

In Aspen

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No one recognized Harley Blacker in Aspen. After the fourth day he began to wonder if anyone even saw him. He was a pale, heavy man continually out of breath in a town dominated by younger people who looked like runners-up in a Best Tanned Athlete competition. Certainly some people there read books; he had spotted two bookstores more respectably stocked than the shopping-mall chains. Max Weir, who had invited him to be a guest of the Institute for two weeks, had made much of the fact that Harley's "Fiction in the Year 2000" lecture would be open to the public. So there had to be an interested public of some sort in Aspen—mousy poets from the garrets of the Victorian houses? Vacationing couples tired of the nightly concerts of the summer music festival? The grocery store clerks and waiters who seemed like Ivy League graduates fleeing from the world of briefcases and business suits?

For Harley Blacker to be so nearly invisible when he felt more substantial than ever hit him as a breach of the laws of his universe. In any better neighborhood back in Manhattan he could rarely shop in peace. Flashes of respectful recognition would go off around him like bursts from paparazzi cameras, and then the entreaties would commence. "Mr. Blacker, I'm such a fan of yours. *Berman, The Honor of Her Honor...* Would you sign my, my *Village Voice*?" Harley's chest would broaden as he took the offered pen. There were similar diversions when he visited college towns, waited for the ferry at Wood's Hole or took the bus to his sister's farm upstate. It could even be said that his ideal route from A to B or ideal way to accomplish C included one of these interruptions. In Aspen, though, the most attention he got was distant sympathy from Sunny, manageress of the Silver Mint Apartments, when he came in panting to her office for his mail. "The altitude got you?" she'd blather. "Took me weeks after I got here to work up to my usual four-mile morning run. Here, some more telegrams, looks like. And an express-mail package. I signed for you. Well, have a nice

day." He would puff upstairs to one of his mirrors to assure himself that gravity, mass and identity still made him who he was. Then, thudding onto one of the hard beds, he would rest and imagine his work in progress catapulting him onto the cover of *Time*. His flabby jowls thrust toward him everywhere to sign—well, maybe that would persuade him, finally, to get on a diet/exercise program and stick to it.

Usually his thoughts would spin on over chatter from the swimming pool or the practicing of student musicians, or both. The barrier he'd built against the honking rush of traffic below his study in the city and the cacophony of frogs and crickets around his summer house on the Vineyard held back the talk. As for the music, he was a New York Philharmonic season ticket holder, even though the press of work made him give away many tickets. So he noted a flutist, a French horn player, string players from violinists to a bassist, either an oboist or a clarinetist and the overall effect—like parts of an orchestra warming up, except that they went on practicing their difficult passages instead of unifying in a concert. But Harley firmly intended to save his listening for the musical greats flying in and out of Aspen. Once the lecture was prepared and his novel revision was on track, he'd go hear Rampal and Isaac Stern. If he had already missed Barenboim, that was one of the costs of the discipline that had propelled him, book by book, to the far grounds of the literary pantheon.

Day after day, Harley kept his eat-work-eat-walk-rest-work-eat routine, but little of his output in the Institute-paid apartment came up to his customary standard. So junky was some of the stuff coming out of his typewriter, in fact, that he had to stop and ponder why. Were the mountains ringing Aspen sabotaging him by resembling the Alpine peaks that had surrounded the crash of his last, youthful love affair? He focussed on an image of Suzanne as a test. She flashed with exasperation at him, but he felt none of that long-familiar, chronic pain. More likely the cause was as mechanical as Sunny's suggestion, then: high-altitude oxygen deprivation of the brain.

After the one-week mark, though, he couldn't be so forgiving about his lack of progress. Max Weir picked him up and brought him to Peter Worsley's lecture at the Institute: "Corporate Reform by the Year 2000." The maverick economist was slick and persuasive. His talk was videotaped for cable network syndication. And afterwards a tanned, slim, silver-haired gentleman who introduced himself as the chief executive officer of one of the corporations owning several finer New York publishing houses shook Harley's hand. "I've read two of your books, and I'm looking forward to your lecture next week, Mr. Blacker," Fordham Barnes or Barnes Fordham had smiled. His grip reinforced the message that the following Sunday would be a crucial forum for Harley, a stepping-stone to national talk shows and a spreading reputa-

tion. But the next morning Harley still had no strategy, no catchy ideas. Stretched out on one of the beds, he dug and dug against the surface of his mind, hard as compacted dirt. Then gradually, gently, like a breeze calling his name, something lured him away from his frustration.

