was confusion backstage, then someone appeared. 'He's gone. He left as soon as he got offstage.'

'What?!' Smirnoff tore at his hair.

'Hoffmann's letter of recommendation was spot on,' Simon said before turning to Mieko. 'You didn't read it, did you, Mieko? I was dying to tell you about it, but couldn't because of what we'd agreed.'

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'This is *unforgivable*,' Mieko said.
'What?' Simon blinked at her.
'I will not accept this. *At all.*'
Mieko glared back at Simon.
He blinked again.
'Mieko?'
Trembling, Mieko placed her palms on the table.
'I will not allow it. That boy is an insult to Maestro Hoffmann. I will not pass him.'

Nocturne

*I present to you all Jin Kazama.
He is a gift. There are no other words to express it.
A gift from on high.
But please don't misunderstand me.
He's not the one being tested. I am, and so are all
of you.
He is not simply a sweet gift of divine grace.
He is also a powerful drug.
There will be some who hate him, who are exasperated by
him and who reject him. But that's the truth of who he is.
It's up to all of you – all of us – whether we see this
boy as a true gift, or as a disaster waiting to happen.*

Yuji Von Hoffmann

'I swear, what a shock,' said Simon. 'You responded just as Hoffmann said you would, Mieko. And it wouldn't surprise me if those Moscow cynics have reacted in the same way.'

Mieko was sitting beside him, wine glass in hand, sulking.

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Smirnoff was sipping silently from his glass, staring fixedly at Hoffmann's letter lying on the table.

The night was still young. Pedestrians were strolling past, and cars were streaming by in a blur of red tail lights.

The three music judges were camped out at the back of a bistro on the outskirts of Paris.

The owner remembered this trio, how they would drop in a few times a year to drink and grouse for hours at a time, and had ushered them to this table at the rear.

The meal seemed almost over, or perhaps they didn't have much of an appetite, for there were only a few dishes on the table, though they'd already consumed two bottles of wine.

Mieko's sulkiness was, in part, a way of hiding her embarrassment.

And the source of this discomfort was there, right before her eyes.

That flowing handwriting she'd seen before.

Simon and Smirnoff had been exchanging troubled looks, and at first Mieko had found this odd. In her frustration, she'd told Simon to *give me that letter*, and snatched it out of his hand. Now it silenced her.

Shock. Confusion. Shame. Humiliation.

A jumble of emotions swirled around in her.

The other two looked on sympathetically, hiding their smiles.

Hoffmann, who'd departed this world several months before, had, in his letter, neatly predicted the kind of reaction Mieko would have to Jin Kazama's audition.

So should Hoffmann be praised for his prescience? Or should Mieko be branded immature for reacting so violently, just as he'd known she would? Both, probably. For her part, Mieko inwardly berated herself for being so predictable.

She could picture Hoffmann looking down at her now and saying, *What did I tell you?*

THE WHOLE THING WAS, TO be honest, a complete shock.

Since she was little, people had labelled her wild and

unsophisticated. She was more often than not treated as a problem child. Certainly, she was no star pupil.

So how could I be rejecting this young country bumpkin's musicality? she asked herself. *Before he'd even begun – and after the way all those music professors in Japan and Europe back in the day had called me uncouth and uninhibited?*

She felt a sudden chill.

Am I starting to be one of those stubborn, thick-headed people myself? As I've got older, have I turned into a grumpy old woman, and just haven't noticed? I never thought that could happen, but have I – God forbid – become part of the establishment?

She started to knock back the wine more quickly.

'OK, so what are you so upset about, Mieko?'

Simon had been teasing her up until then with playfully barbed comments, but now he'd turned serious.

'Sorry?'

'I've never seen you react that way before. It's not how you usually are when you're angry. Usually, you become all sly or – maybe I shouldn't say this – a bit stand-offish. So why reject him like that?'

It did, certainly, feel strange to her now. She no longer felt angry about the boy, and even found it hard to actually recall the performance that had so infuriated her.

