

THE HARVEST

STAFF CHOICE AWARD

One of the first things he noticed when he woke up that gorgeous morning was the cellos that were growing in his backyard.

Fingers callused with years of dutiful toil scabbled across the mahogany wood of his nightstand. He plucked his spectacles from where they lay, donned a rich, woolen housecoat, and ambled out to the yard to observe the phenomenon, squinting a little as the first rays of the sun peered inquisitively into his eyes. Oh, they were cellos all right, a bit green around the edges and rather peaky-looking, what with the fresh, spring dew that collected like gold filigree on their small, silver strings, but they looked relatively healthy with promises of a great harvest to come. They were just beginning to bloom: The ripest instrument was still deciding whether to become the light, orangey hue of elm and lacquered rowan or to darken to the rich tint of earthen brown that was the signature cherry wood of most fine cellos.

An unexpected quirk sketched a line across his mouth. Chortling to himself, he tottered back into the enveloping warmth of his house and radiator, and, grabbing a thick iron ring lined with keys, unlocked the door that gave entrance to his shop. He paused for a moment to inhale the musty, dusty smell of resin and wood and just the slightest tang of rose that wafted through the doorway, then snagged the sign by his door that read “Foster’s Violins” in bright, bold calligraphy.

He retrieved his materials at once, dipping a fat, horsehair brush into a small can of beige paint. Meticulously, he smoothed a taupe coat over “Violins,” careful not to smudge out any portion of the elegantly embellished “Foster’s.” When that was done, he set aside the utensil and picked up his pen, his gnarled hand poised like a dancer over the fine grain of the wood. His glasses slipped just a little; with a sound of mild annoyance, he pushed the wire frame higher over his aquiline nose and set to work on creating a new word, one he hoped wouldn’t alarm too many of his regular customers.

He had just completed the second “l” when the soft pealing of bells heralded the entrance of a customer. A woman swept in through the door, wrapped in a voluptuous, double-breasted tweed overcoat. Her glittering wheat-blond hair streamed like a golden river behind her as she sauntered up to the counter, and, catching sight of him, she smiled, her full, rouged lips parting to reveal a straight, pearly row of teeth.

“Todd Foster,” she chirruped gleefully. “Repainting your sign again? Honestly, this is the fifth time in as many years.” The twisty syllables of her edged Cockney accent reverberated off the walls of the little shop like a light, chiming melody.

He doffed an invisible hat to her, a lock of his iron-white hair snagging in a rough, jagged fingernail. “’Tis a pleasure to see you too, Joanne. It’s been a while.”

Michelle Do

She tossed her head and made a moue of dismissal. “Oh, you know. I’m so busy these days. But enough with the boring preliminaries.” She leaned forward and planted an arm on the polished surface of his counter, craning her head to look into his garden through the small window at the back. “I see you’re growing—cellos, are they?”

He sighed in affirmation. “It’s a gift and a curse. I can never grow the same instrument for two years in a row.”

“Oh, do elaborate,” she commented with delicate irony. “I can’t seem to grow anything but flutes. Flutes, flutes, flutes, day in and day out, little metal poles sticking up all over my garden, and Margie next door always mistaking them for bean sprouts. That one year when I had clarinets was by far my most successful, but they’ve never

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grown since.” A dramatic shadow of exasperation flitted over her angled countenance as she irritably drummed gloved fingers on the edge of the reception desk.

He didn’t look up from his work. “You should be thankful you have such a consistent crop, Joanne,” he chided patiently.

The woman’s mouth briefly curved in a scowl. “There you go again, sounding like Grandfather in his old age. Honestly, Todd, you frustrate me to no end.” But the slight was soon forgotten, and she was all smiles again as she slanted a glance at his elaborate handiwork.

“Are you sure you want to put yourself through all that trouble?” she asked lightly, crooking a finger down at the letters.

“Of course I do,” he replied indignantly. “My family has made a tradition of hand-carving and embellishing the Foster signs that hang from our shops.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it that way,” she replied, and was that a sparkle of mischief he heard in her voice? “It’s just that—I wouldn’t be too hasty about decorating the ‘Cellos’ bit.”

“Why not?” he asked, finally looking up, and in response, she pointed toward the back window, her mouth quivering strangely, as if it were a dam to a rising stream of laughter.

The pen slid out of his fingers and dropped to the counter with a cacophonous clatter. He whipped off his spectacles, polished them briefly against the fabric of his sleeve, and slid them back over his eyes again, but to no avail. Blossoming brilliantly not three feet from the steps of his veranda, fronds swaying innocently in a playful, passing breeze, was none other than a gorgeously carved, impeccably varnished, curvaceous double bass.