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Absolute Pitch

Maya Bergamasco

SUNY Geneseo

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Absolute Pitch

“We assemble our personalities unevenly, piece by piece.”

—*Tim Page*

I was seven the first time I lost my mother. It was at a crowded art gallery, bright and loud, surreal and foreign as a nightmare. I kept grasping the hands of other women, watching with a mixture of horror and disappointment as they turned to face me. It was like turning over playing cards, one by one, to find that they were all blank. What if she left without me? I thought with panic. Eventually, I found her, and when I did her familiar scent washed over me like a balm, and with it the overwhelming sense of relief. She smiled down at me with crinkled hazel eyes, oblivious to my distress. Her hair, usually dark brown, took on a reddish tint under the gallery lights as she stood with me before a painting. I took her hand. She squeezed it once, as if she were transferring the journey of her pulse from her hand to mine.

As I got older, I noticed a tinge of discomfort when my friends interacted with my mother. They shifted in their seats, avoided her gaze, and tried to change the subject. It is, I have come to understand, something in her tone and attitude. She is too direct for them. Her eyes and her manner are so frank that my friends often mistake it for intimidation or anger. Her accent too, a mix of South African and British, often throws people off and distracts them. Conversations with her often take on the feeling of a police interrogation.

“How are you doing in school?” she asked my friend Victoria. We were nine years old. My mother was driving us to summer day camp.

“Doing okay,” Victoria answered. I cringed, knowing my mother would most certainly hate that answer. She was often frustrated by a lack of specificity. I was right; as her eyes met Victoria’s in the rearview mirror, I could already see a tiny line furrowing her brow.

“Well, do you have a favorite subject?” She fired back almost immediately.

“I’m good at math and science,” Victoria replied, although it sounded more like a question. She wilted a little in the seat next to me. That was another thing about my mother: the anxiety in searching for how best to appease her often left my friends a little drained.

“Good.” My mother made a tiny nod. Victoria had done what was asked, and had passed.

While I was accustomed to my mother’s demeanor, I also resented it. Her accent was invisible. I could read her face, judge her emotions, predict her actions. My father and my older brother, Oliver, could too. However, even with this predictability, she made us tense almost constantly.

“It’s always walking on eggshells with you, Emilia!” My father would often shout when they argued. It was not a single thing that set us on edge, but many things, because my mother was so particular and specific about everything and about the most peculiar things. For example, every time we wanted to eat food outside of normal meals, like a bowl of cereal or tortilla chips, we had to ask. Once, on vacation, Oliver and I were talking to a family friend about favorite foods, and we came to the topic of cereal.

“My mom hates buying cereal because we eat it,” I told him.

Our friend paused. “Isn’t that sort of the point?” he asked.

“No, no, it’s because we eat two bowls at a time,” I said. He stared back at me uncomprehendingly. “She wants us to space it out more so she doesn’t have to buy it a lot,” I tried to backpedal but only made it worse. Money, or lack of it, was not the cause either.

My brother fidgeted and looked down at his lap. Evidently, he was leaving me to do the explaining. At this point, the subject had become too complicated. I couldn’t explain to our friend that it was this kind of control that made my mother feel most secure. She craved it, and thus demanded it without question.

Our shoes were always lined up neatly at the front door. It was normal to walk into the kitchen and see her wiping the counter, or into the bathroom Oliver and I shared to find her rearranging the towels in the linen closet.

“See this?” she shouted when I walked in to brush my teeth one day. She waved a handful of wrinkled washcloths in my face. “These were all stuffed in here. This is sloppy. Did you do this?”

“No, it’s been like that for a while, Mom.”

“Why didn’t you fix it?” She was tossing the bath towels onto the floor. I knew she would refold and restack each one individually.

I shrugged. “I thought it was okay.”

“You thought wrong,” she said.

My mother grew up in a world very different from mine. She was born August 30, 1959, in Cape Town, to an upper-class Irish-Italian family, the second of four children. Her father worked as an architect. She and her sister went to an all-girls school run by nuns called St. Cyprian’s.

