

# Solo Tuning

*George Wu Teng*

Friday, after walking home, and changing from black button-down and trousers and dress shoes to short-sleeved shirt, jeans, sneakers, George, sweating slightly from early May, walked the fifteen minutes from his apartment to Sunder, a Lebanese restaurant located in Montreal's Plateau borough.

Inside, he asked for Youssef, and a slightly heavysset man, mid-thirties, who appeared to be "in charge," told George to sit at an empty table, and offered him coffee.

"I'm alright, but thank you," said George, placing his backpack on the ground beside the table, and sitting, head still angled towards the man.

"Youssef shouldn't be long," he responded, then expressionless-

ly turned and walked from the dining area to the grill.

The restaurant was small. Densely arranged plants hung against its large windows. The sitting area, though mostly empty at this time of day—slightly after lunch, and definitively early for dinner—was almost cramped, two rectangular tables, three smaller circular ones, and a raised extended shelf with high stools. There was a counter to order food, and, behind that, the open kitchen, with a grill station, and what looked to be the line.

After a few moments, a small woman with short, brown hair brought a glass of water to him, introduced herself, and asked what position he was applying for.

“Dishwasher,” he said, thanking her for the water.

“Good, good,” she said, while walking quickly back behind the line, torso turned to face George as she stepped. “I hope you’re a good one.”

Five minutes later, a tall, athletic-looking, beard-stubbled man with a tired facial expression entered the restaurant and gestured to the heavy-set man, who pointed at George, then walked over and sat down.

“You’re George?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s right,” George responded.

“Okay. I’m Youssef, one of the owners.” He extended a hand, which George shook. “The guy you spoke to earlier is Amir, he’s the brother of the other owner, Omar.”

George nodded, attempting to allocate some kind of a storage space for the three new names, a task he knew would never be accomplished peripherally and without focus.

“I’m not going to waste your time,” Youssef responded, while glancing down at the table and rubbing the back of his neck with a hand. “The dish space is back there—” he gestured with a hand to a room at the rear of the restaurant, small, where George could see the back of someone craned over a sink, their hand wielding a high-pressure spray head attached to a flexible hose. “It’s a little hot, it’s cramped, it’s fast, and it’s hard work. You’ll be doing dishes, but also helping out with some of the cooking. Have you ever worked in a kitchen?”

George shook his head.

“That’s okay, that’s no problem,” said Youssef, making eye contact with George in an unplaceable and peculiar way. George straightened his back a little, maintained eye contact, and raised his eyebrows in a manner he hoped appeared inquisitive, and not confused.

“No experience is fine,” Youssef repeated, “we’re really just looking for someone who’s a hard worker. Are you still interested?”

“Yes, definitely,” said George.

“Okay. Pay is minimum wage,” Youssef explained, while swaying his head from side to side and grimacing a little, “but you’ll get cash tips every week split evenly with the rest of staff. That sound,” he paused, again making eye contact, “that sound good to you?”

George grinned and nodded.

Youssef returned the grin, surprising George a little. “Okay,” he said, taking out a pad of paper from his pocket. “Are you free tomorrow, from, say, seven ‘til four?”

In his apartment, which he shared with six stuffed animals, a bed,

desk, laptop, digital piano, air purifier, wooden dresser, bookshelf, stove, mini-fridge, bathroom, three plants, tower fan, George spent a couple of hours watching YouTube tutorials on how to cut long pants into shorts, then, taking a pair of old black trousers, carefully mimicked the on-screen incisions. He worked slowly and paused often, verifying that the line he was cutting along was even, and symmetrical with the other made on the opposite leg. A half hour later, he took the shorts to the basement of the apartment building, placed them in the drier, set the timer for fifteen minutes, sat on the machine, and scrolled through an Excel spreadsheet he had updated earlier, with the names of Youssef, Omar, Amir, in one column, and, in the next column over, relevant concise information about them (Youssef: one of the two owners, mid-forties, tired-looking, athletic, tall; Amir: brother of Omar, mid-thirties, slightly heavysset, blank facial expression; Omar: other owner). When the machine shut off, he crouched down, opened the drier door, took out the shorts, grinned and admired them in the basement's harsh fluorescent lighting, then walked back upstairs. After shutting his apartment door, he locked and unlocked it several times, testing whether or not the door was securely shut, then moved on to the light switches, which too needed several switchings on-and-off, before, satisfied, he slept.

George sat on the stoop outside Sunder's entrance, sun striking its facade, still bleary-eyed and groggy from the early alarm, listening to music through headphones, when a short woman around his age, with long, black-dyed hair quickly crossed the street, slowing as she neared him.

“George?” she asked, turning her torso and reaching into a back pocket, producing a small ring of keys.

“That’s right, yeah,” he responded, pulling the headphones from his head and coiling the cable.

“Okay,” she said, eyes focused on the keys, before selecting one, and opening the front door.

She walked in, wordlessly removing her bag, and moved to the back room. George stood uncertainly in the entrance of the restaurant. The woman came back out, adjusting an apron, then walked to the coffee machine, measured grounds from a container on a lower shelf, placed them in the filter compartment, and filled the reservoir with water. She turned towards George, then gestured with a tilt of her head for him to follow her.

“Have you done dish pit before?” she asked, while fiddling with the clump of aprons hanging on a nail in the back closet, finally freeing one and handing it to George.

“It’s not,” she continued, walking in front of him, “it’s not rocket science. Here’s the dishwasher—” she gestured to a unit on the floor, with a fold-down door. “It’s on the ground. It sucks, but we don’t have enough room for one that lifts up.”

George nodded.

