

BENYAMIN STOPS APRIL MID-MEASURE. She expected criticism, not a moan. Worse, the moan, a deep-throated grunt, echoes within a tomb of silence. It's Wednesday, early evening, and she's still numbed by the shock of her first week and a half at Berryville. Seated at a librarian's desk in a corner of his studio, Benyamin leans forward, his eyes fixed downward, places his elbows on his knees, and holding his bald head between his hands, shakes it side to side. He lifts his gaze to peer out at the limestone campus, its woolly evergreens and shorn trees bare-branched netting against a chalky sky. His entire *being* exudes displeasure: Does the world really need another musician?

He shifts his glance away from the window, scrutinizes April for the longest time, saying nothing.

"Awful," he utters at last.

"Awful," a whisper.

"You play like a gypsy. Are you Hungarian?"

"Russian. My mother's mother was Russian."

"Ah. Ukrainian maybe. They are insane. Ukrainian, Romanian, Hungarian," dismissing all with a wave of his hand.

His black trousers, hiked up high, fall short and his open-necked dress shirt needs laundering, bleach and a steam press. Not exactly your *Gentleman's Quarterly* model of the year, April notes. He pulls himself up and walks — ambles, a kind of side-to-side weight shift April calls a "wamble" — over to the Steinway.

"This isn't Sarasate, not some gypsy fiddler serenading the salon set with *Zigeunerweisen*, it's Mozart."

"I'm playing Mozart."

"You are playing Mozart badly." A half-smile plays on his lips. Privately he's amused by her daring. "Get married, have children."

She catches his reflection in the long mirror on the door of a music cupboard beside the piano: flour-pale, fleshy, excess doughnutting his gut. Brown wisps slick his bald top; his eyes, distant and hard when he's angry, mischievous in humour, bespeak a robust inquisitiveness and sharp intelligence. Fat fingers, soiled cuffs.

"Get married, have children. Artist-shmartest, it's no life."

"You don't think I'm talented."

"Talented means *borscht*." Riveter's strength, distance runner's stamina, a two-hundred-percent dose of ruddy good health and a shitload of luck, that's what this business demands! For starters. After that, you'll require someone to shop, prepare meals, clean and press your clothes, schedule appointments . . . in short, a "wife." *Then* talent counts. "*Borscht!* We are not talking talent."

Sure, blue-rinse matrons and paunchy patrons orbit your star like space

junk. Everybody wants. A handshake, How are you? Big embrace; their friends should all witness. All of a sudden they're *machers*, big shots! Bottom line, you sweat it out alone, whether in the studio or onstage naked; crowded airport, busy hotel, your empty room, alone. "It's a waste you should be alone," he says aloud.

Examining her, he sees her eyes probing from behind demure — deceptively demure — John Lennon specs. Light freckles dot her nose and tresses lick her chin and blaze like de Falla's "Fire Dance." Delicious.

"I want to play. Like you."

"You will never play like me. Let's hear the Beethoven . . . and hope it's better than the Mozart."

Faint sounds of a trumpet drift from above down into the studio. She stares momentarily up at acoustical ceiling tile. Advancing chromatically through the octave, the horn runs through a series of scales, its upper range reaching ever higher, mimicking a Bach trumpet's brilliant soprano. Her glance returns to Benyamin, seated at a second grand alongside hers. No longer the glib master of brutal put-down, he's *Benyamin* by way of Bonn and Tel Aviv, fêted from Kiev to Kyoto, London to Lisbon, Versailles, France, to Versailles, Indiana; adored not only in New York and Chicago but Boise and Bowling Green, Muncie, Medicine Hat, Red Deer and Rimrock. He begins the introduction of the C Major, his keyboard a hundred-piece orchestra. On cue April enters with the first theme; performs with authority, brilliantly actually. *She* judges so, but suddenly Benyamin stops dead, jumps to his feet; standing close behind, leans over her shoulder, poking a finger at the music, jabbing at it.

"*Guteenu!* What is this *eruption*, this spewing stream of slime, this thick sap clogging up the passage! What? What is this orgiastic *noise!*"

She gawks at the finger: colossal cherry pink tongue, tumescent, protruding, meaty tip silking slowly along parted cushiony lips, slicking upper lip and lower to a wet shine and coming to rest in the centre, fluttering, an ululating tremor. Oh, God, she despairs, and struggles to discipline her thoughts. She's spending too much time around Josh, picking up his (purposefully) shocking irreverence. Thankfully, Benyamin stops the jabbing.

"You smell today of Seabreeze, maybe mint. Maybe lemon shampoo. It is an arousing perfume."

