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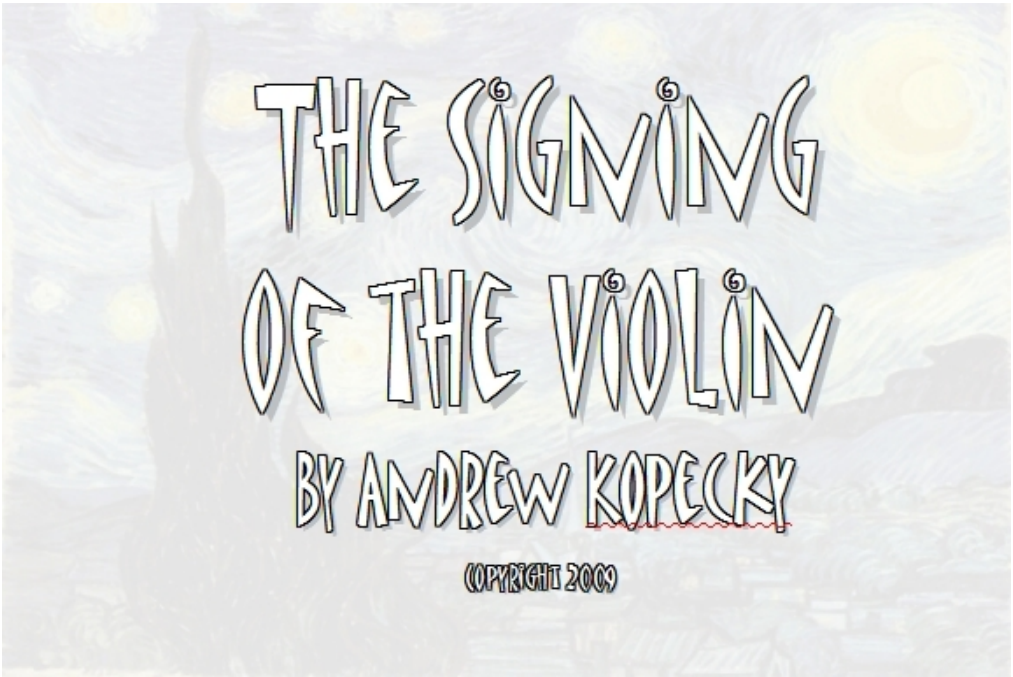
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THE SIGNING OF THE VIOLIN

BY ANDREW KOPECKY

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Tomorrow is Dad's birthday. His birthday comes every year and this year it's going to be tomorrow and he's going to be older and he invited John and Susie and Tamby here to the house for a birthday party with everybody and they're going to bring him gifts and their kids and then we're going to have a cake and sing happy birthday. We're going to sing and Mom said I could play for him. Dad likes it when we sing happy birthday except one time when I was singing too much he got angry at me and he hollered at me and slapped me, but that was a long time ago and then Mom gave me a hug and said he was sorry and she was crying. He didn't mean to make her cry and he felt bad and said he was sorry to her. That wasn't his birthday, that was just an ordinary day when Tamby and Susie and John went to their school and I went to mine and then we sang happy birthday in the evening. Dad made me go to the other school on Ashley Boulevard because there was a short circuit somewhere upstairs in me he said, and he said that often and said it laughing and I didn't know what he was talking about but it was always about school and he didn't seem very nice about it. He said I had to go to school with other kids like me who God forgot about. I don't know why God forgot about me but Mom says that God loves me and He didn't really forget about me and He loves me every day.

But they went to another school and I went to my school and Dad always drove them to their school but Mom always drove me because Dad said he didn't know the way to my school and he didn't want to drive me there and get lost or have the dummies rub off on him and make him stupid. He said that if I got lost that Mom would eventually find me and if she didn't that was okay, and Mom said that if ever I got lost in the department store I should just start singing and she would find me. But Dad said that would scare everybody out of the store, but I don't know how that would happen, maybe they could sing with me. Susie and Tamby and John, they never sang with me and sometimes they talked to me and gave me a hug, but mostly it was Mom who talked to me and gave me a hug. But nobody ever sang with me except happy birthday. So last week or the week before maybe when they were talking about the birthday party and they were finished Mom took me

out of the room and said I should play something for Dad on my violin and maybe that would make him happy for his birthday. She said it would be nice if he was happy on his birthday because he seems sad sometimes, and I thought except when Tamby and Susie come home with their kids then he's really happy, and when John comes home with Pat, he's really happy because he can go out and play catch with the football.

The arc of the football is like the arc of my bow over the strings. That's what Mom says. She always said that when Dad comes back inside he will listen to me play my violin, but then he is always too tired from playing football, with the high arcs and the long throws. And if I played too loud he would holler for me to quiet down and tell me to go in the basement and play and be sure to close the door. Then Mom would cry again and take me down into the basement, and she would sit and listen to me play and pretty soon she would stop crying. Mom bought all of the scores for me and helped me to keep them neat and helped me to remember to practice because sometimes I would forget. And Mom always took me to Mrs. Eisele's house and Mrs. Eisele would teach me to play better and say gentle words to me and touch my shoulder. She was a lot like Mom except she was older than Mom and had gray hair and she smelled like a bar of soap. She set me up for my first recital and that was really nerve-racking but after I played Mrs. Eisele and Mom were waiting for me behind the stage and they hugged me and said nice things. Mom said I was the best twelve-year-old boy in the world and I was happy and I played a lot more recitals and loved my violin more than anything, except Mom.

