

THE WIND AT HER BACK

The opening is hers alone. The silence in the small amphitheatre is that of a hundred breaths held, waiting. For an instant black and white keys blur as Miriam at the Steinway positions her hands on the keyboard, closes her eyes, calls up in her mind the tranquil opening chords of the *Archduke Trio's* third movement, leans in to the piano and begins. Ari allows them to play uninterrupted to the end, but when they finish, he slowly and deliberately gets up from his front row seat, walks to a spot between Sasha and Izzy, and claims center stage.

"But, of course, it is fine playing. Very professional. And you do play with much depth of feeling," he says in his studied European way, his accent marked, though not harsh like some. Well, he's learned to start with something positive, Miriam notes, but she knows what's to follow.

"This middle movement is ... is to climb Mount Everest. It is Beethoven at his most majestic. But we are not here for compliments. So. We must begin ... Yes, Miriam, the sound is right for Beethoven, full, weighty, somber, but you, you play note by note. You must *shape* the phrase, it moves to *here*, precisely *here*," jabbing the exact point in the music. "Build slowly ... *pianissimo*, then more ... more ... and *move*, then open to the climax. The principle is like the stock market. Buy cheap, sell high, with a *phenomenal* sense of release ... knowing no one will ask you to do it again," his voice dropping to a hush.

He waits, allowing his words to resonate, then goes to his seat but turns back, still unsatisfied. "The *turn*, Miriam, the turn must speak, with you it is just a turn. And what is it you do here? It is an accent, yes, but how do you play it? Beethoven was deaf, he didn't limp!" To Izzy, his violin at the ready, "Closer to the bridge." To Sasha, "Weightier, more bow. Don't reprint the music, re-*feel* it! You must ASK ...@ he stretches the word, drawing his arm across an imaginary cello, Ayes, *ask* ... the notes to be long,@ then, AYou have a story Sasha, but it doesn't interest me."

Typical, Miriam thinks, listening to appreciative laughter from the crowd. She catches Sasha's wince, how his serious face, more youthful than his years, reflects his pain.

"Thoughts are expressed by sonorities, Sasha. What sonority do you want?" Ari persists.

"I don't know," Sasha answers after a long thoughtful pause.

"You don't know. Good. Like the weather, you never know." The words slip easily from Ari, a glint in his eye. "Play again please, from where you come in together."

He returns to his seat, opens the score and waits, patient, intent, everyone's eyes on him. In the few moments it takes Sasha and Izzy to retune, Miriam examines Ari: high forehead, dark hair, greying, receding at the temples, sensitive mouth, strong jaw, solid build; in his fifties, some twenty-five years older than she. Escaped the deterioration of age, *willed* it so, she smiles to herself. His dress today is casual: gun metal cardigan, white shirt open at the collar, neat trousers, loafers. Comfortable with himself.

What is it she feels for him? Awe? Admiration? For choosing to be more whole than bitter after Bergen Belsen, greater, not less than himself? He allows only brief glimpses, snapshots long forgotten in a dark closet, stumbled upon. Just a boy then. Vienna; his home ... he's given only hints, the rest she's imagined: leather armchairs, carved sideboards, huge punch bowls, silver candlesticks,

hand cut crystal; music room, grand piano ... family; a first love? All, gone. It's difficult to envision him with a mother and father, sisters, brothers.

His gaze burns into her.

Moments stretch like minutes. She looks over at Sasha: head bent to one side, ear almost touching the strings; listening, tuning, listening. Violin upright on one knee, Izzy waits, silently practices fingering a difficult passage. Sasha gives one last twist of a peg, one last gentle pluck of the C string, and finally satisfied, embraces his cello, a lover, looks over at Miriam, raises his bow, nods: he's ready. At the instant it touches the string she and Izzy join with him, their bodies moving to the music's demands, three instruments breathing as one. Its ripe fullness, interplay of voices, the tactile pleasure of fingertips against keys, the *rightness*, this is what Miriam loves, total immersion in the moment, fully lived without burden of past or future. Her concentration ends abruptly as she becomes aware of Ari beside her.

"But you drown them with this lava of noise!" Ari says, sliding onto the bench, displacing her. "You overwhelm them with feeling! Why must you always feel more than everyone else?" She stands awkwardly by as he imitates her playing in a manner so exaggerated the pounding makes her wince. "I will show you. Where the crescendo begins, from there Sasha, Izzy."

