On Luck

by Karen Rile

> In a poem, one line may hide another line,
> As at a crossing, one train may hide another train.
> That is, if you are waiting to cross
> The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at
> Least after the first train is gone. And so when you read
> Wait until you have read the next line—
> Then it is safe to go on reading.
> —Kenneth Koch, from "One Train May Hide Another", 1993

The girl in line behind us at the hotel reception desk spots my daughter Caeli's violin case and asks if we are also in town for the conservatory audition. The girl tells us that she's a pianist. Her own audition was supposed to have been today. Then she smiles sadly, pointing to her leg, which we now notice is in a cast. Unable to use the pedals, she had to forfeit her chance to play the audition she's been preparing for all year. Caeli and I make expressions of sympathy, but the girl shakes her head. It's all right; she applied to several other colleges and has made peace with not getting into this one. Meanwhile, she and her mom had non-refundable airplane tickets and a Los Angeles hotel room, so they're enjoying a small vacation.

"Well, break a leg—*not*!" she jokes as the hotel clerk hands us our card key.

"How about that," Caeli exclaims as we head to the elevator, "they have a thirteenth floor in this hotel! "

I take the card from her and stare at it: room 1313, really? What are the chances? The two of us have often chuckled in the elevator of her violin teacher's apartment building in New York, which skips straight from floor 12 to 14, as if the 13th floor, where he lives, does not exist.

Well, fine. I'm not superstitious. I don't break into a sweat if my automatic umbrella accidentally opens inside the house. I'm not even afraid to pronounce the name of the Scottish play aloud in theaters.

But, *as luck would have it*, the air-conditioner in room 1313 isn't working. So I don't have to feel completely ridiculous when I immediately call down to the desk and demand a different room, preferably on a different floor.

We fear jinxes because we cannot see into our future. A hotel room number becomes a bad omen. We wear our lucky socks to the audition, and if it doesn't go well, we get a new pair of socks. If it does, we *thank our lucky stars*.

The concept of fortune, good and bad, helps us construct a soothing narrative when life doesn't make sense in the moment. But you can't game the system, because there is no system.

Bad luck knocks you off the path. Even if you work as hard as humanly possible. Even if you're as good as good can be. Maybe someone slams a car door on your finger on your way to the violin audition. Maybe it snows fifteen inches and your flight's canceled. Or your accompanist doesn't show up. Or it's eighty-five degrees under the spotlight and your instrument's fingerboard is slippery with sweat, so you flub a dozen notes. Or you do everything in your power to ensure the perfect audition trip, and then you get a lousy time slot.

In a 2011 essay on decision fatigue in the *New York Times Magazine*, science writer John Tierney pointed out that, after a few hours, the mental strain of weighing in on case after case wears down adjudicators. After a prolonged session without breaks, judging becomes erratic. "…*decision fatigue*," he writes, "*can make quarterbacks prone to dubious choices late in the game and C.F.O.'s prone to disastrous dalliances late in the evening. It routinely warps the judgment of everyone, executive and nonexecutive, rich and poor*." If your audition is the last before lunch and the judges are out of their minds with low blood sugar, you may have lost before you play a single note. Or you could lose for the mere reason of going first. *That's the luck of the draw.*

A few years earlier, when my daughter was an 8th grader auditioning for Juilliard's precollege program, she was assigned the very earliest slot of the day, 8:30 AM. According to the decision fatigue theory, this was an auspicious time for her to play before the well-rested, and presumably caffeinated judges. I stood in the hallway outside the studio, waiting among parents and kids lined up to audition. Seconds after the door clicked shut behind her, the elevator dinged and several key members of the faculty panel (whom I recognized from their Wikipedia pages) emerged, five minutes late, holding Starbucks cups. I watched as they lingered politely outside the door until Caeli finished playing. That is to say, because she went first, a significant percentage of the judges were not even present for her audition. Not surprisingly, she was rejected from the program.

There's no telling whether she would have been accepted to that program had her audition been an hour, or even a few minutes, later. But the idea of bad luck altered the memory this experience from active to passive: from *if only I'd done it differently*, to *if only this had not been done to me.* Perhaps not a good thing, if we wish to have agency in our own lives. When she re-applied to the same program a year later, she was relieved to receive a more felicitous, mid-morning appointment. That time, as Caeli warmed up in the practice room, I found myself fielding panicked text messages from her accompanist, whose train from Philadelphia to New York was stuck in Trenton. After thirty minutes it was clear that there was no way would he could arrive in time for her appointment. Which meant that, after so much preparation, she would not be allowed to audition. I thought she'd had rotten luck the first time; this was even worse.

Then a Juilliard administrator came over and apologized to everyone because the panel was running nearly an hour behind. The other auditioners and their parents seemed agitated by the delay, but I could not imagine better luck. Ten minutes before Caeli was

called to go on, her accompanist appeared in the hallway, beet-faced and panting from his sprint up the subway steps. The two of them went into the audition together, energized by the excitement of the near-miss and their last-minute spate of good fortune. They played the audition with more gusto than if things had gone in a smooth, non-eventful way; it went great; she got in.

This time, the stakes are higher. A college audition might determine course of the rest of my daughter's life. Her audition slot is in the afternoon. Late, but not terribly. It's a glorious Southern California day, so I wait outside in the sunshine chatting with other parents. She emerges from her audition glowing—this was her best audition of the season, she tells me. *Fingers crossed*. Maybe her best audition ever, she says happily. For once in her life, she totally nailed it.

She doesn't even get a callback.

Stunned, we fly home on a red-eye, arriving in Newark just in time for a chilly, cloud-streaked sunrise. Moments like this feel terrible because you cannot see around corners. Imagination drops away and you feel blocked, unable to conceive of what will come next. You curse your luck (*it was bad mojo from that stupid hotel room*) and cast about irrationally for excuses. *I should have played the Bach first. I shouldn't have eaten the tacos*. The future feels absolutely blank. But the river of life washes us along. This is the last audition of the season. Within a few days my daughter, and all the other kids auditioning, and the pianist with the broken foot, would know the results of all their college auditions, and clarity would gradually settle in.

In his poem, quoted above, Kenneth Koch writes of what is hidden by the object or objective on which we focus:... *At a crossing, one train may hide another train. / That is, if you are waiting to cross / The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at / Least after the first train is gone...*

Luck is a problematic concept because it locks you in a static narrative. But only in fiction do stories have a clear beginning, middle, and end. What appears to be good luck, the first audition of the day, turns out to be bad luck in disguise (*careful what you wish for*). What appears to be bad luck, the train being stuck in Trenton, is good luck in disguise (*saved by the bell*). Say you're rejected from the opportunity of your dreams. Pass a little time, and your second-choice life—in a different place, with different colleagues, different friends, different work, even different family—will have become the only trajectory imaginable to you.

Kenneth Koch published his poem in *The New York Review of Books* in 1993, nine years before his death and the same year I miscarried a pregnancy. Her name was to be Terra, *earth*, a sort of complement to Caeli, our third daughter, whose name means *heavens.*

For a while I was crushed by a sense of terrible misfortune. I could not imagine my life without that child, now lost. Turns out, however, that my youngest daughter

Pascale would not have been conceived if the lost pregnancy had continued. As Koch writes in the poem, "*In a family one sister may conceal another…*"

When one opportunity evaporates, a hidden one emerges. The train you were sprinting towards pulls out from the station—revealing the second train. If you remain focused on the train you missed, the second train may run you over in its tracks. Instead, catch it, and travel to your as-yet-unimaginable future.

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