

The Instrument - Elizabeth Roth
2nd Place
Greenbrier East High School, Greenbrier County
Grades 11-12

Micah trudged down the dank subway stairwell for probably the seventh time that day. The bottoms of his khakis were cold and wet against his ankles. They were turning gray from wet road dust, as if, starting at his feet, the grayness of the city would devour him. It was freezing. At home there would be snow, pristine and heavy. But here, steam and footsteps turned it to slush and puddles faster than it could fall.

He was shivering now, standing at the terminal where those putrid underground trains slid by on their metal tracks. That smell. He's taken off his jacket to protect the case he held on one hand. God forbid anything mar its leather perfection. He carefully lifted the sopping, heavy jacket, checking that the place where the lid met the base was sealed tightly against the raindrops. The rich aroma of earthly leather wasn't noticeable to the mass of commuters waiting for the subway, but he sensed it. As exquisite as the case was, what lay inside was a pure masterpiece. The subway screeched up on time, and Micah turned his thoughts once more to studying the map on the wall of the car.

After yet another descent to another subway terminal, another peek beneath the coat, and another look at the map, Micah finally arrived at the instructor's home. It was clear that this was a nice part of the city, as almost every home had what would have been a garden had it not been January. Micah noticed the vines in the small courtyards, intertwined in such a way that they were abundant yet controlled. They looked as if they were on the verge of complete and utter wilderness when winter squelched their efforts. Suddenly he was nervous. The instructor had been his mentor for almost eleven years now, but never had he imagined the rough-hewn man to

reside in such a haughty neighborhood. He'd only known him amidst the trees and the cabin. Twice a week he had ridden his bike-and after upgrading his instrument, driven his station wagon-up the gravel slope to be greeted by wood smoke and salted deer meat. The smell permeated the little hill of the instructor's home. The instructor would stand on the porch with the dog, Bill, to greet him. The whole scene had become as much a part of what they did there as the instrument in the case, and its absence, anxiety set in. The images seemed like boyish fantasies now, in the presence of such grandeur. Micah walked up the stairs to the house, and its great red door swung open.

"Micah!" The instructor stood, arms wide, in his usual garb of wool vest and jeans, glasses a little smudged, hair at his shoulders. Had he expected the man to be any different? The almost hostile environment seemed to have no effect on the instructor, and Micah grinned as he noticed Bill. His fur was matted with burrs, and he sniffed the city wind with an air of distaste. He stepped onto the threshold; the instructor slapped his back and taking the case from his cold, chapped hand.

"Come in, come in." The instructor prodded in along. "How was old Canada when you left her last? Only a few days ago wasn't it?" The two stepped into the house, which was somewhat dimly lit, especially after the instructor closed the door on the white-gray winter sky.

"Thank you. Yes, two. She's cold as ever. Last week it iced, left a nice coat on the trees around your cabin. That was a site. Froze over the port, too. Boats were still able to get through, though not as good of a haul as they would have liked." The instructor nodded, imagining no doubt the exquisiteness of the ice encrusted branches on his little hill.

"And Jim?" At this the instructor paused, as he had been placing Micah's case beside a chair and motioning for him to make himself comfortable.

“Oh, I, he’s been working a lot lately you know.” Micah gazed at the floorboards. Was it mahogany?

After a moment the instructor seemed to deem it best to revert to the former topic. “Too cold even for the fish I suppose.” He made for a doorway to what could only be the kitchen. “Well let’s warm up a bit before we start and then we’ll get right to it.”

“Yes, thank you.” Micah took a seat in a nearby armchair and rubbed together his freezing hands. Opposite him was a large bookcase, filled to the utmost with books and pictures, precariously perched atop stacks of books, and even other photographs. One wrong move and all the achievements, all the memories of a lifetime could come crashing down. Micah didn’t recognize anyone occupying the frames except his uncle. He posed with what Micah knew to be his old band, in front of the small theater back home. Micah thought of the parallels between this band and the band he had, formerly, been a part of. They too had played at the theater, quite recently, before the end of it all of course. Success doesn’t have a universal definition. Maybe that is what had driven Micah to be standing in this place on this day.

The instructor reappeared from the kitchen, two mugs in hand, Bill at his heels. He handed one to Micah.

“So how’s the city treating you so far?”

“Well it’s been different, haven’t seen that much yet. Had a little trouble with the subway.” The instructor chuckled, but knew there was more than that. He saw the discontent in the student’s deportment; he sat tensely in the chair, eyes fixed, almost glazed, bring his heel upward and back down in a slow repetitive movement. And he knew what the student bore. He knew what a struggle it was to leave his home, to leave the place where his passion for music had

its birth. He had endured it too, and the scares were plain to all, but time had of course eased their sting. He was a solo act.

The man and boy gulped their hot coffee, eager to begin their lesson, comfortable in their mutual silence. The cups drained quickly. The instructor stood and cleared his throat, moving to a door. Which when opened revealed a jumble of stands, cloths, and a pile of papers. He withdrew a stand and ran his finger down the stack of papers, and, though it was unmarked, pulled five pieces from the heap. Micah took this as his cue, and bent to the case at his feet. He slid the jacket to the floor, feeling in its pocket the letter he'd received last week. He couldn't drive it from his thoughts, and his mind reeled as its contents raced through his head. Jim had written in anger, sadness, and jealousy. His band mate, his favorite friend, abandoning their humble roots for city stardom? Talent wasn't the issue; he had assured Micah of that. No, he was glad that his friend had been given such a musical gift, but would he not find greater joy in the harmony of his band? Need he not some companion to share with his melodies? Micah had no answer. His heart was a jumble of ambitions. But now he was on his own. And no matter how forcibly he told himself otherwise, his instrument was more a part of him than a companion.

The instructor stood patiently, watching the student's hesitating hands. Micah touched the cold metal clasp of the case, bringing him back to his senses. The gold clasp reflected the lamplight like sun on water. Laying the base of the case on the floor, Micah ran his hand down the smooth leather, clicking each clasp open, until he could life the lid. The interior was plush and velvety brown. Wood smoke had seeped into the fibers, as had pine, from the many outdoor shows where the case had remained open for charity. The smell was tantalizingly rustic. He carefully lifted the instrument from it niche. A violin. It was astoundingly beautiful in its simple design; smooth curves of delicate wood, finished to perfection. The emotion of it workmanship,

as well as its purpose, emanated from it. Three taut strings stretched across the ebony neck, strong and regal, Micah touched each one before lifting the violin to his shoulder. It rested under his chin in such a way that it was obvious he had been made for this instrument, carefully crafted for this violin only. He delicately picked up its matching bow. It was slender and magnificent, and he moved it as if it were an extension of his own arm, bringing it to hover above the strings.

Micah paused and lifted his eyes to the instructor, who nodded in return and sat on the edge of a nearby stool to listen. The air had an eerie yet familiar quality of anticipation. Slowly, deliberately, Micah put the bow to the strings, and closes his eyes. He took a breath and pulled out the first note, a wailing mournful call to the weight of decision.