the big city. He became an insomniac, and I sensed he was plann
to leave.

"Your world looked great from St. Thomas," he said, stuffing clothe in a duffel bag, "but you're out every night. You've turned into som one else."

My eyes welled with tears as he told me he needed to go away for while to help a relative move cross-country. I knew he wouldn't be bac

CHAPTER

20

Les Miserables

ANGELO HACKED AT the decorative cast iron outside my window, smiling proudly as he pulled off a large section. A brick crashed six floors down, bouncing off a car before shattering on the sidewalk. Joan, the former singer who lived on Twelve, waddled past below, hunched like Quasimodo, her matted dog sniffing the brick shards. Angelo jiggled my new air conditioner between the jagged metal pieces and slammed the window shut.

I tipped Angelo as he was leaving and returned to the bedroom. Jorge still blatted distantly on his contrabassoon. Across the street in the apartment I looked into on West End Avenue, the couple's baby, grown to adolescence, pecked on a computer.

The air conditioner unit hummed away, drowning out street noise as I lay across the bed, missing Eric. Sleepless last night, I'd watched an X of light spread across my peeling ceiling from headlights streaming down West End. I'd lived in the Allendale for eighteen years, half my life.

I sat up and opened my calculus book. After Eric left, I had distracted myself by finishing the 1,400-page math book he'd bought me. It allowed me to pass the test to enter Columbia University's algebra and trigonometry class. The course cost $2,500, but completing it was a prerequisite to calculus. I started sketching the solutions. I tried again, again, and again.

"Goddamm it!" I screamed in frustration, and hurled the text away. The spine collapsed, its pages scattering everywhere. I was old enough to be the mother of my classmates. So far, I'd spent $7,500 on Columbia tuition, much of it to study basic or remedial material, like the algebra and an introductory chemistry course that most people completed in high school.

I still didn't know where I was going, but I figured that taking a variety of courses might give me some ideas. At the same time, *Les Mis* was selling fewer tickets and looked as if it might close. Sydney suggested I start taking every gig I could find, as she did, no matter how much travel or how little money was involved.

Sam was up early, hailing a cab to Juilliard to teach a piano lesson. He stood on the corner of 99th with Sue, who was walking the fluffy American Eskimo dog they'd adopted. I thought they looked good together. Sue was sweet and patient with Sam's sometimes volatile temper and erratic schedule. With her MBA and law degree, I imagined she fit in much better with Sam's party crowd.

I greeted them, explaining that I was about to perform as part of a quintet for a children's concert. Sam looked irritated. He was probably late. Since I had finished the "up-and-coming young musician" part of my career trajectory and now just played Broadway, he was polite but no longer expressed much interest in my professional activities. Once his taxi sped away, Sue told me she had quit her law practice in order to stay home and make jewelry from the beads and pearls she liked collecting. She much preferred the creative life, she said.

I took off for the subway, wondering if this morning's gig counted as part of the "creative life." Settling in for the Z train's fifteen stops to Brooklyn's Cypress Hills station, I watched Manhattan-bound commuters creaking by in the opposite direction on rush-hour trains. These morning kiddy concerts were unpleasant for all involved. Few musicians took them seriously, spreading out newspapers during the performances, sloshing coffee over the stage. We rarely played anything I'd want to sit through, so my heart went out to the bored kids. The conductor often spoke to them as if they were either imbeciles or PhD musicologists.

These jobs paid only $70, financed by the Music Performance Trust Funds, which was a union program. The resource was established in 1948 as recording companies were required to contribute a percentage of their revenues to provide free live musical performances in parks, nursing

homes, and other venues across the country where audiences rarely heard live music.

Leaving the subway, I found the public school only a few minutes before show time. I stopped at the water fountain and opened my cigarette-style reed case to wet a few reeds, in order to make them vibrate. A shadow loomed behind me. A security guard thought my reeds were reefer. When he released me at last, I joined the four other musicians warming up in the gym.

