

Strings

He sat in the first pew of the half-empty church, listening to the priest's dreary voice as he recited prayers to the dark coffin in front of him. Jacques Tailor looked away from his dead wife's photographed face. One tear leaked from a bright aqua eye, followed by another, then two more until eventually his features were drowned in a flow of salt water.

When the ceremony ended, he rode in the limo to the graveyard, alone with the driver. Nothing was said as the coffin was lowered into the ground.

Walking home, Jacques thought about his wife, Malinda. At least she'd lived a long life, full of colors and music. Malinda had been able to pick up any instrument you set in front of her and play any song, or sing any note you named her entire life. Eventually her joints became stiff, and a guitar was useless to her, but she never stopped listening. Day and night Malinda would lie in bed, and Jacques would bring her hot soup, and they would let melodies take them.

Jacques, for his part, was hopeless at playing music, but never got tired of hearing it. Thinking about this a few days after Malinda's funeral, he decided to honor her memory and start taking lessons. He was much younger than his wife, and had high hopes for his musical future.

"Malinda's first instrument...was the guitar. So many years ago..." Jacques reminisced. His voice was quiet, but rough, and suddenly he felt a surge of happiness, about what he was going to take on. He decided that he would learn the first song she had ever learned to sing: Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.

The following Tuesday, Mr. Hobbs, Jacques's new guitar instructor, showed up at the door, two glossy guitars in hand.

"Good afternoon," Jacques said, smiling pleasantly.

"Hey." Mr. Hobbs was young, and looked impatient to be teaching an old man like Jacques, who was biting his lip anxiously.

"Come in, come in," he said quickly, closing the door behind Hobbs. They sat down on two soft chairs.

"So. You wanna learn the guitar, huh?"

"Oh, yes please," Jacques replied eagerly.

“Well, first you gotta learn the names of the strings, biggest to smallest – lowest to highest. First one’s E, yeah... no, no, *first* one, the big one. All right, next...”

This went on for a good hour, by which time Mr. Hobbs had become very annoyed, as Jacques had only managed a couple of notes. Hopeless, he thought. Jacques paid him and he agreed to come the next day, and on Friday, and those three days for every coming week.

After just the first lesson, Jacques’s hands were already sore. He hadn’t taken his arthritis and stiffened joints into account when he’d decided to learn the guitar. Maybe this would be harder than he’d thought. And Mr. Hobbs, well, Jacques felt like he had disappointed him, but he wasn’t about to give up now – he would keep trying, for Malinda.

Lessons went on much the same way for the next few weeks. Jacques’s hands were so cramped he could barely play a clean note. Mr. Hobbs was so irritable that Jacques even thought about hiring a new teacher. He didn’t, and soon Hobbs was at the end of his rope.

“Listen, old man. Why are you doing this anyway? What’s the point if you can’t even move your fingers?” he cried one rainy Wednesday.

“My wife, Malinda. The most beautiful musician you’ve ever heard, she passed away a few weeks ago. Her health was never perfect, and it got the better of her eventually. She never stopped singing, never stopped listening. I want to learn ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ for her. I miss her.” Jacques was tearing up.

Mr. Hobbs was taken aback. “Oh, I – I’m so sorry. I had no idea, I’m sure she was amazing. Maybe – maybe if you pretend she’s right there next to you while you’re playing, something will happen. Everybody has a breakthrough sometime.”

Jacques did exactly that. Every time an E rang through the room, her eyes were there. He thought about the little crescent-shaped necklace she refused to ever take off, he thought about her days as a kindergarten music teacher, and her funny smile with every chord.

He practiced and practiced every day, year after year. Mr. Hobbs softened his tone and began to respect Jacques for how hard he worked, but he never seemed to get anywhere.

Time raced by, and soon Mr. Hobbs had been teaching Jacques for two years, and he still hadn’t gotten any better – he’d never had that great breakthrough Hobbs always talked about. His

hands had gotten worse, he couldn't sit up straight when he played, and he was becoming cranky. Jacques cancelled lessons more and more often, and he kept forgetting why he was doing this in

Strings, 6-8, 3

the first place.

One day Jacques got a call from Mr. Hobbs, saying that he would be moving.

"Why's that, Mr. Hobbs?"

"Well, Jacques, I got a call for this great job in Philadelphia, and I need to take it."

"Philadelphia? That's very far, Hobbs, how are you going to teach me from all the way across the country? Are you going to take the plane to me or shall I take the plane to you? I'll probably have to use a wheelchair at the airport, my cane doesn't keep me moving very fast at all..."

"Jacques, I'm going to have to stop our lessons. There's nothing else I can do, I'm so sorry. You're my favorite student I've ever had, Jacques. I've never met anyone who wants to play the guitar more than you, and no one who does has a better reason."

"What was my reason again, Hobbs? Remind me."

"Malinda. Jacques, do me a favor and keep playing the guitar, alright?"

"But Hobbs, it's hard. I can't do it anymore, my hands don't do anything, my arthritis kills me every day, we both know I'm never going to get anywhere. There's no reason for me to continue unless you're going to teach me."

"Jacques, don't ever say that. I have to go, they're starting to board."

"Goodbye, Hobbs."

"Bye, Jacques."

Jacques kept playing guitar, listening to Mr. Hobbs, but he never got any better, just like he said. His joints got stiffer and stiffer and he didn't care as much anymore with Mr. Hobbs to be there for him. He never managed to learn "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

Four years later, Hobbs was sitting in his living room in Philadelphia when he got a call from someone with a very familiar name.

"Mr. Hobbs? This is Malinda Taylor."

"Malinda?" Hobbs replied incredulously.

“Jacques Taylor was my grandfather. I’m calling to tell you that he passed away recently, and I thought it would be right to invite you to his funeral. He looked up to you, Mr. Hobbs, and I know he’d want you to be there.”

“I - of course. Yes, I’ll be there.”

After putting the phone down, Hobbs wasn’t completely sure what to do. He would go to
Strings, 6-8, 4

the funeral in a few days, but in the meantime, he picked up his guitar and began to think. *What should I do for him, what did he do for Malinda? Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.*

He decided to learn a long, beautiful guitar arrangement to the general tune of Jacques and Malinda’s song.

When he showed up at the church the following Saturday, guitar in hand, the young Malinda Taylor looked at him in surprise. Why was he holding a guitar?

After the service and the burial, he sat down next to the newly-dug grave and began to play “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Everybody from both families understood the significance of the song, and appreciated the gesture. Soon the whole family was singing quietly along, between tears, led by Mr. Hobbs. Jacques had never been good at playing the guitar, but he could still listen to it.