

“ Virtuoso Mio”

by

Karen Palmer

Perla Ramirez is cat-faced and sullen, foul-mouthed and resentful, and at twelve she is already a vandal, a pickpocket, a sneak, and a snitch. The entire neighborhood hates her. Does she care? It seems she does not. “Ay, Perla!” rings at her back wherever she goes, but she returns every curse with a violent “Fuck!” of her own, continuing unstopped on her furious way, spilling trash cans, breaking windows, spying on lovers, stuffing her pockets with candy bars, lipsticks, and CDs for the Walkman she pinched off a drunk.

Perla lives with her mother, Sonni, and baby sister, Lani, in three rooms on the sixth floor of a walkup on 137th Street in New York. The skinny railroad-style flat is piled high with junk: stacks of old newspapers, tattered furniture, dead appliances. In the kitchen a closet behind the breakfast table houses the john. A pea-green bathtub stretches along one entire wall, clear to the window ledge; filled, the tub looks like a lake. Hinged to its back edge, a heavy sheet of unpainted plywood serves as a makeshift countertop. Here Perla’s mother stores their dishes, their bowls and glasses and plates. Because it is such a chore to clear everything off, the three Ramirez women bathe together just once each week, every Saturday morning at six. And since today happens to be Saturday, Perla, still half-asleep, sits huddled in tepid water, scowling at the weak winter sunlight that forces its way through the window’s coating of soot. Sonni laughs, and Perla shifts her aggravated attention to the other end of the tub, where her mother lolls with baby Lani laid out in her lap. Famously beautiful all over their neighborhood, Sonni at twenty-nine looks barely nineteen. Her skin is unblemished, smooth as syrup; her arms are round, hairless, and soft. Her eyes are the color of wet maple leaves. She has dimples and curls, red lips, and even white teeth. At the Cafe Reál, where she works as a waitress with three of her girlfriends, Sonni is considered the sexy one, her looks a calling, almost, and she smiles all the time, as if waiting for someone to

take her picture.

Perla, on the other hand, never smiles. She has her reasons, among them the fact that last year Maxie Otero threw a beer bottle at her and knocked out two teeth, his explanation being that Perla looked weird. Now she looks weirder still. And although Sonni keeps making promises that she'll take her daughter to the dentist to see about the hole in her mouth, she never does. They never have any money; but in Perla's opinion, that's no excuse.

The chestnut tips of Sonni's breasts poke through the bubbles. Perla hisses. She crosses her arms over her own scrawny chest. Humming, Sonni soaps Lani's hair with a slivered white bar and Perla slips down till she is submerged to the eyeballs. She opens her mouth and lets it fill with water, then rears up and spits across the lake. The stream hits her mother right in the face.

"Ay, Perla!" Sonni squints one-eyed. "What's the matter with you?"

There is no good answer to that question.

Baby Lani looks as if she might cry.

"Maybe," Sonni says, "you should go hear music at Carnegie Hall." She's talking about the concert this afternoon. Mrs. Davis, the director of the Youth Center, is taking a bunch of kids downtown to a piano recital. It's a gift from the City, an afternoon of culture for the underprivileged. *Classical music*. Fuck that, Perla thinks. She likes hip-hop, Aceyalone and Wu-Tang Clan and Krayzie Bone. She likes the way the angry voices vibrate inside her skull, and in her chest, too, a feeling that pushes against her skin from the inside. Sonni says, "It's that Italian kid, eh, Perla? What's his name? Luigi something something something."

Perla is too smart for that. The flyer is right there on the kitchen table and if Sonni really wants to know, all she has to do is look.

"I can still get Rita to watch the baby," Sonni says.

Perla hunches forward. The idea of ditching Lani is very tempting. She wouldn't even have to make the concert, she could go wherever, do whatever. But there is a hopeful eagerness in her mother's face she feels she must squash.

"I hate that Davis bitch," Perla says, though really, Mrs. Davis is mostly OK, with her kinky gray hair and a gap-toothed smile Perla can identify with. Mrs.

Davis lets Perla drink black coffee on cold days, and once gave her a pair of Nike's with lights in the heels that a grandson had outgrown.

