# ***STILL***

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A lot of my stories aren’t true, but this is a true story…

Once upon a time, there was a young puppet named Still. She wore black and white and eight shades of green, and had a happy, smiling face. Every morning, she went to school to study reading, juggling, arithmetic, and history. At recess, she and her friends chased each other around the playground pretending to be gargoyles. If the teachers weren’t looking, they tied bits of string to each other’s arms and legs and staggered around as if someone was pulling on them until whoever was pretending to be Key the Cutter set them all free.

Still’s favorite thing wasn’t school or games, though—it was her violin. It had been carved out of the same piece of wood as her, and she never went anywhere without it. She loved its sweet young sound, and played everything on it, from tingly little nursery rhymes to the slow song of the canals at night. She even took it to bed with her, so that she could sleep with her arms around it.

Her parents smiled at one another when she did that. Her father, Elbow, was a paper folder, and made the crispest, straightest creases you have ever seen. Her mother, Ramble, was a painter. Every day, puppets came to her and said, “I’ve just been given a very important job. Can you please give me a serious face?” or, “I’m feeling blue—can you please put a happy face on me?” Hour after patient hour, Ramble gave her customers the faces they wanted.

One day, Elbow brought home a big box full of old papers. “The mayor found these in the basement of City Hall,” he told Ramble and Still. “And she wants me to fold them all up so that they can be put away properly. It’s going to be a hard job. See?” He held up one of the pieces of paper. It was yellow around the edges, and crackly-stiff from having been damp and then dried out. “If I make even the slightest mistake, the paper might tear, or the crease might not be straight!”

“Well then, we’d better stay out of your way for a while,” Ramble said. She kissed his cheek. “I’ll go and grind up some lemon peel and amber for my paints. Still, why don’t you go up and clean your room?”

“All right,” Still said. Up the stairs she went. Her room was a mess. There were socks on her bookshelves, and books curled up asleep on her desk, and pencil shavings spilling out of her drawers.

“Hmph,” Still thought. “This will be a lot of work. I wonder where I should start?” She sat down on the bed to puzzle it out. As she thought, she tucked her violin under her chin and began to play.

“Still,” Ramble called. “Are you cleaning your room?”

“Ye-ess,” Still called back. She couldn’t put her books away until she moved her socks, but she couldn’t put them away until she tidied up the pencil shavings, and she couldn’t do that until she moved her books… As she thought, her fingers picked out a little tune on her violin.

“Still!” Elbow said loudly. Still jumped. Her mother was standing in the bedroom doorway, her shoe going tap tap tap. She hadn’t bothered to pencil a frown on her forehead, but Still could tell that she was exasperated. “Ramble needs to concentrate. If you want to play your violin, why don’t you go outside?”

“Can I go to Mister Leaf’s?” Still asked. “He told me last week that he thought I was ready for some special lessons.” And music lessons are much more fun than cleaning*,* she added, but only to herself.

Elbow’s shoe went tap tap tap a few more times. Then she nodded. “All right. But you have to clean up your room when you get home.”

“I will!” Still promised. She gave Elbow a hug, then clattered down the stairs. The front door went bang! behind her.

The sky was blue, and the air had that clean, damp smell that comes after rain. Still skipped along the cobblestone streets, playing little tunes as she went. She went straight to Mister Leaf’s house—except for one little detour to slide down a brass handrail in the park, and another to wave at a big passenger balloon that was taking off for the moon.

Mister Leaf’s house stood next to a little square park full of trees and benches. It was a nice part of town. There were no glass rats creeping half-invisible across the stones to gnaw on her legs, or pirates in red and gold lurking in the bushes, waiting for a chance to bundle her up inside a roll of carpet and smuggle her onto a ship and haul her halfway across the ocean to sell her to a pride of lions so that she could scratch them under their chins when they were finished hunting. It was a nice house, and a nice summer-sunshine day. There was no way Still could know that it was going to be the worst day of her life.

A single drop of rain went plop on the cobblestones. Another drop plopped beside it, then another. “Oh, bother,” Still said crossly. She didn’t mind the rain (although Ramble always made sure that she got herself completely dry, so that she wouldn’t warp), but it put her violin out of tune. She looked up at the fat, gray clouds, then ran tik tik tik across the cobblestones and rang Mister Leaf’s doorbell.

A moment later the door opened, and a deep, warm voice said, “Why, what a pleasant surprise! Please, please, come in.”

Mister Leaf wore blue and orange and a polka-dot hat. He had black curls painted on his forehead and a big smile painted on his face. His eyes were made of tiger-orange topaz. They were so friendly, they almost seemed to shine.

He stepped out of the way and waved her in. “Do what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” he asked.

“My father has some very important work to do,” Still told him as they went upstairs to the music room, “so I was hoping that I could get a special lesson.”

“Ah,” her teacher said. “Very good. Very good. But look, your violin is wet. Here, you should dry it off.” He took a tea towel from on top of the piano and handed it to her.

Still brushed a few drops of water off her violin, then handed the towel back to Mister Leaf. As she did so, their fingers touched, and his eyes suddenly seemed to sparkle.

