



STORIES  
THAT NEED  
TO BE TOLD  
- 2022

A TulipTree Anthology

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THAT NEED  
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*2022*

EDITED BY  
JENNIFER TOP



# On Wings of Song

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MEL KONNER

1

THEY HAD MET IN THEIR FIRST SEMESTER AT JUILLIARD, WHICH like everyone, they called Jailyard. He was in vocal arts; she was a flutist. Each felt like an afterthought in admissions, outclassed by the competition and shy of the commitment expected of the best. Still they shared a true love: music. He would attend a little recital where she and a piano student did Mozart's *Andante in C major*; he sat rapt, as if she were not just playing the flute but serenading him alone. During the high trilled cadenza it was all he could do to not actually answer her. Sometimes they would listen to Caruso on her parents' scratchy record player, a pre-war Victrola; both would weep, and end by laughing at their tears.

They saw a lot of one another despite the differences. He was in his last months of adherence to the faith he had been raised in; she, ostensibly Jewish too, had been raised in none. They talked philosophy as well as music. She said she did not understand what the word "God" meant. In the end he would be convinced that he did not either, and that to the extent he could say what it meant he no longer believed. When he said, "God is life" or "God is love," she answered, "Life is life. Love is love." Then he said, "How about music?" She tilted her lovely head and smiled at him slightly. Her smile became wry and she pursed her lips. She gave him her coyest, you're-not-playing-fair look. "Alright," she said in her seductive, faintly whispery voice, somehow at the same time sincere and dripping in irony. "Maybe God is music."

Aside from student and faculty recitals, they sometimes got comps for Carnegie Hall, for the new Philharmonic Hall across the street from Jailyard, and for standing room at the Met, down at 40th and Broadway, still awaiting its uptown home. They went to the movies together; the *nouvelle vague* was just then crashing over the heads of young insular New Yorkers. Fellini, Antonioni, Truffault, and Godard were the sea gods that generated the breakers. *Breathless*, *8½*, and *Shoot the Piano Player* were instant classics you had to say were films, not movies.

One day in the dull theory class they were taking—and occasionally passing notes in like seventh graders—the professor, pompous beyond even his fifty years, sat down at the piano as he often did to make a point with an example. He was no musician, but this time he played at greater than usual length. Clara leaned into Jacob's ear across the collapsible desk and whispered rather too distinctly, "*T.S.L.P.*," which it took him a second to realize meant *Tirez sur le Pianiste*. The desk flipped a bit and knocked back down. They could not suppress their giggles. The theorist at the keyboard stood up and made them separate, and in response to this humiliation Jacob stopped coming to class, and although he did all the assignments got the lowest possible passing grade.

He did not wear his *yarmulke* to school, and although he wore it at home and in the synagogue, he no longer did anywhere else. But for most of that semester he still kept the Sabbath, and so in order to see Clara on Friday nights, he walked briskly across the Jewish South Bronx—it took nearly an hour—from his parents' apartment to hers. Her father, a mid-level Post Office manager, kept his friends close but his daughter's boyfriends closer. He and his wife let her invite him into her bedroom and even into her narrow bed, but the door was ajar and they were just beyond the thin wall.

They had never been interrupted, and he was aroused beyond reason, but they only ever went just so far. He got to

touch her between her thighs, which were pale and slightly freckled, like her long, fragile face. It had an ethereal beauty, with calm, gray, observant eyes, as if she were a visitor from a far world.

He got to touch her breasts, for which she first apologized. "They're not pretty," she said. "Girls never like their breasts," he said, as if from large experience. "No," she said. "You have to understand. They're not normal." She took his hand and put it inside her dark green flannel shirt, inside her white, plain, frayed cotton brassiere. He touched her tenderly. The breast felt lumpy, and when she unhooked her bra and opened the first three buttons of her shirt to bare them both, the skin was wrinkled and puckered.

"I have polycystic breasts," she said. "It's a condition. My doctor says it's nothing to worry about, but he checks it every year."

"I have a condition too," he said.

