

# Fiddler

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illustration by Shelton Bryant

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November always dragged around the station, but today was one dead Sunday. Not one car pulled off the interstate all morning. Nothing hit the drive but a thin steady rain, puddling slow rainbows in the oil. Me and Harnie just tilted back our chairs against the cigarette rack, watched the monster movie, and waited for the game to start. The big flying turtle was about set to barbeque downtown Tokyo when the drive bell rang, and up sluiced a car so damn gorgeous it hurt to look at it. A '37 Buick Roadmaster it was, painted a red so rich it was nearly black, that straight eight engine whispering like a lover while teardrops of rain rolled down the chrome grill.

Out climbed this tall fellow, dressed like God's grandpa done up for a wedding or a funeral. His skin was brown as a buckwheat cake, with creases deep as drainage ditches. Took a mighty long stretch of sweat and toil, love and birth and dying, to carve a face like that. He flexed his shoulders, then rolled his neck till it cracked. He pulled a pack of Camel straights from inside his vest and flipped one out.

"Got a light?" His voice was deep and warm, half gravel, half honey.

I tossed him a pack of matches through the open door; he caught it left-handed, then flipped it open, folded over a match, and struck it with his thumb.

"This the town with the dead fiddler?" he said after a long drag on the smoke.

"You might say so," I said, ignoring the look Harnie gave me. Nobody talked about her; I wondered how this fellow had even heard about her. "Ain't a fiddle, though. It's a cello, like in the symphony."

The stranger shrugged. "Close enough."

"She ain't d-dead, neither," Harnie said. "M-more sleeping, like."

He puffed out a wreath of smoke. Then another. "Let's go wake her up," he said.

"You best not try, mister," I said. "She been sleeping for thirty some year."

The man grinned. "I'm feeling lucky today. C'mon, boys, let's go."

"Mister, I sure hope you ain't as lucky as you feel. Woman like that, best not woke at all."

"You scared?" the stranger said.

"Damn right I am," I said. "You'd be too, if you knew."

"I just want to see her, is all."

"She ain't no damn tourist attraction. You wanna play tourist, get back in that car of yours and drive on up to Graceland. North on 55, three, four hours."

"I'm no tourist," the stranger said. "You can't spook me." He stepped over the sill through wreaths of smoke, and leaned against the rack of pork rinds.

"Look here, mister," I said. "You see how Harnie ain't got no right hand?"

"M-muh-" Harnie said. "M-my f-f—"

"Take it easy, Harnie," I said, laying my hand on his shoulder. "I'll tell it."

Harnie scowled and grabbed the remote to turn down the sound of Tokyo roasting. Then he tilted back and scowled at me again.

"Me and Harnie was just kids," I said, turning back to the stranger. "Thirteen, fourteen, know what I mean? Harnie fell in love with the lady the day she come to town."

"Y-you too."

"Sure," I said.

"When was that?"

"Back in the late sixties," I said. "Don't remember the date."

"The d-day they sh-shot Dr. K-King," Harnie said. "She was b-beautif-ful."

"Sure she was," I said. "Skin like the moon, hair black with red highlights."

“Like y-yer car,” Harnie said.

I hadn’t noticed that. “Guess so,” I said. “Anyway, she was wearing this long white dress kinda thing, and at first we figured she was just another of them hippie gals hitchhiking to the Mardi Gras, come to sleep in the park.”

“L-lots of hippies,” Harnie said.

“Sure,” I said. “They was everywhere back then. But this ‘un was different. She took that cello out of her case, opened up her legs, and snugged it up against her.”

“She was s-so-so b—”

“Yeah,” I said. “Harnie and I was on our bikes, just watching her wrap her fingers across the strings. She sighed just then, and looked up at Harnie and me with them green eyes of hers.”

“B-blue,” Harnie said.

“They was green, Harnie,” I said.

“B-bl—”

“Dammit, Harnie...”

“What happened next?” the fellow said.

I looked down at the counter. All that smoke of his was stinging my eyes. “She smiled at us.”

“Ah,” the fellow said. The rain whispered steady on the concrete, the smell of its mist cutting through Camel straights and wasted fuel. “Ah.”

