

None Can Die

By: Kathryn E. Miles

The rain came down in a steady stream, coloring everything in shades of gray. It blurred the edges of the world until it had become nothing more than a smeared chalk drawing on a public sidewalk, scuffed by the shoes of passers-by. I stood beneath the old oak closest to the river, watching the smudged outlines of the mourners as they huddled beneath umbrellas at the edge of the mausoleum. I had left mine in the house but the branches stretched above me, heavy with green moss, blocking the majority of the rain so I got no wetter than I was already.

I could hear, over the drumming of the rain, the priest's drone as he recited the final lines of prayers for the dead in Latin. It was musical but emotionless. Grandfather would be very unhappy to hear it. He always said music was the soul of the world, and no soul is without emotion, no soul lives in a silent room. His eyes, clouded by cataracts the last time I saw him, would've grown dreamy and searched her out, Cristiani, cradled carefully against the wall on her stand. I remember times I'd come upon him in the music room, just holding her between his spread thighs, stroking her with hands brutally twisted by rheumatism but still elegant, still the hands of an artist. I would hide in the lee of the door, greedy eyes staring through the crack between the door and its frame. He would speak to her, sometimes in English other times in his native Russian, with the intimate gruffness of a lover about whatever was on his mind. Often, he would pause as if listening to a reply. There were times when he'd become angry and appear to argue with her before, as always, conceding to her greater wisdom. But those were few and far apart.

Mostly, they would just sit, letting the sun warm them as he reacquainted himself with her form.

I never stayed long. It felt shameful for me to witness it, as if she was a true woman and I secretly watched the coital reunion of old lovers. But true or no, she had been his beloved, and he hers, for no other, neither man nor woman, could make her sing as sweet; no, not even I who was flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood.

I inhaled sharply, the scents of crushed grass and moist earth permeating the air. Yet I could take no pleasure in its simple beauty. New England in the spring was something to rejoice over, a celebration of the coming summer. Today, I felt as if neither time nor beauty held significance. I grieved, here, hidden away in my tiny corner of the grounds, surrounded by trees older even than the man whose corpse they now slid deep into the granite maw gaping in the side of the mausoleum.

For whom I grieved, though, I could not say. Was it for the man, cold and distant, who had raised me after my mother's death? He showed me no quarter, no warmth unless *she* was there. Like any mortal woman, she mellowed him, soothed the icy sharpness of his pride from that of a razor to a butter knife which can still cut, mind you, if there's enough force behind it. And he was considered forceful, at least verbally, by more than few. That being said, I began to associate happiness, joy, acceptance, and (dare I?) love with the music room. I can remember the first time I ever walked into that room. It was a conglomeration of stone and glass, of all sorts, clear and stained. The floor was dark, like the doors, and heavy oak. There was so much light and color. It practically pulsed with life. On the plaster-covered stone between glass panels hung paintings of his family, my family. Upon opening the double doors, I was confronted by a large portrait of my great-

grandparents. My great grandmother's laughing black eyes greeted me with warmth from amid the soft fullness of her face. A famous opera diva, Zinaida Korolev-Venedikt spent the majority of my grandfather's childhood dragging him all over the world, finally settling them in New York City when he was thirteen. She stood in front of her husband, the Prince, who stood unsmiling behind her, one long, thin hand resting on her shoulder. Where his wife was small, dark and wildly robust, Trifonov Venedikt was tall, pale and thinly elegant, towering over her and a young Vasily, who sat on his mother's knee, a dark dot nearly lost in the ruffles of scarlet and corn-silk blue. Even then, nothing more than a toddler, my grandfather was dark and pensive. His characteristic dark plait dangled over his shoulder, a shorter mirror to his mother's while his appearance of intense concentration was identical to his father's thin-lipped expression.

