

Intermezzo
Ekaterina Vasilyevna.

When I was thirteen years old my musical life was forever changed when I was given the opportunity to listen to several recordings featuring Barry Tuckwell, who played his French horn as eloquently as a Shakespearean actor divined the nuances of fate. I was moved beyond words and listened to the poppy and scratchy LPs over and over again until I knew every measure and movement by heart. The music I had experienced my young life—from the Japanese renderings of spring blossoms to dramatic deaths in Parisian lofts and Italian parapets—was made real before my eyes. Although there were many instruments in my home to choose from, the expression of my love for music was now clear. And at that moment I chose the absolutely worst instrument with which to announce my presence to the world.

To say that the French horn is a devil to play is more than an understatement; it is without question a cruel joke. Many Middle Eastern texts from antiquity have, in fact, revealed that Satan designed the beast and that he did so in retaliation for the Job Incident. It was his little way of getting back at both God and humanity. Play it badly and you curse the day you were tempted into making such a horrendous decision. Play it well and you live your life in a constant state of humility because you just know that big performance flub is waiting to knock you down a few pegs. Play it to perfection and you realize that your soul is no longer yours and is now a servant to the dark lord of the underworld. There's a theological debate in there somewhere, but since I never rose above playing "well" I was content to accept my lot as a talented player prone to occasional and spectacular bobbling. My cohorts christened me Bobby Corno, which I gladly accepted with much pride because I was a big fan of Peter Schickele and PDQ Bach.

I met Kat during my senior year in high school when we were both members of the Chicago Youth Orchestra. Being chosen to play in this orchestra was no small feat as it drew from the top musicians in the Chicago area and suburbs, and its auditions and repertoire were equal to any professional organization. Rehearsals were held on Saturday mornings on the 8th floor of the Fine Arts Building on south Michigan Avenue. Unlike my high school band and orchestra, where camaraderie often led to lighthearted banter and goofing off, these rehearsals were silent and serious. We had a November concert at Orchestra Hall to prepare for and precious time to jell as an ensemble. There was much competition and petty jealousies among the top-tier players—as all of them wanted to be 1st Chair—but fortunately I never had to deal with any of that. I was just awesome to be there. If you were good, really good, you could eventually move on to the Civic Orchestra or Lyric Opera and from there to the temple of Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. We played in the shadows of titans.

I was the *lanterne rouge* of the horn section—dead last chair—which was neither surprising nor unexpected since I was a city boy amidst suburban snobs who owned shiny instruments, spent their summers at Interlochen in Michigan and drove BMWs to rehearsals while I played on a tarnished, dented public school horn and took buses and

trains. There were very few city kids in the orchestra, so it was a great point of accomplishment for me to represent my school and music department and piss on their parade. For the entire time we played as a section, not one of them ever spoke to me, even the guy with whom I played 4th book. Life was good.

It got even better when she came into my life. My Kat.

We were on a rehearsal break. I didn't know anyone, so I did what I always did under similar circumstances and read my well-worn copy of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* that I carried around with me everywhere. Kat walked past me, did a double take, came up to me and lifted the book so she could read the cover and h'mm'd her approval.

"Be careful," she said. "You read that too many times and you'll end up swinging from a chandelier firing a Browning."

That's all it took. I was in love.

Granted, it was not the most opportune time because my teenage hormones were already running wild, but this violist, this amazing woman, had read *The Master and Margarita* and could probably recite chapter and verse flawlessly if I had asked her to. I was so flustered all I could do was smile and say something that probably sounded like a raccoon attempting a witty reply. God bless her she smiled in return, said, "I like that" (referencing either the book, my reading it or whatever the hell it was I said) and walked away. My face was so hot I started to sweat. For the rest of the break Bulgakov was a blur. The page I had been reading refused to turn.

