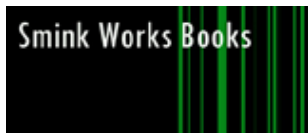




Connections

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BOOKS TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE

When Paul picked up the phone, Tchaikovsky greeted him on the other end. Paul recognized the composition and, from the selection alone, guessed her mood; then hoped he was wrong. “Hello,” he said, but she didn’t answer. That she couldn’t bring herself to interrupt the music was not a good sign.

He named the piece for her. “The Fourth Symphony.” He knew each note as intimately as she. They communicated best through music, and the choice of this symphony alarmed him. “You called to play the Fourth for me?”

She still did not answer, so he tried to draw her out. “Tchaikovsky called his Fourth a ‘musical confession of the soul, which was full to the brim’.”

The second movement traveled the distance from her phone to his. When

Tchaikovsky wrote it, he wanted to express his melancholy. “Have you picked the piece for its mood, or the other way around?” From this far away, Paul couldn’t tell. Sometimes Mother played music to match her mood; sometimes the reverse happened, and she became whatever the notes played. If she selected a piece at random, the composer’s vision transformed her. She could become light and lyrical, changing from an aging woman into a fairy or a nymph if it suited the musical story. For a somber piece she tread the linoleum as though marching in her own funeral procession. Other times she chose a work to match the time of day, the weather or season. For settling down at night, the Fourth was perfect; the notes sounded like the end of a long day. In fact, before the phone rang, Paul might have chosen

it for himself. He had been sitting alone. The mail waited impatiently on the table, but he barely could keep his eyes open. He just sat, hands dangling over the arms of his easy chair. The *Daily Herald* had slipped from his lap.

She called, spoke no words, and played the Fourth. He devised a test. “Did you know — when Tchaikovsky left his mother as a boy to attend school, he became frantic? Frantic. To leave his mother — ”

Martha marveled at the sound of her son’s voice. Whenever he spoke, it seemed she heard Paul for the first time. Each conversation increased the awe that he was hers; that her womb had carried this remarkable creature and gave him life. His vocal chords played counterpoint to Tchaikovsky. It cheered her — to think they had the music in common.

She'd called to tell Paul to come home, but after hearing his voice, Martha couldn't blurt it out. He wouldn't return to Twin Lakes voluntarily. He had reasons to stay in the city. If she thrust her problems on him, he would run the other way, and he would have every right.

If she could see his face, Martha might know what to say. Not able to look at him, words frightened her. More and more often, she struggled to pull herself back to the truth — most days she couldn't separate what actually happened from the mental debris. Some days, her situation grabbed hold of her and squeezed — she walked around bug-eyed and alert, but choking on the simplest task.

Paul hadn't left town till he was more than of legal age. Her eccentricities didn't drive

him away — fate did. He never judged her in word or deed. She understood perfectly. She would go too, if she could. In his haste to find another life, Paul had stumbled onto emergency medicine. He rode an ambulance in the worst neighborhoods. She had begged him countless times to transfer, but he refused, because he discovered that he could save others. Becoming a paramedic defined him more than living in Twin Lakes ever had. Though she missed him with a desperation she never got over, she had to admit it — admiration for what he did, for the courage it took — filled her. Her son rescued people. His letters told her how the calls went; he recounted the runs in detail. It was as if he had to tell someone, especially when it was an attempted suicide. Paul worked

the hardest to save someone who wanted to die.
He refused to let people give up.

Martha eased into the conversation. “Any rescues today?” In the three years he’d been gone, Martha never asked about his love life, the possibility of promotion, how he fared without her — and Paul never volunteered. They steered away from personal subjects and toward the rescues — always using that word.

She had gleaned a vivid picture of his life. Though she’d never seen a big city emergency room, Martha envisioned the trauma center. The blood, gunshot wounds, the hours waiting for a doctor, the stink of people who lived on the streets — life and death decisions made Paul’s heart race. The crowding and patients stacked on top of each other, lined up in hallways — he wanted to help. The chance to

soothe the indignity of it all lured him. And once he had saved a life, that was it, emergency medicine held him hostage. So the two of them spoke of rescues. The act of saving became all-important. Unlike doctors, nurses, and most medical personnel, who regale others with any bizarre case regardless of the outcome, Paul spoke only about the ones they saved.

