

Chopin in Kentucky

A Novel

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## Prelude

Frederic Chopin, famous 19<sup>th</sup> century composer, taught me that life is lived in preludes. Beginnings, fragments, moods-in-miniature, some less than a minute long. Introductions to larger works that don't even exist. Lullabies overtaken by laments. "Why can't you be more like Mozart?" I once asked him. "More...predictable, more full of pleasing pattern?"

"Why can't *you*, Marie?" he shot back. Ghosts can be peevish. But Chopin didn't like to be called a ghost. Or an imaginary friend. "I am *real*," he insisted. "Though as you well know, I died a horrible death in Paris over a hundred years ago."

Unlike the Holy Blessed Virgin Mary, who miraculously appeared to the children at Fatima, and about whom we were forced to read every Sunday in our Blue Army Cadet readers, Chopin's presence was a miracle of a non-religious nature. Perhaps it was the tiny slice of diamond in the record-player needle working its magic; maybe Chopin was a time-traveling phantom-man, or maybe my brother was right and I really did have the brain of a demented ferret and was simply hallucinating. This I know: when his music spilled out of our record player, he came to life for me right there in our living room. He might have been dead and hypersensitive and invisible to everyone but me, but sometimes you don't choose your best friends. Sometimes, they choose you.

"*Mon Dieu*, do you ever stop talking?" he asked. "If you would just listen to the preludes more closely, you would understand that paradox is a condition of joy, even in Kentucky." He sighed. "Especially in Kentucky."

Where words fail, music speaks; Chopin's music is like the suicidal gesture that ends up saving one's life.

## State of Grace

Chopin hunched pale and slight on the piano bench, his gray frock-coat contrasting the Mason jar full of electric-blue Kool-aid, and the crumb-covered red-checked table cloth. Caught up in his music, he did not notice the broken crayolas lying forgotten near the foot pedals. He remained oblivious to the stacks of overdue library books atop the upright piano.

A melancholy melody filled the house. The notes hooked into my chest, sparkly and sharp, like slivers of stars, and I was suddenly struck lonesome for winter. In my white-ish tutu, formerly a frilly petticoat from Salvation Army, I danced and danced under the sorrowful gaze of the black velvet Jesus with the spots of moon in his eyes. I became the ballerina from on the *Swan Lake* record album, perfect and blameless. Never mind my feet snagging on the brownish polyester rag-rug, the scratchy record hissing on the hi-fi.

## Molto Agitato

Chopin was just reaching the most heart-wrenching part when my delicate arch was savagely impaled by a toy army man. Like most romantic ballet performances, mine tended to end tragically, and of all the things upon which it is possible to dance – dogs’ tails, or one’s own foot, for example, the most excruciating were plastic soldier’s upraised rifle. I shrieked and fell writhing on the floor, lame and undone. Chopin stopped playing, his hands still poised on the keyboard, a haunted look in his eyes. Just then, an empty beer can toppled from the top of the piano into Chopin’s lap. Budweiser. “I cannot work under these conditions!” he said, in his whispery French-Polish accent, and I suddenly understood in a moment of unlovely clarity what “these conditions” were: the livid sizzle of the Friday night salmon patties my mother was frying in the kitchen. President Ford’s incessant drone murmuring up through the floorboards from the TV set in the basement. Matthew was apparently losing to his own self at Rock ‘Em, Sock ‘Em Robots, while Mark brandished a section of sun-faded hot-wheel track as a sword. Luke crawled after the barking dog, which ran in figure eights around the dining room table. Ann sawed away at her violin in the bathroom again, practicing where she said the acoustics were good, while Ruthie banged on the bathroom door, hollering, “I gotta go!”

Then the cuckoo clock delivered the final insult, chiming the hour in the off-the-wall way that cuckoo clocks do, and Dad’s tenor erupted: “Jesus said peace and we will have peace in this house, Goddammit!” Chopin stomped off in a huff and I didn’t blame him. He and my father were both chronically outraged, and life in our house was pretty much like the prelude no. 22: *molto agitato*.

