

*During cubicle time, practice diddles. Rudiments.*

*Paradiddles first.*

*Begin slowly; swing the sticks high, move wrists and arms in equal arcs.*

*Accelerate, until you can pick the bounce off the skin, collect it between the sticks and your palms.*

*As sticks quicken, balance the movement of tip and shaft against each other.*

*Tickle sticks with fingertips, until the stick beads hum, sound accents.*

*Push, quicken, sticks nipping fingertips until your knuckles ache, hold, hold, hold it Yes.*

*Then slowly, evenly, drop away.*

*Play each rudiment for three minutes. Perform each three times, without rest.*

*Take a break—one minute.*

*In the next practice room, Yves Poitras presses swollen lips into the silver rim of his mouthpiece. Today he is learning to flutter tongue.*

\* \* \*

THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES cross-country flight takes 16 hours. It starts in Victoria, makes stops in Vancouver, Penhold, Winnipeg, Borden, Trenton, Moncton and Halifax. I am travelling the whole distance—from the CAF School of Music in Victoria to Halifax.

I have a cold. Every cavity in my head is full of green mucous. Each pressure change, each landing and takeoff, stretches my eardrums. They yield. On the ground in Winnipeg I nod my head side to side. Dwack, dwack, dwack. Loose eardrums mimic the smack of an open palm on flat water.

I test them often. Somewhere over Quebec the officer cadet in the next seat, a Queens boy with a band of white skin along a fresh haircut, asks if my neck is sore.

I arrive in Halifax, my head a wash of white noise. I cannot think. Fortunately there is no need. My arrival is expected. I am not important, just a reserve drummer. Even so, the Department of National Defence knows exactly where I am, sends a van to meet me at the airport, instructs a duty Sergeant to find me a bed, a mess card, work orders, a map of the base.

No matter where I go, she expects me. No matter where I go, she is comfortably constant.

In Halifax, as in Victoria or Comox or Borden or Cornwallis, her buildings have linoleum floors (never carpet, never tile). Her bedsheets are greyish cotton and smell of institutional detergent. A weasely Corporal with awful teeth passes them through a half door at the end of a dark hallway. There are four or more pubic hairs locked in the warp and weft of those sheets. I find them, gag as I pluck them, then make my bed.

Her messes serve breaded veal cutlets every Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday; the cutlets contain no detectable veal. Mess cutlery won't cut the cutlets—the experienced diner carries a serrated plastic knife.

In every one of her women's washrooms a brigade of porcelain urinals stands. In Esquimalt they flush in unison, every 15 minutes, respectfully eroding the white deodorant pucks the Corporal places in the drains every third Wednesday.

\* \* \*

*TIME IS NOT NOTES.*

*You can see notes . . . a pattern of fingers on strings or felt pads lifted, holes covered, keys depressed. D is the white key to the right of Middle C.*

*Time is impalpable. If you're not diligent, vigilant, an andante easily stretches to adagio, vivo rear-ends vivace, pushes it through presto, and suddenly it is all happening too fast, and you can't control it anymore.*

*You keep time by practising it constantly.*

*You keep 120 beats per minute.*

*That is the speed of marching.*

*That is the speed of a heartbeat in wartime.*

\* \* \*

THE FIRST NIGHT IN HALIFAX, I hear only watery sounds, gurgles and soft roar. The next morning I go to the Medical Inspection Room before I report for duty. It is Monday. I am the only female. The rest consist of aching Privates, a half-platoon of contusions and pebble-studded shoulders. They talk acceleration and wet curves, and of an old guy named Mike who does bike work cheap from his garage on the Dartmouth side.

"What seems to be the problem today, Corporal?" the duty doctor asks, face concealed in manila.

"Leading Wren," I tell him. He lowers the folder, eyes me. He has a trim collar, a sharp crease in the sleeves, passable sheen on his dress shoes.

"I'm Navy sir—a Leading Wren, not Corporal."

"What seems to be the problem today?"

"It's my ears, sir. I think I hurt them flying from Victoria."

"You pregnant?" I fight the urge to scramble backwards when he reaches for my throat, palpates neck and chin for swollen glands.

"No sir, I have a cold." He pokes the sharp scope into my left ear. The canal is tender and I squirm.

". . . and you're not pregnant?" He scopes my right ear.

"No sir. I'm a virgin."

"A vir . . . well," he places the scope on the examining table, "then you've probably got a cold."

I've been to the MIR three times: twice for flu, once for pink eye. Each time the doctor asked if I was pregnant, each time I said "no," each time they asked again.

"The eardrums are a little inflamed, but not ruptured. They'll be better in a few days, but it'll be a couple of weeks before they're back to normal." He scratches at a prescription pad. "These will help with the pain and swelling. Talk to the nurse if you have any questions."

