



**PURE
SLUSH
BOOKS**

BOLÉRO
AT
BREAKFAST

MUSIC FOLIO 3

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Edited by Matt Potter

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Pure Slush Books
32 Meredith Street
Sefton Park SA 5083
Australia

Email: edpureslush@live.com.au
Website: pureslush.com
Store: pureslush.com/store

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to

Maurice

and

Brendalee

stories by

Pamela BAKER

James BATES

Dawn DeBRAAL

Tom FEGAN

Jane H. FITZGERALD

Ronald T. HARDWICK

GP HYDE

rani JAYAKUMAR

Len KUNTZ

Mike LEWIS-BECK

John NOTLEY

Darrell PETSKA

Sylvia PETER

Martin PHILLIPS

Matt POTTER

Susmita RAMANI

Christine REEVES

Cheryl SNELL

Gail SOSINSKY

Vallie Lynn WATSON

Michael WEBB

Allan J. WILLS

Melissa E. WONG

Introduction

As featured on the Pure Slush website, calling for submissions.

Every weekday morning at 7.05 (directly after the 7.00am news), Brendalee Bernard, host of *Breakfast with Brendalee* (6.30am to 9.15am) on Quonsetville, Vermont's only community radio station WVOC 91.3FM, plays *Boléro* by Maurice Ravel.

That's 5 days a week, Monday to Friday, at 7.05am, immediately after the 7.00am news.

She doesn't play the same recording of it every day though. She alternates five different recordings at whim.

Brendalee began broadcasting *Boléro* in 2015, and she plans to continue broadcasting it until the day she retires ... whenever that will be. (Brendalee celebrated her 85th birthday on December 1st 2022.)

On Tuesday January 17th 2023, Brendalee played *Boléro* as usual ... she chose the recording of Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berliner Philharmoniker, originally released on Deutsche Grammophon in 1966 ...

... and in some way, this January 17th broadcast is heard in your story.

It might be heard live on WVOC 91.3FM, in which case your story would take place in the morning, in or near (fictional) Quonsetville, Vermont.

It might also be heard online at wvocradiofreequonsetville.com/livestream, as all WVOC's programmes are live streamed. (They are NOT recorded for streaming later, though.)

If it's heard online, where will your story take place, and at what local time?

The rest of your story is up to you ... so it could be about many things. *Boléro* might be central to your story, or very much in the background.

WVOC 91.3FM

As featured as background information on the Pure Slush website.

Radio station WVOC 91.3FM is the only community radio station in Quonsetville, Vermont.

Established in 1982, WVOC 91.3FM operates from a house on Sebastopol Avenue, just a few minutes' walk from the shore of Quonsett Pond. (The house was purchased in 1986 after extensive fundraising by the WVOC Founding Committee, with half the money coming from one donor alone, the late Muriel Bathilde Marching. Before then, WVOC broadcast six hours a day – 10.00am to 4.00pm – from Muriel Marching's living room on Melville Avenue. Muriel's favorite nephew Sheldon Bathilde was the station's sole presenter at the time.)

WVOC's charter states its aim is to broaden the cultural life of Quonsetville, its environs and residents, by broadcasting classical music, which it does twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

It does not accept advertising, but it does accept 'sponsorship', though only from local businesses.

WVOC began broadcasting live online in January 2018. It can be found at wvocradiofreequonsetville.com/livestream.

WVOC's most popular program is *Breakfast with Brendalee*, 6.30 to 9.15am Monday to Friday, hosted by Brendalee Bernard.

The most popular spot on Brendalee's program is the *Regular Ravel Request*, played at 7.05 until about 7.22 every morning, when she plays *Boléro* by Maurice Ravel. She selects at whim from five different recordings. The most recent addition to her

Boléro broadcast list was made in February 2021, when she added Pierre Boulez conducting the Berlin Philharmonic (originally released by Deutsche Grammophon in 1994). This recording, however, is rarely played, and some listeners think only under sufferance.



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Happy Birthday, Laurentine!

Matt Potter

Some afternoons I see her speeding down Sebastopol Avenue in her faded yellow Volkswagen Beetle, windows open, Beethoven blaring, gray hair knotting in the breeze.

Some Tuesday lunchtimes, after exchanging a quick “Hello” and “How are you?” and “We really need to catch up again,” I sit behind her back-to-back at the Notre-Dame Tea Room. She smells of blueberries and sugar with a hint of milk as she eats her regular tunafish and mayo on pumpernickel.

And every morning Monday to Friday I hear her raspy tremor on Radio WVOC 91.3FM.

I tune in just after 7.00, listening to the dying embers of the news. Though *listen* ... ? The report could be about the market price for maple syrup, or the Moonlight Bar on Quonsett Pond reopening for summer, or gridlock outside the Municipal Office on LaChute Street, but what I’m really waiting for is the announcement of the next track.

Sometimes she announces the Montreal Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Dutoit. I think her favorite is the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Riccardo Chailly (though she has never said so, so I’m not certain, but I’m *sure* she gives an extra curl to the *i* in Cha-*i*-lly), and she rarely plays Pierre Boulez with the Berlin Philharmonic. Most Fridays (though not

every Friday, and not just on Fridays) she chooses the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Seiji Ozawa.

But *my* favorite – my *very* favorite – is Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic.

It's Herr von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker performing Ravel's Boléro, Brendalee Bernard will announce. And if you've listened to this spot before, you'll know to wait for the slow, soft beginning.

I'm always up at 6.15 and pottering around the house doing ... well, nothing really, rubbing my hands to keep warm, brewing coffee, making toast for breakfast (sourdough, usually, though sometimes English muffins) and always with jam: elderberry or blackcurrant.

This morning is no different.

Though today I'm treating myself to both (on toasted English muffins), spread thick and glossy: one muffin of elderberry and one muffin of blackcurrant.

"You want me to make you breakfast this morning?" my husband Orton calls out from the mudroom. He's doing something in there because I hear a lot of shuffling and some clanging but just what, I don't know.

"No," I say, dropping a jammy knife and two spoons into the dishwasher. "Now why would I want you to do that when I've made my own breakfast anyway, like I do every day?"

Orton leans his lanky form against the doorframe and looks at me as the dishwasher snaps shut. "On account of it's your birthday, Laurentine."

"Well, gosh, no," I reply. "It's just the same as any day."

"You should let me spoil my ole lady on her special day," he says.

“Funny how your ole lady has her birthday the same day as me.”

“Ah, you’re no fun.”

“No,” I say, “and I never was.” I hand him his lunchbox. “Now go do your chores and leave me alone to Brendalee. That’s enough of a birthday gift for me.”

Orton takes the lunchbox, kisses my cheek, says “Happy birthday, Laurentine,” and he’s out the door off to another plumbing job. Jeannie Argencourt over on Lasalle has a leaky cistern.

“Stay safe,” I call out.

I don’t want to miss a note because of my snapping dentures, so I reach up to the radio on top of the fridge and turn the volume dial. Then lifting my plate off the countertop, I bite into elderberry jam and muffin.

... *snow ten feet thick on the ground*, the news report says.

I lick elderberry off my fingers and start in eating the blackcurrant.

... *over at Vesuviusville the snow is even thicker ...*

I swallow blackcurrant and crunchy muffin and gaze up at the radio.

There’s the familiar rustle of paper as news items are shelved until the next bulletin at 8 o’clock, and the news ends – finally ...

The wall clock flicks over to 7.05.

... *Good morning, it’s 7.05 on Tuesday the 17th of January and you’re listening to Breakfast with Brendalee on WVOC 91.3FM. I’m Brendalee Bernard and it’s time for the Regular Ravel Request ...*

I lick blackcurrant off my fingers.

Today it’s Herr von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker performing Ravel’s Boléro, originally released on

Deutsche Grammophon in 1966. And if you've listened to this spot before, you'll know to wait for the slow, soft beginning.

Oh ...

My hand holds the plate in mid-air.

Well, she doesn't *always* announce a dedication ...

My finger dabs the plate and picks up toast crumbs.

Not every day is special that way.

My tongue licks the crumbs off my finger.

There are probably ... plenty of days where Brendalee's listeners don't have birthdays.

My shoulders shrug and I place the plate on the bench. Looking up, the radio display band glares at me.

I look down at my hands, and rub them together.

What will I do for the rest of the day?

Brendalee's probably too busy to read all the email requests for birthday dedications, and WVOC 91.3FM covers most of the county and halfway to Burlington, too.

The countertop nudges my lower back as I sink against it.

That's a lot of Vermont and a lot of Vermonters.

My hands clasp over my stomach.

And this morning's special dedication is to birthday girl Laurentine Grimes, who turns sixty-five today. Hope your day's a truly special day, Laurentine!

Reaching up to turn the volume even louder, I smile as soprano saxophone fills all corners of my kitchen.

A Steady Man

Allan J. Wills

George was a man of fixed habits. Even after four days at -6° with no prospect of it nudging above zero until after mid-morning, he cut the wood for the next day before breakfast. He took the chainsaw out of the shed and cut the logs into stove-length billets. Handling the saw safe and careful just as he had been taught by his father. Every Vermont kid knew the cautionary poem by Robert Frost too: ‘Out, Out —’ the revving saw. Those five metaphorical mountain ranges. The lost hand. The premature death.

Splitting the billets with an axe warmed him and he forgot the saw, now safely stowed again in the shed, and the dark poem. Then adding the split wood to a stack by the cast-iron stove (with its boiling kettle) and energised after the exercise, he was ready for the day. First a cup of tea and the news on the local radio.

Poetry and music. The things that stick as you age, especially the music. Every morning at the same time, slow and building, Ravel’s *Boléro*. A quirky predilection of the local radio station. This morning, von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic recorded in 1966. The progressive layering from the flutes at the beginning had echoed the progressive complexity of George’s life: marriage and children, life as empty nesters. Yet like the *Boléro* music, George had dealt with the complexity of day-to-day living as merely a variation on a theme. The percussion held a certainty of

a march to a destination, like death follows life. Yet somehow, to George's ears, von Karajan was blowing a raspberry at death.

Battle Lines

Pamela Baker

It was still dark when my eyes flipped open. My stomach clenched as I reached to the nightstand for my phone. Six-fifty a.m. Might as well face the day. I swung my legs out of bed, wrapped my thick beige cardigan over my sweats, and pulled on the snow boots I had bought on my way here. Then I ambled from my tiny bedroom into the kitchen filled with three packing boxes. I shivered. Why had I moved into a trailer in the middle of winter? Oh, right. Couldn't afford anything else.

After starting my coffee maker—one thing I made sure to unpack when I arrived late yesterday—I turned on the ancient radio left by my landlord and tuned to a local station. At nine, I needed to report to the Municipal Library for my first day of work. Should I unpack boxes or sit and sip coffee?

I poured myself a cup, sat on my one folding chair at a card table next to the window, and stared out at the snow-covered ground. When my former boss had told me about Quonsetville's dire need for a librarian, I'd jumped at the chance to relocate. Even overlooked the difference in weather from my South Carolina hometown. The mayor had hired me after one phone interview. I groaned. What had I gotten myself into?

The radio announcer broke into my thoughts. "Snow, ten feet thick." Tell me about it. I'd driven through a blizzard over the weekend and would be starting work a day late due to it. My

mother's prayers must have brought me here safely. Her support of this move had surprised me. She agreed I needed a fresh start after the humiliation of standing in my wedding dress waiting for Matt, and getting a text instead.

