

UNTITLED FOR ORCHESTRA

A one-act play with classical music

by

Sharon Glassman

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Cast of Characters

Isabel Nuchik: late 20s-early 40s, female 2nd violinist. Isabel is UFO's narrator; the verbal soloist who enacts The Legend of Epheneel Green at the heart of the show's 1st movement, accompanied by the music/commentary of the BACK ROW PLAYERS. More real world-savvy, less musically-accomplished than her BACK ROW peers.

Back Row Players: Two violinists, one violist, one cellist and oboe- or other wind -player. Age, race, gender wide-open, as in an amateur orchestra. Off-stage Horn Player (or recording) plays during final scene.

Player 1: The back row's historian. Relives long-lost victories and defeats as if they'd happened this morning. Reads musical scores on the subway for fun. Often forgets meals, and to carry an umbrella when it rains.

Player 2: The back row's ringleader - "hot", in an orchestral way - ie: in the land of the four-eyed nerd, the guy with rimless glasses is king. Formerly involved with PLAYER 3; hides emotions for music and people behind 8th-grade wit.

Player 3: Science-team captain turned school principal type. Proud of her calm mien, which Player 2 regularly punctures.

Player 4: Off-kilter visionary whose ideas -- ie: using binoculars to see what's going on in the first row - suit the group to a T.

SCENE

Brooklyn Heights church basement.

TIME

The present.

Movement 1

SETTING: A church rehearsal space; basement or main sanctuary. Folding chairs, metal music stands create THE BACK ROW PLAYERS' home.

AT RISE: A group of classical musicians representing the back row of the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra. It's as if the rest of the orchestra and the conductor are located in the wings, or otherwise just off-stage.

Oboe plays a "440 A". Musicians tune (CD Track 1), shifting into the 1st movement of Mozart Horn Concerto #2 in F Flat Major (CD Track 2). As musicians arrive at the horn solo, which is played by oboe or hummed by another BACK ROW PLAYER, ISABEL speaks, accompanied by the music:

ISABEL:

In the spring of 1952, there lived in my neighborhood - in Brooklyn Heights - a young horn player named Epheneel Green. He was 6'1", barely 20 years old, 150 musical pounds. And with his horn-rimmed glasses and that name, Epheneel, he could have been the perfect hero for New York City's most perfect neighborhood: as smart as a sailboat tacking on a calm summer Sunday's East River. As finely solid as the metal threads of the Brooklyn Bridge he saw from his bedroom window each morning and night. Polite to his elders, attentive to his studies, loyal to his friends.

But the best thing about Epheneel Green lay under the sharpened pencil in the pocket of his neatly ironed shirt: his heart, which beat faster, yet ever-constant

for the two things he loved most in life: Classical music. And his girlfriend, Gladys Fonbacher White. Of the Brooklyn Heights Whites.

(Music: Mozart Horn Concert
2nd mov't, aka: "Ephenel and
Gladys's Theme." CD Track 3)

ISABEL:

As children, Ephenel and Gladys were liked but overlooked by most people in the Heights. Adults needn't worry about two A-students with honorable hobbies, so they didn't.

Other children saw them as a pleasantly forgettable part of their daily landscape, like the brownstones that lined the way to school, unadorned in fall and winter, and the bushes of forsythia that re-blossomed, pencil-yellow, each spring.

But the world, when it works right, rewards quiet heroes. And so from the day they met, sharing a picture book on the first day of first grade, Ephenel and Gladys could see each other's dearest hopes and dreams.

(E+G's theme continues.)

As Ephenel crinkles the book's plastic-protected cover open onto their desk-for-two, Gladys sees in his eyes a tuxedoed, gentle man; horn in hand, as crowds rise, cheering. She embraces that idea with all her heart.

As Gladys decodes page one, in which a boy and his dog meet a girl named Jane, Ephenel sees beneath her schoolgirl bangs a woman in a silver dress waving from the rail of a tall ship sailing. Waving. At him? At him! He is enchanted, and amazed.

From that day forward, Ephenel and Gladys are never lonely. They live in a two-person world created from the perfect understanding in each other's eyes.

(Music: E+G's theme ends.)

And time, being kind, moves with them. Two determined children grow into quietly admired adults: a devoted young musician and his resolute map-maker girlfriend, who can be seen and heard each afternoon and weekend in her parents' sun-room: one practicing scales, the other coloring lands she's yet to see.

Music-stand across from easel, papers rustling in a gentle Brooklyn breeze. And over top, wordlessly speaking? Young lovers' eyes. Which brings us here:

(Music: Mozart Horn Concerto
1st Mov't. CD Track 4)

May 7, 1952. Epheneel Green's 20th birthday. As the sun rises behind the Heights as it does every morning, Epheneel practices his horn, as he does every morning.

But today, his heart beats faster than it ever has before. Because tonight, Epheneel's music will lead the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra into the first-ever finals of the city's brand-new - and only -- amateur orchestra competition: the Bedermeier-Quinterhoffer Every-borough Class-off, known for short as the BQE.

(Music: Ends.)

And soon the call could be heard from the Heights to Coney Island: "Stand up beautiful hills of Brooklyn!" - if only the borough could win again!

Six cruel months ago the "shot heard 'round the world" had downed the Dodgers. From the Sheepshead Bay up through Sunset Park, there was a hole in the soul of the borough of churches. Thousands railed at God. Dozens drank before noon. Hundreds still sat by their solid cherry-wood radios, held captive by the echoes of what could not have been.

But now the news spread from Canarsie up through Lefferts Gardens: A young man armed with perfect pitch and a three-part Mozart horn concerto!

In the city of broken dreams, three million heartsick humans found a sign. It was a *verkakte* idea, the rabbis confessed to the priests, who told the reverends. *Mozart would save Brooklyn.*

But as he slips into his uniform, Epheneel's hands rest assured upon his heart. For more important to his heart than Brooklyn...can you hear it?

More important than Wolfgang Amadeus, or Bobby Thomson, even...beating fast! So fast!

Today, before he plays, and above all: Ephene! will ask Gladys to marry him.

(Music: Mozart Horn Concerto
1st Mov't theme, reprise.)

As the Heights yawns and stretches, Ephene! puts his horn in its case, an engagement ring in his pocket, and walks down the street to his father's pharmacy.

Passing posters on storefronts and phone-poles - "*Come See --! Support Your --! Big Orchestra Concert Tonight!*" - he proposes to each empty square of pavement, like a young man more comfortable with melodies than words.

Ephene!

My Gladling Dorldis...My Dargeling Ladilys...

ISABEL:

Unlocks and opens the pharmacy door.

(Music: Excerpt ends.)

Ephene!

Will you...marry me?

(*sotto voce*)

Hey. That was pretty good!

ISABEL:

All morning long, Ephene! practices his fingerings and his proposal when he isn't making sandwiches and vanilla egg creams.

At noon, he feeds a hungry and curious lunch-counter crowd information about tonight's concert. Here they come, door-chime jingling gently:

(Musician sfx: door chimes
between names below.)

There's the CPA tuna-on-rye from the white-shoe firm up the street, and four blue-plate special officers from the

fire station on the corner; three upper-crust-trimmed ladies of leisure; Mr. Sims, the high-school football coach, and Miss Adams, the new science hire -- and...slam! bang! The egg-salad-sandwich receptionist from the St. George Hotel, running late, into the thick of things, as always.

(ISABEL recounts characters' dialogue.)

Receptionist

(To Ephene1)
What's the word, birthday bird?

Mr. Sims

(To Ephene1)
Think fast, Green!
(Tosses a football.)
S'a little game we play. Kid loves it.
Dontcha, kid? Dontcha?

Receptionist

(To Mr Sims)
Watch it, Tarzan! The kid needs those digits.
(To Ephene1)
So, Daddy-o! How ya feelin' about tonight's music fight?

Ephene1:

Well, I've worked hard - and I've got a secret weapon.
(Pats the ring box.)

Receptionist:

(To crowd)
What did I tell you? The gig's in the bag!

CPA:

Look, I'm Brooklyn, too. But my cousin in Queens saw the finals in Forest Hills last night. Their horn guy is "unreal," she says. "Unbeatable!"

Crowd:

Gettoutta town! You sayin' what?
I'll show you unbeatable!

