

## Sheldon Guberman's Two-state Solution

by  
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In the cramped apartment complex where he moved after his wife divorced him, the tenants occasionally complained when Sheldon Guberman played his trumpet too loud or hit one too many high notes. For that reason, through the summer months Sheldon much preferred to practice in the local park. The middle-aged man was midway through the third study in *Kopprash's Sixty Etudes for Trumpet*, when an olive-skinned woman with a hooked nose approached from a bench fifty feet away where she had been sitting. With an overly theatrical flourish she indicated the gold lacquered horn cradled in his lap. "I've always been partial to brass instruments, and you play so beautifully!" Rolling her 'r's' with a nasally twang, the woman spoke fluently but with a decidedly foreign accent. "My granddaughter," she indicated a gangly youth with jet black hair and knobby knees waiting expectantly on the abandoned bench, "wants to play a musical instrument."

Sheldon ran his fingertips over the valves and felt the recoil action as the springs responded to his familiar touch. "The music store on Beech Street gives lesson."

"They're rather expensive," the woman parried the remark, "and my family's currently rather strapped for cash." The way she worded the reply coupled with a flinty, hardscrabble smile suggested that the woman preferred creative financing. "I thought maybe we could barter for your services."

Sheldon closed the collection of musical etudes lying on the thin metal stand. "I don't follow you."

"I work as a domestic... a housecleaner. Perhaps I could clean your home in exchange for my granddaughter's music lessons."

A gray squirrel was foraging for acorns under a broad oak tree near the young girl, who was furtively following her grandmother's negotiations. "If money's an issue," Sheldon offered, "I'd be willing to teach your girl for free until circumstances improve."

"Circumstances improve," she parroted back his final words with a bitter-sweet half-smile. "That won't be happening anytime soon. I'd much rather give you something tangible in return for your generosity."

"Your name?"

"Samira Khoury." She gestured with her eyes in the direction of the young girl. "My granddaughter's Abroud."

"Interesting name."

"It means 'fair and beautiful girl' in Arabic." The woman nodded at the youngster, who was following the conversation with her walnut-colored eyes. "Abroud was born here, but we are originally from Lebanon."

"I see." Actually, Sheldon didn't see much of anything except that his practice session would be abruptly cut short. He had hoped to wade through a few additional pages of the Kopprash intermediate-level studies before moving on to Sigmund Herring's *Orchestral Excerpts* and a handful of flow studies in a collection by Harry Glantz.

Sheldon gestured for the dark-haired girl to approach. "You'd like to play trumpet?" Abroud wagged her head forcefully up and down. "The trumpet," he raised the horn and held it in front of her face, "is a rather physical beast, a very demanding and, at times, unforgiving collection of bent pipes and pistons." When there was no immediate reply, he added "There are dozens of other instruments suitable for girls... flutes, oboes, clarinets, French horns, violins, cellos, harps and pianos."

"I want a trumpet."

Sheldon made a motion with his wrists as though he was briskly beating an upbeat rhythm with a pair of drumsticks. "What about the drums?"

"Not interested." Abroud's voice sounded even more intractable.

A second time, Sheldon held the golden instrument up in front of her face. "Why trumpet?"

"I dunno," Abroud shot back. "As soon as I heard the sound, I knew."

"Knew what?"

The girl's eyes glazed over. Reaching out, she ran a caressing index finger over the beaded bell. "I wanna play trumpet... nothing else."

Sheldon turned to the grandmother. "I don't suppose she owns an instrument."

"We hadn't thought that far ahead."

"No matter... I've got an old student model she could borrow."

"So you'll teach my granddaughter?" The older woman couldn't believe her good luck.

"I dunno," Sheldon hedged. "Before committing to anything, I want to make sure that the novelty of a shiny new instrument doesn't wear off once the honeymoon period ends."

"What about our arrangement?" Samira pressed.

Sheldon was trying to imagine, from a practical standpoint, what Samira could do in his claustrophobic apartment. "We'll discuss that after the first lesson." Sheldon rubbed his grizzled jaw with a repetitive gesture. "How old is your granddaughter?"

"Abroud turned eleven earlier in January."

"So she'll be attending middle school at Jackson Heights in September." Samira nodded. "I know the music director. They have a first-rate band program."

"Three months," Samira blurted, anticipating Sheldon's unspoken thoughts. "Is that enough time –"

"More than enough to learn the basics," he cut her short, "if the girl applies herself over the summer." "The main thing is to get a handle on fundamentals... breath control, fingering, articulation and reading simple sheet music."

