

A photograph of Leonard Bernstein, an elderly man with white hair, sitting at a piano. He is wearing a plaid jacket and has his hand resting on his chin, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background shows a piano and some papers.

*On the Road & Off the Record with*  
**Leonard Bernstein**

**My Years  
with the  
Exasperating  
Genius**

**Charlie Harmon**  
**FOREWORD BY Harold Prince**

**ADVANCE  
READING  
COPY**

*On the Road & Off the Record with*  
**Leonard Bernstein**

**My Years with the Exasperating Genius**

**Charlie Harmon**

**FOREWORD BY HAROLD PRINCE**



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An Imagine Book  
Published by Charlesbridge  
85 Main Street  
Watertown, MA 02472  
(617) 926-0329  
[www.imaginebooks.net](http://www.imaginebooks.net)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
TK

Printed in the United States of America  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR *Ann*,

FOR *Patti*,

AND TO THE MEMORY OF *Julia Vega*



# Acknowledgments

IT IS A TRUTH universally acknowledged, that every writer dreams of an ideal reader. Two very real readers volunteered for that role, relieving me of my day-dreams: Henry Adams, who knew nothing of my four years as Bernstein's assistant, and David Thomas, who knew plenty, though from a tangential slant. My thanks to Henry and David for steering me toward the better word, the consistent voice, and the honest examination of these four peculiar years.

Though he wrote the definitive Bernstein biography, Humphrey Burton said what every memoirist wants to hear: "All this is new to me." Humphrey's candor gives me hope that this memoir fills a niche. Thank you, Humphrey and Christina Burton.

Cage Ames is so well-read and articulate, she must have been born speaking in complete sentences. Thank you, Cage, for your tireless assistance and encouragement, pots of tea, freshly-baked cookies, and diversionary chat about the Yankees.

My thanks to all who read sample chapters and begged for more: Alison Ames; Alexander Bernstein, Jamie Bernstein Thomas, and Nina Bernstein Simmons, whose joy and kindness are the finest tributes to their remarkable parents; Helene Blue; John Clingerman and Douglas Myhra, Colin Dunn and Bruce MacRae, my adopted siblings on two continents; Paul Epstein, who should have a late-night TV show explaining legal terms; Ella Fredrickson; Roger and Linda James; Liz Lear and Deems Webster; Laurence McCulloch and Bill Hayton; Mike Miller and Tim Weedlun, for housing and humoring me during my Library of Congress immersions; Lee and Tony Pirrotti; Rene Reder and Dan Keys; stalwart Tony Rickard; life-saver Marilyn Steiner; Aaron Stern; Tom Takaro; Mark Adams Taylor; my personal laugh-therapy group, Leslie Tomkins and Michael Barrett; Alina Voicu and Daniel Szasz; my dear friend and mentor, Charles Webb, witness to my long journey from the start; and Mark Wilson.

Affectionate thanks to the friends, family, and colleagues of Leonard Bernstein, living and departed, who consistently encouraged me as I batted my way through the years in this memoir. Starting with those I think of every day: Jennie Bernstein and her sisters, Dorothy Goldstein and Bertha Resnick; Adrienne Barth; Justin and Elaine Brown; Margaret Carson; Schuyler Chapin; Betty Comden; Valentina Cortese; Ann Dedman; Martha Gellhorn; Adolph Green and Phyllis



Newman; Dési Halban; Irma Lazarus and Elsa Kaim; Ruth Mense; Patti Pulliam; Sid and Gloria Ramin; Halina Rodzinski; Stephen Sondheim; Michael Tilson Thomas and Joshua Robison; Wally Toscanini; Fritz and Sigrid Willheim; Harriet Wingreen; and the indispensable Julia Vega.

Gratitude also to: Kazuko Amano, John Malcolm Brinnin, Marshall Burlin-game, Helen Coates, Bruce Coughlin, Jobst Eberhardt, Jack Gottlieb, Kuni Hashimoto, Gilbert Kaplan, Dorothee Koehler, Harry Kraut, Dale Kugel, Robert Lantz, Arthur Laurents, James Levine, Christa Ludwig, Pali Meller Marcovicz, John and Betty Mauceri, Erich and Jutta Mauermann, Carlos Moseley, Kurt Ollmann, Richard Ortner, Eiji Oue, Vivian Perlis, Todd and Helen Perry, Hanno Rinke, Jerome Robbins, Ned Rorem, Asadour Santourian, Jonathan Sheffer, Avi Shoshani, Roger and Christine Stevens, Auro Varani, Hans Weber, Richard Wilbur, and Stephen Wadsworth Zinsser.

Thanks to the many people I met through working for Bernstein and who remain friends to this day: David Abell and Seann Alderking, Phillip Allen, Marin Alsop, Franco Amurri, Robert Arbuckle, Betty Auman and Chris Pino, David Bachman, Ellen and Ian Ball, Susann Baumgärtel, Johnny Bayless, Burton Bernstein, Karen Bernstein, Stephen Blier, Daryl Bornstein, Serge Boyce, Garnett Bruce, Amy Burton and John Musto, Finn Byrhard, Flavio Chamis, Steve Clar, Ned Davies, Emil DeCou, Clare Dibble, Gail Dubinbaum, Roger Englander, Marcia Farabee, Eliot Feld, Joel Friedman and Jenny Bilfield, Carlo and Giovanni Gavazzeni, Domiziana Giordano, Linda Golding, John Grande, Sara Griffin, Emily Grishman, David Gruender, Paul Gunther, Dan Gustin, Erik Haagensen and Joe McConnell, Connie Haumann, Barbara Haws and William Josephson, Marilyn Herring, David Israel, Diane Kesling, Sue Klein, Frank Korach, Eric Latzky, Holly Mentzer, Linda Indian, Gail Jacobs, Wolf-Dieter and Amalia Karwatky, Peter Kazaras and Armin Baier, Jim Kendrick, Steve Masterson, Larry Moore, Kent Nagano, Richard Nelson, Clint Nieweg, David Pack, Kevin Patterson, Gideon Paz, Sandra Pearson, John Perkel, Shirley Rhoades Perl, Charley Prince, Philip von Raabe, Gottfried Rabl, Madina Ricordi, Paul Sadowski, Karen Schnackenberg, George Steel and both his Sarahs, Mimsy Gill Stirn, Steve Sturk, Robert Sutherland, Larry Tarlow, Alessio Vlad, Johnny Walker, Ray White, John Van Winkle, George Wolfe, Paul Woodiel, and Patrick Zwick.

Of my post-Bernstein friends, no less encouraging than those listed above, I must thank Yaniv and Meredith Attar, Christopher Confessore and Bethany Barnhorst, Barry and Deirdre Cullen, Barron and Mary Melton, Mark and Laura Patrick, and David and Anne Pandolfi.

Craig Urquhart gets a thank-you all his own; he held the fort to the end.

Thanks to the photographers whose quick eyes preserved LB as we knew him: Graziano Arici, Ann Dedman, Arthur Elgort and Grethe Holby, Robert Millard, Patti Pulliam, and Thomas Seiler. Special thanks to Andrew French and Henry Grossman. Your work gives these pages a soul.

To Mark Horowitz at the Library of Congress, keeper of the Bernstein flame for the nation, my sincerest gratitude for your assistance, insights, and conviviality.

To Sallie Randolph, who assisted me with legal matters: this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Thanks to Larry Leech, for pointing out the difference between a journal and a memoir at the June 2015, Florida Writers Association workshop.

To Ann Hood, instructor of the memoir workshop at the January 2017 Writers in Paradise conference at Eckerd College: I pledge eternal vigilance at the shrine of literature where you reign as goddess. There has been no more knowledgeable guide since Virgil accompanied Dante, though Ann traverses a happier terrain. Hosannas to my fellow acolytes from Writers in Paradise: James Anderson, Mary K. Conner, Colleen Herlihy, Molly Howes, Karen Kravit, Antonia Lewandowski, Joan McKee, Meredith Myers, Carlie Ramer, Honey Rand, and Donna Walker. Your perceptions continue to inspire me.

Gratitude beyond measure goes to my agent Eric Myers, the first to call and the firmest believer in the story I had to tell.

To my editor, Don Weise and to Mary Ann Sabia at Charlesbridge, thanks compounded with admiration for turning that most ephemeral of human abstractions, memories, into a tangible book. You know your business!

A last bow goes to Harold Prince for writing a foreword with grace, polish, and admirable alacrity. Mr. Prince energetically burnishes the Bernstein legacy, year after year. I'm his fan forever and am forever in his debt.





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## Foreword

WE ARE ENTERING A PERIOD of celebration of Leonard Bernstein's centenary and there will be concerts, opera productions, lectures, reminiscences, books, and memoirs, of which Charlie Harmon's is among the first. Charlie is well positioned to write about Lenny, as he worked with him for the last nine years of his life. It's an informal, affectionate, and not idolatrous account of the life of an astonishingly talented composer, conductor, and teacher.

When Lenny died, I was asked by the *New York Times* why he hadn't written more musicals and operas. And I replied that had Lenny written more music, his conducting, his lectures, and his obsessive desire to teach young musicians and young audiences would have been curtailed. No one was more generous with his gifts than Leonard Bernstein.

I first met him when I was assistant stage manager on *Wonderful Town*, the second musical he wrote with Betty Comden and Adolph Green (the first being the watershed *On the Town*). It was a huge success. The year was 1953. By 1957, I was a producer of *West Side Story*, and by 1974 at the urging of the Chelsea Theatre Center at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Hugh Wheeler and I tackled *Candide*—a light opera with a major score of Lenny's and a flawed book. Wheeler re-imagined it in one act and we mounted it in an environmental production with a cast of twenty-year-olds. In the intervening years it made its way to the New York City Opera. We added choice musical material and expanded the book into a two-act opera. In the interim forty years since I first started working on it, though it was a great success from the beginning, I believe I finally got it right in 2017 for the new New York City Opera. Finally we achieved the balance between opéra comique and Lillian Hellman's desire to be political.

In the year that Lenny died, he and I met to discuss an opera he had always wanted to write about the Holocaust and of course I was interested. But he got sick and it never happened. Given the scope and passion of his artistry, it represents a potent loss.

In his memoir, Charlie Harmon shares with us a conversation with Lenny from the day he died, but that awaits your reading of this book.

