

Musical Theory

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My attorney, Mr. Sol Gutstein — or maybe it was Gottstein, and I'm not sure if he spells it Sol or Saul; anyhow it's biblical — he came and told me it might help my defense if I talked to this psychiatrist or psychologist that he's worked with on other cases. The doctor's name escapes me completely, but it has a strange intonation — no, not strange; just something you don't hear every day. It's almost mixolydian. But the rhythm of the doctor's gestures is way off, as though he's only acting or trying to hide his true rhythm under arpeggios and fanfares. Anyway, the doc tells me that if he's going to help my case, he needs to know a lot more about me. No detail is too slight, he says. He hands me a stiff new notebook and four new pens and tells me to write down whatever comes to mind. I'm a composer, I tell him. Couldn't you get me a notebook with printed staves? I'd try to do it musically, something I feel more comfortable with. No, he says. Except in copyright cases, music is not admissible as either evidence or testimony. That's where you're wrong, I tell him. Music is evidence of intelligent life in the universe, maybe the only thing that is. He jots this down in his own notebook and asks me to go on. OK. Music is testimony to the joy and suffering of every singing being, and everything in existence sings. This is how God created the universe — he sang it, or maybe she did. It's not made up of atoms; it's all notes. How else do you make something out of nothing, out of absolute silence?

The doctor jots down every word, like he thinks I'm making it up. He asks me if I believe in God. I tell him I'm not sure, but I do believe in the song of creation, in music. Then the doctor asks me if I can hear this music. Talk about weird; he'd better lie down on his own couch. His mode

is definitely mixolydian, D dominant, C mediant. It's hard to keep a straight face around him. Can I hear it? Does he think I'm deaf? Even after Napoleon's cannons blew his eardrums apart, old Ludwig was still tuned in. Maybe it was a trick question, to see if I'm as nuts as Sol or Saul thinks I am.

So now I've begun this notebook. I'm supposed to concentrate on why I committed the murder, my motives in other words. That's the first thing Mr. Goldstein asked me, too. Why would you murder a complete stranger without provocation? I didn't want to tell him I was just trying to help the guy out. It would have sounded like I was plucking a golden harp. So I told him I did it in self-defense. That's when he looked up the number of the shrink, twirling through his little Rolodex. Man, I would have loved to amplify that sound, those little cards flapping, like the sound of a croupier on speed.

I think they assume I had some ulterior motive. What, I can't imagine. Every murder is in self-defense, isn't it? And I don't agree with their idea of who's a stranger. No one you have met is a stranger. I guess I'm a combination of Will Rogers and John Wilkes Booth — a strange chord indeed.

2.

The police are the only ones who seem to know what they're doing. They assume the worst about everybody and go about their business. These lawyers and doctors, on the other hand, are always on the lookout for a person's redeeming qualities, trying to save everybody, but only justifying themselves, I suppose. They'd be out of their jobs if there was no one to save. But all we really need are the police. They should lock everybody up and let the lawyers fend for themselves. We're all guilty as hell anyway.

I guess I'm mad at my lawyer and my doctor right now because they constantly pester me. Sign this. Tell me that. They are like light bulbs without shades. The police lead me to my cell, bring me my food and turn out the lights. I look forward to many years under their care, as long as I live.

I'd like to get the trial over with as quickly as possible. I've got a thousand projects in mind, but I'll never get to them until the doctors and lawyers finish with me. I won't have a minute's peace until they get this damned notebook. I know the doc's after all the particulars and he won't rest unless he's got them on paper. The bigger I write, the faster it'll fill up. But he's no ordinary fool.

Just write down what led up to the night of the murder, he says. Hell, doc, my whole life led up to the night of the murder. I don't want to go through all that again, not even on paper. I'm no good at details anyway, unless it's something I've heard. Make a stab at it, he says. No, doc, it was a gun. He stares at me; he doesn't even get *stupid* jokes. If the degree to which the good doctor takes himself seriously were transcribed to music, he'd be a symphonic production with all cellos.

3.

I got thrown out of my fourth apartment and it was only June. I wasn't loud. All I have left that hasn't been hocked is a small electronic keyboard, and I use head-phones. Most of the time I don't even need the keyboard — just plenty of blank staves and a good pen. But I came home and there's all my stuff at the curb in one big heap. This is the same old story of my life, a theme with variations. I don't have to remember all the times I've been thrown out of my apartment. I can just write *da capo* and save a lot of time and ink. *Da capo*.