“This is the sink,” she continued. “Here’s the spray nozzle.” The single sink, to the left of the machine, was also not like most three-compartment restaurant sink setups he had seen; to the left of the sink was a countertop, and, on the opposite side of the room, fridges, and a stainless steel table. “Dishes come in here—” she pointed to the counter. She paused, staring at the sink, then asked,

“You know how to cut cucumbers?”

George quickly learned that the job was atypical for most dish-washing ones: he would also have to wash and chop vegetables, prepare the meat and vegetable skewers for the grill, juice lemons. The woman first showed him how each of the vegetables should be sliced and prepared, the two of them working adjacently on a long table, sipping from mugs of coffee; periodically, she would stop to observe George, making small comments on whether or not his incisions were too large, or at the wrong angle. After George had gone through the onions, lettuce, cucumbers, she placed her knife down, craning and stretching her neck, then stopped suddenly, before blinking rapidly a few times, and turned to George.

“I’m Victoria,” she said, nodding slightly. “You can head back to the dish pit. The rest of staff should be arriving soon, they’ll take over the rest of prep.”

In the next hour, George met the staff, who gradually filtered in and routinely came in the back to place dishes, or throw lids and other Gastronorm containers in the to-wash bin. There was Courtney, first to arrive, the woman who had brought George water the day before, whose miniature stature belied a projecting, full-bodied, and, unrelatedly, seemingly endlessly optimistic-sounding voice; Miriam, light-brown-haired, or dark-blonde, from Montreal, spoke a “hello” in what almost seemed a whisper—though George would soon realise she just naturally possessed a quiet, almost constantly-singing vocal quality; Jeanne, tall, with limbs that moved as if through a material slightly, but not significantly denser

than air, was a manager, and introduced herself with a soft smile, telling George to “let me know if you need anything”; Victoria, he learned, was born in Montreal, and piloted pole position at the grill.

As he focused on placing dishes most efficiently in the rack, he ran through these new names and faces continually, attempting to commit them to memory, anxiously awaiting the end of the shift, when he could go home and add them to the spreadsheet. While in Boston, as a young teenager, he had two parakeets, one male and one female, both the same light-blue colour, both of whom he had initially refrained from naming. He would interact with the birds for long periods each day, sometimes giving them different seeds to try out, other times bringing them out to hop around on his desk. After a few weeks, he noted significant personality differences between the two. Though they almost definitively liked each other (they would often sit and cuddle together on the same branch in their cage, or nuzzle each other’s face, and would always, unfallibly, sleep side-by-side, leaning against one-another, with softly shut eyes), one was clearly more energetic, chirping more often and fluttering impatiently around the cage when kept inside for too long. The other seemed more pensive, and cautious: when greeted with new bell toys, or a different water dish, they took the time to examine the object, assessing it of any risks, before then fiddling with it. He enjoyed when they had arguments—in-frequently, one of them would chirp aggressively and forcefully, while flapping around the cage, the other remaining on a branch replying every once in a while, trying to get a word in. Eventually, they would reconcile and return to their sleeping branch, where

they would nap, or, sometimes, prune each other. He then decided to name the former “Active One” and the latter “Less Active One.” Years later, in university, George would learn that, while his working memory’s ability to recall strings of random digits, and, especially, letters, was markedly higher than average, his ability to remember faces was so poor that he performed worse than 89% of others given the same task, and, in face-name association tasks, 95%.

His first night shift came after two further morning ones, and so, at three, on a Friday evening, he walked to Sunder, dropped his backpack in the back closet, put on an apron, took stock of what needed to be prepared before rush.

“Really sorry about the mess,” said the dishwasher from the morning shift, while placing their cap in their backpack, then hoisting it on their shoulders. “We got slammed today. Good luck.”

Victoria, whom George had nicknamed, in his spreadsheet, “Grillmaster,” was working again, alongside Miriam (“Soft voice person”) and Jeanne (“Manager person”), as well as Vincent, someone George had not yet worked with, a thin, short-haired Franco-phone with slight crow’s feet and a teasing sort-of smile (“Crow’s feet tall guy?”). Over the span of the previous three shifts, he had come to know Victoria as someone intimidatingly surgical in precision, who wasted time neither for small talk nor any sort of prescribed pleasantries; she had spoken maybe two phrases to George since that first training shift, both times to ask if he could reach something on an upper shelf, though, during rushes, often made brief eye contact with him, as he was bringing out meat skewers



or running dishes, and smiling waywardly, before turning back to the grill, where she, often monitoring and flipping ten, maybe fifteen skewers, never seemed to grow confused, disoriented, or fall behind on orders.

Midway through hacking away at lettuce heads, George noted the shadow of someone stepping into the dish pit. He turned, facing a quizzical-looking Victoria, taking bites from a sandwich, one eyebrow angled slightly above the other, staring at his chopping board.

“You drinking enough water?” she asked, using a knuckle to wipe away sauce from a corner of her lip.

“I think so, yeah?” George answered.

“Don’t be afraid to stick a cup in the fridge,” she said, turning to throw the sandwich wrapper in the garbage. “It’ll help during rush.”

George nodded, and Victoria, vacantly gazing at the ground, paused to adjust her cap, then walked back to the grill.

A perk of working in the dish pit, and not the other stations, was that the dishwasher could play their own music, separate from the playlist in the dining area, from a bluetooth speaker, suspended on a rack above the sink. Tonight, George chose slow, almost inaudibly quiet ambient music. He had already grown somewhat accustomed, even comforted by rushes, which, combined with the music, allowed him to enter an almost ethereal alternate headspace—no external thoughts occupied his consciousness, nor emotions, positive or negative. In their stead was the ceaseless, balm-like, numbing sequence of calculation: sixty seconds

per wash cycle, five seconds to rinse a plate, three seconds every thirty seconds to clear out the drain hole. Two minutes to prepare five skewers of fish kafta, fifteen minutes to prep another gastro of lettuce, ten minutes from now and the next big pile-up of ceramic plates and metallic utensils. Sunder had no busboy, busgirl, or table-clearing setup. Instead, servers, or those on the line, had to clear off tables, and would often fling, from outside the dish pit, gastro covers, cutlery, or other objects into the sink, and, if they had the spare second, yell out an apology, before rushing back to work on the next plate.

