

Andy

And now I'm glad I didn't know
The way it all would end, the way it all would go.
Our lives are better left to chance.
I could have missed the pain, but I'd have had to miss the dance.

Tony Arata, "The Dance"

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High D, trill to E, middle C, A, C. High D, trill to E, middle C, A, C. High D, trill to E, middle C, A, C. I repeated it over and over to myself on the bus. Don't you hate it when you think of something you need to remember but you don't have a pen or paper?

"So sorry! Excuse me!" I was bumping into people left and right. Finally, I found my way out the back door and practically ran to my apartment. The stupid door was stuck again, and it seemed like it took me forever to pry it open. I saw the light blinking on my answering machine – new message – but we'll get to that in a minute.

Without even bothering to find my notebook, I scribbled my music on a half-used napkin on the kitchen counter. "Whoa!" I breathed a sigh of relief. I was working on a song for my composition class, and I did not want to screw it up. I'd been writing music for years, but this was the first time anyone else would see it, and eventually, hear it, and that made me nervous – a kind of nervous that I was sure wouldn't leave my head until I turned it in to my professor.

Anyway, back to the answering machine. What I had figured was just one message turned out to be two. The first was the one I'd been expecting – my girlfriend calling to invite me to

dinner with her parents. I was crazy about that girl, and just hearing the sound of her voice put me so much at peace that I almost missed the next message entirely.

“Mr. Vine,” it began, and I could already tell it wasn’t going to be good news. No one ever gives you good news in that tone of voice. “This is Peggy McCallister calling from the Chicago Community Bank. We regret to inform you that your application for a loan has been declined. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at –”

I slammed my hand down on the machine to turn it off. “I’d rather cut my own arm off than talk to you again,” I said out loud. Even the way she said her name drove me nuts – *Peggy* – she seemed to put extra emphasis on it like she thought it was more important than anyone else’s name. *Peggy* had been the one I talked to at the bank in the first place. I remembered exactly what she’d said.

“You know, Mr. Vine, we don’t usually give loans to 21-year-olds with as much debt as you have, especially if they don’t have a responsible parent to cosign.” The fake sweetness in her voice had almost covered up the condescension – *almost*.

In the end, though, I guess I couldn’t really blame the bank. If I was someone else, and somebody’d asked me to loan *myself* money, I don’t think I would have done it. I already had so many student loans, I figured I’d be in debt for the rest of my life. Those loans were enough to cover my tuition at Loyola, but once you added in my rent, food, etc., I needed more money, which, as *Peggy* had just informed me, I couldn’t get.

I applied for financial aid from the university every year, but never got any – once again, though, I couldn’t blame them. My dad made enough money to send a hundred kids to college, and he even *did* pay for my brother’s school, but not mine. I tried to fight him on it, but it was no

use. My brother was pre-med, following in our dad's footsteps, but I was going completely against his plans for me when I told him I planned to leave Indiana to major in music.

"Have you lost your mind? There's no money in that!" he'd said. "Well, I'll tell you one thing, if you think I'm paying one *cent* for that crap, then you really have lost your mind."

Still, as I sat there wondering how long I could survive on the two stale pieces of bread left in my kitchen, I decided to call him. Maybe he'd change his mind at the thought of his son starving to death ... probably not, but it was worth a shot.

"Hey, Mom," I started when she answered. I thought about going through her to get to my dad, but that kind of thing had never worked in the past, so I got straight to the point. "Is Dad there? Can I talk to him please?"

"Sure, honey. Just a second."

I was so nervous I thought I might throw up until I remembered how little food I had left and tried to hold what I'd eaten in my stomach.

"Andy!" I jumped at the sound of his voice. "I was expecting a call from you sooner or later. How are things, son? You changed your mind about this whole music thing yet?" It was my senior year – I think even *he* knew I wasn't going to change my mind at that point, but he still pretended the purpose of most of my calls was to tell him I wanted to be some kind of doctor after all.

"No, Dad, I still really like the 'whole music thing.'" I was pretty sure I was already defeated before I'd even started, but I went ahead anyway and spit it out. "I just got rejected for another loan, and I was wondering if there was any way I could maybe borrow some money from you and Mom?"

