

The Page Turner

by John Olson

Her hands are swift and supple as swallows, bouncing off the keyboard in rapid-fire constellations of notes, because she's playing Bach's Concerto no.1 in D Minor, which is busy and prodigal and all over the place. She is Polina Olegovna Osetinskaya, a beautiful Russian pianist. She's wearing a black gown with extravagant flounces and a long-sleeved top. Her features are exquisite. Seated next to her is a young woman, also dressed in black, who is there to turn the pages of the printed music, a task she performs so smoothly, and with such humble precision, that her presence has the solemnity of thought, a highly focused thought, a concentration of thought, like an abstract of focus in its purest form. The two faces are so different. The pianist's face is luminous, like porcelain, whereas the page turner's face is warm and full, like the air in a bakery on a winter morning. When she rises to turn the page, bringing into detail the black lace of her blouse, she turns the page with calm dexterity, and sits back down. How odd that must feel. Or maybe not. It's hard to guess what people are feeling. The music is self-evident. It's a torrent of notes, a mania, a zeal. The page turner is poised. Outwardly calm. I'd be terrified. Imagine getting up and you can't get your finger on the paper, and it falls into the lap of Polina Olegovna Osetinskaya, and Bach's composition is suddenly frozen, silent as ice. The embarrassment. The loss of a career. How does she do it? Manage that calm. It's masterful. It amazes me how well some people adapt, evolve, nestle into roles of acute stress, and negotiate those critical moments in life, a rock climber's fingers seeking a tiny, barely perceptible fissure, or a young woman rising to turn a page. On a stage. With a full auditorium. In a long black dress. Long silken hair flowing over her shoulders. I'm nervous for her. Which is silly. The concert is over. Everyone has gone home. The stage crew, the conductor, and the janitor have all gone home. The page turner is home in her home. I'm home in my home. Reading. Turning a page.