At the end of the shift, during clear-down, while working his way through the last of the metal skewers, Victoria walked into the dish pit, wiping her brow with a brown paper towel. “Nice,” she said, raising her chin, eyes focused towards the dishes yet to be done, a pile which resembled more a mole mound than Mount Everest. “How are you?”

“Warm,” George responded, turning to face her, grinning slightly.

“You want a beer?” she asked, her face still angled towards the dish pile.

“God, yes,” George said.

Victoria nodded, wordlessly moving past him, removed her apron, placed it amongst others hanging from a screw in the closet, walked out from the dish pit in a rapid beeline to Sunder’s entrance.

She returned, moments later, plastic bag in hand, handing tall cans of Pabst to Miriam, Jeanne, and Vincent, the trio in the process of transferring the remaining salad and prep ingredients into

storage gastros, then walked back into the dish pit, handing one to George, opening one herself.

“How much do I owe you?” asked George, attaching the spray hose to a clasp, then sipping from the can.

Victoria waved him off, then hoisted herself on the adjacent metallic table. She sat there silently, taking periodic sips from the beer as George placed his on a counter, and resumed rinsing.

“You said you were from Boston?” she asked, after a few moments.

“Mostly, Boston, yeah,” George responded.

Victoria nodded. “I visited a couple of times.”

“And you—Montreal, right?”

“A small place off the island.” She took out her smartphone, opened a map application, typed a location, and held out the device towards George. “But we moved into the city pretty early on.”

“I’ve never heard of this place,” he said, looking at the phone screen and laughing. “I’m not really from *Boston*, Boston either.”

Victoria pocketed the phone. “Why do you tell people that, then?” she asked, looking at George with an almost angered facial expression.

“It’s easier than saying ‘a suburb outside of Boston,’ I guess.”

Victoria nodded, took a long drink, then hopped off the table.

“I’ll get back to clearing down,” she said.

Half an hour later, George switched off the dishwasher, removed his cap, splashed cold water on his face. He headed outside, where Miriam and Jeanne were sharing a cigarette, Vincent standing beside them, Victoria seated on the ground, smoking a cigarette

herself, scrolling through something on her smartphone. It was almost midnight, the street darkened and loud, with several groups of people passing by, presumably, it seemed, to George, heading to or from various bars or apartment parties. Down the street, a car blared a horn, eliciting cheers and roars from pedestrians.

“George, hey,” said Vincent, laughing, and holding a fist out, which George tapped with one of his own. “You’re good, George,” he said. “You like working here?”

“I do, actually, yeah,” said George.

“We’ve been having a hard time finding dishies who stick around,” said Jeanne, tapping cigarette ashes onto the sidewalk. She grinned, continuing, “You gonna quit on us? First Friday night rush.”

George smiled, then shook his head. “I actually really like it,” he said.

Jeanne laughed. “What, dish pit?”

“Yeah,” George said, laughing himself. “It’s nice. The flow, the routine, you know?”

Vincent and Jeanne gave each other a look. “No,” said Jeanne, smirking. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“I,” said Vincent, scratching his arm a bit, “started on dish. Moved to, uh, moved to the line as quick as I could.”

“How long have you guys been working here?” George asked.

“Two, no, three years?” said Jeanne.

“Two,” said Miriam.

Vincent nodded, “two for me, too.”

“Almost two,” said Victoria, typing something on her phone.

George nodded, not knowing how to respond.

“So,” Vincent said, after a moment, “what brought you to Montreal?”

“School,” George responded, “university.”

“What do you study?” asked Miriam.

“Music, classical piano?” said George, hesitantly.

Victoria glanced up sharply, then looked down again.

“Piano, wow, cool guy,” said Vincent, laughing.

“One of our other dish guys,” said Jeanne, “the one you’re replacing, he was also studying music.”

“I guess it comes with the degree,” said George, laughing a little.

“Well,” said Vincent, stretching a little. “I’m opening tomorrow, I have to get home. George, good to work with you,” he said, patting George’s shoulder, then waved, and walked to a nearby bike rack.

“I think we’ll get going too,” said Miriam, gesturing to Jeanne.

“You guys live together?” asked George.

“Yeah, just down the street, actually,” said Jeanne. “Victoria, can you show George how to lock up?”

Back inside, Victoria switched off the speakers and the refrigerator lights, double checked that the grill was shut off. George sat at one of the tables, unsure of what, if anything, he should be doing to help. While pressing on each of the sink’s handles, ensuring they weren’t dripping, Victoria, in a surprising, almost excited-seeming tone of voice, spoke suddenly.

“You’re in school for piano?” she asked, moving to the sink in the dish pit, testing its handles as well.

“Yeah, I just graduated, actually. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” she said, shutting the back lights off. She moved to the bathroom, washed her hands, and shouted, “I did that too.”

“What, piano?” George asked, sitting up.

“No, no, I went to university a while ago, for, uh,” Victoria came out of the bathroom, shutting the door, “for bass.”

“Classical?” George asked.

“Yeah,” she responded.

“Wait, wait,” said George, grinning, “how old are you? Wait.” He paused. “Is that impolite to ask?”

Victoria smiled, slightly startling George. “No, it’s fine. I’m, uh, thirty-one?” she answered.

“No way,” George said. “You look, like, twenty-five.”

