

The Light at the End of the Dock

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The green light at the end of Daisy's dock burned across the water from Jay Gatsby's great mansion in West Egg, Long Island. For Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald's yearning, doomed hero, that light represented his desires: Daisy, first and foremost, as well as the wealth, social position, and belonging that she represented.

The Great Gatsby is required reading for about half the high school students in America. They are on the threshold of their lives, reckoning with who they are, what they want to become, and what for them are the lights burning at the end of docks that they can only imagine reaching some day. A moving story in the New York Times on February 17, 2008 described the meaning of that green light to some of these students. For a daughter of Chinese immigrants attending Boston Latin School, the green light is Harvard. For another student from the Dominican Republic, the green light is money, not for its own sake, but for the possibilities money can provide.

When I was entering adolescence, I once played a kind of green light game before I went to sleep. I asked myself, "If I had three wishes, what would they be?" The first wish, of course, was to have unlimited wishes. My next wish was to know who my husband would be. The third wish was that my husband would be famous. For the girl that I was in the 1950's, I saw my future through an inevitable husband as surely as a Jane Austen heroine saw hers in the 18th century. The good news is that my mother saw my gifts as assets for and compatible with wife and motherhood. A good education would help me find a smart husband and raise smart children. I could be creative because I was a girl and wouldn't have to earn a living.

In fact I had a hard time settling on any one green light, husband excepted. A bit like Toad in Wind in the Willows, I was a child of passions: for making art, for classical music, against Rock and Roll, and, with secret longing, for Buzzy Schwartz, the cutest guy in a buzz cut that ever walked the halls of Mount Lebanon High. I got over Buzzy, but the other passions have endured, one way or another, though I have come over time to appreciate rock and roll.

My parents, with all the zeal of first generation Americans, had their own passions, and their most powerful was to give their three children all the advantages that they lacked. My mother described how her immigrant father's first purchases after he had made a little money in the construction trade, was an Edison gramophone and a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica. She grew up with Caruso and Galli-Gurci pouring from the family gramophone, even though she had only hand-me-down dresses to wear. Music was in her bones and critical to an educated life. Some of my earliest memories were of lying in my bed listening to my mother play "Tico-Tico" and "The Maid with the Flaxen Hair" on the Baldwin Acrosonic in the living room below.

As soon as we could sit at a bench for half an hour, our turn at the Baldwin Acrosonic began. The neighborhood teacher was a gray and unforgiving woman, who appeared to dislike children. I remember painfully curving my fingers over the rod she placed over the keys, struggling with the dreaded scales, and finding unexpected joy when I could finally thump out the chug of the Train Song. The stern teacher's verdict: she has talent, but doesn't work hard enough.

Liberation from the piano came with double-digit birthdays. My parents had a formula: first the foundation of the piano, then an instrument. My brother, four years older, had chosen the clarinet. When I turned about 11, Gordon had graduated from his silver-plated Bundy to an ebony Buffet, a fine instrument he owns to this day. I was to inherit the Bundy. "Clarinets are for boys," I protested. "Flutes are for girls." Where I got that idea, I don't know; probably some vague association with anatomy. But flute it was, and I was soon riding the bus downtown with my mother to choose my own silver-plated student model from the biggest music store in Pittsburgh.

I took to the flute. Its voice pleased me. Once I got the basics under my belt, I felt as though I were singing through my flute. I marched in the junior high school band, and within a year, the bandmaster told my parents that I needed a better teacher. Good parents that they were, they found the best teacher in Pittsburgh, and soon I was enthusiastically studying with brilliant and irrepressible Bernie Goldberg, the first flutist with the Pittsburgh Symphony.

The flute, much as I loved it, was not, however, my green light at the end of the dock. The flute lacked a little something; a little extra zing, the attention of the unusual; the challenge of the quirky. For that, there was the piccolo.

