

Jim Meirose

Faith

I hear music from heaven. Everywhere I go, that is, outside. When I'm under the open sky it comes down on me—wondrously gorgeous violin music. They say they don't hear it. They say I'm insane. That's why I'm in this padded room in this straightjacket. They're afraid I'm going to hurt myself. Just because I fall to my knees in the street and tear my cheeks bloody when the music really grabs me—but if the music would just stop, I'd be okay. I try and tell them, let me go outside and see if the music is stopped, and if it is I will be okay. Then they'll be able to let me go—if I say I don't hear the music. But I can't just lie and say I don't hear it. When I hear it, it maddens me. It maddens me with thoughts of how it all might have been. How it all might have been for me, if he had only stayed.

Chris Taylor played the violin beautifully—beautifully enough that the owners of the Cluck-U Chicken fast food restaurant on Main Street across from the courthouse didn't mind him standing in front of their place and playing all day. The music drew people and at noon each day, the jurors from the courthouse would come out for lunch and be drawn by the music, and most would end up eating at the Cluck-U Chicken. Chris Taylor was good enough for business that they had a deal—he could eat lunch and breakfast at the Cluck-U Chicken for free, and the owner of the building let him stay free in a tiny apartment three stories above the spot where he stood playing all day. This arrangement stayed in place for months after Taylor had graduated from Julliard and moved down to Morgenstern, the county seat. Chris couldn't help but wonder what was next for him though. Surely this could not last forever. He sat at the counter in the Cluck-U Chicken at closing time, and, as was his habit, he picked at the wart on his left cheek as he spoke to Marvin, the owner of the place.

You know, Marvin, I wonder how long this can all last.

Well—it'll last as long as you keep pulling in the business. You know what?

What?

You're good enough to get a gig in one of those symphony orchestras—I bet they make good money.

Why don't you try to get a job in one of those symphony orchestras.

Marvin coughed up a large plug of phlegm and spat it into the garbage can as Chris answered, as he tapped his fingers on the counter and continued to pick at his face.

Maybe I will some day—but there's no real money in that. Plus it'd be boring. Playing all that music I've played a thousand times before, over and over night after night—no, there's got to be something better for me. I suppose I'm just waiting for an idea to hit me.

Marvin cleared the counter in front of Chris and wiped it with a red checkered rag.

Well—don't let it hit you too fast. You're young yet—and we got a good thing going.

I know.

So long Chris. Time to lock up.

Marvin.

Chris took his violin case under his arm and left the Cluck-U Chicken and went around to the tenant's entrance and carried it up the stairs to the third floor. He had a one-room apartment with a bed in one corner and a coffee maker and sink and microwave against the wall to the right and a card table in the dead center of the room littered with sheet music, all for the violin. Every week or so Chris would sit at the card table in the grey folding chair and learn a new piece for the violin, to play out front, so the locals wouldn't get bored. He didn't have to worry about the Jurors though—there was a new crowd of them every week so the music he played never really got stale. Chris watched the small portable television for about an hour after the Cluck-U Chicken closed and then turned out the light, undressed, and went to bed. The bed was luckily a comfortable one—and he was tired every night from having played all day so he appreciated it. The days went by this way until one night he heard a loud knocking interrupting his dream—and he tried to shake it off but it was insistent—he woke and sat up. Someone was knocking on his door, here in the middle of the night. He pulled on some pants and went to the door and opened it—and in the dimly lit hallway stood a man with long white hair and a snow white beard, dressed in a white robe of some sort, wearing sandals and having deep blue piercing eyes. Chris began to close the door in the man's face—what kind of weirdo was this roaming around knocking on doors in the middle of the night—but the man spoke first, extending a hand to shake.

Are you Chris Taylor, he said—the violinist?

His voice was deep and thick.

Well—yes I am, said Chris, shaking the man’s hand.

I’ve been looking for you. I thought you could help me. You just graduated from Julliard—at the top of your class in violin performance. I’ve been trying to track you down. May I come in?

Chris carefully looked the man up and down before answering.

Well—sure, said Chris, snapping on the light. Come in.

The man stepped in and the door closed behind him. Chris motioned for the man to sit down in one of the two grey folding chairs by the card table but the man pointed at Chris’ violin case.

Mind if I look at your violin? said the man.

Well—I suppose—

Great, said the man excitedly—I haven’t played in a month—lost my violin in a bet—I need to play one. Can I play yours?