Hal Prince, May, 2017



# 1 | The Ad under “M”

BEFORE I ENTERED HIS LIFE, Leonard Bernstein’s assistants came and went like the change of seasons in New York. I can only conjecture why none of them stayed long. One assistant showed up for four days and then dropped out of sight. Nobody ever said what scared him off. Another started out energetically, sticking labels on clothes closet shelves—“shirst” remained the butt of jokes for years—but a month later, he was gone. Did he object to the teasing about his dyslexia? One notorious assistant drove the Philharmonic’s limo to Georgia, where the FBI apprehended him a few days later. Did he really think a big black car would be inconspicuous? Another assistant quit and tried to return, but in those weeks away, he discovered other priorities: preserving his sanity and pride. I ran into him when I was ready to quit as Bernstein’s assistant, and he warned me, “Once you leave, you can’t go back.” That helped me a lot less than he imagined.

Even more ephemeral were the assistants—if that’s what they were—who had hitched a ride on the bandwagon of glamor and fame. They were the perks—often sexual—of notorious celebrity, culled from a salacious entourage. When I’m asked about that category of Bernstein’s assistants, I demur. “Hard to say.” Actually, I know very well what to say.

I was none of those. Even though I wasn’t any more durable physically, I stuck with the position longer than any of my predecessors. Yes, I had to put my life on hold, but working alongside a creative genius gave me the strongest sense of purpose I’d ever had. Serving Bernstein’s creativity kept music central in my life, and nothing could make me happier than that. And yet I came to the job with almost no knowledge about this famous man, other than his stature as a serious musician, a major orchestral conductor, a famous composer, a *maestro*.

He had a wife and three kids? He smoked four packs a day? Delivered the celebrated Norton lectures at Harvard in 1973? Couldn’t abide elevator music, or champagne, or public transportation? I had no idea. Once I was hired, he let me know what he wanted with no hesitation. “The stereo speakers quit last night,” he’d say. Or, “Get me tickets to *Idomeneo* at the Met this Thursday,” or “See if Jackie Onassis can come for dinner tonight.” Some of Bernstein’s directives were blunt and personal, such as “Stop being so distracted.” He was the priest in a theology of celebrity, and I was the novice, baptized by fire for four scorching years.



Bernstein's manager, Harry Kraut, hired personal assistants for the Maestro, regularly replenishing what was once referred to as "the toilet paper job." The musician who said that to me meant it to sting. It did. It still does, thirty-five years later. A rude assessment of an assistant's anonymous personality, *my* personality, as disposable as toilet paper.

After a rapid climb from the Boston Symphony Orchestra's administration, not a bad place to start, Harry Kraut relished the power that came with managing the world's most famous musician, Maestro Leonard Bernstein. Harry sometimes hosted cocktail parties to spot new talent, perhaps an assistant for the Maestro—though some of these parties degenerated into a beauty contest, with the red-haired candidate always crowned the winner. As a Boy Scout, Harry had been so besotted with his red-haired troop leader that he worked his way up to Eagle Scout just to be near the guy. But his troop leader never acknowledged Harry's infatuation, so red hair remained a beacon for the rest of Harry's life, a personal foible Harry confided to me—and the *only* foible he ever confided to me.

Amidst the gathering of beauties—uh, job candidates—at one of those cocktail parties, someone might show off a few superficial social skills, but any talents that could actually help the Maestro? An in-depth knowledge of notating, editing, or performing music? Never. Still, one candidate usually took charge, answering the door, picking up the phone when it rang, calling a taxi to spirit away an inebriated contender. Harry hired his own assistant this way for the summer of 1982, employing a personable and remarkably resourceful man my own age, whose hair looked a lot more blond than red. So the cocktail party routine worked, once.

Harry also had a more sober and time-honored way to hire an assistant for the Maestro: an ad posted in the classified section of the Sunday *New York Times*. Under "M" for "Musician," the ad sought an assistant for a "world-class" musician. The applicant must read music, be free to travel, sport a bit of European languages, and possess finely-honed organizational abilities. Nothing more specific.

For two years I'd toiled as a menial clerk at the Tams-Witmark Music Library, a music theater agency and rental library in Midtown Manhattan, while I day-dreamed about how to put my musical skills—a degree in composition from Carnegie-Mellon University—and my life experiences to better use. I'd lived six formative years overseas, when my father's Army career stationed us in Germany and Italy. Germany opened my eyes and ears to music and culture. Italy bestowed its rich history and a sense of life's elusive sweetness. I missed those qualities on our returns to the States. Overseas travel wasn't in my budget, and I'd let my German and Italian lapse. But my proficiency at the piano ranged through the Bach-Beethoven-Brahms literature and the shorter works of Chopin. I'd written

songs and chamber works and nursed them through performances. I'd met many professional performers and a few composers, but now, nearly thirty-one years old, I knew I wasn't a performer, nor was I cut out to be a composer. Filling page after page with my own musical thoughts every day? No thanks.

That *Times* ad under "M" in September 1981 seemed tailored expressly for me. I photocopied my half-page resume, typed a breezy cover letter, and sent them off, but I continued to sift through the *Times*' classified section each Sunday, just in case.

Nothing grabbed me like that ad under "M."

It seemed too good to be true when I got a reply and an appointment for an interview. My best friend, John, then an incipient psychiatrist, advised, "Act as though you are already working there. Answer a random question or even jump in on a discussion." I leaned heavily on John for his advice over the years. He possessed social skills more advanced than mine. "Take your personality with you and put it to work," John said.

Mine is a problem-solving mentality. I'm bothered when something is broken—things should function as they were designed. That's how I view an office hierarchy, too. Among close-working colleagues, why not share information?

Immediately after I sat down opposite Harry Kraut's desk, his secretary, Mimsy Gill, burst in with an urgent message from the director of the Hamburg State Opera about the Bernstein, Comden, and Green musical *Wonderful Town*. Mimsy wasn't sure whether the director's name was Friedrich Götz or Götz Friedrich (she got it right the second time). I knew his name because I'd come across it where I worked: Tams-Witmark licensed *Wonderful Town*. I said I'd relay the message at work the next day, and thus slipped myself into a new workplace scenario exactly as my friend John had suggested.

That was the start of the interview, but it went on for three more hours. Harry Kraut nonchalantly explained right off that the "world-class" musician in the newspaper ad was Leonard Bernstein. *Leonard Bernstein?* I combed through the musical part of my brain. At age ten, I'd seen a few televised Young People's Concerts while my father was stationed in the States. In college I almost wore out two of Bernstein's New York Philharmonic recordings: Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* and the ebullient third symphony of Robert Schumann (the album cover featured a Leonard Bernstein portrait next to a same-size image of the monumental cathedral of Cologne, a pairing that should have told me something). Of Bernstein's own music, I had a hazy familiarity with *Chichester Psalms*; if you dropped the needle on the LP, I could recognize it. How many snappy twentieth century choral works in Hebrew are there? Of course I knew the *Overture to "Candide"*—it played

over the rolling credits of the late-night *Dick Cavett Show*. But I'd never seen Bernstein perform except on television. I hadn't read a single one of his books, but I'd slogged through one by his mentor Aaron Copland. What about the symphonies of Gustav Mahler, which Bernstein the conductor had mortared into the symphonic repertoire? I'd heard only one Mahler symphony in performance, not conducted by Bernstein nor awakening me to the Mahler's genius. During the first two movements, I'd indulged in a profound snooze.

I'd never seen *West Side Story*, because my mother feared I would mimic those juvenile delinquents. Maybe so, but not for the reasons she thought. When I caught the film some years after working for Bernstein, it was George Chakiris—tall, dark, and handsome Bernardo, captain of the Sharks—who stole my heart. I'd have gladly tagged after *him* into the most degenerate delinquency, a proclivity probably true for thousands of other gay boys in the 1960s. But the Sharks and the Jets didn't interest me all that much. My heroes were the authors of that transcendent work of music theatre. I owned an LP of 1950s Broadway highlights, and the three selections from *West Side Story* grabbed me with their clever lyrics and punchy Latin rhythms mixed up with 1950s rock-and-roll. The "Jet Song" didn't even sound like show music. It had been pretty nervy of me at age twelve to buy that LP. I usually purchased staid albums by the pianists Brailowsky, Richter, and Rubinstein.

During my job interview, Mr. Kraut spoke persuasively, but his portly appearance put me off. His shirt buttons strained across his midriff. He obviously lived a little too well. A fringe of meticulously trimmed beard edged his bulldog jowls, as if to compensate for his nearly complete baldness. Those peripheral whiskers lent him a late-1800s look, like a New England philosopher. His precise, polysyllabic but leisurely speech put me at ease during the interview, but it also made him sound calculating and slightly pompous.

After Mr. Kraut skimmed over the basic duties of Bernstein's assistant—phones, luggage, mail, appointments—I asked about the schedule for the coming year. He swiveled a bit in his chair and occasionally put a hand to his forehead, as though in his fleshy cranium he could riffle through the files for 1982.

"In March, there are two weeks with the National Symphony in Washington, D.C., followed by two weeks with the New York Philharmonic. Then a week in London with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and two weeks of recordings and concerts in Israel with the Israel Philharmonic, taking them on a tour to Mexico and Texas," he said.

I'd never been to Mexico or Texas, and I'd already lost count of the orchestras. Four?

He continued. "In June, there's a commemorative concert for Igor Stravinsky's centenary with the orchestra of La Scala in Milano."

I knew he meant the opera house in Italy.

"Then a follow-up performance in Venice, and a live broadcast of a Stravinsky program with the National Symphony at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.," he said.

Mentally I tried to add up all those trips across the Atlantic—I'd crossed it only six times in thirty-one years.

"The entire summer is in Los Angeles, to inaugurate the Los Angeles Philharmonic Institute. Lenny calls it 'the Tanglewood of the West,'" Mr. Kraut said.

Though I'd never been to western Massachusetts, I knew about Tanglewood, the posh summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Next summer in California? Nice.

He went on. "For Lenny's sixty-fourth birthday in August, there will be a big party in Salzburg. Then he goes to Vienna for two weeks to finish a Brahms cycle with the Vienna Philharmonic, after which he'll take that orchestra on a little tour of Germany."