"What's that?"

"I'm in love with you." They kissed, not shyly. Then he held and kissed each of her breasts. He had never done that with a girl before.

"They hurt sometimes. But usually I don't feel much of anything."

"Where should I touch you?" She took his hand and put it boldly high up between her thighs.

"There. Right there. You can rub it a little, gently, like this." She moved his hand up and down so that the edge of it made a sawing motion. Her underpants were wet and her breathing a little ragged. She sighed. He began to help her take them off.

"No."

He felt confused. "It's okay," she said, shifting slightly away from him. "I bet you have something you would like me to touch." He didn't answer, but her hand was on him, squeezing and rubbing. She unzipped him, and after a little effort it was out.

“You can put it against me here,” she said. She shifted in place again and without taking her panties off laid him on the bare skin of her belly. She pressed him down hard against her; he gasped and began a rhythmic rubbing. She put her lips to his ear. “Quietly if you can,” she whispered. Joan Sutherland was singing a coloratura aria boldly in the living room.

Afterward, he lay beside her, still pressing against her. “Let me do something for you,” he said.

“No. It’s fine like this.”

“Did you know it’s considered a blessing to make love on Friday night?”

“I didn’t. I like that.”

Involuntarily he pressed against her again and felt an exquisite aftershock of his pleasure flood his body like a drug or a dream.

“Maybe God is you,” he said.

Two weeks later it was announced at school that John F. Kennedy had been killed. They sat beside each other on a floor against a wall, and he held her hand. Everyone was stunned. He wanted only to stay with her and for them to comfort each other. But she soon said, “I want to go home.” So he walked her to the subway. He was with her and she was in another world.

He was never to find out for certain why she had wanted to leave, but not long after that, she said, “I have to tell you something that’s hard to tell. Very hard.” She paused and their eyes met. “I’m seeing someone else.” He felt the blood drain from his face and thought *I need to sit down*, although they were already sitting. “It’s been a few weeks. *He’s* in love with me too.”

“Do I know him?”

“It’s Paul Pollard.” He did know Paul, slightly. He played French horn, rather well. He was tall like Jacob, but broader, masculine, confident.

She squinted through her hand from under her thin brown eyebrows. “You don’t know how much it hurts me to look at you.”

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“Don’t feel sorry for me, choose me.”

“I’m not hurting because I pity you. It’s because I don’t have any idea what I should do.” She was holding her forehead with the fingertips of both hands as if it were about to burst.

“If I believe you . . .”

“Jacob. Believe me. I can’t stand being torn like this and I can’t make a choice.”

He held his own head and rubbed his eyebrows and his eyes. Was this really happening? “Suppose . . .” He swallowed hard. “Suppose we both stay away and leave you alone for a while. A month, say.”

“That would be good I think. I could finish the semester. I could stop going crazy long enough to do that.”

“You can think about what you should do. Maybe it will come to you.”

“God, I hope so.”

At her suggestion, he and Paul met over coffee. They both said that they loved her, that they wanted her to not be in pain any longer. They agreed to give her a month to breathe. Neither would contact her until a set date in January. They stood up and shook hands on it. Paul’s grip was strong.

Jacob, with tremendous effort, honed by a life of religious discipline, stayed away from Clara. Paul did not, proving, perhaps, that he loved her too much to respect a silly pact. Jacob heard from her in writing that she had chosen Paul.

It was a very painful winter, but he did in due course go on with life and love, although not without disappointing several other young women. For several years he did not understand commitment any more than he did God, but mainly he disappointed himself.

## 2

HE COULD, HE SUPPOSED, have found out something through the grapevine, but he had put her behind him. He did hear that Clara and Paul had stayed together, and had married right after

graduation. Clara still played, but evidently had lost heart; she had always detested brutal music competitions; they even made her ill. Paul, while still in college, was going over to arts management; friends said he was clever at that. They said that in a few years he would be the only one in their class with a paying job.

Jacob had stopped believing in God that first freshman winter. He got his own apartment, which he could just afford with earnings from choral gigs, and because the place was far enough uptown. He had four more girlfriends in college, none musicians. Two, he saw in parallel during senior year. He was fond of them, especially one, but they ran into each other at the door of his apartment and that was the last he saw of either. It was not as much of a blow as he thought it should be.

He did not fear competition, but he just wasn't good enough. He could work, but he would always need a day job. He could probably in time find a permanent paid place in a chorus, but even that would be precarious and would not pay the bills. He would rarely solo and would not break out of the crowd. He would sing *lieder* in small rooms and the *cognoscenti* would nod and clap, but he would live from his hand to the mouth he sang with. It still meant the world to him to be able to sing, say, the Brahms *Vier Ernste Gesänge*, mainly because he had always been haunted by the music, but also because the composer—"Brahms the Jew," Wagner called him—had set *Ecclesiastes* to his grand, gothic musical invention. And, too, there were lots of *lieder*.

At twenty-six he decided to get a master's degree, crossing an artist's Rubicon; it meant conceding he would not be a stellar performer—not now, not ever. As G.B. Shaw meanly aphorized, he who can, does; he who cannot, teaches. But because he could also write about teaching singers, and had learned how to protect voices from injury, he secured a spot on the faculty at a conservatory in New England.

By then he had fallen in love again, although not in the same way. They married. His wife was smart and pretty—a psychologist who tried to manage his moods, and did. He had

always wanted to travel, so when the chance arose to go to faraway places with strange names, to consult on training or to audition young singers, he always took it. He still thought himself an artist, however minor, and when a friend who worked for an obscure label gave him a chance to record Mendelssohn and Mahler, he knew it would be a high point in his life. He did not expect it to be reviewed, and it wasn't, but it was there. His wife even listened to it once, during dinner.

How self-absorbed, to become tearful while listening to himself. But it was not him, it was Mendelssohn and Mahler—his reading—not the only one he liked, but his. He wiped his eyes discreetly when his wife got up to pour another glass of pinot grigio. But beyond her, near the door, for a long moment, he thought he could see Mahler—handsome, balding, in those wire-rimmed glasses, wearing a three-piece suit and bow tie, standing with his finger marking time in the air. *Why not, Jacob thought. It's not like there are that many recordings of Mahler lieder. He has time on his hands—it's eternity after all. He could pop in on all of us. Like Elijah the Prophet.*

Not long after that, at the close of a long, notably tedious day of teaching, he picked up his usual dull mail at the department, and as he shoved it into his bag, he saw the blue ink of a graceful hand. It was not recognizable, but also somehow not unfamiliar.

*Dear Jacob,*

*Paul found your Mahler CD, bought it, and brought it home to me. It's exquisite. What you do with the Kindertotenlieder is new I think. People stretch the pathos until it's bathetic—they're songs, not dirges. You've managed to make them lyrical and to realize what I always thought he wanted to do: Kill death.*

*I hope this does not mean you have lost a child. I have two, and I cannot even imagine it—or rather, I can, and it makes me start shaking uncontrollably. Anyway, I wanted you to know how very much your singing moved me. Please write or call if you would like to meet. I would.*

Her name was followed by a phone number. *How very brave*, he thought. He had not lost a child or even yet had one, but he was married and “they” were trying to get pregnant. Obviously Clara was still married to Paul. Happily? But there was almost a yearning in her words, wasn’t there? He put the letter back in the envelope and the envelope into a pocket in his knapsack. Home early the next day, he read it again and an intense feeling flooded him. Not love, but admiration, friendship, even lust. A longing for closeness and for instinctive, symmetrical understanding about music.

He called the number. Clara’s voice was as it had always been, slightly whispery, undefended but still commanding. And yet there were new notes; both the vulnerability and the authority had deepened. She sounded like a person who had taken a lot of hurt in stride. “Thank you for calling,” she said.

“Thank you for writing. It was very brave.”

“I don’t feel brave.”

“So the brave always say.” He could almost hear her smiling.

“I want to see you.”

