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At the Concert of Alternative Music

YOU HAVE BEEN going through the boxes in the garage, the ones that came from your apartment after your marriage ten years ago and which have followed you from house to house, always relegated to the storage room or the garage like your tools, your muddy shoes. When it comes to the things that occupy space around her, your wife is a woman of great moral severity. She knows you had a life, of sorts, between puberty and marriage, but she doesn't want it in the house.

Lately she has complained that the neighbors' garages are much neater than yours; she has suggested that you might go through these boxes, throw out the junk and put the rest in order—though what you might do with this well-ordered remainder she has not said. Today, perhaps because rain cancelled your golf, she finally gathered the courage of her convictions and ordered you to “get rid of some of that junk...or I will!” So here you are, and strewn in piles over the floor of the garage are the artifacts of your time in New York City, when you were happy and miserable in equal proportions. Now, you hardly ever use words like that, they're too extreme. Outside, you hear the storm rumbling mournfully. Your wife opens the door and gives a little shriek, as if she has caught you doing something indecent, but says only that she and your daughter are going to the hairdresser's and they will be gone a couple of hours.

Soon after, you come across the program of a musical event, sandwiched between a photo album and the first three chapters of a novel you once felt quite hopeful about, all of them mouse-nibbled and discolored. It is not a fancy program—a two-page xerox, stapled, printed on stationery from the Public Access Synthesizer Studio. It reads Swansong. Then a list of the pieces

played, with brief explanatory notes under each.

Your hand begins to tremble before you even remember where it came from. You set the program aside and fumble open the photo album looking for her, but then you realize there won't be any photos. She didn't believe in taking pictures of people one loved; she thought it trivialized the emotion. There were many things she didn't believe in. You pace the garage and then, after wiping your feet on the mat, enter a neat kitchen with ruffled curtains and gingham wallpaper. You get a beer from the fridge and open a window so that you can smell the rain. It is coming down hard and straight, big drops that rattle against the deck and clatter on the hood of the gas grill you left uncovered. There is a flash of lightning, and you count eight before the crackle and boom. She was afraid of lightning, you remember—lightning and heights and spiders and darkness. Sitting at the kitchen table, you smooth out the program and are instantly twenty-two again.

You met her at a baseball game, Yankees versus Red Sox, so long ago that Clemens was young and pitching for the Red Sox. You were new to the city, having moved from Boston after graduation, and you were homesick. In the sixth inning Clemens flattened some kid the Yankees had just brought up from Triple-A. He had a four run lead, and the bases were empty.

Behind you, three women leapt to their feet, screaming profanities. You'd been to Fenway so that wasn't new, but one of them spilled beer on you and amused the others by dabbing the top of your head with the bottom of her t-shirt. She had small breasts and big eyes and a disordered mass of black hair; the tops of her thighs were burnt and the sun glowed in her hair like fox-fire. The other two were blonde and looked like Barbie-goes-to-the-ballgame. Instead of apologizing, she bought you a beer, and you took the opportunity to strike up a conversation. That's when she discovered you were from Boston, by the accent. You didn't think you had an accent, but she made you say "pitcher" and everyone around you laughed, even the guys behind her who were cab drivers from Nigeria.

Jim Rice was batting. He grounded to short, and she said he should have gone with the pitch. You mentioned Williams, who did pretty well pulling the ball, and she snorted. "What would he have hit, if he didn't have to play against the shift?" When Clemens came out for the next inning, she cupped her hands around her mouth and threatened to castrate him. You said it was just a part of the game. She climbed down beside you, smelling of suntan lotion and beer, and pinned you to your seat with one finger. "What about Conigliaro?" she said. "What about Ray Chapman?"

You ordered a couple of beers, and after they had made their way down, she told you she was nineteen. She was a Yankees fan, but a Yankees fan who knew Babe Ruth's pitching stats, a Yankees fan with a harp tattooed above her left breast and thorns around one ankle.

When the Red Sox put the game out of reach, her friends left but she stayed. She told you she was at Juilliard taking composition from someone with four names and played flute in their orchestra. That's what she was there for, the flute. You couldn't believe it. "You mean like symphonies?"

"Yeah," she said. "Like symphonies."

On the subway you exchanged phone numbers and made a dinner date, but she didn't show up and wouldn't answer your calls. A week later, three o'clock in the morning, she called and without preamble, as if she'd pulled back the slat in a confessional, started crying about a lesson she'd botched and the cutting things her professor had said to her; about her handsome, violent father and her mother, who was sweet but could never be satisfied, and what a hell it had been growing up in that house; about the controlling ex-boyfriend and his strange lack of interest in sex. She didn't apologize then, either.

You told her you worked for your uncle as a mortgage officer in a bank, specializing in second mortgages. When people had over-spent themselves, when they'd fallen out of the boat but still had their heads above water, they came to you and you filled their pockets with rocks.

She thought you were being melodramatic.

“*I’m* melodramatic!” you said. “*Me?*”

She responded as a true child of the eighties. “Some people need to learn the hard way.”

Easy to say for someone who came from Westport, Connecticut, but you’d grown up in Newton, near the Roxbury line, and knew how easy it was to lose your way.

After that, she called every night for two weeks.

Your uncle invited you home for dinner and told you to get more sleep. “Good advice,” your aunt said, “but if I were your age, I wouldn’t follow it.”

You’d never talked to anyone as you talked to her—politics, movies, restaurants, religion, science, sex. But it was, finally, only talk. Every other day, you’d ask her out, and always there was a good reason why she couldn’t. One night, you turned off the ringer on your phone and let her draw her own conclusions. The next morning there were six messages on the answering machine. She called you at work, demanding to know where you’d been. You said it was none of her business, and she hung up.

For several days you got plenty of sleep. You saw a couple of movies, went out with a teller who looked like Debra Winger and sounded like Judy Holliday and who sputtered pasta when she heard where you’d gone to school. “Tufts? Tufts? That’s a college, Tufts?”

That night while you were reading in bed, you heard a knock at your door. Not very loud, but forceful, like a teacher tapping a pencil on her desk. And there she was in pajama bottoms and fuzzy slippers and a t-shirt that read BITCH. You asked how she’d got past the doorman, and she said, “Guess.”

Because she lived in a dormitory, the two of you always slept in your efficiency, with the bed that pulled from the wall. It wasn’t every night, only once or twice a week, and in between you talked on the phone. You knew business and sports and cars, but she knew everything else. Not just academic stuff but how to choose wines, how to get spaghetti sauce out of the rug. She fixed your computer. Your houseplants thrived.

You discovered that she loved Chinese food at three in the morning. You learned a lot about her tastes at three in the morning. But you were young, and you were working for your uncle.

Since the two of you were sleeping together, it was impossible to avoid the subject of music, and there you disgraced yourself. When she went through your tapes, which she did systematically, putting them in order, she muttered, "I'm sleeping with a man who listens to Merle Haggard! Police—a psychopath who listens to Merle Haggard. You've got to get rid of this. I mean, God! Olivia Newton John?" She set aside your classical tapes in a heap between her legs—there weren't many, mostly Beethoven. "Where's the twentieth century?"

You said you bought what you liked and what you liked was melody, harmony, lyrics that made sense. She lifted the tapes and let them fall through her fingers like sand. "God, if I fall in love with you, I'm sunk."

She tried to introduce you to the mysticism of contemporary music, she lectured you on tones—over, under and quarter—but it sounded like algebra. To you, melody and harmony were natural, like the curves of her body or the antlike queue of hairs that descended from her bellybutton. Who would sit down after a hard day's work, you asked, and listen to bunch of instruments warming up for half an hour? In response, she played you a tape of one of her ex-boyfriend's compositions, which sounded like rusty doors being opened by people with heavy boots on.

You went with her to symphony concerts and tried to be respectful. There was, you recall, an elderly man with a thick accent who announced each level as you went up on the elevator and held open the door. At the top, he would announce, "Dird balgony, da vreal moosic luffahs!" And he would kiss her hand.

She wasn't fooled, and your stubbornness infuriated her. She thought you weren't listening, and she hated people who didn't listen. So when she invited you to a concert of alternative music, you knew that it was a test and that you didn't have a ghost of a chance of passing.

The snarl of a chain saw suddenly interrupts your reverie, then another. The rain has stopped, and to the west sunshine has broken through the clouds. The saw whines through a limb, coughs, snarls. It must be the neighbor, two houses down; their oak died over the winter. You stretch your legs, get another beer, study your daughter's art on the refrigerator door. The sun is shining in every picture, and there is a smile on every face. Back in the garage, you rummage through the boxes looking for more but find nothing. Two years, and that program is all you have.

As you return to the house your memory dredges up a few scraps of your intimate life with her, and you are startled. Somehow, you had allowed yourself to believe that there, at least, the two of you had been compatible. But it isn't true. In love, your wife is tender and considerate, insists on pleasure for both of you and is more creative than you in achieving it. Making love with her is like a leisurely candlelit dinner. With your lover of years ago, it was more like a long, heated argument that ends not in understanding but exhaustion.

Then why is it, if she knocked on the door right now, you would risk everything?

You sit at the table and read through the program and are surprised how much comes back to you. You can't remember the color of her eyes, but you can remember she was wearing sandals that evening and her toenails were painted.

