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Adorable

By RJ Stewart

It proved to be, as I expected, a perfectly horrible idea. My London neighbors had been called to a conference in Brussels, so they inquired of my partner and me if we might look after their seven-year-old boy, a terrorist lad named Oscar, for the weekend. As neighbors we occasionally share life's simple burdens, so the request wasn't as rude as it may seem, but still! Looking after a feral child of seven was at the edge of our idea of community.

Leon and I live simply, he importantly employed at the offices of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I at my duties as critic and biographer at *Bookman's Journal of Fine Literature*. My editors at the *Journal* had been making a variety of adjustments as to content, and while our fortunes certainly didn't rival those at Leon's corridor of offices with the Exchequer, we had enjoyed an increase in both subscriptions and revenue. Originally focused on literature, as our title suggests, we had expanded our coverage to include visual art. Our idea was periodically to theme our journal, by which the editors meant to focus articles on a particular topic. For the upcoming publication, we had chosen music, and our contributors had submitted a substantial collection of appropriate essays. A selection had been made, and it was my job to interview the winner, a respected scholar in Northern Ireland.

Oscar wasn't always welcome at our home, but in the interest of contributing to our village of young professionals we usually didn't turn him away, either. If given any warning at all, Leon and I would hide our breakable belongings or put them high enough that Oscar bin Laden would have to employ a boost or an act of mountaineering adventure that potentially could lead to his death by falling.

Oscar was raised in a bilingual home. His mother is a stunning woman from Moscow, tall, dark-eyed, thin as a model, and the genetic owner of long, flowing black hair that curls coyly at the tips of her noticeable breasts. Bin Laden's father is an American of Turkish descent who grew up near Minneapolis. He is as handsome as his wife

is beautiful, but somehow their DNA had combined to produce a hellion, an apparent combination of Ataturk and Ivan the Terrible.

Oscar is gifted with more than just outbursts of destruction; he also finds it absolutely necessary to describe every one of his ceaseless motions. For example, he will race from one end of our flat to the other with Olympic speed, calling out his darts and dodges as if described by one of those commentators at a football match.

“... he swerves to miss the dragon’s breath of fire! ... he smashes the beast with his gigantic hatchet! ... he stabs the madman bomber with his sword!” and the like.

These phrases are delivered with a curious mixture of accent: English, American and Russian. Sometimes he pulls a phrase from some dark recess of his scheming little brain, and Leon and I can barely mask our laughter.

Once, for example, he was happily destroying our small porch when a pedestrian strolled by with his pit bull. The animal stopped suddenly and the fur on its back stood straight up as he eyed The Destroyer at work. The dog growled menacingly, then lurched to the end of its owner’s leash, snarling viciously at Oscar. He would have ripped out the child’s heart if given half a chance.

“That’s adorable!” Oscar yelled.

When it turned out that Leon was called to a special project relating to the shortfall of funds from the European Union, due mainly to the soaring costs associated with immigration, I was left alone with Oscar. I decided to get him out of our flat before it would be required by zoning officials to raze the ruins. We caught the tube, headed for the modern art museum and its copious display of heavy-duty interactive exhibits that legions of children had so far failed to destroy. Let Oscar The Bulldozer have a go at it, I reasoned, and the museum’s wealthy donors could arrange a tea or some other fund raiser to salvage what they could.

We emerged from the tube and ascended the stairs to the street. After a short walk we came to the square, and it was then that I noticed a cavalcade of apparent musicians, their instruments strapped to their backs in sturdy cases designed to protect the valuable contents. I’m not fully acquainted with musical instruments, but I had read that some of these ancient pieces are worth millions of pounds or Euros or dollars, whichever is greatest at the moment.

The musicians evidently were on their way to a performance at the children’s museum that was our destination as well. Brilliant! I thought. If Oscar is the least like any other human being, music will

soothe his impulses. When Oscar darted away toward what appeared to be a musician carrying a case, I knew my hopes were unrealistic.

I yelled after him to halt, which of course he did not.

The musician turned nervously as Oscar approached, not at all surprising given Oscar's accompanying description of the "play-by-play," as they say in the football broadcasting business.

