

equipment, much of it scavenged at yard sales. He had two mismatched turntables plus a rickety old reel-to-reel tape player and shelves packed with records he'd collected over many years.

There was a lot about the world that Southside didn't trust. He was kind of a classic old-guy conspiracy theorist. He didn't trust dentists, which led to his having virtually no teeth. He didn't trust the police, and he didn't always trust white people, either, being the grandson of a Georgia slave and having spent his early childhood in Alabama during the time of Jim Crow before coming north to Chicago in the 1920s. When he had kids of his own, Southside had taken pains to keep them safe—scaring them with real and imagined stories about what might happen to black kids who crossed into the wrong neighborhood, lecturing them about avoiding the police.

Music seemed to be an antidote to his worries, a way to relax and crowd them out. When Southside had a payday for his carpentry work, he'd sometimes splurge and buy himself a new album. He threw regular parties for the family, forcing everyone to talk loudly over whatever he put on the stereo, because the music always dominated. We celebrated most major life events at Southside's house, which meant that over the years we unwrapped Christmas presents to Ella Fitzgerald and blew out birthday candles to Coltrane. According to my mother, as a younger man Southside had made a point of pumping jazz into his seven children, often waking everyone at sunrise by playing one of his records at full blast.

His love for music was infectious. Once Southside moved to our neighborhood, I'd pass whole afternoons at his house, pulling albums from the shelf at random and putting them on his stereo, each one its own immersing adventure. Even though I was small, he put no restrictions on what I could touch. He'd later buy me my first album, Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, which I'd keep at his house on a special shelf he designated for my favorite records. If I was hungry, he'd make me a milk shake or fry us a whole chicken while we listened to Aretha or Miles or Billie. To me, Southside was as big as heaven. And heaven, as I envisioned it, had to be a place full of jazz.

AT HOME, I continued to work on my own progress as a musician. Sitting at Robbie's upright piano, I was quick to pick up the scales—that osmosis thing was real—and I threw myself into filling out the sight-reading work sheets she gave me. Because we didn't have a piano of our own, I had to do my practicing downstairs on hers, waiting until nobody else was having a lesson, often dragging my mom with me to sit in the upholstered chair and listen to me play. I learned one song in the piano book and then another. I was probably no better than her other students, no less fumbling, but I was driven. To me, there was magic in the learning. I got a buzzy sort of satisfaction from it. For one thing, I'd picked up on the simple, encouraging correlation between how long I practiced and how much I achieved. And I sensed something in Robbie as well—too deeply buried to be outright pleasure, but still, a pulse of something lighter and happier coming from her when I made it through a song without messing up, when my right hand picked out a melody while my left touched down on a chord. I'd notice it out of the corner of my eye: Robbie's lips would unpurse themselves just slightly; her tapping finger would pick up a little bounce.

This, it turns out, was our honeymoon phase. It's possible that we might have continued this way, Robbie and I, had I been less curious and more reverent when it came to her piano method. But the lesson book was thick enough and my progress on the opening few songs slow enough that I got impatient and started peeking ahead—and not just a few pages ahead but deep into the book, checking out the titles of the more advanced songs and beginning, during my practice sessions, to fiddle around with playing them. When I proudly debuted one of my late-in-the-book songs for Robbie, she exploded, slapping down my achievement with a vicious "Good night!" I got chewed out the way I'd heard her chewing out plenty of students before me. All I'd done was try to learn more and faster, but Robbie viewed it as a crime approaching treason. She wasn't impressed, not even a little bit.

Nor was I chastened. I was the kind of kid who liked concrete answers