He was silent for a moment, but right as I thought that just maybe I might win this one, he came back in. “Well, is there any way *you* could maybe switch to a major that isn’t completely useless?”

He was just mocking me now. I knew he didn’t even really expect an argument from me, but I still said, “No. And, for your information, it’s not completely useless. It’s the right thing for me because it’s what I love. Plus, it’s not even just one thing. When I graduate in May, I’ll be certified to *teach* music too, so even if my piano playing or composing doesn’t work out, I’ll have something to fall back on. I know you think I’m wasting my time, and that’s fine I guess, but is it fine with *you* if your son has to live out on the street and eat out of garbage cans?” I always referred to myself as “your son” when I was asking him for something. I guess I was hoping he’d somehow think I was talking about his other son – the one he thought was perfect – and give in.

“Andy.” He wasn’t fooled – he certainly knew which son I was. “You and I both know you’re being overdramatic about this whole thing. You’re not gonna end up on the street. You’re not gonna end up eating garbage. Plus, isn’t that the kind of stuff you tortured artist people want anyway?” he snickered. “Listen, my deal’s the same as it’s always been: you study something that’s gonna get you a real career – it doesn’t even have to be medicine – and I’ll give you all the money you want, but *this*? I won’t encourage any son of mine to waste four years of his life just so he can be jobless and move back home like a big loser. You got it, kid?”

“Yeah, Dad ... I got it.” I gave up.

“I’ll never understand why anyone would want to study music.” He was just twisting the knife now. “Why does it mean so much to you anyway?”

I hung up on him. I'd explained it to him a million times, or at least it felt like it had been that many. If he was going to forget everything I ever said to him, I wasn't going to dignify his question with a response. I still answered it in my own head, though. Even though he couldn't hear me, I wouldn't let him win.

Music meant so much to me because it had done so much for me. When I looked back at my life so far, all the big moments – and even the not-so-big-moments – had been full of music in one way or another. I remember the first time I knew that music was magic. I must've been only about five years old. I couldn't sleep because of a thunderstorm, so I crept downstairs. My parents were still up, and I could hear them in the kitchen all the way from the foot of the stairs. Even the thunder and rain couldn't drown them out. They were fighting – I have no idea what about, but I had never heard yelling like that. Neither one of them had ever been violent, but I remember thinking, “They're going to kill each other.”

Then, all of a sudden, my mom left the kitchen and bolted to the living room. I peeked around the staircase, half-thinking she was going in there to look for a weapon, but instead all she did was put on some music. I didn't recognize the song at the time, but a few of the words stuck in my head, and I looked it up years later – Etta James singing “I'd Rather Go Blind.”

My mom didn't say a word as my dad followed her in there. She just looked at him like she was the one saying the words coming out of Etta's mouth. Her eyes were pleading the lyrics. “I would rather, I would rather go blind, boy, than to see you walk away from me.” Like I said, I don't know what the fight was about, but I just figure she finally got to the point where she didn't know what to say anymore. But, luckily for her, Etta did.

My dad must have gotten the message because, the next thing I knew, the fight was over and they were in each other's arms, slowly swaying across the floor to the rhythm of the slow

drum beat. I just remember thinking that if something could have a power like that, then I wanted to be a part of it.

Later, though, I realized that I didn't just want to be a *part* of it – I wanted to *make* it, too. I wanted to help people like Etta James had helped my parents. So I started playing piano, and then I even started writing my own stuff. I was never any good with lyrics – like my parents, I had to let other people help me out with the words I couldn't seem to find – but I always felt like I had a certain knack for composing.

As I got older, I realized that music had the same effect on me as it had seemed to have on my parents that one night. No matter what I was feeling, there was a song for it. I'd listen, and suddenly I wouldn't feel so alone anymore because I'd realize there was someone else who had felt the same way.

Nothing made me feel more powerful, more useful, than making music in one way or another. I felt like each new song that I played or wrote was a solution to a new problem for someone out there – someday whoever it was would hear it and their problems would melt away as they listened. They'd feel like I understood whatever they were feeling, like my music had said what they couldn't – if not with words, then with melody. That's what I always hoped anyway. And I figured that if I didn't end up being good enough, then I'd teach – I'd help other people write and play music so I could still be a part of it all.