"You know the orange book?" David, the clarinetist, asked. He held up the standard quintet anthology.

"Sure," I lied. I was embarrassed by my lack of quintet experience. He picked the Barthe *Passacaglia*, and we began playing. I had a decent reed, for once, and concentrated on how wonderful my tone sounded. I did not realize I had played the entire piece at half-tempo until the other four musicians reached the end and I was still going. We faced a sea of unruly faces. David gave me a long scowl as punishment for my mistake and then turned to the audience.

"Well, kids, what did you think of that?"

"Sounded like *shit* to me," a voice boomed, as the gym roared.

"Good, good, good!" said David, as panic crossed his face. Still, I could see his mind working.

"Ships at sea! Ships . . . at . . . sea," he ad-libbed. The other musicians snorted with laughter. "What else?"

"Yo! How come she's better than all you?" the same boy asked, pointing at me. I couldn't imagine why the kid would say this, except that, as a well-paid Broadway player, my hair and concert outfit were considerably spiffier than those of the other four musicians. I remembered someone describing how visually oriented kids were because of TV.

"Let's let her tell you," David said, suggesting I choose the next piece. "Perhaps something you actually know this time?" he added. Rifling through the music, I found an arrangement by Aaron Copland. It was familiar, even wholesome.

"Okay, okay, settle down," I called. How did these public school teachers do it? "Next, we'll play an American piece," I said, shouting over the noise. "It's called 'Hoedown.'"

"Woo-hoo!" The gym erupted. "Get the 'ho *down*!"

Were these kids getting anything out of this? Was I? I'm not sure arts education was ever much better, even if there used to be more of it. Maybe big-city schoolchildren were once steeped in Bach and Brahms, but outside metro areas, music education meant fourth-grade flutophones and Sousa-style bands open only to those who could afford the instruments. Many schools' general music classes ran through sing-alongs of popular and folk tunes. All these resources let kids experience making music themselves, but few explored classical music in depth.

When schools began cutting even these bands and sing-along music classes, an army of researchers, performers, teachers, and administrators hustled to justify their existence. They rationalized arts education as a magic pill for achieving academic success, rather than teaching the arts solely for their intrinsic value.

In 2001, Harvard researchers would challenge this assertion, combining 188 studies published between 1950 and 1999 to evaluate the effect of arts education on general learning. Their results were shocking: No reliable causal relationship was found between music education and academic performance (except for spatial reasoning). Creative thinking, verbal scores, and math grades were all unaffected by studying music.[1]

Authors of the 2001 research urged educators to teach arts for their own sake instead of promoting them as a path to academic improvement. They warned that otherwise arts education would lose its status if the promised academic performance never materialized.

Arts teachers weren't the only workers struggling to preserve their jobs. Layoffs across all industries increased 14 percent during 1994. With so many Americans losing paychecks, it wasn't surprising that demand for classical musicians and their concerts waned. Some musicians patched together a professional life of teaching, a few classical gigs, Broadway subbing, and unemployment checks that could be kept current for years by working sporadically. Even when orchestras were still a growth industry in 1980, 1,100 musicians applied for a total of 47 available full-time orchestral positions on all instruments in all professional orchestras across the country.

Switching careers was tough. Performing musicians resembled tradesmen with limited obsolete skills rather than academic intellects. In his 1989 book *Music Matters*, George Seltzer argued that conservatory degrees aren't commensurate with, say, a philosophy major seeking work in an outside profession:

> In most music programs, because the curriculum is filled with courses in music, the student rarely has the opportunity even to become acquainted with the core of courses usually associated with a liberal arts education. In other words, unless the music performance graduate continues in music, he or she is for all practical purposes not college-educated.[2]

By 2001, some 11,000 music majors would graduate with a bachelor's degree, 4,000 with a master's, and 800 with doctorates.[3] Some 5,600 of these graduates majored in music performance (with the rest concentrating on music education, music therapy, religious music, musicology, music history, composition, or theory). A handful would rocket to the top in solo careers. Around 250 a year would find a full-time orchestra job. Many would scratch away as freelancers, while others played only sporadically, supporting their "career" with menial jobs. The rest had squandered their college educations and, like me, might start from scratch in a new profession at thirty-five or else work in unchallenging jobs.

