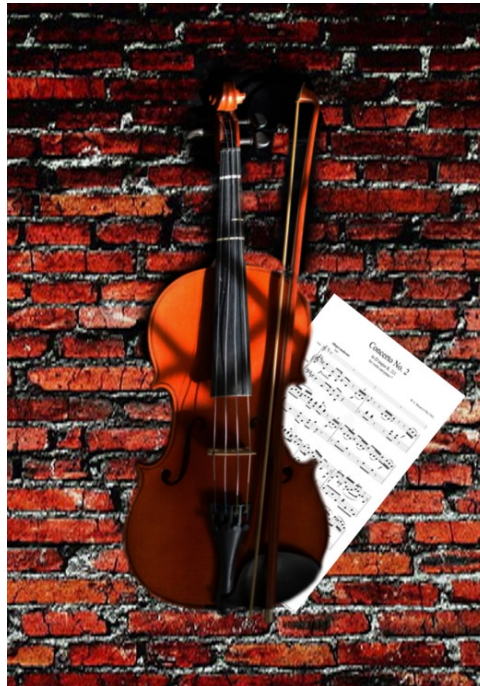


The Violin Player

Judith Nolan



It takes generosity to discover the whole through others.

*If you realize you are only a violin, you can open yourself up
to the world by playing your role in the concert.*

~ Jacques Yves Cousteau



Ehud Ben Armin lifted his beloved carefully from her resting place. It had been several days since he had dared to touch her, and now his aging fingers ached to caress her again. Her long, lovely neck, her curved, satin body that never seemed to age; despite how the cruel years had treated her most ardent lover. *She grows more beautiful with every passing year, while I...*

“But not yet...” Ehud sighed with the need to coax unalloyed beauty from his love once more, in a pure voice that sang only for him. Or that is how he liked to think of her. That she would refuse to sing such songs for another. Soon fickle time would separate them, and then who knew how she would act with a new, more impatient lover...

“My precious love...” he whispered, for her alone. “Did you miss me? I am here, now.”

His old fingers curled around her, trying not to cling too tightly. He feared the day when those same fingers would no longer obey him. When the advancing joint-ill, which plagued him more and more these days, would finally prevent such a joyful union. If he were too careless, his beloved would feel his impatience and not perform as he would wish. If he clutched at her too harshly she would sulk. He trembled with anticipation, tears blurring his aging vision.

He tried to relax his cramping muscles. It had never been like this when he was young, and she had first been placed into his care by his late father. Then they had sung such songs together, and made everyone happy, causing feet to tap, and couples to dance with abandon. Even in the darkest times they could sing together, trying to forget...

"It will be all right. Please, give me a moment..." Ehud flexed his hunched shoulders, trying to ease out the tension.

Together they had travelled many a difficult road through the years, and they had come far. All the way from German-occupied France, and through their terrifying death camps, finally coming to rest in a tiny basement apartment in New York City, where he had found a lonely sense of fragile peace.

Ehud extended his bow arm to study the fading blue of the tattooed row of numbers marking the inside of his forearm. He had to force back the tide of hatred that always swelled within him at the sight of them. He inhaled deeply, releasing the breath slowly, through taut lips. Now was not the time for such bitter memories. Now was the time to capture some new ones. Time to ease the bleak loneliness of his eternal soul...

"My only beloved..." He smiled wistfully, breathing deeply again to slow his heart rate. It worked, as he knew it would.

Sighing now with contentment, Ehud folded his lover into his embrace, inclining his head to rest his cheek against her satin smoothness.

Holding her close to him, he stood for long moments, just breathing and sensing her beauty surrounding him once more.

Then the moment came. He felt her stirring against him, the barest shiver of sensation. She was coming alive again, and responding to his caresses. Only then did Ehud begin to carefully arrange his fingers on her strings, flexing the wrist of his free hand, before lifting the old-fashioned, horsehair bow he held, placing it gently across the strings of his lover, and she began to sing for him as he knew she would...

Ehud closed his eyes, and played. He could not help himself. He played for all those he had loved and lost. All the ghosts which were summoned by the sound of his playing, to inhabit the darker places in the corners of his tiny apartment and crouch there, listening. He played for all the pain and beauty in the world outside. He played despite the tears running down his seamed, old cheeks, dripping off his chin to stain the front of his shirt. He played because he could not help himself.

And on warm summer nights such as this one, he often left the window open beside him, so the sound of his playing could float out into the night, and maybe, just maybe, touch another soul with fleeting joy. Whenever he played for his unseen audience he never turned on the light, knowing his ghosts preferred to visit in darkness and remain hidden.

A miasma of sensation feathered across the back of Ehud's bent neck as his aging fingers soared into Mozart's Third Violin Concerto. He

knew instantly that his most persistent ghostly visitor had finally arrived.