I gathered that took the schedule up through late September.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Kraut said, almost as an afterthought. "The most important project is a three-part commission for an opera, to be premiered in 1983 at Houston Grand Opera, with performances a year later at La Scala and the Kennedy Center." He looked down as if reading a memo on his desktop. "For the first six weeks of 1982, Mr. Bernstein will be a visiting fellow at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. While there, his only task will be to begin writing the opera." Finally, Mr. Kraut paused and looked at me directly. "The new assistant's principal duty is to ensure that Mr. Bernstein meets the opera commission's deadline: June 17, 1983."

Did I hear a slightly ominous tone in his voice? Maybe I should inscribe that date on a stone and wear it around my neck.

After Mr. Kraut's *bravura solo*, I took a deep breath. "Mr. Bernstein needs someone with a lot more stamina than I have," I said. High energy wasn't my strong suit, and my thirty-first birthday was only a month away. Whatever youthfulness I still had was ebbing. "Maybe someone half my age?" I ventured, half-jokingly. I'd never heard of such an insane workload as that 1982 schedule, but what frame of reference did I have for the agenda of a maestro? Those orchestras were the best in the world; the music-making would be inspired. What other chance would I have to hear the Vienna Philharmonic or work at La Scala? Or to travel again? But I couldn't imagine keeping up with that overloaded schedule.

Mr. Kraut benignly allowed me to talk a little about myself, but I left his office after politely putting my application on hold.

Though I had other interviews that fall, none of them interested me half as much as those three hours with Harry Kraut. Could I keep up with that insane schedule? I wouldn't know unless I tried. In December I called Mimsy Gill and asked her to keep my name in the mix. But I never expected to hear from her or Harry Kraut again.

## 2 | Indiana Bound

RIGHT AFTER THE NEW YEAR IN 1982, Harry Kraut called me at work, but Tams-Witmark didn't permit personal calls, so I said I'd be at his office after 5 P.M. I put on a tie as I walked across Midtown Manhattan for what I thought would be a follow-up interview at the penthouse offices of Amberson Enterprises. (The German word for "amber" is *Bernstein*, so Bernstein's management office—i.e., the "son of Bernstein"—would be "Amberson." Many people assumed a mystic connection with *The Magnificent Ambersons*, but no.) Magnificence was in short supply in the Amberson office suite on Sixth Avenue. Once upon a time, Gloria Swanson had resided in that penthouse, but any hint of movie-star glamor evaporated with her departure, leaving a warren of drab rooms.

I heard Harry Kraut talking, evidently on the phone with the student union at the university in Bloomington, Indiana. How absurd that he would arrange for my room in Indiana. As head honcho for Leonard Bernstein, Harry Kraut negotiated contracts with top-tier orchestras and recording companies, not staff hotel rooms. Besides, he hadn't even offered me the job, yet. That phone call had to be a deliberate ploy.

I walked into his office and said lightheartedly, "If you feel I'm up to the job, I'll give it my best."

"I just made your room reservation at Indiana University's student union," Harry said. "You'll fly there with me on Friday."

As I took a seat, I remembered Harry's recitation of the insane schedule for 1982. "Let's make the first six weeks a trial run," I said, figuring I might be able to stick with it that long. "I'll go to Indiana and meet Mr. Bernstein, and on the return to New York, you can decide whether I should continue as the Maestro's assistant."

Harry nodded.

We hadn't discussed a salary until Harry mentioned a figure fifteen percent higher than my current income. Nice, but shouldn't I ask for more? After all, the schedule he'd outlined in our first meeting would require more skills and demand a greater commitment than anything I'd ever tackled. I paused too long, gulped, and accepted his offer.

I regretted that moment four years later, when the assistant after me craftily commanded a salary that was triple the figure Harry Kraut had offered me. Ouch.



Friends in Brooklyn made me dinner that night and presented me with the most useful tool imaginable: a 1982 datebook, one page for every day. I leafed through the blank pages, an apt analogy to my empty life thus far. How would I ever fill up an entire datebook? My friends had a better grip on the reality ahead than I did.

The next day at Tams-Witmark, I told the owner I was leaving to become Leonard Bernstein's assistant. In his genial and astute way, Louis Aborn advised me to "remember this side of the business" after I got to know the principal figures on the other—the creative—side. The business of music theater, in fact the business of all serious "classical" music, marries those who create and those who license. Leonard Bernstein and his collaborators were the creators, whereas Tams-Witmark is a licensing agency. The union of those two sides of the business of music can be prodigiously lucrative or financially disastrous—like any marriage, sometimes serene, sometimes rocky.

On Friday evening, I met Harry Kraut at La Guardia airport for the flight to Indianapolis. As we settled into our seats in first class, he promised that during the flight he'd share all the information I needed. But as the plane lifted off the runway, Harry fell into a profound sleep and snored placidly all the way to Indianapolis.

For two hours I vacillated between panic and deliberation. What had I gotten myself into? I'm meeting Leonard Bernstein, but I know so little about him. Is he a tyrant, a lecher? What if he doesn't like me? How do I get out of this? In the worst case, how would I get back to New York?

At the luggage claim in Indianapolis, Harry did show me one piece of business: how to tip the airport porters. They came running as soon as Harry pulled a wad of bills from his pocket. Monolithic pieces of luggage trundled onto the carousel, each colossus stamped "L. B." but so scuffed they might have been kicked all the way from New York. Harry cautioned me not to touch anything but to let the porters cart all the bags to the rental car. Grateful that Harry offered to drive, I guided him through the signage to Route 37 towards Bloomington. Before leaving New York, I'd bought a map of Indiana and memorized the lower half of it. That impressed Harry exactly as I'd hoped.

We stopped at a cheap roadside diner, and over sandwiches Harry opened up a bit about his own career.

"Management, that's the route to success," he said, a maxim that would haunt me two years later when he boasted that he'd train me to become an orchestra manager. Wait a minute, I knew something about music but nothing about administration. Was he saying I could sell pianos because I knew how to play one?

About Leonard Bernstein, Harry shared only one thing, “Mississippi Mud.” On a Midwestern tour years earlier, Mr. Bernstein had relaxed one day on an old-fashioned Mississippi riverboat. At the first stop, he leapt into the water and slathered handfuls of mud on his face. Then, in a raunchy, blackface imitation of Al Jolson, he belted out the old swing number “Mississippi Mud.” Oh, the irrepressible Maestro.

Onlookers took photographs left and right. One photo sold to *Life* magazine for tens of thousands of dollars, Harry said. It appeared on the last page of the magazine, that issue’s “parting shot,” often a photo of outlandish celebrity behavior. But a black-faced Maestro wasn’t the publicity that Bernstein’s management team wanted.

“If only Mr. Bernstein’s assistant had done something,” said Harry. “I came up with a plan. If it looks like Lenny’s about to embarrass himself, I say, ‘Mississippi Mud.’” Harry looked at me more seriously. “Then you go into action. Do something!”

*What?* I wondered. This plan seemed laughably vague. “Mississippi mud” was a lot of syllables. Plenty could happen during those seconds.

“At all costs, avoid negative publicity,” Harry said, ending his lesson.

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THE NEXT MORNING in the lobby of the student union, I met Bernstein’s chef and on-the-road housekeeper, Ann Dedman. Pert and attractive with a winning smile, she took one look at me and said, “He’s too cute. He’ll have to shave off that moustache.” Ann sounded like a smart and opinionated New Yorker. I’d never have guessed she came from east Texas.

Harry said, “No, Lenny doesn’t like moustaches, so Charlie has to keep his.”

I’d never been told I was too cute before, but the wispy growth on my upper lip didn’t seem to be the real topic of this conversation. Cuteness was a liability? Had prior assistants been up for grabs in some kind of sexual free-for-all? Was I reading too much into this?

We drove several miles outside Bloomington to a condo where Ann had unloaded an enormous, diesel-fueled Buick station wagon she’d driven from New York with a previous Bernstein assistant—whom Harry had wished really had been up for grabs, according to Harry’s tattling later on. Ann had packed into that station wagon every kitchen gadget she owned: an enormous professional mixer with a dozen attachments, a coffee grinder, an electric juicer, a blender, heavy-duty pots and pans of all sizes, massive bowls and serving platters, whisks, spoons, forks, several spatulas, plus Ann’s personal set of impressive knives. She had also

drawn up a yard-long shopping list while scoping out the condo's shortcomings, upstairs and down.

There weren't many shortcomings. Downstairs, a massive stone fireplace presided over a spacious living area, overlooked by a mid-level platform with a large dining table and an open kitchen. Off the front hall were two cozy bedrooms and a bath. A master suite took up the entire upstairs, as capacious as the living room below. A wall of floor-to-ceiling windows looked out on wintry woods and a frozen lake. Every lake in Indiana probably sported such sumptuous weekend condos, but I'd never seen anything like it. The main drawback: its distance from town. From my modest room in the student union, the drive to the lakeside condo took forty-five minutes over meandering country roads. My terrific sense of direction had better not fail me.

Somehow we had time for lunch at Charles Webb's house. Dean Webb headed the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, which made him the administrative mentor for generations of serious musicians. The Jacobs School of Music is the largest music department in the United States—in 1982, it enrolled the biggest population of student musicians in the world. As a music student at Carnegie-Mellon, I'd heard of the Jacob School of Music's legendary teachers, illustrious graduates, and vast library. To meet the man in charge of all that bowled me over.

Only a day earlier, I'd subsisted in a lowly position on the periphery of the music business. Now Indiana's dean was making me a sandwich in his own kitchen. "Charlie, do you want lettuce and mustard?" he asked. "How about a pickle?" Entirely down-home and unpretentious, Dean Webb possessed a solidly good soul. The balm of his reassurance got me through those six winter weeks in Indiana.

On the way back to the condo, I drove through a stop sign at a deserted intersection. Of course, Harry Kraut noticed. I hadn't driven in more than a year, but the last thing I wanted was to be stopped by a state trooper, get my name in the Bloomington newspaper, and blotch Leonard Bernstein's residency with negative publicity. *Mississippi Mud!* I resolved: no matter how preoccupied, I'd drive more carefully than ever in Indiana, a resolution put to the test a month later.

### 3 *The Rebbe in Wolf's Clothing*

BACK AT THE LAKESIDE CONDO, I had no idea how to make myself useful. Should I ask when Mr. Bernstein would show up? Why hadn't Harry or Ann said anything about the Maestro's arrival?

