

**The Violin Man** - Jacqueline Trumbull  
1<sup>st</sup> Place  
Morgantown High School, Monongalia County  
Grades 11-12

A cool wind in late October gathered up the fallen leaves in Gallway and brushed them against the weathered cobble stone street. They floated in confusion around the corner of the famous Opera House, and down an adjacent street. The breeze died down around a man's feet as some of the leaves tumbled delicately into his open violin case. The air was crisp and it felt clean as he breathed in; the sharpness of the cold in his lungs vitalized him as he hit a higher string.

His shoes spoke of too much standing, but his brown suit was pressed. Coarse gray hair was slicked back into the formal hairstyle worn twenty years ago, and his chin was cleanly shaven. Wrinkles formed around his eyes and mouth, which was puzzling because he hadn't smiled in a long time. As he slid his bow against the violin strings, his eyes brightened for a moment before remembering their sadness.

“That's my favorite.”

The violin nearly jolted out of his hand as his mind frantically processed the sound of being spoken to. Gray eyes fastened nervously on a little boy holding a bag of cheap postcards.

“What're yeh sayin'?” His Irish accent revealed the middle class, and was audibly tempered.

“That's my favorite. Yeh play it sometimes when the weather turns. Seamus, eh, my friend Seamus, likes the faster one yeh played jest a couple days ago. He sells candy.” The little boy looked earnestly into his face, and he frowned.

“Who are yeh? Yeh listen to me?”

“I'm Colin. We all of us listen to yeh. You're the only one that plays around here, so close to the Opera House. Rest of us sell things- to the tourists, see. What's yer name sir?” His

voice was high, and the old man tried to, match the note on his violin. He absentmindedly pushed the bow back and forth, lightly, enjoying the odd tone.

“Ballard...Ardan Ballard.” He gazed bitterly at the Opera House. It stood giant, imposing its grandeur and dripping ornamentation on the humble subtlety of his street corner. His face twisted momentarily into a look of betrayal, before quietly settling for disappointment. He swallowed, and nodded towards the House. “I was supposed to be there. I was supposed to play there.” He looked down at the boy again. “Yeh’re sellin postcards? Does that work for yeh?”

“Yes sir, I got the hill, Blarney Castle, Ring o’ Kerry...Yeh want one?” Colin shuffled through his cards, proudly displaying them in front of Ardan’s face. They were thin and revoltingly colorful, as though accusing the green in Ireland of mediocrity.

“Ah... I don’t... have any coins.”

Colin pocketed his postcards, only mildly phased by the rejection. Ardan was studying the Opera House again; studying the beacon of failure that he had never managed to move more than a street away from- a street whose distance couldn’t block the pain of unfulfillment that bound him to his ruined dream. And it was growing before his eyes, emerging from a sea of ordinary buildings, encompassing the entire world, but halting before it reached his feet. He blinked and it was back in its square, set apart from other buildings as is requiring space to unleash its cloud of extraordinary, wrenching talent. It faced straight ahead, innocently averting his gaze, and he hated that it couldn’t see him.

“Yeh, that’s okay- they aren’t very good cards anyway,” Colin said, “but I sell ‘em, cause tourists like buyin’ from kids, see, makes ‘em feel good about themselves.” They stood quietly for a moment, Ardan lingering in the thickness of silence.

“It’s getting late kid... Yeh got somewhere to be?” He watched his bow glide up and down, piercing a gray sky that was beginning to darken around the edges of the clouds.

Movements were slower when darkness first appeared, as though patiently awaiting the liberality of night. His mind stilled, finding the shadows crawling amidst the purple light hypnotic.

“Actually... I was supposed to ask yeh if yeh’d mind playin the song from... umm... it would be three days ago, and Seamus says it was... Vivaldi. That sounds right I think.” He crinkled his nose, which Ardan saw was scrubbed clean under a mass of tangled black hair. “That’s what they wanted to hear, and yeh don’t play it often, so they made me ask. I picked the short straw, see.”

“Listen kid, yeh don’t want to listen to me, because I’m not any good. If I was I’d be playing at the Opera House, see, like I was supposed to.” He didn’t want to play Vivaldi; he wanted to resume his ballad, and force his violin to cry- make it shed the tears of high notes.

“Yeh didn’t make it in then. Well, I s’pose I’m glad about that.”

Ardan squinted down at the boy, not sure if he’d heard correctly.

“What was that?” His mind had forgotten the softness of emerging night, and was concentrated on the imp in front of him who had dared to rejoice in his ruin.

“Wellsir,” he said nervously, “Who would play for us?”

Ardan stared at him for a long time, and when he looked up he saw expectant faces, each belonging to a child holding bundles of unwanted goods. They gazed at him, begging to find solace in a beautiful song, and he stared back, letting amazement creep into his head.

He turned to the Opera House, and it was small. Its carvings were as superficial as the postcards in Colin’s hands, and the music radiating from inside that he could faintly hear was hollow. The applause sounded like the tinkering of china, not the heavy, appreciative sound of tired hands. But he had a real audience. He was the Mozart of the underworld, the Chopin of the over-looked. The last wisps of light frittered away under the leaves in his violin case as he lifted his bow to Vivaldi.

