

Gershwin's Second Prelude

by Charles Baxter

While Kate practiced the piano in the tiny third-floor apartment, Wiley cooked dinner, jogging in place in front of the stove. His feet made the pans clatter, and, after twenty minutes of exercise, he began to hyperventilate. He stopped, took his pulse, then continued, jogging to the spice rack, to the refrigerator's butter shelf, then back to the stove. The air smelled of cumin, chicken stock, and tomatoes—something Mexican. The noise was terrible. He knocked over a spatula. A bottle of soda fell into the catfood dish. Worse yet, he hummed tunes from his high school prom days, melodies like “Call Me Mister Blue” and “Dream Lover,” in a nasal, plaintive whine. The noise diverted Kate's attention and broke her Schubert sonatas into small pieces of musical trash.

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That day at lunch, Kate's friend Sarah had told her to put an end to her passivity in the face of this uproar. “Tell him to shut up,” she said. “Wiley's a narcissist. You have to tell him everything twice. I introduced you to him, so I know.”

Kate nodded.

Sarah bit into a carrot and continued. “It was probably a mistake. Wiley has sinister friends. If I were you, I'd get rid of him fast, before those creeps show up in their Halloween masks. Have you ever watched him comb his hair? Of course you have. He stands for half an hour in front of the mirror. I've seen him put aftershave *into* his hair, right down at the scalp. Nobody does that. I'm sorry, but he's disgusting. He'll never love you.”

“I know,” Kate said. She couldn't afford to eat out and was taking

her omelet in tiny bites.

"He's just living in your apartment because you gave him a bed to flop in." Sarah stopped for a minute, took a long sip of water, and then touched her eyelid with her little finger. "I'm sorry to be crude, but that's how it is. I shouldn't have introduced you two. I feel terrible about it. Will you forgive me?"

Kate nodded. "Sure. Anyway, I don't mind Wiley. You know why? He makes me laugh."

"Makes you laugh? Watch 'The Flintstones' if you want to laugh. But don't keep that loser around."

"He's a good cook. He makes our meals."

"He's a chef, for heaven's sake. That's his *job*. That's why he's a good cook." She stopped. "You love him, don't you?"

Kate shrugged. "I know he's a loser, but losers make me laugh. Things don't matter to them anymore, and they treat life like a joke." She put her fork down. "Winners make ugly lovers," she said with finality. "I don't want that."

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"No more Schubert," said Madame Gutowski in her studio, one flight up from Buster's Subs 'n' Suds. Madame Gutowski was an old woman, and her voice came out in a breathy rattle. In her studio the paint was flaking off the ceiling; mice, or worse, were inside the walls. Kate had finished the second movement of the Schubert B-flat sonata while the old woman had scowled and tapped her fingers on the edge of the chair. "No more Schubert," she repeated irritably. "You play like an American. You speed up the tempo to make a climax. This is Schubert, not Las Vegas. Too much, too much effort to please the customers. The score does not say to accelerate. You make it too pathetic. Also you make it silly. Has been played like this." Madame rolled her hand into a tight fist, shaking it in Kate's face. "Should be played like this." She relaxed her hand and waved

goodbye. "Schubert stands at the door, lends handkerchief, gives good wishes, says, 'Farewell, farewell.' But he knows the sky is getting dark. Always he knows this. That is Schubert." She shook her head. "You seem unable to learn the style."

"Maybe I could learn some new Chopin," Kate suggested. "Chopin instead of Schubert. The impromptus or the—"

"—Chopin?" Madame whispered, before making a clucking sound. "No no no no no no. He is not ready for you. He waits up ahead, is standing inside summer house, head down, listening to sky and grass, thinking about love and anger." She continued to whisper. "I consider Chopin all the time. He is very close to me. *He talks.*" Madame leaned back and stared at Kate, pretending surprise at her own revelation. She returned to her normal voice. "You are too young for him. You have some growing to do. Maturing. He is not for you. Not while you are playing this way, in this girlish American style."

"I'm not a girl," Kate sighed. "But you could teach me to play Chopin. Your style."

"No. You must learn how to be calm as you sit at piano. Chopin will wait for you. *I* will wait for you. I will introduce you to him. But not yet! He likes quickness but not quite so much push."

Kate leaned back and looked out of the window at the grime-streaked traffic. It, too, had a great deal of push. Then, inside, her gaze fell first on Madame's cane leaning against the overstuffed chair, then on the lady's bony fingers. Long-term arthritis made the knuckles look like popcorn. "What do you suggest?" she asked. "Beethoven? Beethoven has a lot of push."