I slumped on the floor next to the largest box. Images of the pity on my friends' and acquaintances' faces filled my mind. Hands braced on the floor, I pushed myself to my feet and brushed dust off my sweats as well as the thoughts out of my head. As I lifted Corelle plates from the box and stacked them in my newly cleaned cupboards, the female announcer's voice blurred into the background. When eerie instrumental music filled the air, I paused. A flute solo? Familiar but I couldn't place it.

I shook my head and continued my task. After emptying and breaking down two of the boxes, I added my parka and gloves to my ensemble and braved the cold. At least here, only the drifts were ten feet deep. Carrying the deconstructed boxes, I switched on the porch light, let the door swing shut, and trudged to the dumpster.

Whack. The cardboard dropped out of my hands as I clasped my wet thigh. The smashed snowball lay at my feet. I spun around looking for the culprit.

"Sorry, Miss." A boy with a red nose and cheeks, peeked out of a hooded navy winter jacket, eyes wide. "It was meant for him." He pointed to my right, at a taller lad wearing a bright red coat.

Red coat laughed and hurled a snowball at the first kid.

Shaking from the cold, I picked up the cardboard and tossed it on the garbage pile.

The eerie music wafted through the thin windows of my trailer and hit a crescendo. That must be a long song.

Thwap.

“Sorry, Miss.”

I clenched my jaw and swirled.

The kid in the navy jacket gave me a cheeky grin.

I raised one eyebrow. “Not meant for me, right?”

He pointed at his friend. “Watch out!”

I ducked. A snowball flew over my head. The music grew louder. I scooped snow into my gloved hand, never mind that it was a thin, South Carolina glove, and launched it at red jacket. Navy jacket cackled, so I chucked one at him, too.

As the music swelled, I scooped snow, threw, ducked, and ran to the marching rhythm of the piece. The boys fell into step with the music leaping and twisting to avoid icy missiles. Shouts accompanied the full orchestral sound, complementing it instead of detracting. We chased and pummeled until the last note. Then we collapsed into a heap next to my back porch.

“As always ... what a superb ending!” The announcer’s voice emanated from the radio.

“You have been listening to Herr Herbert von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker and the sixteen minutes and ten seconds of pure joy that is Maurice Ravel’s *Boléro*.”

No wonder it sounded so familiar. A college roommate had used parts of it for background music in one of her student films.

“Takes me back to 1966 ... what were you doing in 1966?” The announcer again.

I snorted. Not born, yet.

“Tune in tomorrow at 7:05am for another stellar performance of the same breathtaking masterpiece by another thrilling orchestra under the baton of another of the world’s most brilliant conductors.

“It’s now 7:22 am this Tuesday the seventeenth of January and you’re listening to *Breakfast with Brendalee* on WVOC 91.3FM, your community voice in Quonsetville.”

I scrambled to my feet. “Don’t you boys have school?”

“Nah.” Navy jacket brushed snow off himself. “Snow day.”

“Ah.” I winked. “I didn’t think New Englanders got those.”

He nodded, his expression serious. “We don’t most of the time.”

“Bet I can beat you to old man Henry’s.” Red jacket ran off.

“Only with a head start.” Navy jacket dashed after him.

I chuckled. Huffing and puffing, I climbed the steps to my back door. When I reached the landing, I took a deep breath of clean, fresh, cold air and squinted at the sun peeking over the horizon. My cheeks tightened. Must be the cold. No. My reflection in the kitchen window showed a goofy grin on my face. It had been too long since I’d used my smile muscles.

An unfamiliar feeling welled up inside me. Was it hope?

Thanks, Ravel, Brendalee, and my two young friends.

Appetite

GP Hyde

Physically I am tall, muscular through my regime of running and exercise. My appetites are large and endlessly demanding. I strive to meet their incessant shameless desires. Hunger and thirst, they all clamour for meat and wine and I bow to their needs. My craving extends to all areas and I admit with pride that I have a large sexual appetite.

But rarely is this satisfied in the midnight hour. All night I work in the artisan bakery, tucked away at the back of Loretta Lane's Bakeshop. Here I toil with passion to make the croissants and bread to satisfy the more discerning citizens of Quonsetville.

Loretta tempts the citizens daily with a special 'product of the day'. It's a changing menu. Monday was sourdough and today's special is the French baguette. I labour through the night, kneading, pummelling, coaxing the white flesh of the dough to rise up under my passionate attention. As the sun comes up, everything is baked. I switch off the ovens and lay out the bread ready for Loretta opening the shop. The baguettes have baked beautifully and I slip a couple into my bag for after my forthcoming extravaganza.

I begin my jog homeward and set off along Lorraine Street. I turn right into LaChute Street. As I pass Evita's Coffee, my stomach cries out for the caffeine hit of her wonderful *café au lait* but I must resist. I must be back before 07:05 so that I may satisfy

my hunger for culture and the finest music ever written. Quickening my pace, I turn left into DuRiz Street. Arriving home, I shove my key into the lock, clamber up the stairs and slip into bed with my lover-boy. No time to shower but I know how Julian appreciates my manly sweat. His sleep-drenched head emerges from beneath the duvet and his arm snakes out towards the radio. With a click, we are connected to our indefatigable broadcaster.

'Good morning, it's 7.05 on Tuesday the 17th of January and you're listening to Breakfast with Brendalee on WVOC 91.3FM. I'm Brendalee Bernard and it's time for the Regular Ravel Request!'

Ah, Ravel! The passion of his *Boléro*! How he conjures the magic of Spain! The mysterious vistas of its windswept deserts! How clever to have a drummer play the snare drum throughout, like the click of castanets as the dancers parade in their flamenco finery.

I feel the blistering heat of the sun and see the crowds packed into the *Plaza de Toros*. I become Alfredo the brave matador and Julian is the rampant snorting bull. We tussle, I seek to provoke him, to entice his angry energy so that he faces me with nostrils flaring and wild eyes staring. I wave my red handkerchief to divert his attention.

The music rises to a climax and I thrust my sword into *el toro* to secure *la petite morte*.

Afterwards, I plunge my hands into his huge white belly, massaging the white flesh so that it might begin to transform. Brendalee speaks in hushed admiration.

'As always ... what a superb ending! You have been listening to Herr Herbert von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker and

the sixteen minutes and ten seconds of pure joy that is Maurice Ravel's Boléro. '

Yes, thank you, Brendalee. It was indeed a strenuous sixteen minutes but I'm happy to say that Julian and I are now sated.

Hell Week

Len Kuntz

The final night of Hell Week began midday, but if the sun was shining, we didn't know it.

Each of us was blindfolded like hostages, seated in a chair and told not to move or speak unless spoken to. There were 21 of us scattered around the fraternity, all young and stupid but yearning to become members because our dads had and their dads had before them. We were lemmings willing to undergo hazing, bordering on psychotic torture, so we'd become members, brothers, the bright and dutiful future of Sigma Sigma Tau.

Five minutes after the bandanna was tied across my eyes, Ravel's *Boléro* marched down the hall, broadcast on WVOC 91.3 FM that Tuesday the 17th of January, 2023. The walls and floors vibrated around me, the steady, insistent percussion intriguing at first, but becoming a hypnotic hallucinogen by the hundredth playing. Soon it sounded like drunk elephants stumbling around the building, smashing into things. I pictured Hannibal loping through the Alps with his army and a herd of gigantic beasts. I imagined *Wizard of Oz* monkeys crashing into each other or getting crushed underfoot an exhausted elephant. After two days without sleep, my mind imagined the unimaginable.

My best friend, Gordie, had wanted to pledge Sigma Sigma Tau, and because I lacked any sort of focus or meaningful

ambition at age 18, I said I did, too. Gordie had had sex, plenty of times he said. He'd stolen things. Smoked pot. Done blow. All delights I'd yet to experience, and for this I idolized and wanted to be him.

The door opened and I felt the air shift.

"Kuntz," someone said. A member whose voice I couldn't discern. "You're a fucking poor excuse for a pledge. You know that?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"See? You fucking stooge. Are you a stooge?"

"I am, sir."

"And you think you're worthy of becoming a member?"

"Yes, sir."

"How bad do you want it?"

"Anything, sir."

"You'll suck my cock?"

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

"I'm sorry. I mean, I can't. Sir."

"Can't, or won't?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Stop saying sorry."

"Sorr-sir."

"Just open up your mouth and keep your teeth clear. It ain't tough. Every pledge does it before they become a member."

There were others in the room now. I felt the heat and sway of their bodies, but how many I didn't know.

"Well, you wanna be a member or not, Kuntz?"

I wondered about Gordie, if he'd already given someone fellatio. Normally he'd be the one I asked for guidance. He had an answer for any quandary. He was smart, like a parent, but could be trusted with deviance.

I heard a zipper come undone. Heard the member say, "Open your fucking mouth, Kuntz. Just think of it as breakfast."

I imagined a gang of elephants stampeding over my body, punching my bones into dust. *Boléro* continued to play in the hall, the steadfast march of madness.

A different voice shouted, "Do it, Kuntz. Now."

I imagined I was beneath the ocean, already drowned but unable to float to the surface. When I opened my mouth, the shrill of the laughter around me seemed to shake nails from the wall.

"He's fucking gay!"

Someone smacked the side of my face to more mirth.

"Fucking idiot," someone else said.

Hours or days later, *Boléro* stopped, replaced by *Here Comes the Sun*. All of us were marched into the hall and downstairs where the ceremony took place that made us official members.

Play It Again

Darrell Petska

Gerald Conklin
4844 Nantucket Circle
Montpelier, VT 10639

January 21, 2023

Dear Brendalee Bernard,

Our mother and your greatest fan, Lydia Mae Conklin, died this past January 17 at 10:33 p.m. You were her strongest medicine, *Breakfast with Brendalee* being the miracle that kept her among us well past her doctors' predictions.

Living with us since Covid's onset, she began each weekday morning with toast and tea—and Brendalee livestreamed on her laptop. She brightened visibly in your company until each day's sign-off.

Nearly a year ago she began receiving hospice care in our home. She'd been given two, perhaps three months to live. Your radio show brought her to life each morning for an additional nine months! But how hard weekends without Brendalee were—until we managed to record one of your shows, which always gave her cheer until Monday finally arrived. You, and her innate stubbornness, powered her through those months of decline.

Quite accomplished on bassoon, clarinet and piano, our mother taught high school music for decades. She had her

composer preferences: Mozart, Schubert and Dvorak, never mentioning Ravel. Your morning show piqued her interest in the latter, particularly his *Boléro*.

With music teacher zeal, she listened critically to your favored five *Boléro* recordings, preferring the Herbert von Karajan version you played, fittingly, the day she died. On her own she discovered and gave nod to Toscanini's 1939 recording because it was "livelier". Overhearing the many versions as I sipped my morning coffees, I confess I couldn't tell one conductor from the next!

By the morning of January 17, Mother's condition had greatly deteriorated. She waved off tea and toast, requesting only WVOC's livestream of your show.

She fought drowsiness until *Boléro* concluded, then lapsed into a deep sleep.

About 8:30 that evening, she stirred awake, whispering "The music, please."

We understood, setting up our recording of your show, playing only your conductor announcement and *Boléro*. How peaceful her face became. At the music's conclusion, she whispered "again", only to fade into unconsciousness. We gathered around her, my brothers, my sister, holding her hands—and each other's.

At 10:15, she startled awake, her eyes casting about the room. "Play it again," her voice commanded. She stopped breathing 18 minutes later, shortly after the music ended.