“Then she sighed again, her smile melted away, and she shut her eyes. She just sat there, cello snugged between her knees, and didn’t move at all. Not then, nor ever again neither.”

“What about his hand?”

“I-I-I—”

“Dammit, Harnie,” I said. “Don’t get all riled. I’m telling it.”

Harnie blushed and nodded.

“Well, me and Harnie just sat there watching her — heck, we wasn’t moving no more than she was. We sat there all afternoon, watching folks not see her.”

“They st-still don’t, m-mostly,” Harnie said.

“Come nightfall, Harnie and I was just about fit to bust. We walked up to her, as close as close can be.”

“H-h-heard her b-breathe.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I reached out and nudged her shoulder, but she didn’t move. Then Harnie laid his hand on hers, the one she had wrapped round the neck of the cello.”

“But she still didn’t move,” the stranger said.

“Right,” I said. “She didn’t move no matter what we did. Finally, though, Harnie reached down and plucked one of the strings. Just a little pluck like. Just to see.” Boy, my mouth was dry, rain or no rain. “Reach me a soda, would ya mister?”

He went over to the cooler and grabbed three Big Shot pineapple sodas. He handed one to me and slid another over to Harnie. Then he reached inside his vest again and laid a fiver on the counter. “My treat,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said.

He popped the top and took a pull at the soda. “Ahh,” he sighed in satisfaction. “I’ve missed this. Can’t get ‘em where I been.”

“Where you from?” I asked.

“Round here,” he said. “But I been away.”

“Whereabouts?”

He smiled then, a sad smile. “What happened when Harnie plucked that string?”

I took a pull at the soda. “Not sure I can explain it. It was just a little plunk, like. One quiet little note. You couldn’t hardly hear it. But that sound cut me to the heart.” I took another pull at my soda. “I can still hear it. I lay in bed, nights, staring at the ceiling, listening to it.”

“And Harnie’s hand?”

“Harnie’s hand... well, it just lit up. At first it was like he was holding a flashlight to his palm. Then it was shining, painful bright, till finally it was showering sparks like a Roman candle. Didn’t smell like it was burning or nothing, though. It smelled like, I don’t know...”

“Flowers,” Harnie whispered.

“And all the time that fountain of light was eating away his hand, Harnie was laughing. Just laughing.”

“Didn’t it hurt?” the stranger asked.

“Flowers,” Harnie whispered again.

“And nobody even noticed!” I said. “They’d just walk right past us — Harnie’s hand spitting a rooster-tail of sparks ten foot over our heads — and they’d say ‘howdy, boys’ without a second glance. We both stood there staring at Harnie’s arm till the stump sizzled out, and quite a spell longer too. Finally we headed home.”

“What did your folks say about Harnie’s arm?”

“Our daddy been gone since we was babies. And Mama acted like Harnie ain’t never had but the one arm.”

“Ev-ev’rybody,” Harnie said.

“Sure,” I said. “We asked Doc Harrison, he said Harnie was born that way. Pretty soon we stop asking. And they see the lady sit there, day in, day out, but don’t think nothing of it.”

Stranger drained his soda. “That’s quite a tale.”

“Ain’t no tale,” I said angrily. “It’s the God’s honest truth.”

He locked eyes with me. “I believe you,” he said. And I could see he did.

“Okay, then,” I said.

“I’ll ask one last time,” the stranger said. “Take me to her.”

I looked at Harnie, and his face had that look.

“All right,” I said.


It was raining hard by now, but I didn’t mind. I locked up the station and we piled into his Buick. There was plenty room for all of us up front. It was only three blocks to the little park downtown. I wished it was longer; I coulda rode all day in that gorgeous antique Roadmaster. It rode like a dream.

He pulled up to the curb right next to her bench. Then he climbed out and, without even glancing over at her, walked around to the trunk. While he was rummaging around back there, Harnie and I walked over to the lady. She was so beautiful. So quiet.

Then, with three quick snick-snacks of clasps flipping open on a case, the man pulled a National Steel guitar from the trunk. He walked over, sat down beside the woman, and settled the guitar in his lap. He reached out and ran one calloused fingertip along her cheek.

She sighed, and opened her eyes. They were green, just like I remembered.

“Sorry I’m late,” the stranger said, and from his vest pocket pulled out a pick.

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