The plight of young music performers intensifies as they age. In younger years, they sought fame in the city, doubling up with roommates, working a minimum-wage job, their finances perhaps sweetened by an occasional check from Dad. Nonprofit analyst John Kreidler describes their situation twenty years later:

> Today, these same arts workers are in their forties and fifties. At this point in their careers, they may be earning annual wages of $25–40,000, no longer living in shared housing, intolerant of periodic layoffs, and almost certainly receiving no help from their parents. Moreover, the open job market has far fewer opportunities for their skills, and the time for developing the qualifications

> to enter an alternative career is past or becoming short. For many of these veterans, the realities of acquiring equity in a house, saving for retirement, obtaining medical insurance, or helping their children through college have become grim. Given their levels of education, advanced skills, and seniority, these veterans feel entitled to incomes more in the range of $50–75,000, and yet only a small fraction of them, especially in small- and medium-size arts organizations, are able to reach this expectation.[4]

Fanning my black blouse against my chest, I went out of the subway into the brilliant April sun at Columbus Circle. Women and children in pastel hats filled the sidewalk, on their way to the Easter Parade on Fifth Avenue. Amid the spring colors, a man dressed in black walked past the Columbus statue in the center divider. It was Bob, a violinist I knew from City Ballet.

"Who else would be wearing shrouds on Easter?" he grumbled, gesturing to my outfit and to his. In our dark colors, we were conspicuous among the other pedestrians' Easter finery. Bob was headed to Smoky Mary's—the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Times Square—[illegible] the incense-heavy Easter services.

Walking south on Broadway, I turned east on 55th, toward the Fifth Avenue church that hired Basically Baroque each Christmas and Easter. Up in the wooden choir loft, chorus members had already started gathering. Singers like these live even more unstable freelance lives than instrumentalists, often taking jobs at the largest synagogues and churches to sing during their services. They get rock-bottom rates for these gigs, without the union-mandated benefits attached to my check. Together with office temping during the week, they strive to make enough to pay for vocal coaching costing between $70 and $100 or more per hour. Except for the highest echelon of opera stars, even the most successful vocalists barely scraped by.

At rehearsal break, I started walking toward a nearby deli with my Sunday paper. Betty caught up with me, wearing an eighties-style outfit, even though it was 1998. Her blazer was fresh from the cleaners, and she wore sharply pleated black pants and a starched white shirt. I was

never sure what mood Betty might be in, but this seemed to be one of her upbeat days.

As she stepped off the curb to cross the long block between Fifth and Sixth avenues, Betty talked happily about the passing Easter bonnets. She did not hear the beeping sound that commercial vehicles make as they go in reverse. I tried to grab her, but Betty stepped off the curb and a van backed into her and knocked her down. I banged frantically on the van's panels until it stopped. A Hispanic man leaped out of the driver's side, distress showing on his face.

"Lady, lady? I didn't see you, sorry sorry!" the driver said. Betty lay motionless in the gutter; I wasn't sure she was conscious until she finally stirred. The driver held out his hand to help her up.

"Don't you look behind you?" Betty spat, dazed and trying to straighten the knee that had helped break her fall. Tears welled in her eyes. A black woman wearing a yellow suit hurried up the street toward us. She'd seen it all, she said, and would serve as a witness for the driver. She pointed to a crosswalk at the end of the long block, so far away no real New Yorker would ever use it.

We must look like two rich Fifth Avenue ladies to her, wearing these dressy black outfits, I thought. I said nothing to the witness, and suggested to Betty that we go into the deli across 55th.