"No," Madame said. "Gershwin."

"Gershwin?" Kate frowned. "That's trash."

"No. Is *not* trash. Get 'Three Preludes,' learn number two. It is a good piece for Americans. Is hard, requires wizard, but teaches tenderness from first bar to end. You Americans have such trouble learning tenderness, I don't understand. Learn to relax into calm. We start next week." Madame glared angrily at her watch.

Kate stood up and bowed, as instinctively she always had. "Thank you, Madame," she said.

The old woman nodded without looking at Kate. "Gershwin, a nice boy. You two will adore each other."

Kate left, annoyed as usual that Madame never looked her in the eye

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At the institute, Kate sat in front of her telephone, collecting data, or "social research" as it was called. Each day's work kit included a list of numbers to dial, chosen with guaranteed randomness by a computer, and a small pile of questionnaires. An electric clock the size of a large pizza hummed on the wall above her. The clock obsessed her in an unhealthy way. She considered it her enemy. In a nearby glassed-in office, her supervisor monitored all the calls to make sure that the interviews were both discreet and successful. The other women at the institute were all younger than Kate and had taken the job interviewing people they didn't know as a diversion until the job they really wanted came along. For some reason, the institute didn't like to hire men; they had tried it, but the men hadn't stayed for more than three days or so. Something about the job was intolerable to people with ambitions. The average employee stayed around for about three months. Kate had set a record at the institute: she had been there for four years.

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"You know," Wiley said, picking his teeth with a pocketknife after dinner, "I once worked as a circus clown. I may again."

"What?"

"A circus clown. You didn't know that, did you?"

"No," Kate said. "There's a lot I don't know about you." "You said the truth," Wiley agreed. "But the fact is, I always liked to hang around with those show people, you know, the carnival types. I'll tell you how I got to be a clown. It was in my Joe College days, when I was so straight that I thought people were real. It was one of those junior-year-abroad deals, and I was in Amsterdam. I was supposed to be working in a Dutch mental hospital, and I was, with part of my brain, but with the other part I'd gotten mixed up with some lowdown importer-exporters." He stopped, leaned his head back, and laughed. "I guess I wasn't so straight. Anyway, I was headed downtown one day for a meeting with a guy I didn't want to see, and I passed by a large brown door with a sign next to it. The sign said that the place was the one and only School for Fools."

"School for Fools?"

"Yup. A clown college. Biggest one in the world. They teach makeup, pratfalls, balancing, and all sorts of routines. I tried it out for a while. When I got back to the states, I worked as a clown for a couple of weeks during the summer on a state-fair midway. In Minnesota." He nodded. "The land of ten thousand lakes." He nodded again. "I never got my college diploma. But I learned about crowds."

"What's it like, being a clown?"

"Well, working as a salad chef is easier. They pay you more. By the way, I need to borrow some money from you. I almost forgot. But, as I was saying, a circus clown needs timing, which is essentially the hard part. He's usually taught first how to tumble, how to take falls,

then how to do pratfalls and stand on his hands. Like I say, though, it's mostly timing."

"You never told me this."

"We're strangers, Kate."

"I know, but it seems so interesting." She smiled. "Can you still do a pratfall? Is it painful?"

Wiley got up from the dinner table. "Of course it's not painful. You just have to know how to do it." As he stood, he let his body go loose in an effort to relax. He lit a cigarette and said, "All right. Suppose you're in the audience. Now imagine I've just been kicked real hard from behind."

Kate nodded, feeling shy.

"Okay," Wiley said. "Watch."

All at once his mouth opened in an expression of clown-shock, his eyebrows flew up, and his legs shot out in front of him, his body hanging there momentarily as if held by invisible wires before it dropped to the floor, making the dinner dishes rattle.

"Good God, Wiley," Kate said, laughing. "Jesus. You *are* a clown. That's terrific. Can you walk on your hands?"

"Not only can I walk on my hands," Wiley said, "but I can walk on my hands and play your piano with my feet. Are you going to lend me fifty bucks or not?"

"Of course, of course."

Wiley jumped, stood on his hands, his change falling out of his

pockets, and walked on his hands out of the dining room, into the living room, where he lowered his feet to hit the piano keys. He stood up and walked back to the table.

"See?" he asked. "A real clown. Kate, I need that money tonight, before I go off to work."