The Third movement of the Symphony began. Here, Tchaikovsky's imagination wandered, abandoning the melancholy of the Second movement for strange impressions. Not sad or happy, but every nerve alive. *Pizzicato* strings felt like an arm fallen asleep now stuck full of needles as it woke up. As contrast, a drunken oboe lurched around a street and got tangled up in a military band on parade. Every

sound carried the sensation of waking with the dream still intact.

Paul asked, “Shall I record The Third movement continuously on tape?”

“Why would you do that?”

“So you can play it over and over.”

“Not necessary.” Martha found it hard to swallow. *Music keeps thoughts from overwhelming me, and no movement makes my inabilities more tolerable than this one.*

Paul launched into today’s rescue. “My partner and I picked up a brittle diabetic — a woman not that old. She’d had one leg amputated. Diabetes also left her legally blind. This morning she went into respiratory arrest.” Paul’s tempo increased. “We found her gasping for air, coughing, spitting. We started oxygen and two IVs.”

No matter what his shift brought, Paul kept going back. *How I envy you. The radio calls make you whole. I'm glad you've found this. And I know you'll keep doing it till you can't lift a stretcher anymore.* It's the off-duty hours that drag. *Did he say that, or did I feel it?*

Martha fretted. "Did she make it?"

"The hospital staff used rotating tourniquets; they put a tube in her lungs. They hooked her up to a respirator. We got her in alive, and somehow they kept her going."

"A minute later she would have been gone — she might have slipped away."

On this point Paul and Martha came together. For them euthanasia didn't exist. Because they had witnessed a death in their family and at that same moment, the death *of* their family, no matter what the prognosis,

they wanted the frail, unknown diabetic with one leg and no sight to live. They didn't care about the cost or the quality of life. They talked with concern about a stranger and, in a roundabout way, shared their sorrow with each other.

Martha clutched the phone harder. Time to mention the reason for her call. She didn't want to ask, but Paul had told his story. He'd soon grow impatient; she could tell by his breathing. Deeper and deeper breaths meant he had come to the place he slapped her with 'goodbye'. She had no choice. Martha lurched like Tchaikovsky's oboe. "I have an appointment to retrieve your father's personal effects from the lab."

Now silence swamped Peter's end of the line.

“The new Research Director offered to bring them by, but I refused. I said I wanted to come for them, when I was ready ... to come for them.” She had already cancelled twice. “I must keep this appointment.”

“You could have asked someone else to do it.”

“Aren’t you going to ask why it upsets me?” While she waited, unhealthy warmth spread through her, starting in her head and racing down to burn her chest wall. *Go on, ask me. Why does a box of personal effects cause such panic? You have a new life, an important one. You’ve earned a commendation for bravery. You save lives. You can ask me.*

“Are we going through it again?”

You want to forget. You can forget. Well I can’t.

“Mother, it wasn’t your fault.”

She gasped into the mouthpiece. “Don’t
— ”

“Contradict you?”

When he sounded impatient, the music became even more important.

Paul sucked in his breath. “Mother, if you had been home, you couldn’t have saved him. No one could have brought help in time.”

“How old was she?”

“Who?”

“The brittle diabetic.”

He hesitated. “Sixty-two.”

She was sixty now, just two years younger than the woman he had saved.

“Mother, you’re in great health. You have good lungs, normal blood sugar and a cast-iron will to survive.”

But I haven't rescued myself.

Tchaikovsky ended. She rewound the tape to where The Third movement began again, knowing exactly how long to hold the button down to reach the right spot. She cranked the volume up to make sure Paul heard each measure. After a few phrases she returned to the phone.

“Have you cleaned out his study yet?”

The den looked exhausted, as if Richard was due back any moment. He had a habit of stacking reference material around him while he worked. Pillars of crusty old books grew like stalagmites on the floor close to his desk. The lampshade clung to its perch, tipped to one side, having endured another of Richard's long sessions. His steps still reverberated, absent-mindedly tramping out the side door, not

uncaring or unthinking, just intensely attached to the weight of his thoughts. He left the whole equilibrium of the cottage disturbed, and Martha didn't have the courage to set it straight. Even his overstuffed chair still showed the indentation where the springs had caved in, surrendering to the weight of his presence.

