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Fire

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Fire

Trying to understand the riddle of his life's course contrasted with Richard's, Ian often stopped at an evening in their heady years of certainty and friendship at Julliard. Richard's patron had called, weeping. Her lover had died. Ian saw Richard sit silent while the machine recorded her sobs, still reading and occasionally stroking the outer rim of his left ear. Twenty minutes later, he said, "I'm starving," and they walked to the Chinese place in the next block.

Now, Richard does not return messages and Ian has stopped calling.

Late February, they bump into each other at the music store near Symphony Hall and Kiehle – where Richard is living up to expectations and, a young star, is putting the school on the map, getting grants, publicity, and visiting celebrities. Richard, flipping through sheet music, greets Ian all enthusiasm, "I've been wanting to get in touch. Pontus wants me to do a collection of pieces by contemporary composers. I'll have George and Ryan – what about you?"

"It's good of you to think of me."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're a damn fine composer." Richard's patron used to say that Ian's diffidence blocks his career. Ian doesn't know how to curse his critics and shake indifference into assent. Success takes courage and stamina.

Ian accepts Richard's assessment out of courtesy, but has had too few commissions since Julliard to believe he is a fine composer. Though, at the same time, he hopes, he longs, he believes, and longs for more reasons to believe.

"I'll tell you more about Pontus. Let's get coffee."

They walk through the February rain and, in the cafe, discuss what Pontus wants. Ian accepts Richard's comradeship as though no years of silence lie between them. He does not venture to ask about money and Richard does not mention payment. As usual,

the honor is supposed to be enough, and, for Ian, it would be. "It doesn't have to be a new piece," Richard says, and that clinches it. There will be no cash, or enough for only one bottle of wine.

But he drives home happy and tells Elizabeth.

Since Ian's account of the patron's unanswered phone call, Elizabeth expects nothing good of the friendship. "I wonder what's in it for Richard."

"Reputation, I suppose. It'll show he knows who's doing what. Patronage."

"You want to be patronized by him?"

Her question resonates like a note that sets metal and glass vibrating. He re-hears his conversation with Richard, out of key.

"Any money?" she asks.

"Not from Pontus." Not anywhere in new music as far as he can see. Maybe movies.

Elizabeth has soured on talent. She used to believe Ian's work would do something inexpressible, but now they have two children. David, like Ian's father, with fair hair and hazel eyes protected by stubby white lashes, plagued this whole winter with a cough that will not fade. Catherine, like herself as a girl, with eyebrows that will join into one. Elizabeth's favorite aunt had eyebrows like that. The mortgage and the car repair have worn away her faith that no life could be better than an artist's dedicated to beauty. She used to think Ian's music would last. Now she believes he does not see the world as it is. He composes like the people who built granite factories in Fall River as though stone is impervious to time. It is not. The factories stand empty and ruined and Ian's granite music stands empty, not what people want now. She believes Richard also knows that. Nothing will come of this talk about Pontus. People want entertainment now, nothing that lasts. She despairs that success is tinsel, and tinsel is stronger than stone.

The New Ashford Planning Board is looking for something to save this sad quarter of the state. It longs for a casino, and Elizabeth is watching the entertainment industry. Their sedan is rusting and she sees advertisements for SUVs that promise jungle hazards and deserts. How can she protect her children from entertainment fantasies turned into deadly metal? When she was growing up, entertainment seemed like play after work, pleasure after core surviving. Now entertainment is pleasure and core. It is everything – sports, TV, toys, movies, magazines, dances, clothes,

food, government, crime, travel. It claims her and her children. David and Catherine wear entertainment sneakers, tie-in T-shirts, sexy jeans. They do not know nursery rhymes or classical myths. They will never listen to their father's music. Everyone, except Ian, is famous, and having blazed into celebrity, falls to ashes. Perhaps she is distraught. She does not want the casino and does not expect her arguments against it to prevail with the New Ashford Planning Board. It is gray February and has been a long winter, full of coughs and colds.

