

THE DISORDER

by

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My recital was coming up and getting ready took all my effort. This morning I put coffee on the stove, then went straight to the violin. I began with slow scales, stretched-out sounds that climbed the three-octave peak then eased back down. Though barely awake I noticed a lovely depth of tone as I moved from scales to arpeggios. My tempo increased as I waited for the smell of coffee to tell me it was time to break. Usually the coffee aroma reaches me by the time I work up to *allegro moderato*, but at *tempo vivace* I still couldn't smell it. Finally the hiss of coffee steaming to readiness reached my ears.

I put the violin down to investigate. I'm not a big eater and don't get food cravings the way some of my friends do. But coffee is another matter. I long for the rich black elixir, and prepare it in ritual. Each morning I grind the dark beans, shiny with oil. Then I spoon the fine grind into my stovetop espresso pot. I play scales while the liquor presses up from lower chamber to upper, awaiting the smell of its completion. While drinking, I give it my full regard. I do not leave a cup of coffee sitting on a table or desk. Like a tea ceremony I saw once at the Japanese Garden, I hold the coffee cup with both hands. I lift it up so that I can breathe the coffee before I sip, study the fine cracks in the mug, and feel the warmth in my hands. I give it full attention and believe it does the same for me, like praying and knowing that somehow God listens. After coffee, there is music.

This morning no coffee scent tickled my nose into wakefulness. Come to think of it, I hadn't smelled the beans when I ground them either. Could the coffee be stale? But I'd smelled it the day before and every day before that. I poured, then lifted my special mug up with both hands to inhale; there was nothing. No aroma of stimulus. I tried to drink, but put the cup down to go practice.

I placed the violin under my chin. Odd, I thought. My nose was not stuffy. I didn't have a cold. Music beckoned and I ceased pondering my inability to smell coffee.

The Mendelssohn had a warmth I'd never fully appreciated. My ears were fine-tuned this morning, helping my hands to form sound through the instrument. My intonation was exact, vibrato rich, bowing full, a perfect blend of skills I have worked hard to achieve. They didn't always come so completely together. My hearing had moved up a notch in acuity, directing my hands to shape a sound that was ever so satisfying. At lunch I made a tuna sandwich and noticed I could not smell the canned fish, red onion, or kosher pickles.

Taste disappeared next, since smell had already diminished it. I knew when Julianna offered me chocolate that afternoon at our final rehearsal. Julianna played cello on the Beethoven trio. During our rehearsal break she rushed out to buy chocolate. "Beethoven drives me to it," she said, but I've noticed over the years that every piece of music Julianna played required a chocolate hit. So Leon, the pianist, and I waited and talked about electronic music and why it will never capture the sound of even one string vibrating in a room. Leon reached under the lid of the grand to pluck a low string, making his point. My ears expanded to take in the tone and rumble beneath. I heard my violin strings vibrate in resonance.

Julianna came back in and offered us each a chocolate, her eyes dilated with pleasure from the three she'd already eaten. I hesitated. "It's food of the gods," she said. "The Beethoven will be richer. Eat it." I put the chocolate in my mouth and waited. She only bought the best chocolates, the ones made by the chocolatier whose ancestors had made chocolates for the czar of Russia. Julianna's craving never drove her to eat Mars bars. She maintained her standards, in music and in chocolate. I didn't tell her I tasted nothing. Only the memory of chocolate. We played. My ears followed the trio of instruments as though I were playing each one. The Beethoven sang.

I considered calling my doctor to discuss my loss of smell and taste. But the recital stood before me and there was no time for a doctor's appointment. My playing was breaking through to a new level and I didn't dare stop.

The next morning, I became aware of lack of sensation in my left hand. Carefully I pushed the strings against the neck of the instrument and picked up the bow to play. My ears told me I'd hit the right pitches. So I relied on hearing to tell me if I needed more pressure on the strings or to bring the bow down with more weight.

I continued playing, believing that feeling would return to my hands when they warmed up. It was odd. My fingers did everything I needed them to do. In fact, relying solely on my hearing made my fingers more responsive than usual. I imagined touch more thoroughly and precisely than I had ever felt it. My control was acute. After two hours of practice I had no true feeling in my fingers.

I put the violin down and examined my hands. I could see the familiar grooves on the pads of the fingers where I'd been holding the strings against the fingerboard. My right hand had the usual marks creased into my thumb and fingers from holding the bow. I sat down and stroked my hands across the ledge of the music stand, passing my palms, then the flesh between finger joints over the metal; I spread the pads of my fingers out as if reading Braille embossed in the stand's surface. The delicate whispery sound of skin against metal described to me the cool stuccoed texture. So much so that I imagined I felt it.

My heart beat loudly, *tempo agitato*. I rushed to the phone, found my doctor's number and punched it in. I heard the sound of each number entering the phone. *Numbness?* she inquired. *No tingling? Possibly a neurological problem, perhaps a pinched nerve, brought on by overpractice. It doesn't affect your playing? Good, she said. Remember to take breaks. You musicians are hard on your bodies. I'll see you next week and book you with our neurologist. You can see us both the same day. Call me if the symptoms worsen.*

My *agitato* slowed to a *moderato*. I had told my doctor and she had not panicked. I picked up the violin again. My playing was in fact better than ever. They say violinists should rely on their ears and I have, though never so entirely.

