

Robinson sat over his cup of coffee. His eyes moved in time to the jazz playing over the stereo, flicking back and forth in his paunchy face. He was thinking about his wife's nose.

He had just been brought two eggs over-easy, wheat toast, and strawberry jam, the same breakfast as always. The waitresses at the restaurant knew him by name. When he came in he sat down at the counter and waved and they brought him his breakfast and a cup of coffee.

"Hey, Robinson, what song is this?" said a waitress.

"'In a Sentimental Mood.' John Coltrane and Duke Ellington, 1963. Come on, I thought you'd know that one."

"Oh—it's just Pandora," she said. "I don't know all the songs that come up on it yet." To change the subject, she said, "How's your music stuff coming, anyway? How're your students?"

"My students are good. The composition is going lousy."

"Well, keep pluggin' away. You'll get it someday."

"Thanks. Hey, what're you doing on the fourth? You should come by and hear the band play."

"Oh, sorry... we were planning a girls' night. I probably shouldn't mention this to such an upstanding member of the community, but we plan to drink until we're unconscious."

Discomfort flared up in Robinson. He didn't know why and he ignored it. "Hey, I wasn't always a teacher, you know."

"Is that so?"

He smiled. "It is. I was a rogue once."

"You?" she arched her eyebrows. "There's no way. I picture you being someone who's always on top of their shit. I bet you always get your lesson plans together on time."

"Nah, I could see it," said another waitress. "He's got that look in his eyes. That look that real romantics have. Real artists. They're always wild and self-destructive."

Robinson's discomfort grew as he wondered to what extent she was joking, but he kept the same half-smile on his face. He left a good tip on the table and tried not to think about it, but by the time he turned the keys in his car he found that he was furious.

He worked on lesson plans from twelve until three, and then went back to his house to scribble angrily on sheets of staff paper—his composition—until his wife got home at six. He welcomed her with a kiss; she asked how it had gone that day and he said, "Oh, not so bad. I think the horns are almost ready on the third movement." He reheated dinner for her and they watched *How I Met Your Mother* until she fell asleep on the couch.

Watching Emma sleeping gave him butterflies. She wasn't that much to look at—objectively, he knew that. She had a crooked nose. It was the way she used to play that harp, back at Juilliard, where he had fallen in love with her in the first place.

Even asleep, it looked like she had a smile on her face. How could she be so happy all the time? It was a miracle. He wasn't that great.

Lying to Emma about his work always came with a twinge of guilt. He lied to his students, too, and his colleagues. He constantly held fast that jazz and big band music was “the only great American art form that’s left,” even though he hadn’t felt that way for years. “But even that pales in comparison to the work of the great European composers,” he would say. “Mahler’s Ninth Symphony—the most sublimely organized sound a human mind has ever produced.” He had always dreamed of writing his own great American suite of equal value, but in truth a new melody hadn’t come to him in years.

At first, he had been so shocked at his colleagues’ lack of appreciation for Mahler that he had bullheadedly forced the maestro’s Ninth Symphony into the curriculum. They still played it every year.

But he felt that Emma, too, was part of the problem. Every weekend they took to go skiing together, every concert he put on with his earnest but untalented students, to the extent that it made him happy, was a failure, keeping him from the life he was supposed to have.

Late that night, Robinson went out to buy milk. He drove home past the reservoir where the Fourth of July concert would be the next day. He could see the lights of Lincoln below the steel barricade. The night was unusually dark, and the town looked tiny and isolated down below.

Suddenly, something veered out into Robinson’s headlights: a cyclist. He almost ran straight into him. He rolled down his window and shouted at the cyclist, and to his surprise he saw the figure slow down.

Robinson pulled up beside him. “What the hell are you doing?” he said. “I could’ve run you off the road. The lane here is for you, you know!”

When the form of the cyclist emerged into the cone of his headlights, he recognized the unkempt hair and slouch of one of his students. Jared Blecher, alto saxophone, second chair, a student who obviously had talent but steadfastly refused to apply himself. In the glare of the headlights, he looked completely dazed.

“Damnit, Blecher, is that you?” said Robinson.

“What?”

“Are you drunk?”

“Mr. Robinson? Nothing, no—I was just.”

“What were you doing in the road?”

“I was just riding home.”

“After you were drinking? And you left your lights at home?”

He didn’t have an answer. Robinson sighed.

“Anyway, kid, let me give you a ride home?”

He let the kid put his bike in the trunk and they took the road that led back into town.

“Listen, Blecher,” Robinson began. “You’ve got your whole life to have fun, but these are important years. A lot of my friends... a lot of them fucked them up, and now they’re paying the price. Kids that

were really promising, like yourself, and now they're insurance salesmen or waiters or dishwashers. You keep hanging around with that crowd you're in with and who's to say where you're going to end up, no matter how talented you are. And I'm not telling you this to scare you, I just think you're alright and I don't want you to fuck up."

