



The Morini Strad

by Willy Holtzman

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Joyce Ketay
The Gersh Agency
(212) 997-1818

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Working draft

Brian: 40s.

Erica: 70s/80s.

Time: The recent past

Place: Manhattan, Upper Fifth Avenue

Prologue

A once-elegant upper Fifth Avenue apartment. The furnishings have not been replaced in decades. Even the light through the curtained windows seems somehow old.

ERICA MORINI, a woman of advanced if indeterminate years, suffers noticeably as an unseen student violinist labors through the third movement of the Bruch Violin Concerto No. 1.

ERICA

Thank you, please. That's quite enough. No more. I beg you, no more.

(The music stops.)

Well, that certainly was very athletic. You must be quite exhausted. Perhaps your instrument is also somewhat exhausted.

Up on BRIAN SKARSTAD'S modest violin workshop. HE planes a plank of spruce clamped to his workbench.

BRIAN

Violinists shouldn't be let near violins. Instruments make their own music. Hear that? Me neither.

ERICA

Yes, the little finger is essential in the performance of the slow spiccato. But it is absolutely useless in all the detache strokes above the middle of the bow. Too much bouncing, too much percussion. There must be none of this kratz - How do you say this? "Scratch."

BRIAN

They don't know anything about the guts of a fiddle. A spruce top, for instance. Soft wood. Very hard to join the separate halves. The plane snags or chatters - kindling.

ERICA

This bowing technique of yours - it is good to be forceful, but one is not slicing salami. I exaggerate. But for your own good. To bow properly is not to force music into the violin. Proper bowing releases the music that is already inside.

BRIAN

We're talking seamless.

ERICA

Provided it is, indeed, inside.

BRIAN

Like twins separated at birth, united again. Whole. Do musicians know this? Do they even care? They're a necessary evil.

ERICA

Get a tissue, a drink of water.

BRIAN

But what do I know?

ERICA

Emotion is good.

BRIAN

I'm just an artisan.

ERICA

I say these things for your own good.

BRIAN

Not an artist.

ERICA

Very well, then. Bowing.

BRIAN

Now, the glue.

ERICA

(Reaching for a violin case.)

Here, I will show you...

One

Erica's apartment, the next day.
The doorbell rings. And again.
SHE waits for one more ring then
opens the door on BRIAN.

ERICA

You're late, Mr. Skarstad.

BRIAN

Forgive me, Ms. Morini, but...

ERICA

(rapidly)

Mrs. Mr. is departed, but that is hardly reason to neuter
"Mrs." of its "r" having previously been abridged if not
aborted from *mesdames*.

BRIAN

My apologies, Mrs. Morini. I'm sorry you lost your husband.

ERICA

You make it sound as if I misplaced him. I know precisely
where he is - under an elm tree in Cedarhurst going on
fifteen years. He was several years my senior. In any
case, he was not Mr. Morini. That was my father. Morini is
a stage name, rather a family name, or, it seems, custom
dictates one says "maiden" name, though it's centuries since
I was a maiden, and in any case, you are hardly here to
absorb the sordid details of my deflowering.

BRIAN

I'm running a little late. And when no one came to the
door...

ERICA

It's such an epic apartment. I'm at sixes and sevens whenever the staff is on leave.

BRIAN

Butler's day off?

ERICA

One wishes. I am reduced to nurse Bradford, and a most disagreeable housekeeper whose name escapes me.

(beat)

Felice.

BRIAN

The nurse or the housekeeper?

ERICA

My husband. Do you always find names so confusing?

BRIAN

Not as a rule.

ERICA

Felice Sericusano. He was a diamond broker.

BRIAN

My Uncle Norm is a jeweler.

ERICA

Felice was not a "jeweler." He did not engrave bracelets. He was, as I said, in the diamond business.

(BRIAN steps onto a faded Persian rug. SHE glares at his shoes. HE steps back onto the door mat and wipes his feet.)

ERICA (continued)

It was Papa's Persian. Purchased in Persia. While I was performing. In Tehran.

(SHE motions for BRIAN to sit. HE surveys the room and finds the least uncomfortable looking chair. It groans under his weight.)

ERICA (continued)

Ball or bag?

BRIAN

I'm sorry?

ERICA

Tea bag or loose?

BRIAN

Please, don't bother.

ERICA

No bother, to speak of. Of course, the help is scarcely to be trusted. It's a wonder I still have a tea service at all. You look like Darjeeling to me. Black tea from the Himalayas. A thinking man's Lipton. But I don't suppose they distract you with such refinements as high tea at violin making school.

BRIAN

I did go to college, not that we had tea there, either.

ERICA

Perhaps I've heard of it.

BRIAN

Wesleyan.

ERICA

A Methodist school. Not exactly Yale, is it? No matter. Such hysterics about which decal one places on the rear window of one's automobile. I had no formal education beyond high school, and barely that. But I'm fluent in seven languages and I know one variety of tea from another. You trained in Italy, Germany, France?

BRIAN

Utah.

ERICA

From Methodists to Mormons. Is that where you became familiar with my work?

BRIAN

Violin making school? Uh, no.

ERICA

At college, of course. You had a better education than I imagined.

BRIAN

Not there either, really.

ERICA

When exactly did you first hear my name?

BRIAN

Yesterday, on your voice mail message.

(A tea kettle whistles offstage.)

ERICA

Darjeeling, then, Mr. Skarstad?

Brian.
BRIAN

(irritated)
Do call me Mrs. Morini.
(exits)
ERICA

(calling after)
The Prier School. Peter Prier. He's German.
(HE stands and inspects the room, running his
finger along the fringed lamp shade and the dusty
leather-bound books.)
BRIAN

Pass auf!
ERICA (offstage)

I'm being "careful." I was wondering, how did you get my
name?
BRIAN

Was it the Yellow Pages?
ERICA (offstage)

I'm not in the book.
BRIAN

(ERICA returns straining under the weight
of a silver tea service and a silver toast
holder holding toast with the crust removed.)

Here, let me help you with that.
(HE takes the tray from her and carefully
lowers it onto the coffee table.)
BRIAN

How mysterious of you, having an unlisted phone number.
ERICA

I'm not impossible to find, obviously. I'm selective. The
thing is I work out of my house and I have children.
BRIAN

One needn't boast of procreation.
ERICA

I'm n(ot)...my family is very important to me.
BRIAN

We all have our little indulgences, don't we? Did you bring
the item I requested?
ERICA

BRIAN

Item?

ERICA

Please. The toast is getting cold.

BRIAN

Oh, the jelly!

ERICA

(all broad "a"s)

Marmalade.

BRIAN

I had to replay the message three times to realize you meant...*marmalade*.

(removes a jar from his bag)

There.

ERICA

(disappointed)

Orange?

BRIAN

And there, and there.

(removes two more jars)

ERICA

Lime. Ginger!

(SHE strains at the jar lid but her hands are too arthritic to open it.)

BRIAN

Those lids tend to stick.

(Opens a jar.

ERICA meticulously spreads two slices of toast with marmalade. BRIAN pops a slice into his mouth.)

