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PAVANE FOR A DEAD PRINCESS

I THINK OF THAT TIME, BEFORE EVERYTHING GOT CRAZY, and I see Missy Ha like she was then: nineteen with a heart-shaped face, teeth like fine china, and a little girl's giggle for something she knew that you didn't. Other girls tried so hard to make themselves look cute. Missy was pretty just because. And in that smile that stayed in those chinky eyes, you thought you might see something better in yourself.

They were Koreans, her family, with a carry-out up the hill. You'd see their neon wok throwing off samurai blades of sunshine, blinking out the words *Democratic Best* before you even got there. The Has, most of them anyway, lived in the neighborhood, either above the store or next door. When you stepped up to order your food, the Has weren't hiding behind some plexiglass cocoon, buzzing their own in and out. They took your order like real people. Face to face, talking about whatever — the sewer grate at the curb puffing rotten eggs again, or how nobody's giving Obama a chance, or that crazy *2012* movie that had some people so shook you couldn't tell them it was made up.

Summers, the Has hosed off their front sidewalks and eased hustlers off their corners and chilled outside on the sidewalk, reading Korean newspapers, oohing and aahing over someone's new baby and always tidying their roses. The Has did a lot for those roses: gave 'em bone meal and lime, spritz from a mister, nailed little wooden slats into the brick to help them climb, then talked those vines halfway up the front of the house.

Every June they hosted a block party where they cooked out for the whole neighborhood: hamburgers, hotdogs, lemons stuck through with peppermint sticks, and even short ribs if you went early enough. You'd smell the charcoal meat for blocks and you knew it was summer. In the fall, Sundays especially, they represented in purple Ravens jerseys, just like a lot of people. The one they call Unc, with the spiky hair, might even cross the street and take a rip of whatever was going around — Henny or Grey Goose — and then lose a few dollars playing spades in his checkered-trim chef's shirt. Everyone liked the Has. They were good people, like I said, real people.

But none of what I've told here meant they wanted Missy mixing with the customers. And that's what I was, a customer. Regular enough they even called me by my favorite order: Number Five, for the 'picy yakami.

Everything changed after Ma Ha caught Missy showing me her book of drawings. We were low on the back steps, and the big spiral lay in my lap. She kept reaching across my side to flip the pages, embarrassed for me to look too hard. My heart jumped each time she pressed against me, snug.

Missy's drawings were wild. They were on thick paper in this giant spiral, some in rubbed charcoal, others she'd painted freehand in peaches and grays that had crinkled the edges. Lines might be twine-thin or much bolder. The people in them wore open leather vests, mesh garters, push-ups, bustiers. A couple of the chicks even had their titties out.

Jealousy's a nasty feeling — starts eating you up even when it's got no call. And I could feel my face getting hot because you wouldn't think Missy was that kind of girl.

She saw my pinched eyes and flipped the page. But the next page was just as crowded with half-naked people.

I took off my baseball cap and stroked my hair forward. "What kind of parties you been going to?"

She cringed, scrunching up her shoulders, then palmed back a giggle.

"Something funny?" I asked.

All of the smothered laughter just went into her eyes.

I was about to say something really crude. "Whatever."

She rocked forward, caught herself and came up laughing. "They're not real, Bahia."

I rapped a knuckle on the page. "They must've came from somewhere."

"Relax," she said, her smile fading. "They're only in my head."

The kitchen fan was softly venting out, its blades a ghosty-whirl of sooty vinegar blowing through the alley.

"Don't you believe me?" she asked.

"They don't look like nobody's strangers to me." I started redoing the laces on my tennis shoes. "They look real. Like true blue people."

"No, sweetie." She slipped a gentle hand behind my neck. "It's art."

"Art?"

"Yes," she said. "Made up."

"Oh," I said, unsure if this made it better. Then, turning a page, I realized there *was* something off in the way she'd drawn these people, some faraway look in their faces, like how manikins got their feelings missing.

"But these kinda dirty, aren't they?" I asked.

"Like obscene?"

"Like someone might think you easy-peazy."

She dropped her eyes and looked away. "Just 'cause I'm always inside doesn't mean I'm boring."

I turned another page, starting to feel dumb for getting heated. "Why do you draw this stuff anyway?"

She did not answer right away. "I shouldn't have brought them out here."

We were quiet and it's hard to explain because it's been a while now, but I still wonder about those pictures and the sad feeling they gave off and what those lost, oval faces were looking for.

Then Ma Ha stepped out, cracked an old mop handle against the iron railing and called sharply in Korean. I felt then like she'd been watching us. Missy yanked away the spiral, slammed it shut, and popped up. Clanging up those metal stairs to go inside, Missy's legs sounded heavy and her head was down and Ma Ha was just standing there, giving me the stink eye.

Like Missy, Ma Ha had been pretty once too. You could tell. But now Ma Ha's cheeks drooped and her dark eyes rested in little bowls of purple. You got the feeling she was mad at Missy for rocking what she'd lost.

Well, after that, whenever I came around, something caught in Ma Ha's face soon as she saw me. And I just knew she was downing me inside her head. I'd be thinking: *Is you looking at me sideways or is that just your pan face?* Whatever it was, Ma Ha made sure to shoo Missy away to sweep up the back or grumbled for more ice and Ma Ha, or maybe Unc, would finish my order like they were trying to hurt someone before hurrying me out. Sometimes the food wasn't even cooked right.

Two days before everything got crazy, we sat on a low stone wall at the playground. I'd swung past Democratic Best after work. We'd set it up so that, when she could,

Missy would follow me down there after I got my order. At the jungle gym, little kids played at monkey bars or sat pretzel-style counting off some clapping game.

"Took you long enough," I said.

She lit a cigarette and took a long pull. "I had to wait for my mom to go next door."

"Why they like that?" I asked, opening my Styrofoam tray of food.

"I don't usually talk to boys around here."

"So?"

"They don't want me to make a mistake."

"Who they want you to talk to?"

She punched out a short, disgusted breath. "A Korean realtor."

My eyes rested on her mouth where her top lip was bell-shaped. Her hair, inky and shiny, was swept up in a bun, stuck through with two orange pencils. Little wisps hung down and every so often she'd brush them back from her cheeks.

Missy hadn't gone to a zone school — Patterson or Lake — like everyone else around there. Her parents had paid for one of those private schools where the girls wore plaid skirts and rode a cheese bus that came right to their house. In the afternoon, her father used to be at the curb, ready to chaperone Missy those twenty feet to the door.

"So I guess they're not giving me no chance?" I asked.

"Probably not." She bumped her shoulder against mine. "You are not Korean or a realtor."

I wheeled my fork in slow turns through the fried rice and then closed the container for later. I don't like to eat mad. Sits on my stomach wrong. "Well," I said, "it's not like I'm one of these hoodlums that's always cussing or feels some need to act out." I plucked up the front of my zebra work shirt. "I keep a job. I even watch the history channel."

Missy wagged a finger, imitating her mother, "*Rose not like fungus. Make a problem.*"

"Yeah, what's she say about keeping you back there in a dirty apron, chopping onion all day?"

She shrugged and passed me a small, white paper bag she'd smuggled out. It was a cookie, pebbled with chocolate chips. I set it with the other food.

"You're too pretty to be in a apron, anyway," I said.

"She doesn't think like that."

Other girls I talked to, I held back compliments 'cause it got their heads too big and then they'd want the world, but Missy, she wasn't like that. "She oughta," I said. "Because, one day, someone's gonna put you on a magazine."

She dropped her eyes and smiled shyly.

"What?" I said. "That's what they do with pretty girls like you."

We were quiet, and I sipped my half-and-half.

"You'd have to know my parents to understand," she said.

"Don't I?" I asked. "I been eating their food half my life."

"That's the store," she said. "Home, *inside*, is different."

The Has were so far up Missy's business, she had to cook up some wild lies before they'd let her out to the movies with me: that I didn't like girls, tutored kids at the chum bucket, stayed in church Sundays, that I'd be starting college for accounting soon, and that we'd be meeting old friends of hers from school at the theater.

