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The Music Teacher

All Karen could hear as she entered the Lenfield High School teacher's lounge was the hellish last movement of Symphonie Fantastique, the part where the witches dance around Berlioz's dead body in cheerful 6/8.

She felt like she'd been marched to the scaffold already; her guillotined head was rolling around somewhere in the parking lot, her body walking into school from sheer muscle memory—but none of the other teachers noticed her decapitation. They stood in an enthralled whirlpool around Bill, head of the math department and her husband, who had driven to school early that morning in his mother's car.

There was nothing like a good witch-hunt to liven up the school; it was even better when there were hateable suspects.

"I'll bet that Jenkins kid did it," Karen heard her husband say.

Of course he did, heads nodded. Everyone knew Jared Jenkins was sliding down the hill of juvenile delinquency as fast as his older brother laid the track. With a role model like that, one who brought vodka to school in water bottles and burgled an English teacher's house, who wouldn't go astray?

My fault my fault my fault my fault, ran the 6/8 loop in Karen's mind. Everything was falling apart so fast. Bill had slept on the couch that weekend. Franz was leaving. The teachers were circling around Jared like hyenas preparing to devour an antelope who'd strayed from the herd.

"Liar! You know he didn't do it!" Karen wanted to shout. But she didn't. She walked in quietly, as if everything were fine.

"Hey honey," Bill said, coming over to kiss her on the cheek.

So they'd pretend things were normal. Several billion people were playing that game.

Bill, Franz, Jared, how had their unrelated threads tangled so antagonistically? It was Karen's fault of course, though in retrospect her actions seemed inevitable, like she was a marionette and not a woman making her own ruinous decisions.

Of course she'd gone to Franz, for instance. When she'd gotten married at twenty-two, Bill had seemed a reliable and notably sane choice in contrast to her friends' boyfriends, bisexual pianists and melodramatic tenors. And she'd loved him confidently, for his belief in reason, for his enthusiasm as a math tutor, for his adorable, round-lensed glasses. Serendipitously they had discovered Lenfield in a quaint corner of southeastern Massachusetts, with high school teacher openings in both math and music. (It was a weak music program, with a paltry band and a faltering chorus and no orchestra at all, but at the time Karen had believed she could improve it.)

It took her three years to unearth the insufficiency that had quietly existed, she realized, since the earliest days of her marriage, buried like a prehistoric artifact in the garden, hidden and unexpectedly excavated due to an accidental strike of the trowel. This insufficiency had something to do with the flourishing of Bill's math program under support from school administrators, who lived in vague terror of "the Chinese" and their supposed mathematical superiority; it had something to do with how the music program was allowed to hobble along decrepitly, while grant money went to the more obviously useful departments and the football team. It had something to do with Bill's inability to understand Karen's interest in teaching at a school with an orchestra, or at least one where she could recruit more kids for the band, when Lenfield was "perfectly fine," with seniors earning 5s in AP Calc and one student going to MIT. It had something to do with Bill's blithe optimism, while everyone else whispered about the upcoming pink slip apocalypse, speculating smugly which certain departments would be first to go.

So of course Karen went to Franz, Franz Wassermann from Vienna, the music professor she met ten months ago at the nearby Waverly College faculty recital, when they'd caught each other's rolling eyes as the pianist launched questionably into *Fantasie Impromptu*. Franz had come to Lenfield for the year to research for his book on the late composer Hermann Frederick, who had emigrated to the United States and bequeathed the entirety of his papers to the Waverly archive.

"Why Waverly?" Karen asked, unable to connect the composer, whose symphonies were performed by the New York Philharmonic, to quiet Lenfield, where it was a significant achievement to have taught the band the difference between quarter and half notes.

"It was a personal connection. One of his best friends from music school became a professor at Waverly. And when Frederick moved to the States, he started

teaching here as well."

"That's amazing. I'd never guess," Karen said.

"It is surprising, that such a famous composer would come here, instead of going to a big music school. But Frederick was a very private man. He hated prestigious institutions." Franz smiled at her. He was about ten years older than Karen, tall, thin, blue-eyed. "You should come with me to see his scores in the archive," he said. "His handwriting is quite beautiful."

