

to my questions, who liked to reason things out to some logical if exhausting end. I was lawyerly and also veered toward dictatorial, as my brother, who often got ordered out of our shared play area, would attest. When I thought I had a good idea about something, I didn't like being told no. Which is how my great-aunt and I ended up in each other's faces, both of us hot and unyielding.

"How could you be mad at me for wanting to learn a new song?"

"You're not ready for it. That's not how you learn piano."

"But I am ready. I just played it."

"That's not how it's done."

"But why?"

Piano lessons became epic and trying, largely due to my refusal to follow the prescribed method and Robbie's refusal to see anything good in my freewheeling approach to her songbook. We went back and forth, week after week, as I remember it. I was stubborn and so was she. I had a point of view and she did, too. In between disputes, I continued to play the piano and she continued to listen, offering a stream of corrections. I gave her little credit for my improvement as a player. She gave me little credit for improving. But still, the lessons went on.

Upstairs, my parents and Craig found it all so very funny. They cracked up at the dinner table as I recounted my battles with Robbie, still seething as I ate my spaghetti and meatballs. Craig, for his part, had no issues with Robbie, being a cheerful kid and a by-the-book, marginally invested piano student. My parents expressed no sympathy for my woes and none for Robbie's, either. In general, they weren't ones to intervene in matters outside schooling, expecting early on that my brother and I should handle our own business. They seemed to view their job as mostly to listen and bolster us as needed inside the four walls of our home. And where another parent might have scolded a kid for being sassy with an elder as I had been, they also let that be. My mother had lived with Robbie on and off since she was about sixteen, following every arcane rule the woman laid down, and it's possible she was secretly happy to see Robbie's authority challenged. Looking back on it now, I think my parents appreciated my feistiness and I'm glad for it. It was a flame inside me they

wanted to learn lit. *wanted to keep lit.*

ONCE A YEAR, Robbie held a fancy recital so that her students could perform for a live audience. To this day, I'm not sure how she managed it, but she somehow got access to a practice hall at Roosevelt University in downtown Chicago, holding her recitals in a grand stone building on Michigan Avenue, right near where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played. Just thinking about going there made me nervous. Our apartment on Euclid Avenue was about nine miles south of the Chicago Loop, which with its glittering skyscrapers and crowded sidewalks felt otherworldly to me. My family made trips into the heart of the city only a handful of times a year, to visit the Art Institute or see a play, the four of us traveling like astronauts in the capsule of my dad's Buick.

My father loved any excuse to drive. He was devoted to his car, a bronze-colored two-door Buick Electra 225, which he referred to with pride as "the Deuce and a Quarter." He kept it buffed and waxed and was religious about the maintenance schedule, taking it to Sears for tire rotations and oil changes the same way my mom carted us kids to the pediatrician for checkups. We loved the Deuce and a Quarter, too. It had smooth lines and narrow taillights that made it look cool and futuristic. It was roomy enough to feel like a house. I could practically stand up inside it, running my hands over the cloth-covered ceiling. This was back when wearing a seat belt was optional, so most of the time Craig and I just flopped around in the rear, draping our bodies over the front seat when we wanted to talk to our parents. Half the time I'd pull myself up on the headrest and jut my chin forward so that my face could be next to my dad's and we'd have the exact same view.

The car provided another form of closeness for my family, a chance to talk and travel at once. In the evenings after dinner, Craig and I would sometimes beg my dad to take us out for an aimless drive. As a treat on summer nights, we'd head to a drive-in theater southwest of our neighborhood to watch Planet of the Apes movies, parking the Buick at dusk and settling in for the show, my mother handing out a dinner of fried chicken and potato chips she'd brought from home, Craig and I eating