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I have to confess something – at that moment, there was *another* reason why I liked music so much. This other reason was *less* about being noble and wanting to help people. ... It was *more* about one particular girl – who I happened to love more than music, maybe even more

than anything. I told you I had a girlfriend, and yeah, that's the one I'm talking about. Anyway, if music hadn't already given me enough, it's also the reason we're together.

I was at a jazz club one night, sitting at the bar by myself after a less-than-pleasant phone call with my dad, when I first saw her. She walked over – really she almost *danced* over, the way every part of her moved to the beat of the music. I could tell from the look in her eye that she loved the music the band was playing as much as I did. As it turned out, she was even studying music education at DePaul, but what she really wanted to do was sing. Now is that a coincidence or what? She was even in my year in school.

I hate to say it, but I can't remember too many specifics of that night – I can't remember exactly what we said or what we drank, but I do know the exact moment that I knew I wanted her. You can say I'm lying and that there's no such thing as love at first sight, but I *knew*. I knew as soon as the clarinetist stood up from his seat in the band and started playing "Stardust." I had always loved that song – even without the lyrics, the melody still seemed to say something, its sadness forcing everyone who listened to remember every person they had ever loved and lost. It seemed like the whole place got quiet as the clarinet whined and moaned, except for her voice when she leaned in and whispered, "Dance with me?"

I nodded and smiled my stupid grin. I remember I thought of my parents dancing that one night, and I felt like I had gone back in time and was dancing alongside them. She leaned in close and started to sing quietly in my ear. By the time the song ended, I was all hers.

From then on, I always associated her with the sweet, pleading sound of the clarinet. I'd look in her eyes, and I could almost hear the music. I'd hear a clarinet, or sometimes even another reed instrument, and I'd be sure she had just walked in the room.

If there was one thing I loved more than music, it was her, and I intended to let her know exactly how I felt on our first anniversary. I was working on my song for composition class, and I wanted to dedicate it to her. I was writing the music for clarinet – I was sure it would be perfect.

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After my dad refused to help me out with money, I went into action mode. I wasn't going to sit around and feel sorry for myself – I was going to do something. In the end, though, the answer came without me having to do much at all. The next day in composition class, the professor had an announcement.

“In case any of you budding composers are interested, I wanted to let you all know about a competition coming up. ASCAP – the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers – is running it. Any college student is eligible to submit an original composition, and the winner will get \$2,000 and a limited publishing of their music. It's a wonderful opportunity, and I encourage all of you to submit the pieces you're writing for this class.”

Class went on for another hour, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking about all that money and about how it seemed that music would once again magically fix everything. Still, my head wasn't *completely* in the clouds – I realized I needed an alternate plan, just in case the whole contest thing didn't exactly work out.

When I got home that day, my back-up plan became clear pretty fast. My apartment, though tiny and barely even furnished, was full of my treasures – records, a record player, and my keyboard. If nothing else panned out, I knew what I'd have to do – as much as it would kill me, I'd have to start selling them. I'd start with the records – some of them were signed and worth a lot. If I had to, I'd keep selling until I got to the keyboard.

During the next month (the time until both the contest deadline and the due date for my next rent check), I started spending all my time on two things – my composition and memorizing the records I planned to sell if I had to. That second part might sound a little nuts, but you should know that I'd always had a good memory, especially for music. Don't get me wrong, it was still a lot of work, but I figured it was worth it. If I had to sell my records, I was still going to find a way to keep the music for myself somehow. And what safer place than inside my own head? I already knew most of the songs pretty well, but I took it to a new level. I would listen to the same song ten times in a row, or more, until I knew every bit of it – not just the melody and the lyrics, but the background music, harmonies, the subtle instrumental accompaniment. It became an obsession – whenever I wasn't listening to music, I'd start to panic and think about how much time I was wasting, time that could be spent saving my precious records from ever really disappearing from my life. I was running out of time and I knew it, but I kept going, never doubting that somehow everything would get done.

The composing was different – I couldn't force it, couldn't rush through it like my memorization tricks. Sometimes I'd sit for hours and get one measly measure down on paper, only to erase it and start over again the next day. Other times, though, I'd wake up in the middle of the night, feeling like the music had come to me from a dream. I'd get up and write it down before going back to bed, accomplishing more in a few minutes than I sometimes could in days.

