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Moonlight Sonata

Leanne Otto

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Moonlight Sonata

Vera Westing awakes to the sound of glass shattering. She jolts upright in her bed. She thinks it is a dream until she hears the click of a lock being turned.

Her palms are cold. And wet.

She hears another pane of glass crash to the floor in probably a million pieces. Then the old creak of a door being opened.

Panic sets in.

She isn't expecting anyone. That's for certain.

Vera laughs at the thought of Henry's kids showing up in the middle of the night. The last time she saw either Oliver or Violet was at the reading of the will. They were two self-entitled brats that only showed up when they needed their father's money. They also hated her. Couldn't see what Henry saw in her. Vera even had to admit that there was nothing exceptional about her. She was forty when they married and had not once, ever been called beautiful. Although Henry had been estranged from his children for years, it still came as a complete surprise to everyone when Vera inherited everything. Completely blindsided, Violet had cried. Oliver threatened to sue her for defamation of character. Vera had laughed at that one. Dryly.

But they wouldn't go to such lengths to get in—especially Violet. She always had her beady little eyes on that stained glass anyway. Henry wanted to get rid of it as soon as he heard Violet's claims upon it but Vera had coaxed him out of it. His grandfather had imported it from Lancashire.

So it's a burglar. Fantastic.

Vera wonders what kind of burglar he is. Is he a good kid just down on his luck, is he in it for the thrill, or is his intent purely malicious? But none of it matters because she's still an old lady trapped in her bed. She hears him move through the glass, crunching it with his shoes. Vera wonders if it is sexist of her to assume that the burglar is male. But as

she listens to the heavy, thudding footsteps on the marble floor, it is decidedly male.

She hears him in the foyer now. She can tell because she hears him run into that stupid fern—the one that Henry had insisted on placing in the middle of the floor. Shows character, he always said. Rubbish. When she was still mobile, she would always stub her toe on that stone pot. And the damned thing had grown so tall that she could barely see the stairs behind it. But for all the griping she did to Henry, she couldn't bear to throw it out when he died. She hopes the burglar knocks it over.

The clock chimes the hour. Vera counts four. Such an odd time to be burglarizing, she thinks. Close to dawn. Someone might see. But then she remembers that she lives by herself in a large house atop a hill. Maybe being caught doesn't bother him. Vera loses track of the burglar. She shifts around in her bed and strains her neck to listen. The nurse was supposed to leave the door open.

She finally hears him from below. His heavy footsteps seem to echo from every room in the house. She hears the sound of more broken glass and decides that he must have some kind of tool with him. What do they carry? Lead pipes. No, that's from a board game. Crowbar, that's the word. Those daily crosswords are finally paying off.

She concentrates hard on the sound of objects thudding on the floor. It sounds different than the foyer. Almost muted. Like carpet. Vera shakes her head. Rug. Books are being pulled off the shelves. The study. Well he won't find anything there. Henry kept nothing of importance there. More crashes follow. She hopes he breaks that cheap vase Violet sent for her birthday. She hears papers being shuffled around and ripped. Vera guesses the burglar's moved onto Henry's desk. There might even be that bottle of scotch still tucked in one of the drawers.

Scotch. It's a gentleman's drink. Vera remembers buying it for Henry on their last anniversary together. Perfectly aged. Henry drank a glass every day. Said it tasted like a fine summer's evening. Vera thought it tasted like leather. She wonders if the burglar has found it yet. Every man ought to be a scotch drinker.

The noises cease and she follows the thudding a short distance from the study. Vera knows exactly where he's going. The parlor. She's counted the steps it takes to get there from the study. Fourteen. Henry needed it when he started losing his vision. He had refused assistance from a cane so his movements were often clumsy. More than once he had broken a lamp or two on the way there. Henry wanted to be able to walk to the room to listen as she played the piano. For the first time, Vera realizes that she cares about what the burglar does in this room. She imagines what he's seeing. The heavy velvet drapes drawn in every window save for one. The moonlight coming through the only uncovered window, streaming onto the beautiful, mahogany grand piano. Henry bought it for her as a wedding gift. It was made from the best quality woods—hard rock maple, sugar pine, and beech. It was a Steinway. Much more expensive than the cufflinks she'd bought him. Yet he loved them as much as she did the piano.

Vera refuses to think of herself as exceptional, but even she can't deny her talent as a pianist. She took it up at a young age, for she was always such a sickly child. She battled scarlet fever, pneumonia, and mumps before she turned six. Vera's mother used to say that she was made of glass. So she was never allowed to step foot outside, play with other children, or even attend school. Her mother bought her a piano to keep her entertained and it became her only friend. Although she was a poor student, she was very proficient at playing the piano. Her French tutor used to wish that she would put as much dedication into conjugating *être* verbs as she did in playing ninth chords. But it was her flawless rendition of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata that first caught Henry's attention. She had been playing at the Westchester Country Club for twenty years before she ever met him.

Vera sighs. It's been such a lonely, miserable, five years without her dear Henry. She hasn't played since his passing. She likes to tell herself that it has to do with the arthritis—she really does have it—but that's not what keeps her. If she really wanted to she could start right where

she left off. Her memory may be a little dodgy when it comes to remembering things like names or addresses, but not the piano. Simply laying her hands down on the keys would be enough to get her started. She used to play with such precision and purpose. Her long fingers moved so fluidly and effortlessly that they looked like moving art. But most of all, she remembers how in that one moment, she felt like the most beautiful woman in the world.