They went the next day. Franz had the librarian bring out the score of the *Fifth Symphony*, which Karen remembered as a dramatic assault of brass and percussion. But Franz was right; Frederick's handwriting was beautiful, neat yet flowing, hundreds of elegant notes pirouetting across the page. After she'd admired the first pages of the manuscript, Franz turned the page, brushing her hand. Had it been an accident? Karen wasn't sure. All she knew was that she hadn't drawn her hand away.

There followed a summer of coffee, of conversation, of sitting in the overstuffed chairs in Franz's apartment, listening to the Beethoven symphonies conducted by John Gardiner, all while Bill was at conferences, or studying, or under the impression that Karen suddenly had acquired several new girlfriends. She never technically did anything wrong. Once, when Franz's face got alarmingly close to hers, she drew away. But the way her heart rushed under his blue gaze, the way she imagined herself sitting on his lap with his arms wrapped around her, the way he sometimes brushed unnecessarily against her and smiled, all made her burn with guilt.

(And yet she couldn't stay away. She felt she deserved him; she deserved at least one friend in Lenfield who understood music, and therefore understood her. She needed someone who could comfort her, with recordings of Schubert and Brahms and Chopin.)

And so of course this sordid banality came crashing down on Jared, who was doomed, already guilty of everything.

When Jared joined the chorus earlier that year Karen groaned. She'd heard all about him. He'd been spotted drinking near school grounds. He'd started a dozen fights in the cafeteria. He'd stolen a calculator from Bill's desk.

The biggest problem was that he hadn't quite gotten himself expelled, despite numerous conflicts and suspensions. Although his coat sometimes carried a faintly suspicious stench, he'd never been caught with drugs at school. Although he worried teachers with his ill humor,

he'd never threatened violence, had never been seen with a weapon. Some teachers wished he'd do something really bad just once, so they could get rid of him. Or at least the punk could have the decency to drop out.

On the first day of school, Jared and another boy stood sullenly at the back of the five-member chorus. Karen had chosen the song "You raise me up." In the beginning of her Lenfield tenure she'd avoided pop tunes, but then it became too painful to hear her favorite composers ruined by the under-achieving chorus. She played the first few measures of each part on the piano, since none of the singers could read music. (Not that this playing really mattered; she'd never found a student with a sense of pitch.)

She counted off beats and started. Three faithfully tuneless girls droned in front. In the back, one of the boys had emerged from the texture, a resonant tenor right on pitch. *I've gone crazy at last*, Karen thought. *I'm actually hallucinating that I have a good student*. But despite the attempted interference of lucidity, the voice continued. It created tasteful phrases, stopping to breathe at places that made musical sense. The other boy yawned. The voice continued. Was that remarkable voice truly coming from Jared Jenkins, teachers' enemy, Principal Tucker's nemesis?

It was.

In December she convinced him to audition for the district chorus; she spent Wednesday and Friday afternoons coaching him after school. She taught him to read music and rehearsed his pieces endlessly. (She tried to convince his father to get him music lessons, but Mr. Jenkins said no, why should he reward his son with music lessons when he was causing all that trouble?). Jared was the first student from Lenfield High to audition for district, the first to make it, the first to audition for All-State Chorus. When he was accepted, Karen emailed the office so his achievement would be announced in the morning bulletin, but for some reason her note was never acknowledged.

Now Jared was auditioning for the Youth Chorale in Boston, an audition which had required patient persuasion of his father, who finally agreed, if Karen would drive Jared to Boston herself. She agreed gladly. Every year she had hoped to find a student like Jared. She wanted to discover this student as her own music teacher had discovered her, plucked out her sound from the other clarinets in the school band, urged her to audition for a youth symphony in Boston. After she'd been accepted to this symphony, Karen had traveled to Europe on orchestra tour, had seen Prague, where Mozart had written an exuberant sympho-

ny, had seen Leipzig, where Schumann and Mendelssohn and Bach had walked the streets. She had discovered the symphonies of Schubert, had learned that art made humanity worth it—that music, the wrenching sorrow of Brahms, the joyous lust of Beethoven, made everything, the random creation of the earth and its struggles and its violence, worth it, just so that Bach had lived and written for people to hear his fugues, just so that they could listen, and know it was for such sublimity that they were living. Karen had always remembered this music teacher with an emotion that tightened her throat; she had long been convinced that to teach at least one teenager to perceive beauty, to embrace it and breathe it and know unreservedly that because of it life was worth living, was the one thing that truly mattered in this world.

