

Lessons

1. *It's more work than you thought.*

It's tempting to blame Dr. Rotten. In fact, if I ever bump into him in purgatory, I plan to say "this is from Mrs. Luther" and kick his astral balls. But he probably has his own story. That's the trouble; everyone has a story. And it seems like every story is either a lesson, or an excuse.

Mrs. Luther gave lessons. You had to be good to get her. Not only had she been to Juilliard; she was working on a Ph.D. at the university. My mother had heard her give a concert, been deeply impressed. The day we went to try out, Mom acted like it was *her* audition.

"I bet she's very nice," she said for the fifth or sixth time, checking her hair in the rearview mirror, pulling her waistband sideways. She climbed out of the car and smoothed her skirt.

I trailed after her up Mrs. Luther's front steps. The strap of my backpack cut into my shoulder, heavy with piano books and Beginning Algebra. We did a little dance on the tiny slab of concrete, both trying to edge sideways out of direct line of sight from the door. The way we were acting, we should have been on a high dive, not a porch.

My mother rang the bell. Quick footsteps.

"Hi! You must be Jean. And Amy. Come in!" Grasping my mother's hand, Mrs. Luther pulled her over the threshold. I eased in warily behind.

Mrs. Luther had a rounded body and a wedge-shaped nose. Other things about her seemed square--her glasses, her blunt, workmanlike fingers. Her hair reminded me of scabby tree bark, not gray, not brown. On the surface, she was nobody you would look at twice.

But there was something else about her. You might call it voltage. Her body pulsed with this gorgeous, juicy vitality. Looking at her gave me an odd sensation of double vision, one fact layered on top of another. I had no way of telling which to believe.

She led us into her studio, which was completely empty except for a grand piano at one end of the room and a cushioned window seat at the other. “Now.” She turned on me. “Amy. What would you like to play?”

“Um...Brahms?” I asked, fumbling with my backpack. I knew the waltz in A-flat major by heart, but I wasn’t going to risk it without the music unless she made me.

At the far end of the studio, my mother sank down on the window seat, pressing her wrists together. When she caught me looking at her, she smiled brightly. She’d told me several times that I shouldn’t feel bad if I wasn’t chosen. “The main thing is to do your best,” she’d said.

I smiled brightly back.

“We can adjust that bench if you want,” said Mrs. Luther.

“No, it’s all right.” Cinching my hair behind my ears, I launched into the waltz.

I actually preferred books to music. From second grade onward, when I wasn’t chained to a bench I would read, or wander around mumbling narration to myself. *Lithe, copper-haired Amy Harvey sauntered down the dusty alley. All at once a glint in the weeds caught her eye. What is that?* she muttered eagerly. It was always a beer can. But in my story it would be a dagger, or a diamond. *Aha! Amy exclaimed breathlessly.*

I made it through the Brahms with hardly any mistakes.

“Very nice,” said Mrs. Luther, rummaging through my piano books as if they belonged to her, nodding at Mr. Van Vleet’s emphatic scrawls. *Lightly! Quickly! Phrasing!!*

I slid sideways on the bench to give her more room. Her compact body radiated. It took up a lot of space.

“Oh, this is a nice piece. So is this. You’ve done some good work, haven’t you?”

“I guess so,” I said.

If Mrs. Luther took me, at least I wouldn’t have to go back to Mr. Van Vleet. A short man with gold hair and a thick accent, he always taught in a suit. He made me try to learn scales and arpeggios in a different key every week. I couldn’t learn them that fast. I was always in trouble with Mr. Van Vleet. When I missed notes, he hit my fingers with a ruler.

“How about some Bach?” suggested Mrs. Luther.

“Which one?”

“You choose.”

“Well....” I did like Bach. Bach finally showed me what music could be, what it could stir in your heart. That outrush of feeling--love, or elation, or prayer--or all of that fused into one, like the very best moments in church.

I remember the first time it happened. I remember the piece: Bach's Little Prelude in F Major. Mr. Van Vleet played it to show me how it went. It sounded so brisk and brave and glad that I couldn't believe I could learn to make those sounds too. My nose tingled. My eyes tried to leak.

He looked at me sharply. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said, blinking. "It's just nice. I just like it."

It wasn't the hardest Bach I'd learned, but I chose the Little Prelude. Mrs. Luther's piano had a fruity tone with resonant low notes that made the piece sound even pluckier and more wonderful than it usually did.

"That was fine," she said when I'd finished. She didn't use 'fine' like a brush-off, but like fine dining, fine china, fine wine. Blood flushed down my arms, making all the little hairs on them stand at attention.

"Okay," said Mrs. Luther. "I think you and I can make progress. But before you decide to work with me, you need to know my requirements."

