

NINA KIRIKI HOFFMAN

GONE TO HEAVEN SHOUTING

I'VE BEEN ON THIS QUEST for forty-seven years, ever since my sixteenth birthday. Every once in a while I find what I'm looking for, and the restless urge to search settles for a little while. It sleeps.

It never sleeps long.

I haven't been home in thirty years, though I've directed others there.

There are music webs in every community. Find a thread to follow and it will lead you to little knots of musicians who will give you other threads, if you treat them right. There's the church choir circuit, and the community choir circuit, and the big performing arts centers that play host to all kinds of different musicians, big names in classical, rock, folk, alternative; and then there are the contra dance groups, and the old time fiddlers, and the rock bands and the jazz bands and the other people who play in little night clubs and taverns and small concert halls. There are high school garage bands who know about each other.

Then there are the people who practice alone at home when no one else is around to hear, and those I can almost never track down, their threads are so short. Mostly they aren't the ones I want, but it hurts me to know that perhaps sometimes they are.

Some threads lead to more than one sort of musician, and some never cross into alien territory at all.

I never know where I'll find my people. I used to search for them in a more diffuse way, move into a town and walk its streets up and down and wait for the tug of recognition, watch for a gesture or a flash of light or a certain look around the eyes. These last few years I've gone to the music webs, tweaked threads, listened for rumors. I'm probably missing a lot of my people. Not all of them have found their way to music.

Not all of them wish to be found.

I've caught more family fish with music as a net than I did just strolling and trolling with no bait at all.

My name is Cyrus Locke. I carry a fiddle.

Also nice bamboo spoons for rhythm, and a pennywhistle and some harmonicas, but those are easier to hide.

IT WAS A DECEMBER Saturday night like many they get in the Pacific Northwest,

stars scattered across the dark sky, fog lying like pooled milk in roadside a ditches and in low spots in the pastures. The air smelled of cold and woodsmoke. I was traveling by air, the way I do at night when people are less likely to notice. I don't go directly over the roads, where headlights might catch me, but I keep close enough not to miss the sort of buildings I want to investigate.

I had watched a Christmas parade that morning in town, paying particular attention to the various marching bands, but I hadn't seen any trace of my people, though I'd enjoyed the spectacle. Now I was just covering territory and listening. On a cold night you don't often hear music. People have got their weatherproofing up and keep their tunes inside. I would rather search than hole up, though, especially since I had just finished three cups of coffee at a diner and was wide awake.

I drifted over a small country school, slowing to look at it properly. Sometimes there are community events in a school on a Saturday night, and I specialize in community events. If someone is going to shine, that's a good place to find them.

No sign of life there, but on the air a thread of music.

South of the school was a big old oak tree, and huddled near and beneath some of its limbs, a grange building. Light, music, parked cars. Just the sort of place I liked. I chose a shadow in the grove of oaks behind the building and slipped down into it, checking the back porch for people smoking or children playing. I used to get caught once in a while in the early days, when I hadn't learned caution. Once getting caught led to one of my better discoveries. All in all, though, I'd rather pick my moments.

I stood for a while listening to the music. Country western, swing, old tunes that I remembered hearing on radios in backwoods in the fifties, early in my questing years. I took my spoons and a D-pitch harmonica out of my knapsack and stuck them in my pants pockets, then lifted and lodged the knapsack in high branches of one of the oak trees.

On the ground again, I opened my fiddle case and took out Lucia. She's been with me twenty-two years, ever since I rescued her from a pawn shop. If I had some of the gifts of other people in my family I might be able to get her to talk, tell me her past history. What I know of her is that the label inside says she's a copy of a Stradivarius, like most fiddles you find, and it has the name of a German city and a date, 1897. I got out the bow and tightened the hairs, then tuned the fiddle, listening to the music leaking out of the building, an old tune Hank Williams had covered in the early fifties, "Take These Chains from My Heart."

I put the fiddle and bow away, straightened, took a deep breath, then wandered around toward the front of the grange, wondering how these people took to strangers. The windows were curtained with what looked like yellow-orange sheets, so I couldn't see in. One window, the one nearest the stage, was open to the frosty night. I caught a whiff of people: cologne, perfume, and sweat. I

heard the shuffling sound of dancers on a wooden floor.

There is a dream that comes to me sometimes, more often lately than I like, of all the world poisoned and empty and dead. The only colors are gray, black, brown, and ice-white. In this dream I am alive.

In life I have survived many things and anticipate surviving many more.

In the dream, I am alive, but alone.

I opened the double door into the grange hall and saw people dancing and people playing music and I smiled the way I do every time I know my dream has not come true yet. I am so glad to see people alive, whether they are family members or not. My heart lightened. I edged to the left, where older folks were sitting on a padded bench, and murmured to a white-haired woman in a pale blue dress, "This a private party, or can anybody join?"

"Welcome, stranger," she said. "Go right on up and make yourself at home." Such a nice smile she had.