“I get that a lot,” she said, nodding, then moved to the alarm box. “Don’t move, okay?” she said, punching in a code.

George stood outside Sunder as Victoria locked the door, attempted to open it, pushed the key in again, turned, removed it, tested the lock once more. “Hold on,” she said, repeating the process.

“It’s alright,” said George, laughing. “I have to do the same thing.”

“Must take a while to leave your place,” said Victoria.

George shrugged, to a back-turned Victoria, still fiddling with the lock.

Back in his apartment, George removed his boots and clothes, stood in his shower, scrubbed beneath his fingernails with a bar of soap. After a few minutes, he shut off the shower, dried himself, crawled into bed, scrolled through his Excel spreadsheet, adding

an entry for Vincent, and repeating his name, while reciting, “Francophone, tall, crow’s feet.” He scrolled to Victoria’s entry, paused, blinked a few times, added “classical bassist” in the column beside her name, shut off his light, flicking the switch on-and-off a few times, slept.

With his birds, things were easier: there was no need to identify them besides their apparent qualities, and it made more sense, to George, this apparent lack of necessity to assign an abstract term to their beings. In mornings, Active would wake first, chirping incessantly while waiting for breakfast, inevitably waking Less Active in the process. George would feed them, they would eat, then hop about their cage, playing with their various toys, or bathing themselves with the water dish. Active caused frequent splashes and spill-overs, necessitating frequent re-fillings; Less Active was more conservative, carefully pruning their feathers, and furtively sipping from the bowl. At a certain point, they would nap together, then wake, and squabble about something, before George would take them out of the cage for their daily jaunt about his desk. Active held particular affinity for scrap paper, which they would rip up, bunching the strips together in clump-like formations. Then, in the evening, George would return them to their cage, feeding them again, and they would return to their sleeping branch, nestled against one-another.

Once, he took them from his room downstairs, to the kitchen, where he had thought they would enjoy prancing about the countertops, and, maybe, peek at new gadgets, chrome kitchen cutlery, various cooking utensils, take in a different view. Once in

the kitchen, Active commenced to squawking inconsolably, caustically pecking at items scattered about. Less Active, even, seemed to voice displeasure, calling out in uncharacteristically jarring and atonal chirps. After a few minutes, George took them back upstairs, placing them back in their cage, where they seemed to somewhat angrily, disapprovingly stare at George, before aggressively throwing about bird seed from their tray.

The morning of his next shift, George walked to Sunder, idly listening to slow piano music through headphones, when he saw a seated Victoria, on the front stoop, two to-go coffee cups at her feet. When he came close to the entrance, she handed him a cup, saying, “it’s a small Americano,” then stood, turning, and unlocking the front door.

“Hey, George, can you jump on *fattouche*?” shouted Courtney, sticking her head, and part of her torso into the dish pit. “We’re getting slammed.”

George fastened the spray head, taking a moment to wipe his forehead with his shirt, then moved hurriedly to the salad station, where he took a moment to read the massive string of tickets, readying plates in front of him and reaching for a pair of tongs. Victoria, at the grill, was flipping metal skewers with both of her hands, shouting for someone to refill water at a table. The small dining area was flooded with customers, some waiting for takeout orders, staring expectantly at the staff, some seated and talking excitedly at tables. The steady din of the customers, the music playing over Sunder’s speakers, the churning of the grill, and the yelling



from chefs on the line was physically disorienting, and, as George focused on dressing several fattouche salads, Courtney rushing behind him to drop off bussed plates in the dish pit, Victoria called out his name.

“These plates, these ones here,” she said, brows furrowed, eyes scanning the grill, pointing with a pinky to three plates on the counter behind her, “these need to go to table two.”

“Table two?” George asked, dropping his tongs and rushing over. “Where’s, where’s table two?”

“There’s a diagram by the sink,” Courtney shouted, while pulling down and reading a ticket.

George went to the laminated sketch, turning to the dining area, attempting to match up the table configuration, walked to the sandwiches, and took the plates to a table adjacent one of the windows, then walked quickly back to the salad station.

A few moments later, three customers walked up to the counter. George saw Victoria interacting with them, picking up a sandwich, inspecting it, placing it down, saying something to the customers, who walked back to the table, then shouted George’s name again.

“You took these plates?” she asked, staring at George.

“Yeah, yes, what—”

Victoria looked down, aggressively massaging her temples with her fists, groaning slightly, then looked back up at George, gritting her teeth slightly.

“Next time,” she said, eyes sharpened as glass shards, stopping after each word as if separated by periods, “take them to the right table, yeah?” She turned, bent down, opened the fridge, removed three more meat skewers, adding them to the already end-

less-seeming trail on the grill, and shouted for a refire on the order.

As the morning crew shuffled around the back closet, removing aprons, hats, and donning bags, George, mid-motion in closing his backpack, felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to a blank-faced Victoria, staring at something beyond his back. She gestured with her head, making brief eye contact with him, and walked to Sunder's front door.

Outside, she looked up, squinting slightly, and reached into her bag, hung around one of her shoulders, took out a pair of sunglasses, and put them on.

"Beer, yeah?" she said, walking towards a nearby convenience store without waiting for an answer.

George followed slightly behind her, struggling to match her pace. They crossed a street, and George caught the door, shutting, to a shop, Victoria already inside and squatting down, eyeing six-packs of ciders. She selected one, then walked to the cash register.

They sat at a nearby park adjacent a nondescript tree, Victoria taking sips from her cider, George from his Pabst. Victoria, silent for many minutes, finished her bottle, placed it in her bag, pulled out a second, opened it.

"Crazy rush," she said, her face angled towards some indistinguishable point along the horizon.

"I'm still trying to get used to it," said George, in a half-smile. "It's hard to keep a handle on it all."

