

---

# DRIVING OLD I-90

*Sadie Hickman*

The morning air was already starting to warm, and the birds sensed the change. Swooping into the shade, they took refuge among the vehicles and concrete support beams of the Minneapolis I-90 Parking Ramp. The cheerful sound of chirps would fade off as the birds found their nests, their homes, and settled in to hide from the scorching daylight.

A handful of birds gathered on the rooftop level of the parking ramp, picking over the scattered litter. One hopped after a crumb-filled bag as the wind carried it away, squawking as it caught under a large, thick tire.

Regina's bus was sandblasted in patches, more silver than yellow. The windows were caked with dust, some scrape marks dug in where they had been pushed open. A total of five windows had been cracked and repaired with ever-present duct tape, though none were broken completely out. The beige netting remained long after the familiar silver backing fell away.

The front door appeared newer than the rest of the bus but was still caked with grit. Scratched into the dirt on one of the glass panels was a smiley face. A good two inches of sand and dirt had been packed down onto the steps leading up into the cabin.

The cabin itself was clean, barring the steps. The driver's seat had been patched and repatched with several layers of duct tape. A thin veneer of dust laid over the whole interior, dulling even the chrome driver's mirror, everything except for the steering wheel, black and bright in the dim morning.

Out of the twelve usual rows of seats, only seven still remained. Cracked plastic seating perched on thick metal feet, bolted to the floor. Stained yellow padding peeked out here and there

where the duct tape pulled away or the seams had broken. A purposely missing row was lined with military-grade netting, torn by passengers' luggage and repaired by a careful hand.

The back of the bus had been transformed into living quarters. A bunk bed sat to one side, mirrored by old fractured milk crates on the other. A faded blue t-shirt hung haphazardly from a white plastic cage, next to a watch with dead hands that was caught in a crack. An old, sun-baked cartoon figurine was tucked away protectively, the black of the mouse ears faded to a faded grey.

The bunks were occupied.

Rutedger sprawled carelessly over the top bunk, spindly arms and legs hung off the edges, too tall for the bed. He lounged in discolored board shorts, a faded blue and white Hawaiian print, and a sweat-stained tank top. On one foot, dangling over Regina's head, dangled an oversized sandal. He slept on his back, fuzzy brown hair sticking out from his scalp like crazed blades of grass.

He snored. The sounds of his heavy exhalations escaped the bus through the propped-open emergency exit door, along with a ceiling vent. All that remained to challenge the sound of snoring whistling past his shaggy beard was the squawking of the birds outside.

Regina claimed the bottom bunk, her blanket was folded and kicked into a corner. The pillow she slept face-down in muffled her heavy breathing. Her body held no curves to speak of, mostly flat, the clothes she wore were made mostly for men: loose cargo denim pants long faded to a hint of khaki held up by a canvas belt, white undershirt, and a bleach-stained bathing suit top that served as a bra. Her hair was blonde, long, straight and wound into a tight braid, coiling over her neck.

Regina blinked once, twice, blind in one eye. Her vision began to clear. One eye blearily viewed the old shelving system across the aisle, while the other was blocked by sweat-stained

weave. The dream began to fade, a cool dark concert hall dissolved into the hot makeshift bedroom. A violin's sweet serenade faded into the rough gravel of her navigator's snoring, and the cool, recycled air of a concert hall was flooded by the already sticky heat of dawn.

The canvas of the bed stuck to her skin as she pulled herself up and out of the alcove. Rutedger muttered something in his sleep. She punched his foot as she passed.

The old digital readout on the dashboard flickered on when she plopped into the driver's chair, hands wandering over the steering wheel. Her fingertips fit perfectly in the grooves, at ten and two, and the dents in her elbows rested evenly on the rim. The key twisted and the engine turned over once, twice. The sound of the old mechanics firing to life echoed through early morning as the bus rumbled its way out of the parking ramp.

The gusts had been picking up for the past fifty miles, and visibility was starting to get poor. Regina could feel the ground shifting under the school bus.

