

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 41

# The Haunted Girl

by  
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## The Messenger Ensnared

Wounded,

I sink into your flowerbed,  
succumb to enchanted sleep.  
Purple ropes lash all four legs  
to the worm-rich ground  
and lavender stink invades my dreams.  
Grackles laugh. My tail twitches at the sound.

Waking,

I wince at cold needles,  
damn the rain that dissolves  
my auburn fur and vulpine claws.  
Mind and message melting,  
I now resolve: these dregs shall poison  
your salvia, fell your foxgloves bright and tall.

## Lament for a One-Legged Lady

A mortician's daughter,  
she always assumed  
the empty cello case  
in the secondhand store window  
was a voluptuous coffin  
propped open to release  
the velvet-kissed ghost  
of a one-legged lady.  
She'd inch into the display  
and rifle through the loose pages  
of that lady's last will and testament,  
tilt her head to listen  
to the stale whispers  
of sheet music.  
As she pondered this foreign script,  
the meaning of bereft and  
blackened circles  
trapped within lines,  
she wondered where the corpse went,  
half hoped it had escaped,  
like these winged spheres  
breaking free  
of five brittle bars.

## Immobility

Tar snakes plug cracks in the highway  
rippling like manic vipers under our tires  
Strewn along the broken shoulder of the road  
the tattered carcasses of worn-out rubber  
tickle our wheels with frayed fingers of desperation  
Far out, over fields of mesquite and cacti  
hawks circle a pre-feast with the patience,  
the weary vigilance, of those dead themselves  
And you keep looking at me with those rattlesnake eyes.

Driving, once flying, is now a slow-motion race  
against an impassive blue sky  
and a throttling blanket of heat  
The furnace breath streaming past my window  
keens with the steadiness of a seashell  
screaming of loneliness, death, and waste,  
screaming of despair, destruction, and hell  
And though the sun sears darkness across my sight,  
I still can't escape your rattlesnake eyes.

## No Patron Saint

What a relief when he died  
shot in police custody  
the only favor the cops ever did us.  
And all I could think was  
at least he won't keep dragging you down  
one brawl  
one vendetta  
one stupid scam after another  
you and all your brothers  
sucked under by this anchor you adopted  
when his own parents threw him out  
like you needed a seventh brother to break your ties  
complete your barrio fairy tale.

You covered all the mirrors in your house  
you stopped shaving  
you had to explain these rituals to me  
your family fresher immigrants than mine  
and inclined to abstractions besides.  
“So we can hurt without thinking what we look like.”  
You shrugged, impatient with this clumsy tongue  
then spoke in Spanish.  
“No hay lugar para la vanidad en el duelo.”  
“There is no place for vanity in grief,” I supplied.  
You nodded. “La muerte es el espejo final.”  
“Death is the ultimate reflection,” I said,  
and silently decided, *No, I will be your mirror.*

In your family's steam-warmed kitchen  
the windows fogged gray  
like more mirrors veiled  
I sat and held your baby brother in my lap.

Your mom brewed vats of coffee  
black as tattoo ink  
and charred tamales on the comál.  
The baby loved my long hair  
my dangly silver earrings—  
a house full of boys  
how could he not?—  
and he knotted his fingers in the strands  
tugged and twirled and gurgled  
amazed.

When you trudged in  
I saw what you could not:  
your eyes pink as a possum's  
cheeks rough with sketchy stubble—  
rituals aside, you only had to shave every two days—  
but in that moment I saw you  
less a boy than a man.  
Then you dropped into the chair beside me  
and twirled my hair too  
wrestled your brother's babyfat fist from my sweater  
my bra strap and told him  
“*Mi novia.*”

Your older brothers shuffled into the kitchen  
taking turns, swapping places in a sorrow-stoned waltz.  
I kept track of their puffy eyes  
their cheekbones raw from scrubbing tears aside  
beards spreading thick as grief  
and, for once, they hardly noticed me  
neither to flirt nor tease.  
They only engulfed your mother  
men more than you  
but still burying their faces in her hair  
crouching to cry on her shoulder  
and I marveled at how she held them up.  
They outweighed her by at least sixty pounds  
tall like your father.  
Later she thanked me for taking care of her baby

and the way she squeezed my shoulder  
I think she meant you.  
She gave me some hair ribbons, pink, she'd been saving  
and told you to walk me home.  
She didn't need to tell you but she did.

