

The Concert by Emily Jennings

It was dark enough. Diane raised her violin and played a jumble of strangled chords. Her bow hadn't been rosined in . . . a while. She had stopped trying to remember life before this dripping tunnel of brambles. If the sun still existed, she never saw it. Every night, she played for Grubb. He needed her to play him a form, to give him a place to speak from. Here he was now. The black hump growing in the darkness was unmistakable: a bloated, roughly human body with spidery limbs and delicate hands. The shadow's mouth did not move; it exuded Grubb's voice. "Softer," he said. "Play what you feel."

Diane felt only the ground. She relaxed and sunk into it.

"Better. Don't strain yourself. Don't try," Grubb said.

"I'm doing the best I—"

"Play. Don't talk to me. I will talk to you."

Diane let her bow slide down the strings.

"Very nice," Grubb said. He sighed and settled himself further back in the tangle. "If only I didn't always have to leave."

Diane smiled with polite understanding.

"I've been thinking about how to change that," Grubb said.

The music stopped.

"Keep playing. Yes, I think it would be better if you came back here."

Diane stared into the prickly darkness, until the tunnel extended beyond shadow to absolute black. Where she sat, enough silvery-blue light peeped in to illuminate the circle of mushrooms around her. The light coming from the . . . from a . . . well, never mind. Beyond Grubb, it was dark. Diane couldn't form a clear idea of what might be waiting there. If anything, maybe something unpleasant. But it beckoned her, and she couldn't help listening.

"Why don't you come back with me?" Grubb asked.

Maybe she would. If only her feet weren't so sleepy. They were roots in the ground, sinking deeper into the soil each night. Her head lurched forward and her eyelids stuck together. She could hardly stay awake, let alone move. How long had she been awake in the dark?

"Very well, have some rest," Grubb said. "Don't think about it. We'll try again next time."

Diane couldn't help thinking. After silence and loneliness returned to the dark, her mind continued to scramble, and its wildness kept her awake. She sat through eternity, huddled and shivering. And then, a change began. The cold blue light looked and felt warmer. In the air above, Diane heard a sound like the trills she played on her violin. She looked up and saw a vaguely familiar animal flash into view. It grasped a branch with its claws, peered down at her, and trilled in its feathered throat.

Morning, morning. Wake-up time. Doing well?

Diane had to answer it somehow. Words wouldn't work. She positioned her violin to play an answer. "I'm fine, how are you?"

The creature cocked its head and trilled: "Pretty good, pretty good, yes. What are you up to?"

"My job. Busy, busy, busy." Diane did her best to smile with her cheek on the violin. Her fingers began to dance out a song she had played not long ago. Or maybe it was a while back. Whenever it was, her spirit was singing again through music written decades ago by a complete stranger. It was art, something molded and worked at, with a beautiful form, a meaning. It was itself, and it was part of her. She played and played. Patches of bright blue that reminded her of

something she could almost remember opened up between the branches. The world shone yellow. A whole orchestra of pipes, toots, and even squawks joined the duet between violin and singer. They played throughout the brightness, until the tunnel fell into gray evening. Diane curled up and fell asleep.

She awoke to the same dark tunnel. Grubb was there, though she couldn't see him yet, and behind him was the deeper darkness. It called to her again, but its call made her think of the light, and the other world she had seen. Would she ever find it again? Her feet weren't so rooted anymore. Still, it would be easier to crawl down the tunnel, to wade through the loam and into sleep. . . . Whatever she decided, it was time to play.

Hardly aware of her own movements, she began the song she had played in the light. The darkness shivered.

"Stop. Don't," Grubb's voice said. "Please. That isn't right."

Diane hesitated only a moment, and then her joy burst back into song. She marveled at the leaps of her own fingers, at the sweeping of her bow. A breeze whispered, tossing a cloud of dead leaves over her.

"I said, please stop. We don't have much time. You've played enough. You need to come in deeper now," Grubb said.

Diane lowered the violin. Her lips were thick and gummy from long silence. "No. I'm leaving now," she said.

Another breeze blew the claw of a branch against her face.

"You can't leave. Don't you know what would happen?" Grubb said.

"What happens if I go in deeper?"

"Come and see."

Diane felt the tug of the skeleton branches and heard the whispers. She ground her teeth against them, dug her trembling bow into the string, and played. A torrent of wind rushed out from the back of the tunnel. The walls of the tunnel shook. The wind might have shaken them, or the ground itself might have shook, Diane couldn't tell. She struggled to keep upright against the gale, as her mouth stretched into a smile. She could play music for a storm. Her wrist and fingers sprinted through the piece. She had never moved so fast.

Suddenly, a spidery branch swept down, caught the violin, and struggled to tear it from her grasp. She jerked upwards and freed herself. The music resolved in a final, firm chord.

The echo of a distant moan rose from the ground. There was no more black shape blocking the tunnel, only solid blackness. The wind exhausted itself and blew one last feeble hiss. A dark blot sailed out on it and rested beside Diane. It was another one of the creatures from the day, made for the night. It was huge, oily, and black as the handle of Diane's bow. It opened its mouth and croaked at her. Then, griping and moaning, it spread its wings and flapped off down the tunnel.

Diane laid her violin in her lap. What a performance. A shame no one else was there to hear it. Tingling throughout her whole body, Diane wiggled her bare toes out of the dirt and brushed them off. Her black dress was already ruined, so she didn't mind tearing it as she scrambled out of the thorns.

A sick rolling in her stomach reminded her that she was starving and exhausted. Of course. The symphony had played in the park that evening. She was still carrying her violin. After the concert, she must have sat down to rest in that bramble patch and fallen asleep. Only a mangy crow perched in an oak tree watched her stumble home. He disappeared just in time to escape the first light of morning.