## Entree

Mom rang the delicate little bell that meant, “Get in here now and set the table or I’ll cheerfully throttle you within an inch of your life for a nickel.” So I ran in, tripped and fell over Dad’s briefcase -- he had left it exactly in the way, again -- lost my glasses, and narrowly missed stomping on them.

“Marie! You’re a bull in a china closet!” Mom exclaimed. Her glasses had slipped down her nose a little, and her apron, which she had hand embroidered with playful kittens, was stained. Composing myself, I cradled an armful of plates to our dining room table, which used to be a door, and tried to make an interesting design with the layout of the various styles. I put my favorite at my own place: the chipped rosebud with the gold trim. A diverse collection of embroidered cloth napkins from the broken drawer in the cherry buffet, the silverware just so.

“Put the candles on, too,” my mother called. Mom liked a pretty table. She had freshly spray-painted our assortment of dining room chairs in the driveway, a ritual she performed each spring. This year the chairs were a bright sky blue. I thought they looked very nice, even if they weren’t fancy, like in the magazines Mom wrinkled her nose at but thumbed through anyway. When my mother called something *magazine*, it meant snobby-rich, not a compliment. I loved that about our house, that nothing matched. There was something beautiful in its variety, a specialness because it could never be duplicated by someone else. You couldn’t just go to Kmart and buy the decorative scheme of our house. Say what you would, it was original. Another real-life similarity to the unpredictable asymmetry of Chopin’s music.

The overwhelming collage of the senses persisted. Mom hummed along with John Denver and “country road, take me home” playing on the staticky kitchen radio. In between,

Vivaldi issued forth from Ann's violin in the bathroom. The kitchen smelled of sauerkraut, Polish sausage, and brussel sprouts. I couldn't imagine a more unappealing dinner. Chopin was incensed. "You call this sausage Polish? Let me tell you something, this cheap souse is an *insult* to the Polish!" Even though he lived his whole adult life in Paris, he always considered himself a Pole. "Just like, no matter where you go, you will always be from Kentucky," he explained.

"Just sit down," I said to him. But he insisted on hovering, the way he did when he himself worked into a dither.

Dad stomped up from the TV room in the basement, still wearing his blue polyester suit, from a hard day of what he called "herding the hell-bent." He taught English and Theology at the Catholic college. He tripped over his briefcase, which restored Chopin's good humor; refined as he was, Chopin always loved a good physical gag. "What are you looking at, Marie?" Dad spat at me. Leaving his briefcase where it was, Dad stalked across the kitchen, accidentally-on purpose shoving me as he passed. He went and pounded on the bathroom door, and Ann stopped playing to fold up the towel draped across the sink and put her violin away.

After Dad said grace, he casually announced that the ballerinas were coming.

It was such an absurd thing for him to say that Matthew expelled milk emphatically through his nose, for which Dad biffed him on the back of the head.

"What?" I exclaimed.

"I'm sure you meant to say, 'I beg your pardon,'" Dad pontificated. I sighed. You could hardly say anything around him without being corrected. He waited for me to repeat it, then continued. "The Tri-State Ballet is coming in two weeks. Ann is playing in the orchestra, and we're all going." Then he cut off a little piece of pot roast. As if he hadn't just said something so

impossibly earth-shattering that I expected my ears to start bleeding any second. Ruthie was so beside herself that she forgot she was eating and stuck her thumb in her mouth. When she pulled her thumb back out, it was covered in mashed potatoes, which she promptly ate again.

“How could you be so oblivious?” Chopin said to me. “Your sister has been occupying the bathroom with songs from *The Nutcracker* for weeks. It’s even on the calendar.”

“We have a calendar?” I marveled.

“*Mon dieu!*” Chopin murmured.

I was so excited it was painful. Two weeks seemed a lifetime. The interminable gap between this ordinary moment and the arrival of the ballet yawned abysmally. “This is really quite a coincidence,” I said, “because I believe that God is calling me to be a ballerina.” Just then I knocked over my milk.

“Let your light shine before men,” Dad quoted. “But not in a skimpy outfit,” he added. “Now eat your brussel sprouts.”

The ballerinas were coming and all he could think about was the consumption of vegetables? I pitied him.

