

LBRIS

We know
books

PARTITA

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faber

Overture

Here's my question: How does a person step in front of a train and leave everything right there? Inhale, no exhale.

It tilts you on a slant, to walk your whole road with a question like that and no answer to balance it out. Answers are such everyday things to count on, reliable as your teeth. You only notice when one goes missing, leaving its partner to grind on empty air. In life or art or music, it's the same. Object and shadow. Eight measures of statement, eight measures of response—that's how a scrappy German orphan named John Bach got the whole world in his pocket a few hundred years ago, and keeps a lot of us there still. He threads a promise into your ears, weaves it around through soft brain folds and down to the needful heart where he delivers you this conclusion: *Rest easy. This all comes out right in the end.*

A song without any answer in it, though? That's the sound of waiting. For years, I woke up asking nobody and everything, the stupid happy morning light of every day, *How did he do it?* And back it would come as I fell asleep, nudging the base of my skull like somebody's thumb pressing there. I didn't need any reminding, as I am now whenever I see a train or drive over the tracks. In the first years after it happened, we were haunted every minute. I don't mean to say my brother was hanging around the house in a body-shaped bag of light or whatever people mean when they say "ghost." But I saw him, his long shins and overlong feet like a young dog growing into itself, his hair he kept a little too long

to be taken for a jock, the way he splayed himself on the floor to read or think, as if he took gravity harder than the rest of us. Dark eyes looking up, offering no answer to this question that stuffed our throats like cotton wool. It even damped out my mother's favorite warning against getting above myself: *It's not the whistle that pulls the train*. She found other ways to say it, Lord knows. But that word left our station.

It was a long time ago. People say that as a comfort, as if the broken-glass edges of our damage get worn down by years. And in the meantime, you do what? Stare at the train wreck, pick at the scar, play the scorching memory over and over like a hard piano passage you're determined to memorize, trying to dull the cutting edge. Even if it adds up to the pursuit of misery as an occupation. I've studied the angles, read the accounts you can find in the news, a few police reports I probably shouldn't have seen, and these stories get me no further. Right up to the question mark, still empty air on the other side. How did my brother go off and leave me like that? With determination, some self-medication, people assumed: *Drunk or high, fell asleep on the tracks*. But it takes some doing to choose that particular bed, and what about waking up at the last minute with the animal drive to save your own skin? How would a soft body stay put against all that power. Screaming brakes, the instinct for surviving. The people who needed you to stay.

Cyrus's death broke my parents, but I had to go on being somebody, a sister and not a sister, a person on my own. I was eleven when it happened. We all know eleven-year-old girls, with their wide eyes and sincere belief that every terrible thing that happens is their fault. Except for the carefree few who think nothing is. Maybe for some of us, when it comes to the ties that bind us one to another, it has to be all or nothing. Maybe I've wished for the mercy of *nothing*. Maybe I still do.

Prelude I

The first night after Sigurd called, I put down the phone with my hands shaking and a sick feeling that I'd been waiting for something like this. Not a train, but a reckoning coming at me. This phone call, out of a blank silence of twenty-some years. (I'm pretending I don't know exactly how many years.) His voice I'd known instantly. The idea of him coming here, seeing him in person, felt like a bomb he'd put in the phone that might explode in my ear. I told him I needed time to think. Seven days, then. He would call back on the weekend to find out what I decided. I couldn't put any name to the shock I felt. Either choice, yes or no, carried the feeling of a disaster.

I've had plenty of practice at masking nerves, or did have when I was younger and played for audiences, but that was faint help getting me through supper across the kitchen table from my husband. Trying to think of questions I should ask him about the chance of rain, the hay he had to put up. Staring at the patterned Formica tabletop that has irritated me for what feels like a hundred years, because it looks like dancing rubber bands. Listening to the clock tick. What if that call had come an hour later? Instead of buzzing in my apron pocket while I was frying the apples, my phone could have been ringing on the counter right then. Charlie could have been watching the life drain out of me while I said *Okay* and *Where?* and *Let me think about it*. Watching me fall into the sinkhole in my middle so deep, a lot of other things might collapse into it.

That's not what he'd have seen, though. Charlie would ask if I was okay, and when I made up something, a student rescheduling a lesson, he would believe me. Pick up his knife and fork and cut up his pork chop. That's the man he is, solid and good, which makes him sound ordinary, or I guess maybe the enviable side of ordinary as husbands go, but it's more unusual than that. His mind could no more hold thoughts of betrayal than a good strong hand can hold water. Just not built for the task.

