

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: POLYPHONY (novel-in-progress)
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This novel excerpt focuses on Marshall, a musical prodigy, coming of age during the year of 1925, and seven years later, reflecting on the events. The piece focuses not only on the death of innocence for a young adult, but also the last golden years of New York City before the Depression, juxtaposed against the last golden age of the circus freak show. Thematically, the piece explores the very definition of humanity, and how prescribed boundaries, such as race, gender, or physicality, are put into question, especially when art is concerned. Additionally, the novel asks readers how to depict humanity and human experience through art, specifically music, which acts as a backdrop for the protagonist's experiences and informs how he sees the world. Grappling with the first awakenings of death, sexuality, the need for family, and himself as an artist, the protagonist begins viewing New York City and the circus differently, allowing for subtle observations about the impending darkness of the Depression. Therefore, the novel provides a dual awakening, of a change in self and society.

POLYPHONY

By

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I'm not sure what this story will turn out to be, but that's how stories usually begin. It may be a platonic valentine for Jo, or a struggling epic I tried hard to write. It can be both. But it can't be an apology. I won't let it. I lack the theatrical tongue of many I've met, and I'm unable to mimic Jo's poetic prowess and vivacious verbs, though I'll give it a go. When you're around performers for a long period of time, your gift becomes sharper and your ego more humble. I made a Chain of Beings list, similar to the medieval model, in the back of my composing notebook my first summer at Julliard. The list was a rarity. I resist grouping people, especially artists. I'm tempted to revise it. Without reservation, I put musicians on the highest rung, even dotting the two I's of "musician" with shapely quarter notes. That's what happens when you ask for a dorm room next to the music hall, tape bits from a Beethoven toccata on a bureau mirror and sing them on the way to theory class, and manage to separate the allegro of the pipes from the andante of settling wood. Below the musicians were the authors, and yes, I might have put them there because I always found them admirably inarticulate. There's a certain attractiveness in not knowing what to say, even though your vocabulary is exceptional and your written words worthy of imitation. I felt closest to them, because they valued subtlety and precision. My roommate, Sam Jamison, barely talked, but his prose, mainly detective stories set in Istanbul, fascinated me more than any conversation could have. I admit. I miss Detective Milieu, but at least he died romantically--laying under those stars and being trampled by that camel. Yes, authors definitely deserve to be second. Painters came third. I like it better when we paint our own places, sketch out our own feelings. It's the more difficult route. However, there is something about donating a day to a blank space, then freeing it of its whiteness. In my compositions, the whiteness of the pages bothers me. After beheading Milieu's assistant, Gietka, Sam, in a rare moment of verbal wisdom, said that in time the whiteness surrounding my notes would disappear. I'm still practicing artistic patience, but I'm content to wait for that. I placed actors second to last, chuckling the whole time. I've never seen a play, but I've seen several films. Films respect music, and I, in turn, respect filmmakers. But the stories' mouthpieces, buried under heavy costumes, not even saying their own words, turned me off their invented histories. Maybe it was because of my teenage filmgoing experiences. I haven't seen a film since 1925, seven years back. Plus, actors always wanting to hear their own voices aggravated me. The Julliard actors were obsessed with monologues, chose them over shared speeches and choruses. I prefer things to be in a company....now. Then again, the actors may have been placed there simply because they took the best tables in the dining hall.

The last rung was reserved for architects, including sculptors, masons, and builders. I felt some strange masculine affinity for them, a protective instinct almost. I stepped over anthills, avoided spider webs, and steered clear of cement to lend credence to their work.

That same affinity compelled me to root them to the bottom, close to the ground, untouched by the more pretentious artists. The main revision I wanted to make was considerably difficult. Where should I place them? They belonged on many a rung: musicians who knew when to let a song linger and a note rest; authors with stories to tell, these oral celebrations, musings, revelations I'll capture with a pen; painters who saw and made brushstrokes while I sat back and watched, now curating the whole; and yes, some were actors, but that was only six nights out of seven, six hours a day, and they didn't need a script. I'll have to make a new chain, I guess. A Chain of Belonging. The bottom rung is where I'll put myself. You can place the rest.

A good Lutheran boy, which I was at fifteen, knows that everything started with a fall. Hearing the story, I immediately liked Adam. Anyone that gets to name animals and maintain his dignity while being naked everyday is swell in my book. Adam worked with his hands. Throughout my twenty-two years, that's all I've done. I never felt partial to Eve until I reached Parnum, and that was because of the holder of Eve, not Eve herself. It makes sense to start there then, with a fall from the heavens.

I. Stray Notes on the Rafters

The dulcimer softened the clarinet's rough arpeggios as an usher closed the oak doors, shutting out the Manhattan sunlight. A flat flute was covered by its neighbor, a piccolo whose towering trill climbed the cornices. The dutiful violinists plucked their strings, closing their eyes, probably smelling perfume and sweat. The conductor, lanky and pale, fumbled with his music stand, maybe humming Rachmaninoff's first symphony.

I hated missing the warm-up, because I found it the most interesting part of the concert. For those five minutes, I could see the frailty of the musicians. The trumpeters would nervously tap their valves, surveying the crowd for critics and beaming family members. The lone harpist, off to the side of the ensemble, exposed and alluring, would tap his toes on the stage floor, looking longingly at the man surrounded by the golden brass of his tuba. The conductor looked up to Carnegie's roof, a sky with blaring lights, murmuring to himself, maybe conjuring the confidence of Mozart or Beethoven. Those were the precious seconds I treasured before the instrumental war.

That war. The conductor raised his arms high, and their faces disappeared like heads in trenches. I embraced the war's remarkable subtleties. Whatever personality they possessed was lent to the notes--their graceful shyness, their panicky joyfulness, their soft remorse. Some notes clashed, trying to overcome the dominant melody. After the recapitulation, they took turns in a cathartic release, standing their instruments at attention while others raged on. The bevy of clarinets were raised, reeds laced with saliva, as the few French horns of the company were lowered, surrendering to their occupant's knees. The clarinets let out a loud cry, a lofty A, summoning the other woodwinds. The flutes, piccolos, oboes, and bassoons responded with a countermelody, rich and triumphant, until an eager trombone overpowered them with a resounding whole note. The conductor stood atop his perch, silently mouthing commands, pointing his baton at various players. The final note, a conciliatory D, made full use of the acoustics while we shivered in the shadows of the rafters.

"The tone's a little off tonight, Jo," I said, parting the red, satin curtain. Johansen Oswald pressed his cheek against mine, peering down at the orchestra.

"Rachmaninoff's tone is always off. He mix light and dark real good, like a happy funeral," said Jo, biting into an apple.

"No, I mean the other type of tone. Sounds too pitchy. I think it's that oboist. He's new, isn't he?"

"Yeah, so is that black-haired woman with the violin. But I cut that oboist some slack.

He look like he likes to play. That woman...she ain't care."

I nodded, then glanced behind me. The rafters, hidden by thick curtains, were being renovated, a two-year endeavor according to Cubby, the oldest but pluckiest usher at Carnegie. The solid floor we inhabited disappeared after the frieze was finished. I felt compelled to deface the frieze, a beautiful, marble depiction of a siren serenading a ship into Poseidon's grasp, just so the space would stay. I didn't have the moxy to do it. Jo always offered to buy me some moxy in a bottle to perk up what he knew was already there, that infant fire under the meekness.

But I surprised him a couple of times. After all, I was the one who found the space, picked Cubby as the most advantageous ally, and took the premature trips to see if the rafters' acoustics were acceptable. The space was truthfully nothing appealing--dried, pigeon poop in the left corner, the center of the wood scuffed by shoemarks, the lamentable creak everytime Jo and I sat down. It took me a whole week to convince him to come the first time, just to hear Mozart's "Quartet for Strings." That first afternoon, Jo stood near the edge of the surface, nodding and pretending to be engaged, but I knew he was checking the security of the floor. Afterward, Jo couldn't even tell me what part of the concert he liked best.

Then Jo named it. He called it "the heavens" after a theatre term he heard his uncle say once. In the heavens, we mostly discussed music, especially while the notes wafted through the curtains, but during intermissions the topics would often change. After all, fifteen-year olds have lots to talk about.

"You ain't want a apple?" said Jo, fishing in his knapsack.

"Yeah...thanks. Your mom cooking apple pie again?" I said.

Jo handed me a large apple. "Why else we get 'em? But I'm sick of pie. I'm wantin' some of Tilly's potatoes."

I laughed. "Tilly makes the best potatoes. Soon as you put some in your mouth, you actually believe she made them for you, like a mother."

"That comfort food, just like Mama's pie. But I ain't never ate no white woman's food as good as Tilly's potatoes. That swell eatin'."

"Everyday at your house is swell eatin'."

"You should know! You there all the time eatin' lunch and we still ain't fatten you up."

I bit into my apple. "You're not fat either."

"I ain't fat, but I got muscle, like that cello down there. Brown and strong. My voice even be low like its sound, soon as it stop changin'. But you like that dinky piccolo. Squeeze you hard enough and we hear somethin' crack."

I threw a seed at Jo's head and stood up. I started to unfasten the rod of the curtain, feeling the satin bump against my face.

"You crazy, Mars? They'll see us," exclaimed Jo.

"Nobody looks up here. You wanna freeze or not?" I said, setting the rod down and dragging the curtain over to Jo.

Jo and I wrapped the scarlet curtain around us. Jo stuck out his hand to finish his apple.

"This feel real fine," said Jo, running a thumb over the satin. "Wonder how much it cost."

I shrugged. "They're wearing a bit. See how the seam is coming loose? Probably did what someone else was going to do eventually. I'd put up some orange ones, to match the glow of the lights near the balcony."

I hated when I did that. God or maybe Tilly made me so aware of flaws, but only fake flaws, the flaws you try to cover up. It's probably why I dumped Tilly's new make-up in the garbage can when I was seven. I dropped the blush, lipstick, and eyeliner into a

white trash bin. I'm pretty sure I convinced myself that it was actually a poor chemistry experiment, to see if make-up could make a trashcan as beautiful as a face. When it went wrong, when it was just as smelly and ugly as before, I ended up disliking both make-up and science.

"I'd put up some blue curtains. Sky blue. Then it really be the heavens. And me Carnegie's biggest star."

"Well, you're no angel, that's for sure."

Jo poked my stomach under the curtain. "Better a star than an angel. But you watch, Mars. My girl gonna be an angel. I walk her down there, and everybody be lookin' and bein' jealous. We gonna turn heads."

"What girl would have you?"

"Got her all picked out. She gotta laugh, even in church. She gotta know how to fix green beans and chitlins or else Mama think she useless. She gotta mouth back, specially when I say somethin' I shouldn't. And she gotta like to hitch rides on milk trucks and fly kites cause that just natural. What about you, Mars?"

I pulled the curtain closer to my neck, shaking my head.

"I don't know," I said.

"You know but you ain't tellin'."

"No, I really don't know."

I knew alright, perhaps a little too well.

"Well, whoever she is, she sit with my girl. They be friends like us, and we all go out West after we strike it here good, make Carnegie pay us millions. Then, we settle in Texas. A black man can own a mansion there and nobody care. Two mansions near the desert for you and me. Gets us some sheep, chickens, horses."

I bit my lip, listened to the scattered conversation below. So many conversations are meant to be heard, if only you'd stop to listen. Two

gentlemen argued about the morality of toy pipes, the red-haired gentleman quoting a periodical he'd read in San Francisco.

The other gentleman, shining a monocle with the edge of his coat, said that things were different out West, where there was no sense of propriety, and that before you knew it, ten-year olds would be smoking pipes and stealing their father's guns rather than learning Latin. They must have a farm of intellectual ten-year olds somewhere that I don't know about. I longed for a toy pipe to smoke under a setting sun, then to look back at Nebraska from a train car window on the way to Texas, and maybe, just maybe, to have her sitting next to me, our suitcases in the overhead compartment. The train chugged across the tracks, and we sat in the middle of the car, after I had argued with a conductor that we couldn't be separated, that it wasn't right. It was one of the few times where I was loud.

"We can camp out on weekends, and I fix us beans on the griddle. Never too rich for beans," said Jo.

"I don't want your burnt beans," I said.

Jo put his apple core on my head. "My beans good, boy."

I took the apple core off my head and held it in my hands. I twirled it clockwise, then counter-clockwise. Everything should be that easy. Why shouldn't it be? Dreams sprang up out of the desert out there, and the rustle of tumbleweeds provided a lively accent for the dull landscapes. The red clay of the mountains would match our moods--bold, deep, a little brave.

"Why you frowning, Mars? You don't like my plans?" said Jo.

"I want us to make it, Jo," I said.

"It gonna happen."

"How do you know?"

"Cause we in heaven while everyone else down there. We Mars and Jo, and God on our side."

I nodded, finally feeling the warmth of the curtain. We glanced down from the heavens, as the ensemble began a suite from Handel. Jo swayed from side to side, mimicking the conductor. I held the apple core erect, waving it in the air like the conductor's baton. For once I didn't mind the bitterness of Jo's burnt beans or have a problem with the seams in the curtain. The four of us, including Jo's angel, could board the train without problems, without cold looks. But the sunlight was beating against the oak doors as the violins played a somber pianissimo. I knew that Manhattan was trying to break through.

After the concert, Jo and I sat on the steps while Cubby tried unsuccessfully to pull his dress shirt over his paunch. Cubby's life was

half-invented, half true, and if anyone could distinguish the two, then they're more perceptive than me.

Here's one thing I hope was fact. Cubby used to practice his smile, but his back tooth no doubt started hurting again and he stopped. His tooth was weird, he'd told me upon my first visit, as temperamental as the seasons. I first met him on a July day. I was sitting on the steps of Carnegie to hear strands of Bach's sonata in G minor, held by its lush harmony and the gregarious flutes, when Cubby greeted me with his summer smile, a freer smile as it was the season where his tooth ached less. He said that I came to him in a good season, a season where he felt charitable. Cubby invited me in that first night, but I politely declined, something I regretted as I couldn't get to sleep until the next morning.

How could anyone turn down free Bach? I came back two times, just to hear if Bach would make a return appearance. The third time, I noticed a program lying on the top step, calm and white despite the light rain and dirty ground. The rain ended with the first coda while I followed the wet words. Cubby appeared halfway through the program and threw me a light jacket. I still have that jacket because Cubby never asked me for it back. Instead, he kept giving: the space, the stories, the programs everyone threw away but I kept under my bed mattress at Tilly's.

"Good show tonight," I commented. "What's the story for next week?" "Some Russian symphonies and quartets," replied Cubby. "We going East, Mars. Rachmaninoff was just a taste."

"I'll be looking forward to those cellos then. Russians really like the cello," I said.

Maybe it was pity that drove Cubby to let me in those nights, but I like to think it's because Cubby liked having a friend that was interested in his life before being an usher. I'm not sure if Cubby had many friends, and questioned whether the ones he talked about were real. When I brought Jo, it was just someone else, someone to talk to. Cubby always compared him to Nick Baines, who seemed the most flesh and blood out of his friends.

"I was in Russia twice, when I use to be on the national swim team. We always beat 'em, especially me and Nick Baines. He look a bit like you, Jo, except he a little lighter. Nick grew up in Barbados, and me near Coney Island, and we island folk got swimming in our blood. Those Russians don't got that."

"Those Russians know how to carve out that melody, make the feeling sit on top. Ain't no flittery feeling, too. They deep," said Jo.

"Glad to see it ain't wasted on the young. You guys probably hear better music on the street, don't ya? Yeah, some of these people passing through here concerned with the key change and the time between breaks, but what they need to worry about is the space

between them and the audience. If you ain't reachin', then you got bigger issues. That's what you notice when you here every night, and that reachin' come in different ways. When a boy be tickled when spit come out that trumpet valve, or a girl pick that clarinet reed off the floor and see the music under the wood, when a critic shuffle in his seat because he's moved to tears. Ya'll remember that when you get on the big stage."

"We will," I promised. "Thanks for sneaking us in, Cubby."

"It's nothing," said Cubby. "Ya'll get before the crowd come out."

Jo and I started down the steps. He grabbed my arm, and whirled me around.

"Knapsack. Forgot it," he said.

Jo routinely lost things-- twine for his kite, polish for his guitar, coins from his father. I still find it funny that he could remember every measure of a song, but not where he left a pocket knife.

"Maybe we can get it real quick," I said, climbing the steps.

The crowd began to empty the hall. Cubby and Marcy, a blonde junior from Columbia, handed out programs as women with pastel-colored hats, lavender and tangerine, and white and rust-colored minks exited, holding their husband's, dressed in fine Italian suits, hands. I felt like the harpist, naked and judged, as they passed. I always wore my finest, red sweater to Carnegie, the one sweater without any holes or stains. My tan slacks were ironed, and my black oxfords polished. Jo looked worse in his dirty jeans and checkered shirt. The crowd swarmed around me, discussing the conductor's passionate arm movements and comparing this concert with ones they attended before. I searched for Jo, and saw him standing on the final step. He looked down, kicking a step with his shoe. I tried to press through two older men sharing a cigarette. A young gentleman made his way down the stairs, shaking his head at Jo. He had a lipstick stain on the collar of his shirt, and he must've felt pretty manly. He looked like an idiot to me, or what Cubby would call a "young upstart lookin' to make a memorable scene."

The two older men separated, and I nudged past them, nearly knocking the cigarette onto the ground.

"I just standing on the steps, sir," I heard Jo say. "That ain't against the law, is it?"

"This isn't a place for loitering, kid," said the gentleman as I approached. "Don't start any trouble."

"I wasn't botherin' nobody. I just walkin' like everyone else."

"Yeah, I bet you were. You scat or I'll call the cops."

"I ain't do nothin'. I'm a music lover myself," said Jo, crossing his arms.

"They don't play that kind of music here."

“Well, I like all kinds, sir. You can still hear it in the night air . It’s a good time, and you sure look you had a good time,” said Jo, pointing to his collar.

“You smart, little rube...,” shouted the gentlemen, causing a few of the pastel hat women to stare.

“Good evening, sir,” I interrupted, grabbing Jo’s arm and pulling him down the steps.

I dragged Jo all the way down the street, but Jo didn’t look at me. I felt his skin burning through his shirt sleeve. He ran his tongue over his lips, like he was on the verge of saying something. Once we cleared a couple of corners, I offered to go back tomorrow and ask Cubby to retrieve the knapsack, but Jo wasn’t listening. It was odd, as he’d been born with a listening ear.

“I would pay, Mars,” said Jo quietly as we stood at the corner. “I’d pay them they two stupid dollars.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said. “But don’t worry about them. He’ll be asking for your autograph one day.”

Jo started walking, hearing a cat holler in a nearby alley. I could tell Jo was gritting his teeth, his eyes frozen.

“No, he won’t,” said Jo.

The only back door I had to go through was Carnegie’s, though it wasn’t the only space where I couldn’t gain admittance because of empty pockets. How could Jo get use to the swing of such doors, not musical at all? Where were the bells that tinkled when you passed through, the ones in antique stores, the adagio bells? The adagio bells were sad because they knew you would eventually leave. No, no one was sad that they left their stores, their businesses. Perhaps they were in the souls of the people walking in, an inner adagio. Yeah, it must’ve been in there. I’d give them some con brio, some spirit, if I could, but that could only last a few minutes at the most.

“I’d pay ‘em they two dollars,” said Jo. “Maybe even ten.”

Jo’s mood lifted once we got on the BMT, and took a seat near the back. There were no upstarts on the streetcar, just tired folks making their way home. If you cocked your ear right, you could hear Cajun folk songs, tidbits from radio shows, the beginning of a spiritual. The bridge was all ears to these, covering the East River protectively from whatever stings came its way, supporting the streetcar that no longer cost a penny. The blue-white lamps were turned on, a signal that meant we were going to get home at a reasonable time for my piano lesson. South Street was still busy under us, flags waving, people shuttling from the shore to their ships with boxes possibly containing fish and ice. I tried to entertain Jo by going around the train and guessing who would make a good

musician and why. Jo liked this game, whatever game let him be a critic. By the time we were there, we'd determined that the two tall, black gentlemen in the front would make good percussionists because they could see over the heads of the orchestra, and the one, red-haired woman two seats in front of us would make a good flutist because she had good posture.

Hopping off the BMT, we passed Brooklyn Heights, even though my oxfords were biting at my toes. I considered it a small price to pay. We silently walked by the Lowensteins' front yard, and headed down the alley towards the back door. The Lowensteins' was the only building with an orange door, one of the few warm colors along Daly Street. The Lowensteins' Brooklyn townhouse was tall and narrow, moss growing from the crevices of the brick. It was the only life of its drab appearance, except some struggling dandelions next to an overturned wagon. Grey drapes trapped bits of the remaining sunshine, helping dusk along. Jill and Julie Lowenstein had muddied the grass with their ten-minute game of tag in the front yard. Their identical heads, covered with tangled hair and the ground's stolen dirt, often disappeared into the doorway after four o' clock. I always found it odd that I could not see past the doorway on the rare occasions Tilly sent me to the Lowensteins' for sugar. The orange door opened, and only blackness could be seen behind the friendly Lowenstein that answered, even little Jill and Julie. I was never invited in. The door closed after the request, then slowly a Lowenstein would open the door again, drop a heavy bag into my waiting hands, say a cheery "Here you go", make light conversation about the rotten marshmallow clouds (Jill's name for rain clouds) or the Yankee's handicaps, part with an anxious goodbye, and close the orange door before I reached the final step of their stoop.

The familiarity of Jo's home made up for the mystery surrounding the Lowenstein house. I wonder if the Lowensteins ever knew what the Oswald family had made out of the adjoining room they had lent out to them. According to Jo, the room was to serve as

a storage space for Louis Lowenstein's inherited fishing boat, but his wife Sylvia convinced him that his cousin Jerry, who actually lived near a body of water, the Chesapeake, would get more use out of it.

I believe the room made no objections when the change occurred, even creaking in relief. There was a youthful warmth surrounding the place, almost like a medieval cottage. Jo's

father, Otis, set in new, pine walls and wood paneling for the floor like a responsible builder rather than a bicycle repairman. Jo helped Otis set up two cots near the fireplace, and the men of the house alternated sleeping on the floor. I imagined Otis to be a fine father pulling on his brown trousers and clean white shirt, fetching his toolbox, and retrieving his shoes next to the kiln. After sliding on his hot shoes,

he'd glance into the small mirror of the rosewood bureau, holding his head up with authority. Otis never left the room without a sigh, and a final glance at Jo. They had a matched confidence, an amazing armour, that lead them to many competitions using their respective strengths in battles of playing cards, jacks, and wills. Jo had a bendable will, easily swayed, a will that challenged many things. Otis didn't, making sure to tell Jo the rules. No, you couldn't invent rules, even if the deck had only forty-five cards. At least there was a peacekeeper.

I did many things for this peacekeeper. I practiced crooking my arm like a gentleman, for her to loop her arm through; picked up the fallen garbage the dogs had dragged, then wash my hands and return without expecting praise; kept daydreams of her as clean as possible, because I was afraid Jo might be able to read my face when we were with her.

I met her son while whistling a piano concerto and throwing out a trash bag full of dirty diapers, one of the pleasures of being the oldest of the orphans. I saw Jo sitting on a crate through the fence posts, chewing gum and tuning his guitar. He was around five foot four, his skin tan and leathery, his eyes shining like cymbals. I ignored him, concentrating on sparing my nose of the horrible smell. Humming louder, I dropped the bag into the bin, the same one that had formerly held Tilly's make-up. I heard the tune echo from Jo's guitar. It was quick and sharp, played with precision. I whistled a Mozart refrain. He caught that one, too, elongating an eighth note for emphasis. I peered through the posts and waved.

"Never heard Mozart from a guitar," I had shouted.

He liked Mozart. That surprised me.

"Me neither. Just listen good and I can mimic ya," said Jo.

Mimicking? How was that possible? I had to practice every Wednesday for a month just to get through one piece and have it played the way I wanted.

"That's better than mimicking, though. How do you do that?"

"Got anxious fingers and a listening ear."

"A listening ear? Is that a Southern thing?"

Jo laughed. "You mean a black thing? Nah."

I looked down at the trash can. I'd only seen black musicians on the street before I met Jo. They didn't play Mozart or any other composers Tilly introduced me to. They played odd rhythms I couldn't get out of my head for hours on end--bouncier despite having homes where the plaster was peeling off, Daly Street visitors who gave them cautious looks, the nuns from St. Augustine walking up to them and telling them they were playing devil's music after offering them religious pamphlets. I watched them from a window during dinner, while the other kids ate. They didn't have sheet music, and their pauses didn't seem practiced. They paused when it felt right.

Jo hopped off the crate, and walked briskly to the fence. He was actually interested even though what I said was pretty dumb. None of the other kids were into music like me. The toddlers relentlessly scratched the piano's legs, bruising their softness. Dale Berger even had the nerve to spill orange juice on the keys. You can't mix citris with ivory.

"Can I get a listening ear?" I asked.

"Yeah, you can," said Jo immediately. "You play?"

"Piano."

"That's swell. Seems like we congregate. Art meetin' art all over. We should jam some time if you inclined and your folks don't mind."

Jo loved to rhyme, contributing to what he called "rhymin' blood. Rhymin' blood treats words as more than just words; it treats words like a waltz with letters linked to form a harmonious circle. You had to be divided a special way to have rhymin' blood and a listening ear, claimed Jo. He said you had to be a quarter poet, and three-quarters musician like he was, dividing himself up like a cartographer does a map. It's not genetic, he assured me, but God-given. I tried to get both. The Sunday after Jo divulged his division, I went into St. Augustine's Lutheran Church, sat under the stained-glass St. Peter in a backless chair, and asked God for rhymin' blood, and if it wasn't too much trouble, a listening ear as well. I didn't get either. Jo laughed after I told him, and said it would come later when I needed it.

"No folks. Orphanage, I'd said, pointing behind me. But we should jam."

"Yeah, and you can give me some more Mozart. It'll be a right duet."

That was a perfect word. We only got two duets, but not the big one.

Jo knocked lightly on the door, then pushed me in front of him. I gave him a puzzled look, and knocked on the door again. I heard a rattling of pans and a few light curses. The peacemaker wasn't feeling very good that day, so I put on my best smile. I'd been blessed with a cavity-free mouth.

Lisa Oswald appeared in the doorway minutes later, her bronze hair falling in waves to her breasts. Her skin was dark, soft, glowed on its own. You couldn't tell she was a mom if you didn't look closely, because she had the body of a young dancer, slim and graceful, and the face of one, doe eyes and a small nose. She smoothed down her apron over her teal dress and rubbed me on the shoulder.

"Hey, you," said Lisa. "Where you boys been at?"

"Just around," I said, feeling a pang in his stomach then dismissing it.

I thought it would be easier to lie to Lisa by then. We had gone to Carnegie for almost two years every Wednesday afternoon, but it always seemed like the first transgression everytime Lisa greeted us. It was original sin repeating itself over and over again.

“We was flying kites today. Get some use out of this windy April,” said Jo, still trying to shade himself from Lisa’s prodding eyes.

“Boy, I see you!,” said Lisa, snatching Jo’s arm and pulling him closer. “I told you not to dirty these jeans, and here you come lookin’ like you just step off a plantation. What the Lowensteins think when they see you?”

“I ain’t as dirty as they kids. Julie and Jill dirty everyday,” defended Jo.

“They ain’t my kids...and the things going around the air nowadays.”

“I’m healthy, Mama.”

“And you gonna stay that way. Get in there and I fetch some water from the Lowensteins’.”

Jo cast me a final look and went inside. Lisa wrapped her hands around my shoulder and gave me a small kiss on the cheek. I felt her breasts slide against my chest, and let my arms fall to my sides. We had hugged only a few times, but I remembered all of them-- how the first one was careful because she held a glass of milk; how the second was light and lent me the room’s warmth; how the third was the first time I let myself sink into her, my mind blank. But those were childhood hugs, well-meaning, nervous. This one didn’t feel like the others. Lisa let me go, too suddenly, and I walked down the alley, hearing Lisa’s fair “See yous later!” ring in my ears.

Rosie Mills was my only audience for quite some time. She rested her head on the rungs of the banister, pretending to drink in the sun filtering through the window. When I entered Tilly’s after visiting the Oswalds, she gave me a reproachful look, her small hands wrapped around the stair’s banister. I considered myself the opposite of the guy who received female attention, but Rosie religiously waited for me to come home.

“You’re late,” she said, pulling at her left sock.

“Yeah, I was busy,” I said.

“Wanna see my bellybutton?” she said.

“No...why?”

“We’re showing each other our bellybuttons. I have less lint than everyone else, and it sticks out. Susan says it sticks out like a Jewish nose. I hit her because Tilly’s half Jewish, ya know.”

Rosie was a collection of oddities. The bearer of bright red hair, the only red haired-girl without blonde highlights, and one blue eye and green eye, she stuck out in a photograph Tilly had taken four years ago. Then seven, Rosie stood in the middle, smirking because she didn’t want to show her two missing front teeth. She still hadn’t lost the chubby cheeks at age eleven, but she wasn’t the chubbiest of the girls.

"I gotta go get ready for practice. Are you going to listen again?"

"I don't listen. I just like telling you you're late."

"I'm not late all the time."

"Most of the time. I'm never late."

It might have been an act of respect, but I didn't like it.

"Do you think since my bellybutton's so clean that I'll have healthy babies?"

"I think it depends on if you eat well, and go to the doctor so..."

"I'm not going to leave my babies, though. I dreamed last night about my dad."

Rosie often told me about her parental dreams, which were equally strange and sad.

"He had red hair like me, but two blue eyes. I might've colored them blue because my bed sheets are blue. But he got shot by this guy with a moustache, those moustaches that turn up. That's why I've decided I don't like guns. What color were your dad's eyes, Mars?"

I'd told her before, and didn't want to repeat it again, yet I did to get her to stop talking.

"They were blue."

"Like yours. I think they're blue for a reason, Mars. You should think about that."

"I will...but now I gotta play."

Rosie nodded. "Cause now you're really late."

I rolled my eyes. I went into the living room and glanced in the floor length mirror while taking out the pieces for that day, delicately laid out by Tilly on a desk. Bach was joyfully on the itinerary. My close-cut, blonde hair was all over the place after being held by Lisa. It wasn't handsome. I could only guess who I'd gotten my angular nose and hard chin from. My reflection blinked back at me, and I felt my chin poke forward. I was comfortable with the mystery, as comfortable as Rosie with her bellybutton. But I didn't see my reflection when I lay down at night. My features are less secure in the darkness. I see my pale skin and question whether it will darken over time. My feet seem so mechanical, even when my toes wiggle. When I finally grew a small beard, it was twice the surprise. When the others laid down, shuffling in their sheets, they must have felt the same thing. I wanted them to feel the same thing. Mirrors are deceivers, aren't they? I touched the glass surface as the reflection dimmed, then embraced Bach like an old friend.

II. Tea and Timbre with Tilly

It was the smallest sanctuary imaginable, and also the noisiest, but it was there, pushed to the side, holding a vase of begonias interspersed with false peaches and a small statuette of Venus. If you were seeking God, he was in the lattice, the hard, gleaming wood that supported whoever chose to occupy the music rack, whether it was the long-winded Wagner or the cunning, more concise Chopin. I lamented everytime my fingers grazed the wrong key, and felt it necessary to confess my mistakes. Translating their gifts on a crooked Baldwin piano was a tough task, especially when you had the lattice staring you in the face with its beauty and a music teacher straightening up her tea set behind your back.

Tilly had spent twenty-five years in Munich, studying the greats and the not-so-greats at a conservatory. She was the perpetual student for as long as she could be, paid by wealthy ladies to entertain their guests at parties while composing at the conservatory at night. I balanced her perfectly, as I was the student who wanted to quit learning and display my pieces immediately, no matter how rough. She would have stayed there if not for her ailing father in Manhattan. She was a daddy's girl, as Tilly, nearing fifty, gave up most of her musical opportunities to watch her father die of a weak heart six months after she made the journey. An immense benefactor, he hoped Tilly would be the same and entrusted her with the orphanage. She grew used to America, her ink-black hair turning a robust grey. Billy Banks and I were the only ones that saw her hair change.

"Notes not so light, Mars...darker, sadder...this fugue...feeling, not movement," yelled Tilly over the piano, cutting a piece of banana bread.

"I'm trying," I exclaimed.

"No, you're rushing....take time to hear note. Let note breathe long. Think two measures with four quarter notes...eight little breaths."

I shook my head, and took my hands away from the piano. The fugue was central to my teaching,, that last step to having full knowledge about the shape of music. But Tilly made it seem so dire, even though she had placed it there a couple days before. It had taken me a month to learn a relatively simple rhapsody, and three weeks to learn a strenuous gavotte that Jo, in turn, learned in a week on his guitar.

Tilly put my teacup down and placed his hands on the two correct keys.

"Eight weighty breaths...like lightly spoke words...uh, eight....," began Tilly.

"Like eight syllables?" I guessed, pointing to the third and fourth measure.

“Yes...now there’s one subject...it repeat and repeat...and then there are two things that hold it together...two married points...can’t exist without those,” said Tilly, letting my hands go.

I arched my back and straightened Bach. What were Bach’s eight syllables? Probably something profound and off the top of his head. I began to play, collecting measures in my head before I reached them. I anticipated their tone and resonance, each note’s contribution to the whole. They were like lines, lines of poetry, and I recalled poetic hymns I’d played before, on Easter mornings and Christmas afternoons. One line particularly stuck in my head, and I remembered the words clearly. I haven’t laid thee down to rest. Eight syllables, powerful syllables that recalled Jesus’ immortality. They would do. *I haven’t laid thee down to rest...* I really haven’t laid thee down to rest. Missed note. How can you do that when she’s in your head? My head should’ve been full of notes. It was...for a bit.

I haven’t laid thee down to rest. Marginal notes: A fugue must consist of at least one exposition, followed by optional development. I knew her name. I developed it.

Martha Keller righted her hooble skirt, black and newly cleaned, as two teenage boys hummed Gershwin on a stoop cluttered with newspaper clippings and confetti. It was New Year’s 1910, and everyone was enraptured with the survival of yet another decade. Purity was filtering out into the city. A fresh start wasn’t impossible. Kids imitated the bold steps of little Bojangles and factory owners pulled out their top hats and dinner jackets for the seven o’clock show. An older woman raised a glass of champagne in Martha’s direction, her hair falling out of a formerly proper bun. She didn’t know that Martha had just survived, that she was merely hanging on.

She’d heard about Tilly’s from her cousin, the cousin who took her in after she started to show. I was a slow showing, taking my time to let the world know I was there. I wasn’t a burden when Martha carried me around, causing queasiness at the most. She held onto the hope that I would never look like him, inheriting his hooked nose, fat cheeks, and uncontrollable, brown hair. No, I was already sprouting her dirty blonde hair, and had her trusting, blue eyes. Only she could take ownership of my body, and not because she was forced to. It was determined by nature, based on my looks and these circumstances.

Those circumstances weren’t particular to her, but she acted like they were as she tapped on Tilly’s door. She knew that lots of unwed mothers were leaving their babies in the alleys of speakeasies while downing gin at this very moment, and that they were going back into the place surrendering their senses to tobacco smoke and gestures of interest their lovers had learned from silent movies. Those babies were

lucky if they were found. She knew that lots of women under eighteen had left their parents' homes early because some guy offered them rides in those new-fangled automobiles, the ones where the top slid down and you could see the stars, and a kitchenette with orange walls next to the Princess Theater. The Theater closed down several years later. She knew that lots of mothers had tapped the mahogany door after checking Tilly's credentials, which were spotless and enviable. But that didn't matter.

My basket went down reluctantly. It got caught in the thick folds of her skirt. She managed to wrest it free before I started to cry. Martha attached a note to the handle with a piece of tape. It read:

I know how lovely your house is, and cannot suitably care for my son at this moment in time. As soon as it is possible, I will return for him. I will keep you and him in my prayers. With my love, Martha Keller

Martha bounded across the street, sitting down between the Gershwin-humming boys who made room for her.

