

## Beyond Chopin

"It's time," she said.

It sounded so ominous. Time for what?

"You know." She touched my hand, "Come with me."

Because she was happy, I relaxed. Besides, she'd never lead me wrong. "Okay."

She began, "What I know now—well, it's really magnificent. I don't think I've ever called anything magnificent before. But there are no words. It's so much more than I imagined. And, of course you know—I tried to imagine it often. All I wanted was to be with your Dad. All those years. It was no secret. But this, I hadn't counted on this." She repeated, "Quite simply, there are no words."

Then she glanced at me with a hint of pity. "I know that you can't begin to comprehend. But for me, there are no more questions without answers. Now I know it all. The tree of knowledge, forbidden fruit of a lifetime. And here I am, free as a bird, flitting about and swooping underneath and soaring above. Or maybe I'm a monkey, swinging and playing in it. I can be a fish too, if I want, gliding through a thousand seas at once. Imagine. Whatever... I'm eating its fruit and savoring a million astonishing flavors. And what's more, I can see this infinite spectrum of color. It didn't used to exist. Things are so..." She stopped suddenly, flinging her arms high into the air and circling them above her head. Ecstatic. "Oh, and the music! What joy! I don't even need my ears. It surrounds me. I can even consume it, like delicious, rich chocolate, or I can let its sweet melody trickle down my chin and soak into my chest or I can swallow it like warm soothing tea. It fills me. I can dance to it too, if I want. Look. I'm a ballerina."

She studied me for a response as she pressed both hands into the fabric at her thighs, a thousand glistening threads from her flowing, ankle-length dress sliding between her fingers.

"You have a new dress," I remarked.

She rubbed her lips together and then said with a pop, "Yes, it's silk. Do you like it?" She bent with the grace of a dancer, one leg slightly extended, toes pointed, fingers daintily grasping the edges of the soft folds. She lifted the full skirt so it opened in a circle around her petite figure, creating a fan of splendid, translucent colors, like the feathers of a peacock. Her toenails were painted bright red. How had her feet maintained their perfect form for nearly a century? A breeze passed through her, and her body rippled top to bottom, like she had just caught a wave. Like she *was* a wave. Or a leaf in the wind. She smiled demurely.

"I like your hair. You've done something new?" Why did I ask such a pedestrian question? Such details were beneath her now. There were so many more pressing things to ask. But anyway... I was referring to the

wispy ends that were lightly tinged with auburn and had been brushed forward, framing her bright face, highlighting those big blue eyes. No eyeglasses. She had discarded those a while ago.

She smiled as she modestly tapped the wisps of hair at her left cheek. I noticed her fingernails were also painted with shiny red enamel. She used to do that when we were younger. When *she* was younger. "I wasn't sure at first," she said. "But then I told the stylist to just do what she wanted. I'm glad you like it." She patted her hair and smiled again, this time somewhat coquettishly. But not at me. She was looking beyond, towards a man walking in the distance. He had a cane that he swung vigorously, in a mocking sort of way, Englishman-style, and he had a secret on his lips.

"He doesn't need the cane anymore," she said.

"No, I suppose he doesn't." Her eyes met mine. Knowingly.

"So, do you miss us?" I asked her.

She was reluctant to turn her gaze away from the man with the cane. "Why would I? You're here." One of her usual quips. She didn't mean it rudely. She was earnest.

"Well, no," I said. "Actually I'm where I always am. You're *here*."

"No," she insisted. "You're *here*." She lifted her arm in a wide gesture and I noticed that the skin of her upper arm no longer sagged (something she used to complain about). It was then that I realized she was transforming, rejuvenating before my eyes. I saw her eyes brighten, the fine wrinkles around them were receding. Her lips became fuller. She straightened, growing taller, and she stretched her arms, pushing her hands, palms out against an invisible force. She was strong again.

She glanced towards the man with the cane. She was playing with me, toying with him. He lifted his cane, shook it lightly at her (perhaps a signal) then casually dropped it and disappeared somewhere.

"We can come and go. Do whatever we want," she giggled. "All you have to do is focus, and Bob's your Uncle."

"Bob's your Uncle? When did you start using that expression?"

"Just now." She giggled. Suddenly she was seated at a piano playing *Mac the Knife*. "This is for him," she nodded towards where the man with the cane had disappeared. "He loves this." She pounded it out with determined rhythm, her bottom bouncing across the bench, peacock colors glinting off her shoulders and shooting like stars into space.

"Play some Chopin," I stopped just short of pleading.

She paused and wriggled a little to resettle on the piano bench. A sign she was going to comply. She leaned forward, inhaled softly and began. Her shoulders relaxed. Her fingers gently touched Nocturne Op 9, No.2. and the melody was suddenly everywhere. It was one of her favorites too. Pensive. Gentle. Loving. No harm, never any harm. It was comforting. Perhaps she used to play it as a fall-back, something to soothe her own pain. Something she could control, like a magic salve to rub over the hairline slices that he drew across her heart all those times. All those times. But now she doesn't think of all those times. They were forgiven years ago. And now, well, now time is nothing but a concept.

"It's beautiful, Mom." I was crying. It took me back to those days when I used to hear the piano as I approached the house. I used to creep inside and rest my shoulder on the living room door frame, listening and watching from behind as she swayed, and leaned in and then back, head angled ever so slightly as she scanned the sheet music, fingers caressing the keys. Push the pedal down and then release. Maybe she was thinking of her Dad. Maybe she was thinking of *our* Dad. Maybe she was just lost in Chopin. Who knows? But it was a time of peace.

Now, as then, she glanced up and rolled her eyes, fingers seeming to float over the keys, still giving life to the music. This time it carried us somewhere new, somewhere I had never been before.

"Don't get used to this," she warned me. "I'm not going to bring you here yet. It's too soon."

"But I thought you said it was time."

"That's not what I meant. You have a life to finish living."

"Then what is it time for?"

"Well, I just meant that it's time to reassure you about how beautiful everything is."

"You mean, for you? Now? Here?" But we were back in my bedroom. I looked around. It was comfortable, not thoughtfully decorated, nothing special but it was a familiar space that had grown on me.

"Yes, well, this too. Because it's a tiny part of the bigger picture. I can't explain it. I told you there are no words for the knowledge and experience of an eternal, unlimited shared existence."

I couldn't comprehend and I prickled with frustration. She didn't seem to notice.

"There," she said, "Those words—what I said just now, they may come close. I can tell you it's an eternal shared existence but beyond that I can't describe it. It's an experience, not a concept. What comes first? The concept or the word?" She chuckled. How could she take it all so lightly.

All this time, she had been playing, without effort, Chopin's Nocturne Op 9, No.2. It was, perhaps, only her imagination of the song that made it real and filled the space around us. She was capable of anything now.

There was a time, when I was grown and when she old, that she asked me for the answers. Sometimes out of curiosity, sometimes to try to understand how things worked on a side of the world that she had never visited. But now, well now... she is immersed in, and in command of everything.

I am once again the small child asking her the questions. And sometimes when my mind is quiet, we just share.

Every morning, I ask her to watch the sunrise with me. "Can you see it creeping up over top of the Andes, Mom? Watch how its long rays slowly sweep away the darkness. Eventually they'll pass around and clear out the shadows from the crevices."

And I still ask her to tuck me in each night. "May I have a licorice-flavored kiss, please?"