Rutedger was examining the map as closely as he could with the constant bobbing and weaving, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead. The few passengers behind him clutched their bags, seats, nearby passengers. Two young men were bracing themselves against the seat in front of them, but otherwise seemed unperturbed. They had all nodded while Rutedger gave the safety speech—how to brace in the event of a crash, what kind of turbulence they were likely to encounter, how to deal with dust inhalation—she assumed they were fine.

He looked at the driver's mirror at the same second Regina flicked her gaze up, she gave him a small grimace in turn. He bobbed his head in understanding, glasses threatening to plop back onto his nose with the vigorous nods as he buried his nose back into the map.

A woman in a thin windbreaker jacket was watching them, breathing shortly. The man sitting across from her was trying hard to remain oblivious, hiding behind an old paperback novel. In the overhead mirror, Regina could see her eyes dart between driver, navigator, and fellow passengers.

Ruteger let out a yell and pointed a long, knobby finger at the windshield. A sign emerged from the brown cloud, trembling with the force of the wind. The once-white letters were half-peeled away by the torrential gusts.

“Oh-ah...” She sounded it out as she started to let off on the gas, preparing for a turn she knew was coming. The sign disappeared in the thick brown storm, “Oacoma?”

He frowned at her, his bottom lip coming up to almost cover his top. He made a sucking sound as he chewed on his mustache, “Bridge first.”

“Which way after the bridge?”

“North, gotta turn north.” Rutedger nodded wildly, his glasses bobbing up and down on his forehead before falling onto his nose.

A trunk scraped and skittered over the broken asphalt in front of them. Too late. The bus’ already bent grill and fender crunched into the dry wood, shattering it into twigs and splinters.

She let out a string of vibrant cuss words under her breath, impulsively apologizing after each one. Her eyes never left the road, the obscured view in front, except for a momentary flicker up. She had to wrestle the old steering wheel to turn.

The tires screeched against the asphalt, then ground hard against concrete as the bus nudged onto the old bridge. They had slowed considerably, each foot gained a struggle against the wind and the debris on the roadway. Regina wrinkled her nose in focus, grinding her teeth together. She tried hard to keep her grip loose and free, able to compensate at a moment’s notice,

tried to keep her fingers dancing over the worn plastic. Her boots, however, were wedged in tight under the dashboard, keeping her balanced, secure.

She felt a slipping, the wind was catching them. The tires protested hotly.

A loud shrieking of metal sent the bus bucking as the side ground hard against the concrete sidewalls of the bridge. After wrenching the vehicle's already tortured side away, she released a weary: "God damn. Sorry, Ma'am."

Rutedger's face was scrunched up in concern and worry, he kept his eyes ahead. The bus shook and weaved as Regina fought against the gusts.

The storm cleared for a single moment, revealing broken asphalt and dead ditches as far as the eye could comprehend before the debris and dust rose up again, the windshield returning to revealing nothing more than a swirl of beige and tan. Shadows blew past, silhouetted behind the sheets of dirt. Uprooted trees and bushes caught in the tumultuous blast. The sun would break through in rare patches, and then be swallowed up by the storm.

"How much further?" She called back over her shoulder, hearing the rustling of paper as her navigator pulled the map up close to his face again. She frowned and leaned forward, trying to get a better view of what lay ahead. Another sign appeared out of the confusion, quaking under the force of the gusts.

Rutedger's outstretched finger confirmed it. She cranked her steering wheel to the right, nudging the beaten beast through a camouflaged drift. The drag of dirt and debris around the wheels sent everyone not braced jerking forward, but the bus continued ahead, plowing through the storm's refuse. The woman in the windbreaker started to whimper while Regina mumbled apologies, a rosary of regret.

Regina could see a battered green highway sign to their left, arrows pointing further north promising, she hoped, rest and relief. She twisted the steering wheel, hand-over-hand as she wrestled the bus to follow the wind. Each placement of her hands was as practiced as the fingering of an instrument.

She drove past a fallen Holiday Inn Express sign, the bus' engine rumbling and roaring against the whistling wind. She parked around the side, in the shadow of the large, once-white building. The tires crunched over fallen branches and collected detritus as she finally let the vehicle groan to a stop.

