

Richard Spilman

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.

