

How to Make a Violin Cry

“What the hell did you do?” my older brother screamed. His eyes bulged and his neck muscles pulsed.

“What does it look like, genius?”

“It looks like you just burned Grandpop Sol’s violin to a crisp,” he said, now hyperventilating, arms flailing.

“You have a keen sense of the obvious, Henry. Nothing gets by you.”

“Fuck you, Jaks. Why would you do that?”

“I had my reasons.”

In a tortured voice, at the breaking point of tears, he asked, “What reasons could you have had to destroy his violin? You had no right to do that. None! Mom said it was mine if I wanted it, and I wanted it. I’m the musician. She said that was Grandpop Sol’s wishes.”

“Well, she was wrong. As usual. She had absolutely no clue what he wanted. Never did. But it really doesn’t matter, does it? It’s now a pile of hot, smoking ash. Get over it, Henry, before you have a heart attack. Grandpop didn’t want you to have it.”

“How do you know that?”

It was 1972, and I was serving on one of the Navy’s newest nuclear-powered, Fast Attack submarines based at Pearl Harbor. The morning after we pulled in from an arduous two-month mission, I was notified that my grandfather had passed away the day before, and that the funeral was the next day. The Captain granted me five days of emergency leave.

The Navy sprang for the round-trip tickets to Philly and back to Pearl. I was cutting it close.

The flight seemingly lasted forever. I shaved, and changed into my uniform before the plane landed in Philadelphia at seven a.m. It was seven-thirty before I got out of baggage claim. The funeral was at nine-thirty. The trip to Riverton would take at least an hour and a half—and that was on a good day, with Philly traffic.

My father picked me up at the airport, and we drove straight to the funeral home in Riverton. We were there by nine-fifteen. At the funeral home, I gave my mother and brother the minimal amount of attention mandated by the occasion. That's all they deserved.

After the graveside services, everyone headed to my Aunt Dolores' house for the obligatory feast. I decided to ride with my father.

“Do you want me to drop you off at Aunt Dolores'?” he asked.

“No, Pop. I really don't want to spend any more time with Mom and Henry than I absolutely have to.”

“I get that, Jaks. Look... I know there's no love lost between you and your mother, but her father just died. Maybe you could cut her some slack just this one day. And Henry is still your brother.”

“Yeah, and he and Mom didn't give a shit about Grandpop Sol, anymore than Grandpop gave a shit about them. This is all bullshit, Pop. It's just a show for them. Fucking theater.”

My father went quiet. His lips were pressed tightly together. He did not look pleased at my comment. After all, this was his wife and eldest son I was dressing down.

“I’m sorry, Pop. I was out of line.”

He sighed and said, “I was hoping, for just this one time, Jaks, that all of you could put this bad blood aside. I’m not saying you have to be best friends with them, just be... ”

“Be what?” I interrupted. “A good son and brother? Mom and Henry had their chance for the last twenty-two years, and they blew it. To them, I don’t exist, and never did. I’m still ‘the other one.’ I’m not part of their exclusive clique. If it weren’t for you, most people would have thought I was an orphan. Those two belong with each other. I want nothing to do with them.”

My father had an uncanny ability to pivot out of an uncomfortable or confrontational discussion. He said, “Well, I’m sure your aunt and cousins would like to see you. It’s been almost two years since you’ve been home. And there’s a shit-load of food there. I’m sure you’re starving.”

“I’ll see them later, after everyone leaves. And I ate on the plane.”

“So where *do* you want to go?”

“Home. I’m only here for another day and a half. I’ll use my old room, if that’s okay with you.”

My father shook his head out of frustration. “For Christ’s sake, Jaks, you don’t have to ask,” he said. “You know you’re always welcomed. It’s your home, whenever you’re in town. Your mother figured you would probably stay at the house, so she booked a room at the same hotel where Henry is staying. They’ll be out of your sight, and out of your way.”

I asked with some trepidation, “You and Mom are still together. Right?”

My father glanced at me crossed-eyed. “Of course we are. Why the hell would you even ask that?”

“Because she’s staying at a hotel.”