The Venedikts are a cold and somber people. Whenever I was in there practicing an instrument or perfecting a piece of music, I learned to avoid looking at Grandfather Trifonov or the Dowager Princess, whose ebony-framed portrait hung on the West wall between the huge double French doors, which were to the right of the fireplace when facing it. Later, Grandfather bought a grand piano and placed it in the Eastern corner by the pictures of my twin great-aunt and uncle, which hung on the only three-foot-wide strip of plaster on that side of the room. The rest of the wall was alternating floor-to-ceiling panels of stained and clear glass. Mostly of mythological scenes, they were vibrantly colored and exquisitely made by artisans all over the world. Sometimes, when I practiced at the piano, usually Beethoven or Bach, maybe or, sometimes Brahms, I would feel the Dowager's icy blue eyes staring at me from across the room, boring into the side of my face, a face very similar to both her's and Grandfather's. Grandfather told me it

was she who had taught him to play the cello, giving him a miniature as a gift when he was only three, about the age he is in the painting over the fireplace. I could never imagine that mean-looking woman teaching anyone anything, ever, unless it involved a cane or something. By the time that old witch got to him, though, his mother had already taught him to read music so he could help her when she practiced her arias. It wasn't long after that the Prince gave him Cristiani as a going-away present. He was seven when his mother left Russia, taking him with her and leaving the new-born twins with their father. I never met them, my great-aunt and uncle, although they were alive for most of my childhood. There is a story in that, I'm told, but what it is I can not tell you for it was never told to me. That is neither here nor there. They, all of them, though once real and alive, were for me mere pictures on a wall, the music room wall, what little wall there actually was.

There were another set of twins in the family, great-great aunts, Zinaida's younger sisters. Dancers in the Russian ballet, Grandfather loved telling me stories of how before Swan Lake (they both played Gisele in two different productions of the ballet) they would hassle him to play Cristiani so they could perfect their performances. They always swore, he said, that they danced better to the music he and Cristiani made than to any full orchestra. Their production portraits of them each as Gisele hang in identical frames on opposite sides of the music room doors and can only be seen when sitting in the western corner where Cristiani rests with the other stringed instruments. Indeed, there are a dozen various musical devices littering that room. There is Cristiani, of course, a cello, then a lap harp, two violins, a viola, a guitar, a bass guitar, an upright bass and a grand piano, a trumpet, one penny whistle, and a set of different drums. The penny whistle was the first

thing I ever learned to play, the tune a little children's rhyme. I still have one, somewhere, it was my constant companion at school in St. Petersburg. I wish I had it with me now, rather just the doleful sound rain, tears and Latin.

In the music room, if I were in there now, the colored glass on the east side would be dark, murky, hiding its story as well as the story beyond it. But I am not there, unfortunately. I am still standing beneath a tree, watching the men as they open the mausoleum doors. I feel the echo as they fall back, solidly, against the outside walls. The crowd of umbrellas does not flinch. But the rain did not seem to want to stop, as if the very skies weep in loss.

And again, loss of whom? I'm not certain. I wish I was. I watch the mourners, instead, the greatly uneven grouping of moderate size, hoping to distract myself. They have turned away from the priest and the black scar in the granite. The priest, God love him, has fallen silent. From among the tiny spires, flutters of white, lifted faces and naked hands appear as they murmur and Sign the ending of the service. One face lifts higher than the others, searching. It was heavily lined, paler than the others surrounding it, framed by yards and yards of black Spanish lace that gathered around stiff, narrow shoulders. My grandmother's sharp green eyes had discovered my hiding place among the trees, even as far away as I was. I flinched a little bit, curling my too-wide, too thin shoulders under my leather jacket in a futile attempt to remain hidden. She stood for a moment, a stone bisecting the water flowing downstream, and I met her gaze with my own. She did not wave, did not smile or make any gesture of acknowledge or commiseration. She respected my wish for solitude. I sighed, releasing the breath I'd be holding.

She turned her face away, melting into the stream as it flowed past. She allowed my aunt, uncles, cousins, even half-siblings to help her over the water-logged earth to the road where their vehicles waited, still warm and running. She did not look back.

