

One-Part Invention

The Music Building of Cole College is built of precise and dust-colored bricks, and it has dignified Iowa for one hundred and sixteen years. The seasonal metronome: its walls are swathed in brittle leaves, snowdrifts, forsythia, and voracious greenery.

Fall, winter, spring. A beat, and it is early summer. The foliage sucks up oxygen, replacing it with vegetative steam. The building might as well be packed with leaf mold, hot with decomposition. Her door is ajar again. She hopes, with a newcomer's optimism, to coax the dead air to life. If he cared to, he could tell her it is hopeless.

Music flows from her studio down the hall to his. There is a stack of staved sheets on his desk, straightly aligned as dog-eared corners, shredded edges, and coffee-rippled blotches allow. So many of the students associate sloppiness with an artistic nature. But he is not grading papers from Theory of Contrapuntal Forms I. Instead he throttles a coffee mug with both hands, a death-grip. She can't even stick to her own damn Romantics. She plays HIS Bach. HIS Scarlatti. Katherine Avery is an extraordinary pianist, and Michael Owens quite simply detests her for it. He hurls the mug at the wall; it ricochets and bounces toward the door intact.

"Owens? You all right?" Michael looks up. Smoker hulks in the doorway. He is slouched against the jamb, rubbing a grey-stubbled jawline with his rawhide thumb. The other hand is loosely clasped on the front of a worn leather vest. His boots are scuffed a dye-less flesh color. Even his Levis are regressing to a natural state, mellowed almost-white with the barest grainy suggestion of blue. They mold comfortably to his body.

Smoker nudges the mug with the toe of one scruffy boot. "Lost your chops, man — shoulda broke."

Michael twists a pencil in his fists, nods to the trumpet man, "Smoker."

Smoker raises lazy eyebrows and dips his head in the direction of Katherine's studio. Salt and pepper hair brushes his collar. "The lady cooks, and that's a fact."

Michael pictures her, hard and angular, swaying on the piano bench, touched by the same stream of scorching dust-motes that batters the potted plants on the window sill into submission. There is a scowl on her mannish young face. She is attacking the keyboard with an athletic grace — all the finesse of a woman bowler — swearing like a teamster when displeased with her fingering.

Michael shudders. This, for music that requires a fine opposition of abandon and control: impassioned objectivity. And yet, the phrases flow at Katherine's touch as crystalline and pure as thoughts from the mind of God. It is intolerable.

"The music is excellent. It's a fact," Michael replies. Fact: he barely knows her. Fact: he longs for the feel of her surprisingly elegant neck under his fingers. The pencil snaps in his immaculate, big pianist's hands.

Smoker focuses. "Hey, hard day, Owens?" There is an edge of curiosity to his fuzzy indifference.

Michael flings the pencil pieces into the wastebasket. Nothing Smoker would understand. On the contrary. Smoker has invited Ms. Avery to join the experimental improvisation group, OMS: Owens on keyboards and miscellaneous, Mason as percussionist, and Smoker on horns. The jazz man has it all figured. They can change the name to SOMA. Hah. Any connection between Katherine and euphoria — nothing could be more ludicrous. Nothing more repugnant. His skin crawls.

He refuses to think of her. It pleases him, this evidence of mental discipline. He is proud of his ability to expunge trivialities from consciousness simply by making a rational decision to do so.

He eyes Smoker. Even propped against the door-frame, Smoker is weaving, his usual nonchalant manner, if possible, more pronounced. Approaching unconsciousness. "Thought you had a class, Smoker."

The trumpet man grins. "Yeah — Fundamentals of Jazz Technique. At Papa Juan's."

For an instant, Michael sees "Papa Juan's" in pink neon script. A favored spot for faculty gatherings. Smoker's lair. Michael shrugs and says, "It's your ass if anyone ever complains about you holding classes in a bar," and hopes that "It's your ass" sounds natural.

Smoker waves the caution aside. "Kids dig it — they're cool."

"You're crazy," Michael shakes his head. "I don't know how you get away with it."

But he does know. Smoker is a jazz musician; he's supposed to be crazy — a sometimes messy obligation, to Michael's mind. Smoker either disregards or is unaware of the untidiness. He has an innate drive to excess anyway. And such persistent non-exercise of control intrigues Michael. Fascinating to watch, like a tightrope walker. "One of these days," Michael tells him, "you're going to self-destruct."

