

Strings Attached

The grainy video on my laptop screen fails current HD standards. If iPod cameras were revelatory in 2012, now they're only relics. Still, I've endured this performance before and I know the clip's audio resolution is accurate – too accurate. I also know the faltering teenager onstage could have been beautiful if she'd attempted even a little elegance that night. She hasn't. She's pinned her wavy, chestnut hair apologetically behind one ear, although her signature concert bun usually balanced pristinely atop her head. I'm positive she grasps her antiquated world still bows to the Old White Male, and I even remember her alabaster skin and ballerina figure used to garner her extra favor. So why are these clothes a size too big?

She jerks at the neckline of her saggy grey shirt before raising violin and lowering bow to string. The girl can't even bring herself to glance at the audience. She appears resigned to some inevitable doom – even if faint lines around her jaw signal some resistance. Her unpowdered face is already slow-cooking under the stage lights. My stomach clinches and I inhale slowly, attempting some objectivity. “Keep an open mind,” I beg myself. “She's just one more freshman performing in one more conservatory recital.” After all, I've dredged up this video to solve a mystery that's haunted me since the night she performed. But I still don't want to endure my – our – impending torture. Or maybe I can't. I contemplate YouTubing a video of my favorite artist playing this *Ballade*, then realize I'm so distracted that I've missed over a minute of the girl's performance.

As much as I despise myself for doing it, I pause the video and drag the cursor back to where I must have stopped listening. “Besides,” I remonstrate. “You don't even *really* remember what happened, do you?” But when I press “play,” I can't physically hear any music. “Listen, listen, LISTEN!” I order myself. Snatches of phrases emerge, even seconds of sensitivity and

flashes of fire, but an internal adjudicator squelches most of them, just like it drowns out many of my own old recordings, even the good ones: “*Too slow!*” Extra speed would give her *Ballade* some chance at a climax. “*Not clean!*” Fuzzy notes often interrupt runs that should sparkle. “*What a disappointing, unpolished performance.*” I glance at the video’s time stamp. Poor girl – she still has five eternal minutes left. Her body looks defensive and scorched under the inexorable lights.

I know the girl wasn’t punished for this performance, and I grasp at something, anything to explain why. She was a violin major at the Eastman School of Music, Juilliard’s rival. Eastman students didn’t make this many audible mistakes with impunity. Suddenly I remember something my own professor once told me. “You know, it’s not so much the mistakes that bother me. It’s what someone does right after the mistakes. That means something.” Well, this girl certainly fights through the next complex melody, the next troublesome passage, whether or not her fingers fumbled right before it. Something must be driving her. I just wish I knew what it was.

It was the final lesson of my own freshman semester at Eastman, and I was grinning like a toddler as my left hand ghost-fingered a concerto on the neck of my violin. My professor and I always faced each other squarely during my lessons in his office. I’d be balancing asymmetrically, most of my weight slung on my left foot, mimicking “performance stance” as long as the instrument was in my hands. Mr. Castleman would be fidgeting in his cherrywood rocker, curly grey head nodding in time with the music. Occasionally he might snatch his violin

from a dilapidated card table to demonstrate a passage, but he disliked showing. He preferred discussing ideas and letting me synthesize my own solutions.

Perhaps my ability to create music from thought catalyzed what I considered an inexplicable relationship. Even at the Eastman School of Music – which had just outranked Juilliard for the third year in a row – Mr. Castleman and I prized intellect over the virtuosic pageantry most students exuded. He ignored their posturing because, as the school’s top violin teacher, he selected a couple of freshmen once a year and that decision was final. I ignored the exhibition to avoid inserting myself where my classmates – the US kids who won national competitions, and the foreign ones who’d moved to the States just to attend the school – insinuated I would fail. My old violin teachers might have insisted that innate musicality and work ethic could equalize the prohibitively expensive world of rising artists, but freshman orientation at Eastman convinced me otherwise.

