

IDEAS

My great-uncle's violin outlived him. Someday, it will outlive me.

The music an old instrument remembers.

By Stephen O'Connor
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THE AUTHOR'S VIOLIN, PICTURED BESIDE A PORTRAIT OF HIS GREAT-UNCLE, EDDIE O'CONNOR, WHO PREVIOUSLY OWNED THE INSTRUMENT. • STEPHEN O'CONNOR

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As the years roll by, I've begun to wonder what to keep and what to throw out or give away. For example, I passed my youth in a world before email. Consequently, I still have bags full of letters from friends, some of whom have crossed the great divide. I asked my

pal Leo recently what to do with them. “Burn ’em,” he said. “No one wants to deal with that crap when you’re gone.”

We’re all aware that, as the saying goes, there are no pockets in a shroud. All things must pass. But there are things we can’t part with before we depart. Chief among those, for me, is my violin.

It belonged to my great-uncle, Eddie O’Connor. I learned to play violin as a kid because my father didn’t want me to play guitar, which he was convinced would turn me into a rock and rolling hippie and dope addict. He was a great father, but he had some peculiar theories.

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So I took up the violin, and whenever I visited old Eddie, where at least one room still had stains on the walls from the [1936 flood](#), he would show me his violin and say, “When I die, that violin will be yours.”

I’d say, “Well, then I hope I don’t get it for a long time.”

By the time I was visiting him as a kid, he had retired from playing after years of performing with the ensemble he had organized and called Eddie O’Connor’s Orchestra.

The instrument’s strings were loose, and the bridge had collapsed. I asked Eddie if he wanted me to set it up and tune it so he could play. “Why?” he replied. “If I were a mailman, would I keep walking around on my route after I retired?”

“No, but music is different, isn’t it?”

He replied with something to the effect of: “You don’t understand, Stephen. I played so much. I played in every kind of place you can imagine. I played on trains and at funeral parlors and at the city hall and ballrooms and at house parties and weddings and park gazebos and bars. I played in every kind of place you can imagine, except I never played in a bank, or a dry goods store, or a post office.”

Eddie told me a story that I never forgot. Once, his ensemble arrived at a grand house in Lowell to play; they were shown to a hall, and the members of the orchestra, all in tuxedos, set up, tuned their instruments, and began to wait for the guests. None arrived, but a butler told them they should begin. Eddie said they played all night to that empty hall, until the butler brought them an envelope containing their pay and a request for one last song, “We’ll Meet Again,” a sentimental wartime ballad made famous by Vera Lynn. I’ve always imagined a sad old man upstairs, remembering a lost love, or the days of wine and roses, while the strains of Eddie O’Connor’s Orchestra rose to his lonely room.

We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when

But I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.

If the mystery of the empty ballroom had involved lost love, Eddie could well have understood. Once, my mother was bold enough to ask him why he had never married.

“Well,” he said, timidly, and actually blushing, “I was in love.”

He had asked a young woman to marry him, a woman he loved very much. She said she loved him too, but that for reasons she couldn’t explain, he would have to wait for her answer. He was sure that she would say yes, and his eyes shone as he told us how he bounced along the rutted roads merrily in his jalopy on the way home. But she never gave Eddie the answer he so desperately longed for. Shortly after, she fell gravely ill and died. He said that he suspected she could not say yes because she knew her condition and was waiting to see if the sickness would loosen its grip on her young life. But death did not

respect the youth or the charms that had cast a spell over the young musician. After her death, he never proposed marriage again.

Eddie died in the late 1970s, and I've been playing his violin ever since. I've played it in bars and shows and at weddings and funerals, in the Paris Metro, on the decks of ships, and once at the Boston Aquarium, but never in a bank, a dry goods store, or a post office.

Eddie's violin will live on long after I'm gone, and a stranger someday will own it, never knowing where it went with me or with the old orchestra man, or what music filled it in other days.

As for Eddie, the last time I saw him he was in the hospital. He was unconscious, but my mother was there laying a cool cloth on his forehead, and I believe he died the way he had lived, quietly, peacefully. And when we carried his coffin out of the church, it felt as light as a feather. I think about old Eddie sometimes when I take out the violin. I put a small photo of him in the compartment in the case where violinists keep their rosin.

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