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The Fiddle

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Elisa Campos

THE FIDDLE

Sheri Frey

“Come here.” The old voice quivered. The girl drew close. She smelled the soft smell of her great-grandfather; the minty odor of Ben Gay and spicy aftershave mingled with the damp, sour smell of the nursing home. Somehow, it smelled sweetly comforting. The old man’s arthritic hands trembled as he pulled out a large brown case and laid it on his bed. “Open it,” he said.

The girl ran her hand over the cool, rough case and flipped the latches on it. She opened it and then turned back to the man.

"My Pearl danced many-a-hoedown to it."

"I thought it burned in the fire, papa."

"Look at it," he instructed.

Bruises and scorch-marks covered its pale brown finish. One string flopped. Reverently, the girl lifted the violin. It was light — too light, almost, to lift. Gently, she tightened the peg and then tuned the rest of the strings. Carefully, she pulled out a handkerchief, brushed away the dust, and polished the old fiddle. Then the girl took the long brown bow from the case. The horse hairs on the bow were yellowed from age. She tightened the screw and spread chalky rosin up and down the bow in short, quick jerks.

"Sit down and play me something," he said. She started with "Turkey in the Straw" and played on. The tunes drifted to spirituals and hymns. To look at it, no one would imagine how sweetly the fiddle could sing. When the fiddler paused to catch her breath, the old man exclaimed, "Praise Him with psaltery and harps. Praise Him with stringed instruments. Praise Him with high-sounding cymbals. Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord."

The girl tucked the fiddle under her chin and played on. The fiddle played hymns and jigs and everything in between. Its quiet voice carried into the hallways of the nursing home. Soon a group gathered in the doorway. Laughing, the fiddle spit out the brisk notes of the "Orange Blossom Special." Faster and faster it raced while the crowd merged into the room. They roared at the gay "Shave and a Haircut, Two Bits" at the end. Then the little fiddle sang a soft lullaby. Dusk settled over the room. Like a stealthy kitten, dark crept in on silent feet. The grandfather stretched his hand to switch on the lamp, giving the room a dull glow. The fiddle filled the room and then fell silent.

As the crowd dispersed, the girl rested the fiddle in its case. Like a loving mother, she caressed its tired body and then put it to sleep in the rectangular box. She gazed out the window, reflecting how much like papa was the fiddle. Each made their presence known by gentle quietness; both commanded respect. The girl heard a sigh behind her. The old man stared at his gnarled hands in disbelief. Once the fiddle lived in his hands, but now it came to life in other hands.

"The fiddle belongs to you now," he said.