Two girls were framing my doorway when I got back to my room halfway through the “Meet Your Studio Mates” ice cream social. Part of me was disappointed there weren’t any other “Castleman Freshmen” picking through the sundae toppings, but most of me was relieved. It had barely been 72 hours since our scuffed red Camry turned left and vanished at the end of Gibbs Street, but I was already sick of my classmates’ invasive questions: “What does your father do?” (*Nothing...I mean, not right now at least...he’s looking for a job*). “Where are you from?” (*Georgia...I guess technically I live in Wisconsin...we kind of move around a lot*). “Who was your high school violin teacher?” (*Do you know who Stephanie Andersen is? Oh. Well, she’s really great*).

I'd exited the social as soon as I'd confirmed there were no "Studio Mates" to meet, only to find these girls lounging on either side of my door. One was taller than me, with the sort of unattainably glowing skin and ebony curls that would make an excellent magazine cover. Her friend was also pretty, but in a more manageable way. I thought she might be Chinese.

"You must be Grace?" Tall Girl raised one eyebrow. Something about the eyebrow was not encouraging.

"Um...yeah," I faltered. "I'm sorry, were you guys waiting on me or something?"

"Oh, not long. We just wanted to say hi. We're your new *studio mates*." Tall Girl's friend smiled. I hoped she was trying to be friendly.

"Funny how we missed each other at the social!" I was positive we had not missed each other. Silent stares followed me into my room as I kicked open the door and flipped on the lights. "Well, do you want to come in for a minute? How did you get into Eastman? I think that's what we were supposed to talk about..."

The two girls marched through my door in unison, temporarily blocking out the hallway light.

"I'm Rochelle," said Tall Girl.

"And I'm Trina." Trina seemed to be the sidekick.

"We've known Charlie for *years*," Rochelle continued. "Like, my parents paid for me to have extra lessons with him all through high school, and I've gotten to play in his studio class, like, a lot."

"Yeah. Me too!" I wondered if Trina was capable of original thought.

“Plus, Trina and I have known each other for years.” Rochelle narrowed her tone. “So the real question is...how did *you* get in here? Did you study with Charlie or something? Cuz I don’t remember seeing you around.”

I shoved my violin case under the bed with my foot and tried to act casual. “Haha, well, ‘study’ is kind of a strong word, but...I got a scholarship to attend Mr. Castleman’s summer program last year.” One look at their faces exposed my mistakes. I’d just revealed my family couldn’t afford multiple violin teachers – much less Mr. Castleman’s premium fee. And I was traditional enough to call him “Mr. Castleman.” True, I already knew from my summer experience that other students called him “Charlie,” but I couldn’t shake my good Southern upbringing.

“Really?” Rochelle yawned. “You’re *so* cute.”

This feigned exhaustion invigorated Trina enough to conclude the interview on her own. “Adorable! Well, just wanted to let you know how much we *love* Charlie and all the years we’ve already spent working with him. Hopefully things turn out okay for you in studio class, *Gracie...*” I tried not to hear the giggles trailing after them down the hallway.

My make-it-or-break-it audition story might be inspiring on the Hallmark channel, but apparently it was going to be a social death sentence at Eastman. After that, I was too self-conscious of my rural high school resume to comprehend how I’d been accepted to the school at all, much less to Mr. Castleman’s studio.

Yet somehow I’d reached the final lesson of my first semester. Mr. Castleman was rocking in his chair, gnarled fingers drumming like usual, frustratingly oblivious to my

exuberance. After all, I'd been in his office only a couple of weeks ago sobbing over my scholarship. My dad had been unemployed for eight months now, and although I was working at night instead of practicing, I'd just submitted my withdrawal paperwork.

"And how are you today?" Mr. Castleman was clearly not going to investigate my mood swing. He was already checking his "cordial" box so he could proceed to the "make student play repertoire" box.

"I'm GREAT!" I exploded. "I don't know how it happened, but I'm – I'm not leaving. This lady from Financial Aid called me all mysteriously and made me come to the office yesterday and.... Well, I thought it was to sign more withdrawal forms, but it turns out they found someone to sponsor me for the rest of my degree. Except I had to sign this nondisclosure thing since apparently it was top secret or something. She said no one gets more than 60% here, ever?" I paused, waiting for him to confirm or deny. He would know, since he'd culled Eastman's top players for decades.