So I offer to pay the landlord with a couple of compositions. What am I going to do with that? he asks. Those are the autographs, I tell him. They'll be very valuable once I'm dead, fetching an absolutely crazy price, like van Gogh's sunflowers. Well, I can't wait, he says and hands them

back. Neither can I, I said. And that was that. I carted the boxes of manuscripts to my sister's house. I didn't bother to go back for the keyboard or my clothes because I knew they would no longer be there. There are people in my neighborhood who live in cardboard boxes and who push their household and belongings around in shopping carts, and if something's not in your hand, it belongs to them. I don't care. They must need it more than I do. Maybe I'll do a piece about them some day. I'd want the orchestra in shabby gray coats instead of black tails. The conductor should dress like a bag lady; those in the boxes like insecure plutocrats. I'll call it *The American Sweet Dreams Suite*.

So there I was, out on my ear again, which is very dangerous for a composer. We'll see if he gets that one. My sister hands me ten bucks and tells me to bring something back for dinner. But I was far thirstier than I was hungry. Besides, at the end of the block the sidewalk slopes towards Bullock's Tavern. I couldn't help it. Like my sister says, I'm weak.

In Bullock's I meet this guy Mike — he's the murder victim. A real nice guy. You look like I feel, he tells me. That bad? I ask. I look in the mirror with all the bottles lined up in front of it. Mike squints at me. Or, I might be psychic, I say. Maybe that's how I know how you feel. Then Mike laughs and buys me a whisky and a beer. I forget his last name. He has a bottle of whisky all to himself and a pathetic little glass. His whole life history is in that bottle somehow, because he pours out an episode about two years high, swishes it around in his mouth — organizing it with his tongue, I think — and out spills his personal story. After a while it all sounds the same, shot after shot, over and over again like Philip Glass composed him, only it wasn't as interesting without the modulations. Everything that can go wrong in a person's life happens to Mike. Murphy did more than write a law for him — he wrote the fucking Constitution. Anything Clotho could tangle up in knots for him, she did it. And it didn't sound like he once ran into Themis or got a single lousy break

unless it was an arm or a leg. I know all about Greek mythology because one of the pieces I'm working on is an opera about Pythagoras called *Hypotenuse*. The Third Movement, *allegro furioso*, will have as many notes as the square root of the sums of the squares of the First and Second Movements, and not one note more or less.

Mike says he knows he's meant for something better, but what? He's had enough, and pretty soon he's gonna have his last drink and that's it — he's gonna kill himself. His really last drink. In the washroom he shows me his gun — no, doc, it really was a gun, not an adolescent fantasy — and it's the most evil, oily hunk of metal I've ever seen. Gonna go through with it this time, he says. Otherwise it'll be another night of hollering and fighting at home, followed by another day at the mill, and then another night of talking to people who don't listen. Et cetera, *da capo*. But you're different, he tells me. You listen.

That's my job, I tell him. A composer who doesn't listen is gonna run out of gas before he gets there.

No shit, a composer. Anything I might have heard? *Song of the Universe*? He shakes his head. *The Olympian Wheel*? Nope. Or how about *Kublai Khan*? That one almost got recorded by this psychedelic rock band from Portland called Mandalamania. Sorry, kid. But, see, I knew you were different, he tells me again.

Not really, I say. My life's the same as yours, only it's inverted, turned around. I know exactly what I'm good for, but nobody believes me. My parents and teachers were always trying to transpose me into a different key. But with you, Mike, everybody else thinks they figured out what you're good for — good for shit — and you believe *them*.

He nods. You got that right, he says. I tell him that in everything else our problems are exactly the same: landlords, liquor, and lunkheads. The bitch, the bottle, and the bastards, Mike says. Maybe we should have collaborated, Mike. I was never any good at coming up with lyrics.

Mike smiles and sets his empty glass down, a sound as hollow as despair. He slides off the squeaky stool. Well, this is it, he says. Good night.

Are you really gonna? I ask him. It was like when I was kid. I'd run a mile to watch somebody's house burn down just so I could feel bad about it.

Naw, Mike says. I been carrying that gun around for two years. I'm worried about what'd happen to my kids if I went through with it. I'm worth more dead than alive, but the insurance don't pay a dime on suicides. My kids'd be in the same hole I'm in. What I need is somebody to murder me. They pay for that. See you around, kid. He turned and weaved down the sidewalk. It looked like he was playing Step On A Crack, Break Your Mother's Back with his shoelaces tied together. He had a really neat, syncopated rhythm.

I was drinking sad stories of my own, so the idea didn't come to me right away. I chased after Mike. He hadn't gotten far.

Maybe we could work something out, I say.

Like what?

Maybe I could murder you. What do you think?

