

Crescendo

She said it in the same way she might remark about a particular hairstyle, or an exceptionally clever manner of dress. It was not unusual for her to make these remarks; indeed Robert had heard this comment, or one like it, many times before. His wife's taste was uncontested among their circle of friends, who all agreed that she had an eye for the finer things, but not in a way that was ugly or repugnant. It was, after all, Mia's love of High Renaissance Art which had initially brought them together. But this comment, when he heard her say it this time, relieved an anxiety which had been building for months.

"It's magnificent," she said again, starting through the plate glass window onto which someone had whitewashed the word ANTIQUES with a nervous hand, drawing the lower curve of the S too large, partially obscuring the piano.

"Do you want to go inside?" he asked as he evaluated their reflection in the window.

"I don't want to be late for the movie, though," she gripped his hand.

"Maybe we'll stop by another time."

"Whatever you want." He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, checking the address of the shop to himself before looking again at their image in the glass window.

And so at the desk where five days a week he took what pride he could in being the Executive Assistant to the Director, Robert decided to buy his wife the piano. He phoned to the next room for his secretary to look up the number in the directory. He waited with the phone pressed against his ear, hearing the thud of the phonebook both through the receiver and through the wall. As he hung up with her, he realized that it was near four o'clock, and that if he didn't hurry, Shantel would think today was a miss. He was relieved to see her car parked all the way in the back of the complex, behind the Dumpster, like always. He pulled in next to it.

On the steps, just before the landing, he anticipated her perfume.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he apologized as he closed the door behind him.

"Something came up at work."

"I thought today was a miss," she said. "I thought I was going to have to go a week without seeing you." She came up to him and their lips met, her hands on his face. As they undressed, Robert admired the complete continuity of Shantel's body. He liked to trace her skin with his eyes, following it down from her neck, around her breasts, and straight down past her navel. She is perfect, he thought as he pressed his body against her warm flesh.

On his way home, Robert drove past the antique store, rolling slowly by the front window, glimpsing the piano. A sense of reassurance came over him, a sense of redemption, and he sped up, turning for home.

The sun had gone down on the house and as he made his way through the front door and up the hallway, he noticed that the kitchen light was the only light anywhere.

“Hi honey,” he said as he came up behind Mia and hugged her.

“Hi,” she turned her head and smiled. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too.” He kissed her on the cheek. The fabric of his suit began to weigh on him, the freshly-knotted tie was too tight around his neck. “I’m going to change.”

“Okay, but hurry,” she said. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Halfway up the stairs, he leaned on the bannister and kicked off his loafers, which seemed to be shrinking on his feet. His socks were slick on the wood steps and more than once he almost slipped and fell. As he neared the top, he stopped and held still as he thought he smelled Shantel’s perfume. He lifted his jacket to his nose and inhaled. The lingering scent infuriated him but he couldn’t bring himself to ask her not to wear it. He buried the jacket in the back of the closet, reminded himself to take the dry cleaning with him in the morning, and changed for dinner.

To an outside eye, dinner was no small affair. The candles on the dining room table had been lit and their reflection in the china made the table appear to glow. But the frequency and repetitiveness of these dinners drained their mystery and excitement. He looked over the table at Mia and smiled. In the candlelight, she

looked as beautiful as ever. He marveled at her alabaster skin and she smiled back at him.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, tasting her wine.

“You are beautiful,” he answered, a rising sense of guilt building within him. He pushed back his chair, kissed her on the cheek, and sat down again.

“Hmm,” she said, smiling. “This is perfect, isn’t it?”

“Perfect,” he said and looked past her, his eyes falling on the painting behind her. He looked at the darkened curio cabinet filled with the ivory figurines from their trip to Asia three years ago and thought of the geode in the hall, below the beveled mirror. He looked up at the chandelier above the table, peeking out of the darkness, the candlelight green and blue and orange in its branches, and thought of their Victorian poster bed upstairs, the antique grandfather clock outside their door, the Italian marble in the tub. “Everything is perfect,” he said aloud.

