

UNRAVELED SOULS

On a rainy night in the middle of February, Alex threw out his electric keyboard. He did it even though he knew the instrument had a soul. All instruments did. Alex couldn't play any, not well enough for anybody to want to listen to him, but he wrote music for them all the time. The music came out of the cloud of it that played in his head, tangled strands of melody that he had to tease apart to make them into anything, the way his wife Melanie took apart old knitting projects she had given up on so she could start something new. Or at least she used to do that. By February, neither of them had done the things they loved in months.

Alex had kept his old keyboard for more than a decade and knew that it was too small for anybody to play real music on it. Some of its keys stuck, and others gave out a staticky buzzing that made it hard to hear the actual notes, and it had gotten knocked off his narrow desk and had coffee and grapefruit soda spilled on it so many times that it shouldn't have worked at all anymore. In spite of all that, he knew it still had a life and a mind of its own the way every instrument did, but he hauled it out anyway, with the rest of the garbage, and propped it against the curb. "Bye," he told it. He made himself take in its shape one more time and watch the chilly rain splashing down on it and sliding inside between the keys, frying whatever circuitry his soda hadn't gotten to first. Then he hugged his denim jacket tighter around himself and hustled back inside, leaving the keyboard out there alone in the dark.

Melanie was sitting on the old corduroy couch. She had a *National Geographic* magazine open in her lap, one of the dusty 1970s-era ones that they'd bought in a stack at a used bookstore. Lately she was always looking at a book or a magazine, Melanie who never used to get how Alex could

spend hours at a time reading. He still wasn't sure how much she actually read and how much she skimmed over the blocks of type or the pictures. She didn't look up when Alex came in. The frigid breeze from outside stirred the tangled brown curls that framed her face. She never cared how cold it was; she wouldn't wear long sleeves, hated sweaters, and felt like a turtleneck would choke her. Tonight she had on her favorite skin-tight magenta T-shirt and a pair of faded jean shorts. Alex looked at her smooth bare arms and her quick fingers lightly flicking through the *National Geographic's* pages. Her face had no expression on it but calm concentration.

Without taking her eyes off the magazine, she asked him, "Why did you do that?"

So she had noticed him hauling the keyboard out. Three months ago, he'd never have doubted it. She would have met him at the bottom of the stairs, planted her hands on her narrow hips and asked him what he thought he was doing. These days, he was never sure how much she saw.

He told her, "I don't need it anymore. It never worked right anyway."

One of the things she didn't seem to see sat right there on the coffee table, inches away from her bare knees: the baby blanket she had started in November. She had always done her knitting on the couch. The coffee table, which they never used for actual coffee, still had rolls of multicolored yarn strewn on it, ruby and emerald and amethyst shades that made up for all the rich things they couldn't afford. But the color that always grabbed Alex's eyes now, every time he set foot in the room, was the palest one, the delicate almost-pink of wild rose petals. That color was worth more than all the others put together. Every time he saw it, the hole in his heart got bigger.

When Melanie had brought the rose-petal yarn excitedly home, Alex had felt it and thought no newborn's skin could be softer. Now the unfinished blanket lay folded on the table, still attached to the ball of yarn. Melanie's steely-blue knitting needles had loops of yarn around them too.

She said now, still without raising her head, "But you always use that keyboard."

That wasn't true. He hadn't used it since the beginning of December. Back then, Melanie had been knitting the quilt so fast that in another week or so she would have finished it. He remembered the sound of her sleek needles clicking together like Morse code. And another couple of weeks after that, she would have started wearing those awful maternity tops, the best Goodwill had to offer. She'd joked that they would make her look like a cross between a beach ball and a bad acid trip, and she'd asked Alex if he would still be able to stand her. As if she had any doubt.

So she said, "But you always use that keyboard," and Alex couldn't point out what they both already knew. He hadn't written a note of music or sat down to try since December. The cloud of tunes in his head seemed to have blown away. Instead, right now, he thought he could hear the steady drip and trickle of rainwater falling on plastic keys, and he wished Melanie would look up at him with the smile that always used to hide in her eyes, even when they were figuring out where the next mortgage payment was going to come from or deciding that the week's grocery budget wouldn't stretch for a pound of real French roast instead of Maxwell House. If he saw that smile again, he could go over and sit next to her on the couch, let the soft sagging cushions pull their two bodies together and let her warmth drive the chill out of his bones.