“All right, people, listen up.” Regina pried her hands away from the hard plastic, pulling her gloves off and flexing her fingers. She was relieved to find that the digits still worked. Turning to face everyone, she was surprised to see that she had all eyes on her. Usually people were crouched in corners. “I’m gonna go in and see if there’s anyone here. If there is, we’ll request a place until the storm blows over. If not, we’re gonna stay here anyways.”

“Can we get out?” The woman in the thin windbreaker asked nervously.

“Not yet. Wait here a bit, Rutedger will take good care of any bumps and bruises you might have gotten during our little ride.”

Her skinny navigator stood and started inspecting the passengers as Regina pulled her gloves back on, jerked open the door, and slipped out into the storm, her arms over her eyes. The howling was deafening, but the building served to protect her for the most part. Circling around the front of the bus, she spotted the remains of the big branch they had hit, wedged underneath the fender.

She tugged down the fold of her bandana until it covered her eyebrows, and she furrowed her brow to shrug it down even further. She wrapped her gloved fingers around the trunk and tugged hard, heaving against the branch until the majority of it broke free, leaving little twigs embedded in the undercarriage. A grimace fixed her lips in a scowl as she pressed her palms against the grill and bumper, petting away the grit that would return soon anyway.

A thumping on the glass caught her attention, and she looked up, squinting to see Rutedger gesturing to her.

“I’m fine!” She mouthed, and waved her hand dismissively. He responded with a gesture that made her think of a chicken she had once seen caught in a gust. Stifling a chuckle, Regina turned from the bus and trotted purposefully towards the hotel’s rear entrance. Someone had long ago broken the glass around the latch, then repaired the break with duct tape and thick plastic sheeting.

Pulling off a glove, she scraped away a bit of the degraded tape with her nail, pulling it away enough to slip an arm in and push free the handle. The door resisted her pull at first, air pressure suctioning it closed.

She tugged it free finally, but the broken glass caught her forearm. With a sigh, she watched as the long line of red welled up, then began to drip down her wrist and fingers. An experimental flex proved that everything was still connected.

“Miss Regina!” The wind almost took the words away, but she caught the smallest hint of her name. Turning back to the bus, she saw one of the passengers, a repeat customer, running towards her. In his big hands he held a raggedy-looking towel. He stopped as soon as he saw the flapping plastic and the open door.

Regina ducked inside and motioned him to follow, squeezing down on her wrist with her other hand, flexing her injured fingers. He followed her inside, pulling the door shut with a grinding clack.

“I was gonna offer this to help break through the glass, but you might need it otherwise now.” The linebacker-sized man held out the ugly plaid dishtowel, and she took it gratefully.

“Thanks, Brandy.”

“Brendon.” He corrected with a grin, revealing too-white teeth. She had not noticed before.

“Right. Whatever. Wait here by the door, I’ll see what we can find out.” After wrapping the towel around her injury, she withdrew a roll of duct tape from her pocket, awkwardly strapping it down around her arm as she walked past an old ice machine and vending machines.

She walked down a long dark hallway, at the end appeared to be sunlight. The lack of any breeze promised more secure doors and whole windows, a building still complete unlike the hundreds of broken down wrecks that scattered the intercity stretches. She had seen hundreds of half-collapsed homes and stores that had simply failed to stand up to the constant batter of searing winds.

The threadbare carpeting crunched under her boots, scattered trash and broken glass long ground through the fibers. It looked like it was a high-traffic area, or had been at one point.

The lobby area was almost pristine, barring the wind-scattered pamphlets and brochures seemingly swept and piled in a corner. Regina reached to her belt, fingering an old pocketknife. She swept the small reception area with her eyes first, then started glancing under the couches and chairs, under the dust covers, over the counter. Someone had planned on moving out of the hotel.

“What are you looking for?” Brendon’s voice was low. Apparently he had decided to come along anyway.

