

LEGATO AND STACCATO

Emily O'Malley fiction

We sit in perfect rows. It is only rehearsal, but there is no friendly chatter among us, nothing to suggest that this is not serious. To us, a rehearsal is just as important as a performance. Random notes mix together in the air as we tune our instruments, the cacophony weighing us down and pressing us into our seats. Our bows drag across the strings in short bursts until we find the right notes.

The bitter smell of rosin is almost suffocating to an outsider, but we are used to it by now. Our bows slide soundlessly across the hunks of amber, nothing like touching the strings. It is always uncomfortably silent when we rosin our bows at the same time, so we take turns, following an unspoken order. Our lungs must be half-full of the sharply sweet residue floating in the air among the dust.

Out walks our conductor, striding across the stage. When we perform, he takes his time, basks in the audience's gaze. Today though, the seats are empty except for our purses and jackets in the front row. Maybe he imagines those are his crowd, the shells of us watching the soft flesh within, waiting to pass judgment. We are no better than insects.

The tuning stops when he reaches the raised platform that tells the audience he is better than us. There is no exchange of pleasantries – he might not even know our names. Instead, he taps his baton on the edge of his stand to get our attention. We sit up straighter, hold our instruments and bows in front of us like sword and shield.

“We'll begin with Beethoven, Symphony No. 9. The first movement. From the top.”

He raises his arms before him, so we raise our weapons. The flick of his wrist counts time. His arms sweep wide, and we begin to play.

What was cacophony before is euphony now. Our notes mingle across sections, the boom of the cello dancing with the airy violin. There is no guessing; we know where the right notes are. Our fingers seem to move without any sort of command. The stage grows small below as the music carries us up, up, through the rafters, the ceiling, the sky. We look down from space, listening to the music.

“Natalia, please.” The orchestra is silent, instruments returned to a rest position. Only

one of us was still playing, but now, nobody is. The silence sounds worse than the tuning, and we are drilled down through our seats, the wood of the stage, the cement of the building's foundation, and layers of dirt. We reach the Earth's burning, churning core.

Our conductor swings his arms again, and we fly up again. He throws us back and forth, up and down with his baton. Our arms are tugged by strings, him controlling them. The music sounds beautiful from up here.

"Natalia. You need to pay attention." We are silent again. Everyone stares at the offender, the one of us who plays even when the swinging stops.

Then, we try again. The music forces us up, lifting us higher and higher. We are among the stars now, and they sparkle in time with the beat. It is –

"Natalia. Enough."

Rehearsal is over for one of us. The only sound is a clack of the metal buckles on the case as the viola is packed away, a velvet cloth draped over the strings before the instrument's casket is sealed.

She stands, holding the case, its weight heavy in her grip. Before, there was beauty in the way she held her instrument; now, her arms hang limp. As she walks across the stage, down the steps, her footfalls set the tempo. We begin again.

Natalia has perfect posture on the couch, despite the thick

cushions begging her to sink into them. She is never comfortable on this sofa, her foot always shaking back and forth at the ankle as if she is running late for something. Maybe rehearsal. Her discomfort is out of place among the dim lights and paintings of birds. Anyone in the orchestra would notice that her foot keeps time for the trickling water running over the rocks in the little fountain next to the couch.

"So, Natalia, how are you feeling this week?" he asks her. Dr. Phillips is only a little bit older than Natalia, with a shock of brown hair and sneakers that rest comfortably flat, not trembling a foot above the floor.

"Not good," I answer slowly. "I don't feel like me." He stares at Natalia, searching the space between the thick frames of her glasses to find the two green irises that blink like "vacancy" signs for her soul.

"How about you elaborate," he tells her. His smile is tight-lipped. Dr. Phillips taps the nib of his pen on his yellow legal pad, and Natalia adjusts her shaking foot to match the syncopated rhythm.

I have no idea what to say. "It's just like I'm watching my own body, but I don't think I'm inside it. The only thing I'm part of is –"

"The orchestra," he finishes, jotting something down just underneath where he wrote the date. "We've talked about this, Natalia. The episodes." She only swings her ankle in response. Her

thoughts drift back to the orchestra, where we all play together. Part of something larger.

“What do you mean, ‘part of something larger?’” Natalia must have said the thought aloud because Dr. Phillips leans forward, elbows on his knees.

“I like playing with the orchestra. It makes me feel connected to something,” I say finally. Natalia avoids eye contact with Dr. Phillips. Stares at the floor instead. She never noticed the flecks of pink and green in the blue carpet before, but it reminds her of the time she snorkeled over a coral reef with Jeremy. He had loved her then.

“I miss Jeremy,” I tell Dr. Phillips. Natalia’s voice sounds flat as the words come out. She did better when she was in a couple. Connected to another person. Now, she only has the orchestra.

Dr. Phillips squints at Natalia, then says, “I have an idea. What if you didn’t go to rehearsals this week? Play on your own instead. Just you. Can you do that for me, Natalia?”

“Yes,” I say, even as the hole grows deep in Natalia’s chest. She is nothing without the orchestra, but what Dr. Phillips says goes. He keeps her alive.

Tension runs the length of her left bicep, mounts the peak of her shoulder, inches along the curve of her neck until it reaches her chin. The spot on her wrist just below her thumb strains slightly as

her fingers drape over the strings, calluses finding their makers. There is no stage, only a bay window overlooking the city street below. Streams of light peeking over the rooftops across the street reveal the powdered rosin drifting off her bow as it mingles with the dust in the air and the floating strands of fur from her cat. The little gray thing slinks around her ankle as she stands tall before the sheet music.

For a moment, her right forearm bears all the weight of the bow, suspended above the strings. Then, it swings and tugs. Horsehair against metal. The note is deep and sweet, drawn out for several measures. She lets her finger wiggle back and forth, the vibrato adding emotion to the note. The changes are slow at first, a finger or a string at a time, nothing drastic.

Faster. From whole notes to eighth notes. Sixteenth notes. Her entire body rocks back and forth on her heels as her fingers dance from note to note, never falling behind. The ceiling melts away, and she floats into the apartment above her, where the old woman is cooking soup. It smells warm and gentle against the sharpness of the rosin that flies off the bow with each change in direction. Natalia leaves the soup to boil over while the woman watches Wheel of Fortune, the booming voice of Pat Sajak tinny underneath the sound of Beethoven. The roof of the building disappears.

The buildings that loom

tall in the bay window shrink as the music carries her toward the clouds. A pigeon tries to perch on her bow, but the notes change too quickly for it to latch its claws around the wood. She is forced to move into a crescendo to push herself through a cloud, thick with rainwater.

As the air thins, the music seems louder. She does not need to breathe, not if she keeps playing. Even the clouds get smaller, dwarfed by the stars that twinkle in time with the tempo. Heat draws her closer to the fiery corona of an unknown star. Her fingers barely touch the strings anymore. The music is coming from the hole in her chest. It propels her through the aura of plasma until she reaches the star's core. We collide. A supernova.

I stop playing, let my arms fall to my sides. Viola hangs from one hand, bow from the other. The notes tremble on the sheet as I let out a shaky breath. It has been so long since Natalia and I have been one and the same. The hole in her chest is gone, filled with me. With music. My aura is not plasma, but rosin, tart and thick in the air.

When I look out the bay window, all I see is my hand pressed against the glass.