

My fingers caress the glossy finish of her, of the instrument that I picked up so many years ago. Those digits glide so easily along the smooth surface, softly whispering a song from another life. Barely a decade old and yet she carried one memory too many. The passing of family, heartbreak, and depression. The cold, overwhelming wave of sadness that turns idle strumming into impassionate, wild blurs of a hand, desperate to concede the rising warmth in my heart. My guitar, the first instrument I ever learned.

Cough, cough. My head rises, eyes meeting the expectant eyes of the crowd. A personal, small crowd for a personal song. Their eyes bore into my own, waiting with bated breath as I lift her by the fretboard. Her strings are mute, quiet, untouched at this moment. And yet as I sit down, nerves quelled by the gentle creak of the stool beneath me, my fingers slip. A light, airy sound comes forth. It ascends into the beams holding the building taut, settling an anxious crowd. These folks came to hear me play. I had no intention of disappointing them. My fingertips hover just above the strings, perched above the soundhole. My heart is beating in my chest, about to burst as my nerves swing upwards, ready to crumble me before the show even began. I swallow, taking a deep breath. It swirls in my core, calming and cooling the butterflies fluttering just beneath. Slow, relaxed, gentle. I let it go, feeling the tension release in my muscles. As if a weight had been lifted from me, I pluck my first strings of the night.

I was no singer, no angelic voice to soothe the hearts before me. I depended simply upon my instrument, letting it become another extension of myself. The tension of the strings resists before me, easily overcome as my fingers let them loose. The twang of my guitar waves down to the crowd, welcoming them as friends. Familiar, old friends catching up after spending too much time apart. I watch as my fingers fly across the strings, deftly plucking each string in just the right order. The comfortable, rehearsed order that I had practiced time and time again. I felt myself slip beneath the notes, settling between the beat as my fingers flew across the fretboard. Half notes, full notes, rests. I knew this song better than I knew myself. It probably knew me better, actually.

My surroundings fall away. Senses dissipate and bleed away as I focus solely on my instrument, on the beautiful, graceful sounds reverberating outwards from it. I twist and contort, wrapping myself around her, bending just barely over. Having just barely finished the first verse, the crowd fell away from me. They were entranced, rapt with attention with the notes trickling out from my fingers. Rolling over each rise and fall of the song, becoming louder as the warmth in my chest blossomed. The heavy, burdensome weight around my chest was chipped away. Each note scouring away another inch of what had weighed upon me so heavily. Spellbound by my own song, I could feel that intimate sensation overtake me once again for the first time in months. My muzzle blossoms into a smile as the chorus takes over, entrapping my entire attention. Passion and happiness swelled in my heart, so euphoric that I couldn't control how hard I was strumming along now. My head rises with my heart, completely taken by the fiery, desperate light searing away the last bits of stone surrounding my soul.

Faster and faster my fingers flew across my guitar, strumming up and down with wild abandon. I was alight, brighter than I had ever felt. My thoughts had escaped me, swallowed

whole by the unmistakable heights of my joy. Nothing could compare. Nothing would take me over so wholly like a song from the very depths of my soul, unrestrained and unfettered by the ailments of the mind. So full of grief and joy, that the only course of action was to follow the harmