

Over the next few weeks Kit became a regular at the jam. As Nathan hoped, it brought back the casual fun of sharing music she knew as a child and took her away from the pressure she felt standing alone on a stage, with all eyes—and expectations—on her.

Kit soon discovered the back room jam, which became her regular haunt. It was a large function room Murph had never known what to do with. Apart from occasionally renting it to groups for parties after weddings, wakes, and softball games, he kept it locked.

When the jam got popular, people complained there weren't enough places to play. Isn't there someplace more informal that they can go? The stage dominated everything in the bar; you had to play what the people behind the microphones were playing. So Murph opened the back room to jammers.

There was no stage, no sound system, no center of attention. People gathered around small tables or stood in tight circles by the walls. One group would play swing tunes, another Celtic jigs and reels, another bluegrass. There was always one table that played a mix of vocal songs and instrumentals. That became Kit's table.

She never sang, however. She only wanted to play her fiddle, blend in with what was happening around her, and not be the center of attention. She was still unfamiliar with most of the tunes and rusty with the ones she remembered, so she played softly, almost to herself, adding simple lines that underscored the emotion of the melody.

Every week, Nathan brought his guitar into the back room and jammed with her. They always played the way they had that first time, ignoring the main tune and huddling into their private music. As they found their own common chords within the swirl of sound around them, they exchanged the knowing smiles and nods that musicians often do when sharing the wordless dialogue of music.

Between tunes, Kit would ask him about the folk scene, the mores of the jam, and the origins of the music. He was struck by how comfortable she was with her youth and with being a newcomer. Most young musicians wanted to seem hip and in-the-know; he'd certainly been that way when he was young. But Kit enjoyed learning about the music and often reacted to Nathan's simple answers with raised eyebrows and sly grins, as if he'd shared some great secret with her.

And in a strange way he had. By asking him all these things, she seemed to understand something about Nathan that few others at Dooley's did. He disliked being seen as the boss of things; he thought of himself as more of a tour guide, helping people to find whatever music was inside them and learn to enjoy it. More than anything, he wanted to be treated like just another musician. Since that first time Kit had asked for advice about her stage fright, she seemed to know that about him. So the way she smiled when he walked over with his guitar meant more to Nathan than she probably knew.

One Wednesday in late August, a jammer told Nathan that it was his birthday and asked if they could have an after-party at his house. Nathan agreed and immediately

thought of inviting Kit. It would be a good way for her to get to know a few of the regulars.

He walked down the back hallway, up a short flight of stairs and into a large rectangular room with something fuzzy on the floor that probably used to be a carpet. There were about fifty people there, divided into several jams, each with a handful of musicians and a few people just listening. Dim overhead lighting cast a yellowish glow on everything, like a lamplit room in an old house.

Kit sat with a half-dozen jammers at a small table by the far end of the room. They had finished a tune and were laughing and talking in the time-honored way of the jam. Applause is considered bad form because it suggests a performance atmosphere. So after a tune, there's a period of idle chatter, sipping beers, laughing, and shuffling chairs, until somebody begins another tune.

There is an unspoken order to all this, but nobody really knows what it is. It's simply the way it's always been, since the first caveman noticed his neighbor beating on a rock, wandered over, and said, "Hey, I got a stick, too."

A young guitarist in a faded Boston Celtics jersey, neatly trimmed beard stubble, and Martin Guitar baseball cap, suddenly began to sing a traditional cowboy song, "Colorado Trail." Nathan walked closer, putting a finger over his lips when a few people started to say hi. He wanted to listen.

*Weep, all you falling rains,  
Wail, winds, wail.  
All along, along, along,  
The Colorado Trail.*

You could almost hear the slow padding of horses and cattle in the easy gait of the song. It vaguely tells a story about a pretty girl named Laura, whom the cowboy loves and misses. But the song never explains who she is or what's happened to her. She's simply gone away.

As a young man, that drove Nathan crazy. He tried to learn the song a few times, but without knowing what happened to Laura or even what her relationship was to the cowboy, he didn't know how to approach it. Now he thought those omissions were brilliant, because the song really isn't about Laura or even the lovelorn cowboy. It's simply about being alone in a lonely place and wishing that you weren't. Nathan certainly knew what that felt like.

*Ride through the lonely night,  
Ride through the day.  
Keep that herd moving on,  
Moving on its way.*

The young singer was putting more Texas drawl into his voice than anyone in a Celtics jersey should. Nathan moved closer so he could hear what Kit was doing. She had her eyes closed, her bow hovering uncertainly above the strings of her fiddle. Then, with a long, soft downstroke, she began to play.

*Ride through the stormy night,  
Dark is the sky.  
Wish I'd stayed in Abilene,  
Where it's mighty warm and dry.*

Kit played low notes that underscored not only the melody but the loneliness of the lyric. Nathan had noticed before how quickly she was able to zero in on the basic emotion of a tune and wrap her playing around it. It was as if her fiddle knew the unsaid things in the song, the feelings beneath the words: the mix of sadness, homesickness, and tiredness that cowboy had felt so many years ago, riding night herd on some rainy prairie, singing to himself.

*Weep, all you falling rains,  
Wail, winds, wail.  
All along, along, along,  
The Colorado Trail.*

Bobbing his head lightly to the beat, Nathan closed his eyes and wondered what it was about sad songs that appeal to us so much. Do we like being sad? Even the uptempo songs at the jam were usually about train wrecks, dead mothers, ghastly murders, and ghostly lovers walking these hills in long, black veils.

Maybe it's like those actors who say they prefer playing villains because they're more interesting. Our dark feelings have more complex palettes; at least in art they do. But Nathan had learned that form usually follows function in traditional music. Perhaps our unhappy feelings are more in need of examining than our happy ones. Who needs to solve happiness?

We need to understand the dark sides of life; that's where the dangers are. Why else would cowboys have sung all those sad love songs? It was the one time they could display their inner-selves, explore their feelings, and share them with friends. And those deeper feelings need attention, even on a cattle drive. Leave them alone too long, unexamined and unexpressed, and they fester like an untreated wound. Maybe that's why "Colorado Trail" leads us away from the particulars about Laura and the cowboy. Laura becomes everybody's absent love, and the cowboy's loneliness becomes everybody's loneliness. And doesn't the simple act of sharing that in a song make us a little less lonely?

Nathan opened his eyes because he heard Kit's voice. On the final chorus, she'd stopped fiddling and was adding a high vocal harmony. It was the first time he'd heard

her sing at the jam and he smiled. The magic of the jam was working; she and the music were becoming friends again.

After the song ended, he invited everyone to the after-party. A red-haired woman with an old mandolin quickly accepted and offered a ride to anyone who wanted to come. Nathan looked at Kit and said, "Why don't you come, too? You could get to know some of the regulars."

"I'd like that," she said, smiling and nodding her head.