A leader but not leading, following but not a follower, Ari supports so reliably they're suddenly freed, reaching a new artistry. Even Sasha and Izzy are astonished. The audience aahs, claps. Does Ari know how he's reduced her by contrast?

"Aaach! Beethoven asks for clarity and you sound like you work in a noodle factory!@ he flings at them after they try again. "He demands simplicity and you are Hungarian! He asks for shimmering, you offer flat champagne!" Still hurt, Miriam laughs, in spite of herself, along with everyone. Ari's genuinely surprised, delighted.

"This whole section ..." Sasha protests, standing up to him. The audience squirms and gasps, but Sasha persists until Ari's patience is at its end. Dropping all grandstanding, he becomes reflective.

"What you do is correct, but not right. When Liszt says something three times it is because he has nothing else to say. But you are playing Beethoven, not Liszt." He proceeds to sing the melody, his voice holding a dialogue with itself, indicating each nuance, pause, turn of phrase, while imitating the movements of a cellist. "And ... you two are always in agreement." He stops, allowing Sasha and Izzy to think he's offered some approval, then adds ... "Neither of you ever raises his voice!"

"I had once a young man come to my home for dinner," Ari keeps on, speaking directly to Sasha. "As my guest you have a choice! I told him. 'You may have chicken, or chicken.' I offer you the same freedom," he finishes, smiling. Abruptly, as he did earlier, he turns serious.

"One strives for the Classical Ideal, for *balance*," accenting the final syllable, "for unity. Proportion is all. More than all else one must reach for that moment the soul speaks. That great moment that cannot be reached from the mind but must come from the deepest part of one's being. Not that we can indulge passion at the expense of unity, *balance*, proportion."

He pauses, confiding to an intimate, just themselves, alone in a parlour, "Bach is a giant, but he has never filled the spaces of my soul. For me, Ah! Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Brahms ... When I am in their company I ask for that instant of inspiration, that unpredictable dimension that will cause the heart to stop, the earth stand still."

No one moves, breathes. Manipulated by a Master, Miriam thinks. Captivated against her will, for it is the poet Ari she loves.

"It is enough for today. We begin tomorrow with the Mendelssohn at nine, yes?" The audience groans. "All right," smiling, "Musicians need their morning rest. Ten o'clock." Only Ari seems not exhausted from the day's work.

"Miriam," Ari addresses her as Sasha and Izzy pack up. "Come tonight for a session, we have not long before your Massey Hall debut and my time is right now valuable. I leave for Paris and London the morning after you play. My studio at home, six-thirty, don't be late." He walks out of the hall without waiting for a reply. "My studio tonight, Miriam," Izzy mimics, capturing Ari's tone and accent. "I don't know what you're doing, but I'm going home to play the way *I* want. You know what I think about our being here." Miriam doesn't stop him; he's a man of few words.

"What *are* we doing here?" Sasha asks after Izzy has left.

"Ari's the best, Sasha, you know it."

"He cuts us to pieces. We don't need him anymore, we're beyond it."

"No, we do. He's cutting, I know, but his criticism's a gift. That's how *he* sees it. Tell him you're hurt and he won't know what you're talking about, he won't even remember what he said."

"So much for sensitivity."

"Sash, he gives us his all, everything he knows and hears. Isn't that worth putting up with his ..."

"*Brutality?* To you maybe, not me, or Izzy. Maybe it's more than his coaching interests you, Miriam."

"What does that mean?"

"He's not just a coach, is he? Not just the master musician either. Maybe it's the *man* excites you."

"And maybe you'd like to be half the musician he is," she snaps.

"Or the man, Mims?"

Only Sasha calls her that. Once he said, "I'm steady and devoted and I love you." She was stunned, laughed, dismissing him; the look on his face told her how deeply she'd hurt him. He's never brought it up again, but his eyes reveal he still feels the same.

"He's a big ego, all consuming, and he'll bend your talent to his," Sasha says quietly. "It isn't what you've said, it's what you *haven't*. You've not denied anything about Ari, or how you feel," keeping his gaze fixed. She looks away and doesn't answer. Without comment, he leaves. Her silence disturbs her.

It's dusk and the room is growing dark. Miriam looks out, watching for Sasha. Street lamps have come on and cast their light on falling snowflakes, on a mounted policeman riding slowly along the tree-lined path outside the old Conservatory building. Without turning, cello under his arm, Sasha waves as he passes and walks on. Miriam bundles up against the cold, gathers her music and hurries out into the night.