The rest of the rehearsal might as well have taken place on the deck of an 18th century ship navigating high seas in an uncharted part of the world. This woman was under my skin and refused to leave. I was convinced that she was no passing fancy. Between rests I watched her graceful bowing and marveled at the intensity on her face as she dug into every note. All the while I wondered what I could say or do to convince her I wasn't a total idiot. An educated, well-read, talented idiot, yes. This really was not the best of moments to engage in such thoughts as we were in the middle of a heavy session of Richard Strauss' *Tod und Verklärung* (Death and Transfiguration. How appropriate) but why not, I was last chair. Even our conductor didn't know I was there.

It seemed to me the rehearsal ended abruptly. Oh, okay. Yep, practice and see you next week, got it. I had no idea what to do next.

I had resigned myself to eight months of magnificent music and social isolation, but in that one moment the dynamics of my Saturday mornings had changed. Should I pack up, casually approach this woman and make some smooth comment about Bulgakov while my shaking hand gripped my horn case? Thrust out my other hand to introduce myself and in doing so knock the bow from her hand and blind her? Run out of the room and then kick myself all the way home for all the things I should have said and done? Here I

was, perfectly content to play my best, then spend the rest of the afternoon on the second floor of Carl Fischer's on Wabash, or on occasion with my high school brass ensemble that practiced at Roosevelt University down the street. And now this.

The rehearsal room cleared out quickly. My horn section was long gone. No goodbyes, see you, you sounded good today, let's work on a few phrases. I oiled one of my valves, fluttered the key to my satisfaction and waited as others passed in front and behind.

She stood before me.

"Cześć," she said with a big smile. "Nam na imię Ekaterina."

"Privyet, Ekaterina."

"You have remarkable eyes. You must see a lot."

I was so off-balance I didn't know how to respond.

"You look like a man of science," she continued. "The Physics Department at the University of Chicago is having an open house next weekend. Want to go?"

As first dates went she could just as well have asked if I'd be interested in watching lake scum being scraped off the boats at Belmont Harbor. I may have screamed YES! but most likely I pawed the floor, bowed my head and whinnied.

"I was going to suggest we go get some coffee or tea, but there's somewhere I have to be later. Maybe we can make up for that?"

"Absolutely."

"That'll be great. We have a lot to talk about. I can't wait," she said enthusiastically.

She couldn't wait? We had a lot to talk about? Did she have the right person?

"Same here," I said through a haze. "Well, I'll be here. Same stand and everything."

"Cool. See ya then." And like an ethereal vision, she was gone.

Oh, the next week was torture! I invented conversations between us and ran through every possible scenario and constantly reminded myself to talk about things other than music. I mean, Good Lord, Ekaterina invited me to share an afternoon looking at lasers and hearing the latest on Quantum Theory. I loved everything having to do with science, and apparently so did she. Was she for real? Saturday could not come soon enough.

When it did come, it was everything my soul-sick romanticism could hope for. Looking out one of the windows towards Grant Park and the lake beyond before rehearsal began,

the dreary, gray, rainy landscape looked beautiful to me. I don't remember much about the day's session other than watching her and trying to keep my heart from exploding, but I do remember that time was very cruel to me, made even worse because 4th chairs didn't have much to play. At the break, which I had built up in my mind as a chatty preview of our upcoming outing, I was instead crushed when Ekaterina was taken away by her section mates and was afforded only a smile and a wave on her way out of the room.

Well...one of my imagined conversations wasn't going to happen, after all.

I tried to look nonchalant during the second half and studied my part during rests, but at one point, when the conductor stopped us to address an issue with the violins, I looked up and caught her staring at me with wide eyes that said, "Why aren't you paying attention to me?" My concentration was now shot. I must have had a deer-in-the-headlights look on my face because she laughed to herself as we were called back to play, but there was no way I was going to let this go. For the rest of the rehearsal, whenever she looked my way, I gave her a comical stare and pointed her back to her music.

"Are you mad at me because I left you alone?" she asked when rehearsal ended.