ERICA

Felice wouldn't let me near the kitchen. "We must protect those precious hands!" Whenever he was away on business I baked and baked. You couldn't get me out of that kitchen. I was known for my strudel. Since he died, I don't bake so much anymore. What were we talking about?

BRIAN

How...

ERICA

How I got your obnoxiously unlisted phone number from an acquaintance in the Kyoto Quartet. His name is virtually unpronounceable.

BRIAN

Haruki Nakamura. He's a friend of yours?

ERICA

I daresay he'd call himself a "disciple." So many do. He owns you, I believe.

BRIAN

I made a violin for him.

ERICA

An original Skarstad! Of course, I've only ever seen him perform on a Stradivari.

BRIAN

I'm Haruki's back-up. Airplanes, altitude, climate - Strad didn't know his fiddles would be traveling so far beyond the Cremona city limits.

ERICA

Violinists only care about the all-consuming sound. We don't stop to think that it began with a chunk of wood.

BRIAN

Quarter-cut flamed maple.

ERICA

What's that like for you?

BRIAN

Starting a violin? It's been a little while. What's it like? I don't know, exhilarating. Exhausting. Maybe a little how a novelist feels staring at a blank page. No, a ream of blank pages. But with the first push of the arching gouge I can hear the music in the wood. And I see the violin.

ERICA

Were you to describe a Skarstad, what adjectives might come to mind?

BRIAN

No adjectives. It works.

ERICA

Like a chest of drawers.

BRIAN

Open one of those drawers with just the right touch and...who knows, maybe a little magic.

ERICA

He said the instrument wasn't half-bad, once he played it in.

BRIAN

Haruki said that?

ERICA

Words to that effect. Once one sorts out all the "r"s and "l"s the conversation is already miles down the road. He also mentioned you have a certain genius for repair.

BRIAN

That's how I pay the bills. And right now restorations pay more than original Skarstads.

ERICA

There are originals, and there are "originals." Perhaps three or four centuries from now...

BRIAN

I'm just trying to get through the next month. So it's a restoration you have in mind?

ERICA

If you're up to it.

BRIAN

I can fix anything.

ERICA

One "fixes" a priapic mutt.

BRIAN

Mend, heal, restore - whatever you want to call it. I'm your man. Invisible, like it never happened.

ERICA

Are all Utah luthiers so supremely confident?

BRIAN

I had my choice of schools. I chose Utah. I grew up there. I played viola in the Utah Youth Symphony.

ERICA

You needn't recite your curriculum vitae. I'm merely curious, given all the other options. Pierre Francois is just over on 57th Street. He would kill to get his hands on this instrument.

BRIAN

Then why waste your time with me? By all means, call Pierre. Give him my regards. Tell him I don't regret turning down that job offer of his.

(HE stands and crosses to the door.)

ERICA

I did not give you permission to leave! I have concertized at all the great halls of Europe. I have performed before kings and queens. And I am not about to have a violin repairman walk out on me!

(BRIAN hesitates.)

Besides, if you're half the luthier you claim to be, you will not leave without first seeing the particular instrument in need of repair.

(ERICA crosses to the silver closet. SHE removes a skeleton key that hangs by a strand around her neck. SHE opens the closet door and with some effort lowers a battered violin case from the top shelf. SHE places the case on the table in front of BRIAN.)

ERICA (continued)

You may open the case. But you must not touch what is inside until I say so.

(BRIAN lifts the lid.)

ERICA (continued)

It's under the silk scarf which, in case you're interested, was given me by Toscanini for my flawless unaccompanied Bach.

(BRIAN removes the scarf. HE gazes on the violin and fights to retain his Scandinavian reserve.)

ERICA (continued)

Behold...

ERICA and BRIAN

...the Davidoff Stradivari!

(overlapping, counterpointing)

BRIAN

Holy shit!

ERICA

(drapes the scarf over her shoulders)

Arturo was a most charming man. I have a weakness for Italian men.

(On a nod from ERICA, BRIAN lovingly lifts the violin and examines it sideways across the arch.)

BRIAN

Look at the tool marks on the scroll, the chamfer is still black...

ERICA

Arturo absolutely detested Mussolini.

BRIAN

...the purfling mitres are long and graceful - just like the Dupont Strad.

ERICA

In 1931 at Teatro Comunale Arturo refused to perform "Gionvinezza" - the fascist anthem.

BRIAN

It's still covered with the original Cremonese red varnish. And the maple back - I know that tree!

ERICA

The black shirts beat him bloody.

BRIAN

This is a working instrument.

ERICA

I visited Arturo in hospital and played a Bach gavotte to raise his spirits.

BRIAN

Without even drawing a bow across the strings, I know...

ERICA

Arturo sat up and applauded. "Brava, signora Morini! Brava!"

BRIAN

...this will be clear and bold and bell-like all the way up the G-string.

ERICA

Arturo presented me with the silk scarf he was wearing.

(BRIAN spots something on the violin.)

ERICA

Brava!

(BRIAN and ERICA stop simultaneously.)

BRIAN

(to ERICA)

How did this happen?

ERICA

I don't wish to discuss it.

BRIAN

Somebody scraped it - right through the varnish all the way down to white wood. How could you let this happen?

ERICA

You think I can't care for a rare instrument? The Davidoff has been with me longer than you've been alive! I could no more abuse it than you could abuse one of your children.

BRIAN

You realize if you give this to Pierre it will be all over town in five minutes.

ERICA

Which is precisely why I called you, Mr. Skarstad. I expect you to correct it with passion. And discretion.

BRIAN

I'll just play a quick chromatic scale...

ERICA

You'll do nothing of the sort. This is not the Nevada Youth Symphony.

BRIAN

Utah. I hate Nevada.

ERICA

So long as I'm alive, no one else will play this violin.

BRIAN

How do you expect me to evaluate it?

ERICA

You shall hear me play. That very instrument.
 (SHE crosses to a cabinet and removes an old record album. SHE places the LP on the spindle of a stereo record player and places the stylus on the precise cut. Brian winces as she drags the needle across the vinyl. And again at the hiss and pop of pre-CD surface noise.)

ERICA (continued)

My last public performance.

(We hear the Cadenza from Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major.)

BRIAN

The Tchaikovsky. What else?

(The violin is resonant, strong, penetrating.)

ERICA

My signature piece.

BRIAN

Very muscular.

ERICA

The critics said I played like a man! They didn't think a woman was up to the Tchaikovsky. But I never wanted to be seen as a "woman" violinist. One hears good or bad, not man or woman. You are hearing?...

BRIAN

Some pretty slick glissando double stops.

ERICA

I'm humbled by your praise.

BRIAN

Flawless, actually. Your playing is right there with the best.

ERICA

Not *the* best?

BRIAN

It is...virtuosic.

ERICA

That will do.

BRIAN

I'll just take it with me.

ERICA

Over my dead body!

BRIAN

I can't very well work on it here.

ERICA

I never leave this apartment and the Davidoff never leaves my sight.

BRIAN

If it's a question of security...you could open the lock on that closet with a hat pin. There are water marks on the door.

ERICA

A slight plumbing issue in the apartment above.

BRIAN

Do you know what water can do to glue joints, to varnish, to wood? It's not safe. Hell, you don't even trust your housekeeper with the tea service.

