

PLAYING  
FROM  
MEMORY

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A NOVEL BY  
*David Milofsky*

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO

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International Standard Book Number 0-87081-526-1

Published **by** the University Press of Colorado  
P.O. Box 849  
Niwot, Colorado 80544

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Paperback edition 1999

Printed in the United States of America.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, **by** Adams State College, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Mesa State College, Metropolitan State College of Denver, University of Colorado, University of Northern Colorado, University of Southern Colorado, and Western State College of Colorado.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences-Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48-1984

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Milofsky, David.

Playing from memory : a novel / by David Milofsky.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-87081-526-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3563.I444P5 1999

813'.54—dc21

99-11759

CIP

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my father, Bernard Milofsky. Some of the musical scenes in this book are based on his unpublished novel *The Fiddlers Four*

I am grateful to him for his advice and support.

08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Jaqueline,  
and to my mother and father



# Part One

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# I

THE APPLAUSE was thunderous. It rolled out of the tiered seats, enveloping the musicians, resonating through the huge, vaulted hall, until finally it crested and began to subside. Heinz Ober consented to an encore. Schumann, Ben would remember later. Again the auditorium was flooded with noise. A man in the front row stood and shouted, "Bravo, bravo, maestro, more!" But Ober would never play a second encore. He stood and bowed stiffly from the waist. Then he indicated his colleagues with a broad sweeping motion. When the audience tired of clapping, Ober pointed at Antoine Beaulieu, who led the quartet offstage. As the junior member, Ben always exited last. He counted a beat, two beats, then followed Ober. He was ten feet from the wings, his mind blank, his eyes on Ober's polished heel, when abruptly he felt his feet go out from under and saw the stage coming up at him.

He was flying, now soaring, arms outstretched, reaching for the receding tails of Ober's tuxedo. It seemed to take ages to hit the floor; he floated, weightless, outside himself, not believing what was happening to him. Then he was on the stage, shoulder tucked instinctively to blunt the impact of his fall. Ben smelled sawdust as he rolled into the accompanist's stand. But even the sharp pain in his side seemed imaginary. The whole thing was too absurd to be true.

Perhaps his fall would go unnoticed. People were in a hurry to get home, they were reaching for their coats and purses. He would crawl like an

Indian scout into the wings on his hands and knees. Who would see; who cared anyway? But to his dismay, nothing worked. Arms, legs, nothing. He lay as if paralyzed, his vision blurred, his limbs useless. He saw his right leg jerk convulsively, and then, feeling the flood of sensation return to his body, he swept his left hand in a wide arc, looking for his glasses.

He replaced the wire-rimmed spectacles and the world snapped into focus. There was a short, gray woman facing him in front, eyes wide in horror. Ben smiled weakly. It's okay, he wanted to say; a minor miscalculation, nothing more, nothing broken, go home now. Everything's fine. But having made eye contact, the woman became hysterical, pointed at him. "Help! He fell down! Look, help!"

Nervous whispers rose in the hall. Those who had been hurrying to leave turned now to look. Ben felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Get up," someone hissed from offstage.

He felt a hand under his arm, and he pushed unsteadily to his feet. The woman who had cried out was still standing in front of him, staring. A group of elegant matrons with frosted hair approached. Ben raised his right hand to hold them off, and was surprised to see his fiddle secure in it. Through it all, he had managed to protect his instrument. There was comfort in that.

He considered making a little speech; perhaps he could imply it was all part of the concert; something light to leaven Ober's rather predictable program. But then, sadly, he realized there was nothing he wanted to say. He made a deep bow and walked offstage.

## 2

OBER WAS WAITING. The others seemed to have gone to the artists' room. He would apologize to them later. "Ben, Ben," Ober said.

"You're repeating yourself."

"No jokes, this is serious. What happened to you?"

"You saw it," Ben said. "I fell on my ass."

Ober was usually the picture of composure, but now he was beside himself. "Of course I saw. I have eyes. But *how* did you fall? That's what I want to know."

Ben's self-assurance wavered. "I fell. How does anyone fall? I tripped, I guess."

"You tripped? On what? There is nothing to trip on! The stage is clean! Here, don't believe me, go look for yourself."