I wasn't allowed to attend the wake  
not even the funeral  
and truth to tell I was afraid  
when you whispered over the phone that night  
about the bright pennies pinning his eyes  
the rent-a-cops roaming the funeral home  
the beers poured over the casket instead of rose petals.  
Even after he was in the ground  
your mourning crept on  
a nine-day rosary  
the stink of menudo now fogging the living room windows  
and ribboned in my hair.  
Through endless rounds of dominos  
I bobbed the baby in my lap  
and listened over the bony clicks of coffee cups  
to stories that didn't match the obits  
words that colored your mother's cheeks  
that your father chided you for saying  
at least in front of me.

I lost count of the days  
until one night you scratched at my window  
face smooth but eyes old  
and I crawled out after you, followed you  
into the November night  
to the far side of the garage  
where the burrs stuck in my bare feet  
and you braced your hands on either side of my head  
made a cocoon against the needling wind  
and ruttled into my spit-wet fist.  
I felt your razorburn on my forehead, smelled  
your menthol aftershave

and when you spurted in my hand  
your legs trembling, your mouth  
in my hair  
I bore your weight  
I held you up  
I was a woman.

## The 'Ludes

Back then, my favorite thing to do was to pop a few tranquilizers and sit in the balcony for student recitals. As long as I sat up there, out of sight, no one seemed to care if I drowsed and drooled the entire time or slumped in my licorice-red seat and stared at the ceiling in a pharmacological daze. And, as these little concerts were free, it seemed as good a way as any to pass the cold winter nights in a boring little college town.

One night as I slouched there, waiting for the music to begin—Bach's Suite No. 6 in D Major—I noticed a young man enter the balcony. I noticed him, despite the drug-induced haze gently drifting over me, because I'd never seen him before and he didn't belong.

That might seem funny to those who've ever bothered to attend these performances, to say that someone didn't belong. The audience is always a motley sort—faculty and spouses, local musicians and artists, music students and jocks who have to attend so many of these things to get credit for required courses, waitresses and office workers desperate for some culture, their school-age children (alternately awed and bored to tears), homeless folks who need a warm place to sleep for a couple of hours, mentally and physically handicapped folks hauled out as someone's idea of a good deed, and of course, recreational drug users with nothing better to do.

Still, he didn't belong. He was Gothic. Not like those kids who hang out at Hot Topic and think wearing black nail polish expresses their inner turmoil, their eternal angst. I'd seen Goths there before and he wasn't Goth, he was *Gothic*—dark and looming, faintly chivalrous in manner, seemingly possessed of a great, tragic secret. I thought of Brontë's Heathcliff.



Then the cellist appeared on stage and, after a preparatory moment of silence, he sank into the prelude. My haze turned into a dense fog. A warm, gooey feeling came over me, and as I watched the musician pull his bow back and forth across the strings, I thought of pulling taffy, long sticky strings of pastel candy.

Between the prelude and allemande, there were the usual fidgetings of the audience: a muffled cough here, someone shrugging out of a sweater there. I nestled deeper into my seat and waited for the cellist to continue my lullaby. Then, out of the corner of one drooping eye, I noticed movement in the balcony. The Gothic man was leaving, a blue bandanna pressed to his face as if he were weeping. I was impressed. To be so moved by the music when I merely luxuriated in it like a pig in a blanket.

The music began, and I turned my attention, such as it was, back to the man hugging his cello on stage. The notes were as fine as spun sugar, and before they dissolved in applause, I'd dissolved into sweet dreams.



The next night, the performance was Pachelbel's Prelude, Fugue, and Chaconne in D Minor. I arrived early, intrigued that the recital hall's massive organ would actually be used. It formed a fascinating backdrop for whatever concert happened to be going on any given night, its neat, shiny, symmetric rows of pipes ranging in height from a few feet to ceiling scrapers. But I'd never heard the organ itself played.

Apparently, neither had anyone else, for the hall quickly filled until even the balcony was standing room only. Luckily, my pills were already working their magic, so I simply shrugged deeper into the cocoon of my denim jacket and watched the madness from a blissful, anesthetized distance. At the same moment that the organist emerged from a hidden door opposite the balcony, I caught sight of the Gothic. This time I noticed a little more about him—he was compact and angular; he wore black jeans and a blue-black silk shirt,

against which his longish black hair disappeared; he'd arrived early enough to get a seat.

