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The Old Man and C
by Sheila Finch
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Light sprang to the wall when his wife opened the casement window to let in a little breeze from the lake. It shattered, sparkling over bookshelves and wallpaper, as his young student's bow scraped across the E string and the fingers of her left hand searched for high C.

She still could not seem to get it right. The note must sing, not screech! He had shown Rosa over and over, patiently correcting her fingering, the pressure of the bow across the string, explaining to her how the sound was produced in the hope that if she understood perhaps she could improve. She was so brilliant in every other respect.

"Kaffee, Papa?" his wife whispered in his ear.

He shook his head.

"Don't lose sight of the time. Eddie comes this afternoon. And Lisl will want to go with her Opa on the boat!"

Rosa had progressed to the arabesque, a passage she played excellently, her fingers flying like the scintillating reflection of water on the wall.

His wife left him to his pupil and the music lesson, closing the music room door quietly behind her. He gazed at Rosa. Eyes closed, she bit her lower lip in concentration. Wisps of fair hair escaped from braids trailing over her shoulders. She was a good girl, the best student he had ever had. If she mastered this one note, she should easily take the gold medal -- perhaps the last he would ever see a pupil take. She had more natural talent than any of his previous medalists.

But the other students in the competition, children who came from the wealthy suburbs of Zurich where they had Waschmaschinen and Fernsehapparaten, they could afford to spend all day practicing, whereas Rosa got up at first light and helped her father milk the cows. Time for the violin had to be sandwiched between farm chores and schoolwork. Now she was approaching sixteen; her father had begun to think of the day she would marry a solid farm lad and give him one less mouth to feed. This was her last chance, too. He had worked hard with Rosa, giving long lessons and extra lessons that her family had paid for with cream and eggs. Who could say if it would be enough?

Rosa finished the piece with a flourish, the notes sparkling almost visibly in the air between them.

"So, Herr Professor, are you pleased?" Triumph shining on her round face showed what answer she expected.

"I am very pleased," he agreed.

"We're going to win the medal," she promised.

It was important to him that this little farm girl take the very last gold medal. Yet he knew he should not allow his own sense of self-worth to become bound to a pupil's performance in a competition. How had it happened? When one is young, he thought, how many choices lie at one's fingertips? How many roads beckon the eager traveller? Time spreads out before the young man like a map of a marvelous sunlit country. He knows he can write symphonies, build castles, discover the secrets of the universe -- which will it be? He does not know (for God is merciful) that the choice of one road shuts out the possibility of another. Who can guarantee which is right to take?

His mother had always wanted him to play the violin. And he had been an indifferent scholar in school.

"Herr Einstein?" Rosa said, her young face creased in a frown. "Aren't you well?"

He discovered that he was sweating and took out a linen handkerchief to mop his brow. "I'm well, Rosa. It's hot today, that's all. What else should we expect of July?"

"If I get my chores done early enough, my mother says I can take my little brothers swimming." She looked up at him, blue eyes innocent as infinity. "Do you wish me to play something else, Herr Professor?"

He patted her hand. "Enough for today, Liebchen. Enjoy the lake!"

And the light, he thought, the vast potential of the realms of light.

Rosa put the violin away in its case, gathered up her music, dropped him a hasty curtsy, and scurried from the room. The dancing light, fragmented by her departure, gathered itself together again, settling back on the walls and the Turkish rug and the dark wood of the grand piano.

The day's post lay on the floor by the armchair under the open window where he had left it at the beginning of Rosa's lesson. Sunshine fell on the fat pile, a correspondence he carried on with old friends, poets, pacifists, and Zionists, people he had met all over Europe when he had still been touring with the orchestra. They sent letters full of music and philosophy and grand theory, wonderful talk. It was like a rich festive meal that today he did not feel like eating. He set most of the letters aside unopened. There had been a time when he had shared his friends' sense of the universe in the palm of his hand, a gift of a benign God who revealed His existence in the harmony of His creation.

He shook his head mutely. It was a young man's belief. The world had fought two terrible wars since then. Now it was enough to sit quietly and look at what had become of the promises.

He was so tired today.

One letter was from his widowed cousin Elsa, full of news about her daughters, no doubt; he had always liked Elsa. He tore the stamps off the envelope carefully, saving them for his granddaughter, Lisl.

"Papa?" His wife appeared in the doorway, her hands still floury from making Dampfnudeln. "Are you coming to lunch?"