They were playing "If Teardrops Were Pennies" as I edged past couples dancing. Everyone had smiles for me. I smiled back. Sun has beaten my skin brown and folded, and age has bleached my hair oyster-shell white. I am a fraction taller than most but can still fit into clothes I find on the medium rack in thrift stores, like the scuffed loafers, faded dungarees, gray-and-white striped shirt, black leather vest, and beat-up bomber jacket I was wearing.

All around the cavernous room were people who looked vaguely like me in size and age, some sitting on benches that lined the walls, some out on the dance floor, coupled and whirling. A few of them were a little more dressed up than I was. There were a few kids too, and some younger couples. My dream of destruction retreated as I looked around and felt that for this moment I had found a home and a family.

I get this family feeling at the best of times. Sometimes it's deceptive. Often it's not, though. There are other places and people, foreign to where I stood that Saturday night, that feel even closer to home to me. Sometimes I walk into alien worlds when I open a door. Sometimes after I've spent a little time in an alien world it embraces me too. Not many cast me out completely.

There were three people with guitars toward the front of the room, and a woman with a string bass, two fiddlers, one white-haired fellow with a bandolier of harmonicas, a young woman with a banjo, and an older woman sitting and strumming a mandolin. Three microphones on stands amplified voice, fiddle, harmonica, cords were hidden under little throw rugs. Black instrument cases littered the stage behind the musicians, and the desks and floor near where they were playing. Some cases had instruments still in them; a rotating cast of musicians, apparently.

Not quite sure of the particular protocol of this place, I took a seat near the

woman with the mandolin and held my fiddle case on my lap. She was wearing a turquoise sweatshirt with big furry white cats painted on it in glitter. She had red-framed glasses and a big grin, and curly dark hair shot with silver. Her earrings were silver snowflakes.

The tune ended and she smiled and nodded at me. "You new in town?"

"Yep."

"Welcome to Spruce Grange." She held out a hand and I shook it. "I'm Alma."

"Cyrus," I said.

"Care to join us?"

"Love to."

"You want to sign up for a couple tunes?" She nodded toward a yellow shopping pad sitting behind the musicians on a podium that had been shoved up against the stage. "You can just play backup if you want."

"I'll sign," I said. One of the fiddlers stepped up to the central microphone and began "Black Velvet," an old waltz. I hadn't heard it in a long time. It was surely pretty.

I edged behind the other musicians, who made room, and picked up a chewed pencil. The sign-up sheet had twenty numbers with names listed beside them: Joe W., John I., John P., Grace, Calvin, Annie, Jim, Sharon, Lilian, Harry, Dale, Earl, Everett, fine old names with nothing strange about them. None of them sounded like names my family would use; we generally venture farther away from common when naming our babies. I wrote "21" and "Cyrus," wondering where on the list they had reached, how soon they would expect me to play.

Someone would tell me.

I set my case on the edge of the stage, opened it, and got out Lucia and the bow. Tightened bow hairs, ran some rosin across them, checked my tuning, glanced at the other musicians near me, got a nod and a smile from the bass player, and edged into the tune, playing melody very softly to get it back in my fingers and my head, then venturing into harmony, observing the rules of being a backup player: Listen to the leader. Never play louder than whoever is leading, and never play fancier. Follow the leader's tempo by watching his or her foot tapping even if other people are lagging behind or getting ahead. Smile.

It wasn't great music, but it was good-enough-to-dance-to music, and that was swell. People were moving to it and smiling. Near the door at the other end of the hall, three people were even boot-scooting while nearer couples held each other and waltzed. New ways coming in, I thought, then wondered how I knew they were new. I was melding just a little. Thoughts can travel by air, and air is my sign. Join a tune, mix with it, slide under the surface, add your mite while

others are adding theirs, and you can get a little tangled with the thought-stream.

Here it was friendly for the most part. The first fiddler focused on fingering, hoping the tune would stick with her until she got through her fourth repeat of it. The second fiddler hated the sound of the banjo, but didn't hate the banjo player. One of the guitar players was annoyed at the second fiddler, thinking that the second fiddler was misbehaving by playing fancier than the first fiddler grandstanding. Bad manners. The mandolin player was interested in me. She did think I was a good-enough musician, and so far not too musically pushy, and that was warming.

I let the thoughts go and sank into the music, which had a life of its own. The tune had its shadowy ancestry, passed from person to person, and its brief life, born at the first bowstroke, dying with the final flourish, in the middle it reached out into people's heads and planted its seeds there. With luck it would be reborn many ways -- a hum, a whistle, or maybe a kid hearing it and wanting to figure out how to play it. Tunes were like benign viruses. They could sure as shooting mutate from one life to the next, too.

The first fiddler kicked up her foot to signal that she was approaching the end of the tune. She closed it down after that, nodded to the few people who applauded, turned and told us, "Chinese Breakdown," and started on her second tune.

I played twiddles that supported her tune and watched people two-step lively around the floor. It was so fine to see people enjoying themselves in the midst of music and dance. I basked in it, part of the music tapestry myself.