Sonni cups a palm over Lani's eyes. She reaches over the side of the tub, fingers grazing the linoleum to retrieve a plastic cup. Carefully, she rinses the baby's hair. Lani, squealing, hits the water with the flat of her palm. Waves splash to Perla's end of the tub. The baby looks sly, as if seeking applause. Lani is fifteen months old and has a different father than Perla, a white guy that passed on his papery skin and light hair. Perla hates it that the baby is so fucking sweet, that kisses fall on Lani like soft summer rain. Each night, the girls camp out in the living room—Sonni claiming the only bed in the apartment's only bedroom—*toe-to-toe* on the orange Abortion Couch, so-called because wicked steel coils stab up through the weave; and sometimes, very late, when Perla can't sleep for wanting something, she doesn't even know what, she throws off the covers and flips around and crawls to her sister's side. She fits the earphones from the Walkman over Lani's little pink ears. She puts her cheek against Lani's hot little temple. Then she twists the volume, the tinny threads raveling from the radio's heart, the sound growing louder and louder—she can't help herself, she has to do it—until the baby wakes with a scream.

Sonni leaves for work.

There is nothing to do.

Perla digs through the newspapers in the living room, dredging up old comics to read. She spreads them out on the floor. Lani swats at the print, laughing when Perla pushes her hand aside. "You're such a baby," Perla says. Lani scrunches the paper up in her fist. She could play this game till the day's bitter end, but after twenty minutes, Perla is bored.

She heads for Sonni's bedroom. She wants to try on her mother's clothes. Short dresses, bright tops, jeans that fall straight from Perla's hips. But as soon as each item is on, she can't wait to take it off. Sonni has a red silk kimono that Perla rips accidentally-on-purpose, stepping on the hem. The heap of discarded clothing grows. Lani watches from the floor, openmouthed. She drags a garment from the

pile and waves it like a flag.

Wearing a flowered sundress cut so low that her nipples peek out, Perla wanders into the kitchen, Lani toddling after. Perla skirts the breakfast table and squeezes into the john. She opens the medicine cabinet and hunts, looking for something, she has no idea what. She sees: mouthwash and toothpaste, deodorant, tampons, lotions and potions, a cache of make-up. Perla lifts a plastic compact. She opens the lid and wets the small brush with spit, as she's seen her mother do. She lines her eyes thickly with black, then steps back and winks at herself in the mirror. Then she grimaces; she looks like a fucking vampire. Lani, holding on to Perla's legs, bounces energetically and puckers her tiny lips. Perla bends down to apply fuchsia gloss. The baby smacks, not sure she approves of the taste.

Sonni has devoted an entire shelf to plastic bottles that contain various pills. Perla makes a random selection. She shakes a few red capsules into her hand, lines them up on the tip of her tongue. She studies herself again in the mirror. The pills look like little canoes. The baby sits down hard on her diaper and starts to whimper and Perla picks the pills off her tongue and pitches them into the toilet. She helps Lani up, guiding her hands to the seat for support. The baby grips as Perla flushes. They watch the water circle, the pills riding the whirlpool, a gay fleet on a luckless rendezvous.

Lani is making a lot of noise now and Perla realizes the baby's hungry; they both need to eat. Back in the kitchen, Perla dumps Lani in her highchair. "Pea-buh," Lani says, so Perla makes peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She leaves the dirty stuff out. Sonni can do the dishes herself.

Perla sits at the table and chews her sandwich and looks out the window. The building across the alley looms, abandoned, awaiting the wrecking ball. Some of the flats have busted windows, some are boarded over. A ragged black dress hangs from a forgotten clothesline. Perla runs her eyes along the inside of the window frame, coming to rest on a screw placed loosely in a hole in the sill—Sonni's idea of a security system. Perla pulls the screw. She opens the window and the curtain floats in a blast of cold air. It feels good; the super keeps the heat way too high. Perla sticks her face out, and her arms. Then she climbs out onto the