Still felt as though she had a blush painted on her cheeks. She turned around to face the window and tucked her violin under her chin. The rain was darkening the red bricks of the houses across the street. “Shall I start with scales?” she asked.

“Of course,” Mister Leaf said. “And remember, not too fast. The most important thing is to hear the music as you play it.”

Still played a G scale, then a B scale, and then a C-sharp scale, which was the hardest scale she knew. Mister Leaf nodded his head to help her keep time, and said, “Good, good,” or, “Slow down—try to smooth the notes into each other.”

“Very good,” he said when she finally finished. “Now, would you like to play a song for me?”

“If you’d like,” Still said. She laid her bow on her violin’s strings and drew it down. The sound was as sweet and as thick as chocolate syrup, but as clear as the purest ice. She closed her eyes and played a slow, sad gypsy waltz.

When she was done, she opened her eyes. Mister Leaf had stepped forward, so that he was standing just inches away from her. “Ahhh…” he breathed. “That was beautiful. May I try?”

“Try what?” Still asked.

“Your violin—may I play it?”

“Oh my,” Still said. Her clockwork seemed to be whirring double-time inside her. “I—I’ve never let anyone else play my violin before,” she said. “I don’t know if I should.”

“I’ll be careful,” Mister Leaf promised. “We can keep it a secret if you want.” He held out his hand.

Suddenly, Still felt guilty. He was being so nice, giving her an extra lesson like this. What harm could it do?

“Here,” she said impulsively, holding it out to him. “But please be careful.”

Mister Leaf took the violin and bow from her. He gazed at them for a moment as if they were the most precious things in the world. Then he brought the violin up to his cheek and laid his cheek against its bottom side. “It’s perfect,” he whispered. “The varnish… the polish… It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Suddenly he turned the violin right side up and tucked it under his chin. He thrust the bow across the strings. HRING! He pushed the bow back across the strings, then drew it down again, HWAH-HWING!

“Wait, stop!” Still said. “You mustn’t play so hard!” But Mister Leaf didn’t listen. He began to fiddle furiously, faster than Still had ever seen anyone play. The bow flew back and forth across the strings. The violin sang, then shrieked, then howled as he played high notes and low notes, chords and pizzicatto and trills that ran from one end of the scale to the other.

“No, wait, stop! Stop! Oh please, stop!” Still cried, but Mister Leaf just played on. Still grabbed his arm and tried to pull the violin away from him, but he was too strong. Faster and faster he played, until suddenly the strings went PLINK! PLINK! PLINK! He had cut right through them!

But even then Mister Leaf didn’t stop. Before Still’s horrified eyes, gray wisps of smoke began to rise from the body of the violin. He was playing so fast that the violin was catching on fire!

It must have been the smell of smoke that made him stop, because there is nothing that puppets are more afraid of than fire. Mister Leaf raised the bow with a flourish. Then, to Still’s horror, he began to chuckle. The chuckle turned into a laugh, and the laugh got bigger and bigger. “Ah hoo hoo hoo,” he chortled. “Ah hee hee hee. Oh, th-th-that was fun! That was fun!”

As he laughed, Still began to cry. “What have you done?” she wept. “What have you done to my violin?”

Mister Leaf laughter subsided. He blinked at the violin. “Oh my,” he said softly, “What’s this?” He peered at the violin as if he had never seen it before, then pushed it back into Still’s arms.

“You broke it,” Still sobbed, clutching the violin in her arms.

“Sh, sh,” Mister Leaf said. “It’s not that bad. We can fix it.”

“But what will I tell Ramble?” she wailed. “And Elbow?”

“Oh, you mustn’t tell them anything,” Mister Leaf said hastily. “Why, if they found that you’d let this happen, they’d—they’d—why, they’d put strings on you, that’s what they’d do! They’d screw little eyehooks into your elbows and knees, and run black silk strings through them, and they’d never let you move your own arms and legs again, just to make sure that this could never happen again. Do you want that? No, I didn’t think so. Now, the rain has stopped—I think it’s time for you to go home.”

Afterward, Still couldn’t remember how she had found her way home. She must have fallen, though, because by the time she recognized the streets again, she had an ugly dent in her cheek. All she could think about was her violin—her poor, scarred violin.

Her joints and limbs were aching with the damp and cold by the time she reached her front door. She practically fell through it into Elbow’s arms.

“Still!” he cried out. “Still, honey, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“I—I fell,” she sobbed. She held up her violin. “And I—I—”

“Sh, sh, sh,” he said, rocking her in his arms. “Come in here where it’s warm. Ramble! Ramble! Come quick!”

The two puppets sat their daughter down on the couch in the living room and gave her a cup of warm linseed oil to drink. “Here, let me see that,” Ramble said gently. She took Still’s chin in her hand and turned her head from side to side to look at the dent in her cheek. “Oh, it’s not so bad,” she said after a moment. “A little bit of putty, and some careful sanding, and you’ll be as good as new.”

“Why, it’ll even make you look more grown-up,” Elbow said. “Just like the dimples in my cheeks. I wasn’t carved with them, you know. I got this one when I fell out of a tree, and this one when—”

“But what about my violin?” Still interrupted. She had wrapped three thick blankets around herself, but she still felt cold, cold, cold. Even with a big gloop of honey, the linseed oil tasted like ashes. All she could think about was the black scorch on her violin.