I was young when I'd known Sigurd, only twenty and barely more than a child, even if I thought otherwise. Years ago, anyway, time enough for forgiving and forgetting trespasses, even if they felt murderous at the time. Or so I told myself, while dishes were washed, while the newspaper was folded to the local section and read, while we said our good-nights before Charlie turned in. But an hour after midnight, I was still playing Chopin in the dark house, trying to stop time. If I didn't ever go to bed and get up again, if six more days didn't pass, we could go on here, unrattled by this earthquake I didn't ask for. At least I knew my playing wouldn't disturb Charlie. He is early to bed and early to rise, a farmer to his bones, and could sleep through the Second Coming. He's told me if he ever does turn over in our bedroom upstairs and wake up to one of my nocturnes, the sound of me sends him right back to his dreams. So there he lay above me while I sat in the dark living room playing all the Chopin preludes I could remember, then the mazurkas, and after that the nocturnes.

My hand was cramping like a fiend, and I finally quit on Chopin in the middle of a cadenza. Right hand is the bad one. That was Sigurd's fault, and one ruined hand the least of it. I snapped on the little brass music lamp on the piano, stood up too fast, and took hold of the fall-board to steady myself, not wanting to trip over the dog curled at my feet or ding my hip on some sharp corner in the dark. That's bodies for you, underneath all the mind's drama, just pitiable flesh. My legs had fallen asleep. I saw the shoes under the piano and said quietly without thinking: "Oh, Mom is here."

Gaz looked up at me with his ears pricked, pale eyes curious in the

sudden light. He looked at the shoes and back to me, assuring me that whatever I was thinking, he agreed. "Nobody's here," I told him. "Just you and me."

But somebody was, or something. These were not my dead mother's shoes, obviously. I'd taken them off there when I sat down, needing to feel the cold pedals under my bare feet. Empty leather flats with the sad, squashed look of weariness, just like the ones she used to park beside her recliner every time she gave up on another day, accepting her life as the sum of its disappointments. If an elephant had scuffed around the kitchen all day in those, I used to think to myself, they would not look worse. A child can't hate her mother without putting the load-bearing walls of the known world at risk. I settled for hating her shoes.

I hooked two fingers into their backs and carried them with me outside to the porch. I breathed in the late-summer smells of mown hay and ragweed while I watched Gaz make a quick check of the perimeter of the yard. All I could see of him in the dark was the rippling gait of his white feet and the tip of his tail, the rest of him all one with the night. I rubbed my hand where it always ached with too much use or any change in the weather. The ancient injury. He didn't even know. If I were to tell Sigurd now, it could not be kind: I am sundered past the repair of any steel pins. I stood awhile under the accusing stars with heartless crickets singing in my ears: *If this is true, if this is true*. If I'm no better than the sum of my disappointments.

Does every woman turn into her mother? My sister-in-law, Mickie, used to say so. But that was all of a piece with becoming a mother herself, in those years when we drank coffee and visited in her kitchen between the interruptions of shrieks and tears, the U shape of bite marks on a pudgy arm, the discovery of the naked Barbie show behind the couch. She confessed to hearing her own mother come out of her mouth: *Because I said so* and *Right this minute, young lady*, words that ooze down through leaks in the roofs we build between generations.

Mickie loved her children madly, it was plain to see. The eye-rolling was probably her way of apologizing to me for this miracle she knew I could never have. The other ancient injury. But what was motherhood

to me? The sting of a wash-damp hand on a cheek. Or words, of the kind that can sting parts of a child more tender than flesh. Her curdled fortune inside me would not get passed on. What happened to me was for the best.

I left the shoes outside the back door and went upstairs to bed. I always thought of my mother as old back then, older than dirt, but she wasn't. Late thirties or so when she lost Cy and gave up on the rest. I was younger than that when I lost everything.

Allemande

The first time I ever laid eyes on Sigurd, I thought: *I know him*. Which wasn't true, he was a stranger, and I realized the mistake as soon as I'd made it. But I've wondered. Did I recognize the instrument of my downfall? Should we know it when we see it?