ERICA

She's the least of my concerns. There's the night doorman, the accountant, the neighbor, the nurse...

BRIAN

This isn't an apartment - it's a game of "Clue." Look, I've got a safe in my shop.

ERICA

The silver closet is safe enough.

BRIAN

If you're afraid to go outside...

ERICA

Afraid?

BRIAN

I'll take it to storage at Sotheby's.

ERICA

I don't want it stored. I want it restored to its former perfection.

(BRIAN writes down his contact information on a paper napkin and hands it to ERICA.)

BRIAN

Here's my address. Do I have your permission to leave?

ERICA

(beat)

On the condition you say nothing of this to anyone, I will personally deliver it to your workshop - that is, assuming you can repair the damage.

BRIAN

I will make it invisible.

ERICA

I shall expect no less. Now, dear boy, I'm tired. Make yourself invisible!

(BRIAN exits. ERICA lovingly lifts the Davidoff to her chin, raises the bow, turns up the Tchaikovsky recording and without touching bow to string

remembers exactly what it was to play that piece. The music swells.)

Two

A cramped workshop on the second floor of Brian's home. BRIAN wears his shop apron and is bent over his workbench. HE cradles the Strad and painstakingly applies a coat of varnish with a tiny brush. ERICA sits to the side in a worn armchair. SHE holds a book, but exhibits little interest in it.

Time passes. It's night - the end of a long day. A dog barks outside.

ERICA

The train from Boston was very fast that day. Making up for lost time, I suppose. Papa was waiting for me in New York. Another girl in the compartment was traveling alone. She was my age - fourteen. Her name was Dorothy and she was off to visit her grandmother. I told her I was going to play my very first concert at Carnegie Hall. She seemed to feel sorry for me. Isn't that silly? She asked if I would still play concerts once I had children? I said, "I'll never have children. They take up too much time." She said she would name a daughter for me. Isn't that silly?

(Wipes away an eyelash - or a tear - from the corner of her eye.)

Suddenly the view opened up. Through the window I saw the ocean. The salt marsh. The seagulls. It went by so quickly.

(Glances at her watch.)

Oh, for heaven's sake, it's nearly nine thirty.

BRIAN

Huh?

ERICA

The late train back to the City departs at 9:30.

BRIAN

Yes, you told me that.

ERICA

Did I?

BRIAN

Fifteen minutes ago. And fifteen minutes before that. And fifteen minutes...

ERICA

You needn't repeat yourself.

BRIAN

Maybe you could change the subject.

ERICA

I wasn't aware we had a "subject." Not that you ever need one around musicians. The times I had Jascha to my apartment, Arturo, Lenny - you couldn't shut them up. Especially Lenny, when he was onto his favorite subject.

BRIAN

Which was?

ERICA

Himself. The old crowd has gone the way of the dinosaurs. All except me. And I can't even remember the last time I was out of my apartment.

BRIAN

If this is your idea of "out."
(The dog continues to bark.)

ERICA

I'm asked all the time, mind you. Philharmonic Opening Night. The Met. Benefits, soirees. "Living legend of music," and all that. Only last week I was invited to conduct a master class at the Mannes School of Music. I said "no," of course.

BRIAN

Why "no?"

ERICA

Such fuss and bother over nothing. As if I could transmit a lifetime of knowledge through mere osmosis. And I simply detest students. Anyway, it's the Davidoff they want to see, not me.

BRIAN

Somehow I doubt that.

ERICA

Really? And who was it couldn't wait to get out of my apartment until I opened that case?

BRIAN

I was uncomfortable - out of my element.

ERICA

What element is that?

BRIAN

(shouts out the open door)
Will somebody let the dog in?!
(The dog mercifully stops barking.)
Look, a building on Fifth Avenue with the Doorman From Hell. And that beady-eyed neighbor in the lobby.

ERICA

Lucien? He's harmless enough.

BRIAN

The woman he was with must've been twice his age. I heard him call her "mummy."

ERICA

Well, she did adopt him.

BRIAN

That element! And between you and me, I've seen livelier faces at Madame Tussaud's.

ERICA

You're saying I live in the waxworks? Like "Sunset Boulevard?"

BRIAN

I wouldn't go that far.

ERICA

(as Norma Desmond)

"I'm still big. It's the music that got small!" Laugh. I'm having fun with you.

BRIAN

It's not always easy to tell. I'm glad I got you out.

ERICA

Did my watch stop?

BRIAN

You realize a restoration like this normally takes days?

ERICA

Normality is one vice I managed to avoid. Would you care for more strudel?

(ERICA offers a plate to BRIAN.)

BRIAN

I think I have maybe six kinds of toxic chemicals on my hands...

(ERICA forces a bite of strudel into his mouth. BRIAN cranes his neck and holds the violin far away from the flying crumbs.)

BRIAN (continued)

Mmm, delicious.

ERICA

It will help you forget those cunning little white gelatinous cubes at dinner.

BRIAN

Tofu. My wife is into macrobiotics. This month.

ERICA

Ah, the happy homemaker.

BRIAN

I wouldn't say that.

ERICA

She isn't happy?

BRIAN

She isn't a homemaker. She's a composer. Well, aspiring. She studied with Ussachevsky.

ERICA

(mildly impressed)

Vladimir! Quite the ladies man, in his day. Vlad the Impaler, we called him!

BRIAN

He was 90 years old. On a walker. She's very talented. Her cello composition won a national contest.

ERICA

Funny that didn't come up over dinner.

BRIAN

It wouldn't. She's very modest. And you're kind of...

ERICA

Not?

BRIAN

Your resume can be a bit...

ERICA

Intimidating? And how might you have finally familiarized yourself with my intimidating past?

BRIAN

The Internet.

ERICA

I feel rather exposed.

BRIAN

"A sonority of tone."

ERICA

The New York Times - my Carnegie Hall debut! Critics liked to point out my tone. It wasn't always a compliment.

BRIAN

I guess they thought that for a woman...

ERICA

It wasn't ladylike? To hell with that! I always had a big tone. I'm an old-fashioned romantic. Ach, these young musicians today treat a violin like a porcelain figurine, as if it could burst into a thousand pieces at the merest touch. Where I come from the violin is first a folk instrument. No pampering. Play it loud over the noisy

crowd. Pour yourself into every note and the notes will come back like a thunderclap, or a whisper. Play it like you mean it.

(checks her watch)

Heavens - look at the time!

BRIAN

If you're that worried, my wife can take you to the station.

ERICA

Without the Davidoff? Impossible. I might be persuaded to spend the night.

BRIAN

I don't think you'd much like the convertible sofa. Plus, I've got to run the boys to the orthodontist first thing. Braces, both of them - just what I need. And the dog is overdue for deworming.

(briefly turning his back)

ERICA

Such an abundant life. And here I am under foot. I'll bid adieu.

(SHE picks up the instrument. BRIAN turns back in shock, pursuing her and taking the violin from her.)

BRIAN

What are you doing? The varnish isn't dry! This is a critical stage of the process. You wouldn't remove a patient from the operating table in the middle of surgery, would you?

ERICA

You don't have to bite my head off.