“Signs of life.” She leaned on the reception desk, then pushed herself over, knocking an old phonebook to the ground. The desiccated paper crumbled when it landed on the floor. “I think it’s safe to assume we’re alone here. Tell Rutedger to start bringing people in from outside, to the lobby.”

“Gotcha, Miss Regina.” He nodded and flashed another abnormally white smile at her. She returned it with an awkwardly forced grin, which disappeared as soon as the broad-shouldered man disappeared around the corner. Once his footfalls faded, she ducked behind the counter, hands searching the shadowed drawers and shelves.

She felt paper and folders, paperback catalogues and a few magazines, a long-dried up bottle of surface cleaner and an empty roll of what used to hold paper towels. No lockbox, no cash drawer, no such luck. With a sigh, she straightened up and pulled herself back over the counter, taking a couple of the magazines with her.

Rutedger led the small handful of people into the lobby, arraigning them around on couches and chairs. A few wandered a bit around the old breakfast nook, stretching cramped legs while the others could not be supported on their feet, still too shaky, too nervous. Regina moved from person to person, somewhat disinterestedly asking them if they were all right, if they wanted water, something to snack on while they waited. She even handed out whatever magazines happened to still be legible.

“Reggie? Got a minute?”

“Sure, Rutedger.” She stood, halfway through fixing the dishtowel bandage.

The navigator threw up his arm animatedly, leaning on the wall. He had found a toothpick somewhere and was gnawing on it voraciously. “How long you think we’re gonna be here?”

The duct tape was already losing its sticky. “Don’t know. Storm wasn’t too bad. Couple hours? Maybe.”

“Think I should look around, see if the rooms are usable?”

“We won’t be here that long.”

The toothpick waved from side to side, disappearing and reappearing under the mustache.

“I’m going to go check bus.” She smoothed out the strap of tape and pulled her gloves back on. He looked like he wanted to say something but did not stop her when she turned to the darkened hallway, footsteps crunching loudly.

The wind had picked up, she could hear it gusting through the break she had reopened in the door. Sheets of dust and grit fell like rain off the roof of the hotel. The bus was a mere shadow against a backdrop of beige and brown.

Regina tugged the bandana back down over her eyebrows before pushing past the door. The particles of sand bit at her skin, and her arm ached in protest.

She paused for a moment and looked straight up. The sun was there, glowing eerily through the swirls of intermittent darkness. A branch caught the roof of the hotel with a loud clunk, then pinwheeled off into the storm high overhead.

Her boots scuffed up tiny drifts as she wandered. Soon enough, she touched warm metal. She sighed in relief, tracing the lines of the grill with her fingertips, then coughed at the involuntary intake of dust.

She knelt. The undercarriage was shadowed, but sheltered from the wind at least. Silhouetted against the thin sunlight, small branches stuck out helter-skelter, protruding like splinters in a wound.

After a moment, she grabbed the hood and pulled herself to her feet, patting the hood lightly before stepping away. The door to the bus was slightly ajar, making it easier for her to push it open and climb inside. The engine had been turned off, keys left on the dashboard next to the flickering digital display, where Rutedger always tossed them.

She passed rows of passenger seating, edged her way through the boxes and suitcases and backpacks, and reached into the very back of the bus, withdrawing a board on wheels. Out of a cracked off-white milk crate, she pulled a used fume mask and goggles.

Brendon was waiting at the door when she stepped out. The storm tore away his explanation, so he simply climbed inside. She shrugged and went back to the grill, setting down her wheeled board to pull on the mask and goggles.

She knelt and lay on her back on the board, making a small test roll. She pushed, propelling herself under the body of the bus. Her gloves danced over the guts of the machine like a violinist caressing her performance instrument. Branches stood in place of catgut strings and the fingerboard and bridges were now hot engine parts, much as a child's fingers had been replaced by the hands of a woman.

The body of the bus shifted above her, and she glimpsed the linebacker's feet stepping down and around. By lifting her feet and using her palms to shove herself free, she was able to glimpse an off-white crate of bottled water in his arms before he disappeared into the hotel. Satisfied, she slid back underneath.

A few twigs slid free easily. Some stuck a bit, but she managed to ease them out. The last one, she hesitated removing. It was wedged in deep.

