

THE OBOIST/*Anne Miano*

MY APARTMENT sits above a liquor store in a questionable part of town. I delight in telling this because it suggests a degree of daring, a worldliness I cannot claim, as though I keep a Harley out back or red shoes in my closet. I fantasize I will one day be as fascinating as my apartment, but this is unlikely. I am an oboist from Bayonne, the driver of a gray sedan, a fanatical consumer of Rubbermaid products who stutters when I speak. Though I did not, as many assume, take up music to compensate for my affliction. Instead, it was my mother and her unfaltering determination to produce a great violinist that brought me to this profession. Much like my uncle Maury who met an angel at the bus stop and gave his son to the church, my mother had been called (by a *New Yorker* article, I think, on the rise of Japanese virtuosos and the Suzuki Method) to buy me a violin, hire an instructor, and stand over my shoulder shouting, "You missed that note again," for two hours each afternoon as I practiced. As a result of her enthusiasm, I developed quickly into a remarkable violinist and, when I graduated from high school, received a scholarship to Julliard. I also acquired an uncontrollable tremor in my right hand that appeared whenever I played alone on stage. And my speech impediment, which began as a tendency to mumble in groups, grew into a full-blown stutter. My violin instructor suggested speech lessons, but my mother insisted on teaching me at home. "A stutter is a sign of laziness," she said and assigned me long passages from *Hamlet* which she demanded that I recite at dinner.

"To be or not to be," I chanted, stumbling through the crowded *t's*, and my mother would interrupt.

"Wha wha what did you say?"

I would raise my voice and begin again. "To be or not to be."

"Wha wha what did you say?"

"To be or not to be!"

The exchange would continue, back and forth, volume rising, tears pouring down my face. Occasionally, I would glance at my father who sat silently at the table, reading the newspaper section by section. My father was like a seagull sitting on the ocean, calm and unbothered by the churning of the waves. He moved deliberately through each section, sports page, front page, local and comics.

Despite my mother's efforts, the stutter persisted, as did the tremor, which soon showed itself to be malignant, creeping down my arm and

stretching out to embrace my entire right side. My teachers at Julliard were confounded and tried a variety of therapies, including forcing me to play alone on crowded street corners. They finally gave up when I passed out while playing on the steps at Lincoln Center, tumbled down to Broadway, and had to be rushed to the hospital. It was Dr. Schwartzman, my freshman advisor, who proposed a solution. "Julia," he said to me, "You can either go on as you are and die young from apoplexy. Or you can become an oboist and live a long, productive life, surrounded by a hundred other musicians."

"You want to do what?" my mother shrieked when I called her with my plan. "Absolutely not. What are you thinking? Do you hear an oboe on RCA? Do you see an oboe at Carnegie Hall? People do not buy tickets to hear an oboe." I blissfully knew this to be true, that it was virtually impossible to have a solo career as a concert oboist. I hung up the phone and returned to Dr. Schwartzman's office. "I want to be an oboist," I announced. Then I sold my violin, and the tremor disappeared.

That is how I was saved by my oboe. I truly believe this. I would not be alive today without it. Every time I bring it to my lips, I remember the years of unconscious terror and how like a miracle—my oboe is a miracle—all the tics and twitches that plagued me as a child are sucked and blown by its tiny reeds and scattered among the notes and made invisible. I am now in the midst of the long, productive life promised by Dr. Schwartzman. Every day I sit in a symphony hall surrounded by a hundred other musicians who watch their music, follow the conductor, and pay no attention to me. I thrive on this, like a mushroom in the shade. Even our maestro has conceded I work better unnoticed, and no matter the length, the difficulty, the brilliance of my solos, he no longer gestures toward me when the piece concludes. My oboe has made me anonymous. "This is insanity, Julia," he said to me once, "you are cheating yourself." Perhaps. But I am here. I have not died of apoplexy.