Whenever the old man left the window open lately, someone, or something, had slipped silently into the room. The movement was nothing more than the belling of the old netting curtain, as if driven by a stronger breath of night wind. No more than that. Even on nights such as this, when no wind existed at all.

Eyes closed and lost in the moment, Ehud had missed it the first few times it had happened. He'd been concentrating on his music, and it had only been that faint shiver along his spine which instinctively informed him he was no longer alone. But his ghostly visitor remained hidden in the shadows, never advancing into the faint pool of street lighting spilling into the room from the world outside.

Ehud had soon discovered that any movement in the direction of his mysterious visitor, any cough or cessation of playing, resulted in his sudden abandonment. Another belling of the old curtain, and the spirit had left silently, the way it had arrived.

Alone in the world, the old man craved company, no matter in what form. And he sensed his unseen audience often approved of his musical choices. Sometimes, the silent presence stayed until almost dawn, only leaving after the old man had finally slumped exhaustedly into his ancient, rump-sprung armchair, fretful sleep claiming him.

Continuing to play now, Ehud opened his eyes, straining his sight as far to the left as he could manage without actually turning his head. Something moved within the shadows, a slender, dark shape. *There! The sudden sheen of watching eyes quickly veiled! And mortal eyes, at that. No ghost then, it seemed...*

Ehud frowned as his heartbeat began to hammer. He did not fear any kind of attack. That would have happened by now. His visitor came for other reasons. The music was the bridge that had drawn this lost soul to him, forging a wordless bond.

Ehud moved with the music, barely turning, watching for any further movement, while striving to appear oblivious. He would play until his fingers bled, for the sake of company, however uncommunicative and mysterious.

He changed compositions to the dizzying beauty of a pretty Strauss waltz, The Blue Danube. He saw the slim, dark figure suddenly jump. Disapproval seemed to emanate from the darkness. *Not a Strauss fan, then.* Ehud puzzled over the reason why.

Maybe it was as simple as the fact that a waltz was always for a couple, but the other two concertos he had already played were showman's pieces. They conveyed a degree of technical mastery and range. The shadowy figure seemed to understand the difference, which impressed Ehud deeply.

Moving with the music once more he advanced slowly towards the window, changing his playing to Beethoven's Concerto in D Major, and sensing renewed contentment from the shadows.

Ehud turned slowly with his back to the open window, blocking any means of escape. Any ghost worth his name could simply pass right through him and into the night. He sat down on the wide sill and waited. A sudden sense of consternation flowed out of the shadows. This was *not* how the business of the evening was supposed to be conducted...

Ehud shrugged, continuing to play his concerto with renewed intensity. "I know you're there. You can come out now. Let me see you. I won't hurt you. I just want to talk."

The rustling in the shadows intensified, as if his unseen visitor was looking for another exit. But the front door to the apartment was locked and bolted. And the keys were in Ehud's pocket.

Softening his playing to a nocturne, the old man commented, "I didn't think ghosts needed to use a door."

"I am *not* a ghost!"

It's only a child, a boy! Ehud's playing stuttered for a moment before he recovered his composure. He had not known what to expect.

There was a tiny lisp in the voice, almost a speech impediment. But the voice itself was pure music, velvet-low and infinitely beautiful. The old man frowned in puzzlement. "Then what are you? Who are you? Tell me your name."

"Please, let me go..." The boy's voice in the darkness was filled with trepidation. "I should not have come here." Tears trembled in those hushed tones. "My father will be so angry with me." There came a sorrowing sigh. "But, your playing, it lifted me. Sang to me..." The incredible voice pleaded for understanding. "It is very beautiful..."

"Some say music is your soul seeking a voice," Ehud replied quietly, finally ceasing to play. He relaxed, placing the violin and bow across his upraised knee. "You enjoy music. Do you also read books?"

"Of course!" The sense of indignation from the shadows swelled to new heights. "My father has an extensive library."

"So did I, once..." Ehud looked around the neat bareness of his apartment. Since he had retired from his low-paid employment, books were a luxury he could not often afford. Those he did possess, he treasured almost as much as his beloved violin. *Almost...*

With loving fingers he stroked her long, lovely neck, and she purred a silent song for him. He smiled sadly.

"I could bring you books," the voice from the darkness offered breathlessly. "What do you like to read?"

“Anything and everything...” Ehud admittedly honestly. “Though I will admit a passion for poetry. Rilke in the original German is hard to find.”

He scanned the darkness. He wanted to get up and turn on the lights, but he knew that would be a mistake. The unseen presence would only take the opportunity to escape, and Ehud was tired of his own company.

“My name is Ehud,” he offered. “And I do not mean you any harm. But I would like to see you.”

