Fennel Haynsworth had been born nearly blind in one eye. Held by the wire that rested on his nose, his left lens was thicker than the right, making him look slightly googly. But both got foggy when he took a bath. And he bathed often, lest his red Irish hair became greasy. Apart from his extraordinary features--one startling blue eye, the deepest of freckles, the squarest of jaws--he could read sheet music. He was the kind of boy whom passersby would slow for, just to watch his bottom lip curl.

When he was born the nurses all knew, from the grey in that eye, how it would be. “Shame if he can’t see his own delicious reflection,” they said a few times over. So his mother, a pianist and gardener and wonderful cook and reader of Longfellow, called him Fennel. In her deep lovely voice she’d so nicely passed to him, she would recite before tucking him into bed:

“…Above the lower plant it towers,
The Fennel with its yellow flowers;
And in an earlier age than ours
Was gifted with the wondrous powers
Lost vision to restore…”¹

She pleased him. And he pleased her. In their little Franco-Irish American town, where newspaper boys whistled and bakers hummed, the Haynsworths pleased many. In their little Franco-Irish American town many people were particularly pleased when Fennel Haynsworth played the violin. So you can imagine how disquieted their little Franco-Irish American town was when Fennel Haynsworth quit the school orchestra.

“But you’re first chair!” his mother said.
“I’m the only chair.”
“There is no such thing as an orchestra without a violin!”
“I also thought there was no such thing as an Orchestra who didn’t play music. I don’t want to violin. I want to fiddle.”
“That’s ridiculous, Fen!”
“Then I quit.”

For a few days, the debate raged. To his mother, his teachers, his friends, his orchestra-mates, his music instructor, Fennel declared his choice. How the town buzzed!

“Aren’t they the same? A violin and a fiddle?”
“Since when does the orchestra not play music?”
“What are we playing, then?”
“What’s the difference between a fiddle and a violin?”
“The Orchestra plays…”
“He’s the only violin!”
“How will we do Vivaldi?”
“We don’t do Vivaldi!”
“We don’t even tune!”
“It’s really not that bad.”
“So, we’re missing a few sections; so what?”
“Does he even have a fiddle?”
“So we don’t play that well; so what?”

¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Goblet of Life*, Lines 21-25
“Will they still charge the same for tickets?”
“Did the orchestra charge?”
“I really liked that violiner kid”

One old man with an Irish accent addressed him. “Son, a violin and a fiddle are the same bloody thing. Hasn’t anyone ever told ye that?” To this Fennel responded, “But a violinist and a fiddler are not.” And that was that. He cleaned the violin, white with rosin, and put it away.

Within a few days, his mother was a mess. Twice she’d omitted baking soda from the Irish soda bread. She would weep and insist on throwing it out, but Fennel would happily eat it. On the piano, she began playing entire concertos over the weekends in minor keys. She left half of the flowers un-watered, and her once-prized herb garden was eaten by rabbits. But Fennel was happy. If he wasn’t found at school, or dozing in the shade in the backyard with a half-eaten apple in his hand, he was reading quietly inside or listening to an old record and humming. Once she walked into his room to find him peacefully smiling and drawing. It drove her mad.

“Don’t you care at all?” Her voice was shrill.
“About what?”
“What do you mean ‘about what,’ your violin, that’s what! Your fiddle! Whatever you want to call it?” She was shaking.

“Oh, that.” This was not pseudo-insouciance, but genuine indifference. He was absorbed in his drawing, and “that” was simply some crumb he had been reminded was at the corner of his lip.

“JUST ‘THAT’? ‘That’ is all it gets? You spent years learning! You loved it! Everyone loved it! Everyone loved you! And you dropped it! Just like THAT! It’s gone!” She was in hysterics.

“Still do love it. Were you wondering what I want to drink for dinner? Because I want milk.”

She burst into tears and slammed his door shut. His milk was a little warm.