"Um, requirements?" I said.

"First, are you sure the piano is your instrument? Your mother tells me you're thinking of joining the orchestra."

"No," I said.

My mother looked surprised.

In school, I played violin. I was pretty good, first chair. But I'd changed my mind about going on with it. Earlier that week, they'd carted all the eighth graders to the university for a concert, to help us decide if we wanted to sign up for orchestra. A man named Dr. Rodham was the conductor. He'd stood on a box in front of the orchestra, jabbing the air first in one direction, then another. He bent and straightened so abruptly that his coattails slapped the backs of his thighs.

When the concert was over, instead of talking about the instruments, he went into a long spiel about how music is in the soul and we'd know if we belonged in an orchestra by whether we'd been carried away by the performance. What a phony! But all of his flute and oboe and violin players just stared at him with these big Bambi eyes, eating it up. If I kept on in orchestra, I might turn into one of those girls.

"I'll stick with piano," I said.

Mrs. Luther glanced from my mother to me. "It's crucial to focus. Becoming proficient at an instrument takes time."

“I will. I’ll focus,” I promised, glancing at my mom. Of course there was how I felt about stories, but that was different. That wasn’t a job.

“Which brings me to my second requirement. All of my students practice two to three hours a day.”

My mouth opened. My mother clasped her hands together and leaned forward, as if Mrs. Luther had just made the most romantic proposition in the world to us.

“I only practice an hour,” I said. I practiced an hour, and that was longer than anyone else I knew had to practice.

“Well,” said Mrs. Luther. “You’ll have to work harder now, won’t you?”

2. *You have to commit.*

Mrs. Luther was my fifth piano teacher. My mother taught me first, on the scarred upright that still dominates her chilly guest bedroom, its heavy legs gathering dust in their scrolled creases. She would sing the notes aloud, beating time on her thigh with two fingers, waiting patiently for my six-year-old fingers to find the right keys. Her manner with me was painstaking, hesitant, yet oddly fierce. I was going to learn this if it killed her.

She made me practice half an hour every day, measuring the sessions on an egg timer that squatted to one side of the music stand. To kill time, I made up words to the songs as I learned them. I can still sing the Hungarian Dance I played in third grade. *Ick, ick, ick, ick / I hate pi-ano a lot (repeat 2x). I hate to do it / but I have to / the whole day through.*

A neighbor became my teacher after I’d plowed through the series of red and yellow and green and blue books my mother knew. Mrs. Sinclair lived alone. If you got there early she put you in the back room with a black beanbag chair and utility shelves crammed with paperbacks. I started reading *Lord of the Flies* in small installments. The book gave me a nasty, despairing feeling that somehow matched the tone of the house.

Soft-spoken and formal, Mrs. Sinclair moved like someone trapped inside a brittle shell. Young as I was, I sensed it was a good thing for me that the shell was there. I didn’t want to know about anybody who could feel as sad as Mrs. Sinclair. I didn’t want to know that that degree of sadness was even a possibility.

When her separation became a divorce, Mrs. Sinclair moved away. I signed on with a new teacher, Mrs. D’Amico, who had black hair and a temperament. If you missed notes, she would lose patience and yell at you. Sometimes she would get excited and start clapping before you finished your piece. Her house was sloppy with dust bunnies and piles of magazines spilling

sideways. Her two bratty, crew-cut boys would stampede through the living room, interrupting lessons to argue about homework, and whose house they could visit before dinner. Mrs. D'Amico kept leaping up to check on the stove, where something always seemed to be burning or boiling over.

My mother didn't think she took music seriously enough. After a year she made me transfer to Mr. Van Vleet, whose studio looked down on a small brick square with trees. He was serious all right, but I never could figure out why he thought hitting people's fingers would make them more likely to land on the right notes. Once during a lesson, the piano lurched under my hands. Mr. Van Vleet seized his ruler and started whacking. "Ow!" I said. "Stop! It's not me!" I held my hands in the air to prove it. The piano kept rocking. For once, I knew the damn notes. We were having an earthquake.

I had trouble learning from all of those teachers. But Mrs. Luther was different. There was nothing broken about her, nothing false or distracted, nothing to keep her from taking me all the way into the music. I began to make strides.

When I was a sophomore in high school, Mrs. Luther recommended that we rent a baby grand. My parents wound up buying one. It was used, an obscure make, but it cost more money than they'd spent on anything since they'd bought our six-year-old Volkswagen Rabbit. "Compared to the cost of renting for years, it only makes sense," my mother insisted, as if she were the daughter and I were the mom.

The living room was already full, so the movers set the piano up in my bedroom, leaving barely enough room to jam a cot between it and the wall. I had to edge sideways along its curved flank to reach the closet. When I lay down, all I saw was the underside of that piano.