"Ah, Millie," he said. "I'm getting old."

"Seventy-five isn't old!"

"And what have I accomplished?"

Millie spread her arms wide. "This house -- two fine sons -- your sailboat down there on the lake -- your pupils -- Perhaps Rosa gets the gold this year. How many will that make for you? -- And you ask what you've accomplished?"

He was silent, looking at the shimmering light from the lake that shot its arrows into his soul.

"Besides," his wife said. "Lisl adores you. That must be worth something?"

But the sense there might have been more gnawed at him.

* * * *

Later, with his son and granddaughter, he took the sailboat far out on Lake Zurich, tilting gently in a mild breeze and grand weather, sailing under the lee of slopes covered with ripening vineyards, presided over by the hump of

the Albishorn.

Millie was right, he thought. All the tiny joys had to add up to something.

"I picked up a translation of a new thing that came out last year from this American writer, Hemingway," Eddie said, as Lisl trailed fingers in the cold, clear water, shattering the drowned light in its depths into diamond fragments. "It's about an old man fishing, and sharks."

"I don't like to fish."

"You'd like this story!"

He gazed at his younger son, a banker, already thickening into comfortable middle-age. "I don't have as much time to read as you, apparently."

"Nonsense! You read the wrong things -- about wars and terrible things like that. You should read fiction."

"So many wars. Where will it all end?"

"Pfft!" Eddie made a derisive sound. "These Asians are all alike. The Koreans will run out of steam just as the Japanese did in 1947. You'll see. The Americans hate to do anything violent. They'll make another treaty."

"_Opa_," Lisl interrupted, hanging over the low side of the boat, brown hair trailing through sun-spangled water. "Are there sharks in this lake? May I go swimming?"

"Careful!" Eddie warned. "You'll fall in fully clothed, and then your grandmother will scold!"

The sun's slanting radiance scattered from the child's flowing hair. He stared at it, fascinated. The play of light had always obsessed him.

"_Opa?_" Lisl urged.

"A man should leave a mark," he said, watching the flash and dazzle in the lake. "It's not enough just to have lived."

"Exactly the point of the Hemingway story I referred to!" his son said with obvious satisfaction. "I took the liberty of putting my copy on your desk, Papa."

The child began to cry.

Venus, the evening star, was already burning in the western sky. They heeled over and brought the sailboat swooping back to the dock.

* * * *

The map does not indicate which is the best road, only that more than one possibility exists. One afternoon many years ago (perhaps early May, for he remembered the cuckoo's melancholy call outside the open window) he had been at his desk in the patent office in Bern. Splinters of sunlight fell through green branches onto the papers he was reading. The work was sterile, soul-killing. He lived for the evenings when the street lamps were lit; then he walked under pale yellow flowers of the linden trees to the back room of a small Gasthaus. There, he joined a string quartet, exploring their way across Beethoven's stark territory, the rich jungles of Brahms, the tidy gardens of Johann Sebastian Bach. He had just recently graduated from the Polytechnic Academy, where he'd studied mathematics. But music had proved to be his *lorelei*.

This particular day, he remembered, he had trouble chaining his mind to the endless march of dull papers across his desk, while outside the marvelous vernal light called to him. Instead, he played with numbers (the abstract language of music, he had always thought) that combine and recombine in mysterious ways, numbers like the swarming stars that dazzled overhead in the clear Alpine night.

"Ho, Jew-boy!" The supervisor, a spindly little man with a receding hairline who had taken an instant dislike to the new employee, stopped by his desk.

He hastily slid a pile of half-finished forms over the mathematical doodlings. The supervisor leered over the desk, hoping to catch him in blatant error so there would be cause to fire him.

"Is the report ready, young genius? Or have you been too busy to

bother?"

"I'll have it done on time."

"You certainly will -- or you'll look elsewhere for employment!"

He was not born to work behind a desk, filling out forms, following someone else's orders. But he was also not capable of ignoring a challenge. For two hours he worked without stopping till the report was done, far more thoroughly than even the thin supervisor had a right to expect.

That evening at music practice, a warm spring breeze blowing, full of starshine and promises, he received his first request to give tuition on the violin to the child of the Gasthaus keeper.

The next morning he gave notice at the patent office.

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Rosa worked the bow smoothly across her instrument, moving through the difficult passage that led inexorably up the scale to high C, her nemesis.

