How The Bow Curves

The dirty alley near the corner of 42nd and Lexington wasn’t new to me.  The walk back into the alley was depressingly nostalgic: things were exactly how I remembered. The same rusted fire escape ways hung off the stiff brick buildings that towered over the streets, the smell that permeated from a butcher’s dumpster, the cracked and neglected pavement, and the sun that shone through from the far side of the alley through buildings as it was setting. I had slept there for a few weeks last year when the city flooded but the alley was dry. At that time I had found a cafe that let me mop their floors at closing for whatever they didn’t manage to sell that day. Food had become scarce where I had been on the city's East side, I moved back to try and see if they would let me work for scraps again.

By the time I was twenty, I was on the streets. When my parents passed, I was left with nothing; no money, no property, not even a letter or pair of pants. I never wanted to be on the streets but yet here we are. I learned just how invisible I was to the world.

If you asked me then, I would say that I wouldn’t be able to survive a full year, but we are creatures of habit, and habit helped me survive. My routine was the same. In the morning I would go to Grand Central Station and set up camp for the day. I always had two goals: spare change, and recognition. I could survive off the change, but without being recognized as human by someone-anyone-I would start to go insane. Whenever I saw a commuter I would open the heavy wood door that transported them from the terminal to the city streets. I would clink around my jar of change. Some would give me money, fewer would speak to me, and most didn’t even notice me. It got so bad that I felt like I had to justify my humanity to the pedestrians. I was more than the dirty man they saw on the side of the street. Someday, I swore I would be noticed.

Either way, that night I bedded down behind a heating unit, first putting down my cardboard pieces, then a sleeping bag I had stolen from a shipment to the REI store, and finally a heavy blanket I had traded for food from the cafe last winter. The wind funneled through the

alley and whipped at my face, but I paid no mind because I could finally sleep for the night. A feeling of familiarity washed over me until I heard what sounded like a violin on the adjacent side of the alley. I was not in the mood that night, and the crooning notes interrupted my sleep. As the playing went on, I grew more and more irritable. I pulled off my sleeping bag and wandered over to the noise. A man older than I with sunken brown eyes, gray hair, and a permanent sad, longing look on his face sat erect in his sleeping bag playing his violin. He looked like me in twenty years.

“Keep it down over there” I told him, “do you know that people are trying to sleep!” The response to my shouts were staccato notes as the music climaxed to a fever pitch, reverberating off the alley walls, as much as I hated to admit it, it was beautiful. I listened in awe as the music subsided, and when the bow finally stopped flying I was met by a steely gaze.

“Never interrupt one of my pieces again,” said the figure “I’m practicing for my street performances tomorrow, your sleep can wait ten minutes.”

I didn’t appreciate how the musician spoke to me so I asked him “Who do you think you are?”

 “This is how I afford to eat” he replied, “humor me and listen”. So I listened to him play and we talked in between movements, he told me his name was Edgar.

From then on we were close. Edgar and I always stuck together, he was getting older so I gave him a sense of protection and found our meals. In return, every night before we slept, I learned how to play his violin. I started by learning how to hold the bow, and we gradually progressed by practicing nightly until I could play Bach and Beethoven.

After years of companionship, practice, and rooting around in the dumpsters behind music stores for more sheet music, Edgar finally reconnected with his birth family. He had always wanted to make it big in the city so he ran away from home when he was sixteen and went broke chasing his dream. Now the fifty-year-old had found his family and was moving on.

As the greyhound bus rumbled through the stop on the city's outskirts, Edgar and I silently said our goodbyes, there was no need for words. I have always hated goodbyes, especially the permanent ones. The sense of finality just always gets to me, permanence has never sat well with me, I like the unknown. I choked down tears and looked to the cloudy sky for a sign, there was none. The bus stop's glass enclosure made it feel like this moment was the only one that mattered. The bus hissed as it lowered and the doors opened, we hugged, only for a moment, and Edgar released the hug to give me a black case and white bag. “You deserve this where I’m going I won’t need either, keep your head up and someday you’ll make it.” And just like that the mouth of the bus swallowed him up and I was left standing there with tears in my eyes, a violin in one hand, and a bag of sheet music in the other. Once again I was alone, unnoticed.

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The rays of light shining through the alley were what woke me in the morning. I tucked my bedding away behind a dumpster to ensure it would still be there when I returned, I grabbed my violin, and music, and left the alley across puddles and potholes. The tourists always donate the most money, real New Yorkers are so accustomed to street performers that they just block them out. I set up shop at the most touristy place in the city, Central Park. In front of one of the main lakes on the south edge of the park, there is a tunnel filled with gilded-age designs and beautiful acoustics. It was Edgar's favorite spot so it was only right that I picked up his mantle and returned there. The ornate paintings in the tunnel were divided by a winding network of carved golden laurels. I unfolded Edgar's old trusty drab-green camping stool, unraveled my music stand, and placed down what I thought was a particularly pretty orchestral suite written by Bach. As I put my open black violin case down for donations, I noticed the people walking by still didn’t bat an eye at me. It was such a nice venue that I almost forgot I lived on the streets. I pretended like I was in front of a crowd of thousands as I sat down. I took a deep breath, put the bow to the metal strings, and let my wrist flow. I reminisced how Edgar had admonished me for my poor mechanics so many years ago and I wished he was here to see me now. It was my first time playing for anyone besides him, I thought that I would have been nervous, but I felt at peace. I had my eyes glued on the piece for the entire first movement, and when I looked up a small crowd of people was looking back, some even dropped dollar bills into my case! Green on black was such a pretty color, I thought. “God bless you all” I croaked. My first days of street performing were some of the best. I found such a passion for the art and the interaction, and I felt connected to the audience, I was noticed.

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Putting my pen down, I closed the binder that had all of the pages of my half-written memoir in it. I stood up to walk to the kitchen and admired the high ceilings, white trim, and my records that hung behind the thick dark-oak desk. The oriental carpet was soft on my bare feet, and the hardwood floor cool. Making my way past colorful art and mounted sculptures, I stepped into the kitchen with my wife and kids, ready to sit down and eat dinner. I kept my head up and just like Edgar had told me, someday I made it.