

RESONANCE

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I'm cutting the crusts off the sandwiches, just the way wee Mikey likes them. They're spread with cream cheese, as that's what Evie likes. I hope she still does. The soup is simmering away, adding a cheery blupping sound and filling the kitchen with a warm smell of family. Corinne would have made a cake – but I picked one up at the Co-op earlier. Still, I'll add a swirl of cream to the soup as she used to do, Sarah always liked that. What else... napkins? I find some bright blue paper ones in the drawer full of stubs of birthday cake candles. It's nobody's birthday but it's so good to see the table full, to be setting it for more than me. I'll pick some flowers too – Corinne's marigolds still brighten the back doorstep so I take three and pop them in a small vase. Think that's me all set.

My phone pings. It's Sarah at the service station on the way: Hi Dad, did you find the fiddle? Ach no, I'd forgotten – she'd been asking if I could look it out so Evie could have a try. I'm not even sure where it is, haven't played for years, not since Corinne took ill.

It's not in the sitting room – I know that, but still I glance first where it always used to be, in the corner there slotted between the wall and the piano. The piano lid is shut and thick with dust. I get a cloth from the kitchen and wipe it clean. Maybe the kids will play a bit?

It must be in the attic so. I climb the twist of stairs. I've been piling more and more up here to deal with later. I don't even know what's in these boxes that I'm pushing aside with my foot. A rectangle of sunshine falls from the Velux window. There it is! My fiddle. Dusty too – how long has it lain here? I hunker down to greet it, wiping the case with my sleeve, then open the catches with my thumbs.

My fiddle lies snug in its red velvet casing. I sit down on the floor beside it, touch the strings tentatively with the edge of my thumb. G. D. A. E. Not bad for tuning given how long it's been untouched. I lift it, feeling its lightness and my breath catches and comes out in a sigh like 'huh' as I tuck it under my chin. I reach for the bow and tighten it a few turns, then bring it hesitantly to meet the E string. Good grief. The fiddle lets out a crackle then a strangled shriek. I try the G, which gives a low, guttural, stuttering growl.

I pack the fiddle away and carry it carefully down to the sitting room to search the piano stool for rosin. In amongst all sorts of daft stuff – maracas and whistles and plastic recorders – there's a lump of rosin wrapped in a red cloth. It's old but it'll do and I smooth it over the bow, up and down. I strike an A on the piano and tune to it, the wooden peg turning jerkily with a clunk, clunk, clunk. Then the others, slowly, firmly, easing them up to meet the piano's sound. What to play? I try an open string, hesitantly, and it grumbles, then with confidence and it rings clear. And another sound, like a faraway echo, accompanies it: resonance. The piano is singing back.

I play a random phrase, then suddenly my fingers take their places, poised and at ease like well-rehearsed performers. I'm playing a jig! It's light and upbeat, my bow moving easily. Then a reel, my fingers and bow arm moving faster. Well! I can't remember the tunes but somehow my fingers do, the fingers of my left hand step forward, place themselves along the strings, sure in the steps of their dance.

Each tune summons a swirl of memories. I'm back in the pub, the music rising and surging and flowing like a river through the old building. The table in our corner full of pints and we're

all squeezed in, John's big arms stretching his accordion and Ray with his head bowed down to his bodhran, eyes almost shut as if praying to the steady beat.

Then I see the piano in front of me and Corinne is there, her hands rippling, rippling over all those keys. My fingers find a slow air, and Corinne accompanies me. She turns her head, as she used to do, to look up at me and smile, her lovely hands still moving with such grace.

Bang. The slam of a car door and a shout.

“Grandad! We’re here!”

I look out the window and Sarah’s getting bags out of the boot, the children running round to the back door, Mikey hurtling forward like a young puppy, Evie’s more graceful now, and gosh she’s getting tall.

They haven’t seen me. With a jolt I realise I wish they weren’t here yet. Just not quite yet. I slip the fiddle back in its snug case and nudge it under the sofa with my foot, before going through to the kitchen where Mikey’s thudding on the door. “GRANDAD!”

Mikey hugs by hurling his small body into mine. Evie hugs barely touching, suddenly shy. “Soup! Smells good!” Sarah announces, leaning to peck my cheek with her hands full of coats. They come around the table and the house feels full to the ceiling, as if three giants have arrived and are scraping chairs and unfolding napkins and going to the loo and washing their hands. Mikey keeps up a steady stream of chatter about school and football and friends and teachers. I nod, smiling and let the happy babble continue. It’s all at a strange distance. Much closer, more vivid, are the tunes and scenes of music that are playing inside my head, with little twists and turns of melody. Phrases coming up like bright shining bubbles.

I clear the soup bowls, cut the cake from the Co-op. It's good, Sarah says, leaning against me affectionately. I can see Corinne in Evie's face when she looks round at a certain angle. Evie didn't touch the crust-less cream cheese sandwiches, but she turned her blue napkin into an origami frog and placed it beside the wee vase of marigolds.

"Oh, did you find your old fiddle dad?" Sarah asks. "Evie's thinking of learning and I think she's big enough for a full-size one now..."

I turn to put the dishes in the sink. "I had a look but couldn't see it," I lie. "I wonder if we've parted with it."

"You and mum never part with anything! Never parted... with..." she corrects herself, embarrassed about the confusion over which tense to use, what with one of us still here. I smile to reassure her, saying how about take the kids to the park while I clear up? They could do with a scamper after the car journey...

I watch from the sitting room til they've turned the corner, then I ease my fiddle from its hiding place, bring the bow to the strings again, and I play.

Anna Levin is a writer, editor, star-gazer and wildlife-watcher. Her books include: Dark Skies; Incandescent – We Need to Talk about Light; Ripples on the River – Celebrating the Return of the Otter; and My Friends who Don't have Dogs. She runs Open Book's Creative Writing group in Polmont.