

# OVERTURES

One morning I drop my niece off at daycare, riding her on the front of my bike. Jazz is two and a half and holds on for dear life. Her mother (on drugs) hasn't been feeling well lately (from drugs) so I go by and make sure she has her backpack, her lunch, her gold gym shoes. The sound of her screaming and giggling atop the handlebars is a profound musical experience, one of my favorite sounds in the world. Her peals of laughter vibrate at C#.

When I pull up in front of the daycare, she asks when her mother will be feeling better and I look at her and say I don't know. I help fix her backpack and then I ask: "What are going to do today?" and she looks at me and says, "Run it," and forcefully walks inside.

For as long as I can remember, my sister, Izzy, was disappearing. The sound of her absence, of her footsteps quietly walking away was in Bb.

When we were young, my mother would tie a piece of string from my wrist to Isabel's whenever we went outside.

Somehow I can still feel the tug, the tension at the base of my hand, imagine the sound of some other person's pulse beating alongside my own. I feel it most when she's upset, when she thinks the world's against her, when she is looking for a way to vanish.

Before I even pull up at Izzy's apartment, I can already hear her arguing. Twenty-years-old, in a white t-shirt. Even with her hair cut short and dyed blonde, she is impossible to

ignore. She has one of her kids in her arms and the other's in the backseat of the car. The baby smells of hot vomit. I hop off my ten-speed and hear her ex-ex- shouting something from down the block. He what looks like a recent black eye. I walk over and he hands me one of their boxes. I put it in the back of my sister's Corolla. This is the third or fourth time this has happened, moving out of this particular ex-boyfriend's.

When we are finished loading the boxes, she picks up a small statue of St. Teresa and throws it at the back of her ex-ex-boyfriend's head.

How do you save someone completely intent on destroying themselves? Even *Orfeo* has no suggestions.

I turn and see my sister has beaten a hasty retreat in her bombed-out hatchback. *Exit pursued by a bear*, I think but have no one to share it with. The ex-boyfriend holds the back of his head and looks too tired to even complain. He picks up the broken body of the statue and stares at it as if it will give us some answers. I stand by the fence with my bike and shrug as if to say, *What can you do?* I find out later she has gone to stay with her friend Molly.

I'm half deaf. I've been known to imagine sounds that do not exist. A cymbal. A cello. A trumpet. I hear words as shapes, interpret the noise around me as music. I put *Orfeo* on my Walkmans and watch as the southside becomes a symphony. Chemical plant hums in D#. Pigeons sing in G atop an electric sign. A bus closes its doors in Bb

One week after that, I go to the twins' school for Casimir Pulaski Day. I put on my headphones, pull up my hood, and go through my CDs, looking for the perfect composition.

Be it a riot, Mozart. Having your throat cut, Beethoven. Be it the beginning or end of the universe, Bach. Getting your nose broke, Wagner. Having your head stomped, Mahler. A knife in the back, Bartok. Death by drowning, Hadyn. Blunt-force trauma, Grieg. Slow poisoning, Puccini. Blown to pieces by cannon-fire? Brahms. A car accident with multiple fatalities? Stravinsky. Strangled to death by someone you know and love? Strauss. Overdose? Liszt. Suffocation? Handel. Internal bleeding? Ravel. But what symphony do you play while riding your wobbly bike across the southside?

I go with Rimsky-Korsokov, turn on my Walkmans, and ride off on the ten-speed.

I pedal fast as I can. I was born eight minutes late. I have been eight minutes late for almost everything in my life. The southside ignores me as I pedal beneath its out-of-date signs, some in English, some in Polish, some in Spanish. I pull up to the elementary school, lock up my bike, hurry inside.

Someone's mother kindly hands me a Xeroxed program but I'm too nervous to look. I take a seat in the back of the auditorium. George Washington is kneeling beside a fatally wounded Casimir Pulaski. The twins are in the background--one is supposed to be an owl, the other a bluebird. Both of them are eight. Simone, the owl, stares out at the sea of faces, dumb-struck and folds her hands in her armpits while the other kids sing a song

about how Casimir Pulaski's body disappeared. The bluebird, Sophia, dances like she is in a music video, owning the moment in her teal leotard. I can see they have made their costumes out of whatever happened to be on hand.

The orchestra--all second and third graders--carries on uncertainly. The cellist seems ready to cry. I send him some positive thoughts. The performance goes on unremarkably, the music carrying everyone along in its wake.