What was it that irritated me so much?

'Are you telling me you didn't feel anything yourself?' she asked. 'That kind of horrific – painful – sense of being slapped in the face?'

Simon cocked his head.

'No,' he said. 'I felt a chill, and a sense of elation, and I thought, *Wow, the way this boy can play is insane.*'

'That's what I mean,' Mieko said, nodding. 'There's a fine line separating that from disgust. Isn't it the case that you can feel something but can't decide if it feels good or not?'

'Well, admittedly pleasure and revulsion are two sides of the same coin.'

Auditions had a unique feel about them. Even if you

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recorded them, you could never reproduce what you'd felt in the moment.

There's no need for you to go through an audition.

A voice she'd heard somewhere suddenly flashed through Mieko's mind. A gentle voice, with a hint of a smile, yet still stern.

Maestro Hoffmann's voice.

She felt a dull ache inside her, as a long-forgotten feeling was triggered.

Ah, Mieko murmured to herself. I get it now.

Maybe I was just jealous.

That one line in his CV might have triggered it.

Has studied under Yuji Von Hoffmann since the age of five.

Just that single line, a line she'd always wanted to have in her own CV.

'I wonder – was he really any good?' Simon muttered, and the three of them glanced at each other.

Mieko knew how he felt.

'It happens sometimes. Everyone gets so worked up, but then they realize it was a passing thing.'

'Well, we're only human,' Simon said.

It happens sometimes – you listen to a pianist and think, *Wow, this person is really promising*, but then you hear them again and are disappointed.

'The problem lies elsewhere,' Smirnoff said.

'Problem?' Mieko and Simon asked simultaneously.

'It's becoming clear to me what Hoffmann meant by a *drug*.'

Smirnoff's expression was solemn, ominous. He leaned forward and the bistro chair gave a threatening creak.

'Meaning?' Simon's right eyebrow shot up.

'We're faced with a terrible dilemma.'

Smirnoff casually drained the wine in his glass as if it were water. He was known for being able to hold his drink, and maybe it did seem like water to him. Furthermore, whenever he was mulling over something, he seemed to speed up and begin to look more alert.

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'Dilemma?' Mieko murmured as she gazed uneasily at his now sober-looking face.

MIEKO MAY HAVE BEEN OUTRAGED, but after Jin Kazama left the building, the staff were buzzing.

The competition had not even begun, yet they were already talking about how a new star might have emerged. The way he appeared, as the final pianist, before vanishing immediately afterwards, certainly played a part. He left behind a hall filled with excitement. The staff member who had engaged with him explained what had happened.

'His hands were all muddy, and he said he was late because he was helping his father with his work. He didn't go into the green room, but just went to the toilets to wash his hands before going straight on stage.'

'So what does his father actually do?' Smirnoff asked, irritated that the competition office had so little information on the boy, apart from the CV.

Normally the judges would decide swiftly who had passed the auditions, but today they were holed up in a separate room, reviewing the results, and had yet to emerge. From time to time the staff outside would hear loud voices arguing, and exchange curious looks with each other. The whole thing was completely unprecedented.

The reason for the lengthy discussion was obvious: Mieko was dead set against passing Jin Kazama.

The three judges were basically in agreement about who else they would pass, so they spent most if not all of their time debating Jin's merits.

Simon and Smirnoff had both given him almost the highest mark possible in their system of scoring, so even if Mieko gave him a zero, Jin would have just scraped through. They could have ignored her views, and simply passed him, but neither Simon nor Smirnoff wanted to go down that route, and so their discussions dragged on endlessly.

Mieko knew perfectly well that Jin had effectively passed,

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yet she argued on, trying to get the others to reverse their decision.