She didn't look up. Instead she said, with no change in her tone, "You know it's the only keyboard you have."

He didn't need her to tell him that he couldn't afford another. Anger twisted in his stomach like a snarl of red yarn, but it didn't get any farther. An invisible barrier hung in the air between them, no heavier than the rose-petal blanket. "I know," he said. "It's okay."

He pushed his shoes off and hung his damp jacket over the door of the hall closet. The narrow stairs creaked under him as he went up to sit at his desk. He didn't have anything to do there: the music wouldn't come and he didn't have any way to tease it out if it did, not without the beat-up instrument he had coaxed notes out of one at a time, until he could see the shape of a

melody and capture it in penciled dots on a piece of paper. Still, in his office, he could put as much space as possible between himself and the living room and the street outside. Maybe then he wouldn't hear the rain so much, or the absent clicking of knitting needles, or the last sigh of the old keyboard as it gave up its ghost.

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That night in bed, Alex thought that it might have been easier – if you could use a word like “easier” for torch-the-world-and-start-over wrongness like this – it might have been easier if Melanie's body had figured out what was going on before the doctors did. A woman could create life inside her, but if the world had any justice, there ought to be a little camera or extra pair of eyes in there too. Then, if it all went bad, that extra presence could say, “Listen, honey, I really hate to tell you this, but your kid got dealt a losing hand. There's no happy ending here, do you see what I mean? So I'm just going to hit this ‘off’ switch and shut everything down. It's going to feel like hell, but in the long run I'm saving you a lot of hurt.”

If Melanie's body had made the decision on its own, maybe things would be different now. Alex lay in bed listening to his wife's breathing and wondered if she was really asleep. Rain pattered lightly on the roof. If it had been a few degrees colder, they would have gotten snow instead. That would at least be pretty to look at, worth the trouble of creeping out of bed in the chilly house to stare out a window. But then he would have thought about the keyboard lying out there freezing by the curb.

Miscarriage. On one hand, the word sounded almost harmless: you could miss a carriage, the way you could miss a flight. On the other hand, bottomless dark lay behind it. It would have been Melanie's worst fear, if they hadn't discovered something worse yet.

The doctors had called it *termination*. Terminus, terminal: the end of a train track, the place where you collect your suitcases. The doctors used that safe, detached word, and meanwhile the real

one, too ugly for Alex to shape inside his mouth, had swelled up and filled all the space inside his head and inside the sterile exam room. *Abortion.*

Melanie had looked so thin and fragile in the skimpy blue hospital gown. Thin except for her stomach, which by the beginning of December had finally begun to swell. The doctors used phrases like *extremely low life expectancy* and *inability to thrive*. Nobody had needed to say straight out that the baby would be lucky to make it through a birthday or two. They hadn't needed to say, either, what kind of medical bills she might run up during that too-short, too-painful life. And her parents got from one month to the next by the skin of their teeth.

Alex knew they'd had no real choice. How could you bring a kid into the world when she had nothing to look forward to, when you probably wouldn't even be able to make her life bearable? But there was always a *maybe*. Maybe the doctors had been wrong. Maybe the tests had been faulty. Maybe it all would have been okay, and if that was true, they had robbed a soul of a chance to live.

You got to a point where you didn't care whether time kept going for you or not. You knew that some morning you might not wake up, and it didn't seem to matter. In fact, you kind of wished you wouldn't wake up. But you did anyway, morning after morning, day after day, and you went through the motions of living because you had to.

Alex couldn't turn to Melanie in bed and put his arm around her, or touch her shoulder and ask whether she was still awake. Even if she was, they wouldn't be able to reach each other with words or through the closeness of their bodies. They didn't make love anymore, in case the unthinkable happened again.

He stared up at the ceiling. It was as blank as an empty sheet of paper when he had no melody to trace.

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In the morning, he woke up to find that Melanie had already dressed and left for work. These days she took the bus most of the time, instead of getting a ride with him. Alex went downstairs only in the T-shirt and boxers he'd slept in. Watery gray daylight filtered in through the front window, not enough to take the chill out of the air, but he didn't turn any extra lights on. They always had to think about the electric bill. His feet shrank away from the linoleum tile as he went to the window and looked out.