Receptionist:

(To CPA)

You! Hold the phone!

(To Crowd)

And youze! Ya wanna tell me who's
gonna win tonight?

Crowd:

Brooklyn!

Receptionist:

And who's our hero here with the golden horn?

Crowd:

EPH-en-el! EPH-en-el! GREEN-GREEN-GREEN!

ISABEL:

Even Mr. Sims is chanting.

Crowd:

EPH-en-el! EPH-en-el! GREEN-GREEN-GREEN!

ISABEL:

Beside him Miss Adams is cheering like a native. Sims
turns to her and says:

Mr. Sims:

"So the kid can't catch a ball.
Waddya-say we go watch him win together?"

*

(Music: Epheneel and Gladys's Theme.

CD Track 5)

ISABEL:

At 5 o'clock, Epheneel turns the sign in the pharmacy
window to CLOSED.

He walks past the St. George Hotel, where movie stars
screen their movies on the roof, and Johnny Weismuller
swims in the ocean-water swimming pool, and a "Mr. E.
Green" has reserved the honeymoon suite for one year from

today, and arrives at Gladys's house, where the White family waits for him outside.

(Music: Fades.)

Mr. White:

How are you, son?

Mrs. White:

Don't you look handsome tonight, Ephene!
Doesn't he, Gladys?

Gladys:

Happy Birthday, Ephene!

ISABEL:

Mrs. and Mrs. White clasp hands and watch their daughter walk into her future, past the public library, and the florist, with its window of wedding bouquets. Arm and arm with their borough's young savior and a most gentle man, down the street, becoming lost from sight as they travel on...

(E&G's theme. CD Track 5)

...across the Penny Bridge, to a bench by the East River. Gladys's gray dress glows pale silver in the setting sunlight. Ephene begins the overture he's rehearsed for the last fifteen years:

(Music: Ends.)

Ephene:

My darling...Gladys, will you marry me?
(*sotto voce*)
Hey...that was pretty good!

ISABEL:

Silence. Bigger silence.

The words Epheneel has rehearsed for the last 15 years don't fit this scene at all. For when Gladys turns and looks him in the eye, Epheneel can see, in each of her tears, as clear as music, a tiny woman in a gray dress waving from the rail of a tall ship sailing. Waving goodbye.

(Silent beat.)

"Goodbye!" he thinks. "How could I not have seen?" Gladys needs to see the world she draws and dreams. Gray silk glowing. She's standing, going...

"Not gray," he thinks, "but silver," as his she leaves him, ring shining and empty in his outraised hand.

(Music: Mozart piano concerto
K466. CD Track 6. ISABEL's
speech matches its sad, stately pace.)

Epheneel Green, walking alone to St. Ann's Church. Each footstep echoes his despair against the pavement. But the people he passes hear a victory march.

"Go get 'em, son!"

Epheneel is thirty, twenty, ten feet away from St Ann's Church. Cars with oversized fins pull up to the curb. Men in blue suits and brown hats offer their hands to women with polished red nails and diamond engagement rings: pear, square. Cars; doors. The women smile at Epheneel. "He's so adorably pale!"

One reaches her hand out to touch the young musician's arm, but feels only air as Epheneel ghosts by.

(Music: Ends.)

In their unmarked office across the street, the Heights bookies say their prayers, then head to church. Epheneel Green holds the wooden doors open for them, and enters silently.

(Music: PLAYERS, assuming
the role of the historical
orchestra, warm up.)

A hush falls on the crowd as their soloist treads, slow-step by step, up the aisle where his wedding was to occur one year from today.

(Warm-up ends.)

Crowd Person 1:
Go, Brooklyn!

Crowd Person 2:
Go, Queens!

(sfx: PLAYERS and ISABEL
freak out: "Who was that?
Get him! Outta here!" etc.)

Crowd Person 2:
Just kiddin', you cubes. Jeez!

ISABEL:
Ephenel Green stands in his soloist's place, near the altar. The hymnals in each pew are filled with words unspoken. Each whole note on his music is an empty ring upon the page.

Noting Ephenel's arrival, the conductor, Maestro Slivicz, bounds to the podium: white tie, black tuxedo, brown-hair brilliantined and side-parted, like a thirty-year old, Czechoslovakian Carey Grant.

(Music: PLAYERS tune.)

Maestro Slivicz
I could conduct concerto without score.
But I will do this tomorrow when hired
for "Slivicz Season" at Scala! No. Met. No. Scala!

ISABEL:
He raises a tiny bubble of silence atop his baton, slowly.

(ISABEL raises her arm.)
 Lowers it - fast!
 (And lowers it.)
 The 1952 Brooklyn Heights Orchestra begins to play.
 (ISABEL cues THE PLAYERS.)

(Music: Mozart Concerto
 1st Mov't. CD Track 2)

In front of the conductor are seventy people who wouldn't normally talk to one another, playing seventy different parts of the same piece of music. But for the next hour, they're his, completely. He can "accelerando" them...

(ISABEL conducts changes in tempo;
 the PLAYERS follow her.)

...*rallentando* them...make them *tacet*...for an hour, if he wants to.

He points at a math teacher and faith, in the form of flute notes, pours out of her fingers.

In the seconds before Epheneel's entrance, Slivicz slows, then quiets the orchestra, so his horn's first notes will sound even larger. He lifts another tiny bubble of silence atop his baton for his soloist, and looks away. Because no conductor will look a horn player in the eye. For if the player is a nervous player, his breath will catch and bulge in the metal tubing. It will splatter, chatter, and even explode...

(Music: Sudden stop.)

Maestro Slivicz:
 Where is horn player?

ISABEL:
 Poor Maestro Slivicz. Poor Brooklyn Heights. Because tonight, instead of silently melting into Epheneel's solo, the Maestro's tiny bubble of silence has come in contact with Epheneel's broken heart.

Time expands, as it does when it touches a major emotion.

This is why the moment when someone says, "I love you" for the first time is so large.

Just like the moment when someone leaves you. On a bench.
On your 20th birthday.

The bubble of silence grows so large that children could have been conceived and born, grown up and had children of their own inside it. Flowers could have grown from newly-planted seeds.

Like a pitcher frozen mid wind-up, Ephene1, horn in hand, is sucked into the memory of his time with Gladys, from that first shared desk at school to tonight's benighted, sunset bench. The longer he lingers, the more his heart breaks and the bigger the bubble becomes, until finally, Maestro Slivicz, is sucked into it, too.

Inside Ephene1's sad, silent sphere of unrequited love, the Maestro sees his childhood home outside Prague...there is his dream of having tea with Dvorak... And there is Ephene1 Green, standing on a bridge looking into the water.

In a flash, Maestro Slivicz realizes that if his #1 horn player is lost inside a bubble, he cannot be in his chair ready to play Mozart.

The Maestro circles his baton in the air to lasso Ephene1's attention. Nothing.

The Maestro coughs. Ephene1 doesn't move.

Over the years, conductors around the world have done dangerous things in the name of music. They've beaten the time with wooden sticks and violin bows to inspire big, bold sounds. They have conducted with their fingers in their armpits to make players pay attention to their smallest whims. They've smoked behind the podium to appear devil-may-care, setting historic stages on fire.

The silence grows. Maestro Slivicz imagines how the music history books will read from this night forward: "Before May 7, 1952, no conductor looked horn player in the eye. And then?"

The silence is about to drag the whole orchestra under! The maestro has no choice. He is a ship's captain, its lifesaver -- the only man with a baton. He takes a deep breath. He looks Ephene1 Green in the eye, and brings the music down.

Ephenel raises his horn to his mouth and begins to play. But as he blows, his breath catches on his ragged heart. Every ounce of pain and shame and hope and dreams-that-would-never-be-realized blocks, then bursts forth, from his horn.

Again and again, Ephenel emits a sound "The Brooklyn Daily Eagle" describes the following morning in the banner headline of a special edition as: "Explosively embarrassing".

And on that morning, Ephenel Green is no longer the hometown hero behind the pharmacy counter. To the good people of the Heights he has become the heartless creator of The Great Horn-Fart of 1952.

Crowds gather in front of the Green Pharmacy as the news trucks drop off their early editions. People want their money - their pride - they want something back.

But Dr. Green wants something back too.

Dr. Green

Has anyone seen my son?

