

Arian Safavi

Finalist

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Scales

The message was clear. The sharp peals of laughter still rang in his ears, echoing like the screams of banshees as he climbed the stairs. The door nearly fell as he slammed it shut behind him. He threw the worn, brown leather case in his hand onto the stained carpet of his dingy apartment. His hands trembled uncontrollably as he struggled to take off his glasses; they were foggy with tears. He collapsed, face-first, onto the couch. The black leather was peeling off the armrests. What would you expect from a couch he picked up abandoned by the curb? It would be an exaggeration to call this place an apartment. It was a room with a rotting couch and a chipped, discoloured wooden coffee table in front of it. The blackness of the night sky poured through a small window. At the end of the hall was a washroom, and to the left was a stove and sink in an alcove that stretched barely larger than the average closet. His breathing was heavy and irregular, in contrast to the silent tears that fell from his buried face.

He rolled onto his side, cuddling his knees inside his arms for warmth. It was cold. He remembered he forgot to pay the heating bill. He groaned. He lost track of the minutes he lay there, weeping cold damp puddles into the cold, smooth leather. Finally, he looked up. Through his red, swollen eyes, he looked at the Charlie Parker poster that hung across the room. It was the only redeeming ornament in the otherwise lifeless apartment, and conveniently, it was placed to cover a large hole in the wall. His tears began to dry as he stared at this poster, when suddenly a white-hot pain seared through his forehead. Clutching it desperately, he gasped for breath.

He was used to the intermittent pain. It was from the stitches that held his face together from having been slammed violently into the sharp corner of a countertop. The memory associated with the injury came and burned as sharply as the pain itself. He heard his father's endless yells as though it were happening this instant. He felt his father's weathered knuckles break his jaw, as the man screamed into his bloodied ears to get a real job and work for a living, to throw away that stupid, childish fantasy. It culminated in his father throwing him powerfully across the room, splitting his head open.

But his father was right now, he thought. He was a loser. Tonight was supposed to be the gig to change all that, but, of course, he screwed it up. As before, he stood up to play for the crowd, but the air that travelled through his instrument produced no sound. Air went in, air came out; no notes were made audible. With every glance up from his sheets, mirages of his father's face seemed to pass through the crowd. He rubbed his forehead. How much longer would he keep at this? How much more *could* he keep at this? He looked on the worn case in front of him, then again to the poster. His hand remained glued to his injury which continued to throb painfully, and for minutes he did not stir an inch.

The minutes passed into hours.

After an age, his breathing stabilized and his tears subsided; only sunken eyes remained. Finally, he let go of the stitches. He took a deep breath and opened the case. He assembled the saxophone and began to practice his scales.