

## WARTS'N'STRAW

In the fall there's a time when hockey's starting up, when there's new paint on the boards and fresh ice, when you get new skates and, maybe, new equipment, and it's the best time of the year. I was saving up for Cooperalls. My mom and dad were going to pay half. Things were so great I couldn't believe it ... until Julian spoiled it.

From the start Julian wasn't normal. I mean, let's face it, what kind of kid carries around a book all day, even on the first day of school? At recesses he'd lean up against the corner, where the gym meets the west wing, and read books that were ... well ... they were this thick!

In gym class he'd complain about so-called "tummy aches" just to get out of playing soccer or floor hockey. He never joined the rest of us during recesses. He'd find a sheltered place out of the wind and read those books of his. ' Course, he got teased a lot.

One day, in the change room, after Phys. Ed., I was teasing him. "Hey, Julie, I don't get it. I mean, if you don't play soccer or basketball or hockey, what do you play?"

He was pulling a shirt over his scrawny shoulders and putting his glasses back on. "I play the violin, Steven," he mumbled.

Well, I didn't believe it. I busted out laughing. The rest of the guys were killing themselves, too. Julian got all red-faced and walked out in a huff.

After that everybody got on his case. I mean, even the girls picked on him! We'd play jokes on him. Like, one time, Randy and me stuck the pages of his Astronomy project together. Did Ms. Shaffer ever give him heck for that. Julian cried like a real suck over it, but we didn't mean anything by it. We were just having a little fun.

After school he never hung around with nobody. He'd just go straight home to his grandfather's place and I'd hear him practicing away on that old violin. He lived across the back from me and sometimes, at night, I could hear the old man giving him lessons. They'd go over and over the same piece 'til I thought I'd go crazy. If there's anything I can't stand, it's that sissy classical music. I mean,

what's it good for, besides playing over the loudspeakers so girls can figure skate to it?

I didn't mean to break his violin, either. Honest, I was sitting in my desk 'cause Mrs. Shaffer made me stay in again at recess. I had to finish this stupid Math homework I didn't get done. Julian was heading out the door so I stuck out my foot and caught him perfectly. Down he went. Then I heard the crunch of wood.

How was I to know he was practicing for the festival with Mr. Gibson? He shouldn't have been carrying his stupid violin around the class.

“Look what you've done!” he screamed at me, holding out the broken violin. He was really steamed!

“Aw, gimme a break, Mozart! Why don't you watch where you're walkin’?” I said.

“You ... you broke it on purpose you ... you ...”

“Careful now Julian,” I said, smirking at him, “You know how Old Lady Shaffer feels about swearing in class...”. I was enjoying myself, seeing how angry it made him, knowing that he was too puny to think about hitting me.

Well, Julie the Stoolie told Shaffer and she told my parents. My mom grounded me for a week. But worst of all ... I had to apologize to the little suck and buy him a brand new violin!

“You can forget about your new hockey equipment, too,” my mom said. “We can't afford both.”

That did it! If I didn't hate him before, I sure did after I saw my Cooperalls going down the you-know-what for some dumb violin!

This here Kiwanis Festival is put on every year for all the music types in town. Would you believe it? Julie not only wins the violin contest, but also the junior composition. Turns out he's a songwriter, too. Well, big deal!

A week or so after the Festival Mrs. Schaffer announces that we're all in for a special treat. Guess what it was! "Mozart" is gonna play for us! Seems he's brought his wonderful, new, violin and will be practicing with Mr. Gibson, so he can perform for us at the assembly on Friday. Oh, I am overjoyed!

Anyway, I was really too busy to worry about him. The big Westside Tournament began on Friday night after school and we had to play Cedar Hill Warriors in the first game. I was already counting the goals. I could see myself, looking good, even in my old equipment, cruising in from my wing, faking out the defenceman, deking the goalie, and tucking one into the top corner.

We filed into the gym for the assembly and had to listen to the principal blabber on about the talented musicians of Lakeview Heights and their achievements at the recent Festival. Big deal. I was daydreaming about what I'd do to that big defenceman from Cedar Hills who'd given me a cheap shot in the last league game, when they announced Julian.

As Julian went by on his way to the stage he did a strange thing. He stopped in front of me and winked! That's all. Just a wink, as if to say, "Hey, take notice."

"I'm going to play two pieces," he announced in that high thin voice of his, "The first is the piece I wrote for the Festival. It's called Minuet in D."

It was okay, I guess. Everybody clapped, but really it was kinda boring. Figure skating music.

"The last song is a very special one. It's a kind of musical mirror. I call it Warts'n'straw. I wrote it for my friend, Steven, who gave me this special violin."

I mean, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Had I heard it right? Had Julian called me his friend?

You know what he did next? He winked at me again. Then he started playing.

I've never heard a song like it before. It weaved and jumped all over, like a figure skater or a really good forward. It would skitter up high and dive down low. Everybody was listening. It was spooky and goose-bumpy and sent chills to the roots of your hair. It was roller coasters and ferris wheels and firecrackers

blazing ... until ... it paused and the air seemed to shimmer like a piece of saran wrap had passed through the gym...

You know, in that split second when he stopped, like a ball does at the top of its arc or when you see a puck sail past the goalie, I went somewhere I've never been before. Best way I can describe it was the place, I guess, where Julian goes when he plays his violin. I felt how it felt to be Julian. I even felt the bad parts, like having people tease you and make jokes about you. I was in a world where it wasn't weird to play classical music and to read books on the playground.

... then 'Warts'n'straw' repeated, only this time he played it backwards and the firecrackers and ferris wheels and roller coasters pulled back and the music bobbed and dove and screamed up high, rolling itself up until, finally, it stopped.

The crowd clapped politely, but I felt like going crazy, just like at a hockey game. I wanted to cheer and stamp and see everybody gathered around Julian as he came off the stage. I wanted them to mob him like they mob a goalie who gets a shutout or a forward who scores the winner in overtime. I've never felt anything like it. It was ... it was... I don't know, like if the world was different and things were the other way round would I be the weird one. Would I seem as strange as Julian then?

But Julian just walked back to his seat and sat down. Then he looked over at me and, you know what? He winked again!