

# New Fiction *from* New England



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# Doors Made to Order

BY MARCIA YUDKIN

THE SOUND OF the hard rubber tips of her walker against the floor was blunt, but not as curt and indignant as Vivian wished. Murray was late. Any second the grandfather clock would strike eight, and Murray knew that in order for her to be seated for the musicians' first note he had to pick her up by 7:45. This year at least they had aisle seats, but people still would glare at her for making the suspension of the first break more difficult. Murray would flash concern at her, as if to say, "Mother, if you're embarrassed I can take you home." Vivian would ignore him and follow the walker step by step at the limits of her strength. Never was he apologetic himself; he was the loving son devoting his evening to his mother.

Vivian knocked the walker against the door, which yielded easily. Each scrape ahead opened it further, until she had passed through and the door swung closed without rebounding at her. That Jack Mycklowski had done a wonderful job. "I see," he'd responded. "You need them lightweight and fixed so they won't clobber you." Then he'd plunged into the task and turned her apartment into a new neighborhood of sawdust and tobacco. He'd left it a neighborhood too, still sectioned but without barriers. Murray's suggestion would have cost one-tenth as much, just removing the doors and disguising the vestigial hinges, but so what? It would have meant surrender to her disability. Murray seemed to want her stuck in helplessness — or almost stuck, so he could rescue her.



Vivian halted in the position she'd aimed at, beside the front door with her back to the coat closet. That way they'd waste the least amount of time when Murray buzzed. She'd be set for him to negotiate the two remaining doorknobs. When he'd visited halfway through the carpenter's week, he'd furrowed his high brow: "Mother, why not leave the closet and the front door as they are? You won't be going out alone anyhow." Stupidly, reasonably, she'd conceded that much.

A familiar rumble prepared her for the footfalls and the rasp of a key in the lock. "Goodness, Mother, they haven't fixed that elevator yet. I'll call Marvin about it tomorrow." Murray pecked Vivian on the forehead and tossed his long hank of hair back over his bald spot. "Have you been standing here long? You know Dr. Katz said standing in one place isn't good for you."

Vivian jiggled her purse against the walker. "I'll have the stole, please," she said, her voice verging on sharp. It would be chamber music tonight, and she especially hated to miss the first piece on the program. Less familiar works by composers she loved were her great passion. She caught the message more clearly when there weren't passages and themes she could already hum. The sheltering weight fell on her, distributed as cockeyed as usual. Murray hadn't learned to drape the fur like his father, but the nubby dress she'd chosen should keep the silky lining wrapped around her shoulder. "Onward," Vivian ordered.

"I talked to Rubenthal," Murray remarked in the elevator.

"Oh?" Vivian scoured his pleasantness with her ready sarcasm. "Did you convince him?"

"He said you insisted." Murray rattled off his monthly warning about her "risky investments." He was a very old 40, she suddenly noticed, with a deceptive earnestness around his hazel eyes and droopy nose. He counseled conservatism for her and meanwhile scattered the business in directions her husband would have disapproved. But he was her only son.

"Thanks for taking me to the concert," she interrupted, reaching for and squeezing his hand softly. He brightened and shut up, helping her in and out of the car and up the three steps in solicitous silence.

"Heavens, we're not too late," she exclaimed when they turned the last corner. The hall clock read 8:30, and the ushers were still seating people. Maybe the cellist's bow had come unstrung — that had happened once, during his warm-up, fortunately. He'd sped to his hotel and back for his spare while the audience coughed.

"Mother, it's a contemporary program." Murray crackled their pro-

grams beside her in the aisle. "It looks weird. We can turn around and go home."

Vivian faltered. An evening of clicks and strident screeches wasn't what she wanted. But the musicians had begun filing onstage to subdued applause. She pressed on and gestured for him to slip ahead of her. Her heart beat hard; a bead of moisture trickled by her ear. But there was no reason to feel self-conscious. The musicians sat utterly still, as if meditation were their performance. A program landed in her lap, and she read in astonishment.

#### YALE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

Opus 27 (1951)      Wolf Lehrmann

Neal Mellenger, oboe

Jackson Willard, cello

Pierre Gaspard, piano

NOTE: Since this work begins and ends with an undetermined length of silence, the audience is requested to refrain from applauding until the musicians rise from their seats.

#### INTERMISSION

Opus 48 (1953)      Wolf Lehrmann

Julius Bologna, violin

John Miller, violin

Kathleen Miller, viola

Jackson Willard, cello

Pierre Gaspard, piano

And no program notes! It was a scandal. The tenseness in the hall was palpable, all eyes on the motionless three men on the stage, all ears confronting nothing. Vivian thought she saw the neck of the fat cellist twitch, like a subtle signal, but the oboist stayed solid in his pose, the pianist kept his long-lashed concentration. Just when the silence seemed about to explode with frustrated expectations, the dark-locked man at the piano raised his hands to the keyboard.

