

Block-Rockin' Beats

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FROM THE MIND OF

RV A

The violin didn't produce music; it produced emotions.

Eli Demarcus leaned back in an expensive desk chair, bulky headphones cupping his afro. His eyes closed, he listened to sounds that transcended music and were the aural recreation of dreams. Each masterful stroke of the bow created music unimagined by any human mind. The melodies and rhythms transcended notes and time signatures, becoming instead swirls of thoughts. They left the mind blissfully numb before the beauty.

Eli opened his eyes to water-stained roof of his apartment. The ugly beige stain, edged with brown, always looked different each time he stared at it. Now, driven by the music that played through his headphones – music that was transforming his world and his very existence – the stain came alive. Forming into a rabbit, he watched it hop about like a playful dream. Bounding around the white featureless landscape of his ceiling, it played joyfully in a manner only animals know.

Eli closed his eyes again and drank in the music, absorbing it rather than listening to it. The violin slowed, the piece coming to a close. When the final stroke of the bow concluded, silence and emptiness followed. The world felt hollow, like an echo with no noise.

Strangely morose after the music had concluded, he turned in his chair to his desk. The record player's arm was lifting automatically, shifting over to the resting bench. Eli tracked the cords to his computer, the screen dark. He sat up and moved the mouse, causing the display to show the digitization program compiling, finishing the transfer of violin notes into computer code. Here, Eli smiled, a curl to his lips on one side of his face. "Here we go," he said with a grin.

Sitting up in his cushy desk chair and enthused, he activated a mixing program. Importing the music file of the aged record, he began to splice it out without even needing to hear the music. The display of the solitary violin performance was sufficient. He laid down a simple beat and added a reverb for effect, making the violin sound like it was playing in a spacious hall. Reverb gave the intimate music a sense of majesty. With just a moment, Eli played a trial snippet to see what he had created. His smile only grew as the fruits of his labor began to present.

The crowd went nuts for the new hotness.

Eli bounced to the rhythm, not of the music but of the crowd itself. A sea of people stretched out before Eli as he manned the DJ booth, turning controls and adjusting the feed, reacting to the energy of the crowd and amplifying the effects in real time. He bopped along, one ear covered by his headphones. Eyes watched as much as ears listened; not sampling; merely observing.

Strobe lights flashed over the sea of people. Lasers descended and moved and patterned lights spun. The crowd twisted and writhed in the musical cloud. And Eli's smile of pride was real.

With a rattle, the whole refrigerator shook when Eli opened the hard metal door. A pronounced lack of cold came from the fridge and the shelves were mostly empty except for some half-finished takeout and a few cans of cheap beer. Eli scoffed as he pushed the door shut. "This party's lame, man."

"What do you expect?" asked Dierdre as he checked the cabinets over the fridge. Straight out of some 1950s sitcom, the fridge kept rattling back and forth, especially when the 6'4" cross-dressing Dierdre stepped on his thick-soled platforms. Long nails trailed along the cabinets that held surprisingly little crockery and even less food. "William doesn't entertain much. He barely even lives here. He practically lives at the club." Dierdre barely pronounced consonants, making his speech a swirling vortex of soft syllables. The broad shoulders of a weight lifter didn't match the speech pattern, just as they didn't match the neon-green backless dress, but Eli assumed he wasn't the target audience for Dierdre's attire.

"The club's a migrant art instillation," said Eli, pushing the fridge a bit, curious why it was rattling. "He just makes parties happen whenever he can find the spot."

"More to it than making parties happen, brah," said William as he muscled by. With a build similar to Dierdre's but lacking the height, William showed the signs of recent stress with a subtle gut that proceeded him. "What's you guys looking for?" As he asked, he pulled open the cutlery cabinet to reveal a tray of cookies.

"Let me guess: there're gonna be peanuts in the lint trap," Eli teased.

"Ice sluice from the freezer," William corrected. He chewed with his mouth open but smiled with child-like friendliness. He readied to toss a cookie at Eli, aiming for his mouth. Eli was legitimately curious if they could manage the feat but caught the cookie with his hand instead.