He waited for what seemed like an age. His old body would soon begin to cramp, and he would be forced to move. He sighed and shrugged, pushing his feet beneath him.

“Vincent...” The name floated out of the darkness before him. “My name is Vincent. Now, may I go?”

“Vincent...the conqueror...” Ehud mused. “A powerful name. You seem very young for such a name.”

“I have passed my thirteenth birthday,” the boy responded indignantly.

“When I was thirteen...” Ehud shook his head. His shoulders slumped. “It was a very long time ago. But I have my memories.” He eased to his feet. “If you wish to leave, then I will not stop you.” He took several steps away from the boy’s intended escape route.

Turning his back, he placed the violin beneath his chin once more, lifting the bow to lay it across the strings. Softly he began to play a Brahms concerto. Behind him, he sensed the tall shadow of the boy beginning to move, cautiously approaching the open window. Ehud pretended not to notice until the last possible moment. The curtain lifted silently as the boy slipped beneath, just as Ehud spun around, grasping at the passing shape. His searching fingers encountered some kind of heavy woollen cloth, and he hung on with determination.

From behind the curtain came a rumbling growl of warning, frightening in its intensity, and in the street lighting Ehud saw the boy lift one hand to swat at him. Clawed fingernails gleamed as they descended from behind the curtain towards his grasping hand, ripping and shredding the brittle fabric as the hand flashed down.

Ehud closed his eyes, daring to cling to his tenuous connection, knowing any damage to his bow hand would end his playing forever. But, with a desperation born of loneliness, he found he could not let go...

"Your hand...I cannot..." Bare inches from Ehud's grasp on the boy's garment, the clawed hand halted, and was suddenly snatched away. "Please release me," came the whispered plea. "You do not understand..."

"I know you enjoy my playing, and I am starved for company," the old man replied honestly. "Perhaps we could make a bargain. You

mentioned some books..." He let the boy go, standing back to allow him room to vanish back into the night from which he had come.

But the child didn't turn to leave. His heavy boots eased down onto the carpet from the sill, even though his tall body and unseen face were still hidden behind the ruined curtain. "And what would be my end of this bargain?"

Ehud's heartbeat quickened. "You bring me whatever books your father can spare and I will play for you." He eased closer. "Do we have an agreement, Vincent?" He held out one hand towards the slender figure.

It took several minutes of tense waiting before a hand was extended through a long, ragged tear in the curtain. "I am sorry about ruining your curtain."

"Don't worry. It was old and needed replacing." Ehud held his nerve as the hand rose towards him.

He saw an unexpectedly large hand covered in fur, with those long claws instead of fingernails. It ended, well before the wrist, in a ragged, white, thermal undergarment that hid more than it revealed. Swallowing his trepidation, Ehud grasped the unusual hand strongly, and was rewarded with a firm grip and a gusting sigh of relief.

Carefully, Ehud pulled back on the hand, finding it unresisting as he drew the boy slowly through the remnants of the ragged curtain and

into the dim lighting of the room. The curtain finally slipped away from his shoulders to reveal a black-cloaked figure, with a deep hood drawn well up over a shock of tumbled blond hair. And beneath the hair he saw a shadowed, incredible leonine face that would have given any sane man pause to stare in amazement and terror.

But Ehud was looking into the boy's eyes, twin, sapphire pools of pleading wariness. *Don't scream*, they seemed to beg. *Please, don't scream...I will not hurt you.*

"I could teach you to play..." the old man whispered. "Would you like that? You have the soul for it. I can see that in you."

"With these...?" The boy lifted his clawed hands into the wan light. "How could I?" He curled them into impotent fists. "Do not tease me."

"It could be possible. I will admit they could be an impediment. But if you are willing to try..." Ehud swallowed tightly. "Please, let me see your hands."

Another hesitation, then the clawed appendages rose into the space between them, palms uppermost, as if in supplication. Ehud grasped them, ignoring the claws while he went about testing the flexibility of the boy's fingers and wrists. He soon discovered an amazing dexterity he had never seen before.

Vincent's long fingers had incredible extension, more than enough to hold the claws away from contact with the violin's delicate strings. The

bow hand was of no consequence. *He could be taught to control that, I think, easily.* Ehud proceeded to instruct Vincent in a formidable range of exercises which the boy performed with ease, and more than a trace of simmering impatience.

“Amazing...” Ehud finally released him. “And you are left-handed too. Unusual and remarkable. I have never seen your like before. You, my young friend, are a natural. I will endeavour to teach you to play. For your company, and the loan of some books. A fair trade?”

“I never thought it possible.” Vincent stepped further into the room, his eagerness heart-breaking to see. “I would give my soul to play as you do.”

