

Cocoa Instead

by ann marie meehan

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Adele Girdner's big toenail poked through the tattered slipper and snagged the plastic bag containing her daily New York Times that lay in front of the only unkempt Tudor on Windsong Way. Intoning "ohhhhh-m," she bent her roundness over and extended a plump, blanched hand through the sleeve of her kimono splashed with stilt-legged cranes. Lifting the bag, she rose slowly and inhaled, searching for the scent of loose dog that might prevent her obese Manx cat, Hector, from taking his morning constitutional through Gravers Park.

The lazy metal zizzing of her crickets caged in Chinese urns in the music room accompanied her as she spread Section One across her kitchen table. Unconsciously, she extended them that bit further as if to push the day's first lesson with Isuko Saito off the agenda. Adele's physical repertoire included few alternatives to *andante*, but with a croissant and cappuccino to down before the lesson, she shifted momentarily into *accelerando*. Dr. Saito would ring her doorbell early, at least fifteen minutes before the appointed lesson. Each week at this time Adele opened the front door to find Isuko standing on the stoop beside her father, who seemed to be attempting to dislodge a herringbone from his throat.

Why, oh why, had she decided to take Isuko on and add her to her small circle of carefully selected violin students? Her students were almost invariably Korean or Japanese. Over her forty five years of teaching she found them to be the most committed and most diligent pupils; most took their lessons with their families perched upon Adele's couch so that each member could gain something from the cost of the one hundred dollar and hour lesson. When Isuko's parents called asking her to take her on as a pupil as well, Adele

was confident that the child would follow the course of all her other students on her way to Julliard. But then came Isuko's audition.

During the audition Adele noted a string of disturbing little things about the child. There was the small, jade pearl of snot protruding from one nostril that Isuko refused to wipe away with the Kleenex Estelle proffered. Although most students avoided eye contact with their teacher when not playing, Isuko's eyes seized the fast-thinning part on Adele's head, her eyes slightly crossed. This "Evil Eye" so confounded Adele that she found herself checking her clothes every Tuesday evening for burn marks from the child's searing gaze. Adele marveled at the child's ability to have unearthed Adele's sole physical insecurity. She made a mental note to wear her blue silk turban every Tuesday. Most disturbing of all was the way in which the child held the violin when she wasn't playing it. Waving it slowly, tauntingly like a tennis racket, she made Adele hold her breath, just waiting for the tautness of the strings to finally explode the bridge from its foundation.

And so it was Tuesday morning once again. Troubled, she looked to the framed black and white photos of Tibetan nomads that lined her kitchen walls. Their worn, weathered faces seemed to nod imperceptibly, encouraging her to drop Isuko from her schedule. Not so easy, she demurred. She recalled with sad reluctance the look on the Saito's faces the day of the audition. Remarkable mirror images of each other in crumpled black raincoats, they grasped each other's hands and studied the stream of each other's tears over the wide, chiseled plains of their cheeks, whispering "thank-you, thank-you, thank-you" like a bell tolling, over and over until Adele ushered them out the door.

This week's was another torturous, predictable lesson. Isuko, feet spread far apart, brandished her bow like a jousting rod, ignoring Adele's admonitions to keep her left elbow close to her torso and plant her feet close together. Her eyes looked beyond the music stand, pinned to the tiny gold clock on the nearby bookshelf. Upon the 12 year old slaying the sonata, Adele stared at the faded Persian

rug underfoot, imagining it strewn with treble clefs, staves and notes knocked off the page, battle casualties.

"Are you happy with that?" whispered Adele, sliding her piano stool back. "It's marked *cantabile*. This is your opportunity to make the violin "sing," Isuko. Please. Take your time with these tender passages. The next movement is the one you want to attack." Must move that clock before next week's lesson, she told herself.

The pointed tip of Isuko's bow cracked down upon the lip of the metal music stand, and a cloud of rosin signaled the bow's plunge to the carpet. Adele forced her gray eyes upon her pupil, watching the girl's smoldering temper welling to the surface, cracking her open. Heat waves seemed to rise from the violin's "S" holes, while an acrid smell clipped Adele's nostrils.

Before the lesson Adele noticed Isuko's secretiveness upon removing her violin from its case. A limp mouse tail dangled from the case's rosin box. The tail's end was carmine, as if someone had dipped it in a bottle of nail polish. Adele measured one bow length difference in height between her and her pupil who towered above her. She wondered why she hadn't noticed that the girl's amplexness could easily take down Adele's dwarfed figure. In that moment Adele thought that Isuko had smelled her fear; she pivoted confidently and stepped into the pattern of the rug, facing Adele. Slowly, she bent over her bowed legs, and reaching beneath tightly locked knees, she swept the bow from the floor. In the only graceful movement Adele had ever seen her complete, Isuko strode to her case, lifted the mouse corpse and flipped it into the body of the piano.