What she heard was even more startling. The music was rippling chords, dissonances melting and reappearing in a pattern she couldn't catch although she thought it was the same thing repeated with slight modulation. It wasn't pretty; it was faintly diabolical, complex and ambiguous, unsettling and sinuous. Vivian shifted uneasily in her seat and

the cellist came in. He began to weave a mesh with his bow — delicate, strong, intricate, going around and around like an expanding afghan square. The two lines seemed obsessive and independent, yet peculiarly in harmony. Then the third entered, the oboe with a singing part that dipped and soared and hooted in staccato, lay low and rose again in triumph. Her mouth fell open and sensation overcame her, like the time she was five and experienced something known by reputation. She had spilled from a wheelbarrow. "Pain": a concept became real. Now this was — what?

She had no words for what she heard and couldn't hold on to her impressions, which followed the shifting colors and dynamics as they supported and contradicted one another. But it was a revelation, showing that a wall of the world she lived in was pliable and could be peeled aside like a curtain, disclosing a realm that was rigorous and lush. The oboe had parted the curtain, and she tried by squinting at the oboist to fix her vision of the vista. But her eyes were moist; she was losing it; the oboe was dipping to a low note and fading away. The cello became quieter too, weaving slower and more finely until a thread, dangling, diminished to nothing. The piano continued its weird clashing harmonies as Vivian despaired; the wall was opaque and hard again. She glared at the handsome pianist as he lifted his hands and folded them in his lap, let his eyes drop closed, and left a depressing stillness, the silence heavy and turbulent. Behind her a pocketbook hit the floor; lipsticks and pencils clattered; the scene on the stage remained dead and cold.

Without any apparent signal, the three rose in unison, faced the audience and strode offstage. Here and there hands clapped, but the applause didn't reverberate. Vivian rocked with the stark, troubling mood. The lights went up.

Murray's smile, as he bent over her, broke her entrancement. "Mother, shall we go? No need to sit through any more of that."

Vivian looked at him with withering surprise. "Are you in a hurry to get somewhere?"

"Actually, yes." A contrite acquiescence settled over his face. "The men's room. I'll be back."

When he left, her impressions were more jumbled. It seemed she had been shown another world, but not initiated. What had the music revealed? Perhaps the chatter around her held clues.

"It had a nonretrograde rhythm. Did you notice?" That must be one of the bohemians behind her.

"You mean retrograde." Brisk certainty. "It was positively Romantic."

"Negatively Romantic. The guy's a nihilist. That went out with Dostoevski."

Vivian turned to another cluster of voices more lighthearted in tone.

"When I come to concerts I like to lean back and forget my troubles. They put this junk on the series one more time and I cancel my subscription."

"It reminds me of your charge account, dear. It goes round and round and there's never a final payoff."

"Did you hear that Kramer's is having a sale?"

Vivian retracted her attention. Restlessly she wondered when the intermission would end, whether Murray would spend the second half out in the corridor. He had once, claiming an important contact had kept him talking. Vivian worried her gold charms and finally noticed the lights dimming without her son.

This time four men and a woman came out and instead of sitting in silence, tuned up. The string players rotated pegs to match the pianist's note; when the violinist at the front nodded, everyone began. Vivian sat erect in her seat, watched the violinists scrape and ping, but couldn't get it. The terrain was guarded by the piano, with brutally refused access, ponderously pacing on a high concrete wall. Five devotees of a foreign system; what could get her admitted?

She sat back, surrendered as she might to a party of distinguished guests parleying in Turkish. Her mien was still polite; she had influence; she'd bribe someone who could translate when the time was right. Vivian folded the program into her purse and began to summon strength for the slow journey back. Murray's aid was pinched, but she had other resources.

In the next month Vivian tried everything. There was so little time, it seemed, and each simple inquiry was turned back after a while. No, Lehrmann wasn't in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. No, there were no Lehrmann records at Cutler's. No, he wasn't listed at the Yale Music Library. No, Linda Saven's friend Lawrence had never heard of him. Perhaps Louise, who did her errands for her, didn't know how to use a card catalog, maybe friends and reference librarians lied upon hearing the fierce urgency in her voice, but Vivian began to suspect that there was a brotherhood so exclusive that the announcer of her classical music show was left out. In frustration she ordered a set of porcelain that elicited gasps from her friends and remonstrations from her son.

She was troubled by dreams about the failures in her life that she thought she'd forgotten. Accompanied by a repetitive score of discordant



fragments, she would awaken angry with herself, cursing the necessary trudge to the bathroom. She would recoil from the mirror when the fluorescent shimmy made her skin look transparent. If she was as old as she looked in that harsh glare, she should know everything. Then she'd count up the years and take heart, until compelled to inch the walker through the custom-designed swinging door. Nighttime used to rejuvenate her, but no longer, not when every experience or image stressed her limits.

