Opening extract from

The Mozart Question

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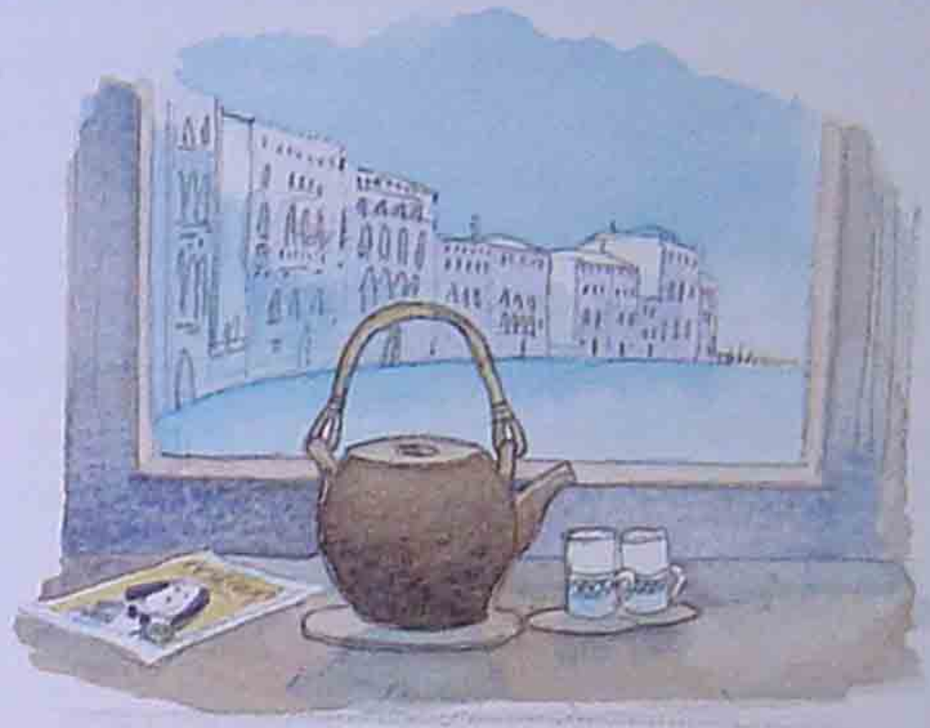


The question I am most often asked is always easy enough to answer. Question: how did you get started as a writer? Answer: funnily enough, by asking someone almost exactly that very same question, which I was only able to ask in the first place by a dose of extraordinarily good fortune.

I had better explain.

My good fortune was, of course, someone else's rotten luck – it is often that way, I find. The phone call sounded distraught. It came on a Sunday evening. I had only been working on the paper for three weeks. I was a cub reporter, this my first paid job.

"Lesley?" It was my boss, chief arts correspondent Meryl Monkton, a lady not to be messed with. She did not waste time with niceties; she never did. "Listen, Lesley, I have a problem. I was due to go to Venice tomorrow to interview Paolo Levi."

"Paolo Levi?" I said. "The violinist?"

"Is there any other Paolo Levi?" She did not trouble to hide her irritation. "Now look, Lesley. I've had an accident, a skiing accident, and I'm stuck in hospital in Switzerland. You'll have to go to Venice instead of me."

"Oh, that's terrible." I said, smothering as best I could the excitement surging inside me. Three weeks into the job and I'd be interviewing the great Paolo Levi, and in Venice!