In the days of first love, she used to dwell on Ian's noble forehead and the shadow at the base of his thumb. She believed love lasts forever. Now she dwells on bills, and foresees that Ian will have no job soon, when Cabot closes its music department. Without his meager salary and stingy benefits she will remain tied to the New Ashford Planning Board by children's sneakers. Her fear will last forever. As for illness or accident . . . She dare not think of greater dreads like losing her job or David's persistent cough.

Sometimes she sees Ian through the neighbors' eyes, home much of the day. Do they imagine him disabled by illness, madness, or drugs? What disables him? Dreaming music like granite. His trouble weighs on her like the claims of a retarded child.

Richard's invitation feels like idle torture, like the talk of a new cure that tormented her family before her mother died. When they gave up that hope, a few days were peaceful and her mother rested and died.

As her dread foresees, Ian's need overcomes doubt. Hectic with hope, he writes, purpose flows through him like a transfusion and he is burning with joy.

Passage by passage the piece draws Ian's whole life into its circle like a shawl in a fairy tale that passes through a gold ring. Sometimes the silk is drawn from years behind years. His ancestors were refugees cast on our shores by wars and famines. As they stood at the harbor, gulls cried out, mothers and fathers embraced children for the last time, brother broke clasp from brother, sobs fused with blessings. In Ian's music, partings and greetings flow into each other as Celtic keening, German lullabies, French seducing, searching each others' melodies for who they are. After calamities of famine and war, the world destroyed by fire, grandchildren and cousins come together singing, a genetic pattern longing to become alive again in Ian's every note.

He does not hear their wheezing and coughing.

Elizabeth sees hope burning like a fever and holds herself still, like when you hear intruders wandering downstairs through familiar rooms but do not move in case you draw them upstairs to do worse harm.

At the due date, Ian takes the composition to Richard at Kiehle, off a hall where graduate students compose at computers. If only he had access to machines like that.

"Come to my concert at Symphony," Richard hands him a poster. "Elizabeth too, if she can." Richard used to envy Ian his marriage to supportive Elizabeth, mousey but sweet. Supple and subtle. The kind of woman who looks like nothing much but in bed . . . "There'll be tickets at the box office and a party afterwards backstage." Where, they both know, careers are made.

No more than a phrase about trouble with the recording project for Pontus.

At the concert, Ian listens dismayed. What has happened? Richard's music has become pretentious and unconvincing. What will he say when Richard asks? But if this is what fills a hall . . . Something like rage at injustice burns through his chest.

In the crowded backstage, Ian's life passes before him as if he is drowning. Here he sees not the life he has lived but its absence, people he does not know, ease he does not have. Pressing through the congratulating swarm, he hears Richard defer graciously to the talent of others who have made everything possible. Richard has learned. At Julliard, he used to take praise of others as stolen from him, and their collaborations mixed envy with friendship.

"Ian, I'm so glad you could make it. Let me introduce you to Han," a famous violinist, "and Yokio," a famous conductor. These soon see that Ian is no one they need and drift off. Richard finds Ian again and grasps his shoulder, "There's someone I want you to meet," pushing him through the crowd, "Incredibly talented." His student introduced, Richard leaves. Ian guesses the protégé knows they have been brought together to occupy each other out of the way.

Their conversation peters out, he waves to Richard and leaves.

The backstage scene burns in Ian, brilliant and leaping like living flame that lights first this moment then that, fresh and searing. When the ancients described hell's fires, they could have been imagining this, pain at once so intimate it feels involuntary, so great it seems not in the mind but outward and infinite, flames never consumed as long as the soul is alive to feel them. Like hell's

flames, they feel to Ian just and impossible to escape though he cannot identify what he has done or omitted to deserve them. Careers in music begin early. He was supposed to compose and be known, as Richard is known. Richard has mastered something he has not and, not mastering it, he has failed his calling. He will never succeed in his life's work.