fire escape. Perla grabs the railing. The icy metal burns her hands, and she wonders about that, how cold can also be hot. Six floors below, the yard is a garden of cardboard boxes and soda cans and liquor bottles. A patch of sky shines, very white. There's a wet taste to the air. Flat-footed, Perla jumps a few times, enjoying the metallic clang and clatter. Next she climbs down three rungs and threads her legs through to sit. She can just see into her own window from here, Lani waving from the high chair, bottle raised in her fist. Perla lets herself fall backwards, slowly, trying not to bang her spine against the steps. The blood rushes instantly to her head; her ponytail sweeps the fifth-floor balcony. From this position she has a good view into the kitchen below, and she sees at once that Victor Boccard is home. He's hanging out naked, getting a blow job from his girlfriend, who kneels on the linoleum. Upside down, it looks really weird, but Perla is interested so she watches for a while. The girlfriend has on a short T-shirt and pink underpants. She looks sweaty and uncomfortable, mechanically compromised, hand and mouth working at odds. Meanwhile, Victor is running an idle hand over his chest, playing with his hair. His eyes are bleary, unfocused. During the week, he works as a meter maid, and Perla has a sudden picture of him writing tickets, wearing nothing but a frilly apron. She stifles a laugh. Victor stares right at her. Perla lashes her arms and moans theatrically. The pressure in her head makes her feel as if her eyes are bleeding. It takes Victor another half a minute, but finally he yells, "Perla! You little shit!" Perla hauls herself up. She untangles her legs and climbs the two steps, then scrambles across the platform and over the window ledge and back into her own apartment. Swooping past Lani, she makes a run for Sonni's bedroom. Perla slams the door. She sinks down onto the floor, panting, listening.

She hears Lani babbling to herself in the kitchen.

Perla sits and sits.

There is nothing to do.

Perla decides to take the baby for a walk. She dresses Lani in her plastic snowsuit and boots, puts on her own winter coat over the flowered sundress. She adds a pair of baggy green corduroy pants and black hightops. She drops a few subway tokens

into her shoe and gets the stroller from the hall closet and belts Lani in. They bump down the six flights of stairs, pausing only for Perla to groan orgasmically outside Victor Boccard's front door.

Out on the street, Perla picks a direction at random. The wind is brisk and her eyes water. She ducks her head as she walks and wheels, turtling her neck into the coat's scratchy collar. Soon enough, she finds herself at the Youth Center. Perla peers through the dirty storefront. Inside, bookshelves line one wall. There are a few desks and scattered artwork, a waste bin filled with deflating basketballs. Mrs. Davis is standing alone at a chalkboard. Banks of fluorescent lights flicker; her hair looks like a pulsating halo. She wears a brown skirt, patterned knee socks and sandals, and a red shirt, too large, with a rip under the arms that displays a crescent of pale flesh as she writes.

Mrs. Davis steps back to assess her handiwork. She presses a fist into the small of her back and stretches and turns, catching sight of Perla through the window. Mrs. Davis grins wildly. She rises up on her toes, as if she can't rein in her enthusiasm sufficiently to remain on this earth.

Perla spits on the sidewalk.

Mrs. Davis comes to the door. She swings it open, a bell tinkling inside. "Come in, Perla!" she says. "Come in! You're very early, dear."

"Early for what," Perla says.

Mrs. Davis looks temporarily confused. She steps outside, where the traffic is heavy and she must raise her voice. "Why, for the virtuoso!"

The word makes Perla mad. "Who?" she says.

"Why, Luigi Marchieri dei Sonatello."

"Who?"

Mrs. Davis cries, "Beethoven, dear!"

Perla scowls.

Mrs. Davis says, "The program says the Waldstein is last. Such a difficult piece. And for such a young fellow. All those trills!" Mrs. Davis purses her lips and warbles, sounding just like a bird. A man pushing a shopping cart loaded with black plastic bags stops to stare. He digs in the pocket of his filthy black coat,

coming up empty-handed.

"I hate that shit," Perla says.

Mrs. Davis says, "You do not! You've never even heard it." Her cheeks are pink and Perla thinks of Victor's girlfriend, her face all caved in at the mouth. In the stroller, Lani kicks her heels. Mrs. Davis crouches. She tickles Lani under her chin, setting off a waterfall of giggles. "Girl or boy?" she asks.

"Boy," Perla says.

"Your baby brother?"

"No way," Perla says. She hears the twangy *thwock* of a ball bouncing against a metal fence. The Youth Center is across the street from a park. A break in the traffic, and Perla sees a kid on a bench hand something off to a middle-aged man. "I found this baby," she says to Mrs. Davis, "in the park. Just now, in fact. But I'm gonna get rid of him. He's a fucking pain in the ass."