It was a slow, lilting melody, a familiar melody, looming out of the web of practicing like a haunting theme in a Charles Ives piece. In the Beethoven, or Mendelssohn, or Tchaikovsky, one of the war-horse violin concerti, it was the part where the spotlight clamps onto the soloist, where aficionados follow with the cadenza's skeleton in their heads. But Harley couldn't follow, even though he recalled how it went, for the melody didn't go on to where the orchestra rejoins the soloist. Instead it returned, again and again, lovingly, to itself. As if some extraordinary soul were singing its essence, Harley marvelled. The warmth of tone ranged from sunny and full to unbelievably vibrant. Never was there a stumble or a misstep, and never could he detect the unauthorized seam in the circle. As if some mature artist were reaching beyond the capacity of mere wood, varnish and horsehair to express joy, triumph, and a tinge of sadness, putting more into that passage of music than music could easily hold, he thought. Then Harley felt a twinge of envy amidst his awe. Had he ever written one paragraph so brimming with life and sensitivity? There was no cleverness, no coy wizardry, no conceit or preening in this playing, only truth and beauty soaring up from a foundation of mastery.

But then the melody vanished, leaving only the competing, tiresome exercises of the other instrumentalists. Harley felt as if pure, delicious air had suddenly gone foul with noxious chemicals. Another violinist was practicing Bach, but with too much effort; some woodwind scales interlaced with the French horn's bray were smooth and deadly. With more quickness and strength than he thought he had, Harley slid the window closed. Too late. He had already recognized in that violinist greatness that he lacked. For all his skill and fame, he was hardly more advanced than any of the routine student musicians.

If he had found it difficult to concentrate before, now Harley became as wild as an oversized, overwound toy. When the glowing tone of that violinist sailed again into his apartment, he tugged the blankets off the beds, hung them over the curtain rods, and careened around. Soon there was pounding on his door. "Listen, man, I live below you," a bearded man, his shirt unbuttoned, complained. "You got elephants, or a troupe of dancers or kids out of control in there, or what?"

"A fly," replied Harley with a steely smile. "A damned indestructible fly, and I'm trying to kill it." He closed the door and turned the television on loud to a channel of static. And yet the music repeated as clearly as in the bedroom, inside his head. As indestructible as what

that nobody on the Atlanta paper said about me, he told himself, low in the soft armchair facing the television. Whether Alexander Skolnick had meant it as observation or prophecy, compliment or gibe, it had taunted him as cursed truth since the day he read it: no one in the history of literature has been able to repackage the same book again and again like Harley Blacker. How could he have anything worthwhile to say about fiction in the year 2000? How dare he compound his hoax with another innovative form and the same old material?

Harley couldn't think of a swear word strong enough to lift his spirits. The wise, noble course of action would be to announce his retirement. Opera singers, baseball players and corporation presidents did so to save themselves embarrassment. Afterwards they could remain respected public figures. But a writer who retired became a has-been, much worse than invisible. Being almost invisible was quite bad enough. He'd better fancy up some old ideas about the future and struggle on with his innovative, self-plagiarizing new novel.

He got up and lumbered back to the bedroom. The striped blankets, hanging like makeshift blackout curtains or crooked abstract tapestries, looked ludicrous. When he yanked them down, one curtain rod came away from its moorings. Orderliness and discipline, eat-work-eat-walk-rest-work-eat, Harley repeated to himself and climbed onto the bed to stick the rod where it belonged. But up there, fixing it in accord with his resolution, he glimpsed a scene in the scaled-down courtyard that brought back, full force, the recent turmoil.