Adele stared at her own translucent nails suspended above the ivory keys and, searching for relief, she let them sink into the piano in the form of a wounded minor chord. Enough, she decided then and there. The irony of it; having to force-feed a beautiful thing like the sound of the violin into this horrible child's senses. Too difficult, like forcing ice cream through a fine mesh sieve. A waste. A waste of her time. And now this; a dead mouse in my piano.

Adele's powdered cheeks prickled as she recalled the worthier ones she'd turned away. Small frail ghosts in damp flannel clutching their instruments to their bellies as if to nourish and sustain themselves through an audition, only to be turned away. Dr. Saito's arrival was still a half hour away. But until then, enough was enough. The only thing for it was for Isuko to put down what had become her weapon and replace it with a calming cup of tea.

She ushered the child into the dining room, placing two cups and saucers like chess-pieces on the vast table, opposing each other. Sunlight streamed through the front window and through the fine china, lighting up the tea set like a collection of bone-bleached shells spread upon a beach. "We'll have tea, Isuko," said Adele, and she headed for the kitchen and switched on the full electric kettle.

While waiting for the water to boil she formulated an excuse that the Saitos would be forced to accept as to why she must drop Isuko as a student. Suddenly the kettle sung out like a soprano, desperate to be silenced. Tossed tea leaves fluttered, then sunk into the pot. After padding out and pouring, Adele returned to the kitchen, debating whether to reward Isuko's bad behavior with tea biscuits, or to reward her own tolerance of her impudent pupil. Looking past the cabinet door she saw Isuko's expansive back, towering over Adele's teacup, her spine like the tight scroll of a violin wound under, hands invisible. She was murmuring something, an incantation into the rising steam, the hem of her skirt swaying gently in time with her utterances.

Not only the mouse in my piano. That child has put something in my tea, Adele thought. Seasick, she stared at the Chinese scroll on the wall, wondering how the wave depicted seemed to have poured out of its frame, flooding the kitchen, filling her ears her nose and mouth, drowning her. "Mrs. Girdner, I'll wait for you, but of course, hot tea's better than cold." the child sang a tad higher than her usual monotone.

Adele scanned the shelf over the stove, her eyes locking on the box of Swiss cocoa that she saved for Saturday broadcasts of Live from the Met. Mixed with milk it was a satisfying meal and dessert

in one for someone over seventy. But Adele couldn't spare the time now- the water would have to do. She took a mug from the dish drainer, tossed two teaspoons of cocoa into it, and poured what was left of the boiling water on top. Murky and brackish, it bubbled and she hastily stirred the contents, then glided into the dining room.

Isuko looked up from her cup, fixing cross-eyed on the glittering gem Adele had pinned to the front of her blue satin turban. With a defiant swipe of her nose across her sleeve, she raised her cup and sucked in a mouthful of Adele's best gunpowder tea. Her glance spread to Adele's place at the table and locked on the mug, and Adele realized that the child was in her own space: that childish place on the brink between crying or screaming. Placing cool palms on the table, Adele creased her moon face into Buddha-like beneficence.

"I'm having cocoa instead," said Adele brightly, cupping her hands around the warm mug and nodding towards it, steeling herself for the cut of the watery cocoa.

She didn't recall much of what happened after that- the sound of china breaking, a breathless, whimpering screech, and the horrified look on Dr. Saito's face as he grasped Isuko in a bear-grip and headed for the door as if in search of a cage to contain his daughter and her rage. He did not return for an explanation and in that moment Adele realized that Dr. Saito had treated his daughter for uncontrolled rage before this.

With barbeque tongs she carefully removed the mouse's corpse and gently closed the piano's lid with an undertaker's concern. Seating herself at the wounded piano, she stared at the score of a Bach sonata and accompanied her "ohmmms" with a feathery stroke on low "C" until the doorbell rang, announcing her next student's arrival.

Upon finishing her last lesson at eight, Adele padded into Hector's darkened dining room to finally tidy up the remnants of the morning's tea. Atop the table, Hector was polishing off the remnants of the belly of the mouse while carefully avoiding the red-tipped tail. Adele's eyes moved to the cushion Isuko had sat upon

that morning. She smelled the urine before she saw the stain. Sighing, she mopped up the tainted tea from the cushion of her own chair, then, noticing that the fabric had been eaten away, she bagged it along with the other cushion and the mouse tail. Although the dining room was his domain, Hector had no objections.

