

## A Whole Distant World

When I was nine years old, I wanted to be a professional cellist. By the age of twelve, I thought it would be impossible. Yet three years later I stared into the half-hearted glow of the computer screen, waiting for an acceptance letter from Juilliard School of Music.

My mom stood rigidly behind me, gripping the back of the chair I was seated in. “So?” she asked. “Did they send you an e-mail?” Her voice was like a sharp edge stabbing into the silence. Her knuckles were white.

“Yeah, they did.” I turned to face her. “But the Internet’s acting up again so it hasn’t loaded yet.”

Her placid gaze did not meet mine, but as I turned away I felt a bony hand on my shoulder. It was the most affection I’d gotten from my mom in days.

When I was eight, I thought she was an evil witch from whom my father had run away. Once a week I would come back from school and walk from our house to my music lessons, the weight of the cello strapped onto my aching back.

On the way to my instructor’s house, I would pass by the local park: bumper carts painted bright yellow, a swing set, a Ferris wheel. And sometimes in the crowded evening air I would dream of seating myself in that bright, freshly-painted bumper cart, driving away into the night, escaping from my mom just like my father must have once done. Then I wouldn’t be forced to practice the cello for an hour every day. I wouldn’t even have to go to school.

All of that changed when I got home from my music lessons one evening: I found my mom at the door, waiting.

“Why are you home already?” was the first thing I said to her. By then I had become accustomed to making my own dinner and –hardest of all – to eating it in solitude.

“Kieran, I know I’ve been really busy at work lately, and I haven’t been spending much time at home with you.” It occurred to me that I’d never heard my mom sound like this: concerned, apologetic. “So I thought we could do something special this weekend.” She brought her slender arm out from behind her back; I hadn’t even noticed she was hiding it there. Clutched in her hand were two tickets to the Henri Dutilleux cello concerto, *Tout un monde lointain*. A Whole Distant World. I couldn’t believe it.

“It’s in the city,” she said, returning to her usual firm tone. “We’ll take the train.”

We took our seats in the crowded hall, and I fixed my gaze onto the empty stage, waiting for what seemed like an eternity. The crowd was abuzz with hushed chatter, words floating up to the dome-like ceiling lending a fervent heaviness to the air around us. And at last, the lights dimmed. Conversation slowly fell to a lull, and hundreds of people waited in silence as the musicians entered the stage, waited for A Whole Distant World.

As the cello outlined its initial, mysterious melody, something came over my mom that I had never seen before: lips parted, eyes wide in awe, she no longer possessed that stiffness about her that she usually wore on her back like a cloak. It was as if the cellist’s bow were pulling a weight off her shoulders. It was as if she was moved.

On our way home we stopped at the local park, and I sought my regular spot in the yellow bumper cart. But I found myself no longer planning an escape: I knew now that my mom was capable of emotion.

The lifeless computer screen stared back at us. “I’ll go check the router,” my mom said. Like the cello on my back the wait was beginning to crush my spine; I thought back to those long moments leading up to the Dutilleux concert. Then I felt a bony hand peel itself off my shoulder, leaving behind the coldness of its absence, an empty handprint. It reminded me of last week.

I was walking back from my music lesson, cello strapped onto my back. And there, in the park, my mom stood as stiff as the unoccupied wooden bench by her side.

“Hey,” she said softly as I approached her. “I was just getting home. Thought I’d meet you here.”

We both took a seat on the bench, my cello set down beside me. Then she said something so startling I nearly fell to the ground.

It had always been an unspoken truth between us. Like most children, I was curious.

“You don’t have a father,” she would always say, dryly. And though I was curious I could never afford to be stubborn. But something changed her mind that evening.

“Kieran,” she had begun, matter-of-factly. “Let me tell you about your father.” And as she spoke, all I could do was stare blankly ahead at the familiar sight of the swing set, the Ferris wheel, bumper carts chipped and dented, the color of stale piss.

When she was done, she put her left hand on my shoulder, that same bony hand. “I just felt like you needed to know before you went away for school.” I nodded, as if I were agreeing to something the bumper cart was saying and not her.

Then she took her hand off, and it was the coldest I'd ever felt. I stared at the rust eating away at the bumper cart, once a bright yellow. My escaping days seemed as if they were a world away.

I turned to look at my mom, and for the first time I was really looking at her: I looked into those ocean-colored orbs I had never once seen moistened, those stiff shoulders carrying the weight of a thousand cellos, a bony hand that held all the love in the world.

"The router's working fine." My mom had returned to standing rigidly behind me, gripping the back of the chair I was seated in. "Looks like we just have to wait." Her voice was like a sharp edge stabbing into the silence. Her knuckles were white.

So we waited; one seated, one erect, a bony hand on a shoulder, waiting for a message that contained a lifetime, a promise of a distant world. And a few minutes later, it loaded. In the half-hearted glow of the computer screen, my mom's eyes filled with silent tears.