

Finding Who You Are

The day you got the bang on your head, your memories tumbled out of your ear like fragments of rubbish knocked from an upended bin.

It's hard to know who to trust. They all come saying, I'm your mother, your boyfriend, your violin teacher. They show you photographs and tell you stories. They cry when they turn away. You settle on Dr Friedman, who has the authority of a long white coat and all the virtue of an expressionless face. He says to you, go to a concert. Don't expect too much, just go along and see what happens. You nod, and you hear one nurse whisper to another, 'They cling to him like a drowning man.' For a moment, you hear the deep rumble of the undertow.

The programme is open on your lap but you forget to look at it because of all the heads, rows and rows of heads: you can't think when you last saw that many. The man in front is bald, his scalp bisected with a long red scar. Does he have memory problems as well? you wonder. He is looking at his programme, and you think maybe you should as well.

It's going to be a mixed bag, it says, something old, something new. The phrase pops out at you, and you feel that you should follow the thought, but you can't find an end to pull. Fidgets run across the seats as the musicians take the stage. The instruments play a tune that is not a tune, but is like a familiar itch. The orchestra and audience pause together with one indrawn breath, and you try not to expect too much.

The first piece makes no sense and, anyway, you are distracted by the members of the orchestra. You notice the collar of a tailcoat caught up on one side, the violinist with the close-cropped hair, the girl on double bass with six inch heels. The end comes on the wrong note, and the only reason you know there is an end is because everyone is clapping. You clap hard to

catch up, and you're struck by the fact that you seem to know the names of the instruments. Earlier today, you are sure, you did not. You try again before the music restarts. Timpani. Clarinet. You remember that Dr Friedman said to try not to chase things, so you let the words shiver and break.

A pianist next. You don't think that you play the piano yourself, but it's like there's a hidden message for you in the long, supple runs. They reach through the air, coating your skin. For a blink of time, it's as if you're naked, right there in seat F9 in the stalls. The velveteen prickles your thighs. There's something you feel you should know about a pianist and his long white fingers, but it's a question you won't ask the one who says he's your boyfriend. The interval comes as a relief.

You think it's a relief, but as you hover by the crowded bar, you wonder if there are people here you should know. Who think you're ignoring them. Who might be the pianist. It's very hot, and there's a thin boy with red hair standing next to you who turns and asks, what did you think of the Mozart? And you think it might be a message and you think you might be about to faint. You shouldn't be here by yourself. Dr Friedman had shrugged his shoulders. 'It's up to you of course,' he'd said. 'But you're perfectly ready to go out alone.' You smile at the boy and you think about leaving, but the next piece is by Mahler. You have a vague remembrance of a friend, a good friend, playing a record on a proper old-fashioned record player and flinging an arm out. 'Wouldn't you just *die* without Mahler?' she asks. You don't know.

The cymbals start, leading up to an outpouring of sound which splits open the world. Your mind is racing: viola, cor anglais, euphonium; perfect fifth, rallentissement, pizzicato. Then comes a change. A double bass plays a simple theme in a minor key. You know that you know it, but however fast your mind runs, it can't catch at the words. So you just allow yourself to follow as it's tossed around the orchestra, here with the wind section, now back with the strings. And the

layers build and you follow the violins as they talk with one voice and you know where this is going. Without a doubt, you know. Not if someone put you in a room by yourself, of course, and played the symphony up to this point and then turned it off and said, there you go, tell us how it ends. But you know that this is part of who you are. If you just sit tight and let it happen, you will know who you are.

And it's as if the concert hall is a balloon and the music from the orchestra is inflating its sides. You sit there and and you feel it stretching and growing and filling with sound. And you think that you can't take anymore, that any second now the tension will reach a critical mass and everything will explode, and you don't know whether you want this to happen or if you wish you could stay at this point just short of revelation for ever, but it's out of your control and it leads up, it leads up...

...to the wrong end. The precariously ravelled outpouring of sound falls short, wobbles, and the air in the balloon begins to escape. This isn't how it's supposed to be. You want to cry out, to wail, to hold someone to account. But wait. The moment is hovering, and the orchestra seems to draw in a collective breath and the climb starts again and the balloon goes beyond what is possible, and further and further, and finally, there is the note. The perfect, gut-piercing, mind-clarifying note, opening you up to a beginning and an end. You don't care who you are anymore, because you can be anything at all. The crash of applause bursts through the sides of the balloon, and you want to hug someone and tell them that you have a future; you want to call Dr Friedman and shout out your news. But for now, you clap and you clap and you let the turbulence carry you round. Because it's you. This is you.

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