The piccolo is the smallest and highest instrument of the orchestra. It commands attention, hurts the ears, is notoriously difficult to play in tune, and requires an embouchure of steel. Maybe this was the green light at the end of the dock. My piccolo career began with the high school band, and ended with Rossini's "La Gaza Ladra," also known as "The Thievish Magpie." Let me explain.

A sure fire way to distinguish myself as a flutist in a high school of three thousand students with a flute population of about thirty girls (yes, girls), was to play the piccolo. I found what I thought was a sterling silver Armstrong, not a bad instrument that could shatter glass and cut through ice. I tightened my lips and blew like hell, and could get a pretty decent sound out of the thing. I played it all through high school, giving me some small extra cachet of distinction, which I thought I needed.

After I married my tuba-playing husband, Eli, in the early 1960's, I pulled the piccolo out again to gig with the Governor's Foot Guard Band at various patriotic parades and to sub with the New Haven Symphony. My last concert, as I remember, was in the early morning. The New Haven Symphony was playing in an elementary school, opening improbably, given the hour and the audience, with Wagner's "Meistersinger Overture," and ending with the rousing "La Gaza Ladra." The piccolo part in La Gaza Ladra is a

doozy, ending with a flourishing solo way up in the musical stratosphere. I did fine in the Meistersinger Overture, and cruised into “La Gaza Ladra,” until the solo. Up it spiraled, higher and higher, until I hit the ultimate, totally exposed, totally climactic note... wrong. I was not asked to play piccolo again with the New Haven Symphony. I put my piccolo back in its little case, and put it to rest. The green light had changed to red.

Over the years I’ve continued to study and play the flute, sometimes with gaps, but always with great pleasure when I’ve returned to practicing and playing. The piccolo was largely forgotten, until about a year ago. That was after Eli was contacted about performing “Tubby the Tuba.”

You may remember “Tubby the Tuba.” The red vinyl recording was a staple of my childhood. I loved Kliensinger’s lyrical melodies and totally related to Paul Tripp’s story of the little Tuba that wanted to sing his own song. With the help of his friends the Frog and Peepo the Piccolo, Tubby finally sang his song in the orchestra. Now the son of the author and the daughter of the lawyer who owned the production rights were reissuing the book, bundled with a CD of the original recording. They thought it would be fitting for Eli to perform Tubby at a party to celebrate the launch of the new book and CD.

Eli has performed “Tubby” professionally several times with orchestras. But in this case, with his customary generosity, he thought the honors should go to Mike Roylance, the new young tuba player with the Boston Symphony. Eli reasoned that he could handle the rest of the parts, accompanying Mike on the piano and synthesizer. That proved to be a challenge. There are the haughty strings, the snickering trumpet, the smirking French horn, the bassoon, the celeste, and, most importantly, Peepo the Piccolo. “Could you play Peepo,” Eli asked. I didn’t even know if I still had a piccolo, much less could play it.

After rooting around in the dark and cluttered window seat that has become a graveyard for old music zeroxes, rusted music stands, and the wooden metronome that ticks in a dotted rhythm, I found it. The leather case was shredding. I opened the rusted catches, and there it was, the silver plate (it wasn’t sterling after all) bubbling and chipping off the keys. After more than 40 years, I raised the piccolo to my lips and blew. Nothing happened. I blew again. A few thin notes. Maybe it’s the piccolo, maybe it’s me. So off to the repair shop it went.

I tried to get a commitment from Danny, the repairperson at Rayburn music. “So Danny, is it a good horn,” I asked hopefully? “I think I can get it to play,” was all Danny would venture. And he did. I worked on my chops, and by the time the book party and a few school concerts rolled around, I was able to hold my own with Eli, Mike, and Amanda, Mike’s professional trumpet-playing wife, who boasts a terrific snicker.