And then one day at my lesson I put the case down and didn't open it.

Mrs. Eisele saw the cut on my face and she didn't smile like usual. "What happened, David?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said

Then she looked at me for a long time still without a smile and was surprised that I didn't take my violin out of the case. "Where is your violin, David?" she said.

I took it out of the case, but not the bow.

She had a wrinkly forehead and it became more wrinkly and she said, very sweet-like, "Where is your bow?"

I took a long time to answer and then I finally said, "I don't know."

She left the room and went to speak to Mom. They whispered and didn't talk loud and then they were very quiet for a while.

Mom came into the room alone. "Where is your bow?" she asked, not as nice as Mrs. Eisele. There was a long quiet time again and she said again, "Where is your bow?" She held me by the chin and looked at my eyes, her eyes moving back and forth fast, and she got her angry look.

"You didn't cut your face playing outside, did you?" she said angry-like, and then she was less angry. And she waited.

Mrs. Eisele came back in and sat down quietly. She had pulled her long gray hair tight around and put it on top of her head. In her hand were two bows, her own and another one.

“No,” I said.

“Did Dad do this to you? Did he break your bow?” Mom was getting tears in her eyes.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Mom wiped her eyes and she looked over at Mrs. Eisele and they stayed like that for a while. Then Mrs. Eisele told Mom to stay and she gave me the other bow and I played.

It was hard for me to play for Mrs. Eisele with her bow and with Mom watching and crying. Dad said I was stupid. Dad said I was an idiot. He said I was wasting my time playing the violin and he was wasting his money and the best way to take care of me was to put me in a nut house. And when I played that day I made mistakes and I was being dumb and stupid, just like Dad said. So maybe he was right after all, and Mom was wrong, saying stupid things like I was the best son in the world and trash like that. But later on he did it again, and again, and everything was always the same except I got older and school was fine.

So tomorrow is Dad’s birthday. In the eight years that have passed since he first broke the bow across my face I have become less stupid in my own eyes, have become a half-way decent musician according to Mom and Mrs. Eisele, and have even applied to the conservatory down in St. John. But now Mom has asked her stupid son to play for Dad. And I am not so dumb anymore, I know that even though I couldn’t go to the normal school like Susie, Tamby and John I still learned something at my school. But if Mom says I am a talented musician with a bright future, and Dad says I am still a bleeping idiot and always will be, well, which is it? It was easier to just play and be dumb and stupid, because Dad got his way anyway.

Last week Mom helped me choose a piece to play and Mrs. Eisele liked it and she helped me prepare it. I am old enough now that I can go to her home for my lessons on my own by taking the bus and getting off next to the Mobile station on Rhodes Avenue. She treats me like her son and often she makes lunch for me because our lessons have always been in the middle of the afternoon.

“This is a nice piece you are preparing,” she said when we met the other day. “Handel’s Water Music. Air. What a lovely piece. But tell me, why are you preparing it for your father?”

In many years she rarely talked about him. So I was surprised. I took off my glasses—the lenses are thick and dirty and the world becomes all squiggly and distorted through the lenses when I take them off. I looked around at her kitchen, and I couldn’t see it and I put my glasses back on.

She continued, “David, you have told me many times of the difficulties you have with him. How many times has he broken your bow? Not to mention the

first time, across your face?" I stared at her without knowing what to say.

She went on. "And still you want to please him. You are preparing this beautiful music to play for him for his birthday. How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know," I said, and then added, because in school our teacher said we should have an opinion, "Fine, I guess."

And then she talked some more. "Despite what he always said about you, you are not stupid. You are very bright. You have given yourself to your music and have made the right choice, thanks mostly to your mother's persistence. Your mother and I have always had the highest trust in your abilities. And to prove that to you, we have made sure you were accepted at the Meacham Conservatory starting next fall. You are capable of so much more. You're going to be a master violinist one day. Congratulations."

But I didn't hear her. My glasses really were dirty. They always had been, they always will be. Mom said I should clean them more often, but I forgot. Sometimes she cleaned them for me. But now they were really dirty. There was nothing I could do to make them clean, because when I cleaned them they got dirty again. Luckily I could always read the scores. They didn't go from dirty to clean, they went from clean to dirty. Just like Dad. He wiped away his badness and he cared for me briefly and then he went back to how he always was, hating me, until Mom came along and cleaned things up. Mom said I should try to love him, but when I loved him, things got dirty real quick just like my glasses got dirty. Mrs. Eisele couldn't see this and she didn't have glasses. Dad would decide he didn't like the idea of the conservatory and then he would beat me with the bow again. He wouldn't do it just once, but twice and a hundred times. Whenever he got tired of the sound of the violin. Whack, whack! Take that you dumb moron! Your violin is smarter than you, you good-for-nothing bleeper. There was nothing to be said or done. Mrs. Eisele didn't know everything. Mom wasn't strong enough to protect me. So I would get into the conservatory. I would play. And he would not like that at all and he would come and bust my bow against my face again and again, and this time in front of other musicians.

