

Jessica Keener

Solo

On a February afternoon in 1969, my brother and I prowled the halls of the music conservatory looking for Mother. We were not in a good part of town. The Conservatory bordered Roxbury and the South End in Boston—a jewel set between decrepit buildings and heroin addicts. Mother had dropped us off to find a parking spot. She had been gone too long.

It had been years since Mother had seen Mrs. Janson, whose amazing daughter, Justine, excelled as an opera singer. The idea of seeing an old high school friend and her prodigious daughter spawned happier expressions on her face at the dinner table and later, when she came into my bedroom to kiss me goodnight. She sat where my sheets folded over the blanket, and talked the way she sounded before parties or outings at the country club.

“Justine started singing when she was two. She’s simply one of those people who knew what she wanted right from the start.” Mother pointed her small chin upwards to reinforce this idea.

“What did she know? Is she nice?” I asked. “Is Justine friendly?”

“Friendly?” She turned to look at me, lying on my back. “I imagine. Her mother certainly is.”

For Justine’s recital, Mother wore an aqua blue wool pantsuit, which looked arresting next to her short, blond hair. Her mohair coat smelled of plastic wrap and bittersweet dry-cleaning chemicals. Peter threw his army jacket over bell-bottom jeans, which caused mother to grimace, but it was the only way he would agree to go. I wore lined woolen slacks and a navy blazer with silver buttons the size of radio dials.

Peter would have driven her Cadillac, but his foot, wrapped in an ace bandage, broke when he leapt off our high school stage during his Rolling Stones-inspired guitar performance. Instead, he slumped in the passenger seat. The doctor told him he had to wait two more weeks. I sat in back, all eyes on Mother’s driving.

Ever since she half submerged her Thunderbird in Gooseneck Lake last summer, and ended up in the hospital—too much drink at the party, too many pills—she avoided driving at night. But she made an exception today. She did not want to miss this chance, as if witnessing

Justine's greatness might infect us all.

"Justine's a true prodigy," mother said, gripping the wheel. "She knew what she wanted and pursued it. That's what it takes. Beverly told me that Justine sang the national anthem in first grade, in front of her entire school. Isn't that something?" Mother's voice shifted to higher, emotional registers. When we didn't answer, she said, "Isn't that something?" as if Peter, at 16 and I, who had recently turned 14, were already heading down a road to anonymity.

I drew circles on the car window, certain I could offer something important to the world, too, I just didn't know what it was yet. Peter and I sang, but not opera. I wanted to wrap myself in soulful harmonies, not satin gowns. Laura Nyro. Joni Mitchell—singers like that. Peter played rock guitar. But that didn't count for Mother. Classically trained in violin from the age of six, she considered our newer forms of music substandard.

When she exited the highway and entered the city, she braked and accelerated at the slightest provocation—a car passing to my right, a pedestrian waiting at the crosswalk. Snow banks from the last storm had narrowed the lanes. The February sky swept us into early darkness. Then, a light snow started.

"You're braking too hard," Peter said. He looked miserable in front. Pale brown bangs covered his eyes as if to block a harsh view of life ahead. On the sidewalk, strangers wore hurried looks, rushing to finish errands before stores closed.

"I can only do what I can do." She took a long, jittery drag of her cigarette, leaving her pink lips on the filter. We didn't say anything again. I'd heard this phrase from her too many times, but it still unfurled inside the car like her cigarette smoke, flattening against the ceiling, flattening us.

Finally, Mother said, "Beverly also told me that Justine practices four hours a day, has done this for years, but that's what it takes when you strive for greatness." She leaned toward the windshield. "There are no shortcuts about that."

"Is that how long you practiced?" I asked because I had no idea. She rarely talked about her musical days.

"Yes, centuries ago," she said, sighing.

Her violin lay in a cool corner of her bedroom closet like a dated history book. Once a year, she picked it up and tapped the strings,

stroking the bridge with one finger. She'd place the chin rest under my chin and for a moment I'd see her face change, soften, open up to a world beyond the one she found herself in, and that included me. She held the bow for me, then sawed my arm back and forth across the bridge and together we listened to the breathy, sleeping strings.