She'd had ample time to put things away, but she had only managed to clean up the stains on the floor. Foolish of her, he would say, to keep the den just as he left it. Richard would never do that. Trappings meant nothing to him. Books, lamp, cottage, probably Martha herself, could all disappear and Richard would've gone on — he often reminded her how a person must keep going. How life's journey meant more than the destination. Arriving was secondary. A person never needs to finish, if the journey kept

him stimulated. Progress was the goal; the end didn't matter. For heaven's sake — forget the trappings.

But, of course, Martha provided the day-to-day necessities. When Richard's notes scattered like dry leaves in his wake, Martha raked them up and returned them to their proper place. She reminded Richard of life's details. Otherwise he would have forgotten the alumni luncheon and his talk on the tenth. It unnerved her to think of another woman reminding him of his appointments and to pick up his jacket — if such a thing as reincarnation existed and somewhere his life was beginning again. With each rebirth Richard would grow less earthly and more spiritual — and Martha did just the opposite, growing less and less daring, more rooted to one point.

Richard's friends advised Martha to let grief take over; offered to help her navigate the seven steps, so she could get on with her own life. One particularly insistent friend said she must find out who Martha really was. The idea made her smile. They all meant well, but the person named Martha had gone extinct. Day by day, microscopic bit by bit, Martha had evolved to live in Richard's space. Over the years he absorbed her desire to see the world, used it up, leaving only biological remnants behind.

Peter set an example that suggested Martha should lose herself in service to others, and by giving to those less fortunate to heal herself. It was an intriguing premise — one that Richard would approve; one that validated his approach to life — doing something noble could repair unseen and undefined damage. And Martha

would've become a volunteer — if she could. If his presence weren't so palpable that Martha expected him to call out at any moment. "Martha, where did *you* put the outline for the graduate class?"

Her best hope seemed to study ancient history; her best hope to recapture B.R. (Before Richard.) Vague pictures of that era flashed through her mind; silent pictures, because sound is always the first thing to go. B.R. wasn't that long ago, though now it felt prehistoric. A lanky girl, not unattractive, but no great beauty either. Clothes looked good on her. She possessed an excellent posture and a presence that turned heads. If she kept her mouth shut, people thought Martha elegant, intelligent even. Wide-set eyes and stature made it so, not the quality of her mind.

By inclination and habit, she cultivated silence as an art form. She let others think highly of her. No sense in tainting the illusion. Richard, especially, found silence endearing. He basked in the quiet — somehow he filled silence to overflowing with the theories and connections that rambled in and out of his mind and at times oozed out of his mouth unawares. Brilliant connections, the kinds of connections no one else was making. How easy to be silent and impressive on the arm of a man like Richard.

The times he ignored her mattered less and less. When he occupied the cottage, electricity filled the air. How truly quiet the rooms were now without him.

Martha carried the phone with her across her now empty, now-clean kitchen floor. The

creaking floorboard screamed at her to borrow Richard's methods and get on with it, follow the example of the master, look below the surface — to a value no one else could see. She could hear him bellow: “Go beyond appearance, beyond biological systems, beyond chemical structure, into the building blocks.” *Yes, of course, how silly of me not to see that.*

“I think you'd want to retrieve the effects and add them to the memorial.”

Sorrow carried Martha toward the den, but she stopped at the threshold. The tilted lampshade with the bulb perpetually lit cast a golden glow onto the oak paneling. His overstuffed chair still radiated Richard's blood heat. She fled toward the front of the cottage.

To her horror, she saw the new Research Director reaching out to ring the doorbell. Once

again she had lost track of time. Or did she deliberately avoid the meeting? She ended the call. “Have to go.”

Moments later the Director marched into the room and set down his burden. “Bill,” he reminded her. “Call me Bill.” Bill was also a man. Worse yet, Bill was a man much like Richard, a colleague, and someone obliged to hug her.

Face flat against his shirt, she struggled to tame her volatile throat. The phone and the hand holding it fell slack to her side.

Bill said something.

She didn’t catch what. Martha pulled away. She looked toward the box. It was filled with Richard’s degrees, citations, and awards, framed in precise black frames, a spare pair of glasses, a faded photograph of Richard’s

grandfather in a doughboy uniform, a manicure kit, which she'd given him early in their relationship, good as new. Probably never used. She picked up Richard's notebook.