"You got one for me, baby?" Dierdre asked William.

"One what, honey?" he asked back with a flash of his eyes and more laughing.

"Ooh," Dierdre delighted. "Maybe in a moment we'll find out, but baby, I have GOT to eat something."

"I got some pizzas coming; threw in some chicken wings too and one of them cookie-pizzas," William told them both. He sniffed a nose used to but not quite addicted to cocaine and said, "Sorry about the refreshments. I haven't been home all week." To Eli, he said, "Good thing I didn't get that dog like I wanted. Glad she went to a real home, huh?" Eli agreed with a nod as he checked the time. The after-party was always a unique experience. No two were ever the same. Without segue, William asked, "Say, man, what was that Mozart thing you played tonight?"

"What Mozart piece?" asked Eli as he followed William. Plastic tray of store-brand cookies in hand, William lead two of his DJs into the parking lot of his townhouse. A circle of cars had been parked together in the nearest spaces and his sofa had been brought out from the otherwise empty living room for some comfortable seating.

"He means that violin piece," Dierdre explained, eating a cookie from the tray, nibbling on the ends in a counterclockwise fashion. "It sounded like Stephane Grappelli on methadone."

"Yeah, what was that?" William asked walking backwards to the rear of his couch. He had another cookie that he ate with his mouth open, holding the tray to make the option available to anyone. The cluster of two dozen DJs, club-goers, and ravers responded lethargically.

"I don't know," Eli said, slender hands in the tight pockets of his jeans.

"What do you mean you don't know, baby?" asked Deirdre, like he was worried Eli was having a depressive episode.

"I mean I found this record. Old record. Got no label. It's got 'Brod' written on one side. B-R-O-D. That's it." Eli shrugged youthful shoulders.

"Brod?" William said with a bit of a sneer, not liking mysteries. To Deirdre, he asked, "Honey, you're my walking encyclopedia."

"Yeah, but I don't know," he said. He asked Eli, "Is that the artist or the producer?"

"No, not a label," Eli further explained. "The thing's, like, scratched on the side. Like somebody took a key to the side of a car. That kind of a deal. B-R-O-D."

William's round face hung forward, genuinely unsure what to do with this information. "Weird." Deirdre nodded, with a similar expression.

"Yeah," Eli agreed. "But shoot, this Brod person sure knew his stuff because...yeah." He gestured at the music from tonight. "I'm gonna find some more. This is good stuff."

"Yeah, you do that," William told Eli in a strangely ominous tone and a coy smile.

Eli's gaze grew cautious, suspicious, and hopeful. "Why?" William averted his eyes and avoided the question. "Why?" Eli pressed. William looked around at the others in the cluster of cars. A few had pilfered from his tray of cookies but most had barely noticed.

"Deirdre, honey, would you handle these?" William told the big man in the little dress.

"Sure, baby," he said, taking the tray. He gave Eli a hopeful look and walked around the couch, finally getting the attention of the others.

As the rest of the party descended on the cookies, William walked a few steps back towards his house and towards Eli. "This little migrant thing," he told the slender DJ. "It's about to go seriously migrant."

Eli tried not to get his hopes up. "What? You're going to throw another party in NYC?" His heart skipped a beat at the lucrative possibility.

William shook his head. "No, brah, so much bigger." Eli laughed, unsure what else to do. "I partnered with this company in Asia. They make soda and stuff. They got me going out to a nine-city, four-nation tour. Thailand, Cambodia. That kind of stuff."

Eli did a doubletake. "Holy crap."

"Yeah, brah," William whispered. "I got to supply the talent; they're supplying the party. I got to supply the talent," he repeated. "I got to supply...the talent," he emphasized again at Eli. "Get me some more of that violin stuff, man. Get some more and we're going to frickin' Thailand."

The deal was sealed with a handclap.

Eli scrutinized the record very carefully.

There were no designations on it, no marks or serial numbers inscribed anywhere. Aside from a few blemishes left by long-lost adhesives, there was no label or decoration of any kind. The disc was just slightly oblong, only noticeable when held out to be inspected. The ridges were very pronounced and rough, rawer than any commercial record Eli owned. The comparison alone prompted him to look at the mountains and mountains of such records which filled his tiny apartment.

