

## **In the Park**

He places his old, brown guitar on the dead flowers in the park. The breeze is light and chilly. The sun makes its appearance, highlighting the gold and red colors of fall. Winter will be here soon. Pete shivers into his worn trench coat with the thought. Looking around, he sees a cigarette butt in the dead, wet grass. Pete picks it up—about three good drags left on it—and sets it and himself onto a park bench.

Pete closes his eyes against the rising sun and thinks of the cigarette. Who did it belong to? Could be a dead soul walking through the park on a lunch break. He knows that is probably the case, but Pete likes to imagine it belonged to a lovely lady—an artist or a dancer. A free spirit. The sun warms his face as he drifts off.

Twenty minutes later he hears the jingling bell of Juan and his ice cream cart. Pete opens his eyes and looks down at the smoked cigarette. He picks it up, rolls it between his finger and thumb and fumbles through his pocket for his matchbook. The short cigarette lit, Pete grabs his guitar.

Children rush toward Juan. Their parents or the bus has dropped them off, and Juan cashes in on their sugar addictions before the tardy bell rings.

Pete dodges the stampede of short beings and walks toward the courthouse to play for the melting pot of peers reporting for jury duty. He notices a kid with shaggy hair and a ball cap staring at the others. He isn't buying ice cream. Pete feels that he wants to but doesn't have the money.

The ball cap turns and shy blue eyes meet Pete's. Pete lowers his own ball cap and keeps walking.

He sets his cap upside down on the sidewalk in front of a bench. One that is positioned between the parking lot and the courthouse entrance—his bench. He unbuttons his trench and sits with one foot on the bench, one butt cheek on the bench's armrest and the other foot on the cement near his ball cap.

The first of the jurors starts from her car to the courthouse. Pete strums a few cords and adjusts the guitar's tuning. The lady walks on the far side of the walkway—keeping her distance from a degenerate like Pete.

Pete tries to make eye contact and the click cluck click of the lady's high heels quickens. Pete picks up her rhythm and burst into a punk rock / reggae song. He belts out the lyrics as his fingers set the old beat guitar on fire.

She hurries on, and Pete glances toward the parking lot. More like her emerge from their coffins of Japanese or German steel. He should switch to Dylan or REM for any chance at getting tips. Really he should switch to Céline Deon or Bette Midler, but Pete doesn't play that shit.

Near the end of the punk / reggae song, a kid that had a gangster look to him slows his walk. He digs his hands into his pockets, but comes out with nothing. He bobs his head to Pete's rendition of the song.

"Yeah, man," Pete hears him say to the ground as he shakes his head.

Pete goes into the final riff of the song and adds a “Yeah ah ah ah man,” to the end. He gives the young guy a nod and a smile and receives a nod and smile back.

Pete freestyles for a while, starting with a Michael Jackson song and weaving it into REM, Pussycat Dolls, Love and Rockets, and back to Jackson. Then into someone else and someone else, always coming back to Michael Jackson.

The poorer-dressed jury of peers give him paper, and the better-dressed jury give him coins—except for one grey-haired guy with a thousand dollar suit, a twinkle in his eye and a rhythm to his walk. He drops two ones in Pete’s cap.

When the crowd thins, Pete has seven dollars and fifty-seven cents in his cap. He plays two classic rock songs good for another dollar and heads back across the street to the park—searching for cigarette butts.

After he collects a few butts, Pete walks two streets east of the courthouse to a punk rock bar. Bikers go there on weekend nights for cheap beer and live music. On weekdays, skaters and musicians go there for pizza, video games and cheap beer. The bar opens at 10am. Forty minutes.

Pete lights the biggest of the smoked cigarettes he collected. He sits on the curb in front of the bar and strums his guitar. He notices the neon lights come on. He hadn’t seen anyone’s car in the lot, so Mikey must be opening today. He’s a bartender that rides his skateboard to work. Pete takes a long drag, burning the tobacco out to the filter and bangs on the door.

The worn wood door opens, and Mikey’s long, curly hair and big, dark eyes peek around the golden wood doors.

“Dude, Pete, dude, wus up?”

“Just wanna check the jukebox, Mikey,” Pete says. “Let me in a little early?”

“For sure, Pete, always,” says Mikey.

“Thank you,” Pete says. “Thank you.”

Mikey returns to the back of the bar to prepare for the day, and Pete moves straight to the jukebox. Nothing new has been added, so Pete plays the newest—the song that he started his morning playing for the potential jurors. He deposits three dollars and adds three more songs—one dollar a song or four for three dollars.

