

Francesca Scotti

Dora Demetz

*... and three roses,
half red and half white,
spring from thorny stems,
and never wither.*

["Der Müller und der Bach"]

op. 25, D 795. Franz J. Schubert]

Spring had arrived and now when we went out for a walk in the park, we only had to do up all the buttons on our jackets not to feel cold.

Lessons didn't really excite much me anymore, not even Music.

Especially since Elisabeth had chosen to sing to the notes of Dora's piano rather than mine. We had been inseparable for years, then she had met Dora, ending up preferring her friendship to mine. We had always sat next to each other at table, read together in the library and laughed like partners in crime when the strict, opulent Mrs Hayward used to warn us not to talk until late at night.

Back when we used to do everything together, Beth and I would stay awake secretly, and in the summer go hunting for glow worms. We had stolen a jar, the sort cooks use for jam, and made holes in the lid to let the insects breathe. It seemed impossible for such ugly creatures to have a unique gift like that. During Science we had learned too what merciless, carnivorous hunters they were. We used to sit cross-legged, opposite each other with the jar between us, and watch the glow worms shine

through the glass. Summer was only a few months away and I hoped by then things would be back to normal. The jar was hidden among my stockings, and each morning it seemed emptier and duller.

That day the Algebra teacher was at the board, diligently explaining unfathomable equations. We were all silent, all with the same hairstyle, all dressed the same. Except for Dora who wore her hair cut short. Elisabeth had moved next to her a few weeks earlier and now both of them were sitting in front of me. I could see where the line of Dora's bare neck emerged from her blouse. I had noticed that behind her right ear there was a thin scar which clearly formed a letter. She did everything to keep it hidden, just as she did about her past. I had never known any girl come to us at her age. It was not allowed. But they had evidently made an exception for her.

I hadn't liked her from the day she entered the dormitory a few months before. She had small shoulders and thin arms which hardly filled the jacket of her uniform. She looked like the type that enjoyed pulling the tails off lizards.

Like all of us, Dora's book was open in front of her. But her face was slightly turned so she could watch Elisabeth's hand which, with the tip of the index finger, drummed on her leg. On that patch of bare skin between the hem of the skirt and the top of the stocking, Elisabeth started to trace simple signs, separated by short interruptions where her hand remained suspended. I stiffened on my chair, as if that would give me a better grasp of what was happening. Letter after letter, Beth seemed to have written something to Dora. Then it was Dora's turn to move her index finger

slowly over Beth's skin in answer. I focussed to follow the movement.

Are you sure?

Yes. At the end of the park.

Ok.

Their conversation was over in a second while I, shaken, ran through those few sentences in search of a meaning. Whatever could Beth be sure of? She, who had always needed me, even to decide whether to have roast potatoes or mash in the dining room.

In any case, at the end of the park there was nothing but scented lime trees. And the round fountain.

From the window anyone could have seen me crossing the garden.

I had tried sitting at the piano, but every note of the Debussy's Children's Corner I was studying increased my solitude. And in each of them was Beth: she was the sullen doll I imagined amid the staccato chords of Serenade for the Doll, the snowflakes whirling down among the semiquavers of Snow is Dancing.

I walked fast, as the sun buried itself unhurriedly. The fact that Dora was so mysterious about her past did not mean she was hiding anything interesting, I repeated to myself.

I reached the fountain hot, the tips of my fingers swollen and my lips cracked from breathing with my mouth half-open. I had never noticed how intrusive the noise of that lively water was.

To the right were bushes with shiny leaves that separated the park from a small botanical garden. It was as if I was seeing them for the first time, even though I had been living there since childhood. I crouched down to spy over the hedge. I couldn't make anything out. It was like looking

through a kaleidoscope. Then, slowly, the images took shape: a figure sitting with its back to me, head bent slightly forward and long hair swept to the side of the neck, to leave the back free. A naked back: Beth's back, and she, still as a stone. I held my breath even though the water would have hidden any noise. A shadow wavered beside her and I saw Dora approaching. Fragile pallor concealing a spiteful soul. Her mouth opened a little to say something I could not hear. She kneeled behind Beth and arranged her hair again. I could not read her movements, nor see her hands but I felt profoundly ill at ease. I almost wanted to throw a stone, make her stop, shoo her off. Like chasing a cat from its prey.

I don't know how long I stayed there, but the light had turned purple and I was cold. At last Dora stood up, restoring my sight of Beth's back. It wasn't smooth and white anymore. Two red marks, thin as scratches, had appeared between her shoulder blades, where wings grow on imaginary beasts. Blood slid slowly from the cuts. There were two Ds; the second, a mirror-image, intersected with the first. Dora Demetz.

It looked like the infinity symbol.

It was clear to me that from then on there would be no room for me.

The air in the park was stagnant, dark and stone-cold. I filled my lungs with it.