BRIAN

Mrs. Morini, I'm sure performing in public was second nature to you. But I generally work alone. At my own pace. I don't see what all the hurry is about - and the secrecy.

ERICA

You must understand, to be a certain age is to accept that your life is no longer your own. At my age there are accountants, attorneys, conservators, executors and God knows what other vultures constantly circling.

BRIAN

You scraped the bow against the top, didn't you?

ERICA

No. Never in all my years.

BRIAN

It's not a crime. I see that sort of thing all the time. Especially with musicians who are, say, a little rusty.

ERICA

Rusty? I'm not a piece of machinery.

BRIAN

It was probably something else.

ERICA

If the conservator thought for even one second that I was incompetent...

BRIAN

He could take it away?

ERICA

(beat)

Not if I sell it first.

BRIAN

You want to sell the Davidoff?

ERICA

Would you rather I wait for one of the vultures to steal it? This is what I have to do.

BRIAN

And you think you can count on me to keep my mouth shut. Like it never happened.

ERICA

I have nothing further to say on the subject.

BRIAN

I'll just go back to work. I'm sorry if my conversational skills fall a little short.

ERICA

I'm not even here. I'll go back to my book. It's Sardou. In French. I'm getting a good deal of reading done.

BRIAN

(continuing the repair)

If I was short with you...I'm under some pressure here. Layer after layer of varnish. And time to dry. See each rare instrument has its own color and hue. I don't use dragon's blood varnish like those quick-fix restorers. I've got a golden orange undercoat, perfect brown on top of that, then alizarin, maybe Cremonese red. And now you tell me it's going to be scrutinized...

ERICA

I've started this paragraph over three times.

BRIAN

I'm trying to explain so you'll know why when an appraiser looks at this - my work - he won't see my work. Only Strad's.

(Loud electric guitars squawk from the room below. ERICA puts down her book.)

ERICA

For God's sake, please stop that unbearable racket!

BRIAN

(stomps on the floor)

Hey, knock it off! No guitars until you're done practicing violin.

(The guitars stop. To ERICA as if to explain...)

Boys.

(HE applies the final brush strokes to the violin.)

There. This just needs to sit under the lamp for a bit.

(HE sets it under a drying lamp.)

ERICA

Have I said something to upset you?

BRIAN

Everything you say upsets me.

ERICA

Something in particular?

BRIAN

I just finished an impossible restoration under impossible circumstances. And somebody else is going to have the benefit.

ERICA

You'll be fairly compensated for your work.

BRIAN

I'm not talking about money. Whoever sells this will have the benefit of knowing he helped sustain the legacy of possibly the most perfect Strad in existence. The fact that there was an imperfection I made go away is a secret between you, me and Strad. I'm okay with that. I don't know, maybe I'm tired of being such a well-kept secret.

ERICA

Perhaps you would have had a more artistic career without the distraction of children.

BRIAN

I generally avoid artists at all costs. Art is for people who can afford it. The rest of us have to work for a living.

ERICA

I haven't worked?!

BRIAN

I don't mean you.

ERICA

What other artists are there in this room? Art is for people who are unwilling to compromise! You think I haven't asked myself how life might have been different with children? I had a gift! The gifted do not squander their time. I wasn't some faux prodigy. I was the genuine article.

BRIAN

Oh, and what is a *real* child prodigy?

ERICA

To not know how you do what you do, and to do it anyway. To have a gift, and not be devoured by it. To be a child, but never have a childhood.

BRIAN

Well, I've got children and I've got to...

ERICA

...provide for them?

(Uninspired violin scales from the next room.)

BRIAN

You like to complete my sentences, don't you?

ERICA

Only when I know where they're going. Brian - where are you going?

(The violin scales are punishingly bad.)

BRIAN

(closes the shop door)

Pierre Francois offered me that job again.

ERICA

Ah, a first rate shop with a chandelier, and no dogs, or boys. You told him?

BRIAN

I'd sleep on it. You have to understand, this job would mean a steady income. Health insurance. The work would be nothing especially inspiring - mostly repairs, tune-ups.

ERICA

Instrument making?

BRIAN

That was not in the job description.

ERICA

Pierre would be very fortunate to have you as an *employee*. And what would be the duration of your employment? A year? Less? More?

BRIAN

I would say definitely more.

ERICA

Take care more doesn't turn into forever more.

BRIAN

It's a job. It's not a life sentence.

ERICA

If you were any kind of an artist you would have told him *Va te faire foutre! Parlez vous francais?*

BRIAN

Yeah. "Go fu--"

(ERICA cuts him off before he completes the translation. The violins are horrendous. SHE reacts.)

They do it to spite me.

(HE stomps on the floor. The violins stop.)

Done.

(HE removes the Strad from under the lamp.)

And done.

(ERICA takes it, turns it over in the light.)

ERICA

Passable enough, to the naked eye.

BRIAN

I can't see it anymore. Have a better look.

(SHE inspects it with a magnifying glass.)

ERICA

It's invisible.

BRIAN

I told you it would be. Let me show you something.
(Hands her a quarter cut plank of maple)

ERICA

What's that?

BRIAN

(taps his finger on the plank)

A violin. Or it will be when I get around to it.

ERICA

Looks like a piece of wood.

BRIAN

And sheet music looks like paper until you remove a concerto from it. I just remove everything from this piece of wood that isn't a violin. Paper, maple - we both start with a tree.

(takes back the maple)

Now that we know we come from the same place, you think you might tell me how the Davidoff was damaged?

ERICA

(beat)

There was a time when I was mentioned in the same breath as Kreisler, Elman, Heifetz! I memorized Paganini's Second Caprice in one reading! Now I am reduced to giving violin lessons to hopeless students. This one young woman was making such a hash of Bruch I could bare it no longer. "Here," I told her, "I'll show you." I never even felt the ebony of the bow against the spruce top. But when I looked down at white wood...

BRIAN

What white wood?

ERICA

What, indeed.

BRIAN

So I guess you'll list it with Sotheby's.

ERICA

Sotheby's is a brothel. I could no more auction off the Davidoff than auction off my soul. You're not very good at business, even if you are a fine...

BRIAN

Repairman?

ERICA

I'll thank you not to finish *my* sentence. I am quite confident you do not know where this is going. That invitation from the Mannes School?

BRIAN

I thought you didn't have time for that kind of thing.

ERICA

Time, I'm afraid, is a commodity that is in ever shorter supply.

BRIAN

You don't have to talk about it if...

ERICA

I'm not in my death throes, thank you. I have an incurable condition known as "old age." As it belatedly occurs to me that I might not live forever, I have to accept certain responsibilities. You might wish to be present at Mannes for the last time I appear in public with the Davidoff.

BRIAN

Kind of a farewell to the troops?

ERICA

And a little free advertising never hurt.

BRIAN

So you plan to sell it without Sotheby's. I'm sure Pierre will be thrilled to cash in.

ERICA

Do you really think I would entrust the Davidoff to that old pirate? No, I would like you to sell it for me.

BRIAN

(stunned)
You're not serious?

ERICA

I'm indeed most serious. It will make you a man of means. I imagine it's worth three million dollars.

BRIAN

Three and a half, conservatively. At standard commission of 20%, that's...\$700,000!