The first thing Robert noticed in the morning was the pink message on his desk. It was from his secretary: ANTIQUE STORE: 306-1514. Thomas Walker, Owner and Collector.

“Hello, Mr. Walker, please.”

“Speaking.”

“Mr. Walker, my name is Robert Glass and I’m calling about the piano in your window.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I’d like to buy it. How much are you asking?”

“I’m sorry, but that piano is sold.”

“But I just saw—”

“They come for it this mornin’.”

“Is there a way to get another one?” Robert asked, his stomach suddenly tight.

“Oh no, that factory closed down thirty-five years ago. She was a beaut—”

“Thank you,” Robert said and hung up as his secretary poked her head in the door.”

“Good morning, Robert.”

He looked up at her and she smiled. He looked away and she disappeared, closing the door. Outside, the sun was already high and even though his office was climate controlled, he could feel its heat. Distractedly, he looked through the daily files, pressing his forehead into his cupped palms until it was time for lunch, which he spent inside a phone booth around the corner and down the street, holding, listening to popular music pumped in from a local radio station. Finally, Shantel picked up the line and he gave a loud, low whistle: their secret sign.

“I needed to see you,” he said when she walked in.

“It’s nice to be needed,” she smiled.

“I was just sitting there and I needed to see you, right then,” he tried to explain with his hands, making large foolish gestures. “I’ve been waiting here since I called.”

“Twice in one week? Sounds serious,” she teased and he stood up and put his arms around her. Her body was solid and as he pressed on her back with his hands, he felt like things were right again.

Outside the theater, Robert and Georges and Michael waited patiently for their wives. Robert moved his foot in a wide arc, the pebble trapped under his shoe scraping a thin, white line.

"Some play," Georges remarked.

"Whose idea was this anyway?" Michael wanted to know.

"I think it was Julie's," Georges looked accusingly at Michael.

"It wasn't Mia's," Robert assured them, saying: "She hates postmodern theater."

"Doesn't matter," Georges said. "Where shall we get drinks?"

"Back at our place," Robert volunteered. "I've got a new port I want you both to try."

Julie and Mia and Cynthia emerged from the revolving door and the six moved down the street in pairs.

"It's got something to do with a subordinated debenture," Michael said to Georges as he took the glass of port from Robert. Cynthia and Julie were seated on the sofa, flipping through old copies of *Architectural Digest*. The door to the kitchen opened and Mia backed out, carrying a sterling silver platter on which balanced a cheddar cheese ball and a hastily arranged sequence of stone grain and whole wheat crackers. "Somebody screwed up somewhere," Michael continued with Georges.

Robert poured for everyone and set the bottle on the pewter coffee table in front of him. He swirled the glass, watching the burgundy whirlpool, listening to Michael drone on about work, waiting for a chance to cut him off with a toast.

But there was no break in Michael's speech; and worse, Julie and Cynthia had become deeply involved in a conversation about rattan furniture. Robert watched the scene and looked over at Mia, who was also watching, alternating between Michael and Georges, and Julie and Cynthia. He couldn't understand why

no one was asking him about the new port. He wanted to tell them that it really should be heated first, the way they do in England. (The guy at The Winery had told him that.)

Soon it seemed like everyone talked at once. Nobody drank their port; Michael had set his on the mantle above the fireplace so that he could wave his hands. Nobody complimented them about their home. Robert tried to remember the last time Michael or Georges had complimented Mia, or the last time Julie and Cynthia had complimented Mia's taste, or had been jealous of an outfit. He looked over at her and she wasn't drinking her port either. Everything around him had lost its luster, had become dull and flat.

At his desk, balancing on the edge of his chair, Robert frantically flipped through the Yellow Pages. Names and numbers rolled across his field of vision: Baldwin, Yamaha, Steinway, Wurlitzer.

"Hello? I'm calling to inquire about a Wurlitzer upright."

"We got 'em. How much you lookin' to spend?"

