Magnum Opus

When the wall phone rang early that Saturday morning, Thomas Dushek got up from the breakfast table, where he was enjoying coffee with his wife, Angelina, to answer it.

"Hello . . . Ah, yes, good morning . . . What? . . . When? . . . How bad is it? . . . Where is he? . . . I'll be right down."

He hung up and stood for a moment in disbelief.

"Who was that?" Angelina asked.

"Nadiya Geiger. She said an eighteen-wheeler ran a red light and broadsided Arthur's car last night when he was driving home from the performance. He hit his head against the window on the driver's side and suffered a severe brain trauma, something called a subarachnoid hemorrhage. He's in a coma. Nadiya's with him at the hospital. I'm going there now."

During the drive to the hospital a rhapsody of memories flooded Thomas's mind. He recalled how he had met Arthur in the Music Department of the local university when they were both freshmen, he studying composition and Arthur the violin. From that day on they became inseparable companions, spending countless hours together listening to recordings, attending

recitals, and discussing classical music. Once they had completed their undergraduate degrees, they went on to earn a master's together, after which Arthur joined the city's symphony orchestra while he began work on his doctorate. They had been best men at each other's weddings and godfathers of each other's children. For the forty-two years since they first met, they had remained in daily contact. Arthur was his second self, his alter ego, his musical soul mate, and Thomas loved him more than he did his own brother.

As soon as Thomas entered the hospital room, Nadiya rose from her chair beside Arthur's bed and flew into his arms.

"O Thomas, I'm so afraid we're going to lose our dear Arthur." She wept on his shoulder.

Moved by her tears, Thomas felt a lump in his throat. He wanted to cry with her but decided he had to stay strong.

"Don't talk like that, Nadiya. Arthur's a fighter. He's not going to give up, and we're not either. Don't worry. He'll pull through this. You'll see." He squeezed her tight.

When they released their embrace and Thomas saw the array of wires and tubes attached to his unconscious friend, his knees nearly gave out from under him. He staggered to Arthur's bedside and took his hand. "O Arthur, Arthur" was all he could say. With his back turned to Nadiya, he could not stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks.

From that day Thomas spent every spare moment at the hospital, sitting with his friend. The doctors had put Arthur on medication to reduce brain swelling and intracranial pressure. Every two or three hours the nursing staff turned him from side to side, and a physical therapist came twice a day to exercise his limbs. All to no avail. In three weeks and two days Arthur was dead. He never regained consciousness.

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When they returned from Arthur's funeral, Thomas said to Angelina, "Sit down, honey. There's something I have to tell you."

They both took a seat at the breakfast table.

"You know how music is my whole life. If I can't compose anymore, I have no reason to live. I mean if something ever happens to me like what happened to Arthur—I'm in an irreversible coma or a permanent vegetative state or something like that—then just let me go. Let me die. Don't keep me alive artificially. I don't want to linger for months, or even years, if I just exist but can't really live. Promise me you'll let me go."

She did.

For the next three months, though, Thomas felt as if he had already died. He was just going through the motions of life without really living it.

Then, a sudden inspiration resurrected him: he would compose a requiem in honor of his friend. It would be a six-voice contrapuntal work for violin, viola, cello, flute, clarinet, and oboe, each voice in the style of a different historical period—medieval, Renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, and contemporary, yet all blending together and harmonizing with each other. Although instrumental, he would pattern it after vocal models from each period. Yes, he would immortalize the spirit of his friend in music. It would be his *magnum opus*, not the longest, but certainly the finest, work of his life.

It was a splendid April morning, and Thomas walked out to his car with a new-found spring in his step and a whistled tune on his lips. He decided to lower the top on his little Mini Cooper convertible so that he could feel the sun on his brow and the wind in his hair as he drove to teach his advanced music theory class at the University. When he had gone a mere three and a half blocks, however, his foot slipped off the gas pedal and his hands off the steering wheel as he

slumped towards the passenger's seat. He felt his face, neck, trunk, arms, and legs going limp, as though his body were no longer his own. Try as he might, he could not raise himself up, lift his head, or even open his eyes. Thomas did the only thing he could do—nothing.

His car had jumped the curve and landed half in the yard of a man still in his bathrobe coming out to get the morning paper. When the stunned man ran up to the car, he saw that the driver could neither move nor speak. Had he suffered a heart attack? He called 911.

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Angelina rushed to the hospital as soon as she received the call. When she stopped at the ICU desk to ask which room her husband was in, a physician who happened to be standing there addressed her.

