

PRACTICING IN THE DARK

by

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It's March and too cold for Delia, who pulls her black wool scarf tighter around her neck and tugs her coat—missing three buttons—tighter around her body. Under the coat, her winter blue-plaid school uniform offers no protection against the chill. She holds a stack of textbooks against her body for added warmth and wishes she hadn't lost her gloves. She longs for warmer temperatures, for spring's kiss on the now-naked winter trees lining the streets. Her father, who has sayings for everything, once told her March comes like a lion, but leaves like a lamb. Today, the lion roars her to numbness. She reminds herself to remember to sew the buttons back on her coat and to possibly snag her mother's gloves.

On Riverside Avenue she forces herself step by step toward the Inner Harbor, away from Mary Star of the Sea High School, knowing she must endure the cold for another twenty minutes before she reaches her neighborhood. First a piano lesson, then home to change, and then her cashier job at the grocery store where her mother knows the owner and finagled the under-the-table job. The stack of textbooks provides some protection against the cold air, but her arms ache from the weight. She sets the stack down on a nearby stoop and shivers in her thin coat until she picks them up again. The books hold her coat shut. A few days ago, she asked her mother for a warmer coat, but winter is nearly over, her mother said, adding that she'd get a new one next year. She also asked her mother to sew the missing buttons, which sat in a small, clear cup in her

room, back onto her coat.

“You could do it yourself,” Ivy said.

Delia felt guilty for asking. She could do it herself, if she knew how to sew. She promises herself that she’ll figure it out, sew the buttons on as soon as she arrives home. She wishes she could skip work today, go home after her piano lesson and do her homework. She wishes she could skip work forever, but Bird and her mother arranged the whole thing, and the money pays for the piano lesson, something her mother didn’t want to pay for anymore. To her mother, going to work was like going to church, except you get paid, and you didn’t skip it unless you were dead, never mind that Bird gives Delia the creeps.

She increases her pace, reaches Montgomery Street, and foregoes her usual stroll through Fedhill Park, proceeding instead down the steep hill straight to Key Highway, a six-lane avenue. She plans to duck into one of the one of the Harbor Pavilions to warm up, even if it is overrun by tourists. She could walk through both of them to stay warm for the duration all the way to Pratt Street. Usually the afternoon sunlight dances over the harbor water causing the surface to glitter, but today’s weak sun hides its yellow face behind gray clouds, and the harbor waters appear a dull green. The city’s skyline, jagged against the colorless sky, casts shadows that look like dinosaur teeth on the pavilion’s faded green rooftop.

In her head, Delia focuses on practicing her Schubert to distract her from feeling cold. She imagines the notes and the rhythms. *Everything is music*, Lucy told her, and advised her to train her ears. To train her ear, she follows Lucy’s instructions of listening to the rhythms of all the sounds around her. She listens hard to the sound of her feet hitting the pavement, but her rubber-soled saddle shoes keep her footsteps quiet. At Key Highway, the orange pedestrian light blinks

“Don’t Walk,” and at the curb near the control box, she listens intently for tones and rhythms around her: traffic horns, tugboat blasts, train whistles, seagulls’ cries, children’s shouts, car and truck engines whizzing east and west along Key Highway. She shuts her eyes and tries to experience the sounds of the world the way Lucy might, and with her eyes shut tight and with intense concentration, she can hear the whirs and clicks of the traffic light controls. She wonders what different things Lucy might hear and “see” with her blindness. Compared to Lucy’s trained ear, Delia knows she misses hearing a lot of stuff and wonders what Lucy misses seeing. A few minutes later, when the whirs and clicks of the control sound again and the sounds of moving traffic stop, Delia knows the light has changed and she can cross the avenue. When she opens her eyes, she sees that the cars are stopped at the light. She also sees Bird’s red delivery car across the street. Inside, Bird waves to her, and a knot forms in her stomach. What’s he doing on Key Highway? What’s he doing here? Why’s he parked in a no-parking zone, his hazard lights blinking in a steady, unbreaking rhythm?

“Delia, do you want a ride home?” he calls across the street, cupping his hand around the side of his mouth like a yodeler.

She hopes none of her school friends will see Bird waving at her. She’s tempted. A ride home would be warmer and faster, but she doesn’t want to be with Bird. “No,” she shouts, shaking her head, as she crosses the avenue to the other side, where Bird is parked. She walks past his car. “Thanks anyway.”

Bird opens the car door and stands, half in, half out of the vehicle. “Come on Delia, I’ll give you a ride. It’s too cold for you to walk,” he yells.

