THE UNWRITTEN SYMPHONY

A Psychological Thriller in Eight Scenes

P. A. Rallax

The Unwritten Symphony

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Soundtrack

A companion soundtrack accompanies this novella: eight tracks, one for each scene, sharing its titles.

1. The Missing Measure
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6. The Man Without a Title
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The Missing Measure

The orchestra reached the passage Leon Arlen had been dreading and played it exactly as he had written it.

The violins climbed, the horns entered beneath them, and a long-withheld chord arrived with such precision that the conductor lowered his hands a fraction before the sound had finished. Leon knew the audience would hear inevitability. He had designed the passage to give them that pleasure. At the edge of the rehearsal hall, behind the last row of empty seats, he felt only the effort of remembering when he had decided it should happen.

“There,” said the conductor, turning to him. “It opens beautifully.”

Leon nodded. They had known each other for twenty years. The conductor could tell when he was being polite, but politeness was part of their arrangement.

“The lower strings are a little early in the preceding bar,” Leon said.

“We’ll take it again.”

The players lifted their instruments. Leon held his pencil above the score. Something in the percussion part caught his attention: a series of measured notes, one at the end of each short phrase. He had written seven where an eighth would have completed the pattern. He must have done it to disturb the symmetry before the release. The decision was sound. He could explain it to anyone who asked. Yet he could not remember hearing that absence when he composed it.

The orchestra began. He found himself counting the strikes instead of following the strings.

One, two. Three, four. Five, six, seven.

In the brief space after the seventh, he heard a faint sound beyond the hall, as if a mallet had touched a distant length of wire. Then the strings rose and covered it.

At the break, a young violinist came up to thank him. His music had meant a great deal to her when she was a student. Leon asked where she had studied and what she was playing now. He listened carefully. He was not tired of people; that was the explanation he sometimes gave himself. He was tired of hearing his own responses arrive before he had thought them.

The violinist asked about the quiet passage near the beginning of the second movement. She said it seemed to open onto a different piece before the full orchestra brought the first idea back.

“It nearly was a different piece,” Leon told her.

She waited for more. He remembered making four versions of that passage and choosing the one that best prepared the return. In the first version, the strings had stopped while a small instrument played alone. He could not recall why he had removed it. The present version was clean and effective. It was easier to describe the final work than the road he had taken to it.

“I kept the door open for a moment,” he said. “Then we had to come back.”

The violinist smiled. “I liked the moment.”

When she returned to her chair, Leon looked at the relevant bars. He had given the orchestra a precise measure of quiet. The score left no possibility of lingering there if the players found something unexpected. There was no fault in that; a composer had to decide. But he had come to make such decisions with the ease of a man closing doors before he had looked through them.

He asked the conductor to rehearse from that passage.

“You’re not thinking of cutting it?”

“I’m thinking of tightening it.”

The conductor said nothing, which was his way of disagreeing. The musicians took their places. In the pause before he gave the cue, Leon tried to remember the timbre of the small instrument he had first imagined. He thought it had been struck rather than bowed. The orchestra began before the memory settled.

At the stage door, his manager Elise met him with a coffee he had not requested and a list he had. They had worked together long enough that neither mistook efficiency for intimacy. She described two interviews, a proposed recording, a patron who wanted a photograph at the gala, and a guest artist who wanted Leon to look at a new score. He agreed to the interviews and the photograph, postponed the score, and asked Elise to send his apologies to the artist. Each decision took seconds.

“The foundation will want a title,” she said as they walked.

“It may change.”

“They know that. They need something to print.”

“I’ll have one by Friday.”

Elise glanced at him. “You said that last Friday.”

“Then my answer has been remarkably consistent.”

She laughed, but he could tell she had heard the deflection. At the car waiting for her, she touched his arm. “How is the work itself going?”

He could have told her he was making sketches and discarding them. He could have told her the few pages he had finished felt like a skilled stranger’s answer to an assignment. She had asked a real question. He answered it with a report.

“It’s finding its shape,” he said.

Elise nodded and left him to his evening. Leon stood outside the hall for another minute, hearing a player practice through an upper window. The passage was not his. He could not see who was playing it. It stopped halfway through, and he found himself waiting with more interest than he had felt during the grand conclusion of his own piece.

At home, the front room was immaculate. The piano stood by the tall windows; framed programs occupied the shelves on either side. The room had once contained a chair with a torn blue seat and a stack of notebooks on the floor. Leon could remember the chair more readily than the decision to replace it.

He opened the lower drawer of his desk. It held the notebooks he had kept before anyone asked him when a work would be finished. He took out the uppermost one, turned it over, and saw a water stain crossing the cover. A narrow strip of paper projected from its middle. He was about to open to it when his phone sounded.

Miriam had left a message that morning.

“I know this is a crowded week,” she said. “There’s no emergency. I’ll be in town Thursday, if you’d like supper. You don’t have to make an occasion of it.”

His sister always said that last part now. Once, when they were children, she had waited beside the piano while he tried to work out a tune that did not quite have an ending. She would listen through ten attempts without telling him which one was best. The detail came back so clearly that Leon put the notebook down.

He began a reply: *Thursday would be good*. Then he opened his calendar. There was a dinner with the foundation trustees that evening. It could be moved, although moving it would require an explanation, and he did not yet know whether Miriam had meant supper early or late. He erased the reply. He would call her after the evening engagement.

He had once written to Miriam from hotel rooms almost every week. The letters were mostly descriptions of cities seen after rehearsals: the uneven stones near one concert hall, a bakery that opened before dawn, an organ being repaired behind a closed church door. As his career expanded, the letters had become postcards, then photographs sent from his phone, then replies to hers. She had never accused him of becoming someone else. That made the distance between them harder to defend. He could tell himself they were both busy and continue to put off a visit without any argument forcing him to decide otherwise.

The old notebook remained on the desk. Leon slid it back into the drawer, leaving the paper strip where it was. He would open it when he had a free morning. He had been promising himself the same morning for years.

The car had arrived.

From the back seat, the city looked polished by recent rain. Lights moved over the glass. Leon thought of the unfinished phrase in the notebook and tried to recall its first interval. The driver spoke about a street closure. Leon answered without attending.

At a crossing, something struck the side window with a delicate, metallic click. It might have been rain dislodged from a sign above them. It came again at measured intervals.

Leon counted without meaning to.

One, two. Three, four. Five, six, seven.

Light filled the window on his side, white and close, as if a door had opened onto a lit room.

He waited for the eighth.

The City of Unfinished Music

The sound did not come.

Leon was standing under the awning of a building he did not recognize. The street before him was dry, although he remembered rain on the car window. Beyond the awning, afternoon light held the buildings in such even relief that it was difficult to tell whether the sun was behind him or ahead.

There was no car. He reached into his coat pocket for his phone and found a pencil, a folded concert program, and a small notebook with a cover so dark a blue it was nearly black. It was not the stained notebook from his desk.

He opened it to write down what he could see, and found that someone already had.

On the first page, in pencil, in his own hand, were seven words: *Do not let him finish it for you.*

He knew the hand. The final stroke of the *h* rose sharply, as his did when he wrote fast. The pencil in his pocket had been sharpened recently and the point was worn down on one side, the way he wore pencils. He did not remember writing the sentence. He did not remember the awning, or the street, or taking the notebook out of his pocket before this moment. He stood with the page open and tried to find the edge of the gap, the last thing he knew. There was the car. There was the click against the glass. There was the count.

He wrote beneath the sentence, smaller: *I remember getting into the car. I do not remember arriving.*

Then he drew the awning, the two tall windows, the position of a piano he could see through the glass. A drawing was a fact he could return to.

The building behind him had tall windows. On the other side of the glass stood rows of empty chairs and a music stand beneath a single lamp. A piano sounded inside. The player began a phrase in the middle register, repeated its first three notes, and stopped before the fourth. Leon pushed the door. It opened easily.

He called out before he crossed the threshold. His voice carried no farther than the nearest chairs. On a wall near the entrance was a directory of rooms; every line had been rubbed pale except for the floor numbers. He touched one of the erased names. The surface was smooth, with no trace of letters under the paint.