"All the time," Smoker smiles from behind half-closed eyes. "I'm a phoenix, man — THAT'S a fundamental jazz technique."

Katherine's music pelts down the hall in a crashing run. It thins to a trill, skips lightly over an eighth rest, and flowers in a final chord sustained, after it dies from the piano wires, in walls and bones. The two men are suspended in humming silence. Then they hear the faint knock of hollow wood; she shuts the lid to keep dust from the keys.

"'Bout time. You coming, Owens?" Smoker swings towards the hall.

Michael wills his taut muscles to ease. He shifts his shoulders under the sticky white shirt and mentally arranges

himself for another insipid faculty meeting. Droning details. Enforced camaraderie. The thorn in his side.

He smooths his hand down the nape of his neck. The sandy hair is cut close and neat, but a longer wave in front has fallen onto his forehead. He can feel it trembling against his skin. Years ago, when they first dated, Dottie called the effect "boyish." He doesn't push it into place.

Katherine is ahead of them, almost at the far end of the hall already. Her studio is closer to the stairs. She holds herself very straight and walks with a long deliberate stride. Her skirt is short, inappropriate, and even with the lingering California tan, her legs look pale, glowing in the interior gloom like the Cheshire-Cat's grin. Michael's mouth twists in disgust.

Smoker, head cocked back and to one side, eyes her speculatively and says, "Bless her raunchy little soul."

From the jazz man, it is predictable enough. But the comment is unsettling; it prods something terrible that is expanding within Michael. He sneers, "You're crazy. The woman has no soul."

Behind, he hears Dottie Hall's geisha walk, a distant rapid pecking of high heels. Ahead, Katherine descends the top four stairs in two steps, the play of muscle in thighs and calves clear before she disappears down the stairwell. Michael frowns. "No mystery. Too hard, too..." He is tempted to say "impure." He bites the inside of his lower lip.

"Nice ass, though," Smoker muses. He is not talking to Michael Owens. One knuckle rasps back and forth across his chin. "Strong legs." The trumpet player is smirking to himself, sunk, no doubt, in some barbarous reverie. Michael remembers a childish put-down and without thinking mutters, "Give it up, Smoker. All your taste is in your mouth."

The phrase amuses Smoker, who slants him a look and chuckles, "Yeah. I can handle that."

Michael feels ill. It's the heat, the midwestern swelter. Summer in the jungle. It is worse this year somehow; unreasonably, he burns to lay that at Katherine's door. Rationally, he sees he is undone with the heat. He has been walking too fast, which accounts for the blood pounding in his head and the smothering shortness of breath. And finally, little as he likes to think of it, he's not getting any younger. He forces himself to slow down. He saunters. Smoker shambles. There is no further conversation as they make their way downstairs to the faculty meeting.

The department chairmanship rotates in three-year terms. Currently, the post is held by the "little old lady." Gage, the chairman, is not old; he is, in fact, fortyish, of an age with Owens and Smoker. Nor is he female — he sports a pencil-line mustache and a pointed little beard, like a foppish grandee. He IS slight, however, even petite, and fussy. He possesses an infinite wardrobe of munchkin three-piece suits.

When Michael enters, Gage is sitting behind a table at the front of the staff room. He has doffed the jacket, and his vest hangs loose, unbuttoned, a rare lapse of his habitual nattiness. But it's hot, and everywhere order melts around the edges.

Michael heads directly for Katherine. He has at his command an aloof presence almost theatrically imposing. And there is his stature as an international authority on Baroque tempo conventions. These attributes are drawn about him like cassock and alb.

He stops in front of her and bends, says softly under the general chatter, "The Scarlatti this afternoon? Almost perfect the last time through."

"Oh." She hesitates. Smiling warms and softens her face. "Thank you."

"But the Bach — "

"Yes?"

"Rather overdone." He is polite but firm. "It is not Beethoven, you know. One doesn't ATTACK the *lento* — it must build. The passion is there but hidden. '*Pianissimo*,' remember? '*Dolce*,' right? *Mysterioso*," he throws in on his own. "The sweet, mysterious spiritual tension — you need work on this."