My stutter, however, has gotten worse. *T*'s have always been a problem, the monsters of my youth. They taught me early that the entire world was just like my mother, impatient and intolerant of my lazy, labored speech. With each year that passes, another letter grows horns and claws and lumbers into my speech to torment me. I keep a chart of this progression. It was *m*'s on my second Tuesday at Julliard, *p*'s five weeks after graduation, and my *b*'s started repeating two days after I moved into this apartment. There is nothing that sets it off, no pattern to the disintegration. I will be mid-sentence, feeling safe among words that seem to ripple without effort. And suddenly I will

hear a record skip and know that it is me. That a familiar, well-loved word has evaporated. Some people measure their lives in spoonfuls, hours, phases of the moon, but mine is marked by reverberating consonants, sounds within my head I can no longer use.

Between the *p*'s and *b*'s, I spent six years in a New York high-rise with laundry room, trash chute, and an enormous rope sculpture in the lobby. My neighbors were quiet, keep-to-themselves types who didn't seem to mind my habit of practicing from noon until four. No one complained. In fact, in almost all the time I lived there, I never spoke to a neighbor. It was as though I had the entire building to myself, and I played with confidence and abandon. But then whoever it was who had been living across the hall moved out and was replaced by Bob and Lil Albertson who knocked on my door and introduced themselves while their movers were still assembling the bookshelves. Bob Albertson, who worked as a nursery school teacher and was home in the afternoons, liked to stand outside my door and listen as I practiced. I know this because a month after the couple arrived, he started leaving notes outside my door ("loved that new one" and "thanks for the Schubert but a little depressing"). After ten years without shaking, I felt a quiver in my fingers. I began practicing in the bathroom, the hallway closet, but the notes continued. The tremor moved down my arm and settled in my elbow, so I took up parking beside an empty warehouse and practicing my oboe in the car.

Fortunately, a spot opened up at an orchestra in California. "Are you crazy?" my mother asked, "Leave a job in New York? I just saw your name in the crossword, and now you're quitting?"

"I need to keep challenging myself, Mom."

"Challenge yourself to bake a pound cake. It's the Philharmonic for godsake. Do you want the Japanese to own that, too? You should have stuck with the violin, learned the Brahms. That was your calling."

"Mom, I'm an oboist. I play the oboe."

"Only to spite me. But I love you anyway because you're my daughter. Hold on. Let me put your father on."

I waited silently as my mother shouted to my father. "Get on the phone," I heard her say, "it's your daughter." A few grumbles followed, along with more shouting from my mother. Hours seemed to pass as I waited on the phone until finally I heard him growl, "For chrisakes, Miriam. I just talked to her last week," and my mother got back on the phone.

"Your father sends his love and wishes you good luck with the move. And if you make the crossword in California, send us a copy. Your uncle Maury would love to see it."

The line went dead, and I stood in my kitchen, staring at the phone receiver. My ears rang with a familiar cacophony, and I wondered if sound changed over distance and if what I heard in California would be different from what I heard in New York. If my mother's voice on the telephone would have the sensation of music. If her disappointment would finally fade to a murmur, becoming fainter with every mile, until I heard nothing.

"Bathroom's new. Kitchen comes with the stove. No fridge, but you can get one." The rector of St. George's Church led me quickly through the apartment, opening cabinets, pointing out shelf space, flipping on closet lights. His voice was a quivering, sixty-eight-year-old monotone. He didn't seem to know why the apartment would suit me, why any apartment in this dirty, noisy city would suit me, why the church even bothered renting out the space. He answered my questions with a noncommittal "yep" or an indifferent "maybe," and stood with his hand on the front doorknob as I took a second look. I wanted him to sell me on the place, to tell me the history of the building, stories of famous past tenants, but Mr. Simms had business waiting for him at the church office down the street and didn't have time for questions or chit-chat or a third look around. "Downstairs" was all he said when I asked about laundry, "out back" when I asked about parking, but when I brought up the walls, which were painted bright, unsettling colors, Mr. Simms was suddenly transformed. The quiver smoothed to a lilt, his voice became music, light shone about his head as the rector pointed out the advantages of red and purple walls. "Adventurous," he told me, "It takes a special person to decorate with such bold colors. Someone with dash, verve, a little savoir-faire. Of course, we can paint it white if you'd like. But the last tenant decided to keep it, and I think he really enjoyed being surrounded by color."

