The Confessions of Joseph Blanchard

An Excerpt
by Ian Colford

I was in the grip of a depression more severe than any I had previously suffered. Many factors came together at exactly this time of my life to bring this about. For one thing, the winter just ended had been much too long as well as needlessly ferocious and cruel. Storm had followed storm with numbing regularity. For weeks there was nowhere to put the snow when it was cleared, and in the end it was piled to incredible heights along every street, obscuring visibility and making walking treacherous. Then when spring arrived the clouds moved in and for many days at a time we were subjected to torrential rainfalls. Outside the city, lakes and rivers swelled and overflowed. Close by my neighbourhood some streets flooded. People were forced out of their homes, leaving behind the belongings of a lifetime. Shops were closed and, in a move unprecedented in my memory, the universities cancelled classes and sent students packing. Like many people, I found it difficult to get about town. After a while I decided it was best to curtail my activities and remain indoors whenever possible.

At work a new management team had been organized with a mandate to shore up the sagging fortunes of our accounting firm, Murchie and Associates, which had seen business dwindle to perilous levels after four years of languid economic times. I had been working there for more years than I care to count, and I regretted seeing senior employees being let go, some of whom were personal friends of mine. In their place a troop of recent graduates was hired, fresh-faced and unsuspecting, straight from the classroom, newly minted MBAs in hand. We were told that the team had hit upon a strategy of injecting the firm with new blood, hoping to break free of the debilitating influence of ritual custom and antiquated tradition that was preventing us from moving into the modern age and which stood in the way of real progress. According to this plan, we were told, an influx of new ideas would surely take root and no doubt flourish. Soon we would discover within ourselves renewed enthusiasm for our jobs and would willingly take on additional tasks and set about doing things in innovative ways. In no time we would have acquired more clients than we could easily handle. I admit I harboured a healthy scepticism regarding what I felt were baseless prophecies, and my fears were by no means allayed when, on the day I was scheduled to address this youthful brood, I found them undisciplined, arrogant, tactless, and shrill. The old ways meant nothing to them, and I was subjected to bold-faced ridicule and open scorn as I attempted to explain how our bookkeeping department operated. Two young men were then placed in my charge, who thereafter seized upon every opportunity to question my abilities and challenge my authority, and in general to make my life a torment. Other staff, sensing my discomfort and—yes, I admit—irritation, kept their noses to their books, their mouths firmly shut, every minute of the day. All banter and humorous exchanges ceased. The office became a mortuary, save for that one corner of the room, where the newcomers were seated side by side, which would erupt with urgent whispers and stifled giggles at irregular intervals throughout the day.

I was not of sufficient standing to raise any objections, but even I could see that far from reinvigorating the stiffened limbs of our firm, the new arrivals appeared instead to usher in a period of profound malaise. Nobody was comfortable with the new arrangement. Productivity took a distressing plunge. Morale sank to unparalleled depths. And though the cheery proclamations and sanguine forecasts persisted in an unbroken stream of pamphlets

and memoranda from the director's office, I could not help but recognize the entire episode as a prelude to the final descent into insolvency that many of us had long feared. When we finally hit bottom—in a year, maybe two—nobody would be safe. All of us would lose our jobs.

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My health was not good during this time either. I had recently developed a succession of allergies to foods that all my life I had consumed with impunity and to which I had grown quite fond. With no warning—as if my body had turned against me overnight—I found myself subject to thunderous headaches and shortness of breath if I were so foolish as to indulge in delicacies as seemingly benign as peppermints, sourdough bread, or orange marmalade. Many other foods suddenly affected me in adverse ways as well. I was compelled to regulate my diet, much as I had seen my parents do in the last years of their lives, and was required to closely monitor my bodily functions and make note of secretions and discharged matter in nauseating detail. My doctor assured me there was nothing in any of this to cause alarm and, no doubt perceiving my distress and seeking to console me, read aloud a passage from a medical text which reported that reactions such as those I was experiencing were in some cases observed to be temporary and that people had been known to re-establish their tolerance for foods after being unable to stomach them for a number of years. He informed me that mine was a classic case of this sort of malady and that I was not simply being neurotic.

However, I was not to be comforted. I could see a decline was in progress and envisioned myself hobbling around, leaning on a cane for support, beset by all manner of aches and pains, suffering from a variety of puzzling symptoms. It was clear to me as well that I would be afflicted by everything from swollen joints and senility to flatulence and bad breath before the passing of too many more years. The prospect was nothing less than intolerable, and there were times, when my torment was at its worst, that I began to give serious consideration to ending my life.