"Very true." Mr. Castleman still seemed nonplussed by my reversal. Considering he'd selected my underwhelming self over hundreds of what I fantasized were more dazzling candidates, I'd expected him to be relieved he wasn't losing his investment. Perhaps he'd been counting on my withdrawal to make room for one of those *real* prodigies. Perhaps my "wonderful news" wasn't wonderful to him at all. My eyes scanned the room for a distraction from this dismal supposition, finally landing on his crimson and black "WWND?" sign. "What Would a Ninja Do?" What *would* a ninja do right now? I drew a blank.

"Of course you're staying." He jerked his shoulders and grinned.

"*What?*" My left hand stopped ghosting the concerto on the violin.

“I went to the Dean and told him he couldn’t let you go. Now about January. What do you think of Ysaÿe’s *Ballade*?” Mr. Castleman was not a proponent of emotional displays.

I hoped a cough would buy enough time to switch topics as adeptly as my professor could. But his topic required more than one cough. As much as I loved the *Ballade*, I’d only heard of graduate students attempting it. I was eighteen. If this was my Christmas break assignment, I’d be learning it with a practice mute in a hotel room – which was less than ideal for tackling any kind of music. My family had finally found a promising job lead in California, but that meant we were currently houseless as well as jobless.

Our embarrassing finances might be common knowledge, but I wasn’t about to debut the hotel unless I was sure it meant failing Mr. Castleman’s assignment. I sped through the probability of learning the *Ballade* with a mute:

Pitch: hard to check since the strings wouldn’t ring, but not impossible

Bow control: fine if I relied on sensation, but would distract from checking pitch

Phrasing: difficult

Sound quality: impossible

My odds were unlikely given the finesse he’d expect at our January studio recital. I’d have to develop the piece’s phrasing and sound quality – its most critical components – entirely through mental practice unless my family found a house during break, and Mom had just left a message lamenting California’s overpriced real estate.

“Are you – are you sure? I don’t exactly have anywhere to practice.” I still couldn’t bring myself to spell out the hotel situation.

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

Would I? I wished I knew what made him so sure. I also wished I knew what made me worth so much.

Mr. Castleman's office was stifling. The August humidity had soaked his Hawaiian print polo and plastered my left hand to my violin, prohibiting me from detaching and wiping it on my jeans. My mind migrated from our conversation to ponder just how long Eastman's administration could ignore the dilapidated offices that crowned the donors' aerated marble lobby.

"So how did you like Catherine?" Mr. Castleman had whizzed over to a bulging music shelf and was unsuccessfully attempting to flip through a book of etudes. He seemed immune to the humidity, unlike myself – or his sheet music.

I dragged my thoughts back to my impending doom and cleared my throat. "Well, to be honest...we didn't exactly get along." I'd already discarded studio protocol by skipping summer music festivals to visit my family in California. Now I was complaining about the concertmaster of the Recording Arts Orchestra – the orchestra that recorded soundtracks for all Sony Picture films. In a sweeping gesture of forgiveness for my not following "the rules," Mr. Castleman had convinced her to meet with me, maybe even mentor me over the summer. And here I stood in his office the week before school started, sweating profusely and reporting my mentor wasn't a good fit. My own worthlessness suddenly blanketed me more closely than the dripping Upstate New York heat.

"You see, she said she left her husband and kids because they were getting in the way of her recording schedule," I faltered. "I think she even went like two weeks without seeing her kids

one time while she *was* married.” Hopefully these details were helping my case. Mr. Castleman knew I’d skipped summer festivals specifically to see my family.

He shrugged and dropped into his chair, still fidgeting with the sticky etude book. For a seventy-three-year-old man who exuded roughly triple the energy of my nineteen-year-old self, I never comprehended why he taught from a rocker.

“I had a student one time who got married. Big mistake. It ruined her career.”