### Album Notes

After dinner, my father lovingly cleaned his shiny black record album with a hankie, then gently placed the needle onto its grooves. Most of the time when he played Chopin, my father smacked us kids away like mosquitoes, then swooned in the sweaty rocking chair with the duct tape on the rungs. But tonight the mood was right, and as the preludes played, my father read to me from the album notes. But I couldn't sit still for thinking about the ballerinas, and after a few moments, it became impossible not to get up and twirl.

Of course, I had my own interpretations of Chopin's music, composed my own album notes. For example, Prelude No. 1 is the "Tricycle Prelude." Just listen to it and I think you'll agree: wheely music, round sounds, rolling down the bumpity sidewalk. Flag, honeysuckle, kite-loops. Dog-frolicking. My mother's hand in the window, opening the curtains to the kitchen theater. Chopin lifting his feet off the tricycle pedals as it slowed and veered off towards the thorny rose bushes, his knees up by his armpits, his coattails flapping in the wind. Grand and hilarious.

## Les Flaneurs

Exactly 14 days til the ballerinas arrived, I was already so miserable with waiting that Mom and Dad both let me go for a Saturday morning walk, which they were loathe to let me do. “How you gonna keep ‘em on the farm, once they’ve seen Gay Paree?” Dad sang.

“More like the funny farm,” said Chopin. He always made everything better -- when he wasn’t making everything worse. “Let’s be flanêurs.” He smoothed his wavy, page-boy hair-do, and straightened his black silk bow-tie.

“Indeed,” I replied, slicking my own rat’s nest hair-don’t with a little dab of spit. “Let’s be...what you just said.”

Chopin sighed, ever annoyed by my idiocy. “It is when the disinterested, artistically inclined wander about, engaging in city watching,” he said, as if it were as obvious as cherry pie in July. He looked around and sniffed. “Or, in this case, town watching.”

I took Chopin’s hand – carefully – and we strolled down to the center of Roanville, Kentucky. Self-centered Freddy thought that Frederick street was named after him, but I told him it was just a coincidence. We ambled past Maxi-Wax Records and the the skating rink and Old Smoky Barbecue, Chopin absently humming prelude No. 2. The early March thaw had coaxed a few snowdrops, lilacs, and daffodils to push their lovely heads up through the mud. The tight little red buds had just appeared, and what Chopin referred to as “the peasants” of Roanville were out and about, smiling and waving to one another. I had no idea that life could become instantly fascinating the second one decided to be a member of an audience. This discovery might prove useful in other ways, I realized, such as when Dad lost it on one or more of us. I made a mental note to try this out as needed, hopefully at a much later date.

At Kmart, we gazed with fascination at a most unusual specimen in Health and Beauty: a large lady in a motorized wheelchair. Her elephantine ears interrupted long strings of gray hair, and her tongue pushed a terrible rhythm against a furry lower lip. A faded American flag drooped from a pole on the back of her chair, and Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" spewed from a transistor radio on her lap.

The bubble of our artistic reverie was abruptly ruptured when she croaked out, "Have you ever seen the likes of this? Why they got to put things up so high where people cain't reach 'em?" I jumped; flaneurie had turned the world into a museum, and it hadn't occurred to me that we were visible to those on display. She grinned at me to reveal teeth like a broken piano, all yellowed, chipped keys, alternating with dark spaces. "What's yer name, little girl?" My heart lurched in alarm and dread, but...the wheelchair.

"Marie," I squeaked.

"Dolores," she said, extending a puffy hand. "Howdy do."

"Do you need some help?" I braved. It seemed the only decent thing to do.

"That'd be mighty nice. Preparation H Hemorrhoid Cream. Extra Strength, please." I couldn't help but notice that the Ring of Fire lyrics seemed to apply literally in Dolores' case. "Oh, thankee a bushel and a peck, honey. Now can you help me with them enemas? And also..."

Chopin stroked his chin thoughtfully as I filled the metal basket on the back of her chair with a horrific collection of requested sundries: X-Lax and toilet paper and Kotex maxi pads. "Sure beats wearing a diaper!" Dolores declared with a cackle. I couldn't get my arms to work right and I kept dropping things and fumbling to pick them up.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” I asked, trying to mask my revulsion. It wasn’t so much that she was an embarrassment to me, more that I was embarrassed on her behalf.