She is staring. Kindly, insincerely, he adds, "You'll get it eventually." He rejects the impulse to pat her head.

The hurt and confusion in her eyes is gratifying. Then she flushes, and her lips and jaw tighten so he knows she is angry. He wants to laugh out loud. Both the Bach and Scarlatti were so exquisite. He could dance for joy.

Smoker has taken a seat nearby. He regards Michael with bleary intensity. Satisfied, Michael smiles, sits next to Smoker. He reserves the empty seat on his other side for Dottie Hall.

When Dottie slips into place he is expansive, generous with congratulations: her protege's senior recital was "masterful, sensitive." Further, "one is gratefully reminded of the versatility of the bassoon, the wide range of literature available for it" Dottie teaches the double reeds — oboe and bassoon. On the whole, interest in double reeds is not staggering.

So her heart-shaped face lights up: young Lillian Gish in shy ecstasy. She draws back warily when Smoker leans across Michael to remark, "Heard him. The kid's OK." Dottie is frightened of Smoker. The praise, however, so excites her that she giggles and winks. Michael cannot imagine Katherine giggling. His exultant mood begins to dissolve.

Gage is tapping his mug of tea with the sugar spoon. "I suggest, ladies and gentlemen, that we commence. I'm sure none of us wishes this to be an unduly protracted affair." He flashes his prim smile. Michael suppresses a grimace.

Gage is calling for the Official Opening Joke. Smoker grunts: he is no longer allowed to contribute jokes. A suitably puerile story is offered by Mason. Michael manufactures a courteous titter at the punchline. It will all be

written into the minutes, including “(Laughter).” Leaning forward, he catches Katherine in the corner of his vision. She has not bothered to laugh; she’s brooding. He could dance.

Gage’s voice penetrates his euphoria. It nettles him. Lately, something about Gage’s precise, urbane manner annoys him increasingly. In all fairness, he has found that same manner restful and congenial for thirteen years. Nonetheless, now it grates. Somehow.

A window is just beyond Katherine. The view is not soothing. The building’s entire first story is ensnared in ivy which, before its annual trim, encroaches even upon the windows. Suckers adhere to the glass; the sun beats through translucent young leaves, silhouetting the palmate veins. Underwater lighting. Stifling.

“... most recent addition to the staff, having completed her first semester at Cole: Ms. Katherine Avery.”

Friendly applause. The most recent staff addition has one careless leg slung over the other and a skirt riding two-thirds of the way up her amber thigh. Pointedly, Michael directs his gaze— a calculated blend of scorn and boredom — at her hem. There is a certain grim pleasure in sensing her ire, feeling her seethe until suddenly she pulls the skirt lower with a defiant jerk. Again he ignores her.

“... establish some guidelines in response to complaints about loud music.” Not Katherine’s practicing, unfortunately. This is the Music Building: someone is always practicing or giving a recital; the Opera Workshop has begun rehearsals; the Concert Band is polishing a program for summer tour; in the music library, the eccentric librarian sets the record player’s volume at HIGH, playing passages for the students, filling in with Cab Calloway— “Minnie the Moocher” wails through the corridors daily. No, something more flagrant is required to generate complaints. Michael looks at Smoker.

Smoker is slumped in his chair, arms folded and legs stretched straight out. He is glaring at Gage. It is Smoker’s

intimidating aspect. The room is very quiet. Dottie is fidgeting, patently uneasy and fearful of one of Smoker's rages.

Gage, however, continues placidly outlining an abstract problem and its generalized solution. No names. There is a new rule: the huge concert speaker/amplifiers will not be moved without prior departmental permission.

The intention, specific though tacit, is that Dr. Smoker will not detail a squad of students to wrestle said equipment into his Music Appreciation class, and, most specifically, he will not then blast through them, full volume, E. Power Biggs on four organs simultaneously, playing Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor so the walls shake, the windows rattle, and people two floors above have difficulty conversing in the same room.

Katherine is making a spectacle of herself. Legs re-crossed, head thrown back, she is laughing in the silence. "I'm sorry," she chokes to Gage, waving her hand in the air. "Something just struck me —." She glances at Smoker, who gives her a narrow-eyed scowl ferocious enough to turn a body to stone. It merely sets her off again. She claps one hand over her mouth.

