

SCARF

Daryl Li

*Christmas 2007*

“I’m making you a scarf.”

Her words produced more resentment than thanks. John looked at the pile of knitted items he had placed in a corner of his room. He tried to tell her that he didn’t really need them, that London wasn’t really all that cold. Sylvia never listened. The truth was, even if it was cold, he had his own assortment of winter wear to deal with it; he thought he would look silly in home-made caps and sweaters. Now a scarf, which she wanted to mail to him—additional expenditure—before the performance so that he could wear it to the concert.

Making excuses, he realised, was futile. She would just insist that it was no trouble.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Just make sure you’re here for the concert.”

The Christmas concert, to be exact. After spending these years abroad and making a name for himself as a classical pianist, John finally had a big break and was due for a recital in the Royal Albert Hall. He wanted her to be there for it, to see him succeed. Orphaned at a young age, his obsession with success and intense belief in his ambitions had left him with few friends. Sylvia was really the only person he held close to his heart. He had, in fact, sent her a ticket long beforehand, and they made plans, agreed on dates, completed preparations.

“I’ll arrive in London some time in the morning and make sure I’m there at night,” she said.

“In fact, I’m already packed, tickets and all!”

“Good,” he said. It was the least he would have expected.

“Make sure you wear the scarf onstage so I can see it!”

“I can’t. It wouldn’t fit the suit. Or the occasion.”

“It will,” she said. “I’ll make it fashionable and all that. Trust me, okay? Just put it on for the night!”

John only gave a murmur of a reply. Her enthusiasm seemed spent on the scarf rather than on his success.

“Promise!” she insisted.

