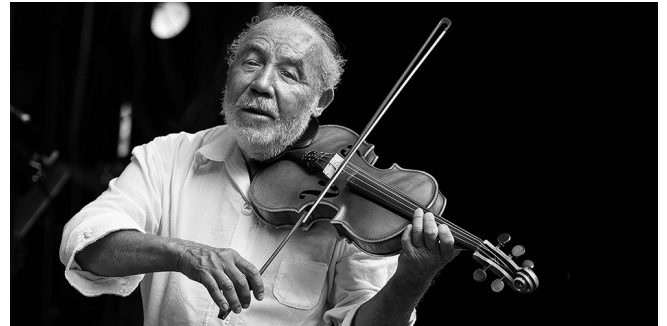


Strings

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Jade stared at the mirror. Her knuckles were white against the sink. Tears streamed down her already wet face. Her mother, father and little brother had not been heard of since she had entered the bunker; not even their dog had been saved. Her fantasies of them miraculously returning had long since unravelled.

When she first entered, when the world was yet to be devoured by sea, Jade had clung to the hope that they were wrong. One day the planet would be liveable once again. She would be able to return: broken and alone, yes, but to go back to something resembling normalcy, able to start a new life and be happy. As the days wore on, however, her hopes diminished to the animal instinct of survival, barely human.

Somewhere in the grey, thoughtless mash of day and night, Jade found herself walking along a corridor. By this point, she let her feet wander to meals and bed, not caring where she ended up. She was like a marionette with someone else in control of her limbs. This time however, they were taking her someplace completely different.

His eyes were closed when she entered; she could simply have slipped away. Yet the music was so beautiful, it was the first pretty thing that had occurred in the blur of concrete and tears that was now Jade's life. So, instead of leaving, she stood there, gazing up at the old man, feeling tears, once again, cloud her eyes. She let them fall, grateful for them. They were not tears of loneliness, neglect, and change, but ones of happiness and joy, and surely, she could allow this one pleasure to make her smile.

As the last few notes faded from the strings of the instrument, the man opened his eyes. Jade saw them widen, taking in the tearful wreck of a person before him.

"Bambina! Why do you cry?" His voice was wizened, yet it had a liveliness behind it, and was thick with an Italian accent. Jade opened her mouth to speak, yet no words came. Instead, she backed from the room, the brief happiness and respite lost.

As the days wore on, she could not resist the sweet melodies that issued from the man's room. Jade entered and spoke, her voice croaky and quiet from lack of use. "Please, sir, play for me."

And play he did.

Every day, Jade would return to the man's quarters and sit, listening, letting the tears slide down her face but smiling all the same.

One day the man paused, considering something. "Bambina. I am an old man; I will not be here forever. What will you do when I am gone? For, if I understand it, my violin is the only thing keeping you going."

Jade thought about this. The idea of more loss in her life upset her; however in her befuddled and clouded mind she knew that she could not, or would not, carry on if the delicate tunes stopped easing her pain.

"Shall I teach you?"

With the tiniest, almost imperceivable nod of her head, they began.

The weeks turned to months, and those to years. The scratchy notes warmed to the most beautiful sound, and soon the instrument burst forth with life, just like Jade.

As she sat by the old, dying man, the first tears in years flooded down her cheeks. Yet even when his eyes had closed, his breathing ceased, he lived on in the music Jade played to the bunker, restoring life and hope into her community.

When she drew her bow across the strings, she remembered him. Everyone did.