The highways he drives flee the city, through Victorian suburbs, smaller roads, trees and newer houses, darkness, to a straggling village, once a mill town, whose buildings stand empty. In the discouraged business district, blind glass faces out from stores for rent. At the corner, an antiques shop is stocked with junk from lives like his.

He stops near the bridge and walks to the parapet. Pale gleams shine where water rushes over rocks. Along the nearby highway, the sounds of cars press tight forward, trail behind.

Does life really recapitulate in drowning? Can a few gasping minutes condense years of struggle? Can ten breaths of animal resistance crush into one all his waiting for rebuff and getting it? Nothing to show for the years of learning and work. Time after time the form answer, grant denied, unfelt regrets, prize not won. Can one night compress his last frenzy of hope into a single capsule?

He has conned Elizabeth. He has no gift to give.

Oh God, what was I born for?

Like intercourse, whose meaning does not yield to description of who touched whom where, despair remains opaque to outward scrutiny. Our story is not a textbook on the anatomy of pain. Enough to know that Ian burned. Richard, backstage, said nothing about the real party after the common crush, when the chosen go off for a drink together. Ian's pain backstage, striking a match to self-knowledge, has left him charred and without skin. His life, air itself, tortures like fire.

Our species survives by not knowing how little chance we have when we go out to meet monsters, a stone in one hand, kidding our puny selves we will bring down beasts and eat their meat. Not a feat to undertake alone, but bent over the river parapet, Ian is alone.

After the concert, Richard is a lord. This is why he was born. To make music and win praise for it, to enjoy mastery. His wife, Karen, in wine velvet, guides their guests to food and wine and people each should meet, moving round him like a rose in a

dream. Wherever he looks she is there, luminous. In his first marriage, everything was competition. His first wife, unsuccessful in her own career, sculpture, resented every credit that came to him. Karen is not like that. Her scientific research receives respect. She is a quiet fountain that wells up and forms the valley where trees bear fruit and give shade, animals browse, birds sing, branches sway. All those years he heard about love without knowing what it is, or how it enters every breath of life. Music itself now comes to him through her.

Their movements thread near each other. Whenever they are close, he touches her – shoulders, back, arm – gestures only partly voluntary. The occasion calls for public modesty. They will exult later, alone in their gray clapboard house. Though until he sees the reviews . . .

Karen wants a child. “I don’t want to mess with biology. I know the statistics.”

Meanwhile he thanks and flatters. At times a bile of envy rises to choke him as he sets out to please the head of his department at Kiehle and Yokio, a conductor, and Drayton, a patron he is wooing to commission a suite, and Birnbaum, a movie director who might command a sound track, and Starrett, owner of Pontus. He has disciplined himself to limit worry about reviews. The public life he must lead is always vulnerable, but he has survived humiliation. Tonight the critics have left without greeting him, obedient to their code. Though he notices that Williamson, whose company is starting a theme park, is not backstage.

The money’s got to come from somewhere. Handel composed background music for fireworks and water amusements, and Bach wrote to put insomniacs to sleep. Williamson’s theme park is going to need lots of sound and he’s been hoping for a grant to Kiehle.

Ian remains alive. The animal who wants to live at any cost has writhed away from the fire. There at the bridge, it argued he was not alone and could not cut off his life without making someone else bleed. If he does away with himself, Elizabeth, David, and Catherine must carry a wound deep as a gene for blindness. It must go down the generations to their children and their children’s children, an opposite of immortality in music.

An immortality, he knows now, will not be his. Grief threatens to burn him naked again. When he composes, he does not know

who will take the harmonies he puts into the world, or how a shape of notes makes meaning in another person. He does not know now how his self-extinction could vibrate to cause harm.

He draws on what happened when Richard's patron, weeping, held herself guilty for her lovers' suicide, "I should have . . ." and "Why didn't I . . . ?" That year, three students at Julliard killed themselves one after the other as though a psychic toxin passed from one to the other. Turning to Ian, Richard talked about his grandfather and an uncle who threw himself off a railroad overpass and the fear those deaths cast over the whole family. There had been two aunts the generation before. Who knew when the genetic stain would stain again?

