The Banjo

‘What the hell is this?” his brother asked as he pulled the oddly shaped cloth bag from the steamer chest in the attic.

Part of him recognized the object immediately and answered, “Pop’s banjo, haven’t seen it since… well, before he died.”

“I didn’t know he could play it,” his brother commented.

“He couldn’t, well not well,” he answered, a smile coming to his face.

“I wonder why Dad kept it,” his brother asked as he turned back to the steamer chest, rustling around in the contents for a few seconds,” Well except for some old blankets that’s it.”

He held the case, just a sack and not really a case, and felt the skeleton thin neck and weight in his hand. “Dunno, maybe just couldn’t toss it.”

“Wasn’t even his father, Pops was Mom’s father.”

“Well then, I have no idea,” he snapped, not even knowing why.

“Whatever,” his brother said flatly, eyeing him strangely for a second.

They made their way through the attic to the ladder down to the spare bedroom. The sheets covered the bed, bureau, and mirror since their father’s death, and they had just finished going through all the “things” left in his dying.

In the living room, it still looked as though their father was alive, as the furniture was uncovered, and the mail was on the dining room table. They had been cleaning up and cleaning out all the debris death had left behind, and were sleeping in their father’s bedroom or on the living room couch.

He sat on the couch, and slowly unwrapped the banjo. The strings were broken, loose or just gone. The tuning pegs were in place and the skin of the banjo was yellowed but intact. The delicate inlays of mother of pearl were all in place, set delicately in the wooden neck. Some of the rosewood fret bars were missing, but the frame seemed intact. It smelled of old cigars, and a faint whisper of Jameson’s. It smelled like his grandfather. He pulled the case around the banjo slowly, reverently, as if wrapping a corpse.

“Can I have this?” he asked before even realizing he wanted it.

“Sure. Pops spent more time with you than any of us,” his brother answered, looking down on the inventory they had to make,” Hell I won’t even list it.”

The next morning he found his brother’s note, which meant he was alone in the house.

He stared at the banjo bag then looked at the stacks of boxes that still needed going through. He pulled one close and the nearest black garbage bag, and one letter at a time transferred them from box to garbage bag. There were a few checks from dividends, but not any companies they didn’t already know about, contacted and had new checks being issued. He kept glancing at the banjo, but felt the need to finish at least one box. Finally, the box was empty, and he walked over to the dining room table. He unwrapped the banjo, and the smell of his grandfather, of his youth came from the instrument. His Dad had always smelled of jet fuel, but his grandfather had the smell of someone who had lived, and was savoring his last days. His grandfather had raised him and had been firm when needed, but never unkind. He was a man of Old World wisdom a young mind could not appreciate, but seeds planted that would blossom in the fullness of manhood. He had embraced the young boy that had been condemned to death when no one else would get close. Perhaps it was his closeness to his own death that brought them together, a kinship in the shortness of time. While others, including the boy’s father, were uncomfortable or looked away, he pulled the sickly child close, and with love. They spent many hours together, and the child, the boy, not only lived, but in time became a young man. Their bond was deeper than love, it was the bond of those who have shared the intimacies of death, and lived.

He looked at the cold, still banjo for a few minutes, drinking in all the new and remembered details. His memories came across in songs of smells, laughter and hospital visits, and the banjo of his memories echoed and warred with them reality of its bones before him. A thought, a need, twanged to life in his brain, a plucked string and it grew to his awareness. He didn’t pause to consider it, just went in resonance and a decision was made, deep inside him, unknown and unasked, and he acted on it before he could talk himself out of it.

A few days later, he came through the door, to see his brother packing a box.

“Where’d you go,” his brother asked when he returned,” And what the hell is that?”

He held a rigid case, an instrument case, and he laid it on the dining room table. Locks snapped open and the lid fell back to reveal red velvet and seated as in a space designed for it was the banjo. It had been cleaned, polished, repaired, restrung and tuned. The only thing that belied its age was the yellowed skin.

“I had it fixed,” he said smiling to his brother.

“What did that cost you?”

“You don’t want to know, “he answered as he cradled the neck and frame, and lifted it tenderly, gently, a newborn, and sat it in his lap.

“What are you gonna do with it? Sell it?”

“No I thought I’d learn it.”

“What the hell for?”

“Why not. Expand the brain, train the fingers, maybe even be halfway decent at it.”

“”I will never understand you.”

“Nope, Pops did,” then he whispered to himself,” Only Pops.”

He adjusted the banjo in his lap, and somehow his fingers moved into chord without his thought. He pulled a pick out of the small pocket, and strummed the strings. Waves of memory filled the room, and his eyes filled with water. A second chord came to him and even a third, the strings of his heart wept in remembrance.

“Didn’t know you knew how to play that,” his brother said dumbfounded.

“I don’t, didn’t. I guess Pops taught me and I forgot.”

He held the banjo at arm’s length, surveying it like an exotic animal that is now a new pet. After a second he pulled it close and smelled it. It smelled of fresh varnish, glue and paint. The old smells were gone, replaced, and it made a difference to him deep down inside. He was strangely upset and hurt, and almost wanted to throw it across the room, but instead gently put it in the case, and then shut the lid.

His brother was gone for a week when he re-opened the case. He stared at the instrument, no longer what it had been but now a strange animal coiled in the case. There was a small tab in the velvet next to the pick holder, and he pulled it and it opened to reveal a black cloth tucked in the space.

“Cleaning rag,” he thought, and pulled it out. The cloth was far too large for a cleaning rag, and he whispered,” What the hell?” There was a whisper of something that tickled his nose and a part of him pulled the cloth to his face , and from it came the familiar and comforting smells of cigars and Jameson’s. A small note fluttered to the ground and he picked it up and read it.

“Thought you might want to keep this, it smelled like my grandfather,” was written on the note.

His children arrived to the three chords of a banjo, played badly and sometimes out of sync, or improperly fingered, but full of the fragrances of history, of family, and love.