"You okay?" asked the older of the two.

"Just keep humming," said Martha.

The orphanage's door opened, and a tall, black-haired woman picked up the basket cautiously. She read the note, running a hand through her long hair and folded the note in her fingers. She cooed to me as I cried. My cries grew more distant as the door creaked behind us. The older boy covered it gracefully with Gershwin, and Martha listened, kindled by his bluesy timbre.

The end of the refrain was coming up. I always hated those because it felt like I was leaving behind the notes that had served me well beforehand. The spaces between the key tugged on the sides of my fingers because I wasn't angling them right again. Tilly stopped arranging the tea set and arranged my hands, crooking my wrist and tsk-tsking while doing it. I blinked at Bach, and imagined him laughing. His wrists were most likely perfection. Perfect wrists make you a good pianist, a pianist that goes down in history.

All our small cardboard histories. Marginal notes: The exposition is followed by the subject, the theme or melody on which a work or movement is based.

All our small, cardboard histories. I didn't know about them until Billy Banks had wandered into the pantry looking for licorice, and peeped under a couple down blankets in the far end of a closet. Before then, we'd all tried to avoid the pantry because it was where we all got spanked. Many times, I would be practicing Handel and hear a few howls from the pantry, but it wasn't loud. Sometimes

they were softer, soft the way chamber music usually is. Maybe our voices were softer because we knew Tilly didn't really want to do it, or maybe we were more brave than other orphans. I know I liked to think both were true. I got my share of spankings until I was about eight, being pulled over Tilly's knees, crying and counting the cracks of the floor at the same time. If I counted, I wouldn't see the disappointment in her face. Tilly had hard hands, too, so I felt every hit, but a hit meant someone cared, I guess.

During Billy's licorice hunt, we were all upstairs getting ready for bed. He came back and bragged, said he found something we'd all be interested in. Unbuttoning his sleeve, he pulled out a small photograph of a man wearing a navy uniform. Billy pointed out the thirteen-button trousers, the clean cutlass, the stars and stripes lining his collar, making a big show out of this tiny black and white photograph.

"So?" I said, even though I was just as impressed as the younger kids pushing each other to get a better view of the picture.

"So, this is my dad, Mars. Phillip Banks," said Billy, beaming at the picture.

I shook my head. "You're off," I said.

Billy scowled. "Go chase yourself, Mars," he said.

Then he turned the others and began to tell them about the boxes under the blankets. I climbed into bed, pulling the blanket up to my nose. The pillow was no comfort because my head was stinging.

"I was scoutin' for candy when I seen these two blankets hoverin' in the dark," said

Billy. "I say to myself that's pretty suspicious. Tilly was in the kitchen, carvin' up potatoes..."

"I want some potatoes," shouted Dale Berger, who back then was four and tolerable.

"Shut up, Dale!," said Hannah Snow. "Go on, Billy."

"So I thought some real good stuff must be in them boxes, especially since we so scared to go in the room in the first place. Myself, I got some bad memories of that room. Anyways, heard the pots rattlin' and Tilly movin' so I had to get a wiggle on. Pulled up them blankets quick and saw boxes. Still hopin', I opened a couple. Third times' the charm or somethin' cause third box I saw an older me lookin' at me."

Hannah Snow shot me a giddy smile. She was eleven, a year younger than me at the time. She probably thought I would be the only other person to appreciate the story because she, Billy, and I were the oldest, but she was wrong. We were all looking for older mes, guiltily glancing around the grocery shops or ice rinks when Tilly took us out. Sometimes we'd get looks but they were always polite and dismissive. Hannah pieced together someone's nose, then someone's eyes, and finally someone's hair to draw an older version of herself, then cried when Tilly found it. She later told me she couldn't sleep

for most of the winter due to the overwhelming guilt she felt. But I thought Tilly more guilty, burning up under the heavy covers. How could you be that cruel to hide something we were all searching for?

"They the real McCoy," said Billy. "Saw some pictures, what I'm guessin was birth certificates and letters. Even some cards. But Tilly was about to come in so I had to blow."

That bugged me. Billy would be the hero again for the week, the second time that month after scoring and sharing cigarettes with two ten year olds a couple weeks earlier.

"Wait," said Hannah in a shaky voice. "What if...what if some of us don't have anything at all?"

There were a few murmurs before the whole room fell silent. The fact just seemed to have hit Billy as he thought he'd been bringing good news for everyone. Rosie, who was quietly feeding paper dolls into the vents of the furnace, cleared her throat. We all turned to see her, but she didn't look back at us.

"Tilly wouldn't hide that from us," said Rosie, dropping another doll down the hole.

"And Billy, you don't remember your dad. You're making it up."

Rosie, who didn't often make sense, was making sense that time. Maybe Billy wanted it so bad. Maybe I wanted it so bad.

"It's a photograph," said Rosie, tossing her last doll into the heat. "That's all it is."

We watched Billy with our last hopes but he didn't say anything. He slipped the photo under his mattress with the girly magazine, then laid on his bed, not facing any of us. The furnace made gasping noises as though it was about to burst. Rosie touched the edge of the vents. I wondered if she was trying to burn herself, numb herself. I already felt numb, hearing the loud crinkle of sheets under me. I heard something else, too.

"Would you have looked anyway?," whispered Katie Black, who was pulling off a shoe by the foot of my bed.

"No," said Hannah Snow, flatly. "It hurts too much to look."

Tilly wouldn't hide that from us. Marginal notes: After this theme has been completed, a second voice enters to join the first voice in a "conversation". From there, any number of voices can leave or enter the conversation. However, to join the conversation, a voice must begin by restating the subject. Tilly wouldn't hide that from us.

Hannah wouldn't look, but I would. I had to know if Rosie was right, if Billy was right. Playing Prelude in C-sharp Minor afforded me an opportunity. The notes are so graceful and airy that they follow on their own. Instead of fixing my eyes on the sheet music, I looked at the

pantry door. Tilly was upstairs, helping Hannah pack. She'd been adopted earlier that day. Her new parents were content to watch her all day-- how she acted in school, beautiful and blonde, bent over Beowulf; her manners during dinnertime, praying, passing salt, smiling at everyone; talking with her about the family she wanted, which was one that would take her to the movies two days a week, especially the ones with princesses in them. The princess request sold them, and Hannah was gone. Just a year younger than me, and she was gone. That didn't seem fair.

The keys throbbed under my fingers. I pressed them like a typist, expressionless but precise. Rachmoninoff would've hit me upside the head. He was moody like that. Play it right, boy, Rachmaninoff would roar, the romance is fading. I stopped, slid down the piano cover, sighed. The quiet that followed was more romantic than the playing. I ignored the echoes. Normally, I wait until the last echoes are done. They tell me I've done a good job. Today, there was no waiting, just a slow pace towards the pantry.

The shelves held things I didn't want to see just then. Peppermint Quack Cure cough syrup to stifle our colds, three Therindex thermometers, and a faded, brown medicine bag with different bottles of vitamins and Band-Aids. Next to that was a sewing kit with thimbles, spools, a mushroom pin cushion and measuring tape used to chart our growth. Smaller things started to stick out as I came closer to the closet. Despite Tilly's best efforts, Patriotic Hair Cream never controlled my hair; instead the white globs of it sat there like a dove resting on my head. When I was smaller, Tilly used to let me taste teaspoons from the Watkins vanilla bottle while she cooked, and I still hoped for traces of it when we sat down for dessert. There were remnants of yeast we spilled at our first attempt at making pizza the day before under the shelves, already prepared patches sitting on the sewing kit, a couple dolls that needed to be fixed. And the closet door was ajar.

A broom lay between the closet door and the hinge. I assumed Tilly had been trying to sweep the rest of the yeast up before Hannah asked for help. The handle rested on the knob, threatening to fall at any moment. I moved it to the side. The last of the sunlight came in from the window that looked out into the garage. Hannah's new parents had a black Oldsmobile with a shiny white roof. The roof would be more noticeable in the twilight as we all sent her off. It'd be the last thing we'd see, a white-capped top appropriate for a girl named Snow.

The warmth of the knob surprised me. I thought it would be more cold. Was it cold before Billy touched it? Maybe it was warm for me. The two down blankets, wool and heavy, were covering something just my size. I pulled them off like I had all the time in the world, as if my heart wasn't already quickening, as if Billy was behind me, pushing

me to go on. There were boxes. My fingers rifled through the wave of papers, through six or seven boxes. Mortgage notices, receipts, bank statements. I saw a pack of overdue bills tied with a rubber band in the box on top. I just passed it over and can't remember any clues to my exit like past due amounts. There were no navy heroes in these boxes. That was clear. There were two more as twilight started. The room was filling up with grey light and I could barely read any more words. However, there were two words I could make out on each of the two dusty boxes. Dust dug under my fingernails when I wiped them clean to read again. Birth certificates. Taking the lid off one, I saw our names on yellowed paper. I read them-- Ian and Margery Black, Neil and Susan Berger, James and Yvonne Davis. They went on and on, more crinkled as I flipped through the old paper furiously.

Billy couldn't read these names, but I could. So many conversations running in my head, so many possible voices. I could read these names and see their children, hear their imagined voices faster than *accelerando*. I'd like to know, Rosie would say, at least their names. Roland and Marie Mills, you're Rosie's folks. Red hair, an odd smile, dreams of you every night. The second box I opened just as quickly. I had to be next. Mims came after Mills. I reached for the first paper without looking into the box.

Harry Mims and Martha Keller. They weren't even married. I hadn't even really cared if they were up until then. If I could've just seen them in the same room, that would've been enough. Marshall Jonathan Mims. My eyes rested there. Tilly always skirted the question about our middle names. She said our first name was enough, but if we wanted, we could make up our own. I can't even remember what my temporary name was. It's funny how a name can slip so easily away. But I do remember Jonathan in the middle of the page.

Born in Brooklyn Baptist Hospital. May 15, 1910. I'd never asked how Tilly knew our birthdays. She gave me sheet music, which I played for everyone seconds later, Tilly laughing and drumming the beat on my back. Then, Tilly made me play Happy Birthday and the others sang it to me, none so loudly and off-key as Rosie. It should've been the day I thought about Harry and Martha most, but it was the day I thought about them least.

I heard a couple of beeps from a car horn outside. Hannah was about to go, which meant Tilly was on her way downstairs. Before putting the top back on the box, I was curious to see who came after me, if anyone came after me. In between my birth certificate and Angel Morris' was a small envelope. The car horn was more persistent, and I heard the rumble of stairs as kids raced for the front door. A couple yelled excitedly about the Oldsmobile. Would they even care if they were sitting here next to me? It was a letter with a photograph of a man tucked inside. My father, Harry Mims. He barely looked like me,

but I knew instantly. There was something about the way he was seated on a chair, his knees jutting out in a strange way the way mine do whenever I sit down to play. A small tuft of hair rises in the middle and you can tell he's not one for smiling if there's not a reason, things I see everyday in the mirror. His hands were folded, as he gazed intently at the camera, almost like he was praying. I thought he was prepared to die, thought he was dead. Maybe he'd gone to war, even though he looked more like a businessman in his spotted tie and tan slacks. I read the letter next.

January 14, 1910

To the Proprietor of Tilly's Township,

My name is Patricia Lewis. I am a nurse at Brooklyn Baptist Hospital, and Martha Keller was under my care. Martha Elizabeth Keller passed at Brooklyn Baptist Hospital this past Thursday, the thirteenth of January, 1910. Ms. Keller arrived at our facility, complaining of short breath and a high fever. Before her death, she asked that we notify Tilda Schenck that her child's father, Harold Mims, has been notified of her child's, Marshall Mims, whereabouts and will arrive at the orphanage a week from the date of this letter. I took it upon myself to address this later, as Ms. Keller stressed the severity of the situation. God Bless,

Patricia Lewis, R. N.

Brooklyn Baptist Hospital

The letter was short, curt, gave me a papercut. More and more footsteps tumbled down the stairs, like a thousand weights were falling on the wooden floor. But nothing was louder than me ripping up that letter. My finger was bleeding but I kept at it until the words were unreadable, until all the sunlight was gone. Then I kicked the box, the certificates spilling across the pantry. Some were so fragile, so thin that they floated all the way across the room, but most hung around my feet. I kicked them as much as they'd kicked us.

Staring out the window, the twenty-eight kids were alternately hugging Hannah, who was wearing pink hair ribbons, ribbons I'd never seen before. I guess they were her first gift. No one noticed I was gone as Hannah's new father opened the door for her, and Tilly shook her new mother's hand. Tilly bent down next to Hannah's ear before she climbed in. She always said words to the one going. I tried to read her mouth, but what was said to each as they climbed into the car, whether Ford or Oldsmobile or Chrysler, we never knew. Hannah kissed her on the cheek, blew a kiss to everyone else, and climbed in.

"Bye Hannah!," they yelled, with a few shouting "Write to us!"

They never wrote. Just like my father.

Hannah's new mother reached to the backseat, and pushed her plait behind her shoulder. My mother could've fixed our tufts of hair. The Oldsmobile backed out, its wheels sleek against the pavement. I let my forehead perch on the windowpane while twilight finally came over Daly. A few stars were just peeking out as a couple kids ran after the Oldsmobile rolling down the street as if it was Coolidge riding to the Met. A few birth certificates rubbed against my leg, itching through the cloth of my pants. A few seconds went by, before I was short of breath, small tears falling down the pane. All I could think, staring at the white roof going by, was, wow, what a classy exit.

This fugue was pretty long. In the liner notes of Book One, it said something about The Well-Tempered Clavier being profitable for the desirous young. With its twelve tones and twenty-four keys, it seemed a bit advanced for the listeners and students Bach was seeking. It took Bach years to compose so it was a very difficult piece, but there's something about the presto. I picture him hunched over the clavier, playing presto in the Lutheran church in which he loved to practice. The young would perk up after a boring sermon, interested because presto is sudden and magical. You don't need to know the tempo or timbre to appreciate it. It's full of playful octaves, and my fingers pass through the presto because it doesn't seem that old to me. I fed off Bach's sprightliness, the fervor under this fugue, its many voices and flourishes. The desirous young who need voices. Bach hasn't ignored us. He loves us kids the way we are.

He loves us kids the way we are. Marginal notes: Episodes are passages separating the entries of the subject. Episodes are usually developed from the material of the subject and countersubjects; they are very rarely independent, but then conspicuously so. He loves us kids the way we are.

Three days a week, we had lessons at St. Augustine's because P.S. 187 was overcrowded and Tilly insisted that in addition to math, English, history, and German, we know the Scriptures. She found Miss Miniver through a mutual friend, and I still wish that friend wouldn't have said anything. Miss Miniver, pins crammed into a really tight bun and a black, velvet housecoat, wasn't afraid to administer the strap. These weren't Tilly taps, taps that disappeared in a couple hours time. No, they were sharp whacks against the palm, where the redness lasted all day. It looked like the lines of your palm were moving because the skin was pulsating so much. The reasons ranged from eating food in class, which was a double wrong because you were, in fact, eating in a church; arriving late; arguing with Miss Miniver.

I argued with Miss Miniver in my head, questioning why she placed so much emphasis on medieval literature, art, and history. She said that's where all true culture originated from, so we ended up studying about King Arthur, feudalism, various popes, and the virtues of virginity and chastity more than any other period. I tried to start a conversation about the Civil War, which was mentioned casually, but she responded with Mar-shall (she placed an accent on the last syllable of kids she didn't like), that war lacked gentility and class. Besides, it's not in our curriculum. Our twenty-five page curriculum. We knew pages fifty through seventy-five very well. One day, I was adventurous and flipped to page two hundred and four. Sitting behind Billy, who was carving BB inside his desk, I peered over his head to make sure Miss Miniver wasn't looking at me. Our classroom was in the back of the church and held forty desks. We filled out thirty of the uncomfortable chairs. Mornings were devoted to the young kids, and afternoons to those over eight. Because of that, the smaller kids sat at the front, reading their primers while we discussed the more sophisticated texts. I didn't mind sitting in the back, where the chalkboard, globe, and the posters of Biblical figures were farther than they appeared. Moses was miles away, but more importantly, Miss Miniver was miles away. The pages held the facts of the Gold Rush with a few pictures. Thirteen then, it was my first introduction to the West: a collection of covered wagons along a Sacramento stream with the California mountains rising above trees; miners holding pans of gold while dust hovered around cowboy boots; my favorite, settlers sitting under a painted orange sky, where the artist gave more shimmer to the banjoes men held than the gold beside them. I took delight in quizzing Miss Miniver in my head. Who discovered the first gold nuggets? It was a Mar-shall, Miss Miniver. James Marshall. When did California become a state in the Union? 1850, before you were probably born, Miss Miniver. I glanced up from the book and pretended to be interested in the start of the presentations.

These presentations of memorized Scriptures were mandatory. We had to read a chapter from the New Testament, practice a verse from that chapter for a couple days, then repeat it and say why we selected that one. Miss Miniver admitted that I was an advanced writer, but a terrible public speaker. Too shy and mumbly, I heard her say to Tilly. Perhaps too much time behind the piano. Tilly answered her, rather roughly, that I just needed more time than the others. I was definitely no Rosie, who assuredly stood before us, one pigtail trailing to her elbow, the other to her neck. She had cut it off earlier that morning because her mother had cut her hair in her most recent dream then stabbed the scissors into her neck. Not surprisingly, Rosie chose a verse about the wars in Revelation.

“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his head,” recited Rosie. “I chose this verse because I like dragons.”

Miss Miniver rubbed her temple, sighing. “The dragon is Satan, Rose-marie,” she said.

“Did you read the entire chapter?”

Rosie stroked her long pigtail. “I stopped in the middle,” she said.

Miss Miniver’s eyes darted to her ruler, but Rosie didn’t notice. Rosie had gotten the strap more than any of us, but there was really no reason except that her lessons weren’t done Miss Miniver’s way. She compared angels to witches once. Rosie said both sang songs, wore dresses, and asked for help from higher powers. The accompanying list was torn up, and Rosie got six heavy taps. Rosie didn’t cry, just looked at the remnants of the list as she held out a steady palm. I guessed Rosie’s admission would get her at least two taps this time.

“Rosie’s the perfect entertainment,” whispered Billy, glancing back at me. “Heard Miniver called her blasphemy walking. Funny thing is she like these assignments the best.”

Miss Miniver liked Billy because he was loud while reciting the verses and did well in math. She didn’t know he’d gotten the answers and verses from John Lyles minutes before each class.

“I hope she doesn’t call on me,” I said. “I always forget the words.”

The sharp rap of a ruler brought my attention back to Miss Miniver. I expected to see Rosie with her hand out, but Miss Miniver was glaring at me, the ruler having been slammed against the desk.

“Mar-shall!,” she said. “Since you’re eager to talk, recite yours.”

Rosie smiled at me, and made her way to her desk, where Madelyn and Susan were giggling and pointing at her.

The trouble was I liked reading the Psalms more than anything else, but we weren’t allowed to say them because they were Old Testament verses. Psalms were set to music, composed by a young kid like myself, David. David was lucky, got to spend his days with the sheep playing his harp, and I get to spend my days listening to Miss Miniver. David also had the massive audience I craved. Every reader of the Bible, even Rosie, got a chance to read his music. I’d be lucky if a fair few got to hear mine.

I approached Miss Miniver’s desk, running my hand through my hair. I had chosen something from Matthew or Mark or one of the gospels. The gospels. What was it?

“Do you have anything or not, Mar-shall?” asked Miss Miniver.

Thirty eyes were on me, solid, seaching stares. Rosie’s was particularly persistent.

Was it a verse about Jesus? God? Everything was gone, even the chapter and verse number. Miss Miniver pursed her lips, but I saw the

smirk hidden underneath. Another failure for the shy kid. But I knew a verse.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me to the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”

I’d played it at the last Christmas pageant at St. Augustine’s as the ladies’ chorus sang in front of me. Psalm 23 was immensely popular in the congregation, it being David’s most famous work. Jo said it was a staple at his church. The lyrics had probably found their way into every cranny of Brooklyn. Never underestimate the staying power of a psalm.

“I chose this because I like the lyrics,” I said.

“They’re not just lyrics,” she said. “And it’s from the Old Testament.”

“Yes, they are,” I said. “They’re songs to God.”

“Mar-shall...,” she started to protest.

“The psalms are music,” I said, a little louder.

I heard whispers flowing around me.

“Sit down,” she said.

I sat, but I left the book open to the banjos. Miss Miniver went to her desk and took a seat, running a shaking finger over her bun.

After class, Miss Miniver informed me and Rosie that we were to trim the hedges alongside St. Augustine’s before Tilly came by to pick us up. It was a new punishment. Perhaps she thought hard labor would make us more disciplined. I wished I’d gotten the

strap. Rosie said she wasn’t going near the hedges because “dogs pee in there” so she decided to watch me do it. We noticed the windows were loose and Rosie pushed a couple to the side. She said she liked seeing all the colors of the stained glass reflected on the leaves.

“Why don’t you do something?” I said.

I kneeled down next to the hedges, clippers in hand, careful not to hit my head against the window.

“I smell pee already,” replied Rosie, scrunching up her nose.

Sighing, I lifted up my head and was surprised to hear voices.

“Musicians have difficulties, I understand that,” I heard Miss Miniver say. “Even beginning musicians. Look at Beethoven. Horrible in math and temperament. But I just want the respect I deserve and that my teaching deserves.”

I put my ear against the hedge, the leaves tickling my neck. It was coming from the church office.

“Mars not difficult,” replied Tilly. “Just very creative.”

Tilly was still there. Rosie didn’t seem to be listening. The clippers snapped. Rosie held hers at arm’s length but started snapping them.

“The curriculum is stringent for a reason,” said Miss Miniver. “We touch on the Old Testament, but we focus on the New Testament because it’s the foundation of our faith.”

He shouldn't be so resistant to following simple directions..."

"He follow direction," insisted Tilly. "He's very good kid."

Miss Miniver drew a deep breath. "I'm concerned. Concerned that he's too quiet, that he's angry about something. Perhaps he would benefit from private study with me. I can hone that intelligence and creativity in a resourceful way."

I turned around, the rough leaves brushing my back. Was I really that much trouble? I just wanted to read the Psalms.

"I'll teach him," said Tilly.

I heard the slide of a chair. Rosie, who was actually listening, dropped the clippers and looked at me.

"Now, Tilly dear, your English is competent at best....," started Miss Miniver.

"Mars smart," said Tilly, forcefully. "Been playing since four. How many kids do that, and do well?"

Well, touched the piano was more like it. I wasn't of outstanding timbre. I couldn't play a melody until six.

"Tilly, that's just one subject," said Miss Miniver. "He can't succeed with that...."

"He got what you gave him and I give him what I can," said Tilly. "I got faith in him."

Rosie sat down next to me, crossing her arms. Her elbow touched my arm, soft but warm.

"When he finish clipping, you send him along," said Tilly. "You send him home to me."

Tilly slammed the door behind her, and the stained glass window shook. Rosie shook her head at me.

"We're too smart to do this," she said, glaring at the clippers.

Lessons with Tilly proved to be harder than I imagined. We borrowed workbooks from Miss Miniver, but I did most of the work on my own. Tilly tried to get me through a couple advanced books, but gave up once the language got more sophisticated. That made me read twice as much. The reward was that I got to read more than Chaucer and Malory. Tilly gave me darker books without having read them: Grimm's Fairy Tales, Treasure Island, and Gulliver's Travels. The music got darker too. In addition to hymns and cantatas, I started getting symphonies and requiems. This is also when I met the sonata. The sonata demands so much from you-- liveliness, pensiveness, grace, the ability to make it all make sense in the fourth movement. Then there was everything not on the sheet-- talent, humility, guts. Tilly placed Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata on the rack, and before the second movement, the slowest of the four, I slid over the piano cover and buried my face in my hands. Beethoven had got the better of me.

This fugue was getting the better of me, but I went on that time. I couldn't fail twice, couldn't let it go.

You believe in chance, don't you, Mars? Marginal notes: A fugue is contrapuntal piece, in which two or more parts are built on a recurring subject. An answer typically stays in the same key as the subject. You believe in chance, don't you, Mars?

There were three things that made nights at Tilly's ordinary: Tilly reading books to the younger children in her broken English, skipping over the many words she didn't know and replacing them with words she did know; Roy Coyden soaking a sleeping Katie Black's hand in cool water to see if she'd soil her sheets against something that worked years ago and gave Roy one of the few pleasures he had left after living there for eight years; Billy Banks attempting to show me his girly magazine, his prize possession that was retrieved from a trashcan at the end of the street. I always told him no, and Billy, offended but smiling, rested his head against his pillow, turning the pages with care. One night, Billy was avid, and tossed the magazine on my bed. I put down a worn copy of *Frankenstein* and picked up the magazine. I looked around the orphanage's large bedroom, checking to see if Tilly had finished reading *The Wizard of Oz*.

"They somethin', ain't they?" said Billy, gazing at the ceiling. "They stacked and curvy. Page forty-six got a chest so big surprised she ain't topple over."

I found page forty-six, and saw a busty blonde in a tight, pink sweater. She winked at me, coyly parting her legs to reveal a bit of pink underwear. Closing the magazine, I threw it back on Billy's bed.

"There's prettier girls off the pages," I said.

"That ain't even the good stuff, Mars," said Billy, putting the magazine under his mattress. "What you gonna do when it ain't no magazine, and that girl pull her shirt up?

You gonna throw her away?"

"No, but..." I said, retrieving *Frankenstein*.

"I know what you like, Mars."

Frankenstein crackled under my fingers as I gripped the book tighter.

"Shut up, Billy."

"I'll shut it, but I gotta warn you that it ain't gonna add up to nothin'."

"You don't know anything," I said.

He had to be bluffing. Billy barely knew Lisa.

"Rosie, right?"

Frankenstein relaxed and I ran my tongue over my teeth. "Shut up, Billy."

“A little too young for ya. That’s why I hunt outside. It’s fair game past the stoop.”

“Can’t you read something else?” I said.

Billy gave me a cold look, and I took a deep breath. I wished I could take it back, remembering that Billy wouldn’t read. Everyone thought Billy’s refusal to read was a dignified act of resistance, an act he was prolonging until his parents returned so they could teach him how. I suspected differently, that Billy had given up prematurely and hid his shame with a practiced indifference toward books. I’d known Billy since he was an infant, so I was probably right.

Billy grinned. “You do your old reading. I rather get a date than a degree,” he said.

Billy turned over in his bed, his back to me. I tried to think of other things to say, but decided that whatever Billy’s true feelings were would fade by the morning. Billy was like that, thinking temporarily and simply, something that was attractive at first. I joined Billy in stealing sweets from the cupboards, dropping eggs out of the windows in the middle of the night, and distributing useless advice to the young children about not licking toads and making wishes on fallen eyelashes. The two oldest, we bonded in these fleeting pleasures, and I knew our relationship was just as fleeting, that it wouldn’t survive once we left Tilly’s. There were too many differences between us. I secretly believed in the validity of eyelash wishes and wouldn’t think it horrible to gain warts from licking toads. The sweet stealing and egg dropping started to grow tiring for me and took away time when I could be reading books. It was probably fate that Jo came to live there. God had made Jo tailor-made for me, made him like the doctor made Frankenstein. I heard Tilly’s voice carry across the room. She was defining the word “scarecrow” for Madelyn Davis.

“We know crow is bird, so it must be bird that scare you,” said Tilly in her confident German accent.

I hid a smile. I had read that book before, when I was ten, and remembered that there were no pictures to contradict Tilly.

“Birds can be scary,” said Madelyn to her best friend, Katie Black. “I seen one that pick at a dead dog.”

“That a vulture,” said John Lyles, who made it a point to sit near Tilly at each reading.

“I seen one when I live in California with my uncle. Ain’t a lot in New York when I come with Pa here. Pa said when he get back here, we goin’ to California and then I prolly see some more.”

“Who say your Pa comin’ back?” said Madelyn.

“He comin’ back. I just here for a couple of years. I ain’t gonna be a teener, like Billy and Mars,” said John indignantly.

“A teener?” said Katie, sticking her thumb in her mouth.

“A teenager,” said Rosie. “I’ll be one in a couple years.”

"I ain't gonna be no teener either," said Madelyn.

"We got story left," said Tilly, putting a finger to her lip to quiet them.

"Now, Dorothy

and the scarecrow...."

Tilly's voice faded as I turned my face toward the bookcase. There were many books, donated by a nearby library. I scanned the shelves, recalling the content of the books I'd already read. In their pages, there were people getting by: the four March heroines of *Little Women* who braved the Massachusetts snow to carry on for their father away at war; *Oliver Twist* joining the band of London pickpockets; Colin and Mary reviving the secret garden. Where were the feisty Anne Shirleys of *Green Gables*, and the Pollyannas with their glad games? Where was *Nicholas Nickelby's* drive and independence? I guess Billy was the closest to *Nickelby*, and Rosie had Anne Shirley's hair but not her temper. Some of them were orphans, others merely orphaned for a short amount of time. I was supposed to be the latter. But the two sects of orphans had to endure the same things. Roy, one of the few who knew his parents were dead, still had to open the gifts from Goodwill delivered on Christmas like everyone else, even the children who dismissed them as stand-ins that would eventually be replaced by better models from their mothers and fathers. Rosie still said her prayers every night, as the children asked God to be merciful on their missing parents, hours after telling me her dreams. We were the stories Dickens could only hope to dream about.

I dropped *Frankenstein*, the bookcase holding my eyes in a trance. I wanted to ask many questions, and perhaps the authors of the bookcase knew. But didn't some of their fathers and uncles come back? Sure, it took awhile, but they did. And didn't some of the others find different families and stay with them? Yes, and it felt as good as the other family probably would've. How did they determine what children were so lucky? Chance, I guess, and you believe in chance, don't you, Mars? Yeah, I guess I do. But they're getting by no matter what, Mars. "My daddy comin' back," said John Lyles as Tilly dimmed the lights. "I'm a go home like Dorothy."

"Yeah," I said as Tilly closed her book and put *The Wizard of Oz* on the bookcase. "They're getting by."

Tilly tapped me on the shoulder, and montioned for me to sit at the table. I closed Bach's fugue, eager to return to it after tea, and sat down in front of the table.

"You really went all out," I said, pouring sugar into my tea. "You haven't cooked banana bread in a while."

Tilly folded a napkin and put it into her lap. She refolded it again, letting the warm fabric slide across her aging skin. I remembered when

there had been no liver spots on Tilly's hands, when they played the piano buoyantly. But now they shook every other measure, and she could never give the full life to the whole notes like she wanted to. They were shaking.

"I can fold that for you," I offered.

"No...no, it's fine...I still do things myself!," snapped Tilly.

Tilly barely snapped at me. I should have cherished such a gentle teacher, but I didn't. That snap was the cruelest thing in the world. I bit my lip and nodded. Tilly rolled her eyes, and then covered them, her hands still shaking.

"What does fugue mean?," I said, picking up my fork and sticking it in a slice of banana bread.

"It...it means...flight," said Tilly, her eyes still covered.

Tilly lowered her napkin, exposing her red eyes.

"It's hard...harder than anything I ever played," I said.

"Mars...Mars, money low this...this year...and I was thinkin'...maybe you and Billy could...could leave...just for little while."

I dropped my fork and swallowed.

"Just for...just for little while," she repeated.

The food wasn't going down, or it had gone down, and something else was there. I focused on the piano. It was the only place where I thought was safe, and now it was cold. Anyone could see its betrayal.

"That wasn't an accident...that Bach just suddenly showed up, was it?," I said.

"Mars," said Tilly, collecting my plate. "I'm sorry."

Opening my mouth, I tried to speak. Nothing came out, just that rolling something in my throat. Tilly rushed out of the room, plate in hand, her slippers sliding across the floor.

I walked to the piano and rubbed my index fingers on the two keys. I wished that I could say I wouldn't play anymore, that I hated Tilly, but I couldn't. She had said "a while", and I didn't know what that meant. It was "a while" before I understood that orphanages all over New York were closing down, and that there were other kids worse off than me. It was "a while" before I entered Tilly's again, though I visited Jo as much as I could. It was "a while" after that I figured out that Venus, who shook when my fingers slipped on the piano, was the goddess of love. Should love shake like that, a robust little shimmy? I didn't think it should as my eyelids hardened to keep back tears. I watched her shimmy. I watched her dance.

III. Cadenza

Jo rifled through a few records, his guitar strapped to his back. It was mostly dance music--*Starlight Bay*, *Underneath the Mellow Moon*, *Red Hot*, *That's Georgia*. Jo pulled out *That's Georgia* and gave it to me. We were in the only record shop on Daly, run by Joseph Little who invited us after our first trip to Goldie's, the jazz club over on Patterson. He said we had to hear music in a cleaner atmosphere than a jazz club. I ambled up the aisles awkwardly that first day, and Joseph Little stepped in, smiled at Jo, then said, "Lemme give the white kid some recommendations." Then, out came Joplin, Turpin, Scott, and Gershwin.

I discovered ragtime in this small record shop and we played them on the phonograph at the front of the store. Gershwin grabbed my ears the most. *The real American folk song is a rag, a mental jag- a rhythmic tone for the chronic blues*. I sang it as I brushed my teeth, and Billy and John, who did it at the same time to save water, glanced at each other. The quiet kid was singing. *Boy! You can't remain still and quiet, for it's a riot! The Real American folk song is like a Fountain of Youth: you taste it and it elates you, and then invigorates you*. Billy later admitted he liked it and asked if Gershwin was black. I answered sure, afraid to look dumb because I really didn't know. When I questioned Joseph Little about it later, he and Jo burst out laughing, louder than *The Cascades* flowing out of the phonograph's horn. "Gershwin is white", replied Joseph Little, "but dang it if he ain't got a little Joplin playing piano in his soul."

Usually, I would search first when we entered the store, but I just stood and watched Jo do it that day. We'd talk about the similarities of baroque music and big band, how they were both made for people to dance, to glorify the dance floor with waltzes or the Charleston. Who knows? Bach might've played Joplin's "Peacherine Rag" with gusto.

"Pull out the Joplin," I said.

"Finally, he speaks," said Jo. "Thought you carried the quiet of church out with you."

Jo always seemed interested with the details I gave him about St. Augustine's. He, Otis, and Lisa went to Bowery Baptist Church, several blocks from Daly. From Jo's tales, it was constantly loud and busy, with praise dancing in the aisles, the pastor lifting up his robes to join in behind the podium, churchgoers waving their fans or hands in rhythm to the gospels "raising the room" as Jo put it. So the stand up-recite-then sit down style of the Mass, and the sedated singing of St. Augustine's surprised Jo.

Sundays were reverent, but not until we got here. As I sung the parting hymn at St. Augustine's, I was really thinking of what records were

waiting for me. Entering the store, we heard the calm fitzz-fitzz of a beginning record. Whatever spun on the phonograph cleared our minds. The needle jumped like it was excited to see us, and the horn was turned in our direction. And here I was about to ruin it.

"If you became Baptist, you be gabbin' already, before you left the pew," said Jo.

I gave him a weak smile. "Bach was Lutheran," I said firmly.

Jo stuck his tongue out at me. "You and Bach should get married, Mars."

I hit him over the head with *That's Georgia*. "Stop razzing me."

Jo commenced looking at the records. I stared hard at his guitar, hanging loosely as if it was ready to be yanked forward and played at any time. Just tell him. Now was a good time, to be as vocal as Bessie Smith singing around us. *Blues on my brain, my tongue refused to talk. I was followin' my daddy but my feet refuses to walk.* We'll still go out West after we make it big where your guitar can compete with all those banjos and harmonicas. We'll have those duets in saloons, and wander to find them if no one's interested. I can come back anytime.

"I'm leaving for a while," I said.

Jo whirled around, his guitar almost hitting my stomach.

"Where you going?" he asked, frowning his brow.

"A pool hall in Manhattan," I said. "Tilly knows this guy Luke who needs someone to wash dishes. Billy's going to work on a fishing boat. You'd figure it would be the other way around. See me working at a pool hall? I don't..."

"Forget that," interrupted Jo. "Why are you going?"

