

Delivery Man

The Spit was busy, windy, and wet—every parking space filled as tourists, discouraged off the ocean by the clouds and choppy waves, scurried between gift shops and bars. They were ready to drop fifty dollars on a couple beers and the briny slurp of oysters. I didn't have the cash to spare to join them, and no patience for a packed room anyway. Lucky for me, there was better company to discover outside.

The old man wore a blazer. Probably for warmth and perhaps for dignity. The square shoulders of the jacket broadened his slight frame. A fedora sat softly on a white-gray bed of hair, and his face was encircled by a curly beard. He sat on the wind-protected side of a shack. I hoped he might make a little room for me.

The other tourists huddled inside to escape the sky's drizzle and the ocean's bluster, but I was happier to have the wind chase me behind a small building for a mixed portion of shelter and storm. Mid-vacation, I was walking the Homer Spit to scavenge for gifts to carry back to friends and family—trinkets nodding at Alaskan wildlife, because vistas can't be wrapped and ribboned. I didn't want to return empty handed, and now a storm mid-shopping trip stranded me in this spot, feeling like an intruder.

The gentleman was settled on a rough bench beside a wooden stall, the wind curving around it to create a cocoon of stillness with room enough for him and—I hoped—for me.

Beside the man, a guitar leaned against the wooden bench; he held the instrument's neck gently, like a woman's hand. His fingers were long, with sharp finger nails streaked underneath by a line of coal-gray dirt. His legs were crossed neatly, thin inside his weathered-soft blue jeans. He cast a sidelong smile my way.

"May I?" I asked, gesturing to the space on the other side of his guitar. I appreciated his quick nod and steady eye contact. Most people shift their eyes to any trivial thing, signaling disinterest. He looked at me directly, his eyes inviting conversation.

"Do you play? She's a beauty. Looks like she's been with you awhile," I directed my words to him and my eyes over the body of his guitar, where the sheen was worn dull from long use. In a couple places the wood itself was paper thin, nearly translucent, rubbed away with strumming over how many years, I wondered.

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His fingers slid across a few frets as though muscle memory played a song without his noticing. He pulled a second hand from his blazer pocket, and he lifted the instrument to his lap. “Even so,” he replied like a man from another time.

“Do you have a favorite song you like to play?”

“I don’t play songs with her, dear,” he replied to me as he nodded his head to her like a subject to his queen. “She plays the blues. I’m just the delivery man.” His words tripped into a chuckle and his body found an easy sway. A brown rubber boot began to tap a $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythm on the wooden plank at our feet. A waltz, if grade school music still served me well.

He opened his mouth. The voice that groaned from him was half-breeze, half-thunder. It was a river, rolling stones smooth, or the ocean massaging sands on a beach like a lover. The man began with a hum, then a mumbling of sounds like he was remembering a language or founding a new one. Without missing a note, one hand danced to a tuning peg for an infinitesimal turn. The guitar thrummed a resonant heart beat underneath, then laced a thousand notes into a tune on top. Like a Himalayan throat singer sends multiple notes from his voice box simultaneously, this man and his guitar produced a full orchestra, but without being showy about it.

Come gather round people

Wherever you roam

And admit that the waters

Around you have grown

My breath heaved in salt-tinged air deeper into my lungs than I’d breathed in a year, then slid back out of me, silky and slow. With each exhale, I exorcised a ghost of regret. That fight with my daughter when I yelled red-faced, shaming her for trying on a word of defiance to see how it fit. That vulture of fear sitting on my shoulder all the time, whispering about money, and cancer rates among women my age. That resentment that builds over time between spouses, knowing no matter how good we are to each other, we are also the death of possibilities. And with each inhale, I gave my own desires a little oxygen. He continued to sing.

And accept it that soon

You’ll be drenched to the bone

The wind dropped for a moment like it too wanted a listen. No one passed us on the boardwalk. Our bench on the wind-sheltered side of a water-taxi hut was a secret concert hall for two. One artist and a one-member audience; one musician and his newly found groupie for life. I brazenly looked up from the guitarist’s fingers to his countenance. He was as casual as Friday. I

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expected him to be enraptured—eyes closed, or open and burning and swallowing the horizon. Instead he gave me a nonchalant wink and played his holy canticle with an ordinary glance, now and then, to his fingers or across the few yards of boardwalk to a cluster of yarrow, its white blossoms nodding in the wind like a half-hearted congregation. These two—guitar and guitarist—are an old married couple, I realized, not a new fling.

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and daughters
Are beyond your command

He riffed and rambled with the melody, carrying me down seven roads to seven new wonders of the world. I stopped watching and leaned back, resting my head on the wall behind us. I closed my eyes. I felt through my feet the tap of his boot and sensed on my cheek the vibrations cast like a net from his instrument. His voice raised goose bumps on my arms, and his song took all the cold and weariness from my bones, treated them like kindling, lit them on fire, then delivered the flame straight to my heart. Did he realize what he was doing? I sat, he played, and the solar system realigned for a few minutes around a different sun.

Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a changin'

As he caressed the final notes, the silence filled the growing spaces between sound, settling on me like a blanket. I had feared a vacuum, an absence, but received instead a calm I might manage to take with me. I turned toward him carefully, not wanting to disturb the peace he had conjured. I looked in his eyes and he didn't turn away from mine. Then a strong gust kicked up and the spell blew away.

"Well. Thank you for that. You are an exceptional musician."

"Ah, I just got lucky enough to find my instrument," he said, rubbing the hourglass contours of her hollow, reverberating body.

I unzipped my purse and pulled out my wallet, wanting so much to give him a pittance. A twenty was in my hand when I looked up to see him scold me with his eyes.

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“If I wanted your money, my hat would be up-turned on that wood in front of me. This one’s on me. A gift for takin’ the time—and for knowing my guitar is a she not an it. She’s most thankful to you for that.”

I pushed my money back into my purse, ashamed I might’ve turned the encounter into a transaction. I felt my spiritual poverty. It tasted like the beginning of wisdom.

He settled his guitar back on the bench beside him as I stood, turning to shake his hand. He took my hand in his, and I warmed at his gentle, God-like touch. “You have a good day, m’dear.”

“Thank you. You too. Thank you for the song. Truly.” I turned to go. Then I went. I caught one last glance at the musician as I rounded the corner. He looked just as he did when I’d arrived.