It was Friday, the afternoon before someone threw a brick through the tech lab window—the tech lab funded by a technology grant that had allowed the school to purchase thirty of Apple's latest all-in-one computers, ten iPads, and a scanner. The window, and the nearest computer, both smashed to bits by the brick, had been worth $2,000.

That Friday Karen stayed after school to rehearse with Jared.

"Thanks for letting me borrow your CDs," Jared said. He took Karen's discs from his backpack: Mozart's *Mass in C-Minor*, Josquin's *Missa Pange Lingua*, Schubert's songs.

"What's wrong?" Karen asked.

"I'm just not sure I can do this," he said, slumping into a chair. His camouflage coat bagged around him, obscuring his slight frame.

"Jared, I've known lots of musicians. You have real talent," Karen said. "With practice, you can definitely make it." She plugged in her iPod player and started the Handel track.

Bill knocked and came in. He glanced disdainfully at Jared. He disapproved of Karen's wasting such effort on a delinquent, when surely there were better uses of time.

Karen paused the music. "We're rehearsing for Chorale auditions," she explained.

"Mom called," Bill said. "She's sick and wants me to come for the weekend."

"Sure," Karen said dryly. "Hope she feels better." Bill left. His hypochondriac mother periodically demanded a weekend sacrifice from her only child; at least Karen had never been expected to go. And while Bill had worriedly explained this aspect of his mother's personality in

the early days of their marriage, and said Karen could come (though he would understand if she didn't), these occasional weekends had now become routine and almost relieving, for it freed them from further nights of small at the dinner table, and the continuing realization that they had little to talk about anymore.

Karen restarted the music. Jared studied the score while listening; then Karen played his melody on the piano. Although his music reading had improved, he still needed some guidance. Karen sounded the initial pitch on the piano; Jared sang back the first phrase, then the second, then both together. He formed each note beautifully. At the end of each phrase, Karen played the final note on the piano to check whether Jared had maintained pitch. He'd done it faultlessly, a real feat for someone without perfect pitch—the ability to pull any note, C or E-flat or F-sharp, out of thin air, acquirable only for children whose parents started them on music lessons at five. Although Jared's window for perfect pitch had passed long ago, he retained pitches he'd heard better than many of the trained musicians Karen had known. Had he gotten musical training at a younger age, Karen suspected, he might have developed into a prodigy.

The door to the music room flew open; Jared's father stormed in. "Jared!" he shouted. "I've called you three times! Let's go!"

"Oh. My phone was off," Jared said.

"We have to get your brother to his meeting with the officer! I told you this morning!"

"I forgot."

"Keep it up and there'll be no more of this chorus bullshit!" Jared's father stormed out, shoving over a music stand on the way. Jared followed.

Karen saw the text from Franz when she turned her phone on. "Are you coming?" he'd written at 3:00, when they'd planned to meet for coffee. Now it was 4:00. She'd completely forgotten.

"Oh Franz," she said, calling him. "I'm so sorry."

"What, did you find someone more interesting to hang out with?" he asked, laughter in his smooth low voice.

"I was rehearsing with my student, the one who can actually sing."

"It's all right," Franz said. "I'm near the high school now. Why don't I just pick you up?" A minute later he arrived, Schubert's piano trio in B-flat gushing joyously from his car. She got in, blinking quickly under his kind blue gaze.

"Karen, Karen, why so glum?" he asked.

"It's my student," she said. "His dad came in today and—it seems things are pretty rough in that family."

"That's unfortunate," Franz said. "I'm sorry to hear that. Well, I may have something to cheer you up. I'm having a dinner party with some friends tonight. You're invited, of course."

"A party? I thought you had no plans this weekend."

Franz frowned. "I'm sorry, I really hate to add to your bad news…but there's been some bad news. I've received word that my mother is ill. I'm going back to Vienna on Tuesday."

"But your research—"

"I've been here for nine months now, and I've accomplished most of what I needed to. I suppose I could always come back, but I don't see that happening in the near future."

All along she'd promised herself she wouldn't get attached. But it was too late now. She felt gutless, like she'd been bayoneted, and her intestines had spilled somewhere back in the music room.