In the middle of the second song someone in the front makes a comment about my sister's dancing. A fight breaks out. I know right away who it is. Isabella. She is kicking and screaming. She gets some parent in a headlock and pummels them hard. Other parents get involved. A father who is a Chicago cop leads Isabel outside. I can see she has a bloody nose.

I go outside and find Izzy sitting on a curb, see her left cheek is pink, see her shirt has been torn. I sit down beside her and put an arm around her shoulder. She elbows me in the ribs and politely asks if I think I'm Oprah or fucking Dr. Phil.

Even I have to laugh.

I put my hand out, and after a long time, she takes it and I help her up.

I go to sleep that night with the radio on my chest, searching looking for new kinds of music. Daniel who shares the room with me has no choice but to get used to it. My brothers is thirteen and so there isn't much he can do.

Always have to have some song playing, don't care what it is: Bach, Beethoven, Michael Jackson, or Jay-Z.

Everyone calls me Aleks, which was short for Wolfgang Amadeus Aleksandar Fa. I am the oldest of eight children in the only Bosnian and Polish family on our block on the far southside of Chicago. The first and second names came from the child prodigy who began composing symphonies at the age of eight, the third from a grandfather who emigrated from Lodz in the middle of the twentieth century, and the last was from my father, a Bosnian-American who lives several blocks away but who no one saw anymore. There were eight of us, each named after some important cultural or historical figure. Emma—after Emma Goldman the anarchist—who was nineteen, my other sister, Izzy, eighteen named after Isabella—the monarch from Spain, Benjamin, fifteen—inventor and father of democracy, Daniel, thirteen—given in honor of the Biblical hero who fought the lions, Charli—my ten-year-old sister named after Charles Darwin or Charles Babbage the mathematician, the story always seemed to change—and the twins who were eight, Sophia and Simone, named for a pair of obscure writers from France. This circumstance of our ridiculous-sounding names and the fact all of us had been raised by well-meaning, pseudo-intellectuals to appreciate poems and music made us strangers on the corners of our unassuming block.

Our hair was all cut using the same pair of clippers, each of us standing over the sink. Emma used to cut everybody's hair but then she got smart and moved in with her boyfriend who happened to be the assistant manager at the run-down pet store on Cicero

where she worked. Charli took over and gave everybody the exact same haircut, which made us stand out even more. Our skin was olive, less pink. We dressed differently—like Eastern European immigrants—in out-of-date clothes Izzy picked up at Goodwill—t-shirts advertising cartoons that were no longer on the air, generic sneakers found in discount bins at the supermarket. Our parents had raised us to think of ourselves as extraordinary, as exceptional, read poetry to us in the crib. Our poor clothing choices reflected our differences—zip-up track suits, turtlenecks and vests, nameless, off-brand sneakers, floods with off-color socks. In the end all I wanted was to be left alone, to live in an imaginary world of classical music.

I go to community college because that's all I can afford. I take all the poetry and music and film classes I can. I have a Humanities course, which I am not a fan of. The teacher acts like the twenty-first century has not happened.

After class I go to one of other my jobs, ride my bike down to 55<sup>th</sup> street, show my ID at the entrance of St. John's, a juvenile detention facility, then show it again on the second floor. The boys are already in the classroom cutting each other up, cracking jokes.

*Your mother this, your mother that.*

The thing is most of these kids haven't seen their mothers in months, some of them, years. All of them are in lock-up; the youngest is thirteen, the oldest is seventeen. Whenever they have a birthday they get evaluated. The older ones move up into the general population system once they turn eighteen. I am paid to do creative writing with them three times a week. I got hired as an assistant as part of a city program in high

school, then stayed on after I graduated. Maria, the coordinator, basically lets me run the entire hour while she sits in the corner of the room, checking emails on her computer. All of the boys, regardless of their age, wear their guilt and anger on their faces. They're too young to know how to hide it. But then I guess it seems like everybody is missing something. What I do is talk about poetry and music but in the end what can I possibly say that will mean anything?