But without a doubt the most crushing blow to my well-being came with the sudden death of my young cousin, Sophie Alexandra Gebhardt. You may have heard of her, for even today there is talk of how brilliant—how consummately beautiful and talented she was. She received her first piano lesson at the age of five and within three or four years was receiving invitations to participate in recitals at the University Concert Hall, her name taking a prominent place on the program beside, and sometimes above, those of performers many years her senior. By the age of ten she was a headline artist, taken seriously in the musical press and treated with deference wherever she happened to go. Her parents were of course delighted to have a prodigy on their hands, but I suppose it was reasonable of them to wish to limit her appearances to no more than a very few each year, at least until she had attained sufficient experience in the ways of the world to be capable of running her own affairs.

Their plan was to enrol her in master classes at the university where she would receive instruction in basic composition and performance artistry, and in this intensive intellectual setting they hoped she would gain a rounded education as well as hone her skills to a fine edge. However, things do not always turn out as we would have them. She was only twelve at the time she was admitted, and she encountered difficulties with her teachers in at least two instances that I am aware of. These people—failed performers themselves though I have no doubt they were quite gifted—each sought to develop a very close mentor-pupil relationship with her and sculpt her as yet impressionable skills into shapes that Sophie was by no

means comfortable with. One, a renowned Beethoven scholar, wanted her to approach the keyboard more aggressively than she was in the habit of doing and to unleash in her playing the raw, untamed passion of the worst of the Romantics. Part of her regimen in these classes was a series of exercises designed to strengthen the muscles in her wrists and fingers, and a few minutes each day spent banging on a drum with a small club. The other, a flautist of pious inclination, evidently told her that if she ever lost interest in music she could make herself very useful as a CUSO volunteer ministering to the hordes of starving and afflicted in Africa. He taught her hymns and offered her a position as a church organist. The report I received was that Sophie returned home one day in tears saying that she wanted to give up her studies altogether and devote her life to the service of those less fortunate than herself.

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Though she subsequently encountered teachers who were more sensitive to the needs of someone her age–and in fact learned much that she was able to put into practice—the eventual result was that she left the university after only two years and after two more years of private lessons embarked upon a career as a soloist at the age of sixteen, playing as many as three concerts a week, always to packed halls, in places as remote as London and Berlin.

Her mother was a first cousin of mine—the daughter of my father's sister—and I was often present during the formative years of Sophie's precocious talent. Being a bachelor, with no prospects of becoming otherwise in the near future, I was a regular dinner guest and thus had the good fortune to share in the thrill of some of Sophie's early triumphs. Chief among these in my recollection is the first time she played Mozart's entire K.333 B-flat major sonata without a single error. She would have been no more than six at the time, and I remember her teacher—a gruff but kind-hearted old woman named Selma Kraus—leaped from her chair as the last notes faded and, filling the room with squeals of delight, hugged the child in what can only be described as a fit of rapturous ecstasy, Sophie herself remaining serene as she wriggled beneath the old woman's perfumed breath, enduring countless kisses as a reward for her perfection. Sophie's mother, as well as her father, a physician who at that time was struggling to establish a practice, displayed a great deal more restraint in their demonstrations of approval and, taking my signal from them, I joined in the polite ripple of stunned applause that greeted the conclusion of the piece. Secretly, though, I knew we were all faint with astonishment at what we had just beheld, for not only had Sophie played a difficult piece of music without stumbling once, she had also graced each note with what I can only call a personal signature: a fluid, lulling, tranquil quality that even on this occasion drew me in and encouraged me to explore Mozart's design—to perceive nuance and depth—as I rarely had before. As the music receded into memory and a meaningful silence enfolded us, I cast my cousin Pauline a stealthy glance and watched as her fingers disengaged themselves from a clenched position in her lap, and I realized that she too had only just begun to comprehend the magnitude of her daughter's capabilities.

The remainder of that particular evening–which lingers vividly in my memory though it was many years ago–was punctuated by lengthy silences as we each took an opportunity to reflect upon what Sophie had shown us.

