

TITLE: “Euphony”
(997 words)

CATEGORY: Senior Fiction

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(Author’s Edit)

Noise. Heat. Light.

She couldn’t stand it.

Sensations pressed in on her, flashing and hollering like a garish advertisement, every outburst buffeting her carefully constructed barriers, flying in her face, clamoring for her undivided attention— all while her mind frayed off into a million tangled threads, each one struggling to keep up with the onslaught.

When that monster had its hold on her, it was all the same, context and catalyst aside. The raucous twisted faces, the vivid perplexing colors, hot hungry flames burning faster and faster and—

I need to get out of here.

Gripping the log beneath her with rigid fingers, Arietta angled her face away from the blazing heat so she could finally breathe.

Just a campfire. Just your friends. You know this place.

But she just couldn't stand it anymore.

Casually, she rose and strolled away, hoping to leave unnoticed. Right then she knew exactly what she wanted: to curl up in the concealment of some dark hollow and lose herself to the static. To *escape* from it all. It wasn't often this strange mood came upon her, but whenever it did, it was always welcome.

Arietta paused at the shadow's edge, just outside the ring of firelight, and observed her rambunctious friends. Not one of them acknowledged her; they just kept on chattering away as if she'd never existed.

I suppose it's all the same...

And so she began her trek. It wasn't easy going, and, much to her chagrin, not particularly quiet, either. At first she couldn't help the ruckus she made, crashing through the undergrowth

like some hulking cryptid; but soon enough, navigating the unfamiliar terrain of this whispering world seemed like second nature.

Now the trees thinned out, and piles of uneven boulders rose from the earth. Emerging into a clearing, Arietta came to stand at the crest of a large moss-covered rock; besides the rustling of leaves, it was utterly silent and black.

This is a lovely place, she thought sleepily. Nestling into the thick moss, she curled herself into an impenetrable ball and exhaled softly. Here she could lose herself, forget but for a few fuzzy hours the reality that awaited her inevitable return. The creeping dread, the nagging doubts, the choking anxiety, the endless responsibilities... Here in the silence, all those burdens were mere trifles, wisps of smoke dispelled with a breath.

Now I can rest for a while.

As she sat there enjoying the silence, staring at nothing, a faint sound began to advance upon the edge of her perception. With vacant curiosity, Arietta listened to the *skch-skch-skch* of approaching footsteps— until an unpleasant jolt of realization yanked her out of her dull dreams.

It can't be them! she thought, gripped with panic. *They can't be out searching for me already!*
I only left minutes ago... didn't I?

Frantically she scrambled up; the thumping of the intruder's feet was closing in. Quiet and quick, she hurried up the slope and hid behind a thick pine tree. Just in time, too— the clapping of shoes on stone soon announced the stranger's arrival.

Cautiously, heart hammering in her chest, Arietta peered around the tree to observe the one who had invaded her silence.

In the filtered moonlight she glimpsed them. A perfectly motionless interloper, standing at the peak of the boulder she'd been curled up on moments ago. The figure was holding a large bulky object, balancing it on the ground; she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Then— a sigh, and muttered words.

“How quiet...”

Arietta's heart spasmed.

HIM.

Even in such stifling darkness, she knew that sound.

And of course, that wasn't just any object— it was an acoustic guitar.

Now strangely nervous, the girl watched him sit and settle his instrument into position. His deft fingers strummed a few chords, and the empty clearing was all at once filled. Heedless of his enraptured audience, he played on, and on— still low and controlled, but ever growing with the quiet resolve that was his essence.

Arietta closed her eyes against the darkness, basking in the musician's gift. Already she could feel it: the static fading away, the aching, anguished tension inside her loosening, relaxing its grip, dissolving away to leave peace in its place.

Then... then, he began to sing.

“They were sitting, they were sitting on the strawberry swing... every moment was so precious...”

A sound so distinct, so comfortingly familiar. She marvelled awhile at the euphony of it: flowing smooth and rich, rising and falling with the strings, stretching on the highest notes in a way that always filled her with warmth.

“Now the skies could be blue, I don’t mind: without you it’s a waste of time...”

All the melancholy, all the fear, melted away by the gentle strength of his song. Arietta pressed herself against the sturdy pine to get her rising, swirling emotions under control.

“Without you it’s a waste of time...”

Of its own volition, the music broke out of her, unable to be restrained. It began as a fragile whisper...

“Could be blue, could be gray...”

...and kept building as she worked her way towards its source, seized with trepidation and longing and giddy joy.

“Without you I’m just miles away...”

By now she was right beside him. The musician’s voice faltered, and he trailed off as he turned to gaze at her in surprise. But somehow, despite this sudden confusion, his practiced hands kept on playing that lovely melody she knew so well.

So she sang the last line herself:

“Could be blue, I don’t mind: without you it’s a waste of time.”

The sense of catharsis lingered. It hung in the cool air as he finished the song, strumming out the last few chords with tasteful delicacy. A satisfied hush fell over the glade, and the tireless breeze sang on alone.

For once, with tears of gratitude staining her placid face, she could finally breathe easy.

Harmony. Serenity. Comfort.

It was all she'd ever wanted.