Harry sauntered around with no sense of urgency, so I traipsed after him up the stairs. The Baldwin piano company had delivered a concert grand to the master bedroom—a courtesy, Harry said, that the company extended to Bernstein anywhere on the planet. In return, Bernstein endorsed Baldwin exclusively, a hard-and-fast rule, until some years later when he spotted an advertisement featuring a luxury watch on Plácido Domingo's arm. Envy—that's all it was—of Domingo's princely timepiece induced Bernstein into endorsing a watch company in return for its sponsoring a music festival. But Bernstein wouldn't consent to appear in any watch-company ad.

In the upstairs bedroom, Harry fingered the thin draperies drawn across the wall of windows overlooking Lake Monroe. "Attend to these right away. Lenny requires his bedroom to be pitch black," Harry said. "Find some black plastic bags and pin them to the outside of the drapes." Simple enough. Then Harry collected Ann with her three-foot long shopping list and drove off to the biggest supermarket in town.

How much time did I have? I found a box of heavy black plastic bags and some straight pins, slit one bag open to make a large sheet, and standing unsteadily on a stool, held the plastic against the flimsy drapes. The plastic wouldn't lie flat unless it fit the hang of the curtains and I was no expert with straight pins. I felt like the hapless maiden in the fairy tale "Rumpelstiltskin," commanded to spin straw into gold before the troll returned. My fix-everything obsession seemed doomed to failure.

Two hours passed. I'd blacked out only a third of the draperies when Ann dashed into the bedroom and urged me to unpack the luggage right away. Then she ran back downstairs to make dinner.

Each suitcase approximated an armoire, but all were nearly empty: a few thin black socks, scandalously flimsy underpants, some sport shirts, a couple pair of tailored jeans, and two blazers. No flannel, no thermal cotton, no woolens. The housekeeper in New York had packed Mr. Bernstein's clothes, but evidently no one had told her about winter in Indiana.

I had no idea how Mr. Bernstein organized his things, so I had to guess. I filled the drawers of a tall dresser with upper-body clothes at the top, socks at the bottom. As I stashed the last empty suitcase into a utility closet, the front door opened downstairs and a boisterous crowd of people burst into the condo. Ann certainly knew about timing.

I could hear Charles Webb with his wife, Kenda, coming through the door. As I descended the stairs, Harry entered the foyer and introduced me to Stephen Wadsworth, Bernstein's librettist for the new opera, and Richard Nelson, a film and television actor serving as Bernstein's interim assistant. A few other university people spilled out of a sizable van in the driveway—and then there was the Maestro.

A cocktail party already in progress inched through the door, the noise at peak volume, as though somebody had just delivered one hilarious punch line. Over the hubbub, Harry said the van's stock of scotch had flowed freely on the short ride from the Bloomington airport. "Lenny raved about the van's cup holders because they lit up," Harry said with a chuckle.

From my spot at the foot of the stairs, I took in this diminutive, decidedly derelict geriatric cocooned in an enormous white parka. Mr. Bernstein made an inordinate amount of noise. "It's the pelt of a real wolf," he said several times, indicating the lining of his parka. *Good, one piece of winter clothing*, I thought. All his energy was going into his jabbering and joking, so he barely moved into the foyer, forcing the crowd behind him into a semi-circle. He looked like a priestly leader shepherding a worshipful flock. The procession shuffled to a standstill but remained on high volume.

Despite the deep tan on his face, Mr. Bernstein looked terrible: shriveled and wizened and wildly unkempt. He looked like he hadn't slept in ages. Nor had he shaved or showered that day. He reeked of rancid suntan lotion, strong cologne, and a damp-dog rankness that wafted from his parka's wolf fur.

I had discreetly poured myself a tablespoon of gin to steady my nerves, but I hadn't yet taken a sip. After Harry Kraut said my name, which was all the introduction I was going to get, I took the wolf off Mr. Bernstein's shoulders and asked him if he'd like a drink.

"What are you drinking?" he asked. I picked up the small glass of gin. He grabbed it out of my hand and drained it in one swig.

"That's *my* drink!" I said.

Mr. Bernstein tilted back his head and roared like a wild beast ready to kill. "You don't talk that way to the *rebbe!*"

My mouth fell open. He's a rabbi? I'd never heard anyone refer so vehemently to himself as a rabbi—while snatching a glass of gin, no less. In the brief pause, I

saw not a biblical scholar but a weary and drunk elderly man, genuinely angry, ready to toss me out on my ear into the snowy fields of Indiana.

Everyone else stood around grinning. Somebody suggested scotch on the rocks, so I poured a little Ballantine's on ice and handed it to Mr. Bernstein, who then swept into the condo for an inspection.

I had no idea what was going on. Was I already out of a job? Had I been rude? I stood by with the rest of the flock and watched the Maestro-Rabbi as he talked first to one university official, then another. When Mr. Bernstein spoke to anyone, he placed one hand on the listener's shoulder, oddly reminding me of a dog steadying itself on its hind legs. As Mr. Bernstein gazed directly into his listener's eyes, he gave the impression that he was devoting his exclusive, utterly rapt attention.

I noticed Mr. Bernstein squinting and screwing up his eyes, and figured they had dried out on the airplanes that day. Later he told me he had herpes on his eyeballs (not exactly the correct medical description) for which he'd been prescribed eye drops that required constant refrigeration. In the months ahead, I nurtured an international network of eye doctors who delivered those eye drops to his hotel suites, and I took great pains to keep those drops refrigerated. His herpes affliction slowly receded, though strong sunlight brought it back. Given that tan on his face, Mr. Bernstein had overindulged in sun exposure and his eyes suffered.

Mr. Bernstein asked to see his bedroom, so I led him upstairs while everyone else stayed below. Now I could find out if this room met his needs and what he expected of me. He'd spend six weeks in that room, so it had to be a place away from all cares except the as-yet-unwritten opera, which, if I still had a job, might be my duty to see through to completion.

I pointed to the plastic bags pinned to the draperies.

"I'll finish this later," I said.

"Don't bother," he replied kindly. "I always wear a sleep mask."

I almost followed up with "*But Harry said—*" as Mr. Bernstein continued: "I have this white noise machine," as he pulled a squat appliance the size of a mixing bowl out of his carry-on bag.

"See, it has two settings, but I always set it on high, and it covers up any outside noise." A sleep mask? A white-noise machine? So I could drop the pin-on-the-plastic bag project, thank goodness. I surmised that Harry's instructions might not always align with the Maestro's reality.

I showed him the dresser drawers. He laughed and rearranged the contents to match his dresser at home. Top drawer: handkerchiefs on one side, socks on



the other. Next drawer: underwear. His jovial tone told me that the roaring *rebbe* of fifteen minutes earlier might have been an act, now abandoned downstairs.

I hadn't unpacked the book bags yet. He offered to go through them with me. The Chambers English dictionary, the standard for aficionados of the cryptic anagrams in British crossword puzzles, went on the shelf most easily reached from the bed. Dictionaries in Italian, German, and Spanish; a single-volume edition of the complete works of Lewis Carroll; the Oxford compilation of English verse; and several current fiction and nonfiction works—these had to be within an arm's length of the bed.

There was also a small Hebrew Bible, as I called it then because I wasn't sure it was the *Torah*, bound in silver and studded with semi-precious stones.

"This travels with me everywhere," he said. "At sunset every Friday, I phone my mother. This is an inviolable rule." It didn't matter what else was in his schedule, or where in the world he was. One Friday, he called his mother after visiting Tchaikovsky's grave. She responded with memories of her Russian childhood. He said he didn't celebrate Shabbat, but this particular weekly observance was sacred to him.

Then he showed me how to unpack a hefty leather valise he had brought on the flights that day. "This is the medicine bag," he said. It contained everything under the sun: an electric toothbrush, Tums and other antacids, toothpaste, hair gel, combs, collar stays, scissors, an expensive electric razor ("Let's plug it in now or the battery will die," he said), three big bottles of cologne, more Tums, more hair gel, Aquafilters—plastic cigarette holders each containing a tiny water-saturated sponge—safety pins, dental floss, buttons, a sewing kit, more Aquafilters, yet more Tums—and prescription canisters of pills he said helped him to sleep, wake up, get over indigestion and diarrhea and just about any other conceivable ailment. I'd never seen Bronkotabs before; those dilated his lungs. I'd never seen inhalers, either. There were several, yellow and blue, for Mr. Bernstein's periodic bouts with emphysema.

I could scarcely make sense of the medicine bag mishmash.

A small compartment in the bag held collar stays and safety pins mixed up with assorted cufflinks, including a pair shaped like miniature tennis racquets. "Stephen Sondheim gave me these," he said, handling them delicately.

*All about playing games*, I thought.

He showed me a pair of elegant lion head cufflinks with tiny diamond eyes that were a gift from President Jimmy Carter. Then Mr. Bernstein held up a pair of gold squares. "Koussy gave me these."

I knew he meant Dr. Serge Koussevitzky, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and founder of Tanglewood, the orchestra's summer home.

"They were his, and I wear them for every concert. If my shirt doesn't have French cuffs, I carry them in my pocket."

I took a breath. Here's Mr. Bernstein standing next to me, telling me that before he walked onto a stage, he brought each cufflink to his lips for an affectionate ritual kiss. These small golden squares were more than a talisman. They represented a first-hand connection to the ancient and exalted history of serious music.



Almost ready to go onstage, Leonard Bernstein kisses the Koussevitzky cufflinks while holding a cigarette and a baton. Standing to his left, the late Carl Schiebler, personnel manager of the New York Philharmonic.

As we stood in front of this disorganized valise, I made a mental note to find a pillbox so I could carry the Koussevitzky cufflinks in my pocket rather than risk losing them in the medicine bag's unholy mess. I was taking stock of things I could improve. Looking back now on what I saw in that valise that afternoon, I realize how Mr. Bernstein's complex life was reflected right there in that chaos.

He showed me two plastic tooth guards, which I'd heard about from my dentist but never seen before. One of them Mr. Bernstein called his "morpho-Max," a combination of Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams, with Max Widrow, the first name of Mr. Bernstein's orthodontist. The other tooth guard was the "conducto-Max." One for the upper jaw, worn while sleeping, and the other for the lower jaw, for conducting. When sleeping or conducting, Mr. Bernstein uncontrollably ground his teeth, so he took these two prophylactics seriously.