By then I was practicing three hours a day. I didn't mind. They were three hours I didn't have to spend doing dishes, struggling with math homework, or telling the family about My Day. Mrs. Luther gave me pieces I could get lost in, ways to thunder my anger and pour out a longing I couldn't put into words. "Stormy" is how my mother describes my adolescence, but here at least was one place where I could storm my head off, storm my heart out, and my parents *liked* it. They approved.

Sometimes, when my mother picked me up after lessons, Mrs. Luther invited her to stay for a cup of tea. I always waited in the studio with a book, but I could hear them talking. Crazy as it sounds, I think Mrs. Luther envied my mom. Mom had Dad, but Mrs. Luther had no one. She'd lost her husband in a car crash. She still loved him. Now and then she would mention him during lessons--Tom used to say this, Tom used to think that. He'd been a musician, too. When

she talked about Tom, she didn't sound like a widow. She sounded like someone who'd just fallen in love.

It was partly to honor Tom's memory that she kept plugging away at her doctorate. My mother, who'd abandoned her own musical ambitions with marriage, fervently admired Mrs. Luther's determination, her spunk. "Makes you want to grow up to be just like that," she said, and I knew she didn't mean me.

The year I became a senior, Mrs. Luther finished her program and received a teaching appointment from the university's music department. In October, she gave her first concert on campus. My mother and I attended together.

"Do we have to sit so close to the front?" I whispered.

"Yes," she told me, claiming two seats in the center of the second row. Before we left the house she'd spent half an hour scraping her hair into a French roll, even though we both knew the auditorium would be dark as a cave.

Mrs. Luther strode onto the stage, beaming, and made a deep bow.

"Doesn't she look wonderful?" whispered my mother. The seats she'd picked gave us a nose-to-toe view of Mrs. Luther's shoes, flat-heeled and unglamorous under her floor-length brocade skirt.

Settling down at the bench, Mrs. Luther tackled a vigorous Beethoven. "Relax," she always told me when I faced a difficult arpeggio or a run of octaves in the left hand. "Relax. It will be so much easier!" Now I could see how relaxed she stayed. Her arms bounced like runaway basketballs, following her flying fingers. Her underarms jiggled visibly beneath her thin nylon blouse.

She cocked her head back and forth in time to the music. And she said the way I beat time with my heel was distracting! Leaning over, I cupped my hand around my mother's ear. "Look at that thing she does with her neck," I hissed.

"Hush," said my mother, batting my face away with one hand and never taking her eyes off the stage.

My mother clapped frantically at every opportunity. She clapped enough for ten people, not that Mrs. Luther lacked an audience. A lot of faculty members were there in honor of her husband, who had once been chairman of the department. I noticed Dr. Rodham in an aisle seat, listening intently.

We met Mrs. Luther at the punch bowl. She and my mother grabbed hands.

"That was wonderful," my mother said. "Wonderful!"

“If only Tom could have been here,” Mrs. Luther said.

Because of her new job, Mrs. Luther gave up a lot of her less advanced students. She started asking more of the rest of us. Halfway through the year, she told me to sit down in the window seat instead of at the piano. She said, “Amy, have you thought about what you’d like to do with your music?”

“Um, what do you mean?”

I felt embarrassed and impatient. We were working on several big pieces for my senior recital. We had a lot of music to get through; the Grieg, the Prokofieff, the Brahms.

“This is a talk I have with all my seniors,” she said. “You’ll be going on to the university next year?”

“Yes.”

“And you do have other interests besides music.”

“Um, right.”

Every night I labored over a spiral notebook, re-writing my own life. In my notebooks I always had the right comeback. I made editor of the school paper. Duane Kirschner fell in love with me and not Heather Ross.

“Your mother tells me how much you enjoy your literature classes. But it’s time to decide whether you plan to commit to your music or choose something else.”

“Oh.”

Choose? I’m thinking. Why should I choose? I still hadn’t figured out that time wasn’t infinite and I wasn’t going to be perfect at everything eventually.

“You’ll want to settle on a major,” she said.

“Well, I like music. I don’t know, what do you think? What do you think I should do?”

I wanted her to tell me I was brilliant. I knew she thought I was pretty good. Talented, musical. God knew I’d put in my time at the bench.

But instead of complimenting me, Mrs. Luther pinched her upper lip. “Let me ask you this,” she said finally. “How do you feel about performing?”