After a while I woke out of the moment and thought about my quest, and opened up my ears for that particular thread of sound that would tell me I had found a family member. An overtone, a harmonic that nobody else could quite produce. It was not a sound that came out of an instrument, but I could hear my own melody there in the overhead, singing about who I was and what I was doing at that moment, a tumbling tune of joy.

Faintly, faintly, masked by other sounds, there was the thread I sought. Fainter than I had ever heard it before. I tuned my listening to this trace, kept my mind on it while my hands played music along with the first fiddler.

It was a strange little melody, plaintive and constant. "Chinese Breakdown" came to a rousing finish and the dancers and listeners clapped, and still this tiny tune played on, the same notes sounding, no shift in awareness (my own tune had spun to a waiting pedal note until the next overtone would rise and it could harmonize). In the brief break between one player and the next I listened to the faint tune and recognized it. "Bright Morning Stars Are Rising," an old Christmas tune whose origins I did not know.

One of the guitar players stepped up to the mike, then turned back to face the musicians. "Hey, Good-Looking," she said, "in G." She grinned at us. "Alma,

play me in, okay?"

The mandolin player nodded and grinned and struck up the tune and pretty soon we were all flowing along the notes together. The guitar player had a nice clear voice and the bass kept good rhythm and dancers flocked to the floor. In the middle between verses the guitar player surprised me by turning to me and lifting her brows, then nodding toward one of the mikes. I stepped up and played a verse, wondering how this would all work out in the hierarchy of musicians, that she had asked a stranger for backup before she went to the ones who were already here. Such tiny shifts and swedes in the living dynamic, everything could change, or everything could absorb change and return to its flow unimpeded.

I played well and strongly, decorated notes with flourishes, finished my verse and nodded back to her, smiling, then stepped away from the mike. "Thanks," she said, and sang the second verse. It was all right. The others still projected contentment. Polite, friendly, welcoming people.

The tiny thread of family still played, underneath it all, unchanging as the evening moved on. We played down through the list, with some people putting down instruments and going out to dance and others coming in off the floor to pick up instruments. I played two tunes, "Florida Blues" and "Kentucky Waltz."

Then the musicians took a break and most people went to the dining room for potluck desserts.

"Mighty fine, mighty fine, Cyrus," Alma said as she put her mandolin back in its hardshell case. "Hope you'll come next week. We're playing out at Ethel Creek Grange then."

"Thank you. I don't know if I'll still be in town, but I appreciate the invitation."

"Want some coffee?"

"In a couple minutes, thank you," I said.

She smiled, picked up a cane that had been lying beside her chair, and moved off after most of the others toward the dining hall.

I put my fiddle away, set the case on the stage. The mystery tune was still playing, clearer now that other ambient noise had quieted. I looked around the nearly empty room.

I glanced through the door into the next-door room and saw a combination kitchen-dining room which ran the length of the dance hall but was narrower across: cream walls, lace curtains, two rows of end-to-end long narrow tables draped with paper tablecloths, folding metal chairs lined up on both sides of them and people sitting in the chairs, talking. At the far end of the dining room was the kitchen area, with a counter spread with snacks in dishes or

supermarket plastic containers. People lined up, holding paper plates, to get desserts. Some dropped a dollar into a donation coffee can on the buffet.

A few people lingered on the benches in the dance hall, talking with each other. One of the guitar players, a tall old guy named Dale, was still sitting up front and noodling on his guitar. The banjo-playing woman came back from the kitchen carrying two Styrofoam cups of steaming coffee. She set them down carefully and then sat next to Dale.

I wandered up the hall and down, pausing near the small clots of people and listening for the tune. Not there, not here, not there. I wandered toward Dale and Rose, the banjo-player. The tune was louder there, but it didn't seem to be coming from either of them.

I climbed up onto the stage.

Louder.

Was someone hiding up here? I was satisfied at this point that the tune was something other people didn't naturally hear, since no one else had responded to it. The music had that flavor of family, and it went on and on. It was hard for me to believe that some lost lonely person would hide out on the stage or in the wings making this music when there were so many friendly people out front.

Not everybody in my family can adjust to regular people, though. Lots of them hide out entirely and never mix. There seems to be more and more of a trend toward isolation with some of my people, and I deplore it. Wonderful people are everywhere. You miss a lot if you stop looking for them.

Simple blank flats framed the stage, with a few pieces of rickety furniture against them. The back wall held a working door. I went through it, listening to the air, tasting. Bats, somewhere up above in the galleries. To the left, to the right, slender dark corridors leading to the wings. No complicated stagecraft here. I had seen grange skits before. Full of enthusiasm, nothing complicated. Occasional raw talent. Occasional trained talent.

On a table, a straw farmer's hat. A bouquet of silk flowers in rust and bronze and gold.

No sign of the tunemaker.

"What are you looking for?" asked a voice from behind me. I turned and found Alma leaning on her cane and peering at me along the backstage corridor.