In the bedroom, Kate searched through her dresser drawer where she thought she had stashed seventy dollars. She could only find forty of it, but she picked it up and clenched it in her right hand.

"Here," she said. "It's all I've got left."

"Forty?" He sighed. "Oh, all right." He made a face. "I've got to go to work." He squatted down, put his hands under her arms to lift her up, and, when she was standing, he put his arms around her and held her for a long time, kissing her mouth and her forehead. When he was finished, Kate felt her heart's rhythms beginning to pick up, along with her breath rate. She leaned hard against him.

"Oh don't leave yet," she said, trying to whisper. "Stay for a few minutes."

"Later, Kate," he said. "Good love takes time."

"I can't sit around waiting for you," she said as he drew away. "I can't."

"You will."

She understood that, despite his passionate embrace and kiss, he wasn't physically aroused at all. His responses were unpredictable: he could stay physically indifferent to her as he managed, simultaneously, to lead her into the greatest sexual feelings she had

ever experienced. She sometimes felt as if he treated her body as if he were a scientist, experimenting to see what he could do to it.

After he left, Kate sat at the dinner table for an hour, imagining that Wiley had walked down to the drugstore at the corner to buy some antihistamine. "I've lived with different guys," she said aloud to herself, "but never with a circus clown." She was collecting the dirty dishes and putting them to soak in the kitchen sink when the phone rang.

"Hi, Kate," Wiley said. "It's me. I'm under arrest."

"Wiley, what happened?"

"They said I was shoplifting

* * *

Gershwin's second prelude is marked "Andante con moto e poco rubato," and as soon as she tried to play it, later that week, Kate discovered that she would have to tinker with the rhythms in order to project the feeling Madame would expect. Her own feelings of nervousness about Wiley she kept out of the music. The prelude sounded like the blues— white urban blues—and as she worked through the crossover fingerings, she imagined a fitting scene for the melody: a well-tailored man standing on a penthouse balcony gazes over a city just after sunset. His building's empty elevators rise and descend automatically throughout the early evening. He thinks of a joke that fails to amuse him. Lights in the other buildings come on. F. Scott Fitzgerald appears, Zelda drunk on his arm.

Wiley was out on bail. That afternoon, Kate had discovered a hypodermic needle in the medicine cabinet, hidden behind Wiley's electric shaver.

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"Posture!" Madame Gutowski snapped, knocking once on the side of the piano bench with her cane. "Remember always posture! Be

relaxed but alert. You sit like killer in electric chair. Stiff, guilty of crimes. Remember to let hands rest on keys, relaxed but alert. And *lean forward!* Music leans forward."

Kate looked down at her hands, trying to make them more alert than they were. They felt like sea slugs, unable to achieve anything like consciousness. Perhaps they knew, in their dumb animal way, that Madame wouldn't care for what they were about to do.

"Play," Madame commanded. "Demonstrate Gershwin." The left hand stretched out and began. Together it and the right hand did what they could, while Kate tried to imagine that lonely soul in the penthouse overlooking the city park, but, as she played, she felt herself losing that image as another one took its place: a semitrailer truck unloading a ton of damp saltines.

"Concentrate," Madame whispered. "Do not fight with your mind."

Then she pictured Wiley shooting up a small, discreet quantity of junk before he walked—no, *sailed—off* to his evening chores as a salad chef.

"Play notes on page," Madame instructed. "Do not swing the rhythm. Do not try to jazz it."

Kate worked her way to the last chord and waited, hands in lap, for Madame to speak. From downstairs she heard the cook in Buster's Subs 'n' Suds calling an order of two chilidogs to the kitchen. Madame stared at her, then said, "You have not met Gershwin yet. He is still inside the piano trying to get out. Play the piece again for me. Remember that the goal of prelude is not to arrive at double bar line, like a train pulling into a depot. The goal is to express tenderness, as landscape flows past."

Kate repeated the piece, as Madame's jaw worked with what Kate thought might be senile anger.

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Kate had been on the phone to Sarah again.

"You didn't tell me that Wiley's a junky," she said.

"Oh Jesus. Is he? I didn't know that. Christ. But you can't blame me, Kate. I only lived with him for two weeks."

"He's been arrested for shoplifting," Kate announced, her voice creeping toward tonelessness. "Why did you introduce us?" She stopped. "Why did you bring him over here?"

"Well, he *is* so funny. At first. You know Wiley. I wanted to get him off my back, I guess. Sorry, Kate. Really, you've got to dump him."

