

1<sup>st</sup> Place, Fiction

Second Chair  
By Daniel Rosen

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When I was still living in the dorms at Juilliard, the other girls always complained about how long it took to put on make-up. I used to laugh at them— it only took me a couple minutes to shave and put on my face, no problem, which in turn bought me another fifteen minutes of sleep. Now, alone, it takes me an hour, and I don't laugh like I used to. That's part of growing up, though. You never laugh like you used to.

After I've performed my ablutions, I tuck my shawl over my legs and make sure it won't get caught in the wheels. Then I head down to the first floor. The way out is long and winding, and there are no signs but direct me, but I've wheeled myself enough times through these stark hallways to know where I'm going. It's a good place to live: I'm far enough from the entrance that no new renters are likely to stumble on my room. Plus, U-Loc Storage has climate-control and they don't ask too many questions about why I spend so much time in my rental unit.

The 14 takes me downtown. It's a reliable route, and it's rare that I have to wait more than fifteen minutes for the bus. This is good, because I'm worried about the winter. I don't know what I'll do if it gets too cold to wait outside. The 14 doesn't have an express, but it's usually pretty quiet in the morning as far as the metro goes. It picks up when we get closer to downtown, but by that time I'm already settled in and no one bothers me.

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After graduation, I moved back to Minnesota and played second violin in the symphony. I lived with Mother in Robbinsdale, where she sold Avon to neighbors. That's why I still have the make-up. God knows I don't buy any. The garage was full of it when she sold the house,

though. Towers of cardboard boxes, from floor to ceiling. Skin-care creams, powders, perfumes, lotions, lipsticks, nail polish, towelettes, colored contact lenses, hair colors, hair sprays and gels, deodorants, hand sanitizers, baby products. The whole nine yards— she left it all when she disappeared.

I guess I don't blame her, but I wish she'd been more understanding. I'm lucky. The diagnosis was monomelic ALS. That means only my legs are affected, for the most part. Still, I missed my auditions because of inpatient visits at Hennepin County Medical, and when I couldn't play in the symphony anymore, I think Mother lost it.

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Now I play downtown, and my chair has wheels. The audience isn't so different though, still suits— black, gray, blue, gray, black.

Jose, pale and skinny, plays ukulele under the skyscrapers along Nicolett Avenue. He hisses at me like a cat when I roll by, but I ignore him. Jose gets the early birds and I get the lunch crowd. Our arrangement is unspoken but he keeps playing Resigned Acceptance whenever I walk by, and so I know he understands.

I prefer to set up in front of the new burrito joint near 11th. The lunch crowd moves at a slower pace and if I'm lucky, I can make my month's rent in a day and get out of downtown while there's still room for me on the bus. Passengers are supposed to make room for you, if you're in a chair, but things don't always go the way they're supposed to.

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After Mother left, I spent a fair amount of time crying. I didn't use make-up for a month. Tears and make-up don't mix well. My brother came back to the States to visit a couple times

before the house was sold. That's when he helped me move the boxes of make-up and the sawhorse to the LockUp storage. I didn't tell him I was planning on living there, but he probably knew. I figured it wouldn't be for long. Auditions would be coming back up in a year and I'd be right back to where I was before the diagnosis. Like I said, I was lucky. Monomelic amyotrophy had only withered my legs.

That was before I discovered I couldn't read music anymore. When I tried practicing for my audition, the score just slipped away from me, like my eyes just saw right through the notes. I felt like I was falling into the ledger lines. I couldn't sight-read at all. The doctors told me it might have been a side-effect of the disease, some sort of minor dementia or extraocular disorder. My brain had betrayed me.

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So now I play downtown, or I have been playing downtown anyway, and I will until it gets too cold. I think I could play all winter with fingerless gloves on, as long as I stay bundled up and out of the wind, but a violin is far more delicate than the human body, even a broken body like mine. There is a crack running along the saddle already, and if it gets worse, I fear the neck will be entirely separated from the body. I don't know what I would do without my violin, and so I put it out of my mind.

Even if I can no longer read it, my fingers still remember Chaconne, and I can speed through the Bach Double without missing a step. Tchaikovsky pops in from time to time, but somehow I've forgotten most of the pieces that I practiced for hours.

More and more, I improvise. I play what I see around me. I bow out the rough chop of Cackling Mistress. I tease at Fat Man With Mustard Stained Tie. Sometimes I play A Crowd

Gathers, but this is usually on Wednesdays or Thursdays and never lasts long. My audience shrinks away autumn grows colder.

In November, while I'm playing Drunk Bleeds in the Streets, a man with a dark blue suit watches me for the full 18 minutes, up until the end when the sirens fade to a dull whine. He claps and smiles and puts a \$20 bill in my case. The smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

Then he approaches me and leans in and says he's never gotten blown by a cripple. I play Polite Refusal. He tells me he'll give me \$100 if I come back to his office with him, emphasis on the verbs. I keep playing. His smile disappears and he hisses at me like a cat, like Jose. \$200. I keep playing, launching into Please Leave. He turns scarlet, spits at me, and stomps away .

I finish the song, then put away my violin. My wrists are suddenly tired. It's only October, and I'm already getting cold. I wonder briefly if I should stop wearing make-up, if that would help. If I'm just creating trouble for myself. I wish I could ask Mother. She'd know.

On the bus back home, a young woman watches the news in front of me on her tablet, her breath fogging the screen. I watch over her shoulder. The meteorologist is a woman, very tall and very tan. Her lipstick is thick and fire-engine red. I wonder if it's Avon. I might have the same tube boxed up in my space.

"It's going to be a warm winter," the meteorologist says, smiling. Her teeth are wide and white. Even the tone of her voice is rich and warm, like the tone of a finely maintained Guarneri or Stradivarius. It's comforting.

For all these things, I thank her silently. We could all use a warm winter. I wonder if it will be warm for Mother, wherever she is. I hope so.