“I hate it,” I said. Why was she asking me that? She knew how I felt. I’d hated performing ever since my first piano class in fourth grade. Mrs. Sinclair set up metal folding chairs in her living room on Sunday afternoon, when her piano took on the aspect of a rack or a guillotine. All the parents came to watch their children be tortured. On piano class days, I

always woke up with diarrhea. My mother smiled, but I knew she felt as terrified as I did. We had to know our pieces by heart, and sometimes people lost their way in the middle, or broke down completely.

My memory was fairly reliable, but I had a physical affliction. My body shook. Not all the time. Sometimes I'd feel petrified before I started, but sail through just fine. Other times I'd think I knew a piece, then halfway through it start shaking so hard I could barely keep my hands on the keys.

"Let's talk about what a music degree is good for without performing," said Mrs. Luther. "You can be an accompanist, or a church pianist."

"Right," I said. I was already church pianist. Nerves didn't afflict me when I was banging out an accompaniment.

"And you can give lessons."

"Uh-huh." I'd been giving half a dozen kids lessons all year.

"Other than that, it's not much use," she said. "Even if you're a teacher, you have to give a recital now and then, to let your students know you can play."

"That's okay," I said. I thought I might want to write someday, but I didn't see how spending my college years in the music department would much affect that.

3. *Place yourself in the field.*

The year I entered the university, almost nothing changed. I still lived at home. I still studied with Mrs. Luther. The only difference was that my classes now took place on campus, my lessons in a gray-walled room.

In addition to my private lessons, Mrs. Luther taught one of my music classes, Comp 101. Bustling back and forth in front of the blackboard, she told us that simple melodies were best. For a positive example, she used Barry Manilow. "I'll show you what I mean," she said, and demonstrated how one of his most famous songs employed only three notes. I looked around suspiciously to make sure none of my classmates was laughing. Nobody was.

Actually, Mrs. Luther proved to be one of the more popular teachers in the department, right up there with Victor Rodham. The orchestra leader taught Music Appreciation, required fare for majors. But students signed up from every department, mostly girls attracted by his moist eyes, willowy hands, and debonair manner. It didn't hurt that the course was known campus-wide as an easy 'A.'

When I did my stint I sat in back, watching and feeling alternately superior and repelled. Dr. Rotten liked to fix his large, mesmeric eyes on the girls in the front row, girls from Business Administration who wore pink and yellow and looked soft and smooth as marshmallow candy, and about that smart. He stared at them until they blinked or giggled. It was disgusting. But I couldn't help but be intrigued by his central question: What makes some music mediocre, other music great? He kept talking about soul, but he never defined it. One day I went to his office during posted hours to make him nail down the term.

"Come in," he said.

I told him what I wanted.

"Aha," he murmured, leaning his fingers together in the shape of a tent. "Interesting question." He looked at me and smiled, and suddenly it occurred to me that maybe he'd spent the whole semester waiting for a person to come in and broach this subject. That maybe having done so put me in a special category in his eyes.

He stood up, walked to the door, and shut it. "What do *you* think soul is?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Let's bring it closer to home. Have you ever met anyone with soul?" He strolled back across the room, standing somewhere behind me. I wanted to turn and see where he was, but my neck refused to swivel. I had the feeling he wanted me to say, him.

"Well...maybe Mrs. Luther," I said.

"Ah, Dr. Luther," he said warmly, walking around the desk and back into my field of vision. "I completely agree. And what makes you think so?"

I sat silent.

"Hard to define, isn't it?" he said, sitting down. "That's why I don't. Soul is divine fire. Soul is passion, brilliance. Soul is aroused kundalini. Soul is...sexual energy."

The clock ticked. The refrigerated water fountain outside the door clicked on and hummed. My throat felt clogged.

"And yet none of those words work, do they?" He waited. "That's why we need music. Because the things that really matter can't be put into words. But I'll tell you one thing. You wouldn't be here asking if you didn't have soul, yourself."

I tried to unstick my gaze from his. I only got as far as his mouth, which looked moist and swollen and pink like a sea anemone, or some internal organ that shouldn't have been exposed to light. "Who's that?" I said abruptly, pointing at a framed picture on his desk, of a small woman with keen eyes and dark hair. "Your wife?"

“The late Mrs. Rodham,” he said quietly. “I lost her four years ago to cancer.”

A necklace hung over the picture frame, suspending a small translucent stone with a spray of dark, organic material frozen inside it. “The necklace was a gift,” said Dr. Rodham, watching me. “Not from my wife. From a student. An extraordinary young woman. We had a special...friendship.”

He raked his hair back. His fingers left lines. I couldn't figure out if he wanted to signal that he was available, or that he wasn't, but there was no doubt that I was receiving a message. My stomach felt excited and putrid all at once. I thought of Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf. I thought of Bluebeard, locking away the bones of all his murdered wives. I stood, shoving the chair back so fast that it made a rude grating noise, like a loud burp, against the floor.