"Now, the critical thing about the morpho-Max," he said confidentially, "is that I sometimes hurl it across the room. Unconsciously, of course." It would be up to me to find the morpho-Max, rinse it, and nestle it on a clean, damp tissue in its little blue case. A previous assistant had balked at doing this, but a piece of plastic dripping with gooey saliva didn't bother me.

We spent nearly an hour sorting through his books and medicine bag, but it seemed as though no time had elapsed at all. There was a lot for me to remember, but Mr. Bernstein confided his personal details with such appealing trust that I felt completely at ease. He looked the part of the wild and exhaustingly intense God the Father on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, but he really wasn't so threatening. His mixing up of words and languages, the names of people and classical references—thank goodness I'd had four years of Latin—sparkled with fun. Yet I detected an underpinning of vulnerability in the chaos of his belongings.

And those cufflinks!

They represented deep personal esteem from some mighty exalted personages—a former president, for one. And a Broadway icon, the lyricist of *West Side Story*—imagine, a present from Stephen Sondheim. Realizing that I worked for a man who led such a fascinating life, I felt a little thrill run through me.

We trundled downstairs to join the Webbs et al. and to find out what Ann had made for dinner. She apologized for serving meatloaf but said it was the best she could do, given the unfamiliar kitchen, the last-minute food shopping, and not knowing the number of guests—or the actual dinner hour. I quickly set the table for everyone, including Ann. Mr. Bernstein paused before taking his seat and counted the place settings. He declared haughtily, "I don't eat with my cook." In dead silence, I removed a placemat to the kitchen counter top a few feet from the far end of the dining table. Mr. Bernstein seated himself at the table's other end,

where he could see Ann hunched over her plate by herself in the kitchen. In the months ahead, Ann and I got Mr. Bernstein to come down from his high horse, but it took a lot of coaxing.

Mrs. Webb charitably tried to include Ann in the conversation, but Mr. Bernstein took over, running at full tilt. He began anagramming the names of everyone present and turned to me with undisguised condescension.

“You don’t know what we’re doing, do you?” he said.

“I haven’t played anagrams since I was nine years old,” I responded weakly. Better not add that at age nine, I knew nobody with any interest in anagrams. I was not in Mr. Bernstein’s league.

Richard Nelson challenged a word Mr. Bernstein had come up with, so the Maestro turned to me again. In his grandest Bostonian intonation, a voice heard on many a Young People’s Concert—dropped *r*’s and vowels as broad as the Charles River—he commanded, “Fetch me my Chambers.”

*What? Was this imperious tone a joke?* I ran upstairs, grabbed the crimson English-language dictionary, and laid it before him. I wondered if henceforth I’d be addressed like an obedient dog.

*“Fetch!”*

I had a lot to ruminate on and was glad the evening came to an early end. On my drive back to the student union, I thought about the ease I felt with some of my new colleagues: Ann, Harry, Stephen Wadsworth, Dean Webb. Beneath, I felt distinctly uneasy. What was expected of me? Was I up to this job? What about a dividing line between the Maestro’s grand demands and the refuge of a personal life?

In Indiana, far from my friends in New York, I soon found I wouldn’t have any personal life.

## 4 | *The Cabin Fever Ward*

THE WEATHER IN BLOOMINGTON turned stormy and brought a fresh snowfall every day. The station wagon that Ann had driven from New York wasn't winterized—on day two its battery died. My automotive expertise didn't even encompass how to pump gas, but I soon learned that a diesel has a built-in heater under the hood. Plug it in when the temperature drops below freezing, and the car will start.

Not this car. On day three I called for a tow truck. Hauling the station wagon twenty miles cost a couple hundred dollars, garnished by the bill for a winter tune-up. I had no idea what that involved, and I had no way to pay for it. I used Bernstein's own credit card after calling his accountant in New York. Then I took Ann to the car rental in town to get her another vehicle. This business with the car took up two entire days. Why hadn't this been attended to in New York? I was learning fast: the assistant does the menial tasks no one else can be bothered with.

Every morning I arrived at the condo around 11 A.M., greeted by two men in bathrobes: librettist Stephen Wadsworth, unwashed and unshaven as he rubbed his eyes over a cup of coffee, and Mr. Bernstein, disheveled but bright-eyed after a productive night of writing music at his piano. One guy barely awake, the other ready to go to bed. Ann Dedman, up since 6 A.M., had cleaned the entire condo except for Mr. Bernstein's bedroom and she was itching to escape the confines of that remote condo on the frozen lake.

Ann was lively, fit, and attractive. She was used to having a social life. What a trial it was for her to leave New York with all her food sources and contacts for this Midwestern, mid-winter isolation. Now she had to deal with me, the none-too-swift novice. I had to write down every little detail and was thrown by the most basic demands, whereas Ann fielded phone calls while stirring three saucepans. Both of her hands were always busy and she remembered everything.

The university provided Stephen with an IBM Selectric typewriter, but its font didn't satisfy him. The type was on a removable ball, so Stephen proposed that I get him a variety of these font balls, each font in assorted sizes. Stephen was collaborating with LB on the opera, so I should do whatever he asked. He seemed to be about my age, but he boasted an upbringing far more intellectual than mine, buttressed by an ambition-driven personality. He had a lot at stake with this

opera, as would anyone collaborating with Leonard Bernstein. But I sensed a barrier between us. I could have worn a uniform of denim overalls, for all the credit he gave me.

I dutifully wrote down every one of Stephen's commandments, not suspecting anything was afoot. But every flock has its pecking order. A year later, he and Ann confessed that each morning before my arrival at the condo, they dreamt up something for me to do, the more picayune the better. Stephen specified odd varieties of paper, Bernstein demanded a particular brand of soft-lead pencils, they both required more reference books: a thesaurus or two, *Bartlett's Quotations*, an unabridged dictionary. I wondered why hadn't those things been shipped from New York? There wasn't anyone to do that—that was the assistant's responsibility, I guess, and the assistant was stuck in Indiana.

Doggedly, I fetched winter clothes for Mr. Bernstein. I also started calling him "LB," as everyone else around him did. He even referred to himself as "LB," in the hand-written notes he left me on the dining table if I arrived after he'd gone to bed. In the years ahead, I discovered that LB was decidedly "the Maestro" when on tour; in Vienna, *der Meister*. In Bloomington, he was just LB. I bought him flannel shirts, heavy wool socks, sweaters, and gloves. It was part of the job: fetching for the Maestro, but he seemed pleased, cooing with delight over the shearing gloves.

I also had to buy the *New York Times* every day. In 1982, the newspaper was printed in Chicago and trucked to Bloomington. Snow and ice often closed the roads so that only part of the *Times* made it to the Indiana newsstands. But if I brought only two sections of the newspaper instead of the normal six, I faced the Spanish Inquisition. LB, abetted by Ann and Stephen, accused me—seriously—of withholding the Sunday magazine, the section with those holiest of holies, the crossword puzzle and double acrostic.

"Are you hiding the Sunday magazine in your room?" Stephen inquired in his pointedly accusatory voice.

"Did you leave it behind?" asked LB.

"Where is it?" they cried in unison. If I were put in that predicament today, I'd roll my eyes and say, "*You guys need to get out more,*" but instead I blamed myself. The missing Sunday magazine was my problem, and I couldn't solve it.

I didn't know that I could call the Bernstein office in New York and demand that they mail the entire newspaper every Sunday. But my true failure was not recognizing the symptoms of cabin fever, the irritability that comes from being cooped up indoors for too long. It was making LB, Stephen, and Ann hypercritical. Ann escaped to the supermarket now and then, but LB and Stephen never stepped beyond the front door.

Wackiness took over. LB impersonated Katisha in *Mikado*: “My right elbow . . . is on view Tuesdays and Fridays.” So I borrowed a *Mikado* vocal score from the university library and played from it when I had to wait for LB to emerge from his bath. Stephen repeatedly rattled through a bizarre ragtime number, “Who Put the Snatch on the Lindberg Baby,” sometimes mimicking Billie Holiday. It was amusing the first time.

Fortunately, I had the unwavering support of Dean Charles Webb and his unflappable executive assistant, Pam Duncan. In short order, they supplemented the fonts for Stephen’s typewriter. When segments of the new opera were ready for a trial hearing, they corralled two pianists and a raft of young vocal students, all vetted by Stephen. To supply this cast with music, Pam granted me use of the photocopier in her office. LB’s first notation in his 1982 datebook is a coaching session for the Act I Trio, “Dear Daddy,” sung by the characters Dede, Junior, and François.

The birth of an opera!

One morning at the condo, as I stuffed dirty clothes from LB’s closet into a laundry bag, LB asked me why I was doing his laundry.

“Don’t you have a degree in music?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “A BFA in composition, from Carnegie-Mellon University.” I looked at him. “You’re not, say, an oil executive who could hire anybody to do his laundry. You’re writing an opera, and I might learn something.” I hadn’t put much thought into what I said. “In the meantime,” I added, “There’s dirty laundry and somebody has to pick it up.”

He sat at the piano in his bedroom, not really listening to me, I thought. He shuffled some pages on the piano’s music rack. “Here, see what you can do with this,” he said. “Make a piano reduction of these pages.” He handed me a scene he had completed that morning. “Make sure you lay out the vocal lines clearly.”

I put the laundry bag down.

LB wrote in short score, which can be any number of instrumental or vocal lines of music (“staves”). It can almost look like an orchestra score, though with less vertical space. But a piano reduction is on only two staves. It looks like it was written for the piano. LB asked me to condense his short score onto two piano staves, a considerable skill. I also had to make the music playable by a single pianist. I’d done this before, but not for anyone on Bernstein’s level, and never with a score as complex as this opera. I welcomed the challenge and got to work.