He sits next to the speaker and listens. Holding his guitar in his lap, he moves his fingers along the neck—not strumming. He adds changes and variation, but mostly listens.

After the first song, the owner of the bar comes in, and Pete goes to the bar and orders a three dollar can of beer. He leaves two bills and eight quarters on the bar for Mikey and counts what’s left. A dollar and fifty-seven cents, enough for a fast food chain bean and cheese.

He knows the owner gives Mikey shit for letting Pete in early just for the jukebox. If he hadn’t come in, Pete would have skipped the beer and had something more substantial for lunch. Last he ate was a bean and cheese this time yesterday.

Most days he listens to the juke, has a beer and eats pretty good, but a string broke on his guitar yesterday, and the pack of strings he had to buy to replace it left him broke and skipping dinner.

Pete resumes his spot next to the speaker, sips off his can and picks up the guitar. In his head, he hears a great variation for the song—the second of the four he paid for. He runs his fingers across the guitar frantically, but the third song starts and Pete doesn't get to hear the riff he wanted again. He keeps it in his head through the third song, working the cords, but not quiet getting it right.

Man he wants to hear that song again, but he has to save the money to feed himself. Listening to the last song, he drinks his beer and watches the first “real” customer of the day come in.

The owner shoves Mikey over toward the well-dressed salesman. Mikey asks what the guy is drinking and the salesman asks for the owner. Mikey and the owner switch places at the bar, and the non-customer starts his pitch for a special margarita machine that will make the bar a killing. The last song finishes.

Pete grabs his guitar and heads for the exit. He takes two step then turns around and goes to the bar. “Mikey can you give be a dollar bill for this change?” he asks and change clinks against the tiled bar. The juke only takes bills.

The owner and salesman look up from the brochures. Mikey scoops up the change, makes the register open with a “ding” and hands Pete a dollar bill. Pete plays his song and gets the variation down. Really down—dollar well spent.

Back at the courthouse—hungry—Pete strums whatever the people walking by look like they listen to. It takes him over an hour of playing for the released jurors—the lawyers or judges never tip because they don't want him there every day—before he gets enough for a bean and cheese plus tax.

Pete hears the jingle of Juan. Is it that late already? He transfers the change in his hat to the pocket of his trench coat and puts the hat on his head. The school bell rings to release the sugar addicts, and Pete grabs his guitar from the bench.

Like this morning, Pete dodges his way through the stampede, and like this morning, Pete sees wanting blue eyes under a ball cap. The kid with no ice cream looks at Pete then looks away.

Pete feels a pain in him. The kid's eyes... Pete knows what it is like to want, and the want in that kid's eyes touches Pete at his soul. Pete starts toward the shaggy head and blue eyes.

“Hey, you want some ice cream?” says Pete.

The eyes disappear under the bill of the cap.

“Come on. I'll buy you one.”

The eyes reappear.

“Come on,” Pete says, and the eyes and shaggy hair and ball cap come toward him. Pete walks to Juan, and the kid follows.

“What you want?” says Pete when they get to Juan.

Blue eyes look up at Pete. "Rainbow Rocket," says the boy.

"How much is a Rainbow Rocket, Juan?" asks Pete.

"One dollar with seventy-five cents," says Juan.

Pete knows he has a dollar and sixty-seven cents. He pulls all his money from his pocket and holds it in his palm. He looks at Juan. With hungry eyes, he looks at Juan, and his stomach rumbles. He can see that Juan knows he is about to spend everything he has on this poor kid. Pete pauses before he starts counting what's in his palm. Juan watches.

"I'm a little short," Pete says.

"For you, my friend, no problema," says Juan. "Special discount for you, my friend," he says, and like a *Hungry Hungry Hippo*, Juan's hand snatches the money from Pete's hand.

He looks at his empty hand, and when Juan hands the Rainbow Rocket to the kid, and the kid smiles, Pete smiles. "Thank you, Juan, thank you," says Pete.

They walk away from the cart, and the kid says, "Thank you, sir."

"My name's Pete."

The kid looks at him.

"Don't call me sir...call me Pete."

"Okay," says the kid.

Pete waits, "What should I call you...? Boy?"

"I'm Derek."

"Okay... See you, Derek," says Pete.

"Sir...I mean Pete," says Derek. "Was that all your money?"

"Not quite," says Pete and looks at the empty sidewalk next to the courthouse. "You should head home... Do your homework."

"Don't have any," says Derek. "What are you doing, Pete?"

"I just sit around," says Pete as he scopes for cigarettes. He holds his guitar up. "And play around on this," he says, still scanning the ground.

"Can I hear?" says Derek.

Pete looks up at the kid. "Uh, yeah."

He looks at the courthouse. A few people are coming out. He looks back at the kid and swings his guitar from his back.

"Woo hoo," he sings—loud.

Derek takes half a step back, and Pete makes his guitar wail. Derek starts to nod his head. After a minute the kid starts to dance like a monkey on crack. Pete laughs and starts moving his hips. They rock out for a couple of songs.

Pete says, "I gotta go, kid."

"Okay. Thanks for the ice cream, Pete."

"Yeah, you're welcome, Derek." says Pete as he turns away.

"And the music was cool," says Derek. "Way cool."

Pete keeps walking. "Glad you dug it," he says without looking back.

Derek waves at Pete's back then turns to walk home. Pete goes to Pete's bench. At home, Derek sits alone. Mom will be at work and Dad, well Dad is on Derek's mind for the first time in a while. He's going to ask Mom more about him tonight. Pete makes two bucks at his courthouse bench and goes to get a bean and cheese. Derek searches the computer for Punk / Reggae.

After the bean and cheese, Pete heads back to play for the people leaving the courthouse before it closes. He only plays for a few minutes and gets a quarter before the bean in cheese wants out. That always happens when he waits so long between meals. Pete picks up his hat and heads to the bathrooms in the park. While Pete shits, the jurors that were either chosen or detained for the whole day—just in case—hop in their cars and drive to their homes.

Pete heads to his current home—an over growth of shrubs behind the dead flowers. He has a blanket and a basket. The basket usually has a few snacks and on good days a beer in it. Not today. Today just the pictures. He flips through the pictures, and the eyes of the only women he loved shine back at him from the faded images.

Man, he wants a beer... And that kid, it makes him smile thinking of buying him the ice cream. He wants to do that again—everyday. Pete flips through the pics one more time, puts them back in the basket and grabs his guitar.

Pete sets his guitar on the dead flowers, sits on a bench and closes his eyes against the setting sun. He thinks of the people going to their homes, imagines having to worry about paying for one of those. Not all are going to homes, though; some to bars or night jobs to pay for the home. He thinks of Derek. He thinks of the bars. He thinks again of Derek. He opens his eyes and heads to a popular bar across from the one he went to earlier.

Out front of the bar, Pete sets his hat upside down and plays his guitar. The drinkers love him. They got cash for beer and give some of it to Pete on their way in. It only takes twenty minutes before the proprietor hears Pete and comes out front.

"Get the fuck outta here, bum... You... I fucking told you a couple of weeks ago to stay away. You think people wanna come in a place that has a bum out front?"

Pete picks up his cap and pockets his money.

"I'm calling the fucking police, you fucking degenerate. Lock your ass up..." Spit is flying now. "What don't you understand about no loitering?"

The bar owner points at the sign, and Pete gives him a nod and a peace sign and walks away, humming "Don't Worry Be Happy."

At the corner, Pete counts his money. Seven dollars and seventy-five cents. He goes to a liquor store and buys two tall cans. He takes his beers to a bench in the park, cracks one open, takes a few sips and hears some people then sees silhouettes coming his way. He takes another pull from the can, hides it behind the leg of the bench, tosses his hat on the ground and starts playing.

Like a Siren, he draws the silhouettes to him. Two guys with their girls listen to him. One of the guys drops some change in the hat. Before they leave, one of the girls takes a dollar from her purse.

"You're really good," she says and meets Pete's eyes.

Pete gives her a smile and a nod.

"Really good," she says and lets the dollar float into his hat. She grabs her man's arm and skips off into the night.

Pete watches them walk away, still nodding, still smiling, stills making the guitar's strings scream.

He finishes the song, then Pete finishes his beer. He looks at his second beer and already wants a third. He counts the money in his hat and puts it on his head. He counts the money in his pocket. Pete thinks of Derek and the ice cream. He goes to the liquor store and buys another tall can. With fifteen cents in his pocket, Pete goes back to the park. He strums his guitar and drinks cheap beer.

When Pete nears the end of his last tall can, he starts thinking of Derek again. He looks at his hat. Two quarters and some pennies from one of the four people that had walked by. He puts the change in his pocket and downs the rest of his beer.

Pete grabs to his guitar and heads back to the bar he was chased away from earlier. He feels excited. He feels buzzed. He starts to jog. When he gets there, Pete drops his hat almost right in front of the door. He starts playing—hard and fast. Someone drops a buck on the way in. Someone else drops another on their way out. After earning another buck, the owner comes rushing out.