"... the daring midfielder races toward the goal! Look at his speed! ... "

A characteristic I absolutely love about my English countrymen is their indefatigable ability to avoid excitement. As near as I was able to discern, not one person in the square bothered even to look at the cause of the sudden commotion. The musician, on the contrary, was clearly alarmed. He clutched the case to his chest with one arm and slashed away at Oscar with the other, yelling in a language I could not understand. Beneath what appeared to be a "hoody" -- one of those ample sweatshirts the young thugs of London like to wear -- I saw a dark face knotted in a malevolent sneer.

What happened next I certainly did not expect. Oscar swerved to avoid the musician's flailing arm, then he darted in again, as if he were some taunted bull and the musician a toreador. This went on for half a dozen or so charges when suddenly the musician's case fell open and its contents spilled onto the pavement. I imagined a conversation with my insurance agent in which he described the pauper's cell to which I would be confined for the remainder of my days.

Instead, an arrangement of plastic bottles connected with wires and batteries tumbled to the pavement. Indifferent English folks suddenly became engaged, and along with a collection of hysterical tourists began to yell and shout. A nearby security officer heard the disturbance and ran to the scene. The musician dropped everything and ran as fast as he could, chased by an army of bystanders and the English law.

Oscar, for his part, was, for the first time in my experience with him, still but for his commentary.

"How ADORABLE!" he said.

I ran to him, swept him up in my arms, and tried to recall quickly where the Thames was, the perfect place to deposit him, I thought. Lacking that, I did a millisecond search for a trash dumpster.

He hugged me tightly, however, and I carried him up the stairs to the museum. His behavior for the balance of the day was good -- admirable even. He held my hand, politely asked for permission to interact with the exhibits, and, when we'd prepared ourselves for a

snack and a drink, sat quietly, occasionally asking a question and listening with interest to my replies. We actually had a conversation.

“Why did he want to blow us up?”

I searched for a response that a seven-year-old would understand. Truthfully, I had no response an adult could understand, certainly nothing I could explain.

“He's very unhappy,” I said.

Oscar wasn't satisfied.

“He needs a friend,” he said.

Adorable, I thought.

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Two days later I was on my way to Belfast. I arranged to meet the scholar, O, at a gentrified restaurant about equidistant from *Waterfront* and *Ulster* halls, Belfast's most-notable performance venues. The restaurant had excellent reviews and was themed on the *Titanic*, which, after my experiences with Oscar, seemed entirely appropriate.

On the flight over, I read in *The Guardian* that “an unidentified” child had foiled the suicide bombing plans of a nutter of a man belonging to some terrorist group. The mad bomber told police he hoped to bring on some last-days conflict that would result in the establishment of heaven on Earth. To me, at least, this unconvincing idea confirmed the mad bomber's insanity.

I had time as well to re-read O's essay, a ten-thousand-word analysis of a violin concerto by a modern composer of Scandinavian descent named *ES*. The essay and the newspaper article, taken together, seemed to be an obtuse commentary on modern times, as if a fingernail-scratched blackboard and a bombing in the square have something in common. O selected lofty language perfectly suitable for our *Journal*, and a style that I believed would appeal to our readers. Still, I had questions.

“What I don't understand – forgive me – is what the composer is getting at. Is there an idea associated with this music, or is it meant to be simply enjoyed? Listened to, as though it were an *objet d'art*?”

The question is perfectly fitting, he said. Although not a musician himself, he said his studies have confirmed that composers mean to say something with their music. They mean to create color and tone,

set a mood, suggest a conflict, find a resolution. All of this can be accomplished, he said, with rhythm, pace, structure, tone, phrasing and the selection of key most suitable to the instruments that will do the “heavy lifting,” as he put it.

He said the concerto we would hear that night in the *Waterfront* would illustrate his point. He warned me there would be dissonance in this piece; don’t expect, he said, a melody you will want to whistle later while you work.