"Financial trouble," I replied. "And since I'm the oldest...I don't want to go."

Jo pursed his lips. "Oh," he said.

He went back to the records, going through them more quickly, as quickly as I did with the birth certificates, all the time shaking his head. I hadn't told anyone about them, not Jo, not Billy.

"Your piano gonna get so dusty," Jo said suddenly as the records flew between his fingers. "Gonna miss so many blues concerts at Goldie's, the Strauss tribute at Carnegie, even Harlow."

"I'll come back for Harlow," I said when Jo got to the end of the row and stopped.

"And Carnegie too."

I didn't know if Jo heard me despite the shop being silent. Bessie had sung the last of her blues. He grabbed *That's Georgia* and *Peacherine Rag* from me, so rough the record covers scratched my wrist, and walked to Joseph Little behind the cash register. I followed, greeted by Joseph Little's sweet yellow eyes under his bowler hat. His sight was terrible but he could always find what you needed.

"How your daddy, Jo?" asked Joseph Little.

“Gave me a dollar to spend,” said Jo, fishing out a dollar and sliding it across the counter. “Bicycle business was good this week.”

“He do a good job there,” praised Joseph Little. “Fixed my nephew’s handlebars.”

Jo nodded, his eyes on the phonograph. “He gone for hours, I mean really long hours, then come home tired and dirty. But Mama always got dinner waiting for him. Mama worry about him travellin’ so far, especially when it dark.”

“I should think so,” said Joseph Little, putting the records in a paper bag and giving it to Jo.

Jo refolded the paper bag, then handed it to me. I took them, blinking at him. Joplin felt so heavy.

“But I say to Mama, don’t fret,” he said, only looking at me. “As long as he comes home, we ain’t got a problem.”

Tilly arranged for a car to pick me up after I walked Billy to the docks. She had a grocer friend that would give me a ride. The act started a bunch of rumors. Mars was leaving for the concert hall, and needed a stylish entrance. The kid’s finally made it. I tried to tell them where I was really going, but nobody bought it except Billy. They couldn’t picture me in a pool hall. So I let the myth continue. The day after I told Jo, I packed my music first, then my clothes, and a few books Tilly gave me. Tilly had knitted Billy a blue wool cap for his voyage, and for me, some red woolen mittens. I put the mittens next to my Mozart, managing to fit everything into a suitcase the size of a third of an icebox. Who knows what was in Billy’s suitcase? A couple packs of cigarettes and a few pants and shirts. He barely struggled with it when he went down the staircase. Or maybe he was just more at ease.

On the way down the stairs, I passed Rosie, who was rooted to the same spot she was during my lessons. She was wearing her favorite green dress and socks that matched with lace on the edges. Until then, I hadn’t guessed that she’d heard the news first after Tilly left the room. But that whole weekend, she didn’t talk. I caught her laying out that green dress the night before.

“Coming out to say bye?” I asked, resting the suitcase on a step.

Rosie swallowed. “I liked Tchaikovsky best,” she said.

I picked up the suitcase and smiled at her.

“I like him a lot, too,” I said. “Bye, Rosie.”

Rosie schooched over, then wrapped her arms around the banister.

John Lyles bounded down the stairs, followed by a few others, as I patted her on the shoulder. When I came outside, I saw the rest were already gathered outside, guessing what kind of car would meet me on the docks.

“A Ford!,” yelled Katie Black. “Because everyone has one.”

“No,” argued Madelyn Davis. “A Chevy Coach. Quality at low cost.”

Madelyn liked to memorize ads and jingles that came out of the radio. Myself, I was hoping for the Ford. It would've been nice to be like everyone else, even just for a little while.

Tilly hugged Billy, who let his arms stick to his sides. He asked for the boating job specifically. For a minute, he let his nose rest in her hair and breathed deep. The words came next, the same given to Hannah Snow and the others making the journey to anywhere. Billy nodded to whatever came out of her mouth, sniffled, and looked at me. Everyone looked at me and I lugged my suitcase to Tilly.

"Where mittens?" she asked, staring at my hands.

"They're in the suitcase," I said.

"Protect hands," she said.

Pulled into a hug, Tilly nuzzled her nose against my forehead, stroking the back of my neck. I balled my fists, trying my best not to blink. My stomach jumped. That didn't stop until I arrived at Luke's. What were the words she was going to say? Your mother's dead. Why didn't she tell me? But she did believe in me, so much so she was sending me off. Wish you well. Sending me off in a real car to a make-believe concert hall, but a real job so I wouldn't wander too far. Your father's late. Tell me something I don't know. Tell me that the concert hall is actually real and that you'll be there to hear it.

"God loves you," she whispered in my ear.

Such standard words. Daly Street shrunk around me: the Lowenstein townhouse door, then little like a piece of stretched out orange taffy; the other kids, stiff and frozen like a still photograph; Jo, I couldn't see him at all. Only Billy looked bigger, fiddling with his suitcase handle.

"So do I," whispered Tilly before she let me out of her arms.

Maybe I had always missed those. Maybe they were just for me. I count when it hurts.

Three extra words. Two musical phrases in her pretty German voice.

"Send me back some comic books!" yelled John Lyles to Billy. "Rin Tin Tin!"

Two overgrown orphans with a couple dollars in our pockets. Multiple beeps of horns from a car gliding down Daly, two news boys yelling about the latest law passed, one baby screaming above me on the fire escape.

"Write to us, Mars," shouted Madelyn Davis. "Especially about the car."

"Still say it'll be a Ford," said Katie Black.

About thirty paces, with our suitcases in hand, and we're yards from Tilly, dotting her eyes with a hankchief. Billy walked on, but I stalled, looking at the stoop where my mother probably waited, the stoop directly across from Tilly's. I imagined that night. She trembled with cold, having no idea she was sick. She'd ask those two men if

Tilly's was really a nice place. They'd say, yeah, its hard to find a place where lonely kids won't be crushed.

Billy Banks threw his blue wool cap into the Atlantic brushing against the docks of Red Hook. The cap floated while Billy lit a cigarette and sat on a pier. He puffed while we listened to water hum beneath our feet. The ship bells clanged brightly, unaware of the sadness of the ocean. It had been sad before we got there because no one ever stayed on the docks for very long and no one ever cleared the trash from its middle; no one would rescue the abandoned wool cap. I saw it eat. I saw the ocean eat the wool cap.

"That a pity hat," said Billy, blowing smoke while the cap descended. "I find me a better one."

"Yeah," I said, sitting on the dock's edge.

"We come to the right place," said Billy. "The ocean don't care where you come from, only where you going."

Billy's voice was barely loud enough to carry over the sounds of a shipyard-- splashing anchors, yelling captains, kids threatening to push each other in. It was soft, scared, not like Billy. But how could I put him down for that when it felt like the bottom of my stomach was leap-frogging over the top, when my reflection in the water was so thin and pathetic? He was stronger than I'd ever be.

I stared at Billy. His lips were trembling as the smoke came out of his mouth. I don't think we'd had more than four long conversations, and those were always about comic book serials or tricking toddlers. This was most likely the fifth, the final, and my shoulders felt heavy because maybe then we were finally an us. And I wasn't the usual killjoy. I wasn't a milquetoast who got really boring. But you couldn't hold onto it. This us was slipping through our fingers.

"But I always knew where we was going," continued Billy. "You'll go to school where you gonna play until your fingers are numb. And you'll get married, married to a girl who's odd and beautiful cause musicians seem to like them girls."

Billy's lips still trembled. He didn't look at me as he narrated this possible life and it was strange, strange because not looking made it seem true. I wanted to believe him, believe in every word that came out of his quivering mouth, because Billy was a smart kid.

"I got a guess about me," admitted Billy. "Measuring yourself is hard. I'll live to twenty and get a girl that cook kettlecorn and lime pie for me on Sundays. But the other stuff I'll keep to myself."

Billy threw his cigarette in the ocean and we silently watched it disappear.

"But I got faith someone'll talk me up. Say Billy wasn't that bad. Say all he wanted was to sail away and maybe find his dad where the ocean most deep because Lord knows he ain't find no comfort on land."

We heard the rustle of feet behind us. I turned and saw a sailor in blue jeans carrying an envelope. He was around thirty-five but had large bags under his eyes which made him look older.

"Either of you, Billy Banks?" he asked, looking at the name of the envelope.

"Yes, sir," said Billy, rising from the dock and shaking the sailor's hand.

"Got firm hands," said the sailor cheerfully. "Those'll come in handy." Billy patted my arm. He touched the jacket Tilly had made him a couple months ago. She made us both one when we outgrew the others.

"Remember me real nice," he said. "If you get the chance."

I nodded, not sure what else to do. Fifteen years with no good-byes. Tilly hadn't even said the words. How were we supposed to?

The sailor collected Billy in a sideways hug as they walked, talking excitedly about the amount of herring they were going to catch that spring and then after that, a summer journey to the Virgin Islands where his girlfriend had a cabin. Billy chuckled, his head resting on the sailor's shoulder. Why go searching for more than a sideways hug? That was just a little less than what I wanted from my father.

The fishing boat was sleeping silently, the mast settled like a drooping cloud. But that was only for a few moments. The sailor checked the rig, pulled the anchor, and began steering the helm. Heat from the sun stroked the now moving mast. Or maybe the heat was only on the harbor. The Atlantic looked young as the *Skygrazer* set off. Billy waved from the starboard, his hands going up and down like a windmill. The sailor threw his head back in laughter, obviously pleased with Billy's excitement. There were kettlecorn-colored rays shining in Billy's red hair, smooth locks now sacrificed to the salt in sea air. And lime pie is as sweet as knowing that a compass can take you anywhere if you hold it right. Living until twenty wouldn't seem so bad if you found treasure chests and uncharted territories. I waved at him, and now I write. I write so I can wave.

The Rosenbaums pulled up to the Van Brunt Store in a Ford when the sun was setting. Before they came, I pulled out one of my music sheets, and drew two staves on the back of Schubert. It was one of his sonatas so I thought I'd act smart and write one of my own. Tilly told me that this sonata was written in memory of an extinct guitar, the arpeggione, and the man who played it. That made sense. Schubert honored many a friend in his compositions. Because of that, I put in a bass clef to make it heavy, which seems like a bit of a cheat. It was the easiest thing to draw just then.

Frank Rosenbaum slid out of the car. He was a short man whose chest was about level to the side of the car. I remembered his bowtie the most-- white with black polka dots.

Whenever he talked, it looked like a black and white butterfly flying up his neck. His wife, Gigi, sat in the front seat, trying to smooth down her curly, brown hair while Frank grabbed my suitcase and put it in the backseat. Gigi was about fifteen years younger than him, perhaps twenty-six. She gave me a smile similar to the one Tilly gave babies as she tucked them into their cribs. I still held Schubert and a pencil when I got into the car.

"Knew at once you were a Tilly's kid," said Frank, steering down Beard Street. "Not one of those ragamuffin kids that run all over the state."

"Those kids are awful," said Gigi.

I folded Schubert and put it in my pocket. Gigi noticed and smiled at me, her hair hovering as the wind from the open window blew in.

"Is that a love letter?," she asked.

"Leave the boy alone, Gigi," said Frank.

"It's music," I said.

Gigi's hair rose higher than dropped abruptly as Frank stopped in front of a bait shop.

"Is it music for a special lady?" asked Gigi.

Frank threw me a look. The bow tie flew as he sighed. I felt my face burn.

"Aw, it is," exclaimed Gigi. "That's so romantic. I love that type of stuff."

Frank snorted. "A bit old-fashioned for my tastes," he said quietly.

Gigi stared out her window. We were nearing Brooklyn Bridge, the same bridge I'd shared with Jo as we made our way to Carnegie. I'd never travelled across this Bridge without him. In the Ford, glossy and graceful, even more graceful as the lights of Manhattan pierced through the dusk, through the windshield, through Gigi's large hair, I thought I could go to the music hall. They'd announce me. Marshall Mims playing Schubert. I'd just happen to have it handy. Then, I'd play the scales I had collected in my head, then launch into fuller pieces. Infectious cantatas, awe-inspiring canticles, and hopefully not a sleep-inducing symphony. I'd have many flowers thrown on stage, with janitors glaring at me because of the mess, and walk out to applause as people crowded on Seventh Avenue. All Frank Rosenbaum had to do was take a few turns.

But he didn't. Carnegie wasn't visible, but a couple warehouses were. The brown paint was peeling off each one, and kids were kicking a can at a small dog trotting against the walls when the Ford pulled up. The

largest had a dirty sign with Luke's Poo Imporium on the front, but the "I" in pool was almost rubbed completely out.

"Luke's English is terrible," said Frank. "Let me get your suitcase, Marshall."

"He's working at a pool hall," exclaimed Gigi, staring at the sign. "You didn't tell me..."

"Yes, Gigi," interrupted Frank dryly. "And don't say anything else."

As soon as Frank got out of the car, Gigi turned around and tapped me on the knee. She had long nails, but they were light.

"Seems us moral folk end up at the wrong places at the wrong time," she said, shaking her head at me.

I continued to look at her nails, red and delicate, felt the urge to have her hand in mine.

"Keep your nose clean and don't go out at night," said Gigi. "And smile because I know that girl is gonna faint when she hears what you come up with. I would. I'd go weak for the right chord."

Frank motioned for me to come forward through the rolled up window. "Bye," I said. "And thanks."

Gigi nodded and started playing with her hair again, the red tips of her nails weaving in and out of the brown hairs. I took my suitcase from Frank. Frank looked at Gigi appreciatively, fixing his bowtie.

"Good luck with the music, Marshall," he said, slapping me on the shoulder. "If Tilly's right, which she usually is, in saying you're good, you'll be in Manhattan for some time, making a way towards Seventh."

"That'd be nice and thank you," I said.

"No thanks needed."

Frank slid back into the Ford, putting an arm around Gigi, who had finally managed to make her hang down nicely. She put his head on his shoulder. The Ford pedalled away into the sweeter side of Manhattan, exhaust smoke trailing out. Frank and Gigi. Those crazy kids. A melody popped up in my head. The Rosenbaums were going to live up the night, and Frank might get lucky if he plays the chords right. Jo would've been proud.

"Tilly kid," yelled Luke as I dropped my second plate on the floor that night. "Tilly kid!"

His accent was rougher than Tilly's, croaking and rumbling, like if a bullfrog had a German accent. I told him my name, but he never remembered, or pretended to remember. Maybe I said it too softly.

"Yes?" I shouted, quickly picking up the bits of broken plate.

Luke appeared before I finished. His whole face fell, the sunken, brown eyes, the thick moustache, his odd, small nose that didn't match his fat face. The gut of his belly made the apron stick out, and the apron was covered with black stains and water spots.

"Use broom," he said. "Hurt yourself the first day?"

I scratched my head, forgetting that I had a shard of plate in my hands. "Ouch," I yelped.

"No sweep at Tilly's?" said Luke, grabbing a broom. "Aye!"

That was Luke's call of disappointment. Aye! He first said it when I walked in. I guess he was expecting someone less skinny because he immediately ordered a bus boy to get a plate of beans and bread for me. The next Aye! came when I said that most of my chores at Tilly's were making my bed, throwing out garbage, getting groceries, scrubbing the floor, but not washing dishes. Aye, baby, exclaimed Luke. I had been babied, watching the other two boys rinse the dishes. They didn't stop to daydream like I did during my chores. Aye, daydreaming on the job! I said that to myself.

Luke thrust the broom at one of the bus boys. The bus boy, who was around eighteen, looked at me grumpily, starting to sweep.

At first, I was glad to be working in the back. Luke had cleared a small room where he stored boxes of sarsaparilla, Cokes, and bottled water. The boxes were off to the side. A light bulb hung around my bed, which took up most of the room. I could fit my suitcase in. The sink was directly across from the door of my room, which was convenient. I really thought I'd be sleeping on the floor, despite Luke being Tilly's friend. I'd take a cracked light bulb, and the rushing of sink water. Of course, this was before the first dish clattered to the floor. The bus boys brought in the dirty dishes, never flinching at whatever was on those plates, then stacked them to the right of the sink. I don't mind grease, but it does make it hard to hold dishes. Plus I didn't like touching spit which soaked the top of several plates. I asked for gloves, but the bus boys looked at me like I was crazy.

"Why you think our hands so hard, cake eater?," said the eighteen-year old, shoving the sponge in my chest.

I tossed the sponge in the murky water, and began scrubbing fast, so fast and so deep my entire shirt was wet in a few minutes. The younger bus boy handed me an apron with a smirk. I hated both of them because they seemed to know everything.

"You don't wash now," said Luke.

He took one of the boxes of sarsaparilla and put it in my arms. I tottered back a little.

"Carry to table in back," he said. "Table got small person."

I leaned forward to find my footing. Protect my hands. Yeah, right.

Luke's pool hall was fairly large, the size of Tilly's dining hall. Instead of the smooth, wooden tables of Tilly's, there were green tops and black legs on these tables. The green tops looked darker under the dim lights. One man stroked the green top like it was skin and kissed the edge of the table, maybe for luck. A lonely eight ball rolled around aimlessly while I made my way between the tables. It dropped into a

pocket, and the man who kissed for luck whirled around and shouted “Woo!”

“Fancy yourself Ralphie Greenleaf?” said his opponent, taking out the eight ball and shaking it like it was bad. “You a showman or somethin’?”

“I am whenever I play you,” said the man with luck. “Fill up the triangle again cause I feel chancey.”

I got in my mind that I was looking for a small person. The man with luck shouted for his girlfriend to come over and give his cue a kiss. She gave him a dismissive wave and took a cigarette from a purse. I skimmed the tables for a kid. After Gigi’s warning, I thought I’d be the only kid in there. Focusing on the last table, where there were at least seven guys gathered, I made my way there. There was smoke ducking in between their heads, and they were laughing rather than playing. It took me awhile to realize that they weren’t playing pool but cards. I saw something moving in between their bodies, as if they put a dog on the table. Were they betting on a dog?

“He married a circus gal, that Greenleaf!,” said a voice from the crowd. “Because he know we got class and we lucky.”

The voice was loud, louder than the man with luck pleading for his girlfriend to give him some affection, louder than the snaps of cue against balls, louder than the shake of sarsaparilla hitting the inside of the box. It was also a little whiny, but in a good way. The whine slipped between the deep voice to make it seem urgent, like that piercing sound when you hear a train whistle over the chugging of a streetcar.

“He know they cheap, too,” said a man in the crowd. “Ante up.”

“Yeah,” said the clear voice. “Greenleaf was my kind of guy, not just cause I work with a showman. He got fame to spare.”

“You sure Luke won’t mind we got this game going?,” said a man, twisting a piece of paper nervously in his hands.

The clear voice chuckled. “Sure, sure,” he said. “I know Luke.”

I tripped and the sarsaparilla rattled. All the men turned around, and the nervous guy made the sign of the cross. The small person in the center of the table didn’t look at me, though. He kept shuffling the cards. Sitting down, his full height was hidden, but he looked about two feet tall, a pumped up toddler. When he breathed, the cut of his muscles were transparent in the dim light. He had a lot of hair, wild and brown on his head, on his arms hidden under a red shirt. It was wilder than Gigi’s, but I think he liked it that way.

“Luke sent in a little spy,” said one of the men, glaring at me. “And he brought you a house, Nez.”

The small man threw a card at him. “Where I lay my head grander than that place you call home. Place look like a john.”

A couple man chuckled. The box felt like it might slip.

“Don’t trust quiet kids,” said the nervous guy. “They’re good reporters. They notice everything.”

Nez rolled his eyes.

“We playin’ poker,” said Nez. “Ain’t like we runnin’ a brothel. Let’s get the pot cookin’. Twenty-five cents. Who in?”

The man who called me a spy nodded, and put in his bet. Amounts flew around, going up to a full two dollars. Nez dealt out five cards to each of the men. The pot was pretty big, seven sets of two dollars. I had a couple dollars. I could’ve played. Staring over their shoulders, I saw Jacks, kings, and queens. Otis and Jo played cards, and played poker when Lisa wasn’t around. I watched them, and Otis’s face would twist in concentration just like the nervous guy’s. Otis would throw me the occasional look, cold and appraising like the King on the card. Then he shook his head at me, and went back to the cards. The nervous guy saw me peering over him and held the cards closer to his chest. He had a Straight Flush. The other men sighed and folded. I raised my eyebrows behind the nervous guy. Nez finally glanced at me. Even though the room was dim, I could make out his eyes. They were shiny and black like an eight ball, prodding like a cue touching someone’s

back.

“How’re the drinks, kid?,” he asked, tapping the back of his cards.

I looked down at the box, but then again at Nez’s fingers tapping on the cards.

“Pretty good,” I said, darting my eyes to the nervous guy’s back.

“They the best quality you got?”

“Umm, it’s okay. We have some really good root beer in the back. There’s a chance you might like it better.”

Nez smiled. “Think I’ll take my chances with what you got in your hands.”

No one really got it. The other men were staring disgustedly at the pot, maybe thinking they were losing money they meant to spent on their girls or new clothes. They stared at it like it was pieces of gold found on green grass instead of wrinkled dollars on a pool table.

“You foldin’, Nez?” asked the nervous guy.

“No,” said Nez. “What you got?”

Nez grinned past him at me. The nervous guy appeared less rattled and he spread his cards against the table. He beamed as two guys announced “Straight Flush!” Nez dropped his cards on the green, with a wider smile than the stoic King and Queen. Royal Flush. Nez collected the dollars, flopping them back and forth, while the other men complained.

“Nah! That just ain’t right!” said the two men, who seemed to enjoy talking at the same time. The nervous guy laid his head on the green top, mumbling at the paper he had

crumpled, "Doesn't work even when you write down the odds."

"Take my pot to my palace," said Nez, standing up to push the dollars down into his pocket. "Who up for another round?"

I dropped the box, and shook out my hands, but this time it wasn't loud, at least not as much as Luke storming up to us. He nodded nicely to a couple men, then crossed his arms, looking at Nez.

"Nez!," he shouted.

"Luke!," mimicked Nez in an over-the-top German accent.

"This second time!," said Luke, shaking his head. "Second time!"

"I figure the first was a warning, and the second a test."

Luke's gut rolled as he sighed. "Don't like gambling. Pool hall already talked about bad."

"They knockin' your place, Luke? Let me have a word with 'em," replied Nez.

The nervous guy relaxed, chuckling on the table top.

"They not knock if you don't bring the bad in," said Luke.

Nez walked to the edge of the tabletop, and patted the nervous guy's head.

"No bills between us this time. We clean," said Nez.

Luke didn't seem to buy it, but there was no proof. He clucked his teeth.

"Nez, I watch you close," he said. "Tilly kid, you go help in back."

"Sarsparilla's on me, chums!," said Nez, handing Luke a dollar. It was met with the two men yelling "Hurrah!"

Nez slid off the tabletop like a kid going down a slide. Someone must have helped him up because he couldn't see above the table.

"Hey you!," he said to me. "Let's take a walk."

We walked to the backroom. I rubbed my hands against my apron and avoided looking at Nez. When I first met him, I couldn't help but think he was the perfect mix of a leprechaun and a wild dog, hairy and joking. It didn't help that he had money in his pocket.

"Tilly kid?," he said. "That a name or somethin'?"

"No, Tilly's an orphanage," I said. "I'm Marshall."

I opened the back door for the both of us. Nez's arm brushed my knee.

"Marshall? That a bit dainty. You like that?"

That made me look down at him. No one had ever criticized my name before. But I don't know if I liked it. Truthfully, I still don't know.

"Most call me Mars," I said.

"Hmmm, that ain't that good. Sound like you a planet. What your last name? We can do somethin' with that."

"Mims," I replied, shrugging.

Nez gave me an approving nod. "Mimsy. Sound like you rub elbows with Capone. I like that."

Mimsy. It wasn't awful. I wasn't a real gangster, but it was swell to think I was tougher because of that name, tough like Billy. I didn't mind helping Nez win that hand.

"Where you stay?" asked Nez.

I pointed to the door. Nez peered into the room.

"What kind of place is this?" said Nez. "Your feet almost touch the wall when you sleepin'. A home ain't a home if you can't stretch ya legs."

I shrugged. "It's not so bad. I've never had a room to myself."

Nez sat on my new bed, and rubbed his butt against the mattress.

"What if you get you a lady friend? This ain't space to do nothing."

He laid on the bed, staring at the cracked light bulb. I didn't even know I had the option to bring a girl back there. I hadn't brought a girl anywhere. It wasn't as if I could bring Lisa anywhere.

"You a little too young, I guess," said Nez. "You in school?"

Rubbing my neck, I sat down next to him, sure that the other dish boys were listening in on our conversation. I'd never been questioned like this before. Still, it didn't seem like he was interesting in judging me, at least not in the same way he judged the room.

"No," I said.

Saying it was a bit liberating. I was free of Miniver.

"All boys need schooling," said Nez. "I ain't seen you here before. You could've won me some more money last time."

"Don't know about that," I said.

Nez seemed shifty, but in a good way, like he'd steal a cover for a guy on the street. I wondered if he was like this with everyone, so open, so interested. Why was he talking to me? I bet I was more boring than the guys in the pool hall.

"I heard you worked for a showman?" I said.

Nez smirked. "Not just any showman. Brick Meyer. Talk so good you swear it was a serenade. And he narrating me, so it that much better."

"Narrates you?"

"What, you ain't drawing stuff out of your mind because of my size? A dwarf in the hall and you asking no questions? I work for Kelway's, a circus."

I'd never seen a circus before, not even in a newspaper. I thought you had to be rich to go, so I kept to what didn't require many coins. We flew kites, traded comic books, raced, played stickball, normal activities where you could make or retrieve what you needed. But what if I never got to see it? What if it was like Carnegie, a place I could sink into with little notice, but still enjoy, enjoy all the small details? Though it sounds conceited, I deserved a sight of it.

"I'd like to see it," I said, running my hand over the bumpy mattress.

Nez glared at me, his mouth shifting to the side. It felt like he was figuring me out. I didn't want him to feel bad for me or know that I was poor.

"You good with your hands?" he asked, grabbing my hand from the mattress.

He turned it over, running his small thumb over the lines of my fingers. I wondered if he could tell I played. Maybe my hands weren't as firm as Billy's, and that would cost me the job.

"Not good, but we can work with 'em," said Nez.

I took back my hand, smiling. Luke appeared in the doorway, obviously displeased that I wasn't working. I didn't even care anymore.

"You stickin' Mimsy in the back, Luke," said Nez immediately.

"Where your sense?"

Luke wiped his nose with his apron. "Mimsy?"

"Tilly kid," said Nez.

"He got bed and roof. I feed him."

"Somethin' tell me this kid ain't doin' well here. That right, Mimsy?"

I twisted an apron string and looked up at the ceiling.

"He quiet cause he like," defended Luke.

"No, he quiet cause he don't like," argued Nez. "You a good man but I can get him a

space, a space where he can fart and not stink up the whole room. We need a boy."

The bus boys laughed lightly until Luke gave them a stern look.

"Luke," said Nez. "Is he really that much a loss?"

Luke scratched his chin. I could see him imagining how many dishes I'd break before the week was over, how many times the bus boys would rile me, how much he needed the room, what Tilly would want. I prayed that he would say yes. A sink's easy to see, but a circus, not so much.

"Tilly kid," he said. "You like room? Tell."

I let the apron hang loose. "I like rooms with windows," I said.

"Who don't?," said Nez.

"Shush, Nez," said Luke.

He moved past us, and picked up my suitcase. He motioned that I should take off the apron. I handed it to him.

"Take what you need tonight," said Luke.

I opened the suitcase, and took out a pair of pants, my toothbrush, and my mittens. I slipped the toothbrush in my pocket, and put on the mittens.

"That Tilly kid," he said, hunching over Nez, his hands firm on Nez's shoulder.

"Don't let eyes loose on him. You treat like Parnum kid, one of your own."

Who were these Parnum kids? Were they like Tilly's kids? I got dubbed a Tilly kid immediately, but would I fit in with them?

"I don't break habit," answered Nez.

Luke put the suitcase against the wall.

"Have Mike drop off," he said, pointing to the bus boy who called me a cake eater.

Mike scrunched up his nose, squeezing the sponge harder in his fist.

"Cake eater won't survive a circus," said Mike, narrowing his eyes.

"Ain't a place for him."

Nez tugged on my pants. I bent down to him, putting my ear next to his mouth.

"If you lookin', it good," whispered Nez. "Ain't a better way to use your hands."

Chapter IV. Fairgrounds and Searchlights

Parnum was that city that died every night, the last of the hamlets bordering the Upper East side. The cold winds often turned the fans of the steel mill, the blades clanging together a little after midnight. Parnum seemed to sleep peacefully, despite its noisy neighbor. Tucked away inside the chilly night air, were warm, mahogany stucco buildings and grey, cracked streets. The city let out its occasional snores-- the hum of a passing car, the opening of a window, the clatter of a tipped trashcan. But for the most part, it lay silent, exhausted after the working day. I rubbed my face with my red mitten from Tilly. I looked up at the April stars, then at Nez, whose tiny body moved hurriedly down the boulevard. Following him, I pocketed the mitten. Launderers took down their lines, folding the sheets. Kids devoured penny Moonpies, hurtling the wrappers at tawny cats prancing across fences. A five-minute aria blared from a ham radio, but was quickly turned off.

"Parnum glows when she sleeps," said Nez over his shoulder. "Just like a baby."

I coughed. "Seems a bit quiet," I said.

"It's worn out, getting' ready for tomorrow."

"Are we almost there?"

"In about a minute. Brick'll be up."

"Is Brick the owner?"

"Nah, he the talker. Kelway, he the ace. But Mimsy, let me do all the talkin'. Gotta handle Brick a certain way, real professional like."

A small boy ran up to me and Nez, half a Moonpie in his hand. He hiked his brown trousers up. I couldn't count the patches on the boy's pants. Nez barely reached the boy's waist.

"Hey, Slicky," said Nez. "You getting' by awright?"

Slicky sniffled, then stuffed the rest of his Moonpie in his mouth, crumbs scattering on his small, pink lips. "Who you?" he addressed me after swallowing.

I opened my mouth, but Nez took care of the introductions.

"This here's Mimsy. Gonna be part of the establishment," said Nez.

Slicky nodded. He looked me up and down, smirked, and turned to Nez.

"Me and Pete is bettin'. He says eight times six is forty-two. That ain't true, ain't it?," said Slicky, wiping his mouth with the cuff of his sleeve.

"Nah. You tell Pete it's forty-eight, and to ask Nez if he don't believe," answered Nez.

"Awright," said Slicky. "Pete ain't never right."

“Both of you should be in school, as soon as your ma get better,” said Nez, giving Slicky a reproachful look.

“We aimin’ to go back this fall...soon as the leaves turn,” said Slicky. “Gonna get schooled up.”

“It ain’t never hurt to stretch your mind,” said Nez, patting Slicky’s chocolate-covered hand. “Tell your ma I said greetings and all, and wash up before ya reach home.”

Slicky nodded, stared at me for a few minutes, shook his head, and ran down the poorly lit sidewalk. Nez turned to me, my gaze was fixed on Slicky’s shrinking backside. Were these Parnum kids? I thought they would be rich, considering they lived in Manhattan. Most of the Manhattanites I saw were rich.

“Pete and Slick are good kids,” said Nez. “But they house a mess. Neighbors try to keep them clean cause they suspectin’ that house got the sickness about it.”

We passed a red-haired, teenage girl airing out a yellow dress. She waved at Nez, but didn’t say anything. Nez nodded at her, but pointed at me, as if saying that he had some business to finish first.

“Diphtheria?,” I said. “One of the kids at Tilly’s had it for a bit.”

“Yeah, that one. They ma too sick to clean they house. Can’t have young, dirty kids in a dirty house, ya know? Better ‘em clean and healthy, so they can live there and take care of her.”

“What sickness does the mother have?”

“We don’t know. It’s like she sad inside and she just stopped. Stopped cleanin’, cookin’, gettin’ along. She just stare into space, payin’ no mind.”

I glanced around at the houses straddling the street. They were all modest, paint peeling off the rickety shutters, flowerboxes holding comatose roses and tulips, dried car oil spread across the driveways. Most of the mailboxes were crooked, a few missing their flags. Occasionally, a shingle trembled, the wind blowing it up and down. I saw tattered curtains in one window, a candle burning behind the glass.

A doll missing its two eyes, a toy ice truck, and a headless rubber duckie lay on the brown grass. It reminded me briefly of a girl in the orphanage, Susan, who used to collect the broken toys and put them in her makeshift hospital. Though the hospital was a cardboard box, and Susan was only ten, it was still a careful procedure, one so meticulous that it required Billy to attach blocks of wood in the box to serve as shelves. Susan put the dolls on the top tier, the stuffed and plastic animals on the second, and the rest on the final shelf. The dolls had the human diseases: measles, the flu, whooping cough. They needed the most attention. Susan had one patient left, a cherub-faced, black-haired doll that was undiagnosed, when I said goodbye to Tilly’s. The doll’s name was Alice,

named after the character in *Alice in Wonderland*. I asked what was wrong with Alice, but Susan just said “she has that sickness we only know about, Mars.” I stopped asking questions, watching Susan wrap tissue paper around Alice’s chest like a tourniquet.

Nez and I reached a dusty clearing, popcorn kernels and apple cores strewn about the ground. After walking a couple of minutes, I could see a big white tent sitting placidly on the dust. It was about the size of a train station. Those big train stations with inside benches that aren’t rough. That was somewhat comforting because I wasn’t rough. I had seen it in a newspaper. Nez tapped my left calf, the highest point he could reach.

“Welcome to Kelway’s Circus, kid,” said Nez, grinning. “Best since Bailey’s.”

“Are we going in there?” I asked, looking longingly at the tent’s entrance.

“Nah, we off to the side,” said Nez. “My home’s near the searchlights. We goin’ to Brick first.”

“Searchlights?”

“You’ll see ‘em.”

Nez walked to the right of the tent, his shoes making wallet-sized imprints. The heels of my shoes flattened Nez’s tracks. I watched the back of Nez’s head, his smooth, brown hair flaying from side to side. His neck was smooth, orange, the size of a woman’s clasp. A tight, red shirt clung to his muscles. His legs were fat and strong, though probably around a foot in height. None of this mattered, however, because these details were eclipsed by the way Nez carried himself. It was the swagger, the upright head, the fixed stares. It was those things you picked up in adolescence if you were lucky, or determined.

Nez weaved through a maze of dilapidated trailers, the foundations that were once white now a decided tan. Some doors were half open letting light slink into the walkways. Each door had a name scrawled in black paint in the center: Maurice, the Marvel; Lana, the Flying Lass; Thaddeus Tibbs, Esquire. We came to the last trailer, hidden in the shadows. I gulped. The weight of the air got a lot heavier.

The trailer was cleaner than the others, a red banner hung on its side. It read: Kelway’s Kynde: Parnum’s Priceless Treasures. Instead of the scrawled paint, a star was pasted on the door, the printed name visible and shining in the dim light. Brick Meyer was the name, evenly spaced out, bigger than the total of Nez’s face.

Nez knocked on the door loudly, beckoning me to come forward. I slowly went across the dust, wiping sweat from his brow.

“Who is it?” said a gruff voice from the other side of the door.

“It’s Nez, Brick. I got company,” answered Nez.

“Awright,” said Brick. “But I ain’t buying nothin’.”

We went into Brick's poorly lit room. About fifty posters adorned the walls. They were interesting pictures, detailed caricatures: Asian Siamese twins playing a guitar, one strumming the strings, the other holding the base in her lap; a small girl with robust, peach legs, and two smaller legs extending from her delicate waist; a woman with three eyes, the extra eye peering from her forehead. Brick sat behind a mahogany desk, the top clear except for a Burroughs adding machine and a pile of paperwork.

"Got ya a boy," said Nez, pointing at me.

Brick gave me a quick lookover. Brick's green eyes seemed to burrow into mine. Some of Brick's hair was greying, and it looked like the rest would change color quickly. His cheeks were pink, unusually pink for someone I believed was nearing fifty. Deep lines were etched near his mouth. You could still make out two small dimples that looked out of use. He picked up his pen and began writing.