"I saw it all, I saw it all! People like you . . ." The woman's cries became muffled as the deli door closed behind us. Betty retreated to the far corner of the back room, applying fresh lipstick while I ordered coffee. I brought it over to her, asking if she was hurt. Should we see a doctor?

"I'm all right," she said, lips quivering as she took deep breaths. "I'm just, just . . ." Betty couldn't complete the sentence. The lines around her eyes creased as her body trembled. Her chest caved in and she sobbed uncontrollably. "I work so hard but nothing ever gets better, I can't get ahead, I don't have any savings, I want to do something else but I don't have a college degree, I'm so lonely and everybody in the pit hates me, I hate playing, and I'm going to have to work and live at the Allendale until I die!"

She choked, breathing in and out in little wet gasps. Mascara streamed down her face. I reached awkwardly for her hand, but she jerked it away, smearing eye makeup across her forehead into her bleached hair.

Betty was now in her early sixties, retirement age for most workers. With a shortage of single men her age, she'd stuck with someone who was married to another woman. Professionally, she'd done everything right, winning orchestra auditions, practicing hard, and trying to love music even though repetition had drained her passion long ago.

Relatives, teachers, mentors had praised her ability. Now no one cared that she had to scrounge for rent or needed medical attention.

This time, I tracked down her hand, squeezing it tightly. I did not know what to say. I would be Betty in twenty years if I didn't do something more constructive than taking a few classes and hoping for an epiphany. I'd watched her age, unhappy and unfulfilled. Some younger person in the Allendale was going to see me in the same way. Betty's life had so much more value than the miserable face sitting across from me. She'd lost all her best years. I was losing mine too.

The Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation/Human Engineering Laboratory was intimidating in appearance, from its marble staircase to a dusty nineteenth-century pipe organ and safe (not opened since 1941) in the mahogany-paneled dining room of the Beaux Arts mansion housing its offices. The house had been built in 1900 for one of the Vanderbilts and remained a time capsule that had not been renovated since. The bathrooms retained their two-inch-thick glass towel bars and enormous tubs, and although the elevator didn't work and the fireplaces were boarded up to prevent drafts, stepping into Johnson O'Connor's headquarters was like stepping into another era.

The organization provided tests to evaluate the natural aptitudes of teenagers and adults who were choosing career paths. When it was started by General Electric in the 1920s, Johnson O'Connor aimed to reassign the company's employees who had been displaced by technology. That described my situation perfectly as a classical musician in a modern society.

I'd already exhausted everything I could think of to find a new career. I asked Sydney, Sam, and other friends what they thought. I asked my parents to remember what I'd liked as a child. Their answers—writing, architecture, animals, nature—were too broad to narrow down. After

accomplishing so much in one profession, it was difficult to imagine I could achieve the same level in a new one.

I read Richard Bolles's career-change manual, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* In the book's appendix, I noticed seminars and tests for evaluating your strengths. I'd tried Myers-Briggs and the Strong Campbell Interest Inventory, but they didn't help because I was answering questions about what I *thought* I did well. Years of practicing had steered me so far from my own wishes that my answers didn't add up to anything constructive. I tried a Work/Life Design course at the Crystal Barkley Corporation, a career counseling institute, but the week-long seminar was meant more for business executives. Johnson O'Connor was on the list too, but I'd avoided it until now because of the $500 price tag for seven hours of aptitude testing.

The Johnson O'Connor theory promoted the idea that by using as many of a person's natural aptitudes as possible in work and leisure activities, the subject would be happier than if the work used skills that he or she wasn't particularly good at. The Institute's staff wouldn't prescribe a specific job but would instead discuss the kinds of professions where my aptitudes were useful.

I told the man performing my tests that I knew all about my weaknesses. I had a terrible memory, poor language skills, and no talent for math, design, or spatial orientation. I was rigid, uncreative, and an introvert whose only strengths were logic and analysis. He told me to put my preconceptions aside and treat the tests like a game, even if I felt I was doing poorly. The tasks Johnson O'Connor's test included would evaluate my natural aptitudes, not what years of trying to adapt to a profession I wasn't suited for had told me.