I said little as I walked between the kitchen and bedroom, listening to Mr. Simms suggest towel colors for the bathroom which was striped in blue and pink. The apartment was enormous, larger than I'd imagined. Nothing like I expected when I noticed the "apartment for rent" sign on the liquor store window. I had passed the store on my way home from rehearsal every day for three weeks. I'd been staying in a hotel, searching for an apartment on the weekends, but finding nothing that suited my taste for space and quiet. Everywhere I looked, kids

ran through the hallways, teenage girls hung out by the swimming pool, and young men gathered on the front steps. "The neighbors are real friendly," the building managers all assured me, "a nice change from New York." I smiled and thanked them, stuffed their phone numbers in my purse, and became more agitated with each slip of paper I collected. I was close to abandoning hope when the sign appeared in the liquor store window. It glared like an omen, compelling me to look.

"Did you see this closet?" The rector threw open a door at the end of the living room. "So big, they used it as an office. Kind of interesting, the green and yellow diamonds on the walls. The guys who painted this place had a business right here in the apartment."

I looked at the wires that ran along the baseboard, up and around every door. The telephone jacks that had been installed, three to every wall. And I could just imagine what kind of business, with phones and wires and orange ceilings, they'd been running out of that apartment. A voice within me said, "take it." It was a former den of iniquity, an apartment over a liquor store in a building owned by a church. It had a Korean dry cleaner to the left, an Indian grocer to the right, and a billboard on the roof advertising milk and gasoline. I wanted to belong there.

"Is it quiet?" I asked.

"Just like it is now. Only one other unit. Hardly anyone around."

"There's no buzzer on the front door."

"Put one in if you like."

"No buzzer," I said, shaking my head. "I'd like to move in next week," I told Mr. Simms, "But I want it painted."

We haggled for a few minutes. Over the rent, the security deposit, a cracked window pane in the kitchen. But the bulk of our negotiation centered on the walls and how soon he could get them painted. "Maybe you should try them out," he kept saying, "You might want to leave them." We finally settled on the next weekend; the painters would prime the walls on Saturday and paint them white on Sunday.

I moved in on a Tuesday afternoon. The walls were white, as Mr. Simms had promised, though I could still see traces of purple along the baseboards. When the movers had gone, I went into the bedroom and threw open the tall French doors to reveal a small balcony and the street below. A light breeze burst into the room, ruffling the papers on my bed and lifting the curtains at the adjacent window. With the last trace of afternoon sun warm on my forehead, I closed my eyes and stood at the door, listening to a mamba from across the street and snatches of rap music as cars revved and backfired at the traffic light beside my building. I heard children playing in the church parking lot.

Screeches of laughter and a ball slamming against a backboard. Voices seemed to come from all around, distant and faint, yet close within my reach.

"Hey, baby. You got a cigarette?"

I opened my eyes and looked down. A bearded man dressed in black swayed and stumbled outside the security gate. He stared at me, calmly, as though he believed I knew him, and waited for an answer. "No," I called down, "I don't smoke."

"That's all right, baby. You have a nice day."

"Thank you. You, too."

The man pushed away from the gate, chose a path going south, and set off in a slow zigzag down the sidewalk. I stepped back from the balcony and waited until I thought he was gone. When I looked again, the street was empty so I closed the doors and locked them. They stayed locked for the next two months, and I practiced uninterrupted. I planted roses on my balcony, bought blinds for all my windows, and read dozens of glossy magazines. Except for the other orchestra members and the supermarket cashiers, I saw no one but my own reflection and the celebrity pictures in *Vanity Fair*. Summer promised to fade without incident. Then on the last day of August, I heard a knock at my door.

"I'm Walter. I live down the hall, and this is my sister Margaret. We made pot roast for supper and thought you might like some."