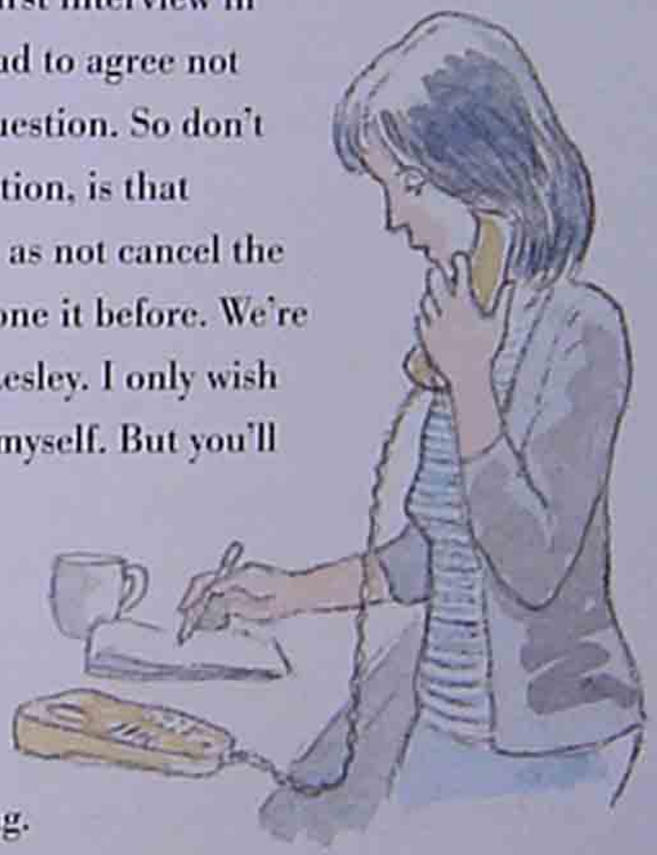
Talk about her accident, I told myself. Sound concerned. Sound very concerned.

"How did it happen?" I asked. "The skiing accident, I mean."

"Skiing," she snapped. "If there's one thing I can't abide, Lesley, it's people feeling sorry for me."

"Sorry," I said.

"I would postpone it if I could, Lesley," she went on, "but I just don't dare. It's taken me more than a year to persuade him to do it. It'll be his first interview in years. And even then I had to agree not to ask him the Mozart question. So don't ask him the Mozart question, is that clear? If you do he'll like as not cancel the whole interview – he's done it before. We're really lucky to get him, Lesley. I only wish I could be there to do it myself. But you'll have to do."



"The Mozart question?" I asked, rather tentatively.

The silence at the end of the phone was long.

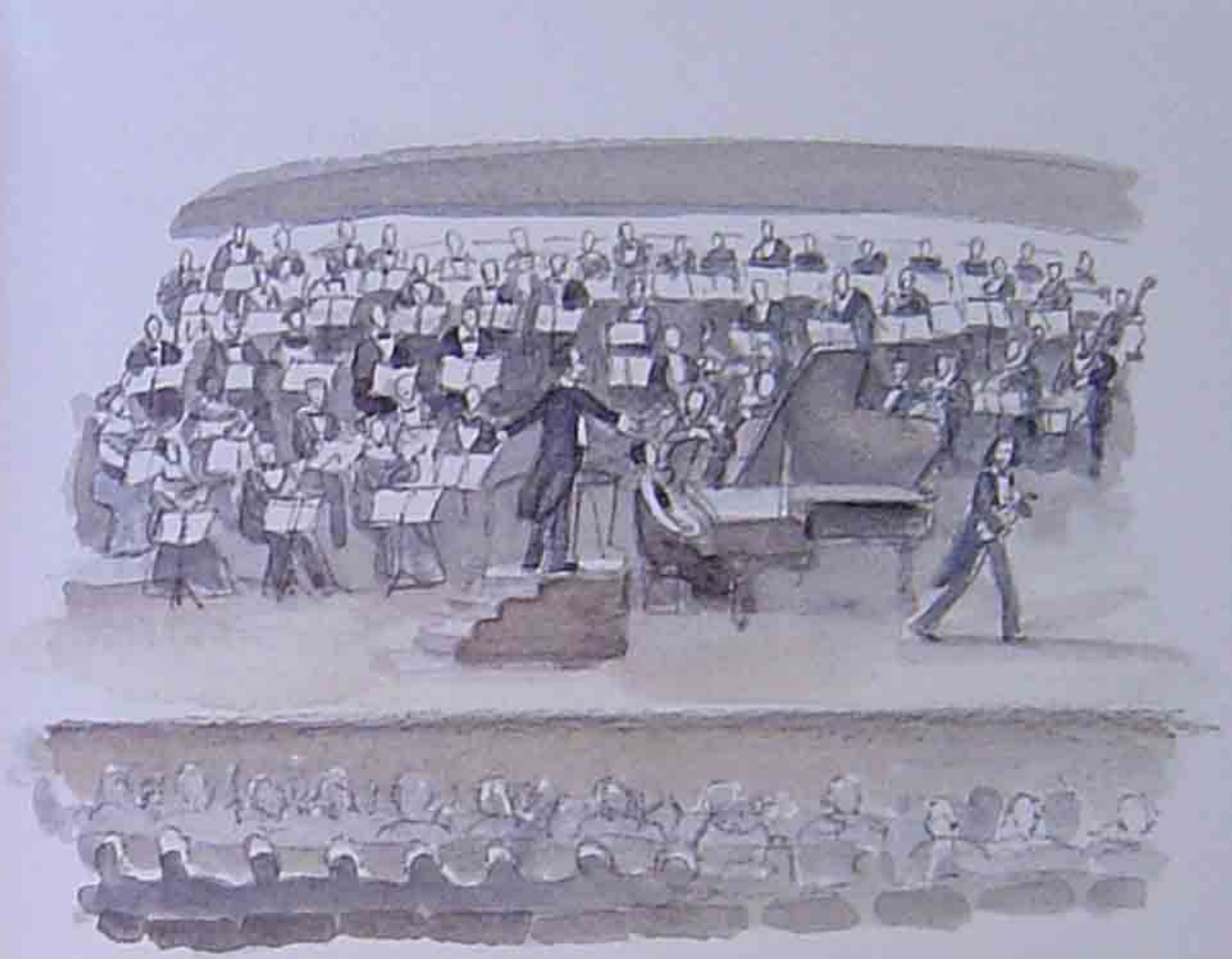
"You mean to say you don't know about Paolo Levi and the Mozart question? Where have you been, girl? Don't you know anything at all about Paolo Levi?"