That was the question, wasn't it?

Without the aid of music as a carrier, I had no idea what she was thinking.

"A tune," I said after a moment.

"You're looking for a tune behind the scenes at Spruce Grange?"

"Do you know that old Christmas carol, 'Bright Morning Stars Are Rising'?"

"Eh?" She cocked her head.

I listened to the trace of music. Here, close to its source, I heard a child's voice singing the words on top of thin fiddle notes. I lifted my voice and joined the song in mid-verse: "Oh, where are our dear mothers? Oh, where are our dear mothers? Day is-a-breaking in my soul."

Alma took two steps back, her face clouding, mouth drooping from its smile.

"What is it?" I asked. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Why are you looking for that song here?" she whispered.

I opened the door in the scene and stepped out into the light on stage. She entered from the wing. I sat on a metal chair among the instrument cases, and she sat on a chair next to me and laid her cane on the floor.

"Something is singing that song," I said.

"What do you mean?" Her eyes were bleak behind her glasses.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Some people do, I know. I believe, but then, I've met a number of them.

"No," she whispered. She looked right and left, then stared down at her feet.

"Never mind, then," I said. I patted her hand.

A thread of family here, but not really in the present time. I could come back later and search, I was pretty sure, after everybody else had left. Might as well enjoy what was left of the evening.

"When I was a little girl," she whispered, and looked up at me. I smiled and waited.

"When I was a young girl, I was searching in the woods for scrap metal to help with the war effort. My daddy had gone off to war and I was a wild girl, a handful, roaming up and roaming down. Momma couldn't keep me home at all. Any excuse to get out would do. I was out picking blackberries before there were any ripe ones, or looking for filberts or pears or apples from trees gone wild from pioneer orchards. Scrap metal was a good excuse to wander, those years.

"It was in these woods, just back of the grange here-- that was before there were all these people in the valley; folks lived much further apart, and the town was a lot smaller in those days- in these woods I found them."



"Who?"

"That little family. They'd raised a house out of up-and-down logs, not regular crosswise. Squatters was what they was. This all used to be part of Tim and Adeline Venture's donation land claim, but they never did log it all off, weren't enough kids in the family...well.

"So I was running through the woods keeping an eye out for metal, only I was so far in wasn't much chance anybody had left any metal thing out there. I thought I was walking where no man had walked before, and then I smelled smoke and came to a clearing."

She paused, her eyes staring unseeing across the hall. Below us, out on the dance floor near the microphones, Dale and Rose played a mournful old song about departed lovers and lonesome train whistles. The banjo made everything sound spunky.

"Morning glories had twined right up over the house." Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "I never saw such a thing before or since. Up-and-down logs -- some still part of growing trees, Cyrus, with branches sprouting out the top. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Maybe," I said quietly. If the family she talked about had any sign Earth people in it, with their gifts of growth and plant-talk, many things were possible.

"And a little vegetable garden up near the house," Alma murmured, looking into the past. "Sassy green leaves on those squash vines. Tall corn. Lacy carrot tops. I tell you, I felt like I had walked into a fairy tale, this snug little house in the middle of nowhere with the flowers growing all over it."

She fell silent again. I sat and listened to the child's thin voice. "Oh, where are our dear fathers? Oh, where are our dear fathers? Oh, where are our dear fathers? Da-a-ay is a-breakin' in my soul."

"I woulda run away again," said Alma presently. "Too many stories my ma told about tripping over a fairy mound and going into another land for a century or two until you come out and everything's changed, everyone you know is dead. I woulda run, but the wind changed then, and I smelled that smell, and heard the child's voice."

She was quiet a long time then. I feared the other musicians would return from the coffee-and-dessert break and the music would start and Alma would fall out of her memory into the present. Once she left this confiding mood, I would not know how to bring her back to it, and she was getting to the meat of the story now.

I touched her hand. A terrible temptation came over me to use my powers of persuasion and force the story out of her, but I waited, and the impulse passed. I could make people talk about anything, I could make them forget afterward

everything they had said; but I could not make myself forget what I had done, and those memories were difficult to live with. I had enough of them already.

"The child was singing that song," Alma said. "Her voice didn't have much voice left in it, if you know what I mean. And the smell was the smell of dead things that have been lying a while in the heat."

"What happened?" I whispered.

"She wandered around the side of the house, a thin little girl in a dirty white dress that was all tatters. She was sick. Her cheeks were caved in, and her eyes sunk down in her head. Come to find out later, after the doctor saw her, she probably hadn't eaten anything in days, and there were vegetables lying on that ground just as fine as anything you see in the market. She wandered and wavered around, singing. `Some have gone to heaven shouting.'"

I could hear her singing that verse even as Alma spoke.

"I stepped out of the woods. `Little girl, little girl. Who are you?' I said. She didn't even look my way, just pranced away and back, singing. I went to her and caught her hands. She looked at me then, and her eyes were like a dead person's. She hummed the tune. Months afterward I couldn't get it out of my head.