I stood at my door looking at two of the most enormous people I had ever seen in my life. Three hundred pounds each, at least, maybe five hundred. It was impossible to calculate such numbers in my head. Pounds and pounds of flesh held together in two piles by a pair of overalls and a spandex running suit, topped off with rosy cheeks and curly hair and bright, eager smiles. Like a pair of giant dessert cups.

"You like pot roast?" Walter asked.

I gave him a polite smile, nothing too friendly. "Yes, thank you, but I have something cooking."

Margaret thrust a plate through the door. "Well, turn off the oven and save it for tomorrow. Nobody makes pot roast like Walter. Lots of potatoes."

"And turnips," Walter added.

"That's the secret." Margaret pushed the plate closer toward me. "Walter uses turnips."

"I'm not much of a turnip eater," I said, but Margaret dropped the plate into my hands.

"Well, just wait until you taste this. You'll change your mind about turnips."

Suddenly, I felt the heat of the plate, so I turned and quickly headed for the kitchen. As I was setting the pot roast down on the counter, I heard Margaret call out from the living room.

"Nice place. I like the way you've done it up. But get on Simms about these hardwood floors. He should have refinished them before you got here. What'd you decide to do about the bedroom?"

I stood frozen in the kitchen, listening to Margaret trot down my hallway and into my bedroom. Then I heard her voice again.

"Nice sheers on the French doors. How's the balcony look?" A latch came undone and doors opened in the background. "Nice rosebushes. That's the wonderful thing about California. You can keep rosebushes all year round." The doors slammed shut and footsteps moved across my bedroom, down the hall, and came to a stop at the kitchen door. "So," Margaret opened the oven to see what I was cooking, "how long you been playing the clarinet?"

"It's an oboe," I answered.

"Yep," she said, still staring into my oven, "that casserole will keep."

Through the door into the living room I saw Walter sitting on my sofa with one foot propped up on the opposite knee, thumbing through my *Vanity Fair*. He suddenly arrived at something interesting, leaned back, adjusted a throw pillow, and settled in for a read. I turned back to his sister who had taken my casserole out of the oven and was wrapping it in a piece of tin foil she'd found, apparently, while going through my kitchen drawers. She set the covered casserole dish on top of the stove and said, "Just let that cool for a while, then pop it in the fridge. It'll taste even better tomorrow. Sorry it's taken us so long to come welcome you. We've been back home in Nova Scotia for the summer and didn't know until this week that you'd arrived."

"That's okay," I said, "Thanks."

"Well, you enjoy that pot roast. Walter!"

I looked again at Walter who made no move to abandon my couch or my magazine. "You can take that with you," I told him, "I've already read it, and I have lots of magazines."

Walter looked down at the pile of *Smithsonians*, *Esquires* and *National Geographics* that was growing beside the couch. "You do seem to get everything."

Walter clutched the magazine to his chest with one hand while he slowly pushed himself up from the couch with the other. As he passed me on the way to the door, he smiled and nodded, then Margaret patted him on the back, and they left. After I'd closed the door behind

them, I stood in the entrance hall, heart pounding, breath held, listening to the sound of heavy footsteps as Walter and Margaret thumped back down the hall. I waited until I heard their door close before I locked the dead bolt and hurried through the apartment, pulling down shades and turning off lights.

The pot roast sat uneaten as street lights came on outside and the sidewalks filled with dogs and owners on the last walk of the day. In my darkened living room, I lay on the couch, surrounded by magazines and listening to the mamba from across the street. I realized, and there was no way around it, that I would have to return the plate. And my dealings with Margaret and Walter would never stop with pot roast. It would go on like this, food and plates, back and forth, until they asked me to join them for dinner. By that time, I would be so sated with smoked ham and chicken that I would say "yes" and sit down without thinking. Without remembering that the four-foot flutist with clammy hands did not chat with me after rehearsal. That no one who had spoken with me ever spoke with me again. That despite his penchant for *Vanity Fair*, Walter and I had nothing in common. And when he learned this, he would stop bringing dinner. To be found, uncovered and abandoned, that was what frightened me. More than Bob, the nursery school teacher, or my right-side tremor.