"Mrs. Dushek, I am Dr. Asa, the attending physician on your husband's case."

"How is he, doctor? What happened?" She winced, awaiting the response.

"Your husband suffered a massive stroke while driving to work, which resulted in what we call total locked-in syndrome."

"What does that mean?" She felt herself reeling and tried to steady herself.

"Your husband suffered damage to certain parts of the lower brain and brainstem, while his upper brain remained unaffected. We thus have reason to believe that he is conscious, but his entire body is paralyzed. All of his senses are probably intact, but his eyelids are closed, and he can't open them on his own, so he can't see. And he could probably taste food, but he can't move the muscles needed to chew or swallow, so we have to feed him through a tube. Because he's completely paralyzed, he can't speak or blink an eye or even squeeze someone's finger. He can probably hear what we say to him, but he has no way to communicate with us."

"Oh my God, that sounds terrible. Will he recover?" On the verge of fainting, she nearly lost her balance.

"It's possible—we know of at least two people who made a full spontaneous recovery from locked-in syndrome—but it's unlikely. Ninety percent of patients with this syndrome die within four months. The remaining ten percent live longer, but their condition does not improve."

Angelina heard nothing after "full spontaneous recovery." Thank God! Her Thomas was going to be all right; she knew it in her heart. Now she felt silly she had worried herself for nothing. She flitted into her husband's room but stopped cold at the sight of the wires and tubes connected to him. Unnerved for a moment, she pulled herself together and kissed him on the forehead. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

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"I have good news, honey," Angelina whispered in her husband's ear. "The doctor says you're going to make a full recovery. You're going to be just fine."

Thomas could indeed hear his wife, who tended to hear what she wanted to hear, and knew she was terribly mistaken but had no way to tell her.

"I think your body is just saying you need to rest. Arthur's death was such an unexpected blow, and you always work so hard anyway. It was probably just too much stress. So, you just rest and relax, dear, and when you're ready, you'll wake up and be all better."

Thomas groaned mentally. By now, in total darkness and unable to move a muscle, he had grasped the severity of his condition. When Angelina left for the evening, he had a realization, one that shattered him: the requiem he was going to compose for Arthur, the work that had given his life new direction and purpose, would be his requiem as well. In the unity of

friendship, they seemed in life to share one soul in two bodies. Now they would share one spiritual anthem in two deaths.

Thomas knew he would never again put pen to paper. Given that stark reality, no ensemble would ever perform his requiem, no audience ever hear it, no recording ever preserve it for posterity. No matter. Although it would come into being in his mind, exist only in his mind, and pass out of being with his mind, once it had taken shape, his requiem would be like a Platonic Idea. It would exist eternally in its ideal being as a musical form. From that moment on, the composition of his requiem became his all-consuming passion. Thomas understood that he was racing against the clock to complete it. If only God would grant him enough time. He never prayed so fervently in his life. The next morning he began his work.

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As the inspiration for the first section of his requiem Thomas decided to take the plaintive *Dies irae* or *Day of Wrath,* a Gregorian chant from the medieval Mass for the Dead. It was a confession of guilt and a prayer for mercy addressed to God as judge. He sang it through several times in his mind, allowing himself to sink into the mood of the melody and the text, feeling it more personally than he ever had before. Then he began to improvise, mentally humming notes without words, until an original melody had taken form in his head. He hummed this melody over and over until he had memorized it so well that he would be able to recall it note for note at will.

Assigned to the viola, this base melody was to form the first of six. To harmonize the other melodies with it and with each other in counterpoint, he would have to visualize it written on a staff with an alto clef. Thomas could mentally place the notes on the staff as he hummed them in his mind, but as soon as he stopped humming, they disappeared from before his mind's

eye. If he could not see them, he would find it difficult, if not impossible, to harmonize them or to revise later the harmonies he had written. He panicked.

For an entire week Thomas practiced all day every day visualizing a single melodic line on the staff until he could see the whole thing like a page in a book. It was exhausting.

Angelina continued to visit him every evening after work. For the first week she repeated her mistaken assurances that he would be "just fine." When he did not "wake up" from his "rest" as she had anticipated, however, her tone began to change.

"Thomas, you have to wake up. You can't just lie there indefinitely." Her voice had an irritated edge to it. "We were both going to take an early retirement in a couple of years. After all those years of working and raising kids, that was finally going to be our time together. Just the two of us. I've waited so long for it. We were going to travel. But how can we if you're like this? You can't do this to me. It's just not fair. I don't deserve this."And she burst into sobs.

