

A Red Bud

"I can't do this anymore," she says to herself. "I can't do this anymore, I won't do this, this is so boring! I don't want this anymore!" The thought keeps repeating in her head, getting louder and more frantic each time until distress begins to show on her face.

Her manager catches sight of her and asks, "hey, you alright? You're looking a little screwy there." Cheeks flushing immediately, she quickly blurts out, "I'm ok, screwy? Jeez man, take it easy."

She waits until he walks away into the back room before she lets herself freak out again. But just then comes a customer.

RING

She turns around and a grumpy sweaty middle aged man, with a stomach invading the space in front of him, asks what to take for a cold. He kinda barks the question at her.

"Try some Vitamin C, drink lots of fluids, and take some rest. It should go away on its own."

"No give me something to get rid of it – I can't work with this damn runny nose."

"Alright well five feet behind you is the shelf for symptom relief."

"Which one do I take?"

"The one that's for the symptoms you're having."

"What do you mean?"

"The ones there that says cold symptom relief, any of those that say runny nose, headaches, those ones." He turns and looks at the shelf as she speaks, gets one, and lumbers off to the front to pay.

"Argghhhhh."

Her head goes off again. She hates that type of customer – doesn't bother thinking at all, will ask where something two feet from their elbow is.

Absolutely no effort, its like some people turn on for work, get it done like a machine, and turn off to lumber around eating and watching TV, sleeping, and arguing until the next shift. And am I any different? I come into this pharmacy every day, hating every boring, stimulation sucking dry second of it. All I do is weigh out doses, put pills in containers, and point out where objects in clear sight are located.
WHAT HAPPENED TO MY DREAMS?

Pacing behind the counter, store deserted after the stomach man's exit, her head reels with fiery thoughts.

I've got this one life, this one little existence – well it doesn't have to be little, WHAT HAPPENED TO MY DREAMS? I can't do this anymore. I'm not drowning anymore, I'm living life from here on out. What's the point of carrying on doing something that's sucking me dry?

“What do I want?” She asks aloud to her ceiling as soon as she gets home.

What do I want, what do I want.

She paces around her cramped NYC apartment, completely lost, walking into things in a state of frenzy.

Outside, on the streets, she spots a mom and a baby safely strapped to her back. His chubby dangling legs and saliva dripping down his grubby baby face causes her to stare for a moment, completely immersing herself in this happy family. From the momentary stillness of her thoughts subsiding and the sudden longing that springs up in her heart comes a sudden recollection of an eight year old girl with crazy outrageous curls singing wildly while checking herself out in the bathroom mirror.

Singing! The memory brings a rush of familiarity, a nostalgia followed by a sense of recovering a long lost treasure. She feels a strange powerful certainty deep within. Pacing continues with more speed and memories come rushing in.

When she was eight she fell in love with singing when she met a woman on the beach singing along to an acoustic. She sat down next to her and joined in, and the woman told her she’s a beautiful singer because it’s obvious her little self means and feels every word she sings. So that night when she got home, spurred by the woman’s encouraging words, she found a natural outlet for her frustrations with her brother and her longings for her father’s love as she sang wildly in front of the bathroom mirror, making sure to turn on the fan so nowhere can hear her.

Then another memory comes in, stronger and more colorful, dipped with a sunset orange and deep purple.

She was 13 and her older cousin had just died, died suddenly by some acute pneumonia. It shattered her world, it made no sense. Why should a healthy twenty year old suddenly die, why was it him that died? Was he marked out for death, was it just a nonsense event, random, meaningless? Death brought her mind to a whole new level. Suddenly aware of so much suffering in the world grief entered her. She took to walking the streets of the city after sundown, humming tunes of songs she liked and melodies that would just come. She didn’t need any words, in fact she preferred no melodies as words sometimes trapped her young mind with their crisscrossing ambiguous meanings. Melodies were clear, they soothed her grief, and on really tough days when her dad would come home angry after work and yell, melodies pouring through her brought a sense of peace that she held inside against his anger.

Despite all the confusion in the world, and everyone’s troubles and grief and arguments, somehow it all still made sense for her. Even on especially dark nights, as heavy clouds hid the moonlight, singing brought her the feeling that everything is alright.