About noon that day, I got on the phone with Missy to hook everything up: fajitas at The Can Can downtown. Then to that new Transformers movie. Popcorn. Sprites. Those little Jujubes I know she likes. Soon as we hung up, I started cleaning — a girl like Missy would expect a sanitary toilet if we came back to my place after. And I was so amped-up that, in between sweeping and scrubbing, I knocked out fat sets of push-ups and crunches.

I can look like a pretty-boy when I want and that night, I made sure I was looking fresh — proper-like too. When I got up to Missy's, I had on a sky-blue, Polo button-down, flat-front, cream khakis looped with a shiny black belt, and gray Pumas right from the box. I also thought that maybe some of the fellas around the way would see us crossing the park and, pretty as Missy was, I liked the idea of that.

Missy had told me to wait out front, she'd be looking out for me. I'd been out there less than a minute when a dude came bopping up the block. When he got close, he stopped, snapped his fingers, and said, "Say, ain't I seen you at Foot Locker?" I couldn't place his face, but I didn't think anything of it, told him yeah.

"Bet," he said, happy for nothing. "I knew I knew you."

I was quiet.

"You working this weekend? 'Cause I'm trying to get that employee discount."

I was like, "Nah, bruh. Can't do it."

"Ain't those new Jordans about to drop?"

"Saturday," I said. "They gonna be tight."

"What — baby blue and silver?"

"Blue and silver or red and black. Take your pick."

"So what's up?"

"Wish I could help you out." I cut a glance up at Missy's windows.

Dude caught a real attitude. "That's petty, man."

"Hey, I'll never make manager giving the hot flavors away."

"Bet you don't tell your peoples that when they come up there."

"My peoples don't come up there," I said. "And if they did, it wouldn't be with their hands out."

He squared himself, close enough now that on his stone face I could smell the sour-medi he'd been smoking. "You a damn lie," he said. "And I didn't ask you all that."

In a minute, Missy would be stepping out looking amazing, probably wearing those skinny jeans and a white halter, and we'd be on our way to those good steak fajitas and this dude wouldn't have no one to jaw at and would've just bounced. But looking in dude's eyes, I could see that this Stone Face wasn't going nowhere. I might look funny, might have a funny name, but I can handle myself anywhere. People used to say I favor Vin Diesel, and I guess I do a little. 'Cept my eyes are like two full moons and my people are all from another side of the world: a father in Brazil and a Canadian mother — one of those white girls that used to lock down her hair in corn rows so tight you knew she was wacky bats. If I grew out my hair, you'd see these countries in me. Plus, I'd rather listen to Wy Clef or Santana or even Adele than any of these phony gangstas on 92Q rapping about how they're the realest cat they know. Call me what you want: I'm a green-eyed, red-boned, bull. Showtime if you want it.

"Do I know you, bruh?" I asked. In my head I was trying to figure out how I can do this and keep my clothes clean, so when I hit him, I was punching a hole in the sky to square this whole thing up front.

But that's not how it went. He was quick and I barely caught him and when he swung there was a cork screw squeezed into his fist, which he socked through my

Painting by Richard Vyse

cheek piston-quick. I knew at once he'd hurt me because I felt that metal on my tongue. Then I was like, if I'm going to John Hopkins, he's going to John Hopkins

Fast, it was all happening so fast. But I stayed cool and got in close. We were tussling in the Has' rose bushes and then he was under me and I knew I had him and that he would have to deal with how I dug up in him. Thorns like barbed wire raked hell out of my neck and arms, but I did not feel them till later. When Missy came out and saw me and dude in the roses, both of us messed up, she started screaming, *No! No! No!*, kind of fanning her hands like a bird too hurt to fly. I felt her tugging on my belt, trying to pull me up, and I let her.

I don't remember climbing those steps. But inside the Has' house, I worried dude would be getting up, and following us in, so I put my shoulder into that door and turned the lock myself. With my back pressed against the jamb, I stood sucking air. The house smelled like cooked cabbage and Lemon Fresh Pledge. I guess I looked bad because when Missy turned and saw me — *really saw me* — she hid her face in her hands.

Down the hall she yanked me. On the bright hardwood floors my face trailed red pennies. A lacquered table with little ivory turtles and a brass dragon swam at me. The Has' home, I realized, was different from other houses nearby, or even the dingy carry-out next door. Because I'd run through a bunch of girls round there and the Has' house didn't look nothing like those jacked-up dumps.

She turned me into a bathroom, and I felt my face being guided into running water. The white sink bowl went winey dark. I peeked up and noticed then that she'd gotten her hair done — it was straight and shiny with gold highlights, parted on the side under a butterfly beret — and she was wearing this candy cane mini-skirt and platform sandals and her long legs, olive and smooth, looked so primo I could've died right there. In the mirror she was biting her lower lip to quit from crying. A wave of hurt worse than my mouth ran through me. I dunked my face under the faucet and rinsed out grainy bits of broken tooth. I checked the mirror again and saw a Halloween mask staring back. My good clothes were soaked through, destroyed. Blood pooled under my tongue. I had to work from swallowing it. I spat and sucked more tap and swished it around, and it was then that I realized that I was steady losing sink water straight out my cheek.

This fool had really gone and messed me up.

I swore and spat again. Blinking away some drops, I turned to Missy. "You look amazing," I told her. But it wasn't Missy anymore standing in the doorway. It was Ma Ha, her mouth cranked open like a stuck Pez dispenser. She was locked in on something near my shirt collar. She swallowed a wounded grunt — *Oh!* — that was full of pain and humiliation. Slowly, very slowly, she reached and picked something off my shoulder. Her face froze as she held it up to the light: a crinkled white rose petal, all oily with blood.

Out of Ma Ha's crumpled face came a shriek more animal than woman. None of it was English, but it was still annoying. I waved her away and tugged the bathroom

door closed because I like a little privacy when I'm watching sink water spout from my cheek like one of those lawn statues you see outside Home Depot.

The next time the door opened, it was the police.

I was eight days in bookings.

People say that when you're first dropped in that bullpen you better find somebody you know and dap 'em up, let these hoods see you cool with somebody. But the blank faces just stared and gave way like they'd never seen someone left back by the meat wagon. A path opened to a corner, and I eased through and slid down in it.

On the second day, before I got my stall, they took me to the little infirmary. The nurse was tired and should've already been home by the time she got to me, and she threaded my stitches like the hurry she was in. I could feel my cheek wrung tight. Much later, even after I'd gotten used to it, my tongue couldn't help circling the whirled-up knot of flesh that nurse left inside. On the third day they took me into a hearing to say I would see the judge in five days.

During those days, I lay on that iron shelf while my eyes traced endless figure eights in the diamonded steel mesh, and I thought about what a fool I was. It wasn't the first time I'd gotten jammed up, but it had been a few years, and I'd told myself I wasn't coming back. I'd tried to do right: took the slow money at Foot Locker, and stopped hanging with the wrong crowd. Left those corners alone, and stayed more to myself.

And yet here I was, again.

In court they make everything sound worse than it is. The judge looked like one of those eaters that gets kicked out of Old Country Buffet: a weazy, can't-help-himself kind of roly-poly — like it's work for him just to stay upright. I pictured pasty folds of fat stacked under the black robe and imagined all the dudes' futures he'd sifted in his stubby fingers.

Now he held mine.

He faced me, and asked if I had anything to say. It was like a trick, though, because straight away he started sliding papers to a deputy, giving him instructions. And when he turned back to me, he was already talking again. "You're going to be placed in a program called Violins for Freedom." He pushed his glasses back up his glistening nose. All his decisions had already been made. "You'll be studying the

violin. An instructor will be assigned to you and there will be lessons that you will have to learn. Meeting the terms of your parole will depend on it."

That afternoon I was out and riding the 13 home.