Sheldon had spent the better part of thirty years teaching disinterested, disaffected, poorly motivated, recalcitrant and hopelessly incorrigible teenagers how to triple tongue and negotiate the *Carnival of Venice* with all five thematic variations. He didn't want to drag another would-be musical prodigy kicking and screaming down that darkened alleyway.

"Most students start out with the best of intentions. A new horn's like a Christmas present in the middle of July. When the novelty wears off, practice becomes drudgery. Some new fad catches their interest, and the golden horn spends more time locked away in the case than the student's hands." "I can whip her into shape by September," Sheldon added, "but Abroud would have to set aside an hour a day to practice her lessons and not fall behind schedule." He turned his attention to the girl. "Have you ever seen a person waterskiing?"

The question, which had nothing to do with the topic at hand, caught Abroud by surprise. She blinked several times and gawked at her grandmother. “At the beach last year... they had a motor boat, pulling the skiers around the lake.”

“What happened when the boat slowed down?”

Abroud considered the question. “The skier sank.”

“And when the boat sped up again?”

“The skier rose to the surface and skimmed across the water.” The girl stared at him with a muddled expression.

“With wind instruments,” Sheldon continued, “your lungs are like the speedboat. You play the horn with your breath not your lips.” Sheldon ran his tongue over his lips, a reflexive gesture, and blew a raspy, sustained tone. When the air was gone and the sound finally petered out, he tapped the girl gently on the wrist. “Now you take a deep breath and make a similar sound. Once the lips vibrate like a reed, you can proceed to the mouthpiece and eventually the horn.”

When the girl had wandered off out of earshot, Sheldon turned to the grandmother. “Over the next seven days, say nothing about our meeting today and see how many times Abroud inquires about the horn. Then come back to the park next Saturday at the same time. I’ll be here. If she mentions her musical interest more than twice, I’ll give her trumpet lessons.”

Samira reached out and shook Sheldon’s hand. “Fair enough.”

Normally, Sheldon would have been miffed at the interruption, but the loquacious woman, with her affable, easygoing manner proved a pleasant distraction. He was no longer preparing for an upcoming performance. The trumpeter stopped playing in the community orchestra the previous year when he formally retired from his position as musical director at the high school “You’re originally from Lebanon?”

“No, not exactly.” The woman watched as the granddaughter ran off in the direction of a playground with tire swings a short distance away. “We are Palestinians, through and through.” She waved a flabby arm fitfully in the air. “Lebanon was a beautiful country... heaven on earth but little more than a way station, a pause in life’s fickle journey.”

“I see.” Again, Sheldon hadn’t a clue what the woman was talking about. Her frenetic mind resembled a glitzy pinball machine with an array of silvery balls ricocheting off a myriad of free associations and unrelated ideas.

“It’s a long story,” Samira cleared her throat and averted her eyes, “but let me try to explain... set things right.”

Samira’s Khoury’s grandfather owned a large tract of orange groves in the Northern Galilee. During the *War of Independence* in 1948, the Jewish army drove the Khourys off their land and into exile in the foothills of southern Lebanon. The family subsisted in refugee camps until the father cobbled together enough money to purchase land and start over again.

“But it was a short-lived affair,” Samira confided grimly. “In 1982 the Israelis rained cluster bombs on Nabatieh where we were living in Southern Lebanon, transforming our glorious fruit trees into charred stumps and ashes. My parents said, ‘Enough is enough!’ and we immigrated to America.”

“You became refugees twice over.”

Samira shrugged, her lips sagging in a bitter-sweet smile. “My grandfather was long dead, but my husband, who was also a refugee, always planned to return when there was serious

talk of a two-state solution. Following the *Six Day War*, he felt the Israelis might agree to a Palestinian homeland in the Gaza Strip and occupied territories west of the Jordan but fate interceded. My spouse took sick and died.” The woman shrugged and blotted some wetness from the corners of her eyes with the back of her hand, then mumbled something so softly that Sheldon could make no sense of her words.

“Excuse me... I didn’t hear what you said.”

“Patience is a cure for everything... an Arabic saying.” Samira wagged a finger at the music case lying next to the bench. “First I interrupt your music and then prattle mindlessly on, talking you half to death. Now *you* tell me something about yourself.”

“That won’t be so easy.”

“And why not?”

“I’m painfully shy,” Sheldon confided, “and never quite know what to say in social situations.”

“But you seem to be doing just fine now.” Samira protested.

Sheldon grinned sheepishly. “That’s only because you came to the bench and initiated the conversation.” He shook the water from the spit keys and returned the horn to its case along with *Kopprash’s Sixty Etudes for Trumpet*. “When my marriage went on the skids, so did I. Twenty-five years we were together... a quarter of a century. I was reasonably happy in the marriage, but my wife didn’t share my sentiment.”