"I don't know. What's the range?"

"It depends."

"You've got them though, right?"

"Yep."

"I'll have to think about it. Maybe I'll come down."

"Open til six."

"Okay, thanks."

Shantel collapsed and rolled off him, her skin fevered and tender. Robert ran his hand along the outside of her thigh, letting his fingers float on the smoothness.

"We're up to once a day now," she said. "We're going to get caught."

Robert sat up. "What do you mean? Who have you told?"

"No one," she answered defensively. "I'm just saying that since we've made this a habit, it has become routine, that's all. I should have said it would be *easier* for us to get caught."

"We won't get caught," he reassured her. "I think we should go back to once a week."

"I'm getting tired of you calling the shots," she said, getting up off the bed. "I swear, I don't know why I keep coming whenever you feel like you need it. 'I need to see you, right away.' What about when I need it? 'I can't right now. Mia is expecting me.' Mia this and Mia that. I'm tired of it." She was fully dressed now.

Robert felt relieved when the door closed behind her. Finally, he was doing the right thing.

In bed with Mia that night, he moved his hand over her thigh, like he had with Shantel, and she responded with a soft touch of her own. I was a fool, he thought to himself as he kissed her on the forehead, then on the lips. Her mouth was warm like her hands, which ignited everything she touched. She climbed on top of him and he felt like he was looking at her—really looking at her—for the first time. Her skin was still young and he liked to touch it, to feel the softness.

Afterwards, he cuddled up next to her even though he knew they would be on opposite sides of the bed in the morning.

Robert stared out the window at the building across the street. He was calm as he waited for the salesman to come back on the line. The music coming through was not like Shantel's hold music.

"Hello? Sorry to keep you waiting. Now what were you asking about?"

"You were telling me about the Young Chang."

"Oh yes, the Young Chang G208—it features a new asymmetrically crowned soundboard, a hard brass bearing rod in the Capo Di Astro bar for improved pitched and reduced maintenance..." The salesman's voice droned on but Robert already knew that this was the piano; this was just what he needed.

"...double duplex system which terminates strings at the rear of the bridge and near the tuning pins with—"

"I'll take it," Robert cut him off.

There was silence on the other end. Then: "Sir?"

"I'll take it. When can I have it?"

"Uh...let's see...let's look at the delivery schedule. Will you be coming in or is this a phone order?"

"I'll come in. How late are you open?"

"Til six."

"I'll come by to make the arrangements."

As he hung up the phone, his secretary walked in, placed a fresh stack of files on his cluttered desk, and turned to walk out. Robert noticed the edge of her slip peeking out from under her dress and as she shut the door behind her, he remembered how he would fantasize about her when he was with Shantel.

His fingers traced Shantel's phone number on the keypad. He traced it backwards and forwards until he was actually punching in the numbers, the receiver in his hand.

"Roe, Bart, and Wade," a voice answered.

He listened and then put the receiver back in the cradle. The rest of the afternoon he pressed his palm against the window until the heat made him jerk it away.

He didn't remember about the piano until he pulled into his driveway.

A cycle of days passed: Robert drove to work, flipped through the phonebook, fingered the keypad, drove home. Mia became dull and flat again and Robert felt distanced from her. His secretary continued to wear inappropriately adjusted silk slips. He began to think that she was trying to seduce him. Maybe she could sense that his wife was too old, that his mistress had walked out on him.

Finally, he picked up the phone.

"Roe, Bart, and Wade."

"Shantel Williams, please."

A brief interlude of pop music, then: "This is Shantel."

He felt like he couldn't do it. He pursed his lips, but he couldn't bring himself to actually blow, to signal to her that he needed her again. But he looked around his office and inventoried his life; she couldn't say no. He gave a short, low whistle and hung up.

A euphoric sense of relief calmed him, made him giddy, and he left the office for the day, strolling down the street.

He pulled the pink thirty-day notice off the door, folded it, and put it in his pocket. The room smelled stale so he opened the window. He undressed and waited for Shantel to arrive.