Now thoroughly relaxing into her memories, she stops pacing and makes herself a cup of tea to wind down. She eases into her favorite chair and think back to high school.

It was 7th grade that she fell in love with singing. And in freshmen year of high school she joined women's choir with precious, red haired Mrs. G. A gem of a woman who lived for her gentle balding husband and for her music students. She loved what she did, standing in front of the classroom with a piano in front of her, guiding her students through interval after interval, day in out and day out, always with smiles and patience.

This was the perfect environment for our budding singer. Here she turned her voice into her own instrument, her own toy to play with, now properly matching the pitches in a song as she poured out her emotions. Mrs. G played lots of different music, some were playful and light, and her voice would flit among the chords, lightly dancing with each chord, and then there were dark somber tunes, through which she revealed her uncertainty and vulnerability. The songs she really lost herself to were songs of longing: she'd bare herself naked, completely exposed and cry, like she used to on cloudy moonless nights, forgetting that she was in a classroom full of kids obsessed with their image, leaving them behind and thriving in her imagination.

Though she wasn't always technically perfect, Mrs. G loved her the most. When she sang, Mrs. G heard the songs come alive, regardless of whether she was a bit flat or a bit sharp here or there. Songs came alive through her – playfulness visited everyone's inner child, mystery and somberness frightened and excited everyone, and her longing, her intense longing pierced completely. Everyday when she went home after women's choir, peace would visit her as she sat at home bearing her father's anger and her mother's absence. A contentment knew her, befriended her, and her longing heart began to trust the world more and more. Thus sincerity opened the world to her and opened her to the world, and everyday the two began melding more and more into one...

But suddenly, it all burned. There was a girl whom she knew in women's choir, Roxanne. She was a great singer, almost flawless technically. They rode the same bus and would always practice together, though beyond that they weren't such great friends. Roxanne was very outgoing, talkative, a social butterfly, loud and impulsive but always charming, and worst of all in our heroine's eyes, exceedingly pretty. Our girl was rather shy and kept to herself. She did have friends, all of them very close but on the whole, she was rather private while this other girl was effortlessly public.

The end of year performance for women's choir had a lead part – a solo part in a song Mrs. G arranged herself. As you can imagine, our singer was ecstatic. She loved the piece, she connected to it immediately and learned it by heart. But as tryouts neared, the choir received word that their performance had to bring in a certain amount of money or their program will be cut. Hearing this, Mrs. G stared at her star pupil, worried that her beloved singer with her crazy unmanageable curls and slight awkwardness could not be sold to shallow eyes. The choice seemed obvious to her: Roxanne would bring in the crowd.

Mrs. G's forced decision thirteen years ago stopped all the singing.

The last memory leaves a terrible taste in her mouth. The skies slowly start turning an orange pink as she walks over to the window again, looking out over the Manhattan skyline.

Somewhere out there, Roxanne's flirting about, bimboing her way to stardom.

Resentment builds up in her at the thought, a huge surge of it that takes her away from the beauty of the setting sun and mars her experience with bitterness.

“She stole my dreams, stupid bitch,” she growled under her breath. “She wasn’t even that good, it was all just her stupid looks.”

Walking over to her bathroom mirror she looks at herself, looks long and hard. She can’t go back behind that counter tomorrow handing out pills to people half asleep. She just can’t. There’s no way.

She’s gonna make it. She has to make it. Firmly setting her resolve in mind, she climbs into bed and drifts off to sleep, not even bothering to undress.

Her alarm goes off and she habitually gets up and heads straight to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She grabs her toothbrush, loads up the paste, and looks up at herself.

Shoom!

It all comes back in a flash. She isn’t going to work today. It may be a bit rash, not even giving a two week notice or maybe she just needs to jump ship and burn her bridges to make sure she’ll never go back.

Panic. Panic, panic, panic. Her breathing quickens, anxiety kicks in hardcore as she realizes she’s really not going back, she’s diving, no she already dove in. Last night was dead serious. Panic. She panics, everything changes now, she’s on the edge, she’s frightened as she grips the edges of her white marbled sink. If she calls to let Bob know, her manager, she might change her mind and run back to the safety that he represents and take her miserable but comfortable place behind that counter. No, she can’t, she’s got to go through with this and burn the bridge behind her.