You meant so much to our mother, and consequently to us. At the celebration of life we've begun to plan, we will play *Boléro*.

We ask that you please consider attending to introduce the piece and dedicate the music to her memory. “Play it again,” as she had instructed.

In gratitude to you, we await your response.

Sincerely,

Gerald Conklin
for the family of Lydia Mae Conklin
311-553-6643

Paulie Changes His Tune

Gail Sosinsky

“Sorry, sorry. Won’t touch it again,” Paulie said, hunching his shoulders as Mr. Dumphy yelled at him for trying to move the radio off the channel with the classical crap.

“See that you don’t!” Dumphy said, his bushy gray moustache curling like an agonized caterpillar. “Nobody changes the station. Get to work. Here.”

The boss thrust a stick into Paulie’s hand, a stick with a metal blade on the end of it, like a broom without bristles, and turned to trundle a cart full of bottles to the other end of the barn where dark-faced calves pushed against the gate, eager for breakfast.

Seething, Paulie took deep breaths while someone named Brendalee introduced the news on WVOC91.3 FM. He had to keep his cool. Judge Feegle had offered three choices – ninety days in jail, sixty days in rehab, or thirty days on the Dumphy farm. 7 a.m., Tuesday, January 17, 2023. One hour down.

Paulie groaned. His brain was fuddled with this morning’s hangover and his attempts to cure it with the hair of the cur that bit him. If good whiskey was a smooth highway, the bottle hidden in his room was ungraded gravel.

At least the chewing gum worked. The old farmer hadn’t said a word about his breath.

But what the hell was this stick for? He twisted the handle to get a closer look at the metal blade. No clue. He’d have to ask the

taco head, what was his name? Reeking or something like that? Paulie watched the farmhand putting away the silvery cups they had stuck on the cows while he'd been feeding them. The thought of the cows' pink, reaching tongues made him shiver.

“Hey ... Senior. DO YOU HABLO ENGLISH?”

Whatshisname paused, carefully finished putting away the last of the equipment and turned slowly, a big smile on his face.

“Que?”

Paulie raised the stick and shook it, pointing at it with his other hand. “THIS STICK? WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH IT?”

For a moment, it looked like he might answer, then the smile returned, and the man said, “Ah!” He grabbed another brushless broom and scraped straw and shit into the gutter behind where the cows had been parked. *Scrape_scrape_scrape tap-tap.*

Shit.

He could handle a month scraping shit.

Paulie stepped across the gutter and started scraping one of the spots where the cows had stood. He could just barely hear some snaky music coming from the radio.

Scrape_scrape_scrape tap-tap. El Senior made steady progress on his side of the barn, keeping time to the music. Stupid Dumphy! Get the Stones rocking the radio, and the barn would be clean in half the time.

A cat caught Paulie's eye, a sleek gray tabby sauntering down the aisle, tail high and hips swaying. Behind it, two others joined, sashaying like models on a runway. The hair stood up on Paulie's neck when four more adults and more kittens than he could count joined the parade, heading for the radio at the end of the barn.

He'd always known cats were weird, but then the two shaggy dogs from outside came in and started prancing to the music.

Prance_prancity_prance_prancity_prance_prancity prance-prance.

Prance_prancity_prance_prancity_prance_prancity prance-prance.

The cats circled the two dogs in a kind of sideways figure eight, and Paulie wondered if the taste was the only thing wrong with last night's whiskey. He looked around for Senior, but he'd worked himself to the other end of the barn. *Scrape_scrape_scrape tap-tap.*

When the hell was this song going to end?

Paulie broke into a cold sweat when chickens started dropping through a hole in the ceiling, their clucks silenced as they reached the ground. *Step_stepity_step_stepity_step_stepity flap-flap. Step_stepity_step_stepity* — until they formed a circle around the dogs and cats.

Sweat trickling down his neck, Paulie backed into the metal bars that kept the cows in place. The music grew louder and louder, with squeaks and squawks echoed by the bawling of the calves keeping time with their little hooves.

Tap_tappity_tap_tappity_tap_tappity tap-tap.

Then, just beyond the door to the pen where forty-three cows waited, one hundred seventy-two hooves thundered in time, the sound echoing like an approaching storm.

Screaming, Paulie dropped his scraper and, leaping cats and chickens, ran through the door into the cold Vermont morning.

Enrique and Dumphy watched from the other end of the barn.

“You know, Boss,” Enrique said leaning on his scraper, “he was a real asshole, but sometimes I think we should tell these guys that you're training the animals to perform at the fair.”

“No,” Dumphy said, loading the calves' empty bottles into his cart, voice straining to be heard over the music. “Judge Feegle says they all come back asking for rehab. I think she likes it that

way. You know, I think we'll use the von Karajan *Boléro* for the performance. The animals always do best when it plays."

"I think so, too," Enrique shouted. "I'm going to go call the sheriff's office to pick Paulie up so he doesn't freeze."

"Good. I'll get breakfast for the rest of the performers," Dumpfy said, his words swept away by the joyous animal noise of the final crescendo.

Miroirs

Cheryl Snell

Jerry picked up the journal, the one Gail never let him see, and brought it to her in bed. She had another headache and she wanted to keep a record of those, now that they were so frequent. He handed the book to her, and returned to the kitchen to get her some ice cream. Cold sometimes helped. When he brought it to her, the book had fallen on the floor, and she was crying.

“I couldn’t get it back,” she whimpered. He picked it up. Some of the pages had been torn out and he put them back inside the cloth covers but not before he saw her handwriting. The words were confined to a single quadrant on each page, written at an odd angle. He shot her a quizzical look.

“Why you so mad?” she said.

“Baby, I’m not!” and he climbed on the bed beside her. He began to spoon ice cream into her mouth. She held it open like a little bird. He would call the doctor tomorrow.

The next day Gail felt better and would not let him call the doctor. Jerry pretended to agree, and got ready for work as usual. “I’ll find you some nice music before I go,” he said, turning the radio dial to WVOC 91.3FM. Then he was out the door, hoping the doctor’s office would open early, and the traffic from Quonsetville to the Medcenter in Quonset Cascade would be light. It was a Thursday, his last chance to report his wife’s

worsening symptoms to Dr. Rigamonti before the predicted January snowstorm socked them in.

When he returned home that evening, his wife was excitedly drawing with his colored pens in the journal previously reserved for writing. “The lady said look out for the pale opening,” she tried to explain.

“What lady?”

“On the radio!” She waved both hands stained with colored ink and then nodded to her picture: an orderly grid with a series of repeating marks that built in intensity from a blotted white to vibrating red, with more and more saturated colors in bundled lines added as the length and breadth of each rectangle expanded. “Eighteen times!” Gail cried.

He didn’t understand what she meant and she had lost the ability to explain. The doctor had told him to expect more of these kinds of symptoms. There were medications she could try, but ultimately no cure.

He brought the picture closer to his face. He was good at discerning patterns but couldn’t find one that seemed connected to the number eighteen. “Are there eighteen verses in the music?”

“No, no, nope. Same thing over again. Bigger.” She drew a crescendo sign on the air.

Or was it the less-than sign? That made no sense. He stared at the design on her paper. Did she mean the same theme appeared eighteen times? *No, no, nope. Same thing over again. Bigger.* Would that be actual music then? No, more like tone quality or color, he decided. He looked over at the radio, turned it on for clues. There was no music, just village news. He would try again in the morning on the chance that the piece that had obsessed his wife would play again.

The first thing he did when he opened his eyes was to turn on the radio. At the sound of the announcer's familiar voice, his wife grasped his hand tightly, uttering sounds like speech, but not exactly.

Good morning, it's 7.05 on Tuesday the 17th of January, and you're listening to Breakfast with Brendalee on WVOC 91.3FM. I'm Brendalee Bernard and it's time for the Regular Ravel Request. Today it's Herr von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker performing Ravel's Boléro, originally released on Deutsche Grammophon in 1966. And if you've listened to this spot before, you'll know to wait for the slow, soft beginning.

Ravel had written this piece while in the throes of a neurological disease like Gail's. Dr. Rigamonti had told him this particular bit of trivia the day before, thinking it would reassure Jerry about the possibilities. To him, it sounded like false hope. There was only one Ravel.

Gail listened to the piece in a way Jerry had not seen before. Her body alert, she stared at the radio as if afraid she'd miss the opening snare drum ostinato. She closed her eyes for the delicate solo flute, and opened them again for the clarinet. When the bassoon twisted in, she clasped her hands in front of her as if in rapt prayer. After the tumult of the finale, after the piece that had begun so softly let loose its cannons, Gail grabbed her notebook and colored pens, and set to work, filling in what she had missed on first hearing. She was utterly concentrated.

Jerry would buy her canvas and a set of oil paints after the streets had been plowed and stores re-opened. It would be interesting to see her interpretation of the music on a bigger background. She might find comfort in a new kind of expression as the old ones closed. Maybe she already had.

No Texas Toast for Breakfast

Mike Lewis-Beck

Clifford Redsockett was ‘on mission’ from the Selectboard, to find out how ‘democracy’ worked in Texas towns, as compared to his town meeting in Quonsetville, where he served as a selectman. Even though the winds blew cold in a Vermont January, he kept Bait and Take Marina open, for the ice fishing crowd. He handed over to Claudette Cloutier the task of running his Bait and Take while gone, even though he knew of her duties as Assistant Librarian in Fourway Corner. He wanted to keep in her circle because he hoped—against hope—that she would marry his son, rather than Marie-France, whom he still thought of as a bobblehead. Claudette, being a peacemaker, put her niece, Hepatica Laver, in charge of the shop. Hepatica did not relish the assignment, since it meant shutting down the *poutine* truck, which she had inherited from Uncle Carl, another Cloutier. To console her, Claudette pointed out that Vermonters, hearty as they were, would not stand outside in large numbers in dead winter, just to eat a pile of French fries covered in cheese curds and brown gravy. Hepatica doubted this claim but did not want to back talk her aunt. Once settled, these arrangements allowed Cliff to travel to Texas on the town’s ticket. (As Town Clerk, he had to be scrupulous about receipts, even for a cup of coffee).

The first morning, at 7:45 am sharp, the conference, ‘Democracy in the Lone Star State,’ gathered at the Hotel Steller in Texas—a star-studded place (no pun intended)—except for the coffee, dirty and bitter, not beany or starry, and poured from a hot pot at the back table of a convention hall with no ceiling, just a tall hall. That bad brew made a rough morning for Cliff who, as a true Vermonter, was fond of fine coffee. His favorite came from a Green Mountain blend, which he would sip while listening to *Breakfast with Brendalee*, on WVOC, the local FM station. He would fill his go-to mug—which read ‘Vermont Strong’— and eat maple sugar donuts, sorting a bucket of minnows or tying flies between bites. This morning, of course, he could experience none of these things, as he was in Texas, for the first time. He asked himself which *Boléro* Brendalee had played that day, among the various choices she ritually entertained. Perhaps Boulez, whose rendition delved so deep, even deeper than Coppola.

Next morning, he woke early, at 6:30, to the harp strum on his phone clock, shaved with brush and mug and a Gillette safety razor from a thrift store, put on his long red pants and suspenders, an out-of-the-bag green-and-black checked shirt he’d bought at Riverwader’s Men’s, and a blue blazer (government issue). Dressed for show, he set out to hunt a good cuppa, like the espresso his son, Clifford Junior, had in Rome by the Spanish Steps, to salute Keats. (Junior styled himself a poet and wore a beret. His dad wore a John Deere cap with flaps, but not in Texas, because of the heat.) He lumbered about the built-up turf and misty ponds embracing the hotel, in search of something like Sriracha’s Café back home. He fell upon Caffeine Craven—its real name — a coffee shop peppered all around its outside grounds with grackles and cats.