“We’ll take it to the shop tomorrow and get it fixed, I promise,” her mother said gently. She took the violin from her daughter’s stiff hands and laid it aside. “Now, why don’t we put you to bed? You can clean up your room tomorrow.”

Still lay in bed a long time the next morning. Her window grew brighter as the sun rose, then dimmed as it passed overhead. Her mother and father came in to see her a couple of times, but she closed her eyes and pretended that she was sleeping.

Finally her mother brought the doctor to see her. He had narrow shoulders and a beaky nose, and wore wire-rimmed glasses without any glass in them. He put his stethoscope on Still’s tummy and chest and forehead and listened to her clockwork go tick, tock, tick, tock. Then he sighted along her arms and legs, one by one, to see if they had been warped by the rain.

“There’s nothing wrong with her wood,” he said to Ramble. “She’s as sound as the day she was made. And that dent in her cheek isn’t as bad as it looks—I’m sure you’ll be able to fix that up in no time.”

“Then what is it?” her mother asked. “What’s wrong?”

The puppet doctor shook his head. “I don’t know. Perhaps her clockwork got a bit jumbled up in the fall. I’m sure it will sort itself out if you give her some time.”

So Still got to stay home from school that day, and the day after that. Each morning she lay in bed until her mother or father came to get her up. She brushed her teeth and oiled her joints and got dressed, then went down to the couch and sat under the blankets, staring out the window at the carts going past on the street and the balloons going by in the sky. Sometimes her fingers twitched, as if she was playing the violin, but she never mentioned it, or wondered where it had gone.

But all the while, Still felt like she was floating in dark, still water. Whenever she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, the dent on her cheek made her look like someone else. She stared into her eyes, and saw a stranger. “You mustn’t tell,” she whispered. “They’ll put strings on you if you do.”

On the third day, her father came into her room with a big smile painted on his face. “If you’d like to get up and get dressed, there’s something waiting for you downstairs,” he said.

“All right,” Still said. A moment went by. She didn’t move.

“Oh, come on, daffodil,” Elbow said. “It’ll cheer you up, I promise!”

“All right,” Still said again. Somehow, being cheered up didn’t seem to matter very much.

When she came downstairs, a big box wrapped in brightly-colored paper was waiting for her on the kitchen table. The creases were as sharp as the edge of a knife, and the folds were so clever that her father eventually had to show her how to get the paper off without tearing it.

She set the paper aside and took the lid off the box. “Well?” her father asked. “What do you think?”

Her violin lay inside the box. Fresh strings had been put on it, each one a different color. Its body had been sanded down smooth and re-varnished. There was only a faint, shallow groove to show where—where—

“What do you think?” her father asked again. “Doesn’t it look just as good as new?”

“I guess so,” Still said. “Thank you.”

“Well all right then,” Elbow said jovially. “Now, if you hurry, you can still get to school in time for juggling.”

“I guess so,” Still said. She stood up and began to walk toward the front door.

“Aren’t you going to take your violin?” Elbow asked.

Still stopped, then said, very softly, “I guess so.” She picked up the violin and walked out into the street.

Still trudged along the cobblestone streets to the school. The sky was a warm, clear blue, and little clockwork birds were chirping in the trees. The puppets she passed chattered to one another as if it was just another day. She ran her thumb back and forth over the faint groove in the top of the violin that was the only sign of— of— she pushed the thought out of her head.

Still didn’t stop when she reached the school gate. She just set her books on a bench very carefully for anyone who wanted them and kept walking. She didn’t pay any attention to where she was going—she just let her own weight carry her down, down, down.

As she walked, the streets grew narrower, then dirtier. Gaps began to appear in the cobblestones, and tendrils of fog began to fill the air around her. They grew steadily thicker until Still could barely see from one side of the street to the other.

And as she walked, the puppets around her started to change as well. Their faces became cracked and worn. Some of them had so little paint left that it was impossible to tell who they were, or how they might feel. None of them looked straight at her, and she was careful not to look straight at them.

Finally Still reached a dead end. She was too tired and hungry to think. An old banana crate full of newspapers lay on the ground beside her. She climbed into it, curled herself around her violin, closed her eyes, and fell straight into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She woke up once, in the middle of the night, when something cold and hard scampered across her leg. “Tee hee,” it giggled. She hugged her violin close to her chest and shivered. She’d never seen a glass rat, not for real, but other puppets had whispered stories about them at sleepovers. What they wanted more than anything was oil to stop them squeaking, and if the only place to get it was from a puppet, well, “That’s why they have diamond teeth,” everyone would whisper in unison.

It took her a long time to get back to sleep.

She woke up hungry the next morning. She hid her violin behind an old sign for a watchmaker’s shop at the end of the alley, then trudged up through the fog to a small market.

Still folded a piece of newspaper to make a box (now, who had taught her how to do that?) and set it on the sidewalk. She stood there for a moment, as still as her name. The wind felt like ice water on the dent on her cheek. Slowly, she ducked her head down, as if she had a violin on her shoulder. Slowly, very slowly, she raised her arm as if she held a bow.