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She arrives at Ari's precisely at six-thirty. She wouldn't dare be late. Snow's falling heavily, lies, a fleecy comforter, over the parkette at the edge of Toronto's Annex. Squinting, she tries seeing through the hoary swirl, drifting confetti, the world a glass paperweight, beautiful, alive with motion.

As Miriam enters the grand old home's studio entrance she hears Ari ... Chopin, *G minor Ballade* ... enters his apartment without knocking and sits on the supple, brown leather sofa, waiting. He doesn't look up. Chopinesque melodies fill the room, questioning, answering, now agitated, now tender; cadenzas weave a filigree, interlacing arpeggios leap upward, downward, playful dolphins, cascade forth, die away. She marvels all over again at his playing.

The room suits him, the man *and* his music, Miriam thinks: two grand pianos facing one another belly to belly, dark wood floors, Persian area rugs, gleaming walnut desk, book lined walls; above his head, on the wall, autographed pictures of Artur Rubinstein and Eugene Ormandy embracing him in one, a smiling Jack Benny with his violin in another ... *To my dear friend, Ari*. A fire in the fireplace spreads its warm glow, flickers its light across her face.

Her thoughts fall away with the dying sounds of the *Ballade*. Ari moves away from the keyboard and they exchange a few words; he's not one for casual talk. They'll work the whole of the evening, longer if necessary, first on her program for New York's Ninety-Second Street Y.

"There are a million ways to play that passage Miriam, but I don't like your way," she hears Ari. She's been working on the Brahms for months, yet he remains dissatisfied. He sings the *Intermezzo*, its wistful melody, tender assertion; its comment, deeper, throatier. Miriam's fingers pick up where his voice leaves off. Then, Schumann, *Kinderszenen*, the *Kind im Einschlummern*. She's played this before but it's become stale, lost its poetry. Ari word paints: sleeping baby, pink and angelic, dreaming; quick movements under closed lids, lashes flicker, tiny plump fingers twitch ... a sigh, a shake, pouty baby lips tease a smile, about the dream? Ari cradles his arms and sways, *listen to the rocking* it says. It flows, Ari, to Miriam, and from her fingers.

Debussy doesn't come so easily; *Estampes*, *Gardens in the Rain*, languorous Spanish rhythms, gauzy sounds, gossamer, chiffon and lace, feathers and thistledown. Where's the spine? No, the Impressionists elude her. Ari says nothing. Then, his words, slow and measured: "It is not life or death, Miriam; it is only one phrase. Get the most from it. What you cannot get today, you will get tomorrow. If you get it all now, what's to live for?"

Finally they move on to the Concerto. Winner of the *Young Artists' Competition*, she'll debut with *Beethoven's Fourth* under MacMillan and the Toronto Symphony. Ari's never been more demanding. They work, Ari at the second piano, playing the orchestral score, moulding, weaving parts, an elaborate tapestry. Value each note, increase here, decrease there, half-pedal this place, none that ... In the process she loses the emotion and the fingers do strange things. "Ari this passage is ..." She stops herself; no protesting. How can it be, a novice again! Hours of painstaking exploration, depressing keys slowly, quickly, from the key, above the key, peaceful wrist or active; technique in the tradition of Czerny, Cramer, Kullak, of Liszt and Rubinstein; legato, legacy of Field and Chopin; pedal, touch, colour, of Debussy and Ravel, Gieseking and Casadesus, all handed down to Miriam through Ari Zachar, everything she's ever learned marshalled to achieve the ideal he hears in his mind. He's a conduit, faith healer, laying on hands. From others he demands the soul's breath.

Getting up from the second piano, Ari stands near Miriam, instructing, "Measure your energy from the first phrase to the last. Play again the beginning." She does as he says, playing the tranquil opening chords once more. "Too much, too much ... hold back, you must save the emotion," Ari directs. "Now go to the *development*. Give more but not everything, save it for the climax." He takes her from instant to instant to the finale. "Hold nothing back now, give us your strength, your heart. We have waited for this moment."

At last Ari's satisfied. "Yes, you will be ready," he says. Walking over to the window, he gazes out onto the square. Miriam follows, and standing beside him, looks out at the still falling snow. The parkette lies beneath a glistening white shroud, elms stretch frothy arms and snow-warmed benches cast long, slat shadows onto virgin whiteness.