The room was empty. The piano’s last vibration seemed to be hanging in the air. He crossed to it and pressed a key. The instrument answered normally. No one was behind the curtains or in the adjoining room. When he returned to the street, the unfinished phrase began again from a doorway farther along the block.

Each room he passed appeared arranged for a rehearsal that had just been interrupted. One contained only chairs and an open cello case. In another, a page lay on each player’s stand, and every page was blank. Leon could hear a bass clarinet practicing somewhere above him. When he climbed the stairs, the breathy low notes came from a floor below.

A violin entered from along the corridor. He followed it to a studio with a narrow mirror along one wall. In the reflection, the far door stood open. When he turned, it was shut. He opened it onto a storage

closet containing folded stands. He went back to the mirror and stepped sideways until he could see both the door and its image at once, and found the angle at which the glass took in a second doorway in the corridor and laid its frame precisely over the first. The effect was mundane once he understood it. He wrote the explanation in his notebook anyway. He needed examples of the city making sense.

Outside, he tried the ordinary expedient of choosing a direction and staying with it. He walked three blocks past a row of windows containing unoccupied practice rooms. On the fourth block, he reached the awning where he had begun. He could not recall making a turn. He retraced his steps and counted intersections aloud. The return route contained one more corner than the route away.

Before going in again, he placed a small pencil mark on the outer jamb of the door beneath the awning. He walked to the corner, turned back, and saw the mark on a doorway opposite the first one.

He checked whether he had reversed the street in his mind. The awning should be to his left; it was. The window with the lamp should be to his right; it was. His mark lay where he had not put it. He named three details that distinguished the two doorways, a brass plate, a missing pane, a pale rectangle where a sign had hung, and copied them into the notebook beside the drawing. If the mark moved again, he wanted more than his certainty to set against it.

A series of light, metallic strikes sounded from an upper window. Seven, and then a silence too measured to be accidental.

In the silence something pressed across his chest, flat and brief, as if a hand had been laid there and taken away. Beneath the silence, so far off that it might have been the memory of a sound, a voice said a word of two syllables. He could not make it out. Then the street was quiet, and his chest was his own, and the piano phrase resumed from above as though nothing had happened.

He wrote: *After the seventh: pressure on the chest. A voice, two syllables. Not from the street.*

He followed the strikes into a long room with a manuscript stand at its center. On the stand lay a single page. At the top, in large, old-fashioned letters, someone had written *Transcendence Symphony*.

He read the notes beneath it. The opening was spare and uncertain; then, just as the harmony began to gather force, the page ended. There was a page number in the upper corner: twenty-six. Leon turned it over. The reverse was blank.

The title troubled him. He had never used it, yet the words seemed to name something he had been trying to write for years. If a work existed here, and if the scattered sounds belonged to it, perhaps the city had a center. Perhaps he could make his way out by assembling what was missing.

He sat at the room's piano and played the phrase. Midway through, he remembered an old house in which he and Miriam had shared a cramped upstairs room for lessons. She used to sit on the floor while he practiced. He could see the thin afternoon light falling over a patterned rug. The page's final bars brought back the feeling of being allowed to stop and try again.

He lifted the manuscript.

"This is part of my symphony," he said, testing the words against the empty room.

The paper became difficult to focus on. It had not moved. He set it down, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. The notes were clear.

He wanted to write the name of the house beside his description of the rug. He had known the name since childhood. It was the name his mother used in letters, though the address was an ordinary street address. He could picture the front door and the stone step. The name would not come.

For several minutes he checked other names. Miriam. His mother. The town. All present. Only the name of the house was missing.

Leon closed the blue notebook. Memory could fail without a reason. He was unsettled and perhaps asleep. But the loss had followed too closely on the words he had spoken.

At the room's window he described the childhood house to himself aloud. Two floors, a crooked gate, curtains his mother kept meaning to replace. He could still walk from the kitchen to the upstairs room in his mind. Nothing else had vanished. He stopped at the house's name each time, as if encountering a missing tooth with his tongue.

On a fresh page he wrote: *The house had a name. I can't recall it.* He left a space to fill in later. Beneath it he copied the manuscript's opening notes rather than taking the page.

He turned back to the first page and read the seven words again. *Do not let him finish it for you.* He had written them before he knew there was a work, or a him. Or he had known, and the knowing was among the things he no longer had.

He went out to the corridor to look at the room with the blank pages. He wanted to see whether the city had changed while he was occupied.

It had. On every stand, the pages now carried notation. He did not need to read far. The first violins had the spare opening of page twenty-six. The cellos had its bass. Someone had copied the page he had claimed into parts for an orchestra that was not there, in the time it took him to lose the name of a house.

He stood in the doorway until he was certain he was not mistaken. Then he wrote it down.

When he came back to the long room, a narrow door at the rear stood ajar. He was almost certain it had been shut when he entered. Through it came a child's uneven piano playing.

He closed the door, returned to the front of the room, and watched. The handle did not move. The tune began again on the other side, and this time its last note was withheld in exactly the place he expected it.

Leon considered returning to the awning. He had marked the route, though the mark itself had moved. He had read a warning in his own hand against a man he had not met. The child's tune was not a man. It was the only thing in the city that had sounded, from the first, like a question he could still answer.

He crossed the room and opened the door himself. The music continued, undisturbed.

He went through.

The Child at the Piano

The room was smaller than its sound had suggested. A square piano stood beneath a high window, and a child sat at it with his feet well above the pedals. He played with one finger of each hand. The tune moved upward, fell back by an interval Leon would not have chosen, and paused.

The child tried a final note. He frowned, struck a different one, and smiled at the surprise of it.

“Which is the right ending?” Leon asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

Leon had intended to ask where he was. The answer to the musical question, offered without embarrassment, held him where he stood.

“Play the first one again.”

The child did. It ended awkwardly. He heard something honest in the awkwardness, a space the music had not decided how to cross.

“What are you working on?” the child asked.

Leon glanced at the notebook in his hand. “A symphony, apparently.”

“Do you like it?”

“I haven’t heard all of it.”

The child thought about this. “You can like it before it’s done.”

Leon asked him to play it without stopping. The child did, adding an ending so abrupt that they both laughed. On the next attempt he delayed the last note until it no longer sounded like an ending at all. Leon recognized something of his own first lessons: not the approved exercises, but the hours when he repeated a sequence because each repetition made another answer imaginable.

“Does anyone listen?” he asked.

“You are.”

“Before I came.”

“Sometimes.”

“Who?”

The child began the tune again. Either the question bored him or he could not answer it. There were moments when he spoke with the simplicity of a person his age, and moments when his silence seemed practiced. Leon wondered if his own need to interpret everyone here was making them harder to see.

“Can you play the next bit?” the child said.

Leon sat beside him. The bench had room enough for both. He touched the first three notes, then stopped. Every continuation he imagined arrived dressed in an orchestra. He could hear a brass

answer, a rise in the strings, a brilliant modulation that would persuade anyone listening that the little phrase had mattered all along. He could not play any of them for the child.

“Try the note you don’t like,” the child said.

“I haven’t played one yet.”

“You almost did.”

Leon felt briefly exposed. He had considered a lower note and rejected it before touching the key. The child could have seen his hand move. He played the note. It was ugly against the harmony he expected. The child held a different note beside it, soft enough that the two no longer sounded like a mistake. Leon moved to a third. They followed the little discord until it settled somewhere neither had planned.

“That’s not the ending,” the child said.

“No.”

“But it goes somewhere.”

Leon watched him start the tune once more. In the old upstairs room, Miriam had sometimes added a note when she thought he was stuck. She had been a poor pianist and an excellent listener. He remembered a winter afternoon when they argued over whether one of her accidental chords was worth keeping. Their mother had called them to supper before they resolved it. Leon had later used the chord in a student piece without telling Miriam. He wondered whether she knew.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Neither do I.”

The child resumed without waiting for Leon to move. They listened to a wrong note together, and neither corrected it.