Early the next morning, before the paper arrived, I washed the plate, tiptoed down the hall, and left it outside Margaret and Walter's door. I heard nothing from them all day, but that night when I returned from work, I found a plastic bag hanging from my doorknob with a note: "Olé. Hope you like. Walter." I stared at it with horror, as though it were a wet and slimy thing, hideous to the touch. To bring it into my house was tantamount to surrender, a clear signal that I had given up the fort, and they were free to assault me with their friendship.

"Refried beans and enchiladas."

I turned to find Margaret on the steps behind me. She panted and wheezed as she reached the last step while tugging on a long leather leash. "Come on, Daisy," she called to an enormous three-legged yellow dog. "The 'Tonight Show' starts in fifteen minutes." Daisy licked Margaret's hand before slowly trotting down the hall, her huge belly swinging with each step. Margaret reached past me to grab the bag off the doorknob. "Take it. Won't bite you. Just some beans and flour tortillas."

"Thanks," I said as she handed me the bag.

"You're very welcome. Walter makes one hell of an enchilada." Margaret winked before she waved goodbye and headed to her end of the hall. I unlocked the door and brought the bag into my kitchen.

Immediately, the smell of Walter's enchiladas permeated the apartment. I was about to toss them into the refrigerator when I heard someone knock. "Who is it?" I called, but I already knew. It was Walter, and he had come to bring me dessert.

"Peanut butter cookies," he said as I opened the door. "Eat them while they're hot. And I brought you milk."

I took the plate and plastic Big Gulp cup from his hands. "Thanks, Walter. But I have milk."

"Well, take it anyway."

Walter stood in the doorway, staring at me with scrunched-up brow, as though he were close to a great discovery. "You don't say very much," he finally announced.

"Not much to say."

He nodded for a few seconds, this time with a smile, and played with the fasteners on his overalls. "I think you're right," he said, "but Margaret would disagree. She thinks everybody's got something to say. And she expects them to say it."

"Hm" was my only answer, and Walter nodded again. "Got the new *Vanity Fair*?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you want it?"

"Can't right now. I'm on my rounds." Walter picked up a fistful of plastic bags that were hidden around the corner and clomped down the stairs. "Just leave things outside the door," he called out, "I'll get them on my way back."

When I got home the next day from rehearsal, the phone was ringing. I knew it was my mother.

"Hi, Julia, honey," she said before I could speak. "It's me. Are they still out there?"

This is how it begins, every Tuesday at five-oh-three: "Are they still out there?" She means the six guys, including one named Candy, who hang out in the parking lot below my bathroom window, playing cards by the dumpster and shouting "Hey gorgeous" as I walk to my car. When I first moved in, they frightened me, like the man in black who asked for cigarettes. There was something familiar in their movements, the way they teased and laughed like school children, calling out jokes in code and snickering as they slapped high-fives in the air. So I hurried to my car and did not speak. "What's wrong with you," Candy called out one day as I struggled with two armloads of groceries, trying to open the security gate before he could reach me, "No one's trying to mug you. Just want to help."

I looked toward the other men, expecting them to snicker and point at me from the background. Instead, they continued on with the business of their lives, drinking and dancing to the boom box someone had brought. I handed Candy my key, and he unlocked the gate.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem." He tossed the keys over the gate, lightly, so that I could catch them, and sauntered back to his friends. This man is part of the "gang" in my parking lot, the one my mother describes to her friends, the thing, she says, that keeps her from visiting.

"Yes, Mom," I answered, "They're all there. Today they have a boom box, and they've invited some women. I think they're planning to party all night."

"Right there in your parking lot? Honey, you have to call the police."

"I know. But it's hard to get the police to come into this neighborhood."

