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KEY SIGNATURES

AS FAR AS THE SYSTEM WAS concerned, Zita Wilson came into existence one September morning at 8:56 a.m. when she was about two and a worker found her on the welcome mat at the Social Services Offices.

At eighteen, she got out from under the system's scrutiny, but she couldn't escape the sense that she needed more than the food, shelter, and care rough and tender but never permanent that the system had given her.

Ten years and eight moves later, she arrived in Spoers Ferry, Oregon.

Angus's workshop was a basement room with fiddles hanging all over the walls, and a workbench holding a bunch of blue horsehair, vice grips, and scattered mysterious tools and bits of wood. The air smelled of oil, glue, and furniture polish. Angus, a hunched old man with a disarming chipped-tooth grin and black-framed glasses, pulled a battered fiddle from the constellation on the wall and handed it to Zita, then equipped her with a bow after tightening the hairs.

Zita had sung in choral groups at some of the high schools she had gone to. She could carry a tune. She had even taken piano lessons for a year at one foster home, paying for a half hour lesson a week with money she got from doing extra household chores. She had had a sense that music was waiting just beyond her ability to play, and it saddened her when she had had to move on and lost her lessons and access to a piano.

Unlike the piano, the fiddle had an infinite capacity to sound horrible, the piano's capacity to sound bad being limited to how many keys she could push down at once. The fiddle sounded dreadful as soon as she touched bow to string.

Angus, who told her he had been playing sixty-two years -- "Built my first fiddle from a cigar box when I was six," he said -- picked up another fiddle and drew a bow across the strings, sounding a sweet, clear note. "Only difference between a fiddle and a violin is attitude," he said. "If you were playing a violin they'd tell you all these things about how to hold this and where to put that, but in my old time fiddle class I just want you to have fun. If you get a tune out of it, all the better." He grinned at her and made the bow dance across the strings. A wonderful bouncy tune jumped out, making her feet itch to jig.

She handed him a hundred dollars and became owner of the battered fiddle, a beat-up case lined with worn yellow fake fur, a bow, and a lump of rosin.

A week later, Zita went to her first class in the new community. The Old Time Fiddle by Ear class met seven to ten Thursday nights in the cafeteria of an area elementary school. Zita had walked into more than enough new situations; she didn't hesitate on the threshold, but strolled in and chose a seat in the

circle

of chairs set out on the institutional beige linoleum. Angus greeted her, calling her Rita, and introduced her to a man six and a half feet tall and more than sixty years old. "This is Bill," said Angus.

Bill was wearing a guitar, cowboy boots, jeans, and a western shirt with pearl snaps. He had a villain's mustache, and the portable atmosphere of a cigarette smoker. He also had flesh-colored hearing aids in each ear. He gave Zita a wide grin. "Always like to meet a nice young lady," he said.

"Bill's our accompaniment," Angus said.

Zita switched her case to her left hand and shook Bill's right.

Other people were wandering in, setting their fiddle cases on the tables and getting out instruments, tightening bows and tuning. Though this was the first meeting of the class, many seemed to know each other already. Zita smiled at Bill, then went over to set down her own case. She had practiced scraping the bow across the fiddle strings at home, and received angry calls from people in the upstairs apartment. She needed to find somewhere else to practice.

By the end of class she figured she had picked the wrong thing to take this time. She took different classes in each new community, searching for something she could belong to. Playing the fiddle was too hard; the weird position she had to twist into to hold the fiddle to her chin and get her hand around the fiddle's neck tired her, and she couldn't get a good sound out of the damned thing.

The next morning she got up to go to work and noticed aches and pains she had never had before. The next night, she practiced (her upstairs neighbors had gone to a movie) and finally got a real note from the fiddle.

She was hooked.

At the sixth class of the ten-week term, Bill came to her and said, "You're getting real good on that thing. You ought to come out to the grange Friday night."

She had heard people in class talking about granges-- there was a grange dance every Friday, rotating between four granges monthly. She had heard, but hadn't listened. She wasn't ready to perform for anybody, even though every week in class she had to stand up and play when her turn came. It wasn't scary in class.

Other people played along, helping her keep time and rhythm and, in the wildly hard tunes, notes. She felt like she knew everybody in class as well as she had known anybody in her life, and they were all friendly.

"Come on," Bill said. "Why, I'll pick you up and take you out there, bring you home whenever you say."