Sure, said Chris, but the man was already snapping open the case and quickly he thrust the violin under his chin, made a flourish with the bow, and brought it down with some force on the violin—first, a huge chord that sounded like the instrument had a thousand strings instead of four—and from there, the man took off, with his eyes tightly closed, into a sweeping swooping melody that was like nothing Chris had ever heard before, and played with a technical brilliance that made Chris feel like an absolute beginner. Sheets of sound swept over the room—the playing transported Chris into a land of minarets and temples and palaces and rippling desert sands and great endless dunes and fleecy clouds sweeping across a bright blue summer sky—and the man played on and the music arched over them and Chris sat down on the bed transfixed—and then the man was done with a final majestic thousand-string chord and Chris felt drunk with the effect of the music and the bearded man stood there and brought the violin down from his chin and said three words.

How was that?

It was then Chris realized he had picked his wart bloody. He also realized that even though it had seemed like minutes, the man had been playing a whole half hour. He rose and rushed and got a paper towel and pressed it against his bloody face. He turned to the man.

That was—beautiful, he said, trying to control his trembling voice. Where did you learn to play like that?

Oh—I'm—self-taught. I saw that you had placed first in Julliard for violin performance, so I thought you might have some connections. I'm looking to make it in the violin world.

Well—I don't know if I have any connections—

As he spoke Chris wondered how this man had found his way down here in Morgenstern.

—how did you find me anyway?

There are ways to find people—

But no one knew I was coming here.

The man's eyes darkened.

There are many ways to know things. Now—have you got any connections?

No, but the way you play—people will find you. Hey listen—I play out front of the Cluck-U Chicken downstairs for donations and meals and this room. If I play good enough, the people come around, and end up buying chicken. How about you play out front here with me tomorrow?

The man's eyes widened.

A street performer? I never thought of myself as a street performer—

Hey listen, said Chris, slapping the man on the shoulder—the way you play. My bet is you won't be a street performer for long—

Chris brought the paper towel down from his cheek and looked into the blood.

—and I could manage this guy. This guy is my meal ticket—

—so what do you say? asked Chris. You game?

I suppose. But I was thinking more in terms of concert tours—

Oh, believe me—play like that out there, and concert tours will come! I'll see you out front in the morning, said Chris, rising. Here—I'll see you out.

He headed for the door but was stopped by the man's suddenly small voice.

I don't have a place to stay. I just got off the midnight train from New York—

Well—you need a place to sleep—morning will be here before you know it.

Where will I sleep? said the man, looking around.

Chris motioned to the bed.

The bed is, luckily, wide. Come on.

Chris pulled off his pants, switched off the light and fairly dove under the covers. The man lay down atop the blankets in his clothes on his side. Chris rolled on his side and tried to get comfortable but there seemed to be some eerie kind of warmth in the bed that he found unsettling. It must still be the effect of the music, he thought.

My God, what music.

At last as he finally began to doze off he realized he did not ask the man his name—oh well. In the morning.

That night, probably as a result of the warmth in the bed, he dreamed of endless fields of green grass baking to glass under a vicious sun. It was not a nightmare; he seemed oddly detached, merely an observer.

The next morning he rose earlier than usual and let the large long bearded white clad man sleep as he put on a pot of coffee. He had an English muffin and thought that would be what he would offer the man too. At last the man rose, stretched, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Good morning. How about an English muffin, said Chris.

Okay.

Say, said Chris as he sliced the English muffin. What is your name? I'm Chris Taylor—your playing carried me away so far last night that I never thought to ask your name.

My name is Ehyeh El Shaddai.

What nationality is that, said Chris idly, popping down the muffin.

Oh, it's—it's Hebrew, said the man.

How long have you been playing?

All my life. It just seems to come to me—I just think it and the fingers do the work.

Well, have this muffin—then we'll go down and get those fingers to work.

Before long, Chris was downstairs introducing Ehyeh to Martin, in the Cluck-U Chicken.

He's a friend of mine, said Chris. He plays violin too—but wait a minute, I just realized Ehyeh, you didn't bring a violin here with you—here, he said, holding out the violin—we'll take turns playing. Go on out—you go first.

