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From This Valley

“The rent is due, Charles, Charley, Chuck, you dippy, drippy, dumb boy, hardly worth calling a man,” he said into the mirror, washed his face, trying to wake up, ran his fingers through his beard and hair, splashed water over the countertop, messy, water everywhere, even onto the floor.

He grabbed the towel and dried his face and hands. “Actually, Chas, boy, my incompetent and undesirable friend and self, the rent is overdue, and the only reason you haven’t heard from the landlady is she is out of town, and the weekend is upon us and editorial or could it be royal we have squat, diddly, nothing much for cash, about seven dollars and twenty-five cents, if I am not mistaken, and I think I am not, since I counted it seven times last night late in a momentarily nervous time, before I went to bed, and most of all, why don’t you just shut up, as and because it is unattractive and more than a little stupid to talk to yourself in the mirror, and it could entirely be, my fine and hirsute friend, image, self that you, we, I have finally gone quite nuts, at last, at last, alas Greensleeves my love, but you screw me wrong to cash me in discourteously,”

Turned from the mirror, wiped the wet floor and the countertop with the towel and threw the towel onto the counter, walked out of the bathroom, picked up his guitar from its chrome and rubber-padded guitar stand and played a series of chords. “Alas, my love..., Your parents don’t like me, they say I’m too poor, they say I’m not worthy to enter your door.”

Dissonant series of chords, “It ain’t your parents I’ve had trouble with, honey-child, but your own self and you who say I’m too poor, and now, after I’ve entered your door a thousand times and lingered there, lingered there in the doorway for a slow and gentle hour at a time, you have decided I’m too poor, so I’ll saddle my pony, and I’ll ride on my way, sad knight, wan and palely loitering.

“If I have only seven dollars and twenty-five cents and little prospect of gathering more, it ain’t enough to do anything with, and I might as well spend it on breakfast cooked for me by some anonymous chef in a downtown restaurant and served to

me by a beautiful waitress, I hope, also anonymous, and so saying, he locked the door behind him to protect his guitar after his wife of lingering odors and oh, so fond memories split, departed, left his company and took everything of hers and everything of theirs and some of what he had thought was his, including take another little piece of my heart, baby, now don't that taste good? and he walked down the stairs broken-hearted and lonely, yes, but too young and too filled with the spirit of life and all the music he has yet to create to die from broken-heartedness, I think, and out the downstairs door and quickly, heels clicking on the hard concrete, into the morning's rising sun, you idiot fool, where else or more exactly, when else could the rising sun be?"

And suddenly quiet, pushed open the clean glass restaurant door, entered, and stood, surrounded by the smell of food, the smell of plastic, the smell of plush upholstery, of feet on the carpeted floor, until the young woman of heavy makeup asked him, "One?" and he thought of beginning a counting game with her, but he recognized she was of the world and might not be amused by playing games with a man strange to her in a strange morning when sunshine stayed out of doors, and he said, "One,"

and she walked away from him, expecting him to follow, and he did, caught up in expectations, and when she turned and asked him, "Smoking or non-smoking?" he so wanted to say, "When I look into your eyes, my darling, oh beautiful woman who I have only just now met, I am smoking, do you not see this smoke, coming from my heated interior, beginning now to boil from my eyes, my ears, my mouth, emerging from every orifice, tooting out behind me like smoke from a coal-burning locomotive?" but he held himself serious, not intruding on this woman's, this morning's sunshineless existence, serious in the world to survive and advance toward success, toward climbing the ladder, toward, rapidly, too rapidly toward older, older stooped with age, like the woman there at the corner table, grey and wrinkled, though her eyes, her ancient, joyous eyes laugh at him, with him, at the world, at time.

Sunshine intrudes through the big window and touches the table and his hands as he eats breakfast. When he finishes his restaurant, uninspired but edible breakfast and a generous tip for the made up and trying so hard to keep smiling waitress, he has twenty-five cents to his name, if he could remember his name, and at last he does, Charles, churlish Charley, and that was what his wife, Isabella, lovely Laura, lily of the west, Peg of my heart, with smiling Irish eyes, oh darling Cory, Corinna

Corinna, Peggy Sue, sweet Peggy Sue had said, had warned him about, that he cared not at all about practical existence, lived wild and without discipline, at ease when he had money, and at ease when he hadn't money and one day, if he didn't settle down and begin to deal with the real world, and he had looked up at her wide-eyed and asked, "But wasn't that why you decided to love me, sweet Georgia Brown, because I am different and wild and full of music and love and fun and not at all concerned with the real world, the world of survival among men, among humankind, among the so serious world of capitalistic gain?"