Neither of them said anything for a long time. Robinson put on a CD to break the silence.

"What is this?" said Blecher.

"You don't know it?" said Robinson.

Jared shook his head.

"What?"

"Nothing," said Robinson.

"What?"

"Don't worry about it."

Robinson turned up the heat in the car. He took these roads at a fast clip, feeling the pull of the embankments on the wheel, pulling the same way they had the thousand other times he had taken this road at night.

They pulled onto the road leading back into town. They passed the football field, the drive-in, the old houses of the west side of town.

They arrived at Blecher's house.

"Listen, I want you to get some sleep," Robinson said. "You've got a big day tomorrow."

Driving home, Robinson thought about what he'd said to the kid. It brought him back to music school and his lofty ambitions. He had watched the demise of all aspirations of his friends from back then. A composer he'd thought was a genius now worked as an analyst at a tech firm; a brilliant pianist moved back to her hometown and played in a church. No one had reached their potential. And here he was, a public school teacher, conducting this ramshackle band.

At eight o'clock on July Fourth, Jared looked out at the lake, far from the crowded subdivision where he lived. He wished he didn't have to practice the trumpet part to Mahler's Ninth Symphony any more. What kind of song was that for July Fourth, anyway? He was young, and this was one of his last summers before he had to become an adult; he ought to be enjoying every last moment he had.

The song sounded like absolute ass every time he played it, anyway. He was pretty confident that some people were made to get good at an instrument and some were not, and that he, Jared Blecher, assuredly was not. Was he put on this earth to struggle and toil with something he was destined never to master? Was he not allowed to enjoy himself?

There was a party going on that night at Aaron Brown's lake house. It didn't officially start until ten and he was supposed to report for duty at the promenade at nine o'clock sharp. But there was no way the performance would go on for more than half an hour. If he went over there for a little while now, he could at least pregame, hang out for a while, hop back over to City Park at ten for the performance, and then go back. It wasn't like Robinson had any real authority to punish him if he

showed up late. Hell, it was the summer. He'd put his dress clothes in his backpack and change in the bushes behind the promenade. There shouldn't be any problem at all.

He put the horn back in its case and set off on his bike for the party. He wasn't going to waste any more time.

As he had done every year since he could drive, Robinson parked his car at the elementary school and threaded his way through big groups of teenagers to the lake. Law and order were suspended within the radius of the Fourth of July celebration.

Robinson had been to the fireworks display in Lincoln every Fourth of July since he was little, first growing up and then summers back from school, and he still looked forward to it all year. Barring his composition, it was the most important thing to him in the world—those kids all coming together to make something unified and whole.

He began his customary walk along the lake that he did every year, before everything was set up. Two kids walked by.

"I heard there's going to be ten tons of fireworks this year," said one.

"No way," said the other. "They keep decreasing the budget every year."

"No way."

"Yeah, they decrease it every year so they can spend more money on cops. See, every year they bring in thousands of dollars from MIPs. It's the only reason they can keep it going without selling tickets."

"No way."

The sun had just gone down and the sky was a dreamy swirl of colors. He thought back to the night before and looked back at his students, starting to set up their instruments. Where was Blecher?

He liked the kid because he was honest. He knew about students ditching band to smoke weed and his attitude about it was generally that boys will be boys, but what really got him about it was the dishonesty. It seemed that they not only went out of their way to create elaborate lies, but also that they were deliberately careless about clearing up the evidence—they actually left burnt-out joint ends all over the ground in the unused loading bay under the band room.

It was nothing like him. In high school, he had spent hours practicing the trumpet. When other kids went out, he stayed in and practiced. Other kids liked Prince and Duran Duran; he liked Beethoven. He would sometimes dream in music, and then he was filled with despair when he sat down at the piano and discovered that he couldn't recreate what he'd heard.

Where was Jared? It was about all Robinson could take. He threw down his baton bitterly and decided he wasn't going back to the bandstand.

The teenagers stood on the shore of the lake outside Aaron Brown's house, across the water from where everything was being set up. It was almost dark; the sky was dark blue, the clouds were grey, and all the people on the shore were bathed in shadows. Jared couldn't see anyone's face; he felt like he was moving through some kind of underworld.

They took shots out of little white Dixie cups. Someone brought out weed, and Jared thought, well, it

is summer.

Jared glanced across the lake to where they were setting up. He couldn't get Robinson's words out of his head for some reason. A drunk bike ride home in the summer. He was seventeen years old—who was Robinson to criticize? Had he never had fun when he was younger? It was bad enough having to think about applying to colleges, and then in four years having to find a job—how was he supposed to do any of that?

He forced those thoughts to be silent. This moment was what mattered. Looking at the dark shapes around him—he couldn't see them but he could hear their voices—he felt free from everything that waited for him across the lake. He felt free.

