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The Clockwork Three

Written by

Matthew Kirby

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1. The Green Violin

When Giuseppe found the green violin, he did not think it would help him escape. He did not think it would play at all when he spotted it floating in the harbour. It bobbed and bumped around beneath the pier, still in its case, and a satisfied seagull perched on it. Giuseppe shooed the bird away and fished the case out of the water with a long pole. Inside it, he found the most beautiful, most remarkable violin he had ever seen. The varnished wood rippled deeper than green, like river water. And the instrument was dry, the velvet lining only a little damp around the edges.

A toothless old woman hovered nearby. She smacked her lips and craned her neck to see what Giuseppe had found, but he closed the case and latched it before she could get a look. He pushed through the other scavengers gathered on the wharf, and his boots beat the pier boards like a drum.

Moments later, they clicked on wet cobblestones as he sprinted from the shipyards.

He had risked time scrounging the docks because the streets had been generous that day. He had played his old fiddle all morning up at the corner of Dorset Street on the square, and before the sun had even set he had one dollar and twenty-five cents in his pocket for Stephano. He was playing when the first rumours began to flutter around the city like scraps of newspaper. A fine ship loaded with cargo from France had wrecked in that terrible storm the previous night, and the waves had flung the flotsam up and down the New England bay. Giuseppe counted and recounted his money all day, and when he thought he had earned enough, he raced down to comb the beaches and the docks for storm-tossed treasure. He had worried that all the good stuff would be gone.

But now here he was, clutching this green violin, by all appearances an extraordinary instrument and far nicer than the one he usually played. He slipped through the streets, darting between pedestrians and horses and carriages like a sparrow. He found a deserted alleyway and crouched down behind a sour-smelling crate of spoiled cabbages.

There, he felt safe enough to lift the green violin from its case. It was mirror-smooth in his hand, yet soft to the touch. He noticed its delicate inlay, and a scroll

carved in the shape of a flower blossom at the head. It truly was a magnificent instrument, but even then, Giuseppe did not think it would help him escape.

He had to pass a few hours yet before he could return to Stephano's lair on Crosby Street. He thought he might as well try to make a few more pennies. The extra money might earn him another crust of bread for supper. Giuseppe took his new violin to one of his favourite corners a few blocks off Gilbert Square, near the Old Rock Church. But before he had even begun to play, one of the older boys sauntered up to him.

"Shove off, runt," the boy said. He smiled, but it was a dirty smile that called nothing but nasty thoughts to mind. "This is my spot."

"I was here, Paolo. I staked it."

The older boy set his hand organ down on the ground and stood up to his full height. He was still smiling. "Boy, you're just dumb, aren't you? Got no sense of survival."

Giuseppe raised his voice. "This is my corner. I was here."

Paolo walked over to a stack of bricks piled against a shabby wall. He picked one up and tossed it back and forth between his hands. "I said, shove off."

The two boys glared at each other. Men and women walked around them, and some strolled right between them as if they were not even there. Giuseppe might have been able to take Paolo if he had Alfeo or stout

little Ferro with him. But he was alone and outmatched. He backed away.

"Hang on, what you got there?" Paolo pointed at the violin case.

"Nothing."

"Give it here."

"No."

Paolo cocked his arm back, hefting the brick. "I said give it!"

"No!" Giuseppe ran.

Two paces away, the brick shot past his head, close enough to leave dust in his hair. Giuseppe did not miss a step. He did not slow down, even though he knew that Paolo would not follow him, not when he had that corner. Not so close to nightfall when every single busker out there played for those last few cents before heading back to their padrones. Some nights it was near dawn before Giuseppe had enough money and nerve to head in.

He jogged around and checked a few more corners, all taken. He saw some boys that were littler than him, and he could have driven them off if he wanted to, but he had done that before and he was always ashamed and mad at himself afterwards. Gaslights sputtered and hissed up and down the streets as he ran.