"I leave for London this week, Miriam."

"How long will you be gone?"

"One month, six weeks ... It is a long tour. Paris, Avignon, Brussels, London, Amsterdam, Vienna ... Israel."

"It is grueling," she says, pondering ... What drives this man who allows the world to see into his soul, reveals more than most dare consider yet remains so apart? Searching his face, she asks, finally, "Ari, can I make it?" He shrugs.

"Do I have a crystal ball? Such questions I cannot answer. You must hunger for it."

"As you do?"

"The more I play, the more I need to play. I can never get enough, it is what nourishes me." They become silent, watching the hushed undisturbed world below. At last he turns to her, a direct, unwavering look. "One searches for a perfection that can never be reached, for inspiration. It is not enough to sail when the wind is at your back. You must learn to sail when the wind is in your face."

"But is it enough for you, Ari?"

"Enough? It is my life." She catches a flicker of yearning in eyes normally so concentrated with purpose. "It is a lonely business, it is not for everyone. I have been not so fortunate to have more. Some things are predestined not to be." He looks back out the window, then as if to himself, almost a whisper, "There is room for only *one* talent and all must bend to it." Sasha's words echo.

"We are asked to make choices," he finishes simply.

For a moment they are still, alone with their thoughts.

"I have never known a talent not wanting to be better than the master. Is this not true, Miriam?" directly to her. "Is this not so?" he repeats, then moving away, walks over to stoke the fire.

She goes to him, hears herself murmur, *Ari?* but in her mind, his name on her lips. In the quiet, flickering light dances across their faces. Extending her arm, she *feels* the imagined roughness of his sweater under her fingers, his arm straining to her touch ... and pulls back. She senses his desire to reach out, not daring, like herself; afraid to breathe, afraid of the moment, its fragility, shatterable as fine glass.

"Come, you will be ready," he says firmly. "I have now work of my own."

She sees in the set of his jaw, his eyes, the almost imperceptible shift of his body, that he's retreated behind his first, his *only* love. He wouldn't allow it to be otherwise.

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At the Steinway, statuesque in a simple black velvet gown, Miriam peers out through the glare of stage lights into the darkened hall. She makes out Izzy and Sasha, scans the rows for Ari, her heart pounding. Yes, he is there, on the aisle.

Massey Hall is filled, the audience in plush red velvet seats, waiting; the hum of voices, silenced, programs quieted, the massive chandelier dims, withdrawing its light; Renaissance wall paintings recede in shadow. The stage door opens, MacMillan appears, strides quickly to the podium, applause crescendos and fades, the hall dark, hushed, orchestra ready. She's been preparing physically and mentally for this hour. He turns to Miriam. The opening is hers alone.

Hold back, hold back, save the emotion. She begins, plays the wondrous opening G major chords not only with her hands but with her soul. *In* the instant, at the same time out of it, listening, evaluating, instantaneously adjusting, she performs as never before. Passages demanding strength are of little consequence, executed without strain, the energy disguised. Lyric moments sing, each tone flows from one to the next, liquid gold, yet hangs in midair, round, distinct, separate but strung together, pearls on a string. *Give more, not everything, save for the climax.* Ari taught her well. *Hold nothing back now, your strength, your heart ... we have waited for this moment.* Final chords linger, float suspended, disappear, existing only as memory.

No one moves ... Timeless seconds ... burst of applause ... Quickly she steps to the front of the stage, bows, smiles, reaches out to the crowd. Her eyes move immediately to Ari.

His seat is empty.

It is a lonely business ... grueling; practice, travel, the anxiety of performance ... but then the supreme exhilarating joy of success! ... *I've never known a talent not wanting to be better than the Master. Is that not right, Miriam?*

Soon it will be morning and Ari will be in Paris. She closes her eyes and imagines him walking along the banks of the Seine and through the Tuilleries, a light snow falling. His eyes will drink in Sislys, Renoirs and Pissaros at the Jeu de Paumes; he'll stroll Paris streets and sip wine in the cafes of Montmartre, lunch on baguettes and cheese; breathe in the smells of les charcuteries et boulangeries, soak up sounds of buskers, their Frenchy voices, their accordions. He'll play Chopin's *F Minor*.

Paris will be beautiful ... even in winter.

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