Victoria sipped silently, pulling grass from ground with one hand.

“I’m sorry,” said George, “about that one order. I don’t—”

“Hey,” said Victoria, in a half-shout, turning toward him.

George felt something of a searing look from behind the sunglasses.

“No need,” she said, taking another drink from the bottle. She looked down, then held it toward George. “Try this,” she said.

George grasped its neck and brought it to his lips.

“Tart,” he said, grinning, and handing it back.

“It’s my favourite. When I was an undergrad I used to bring, like, ten of them to parties,” she said, sipping again, then added, “for myself,” and smiling.

“And now?”

Victoria shrugged. “I don’t really go to many parties nowadays. It’s mostly just work, home, work, home,” she said, swaying her head from left to right.

George opened a second beer. “I used to never get hangovers,” he said, laughing. “When I first started drinking, I thought I was just one of those people who never got them.”

Victoria laughed. “Then, what, you turned twenty-five? Wait,” she said, angling her face towards him. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four,” he said, with a mock frown.

“Jesus,” said Victoria. “You seem, like, a lot older.”

“I get that a lot,” said George. “In my first year of undergrad, I didn’t really speak to many people, and in my second year, this guy came in my practice room and asked for some help with a piece, and was, like, ‘Wait, hold on, you’re doing your undergrad? We all thought you were a doctorate student.’”

Victoria smirked. “Piano guy with an old face,” she said. “What

are you doing working dish pit? Can't you just, like, teach, or something?"

"Is that what you did?" asked George.

Victoria's eyebrows went up for a second, and her face went to the ground. After a couple seconds, she looked up at George, and said, brusquely, "My question first."

George paused, taking multiple sips from his can, Victoria sitting silently, focused on a fallen leaf on the grass.

"I'm not sure," he responded. "I used to work, like, in a work study position, as a stagehand, and then a stage manager?" He moved his fingers through his hair. "I would, like, sit backstage and move chairs and stands around during concerts, and my boss thought I was pretty trustworthy and reliable, so he, one day, came to me, and asked, suddenly, if I was interested in being promoted to actually managing the halls, sort of like what he does. And so I told him I was interested, and—"

Victoria held up a hand, cutting him off. "Hey," she said, swishing around and examining the remaining foam in her bottle, "Dishwashing. Why?"

George laughed, then apologised. "I guess," he said, speaking slowly, "I like the repetitiveness? You can be out of your head for a while. You don't have to talk to anyone. The process is really mechanical, you know?" he said, looking towards Victoria, who gave no response. "You don't have enough time to, like, feel paranoid that you didn't do something incorrectly, or double check anything. There's just the adrenaline, and the endless dishes, and making sure everything is prepped. You can lose yourself for a few hours each day," he finished, then shrugged.

Victoria nodded slightly, smiling almost imperceptibly, then gestured with her chin to two police officers on bikes, going around the park and handing tickets to people drinking.

“I really don’t feel like waiting for those guys to leave,” she said, while standing, and hoisting her bag over a shoulder. “My place is pretty close, you want to come with?”

Inside, Victoria shut the door, testing and inspecting the lock for almost three minutes. She placed her bag down, then walked the short distance to another room, while asking George if he could take his shoes off. As he bent down, undoing his laces, he saw a light flick on and off several times, before eventually remaining illuminated. He placed his shoes on a rack, then traced Victoria’s path.

“This is, uh,” said Victoria, waving both of her hands around, “this is it. That’s bedroom—” she gestured to a door, shut. “That’s other bedroom—” she used her other hand this time, gesturing again to another shut door. “That’s bathroom—” she pointed, to a small room with its door ajar, where George could see a glimpse of a toilet. “This is the, what, the parlour? The living room?” she finished, dropping her arms to her sides.

The room was fairly large, illuminated with an exposed, amber ceiling bulb, and very sparsely furnished. Against one wall was an old, slightly worn white linen couch, and a low wooden coffee table placed in front of it. On its surface lay several mugs, some empty, others still holding some light-brownish liquid, and many empty beer bottles. Two large windows filtered in the day’s last rays of indirect sunlight. A tall, hardwood bookshelf was placed against

another wall, though most of its shelves were vacant, with several piles of books instead scattered across the unfinished wood floor. In a corner rested an adjustable stool, a double bass in its case, a music stand, and several piles of sheet music. The adjacent kitchen, connected to the living room, contained a singular refrigerator, a stove, and no other appliances that George could see, nor food on any of its counters.

Victoria moved to the fridge, opened it, then walked back with a bottle of white wine.

“I never liked red,” she said, sitting on the couch and uncorking the bottle. She took a sip, then handed it to George, while looking at one of the piles of books.

He grasped it, sitting next to and thanking her. “This is a beautiful place,” he said.

Victoria snorted.

“What?” George said, handing the bottle back.

“You don’t have to say things like that,” she said. “Or, at least, don’t copy-paste it.”

“Okay, okay,” said George, laughing. He pointed to the bass. “Do you still play?”

Victoria nodded. “Every day,” she responded.

“What happened?” He asked.

Victoria raised an eyebrow, eyes still trained at a book pile.

“I mean, how come *you’re* not teaching, or, like—” George paused, tapping a finger rapidly against his knee. “—did you ever want to continue on to a master’s?”

Victoria shrugged, then took several sips of wine. George sat in silence for a couple minutes, then stood, walking over to one of

the piles of books, and squatted down. He scanned the titles, then looked sharply back towards Victoria.

“You were in medicine, too?” he asked.

Victoria smiled, looked down to her feet, then up, at George’s face. She stood, ambling to the piles of sheet music, bent down, selected a partition, and handed it to George.

“Wait,” he said. He examined the cover, then started laughing. “You can do this on a bass?”

“With some fiddling.” Victoria started laughing, too. “It works best with solo tuning, I think.”

“This was always my favourite Partita,” said George, flipping through and skimming Victoria’s various circlings, scribblings, highlighted measures.

“God, you didn’t,” said Victoria, sitting back on the couch, “you didn’t play—”

“The Busoni transcription? Chaconne?” said George, standing and laughing. “It’s the best!” he said, in a mock-shout, throwing his hands in the air.

“It’s *awful*,” Victoria responded, laughing loudly and throwing her head back. “Jesus, it’s horr-en-dous.” She took a large gulp, then melodramatically slammed the wine bottle on the table, spilling some of it as it spurted out of the bottle’s opening.

“Fuck,” she said, standing and moving to the kitchen, carrying back a handful of paper towels.

George flopped on the couch next to her, still flipping through the score.

After Victoria finished wiping the table, she walked back to the kitchen, throwing out the towels. “It was my mother’s favourite

piece,” she said, sitting back down and looking at the table.

“Your mother?” George said, bringing the wine bottle to his lips, and looking sideways towards Victoria.

She nodded. “She never really asked me about my music life, but she’d sometimes come into the room and ask me to play that piece for her.”

George smiled. “That’s really good,” he said. “Is she still living in Montreal, too?”

“She died a couple years ago,” said Victoria.

George sat back slightly and his eyes unconsciously widened.

“Jesus,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

Victoria tilted her head, smiling a little. “I brought it up, not you.”

She took the bottle from George, finishing the wine, then retrieved another bottle from the refrigerator, twisting off the top while walking.

“This was actually her place,” she said, drinking while sitting back down.

Outside, the sun had set completely, and the singular ceiling light blanketed the room in a cloudy, warm hue.

“That’s why,” she said, “that’s how come it’s so big,” she continued, laughing wildly and bringing the back of a hand up to her mouth, shoulders shaking, almost choking on the wine.

George smiled weakly. “Can I ask what happened?” he said, crossing his legs, and searching Victoria’s face for a sign of an emotion.

Victoria sighed and set the bottle between them on the table. “Alzheimer’s,” she said, turning up the corner of one side of her



lips. “My last year of undergrad, I dropped out and moved back in with her. You know,” she said, nodding her head slowly and staring blankly at the opposite wall, “to help?”

George looked at her, not knowing how to respond.

Before he could formulate a thought, Victoria spoke: “You don’t have to say anything.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” said George. “I just—”

“There’s not really much to say, anyway,” said Victoria.

“Well,” said George. “That sounds terrible.”

“It was,” said Victoria.

She explained her mother’s diagnosis, the long wait time to see a doctor, the longer wait for a specialist. She explained her mother’s condition, which, thankfully, deteriorated more slowly than precipitously; though the medication was affordable, it did little in slowing the disease’s progression, or alleviate its symptoms. Victoria had looked into hiring someone that provided home care, but, even after factoring in the provincial tax credits, couldn’t afford the several-thousand-dollars per month cost.

“We never had a lot of money,” she explained.

“And your siblings, or, like, your dad?” George asked.

Victoria shook her head. “Only child. And dad died a while ago,” she said.

“Of what?” said George, tensing his face.

“Cancer,” said Victoria. “I was really young, I don’t really remember much.”

George blew out a deep breath.

“Just bad luck,” said Victoria, shrugging. She looked at the

ground. “I tried to read about it, I mean, Alzheimer’s, to, like, to handle it better,” she said, pausing to pick at a crumb on the couch, “or understand what was going on.”

George nodded.

“I guess I felt like if I could understand what was happening, like, the biochemistry of it, it’d be easier to live with.”

“Was it?”

Victoria smiled and looked at George. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, you know what’s coming, but.” She trailed off, then cleared her throat. “It still sucked. Yeah,” she said, nodding. “Really sucked.”

George nodded again, and began to speak an apology, when Victoria interjected with a sudden, loud laugh.

“I mean,” she said, “I had enough of my own shit going on, you know?” She spun the wine bottle by its neck idly on the table. “The first month I moved back in, my OCD was already flaring up. Then the end of the first year, even worse, and worse in the second, and the one after that—” She stopped speaking, and grinned, shrugging. “But, what the fuck,” she said. “I wasn’t the one losing my mind.”

“I mean,” said George, smiling softly, “in a way.”

Victoria nodded. “Have you ever had to deal with any of that?”

“Well,” George paused. “Wait, what do you mean? Alzheimer’s?”

“Any of it,” Victoria repeated.

“Alzheimer’s, no,” said George. “Cancer, no.” He laughed weakly. “OCD, sort of, yeah.”

Victoria turned to him, raising her eyebrows. “Yeah?”

George nodded quickly. “Most days it’s really okay,” he said. “A few light switches here, a few unplugging-and-plugging-in there. The worst is going to sleep—”

Victoria laughed. “Yeah, yeah,” she said.

“—and checking your alarm?” George continued.

“Yes!” said Victoria, pointing an index finger at George and leaning back.

“God, it takes me, like, ten minutes,” he said, pulling out his phone and showing her the alarms he had set, for six, six-oh-seven, six-fourteen, six-twenty-one, going all the way to ten-oh-three a.m. “I just check all of them on, then put my phone down, then pick it back up, and check that my alarm volume is all the way up, then put it down, then pick it up again and turn off all the alarms, then turn them back on, and, fuck, it’s a nightmare.”