Cliff gripped his suspenders and approached the counter. “You have espresso?” he asked Diego, the name on his mint shirt.

“*Yes, sir, best in the Brazos.*”

“Pull me one, please,” he asked. Diego did it, like a Texas Roman.

“*Want Texas Toast with?*”

“No señor,” he answered, in uncertain Spanish.

The smell of the coffee lifted Cliff’s spirits, flagging from the heat and the wonderment of Texas palm trees. He chucked off his polyester blazer and wished he had not worn a flannel shirt. He recalled the Pope, and the recent picture of him outfitted as a polar bear. He speculated about what Claudette, a practicing believer at St. Everine’s congregation, would say about that. Sweat rolled off his forehead, as he wiped it with napkins from a cannister on the counter. He bolted his coffee—Gulp!—down his throat. He stood, frozen, then a smile broke across his expanse of perfect teeth.

“Man, that’s coffee!” he declared.

The pond mist suddenly condensed to a fog and shrouded the shop, like steam from its espresso. Cliff thought of the sacred Shroud of Turin, that Claudette had once described. A grin took over his face. He ordered another shot of espresso, along with a churro.

“Could I please have one of those churros?” he asked, aiming his index finger at a tasty-looking well-fried swirling stretch of dough. He could not resist the aroma.

“*Sí, señor,*” Diego said.

From outside, Cliff heard the grackles raise an increasingly agitated crackle. He saw the cats were chasing them. This democratic conference had its delights after all.

The grackle racket reminded him of the time—7:05—and the day—January 17. He wondered which *Boléro* Brendalee would play. He feared it would be von Karajan, which he did not like—unwieldy, cannon-loose drumming and strumming. He supposed he could catch it on the live stream, if he could not dial it up directly ...

Bloater Hill Boléro

Martin Phillips

“I don’t get it, Debs. Classical music! You? Quonsetville’s Grunge queen?”

“A girl can always broaden her horizons, Patti,” Debbie had chuckled. They’d been having coffee in Sriracha’s Café. “My boss Loretta put me onto it. I reckon she’s right: ‘Only in Quontsetville would a station play a sixteen-minute track on the prime time breakfast show.’ I checked it out and it’s crazy. They don’t just play a sixteen-minute track – it’s the *same* goddam sixteen-minute track every day!”

Patti had flicked flakes of almond croissant off her hoodie. “I mean, who the hell does that? Keeps putting on the same thing, day in, day out. What’d that Epstein guy say? ‘Doin’ the same thing and expectin’ it to turn out different makes you go batshit’.”

“Einstein. And even he could talk out of his butt sometimes. When I first got *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, I took it up to my bedroom, played it every day for weeks.”

“Thass different. Thass *real* music.”

In the early days, it wasn’t just the wackiness of the idea which kept Debbie tuned in every morning at seven. She’d found she was actually *liking* this classical stuff. She wondered whether it was age. Her big four-oh was only a year away when she

discovered *Regular Ravel Request* and its octogenarian presenter, Brendalee Bernard. Perhaps you really *did* change when you reached that milestone. She still played her Nirvana, Soundgarden and Pearl Jam CDs. But mainly to bring back her carefree adolescent days. Ravel? She had to admit it – these days she found him more interesting.

The first three years, she rarely missed a show. She reckoned within twenty seconds she'd know which of the five versions of *Boléro* Brendalee was playing. It was when Ravel got sucked into the arguments that things tailed off. Chuck usually stormed out after a few bars and had his before-work joint in the pickup. One morning he just boiled over.

“Fuck sake! That fuckin’ racket!” He grabbed the radio and threw it into the sink.

“Fuck you!” Debbie screamed at him, salvaging the set from the dishwasher and dabbing at it with a cloth. After that they often got into a *Boléro* stand-off. But as her energy for fights weakened, they mostly compromised and tuned to CNN for breakfast news.

But today there was no one to stop her tuning in to WVOC 91.3 FM. Ravel as comfort blanket. *Boléro* to get her through what she had to do.

“Good morning, it’s 7.05 on Tuesday the 17th of January and you’re listening to *Breakfast with Brendalee* on WVOC 91.3FM. I’m Brendalee Bernard and it’s time for the *Regular Ravel Request*.” Brendalee’s instantly recognisable husky voice.

It was the von Karajan. Her favourite. The tempo was just right. Not like Ozawa and the Boston’s frantic rendering. Karajan was stately. Ozawa bordered on anarchic. There’d been a couple of times when, even though Chuck was out, she’d had to turn the volume right down on the finale. Dutoit and the Montreal

managed to drain a bit of the emotion: even the building crescendos were too measured. No. Herbert had got it spot on.

This morning, as the flute joined the snare drum, she started to think of *Boléro* as a musical portrait of her marriage.

She'd met Chuck at a beach party down by the ferry dock. He was a big man: over six foot with a big ginger beard, big mane of hair, big laugh and, she'd thought at first, a big heart. "We're meant to be," Chuck had said when he asked her to marry him after only two months. On what passed for a hen night, (her and Patti getting loaded at Korsakoff's Cocktail Bar), Patti had asked her how she felt about her parents not going to the wedding.

"When did they ever approve of any fuckin' thing I did. Remember when I got the nose ring? You'd think I'd had a face transplant. Fuck 'em."

After the wedding, Debbie moved in with Chuck at his place in Bloater Hill Trailer Park. He worked on the Bridalvale ferry during the summer and casual bar stuff the rest of the time. She stuck with her job at Loretta Lane's Bakeshop. He bought her flowers. She baked him pecan pies. Life was sweet as the sound of the flute or clarinet. And that's how it was for the first few years. Until things started to sour.

Chuck had always drunk. But gradually he came back later and later from the Tipsey Towie, and in worse and worse states. And then one night she locked him out. He smashed open the door and punched her in the face. After that, there was no more pianissimo. Just a slow, snarling build-up of tension.

The insistent ostinato of the voice in her head telling her to get out hadn't happened until this final year.

"Get the police in," Patti had said. "It ain't okay what's goin' on and you gotta put a stop to it."

Did she believe it would get better? Was that why she let it go on as long as she did? If only she'd listened to Patti. Maybe today wouldn't have happened.

In the kitchen, von Karajan was winding the orchestra up into the crescendo. All the instruments at full, discordant fortissimo. The timpanis thundering. And then finally, the trombones raucous glissando mirroring what had just happened. He'd come at her, tried to grab her hair. She'd sunk the knife he used to slice beef jerky deep into his throat. Blood spurted, an artery severed. He staggered backwards, sank to his knees, then collapsed at her feet.

As Brendalee Bernard back announced Ravel's *Boléro*, Debbie picked up her car keys and took a final look at the widening pool of blood. Now she had no option but to get the police involved. Chuck's drinking buddy, Sheriff Baringer, would have to hear the whole sad tale.

I can't have too many Boléros

Sylvia Petter

I'm pencilling in 17 January 2024 at Philharmonie Berlin, Herbert-von-Karajan-Str. 1. If I can't make it from Vienna to Berlin on that day, I'll tune in to *Breakfast with Brendalee*. (Hope she'll still be going strong at WVOC 91.3FM, playing *Boléro* by Maurice Ravel.) Because of the six-hour time difference between Vermont, USA and Vienna, Austria (although the internet time zone thingy did keep looking for Vienna, USA and said they were on the same line), it'll be well into the witching hours here in Vienna, Austria.

I fell in love with Herbert Ritter von Karajan – Ritter – he was a knight you know, when I found out that he never looked at his orchestra while conducting – a blind conductor, so to say. The Austrians abolished knighthoods and the like but we're still proud of him. He passed away 34 years ago, and his widow published her autobiography, "My Life by his Side" for his 100th birthday in 2008. Brendalee's programme this morning with his rendering of *Boléro* brought back lots of memories that I hope to revisit next year in Berlin.

Last Night's Concert

Vallie Lynn Watson

We gathered in the gentle morning rain on January 17th, 2023, exactly 3933 days since our last arm's-reach meeting, a meeting that bore our only disagreement, over Ravel.

Entering a building immediately would signify some sort of intention, despite the mist, some sort of temporary permanence, and we had to pretend, at least in those first long, building moments, a certain freedom. We didn't go inside until the clouds rearranged themselves.

Once we enveloped ourselves by the boundaries, the parallels and perpendiculars, the straight lines that constituted a small, fleeting sense of home, we lost the clearing skies.

We didn't know about the sky's tiny arch of rainbow. We wouldn't have picked it up on our own, because we were both color-blind, but we might have seen others looking upward in wonder. We couldn't see the droplets of rain glistening in the street's sun, streets named for New England trees.

We didn't know about the concert the night before, where we would have heard what others couldn't hear, its penultimate song simply the same five words repeated 104 times, the sound of the chorus singing, "Home."

We could have seen, through the nearby window, the car linger at the curb, its windows down, but we could not have heard the radio push Brendalee's voice from inside the car to the outside,

the sunshine waiting to catch her announcement, which version she'd play on WVOC that morning, and swirl her words repeatedly through its damp rays, until they collapsed into nothing.

A Winning Gesture

Jane H. Fitzgerald

My last performance with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was on my sixtieth birthday, April 4, 2020. Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* was played as a tribute to the Health Care workers during the COVID-19 crisis, a very fitting piece for them, and for the ending of my career as a burned-out violinist.

Without the camaraderie of my fellow musicians, the city seemed strangely empty and quiet. Plus, it was getting too expensive on my small income. I felt very lonely. I needed a change.

While reading the newspaper (I still like to hold a real paper), I saw an advertisement for a small, reasonably-priced cottage for rent in Quonsetville, Vermont. I decided to check it out right away.

It was late October and the drive was uplifting as the brilliant, colorful leaves swirled gently in the breeze. Suddenly, I was feeling free and hopeful about the future. I found the little cottage not far from Loretta Lane's Bake Shop on Sweetspot Street, almost in the middle of town. The second I saw it, I knew it was for me. It was painted a cheerful blue with a bright yellow door. The agent, a middle-aged woman with a friendly smile, was waiting on a lawn chair in the front yard. After a tour of the cozy living room with its brick fireplace and beamed ceiling, the quaint kitchen with a window overlooking the lovely garden, and a steep

stairway that led to a bath with an old-fashioned claw foot tub, and a bedroom on either side, I impulsively signed a long-term lease.

I returned in a few days, followed by a truck with my belongings. The next morning, I turned on the local radio station, WVOC 91.3FM, just as an older woman finished a news item about a gaggle of geese eating spilled grain on Lorraine Street. The road was blocked yesterday for ten minutes, causing a delay in the opening of several cafes. Coffee lovers were not pleased. Then she announced she was playing *Boléro* with Seiji Ozawa conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra. How strange I thought, to be playing *Boléro* in the middle of the news. I sat down with my coffee to listen. This had always been one of my favorites as Maurice Ravel carried me along on a rushing river that grew stronger and faster as it reached the ocean. The piece was like home to me.

The next morning, it surprised me to hear it again, this time by a different orchestra. I was delighted to find that the announcer played *Boléro* every day at exactly 7.05. How wonderful, that by chance, I ended up in a town that appreciated Ravel as much as I did. I happily settled into my new life, habitually listening to the same radio show hosted by Brendalee Bernard with my coffee and croissant from Loretta's.