Everyone on my block — the regular down-the-hill crew: kids mostly that should've been in school — had already heard everything, and greeted me like I'd saved the world. They could hardly wait their turn to get at me — the meat of our palms popping and snapping loud enough for the whole block to hear — pouring out a chorus of *you got him, man, we heard you messed yo up, he ain't coming back*.

But I had nothing to celebrate.

I saw that I hadn't missed anything. The corner boys went back to their spots, churning on their little strip: "Page turner — got that page turner." Here came Chief, hunched over his wire cart — elbows better than hands, the way he steered it — not yet embarrassed enough to hide the rotten gray something growing on his big toe, trying to sell off the last of his pack: "Loose ones! Loosies!" The plastic bottles and bags scattered in the bus shelter looked the same as always, like that was where the wind had swept them and where they would stay. Little kids were ducking in and out of their hideaway — a brick-charred vacant, gone hollow straight through and sprouting leafy trees. And from a breeze lifting out of the alley came that dead rat smell to make you think you're it.

I climbed the stairs to my third floor efficiency. Inside it smelled yellow and closed up — like something stuffy trapped in the shadows. I shimmied open one window and then the other. A breeze skipped along the sill.

It was strange somehow to be back in my place among my things. Take away the bathroom, it was just one room, but it was mine, had been mine since I'd aged-out of my last group home two years before.

Had I been away only eight days? A lot had happened, and I knew the tide of consequences was still rolling in. I stood beside the wobbly card table I usually ate at and pressed a finger on its edge, checking for the familiar see-saw in its legs.

I'd forgotten how much I'd straightened up for Missy: No plates in the sink, no trash in the can. Pots tucked in the oven, pans hooked on the peg board. And from Door Busters on Monument, a new bedspread looking like a hot iron creased its edges. I'd even taken a wire brush to the caked-in grime that had set into the stove-

top long before I got there, but some things you can't get clean.

It felt like I should call someone, tell them what happened. But there was no one I really wanted to talk to, except Missy. I've known people — grown men — who couldn't stand to be by themselves, and I knew I was not like them. A lot of my life I'd been alone, and it had been alright. Now the quiet was on me, heavy and lonesome.

Jail stink — some lowlife rotation of lice disinfectant, no account heads sweating through their underwear, stopped-up toilets — was still in my nostrils. I stripped off my crusty shirt and khakis. In the bathroom mirror, my busted-up face stared back. I was remembering how different Missy looked in her going-out clothes, and I began to wonder what she ever saw in me anyway. I'd never thought she'd go for me. Maybe now she wouldn't.

I stayed under the shower until the steam quit and the water went cold. Afterwards, I changed into clean shorts and a v-neck tee and dropped on to the bed.

I plugged in my phone and laid it on my chest, waiting for a charge. I knew better than to just go bopping back into Democratic Best. The Has wouldn't want me anywhere near Missy, or them, again. Not after what I did.

After a while I called work, hoping my shifts hadn't been given away. "We're busy here, Bahia," the manager said. "I got a store to run." He hung up.

The noise in bookings had been constant, and I'd not gotten much rest. I was grateful to be clean and in my own bed again and, lying there, sleep flickered over me.

The next day I had to be to Violins for Freedom at noon. I hadn't given it too much thought, only that whatever it was going to be, I wanted to get it over with. I was up early and rolling.

A letter and map from the court bailiff showed a starred address by the water. The east side I knew all over, and walking didn't bother me because you can kind of think things through while you go along.

I set off, making sure to go well around Democratic Best. It was a blue sky with white clouds tied in knots. I cut a diagonal across the park where over the last few years people had come in and fixed up these row homes — slowly at first, then all at once. And I'd wondered where all the money came from to scrape off the flaky paint and put on fresh, to hang the heavy, paneled-wood doors fitted with the shiny brass hardware, to solder the new copper flashing over the bay windows and tuck the

flower boxes under them. And walking those blocks, you could feel lost, like you'd crossed into another world you no longer belonged in.

In the distance the expressway ramps dropped into downtown like undone laces. Homeless would be under them, stretched out on their blankets in the heat. It wasn't far from where my mother had once lived. I'd always had it in my mind that she might be under there, among them. It was stupid to think so. She could be anywhere, or nowhere.

I sloped off and took turns going along the streets that ran in straight shots down to the water — Wolfe, Durham, St. Ann. Another twenty minutes and I was trailing along the expensive shops by the water, past valet parkers posted-up in red coats, and little boutiques where all they sold were perfumes no bigger than a house key.

At last I reached the address. It looked like any of the storefronts around there, a travel agency on one side, some kind of bank running lit-up fractions across the glass on the other, and I felt like I must be in the wrong place.

But when I tugged open the frosted glass door and stepped into the empty hardwood lobby, I saw it: A uniform at a back room door: a cop? A CO? A deputy? Someone from parole and probation? It was the law, whoever he was. Black stripe down the side of his grey pants and a sidearm on his waist.

Holding out my paper, I stepped forward. He patted me down, and while he ran his crackling wand between my legs, I realized the place must've been a hair salon once. Cushioned swivel chairs were planted before a long row of mirrors, and there were two shampooing sinks with that u-shaped dip where customers once lay their necks. The guard told me to sit tight. Sweat marked my t-shirt, and, sitting in the chair he'd pointed at, the cool air felt nice.

Soon, the door opened and a very old man came out. He knew my name already and said it funny. Instead of Bahia Salazar, he said *Bajia Zalazar*.

His head was a pale dome. Piled-up silver brows arched over grey eyes. He wore a crisp dress shirt tucked into dark suit pants.

He showed me into his studio where he told me I was there to learn the violin, that, if I didn't like it, I could choose to be remanded instead, that his name was Boris Wollensky and that he was to be my teacher. His accent was not easy to understand, and I had to listen hard, even playing back the sounds in my head to make out the

words. The guard, whose face gave away nothing, hung close to the door.

I looked around. It was laid out nice in there: a plush ruby-colored couch and matching ottoman, a tasseled Oriental rug. Against the wall, a rack of violins stowed in open cases. Sheet music was propped on stands. Framed, gray pictures of tuxedoed white dudes playing the violin hung on the wall. None of them had normal names either: *Heifetz. Szigeti. Piatigorsky.*

His studio had a little kitchen with a fridge and a small sink set into a stone counter. He'd been fixing himself tea, and he went back to it. Under his dress shirt, I saw his back was kind of stooped and boxy. From an electric kettle he poured steaming water over a cup that looked like somebody's good china, squeezed lemon over it, and left it to cool.

"Have you heard a violin before?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's what they play when the movie's about to be sad."

"That's it? Nowhere else?"

"Pretty much."

"Booo," he said.

"You asked."

"Maybe you're clogged." He pointed to his head.

"Maybe I never been around 'em."

"Open your ears."

I was watching him. He was very old, but there was something lively and game in the way he carried himself. He handed me a laminated, fold-out diagram of a violin, and told me to open it. Along the neck, notes ran up and down, side to side, or spiral — couldn't tell which. It all looked the same.

He took up a violin and held it parallel to the diagram. "First assignment: find the notes on your violin, memorize them." He ran his finger down the neck. "Low to high — " then back up — "High to low. All four strings."

"How long I gotta do this?" I asked.

"What is the length of your probation?"

"They gave me a year."

His lids lowered and his lips curled down. "God willing."

"I gotta keep coming down here for a year?"

"Twice a week," he said. "Take it or leave it."

An irritated hiss snagged in my throat.

"You must practice every day — " he eased the violin into the case, folded it closed, snapped the clasps and handed it to me — "for your freedom."

I left Wollensky's, a violin crooked under my arm, like I could hide it. Along the way, I was popping into stores and filling out applications: Under Armour, Dunkin Donuts, Jiffy Lube, Royal Farms. Each time I came to that felony box, I checked no. Footlocker had skipped the background check. Maybe I'd get lucky again.

