# CHAPTER ONE

BEGIN IN F♯ MINOR WITH A SYMPHONY OF GHOST NOTES. Why not a concerto that details every known silence? Or the most noiseless overture in all of history? Let the trumpets go mute and the cymbals be still. Let the lull from the concert hall destroy every awkward moment, every long-standing argument, with cannons raging in unheard fury and the closing note being fireworks exploding soundlessly in the sky, so that everything finally goes quiet. What would Mozart have to say to that?

*Orfeo* is booming through the house. I am struggling to do a single pull-up before work. My sister calls and says she is not feeling well and then asks if I can drop my niece off at day care. I slowly catch my breath and tell her I'll be there soon.

I put on my red hat and my winter coat with the Polish flag on the back, grab my bicycle, and then pedal toward my sister's apartment on 95th. I pretend I'm a car and ride in the street, much to the annoyance of other vehicles. Someone honks their horn and shouts, *GET OUT OF THE WAY.* As I ride I ignore all the noise, all the distractions, and try to imagine an entirely new, improvised composition.

I lock my bicycle up and climb the stairs to my sister's apartment. I make sure my niece is wearing her gold gym shoes and find my older sister Isobel leaning against the refrigerator in in her high school track jersey and exercise pants, although I have not seen her exercise in a long time, several years possibly. Her ragged blond hair is unbrushed and something in her eyes appears to be off. I ask her: "What's up?"

"I'm just not feeling so good. Feminine problems."

"Like in eighth grade when you wrote a love letter to Patrick Swayze?"

"You're not funny. You're almost never funny." She touches the side of my head. "I'm not so sure about this haircut. You have a big bald spot in the back."

"I tried cutting it myself." I ask: "Are you sure you're okay?"

She nods and we stare at each other for another moment. With my eyes, I ask, *What's really going on*? but she doesn't answer. So I help my niece on with her coat, and then, once we're outside, I put her on the bike.

I go faster than anyone with a three-year-old on the handlebars should. It feels like we are flying. A car from the 1980s pulls out in front of us and my niece, Jazzy, laughs and screams at exactly the same time and it is one of my favorite sounds ever, a profound, musical experience, always in D minor. If you could only see us, darting among the traffic and January slush on Kedzie Avenue, you would know that we are majestic, we are glorious, we will be triumphant!

Somehow we break our long-standing record and get to the day care on 87th on time. As I help Jazz off the front of the bike, she murmurs, "Your hair looks weird," and I nod. I walk her inside and help her hang her coat. With her hat off, her hair is dark and frizzy and her eyes a sparkling green. She doesn't look much like my older sister but they have the exact same personality. I get her set up at a table, coloring with Magic Markers. On the way out, the day care worker in the large pink sweater eyeballs me angrily because she and I have an unfriendly competition going and today we will not have to pay the ten-dollar late fee, which is the best thing to happen in the year 2008 so far.

Back outside, the snow has made everything look new. It is one of the most beautiful mornings in a long time and I put on my CD player and fast-forward to the second movement of a symphony by Verdi and then a

utility van swerves in front of me and I collide with a parked car right in front of a funeral home. Oh the irony. For a moment I feel myself go flying through the air. I hit the ground and watch the world spin around me, hearing the music repeating itself again and again. As I'm lying on my back, my thoughts begin to circle and I think of my sister and her pained expression and all that it might mean.

Is there any way to escape your fate? Even *Orfeo* has no suggestions.

Beginning at the age of three, Isobel and I had our own language, first playing music together—my father installing me in front of the piano, while Isobel, at five, was already playing short pieces by Beethoven on the cello. My father would tilt his head toward her, focused on each and every note, the phrasing, how she held the bow. I, on the other hand, was more than happy to exist only as background noise.

When I was five, my mother suffered from a months-long bout of insomnia and took my older sister and me out on midnight excursions to familiar and sometimes magical places, a convenience store or a far-off car wash on Central Avenue, all while my father happily slept at home. Sitting in the back of the station wagon in my pajamas, eating a candy bar, I was both afraid and excited. My mother's eyes were round and bright in a way they usually weren't during the day. I think she was trying to show us something about life, to get us to see what other people never took the time to notice. I remember my sister reaching across the backseat and holding my hand as we watched the foam rollers cover the windows in an otherworldly, milky haze. I stopped being afraid then and accepted whatever befell me, knowing my sister would be there for me.