ISABEL:

He asks.

Dr. Green

Anyone?

ISABEL:

And amid that aching silence, the Heights begins to crumble.

The ocean-water pool at the St George Hotel drips drop by drop, back into the ocean. Movie stars leave the roof for LA; families for Long Island. Bulldozers tear down the Penny Bridge to build the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway; brownstones, abandoned, sink and burn.

The sun still rises over the East River but who cares? The egg creams have lost their fizz.

In 1957, unable to recover from the double-header of Ephenel's shame, the Dodgers leave Brooklyn for Los Angeles.

In 1963, outdated and abandoned, the Green pharmacy closes.

But the orchestra keeps playing, because that's what orchestras do, and did...

...as the Titanic sank...

as the Nazis invaded...

From 1952 on, following the lead of generations, the Brooklyn Heights Orchestra played on, into and through calamity..

PLAYER 1:

May 7, 1953 - Our change-in-strategy year: We play the Handel concerto in G major featuring Winstead Block, who challenges Bronx Community's horn to a thumb-wrestling contest on a concert-bound El. Result? Two distal phalanx fractures. BQE winners? Two-time champions, Forest Hills, led by Mr. Unreal the Unbeatable, destroyer of nations, with his big fat French horn.

PLAYER 2:

May 7, 1954 - Our comeback year, in which Eric Romler of the San Diego Symphony leaves us to join a jazz band halfway through our 1st rehearsal, and Staten Island risks it all -

PLAYER 3:

- courageously -

PLAYER 2

- by playing a six hour original composition by a local composer, justly known thereafter as the Fresh Kills Symphony. BQE Hat-trick: Queens.

PLAYER 3 (alternating):

PLAYER 4 (alternating):

May 1955-70, forward:

May 1971 to now, backward:

Addison --

Zyrsky --

Angler --

Abercourt	--	Zanders	--
Behkowski	--	Yawley	--
		Yingling	--

PLAYER 2:
Injured...talented but crazy...slightly nuts...completely nuts.
Yingling was pretty good.

PLAYER 1:
But then he died.

PLAYER 3:
Who was the one who was allergic to metal?

PLAYER 1:
That was Lieberitz.

PLAYER 3:
Wasn't it Linerizt?

PLAYER 1:
No. Lineritz was the one who fainted during the rests.

PLAYER 2:
1968 wasn't too bad...
(To PLAYER 3, seductively):
Remember?

PLAYER 4:
Until "The horny horn player" - that numchuck, what's-
his-name -- Poterlink -- cuts his lip on the zipper of a
cheerleader's sweater. We lose any shot we might have had
at the BQE finals, not to mention our after-school gigs -

PLAYER 3:
and Manhattan Community loses to Queens playing Brahms 4
- and -

(pointedly, to PLAYER 2)
Brahms is invincible. In 1975, we play a Disco medley and
get disqualified. Those were desperate times.

PLAYER 4:

Maestro Slivicz had his first infarction in '78.

PLAYER 3:

But swears he'll play that Mozart 2 before he dies.

PLAYER 2:

1984. Rezinsky defects back to Russia rather than play with us.

PLAYER 1:

But Greenwich Village makes it to the finals with John Cage's "4'33", only to lose to Forest Hills. Oh, why do they win with such consistency?

PLAYER 4:

I think they bribe the judges.

PLAYER 2:

Or sleep with them.

PLAYER 1:

Or blackmail them.

PLAYER 3:

Or maybe they're just better than us?

(PLAYERS recoil.)

ISABEL:

The Heights kept playing and losing to the Hills -

PLAYER 4:

- for 50 years.

ISABEL:

And that's where I come in.

PLAYER 2:
(intrigued)
Fifty years. And that's where she comes in.

PLAYER 1:
(historically)
Fifty years.

PLAYER 4:
(dreamily)
Fifty years?

PLAYER 3:
Who was the one who played kazoo?

PLAYER 1:
Fifty years, and trust me: we never lived through
anything as bad as this.

ISABEL:
Like I said: that's where I come in.

(Music: Mozart Concerto 1st Mov't,
end of theme. CD Track 1.)

(END OF MOVEMENT)

Movement 2

(Music: Transitional, TK.)

ISABEL:

There are two kinds of musicians in the world. The naturals are the ones who play perfectly without practicing. Wanna-be's can practice eighteen hours a day and still lack something majorly musical.

With violinists, you can see the difference right away. A natural's hand alights on the bow like a butterfly. Wannabe's look like they're trying to fish with a chopstick.

But the people who are a true conductor's nightmare are the Mamma-wanna-be's: kids who bring home a permission slip like the one I brought my mother in fourth grade, which asked her:

Mom:

(Reading aloud.)

Would you like your child to play an instrument?

Yes.

(Noting her choice.)

Maybe this will make my daughter less of a reading-books-under-trees kind of kid.

(Reading.)

Which instrument would you like your child to play?

Violin!

(Noting.)

Because we're Jewish.

ISABEL:

When my parents took me to buy this violin, the man who sold it to us told me: "The Hebrew word for the sound post - the little toothpick between the back and front panels - that gives each instrument its life and personality - is the same word as the Hebrew word for soul: *neshama*."

"This one, " he said, as my mother wrote him a check, "- 's-got *neshama tov*". That's Hebrew for good neshama. I'll throw in the case for free."

I think this is why, when Jews need to make soul music, we instinctively grab violins - it's part of a 2,000 year-old vibe handed down to us by Moses by way of Mom.

I also think this is why, thanks to Jewish moms like mine that the roll-call for my fourth grade violin class sounds like a JV law firm: Lesnick; Resnick; Eskin; Garfinkel; Glickman; Goldstein; Grossman; Hoffman; Stern; Liang, whose mother's maiden name was Geller, and me.

In the beginning, printed music looks like Braille for people who can see. But my music teacher keeps saying:

70s Music Teacher:

As long as you can count and feel the notes falling into place, everything will come together in a magical, musical, TA-ta-TEE-TEE-ta!

ISABEL:

The weird thing is, it works. The first night I bring my violin home, my family changes forever. My Dad comes home from work. He looks at the half-size violin case sitting by the front door.

Dad:

Look at that. There's music in the house!

ISABEL:

He walks me over to the stereo where he reaches behind the Harry Belafonte records he'd used to woo my Mom in the 50s and pulls out his Angel recordings, these dull brown album covers with the little gold angel on the front that I'd never seen before. This is back when a dead composer's name on an album cover was enough to sell millions.

And he turns on the Jewish Top Two and blows both of our minds.

(VIOLIN 1 plays Mendelssohn Violin Concerto excerpt. CD Track 7.)

ISABEL:

The Mendelssohn violin concerto, and...

(VIOLIN 1 plays Tchaikovsky
Violin Concerto excerpt.
CD Track 8.)

...the Tchaikovsky violin concerto.

This was before Laserium, so we just sit there, watching the dust motes dance in the fading living room sunlight. As we listen, my Dad's eyes flash me the secret message of all violin-giving parents: Since I'm a right-handed, reasonably intelligent Jewish kid, the only thing between me and Carnegie Hall is 90 minutes on Amtrak.

Just like Heifetz, Menhuyin and Stern before me, my destiny was clear: if I played music, he'd believe. And so we begin to perform the classical duet for father and child, in which my Dad's unspoken melody is: Dream it - be it! My counterpoint is: OK - fine!

A couple of months later my Dad tape-records my elementary school orchestra on his Radio Shack portable with detachable mic:

(Music: Out-of-tune student
orchestra. CD Track 9)

ISABEL:

He plays the tape at home before dinner, followed by the Mendelssohn.

The unspoken message here is that Mendelssohn was a nice Jewish violinist who played his debut concert for Brahms when he was only 16 years old. And since we have fashion retail on both sides of the family, my Dad's probably wondering what he would wear to my debut.

I'm only ten, but I know from my uncle that it's good to order early -- something Italian, double-breasted, with a subtle vent and patterned red tie.

(Beat.)

One Sunday afternoon, my Dad and I are grooving to our people's music. We're listening to the opening violin solo of "Fiddler On The Roof", to that haunting melody coming from the soul of, ostensibly, Zero Mostel, who's staring at us from the album cover, where's he's

photographically balanced, fiddle in hand, on the shingles of a hand-drawn shtetl, the kind of place my ancestors may have tried to live, outside of bad ol' Kiev.

