

Good-Bye Tchaikovsky

by Michael Thal



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For Jila: My Inspiration

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A background image of a musical score with various notes, clefs, and dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f'.

Chapter One

The Virtuoso

The last chord of the orchestra vibrated in my ears. My stomach made flip-flops. This was my moment. I was first violinist in the Youth Orchestra. I was about to play solo in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in Symphony Hall. I pushed myself from the safety of my seat within the strings section and claimed center stage.

I tucked my violin under my chin. Stage lights blinded me, leaving the audience in darkness. I lifted my bow and focused on the conductor perched on a stool before me. Maestro raised his baton. I struck the first note, clear and vibrant.

Music encircled me and lifted me into the clouds until I played my last note and was plopped back onto center stage. Applause wrapped around me like warm socks on a winter day.

“Bravo! Encore!”



The next morning my mother's chirpy voice called, “Wake up, sleepy head. We have a lot to do before catching the four o'clock flight to LA.”

When she opened the drapes, the glare of the summer sun pulled me from my exhausted slumber.

“Ugh! You must be kidding,” I complained. “I just went to sleep.”



She picked my clothes from the hotel suite's floor, her arms full and her lips pursed. She had that look. You know, the kind that says *you were up too late so too bad for you*.

"How often does the Maestro let us stay past curfew?" My voice sounded like the whine of a badly played note.

"Never. Anyway, take a look at this." Mom plunked the *New York Daily* on my bed.

The headlines read, "Virtuoso Violinist David Rothman Brings Down the House!"

I shot from the pillow. I couldn't believe it. My first New York review, and I was a star.

"David, I'm so proud of you." As I sat on the bedcovers, Mom settled next to me. "It's ten o'clock. We have six hours before our flight leaves for LA. We need to pack, fight airport traffic, and wait in long security lines. We'll just make it. Please get dressed."

I didn't need an airplane to fly home. I had been riding clouds ever since I became first violinist, leader of all the violins, a few months back. It hadn't been easy getting there. I had to defeat every violinist ahead of me.

When the cab pulled up in front of the hotel, my thoughts drifted back eighteen months...



I had recently joined the orchestra and was assigned the last seat of the third violin section—no more than a lowly substitute. When a violinist was absent from the other two sections, I got to play, maybe. That depended on how many third violinists showed that day. I was last in line. It took a year for me to reach first chair. To make the move, I had to make a challenge.

Before my first challenge, I felt like puking. I had to play a piece of music. Then the girl next to me played it. Maestro



sat on the podium listening and thinking. He tapped his wand and looked up. “David, take Julie’s seat.” I couldn’t believe my luck.

After a few months, I advanced to second violin. When I made it to that section’s front, I challenged the first violins. Every Friday I took the risk and won. Eventually I reached first seat of the first violins.

My friend Joan, a cellist, had said, “Everyone looks forward to Fridays, David. Your sense of humor makes us smile.”

I saw my future like an astronomer sees the stars. I’d stay with the Youth Orchestra for two more years. Before my fourteenth birthday, I’d apply to Los Angeles Music Preparatory, a special high school for musicians and vocalists. After graduation, I’d attend the best music college. After four years of that, I’d apply for principal of the second violin section of any orchestra in the country. I’d play for kings and presidents. I’d be on demand by every performing arts center in the world for guest appearances. My ultimate goal was to play solo at Symphony Hall.



As I daydreamed about my glorious future, the taxi arrived at the airport terminal. I hadn’t even noticed the long drive from the hotel.

We landed in Los Angeles at sunset. Mom and I grabbed a shuttle to our San Fernando Valley apartment. It was dark, the shades drawn. “I’m surprised Karen isn’t watching TV,” I said.

I hauled our luggage to our apartment on the second floor. Mom unlocked the door, ushered me in, and when I heard the door thunk closed, she flicked on the light.

“SURPRISE!”



Karen stood in the middle of the room, dark hair highlighting her sun-tanned face and Bozo-the-clown smile. My best friend, Glenn, and a few neighbors surrounded her. They all sang “Happy Birthday.”