The little cottage presented no problems, until one day, I discovered water on my bedroom floor. Looking up, I saw an ominous stain on the ceiling. I immediately called a local roofer who came right over. He was a rough type; getting on in years, large, muscular, dressed in jeans and boots, but cordial with a kind smile. He promised to come back the next morning.

The date will always stay in my mind due to what happened. It was January 17, 2023, and *Boléro* was being conducted by

Herbert von Karajan of the Berliner Philharmoniker. I decided to pick up my violin and play along with the radio, quickly becoming lost in the joy of being part of the orchestra. I wasn't aware of it, but the roofer had returned and was standing outside my kitchen window listening. Apparently, he had been transfixed through the whole piece from the slow buildup to the escalating climax. When it ended, I heard clapping, and was surprised to see him through the window. He waved, could he come in? I nodded.

"You know, you really play great," he said, closing the door behind him. "You must have taken lots of lessons. I used to play the French horn until the music teacher told my parents they were wasting their money."

I told him, "I'm sure you would have improved with practice. That's what it takes, practice."

"Well, I love music, but it wasn't meant to be. Roofing is my challenge. Just call me if you have any other problems. I'm good at fixing all sorts of things. I'll be happy to help you out anytime you need me."

I smiled. "Thank you so much. I'll be sure to keep that in mind, but I'm really alright."

Underneath, I was feeling awkward as he wasn't the type of cultured man I was used to. He definitely wasn't dressed like the musicians in the orchestra, yet I sensed a sensitivity in his offer to help me, and his attentive demeanor was refreshing.

As he was leaving, he paused for a moment, leaned down and gently kissed my violin. I gasped, shocked and touched. That one small, intimate gesture, won my heart, and changed my life.

"Would you like to come back for coffee tomorrow morning?"

Since then, *Breakfast with Brendalee* has had two avid listeners in the little blue cottage, who both drink coffee, eat croissants, and revel in Ravel.

Shake and Two Bits

Susmita Ramani

At 6:50 in the morning in midtown Manhattan, after opening the place – which was easy because she and her husband lived in an apartment upstairs – and turning on the radio (by docking her phone into a port next to the cash register so she could livestream her favorite shows), Agnes pulled her caramel hair into a tidy bun and ran a mop over the floor of the “Shake and Two Bits” diner. Jack ran the night shift, she ran the morning shift, and they spent the middle part of every day together.

The two waitresses on shift that morning, Dahlia (with short orange corkscrew curls) and Juniper (with two long honey-gold pigtails), arrived together (because they were also roommates), clocked in, and stowed their coats and wet snowshoes in their lockers.

“It’s sludgy out,” said Juniper. “Ah, New York in the winter!”

“It’s dangerous but I love it,” laughed Dahlia. “Agnes, guess what? Yesterday after you left, a guy named Frank phoned from the accounting firm down the block, wanting a huge order of deviled eggs, raspberry scones, glazed doughnuts, and finger sandwiches. He didn’t want any milkshakes, so he asked for a discount. We said no way. Everyone pays full price and everyone gets milkshakes.”

“It’s in the name of the place!” Agnes frowned. “Everyone gets a shake and two appetizer-sized bites to eat. That’s our gimmick, and I’m sticking to it. I love that you girls have always gotten it.”

“Of course, we do!” sang Juniper.

“Also, what’s their issue with milkshakes?” asked Agnes. “Everyone knows we do oat milkshakes, almond milkshakes, coconut milkshakes, soy milkshakes, sugar free, and on and on!”

Dahlia stretched in her long-and-lean way, because when she wasn’t waitressing, she was a Broadway dancer. “Last week a lady named Flora from that law firm across the street called, asking for just milkshakes. She wanted fifty of them. But no food! She asked for a discount to get just the shakes. I said sorry, but: no bits, no dice.”

“Way to tell ’em!” Agnes laughed and shook her head. “We can’t go veering off from our mission.” She held up a hand. “Shhh! It’s time for *Breakfast with Brendalee*. You know I like to keep track of the comings and goings of my hometown. I still have relatives and friends in Quonsetville!”

Quietly, Dahlia and Juniper married ketchups, refilled sugar and sweetener packets, and checked the contents of salt and pepper shakers, while Brendalee went on the air and did her usual introductory patter ... and then came the music. Every morning that Agnes worked, *Boléro* by Ravel played at 7:05, filling every corner of the diner not merely with sound, but with feeling, for almost sixteen minutes.

Dahlia had long ago created dance choreography for the entire piece; she couldn’t help it. It was her gift and her calling. She couldn’t listen to a piece of music without wanting to move to it. Whenever *Boléro* was playing, she danced: ronds de jambe, jetés, pirouettes, and much gazelle-like leaping hither and thither.

It didn't interfere with her work. Agnes and Juniper loved watching her dance, and Dahlia enjoyed being watched.

Juniper's talent was for singing on Broadway, so she often sang under her breath. She was secretly composing lyrics to *Boléro*, only for herself.

Listening to *Boléro* made Agnes recall her honeymoon in Spain with Jack, where they had danced, eaten delicious food, bathed in art and culture, soaked up the sun, dashed onto trains to escape the rain, taken tours, and met friends.

Five minutes into the piece, as a snare drum beat steadily behind a lone flute playing the melody, there was a knock at the diner's door.

"We're not open yet!" called Agnes. "Please come back at 7:30!"

But instead, more knocking. Sighing, Agnes opened the door to a handsome, twenty-something brown-haired man.

"I'm Frank," he said, stepping inside. Agnes shut the door behind him.

"I called last night," Frank continued, "about only ordering food from here. Your food is amazing, and although it's small portions, it packs a punch. But we're not all that keen on milkshakes, dairy or otherwise."

Before Agnes could say anything, there was another knock at the diner's door.

"What now?" she asked, opening the door again. She let in a slender, twenty-something cocoa-skinned, dark-haired woman with a wide smile.

"I'm Flora," she said. "I called last week about only ordering your shakes. The thing is, many of our lawyers are on all-liquid diets. Being lawyers, they view milkshakes as an acceptable loophole."

Agnes shook her head. “I feel like I keep saying the same thing over and over again, unvaryingly, and ever more insistently. What you get at this diner, whoever you are, is a shake and two bits. There’s no customization.” She looked from Flora to Frank and back again. “Having said that, I think you two might want to talk!”

As the music swelled at the end of the thirteenth minute of *Boléro*, Flora’s and Frank’s eyes met, and they walked out of the diner together.

For the last two minutes of the piece, Dahlia danced, Juniper sang softly, and Agnes savored the music.

A year later to the day, Flora and Frank had their wedding reception at Shake and Two Bits. *Boléro* played. Flora and Frank danced. Agnes and Jack danced. Every cook, prep cook, waitress, and busboy danced. Juniper danced. Dahlia sang.

An Exercise in Control

Christine Reeves

As the first bars of *Boléro* wafted from the radio, Kayla began,

Stretch, bend and touch toes.

Stretch, bend and touch toes.

It had been just after Christmas when Tyler made fun of her generous proportions.

‘This is not a good look for you,’ he said, running his hands over her waist and down her thighs.

‘You’ve always said you don’t like skinny women,’ Kayla retorted.

‘I don’t, but there’s curvy and ...’

‘Are you calling me fat, Tyler Morrison?’

‘No, course not, I wouldn’t do that, I was just thinking of your health.’

The conversation ended there.

March. One. Two. Three.

March. One. Two. Three.

Although she accepted his answer Kayla had not stopped thinking he might be right. Standing naked in front of a mirror the following morning she decided there was too much wobbly fat covering her body. Her figure had changed in the 18 months they

had been together; she put it down to love, although it was more likely due to the burgers and pizzas they often ate. She decided to take herself in hand, just in case Tyler's attentions wandered elsewhere.

As well as resolving to eat more healthily, she knew exercise would help to tone and firm her body. Being winter there was no way she wanted to go jogging and visiting the gym was too organised, too public. Instead, she decided to follow a 15-minute workout in the privacy of her own home.

Twist and stretch.

Twist and stretch.

Since the New Year, Kayla carried out the same exercises every weekday morning to the unlikely music of Ravel's *Boléro*. Brendalee Bernard, early morning presenter on local radio WVOC 91.3FM, played the piece Monday to Friday just after the 7.00am news. The regularity helped Kayla stick to a routine whilst the 15-minute duration was long enough to appease her conscience.

This morning when the alarm buzzed her awake Kayla turned over wanting to go back to sleep. She'd been getting up early for sixteen days, it was still dark and the room icy cold. She shivered knowing how much colder it would be outside and pulled the duvet over her head as Tyler lay snoring beside her. He was no Adonis and his favourite exercise was using his drinking arm to lift another beer. Still, he had a lovely smile, a cute dimple and his mop of curly brown hair gave him a vulnerable boyish charm. Thinking of his smile she had heaved herself out of bed.

Lunge left. Turn.
Lunge right. Turn.

As the music continued Kayla went through the motions changing pace as the intensity increased. She knew the routine by heart so by the time she was on the floor doing sit-ups she was only half listening to the music. She heard Tyler go to the bathroom before returning to bed. She pictured him lying snug and warm under the covers. That was where she wanted to be. Instead, here she was putting herself through this punishment. There was no way she was enjoying herself so why, exactly, was she doing it?

For Tyler.

How would Tyler react if I suggested he was a little too well covered?

He would laugh. Say he's perfect as he is.

This sudden realisation annoyed Kayla and along with the rising relentless intensity of the snare drum, her movements sharpened as she lifted her legs higher and punched the air vigorously.

Did he love her enough to do something about his habits?

As she knelt on the floor, bending her knees into the correct position, she wondered if he would make any sacrifices.

Press-up.

Would he give up drinking for me?

Hold.

Stop having his nights out with the boys?

Hold.

Forgo his Friday night pizza?

And down.

She'd been doing these exercises since the New Year just to make him happy. What would he do to make her happy?

By now as the trumpets and horns blasted out loudly, they sent a signal to Kayla and she lay on the floor, the routine forgotten. She would only continue when and if she wanted to.

As for Tyler. She knew exactly what she would say to him.

Winterfest

James Bates

It was Tuesday morning, January 17, 2023. Clark rolled over and grinned at Ethan, “Good morning. Happy 35th anniversary.”

Ethan smiled and kissed his best friend and lover. “Good morning yourself.” Then he smiled. “I can’t believe it’s been that long.” He hugged Clark. “You look just as good to me now as you did back then.”

Clark smiled at the compliment. He might be slightly paunchy with thinning hair and liver spots on his hands, but he appreciated Ethan’s ability to look at a worn canvas and see a wonderful Van Gogh. He slipped his arms around Ethan and gave him a big hug. “I love you so much. You look great yourself.”

Ethan did look good. At 59 (the same age as Clark), he’d been a runner most of his life and though he didn’t race anymore due to bad knees, he still liked to jog and work out in the gym. Clark counted himself lucky that Ethan still cared for him like he did. But he did, and this trip was proof of that.

It was their first real vacation since Covid. They were staying on the third floor of the historic Station Hotel. Their room was lovingly adorned with Shaker antiques and Carlyle Goodrich photographs. There was even a photo of the hotel in its heyday taken in the early 1900s. The mattress on their four-poster bed felt inviting, not too soft nor too firm, and the flannel sheets looked like they’d be just the ticket on cold nights. To that end,

they opened the window a few inches before they went to bed so they could savor the wintery fresh air while they slept. Which they did, sleeping soundly under a thick handmade quilt with a green, white, and mauve wedding ring design.

