

Doctor Holbrook

by Jane Hannauer

It was a warm afternoon in early September, and we were walking along Nassau Street, Kathe and I, toward the car, having finished our shopping. I was walking backward, as Kathe would have none of hand-holding, let alone being carried, and was proceeding with the dogged gait common to tired two-year-olds. We were nearing the car when I fetched up hard against a large person whom I'd not noticed, of course. He steadied me as I whirled to apologize.

"Well, Miss Chamberlain," he said, "--- no, I guess not." He had seen Kathe.

"Doctor Holbrook!" This was all wrong. Clyde Holbrook belonged to Oberlin and my college memories. He was a professor of religion and much admired by his students, not just for profundity and scriptural insights, but because he always knew each one of the two hundred members of his current classes, by name, within the first week of the semester. His was the Voice of Authority, backed by imposing stature, well more than six very solid feet.

I reintroduced myself and my daughter, who had her face buried in my neck.

"Why are you in Princeton?" I asked, gracelessly.

"We're here on sabbatical; Dot and I have a big house on Jefferson Street. Do you still play violin? I'm perishing for chamber music."

Now, I hadn't so much as picked up my violin since graduation, five years earlier. Three years of teaching sixth grade and two years of motherhood had been quite enough to keep me busy. I felt affection for the instrument, knew where it was, dusted around it regularly, and hadn't ever considered playing it. I had no reason, nothing to work toward. But this was Clyde Amos Holbrook, an Authority Figure, if ever I had known one...

"Of course!" I lied quickly, with false conviction.

"Great!" he said. "I've all the Mozart Quartets with me, and my 'cello of course, and our living room is large. Dot will play viola, and I can find a second violin, I think."

And so I began again to practice violin. Armed with a volume of Mozart -- the first violin part, with one specific quartet to prepare -- I began to work the rust out of fingers and shoulder muscles in preparation for the assigned evening two weeks hence. My shoulder muscles ached,

my pitch grew more nearly true, my fingers became striped with hard work and aluminum-wound strings; I was determined not to disgrace myself, not to have lied.

Our first rehearsal was barely passable; all breakdowns and false starts. But the nearly forgotten delight in working out a difficult passage with like-minded players came back. We four were amateurs, but as the year went on, we progressed through both volumes of Mozart quartets, and steadily improved to the point where we could think as one, let the music breathe at cadences, and communicate with glances, or the twitch of an eyebrow. Quartet playing has an intimacy unique unto itself, and I was hooked. We had gradually moved from playing notes to making music.

That year led to the next ones, becoming a member of the local chamber music community, the Community Orchestra, lessons with Joseph Kovacs who became my friend and demanding mentor, gigs beyond number in churches and high school pit orchestras, the Trenton Symphony, the Collegium Musicum of Princeton.

As the years went by, I was mother to four children, and dealt with life common to that state; with childish clamor and minor emergencies all day long: hot-and-cold running Mommy. I often longed for order and quiet. Evenings of chamber music or Symphony helped preserve my sanity

against routine days of confusion.

Music is played against a canvas of precious silence; audience chit-chat dies, the conductor waits and then raises his baton, gives the down beat, and the music starts. There is a shape to it: an orderly beginning, middle, and end, and that final instant of silence before the applause begins. Breathing space.

Today, retired to Kendal at Oberlin, I play in two different piano trios and the Oberlin College and Community Strings, and still enjoy the challenge of striving to make music of notes.

I never talked with Dr. Holbrook again after he returned to Oberlin. I hope he knows how much he altered the course of my life, and how glad I am to have bumped into him.