Vera remembers the first time she ever laid eyes on Henry. She was sitting alone at a table waiting to play when a man came in. He was wearing a gray silk suit with a yellow pocket square. He had tousled salt and pepper hair and was still quite handsome for a man his age. Vera was wearing her plaid wool jacket with matching skirt. She had tried to be daring that night by wearing bright red lipstick but after looking at the man she realized how ridiculous she looked. She removed the lipstick with her napkin. It was only after in the ladies room that Vera noticed she had smeared lipstick across her face.

That's how they met. She had been so embarrassed about the lipstick that she ran from the bathroom and accidentally knocked into the good-looking man. She had apologized profusely but he slowed her down enough to introduce himself. Then something amazing happened. He asked her out to dinner. On their first date, she set the sleeve of her velvet dress on fire and had to put it out in her split pea soup. Then she crushed his toes with her heel during a Viennese waltz. Vera called it a disaster but Henry said it was love at first sight. Vera still believes it was her rendition of Moonlight Sonata that made Henry fall for her. They married within the month. It was her first marriage and Henry's second. His two children only grudgingly attended their nuptials. Violet had refused to be her maid-of-honor. Oliver called her a witch on the day of the wedding. Still, despite these two terrors, Vera and Henry were together for over thirty years.

Vera dabs at her eyes with one of Henry's handkerchiefs. Then she hears Clair de Lune, being played very softly, from below. The bur-

glar. He plays well, she muses. She closes her eyes and finds that even her old ears can't detect a mistake. Debussy's not too easy either. He's not for any beginner, that's for certain. She laughs quietly. A pianist turned burglar. What are the odds? Vera now listens more intently. She hopes that he will indulge her with another song. After that, he can continue to rob her blind. She feels her heart racing, anxious to hear something else. Mozart. Brahms. Liszt. Anything. Instead, she hears him play a round of scales. Then another. He plays a third. For some reason, this makes Vera smile. Even though the saying is old, she's happy it still applies. She and this burglar just might have something in common after all.

He stops midway through his fourth round of scales and Vera hears the unmistakable cracking of knuckles. Again, she smiles. That sound is familiar to her. Vera's mother used to hate it when she cracked her knuckles. Said she'd get crooked fingers and big knuckles. But she liked to crack them right before she played a really difficult song. She thought it made her look like she was up to the challenge and somehow, it made her play better. She holds out the wrinkly, liver-spotted hands and inspects the long, slightly arthritic fingers. Well, she has the crooked fingers all right but her knuckles didn't look like they'd increased in size. She turns her ring on her third finger around. What used to fit so perfectly now seem two sizes too large.

Her attention returns when she hears the opening notes of a very familiar song. Vera gasps when the burglar plays the haunting first movement of Moonlight Sonata. She struggles to sit up in her bed, but manages to get her back as straight as she can. She closes her eyes holds out her hands and puts them into position. Her fingers press down on nothing but it doesn't matter. She's playing now, keeping perfectly in time with him. Oh how wonderful the feeling is. It's as if she's never stopped playing. She finishes the first movement and transitions into the second movement flawlessly. And suddenly she's back at Westchester Country Club. She's in the dining hall, playing on their piano, but it's not as good as her Steinway. She can feel Henry's hand on her shoulder, the warmth of it coursing through her body. She can feel his approval, his admiration, and his love for her. Vera finishes the second movement with ease

and enters into the more difficult third movement. It is filled with fast arpeggios and strongly accented notes. It requires not only skillful but lively playing as well. It's just as brutal as she remembers it. Vera loves it. She feels the challenge in the form of stiff and sore fingers but fights through it, determined to finish. She feels it nearing its end, but it's still just as raw and powerful as it was when it first began. Her heart is beating just as fast as the notes are being played and Vera is in rapture. She hasn't lost it, not one bit. She's still the most beautiful woman in the world. She finishes the last notes and collapses back against the pillows, trying to catch her breath.

Vera hears the clock chime downstairs. Her eyes open immediately. How long has she been asleep for? Her room is still just as dark as before but it has to be dawn. She looks stupidly at the window before realizing the drapes are closed. Then she remembers the burglar. She listens hard in the direction of the door but hears nothing from downstairs. No more glass breaking, paper rustling, or piano playing. The house is just as quiet as it normally is. She sighs again. Nothing but a dream. It makes sense, an old, lonely woman dreams about playing piano with a burglar. It sounds even more ridiculous now. Vera lies back against the pillows and holds out her hands. They feel sore, almost as if she was really playing after all. But she shakes her head. She's even more senile than she thought she was. She decides to nap until the nurse arrives at eight when she hears scuffling from next door. Mice. Bats. Or cockroaches. Vera settles on mice. The house is old, far older than she, so it doesn't surprise her if the walls are infested with them.

Just as she pulls the covers up to tuck in, she hears the definite sound of a door being shut from next door. The nurse has a key, Vera thinks. She can easily let herself in. She is very upset now. The nurse has specific instructions to ring her before she comes over. The hospital is going to hear about this. The last thing an old woman needs is a scare like this. They're going to have a lot of apologizing to do, that's for certain. Vera is about to call out to her when she sees a white light underneath

her door. It isn't the sun. Vera can't place its source. Then she hears heavy, thudding footsteps in the hallway, right outside her door.

Vera has been waiting for this moment for a long time. She sits up as straight as she can and spreads the bedcovers over her lap. She smooths back her snow-white hair and pinches some color onto her pale cheeks. She tries to wear as dignified a look as possible.

She watches the doorknob jingle slightly, as if he is testing it.

Vera's heartbeat is steady.

The door opens a crack, but it reveals nothing to Vera. His form blends right into the darkness of the hallway.

And then it slowly creaks open, bit-by-bit, until the bright orb of light blinds Vera.

Her eyes adjust.

She smiles.

Leanne Otto
College of St. Benedict '16