“It’s a promise,” he said with a sigh.

~~~

On the morning of performance day, John rose to the sound of the doorbell. He was greeted by an overly cheery mailman with a small package in hand. He glanced at a clock as he attempted to find his keys and realised that he was running late. Unlocking the door, John smiled nervously as he received the package.

“We apologise for the delay, sir,” the mailman said. “The mail was lost but we managed to recover it.”

John put his signature down on the form and shut the door thereafter absently, package in hand. He chucked it to a side and started preparing for the day. He brushed his teeth, shaved, ironed his clothes, ran through his scores, packed his belongings, checked his e-mail, charged his cell phone, and listened to a few records to calm his nerves.

Before he left the house, he stared at the package that now sat at a corner of the apartment.

He thought of opening it just to have a look at the scarf, but there wouldn't really be any point. After all, it wasn't as if he was going to wear it.

Through traffic and snow, he made his way to the Albert Hall. The grand, old building stood waiting in the winter. He pulled his coat tight and went up the stairs. Eventually, he found his room and got himself dressed. He went onto the stage once or twice, if only to accommodate the technicians. He tried the piano and got a feel for things. In his mind, he visualised what it would be like playing to his audience and his heart trembled with anticipation. Then he retreated backstage.

As he waited, he thought of calling her once, just to make sure that she was on her way to the Albert Hall. But he didn't, because she was the one who called. It was the way their relationship worked. She would make the calls, to check up on him, to nag. Besides, it was supposed to be his big day. All the attention was supposed to be on him. He wasn't going to stoop to that level. At least, not on this day.

A pang of anxiety struck as the hour drew close. When the time came for him to take to the stage, he rubbed his palms together so that he could feel his fingers again. This was the biggest stage, the cusp of all his ambitions. He trembled at the thought of it. As he strode onto stage and into the applause, he steadied his breathing and kept his mind focussed on the performance. Standing at the edge of the platform and on the brink of his dreams, he took a bow.

He knew exactly where her seat was. It was a right up front, in the area closest to the stage—the arena, it was called. As he stood amidst clapping and whistles, he searched for her, but in vain. When the noise had died down, he could feel their impatience in the thick silence. Disappointed and angry, he went to the piano and took his seat. Maybe she got caught in the traffic, he thought. Or maybe he had just missed her.

As he began his recital with a Prokofiev concerto, he could not keep his eyes from wandering off of the score and into the crowd. He wanted so badly to see Sylvia. Or rather, he wanted so badly for her to see him, to watch him in his moment of glory.

But she wasn't there.

Mechanically, his fingers flitted across the span of the keyboard. He proceeded with one piece followed by another, until he managed to force Sylvia out of his mind for the time being. With his concentration restored, he dove into perfectly measured chords and surging runs with verve and passion. The applause grew louder with each successive piece. He came off of the stage confident and proud.

The intermission came and went like a hazy memory. He checked his cell, but there wasn't any record of a phone call. He asked some of the staff if they could find her for him, but they came back without any good news. He could feel his heart sink. It didn't matter if she was late, or if she just decided not to show up. He felt betrayed and bitter.

His playing was not as assured in the second half of the recital. Distracted, he made two or three mistakes, but had earned the forgiveness of the audience with the strength of the first half. At one point, he turned all of his bitterness into abandon, and played with such striking force and verve that they were on their feet applauding long before he had completed the piece.

And as something of a crowd-pleaser, he closed the night with a Christmas medley—*Greensleeves*, *O' Tannenbaum*, *White Christmas*—arranged specially for the concert. The reception was incredible. He basked in the limelight. The applause was deafening. This was where the gratification was supposed to come in, where all his hard work was supposed to pay off.

Yet he never imagined that, standing there and receiving the praised they lavished upon him, he would feel so strange and hollow. He had worked like a dog for this one moment, and now that he had achieved it, it was unusually underwhelming. It was perhaps tragic that the point of his greatest achievement was also the point of his disillusionment.

As he took a bow, he looked to the arena again. She wasn't there.

When he returned backstage and proceeded to pack up, he couldn't help checking his phone again. Nothing. The audacity! She didn't even make the effort to call! In a fury he collected his belongings and stormed home. He did not even bother with the bouquets and well-intentioned gifts that represented the blessings of a variety of people. He was upset, and the only thing he wanted was

to get home.

When he reached his apartment, he went first to the bathroom to wash his face, hoping that the cool of the water would have some sort of calming effect. It worked, somewhat. Staring at the mirror, he made up his mind that he would get to the bottom of the matter. Immediately, he went to his phone and punched in the numbers, all ready to give her a piece of his mind. He was greeted by a recorded message.

Her cell phone was off. While he was seething, he also realised that he had little choice but to try the number to her home.

“Hello?” A man’s voice. It was her father.

“Sir, uh, it’s John. Is Sylvia there?”

“Oh. Uhm... Son, I know this isn’t going to be easy, but—God, I don’t know how to do this—Sylvia has passed on.”

“...What?” The words reached his ears like a gunshot. He thought it was a joke, but that was impossible. It was far too cruel to be one.

“She was on the way home from the post office after mailing a scarf to you. She lost too much blood. They couldn’t save her.”

“You can’t be serious...”

“I was on my way home from the office when I saw her on the ground bleeding to death. Called the ambulance,” he continued. “She told me not to say a word to you until after the concert. She... didn’t want the news to affect your performance.”

“This... This can’t be true...”

“She’s dead, son. I’m sorry.”

The next thing he remembered was sitting alone in the darkness, as if the shock had eaten away the time in between.

His fingers felt cold and numb. His thoughts were scattered and his heartbeat had vanished. In his ears rang a stinging silence. He felt deader than stone. Outside, the snow fell silently. In the cold moonlight, he stared at the package that the mailman had delivered earlier in the day. Stumbling across the room, he crawled to the corner and retrieved it. With much difficulty, he tore open the package and retrieved the scarf from within. He couldn’t help thinking of how perfectly it would have complemented his suit onstage, just like she said. It was beautiful, he thought. Like the cap and the sweater. Like everything else she had ever done for him.

He held the scarf in his hands and shivered. He remembered her warmth, her voice, her eyes. It was almost as if he could feel the softness of her hair and the feeling of her breath on his skin. It was like she was there, watching over him, telling him not to cry. One of them was dead, and one of them was alive. And dash it all, he wasn’t sure which one of those he was.

He looked at the card again and read what she wrote. Above a little cherub she drew a big speech bubble, with the words ‘Merry Christmas, John’ in dark capital letters. There were so many things he wanted to say, yet so many things he couldn’t frame into sentences. In tears, he struggled to force the words out of his throat. And when he finally did, he only managed three.

“Merry Christmas, Sylvia.”

~~~end~~~

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.