Sophie remained utterly mute during the dinner itself, picking at her food and not even finishing her dessert—a concoction of cake and cream and strawberries that I knew she loved—before asking to be excused. Conversation was sporadic and perfunctory, and none of us directed a single remark Sophie's way, as if afraid to disturb, with prolonged attention or the sound of our voices, the surface calm

of some invalid whose public equilibrium could not always be counted upon. This was obviously not the case at all, and I for one was uneasy at the prospect of not addressing in some conspicuous fashion the remarkable performance we had earlier witnessed. Even Miss Kraus, who as was customary had been invited to stay for dinner, and whose effusiveness was near legendary, spoke very little, having only a few tales to tell concerning the exploits of various young nieces and nephews. Pauline remarked upon the weather, and I contributed an anecdote from the office where at that point I had been working for some three years. I regret that my story was not more interesting, because it was directly after I concluded that Sophie asked permission to leave. I remember being troubled by the thought that I had bored her and that from now on she would look upon me differently, that I would not be as important to her as I'd been in the past. I didn't know what to do about this and sat quietly for some moments after she had left, struggling with an urge to apologize to everyone present for my social deficiencies. However, one thought persisted in my mind throughout the remainder of the meal, and for some reason I regarded it as very significant: the fact that of all the people seated around the table that evening, Sophie was closest to me in age.

Normally a quiet child, Sophie was not one to draw attention to herself or her accomplishments, and I remember thinking that if the rest of us were in awe of her abilities, what must be going on within the mind of this fragile-looking six-year-old girl as she tried to sort out what it all meant? Her rapid progress at the keyboard had been noted, but I don't think anyone had remarked upon it as anything beyond what could be expected of a very bright child who showed strong interest in what she was doing. I can almost see—as I look back with the advantage of hindsight—how that evening seemed to mark for Sophie the crossing of some threshold that made possible everything that came afterward. She may not have seen it coming herself and been just as astounded as those of us who were lucky enough to be in attendance. Perhaps she was saddened, or confused. She may have realized, as I eventually did, that from the moment the piano fell silent and Mozart's exquisite harmonies drifted into the spheres, her childhood was over and any mistakes she made tomorrow would not be tolerated as they had been yesterday. The burden must have been great, and so I am not surprised she chose to leave the table early in order to take a few moments for herself.

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I remember after dinner indulging in a brief stroll in the garden next to the house, enjoying a cigarette as was my habit then and observing a distant stream of clouds that seemed pinned to the surface of a placid sky, like an insect, unable to move. I walked about in a rarefied state, full of wonder, utterly enchanted by even the most trivial of sights. I watched a steel-backed beetle bustle with apparent purpose over the lichen-crusted surface of a rock; and then a sparrow as it flew from tree to tree, following some design that I would never comprehend. The rhythm of the heavens seemed to have somehow made a subtle shift in order to accommodate the revelation of Sophie's talent, almost as if nature itself were absorbed in rapt attention, waiting for whatever might happen next. A brief rain had fallen while we were eating, and the leaves now glistened with a luminous quality of pristine freshness as if they'd only just unfolded themselves toward the light for the first time since the world was formed. I walked slowly and with care, not wanting to slip on the wet grass, watching the perfect spiral of smoke from my cigarette drift upward only to be dispersed by the cool evening breeze.

All this while I struggled to assess, in realistic fashion, the musical dexterity that my young cousin had earlier put on display–and I place special em-

phasis on "realistic" because we all know how during such an experience one's objectivity can be lulled into a torpor. Especially where music is concerned, the experience itself can approach a degree of almost mystical intensity that clouds one's judgment and encourages a fantastical interpretation of events. Afterward, when reason prevails, you shake your head and marvel at your own credulity. I wanted to assure myself that no such unconscious exaggeration had occurred here, and so in my mind I placed Sophie back at the piano and followed her movements and the sounds she produced as closely as I could, given my no doubt faulty recollection and the two glasses of wine I'd consumed along with my meal. Doing the best I could, I replayed the sonata through in my head exactly as she had rendered it, from the introductory theme—with its rapid cluster of trilling notes that put me in mind of a young girl running across a meadow—to the final chord that brings the whole piece to such an unequivocal yet humane conclusion. In none of this could I detect anything that struck me as strident or crass or ill-considered; there was nothing that violated the spirit of Mozart's intentions (as I understood them), yet also nothing that came across as shallow or stale or derivative. With her childish ingenuity she had unearthed what was vital and essential at the heart of the music and had conveyed this to us with the utmost skill and ingenuous charm. She was not trying to convince us of anything—as so many artists do, much to the detriment of their work. She only wished to send the music out to us, and it did seem to me very much like a gift, one that we were not required to reciprocate. I realized also, of course, that she had simply been trying to please us—her audience—and that she had likely been more than a little nervous playing before her teacher, who would have certain expectations, and her parents, who paid Miss Kraus's wages and were entitled to see results for their money. But what left *me* in a state of giddy incredulity and open-mouthed wonder, with the word "genius" hovering unarticulated in the margins of my mind, was the fact that in a single stroke and with no apparent effort she had surpassed to an astounding degree the level of musicianship I would have readily granted her, and at the same time completely shattered my notion of who and what she was. ■