

FROM

The Museum of Modern Love

BY HEATHER ROSE



He was not my first musician, Arky Levin. Nor my least successful. Mostly by his age, potential is squandered or realized. But this is not a story of potential. It is a story of convergence. Such things are rarer than you might think. Coincidence, I've heard, is God's way of being discreet. But convergence is more than that. It is something that, once set in motion, will have an unknown effect. It is a human condition to admire hindsight. I always thought foresight was so much more useful.

It is the spring of the year 2010 and one of my artists is busy in a gallery in New York City. Not the great Metropolitan, nor the Guggenheim, serene and twisted though she is. No, my artist's gallery is a white box. It's evident that within that box much is alive. And vibrating. But before we get to that, let me set the scene.

There is a river on either side of this great city and the sun rises over one and sets over the other. Where oak, hemlock, and fir once stood beside lakes and streams, avenues now run north-south. Cross streets mostly run east-west. The mountains have been leveled, the lakes have been filled. The buildings create the most familiar skyline of the modern world.

The pavements convey people and dogs, the subway rumbles, and the yellow cabs honk day and night. As in previous decades, people are coming to terms with the folly of their investments and the ineptitude of their government. Wages are low, as are the waistbands of jeans. Thin is fashionable but fat is normal. Living is expensive, and being ill is the most costly business of all. There is a feeling that a chaos of climate, currency, creed, and cohabitation is looming in the world. On an individual basis, most people still want to look good and smell nice, have friends, be

comfortable, make money, feel love, enjoy sex, and not die before their time.

And so we come to Arky Levin. He would like to think he stands apart from the riffraff of humanity, isolated by his fine musical mind. He believed, until recently, that he was anesthetized to commonplace suffering by years of eating well, drinking good wine, watching good movies, having good doctors, being loved by a good woman, having the luck of good genetics, and generally living a benign and blameless life.

It is April 1, but Levin, in his apartment on Washington Square, is oblivious to the date and its humorous connotations. If someone played a practical joke on him this morning, he would be confused—possibly for hours. The morning sun is spilling into the penthouse. Rigby, a gray rug of a cat, lies sprawled on her back on the sofa with her paws stretched high above her head. In contrast, Levin is curled forward over a Model B Steinway, his fingers resting silently on the keyboard. He is so still he might be a puppet awaiting the first twitch of the string above. In fact, he is waiting for an idea. That is usually where I come in, but Levin has not been himself for many months. To write music he must hurdle over a morass of broken dreams. Every time he goes to leap, he comes up short.

Levin and I have known each other a very long time, and when he is like this he can be unreachable, so caught on the wheel of memory he forgets he has choices. What is he remembering now? Ah yes, the film dinner from the night before.

He had expected questions. It was why he'd avoided everyone, hadn't attended a function since December. It was still too raw. Too impossible. For the same reason he'd ignored emails, avoided phone calls, and finally unplugged the answering machine in February after one particularly upsetting message.

And then last night, in a living nightmare, three of them had got him at one end of the room and harangued him, berated him. Outrageous claims of abandonment and lack of responsibility.

"You don't seem to realize I had no choice in this," he had told them.

"You're her husband. If it was the other way around . . ."

"Her instructions are perfectly clear. This is what she wants. Do I have to send you a copy of the letter?"

“But, Arky, you’ve abandoned her.”

“No, I haven’t. If anyone has been abandoned . . .”

“Please tell me you are not suggesting, Arky, that you have the raw deal here?”

“You can’t just leave her there.”

“Well, what exactly did you have in mind?” he had asked. “That I bring her home?”

“Yes, for God’s sake. Yes.”

They had all seemed stunned at his reluctance.

“But she doesn’t want that.”

“Of course she does. You’re being unbelievably blind if you think anything else.”