Inspiration came from the strangest places. I remember one time I started banging my head against the wall in frustration – I hadn't written anything new in a while, and I was worried I'd hit a serious roadblock. The soft thud reminded me of something, though – I started to really listen and soon all I could think of was someone plucking a string bass. I wasn't writing for a

bass, but it was still a sound I wanted, a sound of subtle anger and a little bit of sadness. Before I knew it, I'd written another 15-measure phrase without even breaking a sweat.

I started to find bits of all the songs I was memorizing in my own music, too. I wasn't stealing themes or anything, just mixing everything together into one long, pleading cry for everything I wanted in life – money, music, my girl, and maybe just the tiniest bit of acceptance from my father.

Sometimes life really can be ironic. My father wanted nothing more than for me to move away from music, but in the end, I don't think I ever could have written much without him. You can't exactly write something sad if you're perfectly happy with everything in your life, and my father certainly gave me a few things to be *unhappy* about.

Most importantly, though, there were notes in my music for everyone I'd ever loved – my parents, my brother, and of course, my girlfriend. I'd played the music on my keyboard, and I'd see each and every one of them dancing in front of me. I could only hope the judges saw something of what they loved in my song.

Something wasn't right, though. No matter how much I wrote, I couldn't seem to find a way to end it. I wanted so badly for it all to come together in some magical final phrase that would practically force the judges to give me first place, but I felt like I wasn't even close. There was too much resting on that one phrase – I was so scared I'd screw it up that I couldn't even *try* to write it. As long as I put it off, I could pretend I still had something up my sleeve that would save me from homelessness and failure, but I figured that as soon as I wrote down anything less than perfect, I'd be doomed.

So I stayed up at night, so nervous I couldn't sleep, but nothing came. I was frozen, and I couldn't do it alone anymore. Luckily, I didn't have to.

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A couple days before I had to finish my song, my girlfriend called me up and informed me that I needed a break. “I’m picking you up, Andy. You have 15 minutes,” she said. I started to argue with her about how I didn’t have any time and I had to work, but she cut me off. “Nope, I said 15 minutes, and I meant it, mister. I don’t care how much work you have to do – you’ve been working too hard lately, and you need a break.” I loved the way she called me “mister” when she was pretending to get mad at me. “You better be ready or I’ll just have to come in there and get you.” Well, I wasn’t going to argue with that.

I peeked out my window 15 minutes later and, sure enough, there she was walking up to my door. She must have felt my stare or something because suddenly her eyes snapped right to mine and her smile practically pulled me out the window. When I got outside, the first thing she said to me was, “When was the last time you ate?” She raised her eyebrows and smirked. “And remember before you answer, two-week-old bread doesn’t count.”

“Hmm ... in that case, I believe I would have to say last night.” She looked at me like she might start crying – it was already after 6:00. “You should know that you’re really underrating the bread, though. Especially when it hits that two-week mark – ooh man, it’s just aged perfectly!” I tried to cheer her up. “Really though, I promise I’m fine – just a little busy.”

“I don’t know if I believe you.” She squinted at me, trying to read my eyes.

“So what do you wanna do?” I changed the subject.

“Oh I’ve got plans for you, buddy,” she said, the smile back on her face again. She grabbed my hand and started leading me down the street. I was a little nervous – I only had a couple dollars in my pocket, and I didn’t want her to feel like she had to pay for my dinner – but it certainly did feel good to leave my apartment for a while.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“A concert.” I cringed, worrying it would cost money I didn’t have. “Don’t worry, it won’t cost us a thing,” she read my thoughts.

Soon we were in the park, but I didn’t see a stage or musicians or anything. “Are we in the right place?”

“Just wait one second.” She led me over to the playground and had us sit on the swings. She started pulling food in plastic containers out of her purse and handing it to me – potato pancakes, Polish sausage, fresh rye bread, an apple, and last but not least, some kind of pastry she had elegantly pulled into the shape of a flower.