ERICA

I was thinking of something more around 15%.

BRIAN

That's still a miracle.
(HE starts to hug her. SHE recoils.)

ERICA

I have a low threshold for gratitude.

BRIAN

How can I properly thank you?

ERICA

You can start by driving me home. With all your jabbering, I've missed my train. Perhaps we can stop along the way for some marmalade.

Variation

A recital hall at the Mannes School of Music. ERICA sits in an arm chair, as regal as a queen on her throne. BRIAN watches from the wings.

When I was younger than the youngest of you here, I made my New York debut at Carnegie Hall. Do you know what it is to step onto the stage of the greatest concert hall in America at an age when most children are more worried about pimples? Can you grasp the sacrifice that is required? When you step into that light, you might never again step back out of it. Yes, they say the way to get to Carnegie Hall is practice, practice, practice. No. Practice is not enough. You do not merely play the instrument. You must *become* the instrument! After Carnegie Hall I was presented with the Maud Powell Guadagnini, which she had bequeathed to "the next great woman violinist." When one is young one hears only the word "great." When one is less young one hears only the word "next." There is always the next, and the next, and the next. In any case, I politely declined the offer. For me, there was only ever one violin.

(BRIAN hands her the Davidoff. SHE holds it up for all to see.)

The Karl Davidoff Stradivari. Papa borrowed every cent he could to purchase it for me. What did he care about money? My artistic destiny was within reach. I did not disappoint. (cradles the Davidoff)

It has been a long and bountiful union. But be forewarned - while music and musical instruments are immortal, we

musicians sadly are not. Here, I say this to each of you - life is a symphony. A composition in four movements: allegro, adagio, scherzo, allegro. Fast, slow, fast, faster. The fastness of it all is rather shocking. I find myself amidst the final movement of my life, and it takes my breath away. But in the symphony of life it is the third movement you must savor. That is the scherzo, the dance. Grace and spirit in perfect balance. Perfection is ever within reach if you are true to your art. But never compromise. Hold nothing back. So in the end you can say, "I played life's symphony bold and true." Thank you.
(SHE regally acknowledges the applause.)

Three

Erica's apartment. ERICA wears a simple black dress that she might have once worn to perform. BRIAN wears a rumpled blue blazer and tie over faded jeans. HE closes the door on unseen visitors. The Davidoff is in its case on the coffee table.

BRIAN

We can't thank you enough for stopping by. Safe back.
(HE closes the door. A beat. BRIAN breaks out in laughter.)

ERICA

Shhh. They'll hear.

BRIAN

I watched them all the way into the elevator.

ERICA

(laughs)

I've never seen such an unrelenting smile.

BRIAN

She was Miss Oklahoma, 1987.

ERICA

Imagine the facial muscles it takes to maintain a smile like that.

BRIAN

I read somewhere they put Vaseline on their teeth. It keeps the lips from drying out during the smiling. She's an epic smiler. She finished first in the talent competition at the Miss America pageant.

ERICA

She has ghastly technique.

BRIAN

You might ask her husband about that.

ERICA

Husband? I thought he was her grandfather!

BRIAN

Oil money makes the years just melt away.

ERICA

That and whatever use she might make of all that Vaseline in her mouth.

BRIAN

Signora Morini!

ERICA

You think that sort of thing doesn't go on in the classical music world?

BRIAN

It does?

ERICA

Hardly ever. Most musicians would prefer "bravo" over fellatio any day.

(shudders)

How you ever talked me into letting that woman touch the Davidoff let alone play it.

BRIAN

I don't know about you, but I've never heard a finer rendition of "America the Beautiful." Okay, I admit it, she really sucks - pardon the choice of words. But you've been pretty liberal with your veto power all week. And it's good for the remaining customers to know there's competition. It will be better with Bornstein.

ERICA

You mean that Liberace is coming here today?

BRIAN

(pointing)

His name is on the appointment list. Right after Miss Oklahoma.

ERICA

Finally in his proper place.

BRIAN

Come on. It's hard to fault his credentials. One of the youngest Juilliard graduates ever. Five Grammy awards.

ERICA

Are you sure they weren't "hammy" awards. Those absurd facial expressions.

(imitates faux ecstasy)

Overcome by his own artistry. What a load of crap. The man is up there having sex with himself.

BRIAN

Where did you see him play?

ERICA

I believe it was on a PBS fundraiser. In front of a fountain. At Disney World.

BRIAN

Alright, alright. Well he seemed very interested when we spoke. So what if he's a diva?

ERICA

Oh, he's not even worthy of the designation. He's a technician. A diva must be passionate, tempestuous, orgasmic.

BRIAN

Orgasmic?

ERICA

As orgasm-inducing instruments go, I'm given to believe Mr. B's is rather *diminuendo*. Whom can he please with such an instrument?

BRIAN

His audience.

ERICA

A pack of Philistines who applaud between movements and listen to Barry Manilow on the way home. I don't want to talk about Bornstein.

BRIAN

Would you mind if we talked about money for a minute?

ERICA

I ordinarily leave that to my accountant.

BRIAN

The thing is I already talked to my accountant. He said I'd take a smaller tax hit if the commission came incrementally instead of in one lump sum. Now he thinks it's possible to structure this in a way...

ERICA

Relax. It's only money.

BRIAN

Money is never only money. I mean, 15% of 3.5 million comes to \$525,000. That's years of work for me. Money for the boys' college. Money to buy the new car I never had. Money to repair the running toilet, the leaky storm windows, the rotting gutters. Money to pay off the mortgage - mortgages. To buy an engagement ring for my wife. Oh, and a private studio for her with a brand new Steinway baby grand. And matching Stratocasters for the boys.

ERICA

Strad-o?...

BRIAN

Stratocasters. Electrified stringed instruments.

ERICA

Guitars.

BRIAN

Strats, in rock parlance.

ERICA

And what is so special about a Strat?

BRIAN

It has three pick-ups instead of one. And the Whammy Bar, I mean, you could light a cigarette, read a magazine, the note would still be playing.

ERICA

The bowing I had to do. If only I'd plugged in.

BRIAN

All the greats had Stratocasters - Clapton, Hendrix, Lennon...

ERICA

When he wasn't murdering the Czar.

BRIAN

John Lennon.

ERICA

I know. I'm not that much of a dinosaur. In any case, I preferred the Rolling Stones.

BRIAN

I might have seriously underestimated you.

ERICA

I know nothing of their music. Mick Jagger once visited me backstage at Town Hall and said he was an enormous fan.

(beat)

Strats, Steinways - all this virtuous selfless purchasing for others. You would want nothing for yourself?

BRIAN

(thinks)

Time. Time to lock the door to the shop. Unplug the phone. Time to do the work I want to do.

ERICA

Original Skarstads!

BRIAN

Yeah, but, let's face it, there's not what you would call a great demand for them.

ERICA

Time will tell. Aren't you going to ask me what I'd do with my share of the proceeds?

BRIAN

Is it any of my business?

ERICA

No, but we've already exhausted the subject of oral sex.
(beat)

I will leave everything to Hadassah.

BRIAN

Hadassah?

ERICA

You find that amusing?