“I just need one more thing -- a bottle o’ that lemon-scented Mr. Clean. For mah down south. Makes the best douche, don’t care what nobody says. It’s like, super-atomic strength!” I wasn’t sure what a douche was, but I was fairly certain Mr. Clean should never be applied down south. I hesitated, freshly appalled that I had signed up for this extra special brand of humiliation. But, the wheelchair...I put the Mr. Clean in her basket.

“Just one more thing. I hate to ask you this, honey, but I need some help in the bathroom.”

“Oh. Um. OK,” I said. There was no turning back now.

I accompanied Dolores into the bathroom, and she leaned heavily on me as she tottered to the toilet. She needed help to get her pants down, like a child, and I suddenly felt honored that someone trusted me enough to help with this most intimate of tasks. I tried to counterbalance her as she dropped her body heavily onto the toilet. But I was too small, and I ended up being pulled forward into her lap. She laughed and laughed. “Oh, this is a fine howdy-doo!” she howled. Red hot shame blushed over me, like I had done something wrong to find myself in such close contact with a semi-naked with a naked person. I turned away from her while she did her business, then pulled with all my might to stand her up again. After she had washed her hands and sunk back into her chair, Dolores pressed a quarter into my hand.

“Oh no, I can’t accept this,” I said. “I’m happy to help.”

She puffed up her chest. “Don’t be a ridiculous dumb-ass,” she sniffed. “My handi-cap money spends as good as ever’body else’s. Now you take this here quarter and shut yer pie hole.”

“I’m sorry,” I stammered. “OK. Thank you. Sorry.” After all that, I was the one thanking her and apologizing, the very illustration of a ridiculous dumb-ass. She wheeled around and proceeded to the checkout, as “On the Road Again” ushered forth from her radio.

Things had taken a decidedly less artistic turn. I spent the quarter on an yet another interactive exhibit: Aquanetta, a cashier named after the hairspray, working the intricacies of the Icee machine. I asked for half red flavor and half blue -- Chopin’s favorite color was purple -- even though I had supposedly given up sweets for Lent. “You done a real nice thang for yer friend Dolores,” Chopin mocked.

“Don’t be mean,” I said, jabbing him in the ribs. “She can’t help the way she is. You, on the other hand, can. Also, your lips are purple. Which they wouldn’t be if Dolores hadn’t given me the dang quarter.”

Crossing the parking lot, Chopin pointed to a car and asked, “What is *that*?” and we agreed that the 1977 Gremlin was indeed, hideous. I tried to see the power lines from Chopin’s point of view, as if they were from the future. It was a hard thing to do, seeing something so familiar with new eyes, and when I succeeded I realized how stringy and saggy the cables were. The telephone poles were oily, chipped, gum-stuck. That kind of eyesore certainly couldn’t have been good for an artistic temperament like poor Chopin’s. I felt bad for him. Or maybe for myself. It was hard to tell the difference sometimes.

### Impromptu Mountains

Back in the yard, I kicked off my pinchy, faded-blue sneakers. My bare feet read the fresh textures of late spring as if they were interpreting Braille: the prickly new grass, the soft crush of clover, the lovely ache of the rungs against my arches as I climbed up the neighbor's forbidden TV antennae tower. "C'mon up," I called down to Chopin.

"Climbing is for urchins, Marie," he sniffed. Whether he was afraid for his hands or for his pale lavender kid gloves, I couldn't tell.

Either way, who could blame him? Chopin's hands were magic. They raced up and down the keyboard like crazy dancing spiders, making hills of sound that rose and fell in what he told me were "arpeggios." The word itself tasted of pure elegance; I wanted to swirl it around on my tongue and swallow it and let it take me over, like an ice cream shiver. Perhaps that's why I was powerless to withstand the lure of the tower -- I imagined myself as a real-life arpeggio as I climbed my way toward the top, ascending like Chopin's fingers up the keyboard toward a tense and lovely trill. "I could fall to my death!" I sang out excitedly, causing Chopin to roll his eyes and sigh in exasperation.

