Elegy

Khen Julia

It is a peculiar quality of youth to believe that the world is arranged entirely for one's own aesthetic consumption. We were seventeen, gilded by the late-afternoon sun of our New England boarding school, insulated by our families' names and the heavy ivy that crept up the stone chapels. We were loud, careless, and magnificent in our own minds. And then there was Julian Hayes.

Julian possessed that particular brand of invisibility reserved for those who are neither beautiful enough to be adored nor awkward enough to be pitied. My clearest memory of him belongs to the damp, quiet confines of the old conservatory. While the rest of us spent our free periods smoking on the lacrosse fields, Julian would sit at a scarred Steinway, playing complex, melancholic arrangements of Debussy. He played with a restrained intensity, his cuffs slightly frayed at the wrists, staring at the sheet music as if it held the coordinates to a world the rest of us could not enter. I admired him, in a fleeting, superficial way, but I made no effort to understand him. To us, his quietness was merely a prop, a dash of eccentric scenery in the grand, unfolding theater of our own lives.

Time has a way of dissolving the architecture of youth. We graduated, scattering to universities that looked much like our boarding school, trading our youthful arrogances for more expensive ones. Julian did not come with us. He simply vanished from our orbit, his absence a pebble dropped into a deep well—barely a ripple reached the surface.

It was three years later, amid the clinking glasses and bruised summer lawns of a graduation party in Newport, that his name resurfaced. I was standing near a white canvas tent, half-listening to a debate about investment banking, when a mutual acquaintance mentioned him. The details were fragmentary, passed down through the careless telephone of high society. Julian, it was said, was living in a fading coastal town in Massachusetts. He hadn't gone to college. There was a murmur about a father's disgraceful financial collapse, a mother's sudden and severe illness, and Julian working the loading docks to keep the wreckage afloat. We listened, offered our solemn, gin-soaked sympathies, and then seamlessly returned to discussing our futures. His struggles sounded almost romantic to us, like a tragic novel we were skimming for the atmosphere.

The tragedy, when it came, was entirely devoid of romance. There was no grand dramatic crescendo, no poetic climax. It was mid-November, the kind of gray, unforgiving month that strips the romance from the coastline. Julian had fallen asleep at the wheel of a rusted sedan after pulling a double shift at a freight yard. The car had slipped quietly off an icy embankment and into the dark, freezing waters of a local quarry. It barely warranted three lines in the state paper.

Driven by a vague, voyeuristic sense of duty—and a desire to cast myself as the sympathetic friend in a tragedy that did not belong to me—I drove up to that bleak coastal town the following weekend. The sky was the color of iron, and the salt air smelled of rust and rotting kelp. I found the address the school's alumni office had scrounged up: a cramped, drafty apartment above a closed-down laundromat.

The door was ajar. Inside, the rooms were stripped of anything soft or beautiful. There were no books, no music, no Steinway. There were only stacks of unpaid bills, cheap linoleum, and the suffocating weight of sheer survival. Julian's older sister, a pale young woman with his same dark, exhausted eyes, was packing away coarse woolen work shirts into a cardboard box.

I stood in the doorway, bundled in a heavy cashmere coat, feeling the sudden need to say something profound. I wanted to tie a neat, lyrical bow around his life, to make his death mean something palatable.

"It's beautiful, in a way," I murmured, leaning against the doorframe, trying to arrange my features into a mask of sophisticated sorrow. "He was always too delicate for the machinery of the real world. I remember him in the conservatory. He belonged to the music, to his own dreams. He was a romantic."

His sister stopped folding. She did not weep, nor did she raise her voice. She simply looked at me across the immense, unforgiving gulf of my own privilege.

"He worked the night shifts at the yard so they wouldn't foreclose on our mother's hospice bed," she said, her voice entirely devoid of color, as flat and cold as the ocean outside. "He hadn't touched a piano in five years."

The silence that followed was absolute. It rushed into the room, deafening and complete, stripping away the romantic veneer I had so desperately tried to apply. I had come to offer poetry, and she had handed me the brutal, crushing weight of reality. I muttered an apology that sounded pathetic even to my own ears, and I retreated into the cold air, my face burning with a shame that I knew, even then, would outlast my youth.

I am older now, much older than Julian was ever allowed to be. The years have refined my understanding of what occurred in that drafty room. I see now the sheer, staggering arrogance of my youth—the belief that I could distill another human being's profound suffering into a pretty anecdote. Julian had not been a tragic poet fading beautifully into the mist; he had been a boy drowning in responsibilities he never asked for, fighting a quiet, desperate war while the rest of us were playing at adulthood.

Last month, a business trip took me through that same Massachusetts coastal town. I drove past the street where the laundromat used to be. The neighborhood has been gentrified. The old building has been torn down, replaced by a row of sleek, glass-fronted boutiques and an artisanal coffee shop. The rust and the rot have been swept away, paved over by a new generation's easy prosperity.

I parked my car and stood on the sidewalk, watching the well-dressed pedestrians hurry through the autumn chill. The air still smelled faintly of salt, but everything else had been erased. I stood there for a long time, watching the light fade, wondering if anyone else in the world remembers

the boy who sketched impossible cities, who played Debussy in the afternoons, and who bore the crushing weight of the world in the dark.