At the end of the semester, a concert pianist came in to rate us. The adjudications took place in the same auditorium where Mrs. Luther had played. Each student had been assigned a time slot, but the judge soon fell behind. About half a dozen of us milled in the lobby, edgy as prisoners before a sentencing.

“I hate this,” I moaned to Mrs. Luther, who stood in the doorway sipping coffee and signaling students as their turn arrived. “What's the point? You give us a grade. Why do we have to play for this guy?”

“Because he has no preconceptions to influence his view of your performance. He'll help you assess where you stand in the field.”

I looked around. Liza, Mrs. Luther's most advanced student, had backed into a corner behind a potted plant and stood glowering at the rest of us through the foliage. She'd prepared a brooding Rachmaninoff for the occasion. Mark, another rival, stood by the building's entrance, letting people in and out like a gregarious doorman. Gaunt as a scarecrow, with high cheekbones and pale eyes, he loved to perform. He volunteered to play for theatrical productions and gave recitals that weren't even mandatory, wearing rented tuxedos and catching roses and generally hamming it up. He would play a glitzy Liszt.

I had no idea how my toccata stacked up. My idea of detached self-assessment consisted of noticing that I looked better than Liza in jeans.

“Assess where I stand in the field? Why do I need to do that?”

Mrs. Luther laughed. “You're up,” she said.

Pressing my dog-eared music to my chest, I entered the auditorium. The judge, a thin man with a spotty beard, lounged in the gloom in the last row of empty seats.

“Page forty-three,” I told him, relinquishing my book. He didn’t smile.

My hands felt slick and cold. Rubbing them on my pants, I walked down the long, slanted aisle, climbed the stage steps, and sat down at the piano.

My selection was a bombastic Khachaturian, a piece that leaped and galloped all over the place. I knew I could make it through the percussive opening chords. The rippling arpeggios were a snap, as long as I kept my hands near the keys. The parts that tripped me up came further on. There was a section where I had to strike a single repeating note rapidly for three, then four measures at a time. Unless I stayed relaxed, the note refused to sound. There was a section where shimmering triplets hovered above a driving four-count bass, and the first of the three triplets had to be played an octave higher than the others. Scooping up those high notes required a lateral darting movement as fast and accurate as the flick of a frog’s tongue.

“You can begin when you’re ready,” the judge said.

“Okay.” I fiddled with the knob on the side of the bench, trying to raise it three inches.

For some reason I was remembering a girl who’d bombed at a joint recital when I was in the sixth grade. She’d forgotten what notes her piece started on. She began in the wrong place. Right away it was clear she was sunk, so she tried a new location. That didn’t work, either. She took a breath. Sticking out one finger, she poked a few keys. Then she shrugged, got up, and walked back to her seat. She was fabulous. You could almost hear her thinking: What are they going to do, shoot me?

Nobody knew whether to clap or not. Did you clap for somebody who hadn’t played? No one dared look around for cues. We sat frozen, even the teachers. Unable to contain myself, I finally clapped a little. I was the only one who did.

“Go ahead,” the judge said.

The second I whammed out the opening chord, I knew I was in trouble. My body started vibrating like a jackhammer.

Music filled the auditorium in a fierce, authoritative swell, I thought, trying to encourage myself. Grudging admiration overtook the titian-haired pianist’s sole auditor.

The shaking made it difficult to keep my arms on trajectory. My quivering knees created a real problem at the pedal. I could feel my body stiffen, trying to control its own panic.

By the time I came to the single repeated note, my wrists and forearms had fused into a single clumsy unit. Instead of the insistent, almost subliminal pressure I wanted to create, I made a sound like a woodpecker rapping on a dead tree. And I missed every one of the octaves, splatting down on notes that weren’t even near the ones I was after. By the time I reached the

final chord I was so demoralized that I pounced down on four octaves' worth of F's, instead of E-flats.

When the judge handed me my scorecard, he was laughing. Not out loud, but with his eyes. "Congratulations," he said. "I've never seen anyone shake so hard and play so well."

"Um, thank you," I said.

Hot and ruffled and still quivering, I retreated to the lobby to read what he'd written. It wasn't as bad as I thought. He'd called me "extremely musical" and noted that I was "technically, quite advanced." But at the bottom he'd written, "*Needs to address performance anxiety.*" That part was underlined. Twice.

4. *Let it through--it's not you.*

Not often, but every now and then, I would be forging through my Beethoven or drifting through my Debussy, and suddenly lose charge of my body. It was very strange. Music would rush through my arms and out my fingertips, eager as a creek at flood stage, while I just sat back inside myself and marveled.