I grew up with CNN on at our house all the time, bombarding the airwaves with some constant tragedy. On the day I lost my virginity, there was the discovery of another mass grave outside in Srebrenica. I was fifteen. It was the year 2000, the beginning of January. Losing my virginity was most definitely one of the worst experiences in my life. I won't go into details—other than the fact that the girl I was with ended up being with another boy that same day—but I will tell you that when I came home I found my mother standing in the kitchen crying. On the small television on the counter the reporter mentioned that the bodies belonged to Bosnian Muslims and Croats. One of our great-grandfathers was from Srebrenica. My mother said that the world was coming to an end. Then I noticed a teacup was broken in the sink and the palm of one of her hands was bleeding. After that they doubled her lithium and put her on some other kind of mood-stabilizers, Paxil, then Xanax, then Seroquel. She hasn't been the same, mostly stays in her room and listens to music, classical and opera, sometimes songs from her childhood in the 1970's. A few months ago we found out she was sick, had been sick, and that her liver was failing from all the lithium she'd been taking over the years.



Izzy comes by with her new boyfriend Billy. Izzy moved out when she was eighteen and got pregnant the first time, right before dropping out of high school. She had a second kid with a different guy a few months back. She has a tattoo for each of her kids, one on each wrist. Both are illegible. Of all my siblings, she is the one that I feel worst about. I look at her and feel a deep sadness and wonder what happened to my best friend. She used to be my hero; she was the smartest, the most unstoppable out of any of us. Now. She opens beer bottles with her teeth. Now. She laughs too loud like she's trying to hide something.

Billy, her boyfriend, just got back from overseas. In 2005 everyone thought the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would be soon over. But that just goes to show you. Izzy's boyfriend had an Irish flag tattooed on his neck, a typical southside hood. Part of his left leg was amputated after he had stepped on an IUD, he said.

My brothers and sisters all looked at him, even though he was not the first visitor to come to our house missing a limb. He rolled up his pants and showed us where the beige plastic met the scarred remains of his knee. He passed his foot around and he told tell us war stories, about Baghdad and the battle of Fallujah.

Later, after he went home belligerent and drunk, knocking over chairs and waking everybody up, Izzy looked over at me with narrow eyes and said, "What?"

"Are you serious? What are you doing with him?"

Both her kids were asleep on the couch, the baby dangling precariously near the edge of the sofa cushion. She inhaled on her cigarette and looked at me, nodding.

“Because. I like him. I like that I can see what’s wrong with him from a mile away,” she says and exhales cigarette smoke through her nose.

“You know you’re not supposed to smoke in here. Mom’s sick.”

“Mom’s been sick a long time. Anyways, who died and left you in charge?”

Both of us begin to laugh because of how funny it isn’t.

Before the walls came tumbling down, everything was like a fairy story.

Before: my mom at the kitchen table reading to us from the *Economist*, *Mother Jones*, *the New Yorker*.

Before: her hair, long and black, sometimes braided. Eyes with flecks of green and gold.

Before: sound of her singing as she hung the laundry on a line in the upstairs bathroom. Her painting some abstract watercolor, surrounded by light in the front room.

Before: her telling us strange stories about relatives back in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some real, some possibly not:

*Once your great-uncle from Modrica was so poor he was locked away in prison in Sarajevo to work off his debts. This was before the Second World War. When the Germans and Italians and Hungarians attacked, they put all the men in prison to work at a factory making pistols for the S.S. The Bosnians made the best firearms because they could be quiet, they knew how to be patient, but were very cunning. The men began to smuggle parts of guns out one piece at a time and then killed several S.S. officers on a train. All of them men from the factory were put in jail again, and were awaiting to be shot, which is*

*how your uncle learned how to fly. It was just like climbing a staircase, he said. Over the wall he went. But because he was always forgetting things, he forgot how to do it as soon as he landed. He was later shot in the back of the head in an alley.*

Quiet: she's telling you another unlikely story, putting her hand beside your ear.

Before: each day she would write out quotes from Shakespeare, Jung, Karl Marx on the chalkboard in the kitchen.

Now: unmoving in bed. Her hair, uncombed, feet bare, wrists naked. Weeks without showering. Corner of her mouth covered in dry cold sores. Now: the same quote from Sophocles has been on the blackboard for the past eight years, which no one has the courage to wipe away. *Dreadful is the mysterious power of fate; there is no deliverance from it by wealth or by war, by walled city or dark, sea-beaten ships.*

Izzy comes by a few days later with her children Jazzy and the baby, Turbo Junior, who is just a few months old. Both kids seem like recently-released mental patients. Sitting on the floor in the kitchen, they throw knives and forks at each other.

I say, "I was thinking you should change that baby's name. Life is going to be hard for a kid named Turbo Junior."

"It's worked out for you. Having a unique name."

"Did it?"