The friends flocked in at five o'clock. Karen had no idea how Franz had managed to meet all these people. There was a violinist from the Boston Symphony, a bassoonist who played early music with the Boston Baroque. There was a French conductor, and a composer from the New England Conservatory, and an English professor from Harvard. There was a writer and a pianist and, incongruously, a postal worker from Norton.

While everyone else drank white wine and champagne and vodka, Karen gorged herself on baked brie, braised duck, and roasted eggplant, then stuffed herself into a corner of the living room couch, where she had free access to a tray of miniature pastries, cannolis and Boston cream cakes and cream puffs, stuffing more sweetness into her mouth the more that she felt about to cry. Somewhere Brahms' *Third Symphony* was playing, gushing nostalgia like too-sweet perfume. Around midnight drunken friends drifted away with teary goodbyes. Although Karen wasn't drunk, she felt like she was. She sulked in her couch corner, heavy-headed, exhausted, and queasy from eating too much.

Franz sat down next to her. "I'm an idiot," he said. "How can I be leaving? When you're here?" He rested his head in his hands. "But there's nothing I can do. I should drive you back to your car. It's late."

"I don't want to go home," Karen said. The house would be empty. The bedroom would be still. Under the

dark ceiling, she might as well be alone in the wilderness, undefended by walls and a roof.

"You shouldn't stay, Karen," Franz said quietly. "You haven't done anything wrong—what's the point of risking everything now?"

As Franz pulled the car out she turned her face to the window so he wouldn't see her tears. They sat silently as Franz wove capriciously down the street. What a scandal it would be, Karen thought, if he crashed and their bodies were discovered together on Saturday morning.

There were hardly any other cars on the road, just one behind them, some distance away. They arrived at the high school parking lot without accident. They pulled into the front section of the lot where teachers parked their cars. Franz's headlights swept the front of the school. Two hooded boys holding spray paint cans came suddenly into view. There was Jared in his camouflage coat; he turned to confront the car and then ran. The other boy followed him to the wire fence on the side of the school property, where they scrambled up the diamond links and jumped to the other side.

Franz stepped out of the car. Spray painted across the front doors were the unfinished words: *Lenfield HS suck*.

"Oh my goodness," Franz said. "Did you recognize them?"

"No," Karen said.

"Should we call the police?"

"No," Karen said. "It's none of our business."

Just then another car pulled up. The headlights blinded both of them. The driver got out and slammed the door, the car still running. He threw a bottle to the ground. Instead of smashing the bottle skittered, leaking dark fluid like blood. Karen's eyes adjusted. It was Bill.

"You think I didn't know about this?" he shouted. "You think I'm stupid?"

"Bill!" Karen yelled. "You don't understand!"

"Damn you! Damn both of you!" Bill screamed, lunging to grab one of the loosened bricks from the sidewalk.

Bill started to throw the brick at Franz, who flinched and held up a defending arm.

"Bill! No!" Karen screamed. At the last moment Bill spun and launched the brick against the school. The tech lab window shattered spectacularly, the shards glittering in the headlights, falling to glisten like ice on the ground.

It astounded Karen to learn that behind Bill's earnest, glasses-wearing visage lurked the capacity to de-

ceive. He'd gone to his mother's to borrow her car just so he could track Karen unnoticed; he'd followed her since she left the high school, waiting outside Franz's place for hours, drinking the whole time. The more Karen protested that she had not really cheated, the more convinced he was of the truth of his suspicions. That weekend, when Bill slept on the couch, Karen also realized how large a king-sized bed really was, and with just one occupant, how empty.

That Tuesday, the day after the furor in the teachers' lounge, Karen had chorus first period. Jared came in last, just before the bell rang. She watched him for signs of distress. He once stopped singing for a few measures, cleared his throat, and then continued. After the period ended he tried to leave, but Karen stopped him.

"Jared. Is everything alright?" she asked.

"What, did you know about this?" Jared said. He pulled a crumpled letter from his backpack. The letter demanded his presence at an expulsion hearing before the school committee and Principal Tucker. The hearing was for vandalism and possession of alcohol on school grounds, as well as numerous offenses that had resulted in ten suspensions over three years.

"Mr. Tucker just gave me this stupid letter," he said. "I can't believe it. Actually, I can."