The clouds had grown green and sodden, like bruise-hued watercolors on saturated paper. And I wished I could eat them, because I knew they would taste sweet, like an over-ripe pear. I let go, raised my arms and dared the storm to come and get me. I balanced on one leg; my skirt became a sail, and anybody standing below could almost certainly see my underwear, ha HA!

The roiling, jerky circles of the No. 8, the one I called the Angry Dad Prelude, raced through my mind. This is the dangerous music of do-not-disturb, of Dad bent at his desk, dotting and re-dotting his i's and crossing his t's. He couldn't be too careful, because when he was

twelve years old, my father was struck by a mail truck and the doctors sent him home to die with a hole in his skull. He surprised everyone by living anyway, with a dent in his forehead and a pure rage that could come on as sudden as a tornado.

Written notes and musical notes came together in the No. 8: the piano keys and typewriter keys as my father labored over his flash cards. “Fear not, for can’t you see I have carved you into the palm of my hand?” he wrote. Under a crooked, second-hand desk lamp, my father, like Chopin, composed. Surrounded by heretics and flies and stacks of index cards, he searched for something called “ultimate meaning.” And he told me that one day I would carry on his work, would collect quotes, make note of things. As if words were real things a person could climb on, like ladders. Ladders in his brain where the hole would always be.

## Violet Heart Jelly

“What did I tell you about climbing that antennae tower, Marie?” Dad snarled, standing below. He started his routine, warming up for what was coming, getting himself worked into a lather, repeating, “What did I tell you?” over and over. This was the scariest part of the entire exercise, worse than what would come next and the part that always featured most prominently in my nightmares. My mouth filled with cotton, my hands turned icy.

A city of violets spread purple around him. Chopin and I both loved the violets best, little happy accidents; miniature, like his most famous piano pieces; the scent, like the end of a note, disappearing before I could quite grasp onto it. They grew wild all over the backyard, the sad-sweet color bursting out from impossibly green grass, before Dad’s lawnmower sheered them clean away. Or else Mom picked them to make sour-sweet violet-heart jelly. The word itself tasted purple.

Dad slapped his belt against his palm.

Chopin had disappeared; the audience we had been a part of dissolved.

I climbed down. It took a slow motion forever to climb back down, into Dad’s waiting arms.

## Bricolage

After we all walked home from confession on Saturday afternoon, which was more or less the opposite kind of walking as being a flaneur, Ruthie and I got out two giant sheets of paper from the big roll in the basement. One side of the page was full of purple lines drawn by my grandfather, who was an architect, and I was helpless to resist the noxious-scented allure of the inky ammonia. The other side was invitingly blank, perfect for drawing ballerinas with flounced skirts, flounces and flounces that looped across the page in time to “Waltz of the Flowers” that Ann played on her violin in the bathroom above. Mom came down the stairs with the laundry basket balanced on her hip.

“That looks like a dress from the time of Little House on the Prairie,” she mused, studying my drawing. “You know, Marie, I’ve got a piece of pink gingham around here somewhere. I could make you a dress like that. And a sunbonnet, too.” She set the laundry basket down on the arm of the sofa, whereupon it promptly toppled, scattering dirty clothes onto the floor. Mom didn’t notice. She had a helpless obsession with Little House on the Prairie. “What I really want is a tutu,” I said in a small voice -- I didn’t want to rain on her parade. But Mom wasn’t listening.

“I could make you a pioneer dress with princess seams.” Princess seams. That sounded just my style. If it had a big enough skirt, it would poof out when I twirled. And Dad would think a tutu was indecent, anyway.

Ruthie was jealous. “Scumbag,” she cursed, under her breath.

“Shut up,” I said. “You got the nurse hat and the orange lollipop when you fell

and busted your lip. And you weren't even supposed to be playing on the car! What did I get when I ate all those vitamins? My stomach pumped and a big fat lecture!" Ruthie stuck her thumb in her mouth in retort. She was too old to suck her thumb but everybody had their inexplicable temptations.