Samira lowered her eyes and pawed at the grass with the toe of her shoe, “Perhaps there was another man.”

Sheldon’s head bobbed up and down, as his features cycled through a series of unflattering emotions. “My ex-wife, Myra,” he continued, “was constantly berating me for not being more enterprising... like her brother, Jake, a lawyer who specialized in personal injury and medical malpractice. My brother-in-law also managed investments and pension funds for several of his wealthier clients.”

“When I pointed out that we weren’t doing so badly, she sniggered that, compared to Jake, we’re penny-pinching paupers.” “As my brother-in-law’s fortunes blossomed over the years, Myra became more shrewish and demeaning. Jake drove a fully-loaded Jaguar convertible. He owned a lavish summer home, a mini-mansion on the beach in Yarmouth, where he could stroll along the beach at sunset, watching the tide roll in off Cape Cod Bay.”

Sheldon stared morosely at his trumpet case. “My wife eventually ran off with the manager of a real estate firm where she worked part time. The middle-aged love birds move away to San Francisco. I haven’t seen or heard from her since the divorce was finalized.”

Sitting down on the bench next to him, Samira folded her hands in her ample lap. “At least you don’t have to listen to her endless complaints.” Samira noted.

“About a year ago an article appeared in the local newspaper: *Prominent Local Lawyer Indicted for Embezzlement*.” Sheldon made a wry face. “My ex-brother-in-law jerk stole over two hundred thousand dollars from a client’s retirement fund and squandered all the money.” Sheldon watched as a gray squirrel picked his way in a zigzag pattern across the grassy knoll in search of acorns. “At first Jake denied the allegations and the case went to court, but shortly before the trial he pled guilty.” “Five years... that’s what the judge gave him.”

“So much for the mini-mansion overlooking the harbor,” Samira observed with a tersely laconic grin.

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Arriving back at the condo, Sheldon checked his mail. There were a handful of bills, a flyer from the local supermarket offering two-for-one specials and the latest copy of the *International Trumpet Guild* journal. From out in the hallway before inserted the key in the lock, he could hear the telephone in the kitchen twittering incessantly. "Hello, Sheldon?"

Recognizing his wife's whiny voice, an icy chill slithered down his spine. "Myra, I haven't..." He left the sentence dangling.

"How you been?" The woman had spoken a sum total of five words, and yet the gloom-and-doom undercurrent of diffuse rage filtered through the telephone line like a malevolent curse. But Sheldon had nothing to fear from Myra, the congenital malcontent. Three thousand miles of mountains, deserts, lakes and rivers physically separated them.

In her youth, Myra had been passably pretty with sharp, angular features, auburn hair and a thin-lipped smile. But over the years perpetual discontent eroded her more congenial features. The supple lips grew taut and wrinkled. A smattering of crow's feet took up permanent residency around the corners of the hazel eyes.

"Not bad. Why are you calling?"

"I don't want favors... ain't asking nothin' for myself, but Jake's having a rough go of it at the facility." As Sheldon remembered, Myra refused to use the term 'prison', when referring to her brother's current living arrangement. She much preferred a benign euphemism over the harsh reality. "Nobody treats him with respect."

"The guards or other inmates?"

"Both," she shot back. "And worst of all, hardly anyone ever goes to see the poor slob. He seldom gets visitors."

Like an over-the-hill prize fighter, Myra telegraphed her punches, inviting the opponent's counterpunches. "When's the last time *you* saw your brother?"

"The week before sentencing."

Feeling the urge to retch, Sheldon pulled his ear momentarily away from the receiver. Myra had never bothered to visit her brother since he entered prison. "You could fly east and spend some quality time with Jake."

"Not a possibility."

"And why not?"

"I got domestic problems of my own," she replied in a voice as coarse as 60-grit sandpaper. "I thought maybe as a kindness you might visit Jake. The facility... it ain't more than a two-hour drive from where you're living."

"I'll see what I can do," he muttered noncommittally.

"So you'll go see my brother?"

"I dunno. I'll think about it."

An awkward pause ensued. "Goodbye, Sheldon."

He hung up the phone without bothering to say anything more.

Sheldon couldn't believe his bad luck. After such a pleasant afternoon – pure serendipity – meeting the vibrant Samira Khoury, Myra, the ex-wife from hell, resurfaces! She emerges from the black hole of his melancholic past with a request that he spend quality time with Jake - the shifty, cagey, con-artist with no moral center.

Sheldon brewed a cup of chamomile tea and curled up on the bed with his *International Trumpet Guild* journal. He plodded through an article describing the use of the alt-7 chord in jazz

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