"I'm never alone as long as I have Bulgakov," I replied.

She narrowed her eyes. "I may need to take your book away."

"You can always try."

"Let's go," she said with a quick snap of her head towards the exit. "I need me some high particle, hifalutin learnin'."

Ekaterina was a font of information and gossip as we descended eight flights of stairs, crossed over Michigan Avenue and onwards to Columbus Drive and filled me in on all the intrigues within the orchestra with nary an opening for me to comment or offer my own observations. Whereas I preferred to fly under the radar and accept the orchestra as a solid learning opportunity, my violist was keen to derive amusement from all the angst around us.

"I learned about music from watching Bugs Bunny cartoons," she said at one point. "I'm all for serious play, but have some fun with it. Your grandkids are gonna roll their eyes when you start blathering on about that piece you played that one time, anyway, so why not tell them a story worth listening to?"

"Like the time you set your viola on fire or stabbed somebody with your bow?"

"Both viable options. See? I knew you'd understand."

All this time I had listened carefully and found no point of disagreement with anything she said; in fact, I was grateful to gain a new perspective on the orchestra I would keep

with me going forward. But I also wondered where we were going, as there were no bus stops on Columbus Drive to take us to The University of Chicago.

“They should know better than to write these things,” she said as she plucked a ticket from the windshield of her car and tossed it into the gutter. “Was I here today?”

“You were where?”

“Exactly my point.”

After a short jaunt down Lake Shore Drive we found a parking space on a side street off 57th and walked the rest of the way until we found signs directing us to the open house, which was scattered among numerous buildings. We visited each of the labs, eagerly watched demonstrations and attended lectures and walked around the campus in the rain, the sky growing ever darker as the day went on. The great Gothic buildings looked ominous, like something out of a Hammer horror movie, and the absence of students left us happily alone. The vast expanse of the Midway, its autumnal hues muted, beckoned us to stay and relish in its fading warmth.

“It feels so good to be out,” she said as we aimlessly wandered. “I loved the talks, but there were so many people and we were all so damp I was getting overheated.”

“Same here. Some of those rooms were pretty claustrophobic, too.”

Ekaterina suddenly turned to me. “Can I ask you something? What made you audition for Youth?”

“My orchestra director. For some reason he wanted me to give it a shot. Funny thing was, when I did the audition I had a raging fever and bronchitis. On top of that I had to play a section from the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s 4th. I could barely breathe, let alone syncopate and play at fortissimo. When I was done all I wanted to do was go home. I was convinced that I had failed miserably, but a week later I was notified that I had made last chair. Go figure. Could I have done better? Who knows what I could have done healthy, but in the end I was glad it worked out the way it did. You?”

“My teacher pushed me to do it. ‘Good for your confidence,’ whatever that meant. My audition pieces were *Harold in Italy* by Bizet and a section of *Coppélia* by Delibes. I was already doing ensemble performances, so did I really want to give up my Saturday mornings when I’d rather be sleeping? I wasn’t motivated to claim some glory in being a part of Youth, but I’m glad that I did. I finally met you.”

This confused me. “Finally? I hate to say this, but I would have remembered you if I had seen you somewhere before.”

“Because I’m so darn cute?”

“Beyond cute. Cuter than cuteness has any right to be.”

“You’re off to a good start, Sir. I heard you play two years ago. Kościół Świętego Stanisława Kostki. Does that ring a bell?”

“Right...St. Stanislaus. It was after Easter.”

“You did the overture from *Hansel und Gretel* and a movement from Hanson’s *Romantic Symphony*, then some ensemble pieces. Yours was the Nielsen *Quintet*. You guys were great.”

“Good memory.”

“I also saw you later that year at the Antheneum when you were in the pit for *Hello Dolly!* and I saw you conduct a 4th of July concert at St. Patrick’s. Your crew got around quite a bit, more than we ever did.”