This was not true. Several times I have called the police, and the squad car comes quickly, blaring its bullhorn and ordering the men to move on. The parking lot empties, and for a few minutes, there is silence. But the squad car only scatters them. When the bullhorn passes, they quickly return, as though there is a rhythm to these men we cannot disturb, like the pounding of ocean waves or the rise and fall of constellations. "Who are they?" I have asked Abdul, the manager downstairs. He shrugs and says, "Who knows? They here every day." Always the same group, always the same schedule. They come and go like factory workers—in each morning when the liquor store opens at nine and out at night when it closes at ten.

"Maybe, Julia," my mother said, in a voice that sounded close by, "It's time for you to move. Find a sensible neighborhood. Someplace your father and I could visit without fearing for our lives."

She does not ask about the orchestra or how I am doing there. She has never heard me play, not as an oboist, and has no interest, at least none that she reveals. She sometimes asks me about the artists who pass through. I have met them all, but avoid the circles in which they move. Parties where I imagine multitudes of conversations. Rooms dense with tangled chatter, sentences that crawl and curl around the doorways. If I went to such places, I would be lost inside forever.

"Hold on, Julia." I heard one of my mother's friends speaking in the background, then my mother's voice returned. "Pat wants to know if you went to the gala?"

"No. It was much too big."

"Too big? Really, Julia, if you thought like a violinist, you'd get out more. Well, let me get your father. He's home, and I'm sure he'd like to speak to you."

Suddenly, I heard a sound at the door. "There's someone here, Mom. I have to go."

"You're going out?"

"Yes. They're here to get me. I'll talk to you soon."

"I can't really stay," I told Walter as he led me to the living room. "I need to get dinner started."

"No, you don't," he said, "We have dinner for you here."

Walter turned on a lamp by the couch and hurried into the kitchen. I stood at the living room door, scanning the walls, the floor, the piles in the corner, trying to take in the collection of things and stuff. Except for a small space, just big enough for my feet, every inch of the floor seemed cluttered with furniture: chairs of all types arranged haphazardly—three facing an enormous television, two stacked by the kitchen door one on top of the other, and a brown wing-back turned toward the wall holding a tall stack of old *Encyclopedia Britannicas*. A huge four-poster bed was surrounded by a forest of lamps: table lamps, floor lamps, modern and rococo. They had neither shades nor light bulbs, but their cords tangled and snaked across the floor in all directions as though they had just been pulled out or were soon to be plugged in. Pictures covered the walls from floor to ceiling, a mix of what appeared to be dead relatives and river scenes from national parks. I edged past a china cabinet filled with baby shoes and took a seat on an enormous, eight-foot green velvet couch.

"What do you think of that couch," Walter asked as he came in with two glasses of milk. "Bet you've never seen one so big."

"It's the biggest," I told him.

"Has to be to fit me and Margaret. And company when we have it. And Daisy, of course. Found it at a place that rents furniture for movies. They used it in something where somebody shrank." He sat on the couch and handed me a glass of milk. "Dinner'll be done soon. Margaret's in the bath. She sometimes likes to soak when I go on my rounds."

I put the glass on the floor, unwilling to drink it and commit myself to dinner. "Where do you go?" I asked.

"There's a guy across the street. Alfred. His wife left him, and he drinks too much. And Mr. Watson next to the church. He can't get out. And Nancy Simpson. Nothing wrong with her but she likes my tuna noodle casserole. So when I make that, I take her some. But Alfred and Mr. Watson, they eat everything I cook."

"Do you cook for them often?"

Walter shrugged and shook his head. "Margaret likes me to cook, but I always cook too much. So I make the rounds and drop some off. Might as well. No trouble."

"You don't have to cook for me, Walter."

"That's it!" Margaret announced from the kitchen door. She stomped in wearing a huge pair of overalls just like Walter's. "That's it," she said again, "That thing you do with your t's. I noticed it before. You do it a lot."

"It's a speech impediment."

"No. Not an impediment." Margaret dropped down onto the couch, shaking the springs, creaking the legs and rocking the cushions with the force of an ocean. "An impediment is when you spit too much or shout 'asshole' for no reason when you're alone and walking down the street. All you've got's a little hiccup. A distinct little hiccup. I'd know it was you talking even if you spoke French."