I gathered these pieces of information over the years. She was very vague about her childhood except when she talked about her grandmother, Albina Bini.

Albina seemed the center of my mother’s life, acting as a mother figure and role model. It was from Albina that my mother inherited her love of music. Beginning at the age of three, Albina taught my mother classical piano and opera. Later, my mother performed piano duets with her sister and lent her soprano voice to operas like *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

It was this exceptional talent that led my mother away from Cape Town to London, where she was accepted to the Royal College of Music to study voice and piano when she was eighteen.

I was eight when my mother signed me up for piano lessons. I was excited. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother sitting at her piano in our old house playing Schumann, Chopin, Mozart, and Grieg. I wanted to play like her, and my mother knew it. Before the piano lessons, I sat at the piano and played random notes, looking up at her in confusion when they didn’t sound like hers.

To meet my curiosity, my mother did some research and found Pat, a kind old lady who gave piano lessons out of her home on the outskirts of Tucson. Thus, my mother drove me to Pat’s house once a week. Pat was a gentle guide, placing my little hands on the keys to form chords and scales, yet it was my mother who pushed me the most. Whenever I practiced at home and hit a wrong note, my mother would yell, “That’s not right!” from the other room. I would learn later that she did not just have a good ear, as I had assumed before, but that she had absolute pitch, which meant she could recognize and sing any given note at will.

Once, I was playing a particularly difficult piece from my lesson book. It had dotted quarter notes, which I had just learned.

“Don’t speed up!” My mother called, inevitably recognizing my worst habit. She stopped whatever she was doing and rushed to the piano.

“Stop, stop, stop.” She shooed my hands away from the keys. “Like this, see?” She played the measure herself, perfectly, unwaveringly. I attempted to copy her as she hovered over me, her finger tapping the beat against the wood of the piano. I made the same mistake.

“Look, you have to count. Get your shit together.”

As I continued to make the same mistake, my mother’s tapping finger became a slapping palm against the wood. She nudged me so she could sit beside me on the bench and mark the sheet music with a pencil, her voice insistent in my ear as she wrote out the beats one by one. No matter how many times I repeated the passage, it was not good enough. My mother’s voice became loud and urgent. She began to shout. I felt the weight of her disappointment and with sinking despair, I started to cry.

“Can I stop? Mom, I want to stop. I don’t want to do this anymore,” I pleaded.

“No, you can’t stop until you get this.”

When I was seventeen, my mother announced she was moving back to Tucson, the city of my childhood. It was the summer of 2013, marking our sixth year living in upstate New York.

My mother’s plan did not surprise my brother and me. Our parents’ relationship had become strained. They could barely agree on anything and keep the peace for more than a week. They had stopped sleeping in the same room together, and my dad had taken to the guest bedroom. Oliver had finished his second year of college, and I had just graduated high school. My senior year, I had become both the buffer and the anchor for my parents. I was the last straw. I tried to imagine my parents living together without me and failed. The house would undoubtedly become a morgue entombed in my parents’ silence and distance.

“I need the sun,” my mother said. “I’m tired of living in a place where it’s cold and dark half the year. Where I grew up, the weather was like California,” she reminded us.

My mother and father left with the horses and drove to Arizona a few weeks before I left for my freshman year of college. It was decided that my father would fly back and stay in New York. He would continue his job as a high school teacher in the neighboring town and take care of the house.

About a month after I started college, I talked to my father on the phone.

“How’s Mom?” I asked.

“She loves it out there, she’s doing great.” There was a pregnant pause. “You know what she told me? She said she left because she felt we didn’t appreciate the support she gave us.”

After our phone call, I sat in the common room of my dorm and stared out at the parking lot below. I imagined my mother in the sunshine, separated by a three-hour time difference, in a different season, in a different life. I might have missed her differently if she had remained at home. The stretch of country between us only made me feel her absence more keenly. Later, I would think angrily that she had abandoned us. Whenever we argued, she would yell, “Take a hike!”, meaning I should go to my room and think it over. If she noticed that I had spaced out during a conversation, she would wave her hand in front of my face and say, “Now’s not the time to check out!” That’s what she had done, I thought. She had taken a hike, she had checked out.