A thin rain still fell, slowly and without any emphasis, but as if it could go on forever. Drops of water had collected on the yew bushes under the window. Their needles looked more black than green in the gloom. At the curb, the trash bags had disappeared. So had the keyboard. In the place where they had been, the pavement was bare except for a puddle of water.

Alex looked at the empty place. That was it, then.

His job consisted of sitting behind the info desk at the local home-supply store. This morning, the canned music over the speakers filled the empty space in his head until the front doors swished open, letting in a gust of cold damp air that cut through the store's potpourri smell. A young couple came in with a shopping cart. The woman wore a long red coat and a cream-colored cap that hugged her sleek blond hair, and the man – he was probably Alex's age, but he looked younger – could have come straight out of a prep-school catalogue. Crisp khaki slacks, a navy blazer, a striped tie with a gold clip that Alex could see glinting from where he sat. In the shopping cart's kiddie seat, they had a little girl.

She was about two years old, give or take a few months, and dressed from head to toe in pink. (Melanie wouldn't have done that. A pink blanket, sure, but she would have made sweaters like pieces of rainbow. Caps and slippers out of ruby and amethyst and sapphire-colored yarn.) This little girl had blond curly hair and chubby hands that gripped the handle of the cart. Her feet were bare

except for her pink stockings. Alex could see the rounded shapes of her toes through the fabric as she swung her legs back and forth.

Prep-School Kid came up to the info desk. “Excuse me. Where can we find sushi kits?”

In the cart, the baby pointed at something and laughed. Alex tried not to notice how the mother bent over her so that her blond hair brushed the little girl’s cheek. He waved toward the aisle on the right. “All kitchen supplies are over there.”

“Thanks very much.”

The cart rattled away. As it disappeared down the long aisle, Alex could still hear the baby laughing.

You saw parents and little kids everywhere. Melanie probably saw them at her job too, all the time, though she and Alex didn’t talk about that either. She worked at a craft store, where her boss had never minded her bringing in knitting to work on behind the cash register. After all, her projects gave the store free advertising for its yarn collection, and nobody could have asked for better.

Melanie worked fast but so carefully. If a project wasn’t perfect, she would unravel it and start over, once, twice, sometimes more often, not to waste the beautiful yarn while she figured out exactly the right pattern of stitches. Alex knew how frustrated he could get when a tune wasn’t coming out right in his head. He would scratch out notes on the page so hard that the paper tore, or wad up the whole thing and spike it against the wall, or rip it into confetti before he dumped it into the trash. He had always admired how unraveling row after tedious row of stitches never bothered Melanie. She would smile and call it a fresh start, and tell him how much better it would be the next time around.

No other customers came into the store. Alex listened to the canned music for a while until the young couple reappeared with their cart piled high. Prep-School maneuvered it up to the register. “You all have too much good stuff here,” he said. “Heather’s going to max out my credit

card if we don't leave right now." The woman, Heather, laughed. Alex tried not to see the baby, who had pulled her cap off to play with the fuzzy pink pompon on it.

Prep-School unloaded the purchases on the counter. They had found their sushi kit. They had also found a water purifier, a make-your-own-soda machine and a special ceramic cheese plate with three ceramic-handled knives in assorted pastel colors. A pile of bath towels, the extra-thick kind with satiny embroidered borders. Two sets of king-size sheets, genuine percale, and four brass curtain rods with what looked like big glass marbles on each end. Three plastic storage containers: stuff that you bought to put other stuff in. Two bags of trail mix, a tub of green jelly spearmint leaves, and a package of foil-wrapped dark chocolates with raspberry filling.

Alex scanned everything and piled it into big blue and white shopping bags. All of it, except maybe the snacks, would turn into junk eventually. (In a way, the snacks would too.) It would all get worn out or fall apart someday, and Prep-School or Heather would stick it out by the curb for a trash truck to pick up.

Prep-School swiped a platinum Visa through the card reader and signed the touch screen with a flourish. "There you go, babe," he told his wife, grinning, as he filled the cart back up with all his bags. "Thanks, man," he said to Alex. "Have a good one."