The strikes came, nearer than before, from somewhere above the high window. Seven. The child lifted his hands from the keys and looked up, the way a child looks up when a name is called in another room.

In the gap, the pressure across Leon’s chest again; and under it the voice, a little nearer now, two syllables, the second lower than the first. A woman’s voice, he thought. He could not have sworn to it.

“Someone’s calling you,” the child said.

“Who?”

“You’d know.”

He did not. The strikes had stopped and the voice with them. The child put his hands back on the keys as if nothing had interrupted, and Leon found that his own hand had gone to his chest and was pressing there, as though to hold something in.

At the far end of the room a door shut softly. Leon turned. There had been no one there a moment before. He crossed to the door and opened it onto a short hall lined with coat hooks. At its end he heard the same tune played in a steadier tempo. He looked back.

The piano bench was empty.

The boy had gone, though Leon had heard neither footsteps nor the opening of another door. Leon walked back to the instrument and played the tune as he remembered it. He could recall the child's hesitation more clearly than any one ending.

He wrote the phrase in the blue notebook, leaving the last bar open. On the facing page he recorded the room's dimensions and the high window. He was learning to make the notebook do two things: hold the music, and tell him whether the rooms changed when he returned.

He checked the window from the hall. It should have looked onto the narrow lane he had found earlier. Instead it faced a courtyard with a fountain whose basin was dry. The wall beyond the courtyard carried no windows. Leon compared the distance he had walked through the rear door with his street diagram. The rooms could have been nested inside a deeper building than he realized. He marked the possibility rather than erasing the earlier drawing.

On the way back to the piano, he found a second doorway. The room through it was identical to the child's room, down to the crack across the upper pane, but its bench was pushed in and the keys were covered. He lifted the cover. One middle key made no sound. In the room he had left, he remembered every key answering. He went back to test it and found the child gone. The same middle key was silent there too.

He could have misheard the instrument before. The defect might belong to both pianos, if there were two. He wrote down what he had seen and refused to supply a conclusion.

In the hall, the tune continued from farther away. Its tempo was still steadier, and it now ended on a chord. Leon held the notebook closed against his chest. He wanted to follow the sound, but he waited long enough to fix the original version in his mind.

Then he went to hear what had become of it.

The First Compromise

The steadier music came from a rehearsal room with three chairs and no audience. A young man at the piano was working over the child's phrase. He played it twice with a small alteration in the ascent, then attached the assured cadence Leon had heard from the hall.

"That's not how it began," Leon said.

The young man looked at him without surprise. He wore a dark coat over a shirt that had been ironed badly. A stack of handwritten parts occupied the floor beside his chair.

"Do you prefer it without the ending?"

"I prefer to know why you changed the interval."

"Because the first one sounded uncertain."

"It was uncertain."

The young man lifted a shoulder. "Then the first one wouldn't have been heard."

Leon moved to the piano. "Play it again."

The younger man obliged. On the third repetition Leon found himself admiring the correction. The larger harmony was already implied by it. In a concert hall, played by a good orchestra, the tune would carry farther. He could imagine accepting the change without a second thought.

"Who asked you for this?" he said.

"Someone who might open a door."

"And if he didn't?"

"I would have written something else."

The answer came with an edge Leon recognized. Years earlier, a visiting conductor had advised him to remove an odd, quiet passage from a work that was to receive its first major performance. The conductor had not been cruel. He had described the piece the audience would be ready to hear. Leon had made the cut by lamplight, copying the altered bars by hand while a train crossed the bridge outside, certain that acceptance would buy him freedom later. The sacrifice had seemed temporary because the original passage remained in a drawer.

The performance succeeded. Afterward, the piece existed everywhere in its revised form: in a recording, in an orchestral library, in the accounts of people who claimed to know what it meant. He could have restored the passage in a later performance, but by then it felt like a private objection to a public fact. He had begun to doubt his own hearing. He had always remembered the omitted passage as flawed. Standing in this room, he realized he no longer remembered enough of it to know.

"What if the person who opens the door stops listening once you're inside?" Leon asked.

"Then I'll find another person."

"And another version of the tune?"

“If I have to.”

The young man played the polished cadence at twice the speed. It remained clever but lost the small breath before its final chord. He slowed it again, annoyed by Leon’s attention.

“You had a choice,” he said.

Leon stared. “How would you know?”

“You always had a choice.”

The statement was unfair to the younger man Leon had been; reputation, rent, and an orchestra’s willingness to play unfamiliar music had all mattered. It was also true. Leon did not know how to hold both thoughts without retreating into an argument he had settled decades ago.

“Sometimes you have to get into the room,” the young man said. “You can write what you want once you’re there.”

Leon had said those words to Miriam after his first commission. She had not argued. She had asked how he would know when he was inside the room. He had forgotten that part of the conversation until now.

“What’s your name?” Leon asked.

The young man looked down at the parts beside the piano. No name appeared at the top of the nearest page.

“Would it change what you heard?”

From somewhere behind the wall came the measured metallic figure. It was too soft to interrupt the conversation, but Leon counted it, and he saw that the young man counted too, his lips moving slightly, and that he waited until the seventh strike had passed before he spoke.

“You came for the larger work,” he said. “There’s another page two rooms along.”

“How do you know?”

“I heard you play the first.”

Leon had played the first page in an empty room. He considered saying so. The young man’s calm expression made the assertion seem less useful than it ought to have been.

Two rooms along, a single manuscript page rested on a table. The number in its corner was thirty-one. Leon examined it without touching it. Its second system developed the child’s melody in long, low notes. The result was less finished than the young man’s version, and more beautiful than Leon expected.

Read it without claiming it, he wrote in his notebook. He played it silently from the page. He remembered Miriam reaching across him to correct a note in a childhood exercise. He remembered being annoyed. He remembered her laughing when he insisted the mistake was more interesting.

The memories remained.

Leon picked up the sheet and said nothing. It was ordinary paper, substantial and slightly rough. The room did not alter.

He had not conducted a useful experiment yet. A memory could disappear without his noticing; he could not measure everything he carried in his mind. He needed a fact he could check.

On a clean notebook page he wrote:

My sister's name is Miriam. When she was little she called me Leo. When she says my full name now, she lowers her voice on the second syllable. She telephoned this morning and asked me to have supper Thursday.

He read the sentences twice, attending particularly to the sound of her voice. He told himself that he was testing the city. He knew, as he placed the manuscript on the stand and laid his hand on it, that he was also listening to the second system in his head, where it had already begun to join itself to page twenty-six, and that he wanted the join.

"This is part of my symphony."

The room stayed still. Leon waited. The passage in his mind had grown larger, ready to connect. He was almost relieved.

He read the notebook.

Miriam. Leo. Thursday. Every fact made sense. But when he tried to hear Miriam say *Leon*, the remembered voice was gone. He knew her speech was lower than his and sometimes rough in the morning. He could have identified her on the telephone an hour ago. Now all he could summon was the rhythm of what she had said.

He sat down so abruptly that the chair struck the wall.

The first loss could have been chance. This one had taken place while he watched for it. He could read what was missing, describe its absence, and still not restore it. His written record had preserved the fact but not the experience.

Leon put the manuscript back on the table. He tried to withdraw his claim, to tell the room he did not want the page after all. Nothing changed.

At the bottom of the notebook entry he added: *Reading costs nothing. Saying the work is mine costs what I love. Do not test this again.*

The strikes began while he was writing. They were closer together than before, and he had the impression, which he could not have defended, that they came from inside the wall rather than beyond it. Seven. Then the gap, and the pressure on his chest, heavier now, a weight laid flat and held; and under it the voice.

It was near enough this time. A woman. She said his name, both syllables, and let the second one fall.

He did not know her.

He waited for recognition the way one waits for a sneeze. Nothing arrived. It was a stranger's voice, warm and tired, saying his name as if she had the right to, and he sat with his hand pressed to his chest

and felt nothing for it except the ordinary unease of being addressed by someone he could not place. Then the strikes ended and the weight lifted and the voice went wherever it went.

