



Photo by Tom Watson

Allegro con agitato

By Jennifer A. Cognard-Black

"Pretty as a picture," Mrs. Lombard said to my mom. We settled ourselves in the chairs farthest from the piano bench. I itched. Mom had starched my white dress stiff; it prickled my arms and legs. A cream bow was nestled in my hair. My patent leather shoes gleamed. I tried to see the reflection of my panties in the toes of my shoes while the first kid took his place at the piano. I didn't have much luck.

Mrs. Lombard was my grade-school piano teacher. She held these recitals twice every year, like clockwork. I always played Bach—this year I had graduated to the "Minuet in G." Mrs. Lombard tried to be friendly with my mother whenever she was in the studio, paying me compliments, telling Mom, "Jenny's so talented for a nine-year-old." Secretly, I knew she was a witch.

Mrs. Lombard had lots of strange-looking vials, ashtrays, and vases in her basement, where we had my lessons. Her house smelled old, like rotting fruit. I had never seen a Mr. Lombard or any kid Lombards; I imagined she had boiled their bones for her potions, creating the pungent smell of the house. When I looked at Mrs. Lombard's face, I saw nothing distinctive in her features, just the deep lines erasing the personality she once was. She wore coral on a string around her neck and a big, gaudy ring with a single black stone. I was convinced that if I were to mess up too much, she'd turn me into something horrid—a toad or an eel.

During my lessons, she used a wooden pointer to tap along with the clicking of the metronome. Sometimes she tapped the ledge of the keyboard; other times she tapped my shoulder or my head. Being a stickler for perfection, Mrs. Lombard didn't have much patience. If I accelerated too much or made too many mistakes, whack!—she'd crack the pointer down on the back of my hands, hard. Those days I got into the car to go home with small red lines over the bridge of my knuckles.

Just then Mom nudged me, and Mrs. Lombard nodded from across the room. It was my turn. I walked the long stretch between my seat and the piano, mindful not to look at the other kids. Reaching the piano bench, I carefully sat down, my hands curled in my starched lap. I looked at the keyboard, the flat white keys divided by the round black ones. Mrs. Lombard's two pianos were old uprights, shiny black, and I could see the reflection of my torso in the underside of the lid that covered the keys. I couldn't remember how to begin my minuet. I heard another kid shuffle and felt the weight of my mother's anxious stare boring into the white of my back. I raised my hands to the keys, closed my eyes, and began.

2

Dr. Berger's office was small and cluttered. He was a psychology professor who dabbled in music therapy. The first time I went to see him I was seventeen. I remember what he wore—jeans, cheap tennis shoes, and a white fish-net tank top. He was whistling as I entered, gazing at the ceiling, hands locked behind his head of dark curls. His bony legs were propped on a worn wooden desk. As soon as he saw me, he hopped up and bounded over to where I was, offering me a huge smile. His black skin shone beneath the netting of his tank top.

"I prefer this casual dress stuff—ties just aren't my style," he explained as he tugged at the netting.

To begin our session, Dr. Berger motioned for me to recline on a threadbare couch. "We're just going to move you through some relaxation techniques." His hands fluttered about his body.

"I'm going to start by asking you to relax each part of your body, one piece at a time," Dr. Berger said while sinking into an old leather chair next to the couch. He bent one leg over the other at a jaunty angle. "Don't worry about anything for the next hour, okay? You just let the worries of the world go down the drain." He laced his hands and cracked his long, black knuckles.

I fidgeted until comfortable.

"Close your eyes," he instructed.

The dim light that filtered through the cheap venetian blinds made stripes of orange and purple on the inside of my lids while Berger talked. "Think of that brain of yours just smoothing itself out," he said. I thought of it as gray, of course, tightly coiled, buzzing with electricity. Berger said my brain was a rubber band, one that was twisted tightly and could be slowly unwound. But I didn't think my brain was a rubber band. Instead, I saw it beeping, sending out its signals and receiving ones back. As he talked through each joint and limb of my body, I tried to pinpoint which part of my brain controlled the stage fright. I wondered why I couldn't control that part just as easily as I could control my breathing when I held my breath. I wanted to hold my fear—big gulps of holding, turning that part of my brain blue, keeping the fear from spreading through me like a fog.

"With each breath you take, energy is flowing out of your fingers and toes," Berger whispered. I envisioned myself in a Walt Disney film—a real person in an animated world, my fingers and toes alight with bright bands of orange energy. I threw the energy at Mickey Mouse. He ducked and it hit Cinderella on the side of her head.

Once we had moved through my body, Berger told me we were going to take a trip on an elevator. "I'm going to let you in a floor number ten, and then I'll talk you down until we reach one." I wondered how these images were connected—rubber band, flowing energy, elevator. "As we work you down," he said, "you will become more relaxed with each passing floor. You ready?" I heard him shift his weight in the chair.