And then she began to play. A few puppets stopped to watch, and then a few more. They stared at the strange sight of a young, beautifully-painted puppet playing a violin that wasn’t there. Still didn’t make a sound, but the puppets around her would have sworn that they could almost—almost—hear music. It made one puppet think of black butterflies fluttering among blood poppies under a full moon. It made another think of a hawk circling patiently over a snowy field in winter, just waiting for the rabbit’s clockwork to run down.

When Still stopped, the puppets around her sighed. A peg-legged old puppet in a soldier’s uniform pulled a grimy green gumdrop from his pocket and tossed it into Still’s paper box. Plop plop plop went a few other pieces of candy. Still bowed gracefully, then picked up her takings and trudged back into the fog.

And so began the pattern of her days. Every night she found a box or doorway, and curled up with her violin in her arms. Every morning she hid the violin somewhere safe, then walked into the market to play her silent music. She forgot to remember that she had once slept in a warm, dry bed, or that the puppets who had made her had loved her. The worn-out puppets who worked in the markets on the edge of the fog wondered about her for a while, then found other things to wonder about. In no time at all, she was just another nameless toy.

From time to time, though, properly-painted puppets from the heart of the City wandered through. The nice ones came to buy old, broken-down things to mend—chairs with wobbly legs, flutes that were missing a few notes, or picture frames that didn’t hang straight. The others, who weren’t so nice, came for the smell of the fog. They walked around the market in groups, making jokes with one another and staring at everyone. Some of these puppets pointed at Still and laughed, but there were always a few who would give her licorice or even some chocolate if she would pretend to play for them. A few even asked her to come back with them and give them a private concert, but Still looked at their bright, shiny eyes and shook her head.

As the weeks went by, Still got to know a few of the other puppets who lived in the fog. She told them that she had been stolen from a far-away villages by lions, and sold to pirates who had brought her across the sea to work as a slave in the glue mines. “How did you escape?” they asked. “Oh, that’s a secret,” she said. “If I tell you, you might tell them, and then if I’m ever caught again, I won’t be able to get away.” They didn’t believe her, and she knew they didn’t, but they pretended right along with her, just as she pretended to believe that the one-armed puppet who pasted leaves on the trees had once been a princess, or that the twins who boiled scraps of canvas in an old black kettle to get the oil out were really magicians in disguise.

From time to time, though, Still heard Elbow’s or Ramble’s voice, very faintly, calling her name. Whenever that happened, she whispered, “You don’t belong here anymore,” and hid herself until the voices went away.

And once, just once, she saw a puppet she almost recognized. His clothes were blue and orange, and he wore a polka-dot hat. He had black curls painted on his forehead, and a warm smile painted on his face. He was with a crowd of other puppets, all of them so painted and polished that they looked brand new. As she watched him, he pointed at the little cans of fish scales that one tired old puppet was trying to sell and laughed, “Ah hoo hoo hoo… Ah hee hee hee…”

Still hid behind a pile of old dreams until the puppet was gone. When she finally ventured out again, she played her silent music faster and more furiously than she ever had before. Her arm practically whirred as it flew back and forth. No-one gave her any candy that day, and even a few of the puppets in the market’s stalls muttered about her under their breath.

And so the days passed, each colder than the one before, until one morning Still woke up to find a faint dusting of snow on the dirty streets around her. She wrapped her violin in newspaper, then climbed up a drainpipe so that she could tuck it under the eaves of a warehouse whose windows had been boarded up. She walked the long way around to the market, just so that she could see how the snow made the city look. She played all day, but only a few puppets went past, and none put any candy in her paper box.

As the sun began set, Still trudged back down into the fog, circling the block once to make sure that no-one was following her before climbing up the drainpipe to get her violin.

It was gone.

Still felt around under the eaves. It wasn’t there. She leaned out as far as she could so that she could grope around the next section. It wasn’t there either.

Panic grated in her gears like sand. The dent on her cheek seemed to throb. Where was her violin? Where had it gone?

Still was just about to start whimpering when a grating voice above her said, “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Still was so startled that she almost fell off the drainpipe. She looked up. The voice had come from a beaky gray head that sat atop a short, barrel-shaped body. The figure had long arms, and wings folded up against its back. It was a gargoyle!

“Some crows saw you hide it this morning,” the gargoyle said in a voice that sounded like bricks being scraped together. “You know what they’re like for taking things, so I thought I had better keep it safe for you.”

“May I—may I have it back?” Still asked. She felt as though her mainspring was about to snap.

“Of course,” the gargoyle said. It handed the violin back to her. Still snatched it from him and hugged it close.

“Will you play it for me?” the gargoyle asked. “It’s been a long time since I heard any music.”

“I—I don’t play it any more,” Still said. “But if you’d like to come down to the street, I can give you some of my gumdrops. For keeping the violin safe,” she added, seeing the gargoyle’s frown.

The gargoyle shook its head. “No thank you,” it said. “Even if I could come down to the street, I don’t have much use for candy.” It shrugged its wings.

