

# The Violinist

by  
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It all started before the fire.

For months, the man had kicked his spouse awake during the same recurring nightmare. In the dream, he arrives at Times Square in Manhattan on the Number 2 train he had boarded at Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn. The man is the first violinist and founding member of the respected Arch String Quartet. He maintains a blossoming parallel career as a soloist and chamber musician. The violinist is at the top of his game. His instrument: a 1735 Guarneri *del Gesù* violin, on long-term loan from the Gothamburg Family Trust for the Arts, New York City. *The Strad* magazine judged his violin *the* premier example of the Golden Age of Cremonese violin-making. The Gothamburg Family Trust insured the violin for eight million dollars.

In the nightmare, it is morning rush hour. The man is wearing a suit and carrying his violin case. He changes to the 42nd Street Shuttle to Grand Central Station; but when he arrives at the end of the Shuttle tunnel, there are no stairwells, only a gaping hole in the floor thirty feet above the Lexington Avenue IRT tracks. There is an express train in the station. Wherever he looks, he sees shattered walls, twisted girders, broken concrete. On the other side of a pile of rubble, he sees a column of people, six-deep, walking in lock-step. Their movement doesn't resemble the typical helter-skelter of New York commuters. There is a mechanized purpose in their march.

Standing in the wreckage-strewn subway concourse, the man hesitates. Should he join the ranks of these automatons? He notices brown paper bags over their heads. Their other accouterments are typical of urban commuters — backpacks, folded newspapers, books, cell phones, purses, water bottles, shoulder bags, rolling luggage, umbrellas. With military precision, this band of sojourners ascends a steep temporary wooden ramp. Their footsteps raise a fine white dust.

*Ah, the dust must be why they are wearing paper bags on their heads. It's also why they are marching in step: they can't see. That's it. They can't see where they're going. They're blind mice.*

In the dream, he pulls a white handkerchief from his suit jacket and ties it over his mouth and nose. He hears a droning sound. It's them: the marchers are humming. Their paper bags give a kazoo quality to their combinations. There is no melody, only monotone buzz—maddening in its banal sameness.

No one in the moving line notices the wrecked station or the catastrophic structural failure. Oblivious to their surroundings, they ignore the collapsed walls and piles of rubble, marching on. They're blasé, thick-skinned New Yorkers, inured to inconvenience.

*Maybe some authority has forced them to don the paper bags? Is it to prevent the marchers from seeing the carnage?*

Then it hits him: fear, nausea, panic. There is no place to run. No escape. His heartbeat becomes arrhythmic, his mouth dry, throat parched, clothing foul with fear sweat. He clutches the violin case close to his body; he watches the phalanx of travelers. If he can find an exit, he'll grab a cab or an Uber to his 10 o'clock rehearsal at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It's already 9:30. Hemmed in by boxcar-size holes and surrounded by towering heaps of debris, he has little choice but to join the line mounting the temporary ramp.

In the dream, there is no signage. The man doesn't know where the ramp leads. Then, without warning, a large chunk of concrete falls from a broken ledge and strikes the young woman walking alongside him. The woman stumbles, grabs his arm. A length of rebar protruding from the block pierces her head. She utters a short scream and falls silent. Her collapse wrenches the violin from his arm, and the sharp edge of the concrete slices open his violin case. His irreplaceable Guarneri is now prey to the mayhem and dirt of the ramp. Torn between assisting the woman and attending to his damaged case, he hesitates. Before he can act, a girl in a school uniform (blue blazer, plaid pleated skirt) kneels beside the fallen woman. The school girl closes the woman's legs and straightens her skirt. With a gentle brush of her hand, the girl closes the dead woman's eyes. She stands to look for help when two men in hazmat suits jog toward the dead woman. They pour a green liquid on her: within seconds she dissolves into a puddle of emerald mucilaginous goop. A hazmat man jams the woman's clothing into her torn paper bag. They leave it where the woman died.

