

New World

On a sunny Saturday in October, two teenagers from opposite corners of the city left their homes, headed for the same destination. It was noon, and the air was cold, despite the sun that shone brightly over their heads like a mocking mirage in the sky.

Fifteen year-old Clara stepped out of her house and locked the door behind her. Turning left onto the sidewalk, she briskly began to head toward the nearby public park. She wore her dark fall coat and leather boots, and carried a colorful tote that hung from her shoulder. Hidden by her coat, a locket dangled from her neck, slightly bouncing off her chest for every step she took.

Anyone who knew Clara well could vouch that they had never seen her without her locket. For that single piece of jewelry was like an extension of her skin, and of her soul. From the moment that she first gotten it, it had never been removed from around her neck. Yet.

Many miles away, sixteen year-old Aiden waited at a bus stop, texting his friend. The bus, as usual, was late, and so was he. Shoving his phone back into the pocket of his hoodie, he paced, hoping his friends wouldn't start the game without him, and that the weather would warm up.

Finally, the bus arrived, and twenty-five minutes later, Aiden was at the park. It was a vast expanse of lawn encircled with thick trees on one side, and a large paved area on the other, overshadowed by a community centre. Despite the cold, people were everywhere: families picnicking, couples strolling, and friends hanging out. A crowd was building up around the outdoor stage, on which an orchestra was being installed. A free concert, Aiden thought. No wonder it was so crowded.

Aiden pushed his way through the people, heading toward the basketball court. He could already see his friends playing without him. It was getting warmer suddenly, but maybe it was just the crowd. As Aiden barely avoided bumping into an old man, and dodged his way through a herd of punk

teens, his gaze was suddenly arrested by a colorful tote among the dull crowd, like a moth drawn to a flame in a dark room. He continued walking in the direction of the basketball court, while keeping his eyes on the girl carrying the tote, who was standing near the stage. He could see only her profile, but was somehow sure that he had seen her before. Then, the girl turned slightly, now facing him, and unzipped her coat.

She wasn't attractive, or even vaguely pretty, but Aiden could not take his eyes off her. If it wasn't for the crowd forcing him to walk, he would have stood still and just stared, trying to place her. It wasn't her long dark curls that held his attention, nor her slight, petite figure. It was her countenance: shy, and earnest, but alive with a rich energy: it was as if the girl could see things around them that no one else could.

As Aiden continued to walk, getting closer and closer to her, he watched her unzip her coat, and noticed something around her neck. It was a dull gold locket, oval-shaped, with a treble clef on it. It looked worn.

Aiden finally averted his eyes and reached the basketball court, where he joined the game. On the court, he could distantly hear the faraway lull of orchestral symphonies and concertos, and all else was quiet save for the communication between teammates on the court and the sound of fountain water running. He had all but forgotten about the girl with the locket.

Not far away, Clara stood among the vast crowd, listening to the orchestra playing the second movement of Dvořák's Symphony N° 9 "From the New World". As the English horn outlined its slow opening melody, Clara closed her eyes. The music was a palette of many colors, and her ears, a blank canvas. She imagined the beautiful new world that Dvořák was trying to depict, an unattainable illusion of peace, and freedom, that people spent their lives pursuing, unsuccessfully.

In moments like this, when Clara could feel herself being transported by the music, she would often raise her hand to her chest and hold onto her locket. As she did so, however, her hand found only the cool skin of her bare chest, shocking her like the touch of a Taser. Clara's eyes jerked open, and she looked down at her chest. The locket was gone.

At the basketball court, Aiden and his friends took a break from their game. Having forgotten a water bottle, Aiden headed toward the vending machine near the entrance of the community centre, dreading the crowd near the stage that he would have to pass. Unexpectedly, he heard a crunching sound as his foot made contact with something on the ground. He lifted his foot and bent down to pick it up. In his hand, a dull gold locket, oval-shaped, with a treble clef on it.

As soon as Clara realized what happened, her eyes darted to the ground. She could feel her accelerating pulse in her ears. The color left her face, as she pleaded with some unknown deity. *Please, help me find my locket. Please.* Frantically, she began to push people out of her way, looking all across the pavement below her. Like the illusion of Dvořák's new world, she suddenly began to feel as if none of it was real. It was too painful to be true.

The orchestra's performance was drowned out as Clara continued to scan every inch of the ground. She recalled the day, eight years ago, when the locket, a gift, was placed around her neck. It was summer, and her grandmother had just been diagnosed. Clara hadn't understood what was happening, but she knew her grandmother was sick, and was becoming increasingly forgetful. Her grandmother, who had taught her the cello and the piano, who had introduced her to the worlds of Dvořák, Bach, Puccini and Chopin, couldn't even remember how many notes were in an octave.

"Someday", she had said that day, her long, frail fingers fastening the locket around her granddaughter's neck, "I won't remember much about people and places. And someday, decades and

decades from now, nobody will be there to remember anything about me, or about you. But none of that matters, Clara. All that matters is that you never forget who *you* are. Promise me that.”

Clara had never been good at school, and things didn't come easy to her. But somehow, nothing had ever made more sense to her than what her grandmother had told her that day.

Clara began searching more and more urgently for the locket, the last string tying her to a world where her grandmother wasn't a widow with no recollection whatsoever of her previous life. A world where her grandmother could teach her new songs and play duets with her, instead of spending every day at home, sitting at her piano, staring at it, unable to bring it to life.

A few meters away, Aiden opened the locket, and found a picture of the girl he had seen earlier, but younger. He closed it, and began to scan the crowd around him in search of a colorful tote, determined to return the locket to the girl, partly hoping to use it as an excuse to talk to her. Sifting through all the people, he hurried to the spot where he had last seen her standing. But she wasn't there.

Clara was still searching. The crowds were a blur around her, and she almost felt dizzy with fear, and loss. But she kept looking, until she had gone over the whole paved area twice. She stopped near the fountain and tears began to sting her eyes.

On the other side of the park, Aiden spotted the elusive girl by the fountain. He began to jog toward her, suddenly conscious of the fact that he had no idea what he would tell her. The girl appeared in and out of his sight as Aiden navigated through the people, an electron finding its way through a circuit. But as he looked up at the fountain when he got nearer, the girl was gone.

The fact was that Clara had left her spot near the fountain, determined to search the pavement yet another time for her locket. But she was searching too hard to find it. Until only a while ago, the locket had never left her neck. Now, it would never come back.