"I don't have to, I trust you, Heinz. I tripped over my own feet. I lost my balance. It happens, I'm a klutz, I fall down a lot. Why don't you ask about Cleveland, or that shower stall in Boston, or my broken wrist in Madison last year, it's the same."

"Very good, you take the words out of my mouth. I would very much like answers to all these questions."

"And I already told you. The throw rug in the hotel came out from under me, the fireplug was hidden, shower stalls are slippery. I sued the city of Madison and won; the court believed me, why don't you?"

Ober lowered his head, chastened. "I'm sorry, Benjy, I . . ."

"Ah, to hell with it. You're right, it's not normal. I don't know what's wrong." Suddenly he felt light-headed again and walked over to the wall and sat on a desk.

Heinz followed, and when he spoke, he was sympathetic. "Benjy, we are friends, you are like a son to me."

"Sure, Heinz, I know. I appreciate it."

"But I am worried; as you say, it's not normal. I am concerned for your welfare, that is all."

"And the welfare of the quartet."

"Of course. That is my responsibility as leader."

"Sure," Ben said. He couldn't blame Heinz. They couldn't have him falling down at concerts.

"I understand how you feel," Ober continued. "It is like being under attack, as if your body is in revolt. It is upsetting, I know. But it is not only you that is affected. I too am concerned when my second violinist falls and breaks his arm. Now you fall again. This is very serious. Careers, you know, can hang on just such an incident. As musicians, our bodies are terribly important. Beyond interpretation, beyond theory, we must have marvelous coordination, we must be alert, we must eat properly, we must exercise, we must—"

"I know all that," Ben said abruptly. Next Ober would get into orgone theory and blame it all on Ben's refusal to sit in the goddamned box he had brought back from New York.

Heinz was insulted. "All I meant was that we can never afford to take our health for granted."

"I know," Ben said. But he also knew it went beyond that. Ober would not be a left-handed fiddler today had he not broken his arm in two places when he was thirteen years old. The arm took more than a year to mend and never did heal properly. Ober had been forced to switch his bow arm; and he said his tone had never been the same.

"Look, Heinz, I know what you mean. I agree with you; it's very serious. But I don't know what to tell you."

"All I ask is that you see my doctor."

"Not that orgone guy?"

"Very funny. Very amusing. I mean the head of the medical school at the university. He also has a private practice; there is no reason anyone else need hear about it. But I must know if there is anything seriously wrong with you. If there is, we will fix it; if not, then we can forget about the whole thing. Agreed?"

And what if they couldn't fix it, as Ober said. What then? But there

was no point in arguing. "All right," Ben said. "What the hell. I went to a doctor in New York and another in Cleveland. Neither of them found anything, but if it will make you feel better, I'll go see the guy at the medical school. What harm can it do?"

"Exactly," Heinz said, pleased to have convinced Ben. "Now come, there will be people waiting for us, a reception."

"I think I'll just stay here for a while," Ben said. "I'm a little shaky; I'd just as soon not see anybody right away."

"As you wish, my boy," Heinz said. "I'll make excuses for you." He tapped Ben's shoulder and moved off toward the greenroom.

### 3

BEN SAT on the desk, still holding his fiddle under one arm. His broad shoulders and long trunk made him appear taller than his five feet eight inches, but he was not a big man. Now he peeled off the toupee, revealing a nearly bald head with a neat fringe of brown hair and a pate that gleamed in the stage lights. Heinz claimed his pink scalp distracted audiences, which insulted Ben, but he let it pass. There were more important things to worry about. Now he lit a cigarette and sucked on it, his cheeks hollow with the effort. Everything seemed hard tonight.

Color distracted him. Turquoise just out of his field of vision. Then he remembered: Dory was meeting him. They were going for a short vacation, had been planning it for weeks. He turned to see his wife watching him.

"Have you been here long?"

Dory ignored the question. She put her arms around him and held him tight. The turquoise shawl blocked his view, so Ben closed his eyes. He smelled her perfume; violets, he thought. She kissed his neck, then pulled away. "Are you all right?"

"I feel fine," Ben said. There was no point in worrying her. "I don't know what happened. Suddenly I was flat on my face. How did it look?"

"I couldn't see anything. Everyone was standing up and pointing. It was awful, like the circus. By the time I could see, you were on your knees. I was scared."

"I just tripped." Then, elaborately casual, Ben said, "Heinz wants me to see his doctor."