Three years later, when I was eight, I had the chance to play before the Jugoslavian ambassador—a friend of the family—who promised to get me into an exclusive conservatory on the East Coast. My father was ecstatic but the dignitary never showed. A snowstorm had created an enormous traffic jam downtown. I sat on a stool on the small stage and stared at my family and music teacher, Mr. Gennaro, gathered together in the front row. Even my baby brother Daniel was silent in my mom's arms.

On that cold evening, with the wind coming in off the lake, you could hear the doors and windows banging—the opposite of applause. Someone had carved their initials *EM* on the top of the piano. I imagined all the names that started with E.

As we waited for the next forty-five minutes, I kept my eyes on Isobel, who never looked away. She mouthed knock-knock jokes and folded a bird out of the program my father had gotten printed. What do you call this other than magic or ESP? In the end my father asked me to play, even though the dignitary was not coming. I did as I was told, placing my fingers above the dull white keys, imagining the paper bird swooping over the empty concert hall, as I glanced up at my sister whenever I could. I don't know if I ever played that way again.

I'd do anything in the world for this person is what I'm trying to say.

I go by the no-name convenience store on the way to work. The same hoods are out front with their conventional, southside Irish American faces. There are four of them, all in drab green uniforms from the nearby cemetery. The cemetery in Evergreen Park is one of the largest in the Western world, stretching on for miles and miles. What does it say about a neighborhood, an entire place, that its biggest claim to fame is that it happens to contain one of the most popular locations to leave your dead? As I open the door to the convenience store, one of the thugs knocks the headphones from my ears.

"Fa," one of them says.

Then another: "Fa, your sister talks about how you're always listening to music. Come on, let's hear you sing something."

I ignore them and go inside, walking over to the freezers. I grab a bottle of chocolate Yoo-hoo. When I come out, someone gets me in a headlock and I immediately remember why I hate this place.

I'm half deaf. I have to tell you. I have partial hearing loss in both ears. It's asymmetrical, which means it's worse in my left. I began losing my hearing when I was ten. I first started missing certain words, then certain notes, then entire frequencies by the age of twelve. In the end, the look of empathetic disappointment on my music teacher's face was the hardest thing to take. No one knew why or how it happened—if it was from some accident, or from some virus, or was possibly genetic, passed down from generation to generation through my family, alongside mythical stories of Poland and Jugoslavia.

I don't know any sign language, I'm embarrassed to admit. I don't like talking about my hearing loss but it makes it easier when other people know. Most of the time I just pretend to understand what everyone is saying.

I work at a high school, St. Josaphat, where I once was a student. No one knows this fact but I do. I find it hilarious and also humiliating, depending on the day. I put on my uniform and ignore the misspelling of my name. In the hallways, mop in hand, I make myself invisible. That afternoon, there are some girls from an after-school club hanging out by their lockers. Two of them see me and whisper to each other in ninth-grade French. I think maybe they recognize me as someone who used to have potential but then I remember no one outside my family cares about classical music. These girls are only laughing at a twenty-year-old person talking to himself, mopping the same spot over and over. I look up and watch one of the girls glare at me as she takes out a wad of gum and sticks it against a locker door. After they leave, I am obligated to scrape it off. I look down at the hardened lump and think: *Why won't these people let me be excellent?*

Later I find several cardboard boxes full of old math textbooks in the second-floor storage closet. I ask my boss and he shrugs and I carry the box under my arm all the way down Western Avenue while piloting my bike. I climb up the metal fire escape to my sister's apartment and leave the books beside her back door without asking.

When I was ten and a half and Isobel was twelve, we both got chicken pox at exactly the same time. My mother put us in the basement, set us up with a pile of blankets and sleeping bags to keep Daniel and my father—who had never had chicken pox—from getting sick. For days we read comics and watched television and listened to the radio together, made up our own language consisting of elaborate knock-knock jokes, hand signs, and whistles. We imagined entire cities of our own invention, which somehow led to a game where we tried to come up with the worst thing that could happen, a game which later came to be known as *Who Suffers More*?

I'd say, "Everyone forgetting your birthday," and she'd say: "Every person in the world forgetting your name."

I'd say, "Amelia Earhart," and she'd say, "JFK."

I'd say, "The *Titanic*. Hitting an iceberg. Except there are no survivors."