He leaned back in the armchair, eyes closed, evaluating, trying to hear the Rachmaninoff the way the judges would. Rain spattered the closed window, and Millie had lit the lamps in the middle of the afternoon. One week to make a mark, to change the path of the stars that told man's fate, to mold the universe to one old man's will.

He was tired all the time now. The Earth under his feet tugged at him, bending him out of shape.

Then she faltered once again on the high note, and he leaped up from the chair, forgetful of stiff joints.

"No! No! No!" He seized the instrument from her hands. "What have I told you? You aren't milking cows here! You must glide up the notes like a fish swimming in a river! Like this."

He ran the bow smoothly up and down the scale, arthritic fingers for once remembering how they had moved in their youth when he had been the soloist with the orchestra in Paris and Vienna and at the Albert Hall.

Rosa lowered blond lashes over her ruddy cheeks, and he caught the gleam of tears in the glow of the lamps.

He relented. "All right now. We've worked hard enough for one lesson. Perhaps it'll go better tomorrow, or the next day."

"I'm sorry, Herr Professor. I don't wish to let you down."

But perhaps he had let himself down? Perhaps if he had stayed longer in the patent office, used the time to think about numbers?

"Let me try it again," she pleaded. "I will get it right."

He gave her back the violin, thinking about possibilities and life that had a habit of squeezing them down.

His Uncle Jakob had urged something else, but Mama had her heart set on music. And music had been good to him, he could not deny that. He had moved back to Zurich, married his university sweetheart, and raised two young sons in relative comfort. In his orchestra days, he had seen something of the world. He had books and music and friends around the globe who wrote to him and came to visit. He had had good students -- more silvers and bronzes than any other teacher in the canton, and a respectable number of golds. One had even gone on to world class competition -- he remembered a brief, breathtaking visit to New York.

And now he was at home with the lake and the boat and the crisp Alpine light sculpting the mountains.

If he had been someone like Van Gogh, he would have painted that light. Sometimes he thought about the incandescent heart of distant galaxies, spewing brightness through the universe to break at last under its own weight on the shores of Lake Zurich. It made his heart ache to think of it.

Rosa tried the passage again. This time he did not have to wince as she reached high C.

That evening, drinking his coffee with whipped cream and chocolate, sitting beside Millie, hand in hand, on the balcony, watching the moon come and go in the scudding clouds over the lake, he thought about the mystery of roads where one made decisions in darkness.

"Do you never wonder, Millie, if your life might have been different?"

"How so, different?" she asked suspiciously.

"Do you never entertain the idea that perhaps you might have done something else with your time, something you might have been better at?"

"No," Millie said.

He sighed. "We could have travelled. We could have seen more of America."

"We could have had problems and divorced!" she said sourly.

He patted her hand. "Never."

The ache persisted, nevertheless.

* * * *

The next morning, Hans Albert telephoned from Berlin, where he was a professor of physics.

"Have you read the newspaper, Papa?"

Behind the telephone in the hall, the wallpaper -- Millie's favorite pattern, clumps of creamy roses festooned with little pink ribbons -- glowed in the warm sunshine. He stared, imagining the artist making the very first drawing from a real vase of roses, the blooms illuminated by a ray of sunlight falling like a benediction on the studio. In some sense, it was all happening now: the painter, the roses blooming in the garden before somebody cut them, the old violin teacher gazing at wallpaper. The past, like the future, was only a stubborn linguistic illusion.

"Papa?"

"Ah. What should I have read?"

"The war, of course! Don't you always read about the war in Korea?"

Yes, the war. The strangeness of the place-names: Seoul, Pyongyang, Pusan. And the stupidity of young boys killing other young boys in jungles and rice paddies where light slanted through palm trees and bamboo thickets, light that had crossed the darkness of space from a distant star to illuminate a scene for painters.

"They're still fighting?"

"Papa!" Then another idea seemed to occur to his son. "Are you feeling well?"

"You're going to tell me that the American airplanes dropped a most peculiar bomb on a Korean town with a name as singular as roses. Isn't this so?"

"Yes -- but, roses? Anyway, let me tell you about this weapon, Papa! A great advance -- the future beckoning! -- You see what they've proved? A particle of matter can be converted into enormous outbursts of energy. This is something we've been working on here at the university, splitting uranium atoms."

"Light," he said. "It travels so fast! No time at all, really, from our point of view."

Hans Albert was silent. After a while he said casually, "Is Mama there? Let me speak to her."

