

I

The scratchy, metallic sound of the brakes woke Daniel, but he kept his eyes closed, until he heard the bus driver announcing this was the last resting stop.

Las Vegas was Daniel's final destination. One last city, one last gig in a grimy, smoky bar. At forty-one, his high hopes of stardom had been replaced by a resentful contentment. His routine was to play whatever the audience wanted, the usual lame hits he'd always hated or those he'd learned to loathe through painful repetition, night after night.

He walked toward the front of the bus, slowly. Before stepping down, he exchanged glances with the driver and then turned to check on the only other passenger, a very old and wrinkled woman with a wide nose, long white hair, and very small eyes, who seemed—in contrast to his own disposition—immutably tranquil and appeased with whatever life had given her.

A warm, dry breeze welcomed Daniel as he stepped out into the bright light that reminded him there was a world outside the dark cabin of the bus. He cracked his back with a stretch, closed his eyes and inhaled the fresh air deeply until the driver interrupted his moment of joy, saying,

“We'll leave in twenty minutes.”

Opening his eyes, he discovered a world discolored by dust and neglect. Closest to him there was a struggling gas station with two pumps, although only one was functional. The other resembled one of those in old postcard photos. In front of it were old tires spread randomly on the ground and a carpet of rusted Coca Cola and Budweiser cans reflecting the sunlight, like shards of a broken mirror scattered on a beach.

A large tumbleweed caught his eye, and following it, he saw it was rolling toward an old Chevy truck, as old as the gas pumps. Behind the truck was a small shack named Bagdad Café selling pancakes and coffee. Next to this small establishment was another shack with a sign on the roof that said “Music Store” in shining red lights, although the bulbs for the letter u weren’t functional.

Daniel loved music. Needless to say, he was attracted to this establishment just as some women are attracted to a nice shoe store, except this particular shop didn’t look promising.

“Good afternoon,” he said, entering the store. He breathed in the fragrance of the old wood floors and walls and was pleasantly surprised to discover the store sold nothing but vinyl records.

Behind the counter were two other reasons for him to like the store: a sign that said “Collectibles Only,” and a girl of rare beauty who seemed busy counting some bills. He might not have noticed her big eyes if it weren’t for a brief glimpse she offered him before returning to her task.

He flipped through a couple of albums in front of him, until a collectible 78rpm single of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s *Corinna Blues* caught his attention. Excited, he lifted the record to examine it further, only to find the first edition of Edith Piaf’s debut record right behind it.

“Piaf and Blind Lemon in the same pile?” he said out loud.

“Wild, isn’t it?” she said from the counter. “We keep everything quite disorganized to encourage customers to wander around. Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Not really, but your strategy is very effective,” he said. “I was in a hurry to get to the city, but now I hope my bus needs new brakes or something, because this store is amazing.”

Leafing through the bins, suddenly, Daniel seized an album—an LP bootleg of Traffic playing at the Boston Music Hall in 1971. It was as though he'd just discovered the treasure of El Dorado.

“May I ask what accent you have, Sir? Italian?” she asked.

He admired the beautiful shape of her light eyes, unsure if they were green or blue, then stuttered his response:

“No, no... I am South American.”

He paused, as if expecting another question, and then added,

“I play the guitar.”

“Oh! Then please, follow me. This will interest you, I think.” Her smile was open and frank. The fact he was a guitarist immediately changed her attitude; he would no longer be “Sir.”

She navigated toward a corner of the store through the narrow labyrinth of custom cabinets holding vinyl records. He followed her, but looking from side to side, searching for more gems. He spotted McLaughlin, Di Meola & De Lucia's *Friday Night in San Francisco*, walking past it with a music snob's certain arrogance. *I was there that night*, he thought proudly. *And I have it at home.*

They arrived at a wall library with multiple boxes, records, and a few books. She stood in front of the shelves, as if trying to remember where she'd left something. This was the first time he'd had a chance to get a proper look at her. *What a beautiful girl*, he thought.