They were in Quonsetville a few days to partake in Winterfest, a week-long celebration that had begun on Saturday. They'd arrived on Sunday and would be leaving the following Wednesday.

Sunday had been fun exploring the village, culminating with a scrumptious dinner at the Tsar Nicolai Russian Restaurant. It was the first of many pleasant surprises during their stay. Another one was Monday morning when they turned on the bedside radio to find it had been tuned to local station WVOC 91.3FM. They sipped their coffee (delivered by room service at 6:45 a.m.) and listened to a charming radio program *Breakfast with Brendalee* hosted by Brendalee Bernard, whose voice sounded as smooth and rich as warm bread baked in Ethan's great-grandmother's wood stove.

The two men had been lying in bed talking quietly and planning their day when a favorite song of theirs was introduced by Brendalee. She had a love of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* and at 7:05 a.m. just after the 7:00 a.m. news, she played *Boléro*, much to the delight of Clark and Ethan. Clark quickly consulted a local guide book that lay on the nightstand. It turned out that Brendalee played one of five different recordings of *Boléro* each day of the week. Clark and Ethan looked at each and both exclaimed at the same time, "How cool!"

Boléro was considered "Their Song." Ethan had put it on the CD player the first night he and Clark spent together thirty-five years earlier, and it had been awarded a special place in their hearts

ever since. The fact that they'd heard it that first Monday morning promptly at 7:05 a.m. they considered a good omen.

And it had been. They spent Monday walking up and down the streets and getting to know the quaint town. Clark taught American Literature at Montpelier Junior College and Ethan was a potter who made solidly functional pots and mugs that he sold locally and online. Some of his work was even carried by the local Potty Mouth Studio.

Monday night they set the alarm for early Tuesday morning so they were awake for their 6:45 a.m. room service coffee and Brendalee's broadcast. There was an issue, however. Clark had recently been diagnosed with macular degeneration, a potentially debilitating eye disorder that could result in blindness. He'd scheduled his first treatment at the end of January. It would be administered by an injection to his eye, something he wasn't looking forward to at all.

The question had to do with telling Ethan about it.

Clark watched as Ethan poured them each a steaming coffee latte and brought them to the bed, handing Clark his cup before climbing in. "Here you go. Fresh coffee for the broadcast."

"Thank you," Clark mumbled, taking a sip from his cup before setting it on the nightstand.

Ethan set his cup down and caressed Clark's shoulder. "Hey there, guy. What's up?"

Clark looked at the clock. The news was just starting so he still had a few minutes. He looked at Ethan, sighed deeply. "I've got something to tell you."

Concerned, Ethan took Clark's hand. "What is it? Tell me."

"I will in just a minute. Let's listen to this recording first."

"You sure?"

Clark nodded. "I am."

So, they did, lying under the covers in each other's arms and listening to every note of the nearly sixteen-minute recording. They loved it.

When it was over, Clark turned to Ethan and without any preamble said, "Okay, what I've got to say is this. I've got issues with my vision. It's called macular degeneration and if it's not treated, I could go blind. I'm going to have to start getting shots to contain it soon." He looked at his lover. "I'm scared."

Ethan didn't hesitate. He pulled Clark to him and hugged him. "Don't worry, guy. I'm with you forever. Never forget that."

Clark sighed in relief and hugged Ethan even tighter. "Thank you so much. And I'm with you forever, too."

Tuesday's broadcast would become their favorite recording of *Boléro*.

Clark started the shots at the end of the month. By the fall his macular degeneration was in remission.

As soon as they found out, Ethan picked up the phone. "Station Hotel? I'd like to make a reservation for next January 16th."

And he started humming *Boléro*.

Boléro on Ice

John Notley

Carol spent her early years in Streatham, a suburb about five miles south from the centre of London. Streatham is a nice place for a child growing up. Good schools, open spaces such as the Common, friendly neighbours. Apart from the honour of having the longest high street in Europe, Streatham also possessed the oldest and only ice rink in London when it first opened in 1931, before her parents were born.

Having been taken to the rink by her parents from the age of five onwards, Carol soon developed a love of ice skating. After pleading with her father to be allowed to take lessons, it was soon noticed by her instructors that she had a talent for skating and she was encouraged to continue as they could see her potential.

Although ice skating was an enjoyable pastime it was also an expensive one. Luckily her father had a good job in banking and was able to support her during her school years. She managed to win several competitions and various medals.

After high school, not being academic enough for university, Carol found herself an office job with a publishing company and continued ice skating in her leisure time. Then one evening the worst thing happened to a skater: she fell heavily on the ice and severely fractured her right leg.

Again, fate played a hand in her life. During her visits to hospital, Carol met a young American from Vermont who was

staying with friends in London. Carol and Charles began dating and within a few weeks decided to marry.

Charles came from a family in Quonsetville, where his father had a law firm and that's where they decided to settle, a small place unheard of by most people. The Green Mountain State is known as one of the most beautiful in the Northeast, on the border with Canada. Her husband said she did not need to work but Carol was determined to use the skills acquired in her years of skating. She soon found a part-time job at Chalet Vue Ice Rink, the local venue where she could pass these on as a coach. Although her damaged leg had now healed, she knew her days of winning medals were over.

In more recent years America's successes in figure skating had been in decline and Carol was determined to redress this. She would do her best to coach her youngsters to reach high standards. She had in mind skaters such as Tonya Harding (who had started skating at the age of three), Ting Cui, and Michelle Kwan, the world's most decorated figure skater. Was she aiming too high?

It was not work to her but a real joy to be out on the ice and inspiring all these younger people. It gave her even greater pleasure when a few of her pupils started to win their own medals. But as ever, time passed too quickly and sadly Charles had died from a heart attack at the age of 40 some years before. How pleased she was that her time spent at the ice rink helped to pass the lonely hours. Yet even this had to come to an end, for tomorrow was to be her last day. Her skating days were over.

Carol was an early riser and just after seven was in her kitchen preparing breakfast, her usual pancakes with the maple syrup for which Vermont is known worldwide. Accompanied, of course, by Ben and Jerry's ice cream, another locally-made specialty.

Carol switched on her radio tuned to the local station WVOC, 91.3FM. The familiar voice of Brendalee Bernard was already introducing Ravel's *Boléro*, today played by the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan. Although she had heard this piece played zillions of times, she always enjoyed it. *Boléro* always brought back memories of happier days when she was a rising star in the world of ice dancing.

The first time she had heard it, in a shortened version, was in 1984, St. Valentine's Day. She had been lucky enough to travel with a group from the ice rink to watch the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. That fantastic year when Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean had won gold for their ice dance.

The condensed version of *Boléro* had been skillfully adjusted to fit the permitted four and a half minutes allowed by the competition. A performance and a tune she would never forget. She was one of the millions who watched their mind-blowing achievement that day. She had been one of the first to personally congratulate the pair on their maximum points win.

Carol finished flipping her pancakes, switched off the radio and began to shower. Today was another special day for her. She would take a brisk walk to the library sandwiched between the Municipal Office and City Court on La Chute Street. She had spotted an advertisement in the *Quonsetville Quacker* for a part-time assistant at the library and hoped the position would be offered to her. Reading and ice skating had little in common. But so what? She was up for it. Just another road to travel.

Beginning the Day with Boléro

Tom Fegan

The 7:00 a.m. news on WVOC 91.3 on Tuesday January 17th 2023 ended with the announcement of the shocking discovery of a murdered citizen of Quonsetville, Vermont. The victim was Josiah Wakefield, and his corpse was found near Ferry Dock on Quonset Pond, four gunshots to the back of his head. Wakefield, a federal government retiree formerly with the Internal Revenue Service, had been a resident of Quonsetville for ten years. Authorities later determined the criminal action to be a professional hit. The puzzle was: why would Wakefield be a target?

I generally begin my day with morning coffee. Sitting at my dining table in my single wide mobile home nestled in Happy-Go-Luverly-Home-Away-From-Home Mobile Home Park, I listen to *Breakfast with Brendalee*. Brendalee's show adds a cheery note to my day, which is sorely needed in the line of work I have chosen.

After the news, Brendalee continued her show with the daily broadcast of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*. That Tuesday, her choice was Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmoniker.

As the music started softly, Josiah Wakefield's fate filled my thoughts. An apparently solitary soul who lived quietly in a small

frame house at the pond end of Old Tannery Lane, he drove a vintage light blue Volkswagen Beetle and was not socially active. His unassuming presence around town would no doubt not be missed.

I am a professional federal contractor. My trade I learned in the army, and I utilize it in civilian life with the government. Travel has been an eminent part of my work. But I am a local boy who came back to his hometown, and Quonsetville serves as my home base. To avoid lengthy conversations with neighbors in the trailer park as well as longtime friends about my job, I state what I do is classified. Which is not a lie. When a person earns a paycheck from the federal government, their efforts are “classified.”

I paused as *Boléro* ended and Brendalee commented, “As always ... what a superb ending!” and added with a laugh, “You have been listening to Herr Herbert von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker and the sixteen minutes and ten seconds of pure joy that is Maurice Ravel’s *Boléro*.”

I put my mug down on the dining table and having completed cleaning my .45 and silencer, placed the implements back inside my briefcase and clasped it shut.

Sharing information obtained through his position in the Internal Revenue Service, Josiah Wakefield’s isolated home on the edge of town had been the center of a crime syndicate generating false identification documents for terrorist organizations infiltrating the United States.

Completing the job was not difficult.

Reaching across, I then clicked ‘Send’ on my computer.

I hoped my e-mail request would be honored. It felt appropriate for a job well done, and I could almost hear Brendalee

announcing on her show tomorrow: “Next, a request for John Phillip Sousa’s *Stars and Stripes Forever*.”

I pushed myself up from my chair, placed my briefcase in a closet, and turned up the thermostat to get rid of the chill in my home.

Love and Music

rani Jayakumar

December 1, 1955. Brendalee Bernard walked up the Champs-Elysees on her eighteenth birthday, though no one knew it. Her friends had abandoned her, but people here in Paris were kind to a young woman on her own. She stopped under the Arc de Triomphe. She could hear music in the distance. She'd never understood music, really.

“It’s a dancing piece. Katchaturian,” said a voice. She saw a tall, dark, handsome gentleman, perhaps thirty years her senior. She caught his dark gaze. She listened to his subtle accent. She was instantly smitten.

Sami served as her guide to Paris. He took the impressionable young woman to symphonies, ballets, and operas, explaining each piece. Brendalee couldn’t help but fall in love with everything he showed her, and with him.

They traveled all summer, drinking in the transcendent music, the way others crawl from pub to pub. But they were drunk, instead, on music and love.

Then Sami took Brendalee to hear *Boléro*.

Summer 1928. Sami was only eight at his first big performance. The whole tariqa had been practicing a Sufi dhikr to perform for

the French leader, Millerand, and a gathering of Europeans and Americans.

Mahmoud, Sami's music teacher, playing the stringed gimbri and al qambari, waved his hand toward the left side of the crowd. "I have heard there is a famous composer in the audience. Sing, my young pupil!" he said, thumping Sami on the back.

Sami sat up straighter and sang, looking into the eyes of the composer with curly, gray hair, and dark, liquid eyes. Sami never forgot the face of Maurice Ravel.