She muttered an apology into her dust-sparkled mask and braced her feet before taking a hold of the stick.

The wood shuddered and budged only an inch. Another tug bought her another few centimeters and a metallic groan. Another apology, another sharp tug, and the branch screeched free, an inch-thick dagger of wood.

Regina tossed it away with a grunt, letting her head fall back against the dirty asphalt. She stared up at the undercarriage of her bus through cracked and scratched lenses. It was the first rush of fatigue she had felt all day, but when the adrenaline finally petered out, the ground was there to catch her.

A loud, echoing *bong* woke her up suddenly, before she even realized that she had closed her eyes. She raised her head to look down, past her feet. Skinny little legs stuck into sandals paced a bit before the echoing slam happened again, a hand on the hood. Past the bony ankles shone pure, unadulterated sunlight.

Irritated and curious, she pushed herself out. Rutedger looked down at her, a wide grin splitting his fuzzy beard.

“Morning!”

She looked past him, at the bright blue sky of South Dakota. No clouds, birds, or airplanes marred what had so recently been a maelstrom of dirt and debris. The sun was brightly hot, raising waves from the ground rather than

“Have a nice sleep?”

“How long has the storm been over?” She stood, shoving both fists into her lower spine and bending backwards. One loud pop and a string of cracks echoed through her chest, followed by a groan of relief.

He glanced back to the door of the hotel, which was propped open. “Well... ‘bout an hour? Maybe two?”

“How are the passengers?”

He shrugged again.

Regina sighed, pulled off her mask, and shoved the goggles up onto her forehead. They began to walk together out of habit while she tugged free her gloves. She watched the people standing outside the door, loitering in boredom. One was smoking, another toyed with a small stick.

The air was dead calm and once they reached the outer limit of the hotel building, they saw the highway laid out before them, wavering in the head and littered with drifts of all sizes. It lead off into the hills like a glittering black miss-stitch that dotted its way through khaki shorts.

“We’re heading out of here.” Regina tossed the ugly dishtowel dotted with her blood into a trash can. The next taxi driver might find it.

The passengers looked up—some stood, others hesitated. Brendon was the first to pop to his feet, grinning cheerfully. His aura was infectious.

“This guy has a way with passengers.” She muttered, and Rutedger nodded. He grinned, jokingly slapping her with the back of his knobby hand, just under her collarbone.

“He’s like you used’ta be!”

She glared at him as he moved away to help an older man stand. Brendon led the way from the lobby, and, as each passed, Regina counted heads. One seemed to be missing, the lady in the windbreaker was not among the others. Waving half-heartedly, she motioned before walking off into the rest of the building.

Most of the doors were closed, some propped ajar by discarded furniture. A chair leg here, a shower curtain twisted and pulled there. She stepped heavily around an overturned bed frame, her boots thudding over the mess of rusted springs. Her heel caught in one of the coils, reigning her in.

Halfheartedly, she tried to pull her foot free. Her struggle grew more animated until she let fly a vicious kick. The metal curls clattered against the wall, still wedged into the tread. She kicked again, and again, and again, slamming the mattress skeleton against the wall.

The woman in the windbreaker crept out from hiding, cautiously peeking out from a doorway down the hall. She had a blanket in her arms, folded and flattened, held tightly against her chest.

Without speaking, Regina simply pointed back, down the hall. The metal coils creaked as the woman, muttering, skirted around her. Her weight added leverage to the rusted wire and popped Regina's boot free.

The woman fled down the hall, but Regina continued on, pushing open the door to the room she had left.

It was surprisingly intact. Two suitcases rested at the foot of the first bed, the curtains were drawn, and a thick layer of dust caked everything. There were recent fingerprints, a large smear was wiped from the bathroom mirror, and the closet had been raided for what she assumed the woman had carried off.

The room safe was open, door hanging slightly ajar. She tugged it open completely, scraping free a shower of grit. After a long pause, she reached inside, removing a handful of random papers, wallet, watch. A passport.