A brilliant ray of light coming from the open door was shining through her white dress, which was of very light linen, decorated with a pattern of flower buds.

The sun radiating through the fabric of her dress illuminated the curves of her body like an X-ray. Even after she moved aside, still searching for whatever she was looking for, he persisted in his examination. She definitely noticed.

“Yes! Here it is!” she announced with an inviting smile, but confronted with his penetrating look, she blushed and immediately pulled the bait back, then changing her tone, asked,

“Are you familiar with Agustín Barrios?”

“The Great Paraguayan? Of course, who isn’t?”

“Well, in this country nobody knows of him, you know, but my father says he still is the best composer for the guitar to ever exist, even better than Robert Johnson.”

“I assume your father owns the store, no? Where is he?”

“He’s not here. He works at the casino just outside the city, about two hours from here. He’s trusted me with the store for a year now.” She said and kneeled to locate the box she was looking for on the lower shelves of the library.

Daniel noticed the melancholy in her tone and wonder for a brief moment what had happened. Her stumbling, drunk father wasn’t able to manage the store or his own life. He had left her in charge, with not much else than lots of time to mull over her frequent thought of running away from a torturing town that breathed nothing but dust, solitude, and the memories of her dead mother. The one thing keeping her in the store was her love for its music.

“Did you know they called Barrios ‘the Devil of the Guitar’?” he said.

“Did he sell his soul to the devil too, like Robert Johnson?” she replied.

Surprised the girl had heard the myth about Johnson, Daniel said reflectively,

“Well, I think I would sell my soul to the devil too, you know? I mean, if I could play as well as Barrios. Hell, I would sell my soul to spend a few more hours with you listening to all these wonderful records. I haven’t met a woman who knows a quarter of what you clearly know about music,” he said.

She laughed and stood up with the box.

“Well,” she said coquettishly, “These records are keeping us trapped in this stupid desert, aren’t they? It’s just you and me.”

He struggled for a second to determine whether her tone was insinuating; her smile and the slight tilt of her head confirmed that it was. *Shit, how old is this girl? Twenty?* He thought, absorbed by the beauty of her eyes.

“What’s your name?” he finally asked.

There was a brief silence...

“Julia,” she answered, blinking slowly and gracefully, showcasing her long eyelashes. He moved closer to her and to meet her inviting eyes.

They stared at each other momentarily, separated by the box she was holding between them, until she stepped back and said,

“Precisely, what I have here will interest you very much. This is an unpublished recording of Barrios’s *Julia Florida*, played by Barrios himself.”

She opened the box and withdrew the old 78rpm record, adding,

“Let me play it for you. But I must warn you: this one isn’t cheap.”

While she went to change the music, he peeked inside the box and noticed an old photo of Barrios stepping off a train with a young girl. He looked at it briefly and at that moment, his

arousal intensified, for he had noticed the music playing. *Oh God, Glenn Gould's 1956 recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations. It sounds so pure on vinyl. Who is this girl?*

He watched her replacing Gould's record with Barrios's with such patience and care that it was obvious she knew too well the value of what she was handling. As soon as she rested the needle on the record, the slow introduction of *Julia Florida* filled the room.

II

They remained listening for a moment, aware of a strange, dramatic change in the atmosphere of the place, starting with the sudden arrival of a rose fragrance. Briefly doubtful, they remained separated by the length of the store, until finally, Julia came back toward him.

Mysteriously, her complexion started darkening and her hair grew thick and wavy. A small, dark mole adorned the side of her now thinner nose; she had transformed into the young girl he recognized from the old photo.

Daniel would have wondered at the change, but she stopped once again near the door where the sunlight filtered through the fabric of her dress. Her whole silhouette was there for him to admire and he made no effort to conceal his desire. Not even her sudden blushing persuaded his eyes for looking at her.