Watching her go, I exhaled heavily, my breath misting around me, and I desperately wanted a cigarette. I began to dig in my back pocket for the pack I always kept there, before remembering I'd quit smoking over a year ago. Crap. I licked my lips and proceeded to stuff my balled fists deep into my pockets. Yes, a year ago, right around the time that I had returned from St. Petersburg, just in time to have that stupid argument with Grandfather. That time, it seemed, was just right for a lot of stupid things: to leave him, to quit smoking, even to change my name. It felt like ages had passed since then. It felt like I'd aged ten years in one.

The rain had slowed to a miserable drizzle. The tree was no longer able to protect me from the damp so I began to walk around the grounds. Thoughts bounded around my skull, skidding on the slickness of self-denial or becoming mired in my uncertainty. I had no real desire to think on the mysteries left to me by my grandfather, or the future encounters with the rest of my family or of my future in general, now that he was dead. Instead, I wanted to think of Cristiani. I wanted to think of things that were not weighted down in sorrow or anger or deception.

So, I thought back, back to the beginning when I had first come to this place, a large estate settled between two mountainous hills in up-state New York, hidden from the eyes of Grandfather's adoring public. I was eight, freshly orphaned and dumped on the only relative who would have me, my mother's father, Vasily Venedikt. My aunt drove up me there, it was spring and the valley writhed with life of all shapes, sizes and colors.

We turned off from the main highway onto a gravel road after driving for hours and hours. I remember my aunt's face was stark and, under the heavy canopy, slightly green. When I think on it now, I am not sure if it was the light or the thought of seeing her father that tinted Tatiana's skin that particular shade. You know how time always seems to pass so slowly when one is young, but it practically stood still as we drove through the colossal pillars marking the entrance to his estate. Made of Belgian granite and golden sandstone, the house looked like something out of a fairy tale; twin towers, like two squat giants, guarded the eastern and western sides while the façade and front entrance were gothic and golden, reflecting the afternoon sunshine. The front doors were monstrosities, ringed with iron and studded with decorative nails to resemble those of an ancient keep. The drive was circular, filled with millions of stones from the surrounding rivers, their surfaces polished to a high sheen by eons of rushing water.

Tatiana pulled up and got out, leaving the car door open as if to show she had no intention of lingering. I was so nervous I had trembled with it and my tiny fingers could not manage the cumbersome handle. My aunt, finished unloading my single trunk, came and opened it for me, scolding me in rapid French. I was always getting yelled at in a myriad of languages in my grandmother's house; French, English, Russian, you name it. I looked up to see the great doors were opening, with ease it seemed. To my child's eyes it seemed the feat of a great hero, if not even a god. *He* stepped between them and stopped on the first step, his hands clasping his wrists behind his back, nonchalantly surveying us.

Always a tall man, my grandfather had loomed over me that day like a great dark bird of prey, looking down at me with the blackest eyes I had ever seen as I stood on his massive front stoop. The many stairs increased his height to such an impossible degree

that my powers of speech deserted me momentarily. Tatiana stood behind me, her hand a white-knuckled claw on my bony shoulder.

“Hello, Tatiana,” he said, his voice deep and melodious, it seemed to caress the Russian syllables as they left his lips. A man with such a voice could not be evil, I reasoned, and I felt myself observing him as he was observing me.

“Hello, Father,” my aunt replied in her father’s language, her hand tightening painfully on me with the words. “I have brought Elana’s boy, as you, and she, requested,” she continued, her voice shaking the tiniest bit. My skin had been mottled black and blue when I looked at it later that night.

“So I see,” he answered, then turned and looked at me, “Hello, boy, I am your grandfather, and you will address me as such; what am I, then, to call you?”

I’d frowned up at him, confused as to why he didn’t already know my name. “Marcus, sir, Marcus Vasily Venedikt,” I finally replied in Russian, my bottom lip pushed out in consternation. Those black eyes widened and darted up to my aunt’s face. “He does not have his father’s name, ‘Tiana?’” he asked her, incredulous, and careless in it, calling his estranged daughter by her childhood pet name.

“No, Elana did not wish it,” Tatiana was stoic, her reply monotonous. But her increasing grip made me wince. “Father, I must leave; Mother and the other children, they need me.”