"You too," Alex managed to answer. The baby was still giggling over the pompon as the couple pushed the cart out into the rain.

The clock on the info desk computer said eleven twenty-three. Almost six more hours till Alex could go home. When he got there, he and Melanie would have another silent evening. Melanie would flip through her *National Geographic*, or maybe some other magazine or a book that she didn't really see. Alex could be near her, or upstairs in his office: it wouldn't matter. Neither of them could break through the invisible barrier that hung between them. He wasn't even sure they wanted to try.

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On the drive home, Alex ran the car's windshield wipers, trying to clear off the clinging mist that smeared all over the glass. The street lights all had white halos around them. So did the light over the porch when he pulled up in front of the house.

When he opened the door, he saw that Melanie wasn't on the couch. He had gotten so used to finding her there, curled up over whatever pages might let her escape from the world, that her absence felt like one of his hands or feet had suddenly gone missing. She wasn't there, but the lights in the living room and the hallway had been left on.

Alex hung his coat up in the hall closet and looked in the kitchen, half thinking she might be there, somehow already knowing she wouldn't. There, too, the room was lit up like daylight. The ceiling lamp glared down on Alex like an accusation, or a warning.

For the first time in a long time, he wanted to call out, "Hey, Mel, I'm home!" Just to hear her voice coming back to him. The emptiness in the house sent the words crawling back down his throat. Then he heard a noise coming from upstairs: a low steady hum.

He left his shoes at the bottom of the steps and started up with his heart pumping in his chest. The upstairs lights were on too. In the hallway, and the master bedroom – both bedside lights had been turned on there, as if two invisible people were reading in bed – and the bathroom. In the little spare bedroom, which had also become Alex's overflow library, and would have been the place where they put in a crib and changing table. All the rooms were empty except Alex's office. His door was shut, the way he had left it the night before, but the strange humming noise came from the other side.

He finished his survey of the upstairs in a snatch of seconds and put his hand on the office doorknob. What was that noise? How often could you wish, at night, that you didn't have to wake up in the morning, before you decided to make sure you wouldn't? What did they have in this house that you could turn into a weapon and point at yourself?

She hadn't set the lock. The knob turned, the door opened, and all in the same relief-washed second Alex saw Melanie kneeling on the floor with her back to him, bending over a long black object.

She wore the magenta top and jean shorts again. Her hair fell in wild curls down her back. In her hand, she held something that she pointed at the carpet.

Alex finally recognized the noise. A hairdryer. She moved it slowly back and forth, directing the jet of hot air at the black rectangle in front of her. In another second or two, his stunned brain finally put it all together.

He knelt down beside her. "Mel," he said, touching her shoulder. "Mel."

She turned around, startled. She hadn't heard him come in. Her eyes had no smile in them. They were huge and blue, full of tears.

"I thought I could," she said. He had to struggle to hear her over the noise. Her hand shook, but she kept the hairdryer aimed down. "It was still out there this morning. When I got up. I thought I could bring it in, you know, and..."

Alex gently took the hairdryer from her and switched it off. Quiet settled on the room like a blanket.

"I would have done it before work," Melanie said. Her voice had a shiver in it. "But I had to go."

Alex looked at his keyboard. She had set it on the floor facedown so she could focus the hot air on the back, closest to the circuitry. "I don't think it'll work, hon," he said. The words squeezed out past the lump in his throat. "I think it's pretty much shot."

She looked at him, as innocent and vulnerable as a child. "I know."

"It was shot before," he said. "I mean, it was crap to start with. And then I dumped my soda in it."

“You did,” she agreed.

A laugh bubbled up in her throat, the first laugh he had heard from her in a long time. It filled up the room, and filled up her eyes too, but at the same time, a tear traced its way down her cheek.

Alex thought of the rose-petal blanket, three-quarters finished, on the coffee table downstairs. In his head, he saw Melanie picking up her knitting needles again. He saw her unraveling the blanket gently, stitch by stitch, to waste none of the impossibly soft yarn.

Only one girl could have slept under that blanket. Now she never would. *Goodbye*, Alex said in his head to the soul that was gone: one so-tiny word to hold so much love and sadness. Then he reached out, through the barrier that had come apart and drifted away, and put his arms around his wife.