I cringed. Had he selected my “mentor” to mend what he considered a debilitating flaw? I was painfully conscious of what I owed him after my scholarship. The least I could do was make a decent name for myself. But did that require walking out on my family? There were some prices I just wasn’t willing to pay – not even for my violin, not even for him.

“Well, and there was one other thing.” No matter where we stood on my first objection, I was certain this one would be incontestable.

“Which was?”

“I want to end up in California because of my...umm...family. I mean – ” I rushed to compensate for my lapse. “ – I’m fine with touring, but something like her recording job would be great when I’m ready to settle down...*eventually*, that is.”

“And?”

“She basically said there was no way I could get a job, even coming from Eastman. She said the market’s too competitive, and I didn’t look like I had what it took.” Now it was my turn to fidget, inducing a cough-worthy cloud of musk from the shag carpet. “And you know, she’s probably right. I mean, if you think about all the people coming out of here and Juilliard, that’s a lot of people, not to mention the pros who’ve been around forever. And who am I kidding about touring with a chamber group *first*?” I accelerated as I began reciting the incompetence I’d

internalized from my mother during high school. “I don’t exactly have perfect technique. And I can’t even afford a fancy violin. Basically, there’s a ton of people out there who sound better than me.” My stomach convulsed as I flashed back to the *Ballade*. Mr. Castleman finally tossed the etude book next to his violin on the card table, only to keep fiddling with his hands in his lap. ADHD wasn’t acknowledged when he was young, otherwise I was sure he would have been diagnosed.

“Did she hear you play?”

“Well...no.”

“First, good people always find jobs. And good people don’t need fancy instruments to find them. So forget about that. Second, when people get here, I already have a plan for them. I know how good they are, what I’ll do with them, and how far they’ll go after they graduate. But with you, I don’t know. I had a plan when you showed up last year, but with how you’ve been improving over the past few months, I really have no idea.”

“Oh. Umm...well...thank you?”

Direct compliments from Mr. Castleman were rare. I’ve never received them skillfully from anyone, but praise from the man who’d coached most of the nation’s top violinists made me feel like an alien.

“Now show me your Paganini Caprice.”

His omniscient eye had pinpointed what I could not: something that made me worthwhile, even when I fumbled through the *Ballade*, even when I flouted his rules in spite of my scholarship. That Caprice was technically as prohibitive as the *Ballade* had been. But this year my hands were strong enough to finish well – sticky fingers and all.

My left hand lies twisted in a knot of silenced nerves that my brain does not recognize. It's been barely three weeks since a car careened into me as I crossed the street on my way to the first concert on my frenetic Christmas schedule, but I've already become an expert at tracking this ghost limb so I don't roll on it, damage it further.

"I have something to tell you."

Dad lowers himself into the blue vinyl chair beside my hospital bed. Neither the Riverside ICU nor this Orange County rehab hospital have been ideal for his oversized frame, and the chair squeaks while he adjusts his legs. "I figured I'd let you know before I tell Mom or Ivan." He sighs. "Mom will probably be upset."

"What?" I should act more interested, but I can't stop staring at the claw slung over my bed sheet. Doctors, nurses – even my own family – seem intent on coddling me with noncommittal allusions to my injuries: shattered legs, two strokes, a traumatic brain injury. At this point I'm desperate for a fresh voice to detail some realistic implications, even if those implications are crushing.

"I emailed Mr. Castleman last night."

"*What?*" Suddenly Dad has my full attention. "Why in the world would you do something like that?"

"Don't you think he'd want to know? Just a few days ago we didn't know if you'd wake up. You're a person, not just a violinist."

"Really, Dad. I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to hear from the father of the girl who left school to be with her family. And then got *married*." My recent months are a disorienting void, but my final year at Eastman flashes into focus like I flew home yesterday: Skipping summer festivals yet again. Winning the concertmaster audition for the Eastman Symphony Orchestra.

Trying to ignore classmates who were substituting professional orchestra residencies for holiday breaks. Sobbing uncontrollably as I handed the flight attendant my one-way ticket from Rochester to LAX.

My eyes drift back to the grotesque left hand postured near my chest. “Why would Mr. Castleman possibly care about me now?”