My mother comes into the living room, from the kitchen, where she and my sister have been playing "Empty the Dishwasher; Then We'll Scrabble!" She's at peace with the world. She thinks she's finally found a team sport that I can't break a leg or a lamp while practicing. Then she picks up the album cover. Looks at the picture. Lowers the volume on the stereo - fast.

Mother:

(pointing to the album cover)
Look at him! What if he fell?

ISABEL:

She's found the danger.

Mother:

You could poke out somebody's eye with that bow!
Music is a beautiful thing. But if I ever catch you playing on the roof, I'll break your arm. Understood?
Understood! Now, who wants pizza?

ISABEL:

And so I became a second violin: a sturdy, dependable Mamma-wanna-be, safely grounded in the easy rhythms and lower registers; a classical back-up-singer to the fearless, natural firsts.

(Music: Blue Danube Waltz. SECOND
VIOLINS pluck along. CD Track 10)

In the beginning, being a second violin is so easy I don't even have to look at the music.

In junior high, my best friend and I sit in the back of our section and play the music upside down.

(The waltz continues. SECOND
VIOLINS play as before.)

In high school, we play the music upside down while high.

("Stoned" SECOND VIOLINS

grin and pluck along. Music: Ends.)

There's not a lot of room for wanna-be's in college orchestra. Then I move here. And all of a sudden it's time to stop plucking around and get an apartment getta job, getta gym getta clue, getta date, getta raise, get invited to the party you'll read about in the Sunday paper next Saturday - get smarter, slimmer, faster, richer, wiser, getta Tang-Fab-sushi-smoothie!

Before I know it the city's been playing me for ten years, and I'm incredibly skilled at getting stuff I don't need.

I have an apartment, but I can't stop looking at the real estate ads. I have a freezer full of bagels but I can't help getting bigger, flatter fresher ones on sale. I need a boyfriend. But like I said: I'm really good at getting stuff I don't need.

So when my neighbor's cousin leaves her job at the department of Cultural affairs, I already have a job, but I go and get it, because hey, why not? I mean, I can. So now I've got this life that's perfect on the outside: job, apartment... But there's not a whole lot going that gives me chills or makes me laugh milk out of my nose. My neshama's got a hole in it the size of the Cyclone. So I go to Coney Island with some friends. I ride the Cyclone - over and over. But the thrill of the fall? Doesn't last.

One Monday night, I'm wandering home from work across the Brooklyn Bridge. I'm passing through the background of a dozen other people's photos, when a woman rolls by on a giant tricycle with a harp attached to the back. OK... The harp is held up by a wooden platform that has a tiny stereo speaker attached to each back corner, playing an all-harp version of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy".

(Music: Strings pizzicato
harp-like Ode to Joy melody.)

A few beats later, a bald man with an upright bass with a wheel on the bottom rolls up.

Bass Player:
Hi! Whoops!

ISABEL:

He falls behind, then rolls up again, like a musical Sisyphus, as we approach the Manhattan-Brooklyn border, where...zzzzffffttt! a roller-blader with a flute case strapped across his chest flies by the bass and me, and cuts in line behind the harp as the speakers play:

(ISABEL hums Ode to Joy theme.)

ISABEL:

PLING-PLING-pling-pling-PLING-pling-pling-pling-PLING-PLING-pling-pling-PLINGGGG-pl-PLING...

I fall in line between the bass and the flute. I'm wondering if anyone will ask what I think I'm doing here. But no one does. We just roll/march down the ramp and across the little park and up to a church and down a flight of stairs to its basement door. I stand there and stare as the harp rings the bell and a clarinet opens the door.

Fortunately for me: staring stupidly into space at a total stranger? In orchestra world, that's pretty normal.

The crucial thing is, who knew? There's an amateur orchestra rehearsing three blocks from where I live. Its name is right there, taped to the door in big computerized letters: Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra!

There's a handwritten line underneath that says: Walk-Ins Welcome.

I run home and dig through my junk closet, under my ski boots and the skateboard I rode once, and find my high school violin...I spend the rest of the night twisting the pegs, which won't turn -- and the rest of the week relearning which string is which, and tuning them to notes I can't really remember.

My hands are cold; my stomach's burning. I haven't had this much fun in years!

The next Monday I carry my fiddle through the lobby at work, so casually.

"Salve you guys!"

(To her co-workers.)

That's Latin for hello.

We classical types, you know, we're classy. Excuse me!
Comin' though! I got an instrument here!

(To audience.)

I'm just another hard-working musician with a government
day-job in Cultural Affairs.

(To co-workers.)

Hey, don't bump the handle! How ya doin'? A fiddle, yeh.
A violin.

"I didn't know you..." the guy next to me says.
"Yeh, well, I quit for twenty years," I tell him. "But
I'm relapsing."

Eight hours later, I join the parade of instrumentalists
hiking its way back into Brooklyn like a loner's Noah's
Ark. The harp rings the bell again, the clarinet answers
the door again. I wish Jews could "six-pointed-star"
ourselves for good luck, but we're not that coordinated.
So I just walk in behind them, like I belong, down the
stairs -- and down more stairs -- into the basement:

(Music: Pre-rehearsal noise.
PLAYERS tune, pass time playing
pop tunes, fave classical bits.)

Will you look at that! It's amazing.

Public radio fund-drives like to pretend classical music
is a dignified pastime for serious adults. In reality,
this room is more like eighth grade, repeat. You've got
your maps of the world on the walls and your smart folks
in the front, hair neatly pulled back, eyes a-glowing.

You've got your C-students in the middle checking out
their reproductive prospects, and your class-clowns and
hopeless cases confined to the back in the wobbly chairs,
in front of the Twelve Steps poster and the cut-out
Easter Eggs taped permanently taped to the back wall with
that five-for-a-dollar scotch tape that goes yellow
"like-that!".

The orchestra fills the room completely but neatly. Different instrumental territories with equally different states of mind abut one another like an Old World audio Europe, passing time between wars.

The first violins are Parisian purebreds, very excitable and always right - especially when they're wrong! Cellos are German romantics. Flutes are super-precise Swiss elitists, slightly dangerous under their calm.

Violas are their own orchestral Poland.

(Repeating a classic orchestra joke:)

What's the difference between a viola and a violin?

A viola burns longer.

It's that bad.

Basses are a multi-lingual continent all their own, with their deep, deep sounds and big, big bodies: I may be playing Bach all nice and neat now, they rumble, but come see me at 2 am when I'm jazzzzz!

Winds are Swedish, brass are Flemish.

And the second violins? Everyone likes to pretend we don't really exist even though we're technically necessary. In the romantically European-flavored world of an American orchestra, we're a musical New Jersey.

This is how it works, no matter where or how or when you go. Instruments divided into sections. Naturals ahead of wanna-be's, who insult and envy the more talented kids up front. It's a vicious, class-ist system that has driven more than one seriously neurotic person majorly crazy...er. On the upside, a seating chart based on skill makes it really easy for me to find my place. Just like in 8th grade science; I head to way-back of the room, with the last of the worst; where all the bad jokes are:

PLAYER 2:

Good morning!

ISABEL:

It's 7:30 in the evening.

PLAYER 2:

So, what took you so long?

PLAYER 3:

Don't listen to him. He lost his brain in the war.

PLAYER 2:

A waist is a terrible thing to mind. Table, or should I say 'desk,' for one?

ISABEL:

I don't know these people. But I went through 8th grade with their younger selves - kids who endlessly repeated the same three Monty Python jokes, and stashed sci-fi comics under their sheet music. For the first time in years, I feel like I'm home.

There are an odd number of second violins, so I sit down alone at the last stand, which is called a desk, the same way a violin is called a fiddle. Because it is. So there!

(aside)

I'm sounding much more eighth grade already!

I start tuning up my strings while peeking at the music: The Mozart Horn Concerto #2 in F Flat Major. I don't know it.

PLAYER 4:

But you will! We play it every season. Welcome to the back of the back-row, kid.

(Holds up binoculars and stares
offstage, ie: at the conductor.)

How did you...? Hold that thought -- Slivicz's starting.

ISABEL:

Maestro Slivicz, the eighty-year-old but still-dashing version of that Czech Cary Grant from 1952, flips his gray hair back, lowers his baton and we start to play.