Glenn pulled me aside. “I read the article about you in the *Los Angeles Post*. Good job, bro.” The back of his hand slid past mine, then my palm slid against his. We ended our secret handshake by banging fist against fist.

The doorbell chimed. I greeted Joan at the door. She threw her long arms around my neck and gave me a big hug. “Karen called my cell and invited me. I hope I’m not too late.”

I shook my head. “You only missed the Happy Birthday song.”

Joan was a head taller than me and was five years older. She started her senior year in high school that fall. Next to her I felt like a little kid.

As I followed Glenn to the chips, Joan pulled me into my bedroom.

“Babe, did you hear?” Joan sat on my bed patting the spot beside her.

I ignored the invitation and stood with my hands on my hips. “Hear what?”

Joan screeched, “Our orchestra was invited to play for the Queen of England this fall. We’re all going to England.”

“Oh my God.”

She shook her head and I sat next to her, my mouth hanging open.

“Maestro said the Queen read the *New York Daily* article about you and our orchestra. She wants to meet us.” Joan kicked her shoes off and crossed her legs, Indian style.



“YES!” I thrust my arm into the air.

Joan leaned forward and planted a big smooch on my cheek.

“A year-and-a-half ago you started with us.”

“I was pretty nervous,” I said.

She giggled. “It didn’t show. Your hand stayed steady when you challenged that girl sitting next to you.”

“I watched her for a week. Everyday I practiced the music she couldn’t play well. When Maestro asked for challenges, I was ready.”

“That was when you got your nickname,” Joan said.

“Babe.” I laughed. “After every challenge, I left a Baby Ruth bar on my seat for the loser.”

“Why did you do that?”

“That’s my favorite candy bar. I bought it for myself just in case I lost. When I won, I felt bad for the loser and left it for him or her instead.”

Joan nodded, her short brown hair bobbed on her bony shoulders. She gave me one of her perfect smiles. Then she kissed me on the cheek again and left to find Karen.

I decided I wouldn’t wash my face for a week.

Karen fingered keys on our gift-covered piano playing, “What it Feels Like For a Girl,” by Madonna. Her braces reflected the light from the halogen lamp. Her eyes focused on me standing beside the baby grand.

She banged a ‘C’ flat, stood up. “Announcement.”

The noise in the room went from a fortissimo roar into a pianissimo hum. My mother walked in from the kitchen.



“David and the Youth Orchestra have been invited to play for the Queen of England in London in October.”

The noise grew around me. “Way to go, dude!” Glenn whooped and smacked my back.

High-fives and congratulations came from all directions.

“I’m so proud of you honey,” Mom said.

That night, before I went to sleep, I thought of something else my mother had once told me. “David, you inherited our family’s gift. There has always been a musically talented Rothman.”

The next day I learned I also had the family curse.





Chapter Two

The Booth

I'll never forget the day after my twelfth birthday. I awoke to a profound silence. This didn't make much sense because I lived in an apartment building nestled between an office building and a supermarket. There was always noise.

I threw back the sheets and pushed away the white drapes. A garbage truck was parked in the middle of the street and a woman stood outside the office building smoking a cigarette. I shrugged my shoulders and picked up my violin. The California Youth Symphony had another concert slated for September, and I needed to be prepared.

I plucked the 'A' string. It shook with a puff of resin. The violin vibrated, but there wasn't any sound. *Darn*, the soundboard's broken. "Ma!" I screamed.

Nothing. I couldn't hear my voice. I just kept thinking, "How could I lose my voice?"

"Maaa!"

She didn't have far to run. She opened my bedroom door; the aroma of coffee and eggs filled my nostrils. She padded into my room; put her arms akimbo, and talked. Her mouth moved but nothing came out.

"Ma, I can't hear my voice, my fiddle, or you. Nothing. What's happening to me?" I held my head and shook it.

Her lips formed the words, "Oh my God."

I once saw a building implode. Spectators were forced to stand behind a line as a construction worker pushed a button. Like a house of cards, the building fell in on itself.



