

Finalist, Fiction

Grandma's Farm

By Lela De La Garza

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Carl had a hard time asking Mom to put the radio on for him or play music. Words didn't come out right for him. They ran away before he could get his tongue around them, or they came out sounding different to other people than they sounded in his head.

Carl's mom, though, was a pretty smart lady. She understood early in Carl's life that he liked music. She got children's CDs and a player, but Carl seemed to feel the same way about all the music he heard.

She was wrong, though Carl couldn't tell her. He felt a lot of things he couldn't say, and he felt different things about different kinds of music.

Some music made Carl want to dance. He never did that; his feet were too clumsy. The toes of his left foot were stuck together, sort of, and it threw him off balance. He could jiggle in time to the music, though, and he did. Carl's mom never realized just how well he was able to keep time.

Some music made Carl feel comfortable and safe, as if arms were around him, holding him tight. Other music picked Carl up and carried him on wings.

There was a kind of music that almost hurt, making strange ripples across his mind.

He enjoyed it all, really—the soaring, the comfort; even the hurting. There was a door in Carl's mind; music pushed against it, curled under it, shone through the cracks. Someday music would open that door...

One late spring morning Carl's parents told him to get in the car. "We're going to visit Grandma. She lives on a farm."

This was pretty exciting. Carl's Grandma had been to visit him, but he'd never visited her. And he'd never been on a farm.

The radio played, and Carl jiggled to the music, and felt soaring and almost-hurting inside himself, and sometimes laughing, and most of the time just happiness.

Grandma's house was dark and too quiet. In fact, the too-quiet was what Carl noticed first. It made him nervous.

So did his grandmother. She loved Carl but wasn't sure what she should say to him.

"Hello, Carl!" she greeted him, much louder than was necessary. Carl had nothing wrong with his hearing. Since she hadn't asked a question, Carl didn't think he had to say anything. This made his grandmother even more nervous. "What would you like to do?" she asked—louder this time.

Since Carl didn't know what he wanted to do, or what he was expected to say now, he just kept still, and then Mother took charge. She sat Carl down in a quiet place and handed him his radio and earphones. He turned on his music and tuned out the world. After a while his eyes closed, and he slept till lunchtime.

Grandma made a good meal, but Carl wasn't hungry and didn't eat very much. After lunch, though, Carl's parents took him outside and showed him the farm. Carl enjoyed this more than anything so far.

He'd seen farms in pictures and on TV, of course—but never like this. There were baby chicks; yellow balls of fluff that ran after their mother hen. They made a high, soft noise that sounded like their colour. Pigs made a “wuffy” “mushy” sound. The cow sounded like a strange, low horn.

Carl had seen flowers growing before, but only in gardens. Flowers on the farm grew anywhere they wanted to. Some were pink and gold and Mother called them buttercups. Carl put his tongue to one, and it was cool and silky, but he didn't taste any butter. There was so much blue and green and red and purple that Carl's eyes got dizzy.

When he finally got back to the house he was so full of colours and sounds he didn't even feel like music. All the things he seen and heard were jumbled up in his mind like a ball. He wanted to make a picture of them, but it wouldn't come clear—just kept rolling around and around in his head.

Carl found his way into a different room this time. In the corner was a large piece of furniture. Carl knew what it was; he knew what it did. He'd never touched a piano before, but the sight of it was like finally coming home.

Carl sat on the bench. His feet dangled. There were white plastic sticks and shorter black ones. He touched a white plastic and made a sound. He touched the black one next to it and made almost the same sound, but strange. It didn't take Carl long to discover high sounds, low sounds, middle sounds, happy sounds, sad sounds. Under the piano (and Carl could just reach them if he scrunched down and stretched) were things that made sounds loud or soft or long.

Now he had a way—this was finally the way: closed door opening, hard, frozen gate unlocking—of saying what he wanted to say.

It was some time later that Carl was aware of people in the room. His grandma. His parents. All unbelieving, questioning. “What is that?” “Where did you learn...?” “Who taught...?” “How...?” “Why...?”

Carl told as much truth as he understood: “My fingers knew and taught me how.” The amazing thing was not just the music, but the fact that everyone understood what Carl was saying. His speech was slow, but perfectly clear. For once his tongue didn't lock and stutter and get in the way of his words.

Carl turned back to the piano and put his fingers on the keys. “This is pigs.” He played pigs, grunting and squealing. The cow lowed; baby chicks ran after their mother in a tinkle. “This is flowers.” Carl played reds and yellows and blues and a flow of green. He played silks and sweetness, and the dark, damp room began to fill with warmth and colour and light.

Carl was to write a lot more songs in a career that spanned almost seven decades. Some were longer, and some were better, and some were just good, and a few were past great. But this was his first, and he never forgot it. This was the one that opened the door to Carl's music and gave his spirit wings.

"What are you playing?" Carl's mother asked. "Do you know the name of it?"

Carl thought for a moment (though he already knew the answer; had known it since the first note). "I call it 'Grandma's Farm.'"