I dropped the violin at home and beat it over to the playground Missy and I had been sneaking off to before I got locked up. On the stone wall, I sat, looking at my phone. After a while, I keyed in a text: *I'm here. At our spot. I'll wait for you*.

It felt like forever that I was waiting and after a while I took up a stick and began turning it between the loose stones in the wall, digging out the dusty grit.

My breath skipped when I saw her coming down the steps, reaching back, undoing that white apron. When she got close, she lobbed the balled-up apron at me. I picked it up near my feet and began folding it neatly. She had on a white tube top and yellow capris, a little canister of pepper spray clipped on her hip.

Shame burned my cheeks. "You're not gonna mace me are you?"

She squinted, her face full of questions.

I hesitated. "How you doing?"

She took my head in her hands, staring at the buttoned wound healing on my cheek, and everything I wanted her to say came into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She sat and eased into my arms. Her hair was in my face and her breasts pressed against me. Behind the kitchen grease, she still smelled nice — shampoo, lotion, perfume, never knew what it was because Missy used to mix up her smells.

"I've been worried," she said. Tears hung on her long lashes.

We were quiet.

"I called your job," she said. "They didn't know anything."

"I don't think I work there anymore."

She was watching me.

"How I look?" I asked.

"Like trouble." She laughed.

Softly, I passed my thumb over her cheek, smoothing away a tear.

"I didn't know what happened," she said.

"I ain't altogether sure myself."

"Who was he?"

I shrugged. "Just some out the way yo come around to mess things up for somebody else."

"I thought maybe he was someone you knew."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "First time."

I took her hand in mine. Grey and green paint smudged the tops of her fingers. "How're you doing with your pictures?" I asked.

She did not answer, but leaned in and kissed me. It was nice — kind of salty like the Has' food, and soft the way she held my face in her hands. We stayed like that and it felt good just to be with Missy again, kissing on the playground.

After a while, Missy dug in my jeans pockets and pulled out my phone. She checked the time. An hour had gone by like nothing.

"I gotta go," she said, getting up.

I reached for her hand. "Don't," I said. "Please. Stay."

She unwrapped a piece of Bubble Yum, and started slowly chewing.

Her hand was still in mine. "If I hit your phone later," I said, "you gonna answer?"

"Maybe."

We were climbing the steps to the sidewalk. I was dying to be alone with her again. "Promise?" I asked.

Then she was popping bubbles, walking backwards, watching me. "You can't promise maybe."

Some people took me for illiterate — talked to me slow, like I can't do for myself, or I never learned listening skills. But I had a good head for numbers — teachers used to tell me — and I was never one of those kids in class who didn't trust his own answers, so learning to follow the music on the treble clef was not hard for me.

Monday and Thursday afternoons, I went to lessons at Wollensky's studio. Each time I clamped my jaw on that chin rest, the violin felt dumb small, like a stupid toy for embarrassing me, but I found out soon enough that old man was nothing to play

with. The other felons in Violins for Freedom never lasted. Wollensky rode them down, right to the last.

While I sat waiting in that styling chair for my lessons, I could hear Wollensky putting it to them: the ones that took him for a joke, the ones that got to jawing with him, the ones that tried to duck him out, skip lessons, and then slide on in like everything was cool, the ones that assumed just showing up — *I thought I was maintaining* — was enough.

When Wollensky got mad, his tongue had to work extra to get his words out. He'd be picking dudes apart, his English getting worse and worse, and sitting there, next up in the rotation, I would swivel an ear towards the studio's closed door, and listen to the strange sounds he made. He'd switch up his *w*'s for *v*'s, get stuck on his *l*'s, tack a *k* at the end of his *ings*, and drag his *r*'s half back to Russia. And when Wollensky said, "*Ve* are not *rrrr*unning-*k* a charity," he wasn't lying.

For a while, other felons shuffled in and took their place. Wollensky dealt with them just the same. A bunch of them quit from the jump. Couldn't take it, said they'd rather jail than learn a violin. And so they did. With my own eyes, I watched the law roll in, four deep, and snatch dudes up for violating the terms of their probation.

Missy and I kept up our playground dodge, hiding from Ma Ha and Unc and the others. I guess we started to think we were pretty slick because it began to feel like a kind of game, sneaking around, getting itchy that one of the Has might be slinking down those playground steps on us.

Out there, she never let me go past feeling on her ta ta's, but I didn't press it because I was happy for what we had, and I didn't want to spoil the good feeling of being together. If our playground kisses were ever going to go any further, it would be because Missy wanted it as bad as I did.

One day she aimed her phone at me, clicking close-ups, and told me she was working on a portrait.

"A portrait?" I asked. "You mean like a picture?"

She nodded.

"For real? You're putting me in your spiral?"

She looked at her phone, distracted. "Aren't you listening, Bahia?"

I shook my head, smiling. "Your people aren't gonna like that."

"They don't like any of it anyway." Our legs dangled over the wall, her heels tapping stone. "It's not like I'm gonna stop. They can't make me stop. I'd probably explode if I did."

"Can I see it?"

"It's not ready."

"How much you got to finish?"

"I don't know."

"How can't you? You're the one making it."

"It's not lo mein."

I was happy. Nobody had ever done something like that for me.

I don't know why it felt good just to sit and talk to Missy. Normally, I don't say too much to people, and it was only much later that I realized that there on that left-behind playground the city had let go, I'd gotten carried away and given Missy the whole sad story. Things I hadn't spoken of in years. Told how I was born uptown at Sinai and that my father named me after the town he came from. Told how I used to be scared of my mother's teeth, which were as jagged and grey as a monster's from all the crystal she'd done. Told how my father — before they got him — had been here so long, fixing up houses, that he'd forgotten it wasn't his country. Not a lot had scared my father, but immigration at the door had.

"It was bad in DSS?" Missy asked.

"For them," I said. "I wore those people out." Then I told the names of the placements I'd been through and the ones I AWOL'ed out of, counting them off on my fingers.

We were quiet.

"You know how kids are," I said. "When you're seven, all you know is you want to be with your father."

She listened, waiting.

"I'm pretty sure he must've got jammed up at the other end," I said. "No way he'd have fostered me out like that if..." I let my voice trail off.

We were quiet and then Missy said, "Well, he could've been Vincent Van Gogh and if they decided he didn't check the right box on one of their forms? It's *ahn yung*. That's not your fault or his."

Inside the monkey bars, a little boy was passing two flattened soda cans between

the slatted poles, tilting with them, making engine noises.

"Who's Vincent Van Gogh?" I asked.

"A painter," she said. "Like me."

"He's good?"

"He was amazing."

"What'd he put in his pictures?" I asked.

"Different stuff. Stars. Landscapes. Potatoes."

"Potatoes?"

"If you saw his painting — *Earthen Bowl with Potatoes* — you'd realize he's showing us something we had no idea was there."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you. You have to *see* it."

I was thinking how if you stare at something long enough you can start imagining all kinds of things in it, and I wondered if that's what Missy had done. "They got him in museums?"

"All over the world."

"Oh, if they got him in museums, it's a wrap," I said. "He must be good."

She nodded.

I was twenty years old then and the only person I'd ever loved was my father and I'd not seen him in a very long time. Those words — *I love you* — were not words I'd told any girl, ever, but I was hung up enough on Missy that I was ready.

It's like she knew, too, because she smiled, letting that twinkle stay in her eyes, and clamped my birds baseball cap low on my forehead.

And I was sure it was love because it was still there, inside me, long after she was gone.

By the time Wollensky started me on simple scales, we were bumping heads. I'd be playing my lesson and, while he listened, he'd dip his face into that fridge and stand picking at the food on those shelves: little jars of pickled herring or trays of pink salmon. Then he'd turn back to me and kick at my heels. "Feet together. Violin up. Wrist back. Your pinky — is it mush? *Curl* it."

When Wollensky pinned my thumb lower, and braced my pinky into an arch, the smells of those hors d'oeuvres he'd been sampling would be on his breath: sardines,

chicken livers, deviled eggs.