"What do you mean? Look at you. You're doing okay."

“Look at me. I’m twenty and I don’t have shit. I was hoping to finish community college and go to a real school but that doesn’t look like it’s going to happen any time soon.”

Both of us turn and glance and watch the baby happily hitting himself in the head with a spoon. Izzy looks at me and sighs and then comes out with it: “I think we’re going to be living here a while,” she says. “My friend Molly doesn’t have enough room.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask. “You talk to mom about that?”

She looks away, unwilling to answer. I go up to my room and put on my headphones and try to find a way to leave my body.

Back at community college: I turn in my Humanities essay about the history of Balkanization and the War in Yugoslavia. I worked on the essay all week, pulled quotes from different sources, different articles and wrote the essay in such a way as to show how Bosnia was conquered over and over using different-colored fonts—to make clear how it is a collision of cultures, ideas, and overlapping identities, often in conflict. During the film, the prof. sits in the back, grading papers. After class he tells me he believes the essay has been plagiarized.

It goes how I thought it would go: badly. I try to explain to the prof., to the Dean, even to his administrative assistant—who writes everything down—that I borrowed the excerpts and built something new, but none of them are having it. I tell them how Stravinsky borrowed the opening of *Rites of Spring* from a Russian folksong and how almost all of old school hip-hop was based on sampling. In return, I am told the college

has a strict plagiarism policy and that I am to be expelled immediately. I don't want to blame history but it is hard not to think about how it might have gone if I had written about fencing or soccer, instead of doing something that mattered. But, in that moment, it felt like my need to be seen as clever had once again ruined me.

But all you need to know about me is that I fell in love with music before I could speak, first Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, then Rimsky-Korsokov, Stravinsky. When I was two my mother and father would put on a classical record each night, the sound of the needle marching through the dust in the grooves becoming a harp-like transition from wakefulness to dreams. Later, I realized it was to cover the sound of the two of them arguing, but at the time and maybe even now, it felt like a secret, something beyond both of them, the most thoughtful thing they could do for me.

I began lessons at the age of two, first piano, then when I could hold the bow at three, the violin, then the cello. I learned how to play Handel and Chopin on both instruments, then, for fun, the theme from *The Empire Strikes Back*, and every Beatles song my father would bother to teach me. The calluses from the strings became tougher and tougher each year. I worked with a music teacher from Sarajevo twice a week. At home my father tried to force me to appreciate Beethoven, and Bach, and Mozart, especially his 8<sup>th</sup> symphony, which he wrote when he was a child. He would play that composition over and over and point out the shifts in the different movements, but at some point I could no longer hear it. By then music became a punishment.

When I was ten I bombed an audition for a children's conservatory. My father took me downtown on the train and it was there that I brutalized a cello composition by Britten. I think I just stopped playing in the middle of the performance and lowered my head and began to weep. On the train ride back, my dad did not anything. It cost him a month of working overtime just to get the application money together. Things got bad between my father and mother after that. Two years later he climbed out of the car in the middle of a parking lot and didn't look back. Then somewhere along the line my older cousin gave me a copy of the Wu-Tang Clan's *Enter the Wu-Tang 36 Chambers*. I gave up listening to classical music for a long time after that.

Begin putting together a song in my head the morning as I make ten sandwiches and put them out on the counter. I don't know if Izzy's baby will eat a sandwich or not but I make him one anyway. One by one my siblings all disappear, going out the back door with backpacks, coats, and unlaced, mismatched shoes. When Izzy finally gets up with the baby, all of the sandwiches are gone, which means someone stole the baby's and hers.

When you get kicked out of community college, when you get beat down, who are you going to run to, who you going to tell? *Our wills and fates do so contrary run, that our devices still are overthrown; our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own*, or so Shakespeare once said.

I get off the bus, lock my bike up in front of St. John of God's. Before I even get into the classroom, I can hear all of the kids say, *Aleks ain't shit. Aleks don't know nothing about hip-hop or writing lyrics.*

The boys start in on my clothes every time.

*Yo, Aleks, you look like someone from the eighties.*

I wear these threads for you, I say.

*Yo, you look like a 1980's porn star.*

Today I say, "All right, then dream-time. Write a dream you had recently."

A boy named Wallace who is barely twelve looks up at the fading asbestos ceiling tiles as if the answer is written there and then begins to write. When it's time to share, nobody will make eye contact with me. I call on Wallace and hope he'll come through. He tells me about a dream he had, one where he could fly into space, and go back in time before he did the thing he did that got him there.