"Now just keep breathing steady." He paused for a moment and then said, "Ten."

I built the inside of this elevator. I covered it with mirrors—even the ceiling had them. There was a wooden handrail around three sides and a deep red carpet at my feet.

"Eight . . ." I held on to the rail, looking at my reflection in each direction. I decided to wear my favorite jeans and an old sweatshirt. I didn't bother to curl my hair.

"Five . . ." Squinting closer in one of the mirrors, I noticed dark half-moons beneath my eyes and speculated that the overhead light was casting shadows. I decided to put on makeup so that they wouldn't be noticeable, rubbing on pink foundation I found in my pocket.

"Three . . ." I thought I heard the elevator cable break. I felt the swooping plummet and saw my innards splatter as I was smashed flat as a pancake. Then I told myself that this wasn't a very relaxing thought.

"Two . . ." I looked up through a hole in the ceiling of the elevator and saw Berger still on the tenth floor, leaning casually against the wall, peering over the side. He continued to press a button that said "down," while repeating "relax, relax," over and over.

"One . . ." he mouthed from above. Then, "You've hit the ground floor."

The elevator opened to an ocean at sunset. Berger said it was my special place of relaxation. "You can come here yourself. You can get away from the rat race anytime you want," he told me. Berger asked that I walk down the beach.

As I walked, he said I should imagine myself playing piano at my next competition. "Think of each piece of music, each and every one, and then play through all of them up on that stage under all those lights." An audience was fanned out around a bright stage. I sat upon a wooden bench at its center. A grand piano, its keys polished and white, waited in front of me.

I saw that the audience was mostly made up of piano teachers, balding and sun-spotted. A commanding woman sat in the front row, close to the stage. She didn't smile. She was older, in her fifties, bespectacled and heavy-set. As I looked at her, I noticed the grand piano in her glasses, tiny and distorted. She held a pencil poised over sheaves of music and looked up expectantly. A judge. I couldn't remember one note.

During the visualization Berger chatted on about the salt in the air, a warm breeze, the rustling of grasses on the hills surrounding the beach. From my position on the stage, I faintly heard the crash of waves, blurred and indistinct, much as in a dream.

3

My first and only solo piano recital was in the early spring of my tenth-grade year. We held it at my parents' house, and Mom planned a small reception for afterward in the dining room. It was to begin at four o'clock, and by two-thirty I was dressed, had begun each piece, and had worked through the "starting places" I could use if I screwed up or forgot. This left me an hour and a half to roam the house, bumping into people, watching the fuss that was all on my account.

The relatives arrived first, bearing food, clucking at me in proud tones. My mother told them that I was playing pieces fit for college students. "Jennifer's Debussy was the closing piece for the winner of the Van Cliburn two months ago. She's really advanced for her age," Mom added. The relatives nodded, faces glowing.

My aunt Shirley brought a comb to put in my hair. She had made it from small cloth flowers and fake pearls. At fifteen, my hair was the longest it had been since I was a little girl, and the comb helped to keep it out of my eyes. Its pastels matched my floral print dress. My cousin Helen set about to make the food table into a perfect display of color, dishes, and texture. She wouldn't set the crackers next to the mints or the cake next to the cheeses.

Ms. Harris, my high school piano teacher, arrived next. She was the opposite of old Mrs. Lombard. She was young and tidy, her short, highlighted hair combed back and her dress pressed and crisp. She busied her hands straightening programs, patting shoulders, arranging napkins, keeping me out of the music room and away from the piano. She talked to me about my starting places, when to bow, the order of the program, what to do if I made a mistake. She said, "Never show that you're worried, even if you hit every note wrong. If you fall off the piano bench, just keep on going."

Mom had that anxious gleam in her eyes. She followed me

about, telling me that it was probably scarier for her than it was for me. "I don't have the control you do," she reminded me. "I just have to sit, watch, pray, and hope for the best." She pinned my corsage on the front of my dress. "Imagine everyone in their underwear; remember that the audience goes to the bathroom just like you; if you make a mistake, no one will know except me and Ms. Harris." The corsage was heavy and pulled the floral material away from my body.

The audience finally came, unwrapped themselves from their coats, bearing small gifts, giving me private smiles. Making my mind blank, I looked at them, packaged in shimmering garments like exotic fish in an aquarium, each pressing up to the glass to see me better. I was the sprinkler of food, bits of music, a little boredom, a chance to get out of the house and away from their kids for two hours. As I agonized over eleven pieces, two breaks, and one encore, they would think about their week, the fight that they had had with their spouse, or when they were going to make time to do the taxes.