So that’s what she meant by we have a lot to talk about. This revelation didn’t really surprise me. Even though we attended different public schools ours paths would have constantly crossed as we played throughout the city and attended others’ events when we weren’t. Our concerts and ensemble performances took place in churches, synagogues, theaters, retirement homes, elementary schools, parks, museums, you name it. For all I knew we were in the same place more often than we could imagine. What did surprise me was that she remembered me at all.

“So you see, you were never much skilled at hiding,” she said, breaking into my thoughts. “You’re too good not to be noticed. Even in Youth.”

“You’re just saying that because I read Bulgakov.”

“And that’s what did it for me. A man with a French horn is classy, but a man with a book is sexy. It’s a lethal combination. If more men walked around openly with French horns and books they’d be hunted to extinction.”

“Really. You think so?”

“I got you to give up your afternoon for me, didn’t I?”

“That you did,” I admitted. “What else do you have in mind for me, Kat?”

I didn’t mean to say that, to call her Kat. In Slavic culture, calling someone by a pet name was very personal. This was not something lightly given or taken.

She didn’t blink or bristle at my presumption. “Kat. That’s what my family calls me. So you must be someone special.”

“I would like to be.”

We got out of the rain for a while and had coffee and something to eat at Salonica, a Greek-American diner popular with both locals and students. We talked about our families and schools, discovered we knew a lot of the same people, mostly other musicians, and discussed our college plans. We often touched each other’s hand or arm while making a point, and our laughter rolled easily over tales of rehearsals and performances. Outside the rain had let up and showed some sign of moving on, so I suggested that we walk around some more.

“Or we can stop in one of the bookstores,” I said.

“No, let’s walk. I’m enjoying the day.”

The respite must have sent out a campus-wide signal, as students suddenly appeared and scurried between the library and other buildings clutching their backpacks and looking to sky to see if they would reach their destination before the next downpour.

“Do you think this is how we’ll look when we’re in college?” Kat asked. “They don’t look very happy.”

“Well, it is the University of Chicago.”

The students must have known something we didn’t because it wasn’t long—as we started working our way back to Kat’s car—before the sky opened up and our raincoats provided little protection from the heavenly onslaught. We turned to look at each other.

“Now this is my idea of a date,” I yelled over the thunder.

“I love it!” Kat yelled back.

Our first kiss, so sudden in the deluge, was unexpected and clumsy and silly. Our lips were well intentioned but slid and missed the mark more often than not as we could barely see each other and what we were doing.

“Where’s your face...gimme your face!” Kat demanded.

We whooped and screamed with each crash of thunder, jumped into pools and puddles, held each other tight as we could manage, and then slowly walked hand in hand as if the day were gloriously sunny and we had no place in particular we had to be.

When I got home later that evening, wet and chilled and a thousand years older, I couldn’t eat. The smell of my mother’s tomato soup, a Saturday night staple, failed to entice me from the bedroom I shared with my younger brother. I was both elated and

disoriented. I had never spent a day alone with a woman. I went out with fellow musicians after a concert or a show all the time, but nothing like this. Soon to be eighteen years old, I knew everything and nothing. But there was a clear sense that I had crossed a threshold, and it scared me to death.

Kat was just the opposite, or at least it seemed that way to me. When we didn't see each other at rehearsal or talk on the phone during the week, she would show up at my house to whisk me away on her motorcycle to partake in a John Waters film festival at the Music Box Theater on Southport Avenue. Or to enjoy the waterfall at Olson Rug Park on Diversey. Or to catch a Tuesday night performance of the jazz ensemble Ears—featuring Dale Clevenger and Larry Combs from the CSO—at Orphans Pub on Lincoln, across the street from my favorite used bookstore. Or to spend a day on Maxwell Street to listen to Blues musicians and browse through the open market before stopping at Jim's Original Polish Sausage for something to eat. Or to hang out at a deserted Oak Street Beach on a Sunday night, the two of us shivering from the cold lake winds.