In the warm light of the day that filtered through faded curtains, Eli considered the records like they were silent experts. He decided he needed a consult.

With a jangle, Eli stepped into the cigar shop. A wood-paneled establishment on the back of a nowhere street, it smelled of aged tobacco and clean steel. There was a whiff of brandy and other comfort liquors in the air while several clocks ticked in perfect unison.

The grandfather clock, to the right of the sunny door, was open. An old man with well-groomed white hair turned the key to wind the clock. He noted Eli enter and sniffed. "Mr. Demarcus." He pulled the chain of the clock with a satisfying clack of each length and shut the door. "What brings you here?" He locked the door with a ring of keys, all locking antiquated things.

"I got a record for you to hear, Mr. Ales," said the college-aged man.

"A record?" responded Ales, with skin the color of bleached parchment. He walked back behind the counter and removed two glasses. "Did you drive?" Eli shook his head. The man old enough to be Eli's great-grandfather poured two very short glasses of brandy. He pushed one vaguely towards Eli and let the other be. He began to head to the back of the store. "What's this you have? I'm not much of a man for modern music." He shouted to be heard as he disappeared into the back.

"Yeah, but this is obscure. This is weird," said Eli. He took the glass and sniffed it. The scent burned his nose and he hesitated.

"Obscure? Weird?" said Mr. Ales as he came back around, a laptop under his arm. He set it on the counter next to the small brandy glasses. "Hardly a thing a man like me might know a thing about, but I'm flattered you thought of me." He laid out the laptop and opened it, a lovely pastoral desktop appearing. He plugged a turntable on the counter into the laptop and speakers in the cigar shop came to life. "Regale me, Mr. Demarcus, regale me."

As Ales had a sip of his brandy, Eli set the record on the player and let it begin to turn. The needle arm moved on its own, sensing the weight of the disc. It placed itself with robotic precision and the speakers crackled as the audio began.

With the first notes, Eli could see Ales felt the same thing. Those first long strokes of the piece were like being grabbed by the soul and pulled aloft. Memories of things forgotten were laid before them both as the music that came through those speakers reached right inside of them.

Ales forgot about his brandy and was lost in the haunting mystery that was the violin. Amid the imperfections of the recording, cutting strokes of the bow slid through the air. Melodies were piled atop one another, cascading quickly into a torrent of experiences far beyond sound. Music and memory fused and transposed, until both men at the counter were feeling life rather than hearing music.

For Eli, his eyes drifted to a case where cigars were stacked in a humidifier. Inside the glass case, Eli saw the cigars begin to twist and roll. What had been a box of indulgences rose into a snake. A hooded beast like nothing on this earth turned from its coiled position. A pair of dangerous eyes twisted and focused on Eli, not quite threatening him but aware of him and mindful of his distance. The snake slithered its tongue once and its hood began to grow, expanding wide.

A distant horn awoke both men.

A near-collision outside the shop shocked them both. They realized they were panting. Mr. Ales' hand was shaking when he pulled the needle arm off the record. The music stopped with a hint of a scratch and the shop was empty and lifeless. Air made hot by glass cases and stocked shelves, felt like it was settling ash after an eruption. The world was flat and unimpressive without the bittersweet sorrow of that violin.

"Wow," whispered Eli.

"Wow, Mr. Demarcus?" Ales said, his face flushed. "You act like you've not heard it."

"Sure sounded different last time," said Eli. He wiped his brow, surprised he wasn't sweating. "Sounds different each time."

"It is amazing how important the context of art," said Mr. Ales. He removed the record with great care, with reverence. "A book read at night instead of the morning. A movie seen on vacation as opposed to a work night. A painting seen as a poster in a dorm room instead of in a gallery showing." He slipped the record back into the generic case Eli had bought. "Context is almost as important as the art itself."

"Too true," Eli said, agreeing more and more with each passing second. He accepted the record and asked, "You know who it is?"

