

*"You aren't loved. No one loves you - just walk ... faster ... FASTER! Good ... now jump ... JUMP I SAY! ... jump into the water! Pretty, isn't it? Don't worry Strummer, your family won't remember you. No one will remember you. They won't miss you at all. Just jump dammit! Do it! Do it NOW! ... JUMP! ... JUMP!!!"*

I began sinking down, further and further into a dark, cold abyss. My ears popped as I tried to scream, but I made no sound. They were right. My family wouldn't remember me. They wouldn't miss me. I was done. I closed my eyes and waited to drown in the sinister silence. But the silence didn't come. Instead, I heard a child's voice.

*"Daddy? Why is that man in the alley?"*

I cracked my eyes open just enough to see the fuzzy outline of a little boy standing at my feet staring down at me.

*"Is he dead?"* The boy asked his father. *"Or is he just sleeping?"*

The boy's father didn't answer; he just glared at me, repulsed by my sight, then he took his son by the arm and whisked him away.

*"Don't stare,"* The father said to his son, *"it's not polite."*

But as the man and his young son were walking away, the boy couldn't stop himself from glancing curiously over his shoulder at me.

*"Damn kid should listen to his father."* I muttered to myself as I slowly dragged myself up off the street. My body was tight and sore from sleeping on the concrete. I arched my arms high above my head to try to stretch the ache out of my body only to be blasted by a shower of dirty street water splashed in my direction by a passing cyclist oblivious to the stagnant puddle of spilled booze, urine, and rain water at my feet.

“Great.” I remarked sarcastically as I wiped my face dry before snatching up my guitar and heading out to try and find a spot where I could perform in solitude. As I walked, I noticed fancy new clothes in the windows of the retail shops and I immediately envisioned myself in new clothing.

*“You don’t need new clothes, you have us.”* The voices inside my head were back. I pressed my hands tight to my ears to try to make them stop.

“Shut up! I said. “Just shut up!”

A pair of teenage girls walked by me whispering under the breath as they passed. But I could hear them. I could hear them loud and clear. Their words stung like a slap in the face.

“What a freak.” They said. “Just look at those dreads ... I’ll bet he hasn’t had a shower in like, forever!”

I pressed my ears even harder and dashed down the sidewalk trying to get away from them - away from the voices, away from the petty teenage girls. I needed to find somewhere safe. Somewhere no one could find me. I walked faster and faster until several blocks had passed under my feet. I was on the edge of town when I stumbled on a small alley between a Chinese restaurant and a chocolate shop. It seemed a good fit, it was dark and quiet, just what I wanted, just what I needed. I pulled my beat-up guitar out of its case and started to play.

My guitar was everything to me. It was my escape - my solace - my Heaven. When I played my guitar, everything bad melted away. I could close my eyes and get lost in the music. My fingers would glide instinctively up and down the neck, picking out each chord, each note, as if they weren’t even a part of me. And when I played, I always attracted a crowd. The music was a magnet to them. When I played, they didn’t care that I was dirty, or crazy, or poor. It seemed funny how they’d all come to watch someone like me, but I liked the attention, and when I finished a song, someone in the crowd would always shout, “Play another one!” And I always would.

This night was no different, their applause rained down on me. They were asking for more. A quiet smile crossed my face as I played another song, and another, and another. I kept on playing until my fingers were cold and cracked and started to bleed. I didn't pay attention to the pain because the crowd was getting bigger and bigger. I played and played, until my fingers were so numb and caked with blood that I couldn't play any more. I tried bringing my frozen fingers back to life by cupping them to my face and breathing warm air into them. I rubbed them vigorously back and forth against each other, like I was trying to start a fire, but they remained cold and numb. Without my music to hold their interest, the crowd began to thin. Within minutes, they all had vanished.

Dejected, I slumped down onto the wall of the alley. My crowd was gone, and I knew that when the music stopped, *the voices* would return. It was a battle I could not win, so I packed up my guitar and headed out to try and find a safer place to sleep. The streets were congested as usual, but for some reason I felt at home. It was a feeling I hadn't had in a while, but as I walked, I began to cough. It was a sharp, violent cough that burned my chest.

*"Boy, That didn't sound too good."*

The voices were back. They jabbed at me with their laughter.

"It's just something stuck in my throat." I shot back. "It'll be gone by morning."

*"Sure ... whatever you say."* The voices mocked.