"The smell was stronger. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't so old myself. `What's the matter, little girl?' I said. She sang at me and that was all. She didn't try to pull away or anything. Just sang."

Alma's hand slipped from under mine. She put her hands over her eyes. "You know, I knew that everything had gone wrong, and I didn't know what to do. I let go of the girl. I opened the door of the house. The door, it had a carving of a man's face on it, a bearded face with leaves all around it, and it scared me some -- too much like something from Ma's tales, a door that could look at you.

"I opened that door, and that horrible smell came out, stronger than before, and the buzzing of flies. Only light in the room came from it might be a hole in the roof, I didn't look long enough to figure it out; but there was the two of them in there on a bed, lying under that hard light, dead, as far as I could tell, for days maybe; covered with flies."

She lowered her hands from her face, gripped mine in both of hers. "She had to be going in and out," she whispered. "The fire was still lit. That was hard for me to know, that she would go inside with them in such a state." She shook her head.

"I didn't know what to do. I took the girl's hand and led her out of there. The grange was the closest building. I led her here. It was a Saturday, and women were quilting. I brought the girl here and they all started up like a flock of birds. Someone got the doctor. They tried to feed that child, tried to give her water, tried to get her to name herself, but she never did. Only thing she ever

did was sing. She died later that night. Doctor said it was starving did it."

The hall filled with talk and commotion as people came back from their conversations and coffee. Musicians gathered around the microphones. Alma gripped my hands and finally looked up at me. "We never even knew their names," she said. The anguish she had felt more than fifty years earlier was still in her face.

"It's all right," I said. I held her hands tight, trying to give her reassurance. "I'll take care of it."

She cocked her head and stared hard at me, almost as hard as she had stared into the past. "What do you mean?" she asked.

I looked at her and wondered how much to tell her. "I believe in ghosts," I said at last. "I'll talk to her."

"Talk to her." Her voice sounded flat.

"She's here. Still singing. I'll talk to her."

"What good will that do?"

"I think she must have been a relative of mine," I said, "and in my family, we know how to care for our dead."

"Alma?" someone called from below. "You back me up on 'Your Cheatin' Heart'?"

"Sure, honey," she said in a distracted voice. She grabbed her cane, left the stage, and went to get her mandolin. We both joined in the music again. Between tunes, though, she was always looking at me.

THE DANCE LASTED until eleven, the dregs of it anyway; people packed up and left in trickles earlier, until at last only Alma and Rose and a guitar player named John and I were left, and the couple who swept the dancing dust off the floor and put away the folding metal chairs.

"Time to go home," John said, "before they kick us out."

I wiped the rosin off Lucia's strings with a bandana I keep in her case for that purpose. I loosened the horse hairs on my bow. John put away his guitar, Rose packed up her banjo, and Alma locked her mandolin in its case. We said good night to the caretakers and left the building amid their invitation to come back next month.

Rose and John went to their cars. Alma stood beside me in the chill night. The motion-sensitive light above the door lit us from behind, but if we stood still long enough, it would switch off again. I waited.

"You got a car, Cyrus?"

"No."

"How'd you get here?"

"Hitched a ride." On a wind.

"You want a ride somewhere else?"

I smiled at her. "I still have business here."

"You believe in ghosts," she said, and then whispered, "I've been so afraid they exist. None of those deaths was quiet, and I've never been able to stop seeing them. Poor little mite. Holding her hand was like holding twigs."

"What I need to do now is private, Alma."

"Don't tell me that," she said. "Don't you tell me to go away with this darkness still in my head. I've lived with it a long time, Cyrus. I am more than ready to let it go."

I sighed. I wondered. Even though she didn't want to go, I could tell her to go, and she would do it. But if the thought of these spirits was troubling her so much, how could I leave her with that darkness? "Wait here," I told Alma, and I went around back of the grange and lifted up into the tree where I had hidden my things.

Mostly I make my own rules, but there are some very strong ones almost all of us follow, and one of them concerns outsiders. I'm not supposed to reveal family secrets if I can help it.

I took my snow crystal out of my knapsack and sat on a branch, holding the crystal in both hands. "Powers and Presences, lead me and guide me," I murmured. "Help me to choose what is right for each person."

"Which are your choices?" whispered a breeze past my ear.

"Here is a spirit that needs a path, and here is a person who has a troubled mind. I would like to help them both if I can."

"Why not?" whispered the wind.

"One is not of our family."

A moment of silence slipped by, and then the whisper came: "In your hands."

I kissed the crystal, tucked it into my pocket, and shrugged into my knapsack. I climbed down the tree, and a good thing, too: Alma was on the ground below, leaning on her cane and looking up. "What were you doing up there?" she asked.

"Praying a little and getting my things," I said, hanging by my arms from the lowest limb, then dropping. I had not swung from a limb in quite that way since I was a boy, and I felt absurd.

"Your things," said Alma. She glanced from my fiddle case, still at the base of the tree, to the knapsack on my back. "Those are all your things?"

I nodded. "Just passing through."