Her secret life began the next night.

Sitting at her window in the bank, she wondered what the other tellers would say

if they knew of her secret life. Most of them went home to television and children and exhaustion; to Zita it felt odd how her present life was fragmenting within itself, her job in one fragment, her fiddle class in another, and the grange dances in a third, different sets of people in each fragment, though Bill and Angus and a few other fiddle students overlapped two.

The granges were miles out of town, and gathered dancers and musicians from their local populations, she never saw people in town that she had met at the granges, aside from fiddle class people. She felt like a superhero. She could put on a whole different set of clothes and assume another identity, flirting and dancing with the men, gossiping with the women, pretending she was a country girl when she had spent most of her life in metropolitan areas. They knew nothing about her, but they accepted her without question. At first she knew nothing about them. She gathered bits and snippets of information and took them home to warm her in the silence of her apartment.

On her first night she had listened to the musicians and realized none of them would ever make a record. Some of the fiddlers were talented and some were very untalented. After six three-hour classes she could play a tune as well as the worst of them, better than a few. The guitar players just played chords and kept time. An occasional bull fiddle, mandolin, harmonica, or banjo lent spice to some of the meetings, but even without them the dances went fine. Some people sang but their voices weren't the kind you heard on the radio; syllables got swallowed, pitch varied from true, and sometimes they forgot the words.

When she shook off her competitive edge she started listening in a different way. She heard the music saying something in a language she could almost understand. It had warmth in it, an invitation. Come. Here is home. Her heart wanted to open, but the scar tissue was too thick.

She got books of lyrics out of the library and studied the words to the tunes she had learned on the fiddle, "Take These Chains," "You Are My Sunshine," "Have I Told You Lately that I Love You," "The Wild Side of Life," "Wildwood Flower." Most of the songs had been written thirty or forty years earlier. That made sense. Most of the musicians and dancers were upwards of fifty; one of the fiddlers was eighty-seven, another ninety-one.

Some of the other tunes had titles but no words, and those, she thought, were older, brought to this new world from over the sea, passed down through families, trailing history with them; some had probably originated in the mountains to the East. Most of the people at the granges came from out of state, Minnesota, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee.

Travelers, like she was, ending up in Oregon, as she had. Jetsam, washed up on this particular beach.

The Thursday night after class had disbanded for the summer, Bill called Zita and asked her if she'd like to go play music in Kelly's garage. Zita had picked up a few tales from Kelly and Bill, though she couldn't always understand their accents or their habit of speaking almost too softly to hear. Kelly and Bill

had  
driven taxis together in San Diego after they left the navy following World  
War  
II, and before that they had both come from Arkansas, though they hadn't known  
each other when they were younger, had only met after they had gone around the  
world. They had both moved to Spores Ferry in the late fifties, raising their  
children as friends, their grandchildren as mutual.

Zita had met Kelly on one of his visits to the fiddle class, and she liked  
him.  
She and Kelly sometimes made faces at each other at the granges. Kelly, whose  
hair was thick and white, who wore silver tips on the points of his collar and  
sported a turquoise bolo tie, could roll his eyes faster than anybody else  
Zita  
had ever seen.

Waiting for Bill to pick her up and take her to Kelly's, Zita took her fiddle  
down from the wall (one of the first things Angus told his class was, "Hang  
your  
fiddle on the wall, where you can grab it and play any old time. Don't make it  
hard to get to.") and thought of her lives in other places, how she had made  
an  
effort to meet people but usually ended up spending all her nonwork time in  
her  
apartment, communing with the television and all the friends there who never  
answered when she spoke to them. In her various foster families there had been  
brief sparks of warmth -- a gentle haircut from one woman, a secret alphabet  
with a foster sister they could write coded notes to each other in, a  
treasured  
doll for her eleventh Christmas -- and brief sparks of violence, shock,  
disillusionment. And long stretches of sadness.

She nested the fiddle in its case and looked at its battered face. "Tell you  
what," Angus had said when he sold the fiddle to her, "this fiddle used to  
belong to Jack Green. I think he got it from his granddaddy. Saw him play it  
many a time. After his death his widow sold it to a pawn shop, and I found it  
there. You take good care of it and don't leave it where the sun can get it,  
specially not in a locked car, hear met"

Her fiddle had a longer history than she did.

But then, most instruments probably outlasted their players.