The gist of her argument was this:

If he hadn't been Hoffmann's pupil, she wouldn't have put up a fight. But as he had presented himself as Hoffmann's protégé, and had got an actual letter of recommendation, she would not accept his foolish style of playing, which flew in the face of Hoffmann's own musicianship. It was as if the boy were purposely defying his teacher, deliberately picking a quarrel with him. That was a questionable stance for a musician to take. She could understand it if, after establishing himself as a musician, he decided to adopt a different style, but at this stage not to acknowledge what his teacher stood for was a major issue.

Simon and Smirnoff each indicated that they understood Mieko's position and took turns arguing her down.

'You do admit he has extraordinary technical skills and impact, don't you? If so, then whether you approve of his playing or not is outside our purview. If he exceeds a certain minimum level, then we must give him a chance. Whether we like the candidate's style of performance or not is, at this juncture, irrelevant.'

'In the first place, wouldn't you say it's quite astonishing that he's caused so much debate? The fact that he can inspire such diverse reactions is proof there's *something* about him worth considering. Aren't you the one always saying, Mieko, that if you have multiple judges, you end up choosing bland performers and how that's so uninspiring? Maybe it's just a fluke, but the fact is that he does provoke a strong emotional response, and shouldn't we give that due consideration? To say nothing of the fact that his technique is superb.'

There were no holes in the two men's arguments, and Mieko, feeling outnumbered, fell silent.

What they said next clinched it for her.

'Wouldn't you like to hear him again? Don't you want to make sure that it wasn't just an accident, a one-off?'

'Wouldn't you like the judges in Moscow and New York to hear him? Won't it be fun to see how he raises a few eyebrows?'

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The two of them knew which of Mieko's buttons to press. Auditions were taking place simultaneously in several cities, and the judges in charge of each had subtly different approaches. It wasn't as if they were in open disagreement, but Mieko and her two colleagues had dubbed the judges in Moscow and New York *The Authorities* and *The Sensible Ones* respectively (ironic nicknames, to be sure).

Mieko pictured those esteemed judges listening to Jin Kazama and reacting with disgust, then crowding around Mieko and her colleagues, hysterically shouting, *How in the world could you pass such a vulgar performance?*

Forgetting that she had reacted in the same way, the fact was that Mieko found this scenario very appealing. And this alone led her, albeit reluctantly, to agree to pass Jin Kazama.

OK, then – time to notify the successful candidates.

Before she could even nod in assent, Simon and Smirnoff simultaneously rose to their feet and left the room.

Mieko was left feeling a bit stunned. *They fooled me, sweet-talked me into it*, she mused. But by then it was too late.

PERHAPS IT WAS SMIRNOFF, THOUGH, who felt most keenly that the damage was done.

As the waiter refilled her glass from their third bottle of wine, Mieko gazed at her fellow judge.

'I bet he hasn't been having regular music lessons,' Smirnoff muttered. 'The way he behaved on stage, the fact that he ran the three pieces together without a pause – I'll bet he's never played to an audience before. Hoffmann was aware of this, which is why he sent a letter of recommendation. To ensure he attended the audition, and passed.'

'Well, that goes without saying,' Mieko said.

Smirnoff gave an exaggerated shrug.

'Hey, don't pretend you don't understand, you two. You know very well what I'm trying to say.' He gulped down his wine. 'It's as you said earlier, Mieko. We can't very well deny Maestro

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Hoffmann's musical legacy. We all respected him so much, he was an astonishing musician. Plus there's the fact that he's no longer with us.'

Smirnoff looked quite stern now. 'We went ahead and passed the boy. You saw how the staff adored him, didn't you? Rumours were rife. About Hoffmann's letter, too, of course.'

Mieko shivered.

'So why include a letter in the first place? To make it almost impossible for us to fail him.' Smirnoff gave an odd smile as he looked at the others.

Simon took over.

'In other words, it's OK to fail someone without a letter of recommendation.'

Smirnoff nodded, looking satisfied.