He wrote: *A woman. She says my name as if she has the right to. I don't know who she is.*

He read the line above it, the one about the second syllable, and did not connect them. He noticed that he had not, and wrote that down too, because the notebook's purpose was to hold what he might later be unable to.

He carried the notebook into the corridor and left page thirty-one behind.

Two doors down, the young man's cadence sounded once and fell silent. Leon walked toward it, meaning to demand an explanation, and found the rehearsal room empty, the three chairs in their places, the stack of parts on the floor. He bent to look at them. At the top of the nearest page, in the large old-fashioned letters of the title he had seen on page twenty-six, was a name.

Leon Arlen.

It was on every part. He turned them over one by one. The city was crediting him. He thought of the room with the blank stands filling with the page he had claimed, and understood that somewhere in the building an orchestra that was not there was being handed the second system of page thirty-one, with his name at the top, and that it had cost the sound of his sister's voice.

Beyond the rehearsal room was a narrow stairwell. On its landing, on the jamb of a door that led only upward, was the pencil mark he had made on the first building's door: a short diagonal line crossing a smaller one. He turned the notebook to his sketch and compared the jamb, the hinge, the light on the wall. This was not the same door. Someone could have copied his mark. If the city could move a room, it could move a pencil line. Neither explanation gave him a route out.

He sat on the lowest stair and opened the notebook to the first drawing, the awning and the two windows, to set it against what he remembered of the street.

The page was blank.

The previous and following pages were intact. The warning in his hand remained. So did the note about Miriam, and both versions of the child's tune, and the line about the stranger's voice. Only the drawing was gone. He pressed his thumb against the sheet and felt faint indentations where a pencil had crossed it. He tilted it to the light and could make out the ghost of an awning. What had vanished was the graphite.

It was possible he had rubbed it away without noticing. There was a gray smear along the edge of his hand. He had been turning pages quickly. The thought steadied him for a moment, then troubled him more: if such a small ordinary action could account for what he saw, how would he ever tell whether anything here was being done to him?

He wrote a simpler inventory. *Awning. Page twenty-six: the house. Child. Young man. Page thirty-one: her voice. A woman calling. My name on the parts.*

At the end he added a question he could not have put to either figure: *If I knew the price, why did I say the words?*

Above him a door opened onto the sound of an orchestra tuning.

The Conductor's Promise

Leon entered a hall larger than any of the rooms he had seen. Its seats were dark and empty. Onstage, music stands waited beneath a wash of light, and the sound of tuning continued, one violin holding an A, a bass clarinet answering from nowhere Leon could see.

The chairs were not empty. He understood this slowly. When he looked at any one of them it held nothing; when he let his eyes rest on a whole section there was a sleeve, the curve of a bow arm, a face turned toward the podium, the way a crowd is present in the edge of vision and gone when you turn. The first violins were nearly full. The cellos were half there. The brass, at the back, were a row of vacant chairs with instruments laid across them.

A man stood at the podium, arranging a set of pages. He was neither old nor young, and his clothes had the precise ease of someone who never had to hurry before a rehearsal. He glanced up as Leon approached.

"You've heard what the individual pages can do," he said. "I'd like you to hear what happens when they belong together."

Leon stopped beside the front row. "Who are you?"

"The person who can show you the whole."

"That isn't a name."

"You asked the young man for his. What did it tell you?"

Leon walked to the stage, keeping the blue notebook in his hand. He held it out. "If you're assembling this work, you ought to know what it was before anyone corrected it."

The conductor read the child's phrase. "I do."

"Then play it."

The conductor stepped down from the podium and played the phrase on the stage piano. He kept the child's awkward interval and even the small pause Leon had recorded. He stopped where the notebook stopped.

Leon had prepared to hear the tune smoothed over. This was worse. The conductor could preserve a vulnerable detail when he wished. His larger arrangement was a choice, not an inability to hear.

"How do you know what I've heard?"

"You hum when you're thinking."

Leon discovered that he had been making a sound under his breath. He stopped.

The conductor returned to the podium and lifted his hands. The tuning settled. Then music began.

It did not resemble an orchestra heard from a neighboring room. Leon could distinguish each entry: a pulse in the lowest strings, a distant breath in the clarinet, bright strikes that seemed to travel across the hall. The chairs he had thought empty were playing. The child's little ascent appeared deep inside

the texture, entrusted first to one instrument and then another. The young man's altered interval opened a broad harmonic distance. An idea Leon had heard alone in the long room became an answer he had not known to ask for.

It was extraordinary music. For several minutes he forgot to defend himself against it. At a point where he expected the melody to rise, it fell instead, and he laughed quietly, because it was better than what he would have done.

The sound diminished without ending. The conductor lowered his hands.

"What happens when I say it's mine?" Leon asked.

"You know what happens when you give your attention to something fully. Other things recede."

"My sister's voice isn't an other thing."

"I didn't say it was."

The answer was kind enough to make Leon angry. He opened the notebook to the record he had made. "I can tell you the sequence. I read a page and remembered her. I claimed the page and forgot the sound of her voice. Twice."

The conductor considered the lines without reaching for the book. "You don't know what the first page cost you."

"The house."

"The house was the second."

Leon heard the sentence and did not, for a moment, understand it. Then he turned back to the first page of the notebook, to the seven words in his hand.

"What were you doing before the awning?" the conductor asked.

"I was in a car."

"And then?"

There was the click against the glass. There was the count. There was the light in the window. Then there was the awning, and a notebook already written in.

"You claimed a page before you had written a word in that book," the conductor said. "The opening. The first page of the work. You had been trying to write it for years, and here it was, and you said the words without being asked. Afterward you were frightened enough to leave yourself a warning. You've read it several times today. You didn't recognize the occasion."

"What did it cost?"

"Whatever happened between the car and the awning."

Leon sat down on the edge of the stage. He had taken the gap for the ordinary seam of a dream. It was a wound. Something had happened to him in a car at a crossing, and he had sold the memory of it for twelve bars of music before he knew there was anyone to sell it to.

“You could have told me,” he said.

“You didn’t ask. You asked what it would cost next.” The conductor paused. “That’s not an accusation. It’s the question a composer asks.”

“Where’s the way out?”

“There’s a door. You have time to finish before you reach it.”

“How much?”

The strikes answered. Seven, from the back of the hall, closer together than they had been an hour ago, if it had been an hour. In the gap the weight settled on Leon’s chest and the woman’s voice came through it, clear now, his name with the second syllable lowered, and after it a second word he had never heard her use, which might have been *please*.

He did not know her. He looked at the conductor and saw that the conductor was listening too, with the slight tilt of a man hearing a part come in late.

“She’s persistent,” the conductor said.

“Who is she?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t know her.”

“No,” the conductor agreed. “Not anymore.”

Leon stood. He was shaking, and it was not entirely fear. “What happens when the measure ends?”

“The work is finished or it isn’t. Finished, it stays, and everything in it stays with it. Unfinished, it’s lost, and everything you’ve put into it is lost too.” He laid a hand on the pages. “The house isn’t gone, Leon. It’s here. Her voice isn’t gone. Listen.”

He turned to the orchestra that was and was not there and gave a small cue. The low strings played four bars Leon had not heard before, a cadence settling into a key like a house settling at night.

The name came back.

It was there, whole, with the stone step and the crooked gate: the name his mother wrote on envelopes. He had it for the length of the phrase. When the strings stopped, it went, cleanly, as a light goes when a hand leaves the switch, and he was standing on a stage with his mouth open around a word that was no longer in it.

“You see,” the conductor said. “Nothing you gave is lost. It’s kept. Finish the work and you keep all of it.”

“And if I leave?”

“Then I can’t show you what it becomes.” He did not threaten. He stood among the manuscripts with the patience of someone offering a real opportunity, and Leon wished for a cruder opponent, because a threat would have told him where he stood.

He looked at the page the conductor held. He could read the opening system from where he stood. It developed a passage he had been certain he invented at twenty-five and had never published. The thought of an unseen person possessing it should have shocked him. Instead he wanted to know the next measure.