"All dried out. They sound terrible."

She stopped sawing and her mood changed.

"You could buy new ones."

"What's the point?"

When people asked why she no longer played violin, she said, "arthritis and children," and gave a quick smile, as if having children was some kind of ailment. I know she didn't mean to hurt me when she said that, but it did.

In the car, she reached for her cigarette again, her middle finger and thumb wincingly misshapen. Pain pills filled our medicine cabinets. She took two tablets in the morning, two in the afternoon, extra pills before this trip, because her finger joints throbbed like suffocating hearts, especially in damp, cold weather. Did all mothers take so many pills?

Downtown, we circled around the block, past several filled up parking lots.

"I'll let you two off," she said.

"What will you do?" Peter asked.

"I'll find a spot. Go."

"We'll stay with you," I said, leaning forward. I hung my arms over the front seat.

"Hurry. Go on. I don't want you to miss the beginning. It sets the tone."

She dropped us off at the front entrance and we watched her turn in the direction of nearby Symphony Hall, where mother played once, her red brake lights flickering as she merged with other cars.

To my surprise, I fell in love with the inside of the conservatory—ornate plaster ceilings, moldings wide enough to curl up in, chandeliers intricate as bee hives. It captured the essence of beauty or hope, seemed to offer a permanent escape from ugliness and despair. Maybe Mother was right to bring us here, after all.

Peter and I followed a curved hallway to a small recital room at the building's rear. He limped and sounded one-footed in the hall—the

padded sole of his special boot silent while my heels clapped in double rhythm against the shiny floor. A small poster on the wall showed a picture of Justine Janson, her hair pulled back. She looked much older than twenty-one.

As soon as we entered the recital room, Mrs. Janson came over to us and introduced herself. I shook her small hand. She was a short woman with frizzy hair and wide, hula-hoop hips.

"You're dears to come in this weather. Where's your mother?"

"Parking," Peter said.

Mrs. Janson made a face, one that sympathized with the plight of finding a parking spot in Boston, then smiled and thanked us for coming. We took our seats in a row near the back. Peter draped his army jacket over Mother's empty chair to reserve it for her.

Soon, the lights dimmed. A man in a tuxedo crossed the stage and took his place at the piano. The door to the recital room closed. I looked back instinctively for mother, still circling the building, I imagined, looking for the elusive parking spot. Peter shrugged. Then a spotlight brightened and Mrs. Janson's daughter Justine glided to center stage swathed in purple chiffon. The pianist began a roulade of scales. Justine parted her lips and sang in Italian.

The program notes translated each aria into English. Justine sang about loneliness and longing, the beauty of the woods through which she walked. She shaped her lips around high notes. She trilled about her aching breast, her lost love.

"What good is the exquisite flower lighting her path with no one to share it with?" she sang. *"What good is the sweet air if only I can breathe it?"*

While Justine's voice hovered in uncertainty, or made unexpected flutters and skips, I counted fourteen rows of wooden seats. The minutes became half an hour.

"Where is she?" I whispered to Peter.

He left his seat and slipped out the door. I went with him.

The long, marble hallway was empty except for two women taking tickets at the front entrance of the main Jordan Hall. The Vienna Choir Boys were singing in there.

"Did you see a woman in a mohair coat?" Peter asked the girl with thin hair and freckles.

"She's our mother," I said.

The girl shrugged. "A lot of people pass through here. Where is

she supposed to meet you?"

"She's parking the car," I said.

Peter pointed in the direction of the small recital hall to the left.

"If you see her, please tell her to go to there."

The woman nodded.

"She's very pretty. She has blond hair," I added.

We walked down the foyer steps and looked outside. Snowfall covered the roads in a crusty membrane, the falling sky lowering itself upon us.

"Is she lost?" I asked. My breath fogged up the glass door.

"Possibly."

We waited together, staring at the street lined with parked cars. Under the snow, the cars had turned into white ovules.