I practiced standing, as I would perform. My ears demanded a balanced sound. So I moved until the violin found the sonar center of the room. The tone swirled around me in perfect

circles. My ears tracked the arc and curve of each cycle and vibration, allowing the music to build until it overpowered my practice room. Sound expanded against the acoustical tiles on the walls and ceiling.

My ears tingled. I practiced in a rapture through late afternoon and into early evening. When I emerged from the practice room, I walked to the picture window to catch the sunset improvising its wild and final solo cadenza, clouds suspended for an ephemeral moment until the contented return to tonic.

The recital came at just the right time. My ears buzzed from shaping sound so fully and precisely. Indeed, the recital was my best. I'm not one of those performers who always claims my last recital was my best and the next one will be better. This recital was truly my best. The Mendelssohn soared, the Beethoven trio was rich and full of passion, and the Bach unaccompanied suites were straight from the angels. My ears told me everything I needed to do, how much vibrato to create, how much bow to pull across the strings. I closed my eyes and it was just me, the violin, the music, and my ears, all working as one. This was it, I thought, the piercing ecstasy Bernini carved into the marble face of Santa Teresa of Avila. I had thought it unattainable on this earth. But now the ecstasy moved through me, swirled around me and lifted me up, even if only for a glorious instant in time.

The reviews were raves, which in the music world doesn't happen often. "Ms. Kechley achieved that rare perfection of sound that all violinists strive for. The recital was a jewel." I had to hold the newspaper just the right distance to read it.

After the recital, I stayed in for the weekend and basked in the rapture of music. I shouldered my violin in each room, allowing my ears to direct sound and adapt my playing to acoustical change. I felt like I could stay forever in this aural world, breathing the clear air of magnificent vibration.

I knew I had no excuse now for not keeping my appointment with the doctor. I went by bus. My distance vision had become too blurry for driving. I squinted out the bus window and when I spotted the ten-story clinic, I rang the bus bell, noting its remarkably sonorous chime.

My doctor examined me, asked me questions, wrote responses on her chart. “Definitely a neurological disorder. It’s a good thing I got you that appointment with Dr. Morgan. This is out of my league. But don’t worry, he’s tops in his field.”

For the next two hours, Dr. Morgan and I were together in an exam room. He asked me about the losses, when I noticed each. He asked about my profession and whether the losses affected my performance. Then he directed me to sit on the exam table. I closed my eyes while he tapped on my wrist, my knee, my shoulder. Though I heard his every movement, and could sense his touch, I could not say that I felt it physically.

Then he rolled in a metal tray with holders for glass vials that reminded me of allergy skin tests. These contained aromatic essences of gardenia, anise, tea rose, and chili peppers. He asked me to close my eyes. I heard the thick slide of oily liquid against the glass as he waved each under my nose. I shook my head. I smelled nothing.

Next he brought in wafers for me to taste. Each came separately wrapped so its flavor would remain singular and unmixed. The number on each wrapper corresponded to numbers on his clipboard chart. I chewed slowly, waiting for my tongue to wake up and identify the familiar taste of lemon, onion, black pepper, or banana. I shook my head again and again.

“I’ll need to test your vision now.” He led me into a small room where I looked through a machine and read down the lines of diminishing letters. My confidence wavered after the third line. As I already knew, my distance vision had blurred but close range was fine, even sharpened slightly as the tests confirmed.

The hearing tests were last. I sat in a booth and put on earphones. He told me to push the button whenever I heard a sound, no matter how faint. I did and even through the earphones and the soundproof booth, I heard his pulse jump at what I could perceive.

We went to his office. Dr. Morgan pulled thick books and journals from his shelves and spread them across his desk. I waited as he read, watched him turn pages, wrinkle his brow, write notes in the margin with his mechanical pencil. Finally he spoke. "It's a rare disorder, but the symptoms are classic, for a musician, that is."

"What is the disorder?"

"Idiopathic Mono Esthesia." I listened to him pronounce the name, not sure I wanted a name to attach to my experience. "I've seen only one other case myself," he said. "A sculptor." He opened a medical file and scanned it. "Yes," he said. He pushed his glasses up and I heard the moist slide of plastic on skin. "This is how it works. The brain and nervous system weaken the senses not needed for the artist's work, and at the same time, enhance the most necessary sense to extraordinary levels. In your case it is hearing. In this clinic, no one has ever achieved your perception of pitch, volume, vibrato, timbre. You have superhuman hearing perception. Your sense of touch is processed through your hearing and I believe you will not lose any more sight because you need close vision to read music."

"I won't lose more?" I asked.

"Not likely. According to the reported cases, the losses and enhancements take place within the first week or two and then stabilize. In essence, the disorder leaves you with exactly what you need to pursue your art. And only that." He creaked back in his chair and studied me.