He tilted his head slightly to the side, like a sparrow, and stared at her for a moment, gauging. He nodded then motioned behind him to a large, stout man who had stood in the shadows, unseen, waiting for my grandfather.

“Very well, daughter, go back to your mother,” he said, “I certainly have no further use for you.” He frowned deeply, the lines showing around his still-boyish mouth, “Good day, and give my regards to my wife and your brothers, Tatiana.”

My aunt released me, nearly hurling me onto the steps at my grandfather’s feet. I stumbled, but caught myself with my hands. I can still remember to this day the feeling of those river stones kicked up by the tires striking the backs of my legs as my aunt spun out of the drive. The bruises on my shoulder and my calves matched that night. He watched her drive away, until, I’m sure, she was nothing but a shadow among the trees. He finally looked away and turned back to me, shoulders drooping imperceptibly

“Come inside, then, Marcus Venedikt,” he sighed, weariness now the only emotion on his face. I went to gather my one small trunk. He turned back abruptly, “No, boy, that is Joseph’s job, now come inside; I will not ask again.” I still do not remember how I got to the top of those steps. Joseph, the shadow, waited for my grandfather to address him.

“You will place his things in the Eastern Tower, please, Joseph,” he said in English. I was shocked. “You speak English, Grandfather?” I had burst out, jaw dropping. He’d smiled down at me, “Oui, mon fils, je fais,” he replied in French. “Oh, sir, Auntie said you spoke only Russian,” I remember answering, perplexed. He sobered instantly. I was suddenly terrified I had angered him and now he would toss me out and down those horrible stairs. “Do not, Marcus, believe everything your Auntie, or Grandmother or any one else ever tells you about me, do you understand?” he’d demanded, “I wish you to make up your own mind.”

I nodded quickly and he turned away, leading me into the only place I have ever called home. It is different now, of course. It aged, just as he aged, becoming more and more like the exiled kingdom to his exiled king. It is just, I think, that it should rain the day of his burial. I wandered about, this area close to the river was riddled with paths, but I can't bring myself to walk out of sight of Grandfather's tomb. So, instead, I give it up and returned, sitting on the little marble bench just outside the wrought iron fence surrounding the small family plot. I run my fingers through my hair, the too-long strands clinging wetly to the fingers my grandfather always praised. The thought drops my hands to my lap and, hunching forward, I let my elbows rest on my knees. I watch my fingers as they dangle there. Here he is, in the length of my fingers, the elegant lines of my wrist and forearm. Dammit. It seems that I can never go far from him, in thought or deed, particularly in the instance of Cristiani.

Oh, Cristiani, Cristiani. Why did he keep you from me? What made him lie? A moan escapes my lips as I bury my face in my hands, elbows digging into the tops of my knees. But he did, and now you are gone forever, locked away with him, to be soiled by his corruption in body I was his trickery. I will remember you as you were that first dawn. I'll remember the satin of you beneath my fingertips, the contrasts in plane and texture. I'll remember your voice as he played you for me, Bach's Sarabande, so rich and resonant, that spring dawn so many years ago. That morning at breakfast he asked me, "Marcus, why did you want to leave your Grandmother? Was she not good to you?" My reply, beloved, was that, yes, she was good; as good as she was to anyone else. "Then, why did you want to leave, boy?" he'd demanded. I placed my fork back on the table and said, "Because, Grandmother sees too much and it hurts." How could he have known that

I spoke of the hurt it did to her, not I? But who is to say that he didn't know the mind of an eight-year-old boy? "Yes, yes, I agree, boy, I agree," he'd murmured, that look coming over his face. You know that look. It says, 'I must think on this.' And he did, and toward the end of the meal he said, "Marcus, when you are finished, and clean, have Joseph bring you to the music room." Oh, Cristiani, how could I have known that that trip would change my life? Would I have refused? Run away as fast as my legs could carry me? I can not say, beloved, I will not because it does not matter now. I went, curiosity and fear warring in my chest. That room had been forbidden, until now.