Things did not start out well. At dinner in the Village, because she had just come from practice, she rambled incoherently; you had spent a cheerful day learning how and when to start foreclosure proceedings and were beginning to look at her as a liability. But by the end of the Chardonnay (no waiter ever carded her), you were holding hands across the table.

The concert was in a loft on 14th Street. She'd never been there, but someone had taped black arrows to the sidewalk, through the doors of a dingy grey building and around two corners to a freight elevator.

By day, the studio rented time on synthesizers to composers who couldn't afford them. There were no computers—it was

that long ago. The loft was not very large: the walls, pipes, conduits, windowsills painted white; the thin-slatted wood floor reflecting many coats of urethane. Silver-hatted bulbs dangled in two neat rows from the ceiling.

The crowd you recall only vaguely as young and earnest and underfed. Though she knew the director through her ex-boyfriend, your lover, too, seemed out of place. Immediately, you announced your ignorance by pointing to a synthesizer and asking what it was, but the director was a man of eclectic tastes. He explained to you how the Moogs worked and used one to show you that much of your favorite music was canned.

You and your lover plopped down on one of the migratory squares of white foam that served as seats. Hunched before you was a large synthesizer whose tentacles, gaffer-taped to the floor, spread to speakers in other parts of the room. On one side, a table full of what looked like flea-market junk and behind it a rack from which metal objects hung. On the other, an array of dried plant life, including tiny potted cacti wired with contact microphones. The director asked that applause be withheld until intermission, and you were happy to oblige.

According to the program in your hand, the first piece was “Child of Tree” by John Cage (you’d never heard of him), so called because it “utilizes sounds made solely from plant materials.”

Oh God, yes. That was the guy in the white dashiki who went through the whole thing in slow motion, as if he were serving communion. He announced that the order in which the instruments were to be played had been determined by consulting the *I Ching* and then pulled out a stopwatch. It makes you laugh, now, but at the time you were on your best behavior. You remember dried thistles and seedpods that looked like jesters’ caps, and especially the amplified cacti, which sounded vaguely Chinese. The performer was rather old and dry, himself, and muttered softly as he worked. He reminded you of your father routing cabinet doors in the garage.

The next piece—how could you ever forget? “An artistic editing of a deaf girl’s attempts to speak.” You have a deaf cousin and felt like shouting, “This isn’t art, it’s sadism!” Your lover, who

knew about the cousin, squeezed your thigh. When it was over, she said, distinctly, "That was terrible."

Once you had found a piece that you hated, you were happy. You remember having some hopes for the next piece, "Back to Tonbak," because the performer, a beefy man with a red face, was obviously drunk. According to the program, the tonbak is "an improvisational instrument used in instrumental music and dance accompaniment." You wonder why they took such care to avoid the word "drum." The piece you don't remember, only the man.

At intermission, you found a Coke machine, one floor down, outside the shop of printer. That made you a hero to the three or four children attending. Perhaps because she still had hopes for your education, your lover was disappointed in the performance. "We did better than this in high school."

You said it must have been an interesting high school.

She asked if you wanted to leave, and you said, "No," and pointed to the next piece on the program, which was an "exploration of the modern experience of loss, alienation and despair."

She said, "Why?"

And you said, "I'm a Red Sox fan."

She shook her soda can and chased you up the stairs with her finger on the pop top.

The harbinger of despair was a small, barefoot woman nearly swallowed up in white gauze. The piece was called "Event Complex #11," and you don't remember it at all. It may have been the one your lover said was too New Age.

The program lists three more. A piece called "Quadrants," described in refreshing technical jargon as "a rich texture of pulsation, phase scaling, heterodyning, vibrato and tremolo." Another, called "Death of the Unicorn" was a "deconstruction of Berlioz 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.'" Of those two you recall only your shock that your lover didn't know the Berlioz. She'd heard of it, she insisted, she'd just never *heard* it.

In the margin of the program is a phone number in her handwriting. You don't know whose it was, but even now, you want

to. She had a lot of male friends, and you could not contain your jealousy.

You go out onto the deck among the hundreds of glittering beads left by the rain. You shake the water out of the plastic cover and drape it over the grill so your wife will not know you forgot. There are birds again and the rich smell of wet grass and the clatter of a wood chipper your neighbor is using to get rid of the branches. All of this would have been impossible with her.

She was a performer. In everything she did there was drama—she ate no meat but fish, paid her bills in person, talked through movies. That was why, after twenty-two months, she left (your wife thinks you were the one who walked out): she said you had no life, you just lived. When she broke it off, you were relieved, though there was that day security at Juilliard had to escort you out of her building. You had grown to resent the strange demands and even stranger freedoms of her life as a musician. You wanted someone on the same wavelength, which, she had once pointed out, was a very male way of looking at love: as if it were a mechanical exchange, transmission and reception.