(Music: Ends on
dramatic chord.)

When it works, playing in an orchestra is like having sex with seventy strangers, in a good way.

PLAYER 2:

Was that good for you?

ISABEL:

You even get snack time. And then you play some more.

PLAYER 2:

(to Isabel:)

Watch! Now he's going to ask to repeat from A with more feeling.

(to Player 1:)

Eewwww! Did you see who the third desk's talking to?

ISABEL:

Where's A?

PLAYER 1:

Twenty-six measures before B!

(to PLAYER 2)

He doesn't stand a chance with her, trust me - have you seen his *spiccato*?

PLAYER 2:

(to ISABEL)

Then he's going to ask us to draw eyeglasses on the third passage before A so we remember to look up and watch out. Then -

(to PLAYER 1)

Besides everyone knows she really wants me! They all do.

PLAYER 3:

(louder than intended)

Stop it, stop it, stop it!

(To the Maestro offstage)

My apologies; there must have been something on my back -

(to PLAYER 2)

- like an asshole.

ISABEL:

Just like in eighth grade, it's only a matter of time before these two get together.

PLAYER 4:

They've already been together. They shared the back row, then they shared a bed, now they share custody.

PLAYER 1:

What were they thinking - a string and a wind?

PLAYER 2:

We hooked up during Mahler 3 - you know the sixth movement with the

(BACK ROW PLAYERS hum Mahler 3 theme)

It makes anybody look good. Plus this was what? Fifteen, 16 years ago?

PLAYER 1:

Sixteen years ago was Beethoven Five. The year after that we did the Brahms cycle... Mahler 2 and 3. And of course, each season, always:

(Music: First four measures of
Mozart Concerto 1st Movt.)

ISABEL:

Mozart Horn Concerto #2 - it's some kind of orchestra tradition. Right now, we're practicing the group parts - the "Tutti" - which is Italian for "everybody". At the end of the night we will each have to audition by playing a "Tutti" section "da solo" - which is Italian for: "all alone".

This is the point where even a lot of natural players totally lose it.

Playing with the group is like singing in the shower. Auditioning is like singing in the shower, with the water turned off, in front of 70 "friendly and supportive" people who'd be thrilled to watch you fail..

Lucky for me, Mozart is kind to second violins in this concerto - we don't have a lot of tricky individual notes. We have these little noodles of notes that repeat over and over. And as a lifelong second, I'm a natural noodler. I'm also pretty skilled at the "stealth audition", which is something I invented back in "high" high school. The trick is to lower everyone's expectations. And then...not suck. So after the firsts..

(FIRST VIOLIN plays Mozart excerpt.
As she plays, other PLAYERS flash
score cards behind her head. It's one
of their favorite jokes.)

...and the cellos...

(CELLIST "auditions" for the
unseen conductor by playing
a few measures of the Mozart.
Score cards raised as before.)

...and the...

(OBOE auditions; score cards.)

Play their part of the tutti, I offer mine...

(ISABEL plays simple musical phrase.)

It wouldn't get me to be an usher at Carnegie. But for a
community second, it's OK.

OTHER SECOND VIOLIN:

It's better than OK!

ISABEL:

Because I get seated second to last in my section, next
to -

(Indicates her new stand partner.)

OTHER SECOND VIOLIN:

-- and ahead of me. That's where I used to sit!

ISABEL:

And now I'm officially part of the group. I've made my
first enemy.

OTHER SECOND VIOLIN:

I think he sat her there because she's new. Did you hear
her play? Did anyone hear her play?

PLAYER 1:

(matter-of-fact)

I gave her a seven.

PLAYER 3:

(kindly)

I gave her a 9.2

PLAYER 2:

(lasciviously)

So did I.

(Players 2 and 3 glare at one another)

ISABEL:

Fortunately, we're all adults, and everyone's at peace with his or her seat by the time we go home. We understand that music, like love, is a totally subjective thing. And we accept our assigned place in it...

(PLAYERS warm up, chat.
OTHER SECOND VIOLIN approaches
ISABEL.)

OTHER SECOND VIOLIN:

I call you out, bitch!

ISABEL:

...until rehearsal number two. Music, like love is also a brutal contest. And that's why every orchestra offers its players a way to even the score. It's called a challenge - it's kind of like being called out in elementary school, except you don't get to beat the other person up physically. You have to play your solo again, and if the other person is better than you, they get to take your seat.

(Musicians pull back seats
to make room for the 'fight.')

And so between the warm-up and the start of rehearsal, we rosin up and throw down, schoolyard-style, with our seconds gathered around us.

(ISABEL and other second play
alternating phrases of their
audition pieces.)

ISABEL:

We play little bits of other things we agree on...

(ISABEL and OTHER SECOND VIOLIN
alternate phrases of Bach
Double Violin Concerto.)

...or don't.

(They alternate excerpts of vastly
different musical pieces, eg:
Havenu Shalom Alechim/Irish jig.)

ISABEL:

It's sick, but it's fun. Because I'm winning.

(Final set of scorecards. Isabel gets
the higher score. If she has clearly
played worse than other player,
she can add: "Hey. It's my story.")

And then, I've won.

(to OTHER SECOND)

Great job!

(*sotto voce*)

Bitch.

ISABEL'S STAND PARTNER

(to ISABEL):

Nice work, partner! You know, in fifty, sixty years, with
a ton of practice and some better DNA, you could even be
a soloist.

ISABEL:

I'm just happy to sit back here and noodle.

ISABEL'S STAND PARTNER:

I'm with you on that. Life's hard enough back here; why
risk the front lines?

ISABEL:

(to Stand Partner):

So, who's going to play the horn solo for us, anyway?

(BACK ROW PLAYERS respond to this question with stunned silence.)

ISABEL'S STAND PARTNER:
You don't know?

PLAYER 3:
She doesn't know?

ISABEL:
(to PLAYERS)
What don't I know?
(To Audience)
And so they tell me the legend of Epheneel Green - how one man's broken dream tore the heart out of a once-hopeful neighborhood.

PLAYER 2:
It was the way she looked at him, like 'I'm heart-broken, too. So please don't hate me.'

ISABEL:
Don't you think Gladys might have done the right thing? They could have ended up bitterly divorced, or romantically disillusioned for the rest of their lives.

PLAYER 2:
But we would have won.

PLAYER 1:
Instead, Forest Hills has won the BQE for the last fifty years! Meanwhile, we've spent 26,000 Monday nights without a horn player.

ISABEL:
You've got to be kidding! Are you trying to tell me that everything that's wrong in Brooklyn is Gladys White's

fault? You people have been playing in the basement way too long!

PLAYER 2:
(with 8th-grade decorum)
Nya-nya-nya!

ISABEL:
I'll find us a horn player, no problem! Listen - I'm a Cultural Affairs professional. It's what I do!

(Music: Transitional, TK)

(END OF MOVEMENT)

Movement 3

(Music: Transitional. TK)

ISABEL:

People say it's hard to find a man in New York City - get over yourself! 48% of the humans here are men. If you want to bitch, try to find a horn player for the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra.

Tuesday morning, I get to work and open up the Amateur Musicians International Directory. It's The Yellow Pages for people who enjoy taking their tubas on vacation.

Under USA, I find New York (Metro), under which I find every horn player in NYC. How easy was that? I start in the middle of the list just to make things fun. I check my breath. I pick up the phone. All of a sudden, I feel like I'm blind-dating:

Hello? Is this Zdkebergie, Litzderdish? Great! Mr. - Ms. Liztderdish, I'm calling from the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra - click!

Sven Richardson Paulson? Hello! I'm calling from the Brooklyn Heights Commu - click!

It's not going to be like this, is it?

After 49 hang-ups, I identify three candidates. Our first potential horn is: Alexi Radivich.

PLAYER 1:

Oooh! Can I be him this time?

PLAYER 4:

You were him last time. It's my turn to be Alexi. You can be -

PLAYER 1:

FINE!

ISABEL:

The key to sizing up a horn player? You listen. Are they heavy breathers, are they not breathing? Each time I introduce myself, I say hello and then I

(ISABEL illustrates her listening technique.)