Walter picked up my glass from the floor and handed it to me, nodding. "Margaret speaks French," he said.

"Not very well. Not anymore. But I did when I worked in Montreal."

"Margaret's a nurse." Walter pushed himself up from the couch and clomped into the kitchen. He stood at the door and nodded to me. "Now she works at a high school."

After he had gone into the kitchen, Margaret whispered, "Walter's a fisherman. But not since he broke a hip. Those things never heal."

All of a sudden, a burst of smell invaded the room, throwing salty hints of corned beef and cabbage. Margaret was dazzled to silence, and we sat on the couch, sniffing in unison. My eyes were closed, they must have been, because I opened them when I heard Walter.

"Dinner," he said and handed me a plate. I heard Margaret gasp.

"Walter, where are the turnips?"

"I gave them to Alfred. He likes them particularly." Walter sat down between us and speared a huge piece of cabbage. "His little boy is visiting."

The news made Margaret put down her fork and throw Walter question after question. How is the boy? How long is he staying? Will Albert bring him by for a visit? I put down my empty plate and listened. Walter's voice, then Margaret's. Walter's then Margaret's.

I picked up my glass and drank.

"Well, now. You're later than usual." Margaret called to me from the front steps where she sat feeding Daisy long strips of beef jerky.

I unlocked the front gate and waved to the guys at the dumpster who were shouting "Hey, baby" and "Got change for a cigarette?"

"They bothering you?" Margaret asked, "Walter will give them a talking to if they're bothering you."

"I don't mind. They keep their distance." I said, heading for the front door.

"Don't hurry off. Come and see Daisy."

I took my key out of the front lock and walked over to pet the dog.

"Is old Mr. Simms giving you any trouble?" Margaret asked me. "He's got me coming and going. Leaving me notes. Calling me about the clothesline on the roof. If he gives you any trouble, just let me know. I'll give him a piece of my mind."

I stood by Daisy, fiddling with my keys. "I don't hear from him."

"That's probably because you pay your rent. He's always pestering Walter about something. Walter sits here to read the paper in the morning, and that old bastard's always getting on him about the rent. I've told him, 'Walter's a guest in my house. Don't you be pestering him.'"

"How long is Walter staying?"

"Don't just stand there. Have a seat." I sat down on the steps next to Daisy and the jar of jerky.

"Walter stays as long as he likes. He worked hard for a lot of years. Been at sea since he was sixteen. Twenty years. And this one," she pointed to Daisy, "she traveled with him."

"Does Walter cook for you all the time?" I asked.

"Oh, he loves to cook. And tonight he's making tuna noodle casserole, so come by early, before it's all gone."

"Walter doesn't have to cook for me. I don't want him going to any trouble."

"No trouble. It's already made. We eat at seven, but come by whenever you like."

My mother called again that evening.

"Yes, Mom," I answered. "They're still out there. Tonight they've got a fire in the trash can and they're hosting a barbecue."

"No!" My mother clicked her tongue. "What do your neighbors say about this, the fat ones down the hall?"

"Walter and Margaret. I think they're planning to go."

"Well, I hope you're not. Barbecue out of a trashcan. That's probably how they got so fat."

"Maybe they've always been that way."

"I certainly hope not. Most fat people aren't born fat, they make themselves fat. And they can change."

This is what my mother believes, that it is better to have gotten broken along the way rather than to have been defective since birth. Because if you were normal once, you can fix yourself and be normal again. But normal, I think, is as far away as China. It sits on a mountain, high in Mongolia, surrounded by jungles and brambles and streams, so far and remote that there are no taxis or maps to get you there. And you can never know as you travel if you are getting closer or farther, if you are lost or if you are found.

Seven came and went as I flipped through magazines and sniffed the smell of cheddar and cream that crawled in beneath my door. At seven-thirty, Walter arrived. "Julia," he shouted from the hall, "dinner's ready."