“I won’t claim it,” he said. “May I read it?”

The conductor laid the sheet on the podium and stepped aside. The music led toward a cadence Leon had avoided in the original sketch. In the second system, the child’s hesitant rhythm had been regularized. It now supported a magnificent arrival for the entire orchestra. Leon found his own pencil in his hand. He did not remember taking it out. Beside the child’s theme he wrote a small mark to restore the pause. The conductor watched without objecting.

“Better?”

“Different.”

“There’s no need to decide now. The score will be here when you are ready.”

“Will you?”

“If you want me.”

Leon wrote down exactly what the conductor had said about the measure, placing quotation marks around the sentence. The conductor waited. “You can make a score of this conversation too, if it helps.”

It was generous, and it was precisely what Leon wanted to hear, and he could not afford to confuse either with proof of honesty. He walked the length of the hall, counting its exits. At the final door he looked back. The conductor had resumed ordering his papers. The first violins were full now, every chair, and they were turning the pages of their parts in unison, with a sound like a flock lifting.

Beyond the door was a square vestibule. A clock without hands hung above an inner entrance. On the wall was a framed program bearing Leon’s name. He had never performed in this city, but the first work listed was the piece from which he had cut the odd quiet passage, and the date beside it was the date of that concert, early in his career. Beneath it was a second title.

The Transcendence Symphony. And in the smaller type reserved for such things: *first performance*.

The date beside the second title was printed. He could not read it. The figures stayed on the paper the way print stays on paper in dreams, present and illegible, and when he put his finger under them they were still there and still unreadable.

The inner entrance opened onto the hall he had just left. He could see the conductor at the far end, although the vestibule should have been behind him. Leon shut the door.

He wrote: *The conductor’s music is real to me. That does not make his explanation true.* Then, beneath it: *He knows who she is*.

The outer door gave onto the street. He did not go back to the hall. He went the way he had come, to the building with the high window, because he wanted to ask the child one question, and because he wanted, more than he could justify, to see him.

The two rooms were there. Both pianos were closed. He opened the first and played the child's tune, and the silent middle key stayed silent, and when he came to the last bar he could no longer tell whether the ending he wanted was remembered or invented. He closed the lid. The child was not there.

In the corridor he stopped at the high window. The courtyard was where he had drawn it. The fountain's basin had been dry. It now held a hand's depth of clear water, and as he watched, a drop fell into it from the spout, and then another, at the interval of a slow pulse.

At the far end of the courtyard a door stood open onto the street. He took it, keeping the notebook open to his latest drawing until the building was behind him.

The Man Without a Title

At the edge of the square, Leon found a café with its chairs set out but no sign of service. A man sat at the farthest table, turning a cup in his hands. There was no music inside. After the hall, the absence felt almost arranged.

Leon considered passing. He had met three people in the city, and each had understood something about him before he spoke. He had begun to dread the sound of his own name.

The man looked up. “You can sit if you’d like.”

Leon sat opposite him. There was an empty cup on his side of the table. He did not touch it.

The man had a plain face that Leon thought he might forget as soon as he looked away. His sleeves were rolled unevenly; one hand showed a narrow scar at the base of the thumb. He waited for Leon to speak.

“Do you know where I am?”

“I know where we’re sitting.”

Leon laid the notebook between them, open to the first page. The man read the seven words without changing expression.

“Is it good advice?” Leon asked.

“Do you know who wrote it?”

“I do, now.”

“Then you know whether it’s good.”

Leon reached for the notebook. As he drew it back, a slip of paper fell from between the leaves: the concert program he had used to test the lane. He had folded it into his coat pocket afterward. He did not remember moving it. He turned it over.

On the reverse, in his own hand, was a list.

The crash.

The house.

Her voice.

The three lines had been struck through, each with a single stroke. Below them, unstruck:

Her name.

Her face.

Her.

Me.

He read it twice. The handwriting was his. The final strokes of the *h* in *house* and *her* rose as they always did. The pencil was the one in his pocket, worn on one side.

“I didn’t write this,” he said.

“Whose hand is it?”

“Mine.”

“Then who set the price?”

Leon looked at the list and understood it, and the understanding was worse than the fear. The order was his. He had made it before the awning, when he had claimed a page with no one to stop him, and had been asked, or had asked himself, what he would give. He had put the crash first because it was already gone. He had put the house second because it was only a name. He had put her voice third, and her name fourth, and her face, and then her, and he had put himself last, because that was the order in which he had always been willing to spend things. Letters, then postcards, then photographs, then replies to hers. He had not needed a city to teach him the sequence. He had only needed someone to write it down.

You gave him your list.

“I’ve done this before,” he said.

“Here?”

“Everywhere.”

The man did not dispute it. He took a sip from his cup at last. Leon had thought it empty. The cup made no sound against the saucer when he set it down.

The strikes came across the square, seven, hurried now, like a man taking stairs. The gap after them was longer than it had been. The weight came down on Leon’s chest and stayed, and the voice came through it, and it was the same woman, nearer than she had ever been.

Leon. Please.

He did not know her. He sat with his hand flat on his sternum and his eyes shut and tried to know her, and could not, and the not-knowing was a smooth wall with no purchase on it anywhere.

“There’s a woman,” he said when it had passed. “She calls me by name. I don’t know who she is.”

“What does she sound like?”

“Tired. As if she’s been doing it a long time.”

“Does she sound like she wants something from you?”

Leon considered. “No. She sounds like she wants me.”

The man turned the cup a quarter turn. “The one calling you doesn’t know your work.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she isn’t calling the composer.”

Leon noticed the scar again. Miriam had once cut her hand on a broken glass and worn a dressing in exactly that place. Many people had scars there. He had spent the city making connections between fragments of music; perhaps he was doing it now with faces.

“Did you know me before I came here?”

“What would satisfy you as proof?”

“Something I couldn’t have told you.”

The man tapped a rhythm with one finger against the cup: three strokes close together, two spaced farther apart. Leon’s sister had used that rhythm when she waited for him to finish practicing. He had not written it in the notebook. He had not played it for anyone in the city.

“Miriam did that,” Leon said.

The man stopped. “You remembered.”

“You knew it first.”

“I tapped a rhythm. You gave it a name.”

The distinction was exact. Leon resented it, then saw that the man was right. He had supplied the meaning. And something else was moving in him, a second thing surfacing under the first, the rhythm and a voice coming toward each other from opposite sides of a dark room, and he said, “The woman—” and the strikes began again, seven, close as a stumble, and when they had passed and the weight had lifted the two things were on opposite sides of the room again and he could not remember what he had been about to say.

“You were going to say something,” the man said.

“It’s gone.”

The man looked at him for a long moment with the plain, forgettable face. “Then you had better go before the rest of it is.”

“Are you me?”

“Would you believe me if I said yes?”

“No.”

“Then it isn’t an answer I can give you.”

Across the square, the café’s other tables had cups on them now, each with a thread of steam, as if a dozen people had stepped away a moment ago and would be back. Lights were on in windows that had been dark. The city was filling the way a hall fills in the last minutes before a concert.

“Suppose you leave without it,” the man said.

“Without the score?”

“Yes.”

“I came here because I needed it.”

“What were you doing before you came?”

Leon described the rehearsal. His account was fluent: the orchestra, the conductor’s compliment, the violinist who had thanked him. He told the man about the next commission, the foundation dinner, the unopened notebook in his desk.

“You made music without this score,” the man said.

“I knew how.”

“Is that different from wanting to?”

Leon looked down at the empty cup. “It has been.”

“If no one would hear the next piece you wrote, would you still write it?”

He could have answered with a graceful statement about the privacy of art. Instead he thought of himself at the desk that morning, failing to open the stained notebook. He had no confidence that he would have written anything.

“I don’t know.”

The man nodded, as if an uncertain answer could be complete for the moment. He pointed toward a narrow street behind the square. He did not say where it led.

At the café threshold, Leon turned. “You never told me your name.”

The man placed the cup on its saucer. “You haven’t told me why you need it.”