"He too wiry," said Brick, not looking up from his paper.

"Better than that fatso we done had," said Nez. "Plus he an orphan. Know what that mean?"

"Yeah, I know what that mean," said Brick quietly, slowly raising his head. "How old is you, kid?"

I straightened my shirt, thinking it would make me look taller.

"Fifteen, sir," I said.

"Fifteen! You look about twelve. You ain't lying?"

"No, sir."

"There ain't no sirs here, kid. You call me Brick, and him Nez."

Nez chuckled. "My Christian name Neil. I don't take too well to that, though."

Brick smacked his lips.

"I don't know. He got that young air abo ut him, Nez. Got that soft skin that don't take kindly to these conditions."

"He'll get rougher," said Nez, firmly.

Brick doggedly looked away, and then settled his eyes on my face.

"Your name?" said Brick.

"Marshall...Marshall Mims."

"And you got no relations?"

"None to speak of, sir...I mean, Brick."

Brick nodded towards Nez. "Give me a minute with the kid."

"Gonna meet Lana, anyways. I see ya around, Mimsy."

Nez left the trailer, his small frame disappearing into the night. Brick stared at me again. "You know what business I'm in kid?" he asked.

"I suppose...the circus business?," I answered.

"You supposin' wrong. I'm in the family business. I work for the family, from the old ladies with blue hair to the babies with spit on they bibs."

“Oh...I just assumed..that..that you were the head of the circus...like that main guy in the ring.”

Brick laughed, a deep, assured laugh.

“Obviously Nez ain’t tell you everything. That tent is the main circus, but here, here is the real show. An exhibition of anomalies, things that bring the rich folk out of they high rises, hurryin’ on they lunch break, and everybody wonderin’ why. Why those fancies comin’ to a mediocre town like Parnum? Well, it here. Here bring ‘em. Like honey to a wealthy bee.”

“What’s in the exhibition?”

“Things that’ll make you stop in your tracks, makin’ you rethink your life, makin’ you wonder.”

Something was pushing upward in my stomach everytime Brick spoke, a fluttering that left me flushed. He made me wonder, wonder about those on the walls, a lyrical invitation. How can you live attached to someone else when it’s hard to just live on your own? Does someone with four legs need a special bathroom, and if so, how does she sit on the toilet? Seeing them up close, I’m too tempted not to look away. I wanted to see things I’d never seen before, then and there.

Brick stood up, half of his face hidden in the waning light.

“You wanna see, ‘em, kid?,” said Brick. “You wanna see ‘em?”

The fluttering continued. The promise of amazement, the thrill of the unknown, I don’t know. But it continues.

Brick knew how to sell a show. As we came to the nearest trailer, it was still there. I held onto it as long as I could because it was the first full feeling I’d had since leaving Tilly’s.

Brick knocked on the trailer’s door. I read the name on the door: Anatomia. The door opened, and I took a step back. A tall woman, probably around six feet, appeared in the slit of the doorway. Her muscles were larger than Nez’s, bronze and thick. Her full, caramel-colored beard looked newly trimmed, hanging down to her chest. She wore a kimono with gold thread and patterned blue roses.

“Evening, Ana,” said Brick as the woman held the door open for us.

“Czesc, Brick,” said Ana.

“Got a new kid working for us... wanted to make sure ya’ll got acquainted.”

“Hi,” she said

She sat at her vanity, the mirror askew and the tabletop littered with jewelry, mostly cross necklaces and angel pendants. There was a long bed in the back of the room, white drapes hiding the headboard. Postcards were taped next to a dresser. There were scenes I guessed were European: green meadows with lambs, a bustling city with automobiles emitting exhaust smoke, and blonde-haired children

wading in water. She gave me a smile, off-white and inviting. The warm feeling had faded, replaced by a tickling coldness. The posters didn't move so I didn't feel bad viewing them. You should look. But I felt really bad then, bad because I was cold and couldn't stop staring. But if I talked to her, that would be alright.

"Hi. I'm Marshall...my friends call me Mars," I said, finally finding my voice.

"Ana been here since she was fourteen. Came here from Poland on a ship to Ellis Island, seen Lady Liberty and everything," said Brick.

"I always thought she'd be grey, but she's sort of green, isn't she?" said Ana.

Her voice wasn't as cool as my body was. Why? I was expecting her not to like me, that she had picked up on my nerves. The voice was sweet, babyish, actually interested in what I'd say, everything I wasn't expecting.

"Maybe it was grey once, when they were building it," I said.

Ana's smile widened. "Maybe it was."

"Ana does all sorts of stuff in the show...lifts dumbbells, sings songs in Polish, juggles.

She's our Renaissance woman," said Brick.

"What will you be doing, Mars?" said Ana.

An angel pendant fell and she bent over to pick it up. When she bent down, her beard touched the floor before her hand did. I opened my mouth to answer, then realized that Brick had never told me what my duties would be.

"He gonna be doin' what that fatso Larry was doin'. Odds and ends. Cleanin' up garbage, shoppin' for the company, doin' what needs to be doin'," answered Brick without glancing at me.

Ana kept her head down, and I saw a disgusted frown forming through the soft hairs of her beard. I tried to think how women could grow beards, why they wanted to. Did other people ask these questions, or was I the only one? Sweat slid down my neck.

"I didn't like Larry," said Ana, quietly, rubbing the angel between her fingertips.

"Larry was a bum...but this one don't look too bad, though, do he? Look kinda angelic," said Brick, putting a hand on my shoulder.

Ana got up and pinned the pendant to my chest. The silver angel matched the glint of Ana's gaze. As she pinned it on, her shoulders hunched forward because I was several inches shorter, I held her gaze. She was giving me something five minutes after I met her. I felt awful, watching her do it. Her beard brushed the side of my chin like someone, maybe Tilly, blotting my skin with a cotton swab while putting on medicine. I still have it. It was Michael, the archangel, the producer of the war-cry that lead angels to fight

against the enemies, and the assigned guard for Eve. Ana didn't tell me that. But she told me more with that gift. I received a gift like Hannah Snow. My first gift as a working man.

"Then that's what he'll be," said Ana. "He'll be our angel in the fairground."

Brick closed Ana's door lightly. I rubbed the angel's wings, pressing the talisman to my chest. Brick made his way to the trailer next door. It was the smallest. Brick tapped the door with his knuckles a few times before a clear, deep voice said "Yes?"

"Claude, it's Brick. You busy?" yelled Brick.

"No, the door is open," responded the voice.

I could tell Claude had an accent, but wasn't sure what kind it was.

Brick opened the door, ducking as a hanging papier-mache airplane flew towards his head. I've seen a couple airplanes, pathetic ones, the barnstormers and flying gypsies, flying on the front page of the newspaper. But these were fantastic. I followed suit, noting that there were a dozen airplanes descending from the ceiling, each carefully decorated in distinct ways: commendable wing span, colorful decals, proper proportions. After being guided by Brick through the maze of airplanes, I froze in the center of the room.

Propped on a bed, a brown-skinned man was finishing his latest creation. Claude scratched his temple. It took a while for me to notice something was missing. Claude's deep, black eyes followed the whirring propeller, a playful grin spreading across his thick lips. His shoulders were broad, manly, authoritative. His trim waist touched the green bedspread, and his legs seemed to have disappeared into the soft cloth. Then I stopped looking for his legs, as Claude put his palms on the bedspread and propped himself up. His waist dangled in the air, proud and free.

"This here's Claude," said Brick. "He like aviation. That right, Claude?"

"Actually, it's aviation," said Claude, balancing himself on one hand and extending his hand to me. "It's a hobby of mine. The technology of it is really fascinating."

"He know everything," said Brick. "Aristotle, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Darwin, anybody."

"The classics," echoed Claude. "What I studied in school back home. Still catching up on your American literature."

I approached slowly and shook Claude's hand. I was afraid he might fall so it was a quick shake.

"Claude Carroll," greeted Claude. "I'm from the West Indies. Pleased to meet you."

"Marshall Mims, from Brooklyn," I said. "Mars to my friends."

"Then Mars it is," said Claude jovially. "What brings you here this time of night?"

“Mars is the new boy that gonna be working for us,” informed Brick. Claude nodded. “Welcome aboard, Mars. If there’s anything you need help with, you can come ask me,” he said.

“He good with helping,” said Brick. “He helps me with the books sometimes.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Claude lowered himself and picked up his airplane, then began bending the wings. I started thinking that I made mistakes. Maybe my handshake could’ve been firmer, longer. Maybe I should’ve asked what plane he was working on.

Brick and I exited the room. I stood on the steps. Brick started to walk ahead, but stopped when he noticed that I wasn’t following him. Frankly, I was sick of following. My head hurt with questions, and I was cold.

“Getting late. You can meet everybody else tomorrow. That’s when the real fun starts,” said Brick.

I barely heard Brick. I stared at one of the trailers on his left, where a silhouetted figure was pulling off a shirt behind a window curtain. It was a slender back, with graceful arms stretching upwards. The arms reached up above a head, meeting momentarily, then slowly descended to slender hips. Two shoulders were rolled, contracted, then rolled again. I loved how I could see each movement, demure and accentuated. I wanted to touch the curtain, not pull it up, and trace the back until it froze.

Brick stood beside me and coughed. Startled, I nearly tripped on my own two feet.

“Nez has a trailer on the outskirts. You can room with him for tonight,” said Brick.

“Right...th..thanks,” I said.

Brick gave me a sly grin. “That’s Maltise,” he said, pointing at the curtain. “That’s my gem.”

“Um...I wasn’t...I didn’t mean...,” I stammered.

“So you like what you seen so far?,” asked Brick. “Or not?”

“I...well...it’s...”

“If you gonna run, you do it now, when they ain’t attached. They get attached...quickly...so if you even got it in your mind that you runnin’, sleep here tonight and don’t come back.”

“No, I want to work.”

“You gotta look at ‘em everyday, you know...it just common respect, it’s what’s due. In my house, it’s like breathin’. You do it everyday, every hour, every second.”

It was hard, hard to pretend, to not ask questions. So I housed what I do know immediately: grips of a handshake, the movement of backs, angel wings. What comes next, I’ll take, even if I don’t understand. How can someone live without legs? Why am I entranced by a back? I

had to look for answers, but no one responded. I only know what I know, and what I knew was that I needed a job.

"I can do it," I said.

"Fine. And ain't they somethin', even just those two?," said Brick, staring into space.

"Ain't they a sight to see?"

Nez stared stonily into the fire, swatting a fly that landed on his shoulder. I sat in another chair, letting the heat wrap around my fingers. I was less cold around Nez, in front of the bonfire. It had to be close to two in the morning, but the combination of stars and the overpowering searchlights made it seem as though night was just beginning. Nez had built a strong fire a little ways from his trailer, a few feet from the moving searchlights. Apparently, the searchlights were obtained by Alan Kelway from a military warehouse. Nez said they were new, and that Brick took great pride in finding the large colored filter paper himself. The colors were green and lavender, merging in the center of the sky, then retreating to their respective sides.

"Brick treat ya awright?" said Nez, letting his head fall on the back of the chair.

"Yeah," I said. "Looks like I got the job."

"Figured as much," said Nez. "Thinkin' you'll like it here. I been here since I was nine."

It was so unbelievably easy to talk to Nez. He did most of the talking, which I liked.

"Why'd you come here?"

"Dad dropped me off. Ain't even said why, but I know why. Knew I could make a living here 'cause of my size."

"I don't know where my dad is."

"Looks like our parents were tryin' to do good providin'. Ain't left you on the street like some do. More and more leavin' they kids at orphanages, get 'em fed and schooled and housed. Your luck ain't so scary."

I peered down at the ground, tapping a rotting orange peel with the ball of my shoe. I looked up at the stars, small and shiny like pinballs. Their fixed nature bothered me. I wanted them to clang against each other, moving left and right. They would go in any direction, but they enjoyed the race, the beginning of movement.

"Always thought I'd go to school, even to college, though that seem impossible, don't it?" said Nez.

"Impossible...why?"

"They ain't givin' scholarships to midgets, Mimsy."

I tapped out a rhythm I came up with at the orphanage, a prelude with a lot of ambitious sharps and flats. The notes in my head were surprisingly loud.

“If I went to college, I’d study music. I write music sometimes.”

“That true?”

“Yes, but I don’t think I’ll ever get there.”

“Don’t dish out the doubts yet. You only fifteen. I’d study to be a math teacher. I only twenty-three. That a good age for a teacher, ain’t it? Got that young fire, but time’s experience. Yeah, that a perfect age.”

“Can’t think of a better age.”

My eyes stayed with the stars. They moved faster, running from the spotlight. I liked those stars, stars running from the spotlight.

“Nice night,” I said.

“Really is,” replied Nez. “But those ain’t the real stars.”

“What?”

“The real stars comes out tomorrow when the day start. They pile out they trailers, let the dust cover they feet, go over to the tent to get they muffins and juice, talk about how President Coolidge ruinin’ they lives.”

“Oh.”

“Then we turn off ours selves and gives our wills to the game. We play what we was paid to play, show what God gifted us with. How many people gets to do that, Mimsy?”

“Not many, I’m thinking.”

“Yeah, the day is what I’m wishin’ for, cause at night...man, Mimsy, at night, I feel smallest.”

Before I went into Nez’s trailer, I asked where the bathroom was, and Nez pointed me to a space between a stage and Brick’s office. A long shower curtain hid what Nez termed the khazie. The shower curtain was pretty flimsy so I quickly peed. It felt strange peeing outside. There was no ceiling, and thin walls, so anyone who walked by knew what I was doing. I shouldn’t have worried. No one was outside, but I swore I heard whispers. Somebody’s peeing in the khazie in the middle of the night. That’s so gross. I zipped up.

When I pulled back the curtain, Kelway’s glowed in front of me. Nez having a trailer on the outskirts opened Kelway’s up clearly. It was the size of four music halls stretched out, the darkness set before the show. The tent was in the center, nearly as large as the warehouse. A fairly big stage was blocked off, with four separate compartments and curtains. There were shows inside of shows. I was the first member of the audience, and I liked what I saw. I loved the way the wind rustled over the white tent walls and they flap like hummingbirds; the way I can’t see what’s in the cages, neatly aligned next to a large curtained stage; the way the merry-go-round horses, roller coaster tracks, and my shoes are lit by only the moon. I love that I can be Mimsy in a minute, the sound and strength of a slippery identity.

V. Kelway's Kynde

I woke up in Nez's trailer with a clown marionette close to my face, trying to kick my nose with his plastic shoe. I hadn't seen him when I sluggishly climbed into the bed nearest the door around three o' clock, though I felt something light brush my head. It was originally Larry's bed, and Larry liked puppets, or rather Larry liked to make puppets and give them to cute girls. According to Nez, Larry didn't have anything else going for him. Nez classified him with the three P's-- pimplly, porky, and putrid. I felt just as putrid in the clothes I'd been wearing all night.

Nez's trailer was one of the smallest and didn't have much in it. Nez never spent a great deal of time there so it was full of odds and ends. When I was at Kelway's, I only saw Nez sleep there about seven times, and he had mysteriously vanished that first night. His bed resembled those at the orphanage, small but reliable. Above his bed were hundreds of photographs from newspapers, some more memorable than others. I later found out that he did a different theme every month. On my first day there, the theme was immigration, a subtle nod to Ana and Claude. The photograph I remember distinctly from that day was one of two college-age Chinese girls pointing to a Thomas Nast cartoon where foreigners and natives sat down for Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving with the cupola centerpiece, proclaiming universal suffrage. I don't know why it stuck out to me, especially since I'd never been out of the States. Maybe because they were in a new place, and so was I, and they looked like they were adjusting.

I rose from the bed and the clown jiggled. Sitting up, I felt for the nearest and most solid piece of furniture. Looking around, I saw that I needed to make quite a few adjustments on my side of the trailer. My side wasn't as interesting. What was left of Larry bored me, or disgusted me, like the brown stains on the sheet I slept on the first night. Larry had left a few books under the bed, mostly on puppetry or carpentry. I opened a crate next to a rotting bureau where there were some ugly essentials-- soap that had turned yellow, a down blanket with a large hole at the bottom, a moldy muffin, and tangled string. I wandered over to Nez's side where there were several bars of new soap and fresh towels.

Remembering that there was an outside shower located near the main tent, I grabbed the soap and a towel and headed for the door. My thigh immediately hit something as I started out of the door. There was a small boy that let out a yelp and rubbed his forehead. I recognized him from last night, but had forgotten his name.

"Hey," said the boy. "Where Nez at?"

“Nez left really early. Can I help you with something?” I said.
“I need...I need some...pepper, but I gotta ask Nez. That right to do. Don’t go around nobody, Mama use to say. Ask the person directly.”
“Well, he may be at the tent. I can’t remember the way though. Can you show me?”
“You ain’t been? Well, I acquaint ya with the tent. That a word I know from school. Acquaint. You thought I was dumb last night, didn’t ya?”
“No...I didn’t.”

“I know my way. I been here since I was born. Parnum-bred.”
I closed Nez’s trailer door behind me. I tried to take in Kelway’s daytime while following the boy. The trailers looked prouder in the morning, sitting up in the dirt. I wanted to stall at the animal cages, to acknowledge the rotund bear biting his rear and then clawing at a piece of the banner that was falling off; the two elephants that attempted to toss over their wading pool in hopes of cleaner water; the lion strewn across the cage floor, who I suspected was prepping for the day’s activities or contemplating the number of fleas he had in comparison with the lioness in the next cage. I did stall at the white-faced, black-footed monkeys. One jumped straight at the cage door, and wiggled the latch. I took a couple steps backward. He smiled, wiggling the latch again.

“That Galileo...the rest the famous Capuchin Ten, Parnum’s performing monkeys,”
said the boy. “Galileo always want to escape...he wiggle that latch, challengin’ ya. I know he gonna get free one of these days...probably some little girl who give into that smile.”

As we neared the tent, I found myself sucking in my breath, the shower the furthest thing from my mind. Last night, the tent was so white and intimidating, a billowy cloud hovering over the trailers, above the smoke from Nez’s fire. Just then, the opening seemed like a tunnel, to lose yourself in.

I followed the boy inside, and my eyes took their time adjusting to the soft orange light of the tent. It had to be above sixty feet high, with two platforms on either side, linked by a tight rope, and underneath, a comforting, wide net. From the ground, I could tell they were better than the Carnegie platform. They were secure, but also more forbidden. They would probably only harbor a choice few, the few who were thin and brassy. I could own up to former, but not the latter, and besides, I didn’t know if I was even allowed in there. But I made a pact with myself to make the attempt. Every guy should have a platform, a way to survey the scene.

A breakfast table was situated across from the net. It held biscuits and muffins, jelly and marmalade, hard-boiled eggs, and the boy’s seasoning of choice, pepper. The occupants of the table were less generic. I saw a stream of singularity: a woman in a green-sequined

costume, pulling the feathers on her shoulder out of a butter dish, and wiping it off in the hopes no one had noticed; a half made-up clown in a white T-shirt and balloon pants, chewing a biscuit and reading *Le Morte d' Arthur*; a man in a top hat adjusting the crotch area of his pants, throwing on a jacket of pink sequins and black buttons, and spitting on a muffin to save it from a grabby clown with a flowered hat. It reminded me of one of Tilly's admonishments during a piano lesson: "Beginning of the movement has many colors...colors you should stop to see." The clown in the flowered hat caught my eye the most because he looked a bit like the marionette, with a bit of sadness and a sense of light-heartedness. He had a birthmark the shape of Nebraska, the only part of his face not covered by powder.

"Slicky!" greeted the clown in the flowered hat. "You here to make mischief?"

"Nah, Lou," said Slicky, sitting beside him. "Here to make the rounds. You ain't got spare pepper, do ya?"

"I don't hoard nothin'," said Lou, reaching over for the pepper shaker. "I grab cause I gotta. Tad take all the muffins."

The man in the top hat chewed his muffin indignantly, and sat in a chair near a jug of milk. Lou handed the pepper to Slicky.

"Was gonna ask Nez. How he doin'?" said Slicky, slipping the pepper into his pocket.

"Nez doin' awright. I see him now and then. You know we don't see much of Nez during the week," said Lou.

I sat in a chair next to Slicky's. Lou gave me a puzzled look.

"Hi, I'm Mars...I work for Brick," I said, extending my hand for Lou to shake.

"I don't shake hands while I eat," said Lou. "But you welcome all the same."

"You must got a strong stomach," spoke up Tad, wiping muffin crumbs from his mouth.

"Or you hardened."

"Shut your mouth, Tad," said Lou. "You just mad cause Brick got more fire in his

speech than you. Trust me, Mars. You learn a thing or two over that ways."

"You don't need no speech over there. It all seeing," said Tad.

"Thaddeus Tibbs,

Esquire, got the gift of speakin'. First-rate ringmaster. You be sure of that, Mars."

"Well, some of us got better gifts than others," said Lou. "For instance, I am skilled on the organ, something that actually takes a lot of talent."

“You know, they got them fancy organs that play themselves nowadays,” said Tad to no one in particular. “And they don’t cost that much at Fellini’s.”

“Hey, Tad. Would you like to borrow my balloon pants? Though they’d probably be tight, considering you keeping splitting your own,” said Lou.

Tad smirked and handed Slicky a muffin.

“Would you like to see my organ, Mars?” asked Lou. “It’s next door.”

“Um, okay,” I said, hopefully not sounding too excited.

“Them organs even come with a seat,” I heard Tad mumble. ‘An adjustable seat.’”

There’s undeniable attraction, something I’ve experienced only with Lisa and Tilly’s piano. I felt the same pull to Lou’s organ, its lean gold pipes stretching in the darkened air. Lou told me that Kelway wanted the organ hidden so that it wouldn’t be damaged, and so it would contribute to the ambience of the circus without being seen. That meant a lonely few hours for Lou, playing those mysterious melodies that float around Kelway’s. That’s why he took the second job as a clown, so people could actually see him, even if it was just him sliding face-first into an inner tube of murky water.

Lou told me that the organ was donated by a Catholic church ten years ago, after the pastor announced that the church was relocating to Midtown because the building was being turned into a bank. That meant Nez and Claude had been at Kelway’s longer than the organ. Lou called it a baby because of that, a baby Wurlitzer that was as tall as a giraffe. He tenderly wiped down the keys and pipes every other day with a cloth, and as I found out later, told it if it had done a good job that day and if it hadn’t, things it needed to improve on, like being flat on “When the Saints Go Marching In”. These improvement lectures were scarce, because Lou loved the organ.

I loved it, too, especially the first day when Lou let me sit down on his seat and run my fingers over the keys, but only a few keys because he didn’t trust me enough yet. It was three times larger than the faithful Baldwin at Tilly’s. The pipes cast a shadow over my entire body, even my wimpy, pale legs. Two rows of keys, hands moving upward and downward, riffs rattling then rebounding across the room, all from my hands. Bits of my sonata-in-progress started to pop in my mind as Lou curiously watched me. I had five minutes, five minutes to play careful Cs and dynamic Ds, five minutes to blind them into my unfinished minuet, five minutes to forget that Lou was there, too, and that it didn’t matter. You can stretch five minutes. You can if you try.

“Do you play?” he asked after I hit a resonant high C.

“I played the piano at the orphanage,” I said. “I had lessons.”

“I started off with the piano, but the organ’s sound is so rich. You can hear it for miles, and it seeps under every other sound to make it rounder. Some sort of magic it has. It makes what the people see that much fuller, the food they taste better, the lights they under brighter.”

I imagined Lou playing in the dark while the people in the brightness stop and listen. I saw his back hunched over, because I guess organ playing has sloppier posture than piano playing (it actually isn’t as I later found out), and him mumbling the words to every song he plays. The pipes obey him as if he were some great commandant pressing his officers’ buttons to get the proper response, and they answer appropriately because if they don’t, all is lost and the notes lay on the battleground in defeat and shame. The people pause. They’re moved, moved enough not to notice their cotton candy melting in drizzle, sticky pink liquid ducking between their fingers, sliding to their wrists; moved enough to ignore their throbbing feet, housed in heels and oxfords, feet that have travelled the grounds for hours; moved enough to accept that the combined smell of elephants, tigers, and monkeys, which resembled the smell of the dumpster behind Tilly’s, is natural. But then they laugh when Lou emerges from the tent in a pink wig and orange-striped shirt and floppy brown shoes. He nods in their direction, satisfied that the organ was never revealed and that his second identity as a clown is already at work.

Brick entered the tent. His cheeks were still amazingly pink, but he looked almost normal in a white T-shirt and black pants.

“Mars, right?” said Brick.

“Yeah.”

“Follow me.”

I stood up and smiled at Lou. Lou sat down, and my face must have been a shade of green because he whispered:

“If you ever want to play again, it’s an option.”

I grinned and mouthed thanks. The wind draped the tent wall across my face as I left, sitting there for a moment like the headpiece of a travelling sheik.

Brick turned over a half full bucket and told me to sit as the water spread across the dirt and under Brick’s trailer. I sat, my laces now stained with red mud while Nez peeled a potato. My palms stuck to my pants legs so I cupped my hands together to look more like an adult. The bucket hurt my butt.

“I told you the main rules last night,” said Brick, who had muscled up a couple of wooden chairs to bring outside for him and Nez. “But there provisions too.”

“Mimsy know about provisions,” said Nez with a sly smile. “Probably had rules stapled to his forehead before he could gum. Assuming he went to a right orphanage.”

Brick sighed. “You never know nowadays. They releasin’ ya’ll like balloons in the wind. One wrong move, all those values popped. That why we gotta review.”

“You wastin’ your time,” said Nez, offering me a piece of nude potato. I shook my head. Brick cleared his throat and crossed his legs.

“No drinking,” said Brick.

“Drinking?” I said.

“It happens,” defended Brick, glancing at Nez.

“Where they get they gin is as much a mystery to me as it is to you,” said Nez. “Now the wine, whiskey, hard cider....”

“Just stay away from it, Mars. I keep this place as dry as possible,” interrupted Brick.

“Clean mouth, clean hands, clean trailer.”

“Or clean half a trailer,” corrected Nez.

“Stop mimin’ me, Nez,” said Brick.

“I ain’t mimin’ ya. I’m improvin’ your words.”

“Scat.”

Nez tucked half of the potato into his mouth, bit hard, then hopped off his chair.

“Attack his mama, he fine,” Nez said to me. “But tossle with his terminology he raise that sword.”

Nez gave me the other half of the potato, told me to put it in his trailer, and headed for Claude’s trailer. I grimaced but held it anyway. Nez never finished food. He ate it in parts, which seemed less strange as time wore on, but at that moment made me sick.

“You help raise the partition, set up the stage most days, put up the curtains...there’s a code. Claude gets the yellow curtain, Ana the blue, Nez green, Mal brown. Commit that...the curtain a comfort when you knowin’ different folk out there about to look at ya,” continued Brick.

“Okay,” I said. “Um, can I use that chair?”

“No,” said Brick. “Claude require water before each set. Check with Mal, it vary. Ana’s not a bother. Nez take care of himself. You go grocery shoppin’ on Mondays and Wednesdays. That food for us...no one else. Somebody steal it when you holdin’ it, it come out your pay.”

“Pay,” I whispered.

That word wasn’t foreign to other teenagers. I let it settle in my mouth. There was a warm ache in the front of my neck.

“You wanna work for free?” said Brick. “For the first month, I’ll give ya eight dollars for the first month.”

Eight dollars! That was a fortune.

“But all that’s null if you don’t follow the biggest provision. This place is called Kelway’s Kynde. Kynde mean nature. It on display

when the clock chime two and the steps quicken. When the thrush rustle and the partition high, it a separte world and you contributin' but I helmin' it. No one disrupt the kynde and no one do anything without me aware. I giot your honor that you a good kid?"

The wonderful ache was gone. Brick's stagnant pink cheeks turned a clear red. A shot of pain raced from my bucket butt to the center of my back.

"I'm a good kid," I said softly.

"Ain't nothin' more I value than speech, cause talk always carry weight. So we got a verbal contract?"

"Yes."

Brick stood up, and sighing with relief, I stood up as well.

"Where should I start?" I asked.

"Nowhere," answered Brick. "Enjoy the show. You'll pay your dues later. First one's free."

Walking to the partition, I sunk in a sea of tightrope walkers and contortionists bending their limber legs towards their necks, and clowns shining their miniature cars with spit. You never notice how large Kelway's is until you walk around, not as a performer, but as a visitor. Off and on, I was a visitor. The tent stood by itself, about a mile from the side show. People had just enough time to buy a drink and some food between Brick's two o' clock show and the big tops' six o' clock show. Brick's show was small, but worth the twenty-five cents. We stood before a wide stage near the Capuchins' cage, with four individual compartments, each compartment covered by the color-coded curtains. I wanted to peek behind them immediately. It was an intimate separation, almost like the first time in the heavens. The stage was about the same size as the one of Julliard's auditoriums. I felt like an idiot, and not just because I was still holding Nez's potato. I stood awkwardly next to the crowd, which ranged from babbling four-year olds to grandmothers patting the top of their canes. A man I guessed was a veteran winked at me with the one eye he had left.

The crowd was assembled for Parnum's Priceless Treasures, four treasures obtained from the West Indies, India, Poland, and New York, three of whom I had met the night before and one that I had seen through a curtain. There were about fifty people. The young kids pushed each other while the toddlers asked to be lifted up so they could see. The first things I could see was the sign on the awning announcing Parnum's Priceless Treasures with balloons tied to the corners of the awning. The one-eyed man tapped me on the shoulder, offering me a pamphlet that was circulating the group. I said thanks and hurriedly read the contents.

“Gathered from the far regions of the world, the Parnum’s Priceless Treasures are a collection of peculiarities so original that you’ll be left spellbound. From the muscular midget to the legless Negro intellectual, you won’t believe what you see. Wander over to Kelway’s and pause to wonder at the earth’s most amazing performers. Est. 1899.”

Even though I had met Claude and Nez the night before, their faces became distant in my mind. I couldn’t remember the little things anymore-- how tall Nez exactly was or if Claude’s smile was as bright as I thought it had been. I looked around at my fellow visitors, maybe to confirm that I wasn’t the only one that was getting more and more lost. But it was excitedly lost. I know the moment of suspense when the curtain falls; the odd, silent respect when the curtain touches the ground; the glorious surprise when the lights come up. But I still wasn’t prepared for what came. Excitedly lost. You could never feel more young and amazed at the same time.

“This is good,” whispered a man in a green fedora. “One of the better ones. Delly’s Circus in Hoboken only has two midgets and a girl with a horse face. Purely physical, with no thought of mental oddities.”

“Well, I’ve seen crazy people at the hospital, especially those who just came in from the war,” said the one-eyed man. “Newspapers made it seem like it was easy, but it wasn’t. I saw a guy cut out part of his tongue in the trenches because he couldn’t taste anything anymore, then he slipped it into a dead German soldier’s pocket. Now that’s freakish.”

I let my tongue slide across the roof of my mouth, making sure it was still there.

Brick emerged from the side of the stage wearing what looked to be an expensive top hat. The hat was almost half the length of Nez. He also wore an ironed dress shirt under a crisp tuxedo. He looked weird standing on the sand, the only sharp-dressed man besides the man with the fedora. But then he spoke and the suit made sense.

“Distinguished gentleman and fine ladies of New York City and its surrounding regions, welcome to Kelway’s Kynde, undoubtedly the highlight of your circus experience today,” shouted Brick over cart wheels and chatter. “You can see a clown in a newspaper, and I don’t mean good ol’ Woody Wilson. Just check the entertainment advertisements for any circus. You can see a psychic almost anytime, because apparently there’s one in every family, or so my mother told me. But how often have you run into a Polish bearded woman on the way to Yankee stadium or met a girl with mankind’s story on her back? If the answer is never, here’s a golden opportunity. Assembled from the many corners of the globe, I present to you Parnum’s Priceless Treasures.”

Everyone clapped enthusiastically. I was paralyzed, struck by Brick's formal voice, like a sail caught in a heavy wind, unable to hear anything else. It was awkward because I usually heard more than one thing at any given moment. That's what makes a good musician, hearing multiple sounds in one moment. But my ability was gone whenever Brick spoke.

Brick pulled the chain of the blue curtain, and Ana appeared. Part of her brown beard had been plaited with the rest of her smooth hair trailing down her back. She immediately started flexing her muscles, the braid in between her wrist and elbow.

"To show her strength, Ana Nowak will now lift one hundred and forty pounds," announced Brick.

"Ha!," said the one-eyed man. "A woman can't lift that much."

"I can barely lift the laundry basket," muttered a woman standing behind me.

"Ana will also sing the beautiful anthem of her homeland while lifting. Ana, when you're ready," said Brick.

Ana disappeared from the stage and returned with a very large dumbbell, the size of the bumper of a car. She picked it up effortlessly with both hands, and in a beautiful soprano sang: "*Marsz, marsz, Dabrowski, Z ziemi wloskiej do Polski, Za twoim przewodem, Zlaczmy sie z narodem.*" Maybe it sounds conceited, but I actually thought Ana was singing to me whenever she said Marsz. She gave me the pendant so I knew she liked me. Her voice was so warm that I felt bad about that cold tickling. The closeness to my name couldn't be denied, and Ana did find me among the crowd that day and offer a sly wink. No one had ever sung to me before, not even Tilly in our fifteen years together. Maybe I was forgiven. The song ended. Ana bowed shyly, then vanished behind the stage. I was tempted to follow her, keep my eyes on her, but Brick quickly pulled down the yellow curtain.

It admittedly took me a while to see Claude. From a distance, the only thing you could spot clearly was his head. His smile stood out more than anything else. It was as bright as I had remembered.

"No legs," said the man with the one eye, who emerged as the spokesman for the rather quiet crowd. "Nothing special."

"Kind sir, I apologize, but Claude is quite special," spoke up Brick.

"Claude, share a little Chaucer with them."

Claude cleared his throat. "When April with his showers sweet with fruit, the drought of March has pierced unto the root, and bathed each vein with liquor that has power, to generate therein and sire the flower....," he began.

"Who taught him that?" interrupted the one-eyed man.

"Taught himself. Claude knows anything and everything," answered Brick.

“So basically he’s a twofer,” said the one-eyed man. “Rare in body and mind. I mean, I’ve never seen a Negro recite Chaucer at will.”

Claude lowered his head, and I could tell he was perspiring. Brick or the crowd could ask him anything at any point in time, and he’d have to know it, or know a close approximation of it. He had to do all that work, and I couldn’t offer a decent handshake.

He never messed up once while I was at Kelway’s.

“Very good, Brick,” approved the one-eyed man.

“Next, we have a storybook come to life. For centuries, man has attempted to document the downfall of his fellow men on paper, tablets, vellum, but never a back. A variety of artists here in Parnum have done just that on our next performer, illustrating on her body man’s central weakness: women. So come and marvel at the magnificent Maltise.”

I remember Brick dropping the brown curtain, but more than that, I remembered the back I saw the previous night. It was just as shapely, just as perfect. We couldn’t see her face, only her back. She held a white towel over her chest.

The center of Maltise’s back held a white Adam with a carefully painted fig leaf over his inner thighs, biting a red apple, while a plumper Eve smirked at him in the left corner. Eve had long, flowing blonde hair, but I preferred Maltise’s thick, black hair. In the left corner was a dismayed Samson clutching his hair. I didn’t know who he was before Maltise told me, but before then I just thought he was a wimp. I felt the urge to laugh along with Delilah, who had a joyous smile on her face and large, exaggerated breasts. On the right corner was a knight holding a handkerchief while praying. I had no idea who he was either. It was Gawain, somebody I should’ve recognized after Miss Miniver’s class. The woman had given him the handkerchief to save his life, but it was really a test of his faith. Gawain got in trouble because he had trusted the woman more than God. At least the artist gave Gawain a good nose and a swell suit of armour.

“Amazing,” said the one-eyed man. “How long did that take, Brick?”

“Four years, several sittings,” said Brick. “It didn’t hurt her one bit. Mal’s a trooper.”