Music crashed into me.

I expected bats to come flying out of the organ's pipes. The people around me also flinched at the thunderous sound. The notes were so loud, they actually cleared my senses for a moment. My last lucid thought was of a black-and-white horror flick, *Carnival of Souls*. Then the music plunged me into a downward spiral, each reverberating chord pushing me deeper and deeper into the hellish cycle while the tranquilizers reached from below to snag me in an unrelenting undertow.

The prelude did even out after a few minutes, but the damage was done. I wasn't sleeping that night, no matter how drowsy I got. I knew what awaited me on the other side of the fog—nightmares so black and heinous that even if I never broke through the surface of sleep that night, I'd fear the dark for the next week. Fuck that.

The air still prickled with the last notes of the prelude when the Gothic got up and left, handkerchief to his eyes once more. The people around him murmured, but no one dared to take his seat till the chaconne.



The next night, I was curious enough about Gothic Man that I chose to forego my magic caplets—or actually to take them early enough that by the time the violinist screeched into her prelude I was well-nigh sober. I'd always been vaguely amused by those attendees who could not seem to sit still or ever get comfortable. Now it was my turn to sit ramrod straight and cross my legs first this way, then that. I found it hard to breathe, worried that even the slightest exhalation might disturb the proceedings.

Though fidgeting, I kept an eye on the Gothic. He sat a row in front of me, in the aisle seat. He kept his head lowered so that the black fringe of his hair obscured his face. Without the haze encircling my head, I noticed even more about him. He had a black leather coat draped over his lap and a bandanna ready in his right hand. He'd had a program, but now

it lay discarded on the empty seat beside him. Once, when he raised his left hand to the back of his neck, I saw he wore a silver watch on his wrist, so he was presumably right-handed. No rings on either hand.

When the violinist screeched to a conclusion, the Gothic rose from his seat and hurried away, dabbing at his eyes as usual. This time I followed. I chased him down the stairs and through the red-carpeted lobby, only catching up when he paused to zip up his coat outside.

“Is it terminal?” I asked, pulling on my gloves.

“Excuse me?” He looked unsure that I was speaking to him, though we were the only ones outside. The lights of the parking lot glinted off his reddened eyes.

“Is it terminal? Whatever it is that makes you leave right after the preludes.” I said nothing about his weeping, not wanting him to get defensive.

“Oh, that. I was hoping no one would notice.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked up at the black sky. “No, it’s not terminal, although sometimes I wish it were, just so I could pity myself without feeling guilty about it.” His smile held a tinge of self-contempt.

“Go on, pity yourself. No one else will.”

I looked up at the sky, too. It was vast and moonless.

“And you?” he asked. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m hungry, I need something to eat,” I said, ready with my line. After a couple of seconds, I realized it sounded like I was trying to get invited somewhere, so I invited him instead. “Why don’t you come with?”

“Where you going?” He looked from the sky to me, and I saw he was a few inches shorter than I.

I thought. “Café Bella,” I finally said. “We can walk from here.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”



At the restaurant, I ordered the salad with marinated portobello mushrooms and wild rice. Jared, as he’d told me his name was, only ordered a cup of the lobster bisque.

“You’re not hungry?” I asked.

“This place is sort of outside my price range,” he said, dipping his spoon in the cloudy orange soup.

“Why didn’t you say so? We could’ve gone elsewhere,” I said, exasperated.

“It’s okay. I like the quality of light here.”

I looked around. Now that my pupils were no longer dilated, I thought the place was rather dim, but cozy enough. I nodded as if in understanding.

“So what is this non-terminal condition of yours?” I prodded.

He continued stirring his soup, perhaps wondering whether to answer my obnoxious question or walk out on me. “I used to be a concert pianist,” he finally replied. “But I can’t play anymore.”

“Why not?” I asked, imagining a nervous breakdown a la *Shine*. He looked fragile enough.

“Car accident. A piece of metal went through my palm.” He turned over one brown hand to show me a spiderish network of scar tissue in his left palm. It had obliterated his life line, his romance line, everything.

“Damn,” I said.

“Yeah. Damn.” He turned his hand over again, hiding the spider, and resumed stirring his soup.