And she said, "Yes, Chas, that is part of why I decided to love you, but people also must live in the real world. I am tired of providing for both of us. It's time for you to get serious and get some kind of a job and think about the future."

He played her a song and sang about love from the depth of his heart. He didn't remind her only two months before he had cleared more than three thousand dollars in a month, that glorious month of September. "Shave off those long red whiskers," he sang. "Trim back your fingernails. Put on a charcoal suit, a grey suit, a suit of clothes with a necktie. Walk in through the door that shuts out the sunshine and lie to the man who signs the paycheck and call him sir, sir, sir. Say, I got me a wife, sir, and to make her happy, I sign away my life, sir, my loving, musical life, sir."

Irene walked out the door then, and slammed the door shut behind her, hard. "Irene, goodnight Irene, I'll kiss you in my dreams," but she came back before dark, and he held her in his arms, his arms, his loving arms, "Oh my darling Clementine, Consuela, she take all my money and run Venezuela."

He said, "I need a good drummer and a lead guitarist. I did not mean for Samuel to go to jail and David to get homesick. I will go around and see if I can go solo, sing by myself, play this big Gibson guitar and sing songs. Perhaps you could sing with me, Mary, Mary, sometimes contrary. We could become rich and famous together."

Her job deep in the huge brick building, behind glass vials and racks of chemicals and over burning flames paid her well. She felt secure there. She wouldn't go to places where people ate and drank and stand under lights with him, in front of microphones with him and sing with him anymore.

He couldn't land a paying gig, perhaps, he thought, because he so often sang his own songs, that didn't fit patterns, and he wasn't interested, much, in playing and singing requests for

songs that had already been played and sung by the people who wrote them and by a hundred people since, though he had been willing when Samuel and David played music with him, because that was most of what their music was, the reproduction of music that had already been musiced. He played and sang willingly to their patterns, a price to pay for those times when they backed him so well in his own music, even backed him when he played songs out of the clear blue sky, unclear until the song emerged from the ancient, beautiful guitar and from his throat and mouth, what music he would create.

After breakfast, he walked out of the glass and stone restaurant and down the concrete sidewalk. Autumn sun shone brightly down through leaves changing a hundred colors on trees growing tall above the concrete sidewalks, the asphalt roadways. Air he breathed smelled of flowers, yes, and leaves, and asphalt and burned gasoline, and he breathed it in because he had to breathe even if burned gasoline and asphalt and concrete, Yes?

He had come here because Julia, Cecilia, Leila had been used to living in the city, wanted to live in the city, "Summer in the city, back of my neck feeling dirty and gritty," summer fading, desire to live in this city fading out of him.

On the mountains, tall mountains rising quickly above the broad valley, the first snow had fallen. Peaks stood white against the blue sky of morning. Early winter. White snow would slowly descend the mountains until white snow lay heavy on the foothills just above the valley.

But he did want to stay, he realized, "because, Chuck the upchuck, vomit of the soul, though you would never admit it to yourself, you still hope she, dearest wife, woman of many names, of long black hair, tall and perfectly curved, resident deep in your heart, will come back to you, rejoin you as she has done so many times before, go out and slam the door, come back in again, enfold you in her being as you enfold her in your arms, enfold her in your music, enfold her in your life, and keep her close to you, but you begin to know, oh, and feeling low lowdown and lonesome blue she won't come back to you. It's time it began to be understood, she's going to be gone for a very long time; she's going to be gone for good."

But he still had to face overdue rent. The next morning, his landlady knocked six times rat a tat tat on that wooden door, until he opened and said, "Please come in," and "Please sit down," and "I am sorry to have to tell you, I am without money,

beyond this one thin quarter. Please let me offer you a song.” He started to pick up his guitar, but she said,

“I came to collect the rent, not to listen to your songs.”

and he said, “Consider, if you will, the television set, the table, the chairs, this sofa that Sue picked out so carefully. Her taste is very good, if expensive. I will leave them with you in exchange for another month’s rent.”

She looked them over and hesitated. “I usually rent this place without any furniture.” She stood there looking at him, long red hair highlighted by sun shining in the tall window, quite beautiful, though he had never realized that before, had never looked closely at her before. She said, “I suppose you don’t have any way to move your furniture.”