Three Oriental girls were talking beside the pool. Girls, he definitely wanted to call them, for though they might have been anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five, all were slender, without the full curves of womanhood. One, with flawless posture in a plaid cotton culotte dress, held a violin case steady above her knees with both hands. The other two, sprawled wet along slatted chaise lounges in dark one-piece suits, were gesturing reassurance toward the violinist. She looked silently at the sky, and between her collar and her chin on the left side glared a long red blotch, the mark some violinists retain after an extended workout. Though she might have been one of the plodders he'd tuned out, or just back from quartet practice in another neighborhood, as he watched her insist with dignity on some great worry or hope, conviction rocked him. She was the one with the unearthly talent. He had to talk with her, ask her—something, there wasn't time to think what.

Harley barreled out of his apartment, down the stairs and along a sidewalk to the back of the building. When he reached the clearing where the pool was, the two swimsuited girls shot him curious, slightly disapproving looks. The other girl finished what she had to say in some singsong language and swung off through the gate beyond the pool. Her long hair and bangs stayed in place throughout her exit, and

the violin case dropped gracefully to her side. Harley wanted to follow her, but he already needed a short rest. He flopped onto a slatted chair as if he had come out for some sun, and then rose after a minute as if the heat was too much for him.

By the time he reached the main road to town, the girl with the violin was a distant form disappearing into a side street. He hiked back to the Silver Mint, his ears buzzing from the hot sun or the altitude or the spell the girl had thrown over him. "Hey Harley, you have a pile of mail," he heard. Sunny was waving at him.

"Harley?" he growled. If he were Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow, would she call him "Norman" or "Saul"?

She went into the office and came out looking up from the envelopes with freckled perplexity. "H-A-R-L-E-Y, is there any other way to pronounce it?"

"No, I suppose not," he grumbled, forcing some pleasantness in at the end. No need to have her decide he was a grouch alone and out of place on his vacation. And no need to indulge his reluctance to write that lecture, he scolded himself as he trudged up the stairs. It was obvious: to talk about the future he would have to discuss the role of the young. By the year 2000, video games, computer communication and other entertainments not yet on the drawing boards would have overtaken the quiet pleasures of reading. And then some youth with an atavistic passion for books would remake the medium by infusing the traditions with the new generation's doubts and enthusiasms. The hoary academicians, shocked by the genius' irreverence, would keep putting forward their clones. Those who couldn't tell the difference between nostalgia and vitality would be fooled. But he, Harley Blacker, if he were around in the year 2000, would toss the gauntlet to the one who deserved it, despite the moat or chasm of understanding there might be between them.

The Harley Blacker of the 1980s sighed with relief as he scribbled his conclusion. Certainly this was the kind of talk that would win an ovation in Aspen. And certainly Fordham Barnes or Barnes Fordham would pump his hand with more solemn compliments afterwards. Even the librarians in the audience would congratulate him for his far-seeing generosity. But the ruddy satisfaction with which Harley set down his pen and stretched almost at once went sour. His neighborhood's noisemakers were at it again, and with them, or above them, the rich, descending song fragment with which that young girl was storming heaven.

Harley checked the mirror this time before leaving and exchanged the thongs that slapped and slowed him down as he walked for his old slippers. He had an idea which building the melody was coming from, and he was going to case it until he found the girl's apartment. Should

he knock? Not if she was still pouring magic into the air. He'd listen in the hall until she tired and then try to make her understand why had to speak with her.

Moving lightly on his toes, he made his way to the Silver Mint driveway and then a short distance west, to a narrow alley. As he passed through, he rattled two garbage cans and halted for a moment; the exquisite swirl of notes urged him to continue. At a fork in the alley, it seemed that either direction might be right. He concentrated and then went straight on. The violin stopped, but he was sure now that it came from the small Swiss-style apartment building to his left, the one with cut-out wooden trim and window-boxes. He waited in the shade at the end of the alley and watched two bronzed, muscled men across the street unlock and then ride off on their bicycles. A tall woman with gold bangles on her left wrist and right ankle came out on a porch sniffing the air.

