

Kathleen Burns

Assignment 2: Evocative Artifact

Prelude in C Major

Dad wanted us to be musicians more than anything. He tried to teach my sisters and I piano, and when his patience ran as thin as his hair, he signed us up for violin lessons before school. Every Wednesday, no matter how “sick” we were, our parents packed us into the old blue van and drove us to the only elementary school in the district with a music program. I tolerated the lessons, but my three younger sisters despised everything about violins. As far as they were concerned, screeching instruments that left your hands cramped and your neck ache were instruments that deserved to be turned into wood chips (*i wish*). Worried they would quit music, my father made a deal with them: play violin until fourth grade. If you still don’t like it by then, you can pick your own instrument.

My decision to start playing the cello coincided perfectly with the exact month my parents finally paid off my violin. Dad was thrilled. Mom was annoyed (*instead of him*).

Two weeks before I started middle school, he brought home a cello wrapped in a padded fabric case. My violin lay forgotten behind the coat rack as I frantically unzipped the case and pulled out my new cello. It shone in the lamplight, dark crimson varnish rippling over its elegant body. Four strings, supported by the hand-carved bridge, soared over the deep black fingerboard and ended in neat curls around the tuning pegs. I ran my hand gingerly over the smooth wood, afraid that if I pressed too hard, the entire instrument would shatter in my hands. Excitement soon overtook fear, and I dragged my beautiful cello over to a kitchen chair. I pulled the endpin

out, propped the body between my scrawny legs, and placed my bow clumsily on the strings. I made a downward slash with my bow. The cello shrieked in agony. I grinned up at my parents.

“It looks too big for her,” Mom murmured, frowning. “You didn’t get her a full-sized cello, did you?”

Dad shrugged. “She’ll grow into it.” Another screech came from the cello and Dad winced. “Now, Kathleen, look, you need to move your fingers. An F is a third finger, not second.”

A cello is fundamentally the same as a violin. The basics are there: four strings, wooden body, bow. Transitioning from one to the other is just a matter of learning how to read different music. Before I started officially playing cello in the middle school orchestra, Dad gave me cello music to practice with: a book of Christmas songs, a Beginner’s Guide to Cello, and Bach’s Six Cello Suites. When he proudly handed me the last one, I frowned.

“I can’t play this,” I said, shaking the thin blue book at him.

“Maybe not right now, but you’ll be able to.” He patted it. “I know you will.”

Four months later, I found the blue book on the floor of the garage. I peeled it off the muddy concrete and shook it out. The pages were yellowed and curled, and a tire print was stamped across the wrinkled cover. It glared at me, furious at being abandoned, at being forgotten (*i wish you had gone*). I felt tears in my eyes.

I brought it inside, where Mom helped me dry it out. I was grateful she didn’t ask why it had been on the filthy garage floor, or how long it had been there. I think she remembers that

argument, when I threw Bach to the floor and screamed at her (*i wish you had gone instead of him*) with all the rage of a twelve year old girl and she had stared at me with eyes full of hurt.

When it was finished drying, I hid with it in my room. For the next hour and a half, I pain-stakingly wrote out all of the fingerings for the Bach Prelude in C Major. I propped it up on my music stand. I tuned my cello. And I played.

Commentary

Initially I tried to write this piece with a more stylized approach, but that only made the actual story itself more confusing and I wanted to focus to be on the story not the style. So I tried to make a linear narrative that explained my history with music through interactions with my father. I think my repetition of “I know you/he will” worked well, and I thought I established a clear timeline of events that ended with an unanswered question. I’m not sure I would want to write beyond that last part, but I could definitely flesh it out more. I would still like to add more anecdotes. It might also be interesting to explain my mental state back then through the musical piece. While I was writing this, I had to go back and take a lot of pieces out that just didn’t work, and I learned that sometimes you have to delete entire paragraphs so that the story flows better, even if you really like what you wrote.