When I entered, he sat against the western wall so the sun fell on both of you. You were lovely in that light, simply breathtaking. He noticed me, gawking at you like the green boy I was. "Come here, boy, and meet Cristiani," he'd said, smiling, almost grinning, with pride, "she has been waiting awhile now, too long I think, to meet you." I walked closer, in a trance, my eyes only for you. "Her name is Cristiani?" I asked, reaching out a hand to you, the fingers shaking. "Yes, Marcus, her creator named her as any father would name his daughter; no, no, like this, Marcus, gently, gently," he crooned in my ear, paternal and patient as he guided my fingers over your strings, along your bridge, over the curves of your body. I will never forget what he said as I stroked you: "You are my grandson, just as Elana was my daughter, no matter how much I wished it otherwise. In my infidelity, though, I have created something good, something worth claiming. You look of me, with these fingers," he said, holding my little palm away from you, leaving me bereft, "and your features, Marcus, those are mine, except the eyes, and your talent with music, that is mine, but most importantly, child of my daughter," he whispered in my ear, drawing me close, the closest I ever was to him, as close, Cristiani,

as perhaps you were, so many, many times. He murmured with lips pressed to my ear, “your love of Cristiani, your respect, your reverence for her, Marcus, that is mine, always mine.”

I touched her only twice more and both times without Grandfather’s permission or approval. The first time was the worst. He’d left hurriedly; gone to the city where Grandmother and my aunts and uncles lived. I was thirteen, a man grown in some eyes, with my full height and the shadows of my whiskers darkening my angular jaw. There was news that Tatiana, Grandfather’s favorite now that Mother was gone, was terminally ill. She was dying and Grandfather, who had not been there for one daughter’s passing, decided he would be there for the other’s. Hours and hours he spent in music room, after hearing the news, the doors locked, arguing and arguing with you, with your silence, until he could bear it no longer. He and Joseph left that night, the music room doors hanging open with a carelessness which was disturbing. He was running away; running away to be with one of several that were proof of his infidelity, just as I was.

He sent Joseph back to watch me, to ensure that I practiced my scales and chords, and did not slack on the piano; he knew how I hated it as well as did the work my tutor assigned me. Cristiani was always there, a quiet sign of encouragement. I always believed he would one day teach me to play her and all I had to do was show him I was a good enough musician to handle her right. So I practiced and practiced and practiced. I practiced on the viola, the violin, the bass, and the guitar. I learned to play the flute, the harp, and the piano better than most and was passable at clarinet and trumpet. Grandfather never praised me but I knew he was proud; I had inherited his gift and it

showed with an impossibly bright light. He hoped I would follow him and become a great concert musician.

Months and months had gone by and I hadn't heard from him. I thought he'd abandoned me, just like my father had, then my mother. Cristiani and Joseph were the only connections to him I had then. I abused them both, but one much more violently than the other. In truth, I lusted for Cristiani with an adolescent's hunger, particularly one who did not have access to girls his age, and it led me to do one of two things I will regret till the day I die.

That day, the day it happened, it had stormed in earnest, mirroring my mood. Supper was a quick, sullen affair that ended abruptly when I left the table without requesting permission. How angry I was, how very young and foolish; for a long time I blamed Grandfather for what happened that night. If only he had told me why he'd stayed away so long, why he never spoke to me, perhaps I would not have done what I did. How was I to know that he waited for Tatiana's death out of obligation? An obligation to her for bringing me into his life and a secret promise extracted from my grandmother, to let me alone until his duty was done.