"Oh no," Ales said gravely, shaking his head and his puffy white hair at the same time. "I've heard..." He could only shake his head.

Eli smiled in disbelief. "Come on, man. You've heard recordings of James Hetfield playing chopsticks when he was, like, fifteen. You've got Michael Bubl 's school plays. You've got Mozart pieces nobody knows exists. Come on, man. You've got Victor Borge's audition tapes. You don't know this? Mussorgsky's work before he was famous and Vivaldi's Arias after the death of Charles the 6th. This? You don't know THIS?!"

Mr. Ales nodded, almost proud. "I don't know this." He gestured to the record precisely the same way Eli did. "Mr. Demarcus, you've got something quite unique here." His eyes shone when he told Eli, "I'm not sure I even know what this is." He took the glass of brandy and accepted a sip. As he sipped, he stepped back from Eli and his record. "Is that jazz, or is that baroque? Is this a solo performer or a group?"

"Well, it's definitely a solo," Eli said, one of the few things of which he was certain.

Ales was not so confident. "Is it? What I heard included note schemes that no one person could perform."

"Ever heard of John Stump?" Eli asked rhetorically.

Ales snickered. "John Stump? You're referring to the Tribute to Zdenko Fibich, I assume."

Eli nodded. "The Death March, the part that's supposedly impossible to play." He took out his phone. "I can find, like, five videos of people playing it right now on YouTube."

"Tribute was written as a parody," Ales insisted quickly, stopping Eli from his digital search. "The notations include jokes like calling for a duet of gongs."

"Which would be kinda sick," Eli nodded.

"But no, this is different," Ales insisted, putting his hand on the record. "This performance...what I heard...it included melodies that a single violin cannot produce." He spoke slowly and emphatically as he looked Eli most earnestly in the eye. "This is either a joke," he told Eli, "or something truly phenomenal." Ales took Eli's brandy glass, was about to sip, then paused. Eli gestured quite happily for his host to partake, so he did. "I trust," said Ales tightly after emptying the glass, "you have worked your digital magic and examined it?"

"It's legit," Eli assured him. "This isn't a...this was recorded from a live performance. None of the usual little tells of a recording or a digital work are there. I mean, it COULD be..." He just shook his head. "But nah, man. This is a guy. One guy."

Ales backed away from the counter again, arms crossed over his suit vest. He thought as outside, the city street was mostly quiet. "You might speak to some of the old listeners over on Heide Street."

Eli couldn't place it. "Heide Street?"

"You might be forgiven for thinking it Little Germany," Ales nodded. "It is a neighborhood formed by immigrants of rim nations during World War II."

"Rim nations?" asked Eli, half-sneering at the bizarre term.

"Nations on the outskirts of larger, more famous, more powerful countries," Ales explained, his arms still crossed. "Every child knows Germany, but Luxembourg is a bit more esoteric. Slovenia, Moldova, Estonia. These were just as ravaged by the war but they had not the political power and influence as, say, France or Finland."

"Yikes," said Eli. "So it's just a community of immigrants?"

"Not is. Was," Ales told him. "The horrors seen by many are, understandably, guarded from grandchildren. Now there are only a handful of shops that would carry the hallmarks of the old community, of the old world. Still..." Ales smiled. "The old endure and what they've heard is unlike what we of the modern world might know."

Eli was a little amused by Ales referring to himself as being of the modern world, but he gave no hint of it except to smile. "You recommend anybody in particular?"

"I'm afraid not," said Ales. He collected the two brandy glasses and said, "Good luck in your search."

"Yeah, thanks," said Eli. He collected his record and began to head out. "I'll let you know what I find."

Only as the door was shutting did Ales' smile fade and he answered, "That's quite alright."

The smell of onions and pepper assaulted Eli as he stepped into the deli. A few eyes drifted to the skinny young black man who hedged at the door to look around, seeing old eyes and leathery faces with deep lines. Nothing was said, though, and the patrons returned to their conversations

and their meals. "Can I help you?" called a much older man behind the counter. He had a gruff face, like he had been bored since dawn of last week.