Mrs. Davis folds her hands primly. "You know, dear," she says, "the little one can't come to Carnegie Hall. It's not allowed."

Perla kicks at the stroller's wheel. The brake isn't set, so the stroller does a little sideways jump, then rolls about a foot. Mrs. Davis lunges at the handle. Lani twists in her seat, looking for Perla, who ducks into the Youth Center's doorway. The baby's face screws up into a knot. A piercing wail escapes. Mrs. Davis looks at Lani incredulously. She sticks a finger in her ear. Turning to Perla she says, "Perhaps, dear, you can go another time."

Perla doubts it. There won't *be* another time. She draws back her foot, taking aim at Mrs. Davis's shin. The rubber toe of her hightop connects.

Mrs. Davis yelps like a dog.

Perla grabs the stroller and takes off running. She can hear Mrs. Davis calling after her, but the words are drowned out by other voices, and by wind, by squealing brakes and honking horns, and the blood that pounds in Perla's ears, sounding doom.

There's a plywood barrier in the middle of the next block. It runs alongside the sidewalk for several yards. Behind the barrier there used to be a building, but it's

been torn down. The plywood is papered over with posters that advertise a play at a theater downtown, a bunch of elegant white people standing around looking famished. Someone has drawn breasts and a mustache on one of the women, an enormous hairy penis on one of the men. Farther down, there's a taped flyer about a missing tabby cat. *Fuzzy, it says. De-clawed. 13 lbs.* Perla trails her fingertips on the wall, pretending each ragged nail is a red hot razorblade.

At the point where the barrier should butt up tightly against the building next door, she stops. There's a unexpected break about a foot wide. Perla gets Lani out of the stroller and stands her on the sidewalk. She folds the stroller, and shoves it through the opening, squeezes herself in, then reaches back and drags Lani through.

They are alone on the other side. There is rubble everywhere, glass and rebar and broken concrete, and in the middle of the lot a giant hole. Wind funnels between the buildings and bites the girls' cheeks.

Perla sticks Lani back in her stroller and belts her in. The baby protests. Perla searches until she finds a piece of stiff red cellophane, like the stuff that's wrapped around flowers at the grocery. Lani takes the cellophane in her fists and plays it like an accordion.

Perla studies the excavation. The sides are steeply sloped, but she guesses she can run it easy enough. She moves the stroller so that Lani can see, then she slips and slides down into the hole.

At bottom, Perla can no longer hear the traffic. She begins to search the dirt floor, every square inch, the sound of her footsteps oddly deadened. Perla is looking for something, she doesn't know what. But she's found a lot of neat shit by keeping her head down. Old postcards, videotape, a claw hammer with some rusty stuff on it that looked like dried blood. Once she found a ring she was sure was a diamond, though Sonni said it was glass. Here, she sees piles of cigarette butts, and loose newsprint that looks like it's been used as toilet paper. Charred cardboard—she wishes she had her Bic, she'd like to start a fire down here—the remains of a cookout. An unopened bottle of Seagram's V.O. stands like a lone bowling pin. And then something small catches her eye, something shiny and

white. She bends down and plucks a seashell from the dirt. Quickly, she closes it in her palm. Perla knows someone dropped the seashell, and not that long ago, but still it gives her the weirdest feeling, as if it had been here before the city was built.

She looks up at Lani. The baby has tossed the cellophane and is sucking her thumb and looking solemnly down on Perla. The dirt sides of the hole look steeper and taller from this perspective and Lani seems far away, on another level in more ways than one. The hole feels like more than a hole. Perla is reminded of the day Sonni walked her miles down Broadway. A blue afternoon, the air so sharp it hurt her chest to breathe. Sonni wanted Perla to lift up her head, to look at the signs in the second-story windows, the banners and flower boxes. It's a whole 'nother life, she said, and we don't even know. Perla didn't get what that had to do with her. But Sonni's always saying this kind of stuff. In Perla's opinion, her mother is dumber than rocks.

Now, standing here, she thinks about how she might scream murder at the top of her lungs and no one but Lani would hear. Perla drops the seashell. She kicks dirt over it, hiding the shine.