Intimidated and excited at the same time, she mumbled something about the volume needing adjustment and turned to walk toward the record player. He rushed to stop her, just barely holding her from behind, by the hips, before she could escape the sun's rays.

The moment he touched her, bright color filled the scene. The peculiar greyish tones were replaced with vivid greens and blues and yellows and the red buds on her dress were now fiery red.

“Please don’t...don’t move,” he paused... “What a perfect piece of music.”

Understanding the double meaning of his words and seduced by the beauty of the music, she turned her head to reciprocate and closed her eyes, ready to release her full sensuality.

He too began transforming, although, eyes closed and aroused by his touch, she didn’t notice. His loose hair was now gleaming and combed to the side, while his blue jeans and t-shirt had been replaced with a formal black suit, a white shirt, and a cravat.

Swaying together, they felt each other’s warmth, his arms wrapped around her. As Daniel brushed her ear with his lips, Julia felt the tickle of a mustache that hadn’t been there before. She turned her head halfway and opened her eyes to realize with an eerie thrill that now, Daniel had transformed. The familiar face before her now was that of Agustín Barrios, just as he looked in the old photo—and he was about to kiss her.

The music’s next and more powerful verse started. Smelling the fragrance of cheap apple shampoo on her hair, he slid his hands up from her hips and abdomen, nearly reaching her ribs. At this moment, they both felt an electrical shock that had started down in their belly and risen as a swirl of sensations all the way to their lips. There was a brief moment of hesitation, but swept up again in the current, they let any doubts dissolve. Overwhelmed, they succumbed to internal sensations they had never experienced before.

Desire, guilt, excitement, and terror all battled inside them, until his lips touched hers. The electrical shock came back though the same path and the red petals on her dress unfurled, flying out and filling the room with a peculiar fragrance she had never experienced before. Now, just as the piece was ending, she was *Julia in Bloom*.

III

When the piece ended, the needle stuck in a groove at the end of the last track, making a scratchy sound with every revolution. Leaving Agustín where he stood, Julia rushed to lift it off the record. Agustín, resembling Daniel once more, ambled after her. All the bright color drained from the scene. At the front of the shop, separated by the counter, Daniel and Julia recovered their composure and their physical appearance, facing each other and blushing. Their dreams had dissolved into dust that flew out the door, carried away by the warm air of the desert.

“I’ll take it,” he said. “I don’t care what it costs. I’ll sell a couple of guitars if I have to.”

She nodded and returned the record to the box. She packed it away slowly and with ceremony. They remained silent. The sounds of the sad wind blowing in the desert and the empty cans rolling outside overtook the beautiful music of Barrios.

“Would you like to take anything else?”

“Yes,” he said, willing to end the awkward moment, then hurried to grab a few more records—nine in total.

Attentively, she placed them in a large paper bag, as if they were unprotected Caravaggios. They commented casually on each of the records until the last one was packed. He paid and got out of the store without saying anything else, but after walking ten or twenty steps toward the bus, he stopped and turned around.

There she was, standing on the store’s front porch. She stood with her feet together, one hand holding the other over her waist. The wind died down into a lighter breeze, making the hem of her dress dance a little, but the flower buds remained closed. Behind her, the store was silent.

They faced each other, faithful to the monotony that had ruled them for as long as they could remember. Each unaware of the other's dream, they wondered with some regret what might have happened if they'd actually made a move.

He looked up at the sign on the roof and at the old windows with mosquito nets surrounded by fading pale walls, begging for a fresh coat of paint, then noticed a peculiarity he had missed earlier: The building was in fact a train wagon converted into a store.

Looking a little wistful, Julia waved goodbye. Daniel waved a reluctant farewell in response, and each turned back to the everyday world—Julia behind her counter, biting into her usual tuna sandwich, and Daniel settling back into his seat on the bus, looking out the window, wishing for at least one red petal to liven the grey landscape.

Now and then, even today, the beautiful sound of *Julia Florida* drifts back to their ears, reminding them of their dreams.