The hours passed and he stared out the window, watching the lines on the telephone pole sway. His head sweated onto the pillow and he kicked off the sheets.

She wasn't coming.

After dinner, Mia stretched out on the sofa and opened a new art book she had ordered, which had finally been delivered. Robert downed a scotch and soda and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm going to bed," he announced.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine. It's just been a long day. I'm gonna' watch TV."

"Okay." She put out her hand and he touched it, stooped to kiss it and she smiled.

In bed, he stared at the television until it hurt his eyes and he had to turn it off. Later, when Mia came up, he pretended to be asleep and after she had crawled in next to him, he stared at her back. I have been a fool, he thought.

Pianos were on his mind as he sat down to his desk. It will make things right, he said to himself. But the Young Chang G208 wouldn't do now. She deserved more, he thought as he flipped through the phonebook.

"Schneider and Sons."

"What is the finest piano you have?"

"What are you looking for?"

"Just what I said. The finest piano you have."

"Our finest piano? A magnificent walnut Louis XVI Mason & Hamlin grand."

"Yes, that's the one," Robert said. "I'll take it. Can you deliver it for me today?"

"We'd need two to three working days, sir. It has to be dismantled and packaged."

"I'll pay extra," he offered.

"I suppose it is early enough we could do it. How will you pay?"

"American Express. Do you think you could deliver it after five?"

"We're open til six."

Robert gave the address and hung up. He paced around his office until his secretary went to lunch. He left a note on her desk saying he was out for the day.

Walking down the street, the air seemed cooler than it had been and Robert checked his reflection in the store windows as he strolled by. He ate lunch on the patio of a restaurant he had never heard of.

After lunch, he passed The Strand and decided to buy a ticket. As he watched the movie, a nervous excitement began to build inside him. The movie let out at four-thirty and he walked hurriedly back to his car and raced towards home, stopping only to buy a dozen long stem roses and a bottle of Dom Perignon.

He parked down the street and waited. He stroked the neck of the chilled champagne bottle and sniffed the roses.

The thunder of a delivery truck sounded behind him and as he turned, it rolled past him. The white truck slowed in front of his house but kept moving. Suddenly the brake lights flashed and then two white lights appeared as the monstrous truck backed up. One of the delivery men jumped out and rang the doorbell. Robert started the car and pulled in behind the truck. He felt giddy as he stepped out, leaving the flowers and champagne in the car for later.

"Mr. Glass?" the delivery man at the door called out.

"Yes," he smiled coyly.

"Boy am I glad you're here. You said after five, right?"

"Yep." He casually moved toward him, noticing the circular patch on the pocket of his shirt: Bill.

"I'm glad you're here to sign for it. We called before we came and no one answered and I thought—"

Robert's stomach fell. "No one answered?"

"No sir, and I thought, 'Shit, no one's home' and I—"

Robert pushed past him and unlocked the door. "Mia?" he called out.

Silence.

"Mia?"

Robert raced up the stairs, taking them in twos, and flung open the bedroom door. Everything was as he left it.

"Mia?" he called out again, bounding down the stairs. He searched the living room, running through the kitchen and opening the back door. "Mia?" he called louder, hoping she would hear him.

It was when he turned around that he saw it. Up on the cutting block, balancing on the point where the folds had come together was a pink piece of

paper. He slowly moved towards it, taking it up in his hand. He saw the bold letters: THIRTY DAYS TO VACATE PREMISES.

"Mr. Glass?" Bill called from the hall. "If you'll sign for it, we can start unloading."

"What?" Robert looked at him, confused.

"Will you sign?" He held out the clipboard. Robert took the clipboard and stared at the receipt. His eyes fell on the total. He stood motionless, feeling light-headed. Finally, he looked up and Bill and frowned.

"Mr. Glass?"

He'd forgotten to ask how much it would be. He didn't have the money. It didn't occur to him that he would have to pay, or that the price would be so high.