Even after the breakup she would call, and you would spend hours on the phone.

Eventually, you fled cross country to a bank in San Francisco, where over several years you had affairs with a number of women who claimed to be artists. Only when she left Manhattan for a provincial symphony in France did you return, not to New York but to Boston, where you met at your tenth high school reunion a woman who had to remind you that she'd once gone out with you, who played the piano in church and liked Garth Brooks and was divorced from a college professor who had seduced her when she was nineteen. So you married and embraced a love that does not require pain or desperation. You are happy to have found it, and happy that it did not come any sooner.

You pick up the program from the table. At the bottom, the right-hand side has been torn away, as if someone needed a slip of paper. "A Dream of L..." it says, and you assume it must have

been love, though it could just as easily have been laundry or lungfish. The fragments of sentences below have mostly to do with the materials used as instruments; the word “discarded” appears twice.

Of this last composition you have a very clear memory. It is one of those scenes, like the dabbing of your hair with the bottom of her shirt or her appearance at your door in slippers, which have come to stand for the whole relationship. The performers entered like a ragtag choral procession, fighting oversized scores that swooned like Italian sopranos. They settled themselves behind the racks of homely instruments, shifting places as if they weren't sure where they were supposed to be. Her friend the director began by rolling a thunder sheet, then a kalimba set a rather conventional syncopation; the drunk tried to rattle a hanging saw-blade with his drumstick, but the blade kept jumping away from him; a set of keys entered followed by three upturned mixing bowls; finally, Ms. Gauze in heavy workman's gloves massaged a succession of aluminum pipes cut to harmonic lengths. It was a clown show, and for all their posturing the performers seemed to recognize the fact. They smiled at one another. The drunk grabbed his saw blade, held it at arm's length and spanked it; Ms. Gauze fixed dreamy eyes on the director and drew from the longest pipe a series of throaty moans. The children in the audience laughed out loud.

With a toll of the Chinese gong, the piece ended. The crowd broke into applause and so did you, far more enthusiastically than your lover. “I liked that,” you said, justifying the difference.

She kissed you on the lips. “You would.”

The crowd had risen to congratulate the performers, and she went off in search of her friend, leaving you amongst the homely instruments, once again reduced to scrap. You riffled the keys, pinged the saw blade with your fingernail; no one paid any attention. You lifted the bean rattle, shook it, plucked the spines of the now voiceless cacti, bumped the gong gently with your shoe. A little girl tried to join you but was restrained by her mother.

You tried on the work gloves and discovered their secret—a resin, more gritty than sticky—and for a few blissful moments

you occupied yourself doodling your favorite melodies on the aluminum pipes. Only when the musicians began to gather up their wares did you retreat into the remaining crowd. The old man in the dashiki glared at you as if he'd caught you plucking his Strad.

Surrounded by women, young and old, the director held your lover's hand in both of his the way a child traps a firefly. He murmured and the women leaned in to hear, but when you approached, he became expansive, asked what you had learned. Caught off guard, you delivered yourself of an insight you had been saving for her.

"I'd rather play it than listen to it."

"Ah, a philosopher!" he sighed and patted her hand, which she extricated gently.

Neither of you said anything in the corridor. At the elevator, she embraced you from behind in a way that made you glad you were wearing jeans. An older couple, also waiting, paid careful attention to the door.

Outside, a rain shower had come and gone, purging the sky of smog and leaving an almost antiseptic sharpness in the air. Your two shadows in the failing sun stretched out ahead as if the future went on forever, and as you walked arm-in-arm you bumped hips in syncopation.

You go into the living room, which is usually off-limits since your wife uses it to show guests what her house might look like if she lived alone, and there search the bookshelves for a place to hide this relic. You choose a hardback copy of *Tom Jones*, not because your lover in any way resembled the beautiful Sophia but because it is a book you might conceivably read again and you like the idea of some day, years from now, opening it and discovering the program.

No, you don't want her back, not really—lost loves should stay lost—but you are grateful, and in love, gratitude, you suspect, may be more powerful than desire. Because of her, you listen to the intermittent hum of insects, the wash of passing cars, the distant quarrels of dogs and children. You take long walks, not for

the exercise as your wife believes but to construct from such incidental music makeshift suites that often cause you to laugh out loud. And when you go to baseball games, you sit in the grandstand with the kids and the drunks, the tattooed and painted, the loud, rude self-appointed experts who cheer or groan at every pitch—the real fans.

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