Ian's animal being, though pained, persists in living, but not as before. He will live with failure. He has cherished work at Cabot because it leaves time for composing. He will look for other work. He will take care of his family and free Elizabeth. He will shun composing. Toying with it will accomplish nothing but more torment. He will live like an alcoholic who fears one drink can destroy him.

On a bright October day, Richard is returning from Martha's Vineyard where he will soon premiere a new piece. Tired of the same tedious route back, he pulls off the highway to consult a map. He wants byways, a diner, unfamiliar sounds. He wants a new song. The critics slammed his spring concert as much they used to praise, and in Edgartown yesterday, listening like a stranger, he heard his suite striving and thick with clichés.

What will he do about Birnbaum's movie commission?

He ponders the map of roads and two things catch his eye at once: New Ashford, Ian's town and a tremor in his right hand. The lines twist – Ian, so gifted at Julliard, one strand. The other, fear. His mother's limbs trembled more and more as she neared the grave. He couldn't bear to look at her. Why didn't Ian stay after that ghastly concert? He could have met Birnbaum. Of course he was disappointed about the Pontus project falling through, but there'd be another chance. Ian gives up too easily. Maybe he'd be interested in the movie. He'd have to sell Birnbaum on Ian, but he could put them in touch.

He pulls onto the road, and the flow of space calms him. Fiery trees burn with light.

He swoops off the highway into an avenue flanked with trees

like torches and houses built to the street, before snowploughs took the curse out of shoveling. Pity he's got too much work to take Birnbaum's commission himself. The money is good.

Karen wants a vacation before the winter season. "If we're going to have a child, we have to get pregnant." Paris? Santa Cruz?

A green rise and a white church on its crest. When did his mother's quivering begin? He never noticed it until she came to New York his freshman year. When she lifted her soup spoon in that Chinese restaurant round the corner.

Town hall, clocktower. His parents' alarm clock came from this part of the country, a bell over the dial like a tiny hat. History. Monks, bells, ships, exploration, Columbus, factories, immigrants. Wheels formed water's rush into regular rotation, piston percussion. He is riding chords – a composition will come from this drive.

He is too young for tremors. His mother must have been sixty. In twenty years, maybe, but this is ridiculous.

Elizabeth does not recognize his voice, but at his name wariness slip into hers. What has he done to make her dislike him? Ian also sounds reserved, and takes charge, "Call when you reach the town center. I'll give you directions."

He will see a doctor. Tremors could be a disaster for a man like him, always in front of people, conducting, teaching, wooing.

He passes through worn-out towns built in the heyday of water power and orphaned by electricity and feels the throb of history, the movement of time. How long can a bassoonist hold a note? No matter, technology extends it. Small farms around grim little houses. Skeletons hang in trees and plastic pumpkins mark driveways. Darkness is coming. A tremor.

A block of brick and concrete, the regional high school. Permanent trailers. A gaudy sprawl of gas station. A donut shop, cigarette advertising in the window. "Black coffee to go." At the war memorial on a swath of exhausted grass, he calls again and Ian names nondescript signs to notice – fourth road to the left, a cluster of mailboxes. "Say, half an hour. I'm busy until three-thirty."

Richard doesn't want to hang round this seedy town and regrets the call, but it is done. He walks out to a bridge across the river that once gave this place life. Ian sounds different. It's never been his way to keep someone else waiting. Water flowing, flowing. Cellos and basses break open as the rhythm changes. Time flees to

instruments made to note the finest trembling. It can't be true that he is stricken now. Look, his hand isn't trembling any more. Time measures distance as light, a piccolo would be too coarse for that speed of awe. Trees flame in water, leaves float through air, light disperses and concentrates.