On the shelves beneath the safe, she glimpsed a dull black shape. A thick plastic case, rough and oddly-shaped. It was also cheaply made, the already heat-warped shell cracked when she flipped open the corroded clasps.

Regina carefully ran her fingers over the violin resting on fake velvet lining. The body had begun to splinter and the catgut had long since loosened and lost its tone. The bow's horsehair broke free from its clasp, falling over her fingers, thread by thread.

Futilely, she turned the bow upside down, letting the thin strands drift with the trembling of her hand. The more she tried to gather the threads together, the more crumbled and fell to the carpeting, until the whole handful had drifted away.

She carefully picked the strands out of the case, dropping them on the floor. The bow fit back into the molded plastic set into the cover.

The instrument was worn, broken, and she handled it gingerly. Mindful of the delicate condition, she tucked the violin into her neck and rested her chin on the worn-smooth plastic.

A moment passed. Then a moment more.

Regina sighed softly, taking the instrument from her neck. She grimaced, becoming acutely aware of the throbbing pain in her arm as she closed the case.

Tucking the case under her arm, she stood and, as an afterthought, grabbed another handful of blankets from the top shelf. Just in case.

Rutedger looked up from the map, squinting at Regina as she pulled herself up the steps and into the bus. He shoved his glasses up into his hair and peered at her quizzically.

Regina was holding the cracked case tightly, tucked under one arm. She carried it down the center of the bus, past the passengers that waited, past Brendon. For a moment, she paused, looking at the wide-shouldered man.

“Hey.”

His expression widened into a grin, “Hey, Miss Regina! We were worried you’d gotten lost in there.”

“Hold this for me, will you?” She extended the case to him, cradled on top of a folded blanket.

As she made her way back to the driver’s seat, Rutedger grunted and scratched his head a bit. The map in his hands crinkled when he leaned forward, watching her.

Regina sat heavily in the driver’s seat. The air-ride system creaked loudly as she shifted, following through her general routine of buckling up, starting up the engine, and getting them moving again. Each movement seemed more mechanical than before, and, when she pulled on her gloves and held the steering wheel, there was no gentle touch. She did not glide her fingers around the surface, gently brushing away dust.

There were her hands and the wheel. She held and she turned.

The bus grumbled and groaned to life. Regina looked up to the driver’s mirror, spotting Rutedger. The navigator looked back at her and waved her on, his elbow snapping up and down like a bird taking to flight.

Rapid City opened its gates to the prodigal travelers as the sun was beginning to slip behind the horizon, and Regina guided the bus to safety. Heat-softened tires soaked up the occasional, sharp bit of gravel as the vehicle shuddered to a stop, then quieted to sleep, if only temporarily.

Luggage was passed out quickly—a backpack here, a knapsack there. The woman with the windbreaker smiled pleasantly to Rutedger, the hotel blanket tucked inconspicuously into her duffel bag. Regina broke away from the others to flag down a parking ramp supervisor.

Brendon was the last passenger to leave, stepping off into the setting sunlight with the violin case still in his arms. As soon as she caught his eye, she waved for Rutedger to come over, to take her place in the conversation with the uniformed man. She shoved the key-ring into her navigator's hands.

She returned to the bus, only for a moment, to take the case from Brendon. He gave her that wide, too-white smile and, knapsack over his shoulder, followed the others to the escape marked with chain-link gates. Beyond her passengers, just past those gates, the waves of heat distorted the vision of the city.

The violin case was tucked tightly under her arm. She could feel the old block of bow rosin clatter about inside as she moved.

Late afternoon seemed to herald for the escape from the indoors, the slight cooling of the air allowed a greater freedom of movement. Regina strode down the sidewalk, stepping around the small groups of people that began gathering on the slowly dimming streets.

She turned away from the road, heading down an alleyway between two brick buildings. Warmth poured from either wall, building until it was almost physically difficult to continue.

The place she searched for was just ahead, a door lined on the inside with tinfoil, tucked under a plywood sign. Smearred over the pressed woodchips, the Day-Glo spray paint declared “Pawn Shop.”

