

The Tiniest Guitar in the World

by
Martha Brooks

There are all kinds of girls who play electric guitars and play them well, but the irresistibility of that instrument is still something you could say was a "guy thing," without sounding too sexist. Maybe that's what makes Donald Petrie do what he does in "The Tiniest Guitar in the World." It seems an unusual idea, even to him, and proves to be a first-class challenge. But there are more challenges ahead, as he must defend his actions. This is a story about differing perceptions and a story about caring. It's a story about "travelling on into the light," which, not incidentally, is the title of the anthology from which the story is taken.

Martha Brooks, Budge Wilson, and R. P. MacIntyre are the three writers who, I think, are probably most responsible for putting short stories for kids and, especially, young adults, back on the bookshelves of this country.

I am following Fletcher P. (Flint) Eastwood down the hall. I've been ordered to his office, where we will sit and the lid on his good eye will jump up and down like a butterfly in a frenzy before he'll calmly ask, "What's up, Petrie?"

I will respond politely, "Nothing, *sir*," because my father went to an army academy and he taught me that this always makes a good impression. It also drives Mr. Eastwood crazy. The way I say *sir*, he can't find any fault with.

He's built like a retired football player and sort of bounces when he walks. His suits—all three of them—fit too tight in the jacket and too loose in the pants. There's a little ring of blondish gray hair that sits on his ears like a costume store bald wig, and the skin on top is firebrick red. Which is why we call him Flint.

His dinky office smells of eraser crumbs and old coffee and unidentifiable aftershave. You might say it's like a second home to me.

We get inside. He closes the door. "Sit," he says to the orange chair in front of his desk.

I sit down and kick at a paper ball near my feet. Beside it is a paper clip. I pick that up so I'll have something to fiddle with.

Flint settles in behind the desk, sighs, wipes his face with a wrinkly hand. I shoot a look at him in time to catch the butterfly-in-a-frenzy eyelid maneuver. His chair makes that old familiar squeak as he leans dangerously far back.

He pauses, then comes forward fast. His elbows hit the desktop with a hollow sound like distant drums.

"What's up, Petrie?"

I've twisted the paper clip so that it's like a square with half the top missing. "Nothing, *sir*."

"Goddamn it, Donald—don't patronize me. Mrs. Lindblad saw you outside at noon."

"What? *Sir*?"

"You and your friends. Robert Isles and that . . . Goran fellow—Chris. Loose brown cigarette papers. Does that ring a bell?"

"Loose *brown* cigarette papers?"

He leans in on me. "Are you boys selling drugs?"

The paper clip now resembles a mutilated snake.

"Put that thing down and answer me."

I toss the clip. It bounces off the desk leg and veers back, tangling itself into the laces of my boot. "No, *sir*," I mumble, pulling it off.

The worst thing about somebody making up their mind that you're a liar is that you can tell the truth until you're blue in the face, but they aren't going to believe you, anyway.

"What's that? What did you say?" He's practically lying on his desk.

"I said, no, *sir*."

"Dammit, look at me when you answer."

I look. The other eye is glass. The color doesn't quite match his good eye.

"No . . . *sir*."

"You know, Donald, I can't think of a single other person in this school who spends more time in this office, but it never seems to faze you."

He talks to me a lot about stuff not fazing me—my poor grades, my total disregard for the school's dress code, and my being a disturbing influence.

"You were *seen*, Donald. Outside, at *noon*. *Rolling marijuana cigarettes and selling them to the seventh-grade boys!*"

At noon. Outside at noon. Robert Isles, Chris Goran, and I found a dead squirrel. It was flattened—fairly fresh roadkill. Its mouth was open, its teeth bared. Its right arm stretched up past its ear. The other hung down around its belly. Goran starts joking around that it's lip synching. Isles is sucking on a can of root beer. Goran holds up the squirrel. Makes its left paw twitch frantically up and down. Isles spews root beer all over the ground. And that's when I get this unusual idea.

Goran's little brother, Paul, walks by with Simon Wiebe. We make them go into their classroom and bring out a pair of scissors. And what happens next is pretty amazing. Everybody hangs around watching. It's about the most creative thing I've done since I was a little kid.

"Donald, I've given you more warnings and second chances than just about anyone in the history of this school," Flint says, fishing around his shirt pocket under his gray pinstriped suit jacket. He pulls out a fresh pack of gum. "What is it you care about?" He picks at the outside wrapper. "I'd really like to know." He can't get the tab undone. He finally mangles it open and offers me a stick.