And then she'd say, "The *Hindenburg*. Crashing into an orphanage. Where all the children are deathly afraid of balloons." There was a ferocious pleasure in her voice, a gleefulness in imagining just how bad things could be. I came to understand, over the years, that in our family, there was always a preference for the tragic, as it was predictable, reliable, and reinforced a powerful kind of Eastern European fatalism. Unlike everything, catastrophe would never let you down.

I come home from work that night and go to check on my mom. She has not moved from her bed for the last several hours. Her dark hair is pasted to her forehead. I put a clean glass of water on the table and turn the volume down on the television, which is playing a movie from the 1990s. She looks over at me and says, "I have a feeling Julia Roberts might be Polish."

I tell her, "Um, I don't think that sounds right."

"The way she's suffered in her life and also some of the bad movies she's made, I think it's a possibility. A lot of famous actors are secretly Polish."

"Name one."

"George Clooney."

"George Clooney isn't Polish. You just can't decide who's Polish and who's not."

She stares at me for a long time and then glances away.

I wave my hand around the air and ask, "By the way, have you been smoking in here?" and she completely ignores me. I study the side of her face, look at this incredible woman who supported us for so many years, a woman with two degrees and a fierce intellect, a former librarian who used to read to us from the *Atlantic Monthly* and other scholarly journals, and cannot understand what she has become.

Later I go into our bedroom and find my younger brother, Daniel, drawing in his notebook at the desk. He is thirteen and all he ever does is trace figures from his favorite comics. But in his sketches the superheroes are always doing depressingly real things, like filling out their taxes or crying in the shower. I lean over his shoulder and ask, "What's this?"

"Captain America. Going to a movie alone."

"Uh-huh. Why is he doing that?"

"He has a hard time understanding other people."

"You did a good job with his expression. It looks he's very conflicted."

Daniel nods proudly, his dark hair falling into his face. I put on a Chopin record from my grandfather and then slip the headphones over my ears. Soon my thoughts begin to follow the music, spinning around the corners of the room. I start to imagine AMAZING COMPOSITION #167: Why not a symphony that describes the shape of the Big Bang or all of history, one that goes on and on forever? Why not a different opening depending on the conductor's mood or the weather or the state of the world? Why not an endless number of beginnings and as many endings as one could imagine?

I almost never tell people the truth of my name. Everyone calls me Aleks, which is short for Wolfgang Amadeus Aleksandar Fa. I am the only person I knew who is Polish and Bosnian on our block or in our neighborhood on the far southside of Chicago. The first and second names came from the child prodigy who began composing symphonies at the age of eight, the third from my grandfather who emigrated from Sarajevo in the middle of the twentieth century, and the last from my father, a Bosnian American who lives several blocks away but who no one talks to anymore. There are three of us, each named after some important cultural or historical figure: my older sister Isobel, after Isobel Loutit—a famous twentieth-century female mathematician—myself, and Daniel, named in honor of the biblical hero who fought the lions. The circumstance of our ridiculous-sounding names and the fact that all of us had been reared by well-meaning pseudo-intellectuals to appreciate books and music made us strangers on our block and in our neighborhood.

All of our hair had been cut using the same pair of clippers, each of us standing over the sink. Our skin was olive, less pink. We dressed different—like Eastern European immigrants—in out-of-date clothes my mother used to pick up at Goodwill—T-shirts advertising cartoons that were no longer on the air, generic sneakers found in the discount bins at the supermarket. None of us were allowed to use a computer or the Internet outside of school until I was eighteen. No one in the house had access to a cell phone. Our parents had raised us to think of ourselves as extraordinary, as exceptional, had read us poetry in the crib and played classical music each night as we went to sleep. Our bad haircuts and poor clothing choices only exaggerated these differences—zip-up tracksuits, turtlenecks and vests, floods with off-color socks. In the end, none of it mattered. All we did was disappoint everyone, including ourselves.

I call my sister the next day to ask how she's feeling. There is a long pause and then she says, "Like Margaret Thatcher falling down a well."

Later that morning, I ride my ten-speed to the bus stop and get on. I play a requiem by Chopin and turn it up as loud as I can. I am the only one who nods my head along to any kind of music. Everybody else is dead or is already doomed.

I go to community college because that's all I can afford. I take all the poetry and music and film classes I can. I have a humanities class at the moment, which I am not a fan of. The instructor acts like the twenty-first century did not happen. I raise my hand and ask about current films and hip-hop and he completely ignores me.