I wandered the house, restless and unable to focus. Eventually, I found myself at the doors to the music room. Entering, I went straight for my violin; the Strad Grandfather gave me for my tenth birthday. I haven't practiced and my fingers were tender, the joints stiff as I settled it in the curve of my neck and shoulder, picking up the bow off the top of the piano. I started to play Debussy's 'Beau Soir' but it was too soft, too gentle for my mood. I played with the notes for a moment before I hit a high G. I began to pick out the strains of 'El Tango de Roxanne' from there, letting the bow fly faster,

pressing tightly into the strings with my fingertips. Grandfather did not like contemporary music. Stupid, old man, I thought, my fingers going quicker with my frustration and resentment. I hit notes wrong, too high, too sharp, and the knowledge fueled my ire. I was as good as he, better, and he refused to let me play Cristiani. He had left me here, with no word, for months and months. To hell with him, the senile old bastard, I cursed silently. My playing had become erratic and painful, ricocheting off the glass so violently it rattled. The strings squealed, piercing my eardrums and fueling the emotions boiling in my gut. I leaned into the tango, my body bowing, notes like nails down my back. It was more than I could stand, my knees bowing under the duress. I needed something; I needed to *do* something to get back at him, to get back at all of them. The bow danced rapidly over the strings, buzzing, rippling, whining out in sheer agony. That's when I saw her. The cauldron boiled higher, brimming into my chest. My fingers, wet with what I thought was perspiration, stuttered, slipping from the strings. Staring at her in the gloom, I knew what I was going to do. I should've walked out as soon as the thought crossed my mind but I didn't. The violin slipped nerveless fingers, the dissonance of it hitting the floor mid-note, clawed behind my eyes.

Time ceased to exist as I sat there, where he had always sat. I held her the same, the bow the same but the music, it wasn't the same. When 'Roxanne' poured out of Cristiani, it was angels dying. I dung the bow across the strings cruelly, I used bloodied fingers to force notes at the bridge. I have no idea how much time passed but suddenly something compelled me to look up. Standing, frozen with rage, horrified at my actions, was Grandfather. My hands didn't stop immediately but slowly let the weeping die. He spoke, I couldn't hear him, deafened as I had been by the music. He came toward me

slowly at first but getting faster. I didn't even flinch when he yanked her from me, or when the back of his hand snapped across my mouth, sending me rolling on the floor with all the grace of a rag doll. He was screaming, but I couldn't hear. I didn't know where he'd put her. Then the blows began. He hit me, cursing, white-lipped, wild-eyed. With his fist, his foot, the bow, the violin, anything he could get his hands on. Joseph's voice, abruptly thrown into the melee, made me gasp and flinch, finally, and I covered my ears in agony at the sound. I was tugged between them, a rope or toy, until with a guttural word, Grandfather let me fall into Joseph's arms. Held close to his chest, I only wanted to hear the music again, but all I heard as he walked away from the music room was Joseph's voice in my ear and the dry dissonance of tearing of wood and snapping strings. She was gone.

I didn't speak Grandfather again, not for seven years. Three days after the incident, Joseph packed my truck and bundled me into the car, which would take me to the airport. I was sent to school in St. Petersburg, away from Grandfather, away from the memory of Cristiani. I really knew she was gone when, as Joseph drove out the drive, I saw the bonfire, its pillar of black smoke hanging a pall over the estate. Amid the gloom, I saw Grandfather standing, staring into the flames, her bow clutched in his fist. I think he was weeping, but we turned a corner and he was gone.

Gone, gone, gone, everyone is gone, I think, sitting on this frosty marble. I can not see; tears have clumped my absurd lashes together, another cursed gift inherited from Grandfather. Tears and rain have drenched my clothes and the wind bites my skin through them as I sit curled over my knees on this blasted bench in front of his great hulking charnel house. Anger burns a scalding hole in my stomach at the thought of what

he did. He lied to me! He didn't burn her. Hell, I don't even know what he burned that day. All I know is that he deceived me into thinking she was gone, forever; that I would never get a chance to touch her again, to really play her.