* * * *

The afternoon was warm, but Millie insisted he wear his hat anyway. He had the impression if he had argued, she would have dragged out muffler and gloves too. Stop at the barber's on the way, she had ordered. Your hair is all over the place again!

He descended the narrow street that took him from his house, built during Zwingli's Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, to the violin maker's shop on Bahnhofstrasse in the center of the modern tourist district. Strange, the road that unwound in time from one to the other, he thought, and he too trudging down it. A Mercedes-Benz with German license plates blared at him as he stepped off a curb without looking. A donkey cart clopped by in the opposite direction, its driver wearing a peasant smock that Zwingli might have recognized. There was no such thing as past or future, he saw. It all happened at once in the wonderful, brimming light. He felt the weight of it, soft as petals on his face and hands.

The shop was cool and dim inside until his eyes adjusted. Sawdust muffled his footsteps. His nose filled with the scent of pine and ebony, maple and resin. Unstrung instruments hung on the wall like dreaming angels, waiting to wake and sing. He would not -- could not -- deny he loved music. He ran his fingers over wood like satin and velvet.

"Stradivari's design remains the standard of excellence, even today."

He glanced up at the speaker, a pale stooped young man who carried on his father's and grandfather's craft of making some of the best violins in Europe.

"That's my latest copy you're holding."

The young man took the instrument from his hands, tightened pegs, plucked strings, then took a bow and drew from the instrument a cascade of sound so rich it was like listening to a river of radiance pour down from the sky.

"High C," he said. "Let me hear it."

The young man demonstrated a pure, singing note.

He nodded. "Ah. And it lies easily under the fingers?"

"Very much so," the young man agreed. "But why does that concern you, my friend, excellent musician that you are?"

"I have a student with a great deal of talent and a small hand."

The violin maker glanced quizzically at him. They were, after all, speaking of violins not pianos.

"And a present might give her the confidence she needs to take the gold."

"I see." The young man laid the violin in its case and closed the lid. "On your account?"

"On my account, thank you."

And if it had not been music, he thought as he was leaving the shop, his gift in his hand, what then? What grand enterprise would have filled his life?

Whatever might have been, surely it would have been sufficient. God was subtle, but He was not malicious.

* * * *

One time, when he had been perhaps eleven or twelve, there had been a conversation around the kitchen table in his parents' home in Munich. An early snow sifted down outside, and his mother had pulled heavy velvet curtains across the windows. In his memory, the kitchen was hazy with blue-grey smoke from his uncle's pipe, like a stage scene painted on gauze.

"Another poor report!" his father said, his hand over his eyes as if the mellow amber glow of the table lamp was too much for him. "I don't see why you don't just leave school now and come and join your uncle and me in the factory, instead of wasting your time and my money in the classroom."

"It was just low marks in history and geography, Hermann!" his mother pointed out. She stood with his father's bierkrug in her hand, on the way to the cellar to refill it. "It said nothing about other subjects."

"Ah, leave the boy alone," Uncle Jakob counselled. "He's a slow learner, but he's capable of good things."

"You say so?" his father asked. "Well, I don't see it."

A small fire chuckled to itself behind the glass doors of the potbellied stove; it was not yet cold enough in the room to open the doors.

"Sometimes ..." he began hesitantly, not because he was afraid of his father but because he was not sure himself what he wanted to say. "Sometimes I think there's some great work for me to do."

His father forked up a slice of cold meat and added it to a hunk of dark bread and cheese he had been preparing before the subject of young Albert's bad marks came up. "Electrical engineering is great work, lad! It's the future."

"He's good at mathematics, a natural," Uncle Jakob said thoughtfully. "Too good to be just an engineer, like you and me, Hermann."

"Music is like mathematics, isn't it?" his mother asked, coming back

into the room with a full krug. Foam leaked out from under the pewter lid.

"Then let him be a civil servant!" his father said. "But this schooling is a waste."

"There's something I have to do," he insisted. "I think there's a plan to my life. A riddle I have to solve -- "

"So good at words, and yet he can't pass his composition test!" his father mocked.

His mother smoothed his hair -- even as a young boy it had been unruly. "There's always more than one way, Liebchen."

"I think -- "

"Life's a great game of chance," Uncle Jakob said. He leaned back from the table and re-lit his pipe. "An uncertain ride on a merry-go-round at the Oktoberfest!"

"But Uncle, that's like saying God is a gambler, throwing the dice for our lives -- "

"The dice tell me you are no good in school!" his father roared. "I don't need God to advise me not to spend more money on a poor scholar!"