“Yeah... Because the house turns into a war zone when the two of you are together. I went through that for the better part of eighteen years, Jaks.” He briefly looked at me then, turned his attention back to the road. He said, in almost an apologetic tone, “Don’t get me wrong, Son. I love it when your home, but I kind of have gotten used to the peace and quiet.”

“So, whose idea was it for her to stay at the hotel?”

“It was mutual,” he said looking straight ahead.

I changed the subject. “Are you going to Aunt Dolores’?”

“No. I was recently promoted to second shift supervisor at the main post office. I need to go home, change and get to work.” He lit a cigarette, laughed, and then said, “Truth be told, Jaks, I’d rather be at work. I’m actually happy that Henry lives in Florida, and that both of them will be at the hotel.”

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, comprised of neatly-kept brick and stone rowhomes, in the northeast part of our city. Everyone on the block knew everyone else’s business but pretended they didn’t. My parents could have afforded to move to a more spacious house in my aunt’s neighborhood but, with my brother and I no longer living at home, there was no reason to do so.

My father and I walked up the three concrete steps to the small porch. A black wrought-iron railing adorned the front of the porch, then wrapped around and separated their house from their neighbors on both sides.

I stopped as we entered the living room. Other than a new sofa and TV, nothing had changed. And I don't mean in just the past two years; I mean like in the past dozen years. I could smell my father's Lucky Strike cigarettes, and the morning's freshly perked coffee.

There was another prevailing odor. "What's that burnt smell, Pop?"

"Oh, that. Your mother badly burnt her toast this morning. Do me a favor, Jaks, and open the back door to air out the house. I didn't think the smell would linger in here that long."

"Amazing," I said.

"What is?"

"Mom owns a successful women's dress and apparel store, and she can't even make toast."

"As we all know, cooking has never been your mother's strong suit. But that's not why I married her."

Then why did you? I wanted to ask. But that was not a question I really wanted an answer to, at least not then.

My heart stopped for a moment after what I saw next. I asked my father, "Why is Grandpop Sol's violin on the sofa?"

"Your mother told Henry to go to your grandfather's house and see if there was anything he wanted. I suppose the violin appealed to him. I better get moving, Jaks, or

I'm going to be late. Relax. I won't be long." He hurried up the steps to the second floor of our three-story home.

I sat next to the violin. The leather had dulled and was cracked. Some of it was peeling away. As I gently stroked the top of the case, I felt myself slipping back in time to when I was twelve, and in my grandfather's house.

My grandfather lived four blocks from us, in a rowhome similar to ours. It might as well have been a thousand miles away for as often as he visited my mother.

He didn't spend that much more time with my aunt, but he was at least cordial to her when he did. The same could not be said for him and my mother. On the other hand, he admired and respected my father. My grandfather had made it known, on more than one occasion, that he would have preferred to have my father as a son, than my mother as his daughter.

He could have afforded a mansion for all the money he made as the preeminent bookie in our city. I once asked why he lived so modestly. His response, in his distinctive Russian accent, was illuminating: "Fancy homes and cars draw attention, which *I* don't want, but they really don't add to your status. They're there for your own ego. Hopefully, Jaks, you'll learn that you don't have to show everyone, what they already know about you."

He never conducted his business from his home. There was one specific wooden picnic table—and a card table inside the playground rec building—which he claimed by his decree, for that purpose. My grandfather and his 'associates' were the only ones allowed to use them.

His home furnishings were modest but of good quality, and he kept the house meticulously clean and orderly. There were the smells of typical Russian dishes which always made me salivate: borscht, Solyanka—a thick, spicy and sour soup—and cabbage rolls. Of course there was the ever-present bottle of vodka. Mingled in with these tantalizing smells was the exotic aroma of Turkish and Russian tobaccos. My grandfather rolled his own cigarettes. He always professed American cigarettes were inferior and bourgeois.

The cooking and cleaning was done by a Ukrainian lady friend of his, whose company he had kept for as long as I knew him. Otherwise, he lived alone, and had since he became a widower some thirty-five years prior.

My grandfather would always have dinner at his house. On this one particular late-summer day, I stopped in to inform him that I had completed my daily errands. That was the euphemism he used for me running my allotment of numbers and betting slips. I was twelve, and had been working for him since I was ten.