He came to New York from time to time to coach singers or help with auditions, and early one late fall afternoon he was announced by the doorman at an old, green-awned apartment building on Central Park West. She opened the door almost as his finger touched the bell. She wore a black cotton shirt with a wide collar and the top two buttons open. Her pants were a loose-fitting semi-sheer soft off-white cotton held up by a soft off-white rope tied with a bow. Her face was a little worn, but her smile was as frank and shy and pretty as ever.

“This is nice,” she said, letting him in.

“Yes,” he said.

“I’m nervous.”

“So am I.” They walked into a shower of light and toward a bank of windows overlooking the park. The yellows and browns of the last fall leaves graced the gray branches with a lacy shawl, but his eyes were soon drawn back to her. Her bare feet padded

over the intricate oak parquet. The ceilings were very high. The trim was a rich thick mahogany that almost matched the wood of the open Bösendorfer grand, which seemed to be begging to be played. It defined but did not dominate the room.

“You see,” she said, gesturing in mock grandeur with a sweep of her hand and sighing as if it wearied her. “We’re rich. A glass of wine?”

“Will you have some?”

“I think I need some.” Paul, she said, had become an extremely successful agent, now even a kind of impresario. He was gone a lot. They had two beautiful boys, Eric, six, and Mark, four. She saw him look at the door. “Don’t worry,” she said with a pained look, “they won’t be home soon.”

“The flute?”

She looked pained again. “I play,” she said, clearly intending both glosses of the word. She set her wine goblet down on the gold-trimmed glass of the table. The pale green shimmered and caught the sun. They talked a while, skirting the subject of their marriages. He was thinking how heartbreakingly lovely she still was when she said, “Would you kiss me please?”

She was soon drawing him across the parquet, past the piano, down a low-lit hallway, to a bedroom with a four-poster bed. “It’s a guest room,” she helpfully said. He was glad of that. She folded herself into his arms with a kind of hunger he didn’t recall her having as a girl. She looked down at her waist and smiled wryly. “You can pull that little rope.” He did. She would not let him unhook her bra.

“I’ve seen them,” he said.

“I know, but I don’t always want to. They looked a bit better when they were full of milk.” The sheets almost matched the cream-colored satin she was pressing against his chest. As she had done so many years ago, she guided his hand between her legs. At the apex of her thighs his middle finger found the ridge of raised flesh that, he remembered now, was very narrow and very sensitive, although he had not known then that every

woman was different. But now he was grateful that she could give herself easily into her own pleasure. He rubbed gently. She said, "Yes." In a minute, perhaps two, she inhaled abruptly three times, making a small sound each time. She tensed, squeezed his hand, and relaxed her body with a sigh. "Inside," she soon said. "No, not your fingers."

It felt comfortable, without urgency.

"I've had babies."

"So I've heard."

"I'm not tight."

"You feel lovely."

"Lots of room."

"Stop apologizing." He moved inside her. Their eyes met, and he kissed her open smile. She crossed her ankles in the small of his back, broke the kiss, put her mouth to his ear, and said, "Fuck me, please." He thought he had never before felt so vivid a sense of completion as he did in the interlude that followed.

### 3

IN THE MONTHS AFTER that he did find more reasons to go to New York. Twice more they met at her—their—apartment. On the second of those occasions she came to the door in a flower-print silk mini-robe that obviously had nothing under it, even a brassiere. He came directly from a meeting at which he had had to wear a suit and tie.

"Oh my, aren't we fancy. I have a surprise for you."

She took him to the Bösendorfer. She sat on the bench and opened the accompaniment to Mendelssohn's *Auf Flügeln des Gesanges*, his setting of Heine's poem. It was on his CD, and one of the most romantic lyrics ever.

"I thought it would be a nice touch. Two romantic apostate Jews played and sung by two more. Shall we?"

"I'm no Fischer-Dieskau."

