

Prelude

She had given him a bath, even though it wasn't Saturday, and dressed him in his best clothes and pressed down his hair as best she could. His father had grumbled into his Sunday suit, and she was in the white dress with the pink and yellow flowers, so this was something special.

"I don't need to go," his father muttered again, half-grinning.

"Yes, you do," she repeated, half-grinning back.

"Well, let's go then."

His father was wonderfully tall and terribly strong and wise in all things, and he took the boy's hand while his mother opened the back door, which was the only one they really used, and they stepped into the cool spring evening.

The sun had set, but only just, with the sky still light and kids still chasing each other from yard to yard, as they walked past mostly white-painted wood-frame houses — though the Timson place was brick, " 'cause they've made money," as his father had once explained — and his mother took his other

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hand as an old jalopy wheezed past. The boy wanted to take a ride in a car so bad. “Some day,” his father had promised, but not yet.

They turned onto the main street, the stores locked and dark, the awnings rolled up, the sidewalks night-empty, until they got to the south end, where they met other people heading toward the Opera House.

The boy didn’t know that it was too grand a name for a hall so small, in a town so small, where not a living soul had ever seen an opera, or wanted to. He knew his grandfather had helped build it. “They built it after the town burned,” his father had told him the first time he’d been there, “to show we weren’t licked.” The boy wished his grandfather was alive. He had never known him. He must have been very strong.

“Is it Santa Claus?” the boy asked, suddenly excited, for he had been here once with other children and their parents, and Santa Claus had given him a little toy truck that he still played with.

“No, silly,” his mother laughed. “Christmas isn’t for a long time.”

And he noticed that there weren’t many other children as they climbed the creaking stairs.

The hall was bigger even than their church, and the ceiling even higher and the wooden seats even more uncomfortable than church pews. There were two big brass lights — chandeliers, his father had told

him on Santa Claus day — to warm the wooden walls, and a stage brightly lit at the far end, set up high so that everybody could see. The hall was already mostly filled, especially at the back — like church, again — so they made their way to the front and edged past the knees till they found three seats in the middle.

“Now you have to be still and not make any noise,” his mother told him, just like she told him in church, where she’d press down on his leg if he squirmed too much — her warning that there would be no dessert later if he didn’t behave, though there always was.

So maybe it was church in the middle of the week, which he didn’t like the thought of, because he was getting more church than he needed already, and he began to feel cross.

But then men started to walk onto the stage, and they were dressed like nothing he had ever seen before, in black jackets that were cut off at the front at their waist but hung down at the back to their knees, and they had on white bow ties, of all things, and they carried things with them, and when they sat down, they began to blow into them and saw on them and hit them with sticks, making the most God-wonderful noise, and he grinned and clapped his hands.

“They’re just warming up,” his father explained, which made no sense at all because it was already

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quite warm, in fact he wanted to take his jacket off, and guessed his father did, too.

Then they stopped, and everyone fell silent, and the brass chandeliers went dark, and a fat little man walked onto the stage holding a thin little stick, and everybody started clapping, as though he'd done something.

He bowed to the audience, showing the bald spot in the middle of his black curls, and turned his back on everyone and raised the stick and —

Golly!

He had heard music before, of course. Hymns in church, and tunes his father whistled and his mother hummed. But this music washed over and around him, surrounded him, swirled past him, his pulse racing to catch up. All these men, making all this noise, all together, all at once, with this fat little man waving his stick, leading them on. The sound poured into his chest and up and down his spine, dark as chocolate and fast as horses and glorious, glorious. He had no idea what the music was called and neither did his parents and neither did just about anyone else in the crowd. But while the rest of them cocked their heads and listened, smiles of interest and enjoyment fixed or slipping, this boy was drowning, gasping, coming up for air, diving back in, wanting to drown.

His father looked down at him and nodded to his

mother, who looked down as well. He was leaning forward, breath frozen, his eyes unblinking, his hands clenching his knee.

“Like it?” his father asked, but the boy didn’t hear, heard only the music accelerating, growing louder still, unbearable, making him want to yell back at it, until it smashed to a stop, leaving only an echo in the sudden silence.

People applauded, but the boy didn’t applaud. He clambered onto his seat, his eyes locked on the stage, trying to see, but he couldn’t see because the people in front had stood up, still clapping, and he looked at his father in desperation, and his father laughed and grabbed him around the waist and hoisted him into the air until he was taller than anyone in the crowd.

The fat little man was bowing again, and all the other men were standing, holding their instruments, smiling and nodding. The boy wanted to touch them, wanted to be with them, wanted to know their magic more than he had ever wanted anything.

The conductor noticed him, this boy in the fourth row being held in the air by his father. Their eyes met. The boy stopped breathing, forgot even his father, held out his arms, beseeching.

The conductor smiled, and bowed to him. A private bow, a private smile. A salute. *Welcome.*

And then he straightened quickly, nodded to his players and left the stage, and left the boy amazed.