

Thirty-Five dollars per Month

“What do you do with the pine sap?”

Joseph started at the sound of a young voice, and turned to be met with the wide, blue eyes of a pink-faced little girl wrapped tightly in a red winter coat.

“Sorry?” He said, placing down one of his buckets to tip down his earmuffs.

“The pine sap,” she said, pulling her hat further over her ginger hair. “What do you do with it?”

Joseph blinked. “Well I would assume syrup of some kind.”

Her pom-pom danced back and forth as the girl shook her head, as though the silly man in the field tried to tell her that the sky was pink. “No, that’s what they do with the maple sap. What about the pine?” She tipped forward in her oversized boots to look into the bucket that he had just set down.

“Oh,” he said, pausing to think. “Well then I’m not quite sure.”

“Hm,” was all the girl said. Then she turned and skipped away to the school tour building.

Joseph paused a long moment before pushing his earmuffs back up over his frosted black hair, and bringing his buckets to the truck. The small crew hopped on the edges of the grey truck bed and began their slow rumble to the storage barn. As he tucked his face into his weathered grey coat, Joseph realized that in the three years he’d worked this job, tending to the trees and collecting their sap, he’d never once asked the question that the girl had. He began to wonder if it was used in glue as they unloaded the truck. After all, he could never seem to get the stuff off of his skin and clothing. The girl’s question still echoed in his head as the warmth of the break room hit his numbed face. He sat down at his usual table and removed his blue earmuffs and sap-laden black gloves. A steaming mug of golden coffee was placed in front of him as he was met with a wide smile and a mess of brown curly hair.

“You are a gem,” he said, letting the mug scorch his hands.

“I know,” Andy laughed. He had started working in finances only a few months before Joseph, and it had just clicked. The two dark haired, skinny new guys who had yet to turn thirty had spent every lunch break complaining about their work, joking about stoic coworkers, and trying their best to add some life to the mundane job they did not share. As they talked today though, Joseph couldn’t stop thinking about the pom-pommed schoolgirl. He finally caved and asked Andy if he knew.

“I mean it’s probably used for all sorts of things,” He said, sipping the bitter tea that he loved so much. “I know that our biggest buyer is ‘Santoff Rosin Industries’.”

“Resin?”

“No, rosin,” He replied, spelling out the word.

“What is it?” Joseph rested his head on his cold hand.

Andy shrugged, then laughed. “I just make sure they give us the money they owe.”

A few hours later Joseph was removing his over-used, sap-stained grey boots, and trying to scrub out the invincible sticky substance and the impossible chill from his skin with the hottest

water his apartment's hot water tank could manage. It was never enough to fully rid him of either. Wrapped in warm pajamas and a blanket, he sat down at his laptop and typed in the word 'rosin'.

The second article was labelled "What is rosin and why do violinists need it?" He clicked the link and began to read. He soon gathered that rosin was indeed made from pine sap, and was used on the bow of any stringed instrument to make it sound full and clear. Joseph sighed. The past three years of his life was devoted to something that seemed so insignificant.

He was just about to close the tab when the page began to play a video at near full volume, which almost made him topple from his chair. He gathered himself and turned the volume down. His mouse hovered over the button to close the tab, but he did not press it. The video was of a single violin, playing a soothing, mournful tune that he swore he recognized, but could not place where from. He let the video play through. Then he clicked on the replay button. He sat back in his chair, watching the musician sway with the pendulation of the bow, and breathe with the rhythm of the song.

When the video finished, Joseph did not move for a very long time. He wasn't sure how to feel. It was stupid really, he'd never cared for music, and it wasn't like he'd never heard a violin before. He sighed, then opened YouTube and clicked on the first "violin solo playlist" recommended. He let it play as he sat there, then as he made his dinner. It played as he ate. It played as he brushed his teeth. He turned it off as he got into bed, and yet the violin still played as he lay restless in his bed, and as he finally drifted off to sleep.