The scattered distance of my family became the impetus for reflection on my childhood. Since my brother and I lived in separate places, we talked less about the present and more about the past. We posted clips from old movies we used to watch on each other’s Facebook walls. We basked in our memories over the phone.

“Remember the time we hid from Cooper at Dad’s art opening for twenty minutes straight?” I asked.

“Remember the time we got food poisoning in Mexico and Mom and Dad went kayaking without us?”

“When Dad got pulled over and the cop thought you were a girl?”

“Do you think Mom has something?” Oliver asked me during one such phone conversation.

“What do you mean?” I knew exactly what he meant.

I pictured him on the other end of the phone, shrugging uncomfortably. “I mean, like, a disorder. She has the worst way of telling us stuff. And she can’t keep friends—she always says something that offends them and then they leave her.”

Oliver was right. Our mother had always been difficult because she had no trouble pointing out our flaws. After we hung up, I realized that I couldn’t remember a time when my mother had lied to me. She had always been painfully, hurtfully honest. And I knew that she had no other way of expressing herself. It was this stubborn directness that often resulted in her friends leaving her. She often said things that carried a ring of truth, things others didn’t want to hear.

“You’ve gotten a little fat since you’ve been at college,” she told me when we visited her in Arizona over winter break during my freshman year. She wasn’t wrong. I had gained close to fifteen pounds, and the comment stung.

I read an essay in *The New Yorker* recently called “Parallel Play,” by music critic Tim Page. Page describes his early life with undiagnosed Asperger’s Syndrome. After his belated diagnosis, at the age of forty-six, he describes his relief:

Here, finally, was an objective explanation for some of my strengths and weaknesses, the simultaneous capacity for unbroken work and all-encompassing recall, linked inextricably to a driven, uncomfortable personality. And I learned that there were others like me—people who yearned for steady routines, repeated patterns, and a few cherished subjects, the driftwood that keeps us afloat.

As I read Page’s essay, I aligned his experiences with my mother’s actions. The memories of my childhood were the only pieces available to guide me. What was I searching for? I asked myself, feeling ashamed. Was I misdiagnosing my mother because I was holding a long-standing grudge about my upbringing?

It’s so easy for us to forget the positives of those we love. I have been so quick to point out my mother’s flaws, what I perceive as gaping absences where her presence was needed. The celebration of my accomplishments did not include her. She stayed home for the spelling bees, the majority of the concerts, most of the track and cross-country meets, the cotillion, the prom, the essay contest. It’s so easy for me to hold this against her and even more easy to resent her when she offers her help.

In my sophomore year of high school, I took my first AP class, AP European History. Knowing it was an advanced class, my mother increased her pressure on me to do well in school.

“You need to study harder, Maya. You need to try harder,” she said at dinner one night. My brother got up from the table to finish his homework. “Don’t leave, Oliver, this is a family discussion,” she told him. My father looked on in sympathy. He knew better than to comfort me while my mother had the floor. She easily overruled him; academic affairs were not his realm of parental duty.

Miserably, I slumped in my seat and cried. Nothing I did in school made an impact on her. Her high standards taunted me as they hung just past my reach.

“Stop crying,” she scoffed. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Pull yourself together.”

Once, after one of her lectures, she seemed bewildered by my tears. “Why are you crying?” she asked me. Her question was so blatantly clueless that it only made me cry harder. She saw expressions of emotion as a show of weakness, something to be dealt with in the privacy of your own room. To cry in front of others meant admitting you didn’t have your shit together.

The dinner conversations became more and more frequent. I became unhappy. I began to talk to the school counselor about my stress and about my mother.

“Hm,” she said, looking at me over her glasses and legal pad. “It seems like your mother might have obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

I felt offended that she had suggested that. I didn’t see my mother in that light. It seemed that she picked her diagnosis suspiciously quickly. Did she draw from a hat when I wasn’t looking? It seemed that she didn’t know my mother at all. I stopped going to the counselor; I no longer trusted her.