"How?"

"Introduce him to somebody else."

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Wiley's ideas about music were superficial and narrative: he enjoyed putting Kate's recording of Mahler's second symphony on the phonograph and explaining what the music meant, minute by minute. "Here," Wiley droned, "Mahler is trying to put on his overshoes. But they won't fit. Mahler goes into the kitchen and has a big argument with Mrs. Mahler." (Here the orchestra played fortissimo.) "But Mrs. Mahler resists! She tells Gustav that overshoes aren't her department! '*Liebchen*, 'she says, 'leave me alone with my strudel.' Mahler exits to conduct the Vienna State Opera Orchestra in his French Shriners." (The music's level went down to mezzoforte.) "But on the way, Mahler falls into a mud puddle."

Despite herself, Kate was amused by this patter; she liked to have music humiliated occasionally. Making music look cheap was Wiley's line, and Kate enjoyed it.

"Wiley," Kate interrupted, "I found something a few days ago that I wanted to ask you about."

"Yeah? What?"

"A hypodermic in the medicine chest."

Wiley nodded. "I know about it."

"What's it doing there?"

"It's mine."

"What are *you* doing with it?"

"Engine tune-ups."

"No, really." She had to shout to be heard above the music.

"What do you think it's for?" He smiled. "A diabetic condition?"

"You're not diabetic. Do you shoot up?"

He turned the music off. Then he nodded. "Sometimes," he said. "When I'm in the mood. You aren't going to be American and get all hysterical about this, are you? Because there's nothing to be hysterical about. When they talk about it on television, it's all lies. How do I know? I know because I know."

"Why do you do it?"

"I like to feel like God," Wiley said. "I like to have the sun explode and then spray over my face." He stood up and walked over to her. "And I think you should try it. I honestly honestly do. If anyone is ready for a little taste of shit, Kate darling, that person is Kate."

"No."

Wiley sank to his knees and clasped his hands in her lap. "I can turn your whole spine into a Christmas tree. Colored lights, Kate, and blue and red ornaments hanging on your heart. Listen to me. You could be a bright star. You could make your brain into a success."

"Wiley, where do you get this stuff?"

"You don't want to know them." He shuddered. "The pleasure gets to you by way of riffraff."

"I don't get it," Kate said. "You jog and you eat health foods. But you shoot up this stuff? What's the connection?"

"The body," Wiley said without hesitation. "The body is the theater, the scene. I like to experiment with it. Sometimes I get a little bored with the theater of life, so I do the theater of death. The theater of death is pleasure. Still silent solitary pleasure. It's not like anything happens in pure pleasure. Nothing does. It's the pleasure of death, you understand?" He looked at his watch and stood up. Oooops. Time to go to work." He bent down to kiss her, and she felt his tongue flick against her ear lobe. "Bye, kitten."

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Kate usually woke up when Wiley came in at two o'clock, but when the door didn't open and Wiley failed to drop his boots in the foyer, failed to go to the refrigerator for a beer, and failed to turn on Dr. Tormento's All Night Terror Theater, she lay awake with the light burning. The digital clock glowed. She watched the numbers

attentively. Three o'clock had no funny stories. Four o'clock, the worst hour in the night, had character but no tenderness. Five o'clock was the alarm going off for the sun; its light glowed like an infection in the east. At six all was not well. At seven she knew Wiley was in trouble, and at eight he walked in, his face bloody. He collected his clothes and records, would not say anything, smiled at her, then left. Kate grabbed onto his shirt as he walked down the stairs.

"Oh no," he said. "No. I don't ever explain."

Kate had turned thirty that month. With Wiley gone, she thought of her past, of the music scholarships, the lost jobs, the men, the empty bank accounts. She thought of her parents. They didn't like to call her because she just gave them bad news. "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed," wrote Emily Dickinson, poet of the door mouse experience, and Kate's favorite writer. Kate's mind was full of questions, but the mind refused to answer them. She stared at Wiley's pencil life study of her, where her body had been drawn with specific tenderness.

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"He left me," she told Sarah.

"Good riddance."

"You don't understand. I'm alone."

"So?"

"I don't like it."

"Learn to live with it. He was a creep."

"That's easy for you to say. You're married. I never had sex the way I had it with him. He broke through to something in me."

"I'm not married, I'm separated. There's a difference. Why'd he leave?"

"I asked him about the hypodermic. He left the next day."

"You're better off than you were before."