“Why can’t you come down?” Still asked. “Are you guarding the building?”

The gargoyle’s voice scraped, skrrk skrrk skrrk. It took Still a moment to realize that it was laughing. “No,” it finally said. “I can’t come down because I can’t. Look!” It pointed at its legs. Still gasped. They were carved out of the same stone as the building. The top half of the gargoyle was alive, but the bottom half was part of the building.

“I was made this way so that I would always be on guard,” the gargoyle told her. “That’s why I’m called a ‘guard goyle’. And for years and years, that’s what I did. But then everyone stopped coming, and the shops all closed, and only the fog and I were left.”

Some little piece of machinery inside Still ticked over for the first time in a very long time. “Well, if you’re not going anywhere,” she said shakily, “And if you don’t have anything else in particular to do, would you mind looking after this for me sometimes? Because I keep worrying, every time I hide it, that someone might find it and take it away, and I—I just don’t think I could bear that.” Slowly, very slowly, she held out her violin.

And so Still and the gargoyle became—friends? Perhaps. He told her stories about what the streets had been like years ago, when all the lanterns were lit and puppets on stilts swished back and forth waving signs for different shops. He told her about hearing cheers the first time puppets had gone to the moon and back in a balloon, and about the weeping when the city had woken to discover that Key the Cutter was gone.

That was when Still realized just how old the gargoyle was. “Don’t you ever wish you could see the rest of the world?” she asked one evening. She was sitting beside him on the roof, kicking her feet gently against the icicles that hung down from the eaves. Every once in a while she would kick a little too hard, and an icicle would fall to the street below and go tink like a little bell.

The gargoyle was quiet for so long that Still thought it had fallen asleep. But then it rustled its stony wings. “Don’t you?” it replied.

“Oh, I’ve already seen it,” she said. “I grew up far, far away, in a village on the edge of the desert. When I was little, I was stolen by lions. They sold me to pirates, and they put me to work in the glue mines. It took me years to escape.”

“Do you think you’ll ever escape from here?” the gargoyle asked.

Still opened her mouth, then closed it. “I don’t know how,” she finally whispered. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Well, what would Key have done?” the gargoyle said. “Key the Great, Key the Cutter, Key who snipped strings and walked where she wanted to, and then showed other puppets how to do the same. What would she have done?”

“I don’t know,” Still said with a shrug.

“Well, why don’t you ask her?”

Still forced a laugh. “Ask her? But she’s been gone for ages! She must be sawdust by now.”

The gargoyle shook his head. “Not Key,” it said. “As long as there are puppets in the world, there’ll be a Key to help them cut their strings.”

“But I don’t have any strings,” Still protested. She waved her arms. “See?”

“Sometimes the strings are inside,” the gargoyle said. It reached out a long arm to touch the dent on Still’s face. She jerked her head back. “See?” the gargoyle said. “Something pulled you away. And something keeps you from playing your violin, even though you look at it every morning the way a squeaky puppet looks at oil.”

They spoke no more that night.

The next morning, though, Still decided that she would get the gargoyle a scarf as a present. The midwinter eclipse was coming up, when families gave each other gifts (had she ever done that?). “He probably hasn’t had a present in years,” she thought. “Maybe never.” She had saved up half-a-dozen gumdrops and a big piece of licorice. Another couple of gumdrops and a few sugar sprinkles in change, and she’d be able to get him a scarf that would reach right down to the ground.

But Still knew that gumdrops would be hard to come by in the market now that winter had arrived. If she wanted to earn that kind of candy, she would have to go higher up in the City, up where the puppets’ shoes matched and their stitching was done with silk thread. Up where—where— She shook her head so hard that the thought fell out and rolled away.

Still walked until she came to a tidy little street full of tidy little shops, then chose a corner where puppets were getting on and off bright red streetcars. She found a newspaper on a bench that was so fresh, the ink still smelled faintly of cinnamon. She folded the comics page into a neat little box and set it at her feet, then bent her head and began to play. The fingers of her left hand fluttered in the air, sliding up and down on strings that weren’t there. Her right arm was as graceful as the neck of a swan. Even though she wasn’t making a sound, she was playing as beautifully as she ever had.

Which is why she was so surprised when an old puppet with frizzy white hair sniffed, “I never!” as he walked by. “Out here in the street like that!” he said to the puppet walking beside him.

“It’s shameful!” the other puppet agreed.

Still kept playing. Some other well-dressed puppets sniffed at her as well, but a few dropped sugar sprinkles into her box. Just before lunch time, a strawberry gumdrop went plonk into the box. Still kept playing. As the shadows grew longer, the sugar sprinkles began to pile up. Finally, just as the shopkeepers were taking in their sandwich signs, a tired-looking puppet wearing a turban and big black boots tossed another gumdrop into her box as he strode by. She had enough to buy the gargoyle a scarf!

Still scooped up her box and turned. And froze. And ducked into the doorway of the shop behind her. She pretended to read the sign—“Microscopes and Tweezers, All Kinds, Finest Workmanship Only”—until the reflections of a handful of puppets went by. Most were her age, but one was older. His clothes were blue and orange, and he wore a polka-dot hat. He had black curls painted on his forehead, and a big smile painted on his face.