We made our way into the hall, its ornate walls and ceiling suggesting both elegance and intimacy. The beautiful soloist soon came energetically onto the stage, followed by the Maestro, a long-haired, dark-skinned man of apparent Latin roots. I had not heard a note, but I was captivated already by the soloist’s flowing, dark, cerulean-blue taffeta gown, backless and sleeveless. As she turned and bowed to accept the audience’s enthusiastic welcome, well-defined muscles in her back and shoulders upstaged the incomparable impact of the gown. When she lightly gripped her bow, adjusted the instrument under her chin, then lifted her Asian eyes to Maestro to signal her readiness, the muscles of her lithe forearm, narrow wrist, and tapered fingers suggested a sculpture of highest quality, such as I’ve seen in the Borghese. She flipped her bobbed black hair daringly, set her jaw, and began.

Waterfront Hall was instantly alive with a flurry of notes that continued uninterrupted for nearly thirty minutes. It was as if the musicians’ instruments had fallen from their open cases and crashed to the floor, released from an unwanted enclosure and set free at last. Gongs, snare drums – percussion of every variety – punctuated the composition. Horns blared like taxis in Shanghai. Her bow arm was a blur, rising to reach the lower strings, falling to the higher, the fingers of her left hand stretching to reach the highest position on the fingerboard, trembling in vibrato.

The music was incomprehensible. It was as if the orchestra had escaped from Bedlam and was on the loose in Belfast. Their motions were wild, spasmodic almost, as they fled from one demanding bar to another. The Maestro himself seemed to dance as if a medicine man from some obscure Mexican tribe, a Zapotec or an Aztec or a Mixtec, or perhaps all three in one, the progeny of a mixed race of creative DNA.

When the concerto finally ended with a crushing fall of a heavy mallet on a large drum, the soloist uncoiled like a puppet at the end of a relaxed set of strings. The Maestro likewise slumped, his shoulders rounded, the baton dropped to his side and dangling as if forgotten.

A silence fell on the hall for an extended period of time. No one dared move. Finally, Maestro turned to the audience, reached for the soloist's hand and together they bowed. The audience jumped to its collective feet, applauded, whistled, hooped and hollered, yelled "*brava*" loudly. A young girl came onstage with a bouquet of flowers for the violinist, which she accepted with a slight bow.

As the noise abated, O turned to me to say he was again astonished by the work. It was a word I might have chosen as well: astonished. He was correct in saying that the music was not melodic, at last not for any sustained period of time. Still, I was more than astonished; I also was moved but what I had heard. It was a cacophony not unlike the experience of global travel: Ceaseless movement of billions of people, no harmony or cohesion, but still in some indescribable sense, full of meaning.

"It's an experience you won't forget!" he yelled.

He pulled me by the arm to exit the seating area. He said he had arranged for me to meet the soloist backstage. This was a complete surprise, and I was distracted as he continued his commentary. I thought of Oscar, describing his moves as he wreaked havoc on our flat.

"Picture the conflict we have in our society! How the kindest and the meanest things come together in the subway or the airport. This is what the composer is trying to say! Think of the movement, the frenetic movements of the billions of people around the globe, moving quickly in different directions, racing to their appointments and their objectives! Wishing for peace, sleepless in ambition for success or financial reward! Manipulating their partners, cheating on their spouses! Then – suddenly – aware! Aware of what happens around them! Aware of the connection with other people, like them!"

I was surprised that our individual assessment of the piece had such commonality.

"This was in the music I just heard?"

"Yes, of course!" he said as he elbowed aside an elderly woman who toddled along precariously.

Backstage we found Maestro and the soloist, sipping a cool lemonade. She now stood before me, this Asian counterpart of Pauline Bonaparte, beautiful as anything I could imagine. O blathered on about her performance, and Maestro nodded his thank-yous. The soloist bowed her head repeatedly in polite, respectful acknowledgement, her fingertips together lightly in graceful Asian comportment. Finally, O turned to me.

"And you my journalist friend ... what do you have to say?"

The room swirled. I thought of the experiences with music I had had in just a few short days. Tonight, I had witnessed a brilliant performance of a work for which I had absolutely no equipment to understand. And a few days ago, the Intrepid Oscar the Terrorist and I had encountered a mad bomber who had bundled his instrument of destruction in a violin case and headed to a public square to kill himself and anyone nearby.

I extended my hands, held hers gently, looked as deeply into her dark eyes I could, and spoke.

“Adorable. It was absolutely adorable.”