Then one of two things always happened. Either I got anxious and clamped back down onto the music and killed it, or I'd start giggling from sheer elation and ruin it that way. And nothing like that ever happened in front of anyone, of course. Nothing like that ever happened in front of Mrs. Luther.

"Maybe you should sign up for dancing," she told me, the week after adjudications, when we were discussing the problem I'd had. "Music is something you do with your body. The more you move with it, the more it will flow."

"Dance?" I said.

"Dance. You need to stop worrying about the single notes and feel the big picture. You need grace."

I'd always loved to watch dancers; secretly aspired to dance. Frightened but hopeful, I bought a leotard and registered for Beginning Jazz.

The class involved lining up in groups of five or so. The teacher demonstrated a step. We were supposed to imitate her in orderly rows across the gym floor. She seemed to think the easiest move was the grapevine, which involved stepping sideways with your foot in front twice, then in back. At the same time, you pumped your forearms to the downbeat.

I couldn't do it. I had nightmares about the class. Instead of loosening me up, dancing was turning me into a nervous wreck. It hurt more because I could see what I should be after. I

could feel that there should be no difference between executing a beautifully-controlled and fluid movement on the piano with your fingers and executing one in the air with your limbs. But the more I tried for those moments, the more elusive they grew.

After two weeks, I dropped out of the class. Now I played worse than ever. In addition to my newfound conviction that I was a klutz, I was developing a mental conflict. If the idea was to be self-expressive, why was I letting Mrs. Luther tell me where to end each phrase, where to linger on a chord or bring out the left hand? Doing it the same way every time wasn't inspired. It was being a big dumb music box.

I began to resent her scribbles in my books. She gave me my first B. I pretended not to care. Why should I, when Dr. Towne read my essays aloud in English class, and said they were essays he wished *he'd* written? What did I care if Mrs. Luther gave me a B?

In essay class I made A's, even though for me, writing never flowed. Well, it flowed when I was making up wishful nonsense, telling lies. When I told the truth, as I was learning to do for Dr. Towne, writing was more like jabbing myself to wring out blood, drop by stingy drop. It hurt. But now and then it was worth it, collecting these samples. Now and then I found things out. Dr. Rodham was wrong about the uselessness of words.

Without them, Mrs. Luther couldn't have given me her best tip.

It was at the end of my junior year. At her request, I'd started plowing through a tedious fugue. My mind hit the road. Mrs. Luther listened with an elbow propped on her knee, her right hand covering half of her face. She let me get about halfway through before interrupting.

"Amy," she said.

I stopped. "What?"

I expected her to bawl me out. But instead of criticizing my Bach, Mrs. Luther started describing the African violet that had just bloomed on her kitchen windowsill.

"Sometimes you see something, it can be something very simple like that flower in the sunshine, and you get...I don't know, an infusion of feeling. Do you know what I mean?"

"I guess so."

"And I would say that for me, music is mainly about a transfer of that kind of feeling. It's what I try to put into each piece, and it's what I hope will come out. Otherwise, why bother? Otherwise, it's just notes."

“I know that,” I told her. “I feel the same way.”

She straightened her spine and looked at me from a place far behind her eyes. “Do you know that to be a musician, to be any kind of an artist, you have to practice in every moment of your life?”

“Um...” The hairs on my forearms were prickling again.

“It’s not pressing down keys. It’s not writing down words. Those are the disciplines. But being an artist is most of all a way of receiving.”

I sat for a moment in silence, then returned to the Bach. That was the end of the conversation, but I still think about what she said. I think I know what she meant about receiving. She was still talking about grace.

5. *Know your motives.*

I first heard the news from my mom, over lunch. It seemed that Mrs. Luther had added a hyphen to her name. She was now Dr. Luther-Rodham.

“I’m just thrilled for her,” my mother said. “She says he’s the most dashing man in the department. What? What is it? Why do you look so grim?”

“Nothing. I know him a little,” I said.

Shortly afterwards came a public announcement, with cake in the faculty lounge. But I couldn’t quite believe it until I finally saw them together.

I was at the multiplex with a boy from my essay class, waiting to buy tickets. The two teachers stood in line ahead of us. It was dark and rainy. Mrs. Luther tilted her head up and sideways to gaze at him and I saw her wet face, gleaming in the light of the marquee.

She was incandescent. I will never understand this: something about phony old Dr. Rotten had reached inside her and flipped every switch to maximum power. Despite the weather, she crackled and glowed. Then Dr. Rodham lifted one side of his coat over her head like a huge dark bat, blocking the view.

“Is something the matter?” asked Brendan, my date. He was a tall person with shaggy hair and an analytical mind; nothing like the wildly emotive types in the music department. I found him exotic. He had a Cartesian faith in words. He thought they were keys that could unlock the truth if arranged correctly. If you selected just the right ones.