A Monday rolled around when I was ready to snap. It had been about a month by then — long enough that people had gotten used to seeing me carrying around a violin case and stopped asking what it was — and I'd practiced like I was supposed to. An hour one day, a half hour another, a little something that morning. Had little pads on my fingertips going white from it. Even got a cramp in my shoulder one morning. But it hadn't been enough for Wollensky and now old man was leaning on me and I wanted to take that violin and crack him over the head with it. I dropped my eyes and held the instrument at my side, breathing hard.

"Why don't you just walk out?" he asked. "What are you waiting for?" Crumbs and whatnot had gotten behind his lower lip, and his tongue was swishing around in there.

"I'm alright," I said.

"Violin is not for sweet chops."

"*What*?"

"Violin is not for sweet chops."

Even if I didn't always understand his words, I knew when someone was cracking slick, and I didn't like it. "What're you saying?"

"You're not a sabra. I thought you were a sabra."

"I don't know what that is."

"You stink," he said. "That's what."

He took the instrument and settled it under his chin. He did not play a boring scale, but a song he called a "Hebrew Melody." In his hands the instrument cried beautifully and you felt like Wollensky was wringing the notes from your own heart. The man had a waxy face, teeth full of metal, silver caterpillar eyebrows, flesh hanging off his neck — what they call it, jowls? — and arms spotted the way old people's get, but when he drew the bow across those strings, he killed it. His notes were butter, his stroke was a feather, and the music that jumped out of that little box when he played it filled the whole room.

"Try it again," he said, handing it back.

I got myself together, set the violin back on my shoulder and then dragged the bow across the strings, squeaking and chirping.

He cupped his hands over his ears. "You're not sawing wood. This is violin."

My frustration hissed out in a long pent-up breath. “You want too much.” I sat. The violin and bow lay across my lap and I folded my hands over them.

My frustration hissed out in a long pent-up breath. “You want too much.” I sat. The violin and bow lay across my lap and I folded my hands over them.

He took a seat and we watched each other, his grey eyes watery and searching. You had to give it to Wollensky: Old as he was, he still kept himself up. I was admiring his pressed, herringbone slacks, the sharp collar on his dress shirt — clothes that fit him like a tailor had cut them that morning. Shoes — Magnanni’s, I think — so soft you couldn’t hear him shuffling around beside you. And the way he kept his tea cup on that little matching plate, one never far from the other, you couldn’t help feeling he must’ve been somebody once.

“Your parents — where are they?” he asked.

For what seemed like a long time I did not answer. I wanted him to look away, but his eyes never left mine. “My father was deported.”

“Where?”

“Why does it matter?”

We were quiet.

“It was a long time ago,” I said. “So I can’t answer nothing about it.”

“Your mother too?”

A way-back image rose in my mind: my father circling a finger by his temple to describe my mother’s kind of troubles. “I’m not for sure.”

He drew his seat closer. Our knees almost touched. He took up my left hand, turned it over and back. His thumb searched along my knuckles, rippled and dug out with old scars. He straightened my fingers, flattening them between his warm palms, softly pressing the joints.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“What did you do to your hands?”

“Accidents,” I lied. “What you a doctor or something?”

“A doctor would know better.”

“They look bad?”

"What do you think?"

"I *zhink* you wouldn't know too much about it, G." I said. "It gets rough out here."

He waited, measuring me with those heavy grey eyes. Then he stood and began tidying pages of sheet music. "Such things as this," he shrugged.

"What?" I asked.

"What *what*?" he answered, mocking me.

"What you doing?"

"Our decisions are our own, Bahia," he said. "That's not a nothing."

I felt he was about to give the guard at the door some signal to bust in and haul me out.

"Even when they are to our cost, they're our own." He stretched out a hand, flicking his fingers into the palm. "It has been enough. Give me the violin now."

I looked at him: he was serious. "No, sir."

He reached for the instrument, and I shielded it, turning away. "You can't do that."

"You don't practice, Bahia. You don't really care."

"I do practice."

"What you're doing — this fumbling — it's not practice. Twiddlers I don't need."

"I'm not," I said.

"You're not what?"

"I'm not what you called me."

He wagged his head, his tongue hunting behind his teeth. Then he stepped back and raised his hands from his sides, motioning me up. He clapped and barked out the notes of a short scale: "G, A, Cb,C, D, F, G. Begin."

This I could do. I stood once more and started playing the scale. But each time I finished, he'd holler *again!* If I was flat or sharp, he'd hum in the corrected note, fixing up where I went off. He knew the mistakes I'd make before I even made them. Over and over, he had me run it back.

Again!

Again!

Again!

Again!

It went on like this, the old man pressing in, calling me out, little bits of white spittle bunching at the corners of his mouth. After so many times, I stopped. "I think I got it."

"Your ribs," he said, "take them off your hips."

"I'm ready to play something else."

"What do *you* have to do with any of it?"

"I'm saying."

"Hum it. Show me *your* ready."

I can sing a little bit, but now I hesitated, trying to remember the sound of the notes I'd just played. I mumbled a few sounds, then stopped.

"You see this?" A smug laugh burbled up. "Why should anyone listen to you? You don't even hear yourself."

On the phone that night, Missy must've heard it in my voice. She kept asking about my lesson. Usually, I didn't let on too much. People who got their head on straight — like Missy — can be turned back by fear. They smell trouble and veer away. If Missy knew how close Wollensky was to sending me back, she might realize she deserved better.

"You know how old people get," I said. "He's just hard-headed." I spread a bag of frozen tater tots on a pan, slid it in the oven. "You think it matters if I pre-heat this oven?"

"What are you making?"

"Tater tots."

"Tater tots, no," she said.

"I didn't think so neither."

"I want you to look out for yourself," she said.

Outside a police siren squawked. I went to the window. Across the street, two knockers were pulling up in a Crown Vic where another cop had sat three kids on the curb.

"What I need to worry about that old man for, when I got you to talk to?"

"I'm being serious."

"I'm cool," I said. "I can deal."

"Then why do you sound like that?"

"Sound like what?"

"Mad," she said. "Or like you're about to get mad."

Missy wasn't going to be bluffed out. She already knew me too well. "How you think I look holding a violin?"

She was drinking iced tea, and I could hear cubes rattle against the glass. "Like a violinist."

"Exactly," I said. "I don't know who they think I'm supposed to fool, but I don't like embarrassing myself. Gets old."

"What's this guy expect?" she said. "You're just starting out."

"That's the thing. He doesn't go by that."

"What's he go by?"

"He's not gonna let something slide just 'cause I'm a beginner," I said. "He's particular like that."

We were quiet.

"This is crazy," she said.

"Isn't it? And I done it to myself." Outside the kids on the curb had turned their pockets inside it out and a knocker was toeing around whatever had been in there. "I wish I'd never seen that dude," I said.

"You mean — "

"Neither one, matter of fact. They both tricky. One'll put a hole in your face. The other'll get you locked up behind a violin. Can't trust nobody."

"You can trust me."

"I know it," I said. "I'm glad for that."

Nothing came of the jobs I'd applied for. For a while, I kept at it, stepping up to cash registers empty-handed, asking about openings, filling out forms, following up. But you get tired of putting yourself through all that just to hear another *no*.

Until then, my rent had always been on time. Now, the sugar jar was thirty-three dollars from tapped out. Bone dry. End of the line. And I was scared of what could happen to me. Things could turn very quickly. I'd seen it happen before. One minute someone could be doing fine, with a little job and their own place, maybe saving for a car. Then it could all be gone. It happened like that.

I'd stood out on that corner before, grinding for a dollar in a crew of other

hustlers, and I wasn't going back to that trap game. But I wasn't taking a number for a cot at the shelter, either.

Landlords don't wait on their money forever. Mine was a Jamaican who liked to cuff his sleeves high up, by his shoulders. He'd been popping up, a wad of keys jangling at his hip, looking to catch me in a lie about being broke. On this day, he knocked and called me into the hall. "I never took you for no slippery eel," he said.