With her friends, she would careen from bored to attentive. When Lily, Diane, and Elaine animated the bridge table with grandchildren's names and the exploits of decorators, she faded into her cards. Then she perked up suddenly with a daring bid and the news that she might, next winter, move to Miami Beach. "Really?" Vivian wondered herself where the idea had come from. Lily drove her home and asked if she would mind a stop at the drugstore. Vivian consented, trailed in when Lily was ready to leave, and turned gay and acquisitive at the cosmetics counter. Once she interrupted Elaine to plead, "What do you know about the other world?" When Elaine prattled on about God and religion, Vivian padded toward the phonograph.

Music had been her consolation. But now melodies that soothed made her uncomfortable. Luxurious textures and resolutions she had liked raised her hackles, as if the orchestras were straining to hide something. Sometimes she listened so hard she would start at the baritone announcements on her radio program. Couldn't they take a cue from that "Opus 27" and provide a silence for the effect to reach full force? Vivian pored through her record library one afternoon for the liner notes and found only one offhand hint, on a Beethoven quartet set, that music could be profound. Beethoven's tormented lyricism, though, was equally beyond her.

Murray's Sunday telephone calls continued. Vivian didn't speak to him of her turmoil. Instead she asked about the books he was reading, the plays that he went to. Her prompting led him into such detail about a World War II general once that she dozed off and the receiver tumbled into her lap. He always inquired after her health and counseled caution with her assets. On Mother's Day Vivian checked the acidic retort she had prepared and startled both of them with an unaccustomed "Why?" "The bottom line, Mother, is that you might lose the principal," her son replied. Suddenly she knew what she would do; she had formulated a plan.

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The gold charms clanged as Vivian reached down for another dab of foundation. Maybe she should remove the bracelet. She expected to sit perfectly still, but if she didn't, the small noise might be distracting. Vivian decided to keep it on and focused on her makeup. Her blue eyes sparkled today and were not ringed so much with wrinkles. She might even be considered attractive for her age, at least discounting her poor legs. Vivian hurried through her daydream; she wanted to post herself by the front door before the trio buzzed.

Vivian turned and surveyed the bathroom. A woman's space, but with nothing to make men snicker. She pressed through the swinging door to her yellow bedroom. The pills were stashed in the closet with the baubles she knew shouldn't be for guests' eyes; only the framed picture on the bureau made the room personal. Should there be another hard chair in there? The musicians might wish to warm up privately before the performance. She could have asked Anna Sondheim's advice and hired Louise to set up, but this was her show. Vivian pushed the walker at a brisk but not quite headlong pace, checking all the sights on the way.

When she reached the foyer, the elevator's rumble tautened her nerves. She followed the chorus of steps in the hall and called out firmly at the knock: "Please come in. It's open." She stretched out her hand to the middle man of the three, who had to shift his black oblong case to grasp right hands.

"Mrs. Slater?" His voice was gruff, like a hibernating bear's. "I'm Neal Mellenger. Glad to meet you." He indicated the youngest man, with lashes so long and dark they hardly looked real. "This is Pierre Gaspard."

"Enchanté." He nodded, keeping his hands in his pockets.

"And this is Jackson Willard." The man was very large, with a bulky inanimate companion.

"Hello. Have we beat the crowd? I'm crazy about parties."

"I'm afraid there won't be a crowd tonight. I did say a private party, didn't I, Mr. Mellenger?" Vivian flashed a hard smile and beckoned them into the living room. "This is where you'll be playing, gentlemen. The piano was tuned this morning, Mr. Gaspard. You can warm up here or in the bedroom. Just let me know when you're ready to get started." Vivian headed her walker for the kitchen to leave them to their puzzled glances. She hadn't hired them under false pretense. Even if she had, she'd paid more than the fee they'd asked, in advance. They ought to have suspected, in any case; who would request "Opus 27" for a party?

The door whisked shut behind her. Through it leaked whispers and lulls she interpreted as shrugs. If she were they, she'd be glad to play

without the pressure of reviews and without having to gauge applause. She crept close to the thin barrier to spy — another advantage of that nice carpenter's work. But there were no remarks to hear, only arpeggios leaping from the piano, a thunderous chord and a lullaby reply. The cello growled at its lowest reaches while the notes of the oboe poured upward in a defiant stream. The instruments circled, flirted, and ignored one another like the patterns that had disturbed her. Had they started already? The instructions were to let her know.