“Bastard,” I snarl, raising my eyes, gray as the sky, to glare at the elegant façade of the tomb. They were the only part of me that he hadn't claimed as his. My father's eyes. A new surge of anger and sickening grief rolled me to my feet at the thought. He'd spent his entire life shoving everyone away. Just look at Grandmother, Tatiana and my uncles! It was always about Cristiani, no one human was as good. Except that it wasn't, you know, all about Cristiani. It was really about *him* and Cristiani. If it had really, truly been about her, he would've let her live, with me, after he was gone. He could have given us a chance, for Christ's sake! All I needed was a chance, just one, to make up for what I did, to prove I was worthy of her love. But, no, nothing, nada, zilch, he gave me nothing worth anything. Money, land, what does that matter? It's what I told him when I came home from school a year ago, when he told me he was dying. My sole heir, he called, you get everything that was ever mine. The liar, he knew I wouldn't, and I knew I wouldn't but not for the same reasons. I thought because he'd killed her and he knew it was because he would take her with him. What kills me is the idea that if, perhaps, I hadn't tried to seduce her back then, would've he given her to me now? Part of me says yes, the other no, but I still don't understand his reasoning. Why? *Why?!* I don't understand why he stole her immortality from her, why he didn't let her keep living without him? Dammit, it doesn't make any sense!

I'm pacing now, my feet sinking into the churned grass left by the mourners. I could get her out. Use the crow bar in the barn to break the lock and seal, drag her out the

casket, out of his stiff embrace. Twisting on the ball of my foot, I dashed through the little gate, hitting it hard with my hip as I passed. It clanged loudly but I barely heard. I leapt up the first step but slipped, falling hard to my knees.

“Ah, Christ,” I screamed, crumbling in pain, shards of agony running up my thighs and down to my ankles. I shuddered, curling into myself. God, I think I’ve broken my knee caps. Look where your obsession’s brought me, Grandfather! Look where’s it brought us all. Grandmother, broken and lonely, my mother and Tatiana dead, my uncles distant and cold, all destroyed by your bloody unnatural passion for a fucking cello, a piece of carved wood! Choked sobs shake me, as I lay on the wet rock, clutching my injured knees to my chest. Where has it brought me? I’m grieving, alone, injured on the front stoop of his tomb. My sobs slow to hiccups as I begin to think, really think what he’s done for me. I am a celebrated violinist, I have a life, friends, people who I’m close to, people I can love without reservation.

The marble is cold under my cheek. Did Grandfather have those things? Maybe, but if he did I never saw them, either the real thing or evidence of it. Cristiani was his everything. Maybe what I think was done out of selfishness and obsessive love was done out of something completely different? I closed my eyes, breathing deeply, the scents of wet earth, rock, and green things filled my head, chasing the pain in my knees to a corner in the back of my mind.

I struggled to a sitting position, eyes opening onto the barred door of the crypt. My gaze roved over the façade, taking in details I missed before in my preoccupation. I see it, an etching, close to the door, nearly hidden by two huge stylized notes guarding them. Grimacing in pain, I managed to crawl closer, close enough to read what it said:

“I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we no wean’d till then?
But suck’d country pleasures, childishly?
Or, snorted we in Seven Sleeper’s den?
‘Twas so; but this all pleasures fancies be;
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, ‘twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown;
Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mix’d equally;
If our two loves be one, and thou and I
Loves so alike than none can slacken, none can die.”

Beneath it, it said “the Good-Morrow, John Donne” I read it aloud, letting my voice fill the quiet air, the rain now long gone. The quietness crept inside me, the words still ringing in my mind after I finished. Was it to Vasily and Cristiani, or a note of hope to the ones left behind? We had loved alike, Grandfather and me, in music, in Cristiani. I never knew him to regret anything, but I had been wrong about a lot of things. After all he did to keep her, I wonder if Grandfather regretted loving Cristiani. It alienated him, that love. Would it be so much of leap for him, who had seen so much in himself in me, to want me not to fall into the same trap as he had?

Warmth filled me, and I knew I had found what, after all this time and anguish, I’d been looking for. My grandfather had loved me, unconditionally, in spite of the mistakes I’d made. He knew, that if I was allowed Cristiani, I would relive his story all over again. The thoughts left me heavy and, while my skin was icy, inside I was warm, a feeling of being loved, protected, surged in my veins. Something wet ran down my nose, dripping from my chin to my hands. Startled I looked up, thinking, the rain had started again. It was only when another drop fell from the tip of my nose that I realized I was crying. I had finally realized for whom I grieved. And to my extreme surprise, it wasn’t Cristiani.