Thanks. I really appreciate that, kid. But you'd be in the slammer for life. Losers like us never get away with nothing.

But I don't want to get away with it.

He pats me on the side of my face. His hand is rough and hard. You're a nice kid. You just had a little too much to drink, that's all.

No. Look, Mike. It'd be like I was getting a patron. No bills, no agents, no cooking, no half-ass musicians, no muss, no fuss. No shit, that's just what I need. I could concentrate on my music.

Sorry, kid, this here's America. No counts, no lords, no kings — no Sandy Claus, either, I hate to tell you. Just bosses. Where you gonna find a patron?

We the People, I say. Just because it's a democracy, free enterprise and all that, doesn't mean they're gonna get their geniuses for nothing. We the People ain't done shit for me, except listen to tunes until they're nearly deaf to music. And what's the first thing a biographer's gonna say? *American* composer — born — died. But it's gonna cost 'em this time. They keep telling us there's no free lunch, don't they?

Mike nods. You got that right, kid. I get what you're saying. There'd be something in it for both of us. One hand washes the other. The American way, ain't it?

He slides the gun from his waistband and hands it to me.

Here's to a *long* two weeks' vacation, he says, and laughs.

Here's to three-square a day, solitude, rest, and quiet — to music! I say.

Peace on earth, good will to men.

I put the gun to the side of his head and pulled the trigger. I had plucked the string of the sublimest instrument in the universe: silence.

4.

That was the most horrible thing I ever saw. Really, doc. I never saw blood squirt and spray like that. I got sick all over myself. And the sound! That gunshot was like every note in his unplayed

life coming together in one blasting crescendo. It was not a chord. It was a single note! And, following it, the echoing concrete and bricks were engulfed in the silence of an empty universe.

I don't think I'd ever get it down on paper, much less get an orchestra to play it, but I hear it all the time. I could try for the rest of my life to capture the impression of that single imploding note, but I hope I never reach it. If I did, there'd be nothing more for me to do.

5.

I'm finishing up the new symphonic score I've been working on — *Tuwaqachi: The Fourth World*. I decided I'm going to dedicate it to Mike, who's probably on into the fifth or sixth world by now. I'm figuring his last name will come up during the trial. There are a lot of Mike's in the world and I want this to be for *him*.

One of the guards keeps me supplied with score-paper. Sometimes a little whisky, too. I promised him the autograph of *Tuwaqachi* if he'd xerox it for me so I'd have a copy. Ben's a really nice guy. Ben says he and the other guards always make bets on the outcome of certain trials. He says he's got a good eye and is seldom wrong, and that I'm a shoe-in for the cartoon factory — that's what they call it. There's such long odds on my getting convicted of murder-one or -two that so far there are no takers. Ben says he knows some of the guards down at the Harper facility — the cartoon factory — and he'll put in a good word for me because I'm polite. I'll have all the time in the world for composition. And when my beard gets in the way, I'll cut it. All the time in the world!

Or until you get cured, Ben says.

God forbid, I say. I got lucky the first time. I sort of blundered into murdering Mike. But I'd go nuts if I had to *plan* murdering somebody.

Ben slaps me on the back and wishes me well. Then he clangs my cell shut and turns the key. What a sound! Like a bank vault closing. Hey, like I'm federally insured!

I'm thinking of writing a proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts about my ideas for funding, at taxpayer expense, that won't get Senator Helms' underwear in a bundle. Poets and painters and writers and musicians could get down to their work and not have to hassle with cooking and landlords and girlfriends and boyfriends — and bosses. They could forget about money for once. Money always costs too much anyhow.

I don't know if they'll go for it, but at least we wouldn't be offending anyone. Nobody *sees* prisons. They don't hear them, either. My prison opera will have a chorus three times bigger than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and all their mouths will be taped shut.

6.

It's a really upbeat day today. Mr. Goldberg is going to play some of my music for the jury. He's a really nice guy. He says it'll help prove I was not in control when I murdered Mike. I don't get the connection, but I'd better relax and let Mr. Feingold do all the weaseling. Lawyers come to it so effortlessly, so naturally, like me and music.

7.

I'm almost near the end of this freaking notebook. I'll be finishing up the score for Mike this afternoon, and then I'll be able to start something new that's been clanging around inside my head. I'm going to write a symphony where all the instruments are guns: *The American Symphony*, dedicated to my patrons. Hey, I got me a patron!

Thanks, Columbia! You're a real gem. This Bud's for you. Rockefellers and Medicis from Sea to Shining Sea. Too long for a title, though. What do you think, doc?