George told her of a Saturday morning, in which he woke up, then went to his desk to retrieve something (he couldn’t remember what) from a drawer. After opening it, he was hit with a sudden malaise, bordering nausea, and removed everything from the drawer, before returning each item—pencils, pens, loose-leaf paper, pads of sticky notes, notebooks, various receipts—in organised and stacked fashion. After standing and turning, he felt another wave of discomfort, and emptied the contents of the drawer again, along with each of the other drawers. He organised them relentlessly, each time and iteration discovering a “better, more logical” way that each drawer should be partitioned.

“It took hours,” he said, laughing.

“That’s why you like dish so much, eh?” said Victoria, laughing as well, and held a closed fist towards George.

He tapped it with one of his own, then responded, “How’d you guess?”

“It’s still my favourite station,” she said, draining the last of the wine. “Most days when I see you, I’m pretty jealous.” She stood, taking the wine bottle to the kitchen and placing it amongst others near a recycling bin. “Now you’ve seen *my* place and know all *my* secrets, she said, holding both arms out, palms upward. “Your turn,” she said, laughing.

“What, you’re serious?” said George, standing.

“It’s only midnight, I’m drunk, we both have the day off tomorrow,” she said. “You live far?”

“No, no, maybe a fifteen minute walk?”

“Great. Good,” said Victoria. “More importantly: any beer at your place?”

George laughed.

“I’m all dry here,” said Victoria, smirking slightly.

“The door, the door,” said Victoria, giggling, while hopping on one foot, removing a boot. “Check the door!”

George waved a hand in the air. “I got it, I got it,” he said, laughing, closing the deadbolt, reopening it, closing it again.

Victoria mimicked the percussive sound, laughing loudly, and bent down, opening George’s minifridge, taking out a can of beer, and sat on his bed. “This isn’t so bad,” she said, examining the apartment.

“No,” said George, “not bad at all. Guess the rent.”

Victoria angled her head and placed an index finger dramatically on her chin. “700?”

“No way,” said George, taking a beer for himself, and sat down on the floor in front of her.

“600,” said Victoria.

“580,” said George, “but close enough.”

“No way,” said Victoria. “580? For a studio? Here?”

George raised his eyebrows, affecting a look of incredulity. “They’ve been trying to raise the rent a bit every year, but so far, so good. It does mean,” he said, wiping at nothing on his calf, “that you get some strange occupants.”

“How do you mean?”

“They’re either, like, around the same age as me, and in school, or they’re strange, fifty-something year-old men, who for whatever reason have to, or want to live in studios?”

Victoria laughed.

“Like,” George continued, “there’s the guy on the floor below me, the apartment drunk,” he said, grinning.

“The apartment drunk,” Victoria repeated, eyes scanning the various items and paintings George had pinned or framed on his walls.

“I think he’s Russian,” said George. “He’s passed out in the halls a lot of the time. One day I helped him up and into his room, and he thanked me, in Russian, and gave me a really big hug.”

Victoria smiled. “Relatable,” she said.

“What, the ‘apartment drunk?’” George asked.

“I don’t know,” said Victoria, sighing and falling backwards on the mattress. “I’ve gotta cut down on the drinking. You know, myself,” she said, eyes straight ahead, at George’s ceiling.

George nodded. “When did you start?”

“I never really,” responded Victoria, “until after I moved in again. I don’t know,” she said, sitting back up, propping herself on elbows, and looking towards a wall. “Everyone’s got something, right?”

“I guess,” said George, scratching at his chin. “Like, to cope, right?”

Victoria nodded, and remained silent for many moments.

After a while, George stood. “Hey,” he said. “I’ve gotta pee, gimme a sec.”

When he came out of the bathroom, Victoria was seated at his desk, scrolling through something on his laptop.

“Hey, whoa,” said George, stepping quickly and standing behind Victoria, as she examined his Excel spreadsheet.

“What is this,” she asked, brows furrowed, staring at the monitor.

“It’s, uh,” said George, pulling up another chair beside her, “it helps me with names,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” said Victoria, slowly. “Grillmaster?” she said, turning to face George.

He blinked rapidly. “It seemed fitting.”

Victoria turned again to face the screen. “Explain,” she said, almost harshly.

“Well,” said George, rubbing an arm. “It’s really difficult for me to remember faces,” he said. “Or, I mean, like, to remember faces, and the names that go with them?”

Victoria sat unmoving.

“I think it might have something to do with my autism. Or, at

least, that's what I was told, when—”

Victoria spun suddenly, cocking her head to one side, lips vaguely downturned.

“—when, like, or, the doctor who explained it,” George continued, “he said—”

“Facial memory and name associations are difficult,” said Victoria, “right?”

George nodded, smiling meekly.

Victoria sat back a little. “Weird,” she said, staring ahead. “Grab me another beer?”

George stood, then heard her speak again.

“I mean,” she continued, “I met you, what, like, a few days, or something, ago? And you've got the same things I do.”

George walked back to the desk, handing a can to Victoria, opening one himself, and sat down again next to her.

She took the can, drained half of it, and shook her head slightly. “When did you realise?” she asked.

“I don't know,” said George, and reached over to the laptop. He opened Spotify, clicking through several playlists, not knowing what to play. “Maybe around thirteen?” he said, and scrolled through various ambient albums.

“That one, that one,” said Victoria, pointing with her pinky to *Sleep*, a Max Richter album.

George clicked on it, and adjusted the volume.

“I liked when you were playing this, last Friday, during rush,” said Victoria. “Zen,” she said.

George grinned.

They sat side by side for many minutes, unmoving and un-

speaking. Outside, they heard a few cars pass, and various groups of people, obviously intoxicated, shouting excitedly. Then, George continued: "I guess I realised around the time I got my pet birds," he said.

Victoria gave a small guffaw. "You had birds?" she asked.

"Yeah, two parakeets," he said.

"What were their names?" she replied.

"They never really had any," he said. "They looked almost identical. I guess, eventually, I just called one 'Active,' and one 'Less Active,' you know, like, based on their behaviour?"