I glanced away from the streaming people and saw Dad in the next room, whispering urgently to Mom, leaning in to her. She shook her head as he spoke, looking away. Dad turned from her, angry, balling his fists. He walked toward me, and as he came close said, "You'll be okay, Little Bear," using the nickname he gave me as a baby. "You'll do fine." He patted my head as he passed. He didn't look convincing, just sad and helpless.

The time approached. I went into the kitchen, away from the chattering throng. I flexed my hands, wiggled my fingers. I wiped my moist palms on a paper towel. I looked outside the kitchen window, into the backyard, and thought about walking away, into the neighborhood, into the trees and green and sun. These people would still have their coffee and cake and I would keep walking along, gaining speed. As I looked, I saw my own face in the window, the grass showing through my cheeks, bare branches coming out of my head. I could see my eyes, wide and startled, the eyes of a young doe caught by a hunter, prepared by her mother for this moment, but not knowing what to do now that the moment had arrived.

Then Mom rounded the corner into the kitchen, grasped my upper arm, and said, "Time to go."

My memory of the recital is blurry up to the moment I blacked out the piece. It was a Mendelssohn "Song Without Words." I had begun this piece only six weeks before the recital and had memorized it quickly. My fingers hadn't had enough time to learn the movements by rote. After playing the first three measures, I couldn't remember what came next—couldn't feel where to go, couldn't grasp a pattern from the keys. I tried to begin a few times, then turned to look at my piano teacher. Ms. Harris was calm and whispered, "Go on to the next piece."

I did. Debussy's "Gardens in the Rain," the flashiest and best memorized piece I was working on at the time. I started rather well, with the quiet melody and whizzing left-hand runs. Then came the parallel octaves with the left and right hands together, and I started to lose control. I was playing too fast. It became a game of clank, batter, and fly as fast as you can. When I got to the repeated parts, I chose to skip them and plunge on, afraid that at any moment my fingers would lose the keys entirely. The performance was all technique and no feeling. I pounded out the notes, one clicking on top of the other, my left hand garbling up and down, my right spearing out a melody of sorts. I sacrificed all of the soft, sensitive moments, pushing to get it over with.

Mortified but unable to cry, I took my second break. I sat on a kitchen chair, my head in my hands, waved my mother away like brushing off a fly. Barely resting, I went back in to finish the last three pieces. At the end, I stood by the piano and took a single bow as the people awoke, clapping. I didn't play my

encore, but instead hurried through the music room, past the gaping eyes, out the back door of the house, and crouched behind the big electrical converter in the corner of our yard. Holding my heels, rocking back and forth, I cried.

4

I'm driving through a summer rainstorm to the university. I've brought my music books with me, nestling them in the passenger seat, mindful they don't slide down to the gritty floor. The piece I'm accompanying in three weeks is a Mendelssohn violin concerto, but I've also brought a few new pieces along from my rapidly diminishing solo repertoire. I don't get to the new works as often as I used to because I quit taking formal piano lessons two years ago; I quit all the competitions and recitals, all the real stuff of being a pianist. Now I just play behind other people. This has meant a steady decline in my hours of practice and, consequently, my technique. I am longing to make myself learn a new Chopin "Ballade," but the dogged perseverance needed to pull it off fails me.

Arriving at the university's music building, I place the music inside my T-shirt and bolt from my car to the front doors. I don't manage to evade getting wet, reaching the doors soaked. The music, thank God, remains dry. I hope that since it is summer and a Saturday night the good practice rooms will be available. I also hope that I am not spotted by any professors. Since I graduated a month ago, I no longer have the "right" to use the facilities. But tonight I am lucky. I spot no one and find my favorite room open—a black Steinway baby grand with ivory keys.

The room is small. The piano, a bench, a wastebasket, and a folding chair crowd against the walls, creating a tight space. The walls of the practice room are cement block, painted an institutional cream color. Acoustic tiles have been tacked to them with Velcro; these are cushiony and covered with a cheap burlap material. Sometimes, when I'm practicing late into the night, I pull the acoustic tiles off the walls and stack them on the floor to take a brief nap. The piano itself is pockmarked and worn from trumpet cases, pop cans, pencils, rulers, books of sheet music, and metronomes. The keys, however, are pristine, neither chipped nor blackened with finger oils.

On the back of the door is a long mirror for singers to watch the shape of their mouths as they sing. Without a singer to block its reflection, it shows the piano bench and whoever is seated upon it. Sometimes I watch my fingers as they race along the keyboard, but I enjoy this activity less and less, not wanting to witness the inevitable decay of my ability.