But something was missing. Peepo isn’t your average screeching, high register piccolo. She is plaintive, philosophical, Tubby’s sensitive best friend. My old metal piccolo was more like a common hussy. She just wouldn’t do. I searched EBay, read blogs about

wooden versus metal piccolos, perused price lists (ouch) for professional piccolos, and discovered internet sites for buying and selling used instruments. On one of those sites I found a used Yamaha PC62, a decent granadilla wood piccolo, not the best, but according to the blogs, a solid, reliable instrument. This became my new Peepo. My Yamaha had a warm, sweet tone, and I might have been happy with her forever if I hadn't glimpsed the piccolo equivalent of Daisy Buchanan. As with Jay Gatsby, once I saw Daisy, only Daisy would do. As with Jay Gatsby, she was just beyond my reach.

It happened like this. Once in a while during my grandchildren's piano lessons at the New England Conservatory, I would wander up the street to Rayburn's to talk a little flute talk with Danny. On one of these wanderings he handed me a battered old piccolo. You've got to try this, he said. I put the piccolo to my lips and blew a few notes. They flowed out like silk. I tried some scales. Holy cow! I didn't even know that a piccolo could play so sweetly. "I'll pay any price for this piccolo," I cried. But the piccolo wasn't for sale. It was a bequest to the New England Conservatory for students to use. Danny later told me that he asked if they would sell it to me. The answer was no.

What was I to do? I had seen Paree, or Daisy Buchanan, or any other metaphor you might use to convey the longing I now felt for that perfect instrument to express Peepo's love and loyalty.

Meanwhile, we had named our little ensemble "The Cupcake Philharmonic Orchestra," and were becoming a success. We played at schools and clubs, sometimes adding a violin and cello. I was playing with professionals and soon realized that my problems weren't just that Peepo lacked a little extra nuance; I had better get down to work and upgrade my chops. So I began to study with Sarah Brady, a brilliant young flutist and teacher. She introduced me to her piccolo, a beautiful new Hammig, a fine handmade German instrument. I checked out the Hammigs. Expensive. How could I justify spending thousands of dollars to play a 14-minute piece, no matter how sensitive and loyal Peepo is to Tubby?

But that green light beamed steadily across the bay of my desire. I continued my search and one day, on EBay, I found a Hammig piccolo. The pictures showed a beautiful wooden piccolo nestled in blue velvet in a case of golden leather. The case sold the instrument. It wasn't your usual black leather case. It was a case built for a treasure. I fell in love.

I immediately contacted the seller and discovered that this was the favorite piccolo of a life-long professional musician who spent his entire career as a soloist with military bands. He died after a long illness and the piccolo hadn't been played in years. I discovered through Google that the Hammig factory is located in what was Eastern Germany and has been producing fine wooden oboes and piccolos since the 18th century. I emailed the serial number to the factory in Germany and learned that the piccolo had been made in the 1950's. In other words, this was a pig in a poke.

Sarah was cautious. Eli said, “Go for it.” We all know that love isn’t rational, so I did go for it, and won.

Now I have the piccolo of my dreams. This little piccolo has turned out to be the treasure that I had hoped for, but there’s a catch. I still can’t quite express Peepo’s soulful and vibrant personality as perfectly as I would like. So I’m working hard on my scales and exercises in the hope that I can get closer to doing Peepo, and Telemann, and John Philip Sousa justice.

I’m reminded of something my old teacher, James Pappoutsakis, once told me. I was about 30, a young mother freshly back from two years in the Peace Corps. I was working with Mr. Pappoutsakis on a particularly moving and gorgeous piece, Suite Modale, by Ernest Bloch. I poured my soul out through that piece, except for a few measures that I never seemed able to get right. Frustrated, I turned to Mr. Pappoutsakis and said, “I can hear in my mind just how this should sound, but I never seem to get it right.” “Oh,” said Mr. Pappoutsakis, “That’s the divine difference.” “The divine difference, what’s that,” I asked? “That’s the difference between what we play and how we want to play it,” he replied. “That’s what keeps the music alive.”

Through this process, I learned something important about the green light at the end of the dock. We never reach it. We have to paddle as hard as we can in our little boat of life or we’ll never even get close, but close as we may get, our not getting there may be the best gift of all.