After class I go to my other part-time job, ride my bike down to 55th Street, show my ID at the entrance of St. John's, a juvenile detention facility, then show it again on the second floor. The boys are already in the classroom cutting each other up, cracking jokes.

*Your mother this, your mother that*. The thing is, most of these kids haven't seen their mothers in months, some of them years. All of them are in lockup; the youngest is eleven, the oldest is seventeen. Whenever they have a birthday they get evaluated. The older kids move into the adult general population once they turn eighteen. I am paid to do poetry with them two times a week. I got hired as an assistant as part of a city program in high school, then stayed on after I graduated. Maria, the coordinator, basically lets me run the entire hour and a half while she sits in the corner of the room, checking emails on her computer. All of the kids carry their loss like some indefinable, unforgettable object that sits in the room with us. What I do is talk about European poetry and music. But what can I possibly say that will mean anything? Life has already made most of them a whole lot wiser than me.

On the bus ride back home, I watch two teenagers scrawl a mural of a giant boom box on the back window with silver paint markers. One of boys looks over at me and asks, "What kind of music are you listening to?" and I say, "Bach," and they stare at me and say, "Yo, that's hard core." Eventually everyone gets off the bus and I experience one of the rarest kinds of silence—riding public transit alone, which I imagine as geometric, conical, a glowing orange shape.

I have come to appreciate these silences, all their mesmerizing colors and configurations, after being part of a family whose constant emotional expression was like something out of Stravinsky, where someone was always singing, fighting, rehearsing, or storming off, where disjuncture and disagreement were seen as essential intellectual pursuits, and where CNN was on all the time, rounding out our lives with some other historical catastrophe.

I remember how, when I was almost eleven and did not know how to explain that I had begun losing my hearing, there was a pop quiz in social studies. I only heard some of the questions as everything seemed muffled by a constant, insistent ringing. I did the best I could, leaving several questions blank. I remember I had never left a question blank before and was agonized by it. When I came home, there was news of the discovery of a mass grave in Bosnia, in Korićanske stijene. My mother was standing at the kitchen sink with a broken glass in her hand, her eyes on the television screen in the corner of the room. I remember how small and pale she looked, like she was made completely out of paper. On-screen, a reporter was saying that the bodies belonged to Bosnian Croats and Muslims. One of our great-grandfathers on my father's side was born in Korićanske stijene. Eyes locked on the screen, my mother was motionless. For once, she seemed to have confirmation that the world was as mad as she had always believed. I noticed then that one of her hands was bleeding. I said her name but she was silent, and this silence was the most terrifying thing of all, as it seemed to divide everything into the past and present.

Later my older sister came home and called my father, who drove us all to the emergency room. No one said a word. After that, the doctors doubled my mom's lithium and put her on several other kinds of mood stabilizers, Paxil, then Xanax. She has not been the same since. Now she mostly stays in her room and listens to music—jazz, classical, and opera—or sometimes songs from her childhood in the 1970s, like the Carpenters and the Beatles.

About two years ago we found out she was sick and that her kidneys were failing from all the lithium and other antidepressants she'd been taking, and so now she goes to dialysis twice a week. I ride with her on the bus, there and back. We have the most compelling conversations in those moments, when she is still halfway between the land of the living and the land of the dead and dreaming. Today she turns to me and says, "I don't know about this haircut. You look like a young communist."

"I read an article in *GQ* in the waiting room that says people appreciate it when you pay attention to your personal hygiene."

"*Dobrze wyglądasz,"* she says, touching the short hairs on the back of my head. She has begun talking in Polish, even though she hasn't spoken it since she was a kid.

Later, when we're back at home, I look at her lying in bed and don't know what to think. When she speaks Polish, when she murmurs odd phrases in her sleep, it's another remarkable kind of quiet, sad but also sort of beautiful, like she is a child once again at the beginning of everything.

*Fate will find a way*, says Virgil. But then Camus says, *There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn*. So which are you going to believe?

The next morning, I struggle to do two chin-ups before work. *Orfeo* is once again reverberating through the house. As I'm catching my breath, my sister calls and says she's in the hospital.

"What? Where?" I say, and she asks if I can come. I imagine the nurses in the background mumbling to each other, can almost hear the silence of the near-empty hospital room. Static from some machine buzzes in my left ear and does not stop. I tell her I'm on my way.

I pull on my hat and winter coat then slip my headphones over my ears and ride as fast as my ten-speed will go.