An Army nurse gives me a plastic bottle of sage green capsules and the white copy of a triplicate form that excuses my tardiness.

\* \* \*

#### *EXAM DAY AT THE SCHOOL.*

"Ritard?" *Warrant Officer McPhee eyes you over the top of a clipboard. His hair is silver, so bright it captures shadows. He is young to have such hair.*

*"Gradually reduce speed," you reply. He checks at the sheet with a clear Bic, smiles.*

*"Play four measures and ritard over the last two." You do. He checks, smiles again.*

"Rubato?"

*"It means robbed. You steal time from some notes, make them smaller, then use the time to make other notes bigger."*

*"Go ahead and play it."*

*"I can't Warrant. I've tried, but I just can't." He puts the clipboard down. "It doesn't make sense." You tell him. "It goes against everything."*

*"Yes. It does," he replies. Then he laughs, like it's no big deal.*

\* \* \*

I RATTLE THE PILL BOTTLE IN my pocket, glance at the map that tells me where the band meets. The Stadacona rehearsal hall is several blocks past the Oland's Brewery, about nine blocks from the barracks. I walk down Hollis Street breakfast-

ing on the bready smell of yeast and hops on salt air. I stumble when the vertigo moves through me, pitches me from left to right. A storm of nausea rolls to the back of my throat. I wrestle it still, let it escape as a soundless belch.

It's the ears.

When I arrive at the rehearsal hall the Captain is circulating through the crowd of musicians. Players mill, shifting black boots on the hardwood, drinking Styro-foam coffee, jawing Timbits. I recognize a few faces from the School of Music, two trumpet players, several clarinets.

Pratima is here. She has crow-coloured hair and inexplicably wide eyes. She plays bassoon and oboe.

The Captain has a bristle of medals on his jacket and a coat of pallid dust on his broken shoes. When he turns his head, half his soft collar disappears into the thick fold of his neck. He waves me over.

"Krausier, right?" he asks.

"Yes, sir."

"I want to show you something," he says. "Came yesterday. Never been touched." He leads me by the elbow to the cloakroom that serves as an instrument lock-up.

It's a stack of 14" black Premier snare drums. He takes the top one off the pile, sets it carefully on the floor. It gleams like a showroom Cadillac, oversized chrome lugs, fifteen taut snares laid in even rows across the bottom head, and one white, unbruised skin.

He stares as I size and wrap myself in a fresh white sling. It's new from the package, a little stiff. I lift a pant leg, pull a pair of sticks out of my boot. The bending mounts pressure in my ears and Eustachian tubes. I stand and sway, wince at the thought of making noise.

"It will be too loud in here," I tell the Captain, heaving the drum up, clipping it to the sling. I let the drum sit high, so the top rim presses my belly. "I won't be able to hear properly," I add, fixing the leg rest against my thigh.

Standing in the hall, I run my fingers across the batter head. It is slightly rough to the fingertip, pinched under the top rim, anchored tight.

"Who tuned them?" I ask. I notice fingerprints on the chrome rim, rub them away with my jacket sleeve.

The Captain doesn't answer me, just waves at me: "Begin."

I'm afraid I will play too hard, break the skin. I start a quiet buzz roll, sticks near the rim, nearly inaudible, bring the roll to centre, slight *crescendo*, then back to the rim. I visit each lug with the nylon tips, quietly, listening, feeling for response,

testing for recoil. Evenly, gently, the head pushes back. I accept this as permission.

I play a pattern in 6/8 time, test articulation. Even through the cushion of ear fluid, the drum sounds clear. I play a pattern in 2/4, lots of flams and open space. I listen for tone, bounce some 1/8-note triplets into the hall, gauge projection in the echo. The Captain nods his head, watches my hands as I play.

"S'good, sir. It's very nice." He grins a wide, white grin. I raise the sticks to play again and he shakes his head.

"Wait for it," he says, heading into the crowd, "let's get ready for the show."

The show, the Captain tells us when we are assembled and quiet, is the Nova Scotia Tattoo. It's a public display of military soft skills, archaic war talents like saber rattling and rope swinging. There's a Naval gun run, the stylized transfer of a cannon from one vessel to another across a slip of concrete sea. There's music—five bands. We have three weeks to get ready.

Halifax is a Navy town. The memories of boy seamen are clear here, of prairie boys clenching teeth in wooden minesweepers, combing hot ordnance off the frigid water, of Corvettes racing U-boats into Fundy, into the St. Lawrence once. Before we play a note together, the show sells out.

During the day, Pratima suffers the indignity of cymbals. This is a marching show and you cannot march with a double reed. So the Captain assigns her the brass lids, which she plays well. Before we march she stuffs her ears with cotton batting. When she enters formation, misplaced clouds tuft from her dark ears. At night the sound of her oboe wends through the barracks.