'Exactly. Because all of us are eking out a living after an established musical education. Having students pay for private lessons all their lives, getting them into music conservatories and making them pay yet more tuition fees. Our pupils, our pride and joy, spend so much time and effort to become great, and so we can't very well treat someone who comes out of nowhere, with no pedigree – someone whom no one ever made a living teaching – in the same way. Hence the letter of recommendation.'

Mieko suddenly recalled a bit of gossip she'd heard.

A local city council in Japan had sponsored a piano competition, and one competitor who seemed like a real musical genius had got the highest marks, yet he had no connections in the musical world in Japan, and had never taken lessons with anyone connected with the competition, let alone with any of the judges. Despite the high marks, the judges ended up picking on some minor issues and disqualifying him.

'Hoffmann's letter had a double goal. The first was to allow this complete unknown to be in the audition, and pass. And the second goal . . .' for an instant Smirnoff's eyes had a far-away look in them ' . . . was to ensure that hereafter he would never be ignored. That's why the letter was an absolute must. And

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dismissing this boy would be tantamount to rejecting the Maestro himself. But there's something even more frightening at work here.'

Simon shot the other two a serious look. 'The fact that this boy has superior technique, and that those who hear him are instantly entranced. Even though he's never been formally trained in a music college.'

Mieko and Smirnoff listened in silence.

Did we commit some egregious error? Mieko thought.

She felt an unseen force at work, and it made her uneasy.

Smirnoff's cell phone rang.

Mieko and Simon both jumped in surprise.

'Excuse me.' Smirnoff reached for his phone. In his massive hands it looked tiny, like a chocolate finger.

'Um – yeah. I see. Is that right.'

Smirnoff murmured into the phone, and hung up.

Mieko and Simon looked at him questioningly.

'It's from the office. They've finally been able to contact Jin Kazama.'

'It took all this time?'

Simon glanced at his watch. It was nearing midnight.

'His father is apparently a beekeeper. He has a doctorate in biology as well, and they said he's researching beekeeping in cities. Today he was at the Hôtel de Ville here in Paris, collecting honeybees.'

'A beekeeper . . .'

Mieko and Simon slowly repeated the word, as if hearing it for the very first time.

'Talk about a different field,' Simon said with a wry smile.

It's up to all of you – all of us – whether we see this boy as a true gift, or as a disaster waiting to happen.

There was no mistaking it – all three of them could hear Hoffmann's voice ringing in their ears.

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Tremolo

THE RAIN GREW LOUDER. Aya Eiden glanced up from her book. It was daytime, yet outside it was pitch-black, the torrential rain draining the woods of all colour.

I can hear it – horses in the rain.

This was a rhythm she'd heard over and over since she was a child, but when she'd tried to describe it to adults as *horses galloping in the rain*, they'd responded with blank stares.

Now, though, she'd be able to explain it better.

The shed behind their house had a tin roof.

When it rained normally, she didn't hear anything unusual. But when there was a real downpour, she always heard a strange type of music.

A galloping rhythm.

When she was a child, she'd played the Burgmüller piece 'La Chevaleresque', which included such a rhythm, and the rain on the tin roof drummed to the very same beat.

Recently, a video had appeared on YouTube of a fire alarm going off and a band playing in time to its beat. The video caused quite a buzz.

Aya let out a low sigh.

The world's full of so much music.

This sober thought welled up in her as she gazed out at the colourless scenery, distorted by the rain.

Do I really need to add to it myself?

Aya glanced down at the papers on her desk.

'A typical case of burnout.'

'Now she's twenty, she's just an ordinary person like everyone else.'

She was tired of hearing those nasty comments made behind her back.

Every year countless piano talents, boys and girls, appeared

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on the scene all over the world. They'd play with an orchestra, be extolled as child prodigies, their parents hoping for a golden future for their son or daughter.

But not every one of them would make it. As they reached puberty, some agonized over how warped their world was, drifting back to normal life to spend their youth with others their own age. Others, meanwhile, would get sick of the never-ending piano lessons, upset at their lack of progress, and simply disappear from the scene.