I suddenly felt I might lose the opportunity altogether if I did not immediately sound informed, and well informed too.

"Well, he would have been born sometime in the mid-1950s," I began. "He must be about fifty by now."

"Exactly fifty in two weeks' time," Meryl Monkton interrupted wearily. "His London concert is his fiftieth birthday concert. That's the whole point of the interview. Go on."

I rattled off all I knew. "Child prodigy and genius, like Yehudi Menuhin. Played his first major concert when he was thirteen. Probably best known for his playing of Bach and Vivaldi. Like Menuhin he played often with Grappelli, equally at home with jazz or Scottish fiddle music or Beethoven. Has played in practically every major concert hall in the world, in front of presidents and kings and queens. I heard him at the Royal Festival Hall in London, five years ago, I think. He was playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto; he was wonderful. Doesn't like applause. Never waits for



applause. Doesn't believe in it, apparently. The night I saw him he just walked off the stage and didn't come back. He thinks it's the music that should be applauded if anything, or perhaps the composer, but certainly not the musician. Says that the silence after the performance is part of the music and should not be interrupted. Doesn't record either.

Believes music should be live, not canned. Protects his privacy fiercely. Solitary. Reticent. Lives alone in Venice, where he was born. Just about the most famous musician on the planet, and—"

"*The* most famous, Lesley, but he hates obsequiousness. He likes to be talked to straight. So no bowing or scraping, no wide-eyed wonder, and above all no nerves. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Meryl," I replied, knowing only too well that I would have the greatest difficulty even finding my voice in front of the great man.

"And whatever you do, stick to the music. He'll talk till the cows come home about music and composers. But no personal stuff. And above all, keep off the Mozart question. Oh yes, and don't take a tape recorder with you. He hates gadgets. Only shorthand. You can do shorthand, I suppose? Three thousand words. It's your big chance, so don't mess it up, Lesley."

No pressure, then, I thought.

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So there I was the next evening outside Paolo Levi's apartment in the Dorsoduro in Venice, on the dot of six o'clock, my throat dry, my heart pounding, trying all I could to compose myself. It occurred to me again, as it had often on the plane, that I still had no idea what this Mozart question was, only that I mustn't ask it. It was cold, the kind of cruel chill that seeps instantly into your bones, deep into your kidneys, and makes your ears ache. This didn't seem to bother the street performers in the square behind me: several grotesquely masked figures on stilts strutting across the square, an entirely silver statue-man posing immobile outside the café with a gaggle of tourists gazing wonderingly at him.