

*(Excerpt) Middle C*

Two men in corporate dress, presumably reluctant fathers summoned to usher duty, handed us programs at the door. It should go without saying that for a recital of this caliber – and by that I mean one in which the performers’ median age hovers around nine – the program resembles a bullet point list more so than a letterpress invitation. Every line of text is a new endurance test, challenging one’s ability to remain seated in a fold-up chair for an unknown quantity of time. A Clipart snowman mocks you from the margin as you tally up – goodness! – twenty-two performers’ names and ready your pencil to check them off, one by one. There will not be an intermission.

My mother dropped off some brownies at the back table. All of the food was neatly saran wrapped to keep out early defectors who’d had their fill of Seitz sonatinas. My father turned and gave me a quick “good luck” pat on the shoulder. He headed toward an aisle seat where he could stretch his legs and daydream in peace. Alone, I took my place up front.

Nestled at the end of a winding driveway, the Homestead was a classy venue for a bunch of amateur musicians, many of us barely able to play a single octave scale without flubbing up the notes. The recital hall boasted high ceilings and a checkered floor. A Currier and Ives-style sleigh, padded with the kind of cottony snow found in a back aisle at Michael’s, rested opposite the grand piano on stage. I was used to the cheap upright in my parents’ living room; its keys spoke plainly of how much or how little I had practiced each week. Consequently, I was always startled by this grand piano’s ability to mend even the widest faults with its mellow timbre.

My teacher warmly welcomed everyone to what essentially was a biannual status report on parents’ weekly investments. Is little Johnny gliding through *Sea Mist* as a gentle wave caresses a sandy beach, or is he plodding through the sheet music with

mechanical determination? Does little Johnny show enough promise to merit another five months of training, or would he be better suited for something more physical such as, say, archery or karate? The recital always began with the newest pianists navigating the likes of Hot Cross Buns, and ended with the high school seniors, who, given age and years-logged, were expected to be the *crème de la crème*. In a town where graduating classes barely crested one hundred, family names were riding on these performances.