“The matter? I don’t know. I guess not,” I said.

Maybe we all get born with a certain amount of wattage at birth, to spend however we like. Or maybe that’s not it; maybe we have a mission to shed as much light as we can. In that case, if you find something that ignites you, maybe you have to let it, no matter how corny or costly it seems.

All I knew was, Mrs. Luther had spent her life courting sparks and now suddenly she was on fire. But not about music. And I felt betrayed.

I had just entered my final year, and recitals loomed. In order to graduate, I had to present a full-length program. In addition, I was in charge of scheduling a hall, ordering flowers, planning a reception, publicity, the works. The whole thing struck me as highly insensitive, like asking someone terminally ill to plan her own funeral.

As the weeks eroded toward the event, I never forgot it for a moment. On the outside I felt increasingly waxy, stiff and dull. My insides were melted, pooling one moment in a place of blind panic, the next taking off in a crazy spurt of hope. I could see myself becoming the first student ever to have a degree withheld on the basis of her public performance. On the other hand, maybe this would be the night when the music finally erupted through the cardboard of my dutiful effort in one magnificent burst.

I’d read that it helped athletes to visualize success before tournaments, so every night before I fell asleep I tried to see myself onstage, triumphant. It was pretty hard to picture. Mrs. Luther had videotaped us once and I knew what I looked like. I’d seen myself up there with my clunky sandals and skinny arms. The truth: I didn’t look like somebody who had any business in front of a grand piano.

A week before my recital, Mrs. Luther invited me to her house with Mark and Liza, who also had recitals coming up. “We want to nurture you a little before your big night,” she said, inviting each of us to bring a guest. She suggested that I ask my mom. “Our biggest fan,” she said, and winked.

They’d bought a house in the country; furnished it with deep chairs, braided rugs and gingham curtains. Just outside the kitchen door, they’d planted a modest garden.

“Want to help me pick some beans for dinner?” Dr. Rotten asked me. Playing up his new homey identity, he’d donned a plaid flannel shirt. “Maybe a squash, what do you think?”

“You two go ahead,” urged Mrs. Luther, who stood at a big wooden butcher’s block in the center of the kitchen, ripping up lettuce for salad.

I hung back. My mother shot me a look.

“So, Amy. Ready for your big night?” asked Dr. Rodham when we were outside.

“I hope so,” I said shortly. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I bomb.”

“If you do, you could consider it a message,” he said. “Life is full of twists.”

That didn’t strike me as very supportive. I squatted and slapped aside foliage, focusing on the search for ripe beans.

“For example, I never saw myself as a gardener. I never thought I’d be remarried and living in the country. But it’s turned out to be quite fulfilling.”

I didn’t look up. “Lucky you.” My family lived in the country too, and I knew about gardening. It wasn’t for dilettantes. Real gardening involved bugs and dirt and muscles that ached in the night.

I worked until the bowl was full. Then, arching to stretch out a kink in my back, I happened to glance at the window. Mrs. Luther’s face showed in the glass, a peach-colored smear. When she saw me watching, she quickly turned away.

“I think I hear Mark’s car,” I lied, standing up.

Dr. Rotten moved in behind me, and placed his hand in the trough between my shoulder blades. He kept it there for a second, then patted my back and said, “Well, Amy. Good luck.”

It was a small, silly gesture, but I worried that Mrs. Luther had seen it. When I went back into the kitchen she took the beans I’d picked, washed them, and tossed them in the stir fry, all without meeting my eyes. She chatted with my mom until Mark and Liza arrived. As we carried the meal to the table, I felt even surer that she was avoiding my gaze. But then, when she directed us to our seats, she kept her eyes on me longer than anyone else and smiled brightly, as if to assure me she wasn’t upset.

Dinner conversation ranged from contemporary composers to politics. Mrs. Luther seemed unusually vivacious. Glib Dr. Rotten was dazzling my mom.

I kept quiet. Mrs. Luther had to know that Dr. Rotten would never get anywhere with me. But maybe that wasn’t the point. The point was, she had already begun to mistrust him. And what if Dr. Rotten did find a little soulmate side dish, cheated on his new wife? Worse: what if he left her? Would she still be the same old Mrs. Luther? If not, who would she be?

“Play something for us?” my mother begged Mrs. Luther, when dinner ended.

“Oh--” she demurred.

“Play, Edie. Show these young punks how it’s done.” Dr. Rotten smiled. He hadn’t lifted a finger, but he was directing.