He had not yet eaten the dinner his lady friend had prepared for him. Instead, he was sitting in his favorite leather chair, lovingly rubbing linseed oil on his violin. I sat in silence—mesmerized by his ritual: Apply a light coat; light a hand-rolled cigarette; take a few healthy drags; drink a shot of vodka; carefully buff the violin with an old, white, cotton t-shirt; repeat.

After several rounds, I said, “I didn’t know you had a violin, Grandpop.”

He responded curtly, “There are many things you do not know about me Jackson.”

“How long have you had it?”

“Many decades before you were born.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s mine.”

“Do you know how to play?”

Exasperated, he responded, “NYET!” He took a drag on his cigarette, and a shot of vodka. Then he said, “You ask too many questions, Jaks. Sometimes that’s a good thing. Other times it is not. This is one of those other times. If you want to watch, then please watch in silence.” In the same breath he said, “You’re more than welcome to stay for dinner.”

“Thanks, Grandpop, but perhaps I should go. This doesn’t look like a good time to be with you. Besides, I’m sure Pop has dinner ready for me.” I stood to leave.

He saw the hurt look on my face and said, “You should be thankful your mother isn’t cooking. I know I am. It would greatly sadden me to lose my favorite grandson to food poisoning.” He paused for a moment, and then said, “I’m sorry I shouted at you, Jaks. You’re a good boy, even if, at times, you ask too many questions. Please stay for dinner. I always enjoy your company. I’ll call your father and explain. Okay?”

“Okay, Grandpop. I would like that. Your food smells great. May I have some vodka with dinner?”

“Perhaps a few drops in your water?”

My smile was my answer.

“Before we eat, I’ll answer some of your questions about the violin.”

“You don’t have to, Grandpop.”

He shot back, “I know I don’t have to, Jaks. The only thing I have to do is die. Everything else I do is by choice. But I *want* to answer your questions.”

My grandfather leaned back into his chair and rolled another cigarette. He lit it, took a deep drag and exhaled. As he started telling his story, I noticed he was looking in my direction, but past me—into a void. I turned around, but there was no one there.

“I left Czarist Russia in 1916 as a young man, a few years older than you are now, and made my way to England. World War I had started about two years earlier. As a condition to stay in their country, I had to join the British army. I survived two years in the trenches, until the end of the war.

“The Russian Revolution had commenced about a year before the war ended. After I was discharged, the Brits wanted to deport me because they were afraid I might have become a Bolshevik sympathizer. Nothing was further from the truth. I didn’t want any more part of those thugs than I did with that murderous Czar. I was having none of that. So I used what little money I had to buy passage on a freighter to America. I changed my last name from Boardinsky to Jackson. But everyone knew I was Russian because of my accent. I had to enter this country illegally, because the Americans didn’t want Russians anymore than the Brits did. I’m not proud of that, Jaks. I did what I had to do.

“On my way over, I heard one of the other passengers—a young man, about my age, from Latvia—play his violin. He was no virtuoso, but he could make his violin sing for joy, or weep in utter despair—the full range of human emotion. He offered to teach me to play, but I knew at that time in my life I didn’t have the discipline to learn. So I politely refused.

“As fate would have it, we both entered into a poker game. I, as the other men at the table, was more experienced and worldly than the young Latvian. With no more money to bet, he put his violin into the pot. We did our best to convince him not to do so, and to just leave the game. But he insisted. I won the hand, and his violin.

“After the game, I offered to give it back to him, free of charge. He refused saying it would dishonor him and his family.” My grandfather took a shot of vodka and lowered his head. With his head still bowed, he said, “None of us saw the young Latvian again.”

I didn’t ask the obvious. As young as I was, even I figured out what had happened.

My grandfather laid the white t-shirt in the bottom of the violin case. Then, ever so gently, he placed the violin on it, wrapped the t-shirt around it as if it were a burial shroud, closed the case, and locked the latches. He rubbed his hands back and forth over the top of the case.

Perhaps he was wishing he had learned to play it. Perhaps he was just remembering the young man from Latvia. Or perhaps he was thinking about all the aspirations he had as a young man, which had turned into apparitions, and vanished into the ether like so much smoke from the end of his cigarette—which, too, had its own life expectancy.

