

### Excerpt: "The Aesthetic Experience of Eleanor"

She blinks rapidly, eyes adjusting to the spill of liquid light dribbling in through the open hospital room shades, teeth on edge as she sucks air that tastes of antiseptics. It's the first true daylight she's seen in nearly two months, and it's overwhelming. The nurse, observing her reaction, begins immediately reversing course with the shades to close them.

"No," says Eleanor, shocked to hear so much as a sound rasp up through her throat and out her mouth. She has been so sure that it will never happen again. "It is good," she says, not because it's difficult to speak – although it is, a little – but because complex sentence structure has become a disused tool of her inner voice.

The nurse hesitates, but only a beat, and then she is busy again. She is her own ray of sunshine in the heady mix, bearer of both an encouraging smile and a puff of some floral sachet at the breast as she leans in to fluff Eleanor's pillow. For her own part, Eleanor is shocked that she's not experiencing sensory overload, and that she can understand this woman at all.

"Doctor Yancey says to tell you that today is going to be the 'first good day in a lifetime of good days'," the nurse says, and Eleanor smiles – she seems not to be able to help it, but that's okay. One involuntary response at what is, hopefully, the tail end of a seeming eternity of them is surely acceptable under the circumstances.

"Thank...you," she says. The nurse smiles back, a tiny T-shaped wrinkle forming at the bridge of her nose; her teeth are alabaster, soothing somehow, the opposite of shark's teeth.

"Honey, you just don't know how glad I am to not only see you awake, but *aware* and talking," she says, then looks out toward the hallway. "We all are. You've had a really rough go of it, but we've all been pulling for you."

"I know," says Eleanor, although she doesn't. Not really. Of course, she has seen them coming and going over the days and weeks and months. She has been fed through a tube by them, had her waste removed by them, heard them speaking in a language she only dimly recognized as her own yet hasn't understood. That last part brings to mind a video she saw years ago, on the internet: some young man in Italy had written a song in gibberish back in the 70s, but that gibberish was meant to sound like he was singing in English, because English songs were popular. And, according to the video, it had worked, and the song became a smash hit. But when she had listened to it, it had been just that – so much gibberish. That's how every conversation she's heard for years has sounded.

Until a few days ago, when the little robots inside of her came to life.



"Virtuosity is the enemy of the aesthetic experience."

At first, it was just a thing that she understood, as if she had chiseled it from the stone of human interaction and then found herself absent any further polishing tools. The statement would not earn its scare quote wings until years after she began to inhabit it, when she finally wrote it in a diary, and years later in an email to her father which she would never send.

When Eleanor was four, her father had placed a child-sized violin in her hands for the very first time. Having a dim yet coalescing capture of the world around her which she would have envied in later years had she been capable, the little girl understood that this was not merely generosity on his part. He wasn't giving her a toy. Attached to this little noisemaker was duty, dedication, and fealty to an order that favored discipline. It was not love for what the instrument could produce that he passed down – it was love for the *process*.

And so, in an already confusing world where her mother was nowhere to be found in the photograph of their lives, little Eleanor embraced the stone with her shoulder and worked. By age five, she could keep up with her father in most of the duets they would play together. By seven, she had surpassed him. But that was too kind, though. What she had done was leave him far, far behind, tasting the dust of her rapid progress. Sam – that was his name – had unleashed upon the world of music a true budding virtuoso, a nascent starburst of color and brightness. And the girl who every night went to bed with aching fingers awoke every morning to a daily fix of the only drug she craved: stern approval given in smatterings by her one true anchor and guiding star.

At age nine, Eleanor was traveling the world with her father, performing with various orchestras to stunned patrons of the arts, soaking up their adoration. Sam had many favorite phrases. One was: “There’s no difference between practicing and performing. Every practice *is* a performance, or it’s not really a practice.” And it was true. That casual slow scrape of the bow across the high E string, landing the whole sweating and exhausted piece gently at the top of an octave as if landing on a cloud? To the person sitting in the auditorium, weeping at the beauty of it, the move was like a moment of Divine inspiration, as though God himself had moved the instrument in her hands.

But, to Eleanor, it was Tuesday. It was a shifting of muscles along a well-worn track, an application of the same moves she’d performed hundreds of times, thousands of times. She was happy that she made people happy, but already she lacked the capacity to share in their joy. Mozart was a problem to be solved at the blackboard – and an increasingly elementary one, at that. Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff, Bartok and Paganini...these brought real challenge, and the satisfaction of knowing that her fingers did not bleed in vain.

By the time she was sixteen, Eleanor was relatively famous and was even earning huge sums of money for her performances, thanks in part to viral internet videos of her early childhood, which had spread her name around the world faster than she could travel it.

That money was a good thing, too. Because the aneurism waiting in her brain like the storied Rough Beast for its time to come around at last would, in what seemed for years like the final analysis, change everything.