Bill instructed her. "That's his personal journal."

"Personal?"

"I had to read it; I hope you don't mind," Bill stammered. "I had to know if it contained any research data."

The first urge was to ask Bill what Richard had written. The second was to rail at him for reading Richard's private thoughts, but then Martha remembered that Richard had belonged to everyone. Richard wouldn't want to keep secrets from his replacement.

"What can I do to help?"

But Martha was already running down the hall.

As she struggled over suddenly uneven floorboards, time slowed down. An unknown building block of life knew better than Martha how to ensure survival. Nature slowed her pace. It brought her to a halt. She fell onto a chair in the bedroom, clutching his journal and the phone. The phone and the journal. Inclination told her to dial Paul's number. Instinct encouraged her to run her hands over the cover of the worn out journal. Who was she to resist? The once fine leather was falling apart. He had exhausted the binding.

She opened the cover. How different from other men's black books.

Bill called to her: "I'll just let myself out."

Martha frowned. No phone numbers or female conquests for Richard. Dates and times of influential meetings. Monumental thoughts. The knot in her throat tightened. She placed the journal on her lap where it opened to a page of its own choosing. The handwriting stabbed her, but after a minute she focused. The page that the journal had chosen wasn't the last or the first, but near the middle. The book remembered the spot because Richard had returned here many times to scribble corrections and bits of afterthought in the margins, squeezing them into any open space, exactly the way his thoughts used to ramble and grow and transform themselves.

A young hand had written the original entry: "Evolution means that with each cycle of

life to death the destruction is incomplete. Something survives.”

A more experienced researcher later added: “In life’s spiral, atoms and molecules have a long history, borrowed from Mother Earth and used repeatedly, stepping one rung at a time till achieving consciousness.”

Martha envisioned Richard leaning back in his easy chair, eyes closed, perfectly still, lost in thought. Then suddenly he bent over the book to write. She put the phone to her face, and called Peter. “Here is what your dad wrote. ‘My eyes are the eyes of the earth. This is her mouth’.”

“Dad meant it as more than just a poetic thought.” Now even Peter’s voice shook. “He believed the molecules that made up his eyes

and his mouth had a history of their own, an evolution of elements.”

In the bottom margin, he wrote: “The atoms of carbon, oxygen, and so forth, which make up my body, have been recycled countless times. In other lifetimes they may have been thorns or prehistoric feathers or the retarded brain cells of a harmless idiot. My ancestry includes all of creation.”

The knot between her shoulder blades tightened. She reread his words. She rummaged in the nightstand for a pen and wrote diagonally across the page, scribbling over his. *And your death was just one more turn of the cycle?*

Her eyes wandered over the page again not comprehending, but not expecting to and even abandoning hope of ever getting it right.

“Dad respected the process of life to death and back to life.”

In a rarely used corner of her mind where emotion failed and reason took over, Richard’s words rang true — for him. And what was truer, more right, was the way she scrawled her words atop his. *I’ve earned the right.*

The last strain of music faded away.

Suddenly she felt a smile take root in her face. Martha jumped up. “I’m sorry I called again.”

“I’m glad you did.”

She wandered toward the box of artifacts. Considering Richard’s reputation, his things were worth money. Perhaps a collector would pay a great sum. “Do you want his things?”

“You don’t?”

“No.” The answer came from out of nowhere. For the first time since his death, a decision came easily.

“Good for you.”

“I think I’ll take the box out to the commons for someone else to find, a student perhaps or someone able to make astonishing connections, recognize their value, and incorporate their meaning.”

“Sounds like a great idea.”

As the distance between her and the mementos grew, Martha began grinning. She couldn’t help it. A smile spread on its own. She had forgotten what it felt like — to have the corners of her mouth turn up. The box disappeared from view, and a connection with the cool evening formed. And the smile infected other parts of her body. For the first

time in months she looked forward to what she would do next. She could go home and play the fantasy overture from *Romeo and Juliet*. For her, as for Tchaikovsky, the overture offered the right blend of changing moods, lyrical moments and intensely dramatic heights. She felt ready to soar like the violins.

But then she decided against listening to the master's interpretation of what life could be. Instead she opted for fluffing seat cushions and restoring stacks of books to the shelves. Yes, she would put away the trappings and then explore life on her own.

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