

Clair de Lune

“Repeat.”

A rebellious smashing of discordant piano keys, followed by a young, petulant voice.

“Do I have to?”

A harsh nod, a steely glint in his mother’s dark eyes - “Yes.” She pointed demandingly to the sheet music. “Until it’s perfect, Thomas.”

As hard as he tried, it never was perfect. Never perfect enough for her.

Knock, knock, knock.

Scratchy chips of paint come off onto Thomas’s knuckles as he strikes his fist against the front door. The harsh sound snaps him out of his childhood memories.

The rain’s just passed, but the cobblestones he’s standing on are still flooded. His rippling reflection shines back – a man three years older than the last time he’d stood there. It’s been ages since he left for art school and defied his parents.

His eyes draw up to the corner of the dripping roof. Scattered specks of black mould travel down the weathered brick. It’s as if the house has deteriorated alongside his mother’s condition. Thomas sucks in a shaky breath. *His mother’s condition.* He’d tried ignoring his father’s pleas to come home, but the last phone call had changed his mind.

Thomas sighs, checks his watch, and knocks again.

Abruptly, the door swings open. His father’s favourite gardening boots wedge themselves in the entranceway.

“It’s been a while, Tommy.”

“Hey.” He clears his throat, unable to make eye contact with his father. “I...” he trails off, lost for words.

His father glances furtively inside the house. When he speaks again, his words are heavy. “Thanks for coming, but...” he leans against the doorway, frowning. “She... she might not even remember your *name*.” His voice breaks at the end.

Thomas’s fingernails dig into his palm, but he nods. Silently, his father retreats into the dim light of the house, and Thomas follows. Framed family photos flash at him, stuck to peeling walls with nothing but a mother’s love and Blu-tack. He trails a finger over their happy faces, then turns his attention to the living room. Against the doorframe are still-lingering measurements of a growing boy’s height, marked in pastel-pink chalk.

Thomas steps inside. She's sitting there, cross-legged on an old sofa. Thomas remembers when they had bought it – how he'd thrown his feet up on it – how his mother had yelled at him.

Now, she glances out the window with glazed eyes, clearly in a world of her own, and Thomas wishes she would yell at him again. His eyes linger on the silver-to-black tone of his mother's hair, how her hand presses against the fogged glass, the way the crosswords she prided herself on are shelved away instead of on the coffee table. Thomas's heart sinks, reminded of his father's words. *She might not even remember your name...* he looks steadily at her, trying to prepare himself.

He hesitates, then heads for the grand piano in the corner of the room. Its surface is scarred with a thousand careless nicks he caused when he was a child. He gently lifts the mahogany lid. It's been an eternity since he's played, but...

He gazes at his mother, thinking of his father's last phone call – his usually-strong voice turned heavy with defeat as he'd described his wife's progressing dementia.

Thomas has forgotten many pieces, but there is one he'll always remember. He settles his fingers among the sleek keys and presses gently. A clear, resonating note rings out.

A bittersweet smile biting at his mouth, he starts to play.

Instantly, he can hear the mistakes all too well. How the piano is ever-so-slightly out of tune, how he forgets to press the pedals until six seconds in. But it doesn't matter, because nothing matters when he hears his mother's soft humming work its way seamlessly into the music.

It's over soon. After all, *Clair de Lune* is only six minutes long.

He doesn't know if his mother remembers him. Or if she would even want to see him, after he'd run off into the city for art school and left his parents' aspirations in the dust. But she looks at him with love, as if she sees not a stranger, nor a traitor, but a twelve-year-old boy, chubby fingers on their family's most-prized heirloom, playing her favourite piece.

She smiles. This time, it reaches her eyes.

Thomas swallows, hope blossoming in his heart.

"Play it again, Thomas," she whispers. "It's perfect."