I opened the door and handed him a magazine. "It's the new *Smithsonian*. Great article on Nova Scotia."

"We've got dinner ready."

"I don't think I'm hungry, Walter."

"You have to come. There're people there, and I've told them about you. That we have a famous musician in our building. A real oboist. I told them you're from New York, and you get every magazine there is, and that you give me your *Vanity Fairs*. I think Albert'd like to get his hands on a *New Yorker*. I hope you don't mind. He'll probably ask for this week's issue if you're finished."

"I'm not famous, Walter. Oboists aren't famous."

He nodded and gave me a wink he'd learned from Margaret. "They don't care. They really just want the magazines."

We gathered up the magazines, and I followed him out of my apartment. After I'd locked the door, I stood and listened as Walter lumbered back toward his apartment, the floor squealing with each giant footstep. "Come on, Julia," he called back, "Nothing worse than cold tuna noodle."

"Margaret!" he shouted through the door when we arrived, "Pour some milk. Julia's here."

"I'm sorry I'm late. I had some things to do," I told her.

"Well, come on in," Margaret said as she turned and headed back into the living room. "Look everyone," she announced, "Julia's here."

As I walked into the room, I heard a chorus of "Hi, Julia's." I nodded and smiled and took the plate of tuna casserole that Walter handed to me. "Julia," he said, "This is everybody." I looked around

the room at the odd collection of people. A tall, thin man with a stubbly face and watery eyes, a young boy on his lap. An old man in a wheelchair that I had no idea how Walter got up the stairs. And a teenaged girl with straight stringy hair and a midriff top. This was "everybody," the friends that Margaret gathered and saved, the people on Walter's rounds.

Walter introduced us. "Julia, this is Albert, his son William, Mr. Watson. And this is Nancy Simpson. It's tuna noodle night so she decided to come. Hey, look everybody," Walter pointed to the television set. "*Roman Holiday*. See what you're missing, Julia, when you don't have cable? You have to stay for this."

"Rome is so romantic," Margaret said as she dropped into the couch. Albert shook his head, "Yeah, but you should have seen it in ancient times."

"Walter's seen Rome," Nancy shouted. "Hey, Walter, was it more romantic then or is it more romantic now?"

"I don't know," he answered, "I've only seen it now."

Mr. Watson clanked his fork on his plate. "I say then. It must have been."

"I think so, too," Albert agreed. "Picture what it was like when everything was in place. Before the British went over and stole all the statues."

Walter joined Margaret and me on the couch. "I don't know," he said, "I like it now."

"Well, that's because you didn't see it then," Albert argued.

Margaret rolled her eyes. "Rome is Rome, Albert. It's romantic. Period."

Albert leaned over to whisper to me, "It would be better with everything in place."

The conversation ambled about, brushing up against topic after topic. Sometimes it would stop, when Margaret lightly slapped Mr. Watson's leg and said, "Ssh. It's Gregory Peck" or "Ohmygod, I love this part." The room grew quiet while Margaret leaned forward and mouthed along with her favorite lines. Then she'd sit back and say to me, "What I wouldn't give." This was her cue, and the discussion resumed. Who was better, Audrey or Katherine? Gregory Peck or Harrison Ford? Billy Wilder or Sidney Pollack? "Jesus Christ," Mr. Watson said, "If you think there's anyone better than Billy Wilder, I'm going home."

I adjusted a throw pillow and sunk down into the couch, letting myself enjoy the sensation of being surrounded by voices. Margaret's easy laugh, Walter's gentle stories. The sounds of the room danced with the

smells from the kitchen, moving with a mambo that drifted in through the window. Rap music came and went with the changing of the lights, and woven throughout was a quiet, familiar stammer. A reedy murmur gently trembling in the midst of a crowd. It began softly, mingling unnoticed, then moved in and out with a distinct, even sound. Producing syllable after syllable I had never known I could utter.



Anne Miano is our Editors' Prize winner in fiction. This is her first published story.



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