I continued walking, desperately trying to ignore them. I walked until I found a little church on the other side of town. It looked warm and secure. I decided to spend the night there. The door to the church was open, so I crept inside and laid down in one of the back pews. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

*"Run! ... Hurry! ... They're coming! ... They're going to hurt her! Move... MOVE!"*

“What?... Who? ... Why?” I was dizzy, and groggy. Everything was pitch black and my head was spinning. Shadows of creatures moved in the darkness. Groaning voices echoed off the walls sending shivers down my spine. I was confused and scared. I wanted to get out of there, to wake up, but I couldn’t move and I began to cry.

*“They’re going to hurt her! Save her Strummer ... you have to save her!”*

“What? ... Where are they? ... Who are they? ... Wait, how do you know my name?”

*“STRUMMER!” Save me Strummer! Save me, son, save me!”*

“Mom? Is that you?” I sobbed.

*“Strummer ...”* She moaned, her voice trailing off to a faint whisper. *“Help. Help me. Help me! Help meeeeeee ...”*

There was silence.

“Mom? ... Mom? ... MOM? ... Don’t leave me Mom! I love you!”

I tried to talk to her, to save her, but she was gone. There was nothing. No more voices. No more shadows - just me, in an empty, dark church. But in the darkness I noticed a beam of light coming from underneath two massive doors at the front of the church. Curious, I walked through the doors and found myself standing in a giant room. The room was completely empty except for a box in the middle of the floor. Suddenly, a short, old woman, dressed in all black appeared by my side.

She turned and looked at me with melancholy eyes, but she didn’t say a word. She just took my hand in hers and slowly walked me toward the box. As we drew closer, I was startled to discover the box was a casket.

I tried to pull away from the old woman, but she kept a firm grip on my hand and kept walking me toward the casket. Tears were welling up in her eyes, but still, she said nothing.

When we got to the casket, she let go of my hand and stepped back. I looked at the casket lid, and then I looked at the old woman. She nodded at me as if

to say “open it” and then she turned and vanished. I wanted to vanish myself – to get out of there, but some unexplainable force kept me from moving, and before I knew it, my hand was reaching out and slowly lifting the casket lid until I saw a vague outline of my own face and my blood-caked hands in the shadows underneath.

I slammed down the lid and jumped away from the casket. The loud crash of the slamming lid jolted me awake. Terrified and puzzled by my dream, I looked around and felt my surroundings.

“*Did you like your dream?*” The voices said.

They were back again.

“Shut up – just shut up!” I yelled.

“*Did you like the part about your mom?*” They laughed, the same mocking laugh, just like before.

My blood began to boil. *They* knew I missed my mom. *They* knew I hadn’t seen in her in years. *They* knew she’d be heartbroken if she saw how I was today.

I was angry at the voices. Why wouldn’t they just leave me alone? I went to my guitar in pure desperation and began playing like mad, going up and down the fret board like lightning - up and down, up and down; my fingers throbbing, until *snap!* A string broke.

I sat and cried.

Winter was coming and I was beginning to lose all hope. The voices were relentless, and my music seemed lost. I missed my mom and I wondered if she still thought about me. I wondered if she really was in danger.

The days were getting shorter and colder and my cough was getting worse. The winter wind chilled me to the bone. My lungs felt like they were on fire as I coughed, until I coughed so hard I spit up blood on the sidewalk. I swore I had

pneumonia... or maybe cancer. Whatever it was, I knew it wasn't good.

The sun began to set as I walked. My body was numb from the bitter wind and my stomach was groaning. Weak and cold, I sat on a bench to rest myself. I hadn't played my guitar since I'd gotten sick, but I was in need of its soothing melody. I pulled it out of the case and then remembered the broken string.

I cried once again.

A little boy walked up to me as I cried. I recognized his face. It was the same little boy who'd been pulled away from me by his father last fall.

"Are you okay mister?" He asked.

I looked up at him. He stared at me, unaffected by my appearance.

"I broke a string." I replied.

"Oh." He said. "That's too bad."

The boy smiled at me and then began to walk away. His smile was warm and comforting and made me pick up my broken guitar. I plucked a note, and then a chord. It didn't sound that bad, even with the missing string.

The sound of my guitar made the boy stop and turn around. The boy smiled again, and then I smiled. It was exactly what I needed. I continued to play until chords and notes were effortlessly streaming from my fingers once again.

Delicate snowflakes started to fall, collecting on the sidewalk like little mounds of powdered sugar. But I didn't care, nor did I feel the cold. Soon, the boy's father came to collect his young son, but this time the father paused to watch me play. A small crowd gathered around me as darkness began to fall. Christmas lights twinkled in the trees above me illuminating the city street. It was magical, and I was at peace.

"Goodbye," The voices said.

With my guitar in hand and a smile on my face I closed my eyes.

"Goodbye." I said to myself.

"Goodbye."