Peter looked at his watch. It had been three quarters of an hour since she dropped us off.

"It's icy out there," he said, quietly.

We went back up the stairs and stood near the ticket takers unsure about what to do next.

"Isaac Stern is playing at Symphony Hall. There's a lot going on today," the ticket taker offered as a way to explain the parking situation.

"Let's go back," I said. I wanted to tell Mrs. Janson. Perhaps she would know something. Or maybe Mother had come through a side door.

Back inside the recital room, the audience clapped. Justine left the stage. Lights brightened for intermission.

As soon as Mrs. Janson turned around I started toward her.

"Not here yet?" she asked, looking a bit worried herself. "They did say parking was impossible today."

"It's snowing," I said. I looked for Peter at the door. He motioned to me.

"Let's go back to the front," he said.

We walked down the marble hallway again, past doors I now recognized. Some had gold leaf numbers and others did not. This time when we reached the front lobby we ran into the intermission crowd for the Vienna Choir Boys singing in the main concert hall. People smoked furiously. The doors to the main stage opened revealing cathedral-sized organ pipes above the stage and gold-rimmed railings. It was a beautiful room steeped in carved wood and plush green chairs. It looked happy

inside there, the opposite of the squall brewing in my stomach.

"I'm calling Dad," Peter said testily.

It was the maid's day off. Father had stayed home with my younger brothers, Elliot and Robert. He had a new curriculum to prepare for his college literature class. Peter spotted a telephone booth off the lobby. I stood against the folding glass doors while he dialed home.

"No answer," he said, thumping the receiver into its metal holder.

"Let's go outside."

We went out without coats down one block toward Boylston Street. City lights twinkled red, white and green, impervious to my cold-stiffened fingertips. Peter surprised me by lighting a cigarette.

"I'm thinking of calling the police." He took short puffs, impatient intakes.

"Where do you think Dad is?"

"I don't know," he said, stamping out the cigarette.

"Where could she possibly be?" I heard the whine in my voice. I was freezing, scared, my head covered in a doily of ice. I looked over at Symphony Hall lit up with a border of lights the size and color of onions. The building looked secure, unperturbed by the disorderly streets cutting around it or the panic circling in my chest.

Back inside the lobby, overhead lights flickered. The crowd drained into Jordan Hall for more Vienna Choir Boys, leaving the marble stairway empty again.

"This is insane," Peter said.

An hour passed since Mother left us at the curb. Behind the thick doors of Jordan Hall sounds of the choir crescendoed and receded like underwater currents. Peter went back to the phone booth and called Father again. No answer.

"Something's wrong," he said, unfolding the glass doors, still clenching the phone. His face was wet, his hair stuck in moist bands across his forehead.

"I'm calling the police."

He folded the doors shut. I listened to the dime click and ring through the slots. Someone answered. My brother nodded and waved his hand. He looked at me as he talked but his clairvoyant blue eyes saw beyond my face. His voice lacked intonation. He nodded again and hung up.

"What did they say?"

"They thought an hour was long. They're looking into it."

He walked out of the booth and back over to the front door, which is when we both saw him: my father's face distorted as a run over grocery bag, his shoulders pushing an invisible burden up the stairs.

"Dad!" I called.

He veered abruptly.

"Your mother's in the hospital. Get your coats."

The ice crystals left a glistening halo on his large forehead. I scrambled down to the recital room, careless this time when I opened the doors. The light caused Mrs. Janson to turn. She must have seen a look on my face because she raised her hand to her chin but that is all I remember of my mother's high school friend that day. We ran back outside.

In the backseat of the Lincoln, Elliot, the youngest at eight, and Robert our ten-year old professor of fantasy books, scrunched together on one side. I got in and sat next to them. Peter got in front.

"What happened?" Peter said.

"A furniture truck hit her. Goddamn it! They don't know."

Father pounded the dashboard. When the light turned red, he looked both ways and ran through it.

"Jesus Dad!" Peter said. "Don't kill us!"

"Your mother can't wait." Father swiveled the steering wheel, his eyes twisting all over the road.