According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) is on the autism spectrum. People with AS are described as possessing a “preoccupation with certain objects or subjects [and] inflexible adherence to specific routines or rituals.” Those with AS also experience higher sensory perception, and are extremely detail-oriented. Children with AS experience difficulty falling asleep and are often early risers.

What more could explain my mother’s obsessions? Her aptitude for music? Her amazingly accurate sense of smell and uncanny hearing? She constantly complained that the cars from the nearby highway kept her awake at night. Once, she claimed she heard a horse and buggy on our road at four in the morning, belonging to an Amish family on their way to town for the farmers’ market. After coming home drunk from my first party senior year, I was paranoid for weeks that she would confront me, convinced she would smell the remnants of my first cigarette in the mudroom and the hallway to my bedroom. That like a bloodhound, she would catch a whiff of the alcohol and smoke that clung to the sweater I wore that night.

At the same time, there are facts that are inconsistent with my diagnosis of my mother. For instance, people with AS are marked by lack of coordination and have trouble communicating with others. My mother doesn’t have physical tics, enjoys bike riding and swimming, and has never failed to make eye contact.

My mother taught me how to live by myself slowly. The changes were sly and subtle, and I did not realize how much she taught me until I was on my own for the first time. Oliver was living and working at his college for the summer.

I was alone in the house with the dogs for two weeks when my parents left for Arizona. They stocked the fridge before they left, and I used my bike to ride to my job every day. I wasn't lonely; I found comfort in creating my own schedule and making my own decisions without consulting anyone.

"I want to live in a single apartment junior year of college," I told my mother.

"Did you do the research?"

"Yeah, I looked at some apartments and took some pictures. I'll send them to you and you can tell me what you think."

After I signed a lease on a single apartment, I called her again.

"Won't you get lonely?" she asked.

"Not really," I said. She seemed to understand.

As a child, the comment most frequently found on my report cards was "Good work ethic." This I attribute solely to my mother. As grateful as I am that she instilled this trait, it comes at a price. There is a difficult burden in thinking that something is never complete. In never finding satisfaction in one's work.

When I brought home bad grades—for my mother anything lower than an A minus—she would resort to her threats.

"If your next test isn't picture-perfect, you're off the cast of *Vagina Monologues!*"

When that didn't work, she used the cold, harsh truth, which was the most difficult to swallow and the easiest to deny.

"This is plain laziness, Maya. You can do better." Beyond the stark reality, I knew that she was right, though I would never admit it. The first thing I checked when I got home from school was my Facebook page. I would waste hours posting and messaging my friends from my computer. I got good at hiding the web browser in a separate window when I heard my mother's steps on the stairs. In retaliation, she learned how to check the browser history, or worse, catch me in middle of deleting it.

"It doesn't have to be perfect, you know," my college piano teacher said, in reference to my upcoming recital piece freshman year. "It's okay to make mistakes." We were trying to break my habit of repeating passages when I made an error in the middle of playing. "You need to continue without fixing the problem, otherwise you'll draw attention to your mistake."

I talked to my mother about it after my lesson. "What if it's not good enough? Should I have practiced more?" I asked her.

"Well, what if it *isn't* good enough?" she responded.

I think about my mother often while at college. There are so many things that remind me of her. I realized quite recently that a lot of my friends remind me of her. Perhaps, upon meeting someone, there is something in the directness of their gaze, or their drive to do well that makes me stick around. It catches me at the oddest times, too. Once, my roommate was ranting to me about a boy she found annoying, and her anger, so reminiscent of my mother's feistiness, gave me pause. Another time, someone was singing scales as I passed the practice rooms in the music department. The clear quality and confidence of the voice made me stop in the middle of the hallway, thinking for a split second that my mother was singing instead.

I haven't been successful in my quest to find an answer for my mother. Perhaps there is no single answer to why she is the way she is, yet I remain unsatisfied. I want the picture to be complete. I want everything to be absolute. Even with all the information I have gleaned, whether it be from my family, my mother herself, or the Internet, there are still gaping holes. I think of the places we've lived so far: Arizona, New York, California. Every time we move to a new place, the idea seems to have originated with my mother. We are always a step behind her. She is always leaving without us.