"Now let's see," Mom said, and began sifting through the acres of moldy fabrics mounded in derelict stacks on the ping pong table. She hummed the little song she sang when she was embroidering our raggedy towels or painting our suitcases, and had lost track of time. Soon the sewing machine got that hot smell, and the loud whine it always developed in protest at Mom's heavy foot on the pedal. The sewing machine was like our car that way.

Ruthie was still drawing, but I was just sitting there lost in a day-dream. Princess seams. Arpeggio. Flaneur. Chopin picked his way downstairs, gingerly stepping over a pair of my mom's gigantic unmentionables, dusted off the hopelessly dirty cushion, and sat down on the old couch that Mom had covered in fake zebra fur. It wasn't really a piece of furniture so much as a piece of fitness equipment on which to practice Olympic gymnastics. He crossed his legs and surveyed the wasteland that was our basement.

"Bricolage," he said, causing me to collapse in laughter.

"Marie! Get off my paper," demanded Ruthie. "Mom!"

"You see..." Chopin began. I sensed a big fat lecture coming on, but I didn't mind. Chopin used such excellent, delicious words, and often, he forgot himself and spoke to me as if I were somebody worth talking to. I plopped down next to him. "It refers to the construction or creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen

to be available. It means...how do you say it?...to improvise. It's when you make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand, regardless of their original purpose." I looked around the basement, at the coat-hanger TV antennae, the Easter baskets made out of cut-up bleach bottles, the dilapidated mattress that we used as a sort of indoor sled. It seemed our whole lives were bricolage.

He adjusted his cuffs. "That makes you a bricoleur." The word tasted pleasant, salty and sweet.

"Bricoleur," I repeated.

"Can't you be quiet?" said Ruthie. "I'm trying to work here!"

"Also, I hate to be the one to visit this news upon you, but you might want to go upstairs and observe the bricolage occurring there," Chopin continued.

"Why?"

"Three hints: your littlest brother, the record of my waltzes that you never put away, and a jar of crunchy peanut butter."

"Thanks!" I hollered over my shoulder to Chopin, managing to somehow fall up the stairs. I just couldn't take another of Dad's whuppin's. I had to mitigate the damage before he came in from watering the yard.

"Be careful," Mom warned, her lips pressed tight together around a clump of sewing pins. I wasn't sure whether she was referring to the stairs or Dad.

## Another Armageddon

On Sunday, 13 days before the arrival of the ballerinas, my father stood on a dining room chair and stretched out his arms over the breakfast table, let us pray. “Dear Lord Our God, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts that we were not trampled and eaten by wild pigs in the forest last Saturday. We pray for all the souls of the lukewarm Catholics; of Jews, Protestants, Communists, homosexuals, those addicted to money and to drugs, heretics, atheists, agnostics, materialists, masturbationists, divorcees, murderers, weirdoes, sexpots, and everyone else who has or will die in a state of mortal sin, amen.”

From the front, in his blue and red bathrobe, he looked a little like the pope, but of course from the back you saw where the seat had worn out. Words flooded out of him, flowing out across the scrambled eggs and the bacon and the jar full of tea spoons: Armageddon was coming!

*When?* I used to think Armageddon was a kind of animal, but then I learned it was the worst thing that can happen. Worse than someone using Mom’s fabric scissors to cut paper. Worse than tornadoes, real or dreamed. Worse than Grampa dying from lung cancer, and far worse than Ruthie accidentally releasing the emergency brake on an army truck displayed at the National Guard Armory, which made the entire Officer Friendly Bicycle Rodeo go quite berserk. At night I dreamt of God, giant and angry, tearing the roof off our house and glaring inside: in the end, the sun will spin and there will be no place to hide. The Communists would take over. Soldiers would stomp up the attic stairs with their guns to give me a choice between renouncing God or being shot or going to a concentration camp, and etc. But no Armageddon would ever be so unbelievable as this one: my father, preaching over the breakfast table, fell off the chair.

The rest of us looked down with twitchy mouths, trying to resist the laughter that threatened to hijack us. But Chopin laughed so hard he had a coughing fit.