The violinist now works his way to the side of the moving tide to inspect the *del Gesù*. Meanwhile, at the site of the accident, the marching crowd is trampling his music to Beethoven's *Archduke* Trio and Dvorak's *Dumky* Trio. Impatient to retrieve his scores, the man dashes to the middle of the ramp. On hands and knees, he gathers up the scuffed sheets, suffering kicks and knees jabs from the buzzing army. When he returns to where he left his violin, he spots it up the ramp. When he recovers his case, it is empty. His treasured instrument, gone.

*Where the hell is it?*

His panic increases as he scans the scene for his instrument. No one is holding a violin. His mind stops working. He can't remember his previous actions. Did he put the *del Gesù* in the case, or did he leave it on the piano in his practice studio? And where is the bow? His violin must have fallen from the case when the woman grabbed his arm during her fatal fall. No, that can't be it! He remembers seeing it unharmed in its damaged case. Turning, he forces his way down the ramp, pushing his way against the eyeless army. He spots the bag with the dead woman's clothing, but there is no violin, only his damaged bow and splayed horsehairs.

*Christ!*

A despair so dark envelopes him, his heart stops. He lurches in the bed, shuddering. His wife shakes him.

"Another nightmare? You're screaming! Get a hold of yourself, will you? Really, this is just too much."

"It was the worst dream yet. A subway crowd trampled my violin and bow."

"My god, you've soaked your pajamas."

"And my heart is pounding."

"You drink too goddamn much. That's why you have these crazy night terrors. You're dehydrated from all the alcohol."

He didn't answer. He drank because his marriage was in shambles and he sensed a decline in his love for music. No longer the jovial virtuoso and amiable leader of a world-class string quartet, he had become a neurotic paranoid. Exhausted by a demanding schedule and the sacred responsibility of caring for an irreplaceable violin, he was losing control.

"Was it the Grand Central dream again?" his wife asked, punching her pillow and rolling on her side.

"Yes. I was on a ramp in Grand Central. The ceiling had collapsed. A chunk of falling concrete ripped my violin from my arms, and the people trampled my 283-year-old treasure."

"It's the same nightmare. You and that goddamn violin. Just get rid of it, will you? It's an albatross. Return the damn thing."

"I can't. I love that violin more than anything."

"Thanks. So, what am I, chopped liver? *Listen to me*: For your sanity, return it. It's killing you!"

"But it's an honor to play such an instrument. Fritz Kreisler, the famous violinist, owned it and played it. I love playing that violin. And the sound ... the sound is *nonpareil*."

He threw the bedding aside, ripped off his wet pajamas, staggered into the kitchen, found a bottle of Scotch in the liquor cabinet and took a long pull. In his music room, he put the Guarneri under his chin and played through the last movement of Giuseppe Tartini's *Devil's Trill* Sonata. Eyes closed, his body moved with the music. Performing naked felt right, felt primordial. What an instrument! What a feeling! The violin sang for him. Drawing the bow over the strings was a thrill. Sexual, sensual ... exquisite.

When he returned to bed, his wife feigned sleep.

"Drinking won't help," she scolded, her pillow muffling her voice.

He tried to calm his troubled mind. The man hated upsetting his wife. After a tortured hour of restlessness, sleep arrived. Dreams of carnage were not his wish, but he re-joined the subway nightmare.

In this sequence of the dream, the man hopes that at the end of the ramp he will arrive in the main concourse of Grand Central Station. From there, he knows where to exit and grab a cab.

Instead, he stares down a shattered wall, thirty feet above the IRT tracks. Commuters stand on the platform, unaware of anything strange. A train arrives, there is the usual chaotic exchange of passengers. Then the announcements: *Step all the way into the car*. Followed by: *Watch the closing doors*. After many tries, the conductor closes all the train doors, and the train leaves the station. The IRT Woodlawn Express train is running.

*If I could find a way to that platform, those trains will take me close to the Metropolitan Museum for my rehearsal. But how in hell do I get to the platform?*

A fireman with a light on his helmet and armed with a bullhorn orders people out of the area.

"But I must catch an uptown train."