Is he coming on to her? Absurd. Maybe not. Not impossible, she thinks . . . meaning her own participation. She's flattered; he *is* a genius, renowned the world over. His Debussy, shifting light and shade, his Chopin, passion and shifting mood. She adores the way he spins out song. They'd make beautiful music together. She'd keep her eyes closed. Why not invent for herself the debonair man she's portrayed to others?

Would he play her gently, as he caresses his instrument, or attack with digital independence appropriate to the canons of Bach? Thrum flamenco rhythms *à la* de Falla, or soothe with the feline footsteps of Fauré?

"Beethoven doesn't need any," she hears Benyamin say, feeling him touch her shoulder. "Perfume. Beethoven doesn't need perfume. Again, from where you left off," he instructs, sitting down again at the second piano. It's warm in

the room and from his side pocket he takes a rumpled handkerchief, sweeps it across his temples and bald pate, stuffs the cloth back in, then readies his hands on the keyboard.

Despite his clever cover, she notes, he *is* toying with the pruriently possible, the salacious, seducing her, aware of his own power. Even so, he's unmerciful. Why does she tolerate such criticism? *Because* he's so unmerciful, she answers herself. Because he wouldn't bother were she not worth it. Because since Benjamin happened she's reached dimensions she never before dreamed of. She's been automatically executing *allegro* runs, a tape on fast forward, when he stops his accompaniment. "More glutinous mess." The runs, not clear, not precise enough. Fluid but precise, that's what this section demands; Beethoven the Romantic Classicist, not Brahms, Classic Romanticist. The interpretation too intellectual, too aggressive. "You're like a freshman wanting to know everything about the course!" he accuses. Standing, he walks — that wamble again — across to his desk and from there says bluntly, "Go home and work."

April gets up from the piano bench, gathers her music and jacket and moves to exit the room. Claspings the scores to her chest, she pauses, furrows her brow, bites gently on her lower lip, contemplating. Benjamin's absorbed in examining his date diary and seems to have already forgotten about her. Should she offer explanations? Why? She is after all a mature pianist with a beginning reputation. Talk amongst faculty and students centres on who's good, better, best. Bets are on that the year's competition winner will be a contest between herself and Chaviva. Chaviva Yidal, another Benjamin protégé. Still, April's taken a verbal beating from him this session.

She clears her throat. "Benjamin?" He looks up.

She says she's being tromped by Marching Band. He says nothing, the importance of crowning the Basketball Queen lost on him; descriptions of Stipp and Elkins, sousaphone, spitballs and coke, muddy incline and potbelly stove . . . gibberish. Forget a doo-dooing sheepdog, peeing cat, the Valkyries' nightly ride through the halls of the Ménage!

"How many children do you plan on having, April?" he asks, turning to her. "So then, marry *me*! You'll launder my shirts, pack my bags, arrange airline tickets . . . Redheads must be delightful in bed!"

He is, of course, having her on, but the bed thing's a damn decent idea. He'd turn on some appropriate fucking-music . . . Ravel's *Bolero* is cliché already. Maybe one of his own recordings . . . Scarlatti. Who now besides himself would have thought of Scarlatti! Brilliant! Spanish rhythms, hint of guitars, thickening textures, trills crisp and shivering as castanets, *forte* chords beating like the hammering heels of flamenco. So classically restrained, satisfyingly predictable . . . no, no . . . *inexorable!* . . . *proceeding from possible to probable to . . . Yes! YYYYes!!*

Sweat glistening on his brow, he flounces toward April, and unbuttoning his shirt, strips it off, exposing a short-sleeved undershirt, muscular biceps, baby-smooth arms. April gasps, her eyes widen. What can he be thinking!

Turning point. Inevitable Climax. Kismet.

"You will excuse me, I sweat profusely," pulling the T-shirt up over his

head; a hairless chest slides into paunch, a pot like pudding, the price of pastry, post-performance parties and pampering. Five-foot-three in lifts, to her five-foot-six in stockinged feet.

“Now I have work to do.” He plants himself before her, four-square and unmoving. “An orgasm is required. Foreplay. Climaxo! Varoom!!” Bent arm and fist twist and thrust upward, punching the air. “Denouement . . . *Deflatio*,” he finishes, a whisper, and spreads his hands in a smoothing motion outward. He smiles, noting the startled — appalled — look on her face. “Essence of Rachmaninoff. *All* Rachmaninoff. Varoom! You heard it here.”

Abruptly he pulls away, strides to the piano and sits down, at once the serious artist. “The Concerto,” he reminds, glancing up at her; one last admonishment before focusing on the keyboard and Rachmaninoff.

Dismissing her.