"And you have children, too. So don't tell me how wonderful it is being alone. You haven't been alone for seven years. You don't know anything about it."

"Kate, I *do* understand. I am lonely sometimes."

"Also," Kate continued, "you've never failed at having a career. You have kids, a husband who may come back to you, and for two weeks you had Wiley. He wasn't good enough for you. He was just a piece of male trash, a piece of garbage you threw out. Okay, he wasn't good enough for you, but he looked all right to me. You've never lost out on anything, Sarah, so don't go sermonizing to me." She swallowed. "Because you don't know what you're talking about."

The bus having arrived fifteen minutes too early in front of Madame's studio, Kate went into Buster's Subs 'n' Suds and ordered a torpedo sandwich and a glass of red wine. It was her sixth glass of wine since noon: she had left work, claiming illness, and had walked to a cafe to read Doris Lessing and to drink wine. She had succeeded at both. Now, realizing she was drunk, she studied the other diners until they noticed her; then she turned away. From upstairs, filtered through the grease-flecked ceiling, came music from Madame's baby grand Mason and Hamlin: chords and passages with bizarre contours, the luminously structural madness of Scriabin. Kate thought that the sandwich would sober her up, but when two identical waitresses came toward her, carrying the check, she knew it hadn't.

At exactly four o'clock she walked upstairs, tripping on one step, and knocked. Madame shouted, "Come in!" and Kate entered. Madame was seated at the piano, bent over the keyboard as if weeping, her long thin fingers rushing up and down in a grotesque way. Kate shivered. Madame had known Enesco and Bartok. She had once played for Ravel. Ravel hadn't just applauded; Ravel had stood up. Arthritis had put an end to Madame's career in the 1940s. Without knowing what Madame was playing, Kate knew it wasn't being played correctly, that it was being damaged, that Ravel would no longer applaud.

Madame stopped, turned, and looked at Kate. She pointed one bent finger at Kate's mouth. "Food. Please wipe it off." Kate took a tissue from her purse and licked it before cleaning the mustard stains on her chin. The wine made her feel both drunk and sleepy. She hardly knew where she was. She rubbed and rubbed at her chin until the skin felt raw.

Madame lifted herself off the piano bench with her cane, half-sat, half-fell into her usual chair, and barked at Kate. "Sit. Play Gershwin, correctly. It is a new day today, I know it. Concentrate on tenderness this time."

Though she had double vision, Kate had been practicing the piece regularly, and at first the wine gave her courage. She was halfway through when Madame sat up. "No!" she said. "It is *worse* than before! Incredibly! Is much worse! You are not reading notes on page. *Poco* rubato, little one, not *molto*! Pedal use is very poor: all clear notes turning indistinct. Too much slurring. Whining and pausing and stopping for breath. Why do you insist on playing this way? This style of self-pity?"

Kate stopped. Her hands went limp. She absent-mindedly took out a cigarette, lit it, inhaled, and with it between her fingers she started

the piece again. Before she remembered that she was at her weekly piano lesson, and not at home, Madame exploded. "What is that?"

"Oh shit," Kate said, instantly blushing. She tried to stub the cigarette out on the wood floor near the pedals. The cigarette stuck to her sandal and she had to pick it off with her fingers before throwing it out of the window. "Madame," she said. "I'm sorry. I forgot you were there. I've been smoking lately."

"I smell wine also," the old woman said, her teeth chattering.

"Yes. I'm drunk." Coming back from the window, Kate sat on the bench and looked Madame in the eye. "You know, Madame," she said in an undertone, "I'm a nitwit."

"A what?"

"A nitwit." She pointed at her head. "Nothing but cotton up here. I have a silly job. I fall in love with ridiculous men. I fill myself up with nicotine and alcohol. No talent. I'm not a serious woman."

Madame's eyes stared at her, clear and hawklike. "What? What is this nicotine? You mean morphia?"

"No, that's Wiley. Wiley does that. Me, I just smoke cigarettes. Oh, and the wine."

"Who is Wiley?"

"This man. He just left me."

"You have tried morphia also?"

"No. Never."

There was a long pause. Then Madame leaned back. "Now listen.

You children think you are so new with your misery, with your morphia. Pain always seems new when you have it. And I admit: grief gets in the way of playing piano. It mixes you up. But listen.” She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. “Imagine Paris in 1928. I was studying and playing. *Very* young. You have heard the names of people I knew. I will not mention them. Ravel, many others. For a time, possibility was everywhere. We had been through the war and that was that.”