"No, mister! You must leave, now! Get booking. Move!"

"Why?"

"Look, man, youse gotta get outta here now! This area ain't safe. Falling concrete killed a woman, and a piece of the ceiling fell and broke a man's violin."

"But my violin is right here, sir."

"Oh, yeah? Look in your case, fella. And, say, is this your music? We found these loose sheets." He handed the violinist torn and soiled copies of the Beethoven and Dvorak. The man opened his case: No violin, no bow, no music.

"Stop it!" shouted his wife, shaking him. "You're screaming in your sleep. Wake up! You're losing it!"

Again, perspiration spritzed from his flesh, soaking the sheets on his side of the bed.

"I was back in the nightmare at Grand Central. My violin's broken and the bow's missing."

"I'll make you some Chamomile tea. It will calm you. Christ, you've got to get over this."

"I'm drenched."

"Let me draw you a bath and make tea."

"Fuck that hippy-dippy shit."

"Well, your whiskey sure as hell didn't work. I heard you take the bottle from the liquor cabinet."

"For chrissakes, shut up about the drinking. It's my only comfort these days."

"I'm only trying to help. Look, it's three in the morning. You can sleep for four hours. Should I draw you a bath and make tea?"

"No, I'll take a shower and then have your New Age concoction."

"Good. I'll put on the kettle. God Almighty, I'm up-to-here with this nightly drama. I'm so sleep deprived I can't concentrate on my writing. I'm missing deadlines, losing income."

He didn't know which was worse: His nightmares about losing a priceless violin, or the upset he caused his wife.

When sleep came, he dreamed of playing the evening's concert with no bow, his thoughts controlling a ghostly stick which performed with a clarity no real violinist could match.

"Sweetheart," he heard his wife say, shaking him, "Wake up! Someone is knocking on the front door."

"What time is it?"

"5:30."

"Who the hell is knocking our door at 5:30 in the morning!"

Then he heard the smoke alarm in the outside hallway.

"Shit! Get dressed," he ordered. "We gotta get outta here fast. There's a fire in the building."

"But shouldn't you see who it is?"

"There's a fire somewhere in the building. Get dressed. Find the cat, put him in the cat carrier. Get your coat. *Mach schnell!*"

He pulled on jeans, shoes, a flannel shirt.

"All right already, I'm coming!" he shouted.

When he opened the door, three firefighters were standing in the elevator foyer with long pry bars. On the wall behind them a red light flashed in counterpoint with the one second beep of the fire alarm — Flash, beep; flash, beep; flash, beep.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. There's a fire two floors above you. You don't have to leave your apartment. It's a small fire. Should be out in a few minutes.

"What?"

"How many people live in this apartment?"

"Me, my wife and our cat, Kidd Stretch."

"Who lives across the hall?"

"A deaf grandmother. She lives alone, but she often babysits her grandchildren."

"What about the other two apartments on this floor?"

"Two guys live next door. They're on vacation in Bermuda. The woman in the other apartment is a night ER surgeon at Maimonides Medical Center. She works six to six."

"We order you to stay in your apartment. Stuff wet towels around the doors. Keep all doors closed, even inside ones. DO NOT LOCK YOUR OUTSIDE DOORS."

He watched a burly fireman force the door across the hall with his thick pry bar, bending the metal door frame and warping the door until it snapped open. In the doorway, the man saw two young boys in Pooh Bear pajamas staring up at the fireman.

"Where is your grandmother?" asked the fireman.

"She's sleeping. Are we on fire?"

One fireman volunteered to wake up the grandmother.

"You boys get dressed," said another fireman. "Hurry."

The lead firefighter turned to the man, "Sir, be a hero. Take these children and their grandmother into your apartment until it's safe. If the fire makes its way down here, their broken door will not protect them."