I froze, but not from the cold. Father sped past Symphony Hall. A stray dog hunting for food in an overturned garbage can carried a sheen of snow on its back, a hunk of bread corked between its jaws. Elliot kept wiggling his pudgy fingers like bugs caught in a trap. Robert held tightly to a book and read, which is what he did when emotions churned dangerously.

I prayed as we raced toward the hospital. Father honked at every car in his way. I prayed for everything to be as it was before this moment, until the sound of my father's murderous expletives dulled, and the stinging lights of the city became shadows. I imagined Justine in the deep woods singing alone as if only God were listening. I wanted God to hear me now. *Please, please let her be all right.*

Father swerved into Boston City Hospital and parked in front of the emergency entrance.

"Stay here," he said.

He pushed open the car door and ran inside. The motor idled, warming the car with a moist, leathery smell. Every five seconds the windshield wipers cleared the glass, making Japanese fans.

"I'm going in," Peter said, opening the door.

We all piled out.

Inside, we caught up to Father arguing with a woman behind the nurses' desk. The woman had a hairclip, which she scooped into her hair as she stepped around the counter. She was thin and small.

"I'm calling the police if you don't tell me where my wife is."

"The doctor is coming to talk to you now—please hold on. I will get him."

"Hold on to what?" he said, shadowing her. "Where's my wife? Goddamn this fucking hell hole!" he screamed.

A doctor hurried down the main hallway. His white coat flickered. He wore gray slacks and black tie up shoes.

"Mr. Kunitz? I'm Dr. Greer. Why don't we go into the waiting room? No one's in there right now."

The doctor pointed to a small room off the hall.

"Is she alive?" Father said, grabbing the doctor's elbow.

The doctor stopped and made some kind of calculation. He turned his head slowly. His face was long and flat as a clipboard.

"I'm sorry—"

"What?"

He looked at Father and the rest of us in the waiting room. I heard words about concussion. Shattered spinal cord. Pills. The man's beeper pulsed and he turned it off. Another nurse walked in.

"She's in recovery," she said.

"Recovery? You said she was—For Christ sakes! Which is it?"

Father jammed his face up to the doctor's.

"It's a holding room for you and your family, if you choose," the doctor said, glancing at my brothers and me. But there wasn't any choosing. Father dashed out and we hurried with him to the door where the man had pointed. We moved as one conglomerate, sidling into a room at the other end of the hall. I smelled rubbing alcohol.

The woman's face was swollen inside a helmet of bandages twice as big as her head. She would have been horrified by how ugly she looked. It wasn't her. She didn't move. She lay still as a branch ripped

from a tree. I floated to the top of the room, dizzy with the height.

Father collapsed on top of her, wailing and barking in shredded yelps. Elliot, who was more flesh than bones, sank into a corner. I heard him moan. Robert stiffened. Peter stood at the end of the bed shaking. The room convulsed, a spasm of contractions, as if Mother were giving birth again, over and over, pushing us back out.

"Shut up. Shut up. She'll hear you," I heard myself say. "Shut up, everyone."

This is when my Aunt Annette came in. Nearly six feet tall in her navy pumps, she looked military in her blue suit, white pearl earrings and hair swept tightly into a sailor's knot at the back of her head. "Good Lord. The children." My aunt tried to gather us up like a bushel of apples that had spilled across the floor. But that was impossible. Bitterness had spoiled everything or would if I let it. Mother said there were no shortcuts. It was up to me to know. Whatever life I would lead, whatever greatness I hoped to achieve, would take hours of practice. Years. I turned away. My aunt took my arm and I walked back down that long hospital hall. ~

~ Jessica Keener is a fiction editor at Agni magazine. Her fiction has appeared in literary magazines and online in *The Chariton Review*, *Heat City Review*, *Elixir*, *Northeast Corridor*, *The Huffington Post*, *DearReader.com* and others. Fiction honors include publication in *The Pushcart Prize under '100 outstanding writers'*, *Redbook magazine second prize in fiction*, and a *Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant in fiction*.

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