

GOODBYE, TCHAIKOVSKY

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For Jila, My Inspiration



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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, who was 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 a warm scarf on a winter day.

“Bravo! Encore!”

o o o

The next morning my mother's chirpy voice called, “Wake up, sleepyhead! We have a lot to do before catching the four o'clock flight back 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 up 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 Maestro let us stay out 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 headline 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,” Mom said as she settled next to me on the bed covers. “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 of the violins, a few months back. It hadn’t been easy getting there. I’d had to defeat every violinist ahead of me.

The cab pulled up in front of the hotel, and Mom and I got in for the long ride to the airport. While the driver fought traffic, 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 at the podium, listening and thinking. At last 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 chair 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 and ushered me in, and when I heard the door thunk closed, she flicked on the light.

"SURPRISE!"

Karen, my older sister, 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 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 five years older. She’d started her senior year in high school that fall. Next to her I felt like a little kid.

As I followed Glenn to the potato chips, Joan pulled me into my bedroom. “Babe, did you hear?” She sat on my bed, patting the spot beside her.

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

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

“Oh wow!”

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

“Maestro said that 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.

“Yes!” I thrust my arm into the air.

Joan leaned forward and planted a big smooch on my cheek. “It was only year and a half ago you that started with us, and look at you now!”

“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,” I explained. “Every day I practiced the music she couldn’t play well. When Maestro asked for challenges, I was ready.”

“And that’s when you got your nickname,” said Joan.

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

“I always wondered,” Joan mused. “Why did you leave candy for the person you beat?”

“That’s my favorite candy bar,” I replied. “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 that I wouldn’t wash my face for a week.

Karen was fingering the keys on our gift-covered piano, playing a pop song. Her braces reflected the light from the halogen lamp. Her eyes focused on me standing beside the baby grand. She banged a C sharp, stood up, and called out, “Announcement!”

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

Karen smiled. “David and the Youth Orchestra have been invited to play for the Queen of England in London in October!” she almost shouted.

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

High-fives and congratulations came from all directions.

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

That night, before I went to sleep, I thought of something my mother had once told me. “David, you have a gift, and you’ve worked hard to nurture it. It’s wonderful to hear you play with such talent.”

The next day I learned that I also had a curse.

CHAPTER TWO

The Booth

I'll never forget the day after my twelfth birthday. I awoke to a profound silence. That 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 cars were fighting their way around it. I shrugged my shoulders turned back to my room. My violin was lying on my desk, and I plucked the A string absently. It shook with a puff of resin. The violin vibrated, but there wasn't any sound. *Darn. The soundboard's broken.*

"Mom!" I yelled.

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

"Moooooom!"

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.

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

Her lips formed the words, “Oh no.”

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 rug near my bed. Tears streaked her face, and her body shook with deep sobs. “It’s just like Charlie,” she cried. Charlie was my uncle. And he was deaf.

Forgetting about my own problems, I joined her on the floor and wrapped my arms around her. I said things to her that I couldn’t hear. “Everything will be okay. Don’t worry.” Then 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 I felt 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 had taken that 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 the 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'd finished, Aunt Estelle would hand me a lollipop and say, "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 a while, she greeted us with a warm smile and a wave of her little hand. My mother ran to her in tears and threw herself on Aunt Estelle. Estelle popped her head away from Mom and tried to smile. It was a smile that didn't light up her eyes. 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 and the clicker and pointed to the seat. Then 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. I used the clicker maybe two or three times.

After a few minutes, Aunt Estelle opened the door and mouthed, “Come on out.”

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, “This is a rare condition called SSHL, which stands for Sudden Sensorineural Hearing Loss. It usually only occurs in one ear, but you have it in both. Nobody really knows what causes it, but it's typically permanent. I'm so sorry.”

My mother was sobbing beside her. Aunt Estelle wrote on the paper again and handed it to me. It said, “I'll send you to Dr. Gross. He'll prescribe steroids. Sometimes that helps.”

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