Aya was one of them. She'd won numerous junior competitions both in Japan and abroad, even released a debut CD.

But in Aya's case it was quite clear why her career had been cut short.

When she was thirteen her mother, her first teacher, the person who protected her, who encouraged her, who took care of her, suddenly passed away.

If Aya had been a little bit older, things might have turned out differently. If she'd reached that rebellious stage of teenagers – say, at least fourteen or fifteen – and had started to feel her mother was stifling her, her mother's death might have had a very different impact.

But at the time she loved her deeply, and played the piano to make her mother happy, so when she suddenly vanished from Aya's life, her sense of loss was overwhelming. She literally lost the reason for playing.

Aya was a laid-back person, with little ambition. That said, she wasn't exactly calm in front of a crowd, and confronted by others' competitiveness or jealousy, she timidly shrank back into herself. And so her mother protected her, skilfully working to motivate her big-hearted daughter, guiding her each step of the way – sometimes as her teacher, sometimes as a shrewd and clever manager.

Her concert schedule was fixed for the next year and a half, and so when her mother died a person from the record company hastily stepped in to act as manager.

When her mother was still alive, Aya's grandmother had

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handled all the housework, which allowed Aya not to worry about anything domestic, and it took a while for her to fully grasp what it meant that her mother was gone.

The first time she was really aware of her mother's absence was in the dressing room in a provincial concert hall.

The new manager had set her up with a stylist, who advised on her dress for the performance, did her hair and gave her a light touch of make-up. These were things her mother had always done for her. Her work finished, the stylist left the dressing room for her next job.

'Mum,' Aya remembered saying, 'is the tea ready?'

It was then that she realized how alone she was.

Her mother had always given her a cup of sweet, lukewarm tea from a thermos.

Aya was shaken, assailed by a profound sense of loss, as if the floor was giving way.

She actually felt the ceiling moving away from her, along with a strange sensation, warm and tingling, of the blood draining away from her body.

I am all by myself.

This was the moment she fully understood.

Suddenly she was brought back to herself.

What is this place? What am I doing here?

Her eyes flitted restlessly around the room.

White walls. A round clock above the mirror. A dressing room. *It's a dressing room. In some concert hall. I'm about to give a concert.*

That's right – I've just rehearsed with the orchestra. Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2. It went as planned.

I remember how the conductor and members of the orchestra were so impressed. Some were whispering to each other:

'What a relief. I was so worried about her, but she can make it on her own after all.'

'She's pretty amazing. I thought it'd be a bigger shock for her, but she was very calm.'

'Guess the only way to get over it is to perform.'

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What did that mean?

She felt a chill in her heart.

The numbing reality of it all overwhelmed her again.

I am all alone now.

The stage manager then came to fetch her and even as she and the conductor headed towards the stage, those words spun round and round in her head.

Aya's heart remained frozen as expectant applause rang out.

All she could see was the grand piano, silently bathed in light.

And she knew.

In the audience, in the wings of the stage, her mother was not there.

The grand piano on the stage used to glisten, waiting, as if bursting with the flood of music that she would now set free.

Quick, she would think. *I have to sit down and release the music.*

She imagined it was all contained in that great black box and always had to suppress the urge to rush to the keys.

Not any more.

Now the piano was like an abandoned grave. An empty black box that had surrendered itself to silence.

There was no longer any music inside it.

This cold certainty became a heavy mass, and in that moment, when she felt it drop with a thud inside her, she turned on her heels and ran.

She briefly glimpsed the shocked faces of the orchestra and the stage manager, but she never looked back. She stepped down from the stage – briskly, then at a trot.

She didn't hear the worried buzz from the crowd, the shouts.

She simply ran.

She pushed open the rear door of the hall, and raced outside into the dark drizzle.

This was how she became the *Genius Girl Pianist Who Vanished*.