One afternoon, the music instructor Mr. Jacques Montaigne Auclair, often occupied informing the orchestra of his Franco-American heritage and his grandmother’s crepes, dropped by with Jim, the tuba boy, and the girl who played the harp. Mrs. Haynsworth, with bags under her eyes, and hair frizzles building up around her ears, answered the door with an anxious face and smiled. Eyes and all. She spoke excitedly, with relief, and said “He’s upstairs! I’ll call him. FENNEL!” She twisted her wrists and rubbed her knuckles nervously as she glanced from peaceful boy, descending the stairs, to hopeful trio, and back to peaceful boy. “Tea, anyone? Tea? C-cake? Anyone, c-cake?”

“Ye—” Jim started.
“No thank you!” piped the harp girl.
“Oh, no then” Jim looked at his feet.
“Fennel?”
“No, Mom. Thanks.”
“Well if you won’t have any, Fennel, go get your violin from next to the piano.”
“Why?”
“Well, it’s Mr. Auclair. Go get your violin.”
“You don’t know tha—”
“The school is putting on a show of Peter Pan, Fennel. We’ve been requested to provide the music accompaniment, if we can. Recently we’ve cancelled all our concerts. Without a violin we…” Jacques Montaigne Auclair trailed off.
“We need you back, is what this is.” Jim had always liked Fennel. They both wore glasses.

“Will you come?” The girl who played the harp had very green eyes. And when she opened them wide and slightly parted her lips, they could be very persuasive.

“I don’t know where it is.” Fennel reached for the banister and moved one foot towards the stairs.

“Where what is? WHAT? Your violin?” Mrs. Haynsworth moved quickly into the living room, circled the piano and could be heard in the hall. “IT’S GONE!” She scurried back to them. “WHERE IS IT? FENNEL! Oh, Fen, your violin!”

“Don’t know where it is. Looked for it yesterday. Wasn’t by the piano.” He shrugged. Mrs. Haynsworth’s eyes grew large. She put her hands over her face and sat down on the stairs.

“Who else has been here?” asked Jim. He had always been very sensible.

“No one! No one at all!” she cried. The party was silent.

“Aren’t you upset?” the harp girl asked Fennel. A tint of doubt colored the question, and they all looked at him, his left eye a little bigger, his red hair a little greasy, his freckles beautiful.

“Very.” he said.

“Oh,” she replied, looking at the rug, embarrassed.

“Why, someone must have stolen it. It’s the only violin in town.” Mr. Jacques Montaigne Auclair was always very sure of himself. Mrs. Haynsworth looked up, mortified, and wailed.

“OH GOD!”

Thus did a profound cloud of despondency settle over the musicless village. The newspaper boy stopped his whistling, the baker his humming. The once beautiful French and Irish accents of the eldest of the town dissolved to coarse grumbles and irritating whines. The dramatic and melancholy concertos of Mrs. Haynsworth’s piano were not enough to satisfy the little town’s musical appetite. And so, all were miserable and tired, and wanted to know, where was “that nice violiner boy named after the plant?” But Fennel was happy.

After a few weary weeks had past, the sun lifted one morning to find the sky clear, the cloud lifted. That morning the newspaper boy whistled, the baker hummed. Over night, a mysterious shine had leaked through. And each night it came again. And each night the town awaited its arrival, speaking of it, not a word.

Somewhere between midnight and quarter past sunrise, the noise would begin. Slowly and softly, it would skip through the town, making its way from corner to corner, down street after street. Endlessly and playfully it bounced, so jolly and light. So nimbly it tiptoed through dosing doorways and tickled the ears of the townspeople. Permeating the air, it would linger in their hums for days. In the crisp night, music and moonlight flooded the darkness. One moon beam reached down to dance with the sound. A passerby would have slowed to watch the light bounce off curling red hair, a curling red lip, curling red fingers, and a curling red fiddle, until they all slowly melted into the darkness.