Passersby probably think he’s her father. Delia imagines breaking into a run, but the stack

of textbooks in her arms prohibit that. She continues away from Bird's car. "Later, Bird," she says.

"It'll be nice and warm in the car," he says, now walking beside her.

"I know," she says. "Thanks anyway."

"I have a little prezzie for you," Bird says, his voice sotto voce, almost conspiratorial.

She stops. She doesn't look at him, though she wonders what could possibly top the diamond earrings that have been dangling from her ears since he gave them to her in the store's office. Tempted, she fights the desire to look and keeps her eyes straight in front of her.

"You can give it to me later, Bird," she says. She begins walking. "I like the walk."

"Come on, Delia. Look."

Bird holds a department store package in his outstretched hand.

"There's another, but you have to come with me to get it," he says.

Delia wonders what's in the box. Her arms are full of textbooks, which are holding her coat shut. She stares at the shiny bag.

"It's yours. Take it," he says, smiling. Then he must realize that she can't.

He grabs her stack of textbooks and trades them for the bag. His eyes shine; he's pleased with himself. Delia imagines him jumping up and down like a small child, but he is standing there holding her stack of books, looking earnest. Behind his lips, his white teeth gleam. He carries the stack of textbooks to the car and dumps them onto the back seat. "Shit Delia, you're going to break your back with these books," he says, standing by the car. "Come on, now. Get in and open the bag."

In the car, the hem of her school uniform skirt peeks from beneath her coat. Delia adjusts

that coat before fastening her seat belt.

“What the fuck is going on with your coat?”

Delia’s face burns with embarrassment when she sees Bird staring at her thin coat with its missing buttons. He says nothing, and frowning, he cranks up the heater, blasting it in her direction. She’s grateful to be warm. Eyes watering, tears streaming down her face from the change in temperature, she looks as if she’s crying as she pulls a rectangular box covered with black and white paper and a turquoise ribbon from the shiny department store bag. Bird jerks the car out of the no-parking zone, clicks off the steady sound of the blinkers, and merges onto Key Highway in the direction of the neighborhood.

Delia unwraps the rectangle and holds a plastic-wrapped, pale yellow box with gold French lettering, “Aromatic Elixir.”

“Smell it. You’ll love it.”

She does. The fragrance enchants her. It smells like a musky combination of flowers and spice.

“Thank you!” she says, meaning it, returning the box and the wrapping paper to the bag.

“Wear it now. Go on, spray some on now. You’ll smell grown-up,” Bird says.

When he stops at the red light on Calvert Street, Delia notices he’s in the wrong lane and fails to turn in the direction of their neighborhood. The knot in Delia’s stomach returns.

“You missed the turn,” she says, pointing to where the car should be going.

“Don’t worry Delia. I told you there’s another prezzie. Part Two. We’re going to get it. It’s waiting for you. Just up the street.”

“Part two?”

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise, though I realize now I should have gotten you something else.”

“Here,” he says, handing her a brown bag from the store, filled with fruit. “That’s not your second prezzie. That’s in case you’re hungry.”

Delia grabs a large apple from the bag and bites into it, sweetness of the fruit flooding her mouth, the crispiness of the fruit just the way she likes it.

“Let me have a bite,” Bird says.

Delia winces. She doesn’t like sharing food that’s not properly cut. She takes another bite and hands it to him. “You can have it,” she says. Her mother has warned her so many times not to share food or drinks with others because of germs, but Bird apparently missed this lesson, because he bites the apple without hesitation. Still chewing, he hands it back to her.

“No thanks. You can have it,” she says, pushing his arm away.

Bird finishes the apple, tossing the core out the window and wiping his fingers on his pants. She turns and sees through the car’s rear window the apple core bouncing and splattering on the street, the car behind them running it over, obliterating it, and is amazed that Bird didn’t wait for a trash can to throw it away.

“You’re not supposed to litter,” she says.

Bird laughs uproariously as if she’s just told a fabulous joke. Delia scrunches her face, wondering if it would’ve been faster to walk back. Then Bird turns onto Light Street again, except now they are further north but traveling south, homeward bound, and Delia begins to relax until he pulls into the parking garage for the Treehouse Apartments, sliding into a spot near the elevators.

“Part Two. Come with me,” he says.

“Piano lesson in an hour, so is this going to take long?” she asks.

“Just get out and come with me,” he says, slamming his car door.