"Yeah, hey," Eli said as he headed to the counter. "You know Ales? Mr. Ales? Runs the cigar shop on—"

"Yeah, I know him," said the man. His heavy accent had a husky tone, an abrasive element born of regular but light smoking. "He send you here?"

Eli nodded. "Yeah, I'm trying to find something."

The deli proprietor gestured to the shop. "I got sandwiches."

"This is about music," Eli told him. He slung his backpack off his shoulder and unzipped it. "I got a record with no label. I'm trying to find out who did it."

The proprietor was clearly intrigued. "What kind of music? I don't do any of the new stuff."

"It's old," Eli told him. He glanced when the door opened, the bell over it jingling as a couple came inside. "Just a bunch of tracks of violin pieces. I know classical but I don't know any of these. They're original. All of them."

The proprietor looked very intrigued. "Ales sent you to me?" He laughed, a strange expression for such a naturally dour face. He pulled off his plastic gloves and yelled something in a language Eli wasn't sure he'd ever heard. Another man about the same age appeared from the back. The proprietor kept speaking in a European language, the two clearly arguing, as he untied his apron. A vertical striped shirt and brown pants out of style by multiple decades led Eli into the backroom.

The back room was full of cardboard boxes of produce and meat ready to be sliced. A cooler and a fridge stood next to each other. Opposite them was a small cot with two heavy blankets. Next to it, a set of bedroom shelves which included a record player. "My brother, he gets headaches. Migraines they call them." Nothing else was said as the owner turned on the record player. He stepped back and gestured for Eli to take over.

Eli slipped the record from its protective sleeve and set it on the turntable. He manually set the needle and stepped back. From an embedded speaker of the ancient player, the strokes of the violin began. Whatever the deli owner heard, however, it was not entirely unfamiliar. The man's face contorted with strained recognition, like he was trying to recall

where this music had last entered his life. "You know it?" Eli asked, considering the question rhetorical.

The deli owner's head nodded up and down while his mind was a thousand miles away. Wherever it was, it wasn't good. He removed the needle abruptly and took the record from the turntable. "I'm not helping you." He pushed the record into Eli's hands and pointed. "Get out."

"Whoa, wait, what is it?" Eli asked, not sure if he was certain this was a joke or just hoping.

"No," was all the old man would say.

"Dude, just give me a name or something," Eli begged.

With a finger held forward, the old man stared earnestly to Eli. "No." He pointed over Eli's shoulder. "Get out." Eli couldn't bring himself to argue. He exited onto the street, backing out from the deli. He looked at the unremarkable front, not sure what he'd just experienced. The record under his arm, he began to walk down the sun-bleached street in the afternoon.

Eli made it only a block until he spotted a pair of older gentlemen playing chess in front of a bar. The 'open' sign was unlit but the front door was open. He approached the pair and asked, "Hey, can I trouble you guys for a minute?"

"Bar opens later," said the man facing away from him. He was an ancient man, like a great action hero candle that had melted. A flat cap sat atop a head with less hair than came out of his ears. His words were almost unintelligible, the accent was so thick.

"I'm looking for somebody that knows music," Eli asked.

"Music?" laughed the other old man, with a mustache like a parody and a plaid corduroy jacket. "We don't listen to hip hop much." He was a little more intelligible but the accent was still an obstacle.

"Nah, it's a violin solo," Eli told them. "Dude at the deli got spooked listening to it. We didn't even make it a minute." He looked down at the two men as both of them turned and faced him. "Y'all wouldn't know anybody interested, would ya?"

Three minutes later, in the empty bar lit only by the sun coming in through the windows, the mustached old man set a dusty record player on the bar top. "My granddaughter, she got me an iPod. Little white thing."

He spoke as he set-up the record player. "I have music on there. So much music. Music I didn't think anybody knew anymore."

"Rawhide," said the other old man, still wearing his cap atop a head covered in old age spots. He mimicked riding a horse and the rhythm of the old song. "Rolling, rolling, rolling," he sang, then laughed, then coughed.

"Yes, but not," said the mustached old man, finally plugging in the record player. "I've got music on there. So much music. I can play anything. All the music. If I can find it. The screen, it's so tiny. And the controls, they don't make sense. That wheel. Such a mess."