Life now changes, suddenly, instantly. Everything feels sharper: senses are heightened, colors are vivid, her eyes look wild again like they used to, the return of a fire that was put out long ago.

She’s in the wild jungle of dream chasers and absolutely terrified.

She runs ice cold water through her hands and splashes it on her face. “I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this, I got this...”

Again and again and again, she whispers to herself, “I got this, I got this, I got this...” and it starts to have an effect, slowly at first, but rising as persistently as her chanting.

Her breathing slows, she’s gentle and calm now, and she keeps whispering to herself that she can do it, that it will happen, and that everything will fall into place.

She straightens up, gathers cool water in her hands and gently washes her face, perfectly calm and centered in faith. She has just found all she will every need for everything to come true.

Twenty minutes later she’s out the door for a jog. Early NY streets already screaming in her ears, traffic crisscrossing the island’s grids like busy ants.

“DON’T STOP BELIEVING” Steve Perry’s triumphant voice resonates within as she rounds her way around the blocks, with no route in mind, just zipping through the streets, weaving in and out of people, adrenaline pumping through her, a sheer ecstasy of being alive filling her with an electricity that fuels her on and on.

She gets home she sings in the shower, she sings as she strolls out the door towards Central Park, she’s singing all over the place, on the subway under her breath, saying hi to people left and right, she’s full of life.

Finally getting to Central Park, she sits on the park benches wondering how she’ll go about this new way. In a glorious wave of exuberance still radiating through her, the how doesn’t bother her much and she leans back fantasizing her success:

A silent crowd waits hushed before her, waiting breathlessly for her to begin. She walks on stage with a nervous pit in her stomach and melodies in her heart, teeming and waiting like the crowd to escape out into the world. She begins, gently at first, easing them in and takes them on a ride: the crowd feels their emotion kindling, slowly at first, then gently gaining momentum until a tipping point has them all feeling the full weight of each successive wave of joy and pain they’ve ever felt throughout their lives before coming together to hear this beautiful woman sing. Each person feels something different, something personal, and yet in the combined depth of all emotions, each of them feel the very same thing: love.

“Ahhh!”

Coming back to the present, she blinks back to the park scene as a little puppy pitbull darts towards her wagging his tongue, tail swinging furiously.

Her whole face gets a lick; usually she’d hate it, but not today, today is a day of connecting. Her reveries has her whole body, her whole being feeling light, weightless and radiant which the puppy was lathering up. The owner, a kind looking old lady asks if she’s going to the concert later on tonight in the main square of the park.

“Who’s playing?”

“Roxanne.”

“Oh... yeah I’ll check it out.”

Roxanne’s show was just like her name: a glittering rock of sexed up glamour and lights with the whole crowd shouting along reveling in unbridled desires and vanities, she has everyone up in a frenzy, everyone except the lonely girl in the back with crazy curls coming down her face, almost covering her pained frightened eyes.

Riding home on the subway, thinking back on her daydream, she suddenly felt shy and very silly, so silly in fact she tucked the dream away far out of sight and made a new dream to replace it: a vision of her shining like a coveted stone, like Roxanne. Up on the advertisement banners she notices an ad for a makeover and with a strange feeling of emptiness that she should have paid more attention to, she saves the number.

“Hello.... Hi would you like a makeover?”

“Um..yes – yes I would. I do, I want a makeover. Can I come in tonight?”

“Sure around 7 we’re totally free.”

“Ok, perfect, thank you.”

And at 8 pm that night, she walks out, unhappy, uncertain, in the form of a starlet.

“Alright let’s give a nice round of applause to Mr. Harrigan. That was some bluesy blues, new wave blues, I don’t even know what to call it, let’s give it up for Mr. Harrigan!”

The crowd cheers, a nice strong cheer, and Mr. Harrigan walks off with an awkward gait, a grin lighting up his face.

She’s next, she’s gotta go up after Mr. Blues. Oh man, nervousness shoots through her from head to foot and settles in her stomach, whirling around to make a nice nausea that she’s got to deal with. She gets up and moves to the stage.