Dad smiles and runs his hand over his head. He’s been losing hair ever since I was little, but I’ve never thought of him as bald. Now the gesture highlights just how much is gone.

“Like I said, you’re a person, not just a violinist. Besides, moving back to California and marrying Ivan didn’t mean you quit, did it? Think about everything you’ve been doing since you came back.” I stare through him, probing for any hint of who I’ve become. Finally I shake my head.

“It must be the brain injury.” He tries to sound casual. “Well, you teach violin lessons for one thing. And you play chamber music in Orange County. You’re about to audition for the Pacific Symphony. Don’t you remember soloing with that orchestra in Riverside?” Faces and phrases begin to materialize, but a familiar, accusing voice assures me they’re not enough.

“It’s just that this – this wasn’t what *he* wanted for me. He wanted me to go national. Plus, my career might really be over now.” I wonder if Dad’s forgotten that the violin is a left-handed instrument.

“Mr. Castleman is a very smart man, and he’s got to know how much you love your violin. I doubt he ever thought you’d dumped your career. And as for that hand –“ Dad gestures to the twisted mess I’ve been staring at compulsively for the last half hour – “We don’t know the end of that story yet.”

“I guess.” I don’t bother clarifying which part I mean. I’m not even sure if I know, myself.

Two weeks later, a Facebook message is loitering in my inbox when I open my laptop one-handed for the first time. I’m not sure how long it’s been waiting, but I recognize the abrupt tone and sparse punctuation almost before I note the sender:

“A former student Margaret Tang, had a similar experience to yours several years ago. She recovered from a long coma to no feeling to the point that she now is a member of the Tucson Symphony!”

I squint at the screen for several minutes, trying to decode what I’ve just read. Could it be that Mr. Castleman really cares about me? Or is this just a pity message for another failed student, like the married student he’d warned me about that sticky afternoon in Rochester? Even the brain injury hasn’t erased my hardwired anxiety.

The injury might have introduced a rival, though. An alien voice suggests getting a second opinion before I embrace my own worthlessness, and I shove the computer toward Dad when he pulls back my curtain later that afternoon.

“Look at this! I guess you were right after all.”

“Well, you’re not *just* a violinist.” At least Dad takes the Facebook message at face-value.

“But all these details match my accident so closely – did you write him some sort of hyper-dramatic sob story or something? And he seems pretty familiar with everything that’s been going on, like even what I’d been doing before the accident.”

Dad shrugs. “I just gave the bare minimum, but Ivan’s been tagging you in all his Facebook updates. And it wouldn’t be hard for Mr. Castleman to guess what you’ve been up to after you left, given the kind of person you are. Or what you might still do now. Like I said, your professor is a very smart man.”

The doctor poised beside my hospital bed is answering my family’s litany of “important” questions before I’m discharged the following month: recovery timeline, walking prognosis, my traumatic brain injury. “Well, that about does it,” she says in her flat, Orange County accent.

“Wait!” I gesture with my right hand, which works just fine, indicating the twisted claw that’s still thrown uselessly across my lap.

“My left hand – I’m going to get feeling and movement back, right?”

She sighs. “Hard to say, Grace. Hard to say.”

That’s what all the doctors say for three months, then six months, then nine months.

Finally they say “No.”

But one day I open my violin case anyway. Hasn’t my left hand always listened to me?

This time it says “No.”

First it says “No” to concertos.

Then it says “No” to etudes.

Finally it says “No” to scales.

But I still have my violin. It lurks in my closet, three yards from my bed, haunting my days and often my dreams. I’m usually too terrified to open the case, touch the instrument, coax

something, anything, out of it with my frozen fingers. But there are other days when I have no choice. Days when the teacher I loved and the music still stuffing my shelves force me to drag the case from the shadows – no matter how much I detest the sounds I produce, no matter how clearly I hear the concertos that once flowed so easily. It's in those moments I think I understand the girl in the video. I think she was fighting through the *Ballade* because she loved the instrument. Maybe that's what set her apart. Maybe that's why she, why I, was worth forgiving.