



For Solo Cello, op. 12
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About Kowal:

Mary Robinette Kowal (born February 8, 1969 in Raleigh, N.C., as Mary Robinette Harrison) is an American author and puppeteer. She also serves as art director for Shimmer Magazine and secretary of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. In 2008, her second year of eligibility, she won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer.

Kowal has worked as a professional puppeteer since 1989. She has performed for the Center for Puppetry Arts, Jim Henson Productions, and her own production company, Other Hand Productions. She also worked in Iceland on the children's television show Lazytown for two seasons.

Kowal's work as an author includes "For Solo Cello, op. 12," (originally published in Cosmos Magazine and reprinted in Science Fiction: The Best of the Year, 2008 Edition), which made the preliminary ballot for the 2007 Nebula Awards. Her fiction has also appeared in Talebones Magazine, Strange Horizons, and Apex Digest, among other venues.

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His keys dropped, rattling on the parquet floor. Julius stared at them, unwilling to look at the bandaged stump where his left hand had been two weeks ago. He should be used to it by now. He should not still be trying to pass things from his right hand to his left.

But it still felt like his hand was there.

The shaking began again, a tremelo building in his hand and knees. Julius pressed his right hand—his only hand—against his mouth so he did not vomit on the floor. Reaching for calm, he imagined playing through Belparda's *Étude No. 1*. It foon bowing, on the right hand. Forget the left. When he was eight, Julius had learned it on a cello as big as he had been. The remembered bounce of the bow against the strings pulsed in his right hand.

Don't think about the fingering.

"Jules, are you all right?" Cheri's voice startled him. He hadn't heard the door open.

Lowering his hand, Julius opened his eyes. His wife stood silhouetted in the light from their apartment. Her hair hung in loose tendrils around her face, bleached almost colorless by the backlight.

He snatched his keys off the floor. "I'm fine." Julius leaned forward to kiss her before she could notice his shaking, but Cheri turned her head and put a hand to her mouth.

"No. Sorry. I— I was just sick." A sheen of sweat coated her upper lip.

Julius slid his good arm around her and pulled her to him. "I'm sorry. The baby?" This close, her lilac perfume mixed with the sour scent of vomit.

His phantom hand twitched.

She half-laughed and pressed her head into his shoulder. "Every time I throw up, I think that at least it means I'm still pregnant."

"You'll keep this one."

She sighed as if he had given her a gift. "Maybe. Two months, tomorrow."

"See." He brushed her hair with his lips.

"Oh—" Some of the tension came back to her shoulders. "Your agent called."

Julius stiffened. His agent. How long would a one-handed cellist be of interest? "What did Leonard say?"

"He wants to talk to you. Didn't say why." Cheri drifted away and began obsessively straightening the magazines on the bureau in the foyer.

Julius let her. He had given up on telling her that the accident had not been her fault. They both knew he would not have taken the tour if Cheri had not insisted. He would have stayed in the hotel, practicing for a concert he never gave.

He tossed his keys on the bureau. "Well. Maybe he's booked a talk show for me."

#

At the coffee shop, Julius felt the baristas staring as he fumbled with his wallet. Leonard reached for the wallet with his pudgy sausage fingers. "Let me help."

"No!" Julius grit his teeth, clutching the slick leather. "I have to learn to do this."

"Okay." Leonard patted the sweat on his face with a napkin and waited.

The line shuffled behind him. Every footfall, every cough drove a nail into his nerves. A woman whispered, "Julius Sanford, you know, the cellist."

Julius almost turned and threw his wallet at her. Who the hell was she? Had she even heard him play before the accident or had she only seen him on the nightly news? Since the accident, sales of his albums had gone through the roof.

He wasn't dead, but he might as well be.

Julius bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood and pressed his wallet against the counter with the stump. The bandages bit into the still tender flesh, but the wallet stayed still.

He pulled out his credit card with his right hand. It was stupid and it felt good and he hated it, all at once.

