

The Conductor

On a Tuesday afternoon in late September, Dick Salerno plopped himself behind the steering wheel of his silver Toyota Camry and decided to go for a drive. This was unusual because he found driving exhausting and uninteresting. After years of playing chauffeur, first for his daughters when they were younger, and in later years, his wife, he had grown tired of it, so most days his car sat idle, shaded by a large tree on the street in front of his home.

Besides no longer caring for it, he didn't have anywhere particular to go--unless it was to the doctor, pharmacy, or grocery store. This was even more so true today, as he just had blood drawn last week and his daughters had recently set up accounts for his medicine and food to arrive on his doorstep. Those daughters called and emailed often, though he suspected it was largely out of obligation. They had both moved away for college--one to Chicago, and the other all the way across the country to Oregon--and stayed there. This didn't surprise him; he knew they had been unhappy here, especially his eldest, Ella, who never got along with her mother. Still, when his wife had died two years earlier, Ella had offered to come home. *My husband's job will let him relocate; the kids are young enough that they will adjust*, she had said in the living room after the funeral, sitting next to him on the couch, placing one hand over his, which were folded in his lap. He had told her no, not to worry, he would be *fine*, and to his surprise she didn't press the issue further. Instead, she kissed him on the head and told him alright, but they would make sure to visit more, and he sat very still as she walked out of the room to greet someone, feeling his face grow hot. The silence that followed stunned him. He

didn't cry--he never cried--but inside he felt the crescendo of a wave, growing until it crashed over him, and he got up to find something to drink.

When he was younger, before he had a family, he would drive for hours, often at night, the oncoming headlights from those drives burned into his memory years later like an afterglow. He had received his license at 21 since he had grown up in New York City, where cars were a luxury, meant for people who commuted to large homes or vacation estates up and down the East coast. He finally decided he needed one when he went to college upstate, and his family moved to the Jersey suburbs--and suddenly his life expanded beyond 248 miles of Subway tracks. He had liked it then, the long stretch of road becoming shorter and more familiar until he was on the street where his parents then lived. He always preferred the silence and solace of the road to the hustle and bustle of the city, even though he couldn't imagine having grown up anywhere else. But as he grew older, so did his eyes, which could no longer navigate the dark.

Once, not too long ago, he had tried to pick up Ella from the airport one morning, so early the sun was still sleeping behind the office buildings that dotted the sky, and he'd turned onto a street the wrong way, almost colliding with a pickup truck. Thankfully, it was the only car on the road and the driver, a young woman--her skin so smooth she could've been a teenager, really--was gracious, and waited while he turned around. "You want to go that way," she said, waving a hand to her right. "Just follow the road until you see the airport signs; then you will have to turn right and follow the signs to your airline." He nodded appreciatively, dipping his head in embarrassment. When did he get this old, that he could no longer trust his eyes to guide him? "Thank you,

sweetheart,” he said, and the girl he realized was indeed a woman, pursed her lips in a smirk, as if to say, *who are you to call my sweetheart?* Before throwing her hand up behind her in a wordless goodbye. Dick climbed back into his car and watched until her truck had dipped away, out of sight. Then he drove slowly, watching as the sun awakened and everything around him was gently lit, as if by candlelight.

He’s not sure where he is going, but it seems to be a good day for it. The weather has finally started to turn; the temperature’s dipped 10 degrees in two days and the breeze feels nice as he steps on the gas, letting the car glide down the street until he arrives at a red light. He flips on the radio, perpetually set to 91.9, the only classical station left in the city. He stopped being a regular listener ages ago, when they decided to only play snippets of pieces, instead of the entire work, and no choral music. They wanted to appeal to office workers who needed pleasant background music, instead of people--like *him*--who really loved it.

The sweet sound of violins fills the car, and he instantly recognizes the quick staccato bows of Vivaldi’s Autumn. He realizes the cooler temperatures are a harbinger to the quickly approaching fall, and he flips the volume until the dial won’t budge. The car is bouncing now, as he weaves through the streets of his neighborhood. He slows for a red light, and a woman waiting at the bus stop turns to stare, squinting her eyes against the sun to see who or what is making that much noise. He wonders what she must think when she sees him: an old man, nearly 80, gray hair swaying in the wind as he throws his arm in front of him with surgical precision to the music. The light changes but Dick doesn’t stop; he is leading the cars ahead of him as if they were an orchestra.