He wants to walk. He will find a country lane near Ian's house. It is not far after all. The house, a blue clapboard with a deck on stilts, stands in a slope of goldenrod. Thick brush at the base must screen water, perhaps the same river that flows in the center of town. He walks down expecting a bridge but finds a culvert. A red leaf, entangled on twigs trembles as water slips under it, an unendurable sight. No. Medical science must have a cure by now.

He turns to look up at the lit house. A picture window onto the deck shows a scene he cannot interpret. Ian is bending over a figure lying on a couch. He is doing something repeated and laborious, strenuous and rhythmic. Not sex. Ian is squeezing the chest in his hands, squeeze and release like resuscitation. After a while, the figure, a boy, sits up, and Ian moves to hold one hand on his back. The other hand offers something like a towel. The boy takes the towel, coughs, reaches for a bowl on the sidetable, coughs into it, gives the bowl to Ian and lies down again, face down. Ian's rhythmic squeezing begins again.

This is something important like a coronation or a religious ritual that prepares the boy for sacrifice, but Richard cannot decipher the power in the lighted room. He recalls an Asian wedding he attended this summer, the bride in her dedicated gown, the celebrant's voice lost in a space of lawn surrounded by trees, and the unfamiliar ceremony more solemn for being mute. Some gestures were clear – she turned to look at him. He gave her something. She gave him something. Other rituals seemed obscure. The celebrant's voice invoking ancestors and other witnesses seemed fainter than birdsong. What words were spoken were not meant for the observers on the edge of the lawn.

A gust carries leaves like flames between Richard and the lit room. He stands in the darkening road like a spy outside the human world. The shadowed field is becoming infinite. Quieter than the wedding voices on the lawn. Still as his mother's grave until he threw the first dirt onto the coffin.

In the lit room, the boy sits again, coughs, spits, wipes his mouth and puts his arms up round his father's neck. A woman, Elizabeth, comes into the room. A girl child follows. There they are, a family in light.

He envies Ian in the golden group. No need. Karen wants a child and they will have one. Or two, like Ian. It will be a Bach household, full of music, a place of freedom from the endless chain of flattery.

Ian stands, the child's arms round his neck, and carries the boy away. Then there is nothing but light in the room with its couch and table.

He spatters gravel and brakes abruptly so they will not imagine he came early and has been watching. Elizabeth's greeting sounds half-hearted. Has he offended her? Or is it just a menstrual mood?

Ian leads him to the room with the couch and the picture window, playing host in a more distant way than Richard has ever known. Elizabeth will make coffee in a place out of his sight. Parts of this home are private.

Until now, Richard has not seen Ian's life as something separate from his seeing, a complex busy with interior vitality he does not share. Now, in a movement like the one that recently carried him to commanding a vista of the area's history, he sees that Ian's life has matters as inscrutable to him as that wedding ceremony on the lawn. A thread of fire twists Ian to his trembling mother. At the time, he did not wonder whether his mother guessed his fear at her tremor. Now he feels sorrow that he showed no warmth and did not hold her quaking hand.

In the kitchen, Elizabeth takes out a plate for cookies. The kitchen is full of cakes for the children, especially David, and in a fruit bowl, bananas, apples, pears and one pomegranate. She places the plate back on its shelf. The two mugs, milk and sugar will be enough.

She has only half forgotten myths she heard in childhood about the abducted girl who ate six pomegranate seeds in the underworld and had to return six months of every year and Richard is not really the King of Death. Dear Ian, dear husband, don't let him seduce you back to that unhappy life where you hope and compose and despair that no one wants your heart's work. Stay with us. Something happened the night of Richard's concert. You have not gone into your study since. This is your first new temptation. I want to take you into my arms.

She puts mugs on the tray but not the thermos with refills she used to prepare for Ian to take to his desk.

Although she looks sullen, Richard wants to reassure her. He would like to stroke the white hairs at her temples and tell her

about his mother, as though comforting one woman could comfort the other. If Karen saw this gesture, she would stand back amazed. Karen, so beautiful, far from this worn wife.