The Café Reál is an old-style American diner, with gold-flecked Formica countertops, swiveling metal stools, vinyl booths, a jukebox, and a milkshake machine. Painted on the bricks above the front door is a faded street scene: merchant graffiti from the turn of the century. Once the lunch counter of a prosperous five-and-dime, the diner has long since been partitioned down to its current size. The specialty now is Caribbean food. Burgers and fries are still on the menu, but there are better things to eat here.

Perla barges in, crashing the stroller into the deserted hostess's podium. The café is crowded, noisy with the tail end of the lunch hour crush. Waitresses rush about, platters balanced on the insides of their forearms. Perla smells roasted pork, rice and beans in sofrito, fried plantains seasoned with garlic. Her eyes sweep the room. It's mostly workers, men in flannel shirts and jeans and steel-toed boots. Salesclerks who toil in the shops farther downtown. A guy Perla knows for a neighborhood pimp sits alone at a table for six, whispering into his cellular phone.

One of the waitresses is Sonni's best friend, Jess, a great big fatso who in Perla's opinion puts the lie to jolly. Jess lumbers toward an elderly couple, slams their plates onto their table. The old man is holding one of the old woman's hands in his own, and some of the hot food bounces onto their arms. They don't seem to notice. On the way back to the kitchen, Jess catches sight of Perla and frowns and shakes her head. Perla makes a few understated pig noises and sticks out her tongue. Then she sees her mother.

Sonni is standing behind the counter, one hip thrust forward. She is listening with intense concentration to a man seated on a swiveling stool. There's an empty next to him, so Perla makes a beeline. She parks the stroller so that it blocks the flow of traffic, then huffs and puffs through a show of getting Lani out of her seat. Perla flops down on the stool. Over the top of Lani's head, she checks out Sonni's talker, who has yet to come up for air. The guy has wavy brown hair, a pocked red neck. He gestures extravagantly as he speaks. His hands look older than the rest of him, freckly and loose-skinned.

The guy is saying, "—and if I can get enough investors, everyone stands a chance of striking it rich."

"Uh-huh," Sonni says.

Up close, Perla can tell Sonni isn't quite as enthralled as she first thought. Sonni's chewed off every bit of her lipstick, and she keeps rubbing her arms, as if she's freezing. Perla grabs the edge of the counter and lifts her feet and gives herself a spin. She holds on tight to Lani as the seat twirls around twice. The baby squeals with delight.

"I mean," continues the talker as if they aren't there, "why should the fat cats get it all every time? It's time the little guy stepped up to the plate. It's time—"

"Perla," Sonni interrupts. "What are you *doing* here?" Perla spins again and Sonni says, "Stop that."

Perla drops her feet. The talker turns sideways to stare at the two girls. "Yours?" he asks Sonni.

"What do you want?" Sonni says to Perla.

There is no good answer to that question.

Perla bats her eyes at the guy. "You marry Mama," she says earnestly, "me and Lani'll call you Daddy."

"Ay, Perla!" Sonni says.

The guy says to Sonni, "You don't look anywhere near old enough."

*Asshole*, Perla thinks.

The guy cocks his head. "That baby's a little doll," he says. "She's got a future, that one."

"Hi, hi," Lani says.

Perla wants to throw up. She squeezes Lani and the baby burps. Instead of being disgusted, the guy laughs.

Perla gives Sonni the evil eye. Her mother returns the favor. They hold each other's gaze. But there is something in Sonni's expression that Perla can't read. Fear, or anticipation, maybe, as if Sonni wants something from her daughter she knows she can't have.

But Sonni says only, "What's that on your face?"

Perla puts a hand to her cheek.

"Your *eyes*," Sonni says.

Perla remembers now. Sonni's eyeliner, looking on Perla like shit.

"Go to the Ladies and wash it off," Sonni says.

"Fuck you," Perla says.

"Ay, Perla!"

"Hey!" the guy protests. "Don't speak to your mother like that."

"Fuck you, too," Perla says.

"Go home now," Sonni says in a voice flat with warning. "The baby needs a nap. Put her down right away. OK, Perla? OK?"

Perla sits there.

"*Now*," Sonni says.

Perla packs Lani none-too-delicately in the stroller. She stomps off, headed for the door. She passes the table where the old couple sat. They're gone now, but their plates haven't been cleared. Perla stares at untouched mounds of cold beans and rice. She wonders why they did not eat their food.