“She’s a child, right?” asked the one-eyed man. “Not exactly right for girls to have tattoos.”

“She’s an orphan,” said Brick. “But I assure you. All our performers are well taken

care of. Now, we have one more priceless treasure....”

I broke the hold Brick’s voice had over me, and weaved through the crowd as Maltise disappeared backstage. Now I realize that it wasn’t me, but it was actually Mal who broke it. I went around the stage and found her buttoning up a blouse.

Her set was over and I was still staring. I was still staring at her toffee-colored skin, velvety as a Carnegie's usher vest; staring at her waist, round and delicate as the bottom of a cello; staring at her hair, which was then housed in a serious bun. She looked up and stared at me, a smelly, skinny kid with a half-eaten potato in his hand.

"You're missing the show," she said. "Nez is on now. You shouldn't miss Nez."

"I can see it tomorrow," I said. "I'm here...I mean, I work here now. I'm Mars."

I knew I had to be blushing. I was that pale so I knew I had to be blushing.

"So....um, do you like it here?," I asked.

"Yeah."

"That's good."

Maltise giggled. "You're so weird, Mars," she said, shaking her head and standing up.

"But in case you hadn't noticed, we like that around here."

She brushed past me, and I felt her hair wash over my shoulder for a brief second. Sighing, I chucked the potato in the nearest trashcan. I was alone, hearing bits of laughter across the grounds. Making sure no one was around, I banged my head on the side of the trashcan a couple times. I didn't know it then, but Mal calling me weird was my initiation into the world of kynde, a world of failures, complicated beauty, and the occasional bout of teenage stupidity.

VI. Roustaboutin'

Kelway's opened with clinks, the hammers hurtling to the ground pounding stakes. A few levers were pulled, and these mechanical whirrs spurted, then ceased. Another lever went back and forth, before the Python curled above our heads, a ghostly roller coaster in daybreak. Keys shuffled as workers walked. Tinks from glasses holding candy, lemon soda, or anything "circus diet" clattered in the concessionaries. It was most musical along the midway where the Parnum Priceless Treasures performed. That's where you could hear it all-- the Wurlitzer, the whistling from whoever was in the showers, Ana warming up her voice at eight in the morning, Nez's ham radio that played even when he wasn't there. But most resonant of all-- the roustabout song.

For two days, I'd gone through the movements. Brick oversaw me pivoting the stakes in the dirt, hammering them, tying rope around the support poles, bearing the weight of the poles. Miss Miniver's taps were like hugs compared to these tasks. Like Luke's, I bruised my hands the first day. I had red marks on my wrist from resting my end on the pole, held by four other workers, on my shoulder and holding it until the canvas was clean and folded out. It felt like I had an elephant trunk laying on my shoulder. White patches started to form on my fingertips from tying ropes, and they didn't disappear for says despite soaking my hands under the shower nozzle. Sometimes I couldn't see the tops of what I was holding. Instead, I'd looked around at the empty three rings, repeating that melody on the back of Schubert.

Schubert would've liked the roustabout music. They went on and on, having no set form, only call and response until the person calling ended. He also would've liked Jake, a man that strike music in a second. The first day I met Jake, we were stringing banners around the walled edge of the three rings. This was how I knew what I was. As soon as Jake stepped inside the ring, he announced it.

"Roustaboutin', build a tent as high as a mountain," sang Jake. "We ain't poutin' or doubtin' 'bout what we do, no we just roustaboutin'."

The other roustabouts held the blue and gold streamers in their hand, waiting for Jake to call again.

"As the morning greets, I'm diggin' holes," called Jake.

"Ohhh oh oh ohhh," responded the roustabouts.

I kept my eyes on them, almost ripping a piece of the gold banner.

"I got a travellin' mind, and a beat-up soul."

"Ohhh oh oh ohhh."

I tried to sing along, but my throat got caught. Some dirt flew in there and I coughed.

They kept singing.

“Happiest place I’m creatin’ each day.”

“Ohhh oh oh ohhh.”

Jake walked over to me, smiled, and rearranged my half of the banner, but continued singing:

“But I ain’t anchored cause blues carry me away.”

“Ohhh oh oh ohhh.”

He put some tape on it and glanced up at the platform.

“Mario,” yelled Jake. “I peed on that platform.”

The worker on the platform looked down on us, his smile visible from the ground.

“Si,” called Mario.

“Couldn’t make it down the ladder yesterday,” shouted Jake. “Kelway made me ruin my pants.”

Mario chuckled and started down the ladder. Jake patted the edge of the wall with a pleased grin.

“You don’t like to sing, Mars?” he said.

Every piece of clothing he had on was wrinkled-- a black shirt with the top unbuttoned, pants that were too big around the ankles, even a jacket tied around his waist. The jacket had black grease stains on it, as did Jake’s neck.

“Not really,” I said. “Sometimes.”

“Mechanics takin’ care of musicians,” he said, cocking his head toward me. “Or so desires Brick. Told me to watch you.”

Looking at my wrist, I didn’t question why Brick thought this was necessary. Besides, Jake informed that I would be following him around that day, rather than doing my regular duties. I rubbed my wrist.

“Let me see,” he said.

The other roustabouts were lugging over props-- hoops for Phoenix the lion, mini-cars for Dom and Lou, a pedestal for Tad. Tad was also there to make sure they put it in the right place, no matter that it always was. I surrendered my hands, making sure no one else was there to see it. Jake ran his thumb across the two biggest marks.

“Love rubs,” he said dismissively. “You holdin’ the pole too tight.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

“Okay,” I said, taking back my wrist.

Jake pulled a safety pin from his pocket and licked the edge. Opening it, he flashed it in front of my face. I took a step back, almost tripping over a bucket full of water and rags. Jake wiggled his thumb in front of me, then pricked the inside of his thumb with the tip of the pin. The movement was as hypnotic as a metronome. I stared, and so did the other roustabouts.

“Don’t look pretty, do it?” he asked, pricking his thumb faster.

I closed my mouth after I realized it was hanging open.

“All about resistance,” said Jake. “Inside and out.”

He used the pin to fasten the top of his shirt. The other roustabouts resumed, listening to Tad complain about the amount of dirt on his pedestal.

“Um, so what’s a roustabout?” I asked.

I decided to wait until everyone’s eyes were focused on something else. They probably already thought I was pitiful, and here I was asking a pitiful question.

“We’re behind the scenes,” answered Jake. “We grunt and we get paid.”

Jake took me by the shoulders lightly and lead me forward. We passed the rest of the roustabouts. Jake kicked a little dirt on the air, causing Tad to throw his top hat at Mario angrily. Mario caught it and put it on, doing a mock ballroom dance with a nearby sledgehammer. The sun shone brightly when we left the tent.

“Behind the scenes?” I said.

“Yep,” said Jake. “An extension of the shadows. We light and give life to what they

need. Except of course, the hyphens. We got a hand in both.”

“Hyphens?”

Jake banged on the counter of a concessionary. The man was about to dip an apple into a vat of caramel, but handed it to Jake. Jake bit into it, walking ahead of me.

“Mmm, hyphens,” mumbled Jake, juice spilling down his chin.

A couple roustabouts passed us, lifting a pole full of costumes on hangers. I bet they’d never had love rubs. Tad’s suit, complete with red cumberband, rested comfortably in the center.

Jake swallowed. “Hyphens are folks that do more than one thing. Me? I’m a mechanic-roustabout-circus band performer.”

He said the three jobs so fast pieces of chewed apple flew out of his mouth. He listed others, a couple I knew, others I didn’t know. Lou was a clown-organist-circus band performer. Brick was talker-historian-accountant. Then there were others who did double duty. Ana was a performer, yes, but also a makeshift medic for small scrapes. Dolly did handstands on her elephants’ backs but could sew anything Kelway’s needed, getting the other sequined ladies to help if she needed them.

“What am I?” I asked, after Jake’s rundown.

“You ain’t nothin’ yet,” he said. “Get me a napkin.”

I slouched and walked back to the same concessionary. The man with the apples was wiping the counter down.

“Can I have some napkins?” I asked.

He reached under the counter and brought out a couple. I wished I had already been paid.

Nez had given me some cereal but I really wanted a hot dog. They spun over a smoke producing grill next to some oversize lollipops. Someone tapped my shoulder. I saw a hand, the same color as the caramel, and nails as red as Gigi's.

"It's not even ten in the morning," said the voice.

I looked over my shoulder. Mal leaned close enough that I could hear her earrings, purple feathers with beads on the bottom, clink. A subtle, sweet clink.

"I'm hungry," I said, picking up the napkins.

Maltise smiled at me, then asked for two apples. The man gave me a suspicious look but gave them to her.

"I used to eat way too much too soon," said Mal, giving me the apple.

"I broke out because of all the sweets. Brick had to get me some skin cream."

I fiddled with the apple, not sure whether to eat it. Though I was hungry, I didn't want juice dribbling all over my face in front of her. I put the apple into my pants.

"What do you like to eat the most?," I asked.

Another pitiful question, but I didn't think Mal would be the type to razz on me.

"Cotton candy," she answered quickly. "It doesn't make me feel fat when I eat it."

"Never had it," I said.

Mal's mouth dropped. "Never?"

"Never."

Mal dug in the inside of her shawl for a bit, the earrings giving another timid rattle. She produced a penny, laid it on the counter top, asked for one cotton candy. The man nodded, picking up a paper cone. He put the cone in a small, white machine, containing a large hole similar to a toilet but with sticky, pink string inside. The string stuck to the cone like it was a brush collecting stray hairs. Six or seven times, the string wove around the cone, and my head went around, too. The man gave it to Mal who gave it to me. I tucked a big wad of it into my mouth.

"It's sweet," I said, rolling it around in my jaw. "Tastes like sweet hair."

I looked at my fingers. Pink droplets covered the white scrapes and my hands felt more sticky than sweaty.

"Eat the apple after that," instructed Mal. "Don't want anyone to think I was the one that got you on the circus diet."

I sucked on my lips instead of saying anything. Mal waved and disappeared into Ana's trailer. I kept my eyes on the trailer, as Jake rustled my hair and grabbed for the napkins. The napkins were in the same hand as the cotton candy so I dropped both. Golden dirt covered the pink string.

"You took too long," complained Jake, kicking more dirt on the cotton candy.

I stopped sucking and bit hard on my lip. It bled a little. If I were Tad, maybe I would've done something. Pushed him, spat at him, punched him for ruining what Mal gave me.

But no, it was cotton candy and my third day there, and my hands hurt.

"So whatdoes Brick want me to do next?" I asked.

"You gonna watch me play," said Jake. "And you'll learn some things."

I sighed. Finally, a break from building the tent. It seemed too good to be true.

"What do you play?" I askd.

"Well, I don't play around," said Jake.

"Huh?"

"You heard me," said Jake, pointing to the trailer Mal had gone into.

"I wasn't," I said.

"Let her be," said Jake, crushing the cotton candy with his foot.

"Roustabouts don't romance."

Jake stepped ahead of me. He traced the edge of the trailer, delicately. As I followed him, I couldn't help but wonder if hyphens got all the girls.

My first main tent show was also my first introduction to the circus band. The band was composed of Jake, Lou (who turned in the wig and balloon pants for a white tuxedo shirt and black slacks after his act in the center ring), and eight other men that came in from Manhattan. They carried, thick black cases under their arms, and set music stands in front of chairs in the pit. The pit was right under the first row of seats, and something tells me the people in the twenty-eighth row on the left and right sides of the tent could hear them just as brilliantly as the ones in the first row. The band brought out the brass-- three tubas, four trumpets, two French horns, and the lone trombone player. The trombone player was the unofficial leader, retrieving a bucket for their spit valves, handing out the blue bowties they always wore, asking about the lighting. I got to see things I'd never seen at Carnegie swirling around them before they went on.

That night, Jake, who more and more was believing himself a second Brick, ordered me to deliver the costumes to the big tops. Jake packed on so many I could only make out the tops of people's heads as I made my way to the tent. Someone held the door open for me. I think it was Lou because I saw a pink wig. Stumbling, I fell on the floor, managing to keep most of the clothes locked in my grip.

"Boy in the tent," yelled a shrill voice.

I had stumbled into the ladies' dressing room. A space had been erected near the back of the tent with purple curtains hiding several vanity mirrors, all smaller than Ana's, and stools. Women dipped brushes into small circles then spread blush across their cheeks, kissed their reflections, put their foot on stools to strap up their sequined shoes. They were all pretty, even the ones you wouldn't think were pretty. The feathers on their shoulder of their leotards made their chests curvy so the person in row twenty-five could admire the outline. The lights nicely lit their skin so they shimmered under the spotlights. Tad would introduce them, and they'd walk out and do their individual charms-- holding hoops for a lion with beads of sweat falling down their powdered faces; tucking into themselves above the tightrope; doing a musical number to "Alexander's Ragtime Band", ending with Dom and Lou supporting a pyramid of eight of them.

Two sparkly green toe shoes appeared in front of my face. I looked up. It was the woman I'd seen take her feathers out of the butter dish. Her blonde hair was tied back under a headpiece of green sequins.

"Trying to catch a peek?" she said.

I got up, hiked up the clothes, Tad's cumberband hitting my nose.

"Um..." I said.

"Stand up straight," she said.

I straightened my back, locking my knees together. She took a couple costumes from me and tossed them to another girl, a skinner blonde with a grey, hairy ring around her arm.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Marshall...Mars," I said.

"Your purpose?"

"I work for Brick. I have to deliver these costumes."

I blew a piece of hair from my eyes. I wondered if someone would take me away, thinking I was a sleazy guy.

The two girls giggled, and each took a few clothes from me until I was left with nothing.

"Relax," said the woman with the headpiece. "I'm Lana. Nez's girl. He said you were a bit antsy."

"Oh, hi," I replied.

Lana was extremely good-looking, tall and lean, an interesting match for Nez. I later learned her nickname was "the Helen that got a hundred customers", meaning the guys all came to see her out of all the sequined ladies. The other women didn't seem to mind, especially not Ana, who rivaled Lana in terms of drawing attention.

"I'm Dolly," greeted the woman with the grey ring.

I looked at the ring sliding down her arm.

"Elephant hair bracelet," she explained. "It's good luck. All the riders have one."

There was a rumbling moan on the other side of the curtains, and a couple stamps. It felt like thunder rolling under my feet.

“That’s my horn,” said Dolly, pinching my cheek. “The elephants are antsy tonight. Seems to be the theme around here.”

Dolly ducked behind the curtain, and I could make out an elephant’s butt. It wagged its tail, the same color as Dolly’s bracelet. Lana started sorting through the costumes, throwing Tad’s on the chair, and delivering a couple to two ladies applying lipstick.

“Thanks, sweetie,” she said, cupping my chin.

The elephant squealed. I heard a small smack, and Jake came through the curtain, holding his face and scowling.

“Dames shouldn’t slap men,” said Jake who held a guitar case similar to Jo’s in his hand.

“You yank a tail again, I’ll deck you where it really counts,” I heard Dolly yell through the curtain.

Jake rested his case on the chair. “Stop courtin’, kid. Band’s waitin’.”

“Jerk,” murmured Lana, reclipping her hairpiece and leaving the room. I trailed Jake as we moved through the curtain and I saw people already streaming in. Black shadows filled the higher benches as a couple concessionary workers took their tickets. The stands were so high and dark from the pit where the band played that they looked like black sticks sitting down. The rings were in full display; the other roustabouts set each prop in its proper place. Phoenix growled from his cage, making a few kids going to the twelfth row stop and scream. He pawed at the bars while Dom shushed him. We passed them in the center ring, then veered left to the pit. The leader-trombone player pounded Jake on the back, while I glanced at the music stands.

“Kiss To Build a Dream On,” I read aloud over the trumpeter’s head.

The trumpet player turned around. “We play it for Dolly and her gang. Got bass to match the elephants coming in,” he said.

My eyes ran across the sheet music. The rhythm was more complicated than I was expecting. Eighths were crammed into the measure in such a way that it hurt my eyes.

“What kind of music is this?” I asked.

“Razzmatazz,” answered a tuba player, in between blowing on his mouthpiece.

“Happier jazz from Orleans. Jake’s idea.”

The tuba player went down the itinerary, flicking the pieces of music through his fingers as he explained their part in the show. Sittin’ on Top of the World for Dom, Lou, and the other clowns riding around in their small cars. Paul Revere for Tad taunting Phoenix with a stool. Seal It With a Kiss for Lana, who blew a kiss to an audience member every night as she hurtled above the net.

Jake added a seat to the pit, letting me sit between him and the tuba player. All the seats were full by then. The spotlights went down, then came back up, lighting corners for seconds, then lighting another corner the next. The roustabouts were working outside, pressing buttons to control the spotlights. They were everywhere. The band started, the trumpet doing a fine, long trill. I watched the center ring as the trill continued and the audience clapped. A hundred shadows clapped as Tad pranced forward. A spotlight followed him to his blue and gold-striped pedestal. He was in full gear: red tuxedo shirt with gold buttons, smooth white dress pants, bullhorn in hand, the red cummerbund I'd carried. The spotlight seemed to slim him down, or maybe it was the distance from the pit.

"Parnum!" he yelled through the bullhorn. "Are you ready for the greatest show on Earth?"

The word earth rang in my ears for a while before the cheering continued. Tad's voice sounded brash as it billowed from the bullhorn. It was nowhere near as smooth as Brick's, though just like Brick, Tad's English was better during the performance.

"Spectacle awaits you under these spotlights," shouted Tad. "In the left ring, we have lovely Lana, and her two assistants, the daring duo of Kel and Maxie!"

The spotlight raced over to the tightrope and the platform nearest to the exit. Lana had one arm laced around the bar descending from the ceiling, but thrust the other out proudly, while Kel and Maxie, each on either side of the tightrope, waved to the crowd from their separate platforms. They had really deep tans under their white shirts and green, sequined shorts. Lana got a firm grip on the bar, then swung to the next one, smaller in size. Maxie took his position, his brown hair ruffled by the wind as he swung to the same bar Lana was on. Lana jumped in unison with Maxie, and they landed at the same time, grinning at the black shadows in the stands. They were graceful while I gulped for them. I gulped as much as the tuba player swallowing in between the pulsating razzamatazz rhythms. I didn't stop until Kel and Lana switched bars, and they did it two more times, ending with three flying bodies nearly touching the ceiling.

"Surely a doll of death-defying proportions!," shouted Tad, nodding at Lana.

Lana arrived safely at her platform, then bowed, the feather of her headpiece grazing Kel and Maxie's thighs. A couple whistles rose above the yelling from the audience.

"In the right ring, we have the bumbling boobs just driving in from Broadway. Packed into one convenient car."

Dom and Lou were in the same miniature car, yellow flames painted on its red sides. Dom was in the front seat, steering the wheel, with Lou's legs around Dom's head,

brushing his ears. They crashed into the edge of the wall along the ring, and tipped over sideways. Another clown, whose name I never knew, carried a bucket to the side of the car. He pointed to the flames, of the side of the car, then threw the water on the car, Dom, and Lou. Dom and Lou weren't bumblng at all but it was funny, funny because I knew Dom was more likely to describe Arthurian legends than get angry about a tipped clown car. He did, though, jumping on the other clown's back. The audience encouraged them, shouting "Go!" everytime Dom hit the other clown with exaggerated punches. Lou intervened, putting a bucket on the other clown's head. It wasn't the same bucket. Regardless, Lou acted surprised when water spilled across the clown's face.

"Guess those clowns will have a word with Ford later," shouted Tad. "Now arriving sixteen lasses on elephants, led by Dolly Rae on Petunia."

Between the stands of black shadows, a red curtain parted. This was where Phoenix had been earlier, before the roustabouts set his cage into the center while Tad narrated. The other midway animals were there, too, sleeping while their associates trickled into the main tent. Petunia, a large blue blanket and blue hat over her scaly body, came through the curtain, Dolly standing tall in a straight pirouette on her back. The other elephants and ladies mirrored Dolly, thrusting back their hands when they reached the halfway mark.

Little bits of shadows jumped from the stands. I assumed they were little girls hopping off the benches, deciding to make this their dream job. The elephants' trunks fell loosely, calmly. I'd seen an elephant before, on the backs of tablecloths, in paintings, in books, but they were never this serene. I never asked Dolly to let me ride it. Maybe ladies could only ride those elephants. The parade ended with Petunia and her pack going back inside the red curtain, heads still stretched back so we made out their faces until they were gone under the curtain. There was a small break while Tad stepped off his pedestal and looked for a stool. Dom ran back out to several cheers, members of the audience remembering his blue wig and his noble fight with the other clown.

The band played "Say It With Music", a song I actually recognized. It was one of the records Jo and I listened to at Joseph Little's. We also played it at the Oswalds' a week after I met Jo. Jo borrowed a Victrola from the Lowenstein's. I had never seen Otis inside the house before then. Usually out, I caught him going back inside the house when I left. I'd say "Hi, Mr. Oswald", but he'd brush by me, massage Jo's clean-shaven head for a bit, then close the door. That day, he wiped

down a pair of handlebars, glancing up at me momentarily. It made me so uncomfortable I refused to sit down in the chair Lisa offered. Maybe it was a test, a test to see if I was as rough as Jo. I stared back, hoping Otis would see that I could also give an intense stare, a confident look. It was no use. I saw every part of his eye, the lines of red around the corners, the large black circles. Otis went back to the handlebars, grinning as he wiped them. I don't think he liked what he saw. A soft kid without much to say.

"I never know what to say to your dad," I said to Jo.

"You never know what to say, Mars," replied Jo. "Til you set music to it. That ain't a wrong way to speak at all."

"You want me to play a song for your dad?" I said, scratching my head.

"Nah!," said Jo, smirking. "Music ain't his bee's knees. Just act right and he like you."

Say it with music. The razzamatazz overpowered Tad, now thrusting a stool at Phoenix, freed from the cage, whose sharp teeth were clear from the pit. Jo probably would've liked it. I decided to go visit him the next day. I'd promised to see Harlow. The tuba player was resting, heaving after a particularly long refrain.

"Scary, huh?" he said to me.

"Yeah," I said.

"That's what you get when you lock a lion up for so long, watching them other critters run around without a care in the world."

He was vicious, protecting his space. He bit at the stool, while Dom and a couple sequined ladies held the loop erect. Phoenix growled. He was more under control than he looked, biting in the air, throwing dirty glances at Dom whose legs shook under the balloon pants. I wondered how long he was in the dark, kept beside the other animals who pranced around freely. I noticed a couple shadows shift in a back corner, a bench near the exit of the tent. It was a small square with three benches, and had around twenty people.

"Who are those benches for?," I asked, pointing at the benches.

"For the colored," said the tuba player. "They can't pay the full price most times."

"Why?"

"That's a question on top of questions," said the tuba player. "But they like our razzamatazz. Complimented us a few times. We play a couple of their favorites."

The tuba player brought the instrument to his lips, the quick eighths sudden and sharp. Sharper than Phoenix's claws? Maybe. A smaller space and you're more inclined to bite. I bet you can say that with music.

There were a couple of encores from the band after the show which Jake bragged about as soon as we came into the ladies' dressing room to pick up what needed to be washed. The other roustabouts were already taking down the quarter poles and untying the bars from the trapeze. The spotlights dimmed and Phoenix was back in his cage. Everything was fading. I missed the razzamatazz the most, the feverish beats that matched the activities in the rings. Trumpets, tubas, and the trombone were snapped up in their cases, and those were the last clinks of the day.

"Four repeats and I still ain't beat!" said the tuba player, who made it a point to say good-bye before he left the room. Jake jogged after him after Dolly shooed him out. The sequined ladies wiped off their faces with tissue paper, some talking about how much weight Tad had packed on. Mal was in the center, not talking at all, sifting through what looked to be photographs. I walked up to her, straightening my back like I had for Lana. I was going to pull a Nez, sure of myself in front of a pretty lady.

"Hi," I said.

Mal lifted her head. "Wow, you're really sweaty," she said.

She pulled a tissue from the vanity mirror and dotted my forehead. I didn't look at her, sweating even more. Instead, my eyes fell on the photographs.

"Paris?" I said, touching the edge of one.

It was a picture of the Eiffel Tower. I recognized it from one of my meandering textbook discoveries with Miss Miniver. A grey sky lay behind the tower, with people walking around the bottom. A couple balloons hung in the air, frozen by the camera. They were so life-like I expected them to rise up then and there.

"Paris," said Mal firmly, sitting down again. "It's the place I always ask for."

I pulled a chair next to hers. "You ask for places?"

Mal shyly looked down.

"Well, I don't get to go to them, so I ask people for them. For postcards. I've asked for London, Athens, Rome, but always Paris."

Something rose in my chest, rose like the balloons I thought would rise. I'd never asked for a place, but I liked the idea. Maybe that's why I wanted to go West. It was untamed. You could ask for property out there, a place to make your own.

"There's always New York's Paris," I said. "Greenwich."

"Greenwich?"

I nodded. Tilly had taken us on a weekend trip to Greenwich Village when I was eight. We rode the BMT, when there were only around ten kids. I never questioned how she could afford that trip. We took advantage of it because we didn't get many. I jumped into the fountain

with Billy and splashed the other kids, kicking the coins inside with my feet. Tilly spanked us right afterwards, but that didn't stop us from racing cars down the aisles of the Hand-Painted Toy Shop or daring Hannah Snow to eat the park's grass. It ended with us on the streetcar, and me laying on the seats, listening to Tilly telling a sobbing Hannah Snow that a little grass wouldn't kill you.

"It's really fun," I said. "There's a lot of artists."

Mal grabbed my hands. The lightness of my stomach made the possibility of balloons in my body that much more believable.

"That's why I want to go to Paris," whispered Mal. "To be a real artist."

"But you are a real artist."

Mal shook her head. "Real artists get to go to these places. They don't ask."

She let my hands go, then glanced around at the other ladies. Dolly had retrieved a pillow and was now mimicking Tad, making a balled fist her bullhorn. Lana laughed, her breasts shaking under her leotard.

"Brick likes to keep me close," said Mal softly. "He promised my dad he'd look after me. But he does a bit too much looking."

"He doesn't let you go out?"

"Not me or Claude. Claude doesn't ask, but I do. He says we're a bit more mysterious."

"Oh."

That seemed odd to me. I suppose Brick wanted to keep the suspense, but Mal always hid her back with shawls or shirts.

"Plus...I guess we're both a little scared," continued Mal, looking at the postcard of Paris.

"Scared?" I said.

"Well, people look, but not much else," said Mal, tracing the tower with her finger.

"They're not like you, Mars. You can read the thoughts on their faces, and sometimes they stay. They curl their noses, bare their teeth. No legs, that brings that look."

The tower was bigger than I remembered. You could see bits of sky in between the bars of the tower, grey, sullen.

"I remember those looks," said Mal. "But maybe they'd understand here, in Paris, where artists walk around."

I laughed. "Artists," I said.

"Yeah, they look. They look until something seems natural. They listen to everything, hear everything. I wouldn't be as scared because they'd understand."

Mal chuckled lightly, holding the photograph to her chest.

"I'm just rambling now," she said. "Sorry."

"I'm kind of an artist actually," I said.

Mal looked surprised, letting her hands down, exposing Paris to both of us again. Here was my Nez moment for the taking, a sweaty boy's chance to make a girl pay attention.

"I'm a hyphen," I said. "A roustabout-musician-errand boy."
Call me a liar, but I think she was impressed.

VII. Marshall's Motif

Brooklyn was the city that waited for you. The brownstones with the green yards were still heated by the churning boilers. The car owner still honked his horn at the rare daydreaming carriage driver, then settled his head back against the polished seat, defeated. And from a distance, half of Brooklyn still caved into shadow, while the other half accepted the light. The shy half encompassed Daly Street, a small street made up of two blocks. Despite Daly's size, it held its own with grand offerings: the unpretentious furniture store full of imported Cuban chairs and the popular Bauhaus armoires, the penny arcade that stayed open for the after school rush, and the Gribold Theater that introduced ticket payers to Douglas Fairbanks and Clara Bow hamming it up as Robin Hood and Alice Tremaine. Nez encouraged me to take the train because trains inspire you to think. I thought about Brooklyn and I guess once you leave, it always looks a little more beautiful coming back.

This was my first real train ride, the train before the West called. You'd figure I would think about Jo or Lisa because they were really who I wanted to see, but no, I thought about Tilly's. I didn't enjoy being cast out like some clarinet swab, small and useless. I'd say to her that that wasn't an excuse. There were a lot of clarinet swabs milling around and we were sliding all over the place rather than slipping through the holes of a trusty, warm mouthpiece. It's always nice to find a place to rest, even if it's a bit dark. I can't help but think of Jo's when I say that, but as the train neared the station on Jay and York I was more concerned with keeping track of the stops.

One of the conductors walked up the aisle collecting tickets. He stopped at a woman and her daughter in front of me. The girl offered him her storybook instead of a ticket. The conductor gave the book back, said he'd read it, and boringly ripped my ticket. The girl informed her mother that she loved to read. I wonder if Billy had ever learned to read, and where he eventually ended up. He could be sailing the Atlantic on a great expedition, the illiterate hero with a life worthy of being chronicled in literature. All of us should be so lucky. But I guess at Kelway's, a chronicle can have layers like a musical composition. There were Brick's stories, then the real stories, and probably some other invented stories beyond that once the gossip circulated. I'm still trying to figure it out because they like to jumble together; they're less orderly than movements where I can separate phrases and report the clef and signature immediately. I was relieved when the conductor called out my stop. My head hurt, and visiting Jo seemed so simple. I stepped out of the cart onto the concrete sidewalk and Brooklyn stared back at me, no worse for the wait.

Walking to Daly, I glided down the blocks. I knew those streets, their bends and cracks, their powers and failings. Brooklyn apparently had a love affair with Ma Ferguson that day, as my eyes met the steely lass beaming from the posters adorning the side walls of various buildings. I stopped between Greenway Avenue and Juniper Drive, transfixed by her. She had the crimped hair of any flapper girl, but sad, owl eyes that made you seek her wisdom. Her compassion outshone her wisdom, though. People called her the pretty pardoner because of all the pardons she gave convicts, but I can't help but think there was wisdom in those decisions as well. Throw in a little mercy with that beauty and wisdom and you've got a winner-- an older version of Jo's dream girl except a few shades lighter.

I probably wasn't the only one who stalled for Ma. For the lackadaisical milkmen and the heavy-footed plumbers parting their home around seven in the morning, Ma was the last woman they saw. Her gaze, bold and boastful, seduced them, made them do unnatural things: get their wives to sew yellow ribbons to the insides of their uniform jackets; let their daughters stay out an extra hour for stickball, and afterwards wipe their bloody noses and kiss their smiling mouths as the blood reached their lips; fasten gold and white flowers to their lapels, supporting the National American Women Suffrage Association's latest, post-vote cause. She was a governor that governed in more places than Texas, a Ma of the multitude.

Daly's Street came a little too quickly for me. My legs ached and my armpits felt scratchy. Tilly's Township stood like a broken dollhouse next to the Lowenstein townhouse. Yes, she was there, a Ma of multitudes, a mother of many that threw out a couple of kids. I turned my back to the house, to her, and like so many others, the others we all speculated about, tried to make Tilly's Township a memory.

I trudged down the alley, and knocked on the Oswalds' door. Standing there, I heard the bothersome cries of babies next door, probably being tended to by Tilly. I felt a knot in my stomach.

The knot disappeared when Lisa answered the door. Her hair was straighter than usual, the ends curling near the edge of her ear. She was like the masterpiece you return to once you go through the whole museum, just to make sure you'd really seen it.

"Hey," I said, weakly. "Can...can Jo...come out?"

"He went to the sunrise service with his daddy," answered Lisa. "He be back pretty soon. I'm bein' bad and goin' to the eleven o' clock one. Can't raise myself up for the Lord. That just ain't right."

"I can come back."

"Nah, let me fix you somethin'. You like bread and jam? Or eggs...I make good spiced apples."

I rocked on my heels, avoiding Lisa's warm stare. I'd been alone with her before, but only for a few moments. I was thirteen when Jo first

invited me over, and Jo needed to fetch firewood from the Lowensteins in the middle of one of the lunches I shared with Lisa and Jo. I abused their hospitality and Lisa's good cooking skills. That day, Jo left, the corners of his lips encrusted with tomato sauce. Lisa was sitting at her usual chair, on the right, next to Otis' plum armchair and Jo's guitar case near her ankles. She sipped her tea, and I watched the hot steam hang around her ears and soar up to her forehead.

"You're all red," Lisa had said.

"It's the tea," I had explained. "Same thing happens when Tilly makes it."

I really thought it had been the tea.

"So you write music, I hear? That real hard for a young person to do."

She had said young person, not the demeaning kid or boy, but young person.

"Yeah, but...but I'm not good or anything. I mean, I haven't really...um, done a full piece. They're little measures, nothing special."

"Jo excited to get a friend like you. Plus you make pleasant company."

Lisa had given me a smile through the steam, and I tried composing what I would say, but I have always found words more difficult than music. Can a few words even compare to a refrain? I don't think so. Every meeting I had with Lisa was marked by inarticulate talk and sweaty palms.

I opened my mouth as Jo pushed through the door and dropped the firewood near the fireplace. He settled back into his chair and shook his head at me, grinning widely. "You 'bout as red as me, Mars. Red and skinny. Tilly must work ya'll somethin' fierce over there."

I stopped rocking on my heels, embarrassed at the silliness of the habit and sad when the scene ended in my head.

"No, I...I shouldn't have come so early," I said.

"You still doin' your music?" asked Lisa.

I hadn't played a note, or written anything since my arrival at Kelway's. I was the musician who hosed down the animal cages and got his shoes stuck in elephant poop and wet hay. I saw myself falling, falling from her grace, because I was the budding pianist of the tiger cage, with the ten Parnum Capuchins dancing around me in joy.

"Whenever I get the chance," I said. "How's Mr. Oswald?"

"You know him. Out and about," answered Lisa. "Sent him and Jo to church together, tryin' to get them civil. That boy lost his backpack. You believe that? And it ain't come cheap."

Memories of the heavens flooded my mind. I wished I had gone to Cubby and asked for it.

"Oh," I said softly.

I turned around to see Jo in a cotton red shirt and black dress pants, ambling up the alley with his distinct confidence. The confidence was

different from Nez's, alluring in its naivete. He looked a bit older, or maybe that's how people usually look when you've been away for awhile doing different things, kind of like a children's book you pick up after age twenty-one. It's sad to encounter it again but you're glad you found it.

"Hey, Mars," said Jo, grinning.

"Hey, Jo."

"Where your father?" said Lisa as Jo received a kiss on the head from his mother.

"I ain't know. I ain't his keeper," replied Jo.

"Don't play, boy!" warned Lisa. "Where he at?"

"All he said was he be back."

"Did you act good in church?" asked Lisa. "Cause you know the church got eyes. And I ain't talking about the people in there."

"Yeah, Mama," said Jo. "I acted right. Mars, you wanna go to the park?"

"Sure," I answered.

"Alright. Mama?"

"Alright, guess I cooked for no one. Be back at a decent hour, and a decent hour...", began Lisa.

"A decent hour is when the stars outnumber the hookers," recited Jo.

I always loved that line. It was a pearl of wisdom from Otis, who didn't say much but came up with great sayings. Lisa went back inside, closing the door behind her.

Jo pushed my shoulder. "Didn't take you long to come back. The pool hall kick you out because you too pure?" he said.

"Nope. I'm actually working at a circus," I said.

Jo shook his head. "No way. With lion tamers and midgets and stuff?" he asked.

"Yep. I'm the helper...running errands."

Jo stuck out his tongue. "You just fall into luck, Mars. It's really sickening."

"Well, at least you got good folks. But I still say I win."

Jo scratched his head and avoided my gaze. I just thought he was trying to think of a way to make it seem as though he had the upper hand. I didn't know I actually did.

"You hate me now?," I said. "Because I won?"

"Yeah, you won," said Jo. "But I'll hate you on the way to the park."