The announcer catches her eye, “Ah, here she is, our next performer, come on up!”

She glances down at her red dress, smoothing it over in front, and quickly fixes her hair as she walks slowly on stage. She isn’t breathing, the pit in her stomach has gotten so strong she’s barely aware of the audience.

The lights flash bright over her and the audience she sees is cast in darkness. She gets up close to the mic, suddenly exhilarated by its shining wire-mesh grill, and focuses entirely on it tuning out everything else. Nervousness, still there, recedes to the background and an unruly spiky excitement comes into play. She knows she can ride its waves, jarring and edged it may be but it will carry her through.

She breathes in deep, strums her base chord for the root and takes off...

No recollection. She has no recollection of how she did as she walks off stage in a daze. A dim feeling of happiness persists but there is too much static for her to focus on anything.

“Hey that was pretty nice,” says Mr. Harrigan. She looks up, he startles her back into reality. She takes in an overall impression of khaki brown, from hat to coat to pants, and peering out at her with kindness shone clear blue eyes.

“Thanks...”

“You were a bit off-key though, you may wanna work on that, and you didn’t breathe, and you got a little off tempo... but I don’t know, there was something nice in all of it, we liked it.”

She doesn’t hear the last part. She doesn’t notice the kindness in the eyes.

“What? Oh, ok thanks.” She leans her head down and curls her body inwards, giving clear signs she wants Mr. Harrigan to go away.

Off-key, no rhythm, no breathing – off-key, no rhythm, no breathing - the thought whirls around in her head, pushing her to a state of disgust and shame.

She looks out and sees everyone smiling and laughing, honestly having a good time, but takes it all in as them all laughing at her, mocking her attempt to even get up there and sing.

What was I thinking – I don't have what it takes, it was always Roxanne, I don't fit into these clothes, I can't pull this off, I don't even get music, its not something to cry with, no maybe that's what it really is for but no one sees that, everyone's staring at my clothes and my body and judging how I compare to these celebrities and icons. Ah I can't do this anymore.

She shuts out the whole room, her surrounding become dark to her. She can't bear to hate them but she feels so dejected and out of place she shuts herself in darkness, in isolation, and walks on home.

The people in the café wondered why the bright girl that shone for them felt so far away. If only someone could tell her that they weren't just looking at her clothes and her body, or judging and comparing her to others she wouldn't have to hide herself away. They came to feel, and she made them feel. But some of them were judging her though, the ones that look at themselves the same way, judging and coveting what were given and earned by others, unable to see their own beauty. But maybe they just don't matter, or maybe they too need someone to tell them they're not being judged and compared so they can see their own light.

Walking home on the gravel streets, she eyes the sparking dust in the air, catching the light reflecting off of them and adds pieces from her imagination to play along with them. A relief washes over her:

There's a shining beauty still in the world, and it will always be here when I need it. Beauty, am I beautiful though? If this dust is beautiful, why can't I be beautiful?

There's no answer, only a gloom settling into a familiar place, replacing her relief. She casts her head down and walks home, a lonely figure playing with patterns on the sidewalk.

I've got to work on my pitch, I've got to listen, there's so much to do. I've got to come out of my hole, I've retreated so far into myself over the years. I've got to listen, I've got to dance so I can keep rhythm and I've got to relax so I can breathe. That'll cover everything I got called out for.

She sits at her new keyboard, an old Casio from the local music store. She's got too many bad habits on the guitar, she's got to start over on the keyboard.

She straightens up, calms her mind and plays a single note. And listens. Listens into it. She plays it again. She listens. She plays two notes and listens, listens for the space between them, the pleasing way they come together, and then she sings them, bottom first then top, sings with them, and enjoys the

pleasure of matching the keyboard. She feels that something's in her, far away, hidden deep inside. She's got to go get it, go back in time and be a child again, remember Mrs. G and how much she grew in her class. And she's got to confront the demon the idea of Roxanne has become in her...

With the sigh of one forcible moving away from themselves, she resolves to search for ways to accommodate herself into the limelight, to overcome all of the insecurities Roxanne sets off in her, even wishing inside in a place she couldn't see to be like Roxanne.