I thought it was a shame, how Jesus never laughed. It seemed like laughing was its own kind of sin. You had your venial sins, such as lying, and your mortal sins, such as touching yourself in an act of impurity or killing someone. And then there was laughing in the Presence of God. In the Giant Book of Saints, not one saint's picture showed them cracking anything like a real smile. Maybe saints weren't allowed to laugh. Say one time, a saint saw another saint's pants fall down suddenly, and they were in church, and say the one saint forgot himself and started laughing. Would he get cast out of heaven like Lucifer? But that was a dumb question, because in the pictures the saints are never wearing pants. They're always draped in blankets and tablecloths. Perhaps that's all they had; saints were poor. In that regard, we certainly had a leg up.

"That's no excuse," Chopin said, nearly hacking up a lung. "I have consumption of the purse, but I always manage to dress well. As you know, I prefer gray silk vests for dinner, and for composing, a white poet's blouse." But what did *he* know? Chopin thought I looked good in my faded blue TRAX sneakers from K-mart, with a faded pink-checked pioneer dress whose princess seams failed to disguise the ghost of its former life as a bed-spread. Mom had gotten up extra early to finish it. When I put it on, I felt a flash of unhappy magic, knowing instantly what I had not known before: sport shoes shouldn't be worn with dresses, and a sunbonnet in 1977 could only work as a Holly Hobbie costume.

But neither Chopin nor my parents could see this. They were all hopelessly lost in the past. And I was caught somewhere in between.

### Fight and Flight

After Mass, I needed to go outside and dance so badly that my eye twitched. Even though dog poop and clover-loving bees were ever-present dangers that constantly threatened to stop the show, the stage was considerably bigger outside, and there were fewer shin-busting obstructions. Unfortunately, as always, my father enforced a two-hour Catechism Class in our living room, which Matthew secretly referred to as Cataclysm. We read aloud out of the Bible and the Baltimore Catechism and also about the Blue Army Cadets and wouldn't we join the prayer soldiers for Mary and wage peace upon the world? We would, but not without feelings of murderous rage pulsing toward Dad for wasting yet another glorious Sunday afternoon. Fortunately for us, the part of his brain responsible for interpreting facial expressions was apparently coated in Teflon.

“Why did God make us?” my father drilled.

“God made us to know him, to love him, and to serve him,” we chorused.

“How?” he demanded.

“Nobody knows how,” Ruthie braved. “If we did, we'd be God.”

“Don't be a big, fat dumbhead,” said Dad, smacking Ruthie in the face. “I mean, how are we to know, love, and serve him?”

“With our whole heart, and our whole soul, and our whole mind,” we mumbled, hating him. Ruthie's face reddened in stripes where his fingers had been, and I snuck my hand over to hers.

“Hearts, souls, and minds,” he corrected. “‘Our’ is plural subjective possessive pronoun.” Dad was touchy about grammar and correct pronunciation; he almost had a PhD, and even though he’d wound up back in Kentucky, he had escaped to Erie, Pennsylvania, for several years of graduate school, and was determined that we kids not sound like what he referred to as “the natives.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then we prayed a lap around the Rosary, rambling off the Five Sorrowful Mysteries. Finally I was released and went out to practice leaping over the ditch by the train tracks, which if you listen to the No. 16 Prelude, you’d swear you could hear a train in it, a kind of Apocalypse all its own. The engine came roaring around the bend, its headlight searching me out like the eye of God. And you never knew about the eye of God; you never knew if the engine might suddenly skip the track, or if you might too late discover that you had been closer to the wheels than you thought. Or perhaps, most thrillingly, you might have a compulsive urge to throw yourself toward the train, the way people sometimes hurl themselves off cliffs. Crouch in terror on the train side of the ditch: that’s what the notes tell you to do. A pause, a silence. Then suddenly, at the last possible moment, explode into the air! Let the urgency of the notes and the fear of the train fuel your leap to safety on the other side! You don’t need a ballet lesson; this prelude shows you that leaping isn’t so much about pushing your body into the air as it is about letting yourself fly.

“It’s the landing that is...problematic,” Chopin observed, stroking his chin. What a wet blanket.

There were times I truly hated him.