Prospect Park was for those whose homes were a little less. This is where they could flee to make new homes and hideaways--men resting on greasy cardboard instead of pillows, squirrels storing acorns in styrofoam cups for their babies, a couple of ladies who made a mailbox out of a paper bag decorated with spray-painted flowers. The

rest were strangers passing through, flying their new kites in the sky with bluejays and crows, full from the crumbs given by generous bench dwellers. Everything else prepared itself for some great moment or some impending doom. The Camperdown Elm trees stretched high above the kids playing marbles, ready to be immortalized in some famous poem or meet the developers face-on if they wanted to cut them down. The waterfall cried into the Ambergill Stream, making a sound similar to a moan. The giraffe and horses of the Prospect Carousel shone under the sun, but the shine made the saddle on each look slippery, as if they were about to fall off their metal skin. It wasn't a happy park, the way some authors would envision it. It was a park in wait.

It made sense that Jo and I would find ourselves there. We were waiting for different things, whereas in the heavens, we were dreaming different things. Waiting is different from dreams. It's more practical; it's more me than Jo. I could wait and be happy. Jo couldn't.

Jo and I sat in the middle of the meadow, watching a field mouse climb over a rock. It was a confident little mouse that stayed on the rock and groomed itself.

"Harlow's at Goldie's tonight. We should go," said Jo, laying down on the ground.

"Swell. I can catch a later train," I said.

"I'd be in heaps of trouble if Daddy caught me at Goldie's."

"You get in trouble over the knapsack?" I asked.

"Yeah. But he more mad at me for something else," said Jo.

I didn't think it was that bad. Otis got riled up about Jo not delivering a package once. That was the meanest I ever saw Otis get. He put Jo up against a door, breathing loudly.

"These papers needed those signatures," said Otis. "I just wanted you to take them there."

Jo tried to wedge out of Otis' grasp, looking at me for an instant, then stopping, letting his head rest against the wooden door.

"I had to see someone first," said Jo. "I deliver them later."

"Ain't no later," shouted Otis. "You hard-headed, always going off. I just can't getit...can't get it."

Otis sighed, stroking his hair, black and wooly. Lisa told Jo to take a walk, and I followed him out. Jo later said it was paperwork that needed to be filed for the repair shop. We were both quiet as we walked down Daly, walking nowhere in particular. Jo was just as quiet at Prospect.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing. I know where the line is but I cross it anyway. Threatened to sell my guitar though."

"What!" I yelled, making the mouse scamper away.

“Said we needed the money. It’s not like the Lowensteins are gonna kick us out if we ask for food now and then, you know? He just greedy.”

“Dads can be selfish,” I said.

Jo gave me a puzzled look.

“I mean...I guess dads can be selfish,” I said, pulling at a piece of grass.

“Need my guitar. No one else got my twang. I patented that twang. It’s mine. But he don’t understand,” said Jo.

“Well, my piano’s gone so you have to make sure to keep your guitar. Our duet’s not looking too good.”

“It still gonna happen...just not the way we planned.”

“We should run off to make it happen. Isn’t there some story where all the boys go to this island and do what they want?” added Jo.

I thought back to the books I had read at Tilly’s. “A fairy tale? Oh, yeah! Pleasure Island in Pinocchio.”

“The one with the puppet. Mama told me about it. That’d be nice. To do what you wanted.”

“Somebody lured them there, though. Then they got turned into donkeys.”

“But they was free for a minute. Free to do what they wanted. So we should go, go to where lost boys is kings. Feel right at home. There got to be a place somewhere like that.”

The field mouse came back, and ran across Jo’s pants leg, obviously avoiding me. I threw him a regretful look, but he chose to ignore it. He stopped and sniffed Jo’s sock.

“I always feel lost,” I said. “Don’t think a place can cure that.”

“Yeah, it could,” said Jo. “You just gotta let it.”

Goldie’s was a few blocks away from Prospect Park. Goldie’s was the jazz joint, “*the only place in Brooklyn where jazz gave you a jonesin*” according to the Brooklyn community newsletter. At the height of activity, you could hear saxophone riffs and clinking glasses, cussing and fake pearls rustling. The customers were mostly black, but Jewish and Greek immigrants started to wander in after the publicity in the newsletter. The only separation was in the clothing. The black women dressed in their finest white batiste and beaded dresses in the summer, and blue and silver brocade evening gowns in the winter. The black man donned straw boater hats and black wool spats to cover their hands, their hair perfectly shaved or set in curlicue hairs. The immigrants resembled Jo and I, with ordinary wear in basic colors. We blended into the background even though we were fifteen, often the only teenagers in the room. We let the others stick out.

Jo opened the door of Goldie's to the smell of fermented grapes and newly put out cigarettes, making sure no saw us go in. It was the time of the day when Goldie was getting or making his liquor. His place had been checked out twice, once by the police and the other time by the ladies' temperance society, of which his mother was secretary.

Days later, Goldie's appeared in his mother's Brooklyn Beer-Basher write-up: "The Brooklyn Beer-Basher is happy to report that Goldie's is as dry as the Lutheran church down the block. You'll only get drunk off the lively rhythms and heartfelt singing. One of Patterson Street's few treats."

Jo and I ducked in, and night seemed to have come a bit early within the large room. Yellow candles stood erect in holders next to a battered, but beloved Baldwin, and their light shimmied on the slick, black surface. Every now and again, there was a lamp on top of a table, casting solitary beams but they culminated in a collective light in the middle of the room. I shut the door tightly.

"Where can I get a beer?," yelled Jo, his voice cracking slightly.

"Same place you got that smart mouth," answered Goldie, coming from the back room.

"Hey, Mars."

Goldie's height had always impressed me, but compared to Ana, he wasn't nearly as tall. He had to be around six feet, and Ana perhaps two inches taller. Despite his stature, Goldie's genial eyes reduced what intimidation there could've been, and they always danced, even when Goldie came out after doing his dirty deeds. He wiped the bottom of his apron on his sweaty bald head, brown as molasses, revealing a tattoo of half-notes and a bass clef in a measure above his forehead. He probably didn't get a treble clef because it would've meant more hours in the chair.

"Hey, Goldie," I said.

"You been gone awhile. Too busy readin' them books?," said Goldie, who constantly asked me about the books I was reading.

"Nah, Mars is out Tilly's. He workin' at a circus," said Jo.

"Really now? That swell. Teach them hard work ethics. That all-day work there," assessed Goldie, closing the back room door.

"Well, it's definately not easy," I said.

"Harlow's tonight, right?" asked Jo. "After Jada Lee?"

"Yep, they practicin' in the back room now," confirmed Goldie. "How about ya rearrange them chairs for me in the far corner?"

Jo shrugged, smoothing down his pants. "I even do it with a smile," he said, smirking.

"Boy, get over there," said Goldie.

I started to follow him, but Goldie yanked me back, softly as he could.

“He ain’t doin’ so well, Mars,” whispered Goldie. “He spendin’ too much time here. Ain’t good for him in the least. Keep an eye on him, awright?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Jo was trying to wedge a chair in between two others. I didn’t say anything, still unsure

of what Goldie said. Jo wasn’t acting that strange.

“Gonna be a good show tonight,” said Jo. “Can’t nobody bring it like Harlow.”

“He’s the best thing that ever came out of Brooklyn...well, except for us.”

“That’s more like it. You got the dreaming bug now,” said Jo.

“Borrowed it for a bit,” I said. I knew I was giving in a little.

“Just make sure to give it back,” replied Jo. “I need it more than you do.”

Jada Lee’s flowering drawl filled the blue-tinted room, the sole natural color in Goldie’s. The purity of the tint was diminished in a place of adulterated burgundy and topaz zoot suits, crimson and magenta slip dresses, and beige beer bottles. Bare skin glistened like just-squeezed vinegar. Jo said the shine was helped by butter cream and pinching. It was what Lisa did before she went out, even though Lisa would never come to a place like Goldie’s. Accompanied by toothless Joseph Little on the saxophone, who refused to take off his bowler until after the intermission, Jada’s voice dipped and rose above the soft whittle of saxophone keys.

We sat in the center, and Jo and I repeatedly prided ourselves on getting there early. It was a packed house, not too surprising for a Sunday. They were always escaping from some building, settling in at Goldie’s, storing up their sins to be admonished by home and cleansed by church. The music was worth it, however. It was worth the screaming, guiltless wives, and the resident backbiters of parishioners. Then there was Jada, clad in an aquamarine boa and black, sequined dress, her black hair falling down to her back in siren-like tumbles, her large bosom framed by the house lights, who borrowed our souls for a bit as her mouth opened and closed, but always gave them back with a reassuring wink after the song’s end. I relaxed my shoulders, for Jada to have easier access to what she could draw from me. It came, a small flutter in my chest. Jada ended with a robust, elongated howl, a howl that drew a standing ovation. I whistled, a weak whistle that was buried under loud cheers.

“Thank ya. Now, it my pleasure to introduce the European master of melody... all the way from Paris...Harlow Williams!” exclaimed Jada.

Joseph Little opened the side door, his lips bordering his nose in an odd smile. In came a man in a white and black zoot suit, a polka dot tie

tucked perfectly behind black buttons. I thought he'd just stepped out of a wedding cake. He was fair-skinned, near the complexion of ivory, but appeared comfortable in the bodily wave of ginger and tawny-skinned fellows and ladies. He kissed Jada's mocha-colored cheek and sat down on the piano bench as the applause rose steadily. Jo hooted, punching his fist in the air.

"What ya'll wanna hear?" asked Harlow, as Jada massaged his shoulders.

"Give us some of that ragtime," said Joseph Little. "Something bouncy."

"Yeah, Harlow!" shouted Goldie. "Take us down South. You know, the place you was before you went to ol' stuffy Paris."

There were a few warm chuckles, and Harlow grinned. He scanned the audience and rested his eyes on Jo and I. I grinned, sitting up straight.

"What these boys doin' here, Goldie?" said Harlow. "Grindin' them grapes in the back for ya?"

Jada laughed loudly. "No, that me."

"This Mars and Jo," introduced Goldie. "They buddin' musicians. Mars play the piano."

"Do he now?" said Harlow. "Do yourself a favor, boy, and don't ever play here. The wine flowin' in the back, and cheap Goldie ain't givin' none."

"The wine take longer," said Jada, in an attempt to defend Goldie. "But we shoulda did it sooner...what with respectable company comin'."

"Nah, nah. It awright," said Harlow, folding his hands and placing them over the piano keys. "How 'bout Sing Up, Now! Ya'll know that one?"

A few appreciative yeses, including one from Jo, rose from the crowd. I shook my head, but luckily no one saw.

Harlow ran his fingers over the keys elegantly, his shoulders moving up and down. He played a matchless scale, and I tried to house it in my mind. My fingers lept up on their own accord, and mimicked Harlow's fingers. They danced as Harlow sang: *Sing up now, sing up, hallelujah. Sing up now...sing up HALLELUJAH! Sing up, sing up, sing up hallelujah....before the sun come barrelin' out.*

The rhythm quickened, and I moved my head to match the rhythm. Classical musicians kind of do the same gesture, but it was more head than heart. It's a gesture I picked up from here and nowhere else, a gesture that got me noticed and has gotten me praise and criticism from adjudicators. I do it anyway. I let the jazz have its say among the older styles. I let the youthful voice hang with the elders, like Goldie letting us hang with his older customers.

The high fashion did not stop anyone from loosening up. The zoot suits lived up to their name and reputation, doing the Texas Tommy

with a Harlem strut. Their ladies twirled their beads, doing a subtle Charleston as there wasn't much room for a full throttle Charleston. The Stamoses, regulars that had come from Greece several years ago, did the Cakewalk, high-stepping awkwardly despite the lively nature of the music.

Harlow continued: *Sing up, sing up, sing up, sing up....Hallelujah! Before the sun come barrelin' out!*

"Mm...hmmm. Mmm...hmmm," hummed Goldie, going back to the table to polish some cups.

"Hit 'em, Harlow,!" ordered Jada, dancing off the stage.

Harlow sang: *Lordy, if Mama saw me bangin' the keys, and Lordy, if she see the way I tickle ivory, she jump on the floor, beggin' for more, you think she see Daddy streamin' in from the war....Sing up now...*

I guessed that I was hearing Harlow's past in that verse. I thought it was brave to share a story in song. The stage seemed to move forward then, and I could see the sad, red corners of Harlow's eyes-- the sadness of waiting for his father. I wondered if anyone could look at me that close, if I could let them.

"Sinnngg up!" wailed Jada, throwing her hands in the air.

"Sing up, hallelujah! Sing up now...sing up, HALLELUJAH! Sing up now, sing up, hallelujah...fore the sun come barrelin' out!"

I elbowed Jo. "What's this song again?" I said, still bobbing my head.

"Sing Up!" answered Jo. "The tune was written in slavery time but now the lyrics all modern. A lot of nice key changes, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "You have to teach me this one."

Jo nodded. "I'll give you a little show now. Can come up with my own lyrics right now."

"No, you can't."

Jo stood up, nearly toppling his chair. I caught it before it fell over. Jo ran to the stage and pointed to himself. Harlow gave him a lookover and nodded.

"I play my guitar underneath the golden arch, loud and proud like a victory march,

Pluck down, pluck up...notes come on out, and they as pretty as a peacock's crown.

Jo was completely happy. His wit had gained him inclusion in the song's society. I rubbed the sides of my chair, and started to bob my head again.

"Alright now!" praised Harlow. *"Sing up now...sing up, hallelujah...sing up now...sing up, hallelujah! Sing up little buddy...Fore the sun...."*

"The sun!" added Jada, rocking her hips.

"The sun...," continued Harlow. *"That blazin', amazin' sunnn...come BARRELLLLLIN' out!"*

Harlow played a couple more scales, finished with an airy half note, then rested his head against the smooth, tired Baldwin. A few ladies jumped up and down, wrinkling their dresses. An older woman wiped away a tear, smearing her rouge. I closed my eyes, set in a flushed euphoria of piano notes echoing in the floorboards. The echoes pulled on my feet, and I felt stuck. Jo was talking excitedly with Harlow. I didn't move to join them. Instead, I let the notes keep me.

Jo proudly carried a snare drum to the cop car, while I looked begrudgingly at the two triangles Harlow had handed me. I considered it an honor to help load Harlow's gear into the car of his police escort, but why the most insignificant instrument, the runt of the percussion family?

Harlow ran up to me and flicked the edge of the triangle. "Ain't a purer sound in all the world," he said.

"I can carry something heavier...like a clarinet," I offered, staring at Jo as he adoringly pushed the drum into the back seat.

"Nah, that fine," said Harlow. "So you really play piano?"

"Yeah," I said, suddenly not so keen to watch Jo. "I'm still learning. But I write down melodies and riffs."

"That somethin'. Have you found your motif?"

"Well...I...," I said.

Harlow took the triangle from me and flicked it again. "Need that motif...your signature in the work. It like you signing your piece, stamping your name on the staff."

"No...guess I haven't found it yet."

"But I bet it's harder for you youngins...growing up in these fragile times. But you gotta make your way, gotta sign your name or else they forget you."

Harlow tipped his hat to me, and jogged to the car to help Jo with the drum. I held the triangle up to my chest, and the metal, more silver than the moonlight, cast a glow near my heart. I flicked it, and the glow jumped.

A mop was lying on the floor of the side room, tired after being abused by Goldie's rough hands. I nearly tripped on it and bumped into Jo. Jo put a finger to his lips and flipped on a lamp. In the right corner, under a lone window, was a mahogany Conover, used by the passing musicians of Goldie's to tune their instruments. I had seen the Conover being moved into Goldie's while walking to Jo's. I was a few feet away, but could feel the power of its legs, rounded and polished. The keys seemed to raise up above the shoulder of the movers so that I could see them, and I played a concerto from there with my eyes, a small one because I didn't have much time. It was one of several

imaginary pieces I was content to leave off the paper.

"Should we be back here?" I asked. "Goldie...."

"Goldie said we could see it," replied Jo. "Stop sweatin'."

I stroked the sides of the piano, relishing its sleek skin and lyrical abdomen.

Jo patted the piano bench. "Play somethin'."

"I'm all out of practice," I confessed, sitting down anyway.

"Play April Showers. You know that by heart."

"It's going to be choppy, but...."

Jo spread his body across the brown sofa in the center of the room.

"I'll sing...that'll cover up the choppiness," offered Jo, settling his head on the armrest of the sofa.

"Yeah...and it'll make my ears bleed," I said.

"I'm doing you a favor and you insulting me? Play."

I played the first bars, unsurprised by my hands' eagerness, the keys under the cuffs of my green shirt.

"Life is not a highway strewn of flowers...still it holds a goodly share of bliss...", sang Jo, attempting to make his voice baritone.

"You can sing higher than that," I yelled above the roar of the piano.

"When the sun gives way to April showers...Here's a thought that we should never miss."

"You're a better alto."

Jo made a subtle alteration, but chose a weak soprano over alto.

"Though April showers may come your way, they bring the flowers that bloom in May. And if it's raining, have no regrets...because...what's the rest, Mars?"

My left hand stopped between an A and a B, while I added in a cheery alto: *"It is raining rain, you know. It's raining violets."*

Our attempts sounded through Goldie's, perhaps to the front where I imagined Jada and Goldie stopped putting up the chairs as the last customers left for the night. Perhaps Goldie gave Jada a knowing smile, and dimmed the lights of the main house. He decided not to go back there like he usually did and wipe down the Conover for the following night. The Conover could wait five minutes.

"And when you see clouds above the hill, you soon will see crowds of daffodils," I continued.

The Conover was listening to us, and that it enjoyed our sound because it was calming and fresh. No matter what was going on in the streets, or in our homes, or in our heads, the Conover had it covered.

"So keep looking for the bluebird, and listening for his song," whispered Jo, in an alarmingly arresting alto. "I betcha that bluebird mighty pretty, ain't it, Mars?"

"I guess...I..." I mumbled.

"I think he on an ugly branch waitin' to fly off. But I still listenin' for that song."

VI. Greenwich

I roasted a sausage over the middling bonfire while Claude and Ana discussed stigmata. Claude didn't see how it was biologically possible. The sausage fell into the fire, lost to the embers, while Ana told Claude a story about a young Polish girl running into an abbey with bloody palms and ankles. The girl, apparently the healthiest in her family, fainted near the front pew, reciting psalms until her last breath. Ana threw her beard over her shoulder, confident in the tale's validity. She later told me the story came from her mother, a story she'd held since age eight, the last time she'd seen her mother.

"Lost your sausage, Ana," I yelled.

Ana rose from her chair and walked over, letting her beard flap behind her.

"You're not doing it right," said Ana softly. "First, poke the sausage in the middle, so you get kind of an arch....then hold it near but not in the smoke. The smoke softens the meat so it's more likely to fall in."

I did as Ana said, beaming when she nodded her approval.

"Mars is a quick learner!" shouted Ana to Claude, who was still deep in thought.

"There's a lot of blood diseases that haven't been accurately categorized!" shouted Claude.

That was Claude. He never lost an argument without a fight. If he did, he mulled it over a couple days, a book propped on his boyish calves, and come back to his opponent with cocky surety. He probably read about stigmata that very evening, looking for the loophole in Ana's story.

I gave Ana the finished sausage and went to fetch fresh milk from the tent. I saw Brick on the way, hanging his show pants on the washline for tomorrow. Brick had two dressy pants, his show pants and his sabbath pants. Sabbath pants were, of course, worn on Saturday in honor of Brick's Jewish heritage. It was a rare observance, as were the occasional Yiddish songs he sang.

Sunday mornings here were always strange. The ferris wheel's arms rattled and the seats bowed to the ground when the wind blew. It looked like it was sneezing, pathetic and innocent. The pretzel wagon and cotton candy counter resembled thrown away train cars, the kind where hoboes made their homes. Kel and Maxie appeared less muscular in short, grey shirts and dusty jeans while waiting for Lana to come out of the outdoor shower. Jake threw half a hot dog into the Capuchins' cage and Galileo plopped it into his mouth while the others screeched.

I didn't really understand how they could do it, step out of performance mode for a whole day. I liked to think I was never fully

out, that my fingers twitched not because of the stinging pain of pulling tent ropes, but because they are ready and young and maybe depressed. Two weeks without a piano, tuneless torture, and my body was already jumpy. Melba formerly known as Mallory polished her crystal ball with a cloth covered in seahorses and daffodils. She'd knitted it herself.

"Don't watch me clean the Eye," said Melba formerly known as Mallory. "It's got no tolerance for nosy kids."

"Yeah, I bet," I mumbled, turning my head.

I had honestly tried to like Melba formerly known as Mallory, but she was odd. She eerily carried the Eye everywhere. When I asked Nez about it, he said it was her Puppy-Eye because it stayed with her like a dutiful puppy. I hated Puppy-Eye, as much as you can hate a thing that's inanimate but has been given a personality. Puppy-Eye was only nice to adults, not kids. It turned white when it saw a kid. It's always white, I said to Nez. Cause you a kid, answered Nez, and that's why Melba formerly known as Mallory only tells fortunes to adults. Slicky had vowed to kill Puppy-Eye to the neighborhood kids. I still can't believe he actually pulled it off. I entered the tent, my eyes now conditioned to the darkness. That happened without my knowing about it. It was a useful trick, a trick that helped me go from the theater wings to the center stage of Julliard's auditorium without watery eyes. The first of many such tricks, the simplest of such tricks.

Dolly was ringing out a purple curtain next to a table with milk bottles. Mal sat at the table, bent over some type of needlework. They made an odd pair. Truth be told, I don't remember much about Dolly. We never had a long conversation. She was basically a blonde girl with a saucy mouth that had a thing for elephants.

Mal, on the other hand, was unforgettable-- thick, black-brown hair that always seemed to rustle even when she wasn't moving; brown eyes with green flecks and the right hint of mystery; delicate hands with many colored bracelets and a ruby ring; a thinness that drew sighs rather than sympathy. She made it a point to wear a shawl over her saris or blouses so the art would be hidden from passers-by after the show. They were pretty shawls in girlish colors, pinks and purples and pale blues, gifts from Brick. It was an investment, to cover up the goods. But Mal had so many goods that you couldn't cover the others up.

"Hey, Mark," said Dolly, setting the curtain down.

"Mars," I said.

"Whatever," replied Dolly.

"I need milk," I said.

I sat opposite Mal and reached for a milk bottle, but she grabbed it and held it behind her back. Dolly rolled her eyes and left the table.

"What'll you give me for it?" asked Mal.

“I don’t know.”

“I want Greenwich.”

It took me a couple of minutes to recall our conversation the week before.

“Brick’s right outside,” I whispered.

“I told him I’d be knitting all day, which I am, so it’s not like I’m totally lying. I’ll tell him I don’t feel good, and that I need to rest. You can say you’re visiting that friend of yours...,” said Mal.

“Jo?” I said.

“Yeah, Jo. We can go for a few hours and be back before dark.”

“But Mal...”

“Can we do it in a day?”

“Mal, Brick wouldn’t like it all...”

“Can we do it in a day?”

“Yes, we could...if we hit the right spots.”

“Meet me at the front entrance in an hour.”

I watched Mal leave after handing me the milk. I still felt guilty looking at her back, the wool of her red shawl concealing the skin, like the cover of a treasure chest or a piano cover shading the keys.

On the bus to Greenwich, Mal knitted. It was probably an act of penance. Mal had hobbled on her first step outside Kelway’s, so much so I’d thought she’d faint. Her first sight? Tad picking at a bunion on his foot while sitting on an abandoned car seat. After that? The Manhattan skyline with its gleaming, grey skyscrapers and attractive edginess hovering over modest Parnum. Mal gave me a smile that seemed to fly off her face. You can’t smile like that and turn back.

Artists wander around Greenwich, resembling saxophones going from woodwinds to brass. I can identify with the saxophone, and no, I’m not betraying the piano by saying that. You see, the piano can stand on its own. The saxophone, on the other hand, must align itself with a group, but it really can’t choose because it’s a little of both. I felt that way at Tilly’s. What type of orphan was I? I felt that way at Jo’s. What type of friend was I? And though I’d been at Kelway’s for only a short while, I felt that way, too. Was I kind or was I kynde? Come to think of it, saxophones had it easy.

I stared out the window, reacquainting myself with Greenwich. Washington Square Park was in full bloom with tall, purple and white magnolia trees and pink tea roses in vases near the restaurants. Old men with combed over grey hair played chess under the shadow of the Arch, fumbling with bishops before reaching for the rooks. Boys ran to Sheridan Square, where the sun shines the most, towards the Hand-Painted Wooden Toy shop, rumored to be the American version of

Santa's workshop. Girls tossed pennies into the rustling water of Old Faithful, the park's pulsing fountain. The New York University students sat near the Library, probably catching up on the reading due for Monday. An organ grinder monkey tore of her small, tulle skirt, then put her foot in her mouth. I couldn't help but think of greedy Galileo, who would've made a good match for her. The organ player held the instrument in an ugly position and you could see the pipes rusting. Lou, nor I, would have ever stood for it.

I was about to point out the monkey to Mal, but she grabbed my hand and patted it. Our wrists touched. My stomach gurgled, even though it held five sausages. The bus stalled, and we lurched forward hand in hand. I had offered her the window seat, but she said that she wanted to sit in the aisle to better hear the chatter of her neighbors, actually hear people talking rather than commenting on her. I guess anyone would find it fascinating to hear others talk about the weather or politics when they'd only heard others talk about the circus before. Mal told me that someone had said that it would be a beautiful day, but that that woman was just confirming what she'd already known.

We stood up when the bus doors opened. A young woman in a cloche hat bumped into Mal as she hurriedly made her way to the front. She glanced back at Mal.

"Excuse me, sheba," she said before hopping down the steps.

A couple guys turned around and smiled at Mal.

"What does that mean?," whispered Mal.

"Girls say it to other pretty girls," I said. "It means sexy woman, like the Queen of Sheba."

"Oh," said Mal, pulling back her shoulders.

"You ready?," I asked, squeezing her hand.

Mal nodded. "Queens are ready for anything...at least I think they are."

For a minute, it seemed as though Kelway's had walked across the city, that we'd never left. The hustle and bustle matched the hum of the circus, with street performers flattering dog walkers to get nickels and appreciation; cyclists swishing by and disappearing into secret courtyards; people creating art while others watched them. I thought those people were brave, brave like Mal.

We stopped at a sidewalk artist's work space. I nearly stepped on his chalk stream.

"Mind the river," he said in his stuffy British accent. "That took me all morning."

"Sorry," I said. "Thought it was a stream."

He looked at me, insulted. "Streams are for beginners," he said, before adding a branch to a tree.

Mal gave him an apologetic smile and pulled me down Fifth. Her shawl was falling down so I pulled it back up for her. She held my hand there on her shoulder as we walked.

"He sounded just like my father's friends from York," she said. "They always came to New Delhi with big briefcases."

I nodded, my head down.

"It helps me to talk...to talk about him," she said.

I took my hand off her shoulder, even though I didn't want to.

"Don't you ever...I mean, ever?" she asked.

A couple magnolia petals landed at our feet. I raised my head, hearing the subtle streams from a harp in the Russian tea room nearby, saw the glint of a golden chandelier in there, tasted the dryness of my mouth.

"Nope," I said. "Because he probably doesn't talk about me."

"I bet he does, Mars," said Mal. "I bet..."

"You thirsty?," I said, interrupting her and pulling her into the Crumperie. "I am."

The Crumperie was really crowded that day. You could hear Shakespearean monologues zipping across the room. Bits of Hamlet rose above the clinking of tea cups. *A figure like your father, Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe, appears before them. Something about fathers and shadows but I tried to block it out, ringing the bell at the service counter repeatedly. Distilled almost to jelly with the act of fear, stand dumb and speak not to him.* The room was warm and we were pretty much the only people under twenty there. *Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.* It was too cramped.

Mal avoided me, fiddling with the waist of her sari and staring at the quilt on the wall. A waitress arrived, holding a tray of cookies.

"Table for two?" she asked. "Or are you with the theatre troupe from Soho?"

I glanced at Mal. I had to do something to earn back her good graces after ignoring her. She didn't get it, couldn't get it. Some of us never talked at Tilly's, not if we knew there wasn't a point.

"We're with the theater group," I said, raising my chin authoritatively.

"I'm in the orchestra and she plays the young Queen of Sheba."

"Thank God you're not Broadway actors," said the waitress. "I hate show tunes. You guys are in the back. Follow me."

The waitress walked in front of us, and Mal beamed. "Very classy, Mars," she whispered in my ear before we reached the table. There were two different tables, the ones quoting Hamlet and a table with three gentlemen and two ladies. The table with the five people held two empty seats so we were seated there.

"Be back with menus," said the waitress, rushing to the backroom.

The first gentlemen didn't see us when we sat down, his head bent over a notebook, scribbling down in it furiously. The gentlemen to his

left eyed us suspiciously, dropping sugar into his tea. The third gentlemen was staring affectionately into the ladies on our right's eyes. She returned the stare, wetting her mouth, making her lipstick more red. The other lady noticed us immediately. She had a large brooch that looked like a crawling spider on her dress whenever she breathed.

"Hi," I said awkwardly. "I'm in training to be in the orchestra."

I was sweating a little. I hoped that she didn't notice.

"Viola?" she asked, looking at my fingers. "Limber fingers."

"Marshall Mims, pianist," I said. "She's an understudy for a production across town."

"Maltise Dharma," said Mal, letting her brightest smile cross her face.

"Lovely brooch."

The woman rubbed her brooch. "Thanks, dear. Gift from an admirer. I'm actually not a fellow thespian. Just here for our weekly meeting."

"Weekly meeting?" I said.

"Sure," said the woman. "The Virtuosos."

"A meeting so we can express our minds," said the sugar dumping gentlemen. "No discrimination, though we are quite honest with each other. Poets, artists, even us creative welders."

He had a tweed suit on, and piercing blue eyes, but what I noticed first was that he was missing his left pinky. He saw me looking at his hand.

"I weld and sculpt," said the man, staring straight into my eyes. "It was bound to happen."

"What is a virtuoso?," asked Mal.

"We're skilled, but not like everyone else," said the brooch woman proudly. "I write under two pseudonyms, one male, one female. It confuses my publisher, which makes me feel good. Thinks I have a husband, but I don't. I have a dual identity."

"That's a bit confusing," I said.

"Not in my head," said the woman, then gesturing to the other table members. "Not in the heads of my associates."

The men scribbling in his notebook looked up and nodded a greeting to me and Mal.

"It's how you approach a poem. Does it have to have one author?" he said, his voice nervous and scratchy, probably the result of cigarettes and spitting out wild theories.

"Expand your expectations."

"I haven't read very many poems," admitted Mal.

"Well, there's a potential client for you," the scribbling man said to the poetess. "I'm a little more original than she is."

"You like to think so," said the welder. "But your inventions never go anywhere. My sculptures have appeared in galleries across New York."

"What do you invent, sir?" I asked.

"Verbs," said the scribbling man plainly. "They take quite a long time to come up with."

"Our easy-going etymologist," mumbled the poetess, unclipping and reclipping her brooch.

"Come on, like the writing process is so inventive!" said the verb inventor, laying down his pen. "Poets think in phrases, fiction writers in paragraphs. Repeating words that we've all used, then introducing characters we've already been acquainted with in previous efforts, happening upon settings we've already seen. That's gonna get old come next century."

"Your work isn't progressive," said the welder. "Or else Webster's would be knocking on your door before their next dictionary."

"They'll come soon enough," said the verb inventor. "Especially with my new word."

He handed his notebook across the table to the poetess. The waitress set down two menus and two cups in front of us. The poetess took it upon herself to order the rose tea for us.

"What is it?" asked the poetess.

"You see, kids? No respect from the literati," said the verb inventor.

"I'll keep them secret, thank you very much."

"You're an idiot," said the poetess.

The verb inventor stirred his tea. "Some people's idiots are another man's geniuses," he said, smugly.

The man staring into his girlfriend's eyes broke their gaze and smirked. I could tell he had a glass eye, a green eye that moved. His girlfriend was startlingly beautiful like Mal, with wide black eyes sticking out among the rest of her face, covered in Kabuki make-up.

"That's a self-serving philosophy," said the man with the glass eye.

"Why can't you be like Emerson and look at man and provide some great thoughts about human nature?"

"Yes, why don't you?" asked the poetess.

"Why can't you be like Emily Dickinson and turn into a poetic recluse?," said the verb

inventor. "As for you, my great philosopher, some people naturally look out for themselves instead of looking for the beauty of man in stones and tree trunks. Emerson's a git."

Mal let out a small giggle, which only I heard. The philosopher sighed and shook his head.

"I make men beautiful out of stone," said the welder. "But not ordinary men. Cyclops

and werewolves and vampires. Truth be told, they put those Greek gods and goddesses to shame. They're more interesting, and I'm the first to use limestone rather than marble. Limestone's more durable, lasts the ages."

The poetess laughed. "It's also less expensive," she said.

"Keep it civil, honey," said the woman in the Kabuki make-up, then turning to Mal.

"Have you been acting long?"

Mal looked to me for a clue. I shrugged.

"This is my first professional role," said Mal. "Just started today, actually."

"You're very distinctive," complimented the woman. "Not many Indian actresses.

You have to make yourself stand out. People scoffed at me when I showed up at the theater in my Kabuki make-up, said the roles were strictly for men."

"A woman invented it," said the verb inventor.

"I know! I'm not dumb," said the actress. "Anyway, it got me noticed...what is it, Maltise? Yeah, it got me noticed, and now I'm the only female Kabuki performer in the Soho district, perhaps in all of New York City."

"That's great," said Mal.

"So what've you got?," the actress asked me.

All of the virtuosos glared at me, five pairs of eyes, including a glass eye, aimed at me.

The smell of the rose tea filled my nose. It smelled like a garden after the rain. I tucked my hands under the table, felt my fingers drumming against my thighs, even the pinky I was lucky to have.

"Leave the boy alone," said the poetess, still glaring at me.

"Well, he has to have something," said the actress. "Marshall, right? We're all virtuosos. I bet you have something right, Marshall?"

"I'll help him out," said the philosopher, giving me a warm smile.

"Give us a philosophy, son."

"Those take a lot of time," said the verb inventor.

"Not everything takes a lot of time," said the philosopher, rolling his good eye. "Go ahead, son. Give us one."

I could feel their eyes burning into my skin, even Mal's genuine look of worry. I drummed my fingers again, then it came, short and sweet. I thought maybe if I said it slow that it would sound better.

"When we're young, life is staccato...disconnected but important. But then...then it shifts to a cadence and it starts to flow, to make sense."

There was silence at the table. We just heard the swallows of other customers, the harp playing, the waitress filling Mal's cup. The poetess raised her eyebrows, then gave me a sideways smile.

"Out of the mouths of babes," said the poetess, beaming at me.

"Wow."

"Beats yours, buddy," said the verb-inventor to the philosopher.

I tried my best not to smile, but I knew it was coming through. I felt bigger, triple the Nez, level to Brick. It took a trip to the realistic carnival of Greenwich to make me six feet or maybe taller, with a beautiful woman by my side, and a league of artists around me. Greenwich was opening up to me, then and there. Still, I wasn't prepared for the invitation, an invitation that unfortunately Mal and I never followed up on, and had I known we'd never see the Virtuosos again, I would've appreciated much more in the moment.

"We're meeting in the Russian Tea Room in Midtown next week," said the actress.

"You're welcome to join us."

We politely promised the Virtuosos that we would make the attempt to go to the Russian Tea Room that next Sunday, fully aware that there was no chance. They were gracious the last time we saw them though. The verb-inventor even gave me a firm handshake before we left. As Mal and I neared the end of Fifth Street, it started to sink in that Brick had probably discovered that she was gone. We walked on anyway as dusk started to settle in.

The college students were now milling around the street corners, some laughing after downing mugs of beer they'd retrieved from speakeasies, beer their girlfriends demurely called 'giggly water.' A policeman tapped a seriously uncoordinated guy on the back, slid his arm into his arm, and said they were going for a walk. You could tell he was a dad that thought one drunken night didn't decide the future of the kid. It was nice to see.