"Oh." I heard myself suck in air, then blow it out. "Will I hear everything in the world with such clarity?"

"No, no," he said. "It's selective. Only what you focus on. Otherwise you'd already be going crazy."

I nodded.

"The nature of IME is its selectivity. There haven't been many cases but they have all followed the same pattern. Here's an example." He picked up a journal. "A painter: the patient measured extraordinary visual acuity, able to hold both distant and close images in focus at the same time. In tests, the patient reproduced, with no optical aid, the cellular structure of an object.

The patient measured complete loss of smell and taste, as well as hearing impairment.” He put the journal down and looked up at me. When he folded his hands, I heard the sound of his fingers rubbing against each other, whorl on whorl. “Do you see how it works?”

“I think so,” I said. “Your sculptor must have had an amazing sense of touch.”

“Exactly,” he said. “He did, for a time. In fact, that brings us to the subject of treatment.”

“Treatment?”

“There is a drug we can administer that will effectively bring back your lost senses, but it will also bring your hearing back to what it was before. However, you need to know that the treatment is only effective within the first few weeks of initial loss, which in your case began over two weeks ago.”

“I see,” I said, though I probably should have said that I heard. In fact, I heard the messages just under his voice as well as the ones in it. His words said the decision was mine to make but the tonality disclosed his preference to bring back the other senses, letting the hearing drop to normal. I knew he was not a musician.

“It’s a difficult choice,” he said, “an intriguing predicament.” His voice told me he would want to study me no matter which way I went. I heard medical journals and conference presentations in the vibrations beneath his words. “You need to decide soon.” His eagerness to know bounded around me like a puppy after a ball.

I went home. I sat on the sofa and lifted the afghan my grandmother had knitted to my cheek. I rubbed it against my skin but couldn’t quite feel it. I reached for the basket on my coffee table and ran my hand across the objects it held, the sand dollar I’d found at Cape Lookout, the red scallop shell, the tiny starfish. Holding them at the right distance, I could see each clearly but the feel eluded me.

I put the basket on the table and sat still. Then on a whim, I lifted the sand dollar up to my ear. The whole room lit up with sound, from thunderous waves to the sound of sand moving in the water and the infinitesimal creak of the sand dollar growing, etching a star on its underside. I held the basket to my ear and heard the cedar and raffia twine together giving off

nesting sounds. The afghan brought the click of knitting needles to my ears and the soft whisper of yarn embracing yarn.

I ran into the kitchen and twisted open a jar of oregano and held it to my nose. Nothing. But against my ear, I perceived the sound of leaves slowly drying in intense sunlight, crackling slightly as they became savory and brittle. Grabbing an orange and ripping off its peel, I pushed a segment of the fruit into my mouth and ate, tasting nothing. I tore another segment in half and held it to my ear. A popping sound of individual citrus jewels burst free, released from the skin that had contained them. I could hear the juice moving slowly onto my fingers.

I washed my hands and walked into the practice room. My violin lay waiting. As I snugged it between my left shoulder and ear, I could hear the instrument's complex history of sound. The mellowed wood and taut strings carried the soft resonance of all the music ever played on it. I listened to the rich layering, then took a breath and began to play. A rare purity of tone vibrated through the room, and for each note I heard all of the harmonics singing above the pitch and the fundamentals pulsing below it. My vibrato and bowing altered that overlay and on each note, my ears led me to reveal the perfect harmonic balance.

As I played the Bach unaccompanied suites, I heard the music, the instrument, even the composer's intent. It resounded inside me, settling right in my heart. When I finished playing I heard the gentle slide of tears on my cheeks and I knew that I could never give up this exquisite beauty.

I decided not to return to the clinic and wrote Dr. Morgan. I also enclosed two tickets to my next recital.

From then on, I listened and played the violin. I put it down only when I had to. Friends invited me to dinner and sometimes I went. They asked if I liked their lasagna and Chianti. "It's luscious," I said, but I never told them how I knew this.

I was reluctant at first to have a lover I could not feel, smell, or taste. An oboist from my chamber group kept asking me out. After making excuses through weeks of rehearsal, I finally

decided to go. Perhaps it was the sweet and plaintive sound he poured into the music that seduced me. We ended up in my bed, which was good because I am used to the ruffled sounds of my own bedding and could therefore take in what he brought to my world. I listened to his skin caressing mine, his fingers on my nipples. I listened to our tongues dancing together, listened to him enter me. Our bodies made low pleasure sounds. I heard his orgasm and then mine, an explosive sound that filled my ears, the splash of landing in the middle of a lake on a hot afternoon. Afterward our affection rustled, like birds feathering into a nest.

No one except my doctor knew of my disorder. People knew I had become nearsighted and no longer drove. They knew my playing went to ever higher levels as I came to further understand my gift. Sometimes they caught me listening.

They say I get a faraway look when I listen like that. But I am not far away. I am present. I close my eyes and everything comes to me. I hear.

THE END