The Fiddler

Word Count: Approx. 1159

Abraham Campbell's grandson came in the early hours of a sweltering summer day in 1898. Old Agnes Drummond came from a neighbouring farm to assist his wife, Jane, with the birth shortly after their daughter, Esther, had doubled over in pain. Abraham sat outside on the front porch, fanning himself with a dog-eared newspaper. William and Edward slept soundly while Esther moaned and writhed in the kitchen. Émile begged to remain with his young wife, but Agnes shooed him away with an old rag. Men had no place in a birthing chamber, and Émile had already caused enough trouble. "Abraham Campbell should never have let that Catholic boy into his home," Agnes had clucked to her spinster daughter Margaret when she heard about Émile and Esther's sudden marriage.

Abraham Campbell ran a humble homestead. He had been twenty-five when he took Jane, the eighteen-year-old docile daughter of the Widow Adams, as his bride, who bore him four children. About two years ago, Simon, the eldest, left home at nineteen, much to Abraham's anger. Simon snuck away in the night, leaving the promise of his father's farm for the uncertainty of bustling Toronto. William, the third child, weakened by a bout of scarlet fever, was of little help to his father. Edward, only a child of five when Simon left, could do little more than tend to the hens, so Abraham spread word around the Township, seeking a hired man.

His hired man came in the form of a tall, slim lad with a shock of dark curls and piercing blue eyes, carrying a fiddle case and a battered satchel. The boy introduced himself as Émile Gagnon and named his hometown as some far-flung place in the north of the province. Abraham—an ardent Protestant, a member of the Sons of Temperence, and a loyal subject of

Queen Victoria—was hesitant to hire a French Catholic, but Émile assured him that he had worked for plenty Abraham's "people" across Ontario.

"Well, I know that *your* people drink wine in church, but I don't allow even a drop of alcohol under my roof," Abraham warned the boy.

Émile bowed his head. "I have no vices, sir. You won't have to worry about any trouble," Émile told the older man in his accented English.

Jane showed Émile to a room in the attic. She watched as he arranged his Catholic idols and prayer beads on the bedside table. "Supper will be ready in an hour. You can come and join us in the dining room," was all she said.

Abraham saw nothing wrong in seating Émile in Simon's old seat across the table from Esther. The girl had failed to inherit her mother's violet eyes and flaxen locks. Instead, she possessed a fleshy nose and mousy hair, never catching the eyes of the Township boys. Besides, at sixteen, Esther was a mere child compared to Émile's eighteen years.

Abraham allowed Émile to play his fiddle after supper, entertaining the Campbells with French folk songs. Nursing his cup of tea, Abraham failed to notice the glow in Esther's pale eyes as she watched Émile slide the bow across his fiddle, his sunburnt face raised to the heavens as he sang in his rich baritone. When Abraham tired of the foreign sounds, he cleared his throat theatrically, and asked Jane to bring him his family's Holy Bible, King James Version, from which he read passages aloud. When his throat became dry, he shut the Bible and everyone retired to their beds, Abraham's snores soon resounding throughout the house.

Émile took all his meals with the Campbells, playing his fiddle while they sipped their evening tea. He carved toys for little Edward and took William fishing, insisting that the fresh air would restore his strength. When the Campbells attended church, he stayed behind to pray to his

idols. Émile had been working on the farm for a year when a letter came from Simon: “I’m leaving Toronto for the Yukon to seek my riches in gold.” Jane pleaded with Abraham as he crumpled the letter and hurled it into the hearth. She wept as she watched her son’s penmanship burn. Abraham slept fitfully that night and refused to attend the Sons of Temperence tea party the next day. “Tell everyone I’m nursing a headache,” he told Jane.

It was Jane who insisted that Émile should join the tea party with his fiddle. Township girls flocked the fiddler who resembled the hero of a serial novel. Sweat dripped down his brow as he lowered his fiddle, observing Esther Campbell alone at a table, ignoring the fawning girls who shouted in his ears and pulled at his shirtsleeves.

Alone in his attic room after the Protestant tea party, Émile dipped a rag into the basin, spreading cool water across his face. He was already nineteen and had saved most of his meagre earnings. Perhaps he should think about taking a wife, he thought as Abraham’s snores drifted from the floor below.

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Abraham quaked with anger when Jane told him about Esther’s condition. He grabbed his wife and shook her small frame until her teeth chattered. “Can’t you control your own household, Jane? Your daughter’s a harlot, and your son’s gone away and who’ll inherit my farm!” he raged.

Abraham thought about drowning Émile in the Humber River, but Abraham was a good Christian, and he would never break the Sixth Commandment. Esther came out to the porch. “Émile did nothing wrong…I loved him first. He says he’ll marry me,” she said softly. “He says we’ll raise the baby in the Campbell faith.”

“Tell that boy he won’t be taking our daughter north to his papist family. We’ll raise the baby in our faith—he won’t teach it to worship his Catholic idols,” Abraham told Jane.

After Jane spoke with Émile, the boy hid his rosary and his statues of the Virgin Mary and Saint-Jean-Baptiste under a floorboard in the attic. Émile moved into Esther's room, spent his meagre savings on a simple ring, then married his love in the bland interior of her parents' church. After returning to the farm following the sullen ceremony, he sang softly while his weary wife succumbed to slumber, then he whittled a new toy for Edward.

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Alone in the dark parlour, Émile crossed himself and offered up prayers of thanks when he heard his son's first cries.

After Agnes coaxed the baby from Esther, the old woman washed and swaddled him. Abraham called him Albert, a good English name. He dipped his pen into his inkwell and entered his grandson's birthdate and name—Albert Gagnon—into his family's Holy Bible, King James Version. His hand shook as it formed the French surname.

In the room above, Émile watched as his wife nursed Albert in their bed. "Sing to him, Émile," Esther beckoned. "Sing to him in your own tongue."

Émile cleared his throat, breathed deeply, and began his serenade.