"Who is that man?" was the question I asked aloud. *That man*, because he was a little too old to be one of us, and plainly not a professor. Shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow, well-fitting jeans worn soft at the knees on a body that didn't sit around thinking for a living—you couldn't miss the muscles in the rear view. A townie, then. Hawking some tabloid, a thing people did back then, to inform a reader of the world's collapse and the one sure path to salvation, be that guided meditation or the club that meets at six p.m. in the Women's Studies Lounge. This was 1989, a year of earthquakes and oil spills and iron curtains starting to crash, so our options then were different and also maybe about the same. But trafficking in high-mindedness was the business of students, not town folk, I'd have thought.

I was crossing the campus with a professor I worked for as an accompanist, a French horn player clicking along beside me in shiny kitten-heeled pumps and a blazer. She was an older woman with a household of her own, husband and all that, so it surprised me what she answered: "Mercy, whatever he's selling, I'll buy it."

We both laughed, but didn't cross over the grass to get a better look at his goods. We were running late for something, headed to the MAC

for a dress rehearsal probably—it wasn't usual to practice in that giant auditorium unless we meant business. But with that little glimpse, he got in my head and stayed there the rest of the day: his way of standing on the sidewalk, body presented to the world, bundle of papers tucked under one arm as he cradled the flame of a lighter inside his cupped fingers to light a cigarette. Arms and wrists like Michelangelo's *David*, I swear, with power you could see in the muscle and sinew but tenderness in the hands. I shivered. As if those hands had touched me already.

It was springtime, there was that. Smell of reviving grass and all God's earthworms coming up for air after a winter that nigh had killed me. It wasn't my first winter in Indiana, but I never got used to that level of cold that makes the little hairs in your nose freeze and bristle like cactus spines, till you want to stop breathing. Months of ice and mud, and now here came crocuses, songbirds, light winning over dark like something out of the Bible. All of that could surely rouse a body into rut. Also too, the French horn professor had said what she did—I'll buy it—so it was him doing the selling. No special failing on my part.

I would go home that evening to a sweet boy who'd recently spoken of marriage. To me specifically: Jon Link and myself being married. I was meant to be walking on the clouds now, not looking over the fence. Even if I'd learned not to make too much of the marriage business. We lived among young people who could argue you down to the gristle on which was the better Brahms piano concerto, first or second, but shrugged off marriage as a so-called piece of paper. Unlike the people I'd come from, who held no act before the sight of God to be more important, for people generally but a girl certainly. It had been my mother's main argument against my running off to college: *What boy do you think will have you if you go on getting above yourself?* None likely, I granted, sitting that last day in her kitchen, talking to her back as she boiled potatoes, absorbing disapproval along with the potato smell I dreaded would follow me out of that house. I wanted to ask: *What boy do you think will have me now?* But that was her point. I was too peculiar. And run off, I did, pulled onto the Greyhound bus by a music scholarship that felt like a rope thrown to the drowning.

Finding at the other end of it a whole new world of peculiar. I'd never imagined so much.

I'd had almost three school years since then to find my bearings, two spent with Jon Link in the apartment that went from being his to more or less ours. (One-third of the rent was what I could afford.) A musician's life is about the skills of performance, starting with looking calm while your heart gulps blood and drums against your ears. I'd been doing that on a piano bench since I was ten. Now I could do it in classrooms, in a cafeteria, in a musical debate or beery party with classmates who had no idea how they cowed me with their confidence and straightened teeth and their ways of knowing and judging. I worked as hard at my calm expression as I did on my Hanon technical exercises, carrying it right into the apartment I shared with my boyfriend, listening with a neutral face as Jon Link discussed applying for married student housing in the fall when he started his second year as a grad student. On campus for the convenience, more space for the same money. Hearing myself say, "Sure, or for less money maybe," so we could drop some of the prima donnas off our lists. We both spent a lot of time supporting other musicians in more starring roles, which we felt cheated us from our own devotions, piano in my case, woodwinds and conducting in his. More time for our own work. In married student housing. There it lay between us: a plan for next year and, by quiet agreement, many more after that.

It made no sense, then, to find myself bothered by intrusive thoughts of a handsome stranger I'd seen from a distance. After my distracted rehearsal, those thoughts followed me home. How I spent those hours together with Jon Link I can't really say, but could guess, because our life was made of predictable things: the free Commodity Cheese I got in giant yellow blocks and melted into macaroni. The whopping blue metal cans of discount-brand coffee that should have lasted us a semester instead of a month. Three small rooms of furniture I'd retrieved from sidewalks and sometimes changed out for better on undergraduate moving-out days. I was amazed by the bounty of goods those students—people my own age!—could fling out on the sidewalk. Jon