

Shadow Jamboree

by Lola Lariscy

Alexander walked through the front doors of the elementary school. He glanced around, wondering which students he might meet and which ones he'll probably only see in hallways. He had no choice but to notice the large backpack slipping off the edge of an extremely small girl. The bag was winning—slipping farther and farther to her side. It was threatening to pull her down with it, leaving her sprawled on the floor like a teeny turtle in a gigantic shell.

He started toward her, but just then her two friends righted her. In the moment they lifted her, Alexander saw a grand ballerina being lifted into a leap. He smiled. Maybe her parents would put her in dancing school to help her with balance.

The principal's office was directly across the large hallway from the entrance. *Less opportunity for a student's pleas of innocence to echo down the hallway,* he thought...less

time for angry parents' cries of "Not my child! My child is an angel!" to ring down throughout the school.

He went through the double glass doors, heading toward the tall counter. He identified the proprietor of the reception area by the circle of dark curly hair jutting up from behind the rows of pamphlets and placards. He peered around the placards, intent on finding the face beneath the hair. The face peered back. More accurately, the face glared back.

Why did so many people seem so discontent? He'd had the same experience at the motor vehicles department. The hostility had been as tangible as spit on a hot highway. Like the man had shot laser darts with his eyes. Alexander understood why he didn't want to be there; no one wants to go to the DMV. He didn't understand why the man taking his picture had been so aggressively unhappy. At least he'd been getting paid.

He looked at the receptionist. He searched for any gleam as to who she really was. He got nothing. Perhaps, despite her glare, she was exactly where the universe had intended.

He took the band room keys and made his way through the school and to the auxiliary station out back. Throughout the school, as he swept his gaze across the hallways, he saw astronauts, artists, chemists and even a few more dancers.

His optimism deflated once confronted with the state of the band room. He couldn't say he was surprised. He was told when he

took the job that the band had lost its leader. Apparently it had been for a very long time. The staff collected the trash and swept, but it wasn't their responsibility to compile the disenfranchised sheets of music thrown haphazardly across tables and chairs. That had apparently been no one's responsibility.

He was glad he'd gotten there early. He spent the hour before class tidying up.

Fifteen minutes before class, Alexander noticed the first student lurking in the doorway, half turned toward the outside, ready to bolt if compelled.

He probably would have stayed there if a passing bird's "cacaw" hadn't gotten the teacher's attention. The bird startled the student too, and his books went flying--some out to the grassy field surrounding the auxiliary hall and some to his feet. Alexander could judge by his face as he approached that the books had caused some amount of distress.

The teacher helped the student to the nearest chair. The student, seemingly holding the burden of a thousand years, slumped in the chair. Alexander hastily called the nurse, and then went back to the student, still sliding down the chair.

"What's your name?" Alexander asked.

The student was sniffing, thereby rendering it difficult to speak. When he finally did croak out a reply, it was a

phlegmy, garbled "Nicholas." It sounded more like "Nickels" when filtered through the boy's tears.

The nurse got there about the same time as the other students. While she was checking the boy, Alexander looked over at the string section and realized why Nicholas had been ashamed. The boy had left his instrument underneath his seat. Luckily no one had noticed it there, or had been enticed enough to take it.

Once everyone was seated, Alexander introduced himself. He wanted to see how far they had come along, so he asked them to pull out their instruments and begin tuning.

He glanced over at Nicholas. The nurse had pronounced him unhurt and left the boy sheepishly retrieving the neglected violin.

Judging from the sounds eking out across the room, all of the instruments were neglected. He couldn't blame the children. From what he'd gathered, the only adult guidance they'd received was from the temporary music teachers who had come in once a week to go over the sheet music. Alexander doubted that half the students knew how to read music.

He realized that what he partially mistook for bad tuning was Nicholas still crying. He went over to the boy and asked him what was wrong.

"I can't do this. I've been trying for weeks. Even whining cats sound better than this."

Alexander had not owned any cats. However, he had seen them on TV and heard them in alley ways outside of apartments. He realized it would be unprofessional and discouraging for him to agree, so instead he smiled. He took the child's instrument and demonstrated the correct posture for holding the violin and the correct manner in which to hold the bow and neck. He gave the instrument back to Nicholas and nodded to try again.

As the still-strained, but better-formed notes drifted from the wooden box, the teacher got the student's attention and pointed toward the empty wall opposite them. The students' shadows were just visible at the bottom of the wall. They were hunched over, and indistinguishable from each other.

Something strange began to happen. As Nicholas stared at his portion of the shadow wall, his shadow got taller, better-defined. The shadow was of a young man, not a boy, more assuredly gripping the neck of the violin. As the whole class leaned closer to the wall, they could all hear that the music was better toward the shadow. Leaning back toward Nicholas, the children heard screechy piercings of sound clawing their way out of the instrument.

By this time the students—all but Nicholas—had migrated toward the shadow wall. Alexander ushered them back to their seats.

Nicholas stopped playing and looked up at the teacher, amazed.

"Anything's possible, Nicholas. Keep practicing and that will be you. Please don't leave your instrument in the classroom. I'm not sure we have another to loan you."

The other students gaped at the teacher. He went over to a young girl in the flute section. She attempted to play, but only air blustered out of the instrument.

Once again, the teacher looked at the empty wall. The shadow of the girl rose above the rest, standing. The notes coming from the shadow flute flowed as elegantly as the shadow dress the young woman wore. As the song ended, faint clapping could be heard from the shadow audience.

The young girl looked at Alexander with gratitude, amazement and happiness. Alexander recognized that look. It's why he had become a teacher.

He made his way over to another boy, this one in the horn section. He didn't get the same sense from the student. The boy looked up at him and shrugged his shoulders. He began belting away at the horn. The sound was devastatingly bad.

The children looked over at the wall, but the shadows didn't change.

The boy stopped playing. He looked up at the teacher, helpless and heartbroken.

"You like to draw, don't you?" Alexander asked the boy.

The boy's face lit up. Suddenly he was animated, enlivened. He spoke so quickly that no one could hope to keep up. The class caught bits about art class, perspective, shading.

The teacher smiled at the student. "I'll speak to the guidance counselor about getting you into an advanced art class. That's where you belong. That's where you'll thrive."

Alexander went through the class, showing each student his or her possible future. He told a few children they'd be better suited in the science lab, the library, or on a theatre stage. He didn't render any surprises; they all already knew. All they needed was for someone to tell them; to show them.

The children filed out after stuffing their music pages in their instrument cases. Alexander was left with a clean, uncluttered band room.

Well, almost uncluttered. He still heard drum beats from the wall. He looked over. He was a little dismayed at what he saw and heard, but he wasn't surprised. Shadows still jumped up randomly on the wall: the saxophonist, the trombone player, the floutist.

The harsh, heavy beats of "Doctorin' the Tardis" blared out of the corner. Alexander swore he heard the famous refrain ("Hey!") resonate around the room. He sat down. The headache was coming on.

As if to soothe him, the sweet violin started. It was matched and eventually overtaken by a second violin, coaxing and prodding the first into a Celtic duel. A trumpet popped up, merrily blasting the Dixieland classic version of "When the Saints Go Marching In".

"Be quiet," he implored the wall. "I can't afford to lose this job, too, if you're caught having a jamboree." He got up and opened the door. "Go. Go be with the children. That's where you belong. My future is already here."

The sounds ceased and the shadows abruptly disappeared. Well, all except one. The one in the far corner was much larger than the others had been. It was of a full grown man--older to the point of being hunched over. Despite the compromised posture, the shadow still held the conductor's wand like a master. The music was silent, but Alexander had a good idea what was playing for the maestro.



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