

THE TRUMPET'S REFRAIN

Tanya E. E. E. Schmid

Clay had tried all the seats in the hospital waiting room over the past three hours — the straight backs, the lounge chairs, the foot stools — all in cheerful pastel tones. None of them felt comfortable anymore. His wife, Edith, had fortunately stopped fidgeting about an hour ago and was now engrossed in an article about children's car seats. *How could she possibly see anything through those gray bangs hanging over her eyes*, he wondered. She'd had the same hairstyle for forty years, since high school. "When something suits you, you stick with it," she had told him once. He was glad for that.

A gust of wind rattled the waiting room window and stirred up a bit of snow outside. Just then, a flock of young men and women dressed in white (both doctors and nurses he figured – he couldn't tell anymore since women were more often doctors and men nurses these days) hurried down the hall towards them. But the gaggle whizzed right past the door he and Edith had

been staring at since two o'clock that afternoon. "These things take time," Edith had told him an hour ago, but now his eyes were looking for someone he could complain to.

Clay stood up with a grunt as his legs had fallen asleep again. When he did, a little fart escaped. Edith lifted her head from her magazine and gave him a look that said, *I warned you about the fried onions*. He hadn't paid much attention to the background music drifting through the hospital waiting room, but then he heard it: a muted trumpet solo was playing through the jazz piece. Clay fell into the nearest padded chair, leaned his head back and let the music pour over him.

He was twelve years old when he got his trumpet. Other kids at school had already started playing at age ten, but it took a while for his grandpa to get enough money together. His father never would have wasted money like that. His father, a tall, burly man with fists the size of cantaloupes, drove a snow-plow on the weekends and evenings after work at the Mobile station. He wouldn't even spend money on a hot lunch when he went out into the thick Wisconsin snowstorms, making do with lukewarm coffee from a thermos and a soon-frozen cheese sandwich that Clay's mother had made for him and wrapped in newspaper.

It was the best Christmas present of Clay's life, the large brown package that sat under the naked-looking Christmas tree. And it stayed the best right up to the birth of his son many years later. The black leather case with deep blue velvet lining made the golden trumpet flash like a grand prize. And because it came from Grandpa, his parents couldn't say no. Not like with football or the chess club. "Know your place, boy," his father had said. "Norwegians don't have time for such things. We work for a living."

After one such conversation, Clay broke a teacup he was drying while he helped his mother with the dishes. "Sorry, Ma, I didn't mean to," Clay told her as she gently took the pieces of her favorite cup from his hands. "I get so mad, the way he makes me keep my head down."

"Your father can't forget the times he was turned away from work on account of we're Norwegian," she said. "Not much older than you when he started out on his own."

"I know," said Clay. "With just a coffee can, changing the oil in people's cars along Main Street. But times are different now." He'd heard the stories about how his parents and other relatives were reminded to stick to their side of the street in the fifties. There had been so many boundaries back then. But with his trumpet, Clay felt he could really go places.

Clay spent every free minute after school working at his father's gas station filling tanks and repairing engines. Except when he was allowed to practice his trumpet. He practiced a lot. When he cleaned away the black oil from under his fingernails in preparation, the tough little brush and strong soap hurt a bit. His hands were rough, but that didn't affect his playing. His fingers had to be absolutely clean as he placed them carefully on the three valves.

In the beginning, nobody wanted to listen. The trumpet was loud and echoed shrilly through the half-empty rooms of their house. And woe if he played when his father was at home. But after a couple of years, he was so good that he was invited to play at a neighbor's outdoor cocktail party. He had seen a rare smile on his father's face that night.

As a sophomore he played second chair in their high school band. First chair belonged to Doug Lennox, a suave senior. At band concerts, Doug stood front stage in his alligator shoes and played all the solos, gallantly whisking his forelock to one side before raising the horn to his lips. But soon after Homecoming, Clay noticed that Doug was getting lazy with his practicing. The popular senior now preferred to drive his green Mustang convertible slowly past the Dairy Queen and Sorenson's bowling alley to show off his pretty girlfriend.

So, Clay challenged Doug. “Not something a Norwegian does,” his father said. Mr. Mitchell, the band director, gave them three days to learn a section of the William Tell Overture. Then each of them played the piece in front of all the band members. The band room was stuffy that day, without a single empty seat. The kids clapped a bit louder after Doug played his version, but when he lowered his trumpet, Clay already knew. Doug had made one mistake, and he had made none. The director took Clay, the younger, into his office first while the other band students enjoyed a moment of noisy freedom.