When he clicked on the record player, speakers throughout the bar crackled and a subtle hum overtook the air. "Let me see," said the old man. Eli handed the record over to him. He took it with knobby fingers, joints that had been broken decades ago. He accepted it happily but when his eyes fell to the center, he saw BROD carved in the center. "Where's the label?"

"No label," Eli told him as he waited.

Eyes dulled by age but not devoid of awareness looked at Eli. Across the rims of heavy glasses, those eyes were guarded and cautious. Hands that shook from age now shook from something else. "You know what Brod means?" asked Eli.

The old man didn't speak, he only set the record on the turntable. His watch jangled as he set the needle on the bleed. The speakers crackled loudly, the echo passing back and forth through the bar. Wood paneling and mismatched tables and chairs are created a décor that could only be called eclectic.

The violin began. Long strokes with a bow like a straight razor across the wrist. Heavy notes punched inside of Eli's chest and grabbed his heart. The music was different in the bar. Same notes, same rhythm, same melodies, different impact. Long shadows deepened. Reflections moved in a still world. Eli saw his own eyes staring back at him in every surface.

The man in the hat, with a burst of speed that would have impressed a college athlete, pulled the needle off the record player. The mustached man was panting, sweat on his brow. He had been too catatonic to do the same. To Eli, he said, "That's cursed music."

"Cursed music?" Eli asked, not entirely in disbelief.

The mustached old man grabbed the record with effort, a pained look on his face. "Go somewhere else." He handed the record gruffly across the bar to Eli and the smaller of the ancient men grabbed Eli by the elbow. With

strength more appropriate for a lion than an octogenarian, he pushed Eli through the door.

"Guys!" Eli yelled. "I just want to know who—" The door was slammed shut in his face.

The smell of dusty paper didn't inspire confidence as Eli walked into the used bookstore. Another half-forgotten store that catered to the mostly ancient community, it was helmed by an old man in a dark brown jacket with patches on the elbows. He noticed Eli enter and seemed intrigued. "Yes, young man?" He looked ready to give directions to somewhere more prescient to the life of the young.

"Hey, sorry to bother," Eli told him, his thumbs in his backpack shoulder straps. "I've been all through this neighborhood trying to get some info and nobody wants to help me out."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that," said the old man with a hoarse voice. "And surprised. We're normally a very friendly community. Welcoming, we are."

"Everyone's been real friendly," Eli was quick to acknowledge, "until they hear my music."

The old man smiled kindly. "We're not much for dance music here, I am afraid. Except for maybe something from our youth." He gestured at the store. "I'm not sure I have a volume here for this millennium."

Forgetting his quest for a moment, Eli looked at the store, seeing the crooked spines, warped jackets, and torn binding. He could smell the entropy. "How do you do it?" he asked. "How do you..." The words didn't exist for him.

The old man understood the question even without words. He smiled bittersweetly. "We're from out of time," he told Eli poetically. "We were moving forward, but tragedy tore us from our world." He spoke better than the others, but he shared their accent. "Ripped from all we knew; our lives have become – for many of us – all about finding some shred of what we knew. If we can find it, no matter how small, we cling to it. We guard it jealously, for fear of knowing what it's like to again lose it."

"When you're young, you seek to run," explained the old man with words worn deep by his own mind thinking them but never saying them. "You wish to gain momentum. Trip and fall, proverbially of course." He laughed gently, as did Eli. "Trip and fall and you often need your parents and your family and your community. They help pick you up and you work

to regain that momentum. You pursue change. But fall without family. Or fall together with your family. Fall with your community and momentum stops being a thing that propels you forward. It becomes something that takes you away from what you needed. What you need."

Words heavy with need told Eli, "This isn't a store. It's a museum. It's a museum to the memories of the people who need a place to hang their recollections. They have to have something to hold onto. A book from home. A scent. A smell. Maybe just even an arrangement." He looked at the store, to the store. "My shelves haven't moved since I opened half a century ago. And they'll stay precisely where they are until I am gone. Not for business, not for me, but for the people."