As if it were celebrating, his phantom hand flicked through the opening passage to Vivaldi's *Sonata in F Major*. Jules pressed the wallet harder against the counter, trying to drive out the memory of a hand with each throb of pain.

Avoiding eye contact, he took his iced latte from the barista. He did not want to know if she was the type who watched him with pity or if she stared with naked curiosity.

Leonard had already picked a table outside. Jules dropped into the chair across from him. "So?"

"So." Leonard sipped his mocha. "What if you didn't have to learn to do that?"

"What? Handle credit cards?"

Leonard shrugged, and dabbed the back of his neck. "What would you give to play cello again?"

Julius's heart kicked against the inside of his ribs. He squeezed the plastic cup to keep from throwing it at Leonard. "Anything."

The older man looked away. His tongue darted out, lizard-like. "Is that hyperbole, or would you really give anything?"

Shaking, Julius shoved the stump squarely in Leonard's vision. The phantom twitched with inaudible music. "If the devil sat down with us and offered to trade my hand for my soul, I'd do it. I'd throw yours in with the bargain."

"Good." Beads of sweat dotted Leonard's forehead. "Except he's already got mine." He pushed a newspaper across the table, folded open to a page in the Arts and Leisure section.

SVETLANA MAKES TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO FIGURE SKATING

Julius stared at the article. She had suffered from bone cancer and lost her foot. Two years ago, she was told she would never skate again. Now she was at the Olympics.

"How?"

"A blastema bud."

Jules wiped his hand over his mouth. "I thought those were illegal."

"Here. Yes. Calcutta? No." His tongue flicked again, always the sign of a sticking point in negotiations. "But the blastema has to be from a related embryo to reduce chances of rejection." He paused. "Svetlana got herself pregnant."

The phantom hand froze.

"I know her doctor." Leonard tapped the paper. "I can get you in."

#

Cheri sat in the living room looking at a catalog of baby furniture. When Julius entered, she smiled, barely looking up from the glossy pages. "Did Leonard have anything interesting to say?"

Julius hesitated in the door and then eased onto the sofa across from her. "He's found a way to get my hand back."

Her catalogue hit the coffee table, the pages slapping against the wood. Cheri stared at the stump. Her mouth worked soundlessly.

"It's not legal." Agitatobeats pulsed in his phantom fingers. "It's—" He broke off, rubbing his left arm above the bandages to ease the ache. She wanted the baby so badly. "I feel like I'm dead. Like this."

Cheri reached across the coffee table to grab his good hand. "Whatever it takes, Jules."

He started to shake and pulled back. "The doctors can transplant a blastema bud to the stump and regrow my hand. But we have to do it now, before scar tissue forms."

"That's not so bad." She got off the couch to kneel beside him. "I don't mind moving to a country where it's legal."

He bit his lip and nodded.

Cheri ran her hand through his hair. Cool and soothing, her fingers traced a line from his scalp to the nape of his neck. "Hey. Sweetie. What's wrong?"

Wrong. She wanted to know what was wrong. The shaking started again. "It has to be related."

She froze. They hung suspended, as if waiting for a conductor to start the next movement. Julius stared at the carpet until Cheri moved her hand.

She slid it down his back and stood. "Related?"

He nodded. "To reduce the chances of rejection."

"So it might not work?" Cheri wrapped her arms around herself.

"I don't have another choice." He held the stump up so she could see it. "Do you have any idea what it's like? *I can't play.*"

"You could teach."

A laugh ripped out of him. "It's not the same thing! I can't go from being part of the music to hearing it butchered. I mean, can you imagine me with eight-year olds? Christ. Kill me now."

"Sorry." Cheri paled, her skin becoming almost translucent in the light. She turned and went to the window. "What do you want me to say?"

Say yes. Say you understand. "I— I just wanted to talk about options." Julius crossed the room to stand behind Cheri. He reached out to hold her and stopped, staring at the stump. In his memory, the tour-bus tipped and landed with his arm out the window, sliding on his hand. Grinding it away. "I should have stayed in the room."

