

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Stacey Megally
440 Hz

When I'm curled up next to him like this—head nestled in the spot between his shoulder and chest—I know Brad will learn to love me. I know this as certainly as I know that every symphony orchestra around the world tunes their instruments to the sound frequency of 440 Hz, otherwise known as the pitch, A-natural. And that every rehearsal and performance begins only after the principal oboist plays the A-natural to which every other player will tune.

Brad, the current principal oboist of our student orchestra at Whitman Conservatory, props himself up on his elbow and kisses my right temple. "I've gotta make reeds. You wanna stay or go?"

Still tingling from where his lips touched my skin, I sit up and hug my knees to my chest. "Stay."

Dusky light spills in from the window, illuminating the softness of Brad's cheeks, the curve of his lashes, the arc of his biceps. He opens the lid of his small, plastic reed kit, revealing tools and cane pieces and spools of bright thread, meticulously organized and neatly put away.

Brad selects a reed he'd finished last week and places it between his soft, pink lips. He blows on it softly and I can almost feel the wind of his breath along my spine. He takes it out and frowns. "Not great. I think I can make a better one."

I inch closer until I can feel the heat from his body and settle in to watch Brad fold, shape, scrape, and wrap cane reed. His fingers agile, his expression patient. Now is when we settle into our rhythm. Now are the precious minutes when he's just beginning to shape a piece of cane, full of hope that this one will produce the best-sounding reed he's ever made—that it will provide the warmest, purest A-natural to tune the Whitman Conservatory Symphony Orchestra.

This is when he tells me his dreams about moving to the city and taking on every available oboe gig like a whore until he proves himself and makes enough connections to land a full-time position, so he can settle down with a sweet man—who must love classical music—in a Craftsman house with a front-porch swing. "A yellow one," he says. And this is when I tell him about how I want three kids, so I can take them to school and playdates and music lessons. "I hope at least one of them plays the cello." I picture a dark-lashed little boy with soft, pink lips lugging a cello case up the stairs.

"You know what, Emily?" Brad says today as he folds a strip of soaked cane over his shaper tool. "The best thing you ever did is pick an instrument that doesn't require making your own reeds."

I think about my clarinet reed, a single wooden sliver secured to my mouthpiece—purchased several at a time, by the box. Sometimes I adjust them by hand, but not very often.

"Lucky accident." I hadn't actually picked the clarinet in junior high school—I'd wanted to play the flute. But they'd needed a clarinet player,

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so I agreed to learn it. When it became clear I was good at it, I started to genuinely prefer the perfect roundness of its timbre over the flute's girly shrill.

"Speaking of lucky." Brad begins to shape the cane with a knife. "How jealous is everyone that you're principal for Prokofiev Five?"

A sweet pleasure blooms in my chest at the thought of playing the famous clarinet solos in the last movement of Prokofiev's B-Flat symphony. Only Brad knows how disappointed I'd been during the last seating rotation when Aaron Takahashi had been awarded the principal position—and clarinet solo—for Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. "Be patient, you'll get one," Brad had reassured me. "And something less cliché than *Scheherazade*."

"Actually, there's nothing lucky about it." Brad says now. "You know, Mr. Anaheim doesn't give a shit where most people are sitting in a rotation, but when there's a big solo, there's never any mistake about who he chooses for principal."

"I guess." I watch Brad's steady hands and nimble fingers as he carefully follows the slant of the shaper, the same way they follow the curve of my hairline when we cuddle on the sofa in the basement of the dorm and watch bad movies on a Friday night.

"Do you ever think—" I'm surprised at the acceleration in my pulse, the subtle shaking in my voice. "—about how lucky it was that we happened to sit next to each other in our first symphony rotation last fall?"

"So lucky." Brad squints and holds up the reed.

I wait, hoping he'll say what I want him to—what he's said a million times to me.

"Nobody understands me like you, Emmie." The words I wanted, like the sun on my face.

I run my finger along Brad's dark sideburns, marveling again at the resemblance Brad has to my ex-boyfriend, Max. I've already told Brad all about Max. How I'd admired him from afar for four years before he talked to me for the first time at a carwash fundraiser for our high school concert band. I'd worn a cotton tee-shirt over my bikini top and shorts, carefully avoiding getting it wet. But when I looked down and saw sweat stains beginning to spread over the fabric around my armpits and cleavage, I let myself get doused by the hose. While I was wiping water from my eyes, Max appeared in front of me, rag in one hand, a Coke in the other. He drained the last bit of his drink into his mouth, then looked at me, his dark eyes roaming and hungry. "I'd let you wash my car any day."

"I know, I know." Brad says now. "I look like your ex."

"Except you're not an ass." I rest my head on Brad's shoulder, which rocks up and down as he razors his reed.

"Gluteus Ass-Maximus never deserved you, Em." He holds his reed up one more time.

I close my eyes, warm and happy in Brad's armor-shaped words. He'd come up with Gluteus Ass-Maximus when I'd described my high school

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relationship, unfolding the story—and the sizzling embarrassment—layer by layer, over the first few weeks of our friendship. One night, back in September, we'd returned to the dorm after one of Nick Carroll's beer-and-pot-clouded parties and exchanged our deepest relationship secrets while sharing a bag of potato chips. *Max told me he got a boner every time I got jealous of him talking to another girl*, I'd confessed, still furious at the thought of it, but also mortified that I'd still liked him after that. *Promise me you won't ever let anyone else talk to you like that again*, Brad had said, his hands on my shoulders, his eyes like laser beams.