Just then, a violin started up, not with that captivating, meditative passage, but with energetic runs that could have been another part of the concerto and that genius in a more businesslike mood. Unsure, Harley followed the sounds into the building, across the lobby and up the stairs. His doubts melted on the second floor when the violinist in "2A" broke off and tuned on one note. The uncanny vibrancy filled him with certainty and anticipation. While he smoothed his shirt into his pants with one hand, he raised the knuckles of the other to the door. But before contact, two figures emerged from the stairwell. The other Oriental girls: one screeched, fear in her eyes, and both skittered away.

Harley froze. Not only was he not invisible, they had reacted as if he had been holding a knife, or reaching in through his zipper. To be fingered by hysterical girls as a thug or pervert wasn't how he wanted to become more famous. He fled, hoping the noise he heard behind him wasn't the violinist opening her door and noting his retreat with the same timid disgust. What was the curse Suzanne had thrown at him? His hurt had blocked it out, but as he slowed down around the corner from the Swiss-style building, it hit him that his work had been stultified twenty years now, since she rejected him. Something had gone dead in him, and he'd grown cleverer and stouter to compensate. Perhaps in his early, unpublished work were moments as true and rich as the melody of this Moriko, Meili, Mumpamm who had thoroughly bewitched him. *She* would be able to save him—if she didn't scream at his approach, misunderstanding. Harley kicked at a bicycle chained to a post. Surely by the year 2000 some wizard could help him become suavely thin overnight, but even starving himself wouldn't bring results within the few days he had left in Aspen.

Harley continued to stay away from the concerts of the music festival. How could even Rampal or Stern match the allure of his *svelte*,

straight-backed siren? But there seemed to be strict silence in "2A," and none of the three Oriental girls appeared again at the pool. By Wednesday, he despaired that the girl's friends had spirited her away. Then, while he was drowsing and dreaming a little, he imagined or really heard a girl sobbing out sounds that were not English words. He struggled awake and sat stark still. Was that his Michiko or Meihua crying? An angry version of the fragment he had been listening for now wafted into his window. Instead of round buoyancy, the music was all jabs and jerks. Then it stopped, and Harley's heart went out to the girl. She was definitely despondent and alone in the Swiss-style building. Wouldn't it be ideal for him to approach her now, and offer his comfort?

First, he carefully shaved and put on a cheerful, unthreatening expression. He tried miming sympathy in the mirror, in case her English was deficient. Then he had the brainstorm of bringing along his clothbound Carapaces. His photo on the back would prove that he wasn't some deadbeat but a respectable, honored author. Harley Blacker set out like an earnest, uncertain suitor. Near his destination, however, in the corridor before "2A," he balked, as he had every time since the breakup with Suzanne. Surely it would be more productive, and safer, to write about the situation instead of going through with it. In fact, he could use some of these circumstances in his new novel, make the main woman character Japanese for a change, and instead of the device of a story within a story within a story, try a variation on a variation on a variation on a theme, and... Harley hurried back to his desk. Inspiration at last.

There was a good-sized, very mixed crowd Sunday night at the Institute lecture. A cowboy toting a notebook, bowlegged in old jeans and fancy-tooled boots; vacationers of various ages beaming with health and youth; Fordham Barnes/Barnes Fordham's entourage; even a few small children whose parents set them in the back of the hall with picture books and trucks. Harley walked toward the shaggy-haired man, half gray, half blond, setting up a video tripod. "Good evening," he smiled. "Whom are you filming for?"

"KASP. Local station." The man looked up. "You're the writer, huh? 'Whom.' Jeez, I haven't heard that since my eighth-grade English teacher, Miss Thistle. So you want to know when and where your immortal words will be broadcast, right? Tomorrow morning, eight o'clock, channel seven. And will it be picked up nationally? It's been known to happen, is all I can say. Except you're wearing a white shirt. Don't you know you should wear anything but white? It'll affect your chances. But hey, stay tuned. OK, doc?" The man began turning dials on the equipment with what looked like a smirk.