Leon crossed the square alone. At the entrance to the narrow street he opened the notebook and, beneath the list in his own hand, wrote: *A statement can be true and still be designed to lead me somewhere. That includes my own.*

He did not take the narrow street. The man had pointed it out, and Leon wanted one choice in the city that was not an answer to someone else’s direction. He crossed to the broadest of the other streets, and the strikes followed him, seven, and the gap, and in the gap the woman said his name as if she had been saying it for days.

The Door Without a Score

The broad street led past a row of shuttered shops to a rehearsal building with a clock above its entrance. It had no hands. Inside was a hall with one chair and no music. Leon put the notebook on the chair, walked the length of the room, and came back. It was where he had left it. The building gave him nothing else.

Upstairs, in a row of practice cubicles, he tried a piano. The child's first three notes sounded, and the fourth key went down and came up without a tone. He lifted the lid. It was an old instrument with a repair tag tied inside, and the hammer for that key had lost its felt. No one had arranged it for him that he could prove.

He sat and played a continuation that was neither the child's nor the conductor's. He played it several times. He did not write it down. For a few minutes, in a building that wanted nothing from him, he could play without asking whether the sound would survive the room.

The strikes found him there. Seven, and the gap, and the weight, and her. He went down to the street.

The café's chairs were still out. The man was gone, and the cups on the other tables had stopped steaming. Leon crossed the square and took the narrow street.

It ended at a small performance room. Its double doors stood open. A piano stood on the floor rather than on a stage, and around it, in a broad arc, lay the pages Leon had seen in the conductor's hall: twenty-six by its spare opening, thirty-one by the low statement of the child's phrase, and many more. One space in the arc was empty.

Behind the piano stood a door of unpainted wood. No light showed beneath it. Its handle was within reach.

The room was full. He saw this as he had seen it in the hall, at the edge of vision first and then plainly: players in the chairs along the walls, instruments raised, a woman in the first violins with her back to him and her bow on the string, waiting. They were not shapes now. They had hands. The cellist's left hand was pressing a position he could have named. No one looked at him. They were watching the empty space in the arc.

The child sat at the piano. Leon had not seen him when he came in. He played the original tune, with the open last bar, and took his hands away.

"Did you bring me here?" Leon asked.

The child shook his head. "You followed."

"Do you know where that goes?" Leon nodded at the door.

The child looked at it, then at him. "No."

Leon went to the door and put one finger on its panel. It was wood. He could hear nothing from the other side. He tried to imagine the city continuing beyond it, another set of rooms and a second, more elaborate score, and could not tell whether the thought was a fear or a hope.

Footsteps came from the entrance. The conductor walked in carrying a single sheet of music. The young man was behind him, holding the altered tune. Neither hurried.

“You’ve found it,” the conductor said.

“I found a door.”

“And the work.”

He held up the sheet. Leon could see the page number but not the notes. He had the sudden conviction that it contained the ending the child had been looking for, and he stepped away from the door before he had decided to.

“How much do you know about what’s behind it?”

“Not enough to promise you anything.”

It was the first unqualified uncertainty the conductor had admitted, and Leon wanted to trust him for it.

“Then why keep telling me there’s time to finish?”

“Because I know what you can do with the time you have.”

The conductor crossed the arc, stepping between pages, and set the sheet in the empty space. The arc was complete. Somewhere in the room a string section drew breath. He bent and picked the sheet up again and placed it on the piano, in front of the child, who slid off the bench without a word and went to stand by the young man. Neither spoke.

Leon read the first system. It began with the unfinished phrase, in neither the child’s version nor the young man’s. The rhythm had been altered to make room for a low counterline. He could hear how the rest of the orchestra would enter. The next system made the first one necessary. He saw the shape of the final page and could not stop seeing it.

At the foot of the page was an unoccupied line. Space for a signature.

“You haven’t signed any of the others,” Leon said.

“This is the ending.”

“Would you sign it?”

The conductor did not answer. Leon studied his face. He had spent a lifetime watching conductors interpret his scores, and he could usually tell when one had made a decision before the rehearsal began. This man had.

“You’ve been hearing someone,” the conductor said.

“Yes.”

“You’d like to know who.”

Leon said nothing.

The conductor turned to the room and lifted his hands, and the players Leon could now see lifted their instruments, and the final page began.

It was the best thing he had ever heard. He knew it the way one knows a temperature. The counterline rose out of the cellos under the child's phrase, and the phrase, for the first time, did not sound like a question. It sounded answered. And in the counterline, in the second bar, the cellos dropped a third on the second note of a two-note figure and held it, and it was a voice.

It was her voice.

He knew it at once, completely, with his whole body, the way he had known it an hour ago on the telephone in a different life: low, a little rough, lowering on the second syllable of his name. Miriam. The cellos were saying *Leon* and lowering the second syllable and the sound of it went through him like warmth into a cold hand. He had it. It was here. He stood in the room with his eyes shut and his sister's voice in the music, exact, perfected, orchestrated, saying his name, and he wept.

The conductor let the phrase go round once more and brought the room to silence. When the cellos stopped, the voice went with them, as the house's name had gone, and Leon was left knowing that it had been there and could be again, whenever this man lifted his hands.

"There," the conductor said quietly. "That's what you gave. It isn't lost. Nothing you gave is lost. Sign, and it stays. You'll hear her whenever you like."

The strikes came. Seven, hard against each other, almost a roll. The gap opened. The weight came down on Leon's chest and held, and through it, from the far side of the door, from the far side of everything, the woman said his name.

He did not know her.

He stood between the two voices. In the room, in the cellos, was Miriam, certain and kept, saying *Leon* with the second syllable lowered, his for the asking. In the dark beyond the door was a stranger, tired, saying *Leon* with the second syllable lowered, and he could not join them, and he saw that he could not, and he saw that he was being offered the one he could hear in exchange for the one he could not.

The one calling you doesn't know your work.

The voice in the cellos knew his work. It was made of it. The voice in the dark had never once, in all the gaps, said a word about the symphony. It had said his name, and *please*.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"You know who she is," the conductor said. "She's on the page. Sign, and you keep her."

"Not that one. The other."

The conductor looked at him with something that might have been pity. "Her name is on the next page. Leave now and you go without it."

"Then I'll have to ask her."

He went to the piano. He played the first measures of the final page, and the room's tone was thin against the grandeur he had just heard. At the place where the orchestra should have arrived, he stopped, and played a different note, the one from the child's hesitant version, the one they had laughed

at because it went astray. It did not improve the conductor's ending. It belonged to a piece that was not finished.

"That isn't on the page," the conductor said.

"I know."

Leon put the sheet back on the piano. His hand stayed on it long enough to feel the roughness of the paper. He wanted to memorize every note. He wanted to carry out a proof that his hours in the city had led to something beyond a refusal.

Instead he took the blue notebook from his coat and set it beside the score. The child's phrase was inside it. So were his maps, his warning, the list in his own hand, and the page on which he had written his sister's name and the way she said his. He was leaving the only record he had of a woman he could no longer hear, in a room where she was being kept for him, to go toward a voice he did not know.

He could not have explained the choice to the man he had been that morning. He was not sure he could explain it now. He only knew which of the two voices had asked him for nothing.

The child came toward him. Leon expected a farewell, or an answer. The child sat at the piano again and played the first three notes. He stopped before the fourth, listening.

Leon went to the door. The conductor did not move to prevent him. The young man lowered his eyes to the altered tune in his hands. The players along the walls kept their instruments raised, waiting for a cue that was not going to come.

"What if there's nothing beyond it?" the conductor asked.

"Then I have spent enough time here trying to make a piece of music answer that question."

The door opened without resistance.

There was no light beyond it that Leon could see. No hall, no room, no view. He had an instant to regret the notebook. He stepped forward anyway.

The seven measured strikes sounded at a great distance. The gap after them went on and on. Leon waited in the dark for the one that had always failed to arrive.

When it came, the note was quiet.

He could not tell who had played it.

The Transcendence Symphony

Someone was speaking his name.