There was a matter-of-factness about our get-togethers, as if we had known each other since childhood, and I easily settled into a calmness that dispelled the fairy dust of teenage nest building and its side helping of *Sturm und Drang*. After our first concert at Orchestra Hall that November, when our parents took us out for dinner, our closeness felt so natural there was no easy way to describe it. We just *were*, and it made us all but inseparable. There was still Handel's *Messiah* I was scheduled to play for St. Sebastian's, and numerous concerts to take both of us to take us through the end of the year, but we always found time to meet and hang out.

The Christmas season was spectacular and exhilarating. There were colorful blinking lights everywhere we went, there was just the right amount of snow, and the evening's music still resonated in the cold air. Even our gifts to each other were in sync, as we had both bought pins of each other's instruments. The patrons of that neighborhood restaurant must have thought us daft as we howled with laughter, and in the end we decided not to exchange gifts at all and instead wear our respective purchases. From then on, after we pinned each other, I would wear Kat's viola, and she would wear my French horn.

Spring was an especially busy time for both of us. We had concerts and solo and ensemble competitions to prepare for. I was conducting our department's musical—*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*—and performing *Man of La Mancha* at another school. In May Kat and I had our final concert with Youth, and from there it would be a few short weeks before we took the stage for the final time at our graduation ceremonies. It all went by so fast I wondered where the hell the last four years went, a feeling that would compound with every stage of my life thereafter.

Released from high school and with the city as our playground, Kat and I spent our summer at the beach, meandered through Lincoln Park and the zoo and Old Town and some of our favorite places like Bizarre Bazaar and The Spice House and Wax Trax. She came to hear me play at Theater on the Lake, where we walked hand in hand along the beach in the moonlight during the intermissions of *Cabaret* and *Brigadoon*. We rode our

bikes everywhere and drank mint juleps at outdoor cafes, and we even returned to the University of Chicago under much more pleasant conditions, although we both missed the memories of our first visit. We were heading off to separate colleges in late August, but we rarely spoke about it and preferred to take each day as a blessing.

Then came a very special night at Ravinia.

We had been to the music festival many times after we graduated, usually travelling with others or meeting up with them once we got there. But one particular evening was our own, and together we marveled at the powerful interpretation Andre Watts brought to Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto #1*. It was stunning and breathtaking. Those final explosive chords still resound deeply within me to this day.

Driving back to the city in my parents' station wagon, Kat and I luxuriated in the evening's performance. No words were necessary. The windows were down, the warm late night summer air was intoxicating and we listened to WFMT—LaSalle By Night—as we drove along the deserted streets of the North Shore. With their pale lights and old, heavy trees—branches bobbing and dipping to their own rhythm, the outermost branches caressing the air—the quiet communities slowly passed one after the other. We were in no hurry.

We were in Evanston when it came on, and we both knew the recording well. It was George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra, with Myron Bloom leading his wonderful horn section.

“Turn it up,” Kat whispered, her head resting on my shoulder.

It was the second movement of Brahms' Fourth Symphony. Forever in my mind this movement will always be my Midnight Music. Delicate, haunting, aching. If there was any piece of music that so totally captured my emotions at that moment, this was it. I knew then that I would never find another that so thoroughly expressed our time together.

“So beautiful,” she said dreamily as the movement drifted away. “Thank you.”

My eyes welled up and I kissed the top of her head. “Ravinia, Love.”

Our last night together was spent at a barbeque in the backyard of a cellist's home. There was a mixed crowd of recent graduates and older musicians we had played with over the years, and through stereo speakers we listened to our old concert recordings, some from LPs, others from cassette tapes and reels recorded live and with all ambient noise included. Comments and jokes flew about furiously, both complimentary and otherwise, as a particular section or soloist went through their paces, but it was all done with good humor and the recalling of tale after tale.

As excited as I was about going away to college, I couldn't stand the thought of being away from Kat. But as always she was way ahead of me.