Why let one boor spoil his confident mood, Harley decided. And

indeed, once the audience settled down, the introduction and lecture went well. Max Weir emphasized exactly the points of Harley Blacker's career that Harley himself would have chosen. Harley delivered his prepared text smoothly, a cross between the after-dinner speaker and the college-circuit lecturer. The audience laughed where he expected them to and nowhere else, and at the end a thoughtful silence preceded the applause. Then Max Weir stood and opened the floor for questions.

"Which contemporary writers do you think will last to 2000, I mean not personally, but their reputation and works?" From a tall woman who might have been the one on the porch decorated with bangles.

"How can we get our children more excited about the written word?" From a man who spoke like a midwestern high school teacher.

"Do you think there's a future in interactive computer stories?" From Fordham Barnes/Barnes Fordham.

He had predicted these questions and pronounced his opinions and advice. The next questioner was barely older than a teenager, nonathletic-looking, as pale as Harley. "Mr. Blacker, I haven't read all your books, but I've read three, and though they're all quite different in form, they work out the same basic conflict with the same basic figures, with the same resolution. Can you tell us whether or not your future work will continue in this vein?"

Harley crumpled. But perhaps it didn't show; he frowned at his shoes as if it were a puzzler of a question and then looked up and ad-libbed. "There's music everywhere in this town, and it's gotten me thinking. What's wrong with repetition? Most classical music, as far as I understand it, is built on repetition, variation and development. Isn't that what makes something a theme? I can imagine a twentieth-century genius taking a theme from, say, Beethoven or Mendelssohn or Tchaikovsky and repeating it with various refinements until it jumps out at us as something beyond music. That's roughly what I'm doing in the book I'm working on." Harley pursed his lips at the video camera as if he were going to say more, and then signalled to Max Weir to end the session.

Although the fellow who had exposed him didn't stay for the wine and cheese, the reception was something to be endured. Harley felt he had been X-rayed and found to have no bones. Even the corporation president's wry, friendly praise of him as "visionary" didn't turn the occasion into a triumph. He left as soon as he could, hoping that back in New York the weeks in Aspen would cancel out like a corrected computer mistake. He stopped in at the bar two blocks from the Silver Mint for several brandies to be sure he would sleep.

But later, when all of the instruments in the neighborhood were quiet at once, he thought he heard his Moonflower, his Melanie-san

crying again. He tried to tell her that though he was leaving he wouldn't forget her, but she didn't seem to hear or understand. He awakened half an hour after his alarm went off, the angry version of her melody pounding in his head. While he would have liked to call on her and present his admiration as solace, there just wouldn't be time. Harley dressed quickly, dragged his suitcases onto the porch and went down to check that Sunny wasn't holding special delivery letters of his.

She was in her running clothes, hanging onto a post and stretching first one leg, then the other, humming. "Oh Harley, did you hear the Tchaikovsky competition last night?"

"Tchaikovsky competition?" He began to understand from the phrase she was humming, the lead-in to the part that would now never be just music to him.

"Yeah, I'm not a music freak," Sunny said, straightening up and reaching hands alternately toward the sky, "but the concerto competition I go to every year. It's like getting to watch a great runner without the distraction of all the jerks who race with him. You just hear the winner, and usually you know he'll be famous in a few years. Like last night. He—"

"He?"

"Yeah, John Wilson, his name was. Not very stagey, he looks like he's been growing faster than his mother can buy him new discount suits, but he made me think he could kill someone with his violin."

"Kill? Kill?"

"Oh, I don't mean he'd hit someone over the head with his instrument. I mean, you know how in the '1812 Overture' you can really believe there's a war going on?"

The yellow jeep-like taxi Harley had ordered for his trip to the airport glided into the Silver Mint driveway, giving him a chance to leave without expressing his sadness and horror. He knew now why his Eastern princess had been disconsolate. Her gift had failed to impress, or so she thought. Would she give up, becoming merely a violin teacher or, God forbid, a housewife in Taipei or Seoul? As the main part of town fell behind and the driver tossed him conversation starters, Harley watched clouds ahead tease snow-patched mountains. She wouldn't give up. From that transcendent reaching he had overheard he knew her character well, after all. But his own future was another matter. He himself had as little hope of scaling the beyond as an old circus elephant. She would recover; he would not. ➡

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