

"Can't Make Ends Meet."

I'm a cashier at CVS. I am 62 years old. I rent an apartment, drive a 14-year old car. My children are grown. I am single. I earn \$13.26 an hour. I work at CVS 40 hours a week. But that's not my only job. Without my second job at Super Y I would not be able to pay my bills.

I work at Big Y as a bagger for 20 hours a week. My earnings there are \$12.76 an hour. With these two jobs, if there are no other financial emergencies, I can just about pay my bills after taxes are taken out of my earnings. But something always happens. Last month, my car broke down, and I had to have an expensive repair done. I put it on my credit card. Now my credit card has over \$3,000 in debt which I've accumulated during these past 4 years. I am unable to pay anything more than the minimum payments on my card. The debt is increasing because interest is being added onto it.

I live a simple life in a low rent area. People are very prosperous in the towns that I work in. I see new model expensive cars in the parking lot of CVS and Super Y every day. People are well-dressed, pretty rushed. They don't really look at me. I am a fixture, a robot.

I sometimes wonder why my working life is so hard. I'm pretty tired by the time I get off work. I don't have any full days off. My health is good, but what if something happens to me? I see no way out, so I must make the best of it. I have a TV so I can see the news and things on television. I drink beer every night. Just 1 can. For me, that's a necessity. I see my kids sometimes. I have some friends.

I wonder sometimes, am I that different from you?

Laurie Israel, May 2018

“Vivaldi and Me”

I’m in my childhood bedroom where I practiced, looking out the window at the darkness on a winter late afternoon. I am 11 or 12 years old. I am learning the Vivaldi cello sonatas for the first time. It is the 1950s.

My family is in activity in the house. My mother is reading, and my brother upstairs doing his homework. My sister is quietly occupied somewhere in the house. My dad is still at work, but will come home on the train soon. The train makes a mournful hooting sound as it enters the station, which I can hear faintly.

All this is gone now and only in memory. My parents are no longer living. They’ve been gone for forty years, although, like the Vivaldi, they are embedded within me always. My brother and sister no longer live nearby – we have all scattered. But we are all still connected through memories, family ties, love and music.

The Vivaldi sonatas remain a constant in my life, as do lingering, bittersweet memories of the past. Vivaldi always invokes in me my lost family and those vanished times. I always have loved these pieces, and go back to them often.

Each time I go back, I play the pieces differently, because I am a different person with different memories and knowledge as I grow older. As I connect with them, I think about that girl on the cusp between childhood and adulthood in the bedroom of her family home in the dark winter, playing and hearing the pieces for the first time. I can imagine the purity of the tone coming out of that first encounter with Vivaldi’s loving and eternal soul, in that little New Jersey house so long ago.

There is a touchstone of sadness in all music. Music is in essence the unfurling of emotion through time. Performing music is an act of love, inextricably linked to sadness and loss in some way. As an adult musician, I have experienced many more of life’s joys and burdens than that girl encountering Vivaldi for the first time so long ago in that bedroom in that home. The notes as I play them now are mediated through my present life and experience. And yet the past is also there imbedded in the notes, the girl in that room, playing Vivaldi for the first time, the lost past, with its innocence in a dark winter’s afternoon, and sadness.

Laurie Israel, 2006.