All right, said Ehyeh, taking the violin and bow. He stepped out onto the sidewalk in the front, closed his eyes tight, raised the bow with a flourish, and began to play—he opened up with four great sweeping thousand-string chords followed by an intensely difficult double octaves passage which encompassed the entire tonal range of the violin; followed by far ranging melodies so fast that trying to see his fingers was like trying to see

the wings of a hovering hummingbird—pizzicato passages in octaves and sweeping sheets of sound filled the street—and the people began to gather. His music was like waves crashing on a beach in a hurricane—the music had the force of a tsunami—and he never broke a sweat, and he kept his eyes tightly closed, and for a full hour he continued to improvise. Finally a spiraling swooping passage in both harmonics and octaves crashed down to a final four thousand-string chords, and he opened his eyes, and he stood there. Martin stood in the door of the Cluck-U Chicken with his mouth hung open, and the crowd that now surrounded Ehyeh applauded wildly, and then filed into the Cluck-U Chicken past the open violin case which was quickly filling with paper money and coins.

Martin rushed in to serve the customers and Chris and Ehyeh stood on the sidewalk, still surrounded by people, all waiting to see what the old man would play next—and play he did, even more astonishingly brilliantly than before, now that he was warmed up; Chris melted into the crowd gazing at the money cascading into his violin case—he picked wildly at the wart on his cheek—once more, it was getting bloody and it was all—unbelievable.

That night at closing time a crowd was still gathered around the door of the Cluck-U Chicken, and Martin had to go out to tell them there would be no more music that day. Chris clutched his violin case bulging with money and Ehyeh stood leaning against the counter with the violin and bow tucked under his arm.

I swear, said Martin to Ehyeh—where did you learn to play like that.

It just sort of—came to me through the years.

Amazing, said Martin, as he let Ehyeh and Chris out and locked up the place and began walking to his car—an amazing day, he said to them—I never sold so much chicken.

Chris nodded and clutched the violin case as he spoke.

And I don't think I ever made this much—I mean we ever made this much money.

When they got upstairs, Chris counted the money as Ehyeh El Shaddai sat on the edge of the bed watching. When Chris was done counting, he turned to the old man, astonished.

There's six hundred dollars here, he said.

Ehyeh said nothing, just sat holding the violin and smiling.

The days went by. Each day was the same, with Ehyeh playing his heart out and the crowds gathering and the money pouring into the violin case. As the days went by, people began coming from miles around—there was gridlock and Chaos. More and more chicken was sold and more and more money was made.

Chris smiled, watching it all from the edge of the crowd, picking at his face.

—I could manage this guy. This guy is my meal ticket—

At last one night at closing time, the police came into the Cluck-U Chicken and walked up to Ehyeh, Chris, and Martin.

I'm afraid, said the policeman to Ehyeh, that I have a judge's order here for you to stop playing in front of this place.

He handed it to Ehyeh, but Chris took it and read it. He shook it at the policeman and said Why is this? Who's complaining about the music---it's just music—

It's not the music, said the policeman, waving his hat. It's the crowds. It's the gridlock. It's a menace to public safety. I'm sorry, but the music has to stop. That cease and desist order is signed by a judge. Good night to you!

With that the policemen left the Cluck-U Chicken and Chris was stunned.

What are we going to do now—

I know what you're going to do now, said a mustached man in loud loose clothes who had rushed in the door as the police had left. You're going to sign this contract, he said, waving a sheaf of papers in front of him. I'm Sy Safransky—you may have heard of me—I'm the biggest promoter in the Northeast. I want to sign—what's his name?

Ehyeh El Shaddai, said the old man. Pleased to meet you—

Ehyeh, said Sy—I want to sign you up for a six month cross country concert tour, where you'll make—well, go ahead and read it—fifty thousand dollars a performance.

Wait, said Chris, taking the papers from Sy. I'm his manager. I'll decide what he's worth.

Ehyeh's eyebrows rose and a twinkle crossed his eye as Martin stood behind the counter open-mouthed.

Fifty thousand is a lot, said Martin. How many performances?

Oh, said Sy—around a hundred.

My God, said Martin—what money that will add up to.

Oh, plenty—of course, I take my cut, said Sy. And, as his manager, you'll be taking yours, he said, nodding at Chris. What do you think?

I think it's great, said Ehyeh El Shaddai—don't you Chris?

Yes. What—what paperwork do we have to sign?

Sy Safransky took a step back.

Will you be here this time tomorrow night?

Sure will, said Chris.

I'll be here with the paperwork. We'll do the deal. Ok?

Sy pushed out his hand to shake. Chris shook it, as did Ehyeh.

I'll see you tomorrow night, he said, and he turned and left the Cluck-U Chicken.

I'm stunned, said Chris.

Martin just stood open-mouthed.

Well, said Ehyeh—we're worth it, me and you. You know I was kind of surprised to hear you say you're my manager—but manager you are—here you go!

He pushed out his hand to Chris and Chris shook it as he held a wad of paper toweling to his face, which was once again picked bloody.