"On your way to where?"

"Everywhere."

"Nowhere," she said.

For a moment I felt a strange sense of vertigo. My dream of the death of the planet unfolded in my mind. Fields of barren ground, dark blasted hills, ice along the edges. How bleak it would be to have no one to look for, no one to talk to, no one to jam with. Why explore when every place was gray and dead?

But this was not my reality. I blinked and looked at Alma. "Everywhere," I said again. Everywhere there were musicians, coffee shops, radio stations, roads; crops in the field, people in cars, animals in forests, crickets and frog choruses and murmuring bees, and the slow rich sound of voices talking on a porch of a summer evening, voices murmuring in a firelit room of a winter's night.

Usually my voice wasn't among them, though. I did a lot of listening and appreciating, but not much sharing.

"Have it your own way," Alma said. "Now what?"

"I'm going back inside as soon as they close it up and leave."

"Just how do you imagine you'll get inside that building? You some kind of burglar?"

I smiled at her.

"I have a key," she said. "I'm on the planning committee. I'll let you in."

"Alma? Alma!" Voices called from the front of the building. They sounded alarmed. "You out here? You all right? Alma!"

"Oh, my car's still there," she muttered. She and her cane walked around to the front of the building. "You go on home, Charlie and Liz. I'll lock up. I've got some thinking to do."

"All right," they said, relief in their voices. Presently a car started and drove off down the road.

"Come on, Cyrus," said Alma and we went back inside Spruce Grange through the front door.

The hall looked unfamiliar and dark with nobody in it but us. Alma went into the coat closet and flipped on banks of lights.

"Can you light the stage?" I asked.

Lights went on above the stage.

It was strange to see this empty place that minutes earlier had been alive with people and dance. My doom dream murmured in my mind.

"What next?" Alma said.

I climbed the stairs to the stage. No clutter of instruments and coats; even the metal chairs were folded and stood against the backdrop.

I listened.

"Some are down in the valley singing..."

I knelt on the bare wood stage. I took my snow crystal from my pocket and placed it on the floor, then slid out of my knapsack and sat back on my heels, looking around.

"Some are down in the valley singing..."

Alma leaned against the stage's edge and watched me.

"What I'm about to do may seem strange to you," I said. "It will not hurt you, but it may frighten you. Are you sure you want to watch?"

"Some are down in the valley singing..."

"It concerns that little girl?"

"I believe it does."

She gripped her cane, hunched her shoulders. "Go ahead."

"Da-a-a-ay is a-breakin' in my soul..."

I took a small, pale green glass plate from my knapsack. I had made it as part of my apprenticeship to the glassblower in Cielito, before I understood the limitations of my being Sign Air -- fire would heed me as much as it did anybody without fire persuasions; I had no skill with it, but still, the plate was a gift of earth and fire, lopsided and thick as it was, and I smiled at it as I did every time I dug it out of its protecting silk. I set it on the stage beside

my snow crystal and placed a sprig of desert sage and some dried cedar twigs on it.

I sat and gathered my mind, preparing a version of the "Things Seen and Unseen" chant that would let the invisible attain visibility if it so desired. Usually this chant revealed things whether they wanted to be shown or not, and only for a brief time. I wanted a version that would grant power to the invisible to choose the length of its interaction with light.

When I was satisfied that I had shaped the tool I wanted, I touched fire to the spices on the glass plate. They burned quickly, leaving a smudge of smoke, a signature in the air that smelled of desert starlight and night forest. I addressed Powers and Presences and spoke my chant.

The song stopped.

When I looked up, a young girl stood across from me.

She was slender and hollow-eyed and wore a white shift. She looked just like my little sister Drusilla had at ten, long dark wavy hair almost to her waist, a pale fine-featured face with large gray eyes, slender hands. She was not gaunt the way Alma had described her.

"Presence," I murmured.

Her eyes widened. She touched her chest.

I smiled at her. "Presence," I said again.

"Uncle?" she whispered.

"Cousin," I said. If she had died during World War II, at about ten--she looked perhaps ten, perhaps eleven when she and I had been born at about the same time.

"I don't understand," whispered the girl. She blinked. She glanced around, saw Alma, who stood there staring at her. Alma dropped her cane. Her right fist pressed against her breastbone, and her left hand gripped her right. Her eyes were wide.

"Gift me a name? Mine is Cyrus Locke," I said.

"Helena Exile," said the girl, still staring at Alma.

Exile! A name taken by those who were cast out from our family, the threads binding them to us cut. She was too young to be exiled; her parents must have been the ones banished. I did not even know which clan place they had come from; it was all old news now, no doubt, though I would have to check with the Powers and other Presences about final disposition.

"Helena," I said. "This is Alma."

Alma stood unmoving, her mouth a little open.

"Alma, are you all right?"

Alma said, "How? How can she be standing there more real than life? She looks much stronger than when I saw her."

Helena's face clouded. "Cousin Cyrus," she said. "Please."