Alexi seems like an even-keeled kinda guy; Julliard '89, high school music teacher. I invite him down to meet the folks next Monday night, give the group a test-drive. Then I listen. So far so good. The next Monday he arrives at 7:29.

(Other PLAYERS prepare for the Maestro's downbeat.)

PLAYER 4/Radivich:
Hi! I'm - wait - damn!

PLAYER 1:
What's with the thing in his ear -- is he deaf?

PLAYER 4/Radivich:
Au contraire -
(to himself:)
Yes! Yes!
(to PLAYERS)
My ears are so finely tuned I can listen to you and Monday night football!

ISABEL:
Mr Radivich, it's so nice of you to join us but could you please take your seat?

(PLAYERS begin a few measures before the horn's entrance. "Alexi" misses his cue.

PLAYERS try again.

"Alexi" doesn't enter.)

PLAYER 4/Radivich:
 (to his radio:)

Idiots!!!

(to PLAYERS):
 Not you guys, you're doing great.

(PLAYERS give "Alexi" a third cue,
 which he utterly ignores.)

PLAYER 4/Radivich:
 (leaping from his seat)

Touchdown!

(PLAYERS cease,
 disgusted.)

ISABEL:
 Alexi was a bit...overscheduled.
 (to PLAYERS)
 But look. I'm a second violin and he was my first try.
 (To audience)
 Second time would be a charm. So I listened and I
 listened, and eventually, I found:

PLAYER 3/Daun:
 Dawn, with a W -- but you can call me Daun, with a U. You
 know what's really interesting about this piece? I was
 talking to Mozart before I left for rehearsal tonight -
 he lives with me? It was kind of weird at first, sharing
 a studio with a dead Austrian composer. They eat a lot of
 red meat and I'm vegetarian. Anyway, Motzie - he told me
 to call him Motzie -- gave me a couple of rewrites in the
 second section that I thought I'd pass along.
 (To MAESTRO SLIVICZ)
 Mr. Maestro, sir? I'm Dawn and I was talking to Mozart
 before rehearsal? Can someone help me here, he's not
 saying anything, I'm not sure he speaks English -
 Excusez-moi?

ISABEL:
 Daun was a visionary. But everyone's all-time favorite
 was...

PLAYER 2/Randall:

Randall, no last name, just like a French horn is not "French" but a horn. This piece of metal is an extension of my soul. It has taught me the art of playing myself, no other "instrument" needed. I pour my "self" in, MUSIC comes out. May I demonstrate?

ISABEL:

Definitely.

("Randall" takes a deep breath and makes some a most un-horn-like sound.)

PLAYER 2/Randall:

For the sound to work you have to believe. I played a solo with the Youth Orchestra of Iceland using nothing but an ice cube and a dream.

("Randall" makes another bizarre sound.)

ISABEL:

(interrupting)

Gosh, you know, that was great! Things here are a little booked up right now but thanks a zillion for stopping by - and if anything does change...

("Randall" makes a bizarre noise of goodbye.)

ISABEL:

And then came Sweatlock. Matlock Sweatlock. He'd played with the Met and the Phil and the Pops, the holy Trinity of classical. It was like calling Pavarotti - the good Pavarotti -- to sing with your glee club. But by then, I'd perfected a technique that has won over musicians for hundreds of years...

ISABEL

(re-enacting their phone call)

I think you're amazing, Mr. Sweatlock! Really amazing, really! I've read everything about you; you're a personal passion! Really! I specialize in Cultural Affairs and I...I

don't know what I'm going to do if you don't say yes...Where am I calling from? Have I mentioned how much I loved your Bernstein? And your Bach? It's so...well-tempered! We have snacks! Sometimes they're catered! Okay, yes, okay, but please: don't hate me. I'm calling from the Brook-uh-lyn uh, Heig-htsss Co-mmu -- ...yes, that one! Yes!

You will?! I mean: of course you will! That's 7:30 -- pm - Monday...night - this Monday. Dr. -- Mr? Sweatlock, sir. God, Thank you.

(Transitional music/beat.)

He shows up. The next week he, Sweatlock shows up. There he is (points offstage), shaking the Maestro's hand. He's got the profile of an ancient Greek coin and the body language of my high school physics teacher - like he's got this grown-up knowledge they just don't hand out any more...

There I am going up to him and introducing myself in this totally eight-grade way:

(to Sweatlock)

Ohmygoodd! It is so, you know, um great to meet you? I mean, not meet exactly, but see you, you know, in person?

Sweatlock

(to ISABEL)

It's wonderful to meet you, too.

ISABEL:

(aside)

Oh...my...god! I mean: How nice is that for an ex-Met-Phil-Pops player to say? I mean: I'm a second.

(to Sweatlock)

Um, so, anyway: here's this bottle of champagne I got at work, that I, um, just wanted to give you to say, you know, well -- thanks? 'Cause really-really, you saved my life. Really.

SWEATLOCK:

It is I who would like to thank you for this opportunity to...

ISABEL:
Oh, don't make me, blush, OK?

PLAYER 2:
One would never guess you do this kind of thing professionally.

ISABEL:
Thanks a ton, *Señor Suave*!

PLAYER 4:
(looking through binoculars)
Shhh!
(Gestures that it's time to play.
PLAYERS begin Mozart 1st Mov't.)

ISABEL:
You know how people tell you how "the real thing" makes sorrow worthwhile?

As Sweatlock plays, we're not reading the music, we're living it. He's creating these paint-by-number sonic Rembrandts at the front of the room that we shade in perfectly by playing along, even in the back.

(Music: Ends.)

By snack-time, we're stunned.

PLAYER 1:
Is that what happens if you practice?

PLAYER 2:
That's what happens when you don't need to practice.

PLAYER 3:
The guy's good.

PLAYER 2:
He's beyond good. He's a natural.

PLAYER 4:
(looking through binoculars)
And I believe he has a crush on...
(points to ISABEL)
...you.

ISABEL:
Oh, please.

PLAYER 4:
My ears may be slightly imperfect, but my eyes never lie.
When Sweatlock looks back here -- at you -- his eyes
get...misty.

ISABEL:
Maybe he's got allergies. It's dusty in here.

PLAYER 4:
I'm willing to get a second opinion.
(passes binoculars to PLAYER 1)
Would you call that misty?

PLAYER 1:
I would. And yet, perhaps tender is a better word. Tender
and touching. Like the memories of a younger man.

PLAYER 3:
That was really beautiful.

PLAYER 1:
Thanks, I --

ISABEL:
You guys are sick; the man is what? 80?

PLAYER 4:
So? Most creative geniuses stay procreative past their
prime...

ISABEL:
Nothing personal, but he looks like Einstein - after he
died.

PLAYER 2:

You might enjoy an older man.

ISABEL:

I gotta stop this!

PLAYER 2:

No you don't. You got him for us, you play him for us until the season's through. What's the worst that could happen?

(Music: Dramatic phrase

from Mozart Horn Concerto.)

ISABEL:

Not to brag, but the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra kicks classical ass through our fall and winter concerts. Our notes are notable; our rhythms are tight; our dynamics are distinctly fortissimo and pianissimo. Seventy neshamas are playing as one!

With Sweatlock on French horn, there's nothing we can't do, musically. Socially? That's another story.

Sweatlock keeps trying to wander back to wanna-be-land during breaks. But orchestras are physical minefields - you can step on somebody's toes or knock over their stand, or God forbid! their neshama. We're just too far away for him to make it back here during snack break.

So instead, every week, Sweatlock waves from the front. And says: (mouths): I want to talk to you... And I wave back like I'm friendly but visually impaired: Sorry -- can't read lips that far!

(PLAYER 4 offers ISABEL his binoculars, which she refuses).

I'm playing him like a natural.

(Music ends.)

Then, one small week before our spring concert, two humungous things happen involving innocent pieces of paper.

(ISABEL stares at a handwritten letter.)

Oh. My. God.

PLAYER 3:

(gazing off-stage)

Ohmygod! Breathe. Breathe! Slivicz is holding a purple spotted score!!!

ISABEL

The purple spotted score. The official sign from above that our orchestra has become a finalist in the BQE for the first time in 50 years. It's like seeing the yellow-bellied sapsucker of amateur orchestras. The Holy Grail. The Lotto jackpot. The --

PLAYER 1:

Holy Heroditus, we did it!

PLAYER 2:

Somebody kiss me, we're going to win!