That last-minute cancellation of the concert became legendary. Especially since the orchestra reported that the rehearsal

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had been perfect – in fact even more wonderful than when her mother had been around.

But there were many repercussions that weren't just being sued for damages for breach of contract or complaints aimed at her new manager from the record company. Unless the pianist was some major figure in the music world, they would never be invited to play a concert again. After all, there were plenty of other *geniuses* to go around.

For a while, her name even became a kind of facetious term of ridicule among students in piano departments. 'Do an *Eiden*,' was how they put it. It meant cancelling at the last minute, and the characters used to write her last name – *ei* (glory) and *den* (to convey) – became objects of scorn. Playing on the original meaning of her unusual last name, 'conveying glory', they substituted the character *dan* (to cut off), coming up with 'Eidan' to give the idea of a pianist cutting herself off from all chance of glory.

Surprisingly, though, none of this discouraged Aya.

She knew it made perfect sense for her to suddenly walk out.

If there was no longer any music inside the piano to be released, what was the point of being on stage?

She was absolutely fine about being ridiculed, or ignored, and in fact preferred it to being in the limelight or the object of envy.

Ever since she'd walked out, her followers had begun to vanish one by one, like a receding tide.

Actually, Aya preferred it this way, relieved not to have these hangers-on around her.

From the moment Aya accepted that her mother was gone, she began to live a whole new life. She transferred to a general education curriculum at high school. Most pupils who played the piano and excelled at it tended to have good grades. Aya's grades, too, placed her top of her class. She entered a local high school that aimed at getting its students into university, and thoroughly enjoyed an 'ordinary' high-school life.

This didn't mean she'd dropped music completely. She still loved listening to it and continued playing

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Aya differed from many who were regarded as *geniuses*. She definitely did have an abundance of musical talent.

There were two people who understood this and knew that in Aya's case it might actually pull her away from the piano: her mother – and one other person.

From the beginning, Aya didn't necessarily need the piano.

Since childhood, when she first heard the sound of horses galloping in the rain as it lashed on the tin roof, she could hear – and enjoy – music from many different sources.

The only reason she used the piano to express music was that her mother had happened to start her on it, and Aya turned out to be gifted, with outstanding technique. But it might well have been some other instrument or means of expression, rather than the piano. It didn't have to be music she herself was performing, since the world was overflowing with performers. In that sense, too, she was a genuine *genius*. All of which explained why her mother had had to supervise her so strictly, making sure to keep her focused so she didn't lose interest.

Was losing her supervisor a good thing for her, or not? Aya no longer knew.

When her mother was still alive, there was just one other person she opened up to, and with whom she shared her concerns about her daughter's talent.

And just around the time Aya was thinking about university, he came to see her.

He and her mother used to be classmates at music college, and with the anniversary of her death approaching, he asked Aya if she would play something for him.

Aya hadn't performed for anyone since the day she'd fled the concert. She'd played an electronic keyboard in both a rock group and a fusion band, but had studiously avoided performing any serious piano pieces in front of anyone. And of course it helped that people now kept their distance.

So, normally she would have turned the man's request down.

But on seeing Mr Hamazaki, for that was his name, Aya felt strangely nostalgic.

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The man was stocky and plump, like one of those oversized ceramic raccoon ornaments. Behind his glasses, his eyes were narrow but gentle, reminding her of a high-school principal in a popular TV drama from a few years ago.

Above all, the way he spoke was so relaxed and laid-back, as if he was just asking a casual favour – like saying he'd give her a tip if she'd pick up some ice cream at the corner shop for him – that Aya readily agreed.

'Which piece would you like to hear?' she asked.

'Any piece you like, Aya. Or one that your mother particularly liked.'

Aya thought it over.

'Is it OK to play a recent piece?'

'Of course,' Mr Hamazaki replied.

After her mother passed away, and Aya stopped performing, the whole feel of her piano room seemed transformed.

It was full of CDs and books, stuffed toys and potted plants. It had now become Aya's second living room.