She stood up and made a deep and slow curtsy, holding the edges of her very short robe. "And I," she said as she dipped, "am

no Wanda Landowska." She bowed her head slightly. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

She sat down but soon jumped up again. "Wait." She loosened his tie and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt, shook his trachea back and forth a bit, then moved behind him and took off his jacket. "That's better." She laid the coat down on the love seat and sat again. "Shall we?" She had never been so playful, which was perfect for this song. Together, their eyes singing, they trilled the irony of this nineteenth-century German-Jewish poet bidding his love lie under a palm in a flower bed by the Ganges. She played up-tempo, as he liked it, and he sang it as well as he ever had. She was radiant. At the end they both convulsed in the laughter they had been holding in—violets giggling and cuddling, no less. And yet, that thought of lying down among them in the moonlight, dreaming a sacred dream . . .

The sex that afternoon was fine, but almost an afterthought. On the train back to Boston, he rather astonished himself by feeling a little guilty about Paul. The triumph had been short-lived. He enjoyed Clara—more than enjoyed—her passion, her wit, her rare, maturing beauty. The sex was quite good, and even, given the sameness of years of marriage, freeing. But he was not compellingly there.

He came home to find that his wife thought she was pregnant, which it was soon found she was. She softened and turned inward, even while beckoning him. She might have grown more irritable and demanding as that hard sleek belly she was proud of grew rounder, but instead she gained a maternal glow and charmed him with the magic not of two but three. He was falling in love with her again; or was it with them?

Clara wrote to him a few weeks after their last time, and then two weeks after that. By the third letter she sounded plaintive. He resolved to call, but put it off for days. Then there was a message in his box saying he had gotten a call from "a Mr. Fisher Deescow," saying "how much he enjoyed your Mahler."

He questioned the freshly hired secretary, who said, "But you know, it didn't sound like a man." He'd told Clara that he had, on a lark, sent the CD to Fischer-Dieskau's agent, who luckily wasn't Paul. He did not expect a response and never got one, but the prank call did make his heart beat faster, and not, in the end, pleasantly.

He called her the next morning. "Ha-ha," he said.

"I'm sorry. I thought you'd know right away. I wanted to get your attention." She sounded hurt. He told her about the pregnancy. "That's wonderful. Are you excited?"

"I'm very moved."

"Does that mean you want to be good from now on?"

He thought for quite a while. "Hello?" she said, with that lilt that said she was smiling ironically.

"Not necessarily."

"I'm glad." She paused. "I'll have twice as many children as you, even in—when is it?"

"August."

"Oh no. That's no time to be nine months pregnant. What you do to us. My heart goes out to her." She waited a beat. "But not so much that I want you to be a perfect husband." He did not say anything. It had taken time for Susan to conceive.

"However, you will be a good father."

"I'll want your advice." He could almost see her delicate, subtly expressive face; he could feel her yearning through the telephone. He did want her. "I don't know where this is going."

Was she wincing? "To more of the same, I hope. When are you coming to New York?"

"I actually have a meeting in June."

"Dates, please." He gave them to her.

"I'll be busy during the days, and I have a dinner meeting on Wednesday. Tuesday night, I think I'm free, if I can get down in time. Could you do that?"

"I'll work it out. But it can't be here."

"I'd rather it not. You can come to the hotel. It's the Waldorf."



“Well!”

“Don’t worry, it’s a special rate. I’ll let you know when I know what I can do.”

“I’ve never done this before. How do I do it?”

“You pick up a lobby telephone and ask for me. I give you the room number. You go to the elevators and push the Up button.”

“Sounds easy.” There was a mock-shocked intake of breath. “But what will the bellman think?”

“The bellman will think you are an extremely expensive prostitute.”

She laughed her high, musical laugh. “I like that.”

“I thought you would. But listen, Clara, I’m not sure I can get to New York early enough. I’ll call you if I can.”

“Just call me.”

He did call, dutifully, when he got back to Boston. “You didn’t call.”

“I’m sorry. I was overwhelmed.”