The curtain hangs in front of her, a red curtain blocking her off from the crowd. There's still time before it rises so she runs through the past three years, remembering the ups and downs, the mornings she wouldn't get out of bed, terrified of the path she was on, that first open mic where she sang off key and was told so with kind words that choked out her heart. Then the struggle, the fight to get on pitch, to aim true in herself time and time again till she became consistent and precise, and the slow burgeoning joy with each open mic as her inner world bloomed slowly like a budding flower. But there were times even when she'd do great she'd go home and despair at the miles and miles still left to go. But then it became easy, she hardened through the wearisome travels; crossing the new hurdles of each day and each stage became not easier but a part of her, and faith slowly replaced fear and stayed with her. But there was also that inner work in getting comfortable with her body, her image, the less enjoyable part of her training which was to be more like Roxanne... She had formed the habit of reading glossy magazines which had always bothered her before, forcing herself to move into them, to move past her reluctance and adopt them. These ideals she'd adopted were also there mixed into her growing artistry, ultimately coloring her whole self like a single drop of ink can do when dripped into a clear glass of water.

And now she's here, the opening act for Roxanne. She feels a surge of strength remembering how far she'd come, her back straightens, and she holds her head up high, proud and ready.

The curtains start rising, the wall of red rising up to reveal a dense crowd packed into the Highline Ballroom. Nervousness shoots through her for a split second which she instinctively turns into fuel, her mind already holds the root note, ready to belt it out as soon as the snare drum hits and BOOM! Off it goes, the show kicks off with cymbals and snares, blazing lights on the first beat and her well trained piercing voice belting over 4 bars to really drive up the energy in the room before she vaults through the key, dancing through the progressions played by her guitarist, swinging her hips in and out of the groove, artfully weaving in and out of time. For 30 minutes she plays with everyone's emotions, teasing them, engaging them, pulling back, luring forth their desires, ramping up their primal instincts and urges, getting them all hopped into a frenzy just the way she'd seen Roxanne do that one night in Central Park.

In the dressing room after the show Roxanne congratulates her, but she, still in a haze, a new haze unfamiliar to her, doesn't fully process. Roxanne showers praise on her, and invites her to tour and perform together. The moment of success finally manifests, a tour with her own material with the rival she'd held since childhood. But somehow... it doesn't feel the way she expected it to. She finds herself far away, far away and sees Roxanne speaking to her as if she's at a great distance.

This had been a lucky gig for her, Roxanne's agent had seen her singing in a bar and invited her to fill in for an act that had dropped out at the last second.

She expected herself to say yes immediately but she found herself mumbling, still far away, "I'll think about it, let me get back to you..." With a puzzled look on her face, Roxanne gazes at her, her outstretched hand still hanging in the air, but quickly regains her composure, reminds her of the party and walks off.

She feels drawn in again, like she used to in the beginning. It's weird, she'd come full circle, utterly accomplished everything she had thought she needed after her first open mic but it all felt so off... like a promised prize was opened and nothing's inside. She realizes suddenly she has no feelings for the audience, that she sort of performed in empty air and finds it a strange new thought, but shakes it off and moves on.

She arranges for her roadie to take care of her equipment and belongings and sneaks out a back way for the comfortable and lonely streets. The moon was high in the sky, white and spooky, and the sky had a strange tint to it, darker than usual though... as if some substance of it had left, a vacant sky with no stars.

Her mind races with images of success but instead of reassuring her like it had been lately, suddenly they creeped her out... The images in her mind flashed bright, as bright as the moon above, but they all had a similar sick glow to it.

Not knowing what to do, and suddenly feeling unbearably lonely, she takes a cab to Roxanne's party. She gets there, walks in and chooses the stairs to give her more time to think. But she gets nowhere. Getting to the room, she walks in and immediately sees the other side of the idols she had been chasing for so long. There revealed before her was the personification of all that slowly engulfs and devours the soul, leaving in its wake a decayed shriveled heart flickering like a dying lightbulb...

Roxanne was bent over a table, nose plugged with a straw about to suck in a line of coke... Alcohol lined all the shelves around the room, a room packed with bodies with everyone slurring their words, moving clumsily with hollow eyes crossed and glazed - everywhere she looks she sees only decay...