We didn’t have the right paper, and my music manuscript looked spindly, but each day I reduced several pages of LB’s short score. He looked over what I’d done and made changes. Bit by bit, I figured out what he wanted. I also tried to improve



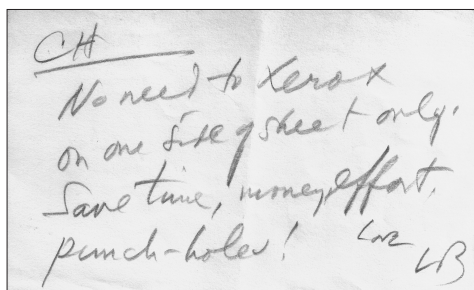
my manuscript. LB was an excellent teacher: to the point, charitable, and encouraging. He teased me about my thinly-drawn lines. The stems I drew, attaching notes to beams, were so lightweight that they disappeared in a photocopy. “Be more forceful,” he said. I aimed for accuracy, but there was more than that to strive for. He wanted the music to look solid, even bold. A steady presence across the page.

On campus, I made photocopies that I then distributed to the singers and pianists for the workshops. Except for the photocopier, that’s how operas have been prepared for centuries.

I also added the copyright notice, supplied by Bernstein’s in-house lawyer. I figured that the singers in those Indiana workshops would keep their photocopies as souvenirs of this brief association with the Maestro. The copyright notice reminded them of the music’s strict limitations. It also made the subtle point that I grasped the business of serious music.

LB’s genius for collaboration kindled his success in music theater, where the authors of the book, the lyrics, and the music, together with the choreographer and stage director, all work side by side. I came to see how this collaborative spirit pervaded all LB’s projects, from his Young People’s Concerts to his Broadway shows, and even to his symphonic programs. The musicians, the composer—living or dead—even the audience—all turned a concert into a collaborative event.

For most of his projects, LB corralled a team. He usually hired whatever help he needed. Hired to assist in the completion of his new opera, I was now part of his team. In my first months on the job, I learned that LB’s professional dedication—a level of intensity normal for him—was what he expected from everyone around him. But he was a genius, right? If I applied myself, could I step up to that level? My head spun. Was I ready for this?



CH  
No need to Xerox on one side of sheet only.  
Save time, money, effort, punch-holes!  
Love LB



I noted the precise placement of the word “only” at the end of the first sentence in this Post-it. That “only” refers to “one side of [a] sheet” of paper. I understood that to place the word *only* elsewhere would change the sentence’s meaning. It’s not an “only need” or an “only Xerox.” It’s one side of a sheet *only*. Clarity in thought and writing consumed LB. He lectured anyone who made a grammatical error, because he was certain that a spoken error indicated a more harrowing error in thinking.

A split infinitive? Regrettable, but understandably idiomatic. But a pronoun in the wrong case—for *you* and *I*—inevitably derailed any conversation. As for a misplaced *only*? Inexcusable. Luckily, I remembered a 1960s CBS broadcast on English grammar, in which the sentence “I punched Walter Cronkite in the nose” served to show how to place the word *only*. *I only punched Walter Cronkite in the nose*; that is, I did not flay him as well. *I punched only Walter Cronkite in the nose*; I did not punch his dog also. *I punched Walter Cronkite only in the nose*; I did not punch him elsewhere, say, in his gut.

LB spared me his “misplaced only” lecture.

IN THEIR OPERA, LB and Stephen intended to bring the American vernacular to the operatic stage: the actual speech of Americans, with its mix of rhythms and tempi, its contractions, slang, and slipshod idioms. Stephen’s libretto in the first act is peppered with interruptions, apologies, apologies for the interruptions, people speaking at cross purposes, and absent-minded woolgathering—all in ordinary, loose language.

One morning at the condo, Stephen read me an entire monologue, probably the second act breakdown by the character Junior. At that point, Stephen was forging onward, though LB was still writing the music for Act I.

I felt flattered that Stephen had asked for my opinion. He sat across from me in his bathrobe. He was deathly pale, unshaven, and as unappetizing as an unearthed but highly caffeinated corpse. I’d had plenty of experience reading plays and opera libretti. As an undergraduate, I’d attended lectures and superbly staged plays at Carnegie-Mellon, and I’d gained some insight on the mechanics of drama. But I wasn’t ready for an intimidating face-to-face with Stephen. As he read Junior’s free-associative going-to-pieces monologue, I leaned back in my chair, as though trying to distance myself.

All creators put pressure on the people around them. *Isn’t this the best thing you ever heard? Are you on this bandwagon or not?* That morning, I evaded giving

Stephen my opinion. I coughed up a lame excuse that the principal characters in what became *A Quiet Place* weren't fully fleshed out for me, and without the music they lacked depth. Stephen wrote me off as utterly clueless and never again asked for my opinion.

At least I got those damn font balls for his typewriter.

## 5 Composers, Conductors, a Celebrated Cellist, and a Charred Cork

BERNSTEIN'S RESIDENCY at Indiana University had no "official" responsibilities, but Dean Webb hinted that LB should feel free to drop by the Jacobs School of Music at any time, sort of like lobbing a tennis ball at an off-duty pro.

It was just the two of us when I drove LB to the campus. We gabbed about ourselves as if we were on a first date. I told LB about my first piano lessons in Germany at age six with Herr Falke. With his beard and girth, black frock and cigars, Herr Falke could have staged a convincing one-man show: *Johannes Brahms Tonight!*

Shortly after my mother rented a piano, Herr Falke strode into our living room and set a book on the keyboard rack. He explained, "This black note below the staff is 'C,' here, on the keyboard, and we have four notes every bar. Now we play!" Together we hammered out "Mädchen, warum weinest du?," the tune fitting easily beneath my fingers and Herr Falke's accompaniment making the rhythm obvious. I had no other memory of learning to read music and played through the entire book in a few weeks, especially smitten with an excerpt from something called *Die Zauberflöte*, or *The Magic Flute*.

LB talked about himself with a casual openness that gave me the feeling of being trusted. Because he liked me? Or was I just the new face in his retinue? I couldn't tell.

He said his first teachers put music in front of him and he played it without hesitation. Hearing an orchestra was the big revelation. "My father could buy tickets for something called 'a concert'—and that changed my life," LB said. I'd felt a similar jolt when my father got tickets for the San Carlo opera house while we were stationed in Naples. The sound of an orchestra and the complexity of staging grabbed me viscerally. I begged to go to every production.

On one of our drives into Bloomington, LB and I talked about Mozart's piano concertos, and I asked if he played the concerto in E flat, K. 271, "Jeunehomme." The opening is notable for two statements by the solo piano, each played after a phrase from the orchestra: orchestra, solo piano, orchestra, piano—unusual for a concerto in 1777. Normally the solo piano enters after the orchestra has played through a third of the first movement.

LB said the first time he played this concerto, he forgot to play the piano's initial solo statement, so there was dead silence for two bars (orchestra; then silence). When the orchestra played its phrase again, as written, LB came in with the piano statement correctly, and the concerto continued without mishap. He said he felt like an idiot through the entire performance, certain that the critics would comment only on his memory lapse. "But nobody mentioned it," he said. "Not even the most erudite critics."

So LB wasn't infallible, I thought to myself. That grandiose employer who bade me fetch his dictionary was human after all.

I asked him if the conductor of that Mozart performance noticed his memory lapse, and a hauteur suffused LB's voice.

"When I play a concerto, I always conduct from the keyboard," he said.

Did he have to sound so pretentious? How was I supposed to know that when he played a piano concerto, he conducted, too? Suddenly, I was no longer chatting amicably with LB, I was in conversational intercourse with the Maestro. There are limits. He doesn't eat with his cook.

One afternoon, I drove LB to the campus to meet the composition students. I knew what to expect, given the school's music-factory reputation. When the door to the lecture hall opened and LB faced seventy young men—I'm sure there weren't any women—he actually reeled backwards.

"How is it possible that every one of you will end up a composer?" he asked the tiers of faces. "How could there be room in the world of serious music for seventy guys to earn a living, writing music?"

The students laughed, but something made them uneasy. They hesitantly placed their scores on a table before LB and played taped performances. As a student, I'd had a session like this, though not with anyone as exalted as Bernstein. Yet I had never been as reluctant as these undergrads.

After three mind-numbing twelve-tone works that rigorously shied away from any emotional attachment, LB had had enough of academic assignments. He leaned back and challenged the students directly. "What do you write for yourselves? Where's the music that you most want to share?"

Dead silence. After an awkward squirminess, LB shouted, "What? *What?!?*"

Two guys bashfully admitted to their passion for improvising together at a piano—but only at parties, and only if no faculty were present.

"C'mon, let's hear something," LB said.

The two tentatively approached the piano. After a bout of giggles, they launched into a selection of Romantic riffs, catchy rhythms, and bits of melodic cheese. As

they found their nerve, they turned the lecture hall into a party. For the moment, they were stars.

Captivated, LB asked, “So what’s wrong with that?” He pressed the group with questions: what sort of instruction did they get? What were the opportunities for performance? What did they want to write? And the opposite question: what was expected of them?

“Our professors require us to produce twelve-tone music,” they said, almost in unison. Neither minimalist nor post-modern music existed in academia in 1982. To be a composer meant giving up one’s personality. None of those composing students contacted LB after that afternoon, so whether their imaginations caught fire from his questions remained a mystery.

Other afternoons, an orchestra assembled at the Jacobs School of Music, and LB held master classes for the conducting students. LB’s teaching fascinated me. Of course, I received a dose of his tutelage every day as I copied his opera manuscript. As with me, LB supported and encouraged the students on the podium, but he stopped them as soon as he saw something questionable.

One student conductor, George Hanson, led the orchestra with his eyes closed, in the manner of Herbert von Karajan—heresy to LB, who insisted on maintaining full visual communication with the entire orchestra, while at the same time continually scanning the score on the podium. Rather than scold George, LB turned to the orchestra.

“Are you missing something?” he asked the musicians.

“Yes,” a couple musicians said. “We want George to look at us.”

“Right!” LB exclaimed as he turned to George.

George opened his eyes and became a conductor, glancing at the music and encouraging the musicians by looking directly at them. How simple.

LB stopped other student conductors, too, and asked them what happens “between the beats.” How do you show those inner beats? About a particular page in one score, LB asked, “What’s important on this page? Where is the music going?” If the woodwinds didn’t enter together as they should have, what could the conductor do? And, by the way, what was the second clarinet playing in bar twelve?

“Don’t look, tell me!” LB commanded, and sometimes the befuddled young conductor skimmed the correct answer off the top of his head.