Now, Brad's frown softens into approval at his perfectly shaped cane. He removes it from the shaping tool and holds it in his fingers like it's an orchid, rare and beautiful. Sometimes he looks at me this way, even though a third of the dreaded freshmen fifteen hang over the front of my jeans in fleshy folds.

It was the expression I'd looked for on Ass-Maximus's face the night I'd lost my virginity. Instead, Max had puffed his chest and smirked like he'd just won a belching contest or told a dirty joke at a party.

"You know who's always staring at you?" Brad says now, setting his newly shaped cane aside. "That sophomore percussionist with the football shoulders."

"Football shoulders" could also have been used to describe Max. Something about the way he held those shoulders—upright and cocksure—carried his sexiness further than his facial features alone could do. On our first date, over pizza, the eyes of every girl who'd walked into the restaurant had lingered on him. But that night, Max had looked only at me. "Where have you been all my life? Why can't more girls be like you?" he said after we agreed that *Pines of Rome* was overrated, that symphonies should play more works by Poulenc. The more the other girls had looked, the more the weight of my body had disappeared, like I'd flown up into the clouds.

Brad picks up an unfinished reed he'd shaped a few days ago. "Time to tie this one up." He chooses a thread the color of clear-day sky.

"Lucky reed." I lace my syllables with coyness.

"You know it, girl." Brad bats his answer back at me, mimicking my tone.

Down the hall, someone blasts a recording of a violinist—one of those unaccompanied pieces violin players like to play as loudly as they can to intimidate each other. This one, my perfect pitch tells me, is in the key of A minor and the violin lands repeatedly on the same pitch: A-natural. 440 Hz.

"God, that piece is so ugly." Brad rolls his eyes. "Violinists are so uptight."

I'm not really listening to his commentary, focusing, instead on the A-naturals. Each one is like a tequila shot, echoing my certainty, revving up my courage.

I sit up and face Brad, my lips itching to touching his. "You know what Ning-Chih told me before I got here?" Ning-Chih was my best friend in

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high school. *Max is an ass* was her final assessment of him the day he'd dumped me—the day after I'd walked in on him with another girl at a band party, but still left with him and had sex with him in the car before he dropped me off at my house. It was also the day we both heard back about our Whitman auditions. Max hadn't been accepted.

"Ning-Chih." Brad smiles approvingly even though he only knows her through my stories. "What did she tell you?"

"That next time, I should make sure there's a friendship before a there's a relationship." I lean toward Brad until his upper arm is against my cleavage and put my hand on his chest. I've done this a million times before, but this time, my heart is beating so hard against my chest I can feel it in my eyeballs. Brad startles, turns his head and looks at me as if I've accidentally squeaked on my clarinet. Almost as quickly, he looks away and leans toward his reed kit just enough to slide his bicep away from my hand. An uneasiness blossoms in my chest.

"I don't think that's how it works in college." Brad scoffs and starts wrapping the thread around the reed. "There are beautiful boys everywhere and we finally have beds that aren't just down the hall from our parents."

The violinist's notes unfold like peacock feathers, flashy variations on one A-natural after another. The sky is almost completely dark now, blanketing the room in shadows. Suddenly, I hear Ning-Chih's voice in my head. *One day, she'd insisted while I'd sobbed into the phone, You'll be at Whitman and you'll think, Fuck Max. Look at me now.*

With my pulse beating almost as fast as the thirty-second notes coming from the violin, I place my hands over Brad's, pausing his tying.

"What are you—" Brad starts to say, but I stop him with my kiss. Finally.

It feels like forever. Like the perfect roundness of the clarinet. A relationship built on friendship. 440 Hz.

"Em, no." Brad pulls away.

The violin recording plays on. My mouth hangs open, forming a cavern like the one taking shape in my stomach. In the darkness, Brad's face shifts into Max's. I shrink back, my fingertips on my lips.

"Em." His voice so soft, so gentle. His features realign themselves back into Brad. "You know I'm—"

I shake my head, willing him to stop talking, relieved that the tears gathering in the corners of my eyes blur my vision of him. Suddenly, the chill of realization shoots up and down my arms. I'm a cliché. The straight girl in love with her gay best friend. I'm just the clarinet solo from *Scheherazade*.

Brad pushes his reed kit away and nestles my head back between his shoulder and chest. We lie quietly while the clock radio on his dresser turns from 9:00 to 9:01 to 9:02 to 9:03 to 9:04. My jagged post-cry breaths eventually even out, rising and falling in unison with Brad's.

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"Sorry you didn't finish your reed." Mine is the voice that breaks the silence.

Brad shakes his head. "It doesn't matter."

"It's going to be better than the last one," I gaze up at the ceiling. "It's going to be perfect."

We fall into silence again. 9:05. 9:06. The violin recording eventually stops and when it does, I suddenly remember eavesdropping on a couple of violinists in my theory class a few weeks ago. They'd been discussing their A-natural preferences. "440 Hz just sounds so flat now," one had said. "I started tuning to 441 years ago, and now 442 is beginning to sound better to my ear." "Yeah," the other violinist said. "In ten years, orchestras better be tuning to 442." *Sanctimonious violinists*, I'd thought, rolling my eyes. Before that day, I'd never heard anyone else challenge the truth that 440 Hz is the only A-natural. But the next time I'd heard a violinist tuning in the practice room, I could tell she was tuning to 442.

"It's just that nobody understands me like you do," I whisper.

"I know," he whispers back.

"I deserve someone who—"

"Totally gets you." Brad turns his head and kisses me on the temple. "I know you do."