I don’t think I realized how hungry I was until my first bite. She had made everything herself, she said, and told me how her mom had been teaching her to cook while I’d been busy with my music. I recognized her mom’s recipes from countless dinners at her house, but the flower was all her – something she’d made on her own. She told me how silly her mom had thought it looked. “Dessert doesn’t taste any better when it looks pretty,” she said, mimicking her mother’s voice perfectly. “Oh! He’s here!” She stood up suddenly, took a few steps back and faced me. “And now it’s time for the main event.”

I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about until I heard him start to play. Across the park, over near a little cluster of benches, there was a man in ripped jeans and an old Cubs t-shirt. He had a clarinet in his hands and a baseball cap at his feet to collect whatever change people were willing to give. I looked at him, and I saw what I was afraid of becoming in just a few weeks when my money ran out – a man without a job, without an apartment, and without anyone to help him.

As I listened to him play, though, I realized I wasn't like him, or at least the idea of him I had in my head. No, I wasn't like him at all because I would always have someone to help me, and she was standing right there in front of me.

Well, maybe "standing" is the wrong verb – by that point she had started to twirl and jump across the playground gravel. She looked like she was doing some ridiculous kind of ballet mixed with a tap dance. I couldn't help but laugh and wonder if the clarinet player could see her interpretation of his music from across the park. Then, all of a sudden, she stopped as he moved from one song to the next. I wasn't sure what it was at first, but then I recognized it from one of my Artie Shaw records – "Any Old Time."

She placed her arms neatly at her sides and started to sing. "Any old time you want me, I am yours for the asking, darling," her beautiful voice blended with the clarinet. "And any old thing you do, I'll see you through. So just remember that I am waiting, dear. If ever you want me, I'll be near, any old time and any place where you may be."

As she finished, I thought about how much I hoped she really meant the words she was singing. She looked down at me, and I was surprised to see that she seemed embarrassed. "I've always loved this song," she said. "I heard him playing it last week, and I just wanted to see what it would sound like if I kinda sang along. You think I'm silly for bringing you here, don't you?"

All I could do was shake my head and smile as I took her in my arms.

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Later that night, when I eventually got home, the end of my song practically wrote itself – my fear was gone and so was my writer's block. If a performance like the one I'd seen in the park doesn't give you inspiration, I don't know what would.

When it came time to give my song a name, though, I wasn't sure what to do. Like I've said a few times now, I wasn't great with words. But I did know one thing – I didn't want my father's name anywhere on my music, so I decided to call myself Andrew Brevik, using my mother's maiden name.

By the time I had to submit my piece, I still hadn't thought of a title – no words seemed big enough for what I wanted to say, so I decided to just use a key. I hoped that a whole key might just be big enough to hold everything I'd poured out on the page. So on my way out the door to submit my piece, I paused and scribbled across the top of the front page: "Song In E Flat Major."

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I was in my apartment when I found out I won the contest. I didn't celebrate like I had pictured I might when I got the call, though. Don't get me wrong – I was thrilled and relieved, but I had given everything I had to that one song. I felt empty, exhausted. I lay in my bed, my head spinning and playing music like my record player. For the first time in a long time, I let myself really sleep.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt like a new man. It was my first anniversary with my girlfriend, but I'd been so busy writing, I'd barely seen her in the past month except for our night in the park. That morning all I wanted to do was see her. I felt like I owed everything to her, and I wanted to share every bit of it. What I did, though, may have been going a little overboard.

I even called her mother to help me figure out the last piece of the puzzle of what I wanted to say. I knew she'd tease me for getting her mom's help, but I wanted everything to be

perfect. When I knocked on her door, I was ready. As soon as she opened it, I dropped to my knee.

“Sylvia Irena Wojciechowski,” I started. If you can’t use your girlfriend’s full name in a proposal, when can you? “I love you so much. ... Ożenisz się ze mną?” I spoke the Polish “will you marry me?” slowly. Sylvia’s mom had spent 20 minutes on the phone coaching me, but I had a feeling I still didn’t get it right.

“My dear Mr. James Andrew Brevik Vine,” she said, laughing at the formality of it all. “I love you, too, but do you realize we’re only 21 years old? I don’t know about you, but there are just a few things I need to do before I marry you – or anyone for that matter.” I think she must have seen how disappointed I was before she kept going. “Please don’t see this as a no,” she crooned, and I heard the clarinet. “Just see this as a ... someday.”