"But Jared, you didn't do this," Karen said.

"I didn't do which one?" Jared asked.

Karen's head rushed. She felt at once light-headed and capable of unprecedented acts of violence. In her free period she went to the principal's office. She pounded on the doorframe in as imperious a manner as she dared. "Mr. Tucker," she said, "I need to talk to you about Jared Jenkins."

Mr. Tucker sighed. "So you've heard. Is he in your music class?"

"Yes, chorus. And he's the best student I've ever had."

Mr. Tucker sighed. "You're the best dead-pan I've ever seen."

"No, I'm serious. He has a musical gift."

"And a gift for juvenile delinquency. The kid who threw the brick through the window? It was him. And we found a bottle of beer nearby."

"But how does that prove it was Jared?"

"The other kid involved in the spray-painting confessed. He turned Jared in."

"What's happening to that kid?"

"He'll get suspended for a few days."

"But how is that fair?"

"He's a first time offender. He was genuinely surprised when we asked him about the bottle, so the alcohol has to be Jared's. Karen, you know Jared's history. He's been disrupting the school ever since he came here. And with this latest offense, he really has to go. I'm sure the school committee will agree."

After Jared was expelled Karen paced the halls during her free period. With him gone the tuneless chorus floundered, and Karen brooded. Her phone calls to the Jenkins house had gone unanswered, acknowledged only by the robotic voice of the answering machine. Over and over the conversation she had with Bill on Tuesday evening played in her mind.

"We have to tell them," Karen had said. "We can't ruin his life, just because we made a mistake."

"We can't ruin my life," Bill had said, "Just because you made a mistake. That kid would have gotten himself expelled eventually anyway."

But by Thursday, Karen had only to pass the open door of Bill's classroom and hear the stream of self-satisfied musing on the central limit theorem when she knew she could not let him escape unscathed. Before she could remember her guilty fawning over Franz, before she could recall how Bill had proposed to her at Cape Cod, with watchful eyes and finite trust, and with the ring she still wore on her left hand, she strode to the office, telling herself to forget guilt and memory, assuring herself that she needed to defend her student, who was innocent.

She walked fast before she could change her mind; she burst more strongly than she had intended into the doorway of Mr. Tucker's office.

"Karen! I was just about to email you for a meeting," Mr. Tucker said.

"Why?"

"I just want you to know that I am truly sorry about this. Times are tough, Karen, and we've had to make some awful decisions. The budget is just shrinking before my eyes. I am so sorry," he said, handing her the letter.

It wasn't pink. It was printed on white Lenfield letterhead, something about "reduction of force" and "layoff."

"I see," Karen said.

For a second she hesitated awkwardly. Then, suddenly, she left.

How could they think music was expendable? Kar-

en didn't understand. In the newspapers the world read black, stranglings and shootings and rapes insinuating that people didn't deserve to exist—that when they did, they preferred to launder billions, to plant bombs, to extinguish races. They liked to steal and cheat and pillage, the newspaper said, and they'd been doing it for as long as they had lived. The things the school thought worthwhile, algebra and chemistry, marketing strategies and computer skills, held up against this like pine needles in a fire; they didn't exactly do much to refute the accusations.

Music, however, did.

Against the leering face of evil Karen held Beethoven as her talisman, the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, the *Ninth Symphony*—the solid, irrefutable proof that humans were capable of goodness, even greatness—that they could enter the world and leave it not ravaged, but more beautiful than it had been before they lived. And how could this, the evidence that human life was worth it, the reason that she lived without regret, the one thing she offered to teenagers as confirmation that people were good, be worthless?

She should have ripped up the letter and thrown it in the principal's face. She should have raged against him for cutting music, while the math and science teachers basked in certainty. She should have screamed in his face that he was wrong about Jared, that Jared was the most talented, most irreplaceable student she had ever known.

But now she was in the parking lot. Now in the face of truth and beauty laughed the mortgage, which despite her current outrage she required Bill to meet. Now she knew that she would stay her husband, because it was the easiest thing to do, because she didn't know what else to do, and because he would pay the bills.

She did not storm back in to rage against Principal Tucker. She did not think of Franz in Vienna, and what she did or did not do with him. She did not drive to Jared's house, although she knew where it was.

Instead of doing these things Karen drove home.