At the threshold, she turns and glances back at her mother. Sonni is leaning against the counter now, bent forward so that her cleavage spills from the top of her uniform. The guy says something to her and Sonni throws back her head, offering him her long throat.

Jess waddles up to the table and begins stacking plates. She throws the silverware ringing on top. She looks at Perla, then at Sonni, then at Perla again. Shrugging, she says, "Everybody's good at something."

Twenty minutes later, back at the flat, Perla watches her sister sleep. The baby lies flat on her back on the Abortion Couch. Her chest rises and falls. Perla takes a step away from the couch and Lani sighs. A bubble of spit pearls between her lips. Perla takes another step. Lani lies motionless. And now Perla is walking slowly backwards, moving first through the living room, then Sonni's bedroom, then the kitchen. She opens the door to the sixth-floor landing. She takes a deep breath, and closes it, carefully, and quietly.

The long line in front of Carnegie Hall is comprised of children from all five boroughs, snaking west on 57th Street, from the box office to the end of the block, then around onto Fifth Avenue. In no way is this line orderly; kids shout, punch each other, dash back and forth, jump, fuss, fidget, giggle, cry. The few adults are pathetically outgunned. It takes Perla a couple of passes to locate Mrs. Davis and the others from the Youth Center, losers she wouldn't be caught dead with under other circumstances. Mrs. Davis is holding forth on some aspect of proper concert hall behavior and Perla takes the opportunity to sidle into line. Maxwell Otero, princely young beer-bottle-throwing shit that he is, jabs Perla with an elbow, contorting his features into a mask of disgust. He holds his big nose. Perla says, "Fuck you, Maxie," and Mrs. Davis stops her lecture. "Perla, dear!" she cries. Instead of being mad, she looks unaccountably cheered. "You made it! Just in time, too."

Perla shrugs. But it's true, the line is starting to move.

At the box office, Mrs. Davis sorts out their admission, and then they all file into the lobby. They march up a short flight of steps and enter Recital Hall. There

are paneled cream-colored walls and row after row of plush red seating. Mrs. Davis herds everyone down the aisle toward the stage. They stop at the twelfth row: they have excellent seats. Perla stares up at the tiers that curve around the sides of the hall, running lights like on an ocean liner.

Mrs. Davis takes Perla's arm. She shoos the group down the row, then scoots in herself, settling into the seat second from the end. She gestures for Perla to take the aisle. "So you can see his hands, dear," she says.

When the lights finally go down, a chorus of shushing ensues. Perla squirms. But she's finally noticed the enormous piano up on the stage. The instrument is polished to a high shine, the lid yawning wide. It looks like a huge black bird on the wing. Then a man in a tan windbreaker and chinos strides out from behind the curtain and the drone of young voices comes to a halt. The man steps to the edge of the stage, raises a hand to his eyes and comments on his inability to see the audience. He waggles a finger, suggesting that perhaps the invisibles are up to no good. Then he veers off into a speech about the beneficence of the City of New York, the gracious management at Carnegie Hall. Soon the kids are shifting restlessly. Perla wonders why she bothered to come. She begins to tear up her program. She puts little rolled pieces into her mouth and shoots spitballs down the aisle. Mrs. Davis is yanking the program from Perla's hands when the man in the windbreaker abruptly exits. A long expectant minute passes. Then Luigi Marchieri dei Sonatello walks onto the stage.

Perla's first thought is: he's just a little boy. Mrs. Davis has told her charges that dei Sonatello is thirteen, but he looks much younger, lost and lonely in his black tie and tails. A pouf of black curls falls over his ears, onto his neck. His face is ghostly pale, the black brows slanting dramatically. Dei Sonatello makes his way to the piano. Turned now to face the audience, he places one hand on his belly, the other on the instrument. He bows deeply, then seats himself at the stool. After making an adjustment to its height, he raises his arms. He lowers his hands to the keyboard.

Dei Sonatello begins to play.