"No, thanks, sir. It's bad for my teeth."

Patiently smiling, he takes a piece of gum for himself. He's going to act all buddy-buddy now. This is the ace up his sleeve, as they say. Sometimes you go to see the vice-principal or a counselor or whatever because you really need help. I don't know if they think you *enjoy* asking for help, or what. But you're depressed. They offer you a piece of gum. You tell them your problems because who else have you got to turn to—your mother? Then they offer you some turd piece of advice that messes you up even more because on top of everything else, you now have to worry about this new evidence they have on you, and about how they'll use it against you whenever they're in the right mood and you're in the wrong place.

So much for the buddy system.

Flint leans his arm on the desk, his chin on the palm of his hairy hand. It's his I'm-open-to-anything-you-have-to-tell-me-because-I'm-a-reasonable-caring-human-being position.

"Have you given any further thought to what you might do after you leave school?"

He's leading up to my becoming a drug dealer. Or to washing dishes at Mr. Steak for the rest of my life.

"Well, sir, lately I've been thinking seriously about marine biology."

"I see." He chews away. Waits for me to continue. We've been over this ground before.

"I worry about oil spills. Stuff like that."

"Stuff . . . like . . . that," he repeats, drawing out my words like my life is some kind of free-for-all display. He wisely

nods. Puckers his lips. Sniffs. I know what he's going to say next and that it will make him very, very happy to say it.

"You are aware, of course, that you'll have to finish high school first. With good grades. Just when were you planning to get those?"

I feel a little nauseated. A little hot. A bit enraged. "To get them, sir?" I say innocently.

He slams down his hand flat on the desktop. I must jump about ten feet.

"Don't be smart with me! I've given you hours of my time. I've tried to reach you. I've been lenient with you. I've done everything I could to be the best possible friend I can. And I *am* your friend, Donald. But today just takes the cake. What are we going to do about it?"

"We?"

"Don't you know I could have you arrested right now? For trafficking? Don't you know that?"

"I wasn't selling drugs. And there's no such thing as brown cigarette papers. Name one time you have *ever* seen a brown cigarette paper, sir."

"Well. She was obviously wrong about the color," he says, like he's thinking for the first time since I walked in here that he might be losing ground.

"She didn't see brown cigarette papers today," I say in a soft, respectful tone. "What she saw was a brown root beer can being cut up and rolled."

I sit back and wait to see what he'll do next. His face shows a real struggle. He's madly trying to stuff back whoever it is behind the vice-principal mask he dons every morning as he's getting that fat knot into his silk tie.

"A root beer can?"

"Would I make up such a thing?"

"Possibly. This may sound like a dumb question, Donald, but why would you be cutting up a root beer can?"

I take a deep breath. Might as well tell the truth. Who knows? He just might believe it.

"I was making an electric guitar, sir."

"Go on." He's got this steady bead on me, like if I blow this one I'm a dead man.

"A very small electric guitar. Not a real one, you understand, but something that looked like one. For a dead squirrel, sir. I made it so it would look as if he was really playing it. Sort of caught forever in the moment, if you know what I mean—kind of like a statue."

Flint crinkles up his forehead and allows this to register. He takes his pencil and sort of dances it between his hands. He then plops it into a stained white mug along with the other yellow pencils and cheap blue pens.

"Where is this squirrel?"

"He's lying on his back, sir, out in the school yard. I can show you if you like."

"And the guitar?"

"It's here in my pocket. I didn't have time to set him up yet, so to speak." The cold aluminum warms quickly in my fingers. "I actually didn't know if I felt like just leaving it out there, either. The guitar, I mean." I hold it out to Flint.

He takes it and studies it for a minute. Then he sort of sags over his desk.

"This actually resembles a guitar," he says, looking up at me with wonder on his face.

"Yes. I know it does," I say, suddenly very happy. It's only at this exact moment that I realize that it does. And that it's actually beautiful to look at. I start to laugh. My eyes smart.

"No. I mean truly it does," he says, pointing to the delicate strings. "How did you do those?"

"I cut the can up really fine there. I mean at that point of making it."

"You must have a *very* steady hand. This stuff looks almost *shaved*."

"Well, I did sort of shave it. It was a kind of experimental shear-and-shave sort of thing."