Eli was awe. "How do you stay open?"

The old man smiled kindly, and sadly. "I find a way. I help, I get help." He smirked. "I don't expect a man of the millennium to understand it, but businesses don't have to be about money. Money is nice, but businesses can be about services. And sometimes the service that is provided isn't the service advertised."

Eli felt strangely humbled and he wasn't entirely sure why. The weight of the statements hanging over them like a cloud, Eli took off his backpack. "I have a record. It's got no label; just the letters B-R-O-D etched into one side. It's just violin music, nothing else. It's old. I played it for a bunch of people here, in this community. The only answer I've gotten is that it's cursed music."

"Cursed music?" repeated the owner of the book shop. Eli set the record before him. The old man took the disc from the sleeve and ran fingers over the four letters. "Hand-carved, I would guess," he described them. "I don't have a record player, I'm afraid."

"That ain't a problem," Eli smiled. He took his phone and cued up an audio player. "I copied the music. I been using it for some dance music." He smiled at the old man, but while he got a smile in return, it was more polite than genuine. "People my age got a place for your world in our lives." The book owner was touched. Eli pressed play and began the melody.

Even a digital copy of the haunting notes carried much of the same might. The violin pushed out all other sounds, and then all other thoughts. It swelled like a cancer, taking over all emotion until those notes were the focus of Eli's mind and heart. As he stood at the counter of the ancient bookstore, he felt books begin to sing, like the dead calling to their kin.

"That's enough."

Eli was awoken from the musical fixation. His thumb silenced the music. He could see the distress in the old bookseller. Eyes that had seen nightmares had heard one now. But it wasn't just the music that had unsettled him. "You know this stuff," said Eli. It wasn't a question or an accusation, but a realization. A confirmation.

The old man took a long, slow breath. "I do." There was a tear in his words. "Ezekiel Brod."

"Brod?" Eli perked up.

"You see it now spelled with an E or an AU or..." The storeowner didn't bother expounding. "You see Smith with a Y." He shrugged heavy, burdened shoulders.

"Who was he?" Eli asked. "Who was Ezekiel Brod?"

There was a tightness in his throat as he tried to speak. His eyes darted about as he searched for where to begin. "Many of them...they didn't know where their neighbors had come from," said the bookseller. "They knew only that they found themselves in cattle cars, riding towards the camps."

The bottom fell out of Eli's soul.

"I know of Ezekiel Brod because of my father, because of my uncles." The bookseller took from old pants that ceased to fit properly a wallet aged with use. From the wallet, he took a piece of fabric pressed between laminate to preserve it indefinitely, permanently, for eternity. He handed over a small pink triangle. "My father wore one of these. Ezekiel Brod did as well."

Eli was hesitant to even breathe, the magnitude of what he'd discovered on that record so much greater than he had been prepared for. The bookseller accepted back the pink triangle, returning it to his wallet. "My father works, as do my uncles." His words shifted, as did his tone. He wasn't recalling but reliving. "Brod, he works, but he also is made to play the violin. An officer in Hitler's forces has Brod play. Play for the workers, play for him, play night and day."

Well worn, hungry lines on the bookseller's face grew more tired as he remembered a story burned into his mind. His memory recalled it like the needle recalled cursed music off the record. "When the Allies came, the Jews were freed and given aid," explained the bookseller with a broad smile. "The Romani, the resistance fighters, all freed." The smile darkened. "The others...not so much. Many were moved from the concentration camps to the brigs of military bases. Not an improvement one would hope for. Less

freedom than merely slightly less inhumane. Brod was one of them. Brod was brought to the United States but was denied access.”

“Why was he brought here?” asked Eli.

“To be tried for sodomy,” said the bookseller with clinical detachment. “He was a criminal. Gays received no sweeping pardons like so many Nazi soldiers. So they were tried – sometimes in Europe, sometimes in America – but they were tried. My father, he was what they now call bisexual. Before his trial, he managed to meet a woman. The details are...” The bookseller smiled and said with old-world dignity, “They are for another time.” Again, his smile darkened. “Brod was not so lucky. I don’t know if he was admitted to the United States or not. He wasn’t then; he was to be returned to Europe.”