My grandfather came out of his trance, and said, “I need you to promise me you will take this violin, at my death, and keep it until the day you die. I do not want Henry or your mother to get it. They do not deserve the honor.”

“But what if they get a hold of it before I do?”

“Then promise me you will find some way to rescue it, and burn it! I would rather it be destroyed than for either of them to dishonor the memory of the young Latvian.” He then asked, in Russian, if I understood and would promise, “Ty ponimayesh' i obeshchayesh'.”

I responded in kind, “Ya ponimayu i obeshchayu.”

“You are a good boy, Jackson. Thank you. I know I can count on you.” He went to the kitchen, brought back another shot glass, poured the vodka into both, and handed me one of them. “You wanted vodka, you will have vodka. Let’s toast to the memory of the young Latvian, and our agreement. Touch your glass to mine, say, ‘Za zdorovje,’ and drink the shot in one gulp.”

In unison we said, “Za zdorovje,” and downed our vodka. I started coughing and gagging; I could barely catch my breath. Laughing, my grandfather said, “It takes some getting used to, Jaks.” The smile then evaporated from his face. He said, “Swallowing bitter memories, however, is something you will never get used to. But the vodka helps to wash them down.”

My grandfather stood, and said, “Now, let’s have that delicious dinner my lady friend prepared. She gets very insulted and nasty if any of her meal goes to waste!”

I snapped back to reality and opened the case to find the violin wrapped in the oil-stained, white t-shirt. Pulling back the shroud, I admired the violin. It looked the same as when I had seen it a decade earlier. Hearing my father’s footsteps coming down the steps, I quickly closed and locked the case.

“Are you ready?” he asked

“For what?”

“To take me to work.”

“Well, if I take you to work, how will you get home?”

“One of the guys can bring me home. You’ll need the car to get around.”

“But how will Mom get home? I really don’t want to pick up her or Henry.”

“We’re doing well enough that your mother now has her own car. And your brother rented a car for his use. You’re in the clear. Now... Can we go before I’m late?”

“Sure, Pop. Whatever you want. Thank you.”

Later, as soon as I returned home, I immediately went to the basement and spotted an old galvanized wash tub. I brought it upstairs, found the lighter fluid my father used to fill his WWII-era Zippo lighter, and grabbed the violin. Then, I took the tub outside to my parent’s backyard, placed the violin—case and all—into it, and doused the violin with lighter fluid. I lit a cigarette, took a few drags on it to make sure the tip was glowing red, said, “Ya ponimayu i obeshchayu,” stepped back a few feet, and tossed my cigarette into the tub. The violin exploded. A bright, orange fireball rose majestically against a cloudless sky. It was a sight to behold. Some neighbors witnessed the event, but paid no mind.

Ten minutes later my brother came home to retrieve the violin. He said he smelled the smoke and thought there was a kitchen fire. That’s when he saw me standing in the backyard over the tub, and our conversation ensued.

“How do I know that?” I answered. “Grandpop told me it was mine ten years ago. He also said he would rather see it burned than for you to get your filthy hands on it.

Grandpop made me promise, and I kept that promise.”

“If you would have asked, asshole, I would have given it to you.”

“That’s bullshit, Henry, and you know it. Mom wanted you to have it, and you *always* do what Mom wants. Always have, and always will. You’re her bitch. Now, no one gets it. Case closed. Discussion over. “Sdelannyye obeshchaniya, sderzhannyye obeshchaniya.”

“What does that mean?”

“Promises made, promised kept. It’s Russian.”

“Whatever, Jaks. This isn’t the end of this discussion. The shit is going to hit the fan when Mom hears about this.”

“And I don’t give a rat’s ass, Henry. Tell the President, for all I care. Nothing left of it anyway except ashes. It’s a moot point, brother.”

“I want nothing to do with you, Jaks, ever again.”

“Then it’s just more of the same. Safe travels, Henry.”

“Fuck you, Jaks.” Henry stormed into the house and left.

To this day, I swear that between the popping and hissing of the burning wood of the violin, I heard it cry—not out of pain, but mourning the loss of its owners.

I also swear I heard my grandfather thank me for keeping my promise.

“You’re welcome, Grandpop Sol. You’re welcome.”

THE END