BRIAN

I just don't think of Italians endowing Jewish organizations.

ERICA

Historically Italians are great philanthropists and patrons of the arts. I just don't happen to be Italian.

BRIAN

"Morini" is an Italian name.

ERICA

Of course it is. It's just not my name. It was all father's doing. "The Great violinists are Italian." Naturally, he took an Italian name.

BRIAN

Instead of?...

ERICA

Morgenstern.

BRIAN

He must have noticed that the great violinists of the 20th century tended less to be Italian than...

ERICA

Jewish. Father was not known for his foresight. I, on the contrary, insist on looking ahead. Especially where the Davidoff is concerned.

BRIAN

I'm going to confirm with Bornstein.

ERICA

What is your hurry? Remember the symphony of life?

BRIAN

My life is no symphony.

ERICA

Certainly it is. You're too caught up in the moment to see. The third movement is everything, dear. The third movement is dance, minuet.

(SHE fumbles with the record player.
BRIAN can't stand to hear her scratch
another record.)

BRIAN

I've got it.

(WE hear a Mozart minuet.)

Mozart. I played this when I was a kid.

ERICA

Slow down a little. Dance.

BRIAN

Metaphorically speaking.

ERICA

There is a lady present, not a figure of speech.

BRIAN

My minuet-ing is a little rusty.

ERICA

We'll oil it up.

BRIAN

Non-existent is probably the word I was looking for.

ERICA

One could fake it. Or not.

(SHE reaches for the record player but
BRIAN intercepts her hand. HE's not
sure what to do next.)

ERICA (continued)

Yes?

BRIAN

May I have this dance, Madame Morini?

ERICA

Do call me Erica.

(ERICA is very ladylike as SHE does
something resembling a minuet. BRIAN
is game but little more as HE tries to

follow. HE gets better as the dance goes on. ERICA seems caught up in some romantic dream. The dance becomes uncomfortably intimate for BRIAN. HE breaks away and stops the music.)

BRIAN

We should probably get back to business.

ERICA

All work and no play...

BRIAN

I'm not here to play. I'm here to make a sale. Not that we're making much progress that way. Maybe we could move up Bornstein's appointment. You know, word on the street is he's really ready to buy. He wants to add the Davidoff to his personal collection. I'll just give him a quick call.

(BRIAN dials the number. ERICA's expression suddenly sours. SHE reaches for the phone.)

ERICA

Allow me.

(SHE speaks into the phone.)

Hello, David. Madame Morini. Yes, I'm aware you are planning to visit. I just wanted to say you needn't bother. No, I'm feeling fine. I simply don't feel you are up to owning the Davidoff. Well, you don't have to get huffy. If you must know, the truth is you are a pitiful hack and shouldn't be let near a fine instrument. I beg your pardon?

(SHE hangs up the phone.)

BRIAN

What did you just do?

ERICA

The Davidoff will not be part of a "collection." It's not a museum piece. It must be played. There are plenty of other fish in the symphony.

BRIAN

What does it matter if you keep sabotaging sales?

ERICA

The man is a pig.

BRIAN

A pig worth millions.

ERICA

Do you know what he said to me?

BRIAN

I heard what you said to him.

ERICA

He said the Davidoff and I deserve each other because neither of us was much to look at.

BRIAN

So he's an asshole. But he's our best customer. I'll call him back. Tell him you're having a bad day.

(BRIAN reaches for the phone.)

ERICA

Touch that phone and our arrangement is off!

BRIAN

Whoa. If you feel that strongly about it. Okay, I picked the wrong guy. We'll start fresh tomorrow.

ERICA

It's not just Bornstein. It's everybody. I'm not selling.

BRIAN

Not selling today?

ERICA

Not ever. I changed my mind.

BRIAN

When? When did you change your mind?

ERICA

I had second thoughts from the start.

BRIAN

If I said something, did something...

ERICA

It wasn't any one thing. But when we danced...

BRIAN

I warned you I was a lousy dancer.

ERICA

Why were you even dancing with me?

BRIAN

It seemed like the gentlemanly...

ERICA

Why was Bornstein coming here today?

BRIAN

This is a trick question.

ERICA

This is *the* question! Why has anyone ever shown the least interest in me?

BRIAN

You're kind of fun in your way.

ERICA

Fun? Am I doing card tricks? Making balloon animals? I am not now nor have I ever been fun. I am, at times, less disagreeable than other times. But it is merely a matter of degree. No, don't insult me with flattery. The truth is that people put up with me, pretend to like me, because of my talent. Well, that's long gone. All that's left is the Davidoff. And if that's gone I might as well vanish into thin air.

BRIAN

Be realistic - you can't take it to the grave with you.

ERICA

Maybe I will!

BRIAN

This is clearly a bad time. I'll come back in the morning.

ERICA

And will you come back at all if I tell you it will be no different tomorrow? Will you join me for tea, ask me to dance if I say there will be no sale?

BRIAN

I like you Erica. I'm sorry you don't have a better opinion of yourself. But I really don't have the patience for this right now. Because all of this is costing me time and money.

ERICA

There. That's all I am to you - a payday.

BRIAN

What pay? I'm out gas, tolls, marmalade, and I haven't seen the first dollar. I could get more for babysitting.

ERICA

Instead of babysitting an arthritic old crone?

BRIAN

Don't be ridiculous.

ERICA

But I am ridiculous. What's more ridiculous than a child prodigy who outlived her childhood? I gave up everything

for music. I cannot give up the Davidoff. I'm sorry if I've disappointed you.

BRIAN

Disappointed? No. Ambushed, I think, says it better. Obliterated. You let me build up this fragile dream and then, BOOM! Why the hell did you call me in the first place?

ERICA

I had reason to believe you would make the damage invisible.

BRIAN

Why not call Pierre Francois? Why call me?

ERICA

Because YOU are invisible. Who knew you were also a vulture, just like the rest of them?

BRIAN

Now you're being paranoid.

ERICA

You hate me. Say it.

BRIAN

Let's not say anything we'll regret.

ERICA

Say it. Mercenary.

BRIAN

That's not funny.

ERICA

Carpenter.

BRIAN

Okay, that's enough.

ERICA

Repairman.

BRIAN

I'm out of here.

ERICA

That's right, run, the way you ran from your gift. Do menial labor for Pierre.

BRIAN

Don't push me.

ERICA

Pushing people is what I do. I'm difficult.

BRIAN

Difficult? You're impossible!

ERICA

I'm insufferable. But I've earned the right to be. What have you earned, you hack!?

BRIAN

The right to tell you to shut up! For once in your precious, spoiled, narcissistic life, shut the hell up!

ERICA

I will not shut up.

BRIAN

Oh yes you will. One way or another. You know, you might be the greatest woman violinist who ever lived, but as far as I can tell you stopped living a long time ago. So you're an *artiste*. Well, I hope your art curls up in your lap and kisses you "goodnight" at bed time. I hope your art comforts you in your old age. I hope your art comes to weep at your grave. But if you ask me, art is a poor substitute for love.

(crosses to the door)

You know, for a few minutes here today, you really were fun. Almost likable. Now? Yeah, you're just a payday. And a pretty lousy one at that.

(exits.)