PLAYER 3:

(Leans in to kiss him; pulls away.)

Oh my god! We can't lose.

(Attempting composure.)

Cal-ming!...Breath-ing...win-ning!

(to ISABEL):

So, what were YOU oh-my-god-ing about?

ISABEL:

(Reading note)

I think I've just been propositioned by a retired horn player. He's invited me to meet him for drinks after Sunday afternoon's dress rehearsal. He's got nice handwriting.

PLAYER 2:

Mazel tov! You need a band for the wedding?

ISABEL:

I can't go out with him! What will I say if he gets misty?

PLAYER 4:

(to ISABEL)

You will go out with that man or we will hunt you down and, and -

PLAYER 1:

Serenade you.

ISABEL:

You wouldn't.

PLAYER 2:

Don't press your luck, *pizzella*. Listen, don't do it for us. Do it for Mozart.

PLAYER 3:

Do it for Brooklyn!

ISABEL:

(aside)

The stakes are high; the time is short...

(To the group.)

Okay, okay! I'll do it!

(To herself.)

I'll go out with Sweatlock for my orchestra, and Mozart and Brooklyn. But most of all, I'll go out with him for Gladys. Fifty years! Someone's gotta get this borough off her back.

(Transitional Music: PLAYERS
who will assume the roles
of a bistro chamber ensemble in
this scene, play Mozart's
"A Musical Joke". CD Track 12)

ISABEL:

Sunday afternoon's dress rehearsal flies by the way time does when you really want it to slow down. One second I'm rosining my bow and tuning. The next second,

everyone around me is packing up and saying to one another: Don't forget your shoulder rest. Don't forget, you're driving me home!

To me they say: Don't forget, everything - and we mean everything - depends on you.

I go home, drop off my fiddle, fluff my hair, sit on the couch; unfluff my hair. And then it's time for me to head over to this little Heights bistro for my non-date with Matlock Sweatlock, our savior.

As I walk down the street, past the landmarked brownstones and rows of yellow forsythia, I can't help thinking: I do need a boyfriend. It would be nice to be walking down the street arm-in-arm with a man I love-ish, through the little wooden door that leads into a candle-lit room where a chamber group is softly playing just for two...

(PLAYERS continue chamber selections.

ISABEL enters romantic bistro

and sits down at a table-for-two

with Sweatlock. CD Track 12)

Sweatlock:

Good evening. You look lovely.

ISABEL:

Oh, hi! You, um, look lovely, too, in a handsome kind of way.

(To audience:)

Like I said: I need a boyfriend. But do I really need a boyfriend who's going to be 110 when I retire? Even if he is talented and smart and kind of looks like Zeus, I think we're pushing the romantic envelope too far. I will be friendly enough to keep him playing. But not so friendly that I end up getting played. Which could be tricky.

One of us has played with the London Symphony. The other one of us can't tune her G-string.

Timing's key in life as in music: I gotta keep on top of things, be engaging. But avoid getting engaged. No flirting. No winking. And most of all? No drinking. No drinking on a first non-date. No "let-me-tell-you-what-I'm-really-thinking". No drinking!

Sweatlock:
Glass of wine?

ISABEL
(to Sweatlock):

How 'bout a bottle?

(Aside)

For the record: Sweatlock is adorably dressed, in a great-uncle-y kind of way, in a bow tie and dark gray suit. So I do what I do when I get nervous; I revert to retail. It's kind of a family thing.

(To Sweatlock):

Nice tie. Is that shantung?

Sweatlock:
I got it from Nadya on our first Asian tour...
(Wine is served; ISABEL accepts
a glass, waits for "Sweatlock"
to serve himself and toast.)
To music!

ISABEL:

L'Chaim!

(PLAYERS switch to a highly romantic

Bach selection, TK.)

Sweatlock:
Ah, J.S. Bach. Did you know he wrote a cantata for his wife every week while they were courting?

ISABEL:

Wow!

(Back-tracking.)

I really think I'd hate that...I mean, it's kind of obsessive-compulsive, don't you think? And so much stuff for her to have to learn how to play every week. I mean,

what if she was busy with other kinds of cultural affairs work? Theoretically speaking....

Waiter:
"Chicken?"

ISABEL:
-- the waiter asks.
(To waiter.)
You have no idea. How am I doing?

Waiter:
You're nervous, but in a cute-ish, train-wreckish kind of way that wouldn't be too off-putting to the right man. Your date seems really nice, though.

(PLAYERS being another
romantic selection.)

Sweatlock:
Ah, but the real question is: Is music - or love - about getting things right? You know, you remind me of someone I once thought the world of.

ISABEL:
(to self:)
Oh God, is he misting?

Sweatlock:
Would you help an old man achieve one night of happiness? Do you believe two hearts united could change history?

ISABEL:
No, I don't. I really don't. You need to know: I'm really cranky in the morning. I don't floss regularly. I listen to bad music - LOUD.

Sweatlock:
Good music, bad music. The question is:
How far are you willing for a dream?

ISABEL:

Look: I told them I'd go all the way. Why don't we just get this over with?

Sweatlock

(raising his glass):

Well! In that case, I'd like to propose...

(Musicians play

proposal music.)

ISABEL:

No proposing! I mean, we haven't even slept together yet!

(To self:)

I-hope-I-didn't-say that-out-loud-Oh-God-I-did-But-like-in-Music-Must-Keep-Going!

(To Sweatlock)

So...you know what I'd love - did I say love? I didn't mean love! You know what I'd like intellectually, to know?

What's it like up there in front of all those famous orchestras? You know, back in my sex...tion of players - my group, not my sex. I mean, I haven't had sex in years!

(To audience:)

More wine! I think this is going well; don't you?

(To Sweatlock:)

You're Superman, they say. But could I be Lois Lane?

You're Sinatra. I'm not Mia, but maybe I could be

Barbara? You're a natural, and I'm -

(ISABEL throws herself across the table and plants a huge smooch on Sweatlock's face. She stops, pulls away, stares.)

I'm really sorry, but I just can't do this!

(ISABEL flees.)

As I run out, I can see Sweatlock's reflection staring at me in the glass door.

When I get home, my phone is ringing. I turn off the ringer, and the answering machine, and

(She's that tipsy.)

my violin case.

That went pretty well. Didn't it?

(Music: Last eight notes of

a "Musical Joke" CD Track 13).

ISABEL:

The day of the BQE is a "scherzo", which in musical terms, is a piece that goes so fast it feels like a joke. One minute I'm waking up all cold-sweaty and nervous; the next thing I know, I'm walking to St. Anns, past the moldy, overpriced brownstones and the pollen-puffing forsythia, in my death-black concert uniform between those neon posters that scream: *Tonight! Matlock Sweatlock and The Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra!*

The deli on the corner advertises special BQE dinner packages. The Mozart features Viennese sausage on a fluted salad. Dessert is a custard-filled crescent called The French Horn.

The guy at the newsstand is selling *Let's go, BHO!* T-shirts for ten bucks. He tells me his kids are flying home from out-of-town to hear us win the Heights' reputation back, live.

He says it reminds him of his hometown in Italy, where soccer fans leave their husbands and wives once a year to go home and cheer for the team from the part of the city where they were born.

He tells me he's betting his entire day's pay on us. And suddenly, I'm nervous-er and sweatier.

(Music: Orchestra tunes.)

Ten minutes til concert-time. The church is filled to the balcony. Classical music fans are SRO in the aisles. People old enough to remember the Great Horn Fart of '52 have brought their sons and daughters and their grandsons and granddaughters. Two sixteen year-old boys in the front pew have painted their faces our orchestra colors: green, and...light blue.

I'm trying to sneak back to my seat undetected -

(PLAYERS hum theme of

Mendelssohn Wedding March.)

ISABEL:

Stop it!

PLAYER 1:

Is that chinrest burn or a hickey you're flaunting?

ISABEL:

(ignoring them)

I've got extra rosin in case my bow hair goes dull, cough drops to ease the tickle-y throat I get from all the extra rosin in the air, an extra set of strings...But something's missing and that something is --

PLAYER 3:

Hey, uh -- where's Sweatlock? Oh my God. Where is Sweatlock?

(PLAYERS glare at ISABEL)

ISABEL:

What? He's a really nice man. I went out with him and made nice. We chatted, we ate, we drank...

