**Nightcap**

Sarah Thomas

Theirs was the only café in the city open after midnight. The yellow lighted sign shone above the entrance like a silent second moon in the dark street. He eyed the line of spirit bottles through the window on the shelf above the counter. There were the usual brandies and vodkas and whiskies. The aperitifs and digestifs. The many different flavours of gin available these days. And tucked away, almost out of view was a bottle of Crème de Menthe.

The man smiled, pleased with himself at trusting his instinct of the empty street.

He pushed open the door and went inside. A young waitress was behind the counter lazily polishing the espresso machine. In the porthole windows of the kitchen door, a solitary chef was visible, completing his nightly checks with monotonous precision beneath the bars of fluorescent lights. An over familiar task which left him weary looking.

The man stood still amongst all the empty tables in the sleepy light feeling as though he was on the set of an amateur play, the keen eyes of the waiting audience packed tight against the outside windows. And suddenly he felt vulnerable in a way he never did when he was on stage.

“Can I help you?” the waitress asked. She had bleached blonde hair dyed pink and wore a black cardigan over her uniform that covered her name tag. She glanced at the cello case balanced on his shoulder for longer than a few moments but didn’t ask any questions.

“A shot of Crème de Menthe, please.”

“I’m sorry, we don’t sell that here,” she said. Her eyes were so heavily drawn with black liner that they could never be anything other than bored.

“It’s on the shelf up there… right at the end,” he said with a shy, almost apologetic smile.

Turning, she followed the direction of the man’s gaze.

“Oh…” she said, shrugging a little huff of laughter, “I don’t think anyone has ever asked for that before.”

He took a seat at a table by the window and stared out at the lonely street, the empty pavements and darkened buildings swam away from him until he was left with only his reflection shimmering in the glass. There was a single, fabric rose in a thin plastic vase on the table opposite him, yet in the new world of the window, it levitated next to his hands, melting into its own universe. The one caught between sleep and consciousness.

The waitress placed the small glass of Crème de Menthe on the table along with a scrap of paper totaling the bill, an indication that they were planning on closing soon. In the dim light, the nightcap shone a drugstore green. There was an intoxicating medicinal quality to it. He sipped at the sweet, minty liqueur slowly and thoughtfully, returning to Paris, even though Paris was long ago and far, far away from him now. And Justine. Her eyes, gloriously sad, finding his through the smoky haze of cheap cigarettes at a party neither of them wanted to be at. Their febrile bodies wrapped in damp sheets and moonlight. A roll up burning itself out in the littered ash tray on the bedside table in their scruffy apartment. They had been in the same string quartet. A secret, sideways glance at one another in the middle of a rehearsal. There was a little café they had liked to frequent in the Jardin du Tuileries during the leafy summer months.

Sighing, his body prickled with exhaustion; he craved the darkness and solitude of the concert hall now emptied of people—the mighty nothingness that lay over it. The concerto he had played that evening was one his second cello teacher had taught him when he was thirteen. Her house filled with antique string instruments and tumbling green plants spilling from their pots on bookshelves and fireplaces. She wore large rings on the fingers of her right hand and as a boy he often wondered how she managed to run her bow along the strings with the weight of all that jewelry.

This concerto is a rite of passage for any cellist, she had told him with a knowing twinkle in her eye.

They spent hours perfecting certain shifts, little nuances, an adjustment of vibrato to let the sorrow shine. Feel what your cello wants you do. Technique would only get you so far. Instinct couldn’t be taught.

There was something incredibly intimate about performing on stage, even in the concert halls of major cities. He was both deeply aware and also removed from himself in one simultaneous act. Often in the immediate aftermath, he was unable to remember his performance at all. But he knew it would return, flowing back to him in colours and flashes. The central melody appearing like a candle glimmering in the darkness. A second performance within his brain, only this one in fragments that would last for hours until the first fringes of daylight moved over his lonely, little hotel room.

The remains of the drink slipped down his throat with a tingle and he stared at the now empty glass twinkling softly in the sleepy little café, still feeling, after all these years, the fresh peppermint glow of Crème de Menthe on Justine’s lips as they brushed against his. He still heard from her occasionally. A little postcard from some far-flung place. Sometimes their paths crossed; the world of classical music moved in small circles. And even tonight he had secretly reimagined her in the tender melody of an encore. Dvorak. Silent Woods.

The lights of the café began to flicker out one by one. The man scattered coins from his pocket on the scrap of paper, leaving enough for a tip, and then, lifting the cello case onto his shoulders, he exited, unnoticed.