"Cousin." I lifted my hands to her even though I knew she could not touch them. "You are only halfway here. You've been halfway here a long time, fifty years or more. I offer you a chance to choose. Do you wish to go farther away? Do you wish to return?"

"I -- I -- My mother! My father!" She stiffened, her eyes glazing.

"They are gone too. They left before you did. They may be waiting on the other side of shadow, or they may be trapped without a proper unbinding. I will tend to them soon. Just now, let's think about you."

"I don't feel --" She reached across to me and tried to grasp my hands. Hers passed through mine. "Oh!"

Alma gasped as well. I looked at her. She was paper pale. Her eyelids fluttered and she began to sag. I bespoke the air around her to hold her up, worried even as I did so that I was going too far. Ghosts, whether she believed in them or not, were part of her everyday, a conversational coin always being spent. Solid air would be outside her experience. "Breathe deeply," I said to her, and asked air to strengthen and sustain her.

After a moment the color returned to her face. She still looked terrified.

"Alma," I said.

"You -- you're one of those black magic demon sorcerers, aren't you?"

"No." I glanced at Helena, who looked down at her hands, at the glass plate and snow crystal at her feet, at me, and then at Alma. Helena might be confused, but if her parents had raised her with any knowledge of her heritage, she would be able to understand what had happened to her, given time and explanation. Alma, on the other hand

"Demon has nothing to do with what I am," I said.

"Are you evil?"

Sometimes. Regrets still pricked me. "No."



"Let me go."

"Are you all right? You looked like you were going to fall."

"I'm fine," she said, her voice hollow as though she were trying to convince herself.

I bespoke air to be air-like again, and Alma shuddered, then bent to retrieve her cane. She limped to the double doors at the far end of the hall, never looking back. When she had closed the doors behind her, I turned to Helena.

"Little cousin," I said. "Flesh has left you. Where do you wish to go next?"

She squatted across from me and stared at me. "I have been so lost," she whispered, "so alone in the darkness."

"Your spirit tied itself to this place."

She looked around. "What is this place?"

"This is a grange hall. A community place where people get together; not usually members of our family, though. There is music here sometimes. You were singing."

"Why am I here?"

"This is where you died, Alma said."

"Alma..."

"Alma found you in the forest and brought you here. She was trying to help you."

"I remember a girl." Her eyes looked inward. "A tall brown girl with twigs in her hair. One of the first strangers I ever saw. I remember her and I don't remember her." She shook her head. "That was after...I -- "

She screamed.

It was a high, huge, sad, chilling sound, a sound that might have echoed across a cold landscape of white and gray, the last sound of life on a dead world. It lasted a good while. The hair on my head and the back of my neck rose, and my skin tingled with goosebumps.

Alma looked in through the doors.

Helena screamed, first with her eyes closed, then with her eyes opened. She stared up at the ceiling and screamed.

She stopped. The ensuing silence lay like a weight on me. She stared at me.

"My parents died!" she yelled.

"Yes."

"They died and left me all alone!"

"Yes."

"I couldn't wake them! Mami! Papa! How could you leave me?"

"They couldn't help it," I said when no other answer came.

"I couldn't let them go, but they weren't there anyway."

"Yes," I said.

"They didn't come back."

"No." I held out my arms to her, wanting to hug her, but how?

Air whispered past my ears.

Air could be solid for me.

"Helena," I murmured, holding out my arms, asking air to be solid where she was in it.

She sobbed and came to me and crawled into my lap, and I put my arms around her, air and light and spirit unbreathed, unfinished. I held her and she cried. Her world had been as bleak as the dead land in my dreams, shorn as it was of all she knew of warmth.

"You don't have to be alone anymore," I told her when her sobs slowed. "You can stay with me, or you can go on and find your parents."

"How can I find them now?" She stirred and pushed away from me. It was strange. It did not feel like a child I held; she was smooth and cool and had no breath or heartbeat. I embraced a weightless stone. She pushed at my arms, and I released her.

She rose and looked at Alma, who had come back and stood against the edge of the stage again. "You were the girl who came?" Helena said.

"Yes," said Alma.

"She was the girl who found me," Helena told me, "and look at her now. She's an old woman. I couldn't even find my parents when they first left their bodies. How can I possibly find them now?" "Where are they buried?" I asked Alma.

"At the little cemetery up the hill behind Ravensville Church. All three together we put them in the ground, under a stone with no name on it. `Mother,

Father, Child' was all it said, and the year of their death."

"May we go there now?"

"I can drive," she said.

"Would you?" I spoke to her doubts and fears. Often enough I have spent time with people who have no magic in their lives, and I have done my best to understand how that feels.

There are so many things to be afraid of.

Yet Alma had returned in the middle of Helena's scream, for me the most frightening thing that had happened tonight. It was a sound of despair that came from a place so deep I had not known whether it had an end. I had been afraid I might spend the rest of my life listening to it.

"I will," said Alma.

"Thank you." I looked at Helena. "Are you ready to leave this place? You have been here a long time."