Thomas knew her grief was speaking, a grief she couldn't face yet. How he wished he could console her.

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The next morning he began work on the second section of his requiem. The base melody would first sound alone on the viola and then repeat in each subsequent section. Above it he would write another original melody, this time for the clarinet, inspired by Luther's setting of Psalm 130, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* or *Out of the depths I cry to you*, a melody in the Phrygian mode and a stately, solemn confession of the need for grace. As before, he sang the hymn several times in his mind, immersing himself in the meaning and mood of the words and music. Then, above the viola score, he visualized a blank staff with a treble clef for the clarinet and experimented with placing notes upon it. After each measure he hummed the clarinet melody

to himself from the beginning and then imagined how it sounded played with the viola melody, checking the harmony as he went. The work proved more challenging than he had expected, and he often lost his concentration. This time it took two weeks until Thomas had composed the two-voiced counterpoint, could hear both melodies distinctly in his mind, and visualize them clearly on the page.

During that time Angelina's irritation gradually turned into desperate pleading.

"I know how much you love your work, Thomas, and I admit that I sometimes complained about the long hours you put in. I felt hurt that you spent more time with your piano than you did with me. Even on the weekends. I confess I felt jealous of your music. You seemed to love it more than you did me. But I promise, if you will just wake up and get better, if you will just come back, I'll never complain again. I'll be the best wife I can be to you." Again she wept.

If only Thomas could tell her how much he loved her, infinitely more than his music. She was the one who inspired all his compositions, and he lived to share them with her—something he would never be able to do with his requiem. Why had he worked such long hours? Only to make her proud of him. Her encouragement and support meant everything to him. If only he could tell her what a good wife she had been.

* * *

In part to lift his own spirits, in part to add contrast to the first two voices of his requiem, Thomas based the oboe melody, to lie just above the clarinet part, on the more hopeful aria from Händel's *Messiah* taken from Psalm 16: *But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption*. He had established by now his work routine, humming the model, visualizing the existing score plus a blank staff, and composing a new melody measure by measure.

Of course, the addition of each new voice beyond the repeating existing voices added a layer of complexity that required a greater power of visualization, ability to hear the multi-voiced composition, and memory. Thomas found the work steadily more taxing and himself more fatigued at the end of each day as his strength ebbed. Some two and a half weeks later he had completed the section.

Angelina now showed signs that her initial optimism, irritation, and promising had receded into the background, while grief had finally come to the fore.

"O Thomas, we've been together for thirty-six years, but now I feel so all alone. Your body is still here with me, but your mind and your heart are far from me. I miss you so much. Soon, I fear, even your body will be taken from me. Please don't leave me. I can't bear to be without you. I've heard the phrase a million times, but I never understood what a *broken heart* was until now. I miss everything we had, and I miss everything we were still supposed to have but never will." Her tears were more bitter than ever.

How could Thomas tell her his mind and heart were with her even more than before? He couldn't. His heart was breaking too.

* * *

Angelina's tears at his bedside reminded him of Mary grieving at the crucifixion of Jesus. Originally, he had planned to base the fourth part, for a violin between the viola and the clarinet, on a *Kyrie* from one of Mozart's *Requiem* Masses; now he had changed his mind in favor of the graceful yet profoundly sorrowful second movement of Hayden's *Stabat mater*, entitled *O quam tristis et afflicta—Oh, How Sad and Afflicted*. The addition of his own original melody inspired by Haydn took a full three weeks, leaving him drained of strength and even weaker.

By the end of that period Angelina gave evidence of a change. Perhaps she had wept all her tears of anger, fear, and sadness, at least for now. She was no longer tearful.

"I know I've been selfish, Thomas, thinking only about what I wanted and what I needed. I entirely forgot that five and a half months ago you told me you never wanted to live like this and asked me to let you go. I didn't remember that until now, perhaps because I couldn't bear to. But I know that you want to go rather than stay like this, and maybe you need to also. Don't worry, my dear. I'm going to speak to the doctor today about taking you off of life support. I'm going to give you what you want. I will always love you, just as I have always loved you. You are the love of my life, my dear Thomas, and I want to give you what you want."

O God, no, anything but that, Thomas screamed in utter silence. Please don't let me die until I have finished my requiem. Grant me this one last mercy. I beg you.