"Your father really does care for you," she said. "Deep down." I didn't know who she was talking to. Through my dirty lenses I stared at her and her mouth just kept moving and I wasn't hearing anything anymore. Her mouth moved and there was nothing and all I heard in my head was the music for Dad. It was in my head and then on my violin and then two hours later I left her house and went home and when I walked past him in the living room he was reading the newspaper and he looked up at me and didn't say anything and hardly looked at me and everything was the same, though Mrs. Eisele didn't know what was anything and everything.

And now today is his birthday. John and Tamby and Susie are here and their kids are running around and their grandfather is laughing with them and cuddling them and joking with them. He went outside and played with the football with Pat and when he came in a big smile was on his face. He talked a lot to Tamby and then he talked a lot to John. Susie was quiet but he tried to talk a lot to her too. He asked them a lot of questions about their families and their work. He made jokes and they joked with him. Tamby went and whispered something in his ear and he pulled her close and hugged her. We all sat down for dinner and during the eating I looked at him and tried to catch his glance but he didn't look at me. He said he missed his kids being at home

and wished for the days when they were younger.

“But Dad, David is still here with you,” Tamby said.

“What?” he said. “You’ve got to be joking.” And then that was all.

Mom made him a white cake with chocolate icing. She spent all afternoon on it and decorated it with a football and “Dad” and “Happy Birthday.” She put a lot of time into it and when she brought it out and put it in front of him he scowled at her. She stepped back and waited.

“Why didn’t you just buy me one?” he said, “instead of wasting your time on something you can’t do?” She held her face steady and didn’t flinch. I was amazed to see her stand there still like that, still with a smile, her hands behind her back. I was amazed even though she was always like that. Her smile stayed and she lit the candles and we sang happy birthday. He laughed when the younger kids sang and little Maria climbed on his lap and helped him blow out the candles. Very soon we were all eating cake and there was more laughter and enjoyment. Dad asked Maria’s older sister Emily to sing for him and she sang a song from school and he clapped his hands and congratulated her. With the cake finished, he turned to the gifts that were waiting for him.

“Honey,” Mom said, “before we begin with that David has a special gift for you.”

Dad grunted and a frown fell over his face. “He’s never given me anything special before, what could he possibly have dreamed up now?”

Mom seemed to be struggling to keep a hold of herself but she made a mighty effort. She leaned over and whispered something to him and his eyes darted over to mine and his expression didn’t change. “Okay then,” he said to me, the first words he said to me all day. “Go ahead and play this special music or whatever it is. But if I don’t like it I won’t pretend. You got it? I don’t pretend with my feelings, so get on with it.” He looked up at his Susie and Tamby and John and they were smiling because Dad talked to them and said nice words.

I left the room and came back with my bow and violin. Dad and everybody watched me as I sat myself down and warmed up. The kids were curious and came closer and inspected my violin. Mom sat down next to me and put her hand on my knee. For a second time my eyes met with Dad’s and he still had no softness to show. For the first time I could remember I hoped that just this one time he would listen to me play and be happy. My left hand fingers twitched against the strings and my right hand fingers tingled around the bow and the first stroke was sweet.

But it was not going to be like that. He will not enjoy it. He is hard, he is cold, he hates it! And the scowl is always there on his face, I make him scowl, I make him hateful. He detests my music, even if I play it for him, I practiced it for him! He does not look at me now, he looks at the floor and he is angry and is trying to control himself. But he cannot. He never could, he never will. The kids have become quiet and are listening to the singing of the violin. They watch me, they look at Dad. And I am playing, my violin is singing its special song to Dad. And he scowls even more and shakes his head and then puts his hand up before I get very far into the piece and he says “Stop,” yelling-

like, and when I don't stop he stomps his feet and jumps up and comes towards me. And I keep playing and then he is close to me and I jump up and run from him, and I am playing and everybody is quiet and watching me. Dad comes after me but this time he will not win, no, he won't win, his hate will not be better than me, I am running and my left hand rises up high and comes down hard and slams the violin against the hardwood floor of the living room, over and over and then again and again. I throw the bow at his feet and am still running, out of the living room and through the kitchen and out into the garage and then outside into the cold, and my left hand still grips my violin, beaten and mangled and lifeless. And I run with my dead violin and Mom's voice follows me calling out my name.

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"The Singing of the Violin" is **Andrew Kopecky's** first published piece of short fiction. He has published online articles on English grammar, language, and English language teaching on ESLFocus.com. He has university degrees in English literature and in linguistics and ESL teaching. Though he has taught English for more than 20 years, his interests are Medieval and 20th Century literature and history. He lives in northern Illinois with his wife and two children.