He met eyes with Andrea Reid. She had a boyfriend who wasn't here. He played tennis, and he always wore his headband around, even in class, which always struck Blecher as disgusting.

She was drunk. There was something in the way that she looked at him... he felt like she didn't want him to break free of her gaze.

Some guy from his calculus class—Andy something—suggested that they go for a walk with Andrea and another girl he hadn't seen before. Andy Something offered him a cigarette.

Blecher met eyes with Andrea. She was looking at him like she wanted to pull his clothes off. She had a boyfriend. This is what Jared would ordinarily have been thinking. But he had a cigarette and he took huge drags on it and blew them out without inhaling. He didn't care. He felt like a man.

They locked eyes. Her face was very close to his and her eyes were filled with energy. Andy Noname and the other girl had gone off somewhere else.

They kissed. He let it linger a long time, feeling a strange dissolving feeling, overwhelming all the objections in his brain.

Robinson surveyed the scene around him. He was in the middle of a festival; he felt as if festivals like this had occurred the same way since the beginning of time, and would keep occurring forever. A group of students he didn't recognize were sprawled across the curb with bottles of beer in their hands and he stood watching them for a while. Their faces were sublimely smooth and unconcerned. They joked and jostled around, flirted, put their arms around each other, all with ease. It was something he had never understood; everything to him was cerebral and thought-out. Even his students, perpetually late to class, unconcerned with practicing or technique, were incredible to him. The ease and lack of concern with which they existed in the world—it was like watching the gods lounging at Mount Olympus.

The fireworks started up. A barrage of them exploded in a burst of golden rain. He was surrounded by unwashed faces, children suddenly screaming, children running around, chasing lit-up electric toys around on the ground. A breeze started up, rustling the leaves in the trees, and he was cold.

Suddenly two memories hit him as strongly as the wind and the cold. The first was of a day, any day, in high school band—the crashing of the cymbals, the horrible roar of the tubas. Playing the alto. It was before his composition, before any of his talk of his “great American art form”; he had just liked playing music every day. The second was of his wife's crooked nose.

Their first date had gone badly, he had thought, all those years ago. He had debated for what felt like hours over whether to lean in and kiss her, and then when he had gone ahead and done it she had tensed up and turned her head to the side. He was mortified; he didn't make any attempt to get

back in touch with her. He kept thinking about her, but he had a terrible memory for faces, and whenever he recalled her in his mind he had to start with her nose and work from there.

One day he saw her name on a poster for a recital on campus, and in a melancholy mood he bought a ticket, thinking he would sit in the back row.

The night of the performance was a Friday night in the fall of his sophomore year. He was becoming nearsighted and from the back, she was little more than a blur. He sat back there, thinking about the things she'd said to him, trying to rebuild her image in her mind, hardly paying attention to the music at all. He tried to picture going up to her after the concert and saying hello, but he couldn't. He decided he wouldn't do it.

Afterwards, tramping through the piles of red leaves on the way back to his dorm, he ran into her lugging her harp back across the quad. He had called to her and offered to help, just like that. It hadn't been so difficult after all. She asked him why he hadn't called her back, apologized if she'd been weird. His heart was beating like a rabbit's.

He told people afterwards, and later on started to tell himself, that it had been that performance on the harp that made him fall in love with her, but that wasn't it at all. The wind was very cold and it was starting to rain.

He wanted to stay out for a little while longer to watch the fireworks.

After the fireworks, both Andrea and Jared were still there—she with her shirt off and her dress pulled up above her hips, he with his shirt still on and his jeans off. Jared was covered with sand. It was cold. Andrea wouldn't meet his eyes.

“What's wrong?” he said.

She didn't answer.

“Wasn't it good?”

She laughed softly.

Suddenly he heard music coming across the lake.

But it wasn't Mahler. It was something else—a saxophone playing by itself. A tune he had heard before.

He pulled on his jeans. Said goodbye to Andrea. His request for her number got another laugh.

He wandered over to where the sound was coming from. He found Robinson playing his alto, sitting on the curb.

“Hey, kid,” he said.

“Hey.”

“Things didn't go as planned, did they?”

Blecher shook his head.

“It's alright,” said Robinson.

Suddenly Blecher recognized the tune. It was “Body and Soul.”

Robinson had played it at the end of class the first day of his senior year. They were starting with a unit on jazz.

It was the last class of the day, September first, and nobody really wanted to be inside at that very moment. The music sounded strange—sour and acrid and littered with wrong notes. Backpacks were zipped up, papers put away noisily, conversations flared up. But something about the music held Jared’s attention.

When it was over, Blecher noticed that Robinson had teared up. A few kids giggled. He pulled himself together and said a few words to wrap up.

“You want to know what jazz is?” he said, trying to keep his voice above the commotion of twenty eighteen-year-olds who wanted to be outside.

“I can’t explain it any better than that.”

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