It is the sound of a door opening, that oboe, moved by its own will, or pushed, the tune of a pin moving round in a hinge. I ask her why she doesn't go to Venus Pizza (where the sailor from the Restigauche died of stab wounds) with the others, or to the junior ranks club, or to the gym.

Pratima tells me she doesn't drink or eat pizza, and she's never been the sporting type.

"What about you?" It is the first time I've heard her ask a question.

"I'm a late starter. I have a lot of work to do." She winces and nods.

After that we spend more time together, eat meals, walk to the practice hall and back. Still, we don't talk much and we spend evenings in our rooms, alone.

\* \* \*

*YOU ASK PRATIMA about rubato.*

*"It's not stealing," she says, "it's more like taking time with the music, finding meaning in the notes."*

*You stare hard at her hands hoping they will offer another clue.*

*She lends you a book, Musical Interpretation: Its Laws and Principles and their Application in Teaching and Performing. It has a whole section on rubato. You read that part nine times.*

*"Fancy a tree with its branches swayed by the wind; the stem represents the steady time, the moving leaves are the melodic inflections. This is what is meant by tempo and tempo rubato."*

*Chopin said that.*

*Chopin was master of rubato, not metaphor.*

\* \* \*

THE END OF THE SHOW BEGINS when the lone piper plays "Amazing Grace." He stands on a catwalk, high above the stadium floor, fingers weaving melody on the chanter, while the drones seep eerily through artificial mist. When the piper finishes, a lone drummer marches from one end of the arena to the other, and back again. The brass bands emerge, play "Hearts of Oak." Then the pipe bands join in. Everyone plays "Scotland the Brave" and "The Black Bear."

In dress rehearsal the bands come together for the first time. We seethe, row into row, like captured water banging in a devil's punchbowl. The music is a brackish tangle.

I am the lone drummer.

On the night of the show I walk in blackness to the centre of the arena. I am one. There are more than 10,000 in the dark. I march silently, 24 paces, to the dab of phosphorescent tape that marks my place.

They can't hear me, but I can hear them. I listen to the random shuffling of feet, unstructured coughing, shapeless scraping of cloth against cloth, mouths over popcorn, crack of peanut shells. Mostly I hear their breathing. They are not together. They inhale and exhale at random and I feel time slipping away from me.

The spotlight thrusts close to the mark. Shifts left, exposes me. It is painful, sharp. The wrap of light tightens, grips my shoulders, focuses on me.

There is nowhere else for them to look.

I raise my sticks. Remind myself that they have come to see only what is in my hands. "Begin."

I respond to the crack of peanut shells with two flams, sharp as rifle fire. Between flams I hear them suck stadium dust across their teeth. I am away.

The time is in my head, flowing through my fingers and they are watching me. I can hear them tapping their feet, patting palms against thighs, clapping. They

are not together, so I play between them, sometimes dragging them along, sometimes reining them back. Still, they are not with me, but around me. I balance *accelerando* against *ritard*, absorb the difference. Their time brushes me on all sides, rocks me. I am at the centre, splitting each second into two equal pieces.

When the brass bands join me from behind the ribbon curtain to play “Hearts of Oak,” we advance at a steady 120. I am utterly unafraid. The 10,000 stand to sing and by the time they mouth “steady boys, steady,” I am drunk on myself.

When the pipers merge into our midst, I can barely stand for dizziness. I weep openly, fist raised and hollering, when we play “The Black Bear.” As the bands fold into themselves I pass three bass drums in a row. The third balances on the belly of a giant and he pounds it so hard my chest rumbles. Both ears snap, a tickle of thin fluid drains into my throat. Nothing is louder, but everything is immediately clearer.

Later that night, at the band party in the staging area, I meet the lone piper. His name is, of all things, Hamish, and he knows magic. He pulls quarters from behind my ears, presses them into my open palm. “Two bits,” he says, harvesting change. We are hot and sweating a little from beer and boozed bodies pressed too close, so he takes me high above the marching floor to the catwalk where he stood to play “Amazing Grace.”

His white tunic lights the blackness around us and I’m afraid someone will see us, glowing. But Hamish is not worried and we sit down on the pleated metal grate.

When I fold back the heft of dark kilt (his tartan has a peculiar bead of saffron), the thick scent of damp wool rises. I am stunned by the moist heat. He takes my hands, twines his fair fingers through mine.

And when we rock together, me on his narrow lap, I am free to choose the tempo. I pick *largo*—slowly, with dignity.

When Hamish whispers, “faster,” I indulge him, because he whispered, because he asked, because I choose to.

He moves steadily beneath me, tactus keeper. I quicken for a moment, hold and drop back to meet him. We nearly join time again, but I hesitate, steal a breath, then push to catch up . . . pause, steal, push.

Ah, yes. *Rubato*.