She wonders what Part Two is doing in this building. In the elevator, which looks fancier than her whole house, Bird stands too close to her. He tries to kiss her on the elevator, but she averts her face. When the doors open, he squeezes her hand and leads her down a long, blue carpeted hallway with drab, forgettable posters on the walls and silk floral wreaths on many of the doors. Bird unlocks the door to 1329, and they step inside. With its bare walls, curtain-free windows, unstocked kitchen cabinets, and empty refrigerator, the place looks sad and neglected. A cheap glass-top kitchen table and four plastic chairs occupy the dining room. A scale, boxes of plastic bags, mirrors, and razor blades sit on the table. An unmade full-sized bed fills the bedroom, the sheets stained in areas.

“My secret apartment,” he says, showing her around.

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Later at home, Delia’s mother Ivy arranges three cups of raw walnuts atop a white linen cloth on the kitchen table before covering them with an identical cloth. She leans into the table and with a thick rolling pin begins crushing the walnuts, pressing the pin into the cloth as she rolls it back and forth over the linen. Periodically, Ivy checks on the texture of the nuts, moves them around with her fingers, replaces the top linen, and resumes the rolling. Delia’s mother’s black, lacquered hair stands tall in a black bouffant, wrapped with an orange kerchief. She’s wearing makeup, mostly rouge in two perfect circles on her cheeks and dark red lipstick, her

signature look. A faded, flour-dusted apron covers a pair of navy blue sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt, and Delia wishes her mother would pay more attention to how she looks. Measuring cups, a bowl of shelled eggs, containers of already sifted and premeasured flour, sugar, milk, a glass of orange juice, a bowl with two oranges, and a bottle of dark rum sit on the counter next to the mixer. Ivy is baking her usual church bake-sale cake, her famous orange, walnut, and rum cake. Delia dislikes the smell of that cake and wonders why her mother never bakes them something simple and plain, something less fancy than orange walnut rum cake, which Delia dislikes anyway.

On the stairs, Delia holds her coat in one hand and the three missing buttons in the other. A towel wrapped like a turban around her head covers her wet hair, which she will need to dry before leaving for work. She's taken an extra-long, extra-hot shower to clean Bird's smell off her skin, but it lingers.

"Ma, can you sew the buttons on my coat while I get dressed for work?"

"Dammit. You see I'm busy," Ivy says. "You can do it," she says, reminding Delia that she said the same thing yesterday.

"But it's just three—"

"You're not a baby. You can sew three buttons," Ivy says. She doesn't look at Delia. Instead, she focuses on the white linen cloth, on pushing the rolling pin to and fro, on baking her stupid cake. Her mother doesn't have to hide the rum bottle when she makes the orange walnut rum cake. Delia wonders how many swigs Ivy has taken, and she doesn't need Ivy to remind her that she's not a baby anymore, especially after being with Bird in his secret apartment.

"You were late from your piano lesson," Ivy says. "You must tell him you're going to be

late.”

“I already did,” Delia says, lying. “Bird already knows I’m going to be late today.” Her mouth doesn’t seem to want to work properly, and she forces the words out. Another black mark spreads across her soul, joining all the ones that appeared on it while she was in the secret apartment, and she imagines how they all cover her once stain-free, white soul like an oil slick. She wonders if her mother sees something different about her, a shadow following her wherever she goes.

“Get moving then,” Ivy says, eyeing the rum bottle.

Delia remembers when she smoked a cigarette with Francie for the first time. They were sitting on the lower steps of the funeral home, a place they thought was safe from prying eyes, but both their mothers knew what they were up to before they returned home. After that, they weren’t allowed to be friends anymore, and Ivy beat Delia with both hands. Delia wonders—if someone saw her and Bird at the Treehouse, or walking to the car in the garage, or Bird driving her back and dropping her off a few blocks away from Lucy’s house for her piano lesson—would Ivy beat her again?

“You were probably wasting time with that big oaf Fred. Bird told me that Fred hangs around you. Don’t let me find out you were with him after your piano lesson, or you’re going to be in trouble.” Ivy’s voice sounded matter-of-fact.

“Why are you talking about Fred like that? You’ve known him forever,” Delia says, knowing that she met up with Fred before the lesson and not after.

“It’s different now. You’re in high school, and things happen,” Ivy says. “Boys that age want different things, things you don’t know anything about yet.”

Delia bugs out her eyes and smirks. She wants to tell Ivy she knows plenty. “I wasn’t with him after lesson, Ma. OK? My lesson ran over.”

Delia wonders if she’s become invisible to her mother. The diamond and gold earrings that Bird gave her shimmer in her ears like giant billboards, and Ivy has not noticed them. She hid the perfume bottle in the back of her underwear drawer along with prezzie number two, a bracelet matching the earrings. “Bird barred him from coming into the store,” Delia says.