“It may come to that. I am not a patient man and perhaps a poor teacher. We shall find out together.” Ehud chuckled wryly, studying his guest with intense curiosity. The boy’s incredible face, coupled with his strange clothing, heavy and functional, but with a practical beauty, spoke of another time and place. All of it could have walked straight out of a dream. *Or a nightmare...*

Ehud decided not to ask why. There would be time yet for explanations. “Tomorrow night then, Vincent? And you will bring me some books?”

“I will bring you all the books I can carry. Even Rilke in German, my father possesses that one. He too loves poetry. As do I.” Vincent

smiled shyly, pushing the hood back from his hair. "But, it is still early. We have time now for my first lesson..."

Ehud put out a detaining hand. He had to ask. "My young friend, why did you not like the Strauss waltz I played earlier? Is it not beautiful?"

"It was beautiful..." Wary sapphire eyes studied him sadly. "But the waltz is for a couple, two people." Vincent shrugged. "I have long had the feeling I will never be a part of any couple. A part of anything. So a waltz is not the music for me."

"I see..." Ehud nodded. "But you may waltz yet, my friend. You are so young. Nothing is ever impossible. Your first lesson should be the thing you like least, just to teach you discipline. And yes, a waltz is something a man does with a beautiful woman who loves him."

He shook his head. "I had that once," he continued, in a broken whisper. "Very well then. But you will soon find Mozart is by far the harder taskmaster."

"I am ready to begin..." Vincent quickly shed the heaviness of his cloak, casting it aside onto Ehud's old chair. His unusual hands were already reaching for the violin, and Ehud could not deny his eagerness...



Vincent stood still in the early evening's darkness. Before him the Chamber of the Falls tumbled heedlessly into the foaming pool below. He often came here to be alone and think. And to play...

He was waiting to begin, to surrender himself fully to the music once more, and allow it to soothe the loneliness of his soul. Then the moment came.

He felt her stirring once more against him, the barest shiver of sensation. She was coming alive again as she had a thousand times, and responding to his caresses. Only then did he carefully arrange his fingers on her strings, flexing the wrist of his free hand as Ehud had taught him. Lifting the horse-hair bow he held, he placed it gently across the strings, and she began to sing to him once more, as he knew she would...

Vincent closed his eyes, and played Mozart's Third Violin Concerto. It was his personal favourite. Those years spent learning from Ehud, before the old man's death, had been the happiest of Vincent's young life. He played for all those he had loved and lost. All the ghosts which were summoned by the sound of his playing, to inhabit the shadows surrounding him.

He kept the violin in her case, secreted in a special place in his chamber, high on a shelf in his large armoire. A place where she would always be dry and warm, free from the possibility of damage. He knew one day fickle time would eventually separate him from her....*but not yet...*

Ehud had gifted the instrument to his good friend, his only true possession. He said, he no longer worried about how she would act with a new lover. He knew she would be in the best of hands, however unusual...

"Found you," a familiar voice beside Vincent commented with satisfaction. "Music travels a long way. You want company?"

"What is it, Mouse?" Ceasing to play, Vincent lowered the violin with real regret.

"April 12th now, up there." Mouse jerked his chin towards the rock ceiling of the cavern. "You said you wanted to go walking in the park. Cold up there tonight, best time. Not too many people around. You said you would go with Mouse to find stuff. Not late, got time before dawn. Long climb, need to go now."

He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Elliot Burch is breaking new ground up there. Burch's sites always got good stuff. Taking, not stealing..."

"You are incorrigible." Vincent studied the tinker's open and honest face. The boy's eyes gleaming hopefully. He would go without Vincent, no matter what his good friend said.

"Very well." His mood of introspection well and truly shattered, Vincent bent down to the violin case at his feet and stowed the instrument

carefully, snapping the clasps shut. "But when we reach the surface, Mouse, I would prefer to walk alone. I need time to think about some things."

"Without Mouse?" the boy asked, without rancour. He knew Vincent liked to be alone at times. It was all the same to Mouse. It only meant Vincent didn't need him right now. "Okay good, okay fine, then. Race you to the drainage tunnel." Mouse grinned. "I'll win. See ya, Vincent!"

In a swirl of ragged clothing and giggling anticipation he was gone, leaving Vincent to look after him with resignation. He picked up the violin case and began to walk. "Thank you, Ehud Ben Armin," he whispered into the shadowed darkness around him. "For everything..."

Something stirred at the edge of his vision, a vague shape; a watching presence. Vincent could not be sure of anything.

Then a sighing whisper filled his mind. *"The other half of your soul awaits Above tonight...Do not hesitate, or you will lose her..."* The barest brush of ghostly fingers across the back of his hand made him shiver. *"And do not forget your Strauss, my boy. You may yet have need of it. Bring her to see me one day. I would like that. Fare thee well, my young friend...Shalom aleikhem, always..."*

~FIN~