LB often said that a conductor hadn’t actually learned a score until he could write from memory any instrumental part, from start to finish, a depth of study one of my college professors had tried to instill in me. My professor had copied an entire Brahms symphony, as assigned by Fritz Reiner, the legendary Hungarian

émigré who taught conducting for a decade at the Curtis Institute. It was there that Reiner became one of LB's mentors. I never tackled a feat as weighty as a hundred pages of Brahms, but I filled notebooks with the works of Bach and Mozart in my spindly manuscript.

OFF-CAMPUS EVENTS began to fill LB's schedule, with faculty gatherings far more elevated than any I'd experienced. Musicians I'd heard about all my life collegially greeted one another, but of course no one wanted to greet *me*. I dutifully delivered the star of the evening to the right house and waited until it was time to leave, careful to stay sober so that I could drive LB back to the condo on roads slick with snow.

Cellist János Starker, who had been teaching for over fifty years and who also counted Fritz Reiner as a mentor, hosted a gathering at his house for fifty illustrious faculty members. LB mingled easily but quickly got very drunk. I sensed a Mississippi Mud moment in the making, or was I being too protective? Someone asked Starker to play a Beethoven cello sonata. He agreed, provided Bernstein accompanied him.

Everyone found seats and got deathly quiet. No one came forward to turn pages for LB, so I volunteered. Starker played magnificently, the sound of his cello filling the room, but LB played as though he'd never touched a piano in his life. He swatted recklessly at the keys. He was even drunker than I thought. He couldn't manage the simplest scale passages. At the end of the first movement, I tried to save LB from further embarrassment. I leaned toward him and mumbled that he didn't have to continue.

In a rage, LB yelled, "Don't tell me what to do!" He had turned into the same drunken *rebbe* who had grabbed a glass of gin out of my hand. In a fury, LB hashed through the rest of the Beethoven sonata. My face burned with humiliation and I could barely follow the music as I tried to focus on the page turns. What did I look like to that roomful of world-class musicians? The Maestro's whipping boy?

After the performance, I haltingly made my way towards Stephen Wadsworth and Ann Dedman, off in a corner telling one another jokes saved up for a dead moment. "What's invisible and smells like carrots? Bunny farts," said Stephen as I got within earshot. I didn't feel like laughing, but they wouldn't look in my direction anyway. Their snug club of two couldn't accommodate me. I found a chair, stared into space, and wondered if this was now my life. Fetch and watch out for the Mississippi Mud. When LB got abusive, I was out of my depth. Should I get the next bus back to New York? I could pack and be ready to go before dawn.

That night in my solitary room at the student union, I gave in to that feeling of humiliation and cried quietly. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried, and I couldn't explain to myself with much conviction why I was crying now. Driving a celebrity around wintry Indiana, hearing János Starker play Beethoven: how bad was that? My confusion only added to an overwhelming feeling of worthlessness. I didn't have the backbone to stand up to LB's abusive behavior. No wonder his assistants didn't last long. Though the first six weeks of this job were on a trial basis, somehow I was the one on trial. I wanted this trial to be over.

If I left, what would I go back to? I'd never get to work for another musician like Bernstein. What about the opera? What about my musical skills? I had a difficult time thinking coherently, but when I woke up the next morning, I resigned myself to stick it out for the whole six weeks.

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ANOTHER NIGHT Dean Webb and his wife, Kenda, took LB and me—Ann and Stephen wanted a night off—to Bloomington's swankiest restaurant. We sat smack in the middle of the room, surrounded by tables packed with Bloomington's elite. Everybody there knew the Webbs and recognized their distinguished guest, Leonard Bernstein.

After the waiter opened a bottle of wine, LB picked up the cork and fastidiously rotated one end of it in the flame of a candle. Carbonizing the cork, he turned it into a charcoal wedge as wide as his thumb.

Then LB turned to Kenda and before she could flinch, he drew sweeping patterns in blackest charcoal on her forehead. He picked up her chin in his left hand and deftly turned her head a little left and right as he swiped symmetrical sooty smudges on her cheeks. He spoke in a low undertone about facial symmetry. His seriousness obliged Kenda to stay calm. Then LB leaned across the table and applied the cork to Dean Webb's face with much more bravado: a big "X" on his forehead, a swooping D'Artagnan-like moustache. LB handed the cork to Kenda, who did her best on LB's face, which took some time, and finally she leaned across the table and marked me up while I closed my eyes and relaxed.

The Webbs managed to stomach their horror throughout this ordeal. None of us laughed. Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw that all other eyes in the room were fixed on the four of us. Not a single utensil clinked. Nobody so much as lifted a napkin. Then the waiter brought our plates, and we four ate a splendid gourmet dinner, looking like tribal initiates in a prehistoric ritual. After a half hour, I excused myself to use the men's room. I looked in the mirror, and decided to wash my face, quickly obliterating Kenda's artwork. When I returned to the table, there



My corked face in Key West, Florida, December, 1988. At the fancy restaurant in Bloomington, LB didn't sing.

were sighs of disapproval all around. Later, LB lectured me about spoiling a party. I got the point: as uncomfortable as I'd been with the greasy carbon on my face, washing it off had disassociated me from the tribe.

As we walked out of the restaurant, the Webbs holding their besmirched heads high, the entire place stood and applauded. There's no record of that evening—digital cameras didn't exist in 1982—but charred cork remained LB's preferred pre-prandial ice-breaker. He never deployed it more dramatically than that evening in Bloomington.

A week later, after a much less formal Chinese New Year feast, LB got as far as the parking lot of the student housing before singing tipsily, at the top of his lungs, a personalized version of "A Bicycle Built for Two" in lyrics expressing his complicated affection for Dean Webb—who fortunately wasn't present.

*Deanie Weenie,  
Show me your peenie, do.  
I'm all steamy  
Over the length of you.  
I won't show you mine, it's teenie,  
But that's 'cuz I'm a sheenie,*



*But you're a goy,  
And boy oh boy  
I just betcha it's built for two!*

Scores of people leaned from their apartment windows to catch LB's impromptu performance. At the song's last line, they raised a raucous cheer.

I was beginning to grasp how much LB relished performing. Whether he understood the limits of decorum was another matter. In fact, were there any limits? Was shamelessness part of being a celebrity, or was that simply the way Leonard Bernstein behaved? "Mississippi Mud" or the irrepressible Maestro? People loved LB at his most outrageous, and he wasn't about to disappoint them.

That evening at János Starker's, I learned the hard way not to interfere. And a week later in a public parking lot, I stood back and let the Maestro sing his heart out. If he wanted to wallow in the mud, let him.

Actually, his personalized lyrics were pretty funny.

## 6 } "Chick" and a Concussion

THE SCHEDULE IN THE FIRST WEEK of February 1982 took Leonard Bernstein to Cleveland, where amid a hoopla of receptions and performances he'd receive an honorary doctorate from Cleveland State University. LB said he'd lost count of his honorary degrees, but this would be his nineteenth. After an easy flight from Bloomington, Indiana, LB and I were to be met in Cleveland by LB's manager, Harry Kraut, and press agent, Maggie Carson. In my first try at the tricky mechanics of Maestro travel, I was concerned most of all about my stamina. After four weeks in the "on" mode—"off" being an option only when alone in the car or asleep in my room—I was running on empty. That wasn't a problem in Bloomington, where I knew the stops I had to make en route to the condo every morning: the dry cleaners, the newsstand, Dean Webb's office. Cleveland loomed like an uncharted territory. What about LB as a celebrity? I'd need a big boost of energy to keep up with that.

Gaps in the Cleveland schedule worried me. A year later, Maggie Carson divulged Harry Kraut's modus operandi. "Harry always withholds some information," she said in her laying-down-the-law voice, "so that only Harry knows what's going on. Then he steps in and saves the day." A simple way to garner plaudits for his suave salvaging skills. As Maggie pointed out, "He gets better at this with each success." By "better," I guess she meant "more devious."

We were to depart for Cleveland on a Monday, so I had all day Sunday to think about packing luggage, which I planned to do after I'd taken LB to church. Dean Webb not only managed the largest school of music in the country but also served as organist and choir director for Bloomington's most imposing Methodist sanctuary. He and his choir had prepared Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* for that Sunday, in the composer's honor.

But when I arrived at the condo, I found LB perched on the edge of his bed, his sleep mask on top of his head and the white-noise machine already whirring. Church was no longer in LB's plans. He begged me to go in his place and let him sleep; my assignment was to ask Dean Webb's forgiveness. LB had already taken a sleeping pill and he could barely sign his note of apology. I patiently held the paper for him, put his note in my shirt pocket, and drove off to the church by myself.

It was a dark and stormy day, a wintry cliché in Indiana. Freezing rain turned to slush on the roads and severely challenged my driving skills. Tire chains? I knew absolutely nothing about them.

Kenda Webb met me at the church door, graciously accepted LB's apology, and led me upstairs to seats in the loft. From there, we saw that the place was packed, with not a spare pew cushion anywhere.

So many years had passed since I'd last heard *Chichester Psalms* that this performance seemed as if I'd come across the music for the first time. Plus, after a month of immersion in *A Quiet Place*, I listened with a new aural sensibility, a sort of Bernstein filter. I heard certain similarities in melodic contour and rhythmic pulse and sensed a long compositional line running throughout all LB's works.

A couple weeks earlier on campus, I'd caught the film *On the Waterfront*, and although LB didn't attend, he had a lot to say about his only film score. "I had to fight for that horn solo over the credits," he said. "The producers wanted a big orchestra, right from the start." Bernstein had argued for a stark contrast instead. Begin with a simple, noble melody—that solo horn—and switch, under the opening shot, to a bombardment of percussion. A percussion fugue, no less.

For that film, LB got what he wanted. Now, I heard an echo of that fugue in the middle of *Chichester*—though I didn't yet know that LB had borrowed that music from himself; he had repurposed a discarded number from *West Side Story*.

LB also described wrangling with a moviola, a contraption for frame-by-frame film playback. Moviolas were still in use when I took a film course in the 1960s, so I understood the tricky coordination of two film spools and a wacky speed-control mechanism. For LB, even a simple on-off switch tested his technological skills.

LB said that in Hollywood he was shown to a room with a desk and a moviola, and told he had a specific number of hours to fit his music to the frames in the film. Figuring things out on his own in that room must have been lonely work for a natural-born collaborator, far from the camaraderie of *On the Town* and *Fancy Free*.