* * *

Although he had little strength left, Thomas had to work harder and faster than ever. He mentally added a blank staff with a bass clef for a cello part below the four-voice score he had already composed. On it he would write a melody based on the *Libera me* or *Deliver me*, a responsory from the Office of the Dead, set by Giuseppe Verde in his *Messa da requiem*. It formed a prayer for deliverance from eternal death at the last judgment. For Thomas it became a prayer for deliverance from death before he completed his own requiem.

* * *

Angelina caught Dr. Asa in the halls of the ICU.

"Doctor, I think the time has come to take Thomas off of life support and to let him go."

Dr. Asa straightened up to his full height. "Mrs. Dushek, I am in the business of saving lives, not taking them. I don't kill people."

"For God's sake, I'm not asking you to kill my husband. I'm saying that it is time to let him die a natural death."

"There's no reason for him to die."

Angelina planted herself squarely on both feet. "There's no reason for him to live. What kind of life can he have when he can't do any of the things he loves?"

"But we have no reason to think he's in any pain. He's not suffering. Why not let him live?"

"Because you're taking away his dignity. You feed him through a tube. You turn him every two hours like a sack of potatoes. Someone else has to toilet him and bathe him. You take these extraordinary means just to keep him hovering between life and death." Her voice had crescendoed.

"Providing nutrition and hydration are hardly extraordinary means of preserving life." The doctor's tone was becoming more strident. "We use them every day with thousands of patients across the county."

"That makes sense when the patient has a chance to recover, but Thomas doesn't."

"I told you at the beginning that there is almost no likelihood of a full recovery, but that doesn't mean that he might not make some progress. If he could even blink an eye, he could communicate. Jean-Dominique Bauby in France wrote an entire book that way."

"But it's not what my husband wants."

"He can't communicate. We don't know what he wants."

"I do." She was confident of herself.

"Does he have a living will?"

"No. But he told me a little over five months ago what he wants."

"Did he put anything in writing?"

"Well, no."

"Were there any witnesses to this conversation?"

"No. It was just the two of us."

"How can you be sure that he didn't change his mind?"

"I just know. I'm his wife." Her self-confidence was eroding.

"You mean you think you know. I'm sorry, Mrs. Dushek, but without a court order we are not going to discontinue his treatment."

"Then I shall just have to get a lawyer."

Angelina made an appointment with an attorney that afternoon.

* * *

The next morning she flurried into Thomas's room.

"I'm afraid the doctor wasn't very cooperative. But I've spoken with a lawyer, and guess what. He is good friends with a judge who often presides over end-of-life cases and supports the right to die. The lawyer feels sure he can get us a hearing in just two weeks and is confident of a favorable ruling. You'll only have to endure a little longer, my love, and then it will all be over. Then you will have what you want."

Inwardly Thomas recoiled in horror. He didn't want to die. Not yet. He had come too far with his requiem to leave his work unfinished now. With five sections complete he had only one to go, but the final labor of visualizing five full staves and one blank staff to be filled in daunted him. His strength had all but abandoned him, and now he would have to strain every nerve, or all would be lost. Angelina was acting out of kindness. But how could kindness be so cruel?

There remained the highest voice, a flute part, to be based on Arvo Pärt's setting of the Canticle of Simeon, *Nunc dimittis*, the first line of which declares, "Lord, you now let your servant depart in peace." More than anything Thomas wanted to make these words his own, which he could do only if he completed his requiem. The simplicity and economy of Pärt's setting was perfect to inspire his final section.

Thomas worked feverishly for the next twelve days, though he began to fade in and out of consciousness. On the evening of the twelfth day he finished the draft of the final section. He spent all his waking moments, which came and went, on the thirteenth day visualizing the six-voice score from beginning to end, listening to the melodies and harmonies, and making minor revisions. When he awoke on the morning of the fourteenth day, the date of the court hearing, he listened in his mind to the entire composition. It was glorious. Yes, he had done it. He had written his finest tribute to his beloved friend, Arthur, and he had prepared through musical meditation and prayer for his own death. It is finished, he thought to himself.

Thomas inhaled peace and satisfaction and sighed out a big breath—his last.

Glossary of Names

Thomas: twin (Hebrew)
Dushek: soul (Slavik). He and Arthur are "twin souls."
Angelina: little angel (ultimately from Greek)
Arthur: no known etymology. The short form "Art," not used in the story, nevertheless suggests that music was his art.
Geiger: violinist (German)
Nadiya: hope (Ukrainian). She hopes her husband will recover.
Asa: doctor (Hebrew)