

## The Ghost Sonata

By Madeleine Mason

Today marks the sixth month of apathetic living.

I perform the necessary functions for living: three meals a day, lots of liquids, and getting ten thousand steps. But, as I feel my food slide down my esophagus and air go through my nostrils, I don't receive the pleasure from living. I don't despise my existence, I've grown out of that stage of grief. Now, everything just is. Nothing moves me. Well, except for one thing.

Apathy takes a holiday whenever I pick up my guitar. Whenever I've accumulated enough willpower to pick it up and do something with it, I feel Apathy slide out of my bones. It's replaced with a sharp pain in my chest, and I'm reminded of everything that happened six months ago. Little demons named Grief, Guilt, and Longing molest my brain and body as I try to exorcise them through six steel strings and sheet music.

One exorcism became an orchestra piece. A damn good one.

My parents grew more and more worried. To ease their minds, and hopefully find feeling again, I unwillingly applied for music conservatories around the country.

Now, I am at the Coliseum. I wait in the wings and come onstage when they call my name. I've prepared as much as I can for this, but now everything goes out the window.

I'm taken aback by the grandness of the music hall. Seats seem to climb higher and higher until they disappear into the painted ceiling. I'm distracted by the faces of gods and monsters carved onto it. I stare at their faces, as if they hold ancient secrets and prophecies. The woman says something but I don't hear. My cellist, Sonia, taps my shoulder. I stare at her until I get the memo.

“I’m so sorry. What did you say?” I choke out. I feel my cheeks burn.

“I asked what have you prepared for me?” the woman replied. Her face is stone cold.

“Ah... um, it’s an original piece. I started it three months ago,” I reply, moving to the centre of the stage. A music stand is centre with my sheet music on it. I adjust the guitar strap around my neck. “I actually finished it the month I wrote it. It’s a piece for piano, cello, guitar, and voice.” I motion to my friends who accompanied me to this audition. “We’ve been rehearsing since.”

My breath feels shallow. I’m not getting enough oxygen. I look over at the woman. She’s writing something on a piece of paper.

“That’s interesting. Care to tell me what its about?”

I plunk a string. I am shaking.

“It’s... um.... It’s about a friend of mine. He’s, um, dead? Yeah. I wrote it after he died.”

My voice cracks a little and I feel my eyes sting.

I swallow, hoping that it will suppress any unwanted feelings. I look at the woman who is giving me a pitiful look. It makes me more upset. I can’t cry, not right now.

“You don’t have to go into detail about it,” the woman says. She smiles in a way that feels patronizing.

“No, it’s alright.”

“Do you need a minute?”

“No. No, I’m good. Let’s do this.”

The woman nods. “What is your piece called?”

“Ghost Sonata.”

She tells me to start when I am ready. I look over at Sonia, who gives me a reassuring smile. It's now or never. I count them in and we start the song.

It all comes back so quickly. I feel the chords, the key changes, the rests, everything envelop me and take me back. I close my eyes and try to continue, pushing against nostalgia, but he keeps coming closer and closer until-

“Hey, Ora.”

I am not in the music hall anymore. My guitar sits in my lap. My hair, which I cut off in a moment of heated anger at the universe, is long and healthy. My body feels warm and alive.

Ewan looks at me. I feel my cheeks blush as I look back.

“I wrote you a song,” I say. I am adjusting the capo on the neck. Ewan's eyes light up.

“Really?” He seems half-excited, half-confused. “You didn't have to-”

“I already wrote it. It's too late to take it back.” I give him a sly smile.

“Do I get royalties if it's on the radio?”

“Maybe. How about twenty-eighty?”

“So I get eighty?”

I give him a little punch on the arm. “You wish. Now shut up and enjoy the thing I made you.”

I am back in the music hall. The song is speeding up and crescendoing. I feel my vocal chords rubbing against each other at a violent speed.

My consciousness jumps back in time. Ewan and I are on a hammock outside. It's a Wisconsin winter, but we keep each other warm. I point out the constellations in the sky to him.

Columba. Pictor. The remains of Taurus in the far west. He's listening, hanging on to every word. It's the most fascinating thing in the world.

I look at him, and feel a deep yearning. I want him to never let go of me. I imagine freezing this moment, and living on this hammock, outside, for eternity. I imagine telling him how I truly felt, popping the cork of the bottle that holds my emotions for him.

Surely he didn't feel the same way. Right?

I am yanked back into the concert hall, where I strum an augmented fifth. There's a break in the music and I look over at the woman. She does not look back.

I am afraid to move on. The next key is minor. It is legato. I look up at the constellations, hoping they will speak to me and tell me what to do.

*I wrote you a song.*

*Really? You didn't have to-*

*I did it because I love you.*

It was always there, in every interaction between us. Every time I saw him, I wondered if he loved me like I loved him. When I found out he did, it was too late.

I hit the next chord with an emotion mixed with anger and regret. It surprises the band a little, but they follow my lead. Tears are streaming down my face. There are no words in this part of the song.

“Ora, I need to give you something.”

I am at a wake. My hair is still long, but my body is thinner. I look like a ghost. Ewan's brother hands me a piece of paper and tells me it's from Ewan's journal. He tells to read it when I get a moment of privacy. I lock myself in a broom closet and read it.

*If I was any good with music, I'd write Ora a song. I'd sing it to her in my horrible voice, but I don't think she would care. I believe she'd see past my musical ineptness. I think she's the only good person left in this world. I don't know how to tell her this. I don't know if I'll ever be able to. Honestly, I don't know how to return the love she gives me. I'm not good enough for her. Frankly, I don't think I'm good enough for anyone.*

I finish the song. I am sweating. I look over at the woman. Her mouth is slightly ajar and her eyes are glassy.

“Thank you,” I say, standing up. I need to leave. I stare at her, silently begging for her to let me go.

“Thank you for your time, Ora,” she says. “We will contact you in about a month regarding your admission.”

I thank her again, shove my sheet music into my guitar case, and run out. I don't wait for the band. I keep moving, walking up and down streets until I find myself at Ewan's grave again. There are fresh stones on it. I kneel, my kneecaps pressing into the cold ground. I open my guitar case and take out the sheet music. I place it on his headstone and I close my eyes.

“I wrote you a song,” I say. “I wrote it because I love you and miss you. I didn't say it because I was insecure and doubtful. And I know it's too late now, but I hope you like it. It's a sad song, though.”

I take a breath. The cold air stings my throat. I shiver.

“I really, really think you'll like it. And we'll split the profits. Eighty-twenty. If you come back, you can take eighty.”

I open my eyes, and my stomach jumps to my throat. The sheet music is gone. It's not possible. The air is still, nothing could have blown it away. I look around the stone to see if it fell off, but it's gone. I look around to see if anyone else is here. I can't see anybody.

A warm breeze rushes past. I feel it pushing me towards my guitar. I look at the headstone and wonder if this is a supernatural calling. I pull my guitar out of its case and the wind immediately stops. I smile, and place the guitar in my lap.

"Are you sure you want to hear it?" I ask. I close my eyes and wait for a response. Another warm breeze brushes past. I take that as a yes and begin to play. This time, my mind doesn't travel. I feel connected to this supernatural force around me. I feel something... something happy for the first time in six months.

When I finish, I pack up my guitar and begin to leave. As I reach the gates, a strange coolness fills my head.

*I love you too, Ora.*

"I know, Ewan," I say.