He had always wanted to play an instrument; anything would have been fine, but he had a real soft spot for the piano. However, when he was a boy in the 1940s, when his father took home \$25 a week for a family of five, asking for music lessons would've been akin to asking for a pony. The thought wouldn't even have crossed his mind, it was that implausible, and frankly, unfair to everyone else. His mother needed to feed them and his two older brothers, as well as keep everyone presentable for school and church on Sunday. Then there was the matter of the rent of their Brooklyn apartment, and everything that went along with it. No, it was something he only dreamt and rarely spoke of. When he was old enough to make a few dollars of his own doing odd jobs at church or for neighbors, he used the money to buy records of the most beautiful music he'd ever heard - opera was his favorite, particularly Verdi. He also loved Mozart, Beethoven and Bach - the holy trinity of music. His favorite afternoon was spent alone with the record player, laying on the rug next to it, absorbing the notes as they swallowed the room with their beauty. He wished, more than anything, he could somehow create such beautiful music. Until then he would study it and listen as much as he could—consuming the notes as if they were air.

One spring day when he was 10, as he made his way home from an afternoon playing stick ball, he found an abandoned piano in the back alley of his apartment building. He was stunned by the beauty of it: the ivory keys were clean and bright against the dark wood; as he admired it, he realized he had seen one this close in person. The one at his church sat largely unused in the choir loft behind the organ, often covered by a large sheet.

There was no stool, but he stood in front of it, and gently placed his hands on the keys.

He envisioned it; in his mind it was easy: he would be a natural; a prodigy. He would learn quickly, all the greats, the holy trinity. His talent would propel him across the bridge to Juilliard, then Carnegie Hall. His parents would never have to worry about money again.

His stubby, olive fingers moved clumsily across the keys, amazed by the sound that came out. If anyone else had been nearby, they would've been confused, maybe even annoyed, by the awkward cacophony of notes that Dick slowly and deliberately banged out on the keys. He was trying to play, by rote, one of Mozart's sonatas, and he was too enthralled to realize the notes were out of tune or that the keys shouldn't have been so hard to press on. To anyone else, this may have seemed absurd, but to him, it was as if he was living inside his radio, finally the performer. He felt a warmth flow over him, as if he were standing under a spotlight.

While he did this, his aunt, who lived in the apartment across the hall, watched from a window above. She didn't know the easy, beautiful world her nephew's imagination had conjured, only this: her sister and her husband could not afford lessons, or music school, or anything that came along with learning an instrument. She also saw that the piano, though beautiful in his eyes, was abandoned for a reason. It was old and needed work - a tune and some paint, all of which cost money no one had.

The next morning Dick rushed through his breakfast, leaving his cereal half eaten, and ran outside into the alley, excited to try and spend the day teaching himself to play. He had decided, as he laid in bed the night before, a grin plastered across his

face, eyes darting across the ceiling, too animated to sleep, that he wouldn't tell his parents about it—wouldn't ask them anything—until he could play an entire piece. This would show them he was serious, and hopefully good, and maybe his dream wasn't so out of reach after all.

As he pushed the back door open, he was enveloped in a burst of sunlight--so bright he stopped to blink before running over to the piano. What he found was a pile of wood; if the keys were still there, they were hidden underneath what was now a mess of dark trash. He felt so stunned he couldn't even cry, just stare blankly at what was now debris in front of him. *Who would do such a thing?* He could understand if the piano had been taken; maybe the owner wanted it back, or someone wanted to sell it. But why destroy it, so no one could ever enjoy it again? This hurt him almost as much as the fact that his musical dream had been silenced. He stood there for what felt like hours, wishing the piano back together, until his mother called to him from his aunt's window, and he hurried inside.