“So much talent around,” Kate said.

Madame waved her hand like a broken flag. “Yes, yes. But they were busy all day, working. You do not see artists in bars drinking wine. They are busy in their rooms, they have *schedules!*” Madame scowled for a moment. “But do not interrupt me. As I said, there was much happiness then, with the war gone away and hundreds of new ideas coming into practice. I was then your age, maybe younger. Like you, very talented. A small bit more talented, but the difference is not important. Basically I sat at piano five, six hours a day.

“So, a beautiful place. Everyone said so. ‘Aren't you lucky to be here, Clara?’ they said to me. I always said, ‘Yes.’ And I had a friend.” Madame closed her eyes and nodded. “A beautiful young man, a painter: oils, watercolors, ex-cubist. He was given attention in galleries and salons. The critics noticed him. For one year we had each night a rendezvous before dinner, when the light was useless for painting and piano practice time was over. We took walks in the Bois. We made dinner for friends. Attended concerts and openings. We talked often, often, about future. Then, the end.” Madame stopped and waited. “No future after all.”

“Why?”

Madame nodded, pleased that Kate was listening. “I will tell you. Remember what you have read about Paris. Now the books say there

was only happiness and creative fire. I arrived, a little girl from Poland. I was introduced to groups. Then, a girl, I discover what everyone has always known. Joy is infected. Joy for too long is infection. Cannot last. My painter disappears, then turns up to see me with his face all cloudy. I ask him why, and he says, 'Opium.' Well. Some it doesn't hurt. But others, the weak little happy ones get it but do not get over it. They fall into it like falling into a lake of diamonds. They don't come up. More joy. *Too much joy!* You have heard maybe of Cocteau?"

Kate nodded.

"Talented, but oh, he was silly. He had a weakness for happiness, that one. Clutched at it all the time. He thought boredom was not real, Cocteau. A big mistake. So my painter, who like Cocteau is finding this opium, he tries to stop but does *not* stop. He loses his vision for painting. His ideas go away. What does he spend his day thinking about? I don't know. He won't tell me. He says there are no more pictures. He says: 'Color is too much work.' Too much work! To me, he looks more and more like a man turning around, on his way back to his mother. One afternoon, we drink champagne together. We walk together by Seine to Notre Dame. He says maybe he will convert, be a Catholic as I am, safe in God's arms. Maybe he will solve problems of soul. We walk upstairs to the top of the cathedral, to see Paris to the west. He cries with happiness, with arrangement of cloud light. Then he lifts himself up, says, '*Au futur*,' and puts his foot on top of a gargoyle face. He takes a leap, aaieee, into space. He broke like an egg below. He lived for three hours, speaking to ghosts."

"I'm sorry."

"Do *not* be sorry. Congratulate me for living in Paris for ten more years, alone. Congratulate me for coming here, for losing career, for opening a studio over a restaurant. Congratulate me for teaching

slow clucks and dumb bunnies. Congratulate me for avoiding infection, for having not too much happiness."

"Congratulations," Kate said.

"Boredom has its own tenderness, its own mercy," Madame said softly. "Now tell me. Will you not celebrate with wine constantly, from now on? Will you not try to be happy, always?"

"I promise. Cross my heart."

"Then give me my cane."

Kate reached over to where the cane leaned against the Mason and Hamlin's shiny black wood and gave it to Madame. The old woman put both hands over it and lifted herself up. Standing, her shoulders bent, she said, "Already you are learning. You will become a hero. You will learn to face losses of giant size. That requires ceremony. It requires champagne. We will drink."

"Do you have champagne here?" Kate asked. The studio was bare except for the piano and Madame's chair.

"Of course not. It will have to be imagined. Raise glass."

"What about my piece? What about Gershwin?"

"Poor boy. He died of a brain tumor when young. Do as I say!"

Kate watched the old woman prop herself on her cane, as her right hand lifted into the air, the thumb and forefingers holding an invisible glass. If there had been a glass, a real one, it would have been shaking, because the old woman trembled with anger and passion, and the champagne would have spilled out over Madame's thin, veiled wrist.

“Raise glass!” Madame shouted. “Stand!”

Kate stood and after a moment hoisted her right hand, thumb and forefinger in a circle broken by a gap for the invisible stem, until the glass that was not there had reached the level of her shoulder. The old woman, seeing that she had done so, suddenly shot at her an utterly fierce and impersonal smile.

“Drink!” she commanded. Kate watched her, then drank.