The younger puppets all had instruments tucked under their arms: flutes, trumpets, glockenspiels, and midget tubas. Still recognized some of them from—from—

“You’re all playing quite nicely,” she heard the older puppet say warmly. “Especially you, Mustard.” He put his hand on one puppet’s shoulder and gave her a friendly squeeze. “I think you’re just about ready for some special lessons.”

“Thank you, Mister Leaf,” the young puppet said, “But I don’t know if my parents can— I mean—”

“Don’t worry about that,” the older puppet said. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

The streetcar arrived with a rattle. The puppets got on. Still waited until she stopped shaking, then walked slowly back into the fog.

She was so quiet that evening that the gargoyle finally said, “Are you angry with me for what I said about strings?”

“What? Oh, no, I’m not angry,” Still replied. She shook her head. Her thoughts rattled around for a moment, but were just as jumbled when they came to rest as they had been before. “I just heard something today…”

“Something bad?” the gargoyle asked.

Still nodded. “Something horrible,” she said. She hugged her legs to her chest and put her chin on her knees. “What would you do if you knew someone was going to do something awful—something really, really awful?”

The gargoyle shrugged his stony shoulders. “I’d whistle as loud as I could until the police came,” he said. “Then I’d tell them everything I knew.”

Still raised her hand to her face. The edges of the dent in her cheek had worn smooth, as had the other nicks and scratches that life on the foggy streets had given her. “But what if they’d put strings on you if you told?” she whispered. “What if they’d screw eyehooks into your elbows and knees, and run black silk strings through them, so that you could never move your own arms and legs again?”

“I’d do it anyway,” the gargoyle said. “If you let something bad happen, that’s almost the same as doing it yourself.” He shrugged his stony shoulders once again. “But you have to remember, I’m not a puppet, I’m a gargoyle. Maybe the last steadfast gargoyle left in Key’s City. If I—”

“Key…” Still whispered. The whirling thoughts in her head fell into place, clunk clunk clunk, like the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. “She’d know what to do!” She leapt to her feet. “And you said she was still here, didn’t you? Oh, where can I find her? Please, please, tell me!”

The gargoyle looked at her with love and sadness in his stony old eyes. “I can’t tell you how to find her,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because you have to figure it out for yourself.” The gargoyle held her violin out to her. “Here. Follow this, wherever it leads. That’s all I can tell you”

Still snatched her violin away from him. It had a few nicks and scratches too, from the places it had been hidden, and her thumb could feel a faint groove from—from— She shook her head angrily. She had just managed to get all her thoughts to fit together—she was not going to shake them up again, not when something so important needed to be done.

“But how can I follow a violin?” Still asked. “It can’t float through the air like a balloon, or run like a clock. What am I supposed to do?”

The gargoyle just bowed his head. Still begged and wheedled, she blustered and raged, but the gargoyle wouldn’t say a word.

“Fine!” Still shouted. “Be like that! I thought you were my friend, but you’re really just a horrible old piece of stone. You don’t care at all!” She spun around, grabbed the drainpipe, and slithered down to the street. Little drops of oil welled up in her eyes as she ran through the street, down, down, deeper into the fog than she had ever gone before.

She ran and ran past the grimy walls and bent-over lampposts. Suddenly she slipped on a dirty patch of refrozen snow. Her violin flew from her hand and tumbled end over end through the air. “Noooo!” Still shrieked as it vanished over a low brick wall. She heard a faint kersplash.

Still scrambled to her feet and chinned herself up on the wall. Two stories below lay a canal full of cold, dark water. Her violin bobbed gently up and down in its middle. Even as she watched, the current was pulling it away.

Still gulped. She would float too—after all, she was made of wood. But how would she get out? There were no ladders on the side of the canal, no docks or stairways that she could see. And it was getting dark…

She pulled herself up onto the wall. It was only half as wide as a sidewalk, and splashed here and there with treacherous patches of ice, but she walked as quickly as she could, glancing down every few moments to keep her violin in sight.

She was trying so hard not to lose sight of her violin, and not to slip on the ice, that she was almost on top of the stairway before she noticed it. The steps were worn and icy, but she clattered down them two at a time. At the bottom, they turned into a narrow footpath running along the canal’s edge. There was ice here too, and frozen slime, and some of the stones were loose. And it was dark, even with the moon coming up—so dark that she wondered if the tiny patch of stillness in the middle of the canal was really her violin, or just her imagination.

Up ahead, Still could hear an echoing, gurgling sound. “Now what?” she wondered wearily. The answer turned out to be a round-roofed tunnel big enough to swallow a coal barge, its mouth covered with a heavy iron grill.

Still gasped in despair as the current swept her violin between its bars. They were too close together—she could reach an arm through, but couldn’t squeeze past them. And her violin was disappearing into the darkness!

Still looked around wildly. There wasn’t a gate. There wasn’t an alarm bell for her to ring, or any sign of a secret door. There was just the pale moon above her, the blank walls of the canal, and the broken stones of the narrow path beneath her feet.

The stones! She bent over and picked one up, staggered to the edge of the canal, and jumped in.