*Didn't this clown realize his men just broke grandma's door? Christ, as if having nightmares about underground catastrophes wasn't bad enough, now I'm saddled with the care of two kids and their deaf grandma. Goddamit! All I want is to take the del Gesù out of this burning building.*

"Well, okay, sure. My wife and I will take them, but it can't be safe to stay here. Why can't one of your men just lead us down to the street, away from the building? We watched people die on 9/11 because they followed firemen's orders and stayed in the building until it was too late to escape."

"Look, this building ain't the Twin Towers, mister. It's pre-war. These old timers can withstand hours of burning flames."

"Yeah, right. We've heard that before."

"Believe it. Don't argue with me. Do what I'm tellin' ya."

When the firefighters left, the two children sat watching cartoons on the television. Grandma and the man's wife prepared hot cereal.

"This is crazy," raved the man. "I'm not staying here. You people can, but I won't. We're only on the fifth floor. How long can it take to descend five flights of stairs? I'm leaving."

"Sweetheart, don't. You heard what the fireman said."

"And from that window, right here in our apartment, did you and I not watch two thousand people die on 9/11 *because they stayed put* just like the fire department told them?"

"But the fireman claims our building won't collapse. Remember two years ago? A tornado hit the building, it swayed, but not one window broke."

"Well, I wasn't here, you were. Look, I'm not going down in history as the man who lost a 1735 Guarneri *del Gesù* violin in a fire because he followed a fireman's orders. We can escape down the stairs; the fire is on the seventh floor, two floors above us."

"But what if smoke traps you in the stairwell, and you lose the violin? How will history treat you then?"

"You're not thinking right. Smoke *rises*. We *all* gotta leave, now!"

"No, honey, we're staying here, just like the fireman said."

"Well, I'm outta here. I'll see you when those geniuses put out the fire."

He grabbed his overcoat, put the Guarneri in its case, filled a satchel with music, snatched the bottle of Scotch, and left the apartment by the kitchen door. The stairwell was smoke-free and empty. When he arrived at the lobby, residents and firefighters were arguing. The firemen were telling skeptical residents it was a small fire and to return to their apartments. He shook his head in disbelief, left the building, walked around the corner and sat on a nearby park bench. Blue-red flames shot from the rear of the building on the seventh floor. That unit was undergoing renovation, who knew what chemicals were in the apartment.

This was no kitchen grease fire. There was potential for a catastrophic high-rise conflagration. If the antiquated gas lines broke or leaked, it was curtains for the building and the poor residents who listened to the firefighters. He counted a half-dozen fire trucks and four ambulances parked near and around the building. The sirens and horns of more equipment approaching added to the cacophony of the car and truck horns at the blocked intersections. Some smart battalion chief must have called for more equipment.

Then, a massive explosion. Bricks, glass, and furnishings flew out the rear of the building. The blast knocked him to the ground. A piece of flying glass sliced his violin case. His hands and face were bleeding from minor cuts. Dazed and disoriented he opened the damaged case with shaky hands. The violin was intact. The lesser of his two bows suffered minor damage.

"Fucking lucky. God damn fucking lucky," he mumbled. "Thank God, the *del Gesù* still lives."

He closed the case as best he could, wrapped it in his overcoat. His nightmares were coming true. *Why me? Is this violin cursed? Am I cursed?* He broke down and wept.

When the smoke and dust settled, he lifted his tear-streaked face and saw that the blast had blown out the rear wall from the fourth floor to the tenth floor. The man saw fires burning in all the exposed apartments. The fire could now spread to the penthouse on the seventeenth floor. Fearful for his wife and neighbors, he circled the burning building, stepping over fire hoses and squeezing between emergency vehicles. Then, to his horror, he saw his wife, the grandmother,

and the two children leaning out the window, screaming and waving towels. Flames menaced them from behind. A ladder truck maneuvered to rescue them. The firefighter at the top of the ladder reached for one of the boys.

Then, a second explosion. Bricks and window glass rained down on the street. The blast threw the two firefighters on the extended ladder to the sidewalk. His wife had the leg of the small boy the firefighter almost rescued. When the smoke and debris cleared, his wife, the grandmother, and the two boys were no longer at the window.