At first Leon heard it as two notes, the second lower than the first. He tried to answer with the note that belonged after them. The effort made him aware of his mouth, the dryness of it, and a weight across his chest that did not move when he wanted it to.

“Leon?”

He opened his eyes. The ceiling was white. There was a narrow strip of daylight beyond it, then the edge of a window. A woman sat beside the bed with both hands around a paper cup.

“Miriam,” he said.

Her face changed. She set the cup down and leaned forward, stopping just short of touching him. He saw that she had been waiting for permission, or for certainty that he was awake.

“You’ve been asleep a long time,” she said.

He listened to her voice. It lowered on the second syllable of his name, exactly as he had written in the notebook. It was the voice from the gaps. The stranger who had said his name and *please* through the weight on his chest, whom he had not known, whom he had walked into the dark toward without knowing, was his sister, and he knew her now the way one knows one’s own front door, without having to look. He closed his eyes, afraid for an instant that it would go again.

“Where am I?”

She told him the name of the hospital. He did not recognize it. His first thought was that the door had opened into another part of the city.

“How did I get here?”

Miriam looked toward someone at the foot of the bed. Leon turned his head. A nurse stood there, checking a display he could not see.

“There was a collision,” Miriam said. “You were in a car.”

He remembered rain crossing a window, the small repeated click, the count, a light. There was nothing after the light until the awning. There would never be, he supposed. He had been told what it cost.

“The driver?”

“He’s all right. Bruised. He asked about you.”

Leon tried to sit up. Pain entered from several directions at once. The nurse asked him to stay still. He obeyed, though his hands continued to move against the sheet.

“What happened to me?”

“You were badly hurt,” Miriam said. “They’ve taken good care of you.”

It was an answer chosen for someone just waking. Leon heard what she had left out. He asked for the rest, and she told him in pieces while the nurse helped him drink water. The car had been struck at an intersection. There had been internal bleeding, surgery, days in intensive care.

She stopped there. He watched her decide whether to go on.

“Miriam.”

“In the ambulance,” she said, “your heart stopped.”

The nurse had gone still at the foot of the bed. Leon understood that this was the sentence his sister had been carrying for days, that she had rehearsed it, and that the rehearsal had not helped.

“For how long?”

“A little under four minutes, they said. Then they got it going again.”

Leon looked at the window. Daylight lay across the frame without changing direction.

Four minutes. He thought of the silence after the seventh strike, of standing in the dark beyond the door and waiting for the note that had always failed to arrive. It had come at last, quiet, from no instrument he could see, and he had not been able to tell who played it. He looked at the nurse at the foot of the bed, at the display she was reading, and thought that he could tell now. An interval of failed circulation. He had spent it in a city, arguing about a score.

“Did I speak while I was asleep?”

Miriam shook her head. “Not to me.”

“Was I ever awake?”

“They said you responded sometimes. They couldn’t tell us what you’d remember.” She looked down at her hands. “I talked to you. The nurses said to. Every day, whether or not anyone was in the room. I didn’t know if you could hear.”

“I heard you.”

She did not ask what he meant. She put one hand over his on the sheet and left it there.

He held onto the word *sometimes*. The city had appeared continuous to him. He had walked its streets, spent hours over a score, and chosen a door. The hospital had measured an injury, four minutes without a pulse, days of care. He had been somewhere while his heart was stopped, and he had been asked to stay, and he had come back. How the hours fitted inside the minutes he could not say. Neither account made the other feel less real.

“I was somewhere,” he said.

Miriam pulled her chair nearer. “You can tell me when you’re ready.”

Leon began with the piano room under the high window. He described the child and the unfinished melody. By the time he reached the conductor’s hall, he was exhausted and uncertain whether he had explained the rooms well enough for her to see them. Miriam did not ask him to prove anything. She asked what the music had sounded like.

He could not sing it.

The discovery unsettled him more than his pain. He remembered reading pages, following their lines, and hearing the orchestra the conductor had drawn from them. He remembered knowing that a passage was more beautiful than one he would have written. Yet when he searched for its pitches, he found only the sensation of listening. The cello line that had carried her voice was gone with the rest. He minded that less than he would have expected. The voice itself was in the chair beside him, asking what the music had sounded like. The child's phrase was clearer, though its ending remained open.

"There was a whole symphony," he said. "I left it."

Miriam waited.

"I thought I had to."

"Maybe you did."

"I don't know what it was."

"You don't have to tell me today."

He almost corrected her. He wanted to tell her before any more of it faded. Then he noticed the marks beneath her eyes. She had been living through days he could not remember, waiting beside a bed and answering calls, while he had been absorbed in his search. He asked when she had arrived.

"The night they brought you in."

"What about Thursday?"

She gave him a puzzled look. "It's Tuesday, Leon. You've been here eight days."

He had missed the supper he never quite agreed to. He wanted to apologize for that, for the hospital chair, for all the smaller postponements that had taught her to leave messages without expectation. He managed only, "I'm glad you're here."

"So am I."

She did not make the words larger than they were.

During the first weeks of recovery Leon tried to write down the city. He asked for a notebook with a dark cover and copied the sequence of rooms as he recalled them. His hand tired quickly. A doorway he was certain had opened from the hall appeared in his next account beside the café. He drew the piano in the child's room against the wrong wall, then crossed it out. He could not decide whether memory was changing as his body healed or whether it had always been unstable.

There were ordinary gaps too: a nurse's name gone an hour after he learned it, a visit from Elise he placed on the wrong day. His physicians expected some confusion. The small hospital errors made him less confident in the notebooks he had kept in the city. They did not explain why the city retained such force when the hospital's days slipped past him.

Miriam brought photographs from her phone: the garden behind her apartment, a table of friends at dinner, a niece Leon had last seen at half her present height. Leon recognized the people, then realized he knew almost nothing about the occasions. Miriam had continued living while his visits became less

frequent. She showed the photographs without accusation. He was more ashamed because she had not required one.

“I meant to come last spring,” he said.

“I know.”

“I put it off because of the premiere.”

“And I came to that.”

“I saw you afterward for ten minutes.”

Miriam locked the phone and set it beside her. “I’m glad we have more than ten minutes now. We don’t have to account for every earlier one while you’re still in a hospital bed.”

Leon wanted to take the absolution she had not offered. He could also hear the boundary in her words. She would talk with him, but she would not spend his recovery reassuring him that the past had not mattered.

A physician listened when he mentioned the vivid experience. She did not look away or reach for the chart. People who had been through what he had been through sometimes brought something back with them, she said; she had heard a few such accounts, no two alike, and she would not pretend to know where in those four minutes his had taken place, or whether it had spilled past them into the days that followed. Leon appreciated that she did not supply a name for the city or ask him to stop using one.

At night he tried to reconstruct the conductor’s score. He would wake with the certainty that the third page began on a low note and turn on the light before the sound escaped. By the time he held a pencil, he was left with a contour that resembled half a dozen passages he already knew. He filled sheets with attempts and grew angry at the body’s slow demands: medication, rest, an hour of walking that left him weak.

Miriam found the sheets on a visit.

“You look as though someone’s set you a deadline,” she said.

“I don’t want to forget it.”

“What if you remember something different tomorrow?”

“Then I’ll need today’s version.”

She read a line of notes without pretending to understand it. “Is this the boy’s tune?”

“No. That’s the other music.”

“You’ve told me the boy’s tune three times,” she said. “Each time you sang it a little differently.”

Leon took the page from her, more sharply than he meant to. She apologized, though she had only observed what he had done.

After she left, he played the child’s phrase on the hospital’s small keyboard. He tried to recover the version that had first sounded from the room. He could hear the boy’s pause. The pitches were less

certain. He played one ending, then another, and grew frustrated with both. For a moment he heard the conductor say that he could finish it. Leon lifted his hands.

He had refused the conductor's page. Here he was, trying to force the same certainty out of what remained.

He left the keyboard alone for two days. When he returned, he played the phrase once without trying to preserve it. A second idea came to him from the low register, quiet enough to leave the first unresolved. He did not write it down immediately. He played it again to see whether he still wanted to hear it. He did.