The fountain now spat water up into the air a little more softly; the arch faded into the golden hue of the sky. Long-staying churchgoers filed out of Marble Church, armed with pocket Bibles, casting a stern look at the drunk college guys, doing a clumsy Collegiate Shag, which became the unofficial dance of Julliard parties I attended. We paused in front of a man putting film into his camera. He saw us and motioned towards a white horse carriage, with two grey horses attached to the front.

"Make a memory?" he asked. "It's only a dime a picture."

Mal immediately fetched a dime from her hand purse and gave it to him. "I'll have my picture taken with the budding philosopher," she said.

I laughed. "It was a fluke," I said.

We climbed into the carriage, dressed in fake rows of flowers, rows of fake peach tulips, bluish-purple violets, deep green petals and stems. The horses had red pom-poms on their heads. I wonder if they felt embarrassed, but the man was so gentle, balding and bouncy, that I didn't want to put down his life's work. Mal sat down on the red cushion, and so did I, but not too close. I didn't want to ruffle her sari.

"No..no!" cried the photographer. "Closer. Put your arm around her."

I slid my arm around her shoulders slowly, so slowly that Mal took the initiative and pulled it the rest of her way, so my right hand drooped just above her breast. The fountain lapped a little louder, defiant but not urgent. It lapped like it had all the time in the world, and I could hear traces of a man singing Gershwin, his deep voice just as lazy, just as refreshing as water itself. The photographer announced that he needed to load more film into his standing camera, said it'd be two minutes at the most. We glanced over the edge of the carriage to see a red-haired man standing in front of a couple of benches, belting out Gershwin, his hands rising to the sky with each lyric. *Oh it wasn't my intention to disregard convention. It was just an impulse that had to be obeyed.* The college students stopped dancing as they watched their girlfriends fawn over the man's brilliant voice. It rose over the rush of the fountain, a baritone that challenged every other sound, halting the chatter and the shouts of vendors, and found supremacy.

Mal grinned. "Thanks for taking me here," she said.

She gave me a hug. My hands traveled down her amazing back, and I wondered if I was the first to touch it besides the tattoo artist. The shawl was softer than I had expected, and my fingers laced through the holes of it. *Though it seems convention we've been scorning, I'll still not go in mourning, though my reputation is blemished, I'm afraid.* I remembered all the men that were on her back. Adam, Samson, Gawain. Were they weak or just inexperienced, nervous, young? Mal pulled away, stroking my cheeks. I could see the last bits of sunlight locked in the hairs above her forehead. They weren't going anywhere. Her lips touched mine, and I closed my eyes. *With just one kiss, what rapture, what bliss.* Mal let my cheeks go as the camera flashed. *Honestly, I thought you wouldn't. Naturally, you thought you couldn't. And probably we shouldn't.* It seemed as though the carriage was moving under our bodies, because my heart was quickening, a cruel thump. It thumped so much it hurt. I wanted words. I needed words. *Whether or not we have to rue it, whatever made us do it.*

"That's a lovely picture," said the photographer.

I opened my mouth to speak but Mal was off, getting out of the carriage, holding the photograph in her hands. She held the photograph up proudly for me to see.

Gershwin's song hit every cranny of Greenwich and the sun fell as his song finally gave

way to the fountain as it ended. But I heard it. *Whatever made us do it...say, aren't you kind of glad we did?*

VIII. Santa Ana Charms

Brick cut out new advertisements from newspapers, pasting them into a small blue notebook. It was the day after Greenwich, and we sat in his office, the shred of paper the only sound. I put dots of glue on the back of these, laid them flat on the notebook pages, reading some of the words underneath. I saw a penguin boy, short and round, his thighs pressed together as if someone had glued them on (“Looks and Waddles Like a Penguin”); a two-headed man in a suit, two noses covering a single face and a deeply cleft lip (“Two Heads are Better Than One”); a pinhead, which Brick remarked was quite popular, whose head was stretched, but whose tuft of hair on top was a brown version of mine (“Perfectly Pointed”). Brick took the notebook, then breezed through the pages a couple times. He put his finger in between two pages, and held the book up for me. It wasn’t a picture we cut. I read the wording underneath.

“Lucy Elvira Jones: Dog Girl. A Texan tyke who crawls on all fours,” I said aloud.

Lucy had a mature face, thick eyebrows and a hard frown. Perhaps the Texan sun had made her bronze, but you couldn’t tell if her legs were bronze as she stood on all fours. They were covered in thick stockings as she stood on a blanket, her arms digging into it, her legs relaxed. It looked someone had turned her waist around, her knees bending backward, the heels of her black shoes right under her waist. It was probably less painful to walk on all fours.

“The more you look, the better,” said Brick, closing the notebook.

“The more wondrous it becomes. We gonna have someone joining us later in the summer.”

I nodded, still remembering Lucy’s vacant blue eyes, her unsmiling face. I never saw a frown so deep before. It was very different from Mal the previous day, whose smile as I walked her to her trailer etched into my mind like that Schubert melody.

“Lucy?” I asked.

“No,” said Brick, giving me a puzzled look. “A child from Texas. When children come, people tend to stare harder, get uneasy feelings, skittish. That why I try to get adult acts, except Mal and Nez who dad threw ‘em into my lap.”

I stood up. “So who is it?”

“Tex Silver,” answered Brick, putting the notebook in a drawer.

“Lion-faced boy.

Kelway decide on him himself.”

Lion-faced boy. I tried to think if he and Lucy had any of the same attributes, a sadness behind the eyes. Did Lucy get to play jacks with other kids, go dress shopping? No

wonder people stared harder. They were trying to see their own children. Perhaps Lucy laughed like their daughters, but you'd never know with her stern, set face. Maybe Lucy liked dolls too, but that wasn't on display. It was just her, knees hunched forward, her back arched, her own walk, her first job.

A couple knocks pounded against the trailer door.

"Who is it?" yelled Brick.

"Jake!" responded a voice on the other end.

"Come in!"

Jake entered, letting the trailer door swing behind him, the star with Brick's name on it flashing gold on Jake's face. His smile was brighter.

"Got business to discuss," said Jake, standing next to me.

Brick ran a finger through his hair. "Circus business?"

"Personal," replied Jake.

I looked at him, starting to grin. He didn't look back, his eyes set on Brick. Brick nodded.

"I see you fifteen minutes before curtain call," said Brick to me.

"Make sure you roll out Ana's dumbbell."

"Okay," I said. "Bye."

I moved across the trailer floor, but glanced back at Jake. He stared at me, the ends of his mouth tightening, a face that was almost painful as Lucy's.

Rolling a dumbbell was hard, especially if you'd never held one. The clanging *clomp clomp* of the dumbbell cycling across the stage echoed against the back of the stage as I pushed it forward. It made me think of Otis rolling bicycle wheels to the back of the Oswald's home. The ends of the dumbbell turned like bicycle wheels, a slow and steady spin. I'd offered to help once after Jo's instruction to "act right." Otis and I were alone outside, my having come there to see if Jo wanted to fly kites. He continued to move the wheels, ignoring me. He didn't stop until Jo came out, a bucket in hand. Jo waved at me, and shouted "One second!"

"Told you to move these wheels back here," said Otis, putting the last wheel next to the house. "You do your house work."

Jo held up the bucket. "I'm fetchin' water now!" he snapped.

"Watch your tone," said Otis, quiet and firm. "You can't sass when you get a real job."

"You accusin' me even though I do right," said Jo. "That foul."

Otis walked over to Jo, and hit the side of the bucket. The bucket rattled, and so did Jo's fingers. Jo took a deep breath as Otis gazed into his eyes. Their faces were close, their noses almost touching, as close as the noses of the two-headed man.

"You do what I say," he said. "Correct that mouth."

He went into their home and closed the door. Jo stood awkwardly on the steps, staring at the bucket, then looking at me.

"You alright, Jo?," I said.

He shook the bucket, and gave me a grin, a grin that wouldn't settle. It alternated between a grin and a frown, very forced.

"I just please strangers with music," he said softly.

We didn't fly kites that day. Jo complained about a sore stomach. I asked if he wanted some medicine for it. No, he said, it comes and goes. I think it came and went with Otis.

"Mimsy!" yelled Nez, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Someone's here to see you."

I saw the bus boy, Mike, darting his eyes nervously around. Mike was such a bum. Though I had other things on my mind, namely Mal, I'd been wearing the same shirt for two weeks. Walking to the front of the stage, the dumbbell now in place, I finally saw Nez as I peered over the edge. Mike opened his mouth to speak, but didn't as Ana passed us. She had decided to wear her beard loose that day, and it was lit by the sunlight, swinging to the side as she went up the stage steps.

"You look kinda nervous, Mikey," said Nez, giving me a smile as Mike watched Ana pick up her dumbbell. "Took you a while to get here."

"Um...," stuttered Mike. "Sorry...it's...it's late."

His eyes followed the dumbbell, as Ana lifted it above her chest several times. I entertained the idea of Mike walking in front of the Kelway's sign, peering in but not going in until he saw Nez. Who's the cake eater now?

"I gotta get ready, Mimsy," said Nez. "Stop sweatin', Mikey."

I took the suitcase from Mikey. He looked down, surprised I had it in my hands, and smiled.

"The more you look the better," I said to him, like an old circus pro. "The morewondrous it becomes."

Ana's show was expected to go well. We had a good amount of people, thirty-five, and the weather was sunny and not too dry. Ana remarked that there were no clouds while putting lotion on her arms. "Even the angels want a clear view of us," she said, her elbows shining. Brick, a new gold bowtie around his neck, introduced Ana, and their expressions matched Mike's-- glassy eyes, lips parted, a slow spread of a smile. There were a few men in overalls, probably mill workers. They had large hands so I figured they worked at the steel mill.

Ana elected to sing a traditional lullaby, her soprano rolling around each word, a song that made everyone stop talking as she lifted her dumbbell. *Oi lu lu lu lu lu, Kolibka z marmooroo, Pielushki zrabecku, lulie aniowedgku.* I only remembered the words because Ana later told me what they meant. *Oi lu lu lu lu lu .Ê No cradle of*

marble, No pillows of lace for you, my darling. I could identify, having never had fancy things. The rest of the translation would've come out false if it hadn't come from Ana. *Though I own few things, I'll not ever need more, I have you my darling. You are what I've prayed for.* Ana didn't have a lot of things, and she didn't ask for a lot of things. She had what she had. She worked on what she had, her voice, her strength, practiced both from morning until night. Standing between the mill workers, I heard and saw the time spent-- the exceptional control of her voice, the deep creases of her muscles, the confidence. I felt bad leaving that tiny measure of my sonata. What time was I spending?

The mill workers brushed against me, then stood in front of me. They breathed heavily, and I smelled alcohol, really faint but clear. One stumbled, falling down on the dirt. Ana stopped singing, glancing at Brick, her brow furrowed. Brick mouthed "Go on" and she resumed the verse. The mill worker put his hand on the stage, trying to pull himself upward. He managed to rip a piece of banner hanging on the stage ends, then dropped it.

Breathing heavily, he started to climb on the stage. Kids screamed, digging their heads into their mother's breasts. Panic crossed every face. The mouths that were open, but bewildered before, now hung loosely in horror.

"Hey!" said Brick, hurriedly stepping off his platform. "Hey!"

"Stop him!," yelled a woman beside me. "He's going to hurt her!"

The mill worker was already on stage, taking hold of the dumbbell. I pushed aside the men in front of me, and one gave me a disgusted look, tried to hit my head but missed. Instead, he grabbed me, held me back.

"Let him have some fun," whispered the man holding me.

I hit him in the gut with my elbow, but it didn't make any difference.

"I can do what she do!," said the mill worker. "You really a man right, all dolled up to look special?"

Ana struggled to take the dumbbell, but the mill worker pushed against her. Brick took hold of the mill worker's waist, his top hat sliding off, his pink cheeks redder than I'd ever seen them. Ana moved backward until her whole body was against the stage wall.

The mill worker was pressing the dumbbell into her, pressing her into the back of the stage. The whole stage shook from the force.

Brick seized his shoulders and threw him against the floorboards of the stage. A couple men from the audience dragged the mill worker off the stage as he yelled, "I was just talking to it, just talking!" I wiggled out of the man holding me, who stopped to follow his friend being dragged off into a small tent nearby.

Ana slid down the back of the wall, her hands shaking. The dumbbell dropped, just missing her feet, rolling to the side in the shadows. She gasped for breath, as Brick tried to calm her down, rubbing her hand. "He wasn't really going to hurt her, Mommy?," asked a boy, his face halfway hidden in her shirt. "Was he?" "No...no, dear," said his mother, tears falling down her cheeks. "It...it was all part of the show."

The rest of the show was cancelled. Customers stuck around to ask if Ana was okay. Brick answered all the questions as I took Ana by the shoulder and led her to her trailer. The mill worker had been arrested, said Brick. And yes, he had been drinking. I turned my back as Ana changed into her kimono, but she asked me to button it because her hands were still shaking. She climbed into bed, putting half of her beard under the pillow. I expected her to cry, despite all the strength in her voice, in her body.

"Are you okay, Ana?" I asked, sitting at the foot of her bed.

Ana nodded, her eyes on the wall. I heard her legs move under the blanket, making the sheets rustle like a long sigh.

I fingered the pendant she gave me. I wore it on the job, a sign of that first day's kindness. It was worn more than my red mittens. Michael had a small, silver bow in his hands. He could've protected her.

"Never told you this, but I like all your songs," I said.

Ana's chest rose and fell under the blanket.

"I have no idea what Poland looks like," I confessed. "But when you sing, I start thinking what it might look like. Grassy hills, lots of flowers."

I heard a snuffle, but kept on. "I wonder what people think of America when they hear it, if maybe they think of here, New York."

Ana sniffled more, wiping away a tear she thought was falling.

"When Lou plays the organ, I think of different parts of Kelway's. The carousel, the Python, the customers going in, sitting down, listening to Tad and still wishing Brick was talking."

I hoped Ana would laugh. She didn't.

"Music's a nice way to remember, isn't it?"

The blanket was thrown off by Ana. It covered the top of my legs. Ana patted my knee, her blue eyes wet, her stare deep.

"There's so much I remember," said Ana. "When he grabbed me...it was like Larry."

"Larry?"

Ana held tight to my knee, her eyes falling on my pendant.

"Everyone knows...everyone remembers," she said. "He was just a kid... not much older than you."

She moved her hand to touch the pendant.

"I think they think about it," she said. "That's why they act nicer, why I lift more. I'm not weak, Mars."

I let her speak. I saw her throat thrust outward under the hairs of her beard. She was letting the words sit there before they spilled out.

"But I didn't say no," said Ana, clutching the pendant tightly. "Not today, that day. I just let him do it, the vanity against my back."

We both looked at the vanity, all the crosses and angels lined in a row.

"I told him....I'd never been touched by a man....never," said Ana, tears falling, some staying on the hairs of her beard. "Then he...he said...he'd never been with a man either."

The mirror glinted even though there was no light in the room. What had it seen? Larry, fumbling with his zipper, holding Ana down, the top of the desk bruising her waist. Larry looking in the mirror as he pushed into her, thinking of his ugly puppets under his bed, not watching her face.

I used a bit of blanket to wipe off the tears laying in her beard. Ana's throat stopped shaking. She couldn't say any more.

"You're not weak," I said. "You cry strong and you cry pretty."

Ana kissed me on the forehead. I hadn't caught all the tears so it was wet like sprinkles before rain comes when she kissed me. I stayed until she fell asleep, until I couldn't look at the mirror anymore. Mirrors are deceivers aren't they? I was scared to see Larry when I looked in there.

I gave Jo one of the Kelway's advertisements after we left Goldie's backroom. Jo took it, turned it sideways because he couldn't read the words. However, some way, Jo had managed to navigate his way to Parnum. He wouldn't tell me how, just that the BMT brought him. Coming out of Ana's trailer, I saw him, tall and lanky, talking to Nez.

"Jo!" I yelled. "What are you doing here?"

Jo waved the advertisement at me. "Why you give me this if you ain't want me to show up?" he shouted back.

Nez playfully slapped Jo's knee. Jo was taller than me, so Nez slapped what he could.

"It's Mimsy's job to advertise," said Nez.

"Mimsy?" said Jo. "What, you get baptized recently?"

"It was Nez," I said. "Blame it on him."

Nez held up his hands in protest. "I ain't heard no complaints for days."

"It's stuck," I said, shrugging.

Nez gave me a pleased grin, then walked away, towards the main tent. Jo and I watched him, smaller than the toddlers running towards the carousel.

"A midget!" whispered Jo, excitedly. "A real midget!"

I laughed. It was always good to see Jo, but especially that day. He started running down the list of things he saw at Kelway's: bears being led by ropes right in front of him, Claude whose strong arms were wrapped around Lou's neck as Lou carried him back to his trailer, a sequined lady fawning over Sal the Strongman even though one, I'm guessing Dolly who was his girl, pulled her ponytail harshly. Jo was really interested in Claude, who I hadn't really thought of as the only black performer until then.

"No legs," said Jo, touching his own legs. "But he look smart. I could tell from where I was standin'. Some people just look smart."

"He is," I said, proudly glancing at Claude's trailer.

"Do you like it?" said Jo in such a way that I couldn't say anything but yes.

"Yeah," I said. "But look at my hands."

I displayed my hands to Jo. The love rubs were there, faint, but still red.

"Soak 'em," commanded Jo. "Can't play a piano with bad hands."

"I did," I said. "They won't come off. Jake says it'll be about a week before they fade."

We walked towards Brick's trailer. I assumed Brick had something else for me now that the show was over.

"You kinda came at a bad time," I said. "Something..."

Brick's door swung open, and he appeared.

"Mars, in here!," he said.

His pink cheeks had returned, but he was in a plain white shirt now.

"Can't stay that long anyway," replied Jo. "I ain't figure in travel time. But I had to see it after these nice pictures. A bearded lady. Is she around?"

I shook my head. "She's tired. Maybe you can see her next time."

"Hope so," said Jo, turning to leave. "She look like she got some fight in her."

Brick said nothing as I sat down. I noticed that the notebook was lying open when I sat at the chair opposite Brick. He stared at me, but not in the same way as Ana. My chest went cold, even though it was May, and the sun was warm, streaming in from a window above Brick. The back of Brick's head was lit by the rays.

"You left with Mal yesterday," said Brick.

He said it so matter-of-fact, like a news bite on the radio, like I didn't know it myself.

"What?," I said, fixing my eyes on the notebook.

Brick balled a fist and banged it on the notebook, abusing the pages we took care in organizing, banging whoever was inside, banging Lucy.

“I had a tough day, Mars,” said Brick, his voice rising. “Don’t get dumb all of a sudden.”

I licked the edges of my teeth with my tongue, unsure of what to say. It was only to Greenwich, not that far away. It was just for one day.

“Nothing happened,” I said.

Brick chuckled lightly, rolling his eyes. He flipped the notebook open.

“See these?” he said, thrusting the notebook in my face.

I nodded.

“All gotta lower they heads cause they came out different,” said Brick.

“Ain’t they fault. It’s the lookin’ that get they heads down. When the spotlight on ‘em, sure that fine. They gifts sparkle. When it off, they deserve privacy.”

“She wanted to go,” I whispered. “I made sure she was alright.”

“Don’t display ‘em when I don’t say so,” replied Brick. “Don’t hurt my girl. Ana been hurt. That’s when they get hurt, when someone come from the outside and decide to mess with they heads. I monitor what they read, what they eat. I decide what’s best for ‘em cause no one else really care.”

Brick pointed to the window. You could see a bit of the tent, the small flags on top waving in the wind.

“That what they know, that what keep them safe,” said Brick. “Ain’t gonna let a little crush ruin what I set. Focus on your work.”

“I didn’t mean...,” I started.

“Focus on your work,” he repeated, gritting his teeth.

Brick said it so loudly that I thought he was speaking through Tad’s bullhorn. I rose from the chair, putting my hands into my pocket. I didn’t have the words to argue.

Maybe I thought Brick was right. Ana had been hurt. What if I hurt Mal without meaning to? I wasn’t a pig like Larry, but I was an errand boy like him. I was like him in one way, and I hoped that was all. The tent rustled again and raindrops were falling. Jo had gone, and clouds were coming in.

Chapter VIII. The Black Curtain

I taped Claude's cream-colored, poster-size postcard to the deli shop window, smoothing the paper as the cold glass stung his wrist. The owner, Mike Perrelli, gave me the thumbs up and resumed packaging Elsa Thomas' pig tongue. I made sure the paper was erect and noticeable to the passing eye by walking past the window a few times. The Upper East Side was unusually crowded that day, even for a Saturday. A little, red-haired girl across the street stared at me, twirling hair around her thumb. The writing was clear, not inky as in previous drafts. Brick had written a few new things.

CLAUDE CARROLL

The West Indian wonder. Come see the famous Negro who defies scientific calculation. The brown-skinned and brilliant Claude was born in the Indies, found under a crude shelter after his legs were eaten by cannibals. With dreams of coming to America in 1915, at the age of twenty, Claude boarded a U.S. ship bound for Lady Liberty filled with kind Christian missionaries. A quick learner, having studied under the missionaries, he soon knew English, French, and Spanish. After being rejected by Bailey's, Claude has resurfaced in our very own Parnum. Testing far past his capacity...a true oddity in mind and body...and only at Parnum...Claude Carroll.

Also featuring the amazing Nez, the eye-catching Maltise, and the talented Anatomy

Coming soon: Tex Silver

Below was a quote from Darwin. "We must however acknowledge as it seems to me, that a man with all his noble qualities...still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin." The words were in small print, but my eyes always rested on those particular words each time I passed.

I felt a small tap on his shoulder and turned around. Jo playfully punched me in the arm. I punched him back, and Jo grabbed his arm in mock pain.

"You anglin' for a beatdown, Mars?" said Jo.

"Soon as you show me where I can get one," I replied.

"Listen to the workin' man," said Jo, leaning on the shop window.

"Are you getting a job?"

"Help my dad with fixing bikes, but I don't see that as work. It ain't so bad."

I smoothed the postcard one more time, and started to walk down the street. Jo followed, edging past a woman selling fruit. She gave Jo a quizzical look, then started to pile plums into a container.

"Hate this neighborhood," mumbled Jo, loud enough for me to hear.

"Me, too. But I know for you, it's different."

"I only come here to see you. Ain't a lot of black kids is there?"

"Nope, not in Parnum, not in the Upper East side."

I pointed at a white-haired man pulling out his accordian. "Probably hiding from the bad music."

Jo laughed. "They should come to Brooklyn, to the blues warehouse, then they'd hear some real stuff. They be tappin' they toes in no time."

"Want a Milky Way?" I asked, stopping in front of a street vendor.

"You gotta buy," said Jo.

I paid the vendor and handed a candy bar to Jo. Jo quickly tore the wrapper, and took half the bar into his mouth, chewing it rapidly.

"Slow down," I said. "Before you choke."

"Ain't had candy in the longest time," mumbled Jo as he chewed.

"Ain't eaten all day."

"Well, take mine. We got loads at Kelway's."

"You don't mind."

"Nah."

"Thanks."

Jo pocketed my candy bar, looking around cautiously. I chuckled.

"What are you looking for? The cops?" I said, poking Jo's stomach with his fist.

Jo winced and dropped the other half of his bar. He took a deep breath and grabbed onto my shoulder.

"Jo...what's wrong?" I said. "You okay?"

Jo gripped me tighter. "It's just a cramp or something."

"You don't look swell, Jo."

"I need to get home, Mars. I'm all right."

Jo let me go. I thought Jo was fighting back tears, his warm, black eyes shaking under his eyelashes. I reached for him. A tall, black man was making his way down the street, armed with a set of papers. He had a black goatee, trim and small, and a three-piece suit on. I watched him go up to a woman seated on a stoop and offer her a small piece of paper. The woman shook her head and clutched her purse tighter. He stopped in front of us.

The black man slipped a pamphlet into Jo's pocket, taking a moment to look Jo straight in the eye.

"I see so much beauty in youth," said the man, smiling at Jo.

I wondered if asylums were throwing people out like they did orphanages. Then again, the man appeared to be well-groomed, his face set with purpose. Maybe he was from the South. Maybe they talked to people differently down there.

“Read that and don’t look back,” the man said, pointing to Jo’s pocket. He walked away, but stopped at the woman still clutching her purse.

“That ain’t even my color,” he said. “Good day, miss.”

Nez opened the door for me as I held Jo. I sat Jo on my bed, while Nez opened a bureau, quickly retrieving a silk pillow that was going to be a birthday present for Lana. Jo’s head sank into the pillow and he moaned.

“I shoulda bought her a dress anyway,” said Nez, taking off Jo’s shoes. “She got a lotta pillows. Some of them so ugly you’d think to sue the person that sew ‘em.”

Jo forced a laugh. “Ain’t likely you can sue ‘em. They make those overseas, don’t they?”

“Yeah, most of ‘em, excepting those ones made in the factories near here. You can sue them bums,” replied Nez.

Nez put Jo’s shoes on the floor, while I pulled a blanket around Jo’s body.

“Are you going to tell me what’s up?” I said. “I didn’t hit you that hard, did I?”

“It’s best you don’t know, Mars,” said Jo. “Just know it wasn’t your doing.”

I nodded. Brick was going to need me soon for the afternoon’s show. Perhaps Nez could stay until then, since he was on after Ana and Claude. I’d never missed Mal’s set, but I didn’t tell her. I said I was in the back, behind a couple of tall men.

“Jo, I’ll be back soon,” I promised.

“Don’t trouble none, Mars,” said Jo. “You gotta work...”

“I’ll be back. Nez, can you...”

“I’ll look after him. You just get goin’ before Brick start railin’,” said Nez.

“Thanks,” I said.

I picked up a bucket near my bed, remembering that Claude liked to clean his face and hands before his set. I glanced back at Jo, who shivered under the blanket and gave me a sad smile. I’d seen many smiles at Kelway’s, but only this one did I wish had never existed.

Brick gave me an annoyed stare over the crowd of around twenty-five. He was telling the suit-clad men, the pot-bellied steel workers, the willowy waitresses, and the few entranced children about Ana’s ability to hold one hundred and forty pounds. Ana beamed, flexing her right arm and winking at a grinning six-year old boy. I made my way backstage, the yellow curtain obscuring Claude from curious observers.

I climbed onstage, the partition shielding us from the sunlight. Not even the keenest eye could see us. It was a small space, but big enough for me to slip through. I saw Claude’s eager face in the shadows. He

wore a small tuxedo shirt and black jacket he had borrowed from one of Brick's suits.

"Thought you had abandoned me," whispered Claude. "You're usually here for the beginning."

"Sorry, got held up," I explained, soaking the washcloth in the bucket, then handing it to Claude.

Claude let the small streams of water slip across his face. Claude's skin resembled rain-soaked lumber. His white teeth gleamed in the shadows. Casting down the washcloth, he pivoted his waist, moving slowly across the bottom of the stage, and waited to be revealed.

"Good luck today," I said.

"Thanks," said Claude.

I left the small space and it took me a while to recall that it was actually daytime. For the first two weeks I had worked at Kelway's, night and day were so distinct, so original. Now, with the start of my fifth week there, they seemed to blend into each other. There was always light bothering the nighttime darkness, whether it was Nez's bonfires or Ana's votary candles. There were always dark patches in the day, the dark recesses behind the trailers, and the partition which hung around the company like a heavy cloak. I no longer kept track of time, because the show was the only event that mattered. Monday through Saturday, from two to four, and every other hour was just there to support those planned hours. Though I felt lost at certain times, I let myself fall into it, asking no questions. It was just easier.

Whenever I was tired, I fell into his bed, wondering why Nez wasn't there that time. Whenever I was hungry, I ran over to the tent, and bothered the vendor for a bagel, a large pretzel, a sandwich, a soda pop. Only when Jo came around did I recall Tilly's, but even that was not so clear anymore.

Brick and the crowd stopped in front of the stage. Joining the crowd, I hung back, behind a heavysset girl plucking cotton candy off the roll and putting it on a boy's, probably her little brother, head. Brick stood on a bucket near the pull chain of the curtain. "Ladies and gentlemen, children of ages, here we have quite a find. Probably our greatest find. All the way from the West Indies, land of diamonds, adventure, excitement, comes a truly wonderful oddity. What Darwin calls a Negro homo sapien. According to scientific journals, Negroes have small craniums not built for large amounts of knowledge. But behold, here behind this curtain, you'll see one who makes Darwin look like a dummy."

A few of the woman giggled, and two men in overalls guffawed. I bit my lip, frowning. Brick only used proper English for the crowds, particularly the businessmen. The speech was getting so repetitive, and yes, I still remember every word. Something that's harder to explain is

the feeling that accompanied the speech. It always made something stir in my heart, that same something that I felt the first time. Only on that day did I realize that it wasn't the words, but the timbre of Brick's voice, teasing, light, intriguing. Sometimes Brick's voice would reappear in my mind hours later, just as rich and loud.

"I give you Claude Carroll, the wondrous Negro," shouted Brick, pulling the chain.

The curtain fell. Claude stood there, smiling, letting the appreciative responses wash over him. Marshall noted that it wasn't the typical oohs and aahs, but very quiet hmms. Ana and Nez never got hmms.

"Greetings, Kelway customers," began Claude. "A line of thought from Aristotle... Wit is educated insolence."

I looked around at the faces of the crowd. A few of the suited men had their mouths open, trying to close them but failing. A couple of wives clutched their husband's arms. The girl stopped putting cotton candy on her brother's head and gave Claude a puzzled look.

"He ain't got legs," said the girl. "Look, Toby. He ain't got legs."

"Eaten by cannibals," spoke up Brick. "When he was a young thing."

"Cannibals," said a young boy next to me. "Wow."

The boy let bits of caramel slide down his candy apple, wiping his mouth with his sticky fingers.

"He just ain't natural," said one of the men in overalls. "Who feeding him those lines? Is it you, Meyer?"

"No," answered Brick. "He knows anything. Go ahead and ask him, anything you want."

The man smoothed down his overalls. "Where were those Wright Brothers born? The ones that flew that plane?"

Claude's smile widened. I couldn't help but smile as well, but tried hard to hide it.

"Wilbur Wright in Dayton, Ohio, on Hawthorn Street, to parents Milton and Susan, and

Orville Wright in Richmond, Indiana," answered Claude.

"That is something," said the man, clapping his hands.

The other crowd members applauded. Claude bowed. I noticed that the boy next to me wasn't clapping. The boy raised his hand high. Brick saw his sticky fingers above the heads of the crowd.

"Can he do that dance?" asked the boy.

"What dance, son?" said Brick.

"That jigaboo dance," said the boy. "They do it all the time down South, in Dixie."

A man in a crisp, brown suit straightened his tie. "Yeah the science journals say they're supposed to have natural rhythm. It's one of their racial gifts, I remember reading," he said.

"What gifts?" said the cotton candy girl.

“Racial gifts, the gifts nature gave the races. Negroes aren’t supposed to have many, but that’s one of them,” responded the man, letting his tie go.

“I’m not sure Claude is up to dancing,” said Brick, wiping his forehead with a hankchief.

“Probably can’t with no legs,” said the caramel apple boy. “I still want to see him dance. All of ‘em know it.”

Claude was sweating. I wondered if Claude knew what the boy was talking about.

“I...I can...I can probably dance,” said Claude.

The crowd applauded, none so loudly as the boy.

“Mars, why don’t you bring Claude some water?” said Brick, stepping off the bucket.

I felt stuck to that spot, and everyone turned to look at me. I gave Brick my dirtiest look and retrieved a cup of water from a passing vendor. I handed the water to Brick without looking at his face, but Brick pulled me in, forcing me to stare into his eyes.

“Tell him not to do it,” whispered Brick. “If I do, things’ll look suspicious. We both know he better than that..we both know he don’t deserve this.”

I took the water from Brick and nodded. I knelt down to Claude, who seemed so large up close. Handing him the water, I leaned close to his ear.

“We don’t want you to do this,” I said.

Claude closed his eyes, tears falling down his cheeks. I knew that Claude knew what dance the boy was talking about. Claude used his small, soft hands to turn away my face. I got up and stood beside the caramel apple boy.

Claude moved his hands in small circles, lowering his head. He pushed his waist up with his arms and landed hard on the stage’s bottom, doing it again and again to give the illusion of jumping. The crowd clapped in unison. I imagined that some were putting accompanying melodies in their heads, harsh, dissonant melodies. Claude used his hands to turn around furiously, enough to make himself dizzy. Then, he snapped his fingers, ignoring the tears that were now cascading to the collar of his jacket. I hated the loud snaps. They sounded like a train moving across the tracks, a steady clickety-clackety. I bent down to catch my breath.

“It’s moving, isn’t it?” said the caramel apple boy to me, patting me on the shoulder.

“They always dance like that. With their whole body. It’s like they pouring out they soul or something.”

My breathing grew faster. The sunlight rushed over the nape of my neck. It burned.

Suddenly, the applause rang out, loud enough to carry across the large fairgrounds. I raised his head. Claude had finished, his hands to his sides. Brick was off to a corner, staring menacingly at the small boy. "Thank you," said Claude softly after the applause died down. The crowd looked at Brick expectantly. "Let's...let's move along, folks," said Brick. He led the crowd away from Claude's compartment. I rushed to Claude, and took his hands in mine. Claude took his hands away from me, and pointed at the caramel apple boy, still gazing at Claude. "Hmmm," said the boy. "Maybe he really is one."

Jo was sitting up when I returned to Nez's trailer. I rubbed my lower back, where I had carried Claude to his room. I suggested that I stay with Claude for awhile, maybe get him a sandwich and talk about the latest work on my sonata. Claude did always like to hear about the swooping minuet. I convinced Nez to lend him his ham radio so Claude could hear how the notes were arranged in one of Haydn's minuets. After hearing it, Claude called them butterfly notes because they seemed both airborne and tranquil, the notes hanging in the air waiting for someone to bring them back down. Mal just liked to hear me hum it. No one else at Kelway's really cared. Nez thought a minuet was an instrument, and Ana said she'd only listen to the piece when it was finished. Besides Lou, I didn't trust the main circus performers, the big tops, with my secret. I only knew them in passing.

I pulled off my shirt, wet and dirty, and tossed it to the other side of the room. Jo held a small cigar box up for me to see.

"Nez finally showed me that coin collection he got," said Jo. "Got stuff from France, the Netherlands, Australia...where you figurin' he got these?"

I shrugged. "You never know with Nez. Inherited them from a dead broad, found them in the gutter, gift from a fan."

Jo put the box under Nez's bed where he usually kept it. I put on a clean shirt, slowly buttoning it.

So...you're not going to talk?" I said.

"Nothing to talk about," said Jo. "Just dizzy was all. Summer heat...city heat."

"But when I hit you..."

"Just a cramp, Mars. Makin' somethin' out of nothin'."

"I don't want to see you dead and gone, specially when we haven't played Carnegie yet."

"I got some notes left in me."

"Been working on a sonata, two out of four parts done. May redo them. The intro and the minuet."

Jo scrunched up his face. "Those the two fast parts. They ain't hard."

“Yeah, they are.”

“The slow parts, the variation, and the end, the rondo, those hard. Heard one once so I know. The rondo...gotta let the melody peter out, like the notes slipping off they staff,

but it gotta be right so no one notice. You gotta let it dwell like there’s all the time in the world. Yeah, that rondo gonna be the devil.”

“I don’t have your patience, but I have a strong will. That’s something, right?”

“Got you this far.”

Jo rose from the bed, stretching, his long brown hands touching the ceiling, and then resting on the side of his hips. He patted his pants leg, where there was a small bulge. Jo pulled something from his pocket. He grinned.

“It that paper that man stuffed in there...the one with the puny beard.”

“That man didn’t look right, probably crazy. What’s it for?”

Jo gave me the paper. I read the first few lines.

“Looks like a pamphlet, about two months old. March 25, 1925. The Survey Graphic. The New Negro by Alain Locke. It’s a whole essay.”

“Read a little of it,” said Jo. “Since I can’t.”