Vivian banged her metal helper through the door and apologized to the startled cellist with a quick mustering of composure. "Everyone's here who will be here," she announced. "But please wait until I get seated." She flushed when she realized that here, in her own house, the musicians waited on her slow movements. The pianist flexed his fingers, the cellist rearranged the loose pages on his stand, but the oboist, gray-haired with a subdued complexion, watched her. His gaze didn't waver until she had settled in her chair, nudged the walker aside, and nodded just as gravely. He nodded at the two others, who, although they weren't looking at him, at once became transfixed like statues. Vivian thought she knew what to expect but was again caught off guard.

The silence started out cushioned, as sound would be by her rugs, soft chairs, and drapes, but it changed. It felt like the automatic car wash she'd dared once, a track jerking the car forward through onslaughts of suds and brushes. Provoked by nothing, the sequences now were all in her head. First appraisal of the stone-still men, gratitude that the roles weren't reversed; worries about the refreshments and whether she'd really turned the clock's striker off; estimation of the lapsed time, wondering when they would begin; the mounting strain of expectation with hostile ideas breaking in; suspense so taut it brought on revulsion and the thought that this was their revenge; and a tumultuous cauldron of feelings that rebounded louder and louder. Vivian thought she would faint, with no relief to be counted on.

When the pianist came alive, his passagework wouldn't let her relax. The shifting chords seemed to go nowhere and so sustained her discomfort. The cellist's entrance didn't spare her either. But when the oboe touched down and took off, she catapulted with it through the cracks in the disorder. Exhilarated, she hung on for the ride, accepting the vertigo of the unfamiliar. Yet the thrill stole all of her energy and let her down too soon. Where had she been? The cello was retracting its support; the oboe was mum. Now there was only the piano, plodding steadfastly in indefinite directions. If she'd been in the other world, now she was lost, naviga-

torless. The chords ended too, without a resolution, infuriating her as the three played dead again. She'd paid them well, and they'd better tell her what it was all about.

An impatient flick of her wrist sliced the silence, and the cellist took the cue to open his eyes. He blinked, and Vivian noticed that he had the look of a big eater starved and unhappy. The young man at the piano exposed dark eyes fringed all around with boredom. Obviously he preferred glory and large halls. A gourmet spread during intermission wouldn't win him over. The oboist emerged last, his wide face weary and spent. No, it would have to be the stout man. Vivian struggled in her chair while staring at him.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Willard," she said, accepting his arm crooked in front of her. "Thank you all, gentlemen. I'll see to the refreshments now."

The cellist was harder to walk with than her metal contraption, but he held the door for her without her having to press through it. "Ah, cake!" he exclaimed when he saw the counter, and let his support drop. "Chocolate cake. Neal and Pierre never eat during concerts."

"Oh? Please, help yourself." Vivian grabbed the refrigerator handle for balance. "Why is that?"

"Neal says eating wrecks his embouchure and Pierre claims crumbs always stick to his fingers. Mm. Did you enjoy the concert?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. But I have a question." Vivian steadied herself and plunged. "What is that piece about?"

"About?" The cellist scooted crumbs from the corner of his mouth to the interior. "It's about nothing."

"Oh, come, now." Vivian edged into the tone she used with Murray. "Do you take me for some rich fool?"

"Oh, no!" He stopped gobbling cake, his no longer greedy eyes innocent and sincere. "I'm serious. That's what Neal says when he lectures. Lehrmann was a discovery of his, a cranky genius teaching deaf children in London. Neal says the pieces with silence especially are about nothing. But don't ask me." He looked pointedly at her hand on the refrigerator handle. "I just play what's put in front of me."

Vivian pulled and extracted a colorful plate of fruit, then let out a quavery distress signal that sent the man away to fetch her walker. Pineapples and melons made her mouth water as she tried to think. She exchanged the fruit for her walker when the cellist returned and indicated that she would bring out the cake herself. The door closed after the musician with its stroke that was never a slam, and Vivian contemplated its perfect fit in her life. Wouldn't getting the lecture be like removing the



door? She liked the knock of light metal against thin wood and watching herself progress against the obstacle. Take the door away and there'd be no surprises, no scenes hidden beyond her sight.

When she pushed through, the tableau was different from what she'd imagined. The bored pianist was absorbed in cantaloupe, the cellist was browsing in her porcelain collection, and the oboist slouched, whittling at a reed. The leader looked up, raising one bushy gray eyebrow.

"Some cake, Mr. Mellenger?" Vivian advanced and dropped the plate on the coffee table. "It's all right because I don't need the second half of the program. Haydn is nice but what I really wanted was to experience "Opus 27." In fact, can I engage you for a repeat performance, at your convenience?"

"I'm afraid our fees are going up," he replied. "It will cost one-third again as much for an evening like this."

Vivian didn't blink, although Murray's unctuous warnings slid through her mind. She'd just tell Rubenthal to sell some stock. She smiled. This was her best investment.