Without the stone, she would have bobbed up and down like a cork. With it in her arms, she sank straight down into the cold, dark, dirty water. She squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that little bright patterns of light danced on the backs of her eyelids. The oil in her joints felt like it was freezing solid. She could end like this, she realized. She could be snagged on some thrown-away piece of machinery under the water, and trapped in the darkness until her clockwork rusted solid and she ended, and no one would ever know.

Still hung on just a moment longer than she could bear, then let go of the stone. Whoosh! She shot up like a clown fired out of a circus cannon.

“Pfaaah!” she spluttered as her head broke through the surface. She looked around wildly. There was the grill—and there was the sky, on the other side of it! She’d done it! The current had swept her beneath the grill!

That same current was still carrying deeper beneath the city. Misshapen patches of fungus glowed the roof of the tunnel like moonlit clouds. A side tunnel led away from the one Still was in. She couldn’t see her violin any longer. There was no way to tell where the current had taken it.

“I can’t just stay here,” she fretted. “What should I do?”

As if in answer, something giggled softly behind her. She whirled around with a splash. “Who’s there?” she called. No one answered.

“Please, can you help me?” she said loudly. “I’m lost.”

“Tee hee, tee hee.” The giggles seemed to come from all around her. “She’s lost… she’s lost… tee hee…” Still whirled around again in the water, peering into the darkness. Suddenly she heard tiny feet scamper across stone, and saw one of the patches of fungus on the wall ripple slightly.

Glass rats! Glass rats, with diamond teeth and sharp little appetites. Another patch of fungus rippled, and another. There must be dozens of them, all around her!

“What do you want?” she cried out.

“Tee hee,” the rats giggled. “Why, oil, of course,” one rat squeaked. “Slippery puppet oil, and crunchy puppet wood.”

Still floated in the water with rats all around her. “I’m afraid I don’t have any wood or oil to give you,” she said as calmly as she could.

The little ratty voice spoke up again. “Well, if you won’t give it to us, we’ll just have to take it,” it squeaked, which made the other rats giggle, “Tee hee, tee hee,” once again.

“But what if I don’t want to give it to you?” Still asked.

“Give it to us?” the rat squeaked. “Tee hee, tee hee! Why, it’s already ours! Everything that comes down here without a good reason is ours.”

“But I have a reason!” Still said. “A very good reason!”

The giggling stopped. “And what reason is that?” the rat squeaked.

“I’m looking for something,” Still said. “Something I lost. Something very important.”

“Really?” the rat asked suspiciously.

Still hesitated. If she told them the truth, they might eat her violin! “Yes,” she said firmly. “I’m looking for Key the Cutter. I have to warn her about something.”

There was a moment of silence, then the rats began giggling again. “That’s not why you’re here,” the little voice squeaked. “We can tell. Rats can always tell. Now, perhaps if you give us your arms and legs, we’ll let the rest of you go.”

“All right!” she said. “All right, I lied. I’m looking for—I’m looking for my violin. It fell in the water, and I have to get it back.”

There was another moment of silence, a longer one, but then the rats began to giggle once more. “Still not the truth, still not the truth,” the little voice said with glee.

“All right! All right!” Still shouted. “I’m not looking for Key. I’m not really looking for my violin! I’m looking for—for—for me! That’s why I’m here! I put myself somewhere, but now I can’t remember where that was, and I’m trying to find me again. Now, if you want to eat me up, then come and eat me up and get it over with!”

Silence filled the tunnel. It stretched and stretched until Still thought she would scream, and then the little voice said, “Rats, she figured it out.” Little feet scampered away in the darkness.

Still waited a moment, then paddled over to the side of the tunnel and pulled herself up onto the walkway. She was safe now, but what did that matter? She had no idea where she was, or her violin either. Drops of oil welled up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. All of a sudden she felt too weak to keep looking, too weak to walk, too weak to even stand. She slumped down in a heap.

She had no idea how long she lay there—minutes? Hours? Her next thought came when she realized that something was bobbing up and down in the water in front of her. She blinked. It was still there. She blinked again, then picked it up.

It was a tiny boat made out of neatly-folded white paper. Neatly-folded paper—now what did that remind her of? She shook her head. Something was written on the side of it. She couldn’t read it—the light was too faint. She stood up wearily and held it up close to the nearest patch of glowing fungus.

Someone had painted a picture of a puppet on the side of the boat. Written underneath it were the words, “Have you seen our daughter?” Still peered at the picture. The puppet looked familiar somehow. She was wearing black and white—

“And eight shades of green,” Still whispered, there in the darkness. The paper boat fluttered like a bird trying to escape from someone’s hand. Still realized that she was trembling. She knelt down and gently set the paper boat back in the water. “Go ahead,” she whispered, pushing it out into the current with one finger. “You go ahead, and I’ll follow you.”

The little boat bobbed up and down as it floated gently away. Still followed it, lost in her thoughts. Black and white, and eight shades of green… Eight shades of green… She knew that puppet, she was sure of it. But what was her picture doing on the side of a paper boat?

When the boat reached the split in the tunnel, it turned right. Still followed it around the corner, and stopped dead. A whole flotilla of little paper boats lay in the water in front of her. She knelt and picked one up. The same picture was painted on its side. “Please help us find our daughter,” it said. She picked up another. “If you see our daughter, please tell her that we love her.”

Her hand was trembling as she picked up a third boat. “Still, please come home,” she read aloud. Suddenly she hugged the little boat to her chest. “Ramble…” she whispered. “Elbow… Oh, where have I been?”

She pulled the boats from the water one after another. They spilled out of her arms onto the walkway, but she didn’t care. She was sobbing, but she didn’t care, because she knew what she was going to find.

And there it was—her violin. The current that had carried the boats to this backwater had brought her violin as well. She picked it up and hugged it close. “Time to go home,” she whispered.

Still walked out into the dawn with her violin in one hand and the little paper boat in the other. A bird chirrupped nearby, then fell silent, as if embarrassed.

The streets around her were broad and clean, and the houses were as tidy as Elbow’s creases. Her fear lay in her belly like cold soup, but she kept walking. The streets began to fill with puppets on their way to work, or school, or just out to enjoy the crisp, cold day. A few stared at Still as she strode past, but she paid them no heed.

The park next to Mister Leaf’s house was just as tidy as she remembered, and the steps leading up to its front door were just as square. The high, hesitant sound of a flute floated through the air from the second-story window.

Still set the little paper boat on the sidewalk in front of the steps, laid her violin on top of it, and bowed her head. Slowly, she raised her left arm, bent at the elbow. Slowly, so slowly, she tilted her head to one side, and brought her right arm up, the wrist and elbow loose, just as she had been taught. Slowly, silently, she began to play.

The wind rustled the last few paper leaves on the trees around her. A squirrel with a squeaky tail scampered across a branch. A child’s balloon blew by. All of them were louder than Still’s music. It was as silent as deep snow, and it spread out in waves around her. First the puppets in the nearby houses heard it. They set down their gossip and chores and stared at one another. The streetcars fell silent, and then the children in the playgrounds. Even the roustabouts working on the balloons overhead stopped their chatter and bluster.

Passers by began to gather around Still. “What’s she doing?” they asked one another, but no one had an answer.

Finally a police puppet rode up on a shiny blue bicycle. He leaned it against a tree, straightened his serious hat, and scowled. “What’s going on here, then?” he asked. Still just kept playing.

“Excuse me, miss, but I asked, what’s going on here?” the police puppet repeated. He took a step toward her.

“Perhaps I can explain,” a warm voice said. Still opened her eyes. Mister Leaf was outside his front door. His student was standing beside him, her flute in her hands, her eyes big and dark. Mister Leaf’s hand was on her shoulder. She looked straight at Still, and Still looked straight back at her.

“Well, I’d be grateful if you would,” the police puppet said. “It’s a mighty strangeness to me, it is.”

“This poor thing was one of my students,” Mister Leaf said. “She had an accident—look, you can see the mark on her cheek. She ran away from home several months ago. Her parents have been very, very worried. I’m sure that—”

But no one ever got to find out what Mister Leaf was sure of. The young puppet at his side shook off his hand and walked down the steps. As Still kept playing, the young puppet set her flute down on the paper boat beside Still’s violin, tucked her elbows in at her sides, raised her hands, and began to play silence as well.

Someone gasped. “Tsk tsk,” said Mister Leaf, striding down the steps himself. “You really shouldn’t encourage her. She needs—”

But no one ever got to find out what Mister Leaf thought Still needed, either, because a puppet in the crowd stepped forward. Wiping away the drops of oil on her cheeks, she raised a ghostly trumpet to her lips.

The silence was deafening. Together, the three puppets played Still’s song all the way to its end. When they were done, Still lowered her arms.

“I didn’t fall,” she whispered. The world was so quiet that everyone around could hear her clearly. “I didn’t have an accident. I had him.”

The moment was broken by Elbow and Ramble pushing their way through the crowd. “Still! Oh, Still!” they cried. They hugged her between them.

“Oh, daffodil,” Ramble finally said, gazing at the nicks and scratches on her daughter’s face. “You’re all grown up now. Are you all right?”

Then, finally, Still began to cry. “No,” she said, hugging her parents close, “But I will be.”

It took Still a while to get her story out. When she was done, the police took Mister Leaf away. “Strings are too good for him!” Elbow said harshly as the three of them walked homeward. “After what he did—your violin, that poor girl’s flute, that woman’s trumpet… Chains are what they ought to put on him!”

“Strings will be enough,” Still said quietly.

It was several days before she could slip back to the little market on the edge of the fog. She bought the biggest, brightest orange scarf she could find, then walked down into the fog. She took three wrong turns on her way to the gargoyle’s warehouse. Finally, she spotted the familiar drainpipe. “Hello,” she called out as she climbed it. “Are you awake? I’ve brought you a present.”

But when she reached the top, all she found was a worn old statue with the remains of a fierce look carved on its face. She stared at it for a long moment, then wrapped the scarf around its neck, climbed back down the drainpipe, and went home.

**Bio:** Greg Wilson never intended to settle in Toronto, but is glad he did.