The air pressure change in the store upon her entry caused the mass amounts of tinfoil to crinkle, seemingly breathing with the open and close of the door. The woman behind the counter at the far end was dusting off jewelry.

She paused long enough to examine the case Regina offered her. With a shake of her head, she shoved it back over the counter, without even opening it. “Not interested.”

“I don’t want to sell it.” Regina shifted slightly, “Wondering if you can repair it.”

The pawn shop owner stared at her for a long time, then flicked her eyes back and both between her and the case. She held up a hand, a gesture to wait.

The larger woman set down her cloth and scooted around the counter, past the rifle racks, the ammunition cupboards, the golf clubs, until she reached a wall of guitars, bass and otherwise. A cello hung suspended from the ceiling, and looked to have been there for years. She reached into the array of instruments hanging on the wall and withdrew a black plastic case, much like the one that sat, broken and warped, on the counter.

“Tell me what you think of that one.”

Regina took the second case back to the front, setting it beside the first. The clasps were not rusted or damaged, the hinges moved smoothly. Inside rested a beautiful violin, dulled a bit by age, but in perfect condition.

The strings were taught and, when plucked softly, carried a resonating tone. The bridge held up the catgut wires firmly, the body of the instrument was solid. The horsehair bow did not

crumble into dust at her touch, and the molded black velvet, though still fake, felt soft to the touch.

“This is going to cost me a ton, isn’t it?”

“Guess that depends on what you’re willing to pay with.”

Regina raised an eyebrow, “You want to come at me with that again? From a direction I understand?”

The pawn shop woman reached out and took the first case into her arms, “I’ve seen you around before, you’re a bus driver.”

“That’s right.”

“My daughter is getting married next weekend.”

Regina nodded and was already closing the violin case.

“You get me to Minneapolis to see my daughter, and I’ll let you have that violin, taking in trade this old one.”

Regina closed the clasps firmly and reached into her back pocket, pulling out her wallet. Inside were tucked multiple trip tickets, blank and ready to be filled out. Once they slid across the counter into the waiting woman’s hands, she scooped up the black case and made for the door.

The sun was almost down now, and bright lights began to flicker on through the streets. As she walked, holding the case tightly, the low hum of the city’s electrical system began to resonate. A breath of wind carried debris down the street, swirled dust around her thick-soled boots.

She heard music as she walked, though it was scratchy jukebox tunes. The sounds of life and vitality faded behind her as she entered the parking ramp. The guard at the front checked her identification and gave her the parking slot number where her bus and Rutedger would most likely be waiting.

The back exit was slightly ajar; the broken ceiling vent had to be propped open by an old shoe. As Regina sat in one of the passenger seats, Rutedger pulled himself up into his bunk bed and flopped over onto his back.

The strings had to be tightened and loosened individually. Her callused hands plucked and strummed softly as she adjusted and readjusted, with no resources other than her mind and memory to depend on.

She grimaced at the first screeching tone and worked the neck of the violin, searching for familiar positions. Satisfied, she tucked the instrument into her neck, resting her chin on the rest.

Regina pulled the horsehair across the vibrating strings. Lifting the bow was painful and twisting her wrist to compensate only made it worse. Her skin stretched against the long cut in her forearm. Once the scab had broken, her strokes were free and smooth.

This second note was followed by another, this time, less hesitant. Pure sound resonated free from the horsehair and catgut and echoed through the slightly-open door and vent.

She was not quite sure what song she was playing anymore, but she was playing. *Camptown Races* blended into an awkwardly slow chorus of *The Devil Went Down To Georgia*.

Regina stopped mid-stroke. Rutedger was lying on his stomach, staring at her. He blinked at being caught, then motioned for her to continue.

She obliged.

Her fingers trembled over the quivering strings. She pulled the bow across the wires. She had long ago forgotten the name of the song, but not the notes from which it had been built. The song began to swell. Her eyes squeezed shut with the effort of remembering.

The music filtered out into the parking ramp, echoing between automobile metal concrete, and rebar. Each time the bow was drawn across, another breath of music spread into the slowly cooling night air until the blasted landscape began to resonate.