Victoria smiled, making steady eye contact with George for several seconds, then turned away, picking up her beer.

"You hide it well, you know," she said, after several tacit gulps, facing another direction.

George nodded. "You have to, you know?" he responded.

Victoria shook her head. "No," she said. "No, I don't."

A few days later, George walked to Sunder, on a characterless, sunny morning, and entered, greeting Amir as he unlocked the restaurant.

"Yo," said Amir, holding a fist out to George. "You good?"

George nodded, grinning. "You're working today?"

"Grill," said Amir, as they stepped inside. "Why else would I be here?" He laughed loudly. "You ready to work your magic?" he said.

George laughed with him. "All the dishes you can handle," he said.

•••



The shift passed in a steady blur; Courtney, Miriam, and Vincent were there, handling the line, salad counter, and running orders. George played Bach's Second Violin Partita through the bluetooth speaker, and idly made his way through the dishes, sometimes pausing to chop more lettuce, or wash parsley.

At the end of the shift, while walking through the next dish worker on what needed to be prepped before dinner service, he saw Youssef enter, replacing Amir on the grill. They exchanged a few words, and a fist bump. Amir, looking towards the back, made eye contact with George, and gestured him over.

"A few of us are grabbing some beers and hanging in the park, you down?" he said.

George paused a beat. "You mean, like, now?" he asked.

Amir laughed. "What do you think?" he said. "Yeah, now."

George smiled back forcibly, then quickly shook his head. "Not today, no," he said. "Lots of piano practicing to do."

Amir nodded, slamming a palm on George's shoulder. "Another time," he said, nodding again. "Rain check."

The following day, George was scheduled to work the night shift. Before leaving his apartment, he spent several moments in his bathroom, adjusting the cap on his head, wondering if he should switch, instead, to a bandana. He placed the cap on, then off, and on again, nervously brushing aside stray strands of hair while facing his mirror. He did this several more times, then stopped suddenly, both hands still positioned on the top of his head, and smiled, then grinned. He adjusted the angle of his lips, and how sharply his eyebrows were lifted, then brought his hands down, to

his sides, and stared at himself, grinning in the mirror.

He entered the restaurant, the first of the night staff, and moved to the back room, where he deposited his backpack. The morning dish worker removed an apron, held a fist to George, saying, “nothing too bad tonight, just one or two more lettuce backups and you’re good.”

George nodded, thanking him, then donned an apron of his own, looking expectantly at Sunder’s entrance as he resumed rinsing the pile of dishes in the sink. Vincent entered first, then Jeanne, and Miriam. He frowned slightly, then turned his face back to the sink, scrubbing at a metal gastro container with steel wool.

A few minutes later, Youssef entered the back room, patting George’s back and startling him.

“Hey,” said Youssef, laughing, and reaching for an apron. “How are you?” he said.

“Good, good,” said George, turning and grinning. “You?”

“Ça va, not bad,” said Youssef. “Friday rush, you ready?”

“Oh, absolutely,” said George, sarcastically. “You’re on grill?” he asked.

“You know it,” said Youssef, turning away.

“Hold on,” said George, abruptly.

Youssef turned again.

“You know when Victoria’ll be back on grill?” George asked. “Not that,” he continued, quickly, “not that I don’t appreciate you.”

Youssef laughed. “Victoria?” he said wryly, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” said George, smiling gently.

“Victoria, Victoria’s gone,” said Youssef, nodding slowly, while looking at George.

George froze for a moment, then rapidly regained composure.

“Yeah,” said Youssef, “that was her last shift, the other day,” he continued. “She moved yesterday, somewhere near Vancouver, I think,” he said.

“Ah,” said George. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, yeah. Onto bigger and better things,” said Youssef. He laughed, then patted George’s back again, and walked to the grill.

One day, in September, just after the start of a new school year, George had taken the bus home, walked the short distance from the bus stop, entered the house, walked upstairs to say hello to Active and Less Active. He went to the feed bag on the other side of the room, took out a scoop, walked to the cage while saying his usual hellos, asking how they were doing, eyes focused on the cup, ensuring no seeds spilled from its sides. He got to the cage. Active lay on its floor—against the grates that were suspended above the replaceable paper sheet on a lower, solid level that they defecated on—unmoving, left wing slightly spread, right tucked against their body, eyes shut, beak barely open. Less Active perched on the branch they slept on together, motionless and silent, not turning to meet George’s gaze. George buried Active’s body. The next day, Less Active died. Their wings were both tucked in when he found them, on the floor of the cage. Their beak was shut.

George walked back to his apartment at the end of the shift, stopping at a convenience store to buy a carton of cider. It was nearly eleven, the sun long set, and he passed many loud, enthusiastic crowds of pedestrians, heading to, or congregating around the

various clubs and bars. He headed up the stairs, then entered his room, shutting the door, and fiddled with the lock. He spent many minutes with it, then, leaving the lights off, removed his shoes, washed his hands, opened the cider carton and retrieved a bottle, brought it with him to his bed. He sat, staring blankly at the floor, twisted off the cider's cap, and drank most of it in large, gaseous sips. Outside, he heard shouts from a group of people, indistinguishable and wordless through his shut, sliding porch door.

After finishing the drink, he took off his shorts, removing his phone from a pocket in the process, and began setting his alarms. After flicking many of them on, he stopped abruptly, and remained still, hunched over, blank-faced, phone in hand, for many minutes. After blinking rapidly, he shut off the phone screen, placed it underneath his pillow, pulled the covers over himself. He lay on his side, smiling softly and breathing gently, trained his eyes on an indistinguishable point on his wall, and fell asleep, arms crossed and wrapped around his stomach.