Erica is suddenly short of breath. SHE gasps for air, then slumps onto the settee.)

Four

Late night, Admitting at Mt. Sinai Hospital. ERICA is seated in a wheel chair. BRIAN rushes in and finds her.

BRIAN

I came as soon as I heard.

ERICA

I'm not sick.

BRIAN
The phone rang and I...

ERICA
I'm not sick!

BRIAN
...was already awake. As if I...

ERICA
I'm not sick!

BRIAN
...knew a call was coming. How are you?

ERICA
I'm not sick.

BRIAN
Then why are you being admitted to a hospital?

ERICA
Kittens get sick. Not me!

BRIAN
You're feeling fine?

ERICA
I'm not unwell. Some nonsense with my heart.

BRIAN
What the doctor said on the phone...do you want to know?

ERICA
I've no patience for medical mumbo jumbo.

BRIAN
Congestive heart failure. Fluid has been building up in your body for some time. That's why Nurse Bradford called an ambulance.

ERICA
She called because she wanted me out of the house. So the vultures can have the run of the place.

BRIAN
That's a little far-fetched.

ERICA
I know what I'm talking about. I am not mentally incompetent. So if you're thinking of going over to their side...

BRIAN
Whose side?

ERICA

The vultures - they're offering to cut you in, I suppose. What do you care where the Davidoff goes? You just want to take your commission and run!

BRIAN

I'm here. I'm not running anywhere.

ERICA

Not yet. But I've got my eye on you. Take, take, take. That's all these people know. Do they ever give me what I want? Did you bring me anything?

BRIAN

It's 3 AM. This is my pajama top.

ERICA

That would explain the little bears. I thought you would bring me something.

BRIAN

I'm here. The doctor called me. I came.

ERICA

To insult me more?

BRIAN

I was hoping you'd forget that.

ERICA

I never forget a bad review.

BRIAN

There's a kind of non-remembering that's not so much forgetting as it is good manners. I shouldn't have said the things I said.

ERICA

You may think of me as some armor-plated Valkyrie. But I'm a frail old woman. I bruise easily.

BRIAN

I can be a little self-righteous when I've been wronged.

ERICA

You think?

BRIAN

That's no excuse. I apologize.

ERICA

Accepted. Possibly I said some things, myself.

BRIAN

Nothing really comes to mind.

ERICA

Please, spare me your good manners. I say the most awful things to people. I hear myself saying them and think only an awful person would say that. Am I awful?

BRIAN

We both speak our minds.

ERICA

Not always. Not now, thank you. Thank you for not mentioning the breathing.

BRIAN

I'm all for it. Breathing.

ERICA

How shallow it is. The pulmonologist is not so circumspect. As a child I hated being kept inside for mere sniffles. I would bang around my room, "I'm not sick. I'm not sick!" I'm not. Sick. What I am is very, very spoiled.

BRIAN

You're an artist.

ERICA

Artists are children. That's why they shouldn't have them. But my husband is gone. My art is gone. The Davidoff is all I have left.

BRIAN

It's a wooden box.

ERICA

So is a house. So is a casket. It's the life inside that counts. You held it. I saw the expression on your face.

BRIAN

You want to know the truth? When I first saw that instrument it pissed me off! Here was something that was created three hundred years ago that I would never do, never even approach. But when the Davidoff was in my shop, on my bench, I held it and felt...forget it, I don't go for that mystical musical crap.

ERICA

You felt, for a moment, that you knew what was in the master's mind. You felt as if your hand and Strad's were one.

BRIAN

It's absurd.

ERICA

No, I feel it, too. Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Brahms - however fleeting, I glimpse their souls, and it's as if their hands are guiding mine. All artists feel it at some point. And we are driven to madness longing just once more for that feeling.

BRIAN

I'm no artist. I'm a carpenter.

ERICA

We both know that's untrue. Violin makers make music by making instruments. Not, I must add, by repairing them.

BRIAN

I have to admit - I love the box!

ERICA

I must make plans. I've called my attorney. Now I need you to do something for me. I need to know the Davidoff is safe.

BRIAN

You should be focusing on yourself, not the violin.

ERICA

Do you think there's a difference?

BRIAN

I'm sure it's okay.

ERICA

I need to hear it from you. Take my keys. Go there. Now. Be my eyes. I know I can count on you. You weren't the only one the doctor called. You're the only one who came. Do this for me.

(SHE reaches for the keys on the strand around her neck but has a sharp pain in her chest.)

BRIAN

What is it? Tell me what to do. I'll go get a nurse.

ERICA

No! They'll only feed me morphine. I will not sleep until I know it's safe. You'll go?

BRIAN

What else do I have to do at three in the morning?

ERICA

I'll wait for you. I'm not sick. I'm not sick.

(An ORDERLY enters to wheel ERICA

to her room. BRIAN takes the keys
and exits.)

ERICA (continued)

I'm not sick.

Variation

A blinding light. BRIAN answers
questions from an unseen
interrogator.

BRIAN

I'm trying to explain. Eri...Mrs. Morini gave me the key.
She insisted I check on the violin. I opened the case and
it was gone.

Yes, I did have the Davidoff in my home, one time. That's where my workshop is. I was restoring the instrument. It was in my home, and so was she. It never left her sight.

She gave me permission to sell it.

Who doesn't need money? I need money. Not enough to take what isn't mine.

Have you spoken to anybody else? No, officer, I'm not telling you how to do your job.

My job? Violin restore(r)...maker.

No, I don't have any immediate travel plans. I plan to be with a sick, excuse me, an "ill," friend.

Can I ask a favor? You have to understand, the Davidoff is not just an object. It's a living thing. It's part of her. Don't tell Erica it's gone. She should hear it from someone she knows.

Coda

Erica's hospital room. ERICA lies propped up in hospital bed. A heart monitor beeps periodically. BRIAN enters and moves tentatively to her side, unsure if she's awake.

BRIAN

Erica? Erica, there's something I need to tell...

ERICA

You didn't come back last night.

BRIAN

I thought we could both use the sleep.

ERICA

The Davidoff?

(BRIAN removes the Toscanini scarf from his jacket pocket. Her face lights up.)

Thank God.

ERICA (continued)

But Erica...

BRIAN

ERICA

All night I was on a train from Boston with Dorothy Bradford.

BRIAN

"Bradford" as in nurse Bradford?

ERICA

Nurse Erica Bradford.

BRIAN

That's the daughter who was named for you?

ERICA

My goddaughter.

BRIAN

Wow. You didn't think to mention that before?

ERICA

We've never been that close. We have nothing in common now, except my failing health. What does she know of music, rare violins?

BRIAN

That's an excellent question.

ERICA

(whispers)

She's not in the will.

BRIAN

Does she know that?

(ERICA nods. WE hear ambient hospital noise from the corridor.)

ERICA

The noise. Can you do something about the noise?

BRIAN

The heart monitor is...

ERICA

(agitated, confused)
 A flat over C. Quarter notes. Eighths. Sixteenths. Turn
 off that infernal sound. I can't bear it. My thoughts are
 all pizzicato, pinging every which way.

(BRIAN turns off the volume. The blip continues
 soundlessly.)
 Carnegie Hall is so noisy!