Pete moves his hat further away from the entrance with his foot and keeps playing. The owner is cussing and screaming. Pete is twirling and jumping, playing and singing.

"That's it," the owner runs back into the bar. "I'm calling the cops," he yells over his shoulder.

Pete dances over to the open doorway. He starts to thrust his pelvis into the bar, strumming and singing, "He's gonna call the police...yeah, the fucking police." More hip thrust, then, "Chase away the entertainment," he sings. "The talent might get arrested." He spins the guitar behind his back, hip thrusts then yells into the bar, "Party's out here, fuckers."

Pete swings the guitar back in front of him and plays and sings and twirls some more. An image of Derek dancing earlier flashes through his head.

People come out to watch. Pete dances over to his hat and twirls around, holding it out, then drops it in front of the crowd. Dollars start floating into the hat.

The owner comes out. "The police are coming for you."

A few people boo. Pete looks at the moon. It's not full, but Pete howls. He dances up to the owner and tries to hump his leg, but the proprietor retreats into his bar. More dollars float his way, and Pete sees red and blue light flashing a few blocks down.

He spin the guitar to his back, takes a deep bow, picks up his hat and says, "Thank you, Pete has left the building." The people clap. "Thank you." Pete stuffs his pocket. "Thank you."

He turns and runs away. Pete knows he should save all the money, but he buys one more can. Why worry? Fucking be happy.

The next day, Pete sees Derek before school. Derek waves but heads into the building before Pete can buy him an ice cream.

While Pete does his courthouse gig, Derek tries to listen to the teacher, but keeps thinking about his dad. "We can try to find him," his mother had said. "We won't... He's gone for good, but we can try," she said.

He also keeps thinking about all the cool music he found searching reggae / punk on the computer.

Derek rushes out of school when the bell rings. He looks toward the park. He looks toward the courthouse. There he is. Pete. He's coming toward him.

Pete buys ice cream for Derek. Derek listens to Pete play, and he dances—like a monkey on crack. After, Derek tries to talk to Pete, Pete answers a couple of questions about music then walks away. Derek waves goodbye to Pete's back.

Every day they repeat the routine. Every day Derek gets Pete to talk to him just a little bit more. When the weekend comes, Pete finds himself looking at the empty school. He misses Derek. On Monday he decides to take time to sit and talk with Derek.

After Derek eats his ice cream and dances his head off, Pete walks to a bench and sits down. Derek stands, looking at Pete—expecting to wave at his back like usual. He doesn't know what to do. Pete fumbles through his pocket and digs out a butt. He lights the smoke and looks up at Derek. Derek is staring at him. Pete continues to smoke.

Slowly Derek walks toward the bench. Half way he stops. "Can I sit down, Pete?"

"Free country, isn't it?" Pete says.

Derek walks to the bench, dragging his feet. Derek sits at the opposite end of the bench, but scooches a little closer to Pete when he adjusts his butt cheeks on the bench. They both sit looking straight ahead. After a while, Pete finishes the smoke. He looks at Derek. Derek looks at him. Pete starts fishing in his pocket for another cigarette butt.

"I live over in Crytown," says Derek.

Crytown is the nick-name for a small housing project under the freeway overpass nearby. Pete nods and pulls a butt out of his pocket.

"Where do you live, Pete?"

“Wherever,” says Pete, inspecting the cigarette butt.

“What do you mean wherever?” asks Derek.

“I mean wherever I want.”

“So you mean you're homeless?”

“I mean I don't worry,” says Pete, bringing his matchbook from his pocket.

“You don't worry about what?”

“Anything.”

“Oh.”

“See that dude over there?” Pete points to a well-dressed, well-groomed, middle-aged man.

“Yeah,” says Derek.

“He worries.”

“About what?” asks Derek.

“Everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah,” says Pete. “Let's start with his shoes,” he says and lights the smoke. “Look at those things. What if it rains? He's gonna worry about getting them fancy things wet. Worry about dodging puddles in a hurry, 'cause he's worried about getting to a job on time. 'Cause his worried about getting a good employee review. 'Cause he's worried about getting a raise, so he can buy more fancy shoes when those ones wear out.”

Pete takes a drag of smoke. “And that's just his shoes,” Pete says. “He worries about the suit, his car, his house.” Pete pauses to take another drag. “I just choose not to worry.” He puts the smoke between his lips and picks up his guitar. “Don't worry 'bout a thing,” Pete says to Derek and winks.