In LB's essay "Notes Struck at 'Upper Dubbing,' California," written in 1954 for the *New York Times*, he recounted his disillusionment over the massive cuts made to his score for *On the Waterfront*. But as I watched the movie in Bloomington, I wondered about LB's musical thinking—it didn't seem intuitively filmic. He wrote distinct musical numbers. After the love theme's first three notes, the entire romantic tune was sure to follow—beautiful music, but there was too much of it and it was too loud to serve as underscoring for Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint's subtle acting. LB's score called attention to itself like a symphonic opus.

MEANWHILE, seated at the Methodist church's magnificent organ and unaware if LB was present, Dean Webb led his choir through *Chichester Psalms*, giving a

polished, lively performance. The concluding unaccompanied chorale satisfied me emotionally in a new way. I heard inner voices resolve slightly at odds with the rules I'd learned in counterpoint class. So that's how a real composer writes. That morning, I heard for the first time "the note that costs"—a witticism LB borrowed from Aaron Copland to describe an inevitably "right" sound, achieved after diligent deliberation. (Copland might have meant that "the note that costs" allowed him to command the big Hollywood tunesmith fees.)

Freezing rain came down more relentlessly as I drove to the brunch afterwards. Ice formed on the streets alongside the slush left over from that morning. How bad would the roads be on my drive back to LB's condo?

On my first solo social outing since tackling the job of assistant to the Maestro, I discreetly said nothing about the opera-in-progress, but I gamely fielded questions about what it was like to see Bernstein every day. The word games: Mental Jotto and add-a-letter, cryptic British crossword puzzles in *The Listener* and *The Guardian*. I described LB's hilarious impersonation of Katisha in *Mikado* and his dinnertime recitations of entire Shakespeare soliloquies.

Talking about LB triggered my jitters about the impending trip to Cleveland. I hadn't packed for the trip and the flight was less than twenty-four hours away. I kept pulling slips of paper from my shirt pocket to jot memos: *pack the crossword puzzles, stash extra pencils in the carry-on bag, don't forget music manuscript paper*. A chorus of "write that down" rang around the table whenever I reached into my shirt pocket. Later, somebody gave me a miniscule notepad and pencil. The size of a teabag, it nestled in my shirt pocket for years.

As I drove to the lakeside condo after the brunch, the dim winter light faded to black and the dark, icy roads demanded total concentration. The free day had revived me a little, but deep down I was exhausted.

While Ann prepared dinner, I told LB about Dean Webb's performance of *Chichester Psalms*. As a student, I'd spoken with composers about their works but never with a composer so famous or a piece so well-known.

LB admitted, "In 'Chich,' I didn't plan my setting of the text, and I ran out of words." Toward the end, the chorus sings "Ah."

"I thought that was deliberate," I said, "as if words were inadequate."

"Rapture," LB said, with a hint of irony.

He insisted I stay for dinner, but I wanted to go back to the student union and get some sleep, mindful of the next day's trip to Cleveland.

To return to the campus quickly, I opted for the limited-access highway instead of the back roads, but as I maneuvered onto the highway, I nearly panicked. It was solid ice. I'd never driven on ice. My car got no traction at all as it slid forward.

I let the car slow to a crawl and looked for the first exit. I could just make out the off-ramp and gently gave the steering wheel a nudge. The car spun around once, then spun around a second time. I put my foot on the brake and the car slid sideways. I'd lost all control. There were no guardrails at the highway's edge, and the car pitched headfirst down a steep embankment.

Even with my seatbelt buckled, my face smashed into the rearview mirror. The glass shattered. Shards rammed into my forehead. I opened the car door and climbed up the embankment to see if anyone was on the highway. I made a mental note of what was in the trunk: no Bernstein manuscripts, of that I was sure. I could abandon the car and whatever was in it without much worry, but I forgot to turn off the car's engine. When the state police came by later, they found the lights on and the motor still running.

I heard ice crunching not far off, so I waved my arms. Without coming to complete stop, a car slowed enough for me to get in back. Of course, this car had tire chains. Any sensible driver in Indiana had chains in this weather. The driver said he'd seen me spin around and dive off the road. He was relieved when he saw me standing upright. His girlfriend handed me tissues to stanch my bleeding, while I apologized for the blood I dripped on the back seat of their car. But I was cushioned by mounds of debris from McDonald's: Styrofoam boxes, paper napkins, hamburger wrappers, paper cups, and paper bags. My bleeding dribbled onto only the topmost layer.

The driver said his mother was a nurse at the Bloomington hospital, so he knew exactly where to go. In no time, I was lying on a gurney in a brightly-lit room as I gave a deposition to a state trooper. He said breezily, "We lost three people at that exit last year," when I asked why there were no guardrails at such a precarious ramp. Then he explained that Indiana doesn't plow or salt the main highways, since everyone knows to use back roads in severe winter weather. *Gee, thanks, I wish I'd known that.*

After picking the shards out of my face and stitching up the largest cut, the doctor in charge made an appointment to reset my nose. It had fractured when my head hit the rearview mirror. The doctor stressed that I had a serious concussion and shouldn't spend the night on my own. I'd need to be awakened throughout the night. The trooper called the condo after I gave him the number. Ann and Stephen were on their way.

When we got back to the condo, Stephen cleared out his room—I don't know where he put himself the next few days, but it was exceedingly considerate of him—and Ann fed me something. As I sat at the dining table, LB looked gravely at me.

"Call your mother," he said.

That hadn't occurred to me. I wanted to explain to LB that when I communicated with my parents, I wrote a letter. I almost never made a phone call. Why would they be interested? Their support had never existed, so why should I turn to them now? I couldn't manage to say all that, but LB never took his eyes off me, as though he were reading my thoughts. Ann brought the phone to the table, and LB watched closely as I told my mother that I'd hit some ice and banged up my nose but was generally all right. After I hung up, LB badgered me further.

"How do you feel?" he asked, not referring to my physical aches and pains—this was a therapist's question. LB considered himself not only the Chief Rabbi of the Universe but therapist to the entire planet. For once, I took him seriously.

"I feel like a failure," I said. "I won't be able to make the trip to Cleveland. I was looking forward to it." I was also truly exhausted, banged-up, and miserable. "I'm letting you down," I said.

"Go to bed," LB said decisively.

There must have been morphine in my system, because I fell asleep instantly. Now Stephen was talking me into wakefulness, and I thanked him: yes, I was awake. This concussion business was new to me, but Stephen let me go back to sleep. Just as suddenly, LB was pushing my shoulders, growling, "Wake up, wake up." I hoped this was it for shoving me into consciousness. I'd have preferred slipping into a coma.

"OK, I'm awake," I said with some irritation.

This time the morphine had worn off, and adrenaline coursed through me like an electric current.

"How am I going to get back to sleep?" I asked LB. "Could you tell me a boring story?" What did I have in mind? "Something dull and uneventful."

He hesitated but sat down.

"There were two women living in a cottage in Wales," he began. "The cottage was perched on a hillside where the wind blew so fiercely that the two women could barely open the door, but every morning they shouldered it open just enough to pick up the newspaper on the doorstep."

LB paused.

"*The Daily Leek*," he said dryly.

The play on the Welsh national emblem perked me up. I knew LB had received a letter from Martha Gellhorn that week, posted from a village in Wales. Years later I read that letter: she described a wind so fierce that she struggled to open her front door. She was a famous journalist, but she didn't mention any newspaper, much less the fictional *Daily Leek*.

"What was in the newspaper?" I asked, now wide awake.

“Oh, the local gossip,” LB said, veering off into his imaginary village. “It’s all in Welsh,” he said, “which sounds like baby talk. Richard Burton tried to teach me a few phrases,” and LB made gurgling noises like an infant sucking on a pacifier. “There’s a lot of sheep news, and of course the police blotter. Who got robbed, who got drunk, and whose horse got loose.”

“What sort of news about sheep?” I asked, sitting up in bed. LB could not tell a boring story.

“The two women had some sheep themselves,” LB said, “up on the hillside above their cottage.” He paused. “But it’s time you went back to sleep.”

He stood to leave and said goodnight.

The next day, LB flew to Cleveland, and I stayed three days in the condo with Ann and Stephen, both of them now full of solicitous concern. They drove me back to the hospital for my appointment with the surgeon, a young man with a confident way about him. He’d played football at Bloomington High School and could tackle anything that came his way. After he coated the interior of my nose with cocaine to dull the pain of setting the fracture, he waited a minute, said that wasn’t enough for a fracture like mine, and gave my nasal passages another coat. Then he stood behind my head, and with a thumb on either side of my nose, snapped it back into place.

Cocaine was new to me. Whoa, no pain. I’ll always remember the snap, and being at the mercy of a hulking blond football hero. As Ann drove back to the condo, she giggled at my cocaine-induced monologue, even as I panicked at a curve in the icy road.

One evening at the condo, Stephen entertained the student participants from the opera-in-progress workshops. Ann turned out fantastic things to eat and I sat on the sofa in a daze, accepting condolences. What else could I do, fogged on painkillers and no longer anything close to “too cute”?



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Leonard Bernstein reeked of cheap cologne and obviously hadn't showered, shaved, or slept in a while. Was he drunk to boot? He greeted his new assistant, Charlie Harmon, with “What are you drinking?” Yes, he was drunk.

Charlie was hired to manage the day-to-day parts of Bernstein's life. There was one additional responsibility: make sure Bernstein met the deadline for an opera commission. But things kept getting in the way: the centenary of Igor Stravinsky, intestinal parasites picked up in Mexico, teaching all summer in Los Angeles, a baker's dozen of young men, plus depression, exhaustion, insomnia, and cutthroat games of anagrams. Ditto half of those syndromes for the Maestro's assistant.

For four years, Charlie saw Bernstein every day, serving as his social director, gatekeeper, valet, music copyist, and orchestra librarian. He packed Bernstein's thirty pieces of luggage; got the Maestro to his concerts; kept him occupied changing planes in Zürich, Frankfurt, Tokyo, or Madrid; and learned how to make small talk with mayors, ambassadors, a chancellor, a queen, and a few Hollywood legends. How could anyone absorb all those people and places? Not to mention the music—lots and lots of music. Charlie did it. And this is what it was like—told for the first time.

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