The dwarf-like man leaned back in his brown, threadbare office chair and said, “Clay, you and Doug both play real well. But Doug had one error and you played through without any.” Clay felt a sense of fullness that he rarely knew. “Still, I wanna ask you if you’ll let Doug play first trumpet till the end of the year, when he graduates. You can play the solos next year.”

Clay felt the ground fall away beneath him, and a yell build up inside, but he pinched his lips together. Although his voice shook, he managed to keep his tone low. “Mr. Mitchell, I practice more than Doug. I earned first chair fair and square.”

The band director pulled at his goatee as if giving Clay a chance to reconsider. Finally, he shook his head and said, “Okay then.” They rejoined the

band, and then Mr. Mitchell disappeared into his office with Doug. Clay felt a bit embarrassed when Mr. Mitchell emerged with a head-hanging Doug and told the band that Clay would now be playing first trumpet. But the disappointed groans from a few band members quickly disappeared from Clay's memory, and the more he practiced, the better he played. Soon the pats from fellow band-members — pats that once belonged to Doug — were landing on Clay's shoulder.

But when Clay himself was a senior, a Brazilian exchange student arrived at the school. Antonio was darkly handsome with a charming accent...and he played the trumpet. Although a year younger than Clay, he played difficult passages with ease. He had only been playing for three years, Clay found out, and in his music was something that Clay sensed but couldn't explain. Now when the band played, Clay listened to Antonio in the chair next to him. He even attempted to imitate his sound. There was a joy, a kind of freedom in it. Something that sang of rumbas and southern climes. "Definitely not Norwegian," his father would have said.

And then it happened. With the encouragement of several new friends, Antonio challenged Clay. Fortunately, Mr. Mitchell selected a technically dif-

difficult passage from a solo that Clay had already mastered. Clay played it perfectly in front of the band. But when the music came out of Antonio's trumpet, Clay got a sunken, hopeless feeling. That feeling you get when you lose your way in the woods. The kind of feeling that makes you want to run. The beauty of his opponent's rendition was visible on the faces of the other band members. And when the boy lowered his trumpet, there was a moment before the applause during which the whole room exhaled. Antonio went first into Mr. Mitchell's office. When it was Clay's turn, the director's words threw him.

The same worn-out office chair that looked like a lumpy potato sack squeaked as the band director leaned back in it. "You both play real well, Clay. Real well. But...Antonio's music has something special. He plays with heart and soul, I tell ya." Clay was ready to burst out with, "So do I!" but he knew what Mr. Mitchell had said was true. Antonio had something Clay longed for, dreamed of, felt was somewhere deep inside him, trying to get out. Something not so Norwegian, according to his father's definition. And Antonio managed to blow all that through his trumpet for everyone to hear.

Mr. Mitchell held up his hand before Clay could respond. "Antonio wants you to keep first chair." Oh, the look on the band director's face – Clay has remembered it to this day.

Next thing he knew, there he was standing at his fortieth high school reunion with Edith on his arm. That was earlier this year.

A month before the reunion, having sized up his bowling ball stomach and the tuft of scrub-brush remaining on his head, he had decided he didn't want to go. But, then again, he did marry Edith, one of the prettiest girls in high school; his son, Karl, had graduated from college; and when Clay's father had died five years ago, he had completely renovated the gas station. Now he had so many employees that he could take a day off on occasion. And he had finally been able to afford a trip to one of those little islands in the Caribbean where Edith and he had splashed along in flip-flops on a white, sandy beach.

What surprised him at the reunion was that none of that mattered. At the reunion he heard only one thing: "Oh! Our trumpet player! Man, could you play." Other faces had fallen into oblivion, but people still recognized him. Him and his trumpet.

"You played Taps at Senator Henderson's funeral," a shrunken man, whom Clay believed to be an old friend, commented.

"Yeah," answered Clay, and his chest grew warm, either from the wine or from the memory of standing in uniform, waiting for the three shots from the rifles, and then playing for all the television cameras.

“Do you still play?” asked a good-looking woman with long, silver hair. Her nametag had disappeared under her jacket.

“No, unfortunately. Too much to do, too little time. You know how it is.” No way to make money playing trumpet in northern Wisconsin. And he had had a family to feed.

“Thelma is collecting musical instruments for Haiti,” Edith chimed in. “It’s a shame your trumpet is just laying around in our attic gathering dust.” His wife pointed to a woman sitting at the next table, and Thelma gave him a candied smile of gold-capped teeth.