“Yes. That is correct. I have no way to move them, these furnitures we now discuss.” Once, he thought, he would have begun to include this young and beautiful and perhaps rich princess into his life, but he had not the spirit for it, the heart for it. His life stretched before him, barren as winter and bereft.

She sat back down and sighed. “Okay. They are worth more than a month’s rent, but if that’s all you ask for them, it’s all I’ll give, because I don’t really want them in the first place. If I decide not to use them to furnish this place, I can sell them for more than a month’s rent. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I do know it. I already know.”

She stayed long enough to hear one song called “Thank you for taking the furniture,” and he tried to include this red-haired beauty into the song, but she simply did not fit, and he gave it up. She left, looking back at him with a look he didn’t understand just before she closed the door on his vision of her love loveliness.

And he stayed, but not a month, because he didn’t want to stay at all but only to get rid of his and Sue’s furniture, everything they owned together, and sometimes he looked again at the beautiful woman who owned the apartment, and sometimes she looked at him, but his heart was still badly broken or even missing entirely, and he couldn’t develop interest in anyone but Sue and was, in fact, still married to her, though he said, “Why should you be faithful to her when she is gone and without the slightest plan to return to you?” but nevertheless

In less than two weeks, he couldn’t stay in the place of so many memories that threatened to break his heart all over again. He knew by then all hope was misplaced, took only his guitar in its case and set out on foot, coat collar turned up against cold

wind blowing down from mountain snow, white halfway down the mountains by then.

By the fourth day, in a small town farther up the huge valley, he had learned that people almost never pick up hitchhikers anymore and some who do, you wouldn't want to ride with them. He walked into a car lot, and to the tall man in a suit with his hair combed straight back, he said, "Do you know anything about guitars?"

The man said, "Not much. Why?"

"I have here a very fine Gibson Hummingbird, thirty-five years old but in new condition, a flatpicker's dream, and I would like to trade it for an automobile capable of carrying me across this wide nation in pursuit of my future and my fortune."

The tall man in a suit, with his hair combed straight back said, "I'm a long way from a flatpicker, but I know a man who is. Let's load that thing in my car and go see him and see what he says about your Gibson Hummingbird flatpicker's special."

The man they drove across town to see, the man with a black beard beginning to show areas of white, with a sun tanned face beginning to show deep wrinkles, with tanned, working man's hands beginning to spot with age, took the shining guitar from its case and played it, and already Charles, Chuck, Chas felt greatly distanced from the instrument, as if it had decided to leave him and never return, and the man said, "Give him a car worth three thousand dollars. I'll make payments on the car until it's paid off."

That was five hundred dollars more than churlish Charley had hoped for on such short notice, so all of them signed papers, and Chas soon drove into the high mountains dusted brightly with light white snow in a car bigger than he had actually wanted and older than he meant for it to be, but dreams are like this, he said to his image in the rearview mirror, in this capitalistic world of crushing hope, though in a better place and a better time, where jobs hang like ripe plums from trees, I will settle and earn enough to buy two cars and three guitars, and all my future will heal itself, in the hard rock candy mountains, where the lemonade springs and the bluebird sings.

In three days, nine hundred and twenty-one miles across the nation he hadn't known was so varied, with so many forms of land and wildlife moving and living on the land, creating almost infinite songs behind his seeking eyes, the car broke. He lifted the hood toward the sky mackerled with thin clouds from horizon to horizon, beginning just now to thicken, to gather over the mountains in cumulus forms of dark grey and black.

Winter smells caressed him in cold wind.

He had never been mechanically inclined, except for replacing, repairing, or using the small machines for tuning on lovely, full-toned guitars, but he knew by the metal rod sticking out the side of the shattered engine block, the breakage of his car's engine was no minor matter. He listened to the radio until the sun came up and shone thinly through eastern clouds above the mountains and the morning warmed up a little. He shut the radio off, got out of the car, and walked away from it along the shoulder of the highway.

He whistled tentatively, without a tune. Then he began to develop a tune and whistled more confidently and louder. He walked a long way before he began to sing the song he had been whistling. "From this valley, they say you are going. We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile. They say you are taking the sunshine, that brightens our pathway a while."

Far behind him, the car sat on the shoulder of the road, hood up into the morning air, inanimate, quite dead, abandoned. His song, perfect in rhythm and in full melody, filled the air and drifted out over the wild land and the ridges around him. Wind blew harder in the early morning, and snow swirled into the wind and blew against him and around him.