That was my mother. She collapsed on the brown rug near my bed. Tears streaked her face, and her body shook with deep sobs. *I had the family curse.*

Forgetting about my own problems, I joined her on the floor and wrapped my arms around her. I said things to her I couldn't hear. "Everything will be okay. Don't worry."

I got off the floor, extended my hands, and helped my mother to her feet.

She brushed the creases from her blue dress and became Mom again. Slowly, she mouthed, "Get dressed. I'll call Aunt Estelle. She'll know what to do."

She was back in command mode. I could be a kid again. The pressure discharged like a coffee pot unleashing steam. Auntie Estelle knew everything about ears. I would be as good as new in no time.

Within an hour, we were driving to her Burbank office.

Aunt Estelle isn't really my aunt. She's my mom's best friend. Estelle Lew is an audiologist. She gives people hearing tests and prescribes hearing aids. I never thought I'd be seeing her as a patient.

As Mom's white car streaked down Riverside Drive, I recalled the many times Karen and I took this trip.

Every year, right before school started in September, we'd visit Aunt Estelle at her office. It was fun playing in "The Booth." It was a tiny closet with soundproof walls, a window, and a chair centered in the middle of its wooden floor. Aunt Estelle would sit at a desk near the window as I sat in a chair in the little room. Headphones covered my ears, and my hand held a clicker. When she played a note, I clicked the button. I also told her the name of the note she played. "That's a B minor...C major...D flat..."



After she finished, Aunt Estelle handed me a lollipop and said, “You have perfect pitch. It’s amazing how you do that.”

On that fateful day, the day after my twelfth birthday, we waited for Aunt Estelle in her waiting room. We sat on plaid padded chairs in the small room beside her office. After awhile, she greeted us with a warm smile and a wave of her little hand. My mother ran to her, sobbing. Mom threw herself on Aunt Estelle. My aunt popped her head away from Mom and tried to smile. It was a smile that didn’t light up her eyes. It was one of those smiles that formed a tear. One slowly ran down her cheek.

She gently pushed my mother aside and came to my seat. She stooped down and grabbed my hands. Slowly her lips formed words, “Come with me.” She pulled me to my feet and to the brown “Booth.” She handed me the headphones, the clicker, and pointed to the seat. She went to her chair next to the window and played with the instruments on the table.

I heard a few tones—the very loud low ones. Maybe I used the clicker two or three times.

After a few minutes, she opened the door and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

There wasn’t a lollipop at the end of this visit, just a somber Filipino woman doing her best not to cry. On a piece of paper she wrote, “I’ll send you to Dr. Gross. He’ll prescribe steroids. That could help.”

I nodded, gave a weak smile, said a short prayer, and cried.





Chapter Three

The Dangerous Swim

“Ma!” I screamed from my bed. The sun’s rays bathed my room.

The steroids the doctor had given were like long fingernails slashing my spine. No matter what my mother or sister tried to do to help me, I lashed out at them like a venomous snake.

Mom ran to my room, drying her hands with a kitchen towel. “What’s wrong?” she mouthed.

“I can’t feel my toes.” I shielded my eyes from the morning glare. “Close the drapes.” I gave orders like a king to his slave.

She ignored my ranting. “Get dressed.” She pointed to clothes neatly folded over my desk chair. “Come get your breakfast.” She mimed the universal sign for ‘eat.’

Slipping out of bed, I ignored my fresh clothes, and plopped into a kitchen chair. I sipped the orange juice and picked at the fried eggs. “Where’s my pill? Didn’t the doctor say I have to take them after each meal?”

Mom padded to the table and pulled a chair close to me. She mouthed something, but I couldn’t understand what she said. Grabbing a pen and a pad of paper she kept in her apron pocket, she wrote, “It has been a month. You haven’t gotten your hearing back.”

She tore off that page and placed it in front of me. She scrawled a few words on another piece of paper, ripped the sheet from the pad, and tossed it in the corner trash. Then



she wrote something else. “Those pills have turned you into a nervous wreck.”

She flipped the page over and finished, “I’m taking you off of them right now.”

