

And yet there was a problem, one I discovered in the split second it took to lift my little fingers to the keys. I was sitting at a perfect piano, it turned out, with its surfaces carefully dusted, its internal wires precisely tuned, its eighty-eight keys laid out in a flawless ribbon of black and white. The issue was that I wasn't used to flawless. In fact, I'd never once in my life encountered it. My experience of the piano came entirely from Robbie's squat little music room with its scraggly potted plant and view of our modest backyard. The only instrument I'd ever played was her less-than-perfect upright, with its honky-tonk patchwork of yellowed keys and its conveniently chipped middle C. To me, that's what a piano was—the same way my neighborhood was my neighborhood, my dad was my dad, my life was my life. It was all I knew.

Now, suddenly, I was aware of people watching me from their chairs as I stared hard at the high gloss of the piano keys, finding nothing there but sameness. I had no clue where to place my hands. With a tight throat and chugging heart, I looked out to the audience, trying not to telegraph my panic, searching for the safe harbor of my mother's face. Instead, I spotted a figure rising from the front row and slowly levitating in my direction. It was Robbie. We had brawled plenty by then, to the point where I viewed her a little bit like an enemy. But here in my moment of comeuppance, she arrived at my shoulder almost like an angel. Maybe she understood my shock. Maybe she knew that the disparities of the world had just quietly shown themselves to me for the first time. It's possible she needed simply to hurry things up. Either way, without a word, Robbie gently laid one finger on middle C so that I would know where to start. Then, turning back with the smallest smile of encouragement, she left me to play my song.

I STARTED KINDERGARTEN AT BRYN MAWR ELEMENTARY School in the fall of 1969, showing up with the twin advantages of knowing in advance how to read basic words and having a well-liked second-grade brother ahead of me. The school, a four-story brick building with a yard in front, sat just a couple of blocks from our house on Euclid. Getting there involved a two-minute walk or, if you did it like Craig, a one-minute run.

I liked school right away. I liked my teacher, a diminutive white lady named Mrs. Burroughs, who seemed ancient to me but was probably in her fifties. Her classroom had big sunny windows, a collection of baby dolls to play with, and a giant cardboard playhouse in the back. I made friends in my class, drawn to the kids who, like me, seemed eager to be there. I was confident in my ability to read. At home, I'd plowed through the Dick and Jane books, courtesy of my mom's library card, and thus was thrilled to hear that our first job as kindergartners would be learning to read new sets of words by sight. We were assigned a list of colors to study: not the hues, but the words themselves—"red," "blue," "green," "black," "orange," "purple," "white." In class, Mrs. Burroughs quizzed us one student at a time, holding up a series of large manila cards and