Hamazaki began to look around.

'Sorry it's such a mess,' Aya apologized.

'Not at all,' Hamazaki said, shaking his head. 'It's nice. It's like you and the piano have become one.'

'I suppose so,' Aya said, laughing, as she heaved open the piano lid.

She felt excited, just a smidgen. She'd forgotten how that felt.

It had been so very long since she'd played for anyone.

She dived straight into her piece – a Shostakovich sonata.

She'd heard a young Russian pianist play it once, had found the piece intriguing and practised it just for fun. The sheet music was expensive, so instead of buying it she listened to the recording over and over again until she could reproduce it.

Hamazaki looked surprised, but as Aya played on, he straightened up and his expression brightened.

When she'd finished, he clapped loudly.

'Have you played this for any music teacher?' he asked.

'No, I don't have one,' Aya replied with a forced smile. When

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her mother was alive, she'd been taught by someone well known, but after running away from her final performance, he'd stopped getting in touch, afraid perhaps of being criticized for how he'd instructed her, and perhaps wanting to show that he had nothing more to do with this problem pupil.

'So you prepared it all on your own?' Hamazaki murmured and then seemed at a loss for words.

'It was excellent,' he continued after a pause. 'What were you thinking about as you played?' Putting a hand to his mouth, as if considering something, he gave Aya an earnest look.

'I was seeing watermelons rolling off into the distance,' Aya said.

'Watermelons?'

Aya explained.

'I saw this funny scene in a Korean movie recently,' she said. 'A load of watermelons had fallen off a cart and were rolling down a road in the mountains. Some split open, some didn't. The tarmac turned bright red, but still the watermelons that hadn't split continued rolling down the road. When I heard this piece, that scene came to me. Don't you get that feeling with this music? Of watermelons merrily rolling down a slope? Can't you imagine a scene where you chase after them and grab one? And the bit at the end is a scene where you clean up all the broken watermelons afterwards?'

Hamazaki's eyebrows raised in surprise, and he burst out laughing.

'I see. Watermelons, is it?'

When he'd finally contained his mirth, Hamazaki sat up straight in his chair.

'Miss Eiden, would you consider applying to our university? I would love it if you would.'

'*Our university* – what does that mean?' she asked, and Hamazaki held out his card.

He was the president of one of the top three private music colleges in Japan.

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'You love music, don't you? You love it so much and understand it deeply. That's the kind of student I want at our college. I really feel there's a lot you would find interesting. You should study at a proper conservatory. So – what do you say?'

He spoke in a rush, and Aya's eyes widened.

Hamazaki waited patiently for her response.

I WONDER WHAT MADE ME decide to take the music entrance exam, Aya later thought.

Until then I'd been thinking of going into science.

But the truth is that Mr Hamazaki's words touched me.

Even if I'm not going to be a concert pianist, I can never be without music.

But music had been just a hobby for me and perhaps I'd been feeling this wasn't enough?

SHE RECALLED CLEARLY HOW THE moment her performance for the examiners was over, the other professors had looked as one at Hamazaki and broken into applause. And how Mr Hamazaki had smiled at her.

This kind of entrance examination was far from the norm, she learned. Allowing an applicant who had no teacher to take it purely on the recommendation of the college president was a highly unusual step and could even have jeopardized his position.

At first her fellow students in the piano department exchanged *Oh – it's her* type of looks, as if trying to remember something disparaging about her, some even making spiteful remarks behind her back.

But as they got to know how unassuming Aya was, and how unrivalled she was in her technique, they began to treat her as just an outstanding classmate.

And Aya thoroughly enjoyed studying what the college had to offer – the rules and methods of composition, and music history.

As Mr Hamazaki had predicted, studying at a conservatory made her appreciate and enjoy music all the more.

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But she never expected at this point to be participating in a competition.

Aya gazed out at the rain lashing at the window and let out another deep sigh.