He finally settled on a rotten corner at Basket Street and the Old Fort Road, down near the tenements where traffic was slow and poor. But Stephano never

came down there to spy on them, so at least it was a chance to try out his new instrument. He tossed his hat on the ground to catch the coins, and raised the violin to his chin. He drew the bow over the strings.

And he stopped.

The clear sound that spilled out of the green violin resonated off the walls. It seemed to penetrate the alleyways and soar up the rickety wooden staircases clinging to the outsides of the buildings. It cut through the street noise, the clopping hooves, the shouts, the factory machinery grinding away around the city. It slid through all of that like a slender hand parting a curtain.

The pavement traffic around him had paused midstride. That time of day it was mostly men on their way home, greasy from work. Giuseppe looked in their sooty eyes, and they looked in his, waiting.

He swallowed and chose one of his favourite songs. Many years ago he had heard a woman humming it through an open window as he passed by one of the city's hospitals. The tune made him think of the grassy hills and tree-lined roads back home in Italy. He laid the bow on the strings and played.

As he fiddled that song on the green violin, he felt a new sensation. He played the music. It came from inside him. But once it left his hands through the violin it was as if it turned around and came back to him as something different from what he sent out. The song

acquired the autonomy of a living thing. Giuseppe watched the invisible tune light on each passerby like a cherry blossom carried on a breeze. The tired bodies, stooped and trod upon, rose up. Their eyes, rimmed with dirt and yellow from smoke, filled with tears.

The copper and silver coins flashed in Giuseppe's hat. When he finished, the passersby applauded. Applause for him! Applause because of his new violin.

As the audience broke up and moved on, he counted the money: thirty-three cents over two dollars, and not in small coins. Most of it was dimes and quarter-dollars. Giuseppe had never made that much in a day. None of Stephano's boys had.

And that was when Giuseppe first started to believe the violin could help him escape, something he had always thought impossible.

He looked at the coins all worn smooth by countless hands, warm from people's pockets, and the idea came to him of how he might escape. He felt tears coming, and he pulled his sleeve over his fist to scrub them out.

Giuseppe wondered how much it would cost to buy a boat ticket from America back to Italy. How much would it cost to see his brother and sister again? Whatever the price, it seemed to be reachable now, when it never had before. He had just made two dollars and thirty-three cents on a single ditty. He

would play a thousand just like it if it meant he could go home. He did not know how he would hide the green violin or the money from Stephano, but Giuseppe decided he had to try.

He put the violin back in its case, so much more careful with it now. Some of the onlookers still milled around, perhaps hoping for another song. Giuseppe bowed his head to them and headed up the street.

He kept off the main thoroughfares to avoid being seen by any of the other boys. Paolo had noticed the violin, but he was all bluster and lies, and Stephano knew it. Giuseppe could handle Paolo. But it would be a lot worse for him if someone like Ezio saw him, someone that Stephano trusted.

Giuseppe cut through the back ways and climbed a few low walls and soon arrived at the Old Rock Church. He checked the corner to make sure Paolo was gone before diving into the dark churchyard. He loved how quiet this place had become since they finished the new cathedral on the square. No one came here any more.

Tonight, the church lights were on and Reverend Grey would be inside, but Giuseppe did not want him to know what he was about to do. Over the last few years the older man had befriended him, even though Giuseppe had never even been inside the chapel. Giuseppe never felt afraid here.

There were monuments and carved crosses and

urns and obelisks. Some of the tombstones were etched with the profiled likenesses of the great men buried underneath them, men who had at one time, long past, been important to the city. Giuseppe sometimes talked to them like they were his friends. But in one corner, next to a rosebush, a watchful angel spread its wings over the little tomb of a child. The angel had been carved in the likeness of a young girl, with long hair and a beautiful face, both soft and sad.

Giuseppe walked up to it and whispered, "Hello, Marietta."

Giuseppe did not remember much of his home back in Italy. It was all bits and pieces. He remembered his mother and father, and how one day they were there, and the next day they were gone.