And his cat, Stretch? Was he gone, too? Did the cat carrier save him?

The blaze burned for 12 hours and the building smoldered for a week. Final tally: 1 building destroyed, 65 injured, 60 families homeless, and 14 dead, including three firefighters. The second explosion resulted when bombs and bomb-making materials ignited on the sixth floor, directly above the man's apartment.

Numbed with grief, the violinist buried his wife and cat in their family plot in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. Sorrow and depression clung to him like a wet sheet. The *Requiem Aeternam* became a thin *sul tasto* earworm.

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After the fire came the stories. The violinist was the hero who saved a priceless instrument. He was the coward who left his wife, two small children, and their grandmother to die in a high-rise fire. The New York tabloids kept the story on the front page for a week. In a televised interview on NY1 news, he mentioned the tragedy of 9/11 as the reason he didn't follow the fireman's orders. He told the police and the press that his wife refused to leave the apartment. No one listened. *Cowardly Fiddler Saves Instrument. Wife and Children Die in Blaze.* (As if they were his children!) This became the clarion call of the yellow press. Whacko conspiracy theorists tweeted that he was a co-conspirator with the bomb-maker who lived above him on the sixth floor.

His career ruined, the bereft widower returned the Guarneri to the Gothamburg Family Trust for the Arts. He disbanded the Arch String Quartet and canceled what few engagements organizers hadn't already canceled due to social media pressure. But the nightmares continued. Conspiracy rumors persisted. President Trump tweeted: *The violinist is a terrorist conspirator. Bad. Very bad.*

Therapy didn't work. For lodgings, the violinist rented a cheap SRO off 125 Street in Harlem, around the corner from the Apollo Theater. He lived on raw fruit, vegetables, and cans of soup. He lost 40 pounds. Real sleep was elusive. When overwhelmed by fatigue, he catnapped, often sleeping with eyes wide open. To avoid dreaming, he walked the night streets, ignoring weather and threats to his life. His face changed from fleshy to the chiseled, sunken-eyed mien of a theatrical Mephistopheles.

Then, two years after the fire, *The New York Times* for Friday, October 9, 2020, ran the following obituary:

### **Viktor Rachmann, Violin Virtuoso**

One victim of last month's horrific terrorist attack on Grand Central Terminal was the famous virtuoso Viktor Rachmann, 47, first violinist and founder of the esteemed Arch String Quartet. He achieved a mixed celebrity in 2018 when he saved a priceless 1735 Guarneri *del Gesù* violin from destruction in a tragic fire in his apartment building. Among the many fatalities in that blaze was his wife, Adele Bauer, a frequent contributor to this newspaper.

Family survivors are two brothers: Dr. David Rachmann and Dr. Yehudi Rachmann. Dr. Yehudi Rachmann, a psychiatrist, disclosed that mental health interventions did not cure Viktor's serial bouts of depression and PTSD. His brother David said, "He never recovered from having to return the 1735 Guarneri *del Gesù* violin he had on long-term loan from the Gothamburg Family Trust for the Arts. Losing his wife and beloved cat, Kidd Stretch, coupled with the social media attacks on his character, made him an eccentric recluse. But Viktor never lost his passion for the violin."

Victor Rachmann found a measure of solace as a regular busker on the subway transfer concourse in Grand Central Terminal and near the Hans Christen Anderson statue in Central Park. He had a large following for his flamboyant performances and had earned the sobriquet, The Subway Paganini. Dressed in white tie and tails, he performed the most demanding violin repertory with aplomb. His electrifying performances inspired dozens of young children to study the violin. He donated his busker earnings to the Musicians Foundation, a charity for distressed musicians. Rescuers say when they found Viktor Rachmann's body this week, it was sheltering a carbon fiber violin. The \$165 price tag from a pawn shop in Manhattan's Chinatown still stuck to the belly of the instrument. Despite debilitating personal sorrow, his love for the violin and its repertoire never faltered. For music lovers and urban historians, Viktor Rachmann, the Subway Paganini, will live forever as a New York legend.

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