He had excused himself, walked the twenty blocks in a rage, aware also that he was weeping and grateful for the handkerchief he never went anywhere without. The bitter taste of helplessness lingered on his tongue. He scratched at the rough patch on his hand that might be cancer. He thought of the night sweats too. Waking drenched at three a.m. Having to change his soaked pajamas and slide over to the other, empty side of the bed, where the sheets were dry. He wondered if it was his heart. If he died in the apartment it could be days before anybody noticed. Except Rigby, who would possibly settle on his corpse until she realized he was not getting up to feed her. It would be Yolanda, their housekeeper, who would find him. Yolanda had been in their life for years. Ever since they were married. Lydia had thought it as normal to employ a maid as keeping milk in the fridge. She had stayed on, Yolanda, through the move to Washington Square. Levin never liked to be home when Yolanda came. Lydia was good at small talk with shop people and teachers and tradespeople. Levin was not.

Levin thought that if he died, the trees on the deck in their tall glazed pots would almost certainly die too for lack of water. He got up and made another pot of coffee, sliced an onion bagel, and lowered one round into the toaster. Within minutes it was smoking and blackened. With the second half he assumed complete vigilance, spearing the thing with a knife when he sensed it was ready, hoisting it up and reinserting it in a slightly different position. Why had Lydia bought this particular toaster and not a version that didn’t destroy his breakfast every morning? How was it possible they

could invent drones to kill a single man somewhere in Pakistan, but not perfect the toaster?

Leaving his plate and cup in the sink, Levin washed his hands and dried them carefully before returning to the piano. On the music ledge was an illustration of a Japanese woman with long blue-black hair and vivid green eyes. He wanted to write something spellbinding for her. A flute would be good, he had decided a few days before. But everything he came up with reminded him of *The Mission*. He felt like a beginner again, searching through old melodies, attempting transitions that didn't work, harmonies that tempted and then became elusive.

And so for the next few hours Levin immersed himself in the process, moving from the Steinway in the living room, where so many of his ideas began, to his studio in the western end of the apartment with its Kurzweil keyboard, Bose speakers, and two iMacs giving him every variation of instrument at his fingertips. He took the ink drawing with him and put it back on the corkboard where storyboard sequences in the same distinctive style were pinned. There were also more illustrations of the same Japanese woman. In one she was bending over a pool of water, her dress the green and shimmer of fish scales. In another she was reaching out to touch the nose of a huge white bear. And in another she was walking with a child along a snow-laden path, red leaves the only touch of color.

Levin switched from flute to violin on the keyboard, hearing the same transitions from C to F to A minor. But violin wasn't right. It was too civilized for forest and river. I suggested the viola, but he dismissed me, thinking it too melancholy. But wasn't melancholy what he was looking for?

I had encouraged him to take this film score because solitude may be a form of contentment when you live in a fairy story, but not when you are an artist in New York who believes your best years are still ahead of you. Artists are stubborn. They have to be. Even when nothing is happening, the only way through is to work and work.

I drew Levin's attention to the day outside. He went to the window and saw sunlight dazzling the fountain in Washington Square. Purple tulips were blooming on the walkways. He looked again at the audio file on his screen. It reminded him of the previous evening, before the women had pinned him against the table. He had sat with his old mentor, Eliot, who had told him of

the Tim Burton exhibition at MoMA. It was not the Burton I wanted him to see, but it was a way of getting him there. For all he wasn't listening to my musical suggestions, he was amenable to an interruption.

"You will have to wait," he said to the Japanese woman, but he might as well have been talking to me. In his bedroom he chose a favorite blue Ben Sherman jacket and his dark gray Timberland sneakers.

He took the E train and got off at Fifth Avenue, crossed the street, and walked into the Museum of Modern Art. With the membership Lydia bought them each year, he skipped the lengthy queue for tickets. The narrow corridor to the Burton exhibition was jammed with people. Instantly he was surrounded by the warmth of bodies, the gabble of voices. Within a few minutes the illustrations of stitched blue women, their wide-eyed panic and long-limbed emptiness mingled with the odor and proximity of warm bodies, began to make Levin nauseated. He saw with relief an exit sign. Pushing open the door, he found himself in an empty corridor. He stopped, leaned against the wall, and breathed.

He intended, at that moment, to go downstairs and sit in the sculpture garden to enjoy the sunshine. Then the murmur from the atrium drew him in.

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