Outside, yellow leaves are falling on the field, though the air shows hardly a tremor. He shivers, a goose is walking over his grave.

Ian says, "It's great to see you."

"We must do it more often."

"What brings you to Ashford?"

"I couldn't stand another mile on Route 3. I've been driving to and from the Vineyard to rehearse a new piece." Ian does not ask about the piece and Richard feels his friend's rush of pain like the acid of his own envy. "Pretty drive at this time of year." He stirs his coffee. This is harder than talking up a new patron. The space between them feels clogged with memories. "I'm still hoping the Pontus record deal will come off."

"That'd be good," Ian sounds carefully neutral. Perhaps he feels teased. Offering Birnbaum may be complicated. "What are you working on these days?" He hears his tone, adult to freshman.

"I'm not composing now." Ian's voice sounds easier, something lanced.

"Teaching keeping you too busy?"

"I've stopped teaching. I'm working at a local radio station. Programming."

Richard hardly knows how to keep a footing in this stream of misery. "Is it interesting?"

"David's been diagnosed with cystic fibrosis."

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry."

"Maybe it's not too bad. He might live to grow up. Ours is an age of medical miracles."

Might live? "I had no idea."

"Neither did we. It's a recessive gene. David seemed fine until this summer. They usually find it younger. We're lucky. A generation ago, he'd be dead by now. Genetic research is where the funding is now, the best scientists, everything."

What joy it must be to work on research for miracles that mean life not death. "I suppose it fills your time. Hospitals, medications?"

"Oh yes, all that. We can do some at home. We massage his chest every few hours to expel mucus, and we've both learned to do that. He's got a special diet, high calorie, not too bad, though it's tough on Catherine that he's always eating ice cream and she can't."

"What about money?"

"We're lucky. Elizabeth's job's got insurance. I'm not earning much yet at the station, but when I get more experience . . ."

"I was wondering . . . There's a movie score I can't take on."

Richard sees a light flame through Ian. It is like the moment when a sheet of paper on a bed of ashes catches their last heat and flares.

Ian feels the fire himself. It could spread, catch more, fill him.

In her basement office, filing and tidying papers, Elizabeth is praying, though she has no formal faith and no words, Oh God, please . . . , and does not know what she is doing.

Flames swirl into Ian, heart, stomach, lungs. Yearning, hope. Fire fills the world with energy and meaning. Living tongues rise to the walls and roof. The house is burning. "Thanks, Richard. I'm too busy. This programming job takes a lot of learning. A lot of time." He breathes. The fire is out.

Richard sees Ian's light dim. "What kind of programming?"

"Hits, pop, country, R&B. Usual AM stuff. Nothing that'll scare local advertisers."

A gust sends yellow leaves scudding across the field. Richard tries again. "There'd be good money if you get the commission."

Ian treads down hot cinders with naked feet, "I can't take the time to try to get it."

Richard hears that as long as David lives Ian will never be able to take the time. Even after, there may be debt. And grief. And the other child?

Karen can't have any idea how dangerous it is to have a child. It could consume your life.

"It must be hard."

"It's a new world. That's always hard." But Ian stands at the prow, not the defeated Ian who came to that humiliating concert at Symphony. "Tell me about your new piece."

Richard sees that this Ian is brave. Braver than he remembers. "I'm not satisfied. It's too late now, but I'll do the concert and fix it later."

"You've done that before. What does Karen think?"

"She doesn't know about music . . ." Offering Ian a sadness of his own.

"Let me introduce you to the children." Ian takes Richard to the kitchen where the children are playing hearts. They stare at him, shy and silent, and Ian shows him their paintings pasted to the kitchen walls. Soon it is time for Richard to drive on.

They go to the door. For the first time in the years they have known each other, in a gesture neither expects, they hug, warming to each other again. To Ian, their embrace recalls forebears in another country and another time, on a railway platform or quay where families, enduring calamity, faced long separation. Or, calamity past, greeted each other after years apart.