The windows are down so the music, which is now so loud the car is swaying, is flowing into the street. Dick feels enthralled, consumed by the music, as he imagines the orchestra in front of him. His arm is moving faster now—the other placed firmly on the wheel—as it often does in the final flurry of notes before it's over. Suddenly, the music has stopped, and Dick says "Wow!" out loud. If anyone had been sitting next to him, he would've said more - so many things he could say about the composer, that recording, even the composition of the piece itself - but the seat next to him his empty so he turns

his face back towards the road and breathes slowly, letting the excitement slowly fade from him as commercials play in the background.

As he looks around, he realizes that in his zealousness, he doesn't know where he is. The streets of his neighborhood have now been replaced with ones he doesn't know, filled with sleek townhomes with glass that reflects the sun and hurts his eyes to look at, and stores he's never heard of selling things he didn't know people needed.

He drives a few more blocks before he pulls over into a gas station to ask someone for help. The shop is small and there is no one behind the counter, which is lined with colorful packages of bubblegum and mints. He lightly taps his finger on the silver bell next to them and tries to peer behind the glass divider to see if anyone is around.

A man appears, stocky, with graying hair and kind, blue-green eyes. "What do ya need, buddy?" he asks him as he wipes the gasoline grease off his hands and offers him a small smile.

"I'm not sure where I am...could you help me get home? I live over in the Palisades. I was just out for a drive and lost track of where I was going."

"Whew! You're all the way over in Shaw pal, but sure no problem. I'll write some directions down for you; once you get back to Massachusetts Avenue, you'll be alright." Dick smiles meekly, embarrassed at the realization he can no longer navigate the city he's called home for 40 years.

Back in his car, he flips the radio off; he doesn't want any more distractions. He drives slowly, focusing on the verbal directions the old mechanic had given him instead of the ones scrawled unintelligibly on the back of a flier advertising their oil change

special. The silence comforts him, allowing him to think. Yet he still feels confused as he drives, unsure of the road ahead.

He decides to pull over to call someone. As he sits, staring at the phone, he realizes he's not sure whom to call. His daughters are in different time zones, unlikely to answer and, if they do, even less likely to be able to navigate him home from across the country. He suddenly recalls that moment after his wife died, and the silence he allowed envelop the room instead of telling Ella *yes, please move home, he'd like that very much*. And then, an even earlier memory, when his chance to become a musician was stripped from him without an explanation, in an awful burst of violence he never understood--though he learned of it many years later from his aunt, who carried the guilt with her until she told him in her old age, asking him to forgive her. He'd said he did so she could feel unburdened, but the anger and pain lingered until they eventually subsided to a dull ache.

Suddenly, he flips the phone closed, and decides he'll figure it out for himself. With renewed determination, Dick starts the car and turns on the radio—he's ready. Then he pulls out into the street, unaware of the teenagers speeding behind him, laughing and singing along to their music, looking down at their phones for a moment before they see him, turning quickly in front of them, and slam on their breaks just as they shatter the back of his Camry, sending pieces of silver-gold metal flying into the sky. That is the last thing Dick sees before it goes black, and the distant sound of a siren pierces the air – a short cry becoming a long, lingering wail.

His daughters will be here soon: fussing over him, smoothing out his sheets and asking the nurse when he last ate and if they can bring him something from home. They will come because they are worried, but he is *fine*, the accident did more damage to his car than to him. He is tired, more than anything.

“You weren’t conducting, were you?” Ella will ask, in a tone he used to use with her as a child. She was always embarrassed when he did that – music blaring, hands flailing – all she could see were the stares and snickers from drivers – whereas Dick could barely be bothered to care about the cars ahead of him.

He won’t answer--only smile and squeeze her hand. He will be glad to see them; he always was.

But what he can’t tell them, has never told anyone, is this: in all his life he was happiest during the mornings when the house was quiet, before his wife and children and the world was awake...when sunlight sliced across the floor, and he imagined the life he did that day in the alley--what could have been before it was smashed to the ground and crushed underfoot. On those mornings, all he could hear were the few notes he’d managed to remember—and soon after, his fingers, as if playing a sonata, floating across the keyboard.