She reached for the phone and pushed the speed dial button labeled “Doctor.” That afternoon he returned her call and agreed with her decision.

When I was a little kid, Mom put me to sleep with a story. She’d read to me for twenty minutes or until I dozed off, whichever came first. That evening she sat on my bed, not with *Charlotte’s Web* in her lap, but with a yellow pad and pen. She took a deep breath and wrote, “I’m so sorry, honey. You’ll never hear again.” Tears rolled down cheeks that usually beamed a supportive smile.

I snatched a pillow and covered my eyes. Maybe this was all a bad dream. Maybe if I went to sleep, I’d wake up in a New York hotel room to good news in a local newspaper.

In this non-dream, Mom gently pulled the pillow away from me and put it behind my back. Reluctantly, I sat up in bed.

“This is important,” she mouthed. Then she wrote, “When I was five years old, my brother lost his hearing, just like you. My parents sent him to a special school to learn American Sign Language. We had a tutor come to our house for two years to teach us ASL. I’ll teach you.”

Mom was fluent in sign language, but she only used it when Uncle Charlie visited.

“I don’t want to learn to sign. I want my hearing back. Leave me alone!” I hid my head under the pillow like an ostrich burying his head in the sand.





After a week of being angry, I gave up. I refused to let my mom teach me ASL. When friends stopped over, I hid in the closet. Then I got a bright idea how I could solve my problem with a dip in the pool.

I awoke early one morning and put on a bathing suit. My sister and mother slept when I opened the door of our air-conditioned apartment and was greeted by a blast of summer heat. It looked normal for a kid to go for a swim on this hot Monday morning. What didn't look normal was the rope I held in my hand.

I dashed around the back of the apartment building and found a heavy grey rock next to the dumpster. I lifted it, feeling my arms strain and my back tighten. Shortly, all the pain in my life would leave like the rush of air from a popped balloon.

I carried the rock close to the ground with the rope dangling behind me. When I got to the pool, I tied the rope to the rock, and my ankle to the other end. I rolled the boulder into the pool, and then I held my breath and jumped into the warm water.

I lay over the pool's surface as if I was about to catch a wave at Santa Monica Beach. I waited for a tug. Air in my lungs dwindled. I refused the urge to gasp for air. I expected the rope and rock to haul me to the pool's bottom and relieve me from my deaf future. But nothing happened. I remained on the surface like a life preserver bobbing on the Pacific Ocean. I opened my eyes and gasped for air. The rope coiled on top of the aqua-blue pool water, then wandered snake-like to the rock, six feet below.

I swam to the ladder. I figured I would have to go upstairs and grab my mother's kitchen scissors. I pulled myself from the pool, untied my leg, and looked up.



Standing in front of me was a man with broad shoulders, a thin waist, with muscular arms and legs. Mr. Tanaka, our deaf pool guy, came every Monday morning to clean the pool. I forgot all about him.

He mouthed something, but I didn't know what he said. Even when I could hear, I didn't understand him because of his deaf accent. I remembered all his words slurred together in a monotone voice, a voice I was sure I'd inherit.

He scanned me slowly, from head to toe. Then he whipped a pad of paper from his hip pocket, and wrote, "You deaf like your Uncle Charlie. Right?"

I nodded, and plopped on the white tiled ceramic surrounding the kidney shaped pool. I dangled my feet in the water.

"You think killing yourself will solve problem?"

I nodded again.

Mr. Tanaka stooped down next to me and scribbled, "Too many people love you, David. Too many people will be hurt if you leave us. Don't do it. No matter how bad things look, there's always tomorrow. Things are bound to get better. In time you'll learn to live with your deafness. Today is like a dark storm. Tomorrow the clouds will part and the sun will shine making the bad day worth living through."

As I had done so many times during the past two weeks since I lost my hearing, I cried. Mr. Tanaka crouched before me waiting patiently for my sobs to subside.

"Please, don't tell anyone," I begged.

He wrote, "Are you a man of your word?"

I nodded.

"If you promise not to try this again, I will be quiet."

"I promise," I said.