BRIAN
 Shhh. You're safe in a hospital room.
 (BRIAN helps her take a sip of water.
 The coughing subsides. ERICA remembers
 where she is.)

ERICA
 I'm drowning, you know.

BRIAN
 You really shouldn't be talking.

ERICA
 My lungs are filling up with fluid. I'm drowning in myself.

BRIAN
 The doctors will fix it.

ERICA
 The doctors stopped coming. They do that, when there's
 nothing left to do. God complex. Poor losers.

BRIAN
 The nurses here are very good.

ERICA
 They make me comfortable. I don't want to be comfortable.
 I want to play, feel the strings under my fingers, hear the
 notes fill the air.

BRIAN
 Music, that's what you need. Maybe I can borrow a radio.

ERICA
 Brian, I know what's to become of the Davidoff.

BRIAN
 Erica, the thing is...

ERICA
 I will stipulate that only you can sell it. But you must
 promise that it will never be in a collection. The Davidoff
 will always be played.

(BRIAN doesn't have the heart to tell
 her the truth.)

BRIAN

You have my word.

ERICA

It must be a child. A girl. She should have imaginary tea parties, friends, feuds. She should climb a tree. But not too high. Not so high she tumbles and scrapes her perfect fingers on the way down. Life will fill the Davidoff. She will have a big tone. She will play it like she means it.

BRIAN

She'll call it the Morini Strad.

ERICA

Do you think so?

BRIAN

I do.

ERICA

I do, too.

(SHE has a pain in her chest. The silent blip becomes more frequent.)

BRIAN

I'll ring the nurse's station.

ERICA

No. They don't have what I want.

(beat)

Did you bring me anything?

BRIAN

You have to ask?

(Pulls a jar of marmalade out of his coat.)

ERICA

Good boy.

BRIAN

Grand Marnier! Would you like a taste?

ERICA

I have no appetite. A speck, perhaps.

(BRIAN removes the lid. HE looks around for a spoon, any utensil. Seeing none, HE dips his baby finger into the marmalade and touches it to her lips.)

ERICA (continued)

Take the rest to your wife. Is it macrobiotic?

BRIAN

She moved on to a gluten-free diet. She's giving piano lessons to help out with the bills.

ERICA

What about composing?

BRIAN

Turns out she's been doing it all along. Gets up in the middle of the night. I thought it was my snoring.

ERICA

She can compose full time once you get your commission.

BRIAN

We're both very grateful to you. She's working on a violin piece in your honor.

ERICA

I am indeed honored. And Pierre Francois?

BRIAN

He called again with a job offer.

ERICA

You said "no?"

BRIAN

Words to that effect.

ERICA

I must know the exact words.

BRIAN

Va te faire foutre!

ERICA

Tres bien! Dearest Brian - Haruki said it plays like his Stradivari.

BRIAN

What does?

ERICA

His Skarstad, of course.

BRIAN

He never said that. Not to me.

ERICA

Musicians say things to each other that are not meant for the ears of civilians.

BRIAN
I'm not a "civilian." I'm the guy who made the damn thing.
He really said that?

ERICA
I heard him play it in recital. He was wrong. It didn't
play like his Stradivari - it played better!

BRIAN
That's why you chose me?

ERICA
You're tolerable to be around. And you've excellent taste
in marmalade.

BRIAN
It wouldn't have anything to do with giving me a chance?

ERICA
A chance to do what?

BRIAN
Stop restoring. A chance to get back to making violins.

ERICA
Why would I do that?

BRIAN
If you thought I was pretty good. Maybe even had, I don't
know, a gift.

ERICA
I'm not that generous. I'm a diva. I only think of myself.
Do we understand each other?

BRIAN
Yes, we do.

ERICA
(suddenly agitated)
Where is my scarf? My Toscanini scarf, man!

(BRIAN finds the Toscanini scarf
and drapes it over her shoulders.)

BRIAN
Here.
(It fails to calm her.)

ERICA
Good God, the noise!
(WE enter Erica's subjective soundscape - the
ambient hospital sounds morph into the murmur

of an audience as musician tune up before a symphony performance.)
 The orchestra is tuning. My mind is blank. Where are the notes? Look at my hands.
 (her hands tremble)
 I can't catch my breath.
 (SHE gasps)
 The houselights dim. How can I walk into that spotlight? I'm afraid.
 (BRIAN takes her hand - her breath steadies.)
 My breath.
 (Her hands stop trembling.)
 My hands.
 (SHE places one hand over her heart.)
 The notes are all here.
 (beat)
 Take my hand. I must tell you - I lied.

BRIAN
 Lied?

ERICA
 About my age. Prodigies do.

BRIAN
 So you're?...

ERICA
 One year older. Do you mind?

BRIAN
 You're just the right age.

ERICA
 Thank you.

(ERICA smiles bravely. SHE salutes Dorothy as planned by bringing an imaginary bow to her forehead. Her head slowly dips to one side. The upstage lights brighten the way a concert hall must seem to a musician making an entrance. Black out.)

Epilogue

BRIAN

When I got out of college I took a job moving pianos to help pay off my student loans. Once we picked up a neglected old junker that people had just lost track of, and we took it to the town dump. We could have pushed it off the back of the truck, but for some reason we carried it down and placed it on the ground. Then we waited for the front loader to pull around and demolish it. You can't imagine the sound. Every string, every note that piano ever played, let go all at once in a singular anguished chord.

Erica was gone. She never knew the Davidoff was gone before her. I couldn't tell her. Hell, I felt like it was stolen from me! That was *my* ticket out. That was *my* future. Call me paranoid, but there are days when I think she knew what happened to the Davidoff. There are days when I think she engineered the whole theft herself. Honest to God, as I stood over her casket at Cedarhurst, I pictured the damn thing in there under her folded arms. Maybe you *can* take it with you!

Then this other image comes to me. A young girl in Vienna, or Shanghai, or Mumbai, or Brooklyn, arrives home from school one day and opens a mysterious package addressed in an unsteady hand. She pulls the twine, peels back the brown paper, lifts the lid and beholds the Davidoff. She gently cradles it under her chin and is filled with the spirit of every note that has ever flowed from its very fiber. She

draws the bow across the strings and the solitary plaintive notes ring out - you can actually see the sound spread in widening circles, soulfully rippling outward until it reaches a gnarled elm tree in Cedarhurst. The young girl smiles and carefully puts the Davidoff aside to jump rope.

I was wrong when I told Erica that art is a poor substitute for love. Art is...

(BRIAN is back in his workshop.)

I came home from the funeral and caught the boys practicing violin, of all things. I took the fiddles away and handed them their old beat-up electric guitars.

(HE puts on his shop apron and wearily stares at the high-paying neck graft restoration. Before HE quite knows what he's doing, HE changes his mind and takes out a piece of old golden brown quarter-cut flamed maple and a large joiner plane.)

BRIAN (continued)

I will remove wood until all that's left is a violin.

(Dueling electric guitars play rock music in the room below. BRIAN stomps on the floor.)

Hey! - play it like you mean it!

The guitars thunder then give way to a violin with a big tone playing a majestic passage from Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major.

Black out.

End of Play