And Perla, who has never in anyone's memory ever sat still, is frozen in

place. For an hour and more she can't move. The music is unlike anything she's ever heard. The sound is everywhere, thrown into every corner of the hall, but it's as if the piano speaks to Perla alone, in a language incomprehensible yet absolutely complete. From the first note, she's caught on the verge of crying. And Perla never cries. She stares at the boy's hands, feeling the lightning fingers like knives at her throat. The power is *there*. It's like what she hears in Krayzie Bones's songs; but it's different, too; or maybe it's just a matter of discovering what the connection might be. One thing Perla knows: she wants this power for herself. Dei Sonatello plays a slow piece, then a fast, then a series of things that make Perla think of foxes dancing. A moment of silence follows, dei Sonatello visibly composing himself. Mrs. Davis leans over and whispers to Perla, "Now comes the Waldstein, dear!" Dei Sonatello repositions his hands. He nods his head once. A persistent thud sounds, very fast and low on the keyboard, and then the music takes off. It is running away with Perla. The notes build a solid vibrating wall. The boy plays and time races forward while also standing utterly still, until at last the notes begin to rise, higher and higher, like bells pealing from a mountaintop or water cascading from a break in the clouds. And all at once it's over. The audience stands. The hall fills with applause. The young virtuoso stands also, and bows. Perla leans out into the aisle, trying to see. Clapping thunders around her. The man in the chinos and windbreaker trots out from the wings, a microphone in his hand. Dei Sonatello says something into it. His voice is liquid, rollingly soft, but Perla can't hear through the applause. It sounds as if he's talking about seas—or seats, maybe. *Seeds*. Perla mimics the movement of his lips, which twist as he speaks. She sticks the tip of her tongue into the empty sockets left by her missing teeth, and concentrates. But she still can't understand. The words come too fast. It's *Italian*, she realizes. She has a brief sensation of fullness, then of a rushing wind that sweeps everything clean. In the next moment, she remembers the open window in the kitchen at home, the curtain floating. With frightening clarity, she sees the rusty screw on the kitchen table. She sees Lani awake, toddling through the flat, looking for Perla. She sees Lani crawling out onto the fire escape.

Perla bolts out into the aisle. She runs toward the back of hall, into the lobby

and through the front doors. Outside, snow is falling heavily on 57th. Perla stops to stare at the huge flakes that blanket the pavement in white. There is so much snow in the air she can't see the buildings on the other side of the street. Then Mrs. Davis clamps a hand at the back of Perla's neck, grabbing her coat. "What on earth!" she cries.

"I have to go *home*," Perla says.

Mrs. Davis's grip is surprisingly firm. "What's the matter with you? What happened in there?" A dreadful comprehension seems to dawn. "You don't mean—" Shocked, she covers her mouth with her hand. And Perla can't stand it. Mrs. Davis knows she's left Lani alone. Perla is embarrassed; she's *ashamed*. She sags a little and Mrs. Davis's hold on the coat weakens and Perla wriggles free. She tears off wearing nothing but Sonni's flowered sundress and the baggy green cords. But the cold can't touch her. The street is cloaked in silence and her footsteps are muffled, erased behind her as she goes. "Fuck," Perla says. *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck*. She repeats it all the way into the subway station, while waiting for the train and on the train, too, running from car to car, trying to shave a minute or two off her time. By the time she emerges again out into the world, the word has become useless, just another sound.

Streetside, the world is buried under inches of snow. In the course of the final few blocks, Perla is covered. When she stands, finally, before the door to the flat, melted droplets fall around her like tears. Trembling, Perla takes the key from under the mat. She straightens. She opens the door and steps inside, into the kitchen where she sees that, yes, the window is open, the curtain is fluttering. The rusty screw sits where she left it on the table. Broken glass sparkles by the bathtub. Three cans of tinned beans lie on their sides, rolled up against the refrigerator. Perla shudders from the cold. She toes the shards of glass. She kneels and, thick-fingered, sets the cans to rights. On her feet again, she decides to bypass the fire escape, advancing instead to Sonni's bedroom. There the discarded pile of clothing has exploded, shirts and dresses dragged into every corner. But a definite trail leads into the living room. *Seeds*, Perla thinks. She moves forward slowly. In her head she hears music. The odd individual note leaps, and she is flooded with an

optimism she knows she doesn't deserve.

And for once, Perla is lucky, so very lucky. Because here is Lani, fast asleep on the couch. Sonni's red silk kimono is tucked under her cheek. Dirty tear tracks streak her face and she's soaked with pee and smells bad. Legs buckling, Perla lowers onto her end of their bed. Lani's eyes pop open. The baby glares fiercely at Perla, then smiles.

— END —