He remembered the funeral in the church full of black veils. He remembered his uncle's smelly cottage, and the man that came jangling a bag of money. He remembered his brother screaming, and his uncle smacking him around, and the man yanking on Giuseppe's arm to pull him away. Giuseppe had gone with him, and the last thing he remembered before the boat and the ocean was his sister, Marietta, crying in the middle of the road.

This statue, the sad angel, reminded him so much of her.

"I'm coming home soon," he said.

Near the angel was another crypt. It belonged to the

body and memory of a man named Phineas Stroop, and it had a cracked flagstone on its backside. One day Giuseppe had pulled on that fragment out of curiosity. When it came free, exposing the black insides of the tomb, he gasped and covered his mouth and put the piece right back where it belonged.

No one would think to look in there for a violin.

Giuseppe counted out enough coin to satisfy Stephano for the night, one dollar and ten cents. He grabbed the cold rock with his fingers, begged the pardon of the ghost of Mister Stroop, and held his breath. He pulled the chunk out, and the opening was the deepest, darkest thing he had ever seen. He pinched his eyes shut and set the money and violin inside.

"Now, Mister Stroop." Giuseppe replaced the flagstone. "I've trusted you with something very important. It's going to help me earn enough money to go home and find my brother and sister. So it's important that no one steals it. You understand?"

The stone always understood.

"Good," said Giuseppe. "Don't tell Reverend Grey, either."

He left the churchyard and strolled down the street, as nonchalant as he could manage. His secret thrilled him, but it scared him, too. He did not want to think about what Stephano would do if he ever found out. It would mean the rat cellar for sure, but

for how long? Three days? Four? Giuseppe shuddered. The longest he had ever spent down there was one night.

Several blocks later, he rounded on Crosby Street and shrank to the side of the road. The lamps here drizzled a greenish glow, almost a haze, as if this forsaken part of the city were sickly and frail. At this time of night, bigger boys could be lurking in the shadows. They had jumped Giuseppe before and stolen his money. Sometimes a few of the younger boys waited to band together before going in, but no one had stuck around tonight. Giuseppe reached down a storm drain and pulled out a length of heavy pipe he kept hidden there.

Padrones were not the only criminals taking refuge here. Crosby Street crawled like a warren with pickpockets, streetwalkers and murderers. They skulked in doorways or gathered in loud, drunken mobs outside the alehouses and gambling halls. Garbage and debris massed and reeked in the street. Empty and broken barrels had been stacked at regular intervals up and down the quarter like defensive barriers. Giuseppe had once overheard a policeman whisper in fear that he would rather take to the open seas in a leaky rowboat during a northern gale than set one foot down Crosby Street.

But the vicious men and brazen women here did not really frighten Giuseppe. Every scoundrel here

knew that if they ever touched him or any of the other boys, they would have to answer to Stephano.

Giuseppe darted from one pile of garbage to the next, looking over his shoulder with every other breath. A stray mutt half-bald with mange crossed in front of him. Partway to Stephano's, he caught movement up ahead in an alley. Some careless boy had let an elbow slip into view. Giuseppe twisted his sweaty grip on the pipe. He crept closer and listened. He heard crying.

He peered around the corner. One of the newest little boys huddled with his knees tucked up, head down, arms wrapped around his shins. He shook with silent sobs.

Giuseppe stepped into view. "What's the matter?" The boy looked up, panicked as a cornered alley cat. "It's all right." Giuseppe sat down next to him. "I won't hurt you."

"*Tu sei Giuseppe?*" The boy sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve.

"Yeah. I'm Giuseppe. What's your name?"

"Pietro," he said, and started wailing. "*Che cosa farò?*"

"Shut up, kid." Giuseppe tried to put his hand over Pietro's mouth. "Be quiet. You want the older boys to hear you?"

Pietro fell silent and took a deep breath. "No."

"And talk English, will you?"

"For why?"

"'Cause Stephano will beat you if you don't, that's why."