“Do you mean by busy-ness, or by the kitsch of impending fatherhood?” He did not answer. “I waited. I even put on a dress.” Her voice was plaintive and husky. He pictured her in a demure A-line sea-green cotton dress, sitting back in an armchair, smoking a cigarette with a little bit of lipstick on the filter. “Keep singing,” she said.

GABE WAS FIVE, AND they had almost stopped trying for a second when Susan became pregnant again. It would have been a girl. The two of them were in mourning, trying to school their faces for Gabe, but after he was asleep she would descend into helpless sobbing.

“How can I be so stricken over such a little thing?”

“You don’t need me to tell you,” he said. “It’s not little.” He sat down beside her on the bed that they hadn’t made in days. She sobbed again and threw her arms around his neck.

“Say goodbye,” he almost whispered.

A few evenings later while Susan was, blessedly, asleep, the phone rang and rang downstairs, and he picked it up just as the tape was about to take it. It was Nat, his high school friend, whom he hadn't seen in months, and he was relieved it was no one else.

"If this has something to do with beer, it's not my night."

"Did you see the *Times* today?"

"No. Did I get elected?" There was a silence.

"It's an obit, Jake. It's Clara Berg." *Who?* Jacob was thinking. "Clara Pollard."

With leaden arms, after laying down the phone in its cradle, and without telling Nat about the miscarriage, he took the folded paper out of the blue plastic bag, where it had lain since the morning rain. It was wet in one corner, which turned out, unfolded, to be the middle of every page. Without moving from where he stood, he turned over page after broad page, each with a wet wound in its heart. He did not use the index. He turned the leaves.

It was not obvious, even among the obits. It was a rented space, three or four column-inches, *Beloved daughter, wife, and mother . . . age thirty-four . . . cancer . . . survived by . . .* Her boys were now, what, twelve and ten? He had never seen them, yet he had a swift bodily image of scooping them both up into his arms. *Paul will do that*, he thought, and this reassured him. He felt as close to Paul as when they were both first in love with her, but without the jealousy.

The Mourner's Prayer came to his lips as it had a few days earlier when Susan bled their baby out, but this time the impulse passed. He was not in a mood to praise God. Likewise he did not deign even to be angry with God. *This can't be* was the cliché he kept thinking again and again. *This . . . cannot . . . be.* And the capricious inequity of life said in an almost childlike voice, *yes it can.*

When he had finished reading the notice for the third time, this time moving his lips and speaking under his breath as if he were intoning a prayer, he leaned back in his desk chair and

turned off the lamp, and in the darkness she was there. He saw her standing on the other side of the desk looking down at him with her pale, pretty countenance and her wryest, most persuasive smile. He closed his eyes but that only made him see her more vividly. She looked down at her chest and began slowly unbuttoning her blouse, which was a pale green satin one he hadn't seen before. She opened it unblinkingly.

*They're perfect, now,* she said, with more than a little irony.

*They are.*

*I wish you could touch them.*

His hand reflexively began reaching out toward her, but immediately rested flat and open on his own chest. His heart was thudding stupidly, as if his feeling for her could still matter. Their eyes met for a long beat, but he soon found that too painful. He stood up, turned, opened the Bose CD player behind him on the old, bent file cabinet with the beige paint peeling; it had belonged to his father, and once had held the annals of a small, conscientious dry cleaner. He leaned down the helical tower of discs beside it to where he knew they were: the *Kindertotenlieder*—but not, of course, his own, or even Fischer-Dieskau's. It was no male voice he reached for, but his true favorite, Jessye Norman's.

*Clara,* he said aloud in the darkening study, *you are going to love this.* The only light came from the yellow glow of the street lamp, faintly, through the orange leaves of the elm outside the window. He dropped the disc onto the spindle, closed the cover, and pressed Play. The almost unearthly, dense, liquid tones of the mezzo-soprano decanted and settled into the room, crowding death into a corner. The voice was sacred, earthy, piercing, embracing, warm. He stayed standing, leaning toward Clara, poised opposite him across the disheveled oak desk, her blouse partly re-buttoned, her face barely visible in the unforgiving shadows but still slightly glowing, and they heard the song together.