"Does it actually fit the squirrel?"

"Yes, it does. We tried it out. It looks very lifelike."

"Believe me," he says, still looking at the guitar, "I know more than you think I do about what you're going through. You have an original turn of mind, Donald. If you could only find a way of using that to your benefit, instead of always using it like a suit of armor, then you'd have a sweet life."

"A sweet life?"

"Yes."

I wait for him to elaborate on this. He doesn't. He hands back my guitar. He plays with a pile of papers on his desk. "I pulled you out of your last class," he says, finally. "You might as well go on home now."

"Really? Thanks."

Flint's biggest problem is that he still likes kids, but we've finally worn him out.

I pause at the door, and on a kind of whim I say, "You really should be looking into another line of work, Mr. Eastwood. Something that makes you feel happier."

"That would be terrific, Don," he says tiredly. "If I could only find the energy."

"You'll figure something out," I say.

I close the door as soft as a feather, so as not to jar his nerves any further.

I start down the hall. This is a small private school. I've been coming here ever since three-quarters of the way through first grade. The elementary school and the junior and senior high schools are separated by double glass doors. I don't often have a reason anymore to be in the elementary part. But as I slide between the doors, I'm glad I came. I've entered another world—it's a trip back. Colored construction paper taped to the walls, framed decorated poems entitled "What Is Spring?" Some little kid has pasted cotton balls onto brown crayoned lines to show that SPRING IS PUSSY WILLOWS!

I'm thinking about my second-grade teacher, Miss Huska. She had black hair and green eyes and I fell in love with her on the first day back to school after Christmas vacation. My dad had left on New Year's—packed up as much as he could get into his big brown suitcase and left for good, and even though I didn't know exactly what was going on, like that I wouldn't see him from then on except sometimes in the summer, I felt sad and sick. At recess, when everyone else went outside, Miss Huska let me stay with her, indoors. That was when I decided to invite her to have lunch with me.

In the smaller grades, the teachers would sit down and have lunch with a student if they asked. First you had to write out a formal invitation (to improve your writing

skills), and then they would write back. When I handed her my invitation with a picture of a lady and a boy eating lunch in their bathing suits (beside a big sand castle), she laughed and said, "Thank you, Don. This is for *me*?"

She always said, "This is for *me*?" like you'd just handed her a million bucks.

After the bell rang, we all sat in our desks for art class. Miss Huska smiled when she gave me her reply, which read, "Dear Don: Yes, I will have lunch with you. Thank you for your gorgeous picture! And thank you for inviting me. Yours truly, Miss Huska."

That morning, in art class, I repeated in my mind the word *gorgeous*, like a prayer, as I made her three lime green tissue-paper roses. She put them in her pencil can, where they stayed for months and gradually got faded by sunlight until we were let out for the summer.

Outside the second-grade room, which used to be Miss Huska's class, a boy is sitting in the hall, on a sunny spot, his legs sprawled. He's flicking his chewed-up pencil against his knee. The door is closed, but I can still hear the voice of his teacher on the other side, raving on about arithmetic.

I shove my hand into my jacket pocket. I feel the feather-light strings of the guitar. The kid looks really bored, waiting by the door until his punishment is over. I push against the toe of his shoe to get his attention. He's skinny, with a grown-out brush cut. I hand over to him my work of art.

He looks at it, turns it upright, raises his eyebrows like a TV cartoon. He smiles. He has the kind of teeth that'll need braces in a couple of years.

I'm beginning to wonder if he appreciates what I've just handed him. I remember reading somewhere that art doesn't become art until it goes out into the world.

"It's yours," I say.

Even as I say it, part of me wants to take it back. It looks better and better in his hands. I can't believe I've created something so . . . gorgeous. That I actually did that. Finally I say, testy as hell, "Do you want it, or don't you?"

The kid pulls it to his chest, and my heart sinks. Then he gives me the craziest wink and starts madly fingering that tiniest guitar in the world like he's some big-time rocker.

He gets so involved that he doesn't even notice me leave, my boots clacking down the hall.

Outside, the sun is bright and the air is cold. On my way through the school grounds, I pass the squirrel, on his back, forever playing the invisible guitar. I'm grateful to him. Maybe I should make more stuff out of rejected junk material—a sort of personal statement on overlooked beauty.

I lean over, touch my right hand to my forehead, and salute him. After that, I turn and head home into the strong spring wind.