Smoke twirls in front of Pete's face, and he starts a rocked out version of the Bob Marley song.

Derek smiles and his head starts to bob. Pete's smile grows behind the curtain of smoke—ear to ear. Derek stands up on the bench and starts to dance. A guy walks up to listen—and watch. Pete tosses his cap on the ground, and the man reaches into his pocket. Pete looks to the sky as his fingers dance across the guitar's neck.

Derek's feet dance across the bench, and he watches the man float a dollar into Pete's hat and walk away. A couple seconds later, a fat lady comes over to watch and listen. She doesn't tip, just watches Derek and Pete. A couple walks up to watch and another dollar floats. A skater dude, a big buff guy in running shorts, a rail thin pasty chick with too much makeup and the well-dressed man that worries join the fat lady.

They listen and watch and watch and listen. Change clinks and dollars float, and Pete sings, “Fat bottomed girls you make the rockin' world go round.”



Day after day, Pete buys Derek ice cream. Day after day, Derek gets Pete to sit on the bench and talk a little more. After they talk about something for a few minutes, Pete switches to playing and singing about it.

Derek always starts by dancing on the bench but eventually jumps off and runs and dances around the gathering crowd. Pete has a new bench. An afternoon bench. A bench where more change clinks and more dollars float than at his morning bench over by the courthouse.

On Friday Derek sits on the bench and asks Pete, "What about love?"

"What about it?" says Pete.

"Do you have someone to love...? A girl?"

"Why? Do you?" asks Pete. "Come on, what's her name?" Pete teases. "Jenny? Molly? Come on."

"No, no one," says Derek.

"Her name is No One?" says Pete. "Derek and No One sitting in a tree k.i.s.s.i.n.g," he sings.

"Really," says Derek. "Is love a worry? Cause I think it could be an important one," says Derek.

"Man, you are one smart little dude," says Pete.

"So?"

"So, I did the girl thing a couple of times and really loved one once," Pete says. "But for me I've decided that falling in love and always trying to please that person doesn't work." Pete pauses to light a cigarette butt. "I've decided to try to love everyone and not worry about pleasing anyone," he says.

"What was her name?"

"Who?" asks Pete. He knows who. He is trying to keep her memory away.

"The girl you really loved," says Derek, forcing Pete's recollection.

Pete says her name and picks up his guitar. He plays a song about his lost love, and Derek starts to sway.

The weekend comes and Pete misses Derek. On Monday morning Pete finds Derek and buys him ice cream for breakfast.

After school Derek sits on the bench with Pete. "I wanna live like you, Pete," says Derek with his mouth full of ice cream. "You know, no worries."

"Worries? How old are you?"

"Twelve," says Derek.

"You're a kid. What you got to worry about?"

"School."

"School ain't fun?" asks Pete and fishes a butt from his pocket.

"Sometimes, I guess," says Derek.

"Deerrek," a women's voice calls from the direction of the school.

"Mom, Mom," Derek says and jumps up on the bench waving. "That's my mom," says Derek, pointing.

Derek's mom walks over to them. Smoking her cigarette – an artist, a dancer, a free spirit. "Hello, Pete," she says.

Pete stops with his cigarette butt half way to his lips and stares at her through the smoke. "Wow," he says. He shakes his head. "Wow... How, um...how long has it been?"

"Twelve years," she says. She nods at Derek. "And about nine months... I see you've met your son."

"My...?"

"Your son, Pete," she says. "Derek's your son."

Pete looks at Derek. He is looking at the ground. "I'm your son," says Derek.

Pete looks back to Derek's mom. She nods and gives him a short half smile.

"What? How...? Are you—"

"I'm sure," she says.

Pete looks at Derek. Derek is looking at him and smiles.

"Hmm. I guess I have something to worry about now," Pete says and drags the smoke.

"Like how he wants to quit school and live with his dad?" she says. "With no worries," she adds.

"Well, he can't," says Pete.

He tosses the butt and steps on it. He grabs his guitar, swings it over his back and walks away. After a few steps, he stops.

Pete looks at his lost love. "It was...amazing...seeing you," he says and turns back around. Walking away he calls, "I'll see you tomorrow, Derek," and swings his guitar in front of him, playing a song about his long lost love.

Derek's mom rubs her son's hair and flicks her cigarette butt over toward the bench. She sings the song softly to herself.

*Now I've got something to worry about,* Pete thinks, and smiling, he skips through the park.