“So you can’t play at all anymore?”

He smiled, sans self-contempt this time. “Maybe the triangle—if I was willing to dedicate myself.”

“You could tour elementary schools. The arts are in trouble, you know,” I said, smiling, too.

We ate in silence for a few minutes. I did anyway. When I looked up, he was still stirring his bisque. I wasn’t sure he’d had so much as a sip.

“Why do you torture yourself?” I exclaimed. “Why go to these recitals at all if you can’t even get past the preludes?”

He looked at me, eyes comically wide, and I saw they were still red, or red again.

“Sorry,” I muttered, looking down.

“No, you’re right,” he said, releasing his spoon. “I don’t know why I bother. Why don’t we both skip it tomorrow night? You can come over to my place and listen to some of my old concerts instead. I’ll show you my scrapbooks.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I stopped chasing rice around my dish and looked up at him. “I’m not too fond of masochists.”

“Great, I’m not especially keen on junkies. What are you on?” he asked, leaning in to examine my eyes.

“Nothing.” I drew back defensively. “Not this second anyway.”

“Come on, come over,” he said.

I thought. “Okay, give me your phone number and address,” I said.

I figured I’d leave them by the phone in my living room, just in case I went missing.



Feeling slightly sheepish that I’d been chided into sobriety, I rang his doorbell at seven the following evening, then took a step back to appraise his home. It was one of the old “hobbit” houses on Court Street, all lumpy cobblestone, curving roof tiles, and colorful past. Its present, however, seemed dim, as befitted its tragic new tenant. All the flowers in the window box were gnarled and dead, and the huge picture window mimicked a black hole, its thick curtains absorbing all light.

The door yawned open and there was Jared, looking Gothic as ever in a white button-down blouse that emphasized his toffee skin and slightly baggy trousers that made him look the unfed orphan. Music spilled out from the den behind him, a soaring, slightly melodramatic violin.

“Come in, come in,” he said, beaming. “I’ve started without you.”

A carnelian and topaz batik print hanging above the fireplace seemed in danger of catching fire from the myriad candle stubs flickering on the mantle. A low flame burned in the fireplace, brightening the soot-stained hearth. Opposite that wall towered an immense black sound system, twinkling with its own red and green lights. Between the dueling lights, a

couple of honey-colored armchairs had been drawn up to a coffee table. His scrapbooks were already open.

My heart stuttered in my chest. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been an invited guest in someone's home, and the pressure not to fuck up was almost unbearable. I could hardly breathe.

"I thought we were going to listen to your music," I said, still looking around. The drapes that zealously guarded our privacy were a hunter green so dark they might as well have been black. The floors were hardwood, but covered with an oatmeal area rug.

"We will, we will," he said, ushering me, without quite touching me, toward the chairs. "Sit, sit."

I realized he must be nervous, too, else why would he have been repeating everything? I sank into an armchair without removing my jacket and looked up at him. His eyes were dark brown, but rimmed with red, as if he'd already been crying. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into—some sort of maudlin sobfest? Would I be on suicide watch?

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked, hovering.

"No, not yet. But could I use your bathroom?" I stood and absently patted my coat pocket, where the tiny, reassuring shape of happy caplets called out to my nervous fingers.

"Oh, sure." He eyed me suspiciously though.

Only one of the bulbs in the bathroom light fixture worked. I leaned against the cream vanity and unwrapped my pills. After a few moments, I flushed the toilet for effect, then swallowed my pills and drank long and deep from the running faucet.

Calmed simply by the thought of chemical halcyon slipping through my veins, I emerged from the bathroom. The violin had been silenced. Jared now sat in the other armchair, brown hands clasped between his knees, an expectant smile tweaking his lips.

"You look happy about doing this," I said, joining him. "You sure you're up to it? You gonna make it past the prelude?"

“Oh yes, yes.” He reached for a slim black remote on the coffee table, hands trembling only slightly, perhaps in excitement. “I’m fine with my music,” he continued. “It’s just the live performances that bother me. Because I’ll never do that again.”

He stopped and looked at me. After a second or two, I realized he was waiting for my signal.

*Great, the drugged leading the deranged*, I thought. Aloud, I said, “In that case, let me get comfortable here. Then we can begin.”

“Wonderful.” He watched, waiting.

I pulled free of my denim jacket, warm with the heat of the fireplace and embarrassment at his scrutiny.

