

FIRST ANNUAL SCR FICTION PRIZE

First Prize: Melody Chan Graves

The Final Bow

The girls who want to be me stand at the stage door to Avery Fisher Hall. They want to be the one to hand you your water bottle, to empty the sweaty Kleenex from your tux trousers after a performance, to guard the four-million-dollar Strad crossing the German border by black sedan because violin cases are too difficult to carry onto planes. To explain to your manager, your publicist, why you haven't returned any of their calls or emails.

–Nathalie, we really need a decision on this—

–Like I said, I'm not his mother. He knows perfectly well what will happen if he doesn't make up his mind.

–But you're the only one who can pull the information out of him—

–Fine.

To listen to you go on and on at the dining table of your apartment about Melissa or Sophie or Jacqueline or Penelope, to

watch your face light up then dim just as quickly as you tell me how it didn't work out, how they couldn't handle you ... your lifestyle. To listen to you tell me intimate details about these women, the beautiful faces that follow you wherever you go. They are ghosts of an idea you have in your head. An idea you love. To watch you look straight through me and tell me how Sophie snores, and Jacky is a screamer, to watch you smile right past my frozen expression and say, Wow, it's getting late. Can we have our meeting in the morning?

–But you've put this off twice already. People need answers.

–Come on, Nathalie, it's not like you don't know where I live.

You walk to the refrigerator and study the skim milk, yogurt, orange juice, and eggs I've replenished.

–Where are my chocolate pudding cups?

–They didn't have any left when I went to the bodega—

–They're never out of pudding cups.

You look at me like I must have somehow not seen them.

–Can't you just—

–Fine.

It's only eleven o'clock at night. But I'll go find your favorite pudding cups, because that's what a personal assistant does.

Forty minutes later, you're sprawled on the couch in your pajamas, halfway through a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, toasting your Grammy awards on the bookshelf. One of Bach's Brandenburgs floats across the room.

–Bach makes everything make sense, you say with a slur in your voice. –Solves the eternal problem—

I think, *Of you being a royal asshole*. I slam the pudding cups on the kitchen counter, loud enough to make you jump.

–Jesus, don't break them!

–You'd better eat something, or you'll have a hangover in the morning.

–Whoops! you say, burping. –I think it's a little late for that.

I step over your suitcase in the middle of the living room and head toward the bathroom. Your newly acquired apartment is

much more spacious than the last one, with a private bedroom you've designated for me, so you won't have to put me up in hotels every time I come down from Boston for our "meetings."

-Hey, I haven't given you a tour of your new bedroom! You leap up from the couch, trip over the suitcase, and come crashing down on the hand holding the champagne glass.

My heart stops. You crouch on the floor, bleeding, holding your left hand.

-Oh my God, oh my god, oh my god. I pluck the broken glass from the floor, find the first aid kit, start dialing Dr. G-----'s home number.

-How bad is it?

-I don't know, you say, holding it up for me. Your eyes are wide now, sober.

-Can you move all your fingers? A red gash streaks along the outer edge of your palm, leaking blood all over the expensive rug. You press a bandage over the top, knowing what this could mean. I look away, trying not to cry.

Dr. G----- tells me we will not have to file a claim with Lloyds of London. The cut is deep but missed all the major blood vessels and tendons. The skin still needs to heal, but if you can stand the pain of playing, it won't do any harm. It could have been much worse.

-You are a very lucky young man, he says. -God continues to smile on you, no? He pats you on the cheek, like you are his son. -Shalom! Don't worry! Come see me in a couple of days and let me look at it again.

You're quiet during the cab ride home. I help you flop into your king-size bed, pull the black silk sheets over your shoulder. Your mouth hangs half open. The Vicodin Dr. G----- prescribed seems to have worked, but you reach out with your good hand and pull me back onto the mattress.

-I don't want to be alone, you say, and I think, *This is so inappropriate.*