Back home, the professional world resumed in stages: flowers, then considerate notes, then questions about whether the next commission would be ready for its announced season. Leon had once liked the sensation that so many people were waiting for him to work. Now the questions entered the room before he had sat at the piano.

He went once to the rehearsal hall where his earlier work was still being prepared. The orchestra had solved the passage he had criticized before the collision, and Leon sat at the back and heard the whole piece as a listener. When the young violinist greeted him afterward, he remembered her question about the quiet passage.

"You were right to like that moment," he told her.

"I thought you'd cut it."

"I almost did."

He did not explain the older sketches or the room with the child. She had heard what was actually in front of her and given him a true account of it. That was enough.

Elise came one afternoon with a folder of possible dates.

"No one expects you to be ready tomorrow," she said. "They just need to know how to plan."

"Tell them I can't promise the new work for that season."

"We could announce a smaller piece," she said. "Something from the sketches you already have."

He was tempted. He had many finished fragments that could become a respectable performance. But he recognized the relief he felt at the thought of answering a question about his future without listening to what he wanted to write.

"Not yet," he said.

Elise regarded him for a moment. "All right. I'll tell them you need time."

The conversation ended without punishment. Its quiet consequence was that, for the first time in years, he did not know what date governed his next morning at the piano.

He opened the desk drawer.

The water-stained notebook lay where he had left it. Leon turned to the strip of paper projecting from its middle. It marked a page from his earliest attempts at a large work. The pencil was faint. Across the

top he had written *Try again*, and under it was a phrase that rose, fell at an awkward interval, and broke before its last bar.

He sat with the book open for a long time.

He could account for the resemblance. He might have glimpsed the page before putting it away; he had spent years carrying its shape below conscious memory. His injured mind might have given it to a child at a piano. He could also remember the bench beside that child, the room's high window, the almost comic wrong note. The book did not tell him which account was true. It told him the phrase had belonged to his life before he wanted the city to explain it.

He played it on the piano. It was less lovely than he remembered. On the second attempt he found that its awkward interval made another line possible beneath it.

Miriam arrived late that week carrying food from a place they had liked as children. She had other plans afterward and could stay only an hour. Leon showed her the stained notebook, then thought better of asking whether she remembered the tune. She had already heard too much of his need for her to verify the city.

Instead he asked about her work. She told him a story about a colleague, then about a train she had nearly missed, and he listened without turning either incident into an example of how he had changed. When she rose to leave, he asked if they could have supper the following Thursday.

"I don't know yet," she said. "Call me Wednesday."

He wrote *Call Miriam Wednesday* on the kitchen calendar. In the city he had written a list of what he would give up, and she had been near the top of it, and the order had been his. A penciled reminder would not repair the years. It was the right end of the list to start from.

The new work grew slowly. Leon did not decide at once that it was a symphony. He wrote a passage for low strings and left its close uncertain. He made a second version that allowed the violin to take up the child's phrase without smoothing it. In the middle of a movement, he heard the seven metallic strikes again. He found a concert cimbalom player willing to visit and spent an afternoon learning what the instrument could do that his memory had not supplied: the dry attack of a damped note, the resonance that stayed after his hands expected silence, the way a low strike could seem to arrive from another part of the room.

The player, a woman named Anikó, asked him to stand at the other end of the room while she tried his first passage. From there, the notes sounded less like a clock and more like someone moving behind a wall. Leon asked her to let the final tone ring.

"For how long?"

"Until it changes the silence."

She tried it. He heard the sympathetic strings continue after the struck note had nearly vanished. What he had written as a rest was not empty.

"If you want it dry," she said, "I can stop it sooner."

"Not there. I thought I wanted it dry, but I hadn't heard what follows."

He revised the passage in front of her, leaving space for the instrument's own decay.

At another session he found that his final movement had become too bright too soon. The violins soared, but the listener had no reason yet to follow them. He moved the first broad theme later and let the low strings carry a slower version of the child's phrase. When the violins entered at last, their height was an answer to something already heard below.

Months later, the score filled more pages than Leon had intended. At one rehearsal, the cimbalom player struck the seven-note figure. Leon waited for the missing note. This time the orchestra did not supply it. After a silence, the instrument sounded it alone, and the high strings entered on a harmony he could not have imagined when he first wrote the little tune.

The conductor was the man who had rehearsed his earlier work the week of the collision. They had known each other twenty years, and he could still tell when Leon was being polite. He stopped the players.

"Do you want more time in that silence?" he asked.

Leon listened to the sound leaving the room.

"Yes," he said. "Let them wait until they need the next note."

They took the passage again. It was not the music he had heard in the city. He could not say whether the city had given him any music at all.

He had titled the score *The Transcendence Symphony*. Elise had asked if the name carried a particular meaning. Leon told her it once had, but the music had changed his understanding of it. He no longer thought of transcendence as a place a perfect work could take him. He thought of the small distance between refusing to begin and beginning, and of how often he would have to cross it.

Miriam attended the rehearsal. Afterward she came down the aisle while the players packed their instruments. Leon expected her to say what she thought of the symphony. She asked if he had eaten.

"Not since morning."

"You can tell me whether you liked it," he said.

"I did."

"You don't have to say so."

"I know. I liked the part where the violins entered after everyone had waited."

Leon almost told her that this was the exact place he had thought of their childhood room. She had described a sound, not asked for its private key. He thanked her. She asked what the players would change at the next rehearsal, and he told her about a difficult transition in the middle movement. They spoke about the work as something alive and still being made, rather than a final verdict on the person who had written it.

"Come on, then," Miriam said. "Food."

He gathered his score. At the doorway he glanced back at the cimbalom, its strings still exposed beneath the lights. A soft note sounded in the room. One of the players might have touched the instrument while putting away a mallet; he could not see from where he stood.

Miriam was waiting outside.

Leon followed her into the ordinary evening, carrying the pages he had written.

Afterword

This novella began with a sound: seven measured strikes, and the silence where an eighth should have been. I wanted to write a book that lived in that silence, a thriller in which the threat was not a person but a gap, and in which the question of what fills it was the question of a life.

It was conceived from the start as a near-death experience. The reader learns this in the final scene, as Leon does: his heart stopped for a little under four minutes, and the city of unfinished music is where he spent them. I have not tried to explain the city, and I will not do so here. I know what the three figures are to me, and the man at the café, and the note that arrives at the end. A reader who has come this far has earned the right to an answer of their own, and the book would be a lesser thing if I took it from them. The physician in the last scene speaks for me. She does not supply a name for the city, and she does not ask Leon to stop using one.

What I can say is what I believed when I wrote it. The story was built to carry four convictions, and I would rather state them plainly than have them mistaken for decoration.

The first is that a finished thing is a kind of death, and that life is in the unfinished. The conductor's symphony is perfect, and it is a tomb. The child's tune has no ending, and it is alive. Leon's life, when the book begins, is a succession of doors closed before he has looked through them. The city makes him look.

The second is that what we love does not need to be kept. The conductor's offer is the most seductive thing in the book, and it is the offer every grieving and every ambitious person has heard in some form: stay here, and nothing you gave is lost. It is true. It is also the trap. Her voice is in the cellos, and the cellos are not her.

The third is that the voice which calls us home does not know our work. The man at the café says this once, and it is the only sentence in the novella I would call a teaching. The woman who sat beside Leon's bed for eight days was not calling the composer. She was saying his name.

The fourth is that there are moments when we must go toward that voice without proof. Leon cannot recognize his sister when she calls. He leaves the room where she is kept for him, perfectly, and walks into the dark toward a stranger. That is not faith in the sense of believing something. It is the act of going where you are wanted before you can be sure that you are.

I wrote this as a thriller because I did not think these things could be said in calm. They are easy to agree with and very hard to do, and the only way I knew to make the difficulty real was to put the reader where Leon is, with the measure running out, and let the lesson cost something.

The novella has a companion soundtrack: eight tracks that share the titles of the eight scenes. It can be heard on its own, or one track to a chapter. It ends where the book ends.

P. A. Rallax