

# Broken Chord

By A.R. Ashworth

*This piece began its existence as a character study for my third Elaine Hope novel, in which Roger and Tessa Forsythe play major roles. I re-voiced it and submitted it to the Ocotillo Review, Summer 2018, where it won Editor's Choice in the flash fiction category.*

His thumb traces a treble clef on the pale, blue-veined skin of her right hand. Her long, light fingers rest in his.

“I need to talk about it,” he says. “I need to know why.”

She lifts her head from the white pillow he fluffed for her minutes ago. For ten pulses of his heart he waits for her reply.

Her hazel eyes study the print hanging crooked on the hospital room wall—two horses, one standing in the shade of an oak; the other gamboling in the sun. A tumultuous marriage summarized in commodity ink.

He hopes she's gathering thoughts, tempering truth with love. He knows that this woman, whose music prisms her soul's colors into his, who lures him from his melancholy past to her crystal present, will not lie to him.

Perhaps she's finding it hard to tell him why. Why she was with that prick Paolo. Why they were in his Maserati, at two in the morning, going so fast. Her motivations are usually mysterious, and rarely straightforward.

“I've been here an hour and you haven't looked at me,” he says, adopting a passive approach.

She stares at her left hand, its fingers yellow with iodine, wrapped in white gauze, pinned with bright metal. Her eyes scan the splint hiding her shattered wrist. She has no feeling in two fingers. The medics say it might return, given time.

Does her mangled hand long for the opening thunder of the Tchaikovsky? Or for the third movement of the *Appassionata*, her signature encore? Will her hands ever again grant her audience the measures of her genius?

A lock of unruly, raven hair tumbles from her brow. She lifts her right hand, its fingers curving as she flops the stray to a precarious perch on the crown of her head. The lock slips again. At home, she practices in a ponytail, while her coach Natalia exclaims and paces around the huge Bösendorfer grand. On stage she wears the tortoise-shell combs her great-grandmother wore when she sang *Carmen* at the *Opéra-Comique* in Paris.

“*L’amour est cheveux rebelle*,” he whispers. He’s often tamed her rebellious hair during their twelve years of marriage. Their eyes at last meet as he extracts the combs and matching brush from his bag. He moves behind her, begins stroking, humming *Carmen*’s *habañero* melody. Her neck muscles stiffen to resist the rhythmic pull of the bristles, as they pacify hair black and lustrous as her piano. By the time he sets the second comb, he’s decided.

Why press for answers now? Best to talk about it later, after questions more important than his ego, or even her remorse, are resolved. Eyes closed, he bends and kisses her forehead.

“I’ve arranged for help at home, while I’m writing,” he says. “At night I’ll care for you myself.”

Her finger brushes his; their hands twine. His thumb traces a treble clef on her palm, and he thanks God for her.