“We’ll be fine, one way or another,” she said as we sat alone at a picnic bench. “I was sick of spending so much time with you, anyway.”

“Is that a fact?”

Kat snuggled me. “I will miss your kisses, even though you do hold me kind of funny.”

“The evening isn’t over yet.”

“Mm. No, it isn’t.”

“And in a few months you’ll have to put up with me all over again,” I continued. “Lots of Christmas concerts. We’ll have to make the rounds.”

“And New Year’s Eve. Most definitely.”

That’s how it went when we got to college. Our letters were frequent and were filled with the details of our classes and performances, the memories of our times together at Youth (had it really been a year already?) and our plans to get together. We met over the holidays and partied with our mutual friends. We went to the movies and restaurants. We roller-skated. Our separation had done nothing to diminish our enthusiasm for each other, and I was heartened by the thought that nothing had changed between us. I couldn’t get enough of Kat’s kisses.

We returned to our campuses with the idea that we would go on a trip, perhaps a bike trip, when summer came around. Our spring breaks were unfortunately not at the same time, and neither one of us had the money to pay for a visit, but at least the summer was something to hold on to. Our letters were hopeful and supportive, always looking to the future and our eventual reunion and were generously laced with the in-joke humor we shared.

Our plans fell to the wayside at the end of the semester and summer approached. I had become involved with a summer stock theater company in the town where I lived and was asked to serve as music director, and Kat was offered a job repairing and restoring sheet music for the school districts in her area. On top of that, we both had full concert schedules with new ensembles. Kat joined a group that specialized in early music, while I played bass domra for a balalaika orchestra. Neither of us would be returning to the city any time soon, but we both promised to make up for it in the fall.

There was no single incident or decision that eventually pulled us apart. Our calls and letters became shorter and less frequent, and over the course of the next few years they stopped completely. I went on to graduate school; I didn’t know what Kat had chosen to do. Even when I was home for the holidays, we were always unable to make a connection, and eventually Kat was relegated to the “I should call her” pile of my life.

As much as it pained me to admit it, it was clear that we had both moved on with our lives. Even though we had spent nearly a year together, we had never made a serious commitment to each other, so there were no expectations we would ever take our relationship beyond hand holding and kissing. Besides, neither of us had made much of an effort to keep it going. Perhaps all we had was a heady high school fling and nothing more.

Or so I thought.

When I finally returned to Chicago I ran into Kat at Orchestra Hall after a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and my heart instantly remembered. So much came flooding back to me I was dizzy. Kat squealed and screamed my name when she saw me. She hugged me forever and told me over and over how much she missed me. And just when I was attempting to adjust to the thought of perhaps resurrecting a relationship with her, I learned that she was now involved with Dmi, who I hadn't noticed was standing behind her.

Dmi was a Chicago legend. I had met him before Kat but under far different circumstances. A pianist from the moment he was conceived, Dmi was destined for greatness. He won his first competition at the age of five. His first composition was performed when he was eight. He was the high priest of the Church of Jesus Christ the Conductor whose linguipotence was unmatched. And according to the maestro himself, he was responsible for half of the city's pregnancies by the age of fourteen. Like everyone else who knew Dmi, I could only beg to bask in his light, although at any moment you'd swear he was about to explode. But that was part of his attraction. You wanted to be there when it happened.

It was so strange to see them together, this centered, calm violist and this ridiculously gregarious madman. How on earth did they meet, I wondered. We travelled in very similar circles back in the day, and although my relationship with Dmi was brief I had enjoyed every minute of it. Still, as happy as I was to see both of them again I wasn't sure how I felt about Kat being with him.

That issue would be decided at another time, and the bonds I would share with them would become the source of our adventures and musical performances for years to come, as if we were making up for lost time. But every now and then, beginning with that moment at Orchestra Hall, Kat would give me a simple look or a knowing smile, and my love for her would swell.