“Chasing the Moonlight”

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English writer and humanist Aldous Huxley once mused that “After silence, that which comes closest to expressing the inexpressible is music.” For me, two notes are all it takes: two notes and I am thrown into Claude Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” in a manner more violent than its gentle melody would ever overtly project. I am at once eleven, nineteen, and twenty years old, and in all but one instance I find myself sitting at a piano.

I’m eleven, and my piano teacher, Monica, is pregnant with her first child. The living room that I have spent so much time in since the age of seven smells of new hardwood floors; a stain on Monica’s green love seat stares tauntingly back at me from its position across the room. The sight of it is commonly followed by an inescapable feeling of chagrin, for despite all efforts to erase the florescent pink blot that Lizzy, my teacher’s niece, and I produced during a particularly spirited game of Boggle, the mark remains. Monica sits at the piano and plays a piece that is new to my ears. The sound moves me in a manner which is beyond my own comprehension. She then hands its accompanying sheet music to me and asks that I play as much of it as I can, by sight. Try as I might, I just can’t get my “Clair de Lune” to sound in the ethereal way that Monica’s does.

I’m nineteen, and it’s April of 2009. I’m not in class, though I should be. My grandmother lies dying in a hospice center near Seattle, Washington, and I’ve flown in from Minnesota to be with her and other family members, expecting the expected to occur much sooner than it does. The center itself is beautiful, tranquil, and at times mesmerizing—everything that such places should be yet so often are not. For nearly three weeks we sleep, eat, and live there, reluctantly awaiting the inevitable. Aimless wandering becomes a favored pastime, and the presence of a seemingly infinite number of corridors indulges my new-found hobby. At the end of the center’s main hallway is a chapel; in the chapel is a piano; in the piano’s bench is a songbook; in the songbook is “Clair de Lune.” I play. The familiar melody begins softly and soon soars effortlessly to the highest reaches of the chapel’s ceiling, gently curving its way around the windowed walls and warming the empty hall beyond. Six years have passed since I’ve played it last. It still doesn’t sound like Monica’s, but the sound calms me.

I’m home from my second semester of sophomore year, and I once again find that all attempts to avoid the *Twilight* series will ultimately end in vain. The girl behind the counter at Schmitt Music opens her eyes with a wild frenzy when I ask for a sheet copy of “Clair de Lune”; I wonder whether she has misheard my question and has instead assumed that I’ve said something vulgar. Within an instant her face relaxes into an excited smile, and with a wink and an expectant lean towards me, she says, “Twilight fan?” I briefly recall a scene in the first film of the series in which Edward, the series’ heartthrob, is playing the song in his room. In addition to making compulsive possession of another individual look like the sign of a healthy relationship to young girls, Twilight is slowly overtaking the natural place “Clair de Lune” once held as a masterpiece within Romantic-era compositions. Monica would be amused, but far from delighted.

I’m now twenty years old. It’s October and I’m walking through the sunny streets of Fremantle, Australia with an ice cream cone in hand and a soon-to-be best friend by my side. James and I pass by Guild Hall, a large auditorium on Notre Dame’s Fremantle campus. The doors are open and we wander inside. A large grand piano rests in the corner and I casually mention that I used to play. James has never played any sort of musical instrument and insists that I sit down and play something in that moment; I am not feeling confident enough in my skills to “show them off” to a new friend. I am certain my excuse is foolproof. I need sheet music! It’s been too long for me to play just by memory! One trip back to our residence hall, a handful of Google searches, and twelve printed pieces of paper later, James and I are back at the piano within the hour. I’m playing “Clair de Lune.” Upon hearing us, a police woman strolls in from the sunlight. I know we’re not supposed to be there. I’m getting ready to pack up. James whispers to me: “Keep playing.” He smiles at the police officer, asks how her day is going, and explains—ever so coolly in his Anglo-South African accent—“Sorry, our lesson will be over soon; we’ve just got a half hour left on the books and we’ll be finished. Is that alright?” She nods, smiles with her honey-brown eyes, and turns towards the door. “Yeah, just repeat that, but play it slower this time—don’t rush it” James says, while she is still within earshot. He winks at me. For a brief moment, Monica is far from my mind. Nevertheless, she certainly has not been forgotten.

It seems that all aforementioned attempts to capture and express what Monica’s rendition of “Clair de Lune” evoked within me have fallen flat; like flames striving to survive in the midst of rainfall, most recognizable sparks live a life of the shortest span. This is not to suggest that I have been playing the piece incorrectly. From a purely technical standpoint, I’ve done it right. Were I an individual much bolder than I am, I might even assert that an untrained ear would be unable to discern my recital of the song from Monica’s. Nevertheless, I have yet to feel wholly satisfied by my performance of the piece.

Akin to my relationship with the omnipresent Twilight vampires, the memory of the haunting beauty that so delicately intertwined itself with “Clair de Lune” plagues me; from its residence within me, the feeling never declines an opportunity to suck the life from its easy prey. It is a feeling familiar to the human experience: the inability to live up to expectations developed in childhood—whether these are borne of a family member, role model, or an internally-driven impetus—is known to create for itself a permanent dwelling place within an individual’s psyche. Whether it be the fifty-six year old man still yearning for the acceptance by the father whom he has loved but never known or the mother who lives vicariously through her child’s success as substitute for a fruitless attempt of her own, the feeling manifests itself in countless ways.

Unquenched desire often delivers a sense of inadequacy, hopelessness, and frustration. At its worst, it is irreparably heartbreaking. At its best, however, it is the life force behind dreams, the will for self-change, and the designs for a day that has improved beyond all others. Imagine what could be accomplished if we spent more time listening to the voice that urges us to “keep playing”! Even in the presence of our ever-mindful superego, a well-developed plan may be all that is needed to make adversity nod, smile, and turn towards the door.

The possibility exists that I will live the rest of my days as an eleven year old girl masquerading as an adult. There is a chance that I will be forever dissatisfied with my attempts at measuring up to Monica’s eloquent expression of the inexpressible. However, since complete satisfaction yields no desire for change, this discontentment will carry with it the vision of a goal to be reached, a mark to be aimed for. With this in mind, I believe that there is much joy to be found in chasing the moonlight.