The door bell rang, and she closed and picked up her fiddle case. Never before  
had she had a date to go to someone's garage. She opened the door and smiled  
at  
Bill, and he smiled back.

Kelly's house was just another small suburban house in a neighborhood full of  
such houses. She had lived in houses like that herself. Grinning, Kelly pushed  
the garage door up to let Zita and Bill duck under, and inside there were six  
chairs arranged in a circle, and three other old men sitting with instruments  
on  
their laps.

"Hey, it's a girl," said the one in the cowboy hat and flowing white beard.  
His  
blue eyes gleamed behind his glasses.

"This here's Sid," Kelly said, pointing to the bearded man, "and that's Harve,

and that's Walt. They came down from Angel Home." Kelly turned to the seated men. "This little gal's just started playing, and she's picking it up real fast."

Zita smiled at them. A foster mother's warning about being alone with men flashed through her head and vanished. Bill was one of the nicest people she had ever known, though she had been suspicious of so much kindness at first. He had been lavish with praise, and cheered her when she learned to return compliments, a skill she had to learn from him. "Hi," she said.

"Sit right down," said Kelly, gesturing at an unfolded metal chair. "Want coffee?" Its warm brown scent flavored the air. He poured a mugful for her from an industrial-sized thermos, handed it to her. Bill sat next to her. A butterfly waved wings in her chest. She had finally gotten up the nerve to play a tune at a grange dance last Friday, with Angus playing along beside her and covering up her mistakes with his own loud accuracy. The experience was amazing: people had danced, and she had played the tune they danced to. She had felt a queer sense of power that almost scared her.

There was less room here for her sound to be swallowed by someone else's. What if they expected her to be perfect?

She put a mute on the bridge of her fiddle. Even she couldn't hear herself play. After half an hour of her playing tiny tentative notes and hoping they fit the tunes the others were playing Harve (large in overalls, and wearing a billed cap that bore the logo of a tractor rental company in Oklahoma) said, "Take that thing off. Better to make noise than silence."

"Your turn to play a tune, anyway, and you got to play it so we can hear," said Bill.

She glanced sideways at him. She wanted to try "Chinese Breakdown," but she didn't know it well enough yet. She thickened out and played "Wabash Cannonball," which was so simple she had locked it down by the third class.

"Shaping up to be a fine fiddler," Kelly said when she had done. She smiled at him, then looked at the cracked cement floor.

Bill sang an old Hank Williams song.

"Remember the first time I heard that," said Sid. "We used to have battery-operated radios --"

Zita, picturing the big garbage-can-sized radios she had seen in thirties movies, said, "Weren't they wired to plug in?"

"Sure, you could get them that way, but we didn't have electricity in the cabin," said Sid. "After the sun went down you could pull in the Grand Ole Opry."

And those big old batteries would be running out of juice and we'd scootch over closer to the radio and listen harder and the sound would fade and we'd scootch closer, and . . . " He cupped his ear and grinned.

Wait said, "When I went to war I was in the Navy, and they broadcast updates from the ship I was on. I didn't know about it till later, but my mama said she figured as long as those broadcasts came through I was okay."

"Hey, you wanna talk, save it for the telephone," said Kelly, and struck up a tune on his mandolin, "There's More Pretty Girls than One."

Zita played along, feeling her bow slide smoothly over the strings, not bumping and jumping and jiggling out dreadful screechy hiccuping sounds the way it had when she first started. She thought of Sid as a boy, inching closer to his radio to catch scratchy distant music, and suddenly a vision opened up inside her, a vision of a web the music made, stretching across time and space, entering the ears of a girl a hundred years ago, edging out her fingers for her children to hear eighty years ago, coming out in hums from those same children now grown fifty years ago, in the hearing of their own children and maybe the children of strangers, melting from one form into another, threads of tune catching up different beads of words, carrying them, dropping them, threading through others, transforming and traveling and yet carrying the original signatures of the first drums, the first lyres, the first flutes, the first voices.

Here was a heredity, handed out freely, gathering in sons and daughters, only asking to be learned and known and passed on. She looked at these five men, who had come from five different directions and ended up here in the garage with her, joining her in the instant family that shared tunes created.

She smiled wide at all of them, and they smiled back.

"Here's an oldie but a goodie," said Walt. "The Log Cabin Waltz."

"Teach me," said Zita.