"There's nothing here for me," she said.

I thought of the music and dance earlier that evening. When I died, I might like to haunt a place like this for such a taste of life, friendship, warmth once a month. But Helena had not been awake to any of it.

I looked at the glass plate on the stage, the dusting of gray ash left behind by cedar and sage. I thanked Powers and Presences for help, asked for more, put away my tools and climbed to my feet, picked up my knapsack and my fiddle case. Helena and I went down the stairs together to the floor below.

"I see it," Alma said, staring at us.

I glanced at Helena, then at Alma.

"You are related. Your nose, hers. Your eyes. How can that be? How could you know?"

"Recognition," I said. "In the music."

She frowned. Her eyebrows drew together. "Guess I don't have to understand it to see that it works," she said. "Let's go."

For a moment Helena and I hesitated in the grange's doorway. I watched her, She looked behind her at the stage, confused.

"You've woven yourself into this place," I said.

"Unbind me."

I worked it out in my head, a thread-cutting chant for ties of place. It had to be specific. I don't like unbinding work; too risky, too counter to my impulses to connect. I said this chant for Helena Exile, though, and felt the brief shock of freedom shake her.

I remembered that shock. I had cut myself free of my home place all those years ago, though I didn't realize I was doing it at the time. It had hurt.

ALMA DROVE a big maroon sedan with well-padded white seats. Helena and I got in the back. Alma glanced over her shoulder at us, shook her head, started the car, and drove through the cold December night along back roads that cut through quiet fields, past houses where all the lights were out. Every once in a while Alma shook her head again.

We went through brief patches of forest, then through a little sleeping town that had a general store, a garage/gas pump, and a feed store. Then we came to a white church among trees, its spire pointing to the stars.

Alma turned the car off on a dirt road past the church and we edged up a small forested hill to a graveyard. She stopped the car, turned off the engine and the headlights. We sat there in silence for a little while.

I opened the door and climbed out, my knapsack in my hand. Helena joined me.

The car engine ticked. Somewhere birds chirped and silenced. Gravestones stood in less-than-orderly rows, some new, some old, some ornate, some plain, some with fresh or plastic flowers at their foot, and some embraced by weeds.

Alma emerged. "Not really my favorite place to be at night," she said after a moment.

"There's nothing here will hurt you," I told her. Then I checked. Sometimes the energies surrounding death and the dead can get muddled and enhanced and strange. Much depends on how people relate to their dead, and what the dead plan to do next.

There was no smell of danger in this place.

Alma shuddered. She straightened her shoulders, gripped her cane in one hand and a flashlight in the other, and headed in among the stones. We followed her.

It was a plain stone, not even granite or marble: a rounded rock you might find in a river, and it said just what Alma had told us: MOTHER, FATHER, CHILD 1943.

"Oh," said Helena, holding out open hands, waving them above the ground. "I feel so strange."

I took my snow crystal from my pocket, held it in my right hand. Powers and

Presences, help us to find the right way to proceed. May we awaken those who sleep here?

They are here and they do not sleep.

I looked up as Alma dropped her cane and gripped my arm. Two glowing shadows stood beyond the headstone, holding hands.

I said the chant I had said for Helena, "Things Seen and Unseen," modified so that those unseen could become seen for as long as they wished.

The shining shadows darkened, took on weight and hue. A broad man and a narrow woman, he in overalls and an undershirt, she in a calico dress. They had the faces of my cousins.

"Helena! Bright staff" the woman cried, reaching toward us.

"Where have you been?" cried the man, opening his arms. "We've been waiting ages!"

"Mami! Papa!" Helena gave a choked sob and ran to them, was swallowed in their embrace.

Exiles. In death, were they still separated from the rest of us?

People make such separations, something whispered past my ear. Most of us do not.

My dream of a wasteland: a place I had sent myself?

Helena separated from her parents, came back to me. "Cousin Cyrus," she said. "Thank you. Thank you." She rose on tiptoe and kissed my cheek, a cold hard spot of pressure and then release. "Thank you for trying to help me," she whispered to Alma, kissing her too. Alma's fingers dug even deeper into my upper arm.

Helena darted back to her parents. They smiled at us, melted into each other, glowed brighter and brighter, then vanished in a final flare.

"What...happened?" Alma said.

I was not alone on a dead world now. Alma's grip convinced me I was alive and in company. "I guess they knew where they were going after all," I said, "once she came back to them." I felt a strange longing to go home myself, and see my sister and my parents and my cousins and aunts and uncles. Some of the people I had known were no doubt dead now, and some new ones had probably been born. I wanted to make sure the family was still where I had left it.

"I don't mean what happened to them, the--the ghosts--I mean what happened? What happened this whole night? Who the heck are you, anyway?" Alma said. "And what were you talking about when you were saying all those things in that other

language?"

People make such separations. Most of us do not.

There was family, and then there was family--all over the place. "I'll buy you coffee at Shari's and we can talk about it," I said, stooping to pick up her cane.