“This first piece is Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in B Flat, Op. 23, No. 2. Rachmaninoff was my favorite.”

I thought of *Shine* again, not without some dread.

“Let her rip,” I sighed.



There was a lot of Rachmaninoff—I would hear it in my sleep for three days—but gradually my muscles melted into a pleasant jelly and my senses dulled to an Impressionistic haze. I leaned against the arm of my chair, chin in hand, and watched as Jared flipped through page after page of newspaper clippings, tattered programs, and touristy snapshots. I mumbled soporifically at all the correct intervals and was generally supportive, even more so as the night wore on and my love for all mankind blossomed like a knife-edged orchid in my chest.

He seemed okay most of the time, though he did dab at his eyes with his handkerchief a few times. By then, Rachmaninoff’s martial raindrops had materialized in rippling curtains before my dilated eyes, so I said nothing. I noticed the blue handkerchief was stained black, like an indigo leopard, but I was so impressed by the piano’s sly galloping—coy horses trying to win the cup but also trying to appear disdainful of any such effort—that I didn’t care enough to point it out.

Though Jared spoke at me throughout the Rachmaninoff, it was only when he switched to the Chopin that he seemed

to take notice of me again, and then only to find my attention insufficient.

“Have you been listening to a word I’ve said?” He glared at me a little as he sat down again.

“Sure,” I said lazily. When I’m floating, I don’t take much offense at anything.

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” he said—an accusation, not a question.

“Nothing. This is exactly what healthy eyes look like when one is doped up on ’ludes,” I said. I didn’t really remember if it was the ’ludes I’d taken, but now I said whatever popped into my head, the barrier between thought and word as demolished as an old whore’s hymen. “What’s wrong with *your* eyes?” I countered.

“What are you talking about?” His tone was dismissive, but defensive.

“I saw your handkerchief. I saw you wiping blood from your eyes earlier.”

“Whatever pills you’re popping are making you see things,” he said with a snort.

“I’m seeing things all right.” I snuggled into the shell of my denim jacket and watched his red eyes narrow, amused by his easy fury. “Are your stigmata eyes the real reason you can’t perform anymore? Instead of ‘Is it terminal?’ should I have asked ‘Is it contagious?’”

“I told you I was in an accident!” He brandished a skewered palm at me, a thick pink spider of scar tissue.

“Before or after your eyes started leaking?” I would’ve laughed, but it took too much effort. “By the way, last time it was your left palm, not your right.”

He jumped at me, jolting the laugh out of me, after all. We flew back in my chair and slammed to the floor. The CD skipped. So did my heart when I saw his fangs extend. But then Chopin’s *Revolution* swept me off to dream land, and anyway, what was the point in screaming?





When I woke, the room was darker. I rolled my head to one side, chagrined by the nausea even that little motion churned up in my belly, and saw that several candles had fallen to the floor. They lay cool and harmless as puddled yogurt on the brick hearth. Less innocuous was the wet warmth I felt pooling under my cheek. I thought about reaching to my pulsing throat and examining the fluid that came off on my searching fingers, but decided against it. I was too wiped out and it was too clichéd.

I groaned and, in response, heard a decidedly unGothic giggle to my left. Slowly, I rolled my head in that direction to see Jared sprawled out beside me, his face smeared with blood, his blouse, however, still bright as powdered sugar.

"This is wild," he said, a gory grin on his face. "I can feel your drugs inside me."

"No wonder," I panted, "I feel like crap."

"Well, that and the blood loss," Jared agreed.

"Give 'em back already," I said, though I had no idea what that might entail. I had a couple more capsules in my jean jacket, but at that very moment I didn't even know the jacket existed, despite its vague lumpiness beneath me.

"Don't sweat it, you were pretty much done with them anyway. That's what's so unreal about this," he said, gazing at the textured ceiling in wonder. "You've got ghosts in your blood, or you did. Normally, drugs don't do anything for me, but with *you* acting as an intermediary... Well, I can feel everything *you* did."

"Great. I'm happy for you."

Chopin was still playing, something dark and funereal. I couldn't come up with the title, but it seemed sufficiently ominous for our situation.

"You're very talented, you know," he said with childlike solemnity. "I've never experienced this before. You're like no other junkie I've ever had."

"I'm flattered."

