**"Don't play what's there, play what's not there."—Miles Davis (1926–91)**

**University of Chicago Supplement (1-2 Pages)**

I’ve always been pretty keen on musical instruments. I have a specific fondness for bluegrass, though, so throughout my life, I’ve been trying to acquire as many musical instruments as I can for as little money as I can. It’s a hobby. I “borrowed” a guitar from my uncle, I traded a set of legos for a harmonica at a spaghetti dinner for charity, and I inherited a banjo left behind in my philosophy teacher’s closet. I could never seem to acquire, however, a violin. And trust me, it was not for lack of trying.

My cousin Andrew had played violin for eighteen years. When he went off to college, he decided to leave his well-loved violin behind for bigger and better things. Like, you know, a viola or something. When I asked him if I could please use his violin while he was away at college, he informed me that my dear uncle wanted to keep the instrument as a keepsake, collecting dust in the back of his closet.

Sure, fine, I thought. I’ll get a violin from somewhere else. So I went to the orchestra conductor at my school. I asked him what his policy was on renting out instruments to students who aren’t in the orchestra. He said the policy did not allow for the striking of such bargains, but he would make an exception for me, if I could only wait a few weeks for all the students in the class to rent an instrument. Fair enough, I thought. But when I returned a month later, to my chagrin, every single violin had been rented out. Every single one. For the first time in years.

At this point, I was disheartened to say the least. It seemed like the gods of bluegrass were actively trying to keep me from busting out the wicked rendition of “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” that I knew I was destined to play. How was I supposed to beat the devil in a battle of wits for my soul without a fiddle to play? I knew the gods of bluegrass had plans for everyone, but I simply couldn’t see what they had in store for me. I felt betrayed and abandoned.

And sure enough, later that month, I was spending the night in Atlanta for a connecting flight, walking to the drugstore and minding my own business, when a man in a long coat and a Stetson hat jumped out of an alley and stood in front of me on the sidewalk. Engrossed in my game of Candy Crush, I neatly sidestepped the man and kept walking, only to see him appear before me again. He whipped off his Stetson, and poking out of his dark curls were two horns. He gestured with his left hand, and a gleaming red pitchfork shot up from the earth. It was the devil. Of course. I always have the worst luck.

So Satan starts yelling at me, asking for my soul and whatever, and all I can think is, “The bluegrass gods knew. They knew this whole time!”

So there I am, nothing to challenge the devil to a duel with, and he keeps waving his arms and shrieking in some ancient tongue, and it’s getting really awkward, and other people on the streets are looking over at us, and I’m thinking maybe I should just give the devil my soul so that he’ll shut the heck up, when I have a burst of an idea.

“I’ll give you my soul, devil, if and only if you can play the fiddle better than me.”

He grins, and I can’t help but notice that his teeth are very white. Really, impeccable dental hygiene. “I’ll gladly accept your offer. And if you prevail, a golden violin I will lay at your feet. Allow me to begin.”

The devil waves his hand, and in a shimmer of glitter, his pitchfork has transformed into a beautiful, mahogany violin. He lifts it to his chin, and in another flick of the wrist, a bow is poised over the strings. And he starts playing Bach’s Chaconne from Partita in d minor, and I’m getting really impressed now because his claws are holding the strings just perfectly, and if I’m being perfectly honest, I’m getting pretty nervous at this point, because I really like my soul, but I play it cool until he finishes.

He lowers his bow dramatically and bows his head to the deafening applause of the bystanders that have now crowded around us. Finally, he raises his chin to me, and I know it is my turn.

Slowly, I get into position. I’m just starting to get focused, when I hear the devil bark a laugh. “Where is your fiddle, mortal? Do you forfeit already?”

I look Satan dead in the eyes and say, “When you’re as good as me, you don’t need a fiddle to play.”

I move my right arm sluggishly at first, moving the bow that isn’t there, as my left fingers glide across the implied strings. The song I imagine starts carefully, cautiously. And I’m pretty self-conscious, and everyone is looking really confused because, you know, I’m just standing there moving my arms in silence with no actual violin. But then something happens. The song I’m spinning in my head, it grows. It grows in intensity and complexity, surpassing what is known, what can ever be known until my right arm is moving the “bow” so fast my elbow is a blur and my left fingers are flying across the “strings” and beads of sweat are dripping down my “forehead” and I can feel my arm start to cramp, but I can’t stop because the song has taken me, and it soars out of my fingertips to a climax of what can only be described as divinely inspired. Then steadily, it recedes, like a wave recedes into the ocean, until the song concludes, and my arms drop to my sides. There is a moment of silence. And I mean, it’s different than the silence of the past five minutes of me not playing any actual music. This is an awed silence. I look at the devil, and his eyes convey, dare I say, fear? And with no warning, he explodes into a cloud of gold dust, leaving in his wake a golden violin.

I look at the violin on the sidewalk for a moment. Then I turn on my heel, and I walk away.

Since that night, I’ve become a world-renowned air-violinist, the first of its kind. People pay hundreds of dollars to see me perform. I’ve already won three Grammys and two Tonys because they can’t really decide what I’m doing. Still, I realize now the gods of bluegrass did have a plan for me after all. And that’s the story of how I destroyed Satan, and also how I learned to play what’s not there.