"What?"

"Nothing." He wouldn't have gone if she hadn't insisted. "We can make another baby."

"Can we?" A vein pulsed in her neck. "It's been two years, Jules."

"So you miscarried before." The phantom hand clenched in a tight fist. "You might miscarry again, and then you won't have a baby and I still won't have a hand. Is that what you want? Are you happy that I can't play anymore?"

Her shoulders hitched and Cheri shook her head.

Julius pinched the bridge of his nose. He had gone too far, but she had to understand. "I'm sorry. I just see this chance and it's the first time I've hoped since the accident." He put his hand on her shoulder. She trembled, her shoulder as tight as a bow. "I'm sorry."

She nodded but did not turn.

Julius waited for more but Cheri continued to stare out the window. He squeezed her once and walked away.

"Jules?" Her voice caught him halfway across room. "We should do it."

Afraid to look at her, he stopped. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes." The word almost disappeared into the hush of the room.

"Because I don't want to force you into anything." He tasted the hypocrisy on his lips, but he needed this. She had to understand that.

She turned to face him then. Her face, all cheekbones and dark circles, was blotched red with anger. "You're offering me a choice between giving you your hand back and raising a child that you hate. What choice do you think there is?"

"I didn't mean—"

Cheri shook her head, rejecting his apology. "Tell Leonard I said, 'yes'." She turned back to the window and leaned her head against the glass.

"Cheri." He stopped. Nothing he could say would make her feel better, without giving away the thing he wanted. The thing he needed. He plucked at the bandages on his stump. If he could play again... "You have to understand what this means to me."

"I understand that I'm your second love. I said yes. I can't give you anything else."

Julius stared at her unforgiving back. "Thank you."

He slid out of the room to call Leonard. His hand trembled on the receiver.

Down the hall, the door the bathroom shut. Cheri retched once. Then again.

Julius pressed the phone harder against his ear and started running Wilde's *Lament* in his mind.

He concentrated on the fingering.

#

The last vibrations of Wilde's op 12 buzzed through Julius's thighs and into his chest. He flexed the fingers on his left hand as he released the cello's neck.

Across the room, Leonard sat with his head tilted down so that his chin vanished in his neck. Julius swallowed, the gulp sounding as loud as it had when he first auditioned for Leonard.

Leonard lifted his head. "What was that?"

"A Lament in Rondo Form for solo cello, Op.12 " Julius stroked the cello's silky wood. The sweat on his palm left a film on the instrument.

Leonard grunted. His tongue darted out to wet his lips. "Well."

"Well?" Christ, the man was trying to kill him. Julius looked down, loosening his bow as he waited for the verdict.

"Heard from Cheri?"

"She sent me a card on my birthday." His left hand spasmed. "Are you going to tell me what you thought?"

"Turn the gig down."

Julius almost dropped the bow. "You're kidding. It's Carnegie Hall! I've been working for this for the last three years."

Leonard leaned forward. "Jules. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Three years, Leonard." He'd given up more than the time to be able to play again.

"Take a gig in a symphony, build up your chops again. You wouldn't have to audition."

"Screw that."

"You asked for my opinion. As your agent—"

"Another agent would get me the gigs that I want."

"Sure." Leonard shrugged and headed for the door. "Take it, you'll sell out the house. But after people hear you play, the only gigs you'll be able to book will be novelty shows." His words resonated in the belly of the cello. "You aren't ready. It's like you're playing two different pieces now."

Julius hadn't thought anyone else could hear it. He gripped the cello between his knees, as if the fragile wood could shield him from the truth. "How long?"

He paused in the doorway. "How long did it take you to become world-class before?"

"Fifteen years... " Fifteen years of études and climbing his way up through the chairs of symphonies.

"Then that's your answer." Leonard shut the door.

Within Julius's left hand, the old phantom hand twitched again and started playing Bach's *Sonata in D-minor*. He clenched his hand, but the fingering did not stop.

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