“Don’t be pissy,” he said, clearly amused. He studied me with an annoyingly lucid gaze.

“Look, are you going to kill me or not?” Anger brought pain with it. I felt imaginary forceps squeezing my head at the temples. The sick roiling in my belly progressed to tomtom throbs. “If you’re going to do it, do it. I don’t like feeling this way.”

“What way? Sober?” Jared thought I was a joke, and it showed. His red eyes glittered like vice.

“It’s worse than sober,” I moaned, at which he laughed.

I stared up at the ceiling to be looking at anything other than him. It was flocked with popcorn insulation and shadows like spiders tucked into the valleys.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea.”

When I did not respond—I had a comeback, but couldn’t summon energy enough to say it—Jared dragged himself a couple of inches across the carpet to look down into my eyes.

“I don’t usually play with my food, but you’re far more interesting to me alive than dead. You got any more of that stuff?”

“Hell if I know.”

“I bet you do,” he said, and began riffling through my pockets. Finding nothing at first, he panicked a little, a stern crease appearing in his forehead, very Heathcliff-ish, but then he saw my denim jacket peeking out from under me and he yanked it free. “Ah,” he said smugly, pulling out the little nugget of foil I wrapped my pills in. “What do we have here?”

“A gross betrayal of my trust.” With the drugs in sight, I felt my powers of sarcasm surging once more.

“Let’s do it again,” he said, lust blazing in his stigmata eyes.

“What makes you think we can?” I said, in spite of the joy ratcheting around in my chest—I wanted them as badly as he wanted their dreamy dregs. “What if it’s not the same this time?”

“Oh, I think we can,” he said as he unwrapped my happy pills. “Though it’s only intuition makes me say so. Do you need water for these?” he asked, holding them just out of reach of my darting tongue.

“Damn it, just give ’em to me,” I snarled, albeit weakly.

Smiling, he placed them on my dry tongue, his fingers cold as museum ivory. I choked them down, desperate for relief.

“I do hope we can have an encore,” he said. He lay next to me, close enough that I felt his arm when I inhaled, but he gave off no warmth and he did not breathe himself. “Better, I hope that that was just the prelude. I’m eager for much more.”

“And if it doesn’t work?” I asked again. The question nagged at me, though I couldn’t think it through far enough to understand why.

Jared cleared that right up for me. “Then I think it’s quite appropriate we’re listening to the *Marche Funebre* from Sonata No. 2 in B Minor, don’t you?”

I sighed. Somehow I always thought I’d go out to the Blue Oyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper.”

“Pop trash,” Jared muttered.

I wasn’t even surprised.



These days, my favorite thing to do is to sit on the riverbank and watch the women’s crew team race their boats over the polluted grey water. They recognize me now and wave every day after trials, early morning sun glinting off their sweat-sheened skin. Sometimes I’ll take a loaf of old bread and feed the ducks as I sit and watch the athletes’ synchronous strokes. Other times I’ll just have a breakfast sandwich and toss the birds my leftovers. They aren’t picky.

Jared mocks my interests, but he lets me do as I like. All he cares about is that I’m happy and relatively healthy. He wants me to live a long time—though not forever. “It’s better to burn out than to fade away,” he reminds me, but I think it’s more like, “Why buy the junkie when you can get the high for free?”

When I ran away, he found me, followed the heartbeat he knows so well just like it was a blip on a radar screen. When I checked into rehab, he was there by nightfall to retrieve me, and my roommate probably thought the man hovering in our third-floor window was just part of her DTs. When I tried to

OD, he bled me within an ounce of my life, then giggled all night long.

There are other ways to off myself, of course, but I haven't had the nerve yet to try them. Even if I succeeded, I'm afraid he might bring me back. Worse than life with Jared would be an afterlife with him—especially if my blood magic ceased. I've got a scar-tissue spider to match his now, only mine's real. Just a little reminder of who's in charge around here.

Sometimes I watch him sleep and I fantasize about offing him. But then he smiles dreamily, and I'm afraid to try.

I still attend the free concerts, but they're not much fun now, even if I'm drugged. Jared and I take turns sitting in the balcony and absorbing the recitals. He goes first while I sit in the lobby listening to talk radio on my headset. Then it's my turn to face the music. The ushers whisper about us and give me strange looks, but I could care less.

I just can't stand the preludes.