She couldn't remember much about competing at junior level as a child. Back then it had felt more as if she was giving a recital. This would be her first senior-level competition.

Once she's past twenty, she'll be just the same as everybody else – nothing special.

This spring she'd turned twenty – the age of adulthood in Japan. It had been seven years since she'd stopped performing.

Her present mentor – an eccentric professor, with whom she got on well – had recommended she enter the competition, though it was clear that the college president's influence was also behind it.

Of course Aya was feeling a debt of gratitude to Mr Hamazaki.

She knew that if she declined to take part in the competition, it would embarrass him. And that since he'd taken exceptional steps to get her into his college, she needed to prove her worth.

But, Professor, she murmured to herself, that kind of music isn't in me any more.

She loved her college life now. She experienced music outside herself, then played the piano in order to relive it. That was enough for her. Through studying theory, and listening to concerts, she got the sense she was probing deeper and deeper into music.

Mum – what should I do?

Aya gazed at the sheets of rain striking the window ever more relentlessly now.

She laid her book on the desk and slumped down on top of it.

The steady hoofbeats of galloping horses echoed in her head.

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Lullaby

IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND walking one more time with your son towards me? OK, you can start now – please come towards me.'

They were outside the gates of a nursery school. Masami raised a hand, and Machiko, a jittery look on her face, started walking awkwardly towards her with her little son, Akihito, holding her hand.

'Just walk normally. As you usually would. Don't think about the camera.'

Akashi couldn't help but smile.

That kind of comment made you even more conscious of it, he thought.

Naturally Masami had done her best to get Machiko to relax, visiting their home several times and having friendly chats. But in reality, having a camera following you brought on a special tension, and today's filming, especially with the other nursery-school mothers standing to one side watching, put even the normally calm and collected Machiko on edge.

'OK – that's a wrap,' Masami said, cheerily waving a hand.

Machiko looked relieved.

'Thank you, Akihito. I'm grateful for your cooperation,' said Masami.

Akihito looked blankly at Akashi as his father picked him up.

'*Co-op-era-shun, grate-full,*' the little boy repeated with a grin.

Masami lowered the video camera and came over to Akashi.

'After this I'll film a little more of you practising,' she said, 'then in the dressing room on the day you perform.'

'Got it.'

'So how's it going? Have you found time to practise?'

When her eye was at the viewfinder of the camera, Masami was a brisk, businesslike TV reporter, but without the camera she immediately reverted to his former high-school classmate.

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'Well – work's keeping me pretty busy,' Akashi answered, hesitantly. 'Honestly, I'd love to have the time to just shut myself away for a while and do some final practice.'

Masami chuckled.

'That's so like you, Akashi.'

'Meaning?'

'You're so unassuming. With you it's never *Me, me, me.*'

'That hurts.'

'*What* does?'

'You've hit my weak point as a musician.'

'That's it?'

'Yep.'

Masami saw his unassuming nature as one of his virtues, that was clear. But in the world of piano soloists, you needed an intense ego and strong sense of your own individuality to thrive, not modesty. Akashi was more aware of this than anyone.

'But I love your playing, Akashi-*kun*. I can't put my finger on it exactly, but something about it puts me at ease. There's an indescribable delicacy to it.'

'Delicacy, eh?' Akashi murmured.

Masami looked at him, her forehead wrinkled in a slight frown.

'Is the filming of the other pianists going well?' Akashi flashed a cheery smile.

Masami nodded in relief.

'Yes, everyone's been very cooperative. I'll be filming a Ukrainian and a Russian pianist who are staying with a local family in Yoshi-gae. That host family always seems to put up some unique pianists, and people think it's like a spell, that whoever stays there will make it to the finals. Rumour has it that the Ukrainian is pretty amazing.'

'Really—'

Pretty amazing. Well, what did you expect? The classical-music world over there had a brilliant history, so anyone they sent over here was bound to be outstanding.

Akashi sighed deeply.

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