"I no speak English good."

"You'll pick it up."

"You speak good. How long you here?"

Giuseppe counted back, something he usually tried not to do. "Stephano brought me over when I was five. I'm eleven now, so that makes six years."

"That is long."

"Yes, very long." Giuseppe stood. "You ready to go in? You can come with me."

Pietro stayed on the ground and shook his head.

Giuseppe rolled his eyes. "Look, I don't need this. Why won't you come with me?"

"I no have money."

"How much did you make?"

Pietro shied away from him.

"I'm not going to steal it," said Giuseppe. "I swear. How much?"

"Seventeen cents."

Giuseppe's stomach tightened. "That's all?"

Pietro nodded, head down.

Giuseppe tapped the pipe against his leg. This was bad. The kid would get a beating for sure, and a severe one. Stephano liked to break them early and hard. Giuseppe swore and dug into his pockets.

"Here." He pulled out some of his own money.

"Take this. It's seventy cents."

Pietro sagged with relief and looked like he was about to cry again.

Giuseppe scratched his head. "You still don't have much. You might not get supper, but trust me, that's better than the rat cellar."

Pietro closed his small fist around the money. "Thank you."

"Come on." Giuseppe put his arm around the boy and ushered him out of the alley. They trotted the last few yards to Stephano's building. Each story of the wooden structure leaned over further than the one below it, and its windows stared lightless and hollow into the street below. The exterior of splitting timber slats and flaking shingles appeared benign enough.

A couple of other boys approached the front door, and Giuseppe hung back. He and Pietro waited and watched. No one accosted the newcomers. They made it inside.

"Let's go," said Giuseppe. He still had forty cents. He had brought Stephano less than that before. He could take the punishment, or at least he hoped he could.

Pietro lifted the latch and opened the door. He slipped through and was gone. Giuseppe was about to follow when someone grabbed him from behind. His feet came off the ground, and his assailant dragged him into the street. The pipe flew from his hands.

"You make a lot today, Giuseppe?" The attacker threw him into an oily puddle. "Of course you did."

Giuseppe rolled over and looked up. Ezio towered over him, thin and as cruel as an icy night spent in the gutter. He held a nail-spiked club he had made from the heavy leg of a table. "Give me your money," he said.

"Not tonight, Ezio. I only have forty cents."

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

Ezio appeared confused. "You always bring in more than that." Then he flicked his eyes towards the front door after Pietro. "Oh, I see."

Giuseppe shook his head. "No."

"You know the rules. You can't give another boy your money."

"I didn't."

"Well, if you did, you deserve a whipping just for being stupid. But I think you're in for a painful night, anyway. Now hand over whatever you got left."

Giuseppe scanned the street. He had a clear escape, but running would do no good. Ezio would just wait for him. Stephano let the older boy stay out all night. Giuseppe glowered and pulled out the last of his coins. "Here." He held out his hand.

Ezio snatched the money. Then he grabbed Giuseppe and spun him around. He locked his arm around Giuseppe's neck, choking him, and burrowed

through all his pockets. When he found nothing, he slapped Giuseppe across the face and laughed. "Better go inside. Get it over with." He started to walk away, but then he turned back. "Paolo said you had something earlier. He said it looked like a violin."

"You mean this?" Giuseppe held up his well-worn instrument.

Ezio shook his head. "He said you had a new one."

"You deserve a whipping just for believing Paolo."

Ezio grinned. He set off down the street, prowling for the last few stragglers to come in.

Giuseppe hesitated in front of the building. He thought about the whip, the muddy ground in the rat cellar, the nibbling teeth and cold tails. He was tempted to go back to the churchyard for some money. He had enough hidden there.

But then he thought about home, of chasing his brother through the sheep pastures, and Giuseppe stayed where he was. If he let himself, he would use a little of that money every night, and soon it would be gone. He refused to let himself do that, or he would never earn enough for the boat ticket. It was enough that he had the green violin.

He went inside.