I apologized again, stalling, promised to have his money soon.

He brushed past me, stepped through my doorway, peering inside to see if I had something worth selling. Back in the hall, he let out a breath, cussing softly. He looked me over — flip flops, shorts, a beater — and bit back annoyance. From his wallet, he pulled a card and scribbled a number. "It's a Dalton there. Tell him, I tell you put you on."

"Put me on what?" My hands went up. "I ain't touching no packs, no pills, no nothing."

His face shied back, offended. "It's laundry, man."

On the outside, Downtown Linens was one in a scatter of old, brick and glass-block warehouses, way east, past Edison Highway, and nowhere near downtown. If there'd been people around there once, they'd moved on lifetimes ago. Grass cracked up the sidewalks, and a wobbled line of headless metal stalks ran where the parking meters had once been.

Dalton was another Jamaican, and he didn't seem surprised I was standing in his loading dock. At the next bay, a pair of gassed Mexican men pitched fat bundles of hospital laundry on dollies.

Dalton wheeled a load inside. The rows of split-pocket washers looked new: shiny locomotives chuffing out something bleachy and sweet. He squatted down and unhooked the snatch. The sling tarp fell open and out of this jumble of hospital gowns and bedding, all kinds of crusty oozes and crumbly wastes tumbled. I must've made a face because he started laughing. He lifted a hand and snapped the blue latex glove on his wrist and howled some more into his forearm.

At another washer, the Mexican men handling the nasty loads looked unfazed.

"You want that mean green, don't you?" The Jamaican wasn't laughing anymore. He flashed twenties from his pocket.

Until you've been on your own with nothing in your pockets, you can't know how rich a couple twenties could make you feel.

Beside me, the machine heaved to life, shuddering as the washer drum picked up speed. The concrete floor throbbed. High up, birds flitted between the ducts, and behind the glass hatch the laundry spun into a single grey zero.

The first song Wollensky taught me was a Czechoslovakian folk song called "Bohemian Brown Bear." It had this corny little two four beat, like clopping horses. No bass. No rhythm. It sounded like nothing I wanted to play and I couldn't understand what Wollensky heard in it. But he kept riding me.

"The brown bear bounces on the two." He sounded fed up.

"I told you, I'm trying," I said. "If you'd quit rushing me."

His eyes were sick with pity. "Perhaps this is your rainy day?"

"I'm serious," I said.

"Your tummy, maybe, is dizzy?"

"Why don't you give me something good to play?" I asked.

Disgust broke across his face like I knew it would. "Don't tell me," his lips flapped out.

"Dag, Mr. Wollensky," I said. "You gotta make everything hard."

He laughed, a long laugh that he cut short. "I will tell you something. If I live another hundred years, I will still be a stranger here. When I came here, I was younger than you even. No family. No country. No culture. I didn't know a soul. English I knew how to say bathroom. Do you know the next word I learned?"

"No."

"Library."

Veins burrowed like blue worms in his neck. He ran his fingers along the inside of his shirt collar, trying to calm himself. "So tell me, what is so hard about this?" His hand was snapping the sheet music.

I bowed my head. "Don't violate me, Mr. Wollensky. They'll send me away."

"You'll send yourself away. You have volition."

"I'ma do better," I said.

"This music," he said, "it is in you somewhere. Find it. Otherwise it will be too bad for you."

A day came when Missy and I did not sneak over to the playground. Instead, we were able at last to be alone, together, without worrying about her family creeping around

or the little kids at the playground watching us.

When I went downstairs to let her in, she was holding a tall plastic bag with something flat and thin in it. A long tattered edge poked out; it could only have come from her spiral. Upstairs, she took out the portrait.

It was me alright, and it looked so real I knew she must've spent time on it. It showed my Orioles cap turned backwards, my brown face, my green eyes, brows dark and straight as a ruler.

"What?" I found the bed behind me and sat down. Then, looking more, I saw she'd given me an expression I didn't recognize — too open or unsuspicious, like the world's so peachy I hadn't been watching my back all my days.

"Don't you like it?" she asked.

"It's amazing," I said. "It's just — you made me kinda soft, didn't you?"

She was enjoying this and did not answer.

I held it away, then close-in again. "It's me and not me."

"You have a lot of faces." She took the painting and propped it on the table. "It's you when you're with me."

I got a tingly feeling, like she saw inside me better than anyone. "That's crazy."

She came over and stood before me and turned her hips for me to untie the apron strings in back. My breath quivered. Missy had plump breasts and one of those cheerleader butts you used to see at school, and everything kind of evened itself out on her. She let me unfasten the button on her shorts and then slowly lower the zipper.

"If they catch me in here, it's gonna be bad," she said.

"They ain't gonna catch us."

"You would say that." Then, straddling my stomach, she pinned back my wrists, her black hair dangling over me, and slowed us down.

Shadows had seeped into the room and you could hear kids playing hotbox outside when we started putting our clothes back on. I walked her up the hill, feeling good, a little dizzy even. The sky was a ribbon of pink, strung low and fading. Street lights clicked on, fuzzy, and there was a lacy, teasing breeze. The houses crouched down in neat stacks, one block after the next, and most weren't as raggedy as by me. Older folks sat on porches playing cards, sipping cans of beer or just bumping oldies on

speakers they'd propped in their windows. As we got closer to the blinking neon of Democratic Best, we hung back.

"It's dusk," she said.

I bent and our foreheads touched, our fingers intertwined. "Is that one of those Catholic school words for it?" I asked.

We were beside a little basement fix-it shop, face to face, eyes open, and the smell of sawdust and machine lube drifted up from the open doorway below.

"It's half and half," she kissed me and pulled away. "Makes you feel kinda different about things, like something new is happening."

I stood there, watching her go. I waited until she climbed the steps to her place and let herself in. I could've skipped home. I even started telling myself that we might work this out with her people; the Has could be brought around. And already, I wished she could be there when I got back. Then, just as fast, I burned with envy for some nightmarish Korean dude in a sleek suit riding a sleek elevator in some downtown high rise that Ma Ha would approve of.

When I couldn't get hold of Missy the next day, I didn't zap out. I figured she couldn't get away. A day after that I still hadn't heard anything, and I knew something was wrong. More than two months had passed since I'd gotten out of bookings and during this time we had not gone a single day without talking.

On the third day I walked over to Democratic Best and stood at the diagonal corner, scoping it out. People came and went, going away with their sacks of beef yakamis or chicken boxes or whatever they were having. There was no sign of Missy anywhere.

I had not been back inside Democratic Best since before I'd fought. Once it had cleared out, I shuffled in like I didn't know any better.

"What's good, Unc?" I said, stepping up to the counter.

He gave me a big smile and acted surprised. "Oh, Number Five."

I looked at him. After everything that had happened, his *number five* sounded phony and I knew he wasn't feeling so swell to see me. I knew he knew why I was there.

He pointed at his cheek, turned down his mouth and groaned.

"Yeah," I said. "He got me good, didn't he?"

His mouth stayed down, stuck on sad.

"It's alright though," I said, "I heal quick."

He clucked out a couple *tisks tisks* before flashing a big smile. "You wan' number five?"

"Why not?" I chuckled along with him, "number five."

He turned and called back the order in Korean and his voice did not sound nice.

"So, everything good?" I asked.

"Ya, ya," he said. "Working, working. Always busy."

"Don't I know it," I said, "You're a hard worker, Unc."

We were quiet, and I breathed in the familiar peppery tang of Democratic Best.

"So," I asked, trying to sound casual, "Missy alright?"

"Oh, Missy," he said, acting surprised again. "Missy not here anymore."

"Not here?" I asked, half laughing. "What you mean, not here?"

"She go Providence."

"Providence?" I said. "Providence what?"

"Rhode Island."

I felt my stomach drop. "What?"

"Ya," he said.

"What's down there?"

"Up," he pointed.

"Up then."