She raised her eyebrows and laughed. Normally I couldn’t hear her laugh without smiling myself, but this laugh was different, artificial. Something was wrong. “This isn’t my night, Victor,” she told him. “My students should play if anyone should.”

“No thanks,” I said.

“Every night is your night,” he told her. “What about the Chopin?”

“Well--” I knew for a fact she had never liked Chopin.

We adjourned to the living room. Everyone sat down but Mrs. Luther, who hesitated a second, then moved toward the piano. She sat, but her posture lacked the erect, springy quality I’d always admired. Bowing her head, she set her hands on the keys and waited, almost as if she were using her fingers to suck up strength. Then she started to play.

It was Chopin’s Fantaisie-Impromptu in C# minor, the one with the opening like a passionate spring storm and the middle that somebody stole for the tune to “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows.” Overplayed but gorgeous, it’s one of those pieces you have to love, even if it’s embarrassing to admit it.

The middle is easy, but when you play that part you have to believe it; you have to be simple, unrestrained. For Mrs. Luther that night, it wasn’t happening. Her tone was thin, her phrasing wooden. She kept smiling, but her eyes made me think of hazard lights in fog.

I glanced sideways. Mark and Liza held their lips clamped in expressions of polite approval, exactly the look I could feel freezing my own face. My mother kneaded her fingers, brave and frightened as she’d been at my piano classes in fourth grade. Only Dr. Rotten seemed pleased, and I doubted if he was listening. He gazed absently at the ceiling, legs crossed, arms draped over the back of his chair. One Birkenstock slid back and forth, conducting.

I hated him.

When Mrs. Luther finished, we all clapped too much. She leaped up, bowed, and hustled back to her seat. Dr. Rotten stopped clapping to put his arm around her, and she literally melted with relief.

My mom touched my arm. “Ready to go?”

“Oh--” My brain wouldn’t work. I wanted to name the terrible event we had just witnessed. I thought that the right words might rob it of its power, or at least turn it into a useful

lesson. But if this was a lesson, what could it be? Maybe lessons were like fortune-teller predictions, easier to figure out once you were past the place where you needed them. I backed into Mrs. Luther's antique sideboard, ramming it so hard that all her dishes rattled.

"What is *wrong* with you, Amy?" my mother demanded when we were outside.

"That was bad. She played really badly. She played like a dead person."

"You're exaggerating," my mother said, exasperated. "She played just fine."

I wrapped my sweater tight. I felt like one of the curious sisters in the Bluebeard story, who unlock the room full of bones. What happens next is, the key they've used starts to bleed. They try hiding it in their pockets, but the blood seeps through. They try wrapping it in a dishtowel, burying it in ashes. Still the bleeding won't stop. They'd give anything to lose the key, to pretend they haven't seen what they've seen. But they can't.

When I told Mrs. Luther I didn't trust my memory under pressure, she made me literally learn my pieces backwards, play their chord progressions from end to beginning to impress them on my brain. When I told her I didn't trust my body, she drilled me on the most difficult passages at twice their normal tempo. Her theory was that by comparison, even the pressure of performing would seem tame.

Now I stood in the shadow of a dusty maroon curtain, and knew that all our efforts had been pointless. I couldn't remember my opening notes. I was shaking so hard I could barely stay on top of my shoes. *The stakes were high, but nothing could rattle the composure of the slim, titian-haired musician*, I thought to myself. It didn't help.

Brendan was in the audience, for one thing. My parents had invited all their friends. My father had sprung for flowers, invitations, refreshments, a new dress. I'd heard him mutter to my mother that it might have been cheaper to marry me off. Mark and Liza and all my other classmates were out there, hovering like vultures to pounce on any slip. And of course Mrs. Luther. Expectant--no, *confident* I'd prove all the years she'd lavished on me worth the price.

Beyond the lip of the stage I could see her, sitting between Dr. Rodham and my parents. In the gloom beyond the stage lights I couldn't tell where Dr. Rotten's shoulder left off and hers started. But I could see which direction her face was turned. Toward him.

And then I got it.

Grace's requirements were tough but simple--unless you wanted it more than approval, it would go. Whether my music came out alive or dead that night might depend on something as impartial as motives on a scale.

The stage manager touched my shoulder. My shoes shuffled obediently forward. *Copper hair gleaming, presence commanding, she swept to the center of the stage*, my brain narrated, trying to help.

Motives. Which meant that when people stopped clapping and I sat down, my performance couldn't be for Mrs. Luther. It couldn't be for Brendan or my mom. It couldn't even be for me, about my wanting so badly to do a good job.

I bowed. Wiped my trembling hands on my dress. The trouble was, I wasn't sure what was left. What *could* it be for? Underneath my fear I had a fragile intuition. But I couldn't seem to match it with a word.