"Roxanne, I can't tour with you I'm sorry. Goodnight."

Horrified at the path she had been walking down, her mind turns over all the images she had been worshipping and finds the gnawing hunger on the other side of them, the horrible other side of glittering Roxanne, the envy and desire of men and women.

She sees clearly into her own desperation for success over the past years, her incessant driving, fueled sometimes by real passion and joy, but other times, and more and more as she got more comfortable playing the role she had adopted, fueled by a weird sort of desperation to possess

something, to have something, to be something, she couldn't quite get her finger on it but it gave her a sense of disgust in realizing how long this drive had been fueling her.

That's exactly why the moon had such a sickly flow after the performance, because walking away from the stage, I had felt nothing... I was in a heartless vacuum of images.

The night streets of the city, brimming with people, feels so alone, a lifeless aloneness. Her eyes cannot focus on the moment, her mind wanders somewhere distant, and the people moving by so fast become blurry lines of red, and blue, black, white, all the colors of their clothes streaking into iridescent lines moving about her, each of them going and going and going. The ones walking alone have their head bent down, focusing on some distant goal. The ones walking in groups laugh loudly with a hollow sound, moving as tight closed off units through the teeming mass of randomness. Even the groups somehow have a lonely lost in the world feeling, each of them looking like they were leaving themselves to be part of a group, leaning out of their skins to fit into a tightly contained box held out in front of the leader's hands, a box determining how they should all look and behave, a box arranged by the media infused ether of the city life. Everywhere she looks there is nothing that feels real, nothing organic for her to lean on and cry; all the people are like drones, busy going on and on their own way going down the tracks in their minds while carefully holding up their structures for the outside world to see.

This is how I've been for so long, ever since that advertisement, I completely gave myself to a form. Am I seeing people for how they really are or am I looking at myself? I don't get it, is this me, are they me, is that us, is this humanity?

Her form had given her everything she'd asked from it – the lights, the glamour, the crowd's exaltation – but now the exaltation somehow seems to be in form too... as if they were supposed to cheer for her if she vaulted through the circus doing x, y, and z... all forms to forms, forming together ultimately forming into nothing.

Her emotions began climbing to a feverish pitch. A tipping point will come, she knew it – all the pressures she had borne through the years, the stifled sense of emptiness she kept ignoring, the horrible false climax of playing with Roxanne, all of that effort spent for absolute nothingness, she suddenly grips the heart of the matter:

I've been in a costume for the past three years.

“What do I do now? Where do I go from here?” The next morning, she speaks to her mirror.

I have no desire to perform like that again, it didn't feel good at all. So what now, what do I? Don't I love singing? I do, I love it, but its not what I wanna do, but its who do I want to be? I went after Roxanne for a while, and now that seems silly too, trying to figure out who I want to be, how can I even help but be anyone but myself?

And she looks into her face in a way she had never done before: she sees the beauty of her hair curling about her face, making intricate patterns against the skin, notices the depth in her eyes, the limitless depths for compassion and thought, and the nice way her skin glows with an inner health.

The fitness paid off at least.

She sees herself whole, as a whole naked and formless and finds no blemish, no imperfections, for there isn't any ideals to compare herself to; they had all been obliterated the night before.

No more forms, no nothing, my mind broke last night. But here I am, here I really am, I'm OK.

An hour later, still deep in thought walking through the lanes of Central Park, she spots a familiar dog walking with an old lady and suddenly, a bolt strikes through mind and fog and reaches some vital bud deep in the mire of her confusion: a vision flashes across her mental screen, a vision of love, love through song, through melody and harmony for people come to see her, to hear her, for people come to feel and remember themselves. A vision that had visited her before but had been blotted out by insecurity and buried deep in self-betrayal.

Through coincidence or arrangement, she sees an inscription carved into a tree trunk as she walks home digesting the flood of awakened emotions:

"Forget yourself to find yourself."

Hmm.

The bud deep within, which had jolted awake just a moment ago, shook with a mysterious wind, a wind she did not yet understand. But those words meant something to her... and the bud decided just then to show a little red.