He began cutting slices of green melon and he ate the fruit right down to the rinds, one after the next. "Better area," he said. "Less problem. Family there too. Butchers." He said this like I was supposed to be happy.

"Butchers?" My throat had gone tight.

"Ya, butchers." His hands scissored the air like he was chopping meat.

I was silent, a little shook. I was thinking, now what the hell's Missy gonna do in a butcher shop?

"When she coming back?" I asked.

He turned up his palms and his shoulders hopped a little. For a long while, I didn't say anything, afraid to ask more. I wasn't sure what to do. If I'd thought it do any good, I'd have yanked Unc over the counter and yoked him up.

They finished cooking my order, and he went about bagging it, putting in plastic

utensils, napkins, creasing and stapling the bag shut, and then sliding it before me.

I laid a ten on the counter and he rang it up on the register and brought back my change. I slipped the two singles and the coins in my pocket. "You like Missy's pictures, Unc?" I asked. "You know, the way she draws them?"

He got a sour look on his face like that wasn't important to him.

"You draw pictures too?" I asked.

"No."

"So I guess she didn't get all that talent from you, did she?"

He was quiet.

"What you all — you sent her away? You gonna teach her some kind of lesson?"

"It's family — "

"You said that."

Something wary and fierce flashed in his eyes, and he didn't say anymore.

I slid the bag of food back to him. "You all think you know me, but you don't."

I turned away slowly. In the doorway, I stopped and called over my shoulder, "It ain't bye if you don't say it."

I walked to the end of the block, whipped a tight half-circle and stood, staring back at Democratic Best. My head was not right — not by a long way. Providence didn't have any teams I could think of and I was having trouble placing where it was. I found Rhode Island on my phone. It looked far away — twice as far as New York, and though I'd never been there, I knew that wasn't close. I thought of catching a bus up there — one of those Greyhounds — but where would I look for her and who would I ask for help, and if I did find her, what exactly could I offer?

At home, I sat on the edge of the bed and squeezed my knees into a tuck, kind of rocking with it, before covering my ears so I would not hear the tears I felt coming.

That night and the next day, my calls to Missy went straight to voice mail and my texts were not answered. Soon, her cell service was cut off and, after that, there wasn't even a number to call anymore.

Then it was the next day and the day after. A couple times I tried to worm a different number or her address out of one of the Has, but Unc was finished pretending to be friendly. He just acted busy. Some of the others gave me short smiles or decided they'd forgotten who I was. Twice I saw Ma Ha and before I could even

You can think hard about a thing and not get anywhere with it. The portrait she'd made stared from the table. Missy had been right. It was me when I was with her, but now I was alone.

apologize for messing up her house, she showed off like she couldn't stand to look at me, like whatever she hated in me was deeper than any sorry I might offer and nothing she'd be letting go of anytime soon.

Inside my place, I lay back in bed, propped up on pillows, my hands folded under my head. My mind jumped around, turning over everything that had happened. I saw myself the night I fought outside the Has — Stone Face feinting low, hurting me. Mixed in were images of Missy crying that night and Missy acting silly at the playground and how she tasted laying here with me in this bed only a few nights ago. I pulled handfuls of sheet to my face, searching for her scent.

You can think hard about a thing and not get anywhere with it. The portrait she'd made stared from the table. Missy had been right. It was me when I was with her, but now I was alone. And I felt then like this was how things were going to be now, that it was going to be hard on me, and that it had been coming all along, closing in. I just hadn't seen it.

Four in the morning and outside someone was laying on a horn. I'd been in bed, asleep. Now I stood at the window and looked down the block. Wind stirred up the world. In the gusts, yellow light danced on ropy power lines. A billboard ad, white and hanging by threads, ballooned, hung there, then fluttered back. On the corner, the neighborhood crew was on their little strip, turned up. I could see their spotters on opposite corners — kids so green they probably didn't know yet they could get locked up on conspiracy just being near it. Tubed gutters dropped down from rooftops, ran underneath the sidewalks and opened at the curb. In one of these piped-out chutes, they hid their stash. A lanky boy kept going back, dipping low, reaching in there. For a while I watched him: chute, corner; chute, corner; chute, corner. Money changing hands.

In the kitchen, I flicked on the bulb and cut on the gas jet and rinsed a pan. I

cracked five eggs on to the hot griddle and let the whites sputter and pop till the edges got crispy. I slid them all on a plate and set it on the bed to cool.

On the edge of the bed, I sat thinking. A cold draft to let you know fall was here slithered through the window frame, and I pressed a pillow into it.

I ate the eggs with wheat crackers. Afterwards, I switched off the light and lay back down. I listened to the voices outside — people bullshitting at the top of their lungs about nothing — and thought about Missy.

It wasn't over. It didn't feel like it could be. And yet, if Unc wasn't lying to me, Missy was in Providence and I was here.

Outside the horn sounded again, frantic.

I'd come up around there, but I was ready for a change. Some place where people took the party inside at night, where I didn't have to wonder whether the mail that came up missing from the jimmied letter boxes in the vestibule was important, or if the lady downstairs running her bootleg electric was about to burn this joint down while I slept.

But there was no where I knew to go. And no way to get there, where ever it was. And if my address changed now, how would Missy find me?

The blinds cut up the floor in striped light. I lifted the violin case on to the bed. In that little bit of light, I unclasped the case and passed my fingers over the soft lining. I brought out the violin and lay back down, resting it on my stomach. I drummed my fingers lightly on its body. I felt the tuning pegs, where the strings were wound in tight spools that locked down their pitch, if you treated it right. I plucked the *e*, then the *g*, letting each ping and fade out, before bringing the other back in. After a while, other sounds came to mind: different, little overlaps that might fit.

A violin was a funny thing. Thinning at the waist like a girl, it hardly weighed anything. Yet, it was somehow bigger than it looked. The lightest graze of the bow, and the strings spoke up. And it had a funny smell — all that delicate lacquered wood kept safe from the world in a satin red case.

The melody in "Bohemian Brown Bear" had begun to make a picture in my head. And in the darkness, my fingers found again the unseen notes.

Wollensky said I had a clock in my head to keep time. He gave me a metronome. And you know it's just a tick. Set it how you want. Slow or fast. Wollensky said slow, very

slow, and now alone with Missy gone and the cold coming on, that's what I did, kept it real slow. And in the *tick, tick, tick, tick* I saw all the mistakes I'd made: fighting at the 'Dox or some other club when I should've been happy just shaking off, taking my problems out on people who had nothing to do with them, quitting in the eleventh when I could've finished because a lot of what I learned I still remember — like how people took Copernicus for a joke for showing the circle we make around the sun, or how copper and tin make bronze, or that book about Odysseus, who went through so much just to get home.

But you can't erase nothing. You just carry it along.

Some tenants complained I was too loud, or that it went on for too long. All the ruckus around there, but my violin was a problem.

In the basement, you had to duck your head, bring a flashlight, and watch yourself. Beyond a pad-locked boiler room, a junk heap spilled off a back wall. I dug in and got between a severed radiator and a shoe shine stand's brass foot rests, tipped over a stack of old board games tied up in twine and slid by a headboard. Dust rose and gagged me. I caught hold of a roll of inside-outside carpet, different couch cushions — enough that it took several trips.

Using a box cutter, I layered grey patches of rug across my bathroom floor. I ripped the spongy, yellow foam from the cushions and nailed these squares to the bathroom walls, going high around the shower. Anyone who saw the humped-up floor and puckered walls would've thought something went wrong here.

On the violin there's different ways to hit a note, and you have to hunt for the good ones. A crooked bow, notes fingered even a dime's width off — these'll make a sound that'll hurt you inside somewhere, make you sorry for ever thinking you could do what the old man was asking.

I thought after a while I would hear from Missy: she would buy a burner or put a letter in the mail to me. Maybe she would come back to visit her people and slip away like she used to. Something.

