

The Music Critic

It was not a talent Lysa was born with. It was acquired, the way one acquires a scar or a limp — by necessity.

As a child, her parents had expected her to become a concert musician. She knew no other path. She was offered no other options. She came to know how conservatory rooms smelled faintly of dust and ambition. She knew all too well how the electric silence before an audition felt far longer than the audition itself.

here was one recital she never forgot. Not because it was disastrous, but because it was so — nondescript. She simply could not give herself to the music. Her fingers were there, but not her heart.

When it was over, the audience smiled. And yawned. And left.

She did not quit music. She stepped sideways.

Criticism proved safer. A way to remain near music without standing naked inside it. Words that kept emotion at arm's length came easily. Her reviews were precise, admired. Editors trusted her bland restraint.

On a Tuesday afternoon, she passed a street musician on her way back from a small chamber concert — technically immaculate, emotionally underwhelming. She had already composed half the review in her head.

The street musician's attire and instrument were unremarkable. Old. The kind you noticed only because they seemed so inconsequential.

She slowed despite herself.

He was not playing *for* the street. He was playing as though the street had wandered into something already underway. The music neither invited nor resisted attention. It moved forward at its own pace, leaving small, inexplicable gaps — rests that felt less like intention than breath.

Lysa waited for the hook. It never came.

She wrote him off and went home.

But the next week, she found herself adjusting her route.

She continued reviewing concerts. Yet afterward, she drifted back to the same corner.

She tried listening harder. Didn't help.

She tried listening analytically. Worse.

One afternoon she approached him, notebook in hand, and asked an easy question about his training.

He smiled — kindly, without warmth — and said he preferred not to talk while the music was still nearby.

What does that mean? she wondered. But she did not ask him to explain.

Over time, she noticed patterns. He packed up and left without ceremony whenever anyone applauded. He never acknowledged praise. A few people lingered after he left, as though waiting for a sentence to complete itself.

Once, she brought a colleague. “Pleasant enough,” he shrugged, already walking away.

That night, Lysa dreamed of her failed performance — not as it had been, but as it had felt. The forward-leaning hope that couldn’t find its footing. The terrible generosity of trying to offer something unarmored — and falling flat.

Weeks passed. Her reviews grew shorter. Adjectives began to feel excessive. She began leaving white space in her drafts, then deleting entire paragraphs. No one complained. One day, standing at the corner, she realized he was playing a piece she herself had played at her last recital. The notes were the same, but the spacing was different. The rests were longer. Almost inconvenient.

She recognized them.

They were the places she had rushed through, years ago, afraid.

Without quite deciding to, she stopped writing reviews.

Deadlines passed. The world did not end.

The street musician disappeared soon after, without announcement or explanation.

Then, one evening, after years of neglect, she took out her instrument and played — slowly, leaving all the room in the world for what might arrive — or not.

Nothing remarkable happened.

— *William Zeitler*
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