That’s what it’s doing, Clay thought. Gathering dust. But the suggestion hit him like a slap in the face, as if Edith had asked him to sell one of their kids. “I’ll think about it,” he said, and managed half a smile.

On the way home, Edith brought it up again. “I know how much you love that trumpet, but maybe this is your time to give back,” she said. “Remember when Antonio let you keep first chair?” She smiled and elbowed him. He let out a little grunt.

She wore him down in the end. Thelma Jacobsen sent him a home-made film of the school in Trou Sables, one of the poorer quarters in Haiti, where

his trumpet landed. He hadn't been able to bring himself to watch it until today, but this afternoon before they left for the hospital he had sat down alone in front of the television and popped it in the player.

The Haitian children's excitement was obvious as a few select kids received an instrument. He caught a glimpse of his trumpet as it was handed to a tall, thin boy. Clay's heart pounded. The boy immediately started to blow into the trumpet, but he barely managed to bring out a sound. *That's how it started for me*, Clay thought with a smile as he slid forward in his chair.

The film showed a young music instructor who practiced with the children again and again, and how they carefully cleaned and stored their instruments each time. His trumpet shone like pure gold, somehow more beautiful than the rest of the instruments. And the tall, thin boy seemed to notice this too.

As he watched the children's daily lessons, clear notes came out of his trumpet. Clay was amazed at how quickly the tall boy learned. "Well, they got nothin' else," he mumbled to himself. At the end, the children played a brief concert. Clay's eyes got all wet when he saw the boy walk up front to play a trumpet solo.

As the music sang from the golden trumpet, Clay's mouth opened wide, and he slapped the arm of the couch. The notes were simple, but the sound was that of the Brazilian! "You mean he sounds like that boy Antonio," Edith had corrected him when he had called her in to listen. "Sometimes you sound like your father," she had added, her face pinched.

But her words hadn't robbed him of his smile. Never before had such mel-low tones come from his own trumpet. The tall boy in the video closed his eyes and swayed softly back and forth as he played. An ache had grown in Clay's chest as he'd listened to the magic, and he could still feel it now as the sound of the jazz player drifted through the hospital waiting room.

Three hours ago, Edith had interrupted his rapture over the Haitian boy's music with, "Honey, Karl just called. They've been at the hospital since early this morning." Still under his trumpet's spell, Clay had leapt up and grabbed his coat. New magic was on the way.

Now, Karl finally emerged from the hospital's mystery door with an exhausted but happy look, like the time he had come home after chasing down his new puppy that had slipped out the gate. Karl led his parents from the waiting room through the halls and into the bright hospital room where Karl's wife, Cindy, was holding their newly born grandson.

“What’s his name?” asked Clay.

“Herbert, after your dad,” Cindy answered in a weak voice. Clay felt his lips press together.

“But we’re gonna call him Vern,” Karl added quickly. “His middle name’s LaVerne.”

Edith took the child in her arms, “Well, hello there little one!” and Clay saw the tears in her eyes.

He didn’t know what to say, so he put a firm hand on Karl’s shoulder and shook it just a bit. Their eyes met and they both smiled. Karl had always been close to Edith, not interested in the Mobile Oil station or Clay’s profession. Clay now realized he didn’t really know his son at all.

“Here, you take him,” said Edith, and passed Clay the scrunched up blue bundle with a pink face peeking out.

Clay felt a surge of panic, but the warmth of the child against his chest quieted it. Little Vern rested comfortably atop his grandpa’s belly. As Edith asked the kids about the birth, Clay turned to face the window with his light package.

“And when you get old enough,” he whispered in the button-sized ear, “I’m gonna buy you a trumpet. Or whatever you want.” At that moment Clay

felt something like Norwegian glaciers melting. Maybe his grandson would grow up without such tight boundaries. The little boy in his arms closed his eyes. So did Grandpa Clay. And as the winter sun shone through the hospital window and kissed them both, Clay's heart sang of rumbas and southern climes.

Tanya Elizabeth Egeness Epp Schmid was a Doctor of Oriental Medicine until 2014 when she started a permaculture farm. Her work has appeared in Sky Island Journal, Canary Literary Magazine, Poet's Choice Global Warming Anthology, Whistling Shade Literary Magazine, Flash Fiction Magazine, and others. Tanya was long-listed in Pulp Literature's 2021 Flash Fiction Contest. She is a teacher of Kyudo (Zen archery) and the author of "Tanya's Collection of Zen Stories" (2018). She grew up in Wisconsin and currently lives in Ascona, Switzerland. www.tanyaswriting.com