“You’d better not be lying, Delia, or there will be hell to pay,” her mother says without even a glance at her. Fred walked her to Lucy’s house after Bird dropped her off. He carried her books for her. Delia squeezes the three buttons in her hand but imagines throwing them at her mother, whom she fiercely hates at this moment. Ivy empties the now-crushed walnuts into a small glass bowl by shaking them loose from the linen cloths.

“Do we have any needles and thread?” Delia asks.

“In the flatware drawer. Do you have time to sew them on now?”

“Bird said to get there when I get there,” Delia says.

He said exactly that when he let her out of the car. Maybe she wouldn’t get there at all today. Through her lesson, Delia contemplated not going to work. In the flatware drawer she finds a spool of burnt-orange thread with a rusty needle poking out of it. The orange thread will clash with her grayish black coat, but she doesn’t care. She wants to be warm. Sitting at the kitchen table with the coat, buttons, needle, and thread, she accidentally pricks her index finger with the needle more than once. She struggles to sew a button onto her coat, yelping softly whenever the dull point stabs her finger and wiping the blood droplets on the towel wrapped around her head.

She imagines the statue at school, the beautiful girl with the long, golden hair who plucked out her eyes rather than marry an older man. Delia can't imagine plucking her eyes out to avoid the sensations Bird made her body feel after school, even if she knows it's wrong. Delia's soul gained a new black mark every time Bird thrust himself in and out, because she couldn't stop it from feeling good. Her body transformed itself into a wicked, out-of-control thing, humming, groaning, moaning, betraying her with its urge to meet Bird's thrusts and to wrap her legs around his hairy thighs, wanting him to go deeper, faster as if she didn't recognize herself anymore. A part of her likes the way Bird moved inside her as if he were late for a train. Unable to look at him or keep her eyes shut, she studied the cracks on the ceiling above the bed in the secret apartment, hating her body for the pleasure it felt from Bird's fingers, worrying about the state of her soul, imagining it looking as black as Benny Pokino's eyes, Benny, the boy she loved since third grade until she saw him shoplifting from the store.

In the secret apartment Bird's face scrunched up as if someone stabbed him in the back. He squeezed her tight and groaned; his weight crushed her as she struggled to breathe, and he kept himself inside her until the last possible minute. Later, all through piano lesson, something leaked out of her into her underpants. When she showered, the crotch of her underwear looked stained with pale yellow. She washed them with shampoo and blow dried them before dropping them into the hamper so Ivy wouldn't see it.

At the kitchen table, Delia completes sewing the first button, the orange thread shouting from the black button. She picks up the second button and begins the process again. Delia notices that her mother has retreated into her own world, perhaps forgetting that Delia is still sitting at the table. Ivy dumps softened butter from its small container into a large mixing bowl and turns

on the mixer. She pours sugar into the mixing bowl, a slow stream of white granules, moving it around with a rubber spatula. Delia returns to the button and then smells rum as her mother pours it into a liquid measuring cup. When she looks up at her mom, she catches Ivy taking two quick swigs straight from the bottle. Delia completes the second button and moves on to the third; she glances up and sees Ivy swigging more rum from the bottle. Delia stabs the needle in and out of the cloth, the orange thread growing more taut.

“It’s time to put the rum away,” Delia says, unable to keep the anger out of her voice.

Ivy, who’s startled by the sound of Delia’s voice, faces Delia with a murderous expression.

“You don’t tell me. I tell you. It’s time to get your late-to-work ass out of here before I slap you two weeks into next month.”

Delia completes the third button before getting up. “I quit,” she yells, just to annoy Ivy, who must have been swigging rum for most of the day because she’s drunk. For a moment, Delia misses the mother Ivy once was, the one there for her always, and despises this odd replacement, an obese look-alike with perfectly round circles of rouge on her cheeks and not a clue about anything else.

“Like hell you did,” Ivy shouts, lobbing a rubber batter-coated spatula at her.

Delia avoids the spatula winging its way toward her and splattering cake batter everywhere along its trajectory. She doesn’t want to be home with a drunk Ivy without her father, who’s working. She doesn’t want to go to work because she doesn’t want to see Bird again. When she leaves the house, she walks across the street to the church rectory and rings the doorbell. The church secretary knows exactly why she’s there and lets her in. She calls the store

and leaves a message that she won't be in. She then enters the church from the rectory and heads straight for the piano where she's spent many years practicing in the dark, the area illuminated only by dim lights of flickering candles.

THE END