“In the last decade something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three norms who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. For the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology: the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life.”

I folded the pamphlet and put it into my pants.

“A new Negro?” said Jo, chuckling. “What’s that mean?”

“Well, I think it’s like challenging all those old stereotypes...Uncle Tom, Black Sambo, Aunt Jemima. Like a different kind of black person.”

“What wrong with Sambo? They stories. Blacks can’t have a few stories?”

“Yeah, but I think those stories shouldn’t speak for every black person. I mean, you have a story to tell.”

“Better to let a few stories out...there too many buried under the surface. Just streams and streams of stories. But a New Negro...he ain’t nowhere. That guy was a real nutter.”

I could hear the typing from outside. It was fast, hard, definite. I listened for a minute, wondering what letters and numbers were

appearing on the paper. There were twenty-five customers in the first half-hour, then a round of fifty following them, some lingering at Nez's set and halting the chance for another group. Then, two hundred feet pouring into the tent for the main show, voices talking about what they had seen, throats clogged with hot, nervous lumps, hands wringing clean programs, and hearts beating individual, enthralled rhythms. I felt like he had known them as they passed me on the fairgrounds, that I could view their insides as though I had microscopic lenses. I could tell when someone's stomach turned or did flip-flops, or when someone else's brain stung in his head. That's just something you pick up over time. I believed that these did not add up to any real number, that what use they had ended with the show.

The typing stalled for a moment, then resumed. Brick's trailer was dark, even with the window open and the prominent sunlight covering the grounds. I didn't know what I was doing, but I had to do something after reading that pamphlet. I sighed and entered, slamming the door behind him. Brick licked his thumb, plucking a ten-dollar bill out of a wad of cash.

"Come back, Mars," said Brick, retrieving a rubber band from his desk. "You cool down and come back."

I rolled my eyes. "Why didn't you stop that?," I said.

"Uh-uh. I ain't do nothin'. Your brain whirrin', ya ain't makin' no kind of sense," interrupted Brick.

I laughed lightly. I hoped it sounded cold, that it stung. Brick nodded to himself.

"This is really about Mal and you, ain't it?"

It wasn't about Mal. I tried to stare him down, give the look Otis thought I couldn't give.

"Spit it out, Mars. You judgin' me, you make it clear."

I shook my head. "It wasn't right," I said.

Brick threw the wad of cash at my chest. I stared blankly at the bills on the floor, now separated into twenties, tens, fives, and ones. White and green Abe Lincolns gazed from the floor, their sinister eyes centered on me.

Brick frowned. "You go outside, Mars. Go out into the street, turn a corner, turn a lot of corners. You there and you listenin' ...to a radio...to some bum lecturin' on the street...a

political type's commentary...but they all, they all sayin' the same thing. They afraid...afraid of what they think goin' on in Harlem."

My eyes settled on the edge of Brick's desk, so rough and brown.

"When they afraid, they come here," continued Brick. "They come to see what they thinkin' is right, not what you is. And yeah, I take they money, but they takin' more from me. They takin' somethin' that'll help 'em sleep at night."

“What about Claude?” I said, softly. “All he took away was...all he took away was something horrible. You could’ve stopped it.”

Brick cleared his throat. “I ain’t want him to do it, Mars, but sometime you gotta let the illusion win. The illusion keep order.”

“Yeah..but...”

Brick held up his hand up, then dropped it. “I been to Harlem. I know what they doin’ up there. I know it ain’t no myth, that they makin’ boys like Claude. They doin’ what science sayin’ they can’t do.”

“Claude...what if he knew?”

“I been real fortunate with Claude. Everybody aimin’ to save up so they can leave. Nez wantin’ to go to that teacher’s college so he can help the kids with they calculations.

Ana wanna travel to Rome someday. Maltise...well, we both knowin’ Maltise got a wanderin’ heart. But Claude, he never been savin’ to go. Least he ain’t told me so.”

I collected the money, retrieved the rubber band, and made a new wad. I couldn’t stand Abe Lincoln eyeing me anymore. I pulled the pamphlet from my pocket and wound it around the cash. I’d let Lincoln give that same look to Brick.

“There’s different types of saving,” I said firmly, throwing both items on Brick’s desk.

Brick picked up both, but dropped the wad and held the pamphlet close to his eyes.

“Where you get this?” said Brick softly.

I shrugged, turning my back to Brick. I heard a violent shove of a chair, and Brick’s shoes clapping across the shiny wood floor. Then I saw Brick’s arm, covered in fine ruby red hairs, take my arm, forcing me to face him.

“Where did you get this?,” repeated Brick.

“Closer than you think, Brick,” I said. “They’re out in the streets, turning corners, lots of corners.”

Brick thrust the pamphlet against my chest.

“You take it and you burn it,” whispered Brick. “It was never here.”

I looked into Brick’s face, so soft and doughy compared to Jo’s earlier that day. His hazel eyes were shaking like lion cubs cowering in darkness. His skin resembled a cut, pink rose, struggling to maintain its original color. I remembered how Tilly hung garlands every Easter. I’m not so sure what types of flowers she used, but I did recall that the flowers were pink and that they died quickly. The false light of the kitchen did not nurture them, and the stems and buds hung in the doorway like nooses, haunting and attractive. Yet, some buds were still growing. So maybe there was an inner warmth there, growing underneath.

“I know...I know you care, but...it feels bad to hide this,” I said.

“I do care, Mars. And that, yes...that would hurt him.”

“How could it hurt? It’s...”

“No, Mars!,” shouted Brick, sitting down at the desk. “Trust me. It’s best.”

I slipped the pamphlet into my pocket, the weight brushing against my leg. It felt as heavy as a million dollars, and suddenly it seemed possible, to have a million dollars in a poor boy’s pocket. There could be possibilities in a pocket.

“Sorry,” I said. “Just needed to clear my head.”

“It ain’t so easy for me,” said Brick. “But not tellin’ Claude...for so long...Mars, that’s what keeps me up at night.”

I nodded, heading for the door, but glanced back at Brick, who tucked the wad into a coat pocket, close to his heart.

After leaving Brick’s trailer, the janitor gave me a block of ice for my trailer. Instead, I carried it to Claude’s trailer, feeling the drops of water slide down my palm and onto the front of my pants. It provided me with an excuse to see how he was doing so I dealt with it. I tapped on Claude’s door lightly, and took a deep breath when Claude told me to come in. Claude sat on his bedspread, holding one of his planes in his hands. I recognized it. It was the Wrights’ Brothers airplane, now complete, the color of vanilla.

“Know why I like planes?” said Claude as I opened Claude’s ice box.

“No. Why?” I said, opening the bag.

“They move so gracefully, from place to place. But Mars, they don’t need their legs.

The legs disappear when they take off. All they have is their wings, their hands. Their beautiful hands.”

I watched the ice fall into the box. The tips of his fingers were now a solid red.

“I never flew on a plane, though. I really did come on a ship to New York. That’s the only part of Brick’s story that’s real,” said Claude, turning the propeller. I closed the ice box, and sat on a chair near Claude’s bed. I wanted Claude to look at me, but he didn’t.

“I’m sorry about what happened today,” said Marshall.

Claude turned his propeller a couple of times, then sighed.

“It was just a rough day,” said Claude. “Tomorrow will be better.”

“Why...why did you dance?”

“They use to do that dance on the ships that came into the Indies. It was something to see, dancing on the ports in between the loading of cane and fruits. I just sat there, didn’t know what to do. I never really talked to them, though I suspected they had interesting things to say.”

“What kind of things?”

“Maybe they’d recount some ordeals they had with tempests, or myths about sea monsters.”

“Nothing like a good tempest.”

“Oh, no, I’m talking about internal tempests. Struggling with themselves about what the sea made them. Salt water permanently in their bronze skin, sand on top of their veins.”

“They sound kind of...I don’t know, majestic.”

“In their own way, yes. But then they’d do really barbaric things. Whistling at girls, slaying chickens on the wharf, ate raw meat. But they only did it to show their toughness.

There’s certain things you do because it’s expected of you. And today...well, I acted like them.”

“I really shouldn’t have asked...I was just....,” I started.

“No, no...but what really makes me disappointed is that my tempest is so subtle. I don’t know why I did it, Mars.”

I took the plane from his hands, and Claude reluctantly raised his head. I set the plane down on the nearest drawer, and pulled the pamphlet from my pocket. The edge of the paper nipped my hand as I handed it to Claude. Claude blinked and started to read it. I don’t know why I went against Brick. I don’t know why but at least...at least, it was something. Claude’s wide lips moved without making a sound ducking into his mouth and then unfurling. He stuck out his chin, then lowered it. I rubbed my neck, gazing intently at the ice box. I felt something firm graze his wet lap, and looked down.

Claude’s head rested between my legs. I couldn’t tell if his face was wet from the ice water or from tears. Maybe it was both. I patted Claude’s back, which couldn’t have been very comforting. Claude’s shoulders heaved, his chest trembling.

“I didn’t know this was going on, Mars,” said Claude, his eyes darting towards his plane. “I didn’t know.”

X. Delirium

We came out when the sun was parched, spent from lighting every inch of Kelway's. The moon arrived then, ready and willing to see our nightly activities. Jake pulled out his fiddle, playing some Irish ditty, because those are the only songs he felt mattered. He stood in the middle of the square, between big top and sideshow, plucking those strings. The lilt of the fiddle called to every corner of the sleeping circus--to Lou who was letting the Wurlitzer wrap up its final melody, to the sequined ladies pulling off stockings and costume jewelry, to Dom and Ana taking a joyride on the ferris wheel before Mario shut it off. The Babes of the Bonfire would stop to come. Nez, the leader with the match. Sal, the lugger of lumber. Lana, the self-proclaimed eye candy. Ana, our sweet-faced soprano. Dom and Lou, the cultured clown duet. Jake, the designated musician. Mars, the orphan boy.

Wordlessly, we arrived in the square and arranged the wood, a large space for the fire to leap. Those nights, Sal retrieved two stools and two tree logs we'd stored behind the Priceless Treasures stage. The stools were for the ladies because ladies shouldn't sit too close to the ground, said Dom. What if their skirts caught fire? Nez usually lit the match.

Jake stopped playing to watch. We all watched. The match was thrown in and we heard the first crackles. Hard to describe the sight of the beginning flickers of flame. Maybe two orange, fiery arms going up and down, like the pulleys used to raise the trapeze net. Hard to describe the smell. Maybe if dying bark has a smell, a mix of smoke, mint, and musk. Easy to describe the mood. Definitely calm. Easy because it was the only time on weekdays where we all experienced calmness.

We sat in silhouette as the fire rose higher. I remember one night the fire stood taller than Ana atop her stool. It was two nights before my sixteenth birthday, and Nez had located a flask of whiskey. The effects were taking hold, because Jake had to light the fire while Nez collapsed clumsily on the ground. Lana sat him on the log where I was sitting, then shifted her stool next to it, frowning at him. From far away, it might've looked like Lana was a mother about to lecture her son. However, from that angle, Lana looked kind of innocent, next to her boyfriend with many muscles.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked.

Lana was beautiful up close, but she wasn't a Lisa or a Mal. Half of her thick, blonde hair was pinned up in curls, the other half hanging down her back. Nez had said that he'd found the peach among the pears, which I guess meant that Lana was a true lady.

"Where didn't I get it?," slurred Nez, taking another swig.

“How much have you had?” asked Lana, stepping off her stool.
“One or two....I think this is my third flask,” said Nez, laughing.
“Ain’t that funny, Mimsy? And me wantin’ to teach math. Can’t count when I need to.”

I gave him a smile and pretended to be interested in my shoes. The Babes of the Bonfire were ones for reflection. We didn’t like looking at ourselves; we let others do that. Instead, we fancied ourselves geniuses because we hoped we appeared that way. I guess that’s why Claude didn’t join us those nights. He was actually a genius. We pretended we were peerless, even though we knew otherwise. Nobody could play the fiddle like Jake, or control a vibrato as wonderfully as Ana. Dom and Nez provided the intelligence and the comedy, while Lou and Sal kept to themselves, which I suppose most geniuses do. Lana and I had wandered in, but at least Lana could do a flying somersault forty feet above the ground, in tight, sparkly toe shoes no less.

Lana attempted to touch Nez’s arm, but he dodged her, his waist brushing up against mine. He smelled like Goldie’s after all the bottles had been uncapped.

“I paid good money for this hooch,” said Nez. “Forgot how much, but I paid for it.”

Lana sighed. “Go lie down. You probably can’t even see straight.”

“I see fine,” argued Nez. “See you a doll with loose stilts, that’s what I see.”

Huffing, Lana managed to take the flask from Nez, who was trying his best to lean on me for support but still pull the flask towards him. Before Nez could get it back, Lana tossed the rest of the whiskey in the fire. That was when it rose taller than Ana.

“You’re a bum when you’re bent!” shouted Lana. “Dry up, then come see me.”

Lana started to storm off, but not before saying to all of us, gaping behind her, “And I ain’t loose.”

Nobody said a word until Jake began another song, light and largo. I’d only heard Nez drunk on two other occasions. I say heard because he came in late at night, stumbled into bed, and I heard muttering and the springs of his bed squeak. It was impossible to see him as our room was dark and my eyes were already blurry, blurry enough not to recognize his small form. Nez said he sobered up quick, which was true because he was always out of the door before I got up the next morning.

“Actin’ like a real winner tonight, Nez,” said Lou, removing his rubber, red nose and sticking it in his pocket.

Nez hiccuped. “I ain’t lamentin’ nothin’,” he whispered.

There was a hint of anger under Nez’s voice. I gave Ana a concerned look, and she gave me a warm smile.

"Jake, what are you playing?" asked Ana, lacing her fingers through Dom's.

Jake chuckled. "The Young Servant-Man," he answered.

"Doesn't sound very happy," said Sal, tugging on his large gold earring.

"No....no," said Jake, shaking his head. "It's a ballad."

"Sing it!" shouted Nez, hurting my ears.

"Yes," agreed Ana. "I'd like to hear it."

Jake did a weird thing. He nodded at me. I started sweating, but I didn't break his gaze. He went back to the beginning of the song with more solid bowing, a hint of urgency between the notes. I felt the sweat getting thicker, warmer, but I had no idea why.

"It's of a damsel both fair and handsome, these lines are true, as I've been told," sang

Jake, his eyes still locked on me. *"Near the banks of Shannon, in a lofty mansion, her father garnered great stores of gold."*

Jake moved the fiddle up and down. It resembled a guillotine, forceful, powerful. The notes pierced through my skin, sharp, sharp like a blade going through.

"Her hair was black as raven's feather, her form and features oh! describe who can?" continued Jake. "But still, it's a folly belongs to Nature: she fell in love with a servant man."

What was the point of this song anyway? Jake stared at me more intensely.

"As those two lovers were fondly talking, her father heard them, and near them drew; In anger home her father flew."

I rubbed my neck, feeling like the blade had gone partly through and my head was resting on its side.

"To build a dungeon was his intention, To part true love he contrived a plan; He swore an oath by all his mansion, he'd part that fair one from her servant-man."

Mal. Jake knew about Mal. Was it spreading across the circus now? Did Brick tell Jake? No, Jake probably told Brick. I glanced around, panicked. The other Babes of the Bonfire were enjoying it. Jake was a brilliant tenor. They thought his voice was pure, but I knew differently. I imagined breaking his fiddle in half. Jake paused, probably for dramatic effect. Our gaze continued for a few more seconds, but I broke. Some sweat fell in my eyes and I broke. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jake smiling triumphantly.

Nez stood up and teetered forward. "Stop the music!" he yelled.

"What?" snapped Sal. "He was sounding good."

Nez put his shoulders back proudly. "I got... somethin' to say."

Sal rolled his eyes, then ribbed Lou, who was smirking.

"Fifteen years ago, a son got left in front a door....he came... to a circus to make a livin'.

But he was cryin' inside... and inside cryin' hurt the most," said Nez, patting me on the shoulder.

Nez stopped now and again, looking upward, as if the sky held the words.

"Hear, hear!" said Sal, jokingly. Ana put her finger to her lips.

"Especially when...especially when you gotta be happy here," said Nez, pointing to his face. "Happy here for others."

Ana nodded, her eyes misty.

I couldn't believe it. Why was Nez sharing my life story right then and there? I lowered my head. Who was that? Slicky? Sure, bring my other tormentor in too, Nez.

"But this kid I took to...this kid I liked."

This would've fluffed Slicky's ego.

"And if I have me a normal-sized kid....and that hopin' Lana take my little butt back...," said Nez, resting his hand on my shoulder.

Sal and Lou chuckled lightly.

"I hope I like my kid as much as Mimsy," said Nez. "Maybe God'll give us a Mimsy mimic."

Then, it started to make sense. Fifteen years. Abandoned. But unhappy? I blinked at Nez. An unhappy Nez? He finally looked older to me-- the premature crease of laugh lines, the sad brown eyes, the stern mouth that was weakening into a grin. My head felt all the way on again.

Jake made a gagging noise, but Sal punched him lightly, but hard enough that he slipped off the log and onto the dirt. I was glad. He'd pack the fiddle away, and though the song sat in my brain, Nez's voice was stronger, stronger than the strings.

"But say a prayer for me, Ana," said Nez, turning my head towards Ana, who was smiling and crying now, her tears wetting her beard. "Cause I don't want these big ears."

I had to advertise my associates, ordered Brick. Apparently, business fell short in the month of May, what with parties, commencements, and weddings to go to. Brick believed more advertising would pick up the slack-- artistic and vocal advertisement courtesy of posters announcing each Priceless Treasure and me yelling in front of Kelway's entrance two days a week. Kelway was our idea financeer, and inquired about my clothing. I thought that was creepy until Brick explained that Kelway, who I still hadn't met, didn't want me to wear orphan's clothes. I didn't know there was such a thing. The kids at Tilly's dressed the same way as the kids in Parnum. But we weren't attracting the Parnumites, Brick reminded me. We want the Manhattanites. Manhattanites walked differently, briskly, more in step. They didn't like too much sun because it gives them freckles so they carried parasols and wore wide-brimmed hats. They liked Nez,

because he had the same wit as their professors at Columbia. They talked like Claude, with their big vocabularies, and they looked down on me like Ana, but not because they were giants. They did it because my uniform was ugly-- bright, yellow pants with yellow suspenders over a white tuxedo shirt. Instead of orphan clothes, I was wearing clothes that made me a five-foot-six banana. A tall banana with blonde hair.

The day after Jake premiered his song, he made it a point to whistle it under his breath as soon as I stepped out of the outdoor shower in my advertising uniform. It was the only space that I thought I could escape embarrassment, but of course, I was wrong.

"Ha!," yelled Jake, spit flying out of his mouth. "Sour boy finally became a lemon."

I shrugged and bent over to tie my shoe. At least they were black and not yellow.

"As a musician, expectin' you liked my song," said Jake, now close enough that I could see his knees.

I was already agitated, probably not as angry as Jo that night on the Carnegie steps, but mad enough.

"You were off-key," I said, raising my head.

Jake ran his tongue over his lips. "I don't think I was," he said, ruffling my hair. I pushed his hand back.

"Certain commodities are best left alone," he said. "Last night was a warning....a warning you'd understand."

Jake walked away, whistling the tune. I never hated a piece of music so much.

Despite the taunts from all the customers passing by, I held Nez's over-size poster steady above my head next to the big Kelway's sign. Brick made me memorize the print underneath the poster, a color drawing of perfectly structured Nez in red, children's swimming trunks. He held one arm out, punching the air, with a solid yellow background behind him. That was the reason Brick said my outfit had to be yellow. All the posters had yellow backgrounds to mirror spotlights shining on the act in the center.

"Come see the amazing Nez!" I yelled, my voice more shrill than deep. "Half-pint and humorous, a midge for the masses, a Liliputian guaranteed to make you laugh."

I took a deep breath. Brick's story had to be right. I felt like his eyes were on me.

"Reminiscent of the great vaudeville comedians! Gifted like Gershwin, jolly like Jolson, a theatrical heart in a tiny body, our amazing Nez is not to miss!"

Brick was watching me. I saw him weaving through a couple girls discussing how much dye my pants must've used up. He was already dressed for the two o'clock show, but there was a large bulge under his jacket.

"Use your diaphragm," said Brick. "Resonance. You should know a thing or two 'bout resonance."

"Yes," I said, lowering the sign.

Brick removed a gold, straw bowler hat from underneath the jacket. A ribbon reading Kelway's was just above the brim. He put it firmly on my head.

"Kelway say you should have this for the sun," said Brick. "But I expect to see some smilin' under this hat. You can frown later."

I nodded, knowing full well I wouldn't smile after Brick had turned the corner.

"Claude's still not doin' well so we start with Nez today," explained Brick. "Come over in an hour to set up."

Brick began positioning me, putting back my shoulders, stretching out my arms, making the sign stick straight up, using his fingers to prop up my lips. I was either a mannequin or a billboard.

"Let's build up our boy, Mars," said Brick, fixing my collar. "Cause he the biggest thing we got."

Well, the posters were successful. By one forty-five, people were already gathering in front of the stage. The usual blue and gold balloons and streamers hung around the proscenium while Sal set up the swords near the side door. Brick collected the tickets from a few Manhattanites, then saw me and told me to get the barrel. I groaned. The barrel was heavy and my arms hurt after all the sign-holding. Brick squinted at me, as if to say "suck it up", so I dragged the barrel next to the swords. The Manhattanite kids lined the midway, licking ice cream, touting teddy-bears, eager to hear Brick's spiel.

Some held the circulated pamphlets announcing our triple-header (Nez, Ana, Mal) and our special guests (Sal and Maurice). Slicky was among them, and he stuck his tongue out at me.

"Tell Lou to work up Wurly," said Brick to Mario.

Mario ducked into a nearby tent and a few minutes later, the Wurlitzer was sounding through the stage area. It sounded like a melodic coughing fit, before it found its rhythm, then a steady stream of "Maple Leaf Rag". The Wurlitzer was raring to go, and so was Brick, hopping on the platform next to the stage. I jumped off the stage and stood next to the crowd.

"Fine Kelway's customers!" shouted Brick as the Wurlitzer's volume went down.

"Over yonder stood Dreamland amid Coney, and by extension, a Brooklyn Liliputia, a minute metropolis. But their dreams were doused

in fire, dead due to the Great Fire fourteen years ago. So one dwarf came seeking, seeking a dream of performing for others. Chicago, New Orleans, Boston, couldn't hold a candle. Not enough bite for this artist, so he came back to where the bite was birthed. The rest of our Priceless Treasures come from all over the world, but our homegrown Nez is Kelway's heart. More kynde, than kind, he knows New York. He knows you."

Brick had written a new speech for today. I actually preferred this one, and so did the

Manhattanites. They'd see Nez, and maybe be reminded of that son they sent off to war or to Yale, but had finally come home, a little changed but theirs.

"So please welcome, with a big round of applause, the warm, comedic stylings of the amazing Nez!," shouted Brick, stepping off the platform. "With special guest Sal the Strongman."

Everyone clapped loudly, even Slicky, who knew Nez's act inside and out. Sal high-stepped onto the stage, strutting, his bald head gleaming, taking time so the customers could admire his nicely detailed calves and chest under his black and white-striped, polyester leotard. Two boys remarked that he looked similar to a comic strip hero they'd seen earlier that day. Sal flexed a couple times before Nez appeared, and walked confidently between his legs. Sal dropped his mouth in mock surprise while the crowd cheered for Nez. Nez wore his usual swimming trunks to show off his abs, and began flexing with more energy than Sal. Sal harrumphed and copied Nez's intensity. Nez cupped his ear, rallying for more audience support. They gave it to him, clapping so earnestly you could hear the rustle of bracelets and the clinks of rings. Nez held his hand up to end it. He looked up at Sal, and you could feel the fire of his eyes from there, from behind the midway. Then, he made his chest dance, his pecs going up and down in rhythm to the Wurly, now cranking out "Skip to My Lou." The woman to my left turned a deep shade of pink, coughing and laughing at the same time. Sal smirked and threw up his hands, then bowed and left the stage.

"My brother, Sal," said Nez, pretending to wipe sweat from his brow. "Low in hair and talent."

The audience laughed as Nez dragged two swords to the front. He thrust one in the direction of the midway kids, over the edge of the stage, and a few of them backed away, tugging their parents' pants legs. Slicky stood his ground, obviously pleased he was in the know. They resumed their position when Nez gave them a warm wink.

"For centuries, the Martin family, of which I am part, been swallowin' swords to get tougher throats," said Nez, as the Wurly came to an abrupt stop. "Seein' we inclined to talk a lot."

“Keeping your mouth shut is no small miracle,” shouted Sal from offstage. His comment was met by jeers from the audience, who had decided to side with Nez.

They always sided with Nez. Slicky gave Sal a raspberry, ineffective because Sal couldn’t see it, but loud. A couple kids patted Slicky on the back for a job well done.

“Little brothers can be a big pain,” said Nez, shaking his head while the adults chuckled.

“So can big brothers!” yelled Slicky, the rest of the kids nodding in agreement.

Nez held the two swords aloft, smashing them together. The rattle lasted a few seconds while we watched intently as Nez opened his mouth wide. The boy next to me leaned forward, the ice cream on his cone slipping off. Nez bent back his head, slowly sliding one blade into his throat. I always expected his lips to tremble when he did it, but they were sturdy. The trick was to guide the blade down the pharynx after relaxing the gagging reflex, said Nez. I didn’t want anything poking around in my pharynx, and I couldn’t control my hair, let alone my gagging reflexes. It was a skinny sword at least, so if Nez choked, it would be easier to take out. Nez put in the second sword effortlessly, breathing steadily while we all gasped. The two hilts rested on the bridge of his mouth like doorknockers. Nez’s Adam’s apple shook a bit, and then he grabbed one of the hilts and grandly pulled the second sword out, and then the first, naturally, marvelously.

“If I done that with an umbrella, I’d be dead,” said Nez, raising his head calmly.

We gave Nez uproarious applause. Brick grinned proudly.

“Thatta way, Nez!,” yelled Slicky.

Sal trudged on the stage again, this time without the high step. Half the audience booed him, even the Manhattanite ladies with their parasols. He set the barrel up at the front of the stage, and picked up Nez, putting him on top. Sal gave the audience a grimace before he left.

“And now a short history,” said Nez, smoothing out his trunks.

“Written by a short author. Thanks, Brick.”

Nez paused while we chuckled. Brick pretended to be wounded, then crossed his arms.

“Anyway,” said Nez, “1899 was a good year for Parnum. McKinley ain’t mess up, though he was colorless as a raindrop. Ragtime raced up the streets, streets where a dwarf could still get some decent beer. And war, I guess it seemed a flicker in the dark. But people still had they kids, their sons and daughters, and they needed somethin’ light to carry when it struck and the kids left. So Alan Kelway came to this lot with not much pennies in his pocket, but who needs pennies when you got money bags stored in the bank?”

A couple Manhattanite men guffawed. Slicky glared at them, obviously angry with them for interrupting Nez's speech.

"Kelway wanted a circus, and Parnum ain't talk back. No, they were keen on the idea. With the stakes set, the canvas flew up for us to paint on. Tightrope trotters, chummy clowns, roustabouts, ringmasters. We been paintin' since we could walk, some carnies, some troupers, most with sawdust in they blood. We ain't know nothin' else."

Nez's words were so heartfelt that we didn't say anything. Even Slicky was caught up, biting his lip, his hands shoved in his pockets. Brick looked uneasy like he'd never heard this before, but he'd heard it millions of times. He kept straightening his jacket, then glancing at the side of the barrel. Nez blinked, trying to keep his head erect. It wasn't the hottest of days, but I think we all felt the heat in the air.

"We ain't know nothin' else," repeated Nez, blinking more rapidly.

"Um, we....we came..."

We fell silent, hoping that Nez would get out the words. Nez took deep breaths, refusing to look at me or Brick. He kept going, kept trying to remember.

"Um....," stammered Nez.

I fanned my face with my hat as the heat rose. Glancing around, I saw the Manhattanites were firm. Their approval wouldn't shift. I can't believe how approving audiences can be sometimes. From far away, you expect them to expect perfection. Up close, that disappears. They'll take anything, even if it's slipshod, anything to take them out of that day. They will you to finish. I would will him to finish.

"Don't suppose you came in a box, Nez?," I yelled, putting my hat back on.

A lot of Manhattanites laughed at my attempt, some forgetting that they'd laughed at my outfit hours before.

"He'll box your ears, organ boy!" chimed in Slicky.

Nez looked down at the top of the barrel. It was a lame attempt, but Nez jerked his head up, smirking.

"Least I ain't look like a tall glass of lemonade," said Nez.

Almost everyone laughed at my expense, even Brick, who lost interest in playing with his jacket and was now holding his sides like his stomach was about to burst.

"So how did you all come to Kelway's?" I asked, snapping my suspenders.

"Funny, you should mention it....," started Nez, his smile returning.

Nez kept on, making the Manhattanites feel like Parnum earned every bit of its lore, that Kelway's was quirky and historic, that he was amazing. I saw it on their faces-- peach, patriotic, far from passive. New York is ours. And when he ended, he tossed the customary rose to a little girl, one inch bigger than him, who asked me if Nez would sign it.

That night, I handed Brick that dumb hat, happy to be rid of it for five days. I might've imagined it, but I could've sworn Brick grinned at me. Who cared if he liked me for that moment? Tomorrow, I would gratefully go back to my regular duties. But that night, I had to walk, walk out of Kelway's. There'd be no Jakes, no Slickys. Just Manhattan.

It was changing on me. The grey stone of the Met looked shinier. The lighted windows of townhouses fell on the sidewalks. Clean Chryslers and Model Ts were parked outside the houses. I peered into a Chrysler window. It could seat five, probably. I wished for one, maybe one of those new Chrysler Sixes that went up to sixty with a quiet engine. The buzz of an accordion interrupted my Chrysler dream, and I followed it. Before I knew it, I was in Central Park, past Cleopatra's Needle, brown and stately; past Belvedere Castle, the building most likely to have stepped outside a storybook; over Bow Bridge, the water beneath resembling a large blot of ink. I wound up on the Great Lawn, sitting on the grass, staining my yellow pants, with the accordion player serenading several guys. I was no fan of the accordion; it was too choppy and the notes sounded lop-sided. But the man played so joyfully, using his fat stomach as the support for the wailing accordion, that I watched in spite of myself.

I turned to see if the people behind me were actually enjoying the show. It was me and a few guys, probably college age. My eyes travelled around the lawn. I saw Nez before he saw me, standing next to a bench, his head resting against the iron-gate arm. He had a white T-shirt over his trunks, and stared blankly back at me. It took him a few minutes before he sat down on the grass next to me, folding his legs. I was surprised to see him, especially since he appeared very tired.

"Followed ya," said Nez, his eyes fixed on the accordion.

I shrugged. "For this?" I said, pointing at the man.

"Heard worse," replied Nez.

You could still see Cleopatra's Needle from the Lawn, stretching high. I wondered if you could think high. If Nez thought high, and that's what made him who he was.

Nez cleared his throat. "It's weird to lie to yourself every day," he said.

"We ain't know nothin' else," said Nez. "But I knew somethin' else for a bit. In the know 'til nine."

You can leave a baby on a doorstep, in front of a trailer door, in an alleyway, but we'll bleed the same. Even on New Year's when everyone is excited, even if you get a piano teacher and an almost mother behind the door.

“At least you know more than me,” I said, running my finger over the cool grass. “Nine years....I mean, with either...I didn’t get one.”

Today wasn’t a day for talking, I guess. Nez had already faltered; I didn’t have the right to act like this was about me. But nine years was a bulk, a bulk of childhood. It was a selfish thought, but I didn’t feel bad about it. Nez looked at me for a bit, and got it. I knew he was the only one who could.

“I know I got to teach someday,” he asked.

I pulled at more grass. I really couldn’t talk anymore. Let him talk. Let the accordion talk. Anyone but me.

“It ain’t for the glory, cause that follow me around already, or the money, or else I stick with Kelway’s,” said Nez. “I can open a door and be the one lettin’ in, let ‘em in and send ‘em off right.”

Grass fell out of my fingers. Send ‘em off right. I saw Nez at the front of class, teaching addition. There’s Slicky and Pete, who would count their fingers, and could count their toes because their shoes were so worn. Their mother was incapable of mending them so Nez kept them after, said he knew a cobbler, said it’d be a secret. Nez can’t reach the chalkboard but explained things thoroughly, then checked their answers by walking and glancing at their papers. Not many need correction. Equations aren’t that easy. Nez: nine years to be a kid, plus fifteen years to be an adult. But how many years should a father give? Do you need any years to be a father? Nez’s answer: It’s the years before they send you off right. That won’t work for me.

The accordion player stopped. The man to my right hooted appreciatively. He had his face painted like a clown’s-- the white face, the oversize lips, pink cheeks like Brick and a red nose like Lou and Dom. Several months before, I would’ve stared more, having never seen a clown. He wasn’t that impressive. Pleased with the hooting, the accordion man motioned for the man to come forward. The man belched, then joined the accordion player. The college students pointed to him, then urged him on, shouting “Canio! Canio!”

“Ha! He a lush,” said Nez.

The accordion player started up again, a slow, serene song. Canio pouted, his lips exaggerated by the make-up.

“Awww!” said his college friends. “Poor Canio!”

Canio pretended to wipe away a tear, but perked up as the accordion player reached what was the start of a refrain.

“To perform! In the throes of delirium,” recited Canio. “I don’t know anymore what I’m saying, what I’m doing.”

Canio put his finger to his lips, trying to look thoughtful. “Still...you must force yourself. Bah! Are you a man or a clown?”

“You’re just a clown!,” yelled his friends.

Canio spat on the ground, looking offended. His friends continued to urge him on. Canio looked to the accordion player for solace.

“Opera singers,” said Nez. “Always dramatic.”

I nodded, having no idea what Nez was talking about. Who was this Canio?

Canio circled his face with his finger. “*Put on your costume...make up your face.*”

I was alarmed. How could a voice that pure come from this drunken guy? He was better than Jake, this tenor with more life, more experience. His friends cheered, and the accordian player played more fluidly, a change that made me sit up. It sounded decent, almost good.

“*People are paying, they want to laugh,*” sang Canio. “*And when Arlecchino takes*

away your Colombina, laugh, you clown, and everyone will cheer!”

Canio’s friends raised their fists in mock salute.

“*Turn your agony and your tears into buffoonery, your sobbing and pain into a funny grimace,*” sang Canio.

“Ah!,” cried out his friends in unison.

Canio slung his arm around the accordian player, who didn’t seem the least rattled. He, in fact, looked right at home.

“*Laugh, you clown ,at your broken love,*” sang Canio, clutching his chest. “*Laugh at the pain which poisons your heart.*”

Canio fell on the ground after the last note, and his friends rushed to get him back on his feet. They yelled “Bravo!” and shook the hands of the accordian player. Nez sat through it all, staring hard at the accordian, at Canio. I guessed that Canio was fresh from the opera, a young man who got a kick out of aimlessly strolling the streets, who got a rise out of people listening to him. Cocky Canio. But I don’t think he was horrible. He’d found the most random musician, sang one of the prettiest songs I’d heard. Canio fell again, this time crying. They looked like real tears because his face was scrunched up. The beauty of his voice was brushed aside as he let out a series of cries.

Nez held his gaze, sharp, searching. I searched, too. Maybe Canio had lost his girl, lost his spot in the show, lost his mind.

“Fool,” said Nez coldly. “Cryin’ and carryin’ on while we watch.”

I didn’t want to contradict Nez, but I didn’t find it foolish. This guy was obviously sad about something. Didn’t Nez know this? You had to crack sometimes. Artists, actors, musicians, we had to crack sometimes. I wanted to say, go for it, Canio. The lives of clowns were softer than I imagined. Do what I’m afraid to do. Don’t fake felicity under the powder. Sing until the notes seem pressing. Make the accordian come alive, just with your voice. More than nine years of waiting. That’s both of us waiting, Nez, years between us. Crack, Canio.

“Fool kid,” said Nez, standing up. “You save that for later.”