I look over at Maria, who runs the arts programming and usually sits at her desk quietly monitoring me. After the session is over, Maria says, "They're moving Malik up. Next week's his birthday. He's turning eighteen."

I nod gravely.

"Sometimes I think what we're doing, getting them to write and paint, it doesn't do them any good. What's the point of getting in touch with your feelings if you're going to get sent up and be surrounded by grown-men in general population? They need to be hard. The last thing they need is to be able to express themselves."

I look at her and then she tries to smile but then begins shaking her head.

“Our grant got cancelled. I can’t afford to pay you anymore. The program’s being discontinued. If you’re serious about becoming a teacher you need to finish community college and get a BA. Nobody else is going to hire you. This place, it’s got no future.”

“I know. I am. I’m trying to.”

As I walk out and flash my ID again I count the money in our savings in my head. Fifty-five bucks minus this month’s utilities. When I get out to the parking lot, two boys—half my age—are trying to steal my bike but doing a bad job of it. One has a pair of comically large bolt cutters.

I try to talk it over with them, say *Yo, guys, what up?* but they seem to have other ideas.

I get the shit kicked out of me and then one of them takes my ten-speed. For some reason they leave my front wheel. I ignore it and hold my head, sitting down on the curb. Everything goes blank.

I come home with a black eye, go and wash my bloody nose in the bathroom sink. Just then I notice the phone is ringing. I pick it up—it’s my niece Jazz’s preschool teacher saying she has failed a test. I say, “It’s preschool. She’s two and a half. I mean she’s still learning,” and the teacher says, *No, I think there may be something wrong with her hearing.*

I don’t know about any of this. Izzy is at work at Payless Shoes and so we sit in the back of the house and I put on a record. Jazz is busy with a coloring book. I put the



headphones over Jazzy's ears but she doesn't seem to notice at first. I watch her as I turn the volume up. It takes awhile before she seems to notice. I can hear the vibrations coming from the headphones before she seems to. I turn the music down and both of sit in the silence, the sound of her hands against the paper the only sound in the world.

I know we don't have much money for testing, for hearing-aids or whatever this person is going to need. But we have to do something because I'm tired of just making do. I read about hearing impairments on the internet all night. The next day, I drop Jazz off at preschool, borrowing Daniel's bike without asking. I watch her climb down from my handlebars and I say, "You go in there and show them what you know. Don't be afraid. You're as good as any of them," but she just gives me a blank look and wanders off into school.

When I get home I call around to see how much it costs for a hearing test without insurance that afternoon. One place says five hundred, another tells me four-fifty. But we don't have anything close to that.

I go by the record store on 95<sup>th</sup> street to look for John Cage's *Quartets I-VIII* when I have time. It's a record I've been looking for over the past ten years, something my father and I used to do together. It's one of his favorite compositions. Even on the internet it's impossible to find. I flip through the stacks, find a foreign pressing of a Beethoven concerto, take it up to the counter.

I borrow Daniel's bike and go by grandfather's apartment on Pulaski to ask to borrow some money for Jazzy's hearing test but he does not answer the door. I can hear

him inside playing the cello, his fingers struggling to find the right notes, but no matter how hard I knock, he does not answer. I realize this is how he has survived for so long.

Today I use an out-of-date insurance card from my mother and bring Jazzy in for a hearing test. It's not good. We sit in a soundproof room and the audiologist makes sure there are no obstructions in my niece's ears, then she places a pair of headphones over Jazz's ears and plays a variety of tones. Later she asks Jazz to repeat a series of words that come through the headphones but Jazzy only says one or two. We get shuffled to an exam room and the doctor—who is old, ancient in a safe, white lab coat—explains something called *autosomal recessive hearing loss* and how her hearing loss is possibly genetic and most likely permanent and then discusses how hearing aids or implants would work and gives us answers to questions I hadn't even thought to ask. I stay up all night on the internet looking for information until I can no longer see.

When I drop her off at preschool the next day, I feel the entire world shift as she hops from the front end of Daniel's bike. I miss the weight of her on the handlebars for some reason. I hold my hand out and show her the sign for *good*, by placing the fingers of my right hand against my lips, then dropping my hand into my left palm. I do it again and she stares at me and does it perfectly, before nodding her head and hurrying into preschool. When I ride off, for the first time in a long while, I have the feeling anything might happen.