Okay guys, said Martin—got to kick you guys out. Got to lock up.

Chris and Ehyeh left and headed toward the side door of the building which led up to their room. Once in the room, Chris put the violin case full of money on the table. He didn't count it this time. What would it be, a few hundred dollars? They were way out of that league now—way out.

I'm going to turn in, said Chris. I'm bushed. I'm as bushed as I am stunned.

I'll sit up and watch TV a while, said Ehyeh, putting the violin carefully down beside the violin case. I'll keep the sound low—say Chris. I have a question.

What?

What are we going to do tomorrow. We can't play out front anymore.

I don't know. Hang around I guess—

How about we go to church. You need to show thankfulness for what you've been given.

Maybe, said Chris. Goodnight.

Goodnight.

Chris rolled away from Ehyeh and for a brief instant before falling off to sleep, he thought it odd the way Ehyeh had said it—you need to show thankfulness—not we need to. Didn't Ehyeh need to show thankfulness too? At the point of that question, he fell off into sleep. The sleep was deep and he dreamed strange dreams about being in a huge dark space like a concert hall, on the stage, poised to play his violin—but then he heard Ehyeh's music from above and knew he could never play the violin again—not like that—and it wasn't worth playing if he couldn't play like that. So he lowered his bow, left the stage empty—what audience had been out there what audience in the dark—he left the stage empty, suddenly his violin evaporated in his hand and he sat up straight in bed, wide awake. The side light still dimly lit the room.

But Ehyeh was gone.

Chris rose and checked the bathroom—Ehyeh was not there—and then he noticed that his violin and violin case were no longer on the table. There was a pile of money there but no violin bow or case—Ehyeh had gone somewhere and taken them with him. Chris pulled on his pants and a shirt and kicked into his shoes and headed outside, down the stairs, to the street. As he went toward the door, he heard Ehyeh's music—for some reason the old man had come out in the middle of the night to play—he heard the arching striving sound of the music and he darted out into the street—but no one was there. The music surrounded him, clutched him, as he went around to the front of the Cluck-U Chicken, and again, saw the street empty. Then he looked up—the sky was clear black and spangled with a million stars—and that was where the music was coming from—the sky. No it could not be true—Ehyeh must be around—Chris dashed down main street seeking the old man and suddenly a lank-haired greasy looking derelict stepped out from an alley in front of him and stopped him, bathed in the music.

Do you hear that, said Chris.

Hear what?

That music. Where is he—did you see an old white haired man in white with a violin?

What music—what man in white—oh, you, said the derelict—you're the one who used to play the violin up on the corner by the court house. I liked it when you played the violin, I really liked it—you and that old man in white—

But don't you hear the music, said Chris, tearing at his face, caught in the grip of it, needing to raise his voice to be heard over the din of it—don't you hear that music? All around us right now?

No, said the derelict, looking Chris sharply in the eye. But tell me—what was that old man's name?

The music wound round them.

Ehyeh—Ehyeh El Shaddai.

Lord! exclaimed the man—

He clutched at his chest as if pained, then continued.

—that is the name of God! My God, my God—that is the name of God—

He clutched his chest harder and his eyes were blazing pinpoints.

What do you mean, God, shouted Chris.

The derelict pointed into Chris' chest with a long sharp nail.

—Ehyeh is the ancient Hebrew for God—the words I AM—El Shaddai is a name of God—

The derelict suddenly bit down hard on his lip, silencing himself, and turned and dashed down the alleyway he had come out of, and was instantly gone.

God? thought Chris—he looked up into the music pouring from the sky in great gouts of thousand-stringed chords—no, no, no—

He ran home through the music and buried himself in his bed under the covers with his hand clapped over one ear, the other buried in the pillow, rubbing his bloody face hard and heard nothing but the faint echo of the music and that eventually died away to nothing, and he fell into a merciful exhausted black silent sleep.

Yeah—I still hear it—and I curse the day I met him, and I knew that the derelict I ran into was sent by him to confront me—that derelict was no real man—he was some sort of spirit, sent to confront me and tell me who Ehyeh truly was, as I stood there in the street like that—and ever since, I've heard the music, pouring down from the sky, day and night—everybody else says they hear nothing—everybody else is lying to me. How dare they lie to me, Chris Taylor—who God came down and chose for some reason I can't comprehend, to hear his music forever and ever. I am not crazy—I am not mad—I just think of what it might have been like had he stayed—what it might have been like, had he not returned to heaven. But I have gained one thing from this—I truly believe in him now, I do, more so than any other living man.