His mother pulled him to her, pressing his face against her starched apron. "Don't worry, Liebchen. I have money for music lessons. My money. Neither God nor your father shall have any say in how I spend it. I'll buy you a new violin."

* * * *

"Come, Papa. You haven't even tasted your champagne!"

Millie linked her arm through his and drew him through the crowded living room, past the neighbors, the friends from their musical circle, the rabbi and the priest of the local Catholic church deep in a discussion of the world soccer cup, past his sons who were arguing over the bomb the Americans had dropped on Korea.

"This atom they've split has unleashed a terrible demon in our world!" Eddie said.

"You don't understand. When the governments of the world are aware of the power of the atom, they'll finally make peace!"

Hans Albert had made the trip unexpectedly from Berlin on the Schnellzug. He was not fooled. One more gold medal was hardly cause enough for his oldest son's visit. They worried about his health. Strange, for he did not worry about it himself.

Rosa, flushed and shining in a new dress, stood by the refreshment table that Millie and the housekeeper had worked all afternoon to set up with Millie's heirloom silver and best china. The gold medal flamed like a sun on Rosa's chest. Her parents stood with her, thick-bodied, slow-thinking. They were good people from the farm, not quite sure they understood why all these elegant folk in silk and velvet and glittering rings had come in taxis to kiss their little Rosa on both cheeks and shake her father's hand. The future unfolded before them like a rose petal uncurling, and they did not have the wit to know it.

"Herr Einstein," Rosa called. "Thank you!"

She blew him a kiss with her fingertips that had so flawlessly reached high C. Then she turned to the young man beside her -- a cousin, he knew, a farm lad -- and tucked the hand with the gifted fingers in his.

Millie herded her husband to an armchair from which he could see everybody in the room. He sank into it, feeling for a moment like the apple whose falling to Earth had demonstrated gravity. Lisl promptly climbed on his lap, spilling champagne over the new grey trousers Millie had made him wear. His daughter-in-law retrieved the child and took her away to bed; her own cheeks were as rosy from champagne as the child's were from summer sun. Across the room, he caught sight of his oldest grandchild, a serious boy, much too old now to sit on a grandparent's knee. He showed signs of following his uncle into the sciences.

Hans Albert, still glowering from the argument with his brother, came to sit in the chair beside him.

"Grand theories are in the air now," Hans Albert said. "Wonderful ideas about extending the Poincare theory of dynamics to include gravitation. But some fools oppose the work."

"Ah. Who invents this?"

"Papa, physicists don't invent. They're not engineers. They propose theories and test them. Anyway, the ideas come from some Americans, Dyson and Feynman. And from our Heisenberg too, of course."

"Light," he said, gazing at the warm play of candlelight on silver.

Hans Albert nodded impatiently. "Of course! The role of light, following an innate curve made by matter, that's in the theory. And space and time too, threaded together and warped by matter. The equations describing this reduce to Newton's familiar prescriptions in the limit of essentially flat geometries. That's what's so exciting. I wish I could make you understand! You see -- "

"How heavy it is."

"What is?" His son frowned at the interruption.

"Each ray as subtle as a rose petal," he said dreamily, "bending down to the Earth."

"Something like that," the younger man said carefully.

"And everywhere it bends. If we go far enough away, does the light streaming out from the stars seem to curve?"

"Well, I don't -- "

"Even to the end of things? Mustn't light bend then, at least?"

Hans Albert stared at him. "No disrespect, Papa, but you're certainly not a physicist!"

* * * *

When Millie's back was turned, he slipped out of the crowded room.

The balcony was dark and empty, and the air rising off the lake was fresh. Overhead, a huge tapestry of stars blazed, a panoply of light streaking outward to the far horizons of the universe. It was a time to see not just backwards but forwards too. Someday, he thought, man would follow the elusive light of the stars, sailing out into the far reaches of space. Hans Albert could have told him how this would be done, but he already knew the truth of it in his heart.

He had a sense again tonight of endings, of a wave that had travelled so far finally curving on a distant shore. So be it. He was ready for it; there were few things to regret. All in all, it had been a good life.

Rosa had reached her C.

And yet -- and yet.

The book Eddie had left for him was wrong in one respect. The sharks who snatch away the victory were not external. They swam in the dark waters of the soul. The trick was not to let them.

He gazed up into the sky at the great gorgeous light.

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