The man showed me a page of drawings, representing a cocktail napkin folded in specific patterns. An imaginary hole was then punched through the resulting layers. If this were three-dimensional, where would the holes be located when the napkin was unfolded?

"I can't do this," I said immediately, shutting off my mind.

"Remember, it's just a game," said the man.

I labored over the first diagram but wasn't sure, so I chose the solution that seemed right. I went through all twenty examples and finished within the time limit, although I was reasonably sure most of them were wrong. My brother would be great at this, I thought. He got all the math genes.

"You got all but one right," said the man.

The tests went on through the day, exploring things I'd never considered, like design aptitude and memory for numbers. I was in the rare state of having so much fun I didn't want to quit. George Wyatt, the Johnson O'Connor associate who was counseling me, spread the computerized results across his desk. I had invited Sydney along, hoping she would be able to help me decipher his advice and perhaps get some ideas on finding fulfillment for herself as well.

"You're one of the lucky ones," George said, pointing out that most of the black bar diagram lines stretched well past the eightieth percentile mark, and many of them went into the nineties. "You're good at almost everything."

I was surprised to see scores in the ninety-ninth percentile for "Ideaphoria" (a creativity measure), musical abilities, and several memory skills. Other high scores included observation; memory for numbers, design, and language; "Graphoria"; and one of the spatial visualization tasks. I'd done reasonably well with manual dexterity and numbers and scored sky-high for extroversion. I'd bombed at logic and analysis.

"You're an extreme example of someone trying to fit a square peg in a round hole," George said. He explained that he'd counseled other musicians, some of them quite famous. The ones who were happy as performers possessed almost the opposite profile from mine. Introversion and low deaphoria" enabled people like performers and researchers to work alone, concentrating for hours on perfecting a minute task.

My classical music training had squeezed me dry of spontaneity. I had no idea what I liked or where my true strengths lay. Locking myself away from others in a practice room, I had drilled on scales and phrases, reproducing someone else's music instead of creating something of my own.

George's analysis was encouraging. He told me I was strong in "people-influencing" skills, and listed professions that would maximize these aptitudes. If I stayed in music, George said, I'd be happier switching my focus to music composition or conducting, where I would be generating new ideas instead of refining someone else's work. Teaching, advertising, journalism, and international business (because of a foreign language aptitude) would all be careers where I might find satisfaction.

Sydney said she could see me doing all the jobs George mentioned, especially something like business or advertising. Those were the two that interested me too, and George and I discussed various business schools.

"Wow, you could really get out of here in style, going to Harvard or somewhere," Sydney said, as George handed me the results and invited me to come back for a complimentary follow-up. Sydney and I went out onto 62nd Street and headed to Madison Avenue for a cab. I asked her where she thought her own aptitudes lay. Sydney was intelligent. I could imagine her in some influential position, perhaps directing a nonprofit organization or a chamber music festival or becoming a business executive. We reached the corner and climbed in a taxi.

"Hey, thanks for coming with me. It really helped," I said. "Would you ever want to do this aptitude-testing thing?"

"Me? Oh, no." Sydney laughed artificially. "I'm just a gig slut."

I winced. Sydney could be so much more. If she were truly passionate about music and freelancing, I could understand staying in the business. However, she complained incessantly. It was clear that Sydney's window of opportunity had closed. Her career wouldn't improve much from here. I tried to imagine how despondent she must feel to describe herself with such words.

We rode through Central Park in silence. Sydney had met a wealthy entrepreneur on a blind date set up through friends. They'd dated for long enough that she was going to move into the million-dollar duplex he owned in Greenwich Village, where she would pay him rent. She didn't behave like someone in love. In fact, she was starting to act more like Betty in her acceptance of an unhappy life. Maybe she was still holding out for a magic dress of her own.