Spring 1957. Brendalee was as in love with Sami as she was in love with music.

But when she heard about Ravel, she spat, "He stole your traditional music, and you're even listening to it!"

That spring, the piece gained a sudden resurgence in popularity, and Brendalee walked out of concert after concert, angry before she even heard a note of *Boléro*.

"Wait," Sami said, finally, after the twelfth orchestral performance Brendalee had walked out of. He clasped her hand. "Please, just listen to it once. All your anger will go away, as mine has."

She nodded, and he pulled her back inside the auditorium.

Sami had once sung the haunting dhikr, the words "Wa la ilaha ilallah" resonating in rhythm with this piece. But this was different.

It grew, and the orchestration became a devotion, as she'd seen in Sami's face, in worshippers, on the faces of concertgoers, as they were transported by the music to another world. She felt herself rising out of her body, lifted over the seats, the music washing over her wave after wave.

Thus, Brendalee too, was transported by *Boléro*.

January 18, 1960. Brendalee had been waiting for Sami to propose, but he never spoke of their future.

Over a lunch of pumpernickel sandwiches, he took her hands in his. Sami smiled at her with such love that her eyes filled to the brim, barely held back by her joy.

This is the moment, she thought.

“Dear Brendalee,” he said, warmly. “I so dearly want to be with you forever.”

A grin erupted on her face.

“But I must return to my country.”

The grin faded and she turned her body away from him. She stopped listening. He was betrothed. He’d left Tunisia in shame for commercializing their holiest music. Now he must return to teach the next generation wanting to learn Sufi music.

As a parting gift, Sami gave her not the ring she’d hoped for, but a copy of the 1957 recording of *Boléro* by Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

“Think of me when you play this,” Sami said.

Clutching the LP, Brendalee stood up and walked away. And she never spoke of Sami again.

Still, over the intervening years, Brendalee thought of Sami often. Quietly, she followed the news, where Sami returned to Tunisia and married Mahmoud’s daughter. He rose to fame first as head of the Sufi music school, and then as an outspoken proponent of arts education. In time, he gained political power. Brendalee knew that for her safety, and his, he would never contact her.



January 17, 2023. Brendalee had long ago married a local, Ted Bernard. And after a few years hosting the breakfast show, she was finally stoic enough to play *Boléro* for her growing audience.

Beginning first with von Karajan for her late husband, Brendalee later chose two more recordings (one each) for her kids, one just for the fun of it, and the Ozawa because the Boston Symphony was a local Quonsetville favorite. And now the last, though she had never spoken of it, for Sami. Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony, a sixth inclusion. To finally be played tomorrow, for the first time on her show.

Someday, Brendalee knew she would tell her son and daughter of the man who'd inspired *Boléro* and who'd ignited her love for music. But today, as she played von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, and pondered over her surprise inclusion for tomorrow – her surprising need to play it – she thought of all the children and musicians who'd benefited from Sami's sacrifice.

Smiling at what might have been, Brendalee back announced von Karajan, included a nod to Lilah-Mae's Flannel with Flair, one of the many locals who'd helped her keep this flame of music burning, then bit into her pumpernickel sandwich and wiped her mouth. At the ripe old age of eighty-six, she was on her own again, and once again surrounded by kind friends and music.

Chewing the last morsel of her sandwich, now all Brendalee had on her plate was to meet with that pesky station manager ...

Handing Over

Ronald T. Hardwick

‘Brendalee, after your show, a word, please? My office.’

The husky tones of Saul Zayden, station manager at WVOC 91.3 drifted into Brendalee’s headphones at quarter past six on the morning of 17 January 2023.

Breakfast with Brendalee started at six-thirty and Brendalee liked to waken the bleary-eyed citizens of Quonsetville with a blast of Beethoven or Gustav Holst. After the seven o’clock news, however, she saved what she considered to be the finest piece in classical music, Ravel’s *Boléro*. Every weekday.

That morning it would be the turn of Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic – a 1966 recording, a special year for Brendalee, who, at eighty-five years young, was the *grande dame* of Quonsetville radio. She considered von Karajan’s rendition to be better than the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Riccardo Chailly, her choice for Wednesday, and definitely Eugene Ormondy’s 1960 recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra, which she never played.

Cuing Stravinsky’s *Violin Concerto in D Major* – her last piece for the morning – she laid down her headphones, stood up arthritically and trudged along the corridor to Zayden’s office. Stravinsky gave her twenty minutes of music before she had to sit back in the studio chair and sign off until the next morning. She tapped on the door.

‘Come in.’

Brendalee entered and Zayden waved her to a seat.

‘Listening figures are down,’ said Zayden, ‘I need to do something about it.’

‘It is winter, Saul. People aren’t as receptive to classical music in winter.’

‘There’s no disguising the fact that year-on-year figures are down 20 percent. How old are you, Brendalee?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘I’ve noticed your voice is growing weaker,’ said Zayden. ‘I could hardly hear you when you handed over to Iola Wilder for the seven o’clock news.’

‘I think I’m going down with a cold,’ said Brendalee.

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘I’m eighty-five.’

‘You know Letitia Devine?’ asked Zayden.

‘From WQUO 103.7?’

‘That’s her.’

‘I know her,’ said Brendalee, ‘what of it?’

‘She’s quitting and she wants to come work with us.’

‘And she’s not eighty-five.’

‘She’s not eighty-five.’

‘Maybe I could change the format of my show?’ suggested Brendalee.

‘Yeah, that’s something else I wanted to discuss. When Iola hands back to you, you play that same bit of music every morning.’

‘Ravel’s *Boléro*.’

‘That’s it. I’ve had letters.’

‘Letters?’

‘Of complaint. I’ll read one to you.’ He picked up a piece of paper from his in-tray and cleared his throat:

Mr Zayden. If you don’t stop that old bat playing that awful Boléro tune every single day, I’m going to switch to another station. She must be madder’n a wet hen to keep on playing it day after day. Maybe she’s bughouse and needs to be put away. You’d better see to it.’

‘There’s several dozen more like it.’

Brendalee fished a handkerchief from her handbag and dabbed at her eyes.

‘They’re so cruel.’

‘Brendalee, they’re our listening public. I know Quonsetville is full of blue-collar morons, but I have to consider their views. Why in God’s name do you keep on playing that tune?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

‘Try me – I’m pretty gullible.’

‘I was married late – twenty-eight, to be exact,’ said Brendalee. ‘Ted Bernard. A fine man. Tall, handsome, blond hair, strong as a Model T Ford. He was the best clarinet player in Fat Springs. I used to go listen to him and his band at the speakeasy near Quonsett Pond.’

‘Speakeasy?’

‘It’s not there now. They pulled it down for the marina.’

‘I see,’ said Zayden. ‘Please continue.’

‘They were a jazz band – six of them,’ said Brendalee. ‘Called themselves the *Fat Springs Stompers*. Baz Macintosh was the leader. Played horn. A Scot who emigrated from Glasgow when the yards closed. Nice man, Baz, but boy, could he drink. He

would sink a dozen beers during a performance. They almost had to carry him off the stage by the end.’

‘Can we stick to the point?’ asked Zayden, peevishly.

‘Where was I? How the memory fades with age. Oh, yes. The highlight of their set was a jazzy version of Ravel’s *Boléro*. They played it every week. Instead of playing in C Major, they played it in B Flat. Gave it a smoky, bluesy feel. Ted’s clarinet was magic. I’ll never forget it.’

‘Can we get on?’ said Zayden, ‘I’ve got a radio station to run.’

‘After one gig in early ’66, I went to see Ted backstage, told him how wonderful I thought his playing was, and he asked me for a date. I didn’t hesitate. We were engaged within three months and married in six.’

‘A whirlwind romance,’ said Zaydon, drily.

‘It sure was,’ said Brendalee. ‘After we were wed, we bought a Pioneer record player. It cost seventy bucks. We had to scrimp and save to get that. When we heard von Karajan’s recording of *Boléro* we went out and bought it straight away. Elmer’s record store near the railroad station. I still have that old Pioneer.’

‘A lovely bedtime story,’ said Zayden, ‘but you still haven’t told me why you keep playing that goddamned tune.’

‘Ten years ago, before I started the breakfast show, we were listening to Classical KCME – you know, Colorado Springs, at five past seven one morning. The presenter played the von Karajan recording and the hairs stood up on the back of my neck – you know the feeling when you hear something wonderful. Ted was tucking into his waffles and honey then, without warning, he groaned and fell face down into his food. Brain haemorrhage. That’s why I play the piece every morning, as a tribute to my wonderful Ted. Thank God I’ll be up there with him soon.’

‘M-m-m, I see,’ said Zayden. ‘I love a sob story as well as anyone, but I’m a hard-headed business executive and I cannot let sentimentality get in the way of decision-making. Brendalee, today’s your last show. When you leave, kindly ask Letitia Devine to step up, would you?’

Brendalee stood up, set her jaw, turned the doorknob and, with one glance back at Zayden, said:

‘Ask her yourself, you ... you ... insensitive dork. I hope your station burns to the ground with you in it.’

Honour almost satisfied, she slammed the door behind her.

Gone Already

Michael Webb

I have a thing about rooftops. I always have.

I love being up high. I read once that cats will often take high ground so that predators can't descend upon them, and once I started my habit of elevation, I understood the appeal.

The summer I turned 16, my best friend and I caught her older brother, Cole, a shaggy-haired lean boy that we mocked mercilessly, yet I secretly found fascinating, climbing up an improbable series of footholds to get up onto the roof of their house. We both knew we now had a bargaining chip, and the price of our silence was that he had to let us go up on the dangerous hideaway when the mood struck us. The novelty wore off for her, but I kept sneaking up there. "That feeling you get when you look down?" Cole said to me once. "That's not fear that you'll fall. It's fear that you'll jump." Three weeks before school started in the fall, I gave up my virginity on that precarious perch, wrapped in a gray wool blanket, an act I accepted as inevitable without much enjoyment. But it was also an event that, to this day, I'm still not sure about. Was it the end of the beginning, or the beginning of the end?

I am sitting on the edge of my hospital bed, letting my brain adjust to what my eyes are telling it. One of the many indignities of being sick is that the simplest tasks are suddenly terribly complicated. Prudence, one of the many women in shapeless

colored scrubs who buzz around me, taking temperatures, checking vitals, administering therapies, is sitting in a chair beside my bed, head on her chest, fast asleep. Over the course of a couple of embarrassing sponge baths, Pru, as she likes to be called, told me how she has ended up in a Northern California hospital night shift: a love affair, a move to the other coast to support his dream, the end of the dream, and then the end of the relationship. She related how mad her family was about her abandonment of college, and how she assuaged her homesickness by streaming her tiny hometown radio station.

I lower my hand slowly and pluck her phone from her lap. Playing on it is the broadcast from home, ones and zeros reminding her of past glories and current failures. “*Breakfast with Brendalee*,” the screen says, the sound routed into an earbud which has also wound up in her lap. I look at the clock, and it is just barely past 4am. I think it’s Tuesday, but in the institutional sameness, it’s hard to be sure. If I’m going to do this, I better do it soon, before a shift change or a wandering colleague sends me back to my bed. I set her phone gently back on her thigh, then straighten up and start to edge my feet towards the floor.