PLAYER 1:

And then?

ISABEL:

And then I kissed him...

PLAYER 4:

Bravo! And then?

ISABEL:

I ran sort of screaming, you know, into the night.

(PLAYERS, furious, turn their chairs.
Their backs are now facing ISABEL.)

ISABEL:

Three minutes to concert-time and the entire back row breaks up with me.

(To PLAYERS)

Hey you guys? Would someone talk to me?

(Aside)

And if that wasn't bad enough --

OTHER SECOND VIOLIN:

I call you out, bitch. Right now!

ISABEL:

I've already lost. So I let her win.

(The orchestra tunes again.)

The good news: The audience hasn't noticed that the person they're here to hear isn't here. In other news: My parents and my sister are waving at me from the front row. "How do we find your, uh, church?" they said, before jumping on Amtrak. And back then, when tonight was going to mark my adult musical debut, I told them: "Take a cab uptown to Carnegie Hall, then head south to Brooklyn."

My dad's wearing a new blue suit and red patterned tie. He's brought his tape recorder so he can record and file this concert in his musical collection under N for "Nightmares" or "No Shows" or "Lifelong Dreams Deferred by Noodnick Daughter/Homewrecker of Community Orchestras". Maybe he hasn't changed the batteries since elementary school. He's holding up an 8-pack of batteries...and a six-pack of cassette tapes.

(To her parents:)

That's great!

(To audience.)

One minute to Mozart. Sweatlock's place - up front, dead center, under a spotlight rented with our snack money for the next three years - is undeniably empty.

"Ah, well," says Slivicz whispers to us, as he takes his place at the podium, like a man who's loved and lost Mozart before. "A horn concerto with no French horn..."

At eight o' clock, Maestro Slivicz can wait no longer. He raises his baton. He waves at Jesus on the cross. And he brings the baton down.

(Music: Mozart Horn Concerto Open.
CD Track 14.)

The way Mozart wrote this concerto, the orchestra sets the tone right from the top. In Movement One we play what critics have called, "a musical phrase reminiscent of water traipsing 'cross country rocks in the spring..." "A song of mild anticipation" ...Mild?! !

We're playing our way to the edge of cliff, and we reach the horn solo, we're gonna fall off, and take the bodies of every hopeful, unsuspecting human out there with us! After tonight, the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra will be classical toast!

(ISABEL akes a deep breath.)

But of course, being an orchestra, we play:

(PLAYERS, including ISABEL
play Mozart concerto leading
up to horn entrance, emphasizing
elements as noted.)

Hear that melody line? After a couple of minutes the horn is supposed to enter and trade musical phrases with us, sweetly. Like lovers calling to one another across a canyon. "Hello...." "Hello!"

We're coming up to that moment of anticipation..."Hello!," we're gonna call. Here comes the cliff..

Hello?

But nothing answers.

(Music: Stops.)

There is nothing louder than "nothing" in music.

(Offstage: French horn plays
Mozart solo. CD Track 15)

Except for the sound of a horn playing the opening solo of the Mozart Horn Concert in F-Flat Major just outside the church. It's almost imperceptible. But if we're imagining it, that's OK -- because seventy of us losing our minds together *Do you hear it?* players are whispering. *Yes, I do!*

(Music: Resumes.)

The violas race in with a series of grace notes attached to eighth notes...

The winds send up a string of thirty-seconds that head straight to heaven...

The celli lay down the low notes, which gives the ghost horn a solid place to land.

The next horn entrance is three measures, two measures, one measure away, when a gray-haired man races down the aisle with a French horn tucked under his arm. He's...OH MY GOD, HE'S -- !

"GOOD GOD!" Someone in the balcony shouts. "IT'S EPHENEL GREEN!"

The crowd is on its feet, cheering; an old woman in the second row is crying, a bouquet of yellow roses in her hand. The most beautiful old woman you've ever seen. Normally normal individuals are shouting:

"It's Green, It's Green! It's Ephene! Green!!!"

PLAYERS 1-4:

EPH-en-el! EPH-en-el! GREEN-GREEN-GREEN!

ISABEL:

In one coordinated movement, the entire orchestra turns and looks Ephene! Green in the eye. Ephene! smiles at us, touches his horn to lips and...

Green's horn is liquid brass, pouring Mozart into oil lamps that have lain empty for the last fifty years. And right behind him all seventy of us once-a-week musicians are plastering our souls against the stain-glassed windows. We're sending sound soaring into the rafters, picking out the lint and shining the halos above each saint's face, so even the beheaded head of John the Baptist looks like it's dancing.

(Music continues. OFFSTAGE
HORN PLAYER and BACK ROW
PLAYERS play together.)

Mozart is in the house, ladies and gentlemen! He's racing through the veins of people old enough to know these notes by heart...He's playing up the feet of the young people who've never heard these sounds before, but who feel them hitting home, heart-first, the way great love songs do.

And now, everyone's staring at the old woman standing in the second row --

PLAYER 4:

(using binoculars)

I do believe that's Gladys White!

PLAYERS

(pause their music)

Gla-dys! Gla-dys!

(Music resumes. CD Track 16)

ISABEL:

The crowd goes WILD! Four hundred and fifty-four people are stamping their feet. Father Righter's jiggling down the aisle...

We're following Ephene's homerun round the bases...four measures until that final chord...now, three...two...one...and...Roll over, Mozart!

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Brooklyn Heights Community Orchestra has won this year's BQE Finals!

(Music: Ends on triumphant note.
CD Track 17)

...

That night all seventy of us take Ephene Green and Gladys White out for the biggest celebration in community orchestra history.

Gladys told us about traveling through Asia with her late husband and her son, and, how funny it is - isn't it? - to end up moving home, around the corner from the place she grew up.

Ephene had been teaching music in Montana for the last 48 years. He says he never minded the cold until his wife died last year.

As for the future? Some questions are even too personal for an orchestra to ask.

But before we left Ephene and Gladys that night on a bench on the Promenade, where they talked until dawn, we asked them the other Big Question.

Gladys swore she'd been coming to our concerts for the last ten years. And Epheneel swore he would have never come back to Brooklyn Heights, if it hadn't been for a call he'd received two nights ago from the "unbeatable" musician he'd played with and lost to in the world's first-ever BQE: Matlock Sweatlock. Winner of the 1952 Bedermeier Quinterhoffer Everyborough Class-off as horn soloist for his hometown community orchestra: The Community Orchestra of Forest Hills Queens.

"I only won that concert because of what you lost," I heard Sweatlock tell Epheneel after our victory.

"You were always the better player," Epheneel said, with a true winner's grace.

"Not tonight," Sweatlock said.

"Well," Epheneel said, and paused like the world-famous musician he had just become. "There's always next year."

(Music: Mozart Concert 1st Mov't
CD Track 18)

And so this time next year, judges willing, Epheneel Green and Matlock Sweatlock will get a second chance to play one another in the BQE finals.

Until then, they play horn duets every Sunday, and Gladys and I go to listen. Then we go out for dinner. Last Sunday, I asked Gladys if she still sees a musician when she looks into her Epheneel's eyes. She just smiled and said that what she sees after all these years is simply this: herself. Not gray, but silver.

(Music: Ends.)

The wanna-be's didn't kick me out of the orchestra, which is pretty big of them.

PLAYER 2:

We think so.

ISABEL:

And up in heaven, I hope Bedermeier and Quinterhoffer are happy with the way their competition turned out.

Because, as the sun comes up over Brooklyn Heights - where the ocean water now returns, drop by drop to the pool at the St. George Hotel, and the eggs creams regain

their fizz, and the Sims twins have moved back from LA to reopen the pharmacy where their parents first dated as teachers - a new day dawns, and a new book opens, as the classics are played in endless ways.

There's just one more thing.

(To OTHER SECOND VIOLIN.)

I call you out, bitch!

(To the other PLAYERS:)

Does anybody have an A?

(Oboe plays a 440 tuning A.
PLAYERS launch into Horn Concert 3rd
mov't. CD Track 19. At piece's end,
OFFSTAGE HORN PLAYER's final note
rings for several beats after the
other PLAYERS have stopped. UFO ends
on a solo horn note triumphant,
followed by:)

(BLACKOUT.)

(END)