Still, I felt that when Missy was able, she would get to me. And now holed-up in front of the medicine cabinet, I worked my pump handle through my intervals — 2nds, 3rds, 5ths, flat 7ths, major 7ths — ascending and descending, feeling that pull towards resolution, circling back to catch in the mirror my bow's squealing slips, the

scars from those rose thorns now a darker rust against my neck.

It took a while, but it did get so that I didn't mind the springy feel of those strings under my fingers or the breathy grip the bow could put on those notes.

The weather turned.

Now when I got near Wollensky's I could taste winter, raw and cold, coming off the water along the harbor. Once inside, I would have to beat my hands against my leg, or warm them over his radiator until the feeling came back.

Back and forth, twice a week. It was a lot of walking and along the way, I pictured my scales, testing myself, visualizing the patterns in as many different positions as I could hold in my mind, and singing the notes, just like he'd shown me.

When Wollensky gave me bookwork, I wrote out the exercises on the long study tables at the Enoch Pratt. It was all getting in my head by then and sitting on those library stools, I sometimes heard the fingerings I penciled beside the staff. Or batching laundry at Downtown Linens, a little stray phrase I'd practiced earlier — some choppy chromatic turn or a relay of triads — would come floating in over the pounding drone of those washer drums, and I would feel I was getting closer to having something to show for the work I'd put in. And every so often, my stroke would be so nice — so clean and even and just right — that the sounds coming off that bow seemed to come from somebody else.

My shifts at Downtown Linens didn't start until eleven at night. It was stupid to save a few dollars walking only to risk getting caught along the way by a stick-up boy or some young'un trying to build up his rep. Better to just pay the bus fare. I'd get a good jump on the 22 and start sorting and batching laundry ten, fifteen minutes early. I wondered sometimes what went on in a hospital that people's bedding could get like that, but it never slowed me down. Nobody was ever going to say I didn't work as hard as any Mexican on our runt crew.

And in this way the days blurred and the holidays passed without a word from Missy.

Wollensky upped my lessons. They went from an hour to two, sometimes more. Each time I got the hang of one thing, a harder piece followed. He sent me off with CD's. Back home, I listened to Ernest Bloch's "Baal Shem," Henryk Wieniawski's "op. 15

Variations," Stravinsky and Heifetz. I had not known that I would like this music. The songs were sad — sad and beautiful. That they could be both kind of threw me. Each time I listened, I caught something different, sometimes long after it was over.

It was after New Year's, towards the end of a long afternoon, that Wollensky's face finally gave up the shadow of a thin smile. I was rolling through a static etude I'd studied all week, tip-toeing through the prelude, concentrating, hitting that trill. Wollensky hummed and counted, anticipating the notes before I got to them, scolding and pumping his hands all at once. When I stopped and lifted my face from the sheet music, there it was: an amused satisfaction on the old man's face. His eyes took me in, glistening with something like pride.

"The notes," he said, "are they bringing out feelings?" Hope lifted those furry eyebrows, and I felt naked.

"Yes," I said. "I feel something."

One day I got to my lesson, and the guard who was always posted up in Wollensky's lobby was gone. It was just me and Wollensky. He let me in and asked me to sit. I blew into my cupped hands or tucked my fingers under my arms to warm them. It was strange to be alone with the old man. I felt he'd entrusted me with a duty I wanted to do right by.

"I want you to hear something," he said. He was more keyed-up than usual. He pulled out several pages of sheet music and stood them on the stand. Then he dropped a cd on the stereo. It was an old song by Maurice Ravel called "Pavane for a Dead Princess." We listened. The music seemed to move him. I had to admit, the pavane was very beautiful — pretty and lonely all at once like that kind of music can be. While it played, we kind of forgot ourselves. Wollensky even shut his eyes for a bit because sometimes you can listen better that way.

It was at the cadenza — something about the way he began calling out the notes — that it hit me: he was going to ask me to learn it. I felt my knees getting bouncy.

"I can't play this," I said.

He tipped his eyes toward the speakers. "Listen."

"It's a real nice song, Mr. Wollensky. It really is, but — "

He raised a hand to hush me. "Don't swindle yourself."

I slouched back. He wasn't going to let this go.

He paused the CD. "Why do you practice?"

"I got no choice."

He looked towards the foyer where the guard would normally have stood. His eyes, sad and heavy, hung over the empty space in the doorway.

I was quiet.

He started the music again and over the sound of the violin, he continued to make his points — outlining the song's AABA structure, imitating the slurring legato — scribbling notes on the sheet music.

Using the pencil eraser, he tapped eighth notes along the measures to match the tempo. "Follow the notes," he said calmly.

When he stopped writing, I said, "Why do you spend so much time on me, Mr. Wollensky?"

"What, I should go to Florida?"

"Supposed to be nice down there, right?"

"It's where old people go to talk about prunes. My bowels function adequately. I have no reason."

"Oh," I said. "I never been."

We were quiet.

"Well, you taught me a lot already," I said.

He stood and crossed the room to a small side table. From a drawer he removed a slim box. He brought it over and handed it to me.

I lifted the top and peeled back the tissue paper. It was a pair of black leather gloves, lined with cashmere. They were shiny and thick and had that new-leather smell.

"For your fingers," he said.

After work one morning I rode the bus straight from Downtown Linens to the Enoch Pratt. I wanted to be there when the doors opened, so I could get a computer, and I hung around outside, waiting in the morning chill.

Any pavane is going to have a lot going on in it and once inside I pulled up videos of different violinists playing Ravel's. They were from all over the world. Istanbul. Tokyo. Other places I can't remember. Old men in tuxedos. Young girls. Each of them sounded a little different and, though they were all good, each had their own way

with it. Sitting there, headphones clapped over my ears, hunched into the screen, listening, I must've looked out of place because I noticed that people were sneaking glances at me.

The videos probably didn't look like much to the people watching me — just a bow swishing back and forth. But they would be wrong because even after all the work I'd put in, the pieces of the pavane had not come together yet.

Back at my place, I stayed with it, taking it slow, beginning again and talking my way through it, keying my attack to the videos I'd watched or the recordings Wollensky gave me. It was good to hold on to these sounds, to keep them close for when you needed something to carry you through this twisted world.

And while I smoothed out the legato of those long, floating bow strokes, the days grew warmer.

Spring came early.

"Pavane for a Dead Princess" was Ravel's song, but as I worked it out and got closer, I thought less about mechanics and just played, and I felt the music was becoming mine too.

One morning I was at my front window, warming up, loosening the joints on my left hand before starting in with the bow.

Then, through the window, I saw Ma Ha outside. She was walking on the sidewalk across the street. It had been a long time and to see her again, even from up there, twitched my ears. She'd been to the farmer's market across the park. Her arms were heavy with plastic bags. Carrots and greens bulged in them. They pulled at her sides, swaying her hair as she walked. I pressed my face sideways to the cool pane of glass and strained to keep her in sight. A flock of pigeons rose and scattered as she went through. I watched her heading away and then — I don't know what I was thinking, still holding my violin — I started after her. I was down the stairwell and sideways out the front door fast.

On the sidewalk I saw her crossing the next block. I didn't want to run up on her so by the time I got up to the Has', she was already climbing her steps. I must've frightened her anyway because she hurried in and shut the door quickly. I heard a dead bolt catch, and the chain latch.

I stood outside, near the rose bushes I'd fought in the year before. Little green

buds were bursting through. Like I said, I'd kind of eased down there, so there was no reason to be gulping air. The windows of the Has' row house looked dark and empty. A few doors down, breakfast smells were coming out of Democratic Best.

People were outside. A woman was shaking out her door mat across the street. Two little girls sat on steps nearby, passing an empty candy box back and forth, trying to make it whistle. An old man was grubbing for cigarette butts by the curb.

When I tucked the violin under my chin and turned back to the Has' house, I could feel the people nearby looking at me, and I knew they'd stopped what they were doing and were waiting for me to begin. And just like Wollensky showed me, I sailed those opening notes of the pavane into the melody, sprinkling in the arpeggios, holding my own, and waiting for the curtains to part.