By the morning he had made up his mind. Waking up a few hours early, he made his way to the closest music store, and rented a violin for thirty-five dollars a month. The case felt empty, the hollow instrument silent and still, weighing barely a thing. When he opened it on his kitchen table, he spent a long time just looking at it. The hand carved scroll, the charcoal coloured neck, and the varnished, honey coloured rosewood body. It wasn't made to be beautiful, it was made to function. And that was what made it gorgeous. He began to realize how ridiculous he sounded. He was 26, still considered young to most, but to pick up an instrument having never touched one before? But he had the violin now, so he picked it up, placed it gently under his chin and rested the bow carefully on the second string. He took a deep breath and pulled the bow across the thin wire.

It sounded nothing like the videos he'd spent hours listening to. It sounded far more timid, more hollow. He placed his first finger down lightly on the string and pushed the bow across it. He moved it up the slightest, trying to get the correct note. Once he had it, he played it over and over again, then bounced back and forth from the open string to the first finger.

It sounded awful. Of course it did. He wasn't expecting it to sound even alright. But still, he felt the hollowness of the instrument as he placed it into the red velvet lining of the case and clicked the latches shut. He let his thoughts cloud over again as he got ready for work.

The day was a bit of a blur. As he went about his repetitive tasks in autopilot, his thoughts refused to leave the violin. The mournful notes cut like a heated knife through the block of ice that he so often felt trapped in.

Andy's hand waved in front of his eyes.
"I said, did you ever figure out what rosin is?"
Joseph blinked. *Rosin*. But he shook his head.
"No," he said, "I didn't bother."

On his way home he stopped at the Music Store once again. It came in a small square cardboard box, no bigger than an inch and half. He opened it at home, the small, round puck falling into his hand with ease. It looked exactly like the pine sap he spent years collecting, without the smell. It was smooth and almost clear, the honey-like colour warping the glimpses of objects seen through it. He followed the instruction of the package and ran the bow across the rosin in short, back and forth motions until he reached the top. Then he did it back down again. Back up, and back down. Then he dragged it up in one long stroke, and finally down, in one final and smooth movement.

The surface that he'd used wasn't glassy and honey-like anymore, but made him think of the sea glass he'd spent hours collecting back home. When he tapped the bow against the string, a small cloud of dust fell from the hairs onto the varnished wood. It reminded him oddly of Andy, and how the snow would fall gently onto his brown curls.

And then Joseph stood there. He stood staring across the violin, the metal strings pulled tight against it, and the bow resting on the second. He looked at the carved scrolls that adorned the surface that let the sound vibrate throughout it. The tuning knobs at the end that he still couldn't manage to figure out. Then he looked at his own hand, holding up the instrument. His bitten nails and fingers, forever a frost-nipped red. He saw a bit of sap stuck to the knuckle of his index finger. He looked back at the bow, sending down tiny clouds of snow whenever he moved it even in the slightest.

He sighed, watching the dust dance away from his breath. He took a deep breath and, one last time, he pulled the bow, slowly and loosely, across the second string.

The sound was clearer, fuller, and it lacked the chalky sound of the scratching that had lingered the first time.

But it sounded just as empty as it had before.

The next day Joseph brought the violin back. He couldn't return the rosin, so he left it in his coat pocket. Sometimes he would forget about it, happen to stumble upon it while reaching for his phone or a tissue. But usually he was aware of it. It seemed so heavy at times.

When the red-haired little girl sat in the velvet auditorium seat next to him, Joseph thought it was the girl from the field. It wasn't, though she still acted as though they were best friends.

"I like the big violins," she said, "they sound so low and loud."

Joseph smiled, looking over to the cellos.

“I like them too.”

“One day when I’m big, I’m going to play a big violin,” she said, smiling.

“Why wait until you're big? You could start playing it now.”

The girl’s eyes widened, her smile filled with excitement as she looked back to the group playing on the stage.

“Yeah,” she said, “I should.”

They both watched each musician let their bow fall like pendulums in unison, the gears of a clock working together to build the perfect, beautiful machine. Joseph watched as the lead’s bow danced in rapid and precise motions as the instrument sang the beautiful melody.

“Do you play one of the violins?” The girl asked.

“No,” Joseph said, smiling, “I just like to listen.”