I take a moment to look at my hair in the singer's mirror before I begin perusing the Mendelssohn violin concerto. I am trying to grow it out again. I hold it up on the top of my head, wisps falling hither and yon. I try to remember the last time I had long hair, five years old, crying while Mom pulled each knot out with a blue comb, the "no tears" shampoo bottle resting by the tub. For my first year of piano lessons I could almost sit on my hair when I was at the piano, legs dangling short of the pedals. That time seems unreal, as if I inherited someone else's cowering body just before puberty and now cannot regain the young child's ambivalence.

Two years after blacking out the Mendelssohn "Song Without Words," I began taking Inderol. Berger said it would inhibit my adrenaline and take out the shakes from my hands and legs. It didn't work—I still vomited before and shook all the way through competitions. The adults I knew continued to talk about music as my life career. After all, they said, how could I waste such a talent?

Everyone but Dad seemed pleased when I announced that I would continue piano in college. Mom and Ms. Harris were sure that I could lick the fear on my own—that it was just a "phase" of my musicianship. Mom called it a "growing experience," an expression that implied a painful ordeal which, in the end, would prove good for me.

I stare at the music I've brought with me. Finally, I pull out the violin concerto, leaf through the first two movements and begin with the third. It's marked *allegro con agitato*. This means play damn fast and sound really pissed off. I begin with my left hand only, working the leaps, deciding the best fingering for the runs. Marking the fingering above the notes reminds me of hours of Bach and Mrs. Lombard's conviction that fingering was all-important to precision and speed. I remember her vicious pointer, marking time.

Mrs. Lombard is now dead and cremated in San Diego. I can't imagine Mrs. Lombard in San Diego, her pursed, thin face under perennial sun. I remember her as an eccentric Nebraska woman, wearing mismatched jewelry, print dresses, and thick shoes. She seems too hard for San Diego, hard like a sod house, an open prairie, a plow. She was a woman who might do anything to survive: eat her children, if need be. Maybe San Diego killed her, all that predictable weather without a chance for a good tornado or a blinding snowstorm. She always said that a good musician needed to do it "the hard way." Maybe surviving became too easy.

In my sophomore year of college, I quit. I quit seventeen hours before I was to perform for a world-renowned pianist. I didn't waste much time thinking about my decision. I picked up the phone, called my piano professor at his home, and said I wouldn't be part of the performance the next day. He didn't believe me at first. He said, "Jennifer, you're just scared. You're the best pianist the university has. You'll do fine. You always do."

And before I let myself buy it, let myself ride on the wave of another's security, I spoke into the receiver. I denounced fifteen years of training, of two hours a day in front of a keyboard, of missed dates because I hadn't finished practicing, of music scholarships, of promised greatness. The tiny girl, the one with hair brushing the back of her starched dress, stared into the reflection of those patent leather shoes and saw herself. She reached through fifteen years, her fingers at my face . . . and I said, "I'm sorry. I quit."

I notice in the singer's mirror that my eyes are tired and decide to call it a night. I close the violin concerto and look at the new pieces, their bindings uncracked, the language of notes and staves within them waiting to be translated. I wonder if I'll ever play through them, knowing that my fingers will never fly as fast, that what I hear in my head will not be realized.

I still rummage around for the fear spot in my head, talking to it, trying to show it that there isn't much to be afraid of. The worst has happened—I forgot the piece. And I survived. I want to play for Ms. Harris, for my mother, for the memory of Mrs. Lombard—with control, fire, and passion. Most of all, with passion. It is impossible to show passion when wrestling with one's body. The minute becomes all-important, each shake, each flutter of the stomach holds the mind in a vice, praying that the moment will end, that the piece will end. This is not music. I've labored for years in search of music, and I've received mere execution—a fast, well-memorized display of technical will. I've performed without passion.

I prepare to go back into the summer storm, wrapping my music books, taking a sheaf of paper from the wastebasket to cover my head. As I gather my things and stand up, I catch how the lacquered lid of the piano reflects my hands. In the reflection, they are perfect pianist's hands—long fingers, short nails. They neither shake nor sweat. I press one palm to the wood, meeting its sister image trapped within. The two hands meet, briefly, as through a chink in a wall. ●



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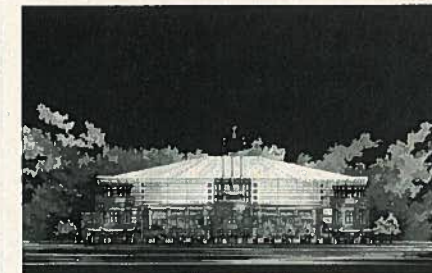
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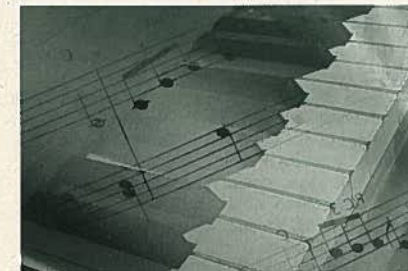
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