Poor Pru, I think. Another victim of a scruffy face, strong arms, eager hands, the magnitude of someone’s lust making lies into truth, if only for a little while. I’ve never told her my matching tale, my marriage and miscarriages, depression and loneliness and divorce. As she ran warm water over my scars, her eyes enormous and her skin porcelain white, I let her talk, not wanting to pollute her potential future with the burnt-out ruins of my past. I didn’t really even enjoy sex all that much, I thought, the whole thing rarely worth the effort. The only thing I really liked was afterwards, the drained feeling, the way they look at you, sated, almost drowsy, like a baby drunk with milk. Pleasing

them was a way to get some peace, for a moment, before the wars started again.

I stand next to my bed, then try a few shuffling steps. My muscles tremble with disuse, but they hold. I slide down to the end of the bed, look at the sleeping Pru, and then take a step towards the door, and then another. I picture my path, down the hall, into the elevator, up, out to the parking garage, find a convenient edge, then one slip, the ground rushes up, and finally, the end to all this. Quiet. Endless calm. Peace. No more striving. It will be as if I had never been born, which, arguably, would have been a better outcome.

I don't hear anyone in the hall, and as I start to leave the room, my heart sinks. I hear the unmistakable sound of Pru snuffling, waking up, coughing, and then the clop of her Crocs as she comes across the room towards me.

“Where are you headed?” she says.

I don't say anything. Her face is flushed. She really is very pretty, and I can see why men like her. Her hands are at my waist, gathering me back towards the bed. Any journey farther than the bathroom is regarded with suspicion, and I know I can't outrun her, so I let myself be led. I want to explain to her that I am busted, my cards useless as smoke, all of my chips in the pot. I just want to fold the hand. I don't want to play anymore. But even with her heartaches, as serious as mine while not as numerous, the myopia of the young means she can't grasp that it is never going to get better, that lovers are never going to stop lying. I want to tell her that you reach a point where you just want it to stop, but as her arms guide me back into the bed, her body still warm and full under the bright blue scrubs, I can't form the words. I can hear the music playing faintly in her ear, something classical, a tinny reminder that she isn't where she wants to be.

I think about an old Don Henley song, the one where he sings, “one day, he crossed some line, and he was too much in this world / but I guess it doesn’t matter anymore,” and I want to tell her about it, but she is already gone.

Tina Tomato

Melissa E. Wong

My tomato plant loved listening to classical music all the time, so I would set up different websites to play the music.

I named my plant Tina Tomato.

Some days, my tomato plant would pull out the plug. Tina cannot turn off the laptop anymore, so she just pulled out the plug, and because the laptop was so old – it died the moment the plug was pulled out.

Every morning, Tina Tomato listened to Radio WVOC 91.3FM. I bookmarked the webpage to make it easier to find for her.

Every day, I was up before 8:30 am Newfoundland time to set up the laptop. I didn't listen to the news report (7:00am at WVOC's home studio), but I think Tina would listen to it. I'm not sure if she understood it, but I hoped that market prices, municipal politics, or other bits of local Vermont news helped her.

I think she liked Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic the most.

I didn't listen. I would set everything up and leave. Some scars won't heal, and I was not the one being paid to take care of her. She wanted me to, but I couldn't be what she wanted me to be. I never could.

At first, I thought Tina had changed when she became sick, but she didn't. Everything was quiet until it wasn't, so nothing changed. The only way she knew how to talk to me was by telling me what I was doing wrong and how I should do it right.

While she saw it as helpful advice, I could only see it as another way to try and control me. I didn't want to take advice from something so unhappy for most of her life anyway. I didn't want to learn to live like that.

Torn between my love and spite, I tried to care for Tina Tomato.

One January day, I ate from the nearly empty yogurt container that morning and waited for Tina to allow me to water her after breakfast.

The laptop blasted the live stream, and I wondered how she was still asleep. I turned up Brendalee to lure her from her dreams.

Stuck listening to a live stream that I didn't even like, I lay down on the kitchen floor. What if my dear plant died? Did I want this on my conscience?

I tried to make up with her, and we were okay for a while, but then she ruined it. How much more did I have to bend?

"... over at Vesuviusville, the snow is even thicker ..."

Why did she listen to Vesuviusville news? The news ended too slowly, and I glanced into Tina Tomato's bedroom.

"... Good morning, it's 7.05 on Tuesday the 17th of January and you're listening to Breakfast with Brendalee on WVOC 91.3FM. I'm Brendalee Bernard and it's time for the Regular Ravel Request ... Today it's Herr von Karajan und die Berliner Philharmoniker performing Ravel's Boléro, originally released on Deutsche Grammophon in 1966. And if you've listened to this spot before, you'll know to wait for the slow, soft beginning."

My eyes glared at the bedroom. She cannot miss this. I walked in and shook her flowers, but she did not respond. I raced out and grabbed the ancient laptop that will die without its cord plugged in and brought it in as far as the cord would let me.

“And this morning’s special dedication is to birthday girl Laurentine Grimes, who turns sixty-five today. Hope your day’s a truly special day, Laurentine!”

The smooth rhyme started as I held the laptop to Tina Tomato’s stem. I don’t know if she was listening or asleep, but I held it for the full song.

Betrayal

Dawn DeBraal

And this morning's special dedication is to birthday girl Laurentine Grimes, who turns sixty-five today. Hope your day's a truly special day, Laurentine!

Laurentine Grimes sat back in her chair at the kitchen table. Her eyes closed, listening to Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berliner Philharmoniker in *Boléro*. One either loved or despised the piece because the beat of the composition was monotonously steady as instruments wove in and out, building suspense in the sixteen-plus minute rendition.

The D.J. on the radio station, Brendalee Bernard, played a different rendition of this song every morning. Laurentine didn't know if it was because her friend, a known procrastinator, needed the time to prepare her show on the fly and the long-winded piece allowed her to set up what she was doing that day, or if Brendalee was enamored with this piece and wanted to give everyone in Quonsetville a lesson on the history of it. Laurentine used it as a meditative tool each morning to set her intention for the day.

After her husband had left to save a cistern in town, Laurentine had waited to hear her birthday wishes offered on the radio. Everyone in Quonsetville listened to WVOC 91.3 in the mornings, catching up on current events. Laurentine had hoped that Brendalee would not forget her big birthday ... and her old friend had delivered!

Laurentine sat in the chair by the kitchen window, smiling. Brendalee usually gave out birthday reminders at the end of her show, too – *And if you see the birthday girl in town, remember to wish her a happy birthday!* – so now all Laurentine had to do was wait for that, and she could start the rest of her day.

Stravinsky's *Violin Concerto in D Major* began to play. Laurentine knew the piece well, as Brendalee played it often, usually to kill time before she signed off.

The composition ended. Still no birthday reminder from Brendalee. In fact, there was no announcement at all.

Boléro began playing again.

Laurentine sat waiting ... wondering.

She looked through the window at the snow outside. Maybe she should be happy with just the initial birthday wish.

When the composition ended again, Brendalee was still nowhere to be heard. The von Karajan *Boléro* started playing again ... from the beginning!

Again!

Where was Brendalee? The previous disk jockey had mentioned that it was snowing badly with more snow predicted.

As the music began its slow ascent, Laurentine was no longer in a meditative mood, now worrying about her husband. Was he alright? Did he make it to the job site?

Laurentine picked up her cell phone and called into the station. Didn't they realize *Boléro* was playing for the third time in a row?

But there was no answer ...

Brendalee must have it on a loop. The normally meditative music had become abrasively offensive. Laurentine was going to turn the radio off but wanted to see how far this faux pas would

go and needed to know of any accidents due to the blizzard, so she left the radio untouched.

She picked up her cell phone, placing another call, this time to her husband, Orton. His phone buzzed under the newspaper on the kitchen table. She rolled her eyes in frustration.

On the fifth rendition of *Boléro*, Laurentine could no longer stand it and turned the radio off. Brendalee was a good friend, and Laurentine was less than a mile from the radio station. She pulled on her insulated boots and parka, wrapping a large scarf around her hood. Laurentine stepped out, hiking through the five inches of snow now lying on the ground.

After fifteen minutes, she could make out the radio station ahead but could see Orton's truck in the parking lot. Her pace picked up. What was her husband doing at the radio station? Was he convincing Brendalee to give further birthday wishes to his wife? That thought made her giddy. Orton could still surprise her after fifty years of marriage.

She pulled on the front door handle of the radio station. It was locked. Laurentine knocked, but no one answered. She trudged around to the back door, also locked.

Stepping behind a shrub willow and shielding her eyes, she peeked through the window, gasping when she spied a trail of clothing that crossed the room, leading to the couch in the studio where Brendalee and her husband Orton were in the throes of making love ... to *Boléro*!

Laurentine spun around, not believing what she saw. So, this was why Brendalee abandoned her show today: to make love to Laurentine's husband? Part of her wanted to bang on the window, break the glass, and give them a piece of her mind. The other part wanted to act as if she hadn't seen what she saw and pretend her marriage was still intact.

Her hands shaking from the cold, still hiding behind the shrub willow, Laurentine watched Orton close the back door softly behind him. Nearly slipping on the snow-covered steps, Orton scooted to his truck. When he had driven out of sight, Laurentine ran to the back steps and shouted for her friend to come outside.

“Brendalee, you come out right now! How could you do this to me, especially on my sixty-fifth birthday! You, you cougar!”

Brendalee poked her head through the opened door. Her face was bright red with a sweaty sheen. Stepping out, she stood unsteadily on wobbly legs. She was probably weak from the energy she’d put into that romp with Orton.

Laurentine gave Brendalee the evil eye as she closed the door behind her.

Grabbing the handrail on the cement steps, Brendalee stepped down, shaking her head. “Laurentine, it’s not what you think. Nothing happened.”

Suddenly Brendalee’s feet shot out from under her on the slippery steps, her head bouncing on the cement. Laurentine didn’t even blink as she watched the blood pooling on the step, steaming in the cold air. The woman didn’t deserve her help. There were no more words to say. She turned and left Brendalee bleeding on the steps.

Arriving home, Laurentine pulled off her snowy parka and boots.

“Honey, you’ve been out in this weather?” Orton pulled her into the living room and rubbed her cold hands. “Let’s get you warmed up. Do you want some hot chocolate, I just made some?” She nodded, “Yes,” and he disappeared into the kitchen. It was like nothing had changed between them. How long had this affair been going on?

“Did you get the cistern fixed?” she called out.

“Yes, I did. It was quite a job.”

“I worried about you with all this snow.” She leaned against the doorframe. “I was afraid you were in an accident. I called your cell, but it was on the kitchen table.” Laurentine sat down at the table, pushing the newspaper aside to show her husband the phone, watching Orton’s face for any signs of guilt.

“Oh, there it is. I thought I’d lost it in the snow.”

Orton looked away as he set the hot mug of cocoa before her, then reaching up to the radio on top of the fridge, turned it on. *Boléro*, again, continued to play.

“Oh, I love this piece. It brings back so many good memories.” Orton hummed a few bars.

Laurentine clasped her hands around the mug, warming them, imagining Orton’s neck as she squeezed the cup with all her might. Her mind flashed to Brendalee lying on the steps behind the radio station. She wondered how long it took for a human being to bleed out and freeze to death.

She sighed. Maybe now, with Brendalee gone, she and Orton could make things work. Their marriage had become a little routine, she had to admit.

“Happy Birthday.” Orton lifted his mug and winked at her. Laurentine returned a weak smile, blowing on her hot cocoa.

January 17, 2023 was a big day in Laurentine’s life, her sixty-fifth birthday ... which was a milestone to be celebrated for sure, but also a day she would never forget.