Beside Michael, Dottie is rigid, waiting for the explosion. He is angered to find her timidity lacking in charm, then wonders what would make Katherine afraid. Which only angers him the more.

On the other side, Smoker squirms in his seat, then mumbles, "Shit," and begins to snicker.

Katherine and Smoker are laughing. Almost everyone laughs. Apprehension is washed out of the room in a flood of good humor. Not laughing are Michael, who coils inside himself, and Gage, who is waiting with a patient, pursed smile for order to be restored.

Someone has a key. There is a key in Michael's back, and he is being wound tighter and tighter. He has hit upon Gage's flaw: that damned ever-lasting composure. He longs to shake the man until his tiny neck snaps, bellow in his prissy face, "For God's sake, be a human being!"

“Bloody pompous little prick,” he hisses beneath his breath.

“WHAT did you say?” Dottie is goggle-eyed, has her chin tucked back into her neck. Abruptly, Michael is ashamed of his disloyalty. There is no rational basis for his agitation. It does not exist. Nor does the formless threat he has fancied prowling within and without. He will not allow it to exist.

Dottie is ideal. Delicate, feminine. Soft and rounded, with no hard edges. That much he did discover before they mutually consigned their relationship to a platonic plateau. Like himself, Dottie prefers to deal on an intellectual level. Coarseness alarms her.

The choral director has the floor and is whining on about the problems involved in this summer’s Opera Workshop production, *Gianni Schicci*. At least Verdi, the lucky dog, hadn’t had to deal with amateurs. The student lead, for example, is unsatisfactory: too stiffly self-contained, insufficiently roguish to sing the con-man title role.

“Do you sing, Dr. Smoker?,” chirps Katherine. There is some laughter. Michael is in control; he does not react. Smoker grunts, but it is a mock glare he sends her. For all his often surly approach, Smoker loves women. He has married several.

The orchestra director, also involved in the opera, backs up the choral director, attempting a duet. Suavely, Gage derails them both, appointing them the *Gianni Schicci* Committee, meeting times to be arranged. It’s almost finished. Thank God.

And Gage . . . Gage is not a bad sort, not bad at all. Perhaps the responsibilities of being chairman emphasize his least attractive qualities. Or maybe the poor little jerk is having a mid-life crisis. Definitely Michael has been too much on edge. At any rate, he now wishes nothing so much as to be done with it. Escape.

Dottie clutches at his sleeve. Behind her hand, she whispers, “The parking spaces.”

“What?,” asks Michael.

"The parking spaces: they're too small. You promised you'd say something."

Michael sighs. He faces her and tilts an eyebrow. "Dot, I want to go home. The parking-space question will keep. It's hardly worth making a big to-do over, is it?"

Gage is declaring the meeting adjourned.

"Christ," says Smoker.

Dottie is piqued. "No," she says, "a big to-do is unnecessary. It's really very easy: just get them to paint the lines farther apart. Nothing could be simpler— provided someone raises the issue."

Smoker has wandered over to talk with Katherine.

"Perhaps," Michael says to Dottie, "you'll get a chance to bring it up at the next meeting." Soft and round and bewildered, she stands pouting at him.

A heavy hand claps him on the shoulder. "Papa Juan's, man. Let's hit it."

Michael laughs and shakes his head. "Duty calls, Smoker. While you're lighting up the night in a blaze of glory, I shall be home slaving away, correcting papers and catching up on my reading. Frankly, I can hardly wait."

"Who's going?," Dottie inquires of the jazz man.

"Just us cool people, baby." Smoker grins at her expression. He is in a manic phase. Up from the ashes and ready to fly. "Katherine's gonna stop by in a while." He turns to Michael. "It's about SOMA, Owens. We're having, like, an informal planning session. You gotta be there, man."

Michael is off-balance. If he doesn't show up, she will think she affected his decision. Yet he wants to go home. Tangential considerations radiate out in all directions; the complexity of his needs is unfathomable. Somehow. Someone has the key.

Idly, he looks to the strangled window. If they don't clip it soon, he will personally begin ripping the ivy away with his bare hands.

"All right, Smoker," he says. "Papa Juan's." One thing is clear: it is imperative he be there to display the extent of his indifference. No mystery there.