Eli swallowed, worried. “Maybe he’s still over there.” The bookseller only smiled tightly, enjoying the optimistic impossibility.

The smile faded like the sun disappearing behind a twilight cloud. “Memories are long,” he said with a whisper in shadow. “Many who hate then hate now, but their hate is for themselves. They hear this music and they hear not the beauty of it, not the incredible skill of it. They hear their own inhumanity. They hear their abandonment of their own. They hear their own backs turning on one in need.”

“So that’s why they call it cursed?” Eli tried to reason, whispering. “Because they feel bad for leaving Brod without help?”

“Men of our caliber can scarcely imagine what it was like in those camps,” the bookseller warned Eli. “Most would give anything to never think of those moments. Most, when death took them, were grateful to be free of the turmoil and torment. To survive took something powerful. Love of family, love of home.”

“So what did Ezekiel Brod love?”

“I don’t know. I never met him,” the bookseller admitted with equal parts lament and gratitude. “I would hope a kindred spirit, a person of tremendous beauty that could inspire a love that would endure. But a gay man in Europe in the 1930s? His was a hidden life.” The bookseller tapped the countertop and turned away. “No, there are suspicions of something more desperate that saw him through the camps.”

An ominous fear overtook Eli. “What do you mean?”

“A Jewish slave was working twenty hours a day, only to be plucked from torment so that he may engage in a beloved pastime? Playing for a Nazi officer perhaps, but it was a luxury to say the least.” The bookseller

shook his head. The shadows of aged lines darkened, as did his tone. "No, if you find anyone who even knows the name Ezekiel Brod, you'll likely hear whispers of a deal he made."

Eli felt a chill in his soul. "A deal?"

The bookseller smiled at his cluelessness. "You know music, sir. What does the name Robert Johnson mean to you?"

"Blues player," Eli answered without effort, without thought. "Allegedly sold his soul to the devil." His words tumbled more slowly out of his mouth. "They think Ezekiel Brod sold his soul?"

The bookseller only shook his head, uncertain of the truth. "Would it be so hard to believe? That a community racked with guilt for their dereliction of responsibility to one of their own would concoct some myth to justify their behavior? Or perhaps," he added cautiously, "would it be so hard to believe that a man devoid of all hope would look to his music and offer anything so that it might save him? Could you blame him?"

"The Devil isn't real," Eli stated, insisted, needed.

The bookseller didn't argue, only said, "Theology isn't my area of interest. Nor is demonology." He gestured to his bookstore and offered, "But I can point you towards some books if you would like." He cracked a smile as forced as it was brief. "You've heard the music," he told Eli, his shopkeeper façade falling again. "Can you tell me you are one hundred percent certain there is nothing unnatural at play?"

"Absolutely," Eli insisted as firmly as he could force himself to seem.

The bookseller only nodded. "You are a man of confidence. More confidence than I have."

Eli found himself second-guessing, thoughts of the impossible notations he'd seen on his computer. He looked down at the record disc and stared at the grooves of the music. "If it is cursed, should I destroy it?" he asked, the words drifting from him like a ghost rising from another's grave. The bookseller grew wary of that question. "Destroy maybe the man's only remaining legacy?"

The bookseller was quiet for a long, long time. He approached the disc like he might approach a viper. "Demonology as I said is not an area of interest for me. However, I know enough of the world to believe it ill luck to destroy a cursed object. Curses tend not to be destroyed, merely passed on."

"I don't want some demon in my house," Eli said quickly.

The bookseller nodded. "I would find a safe place, and leave it there. Never to be seen or heard again."

"And the music?" Eli asked. "Is that safe to play? Like, if I got it off the record?"

The bookseller surrendered a sad, sympathetic smile. "You are looking for absolutes when there may be none. You seek rules to protect you when there may be none, where there may never have been any." The bookseller stepped back from the counter, from the record, from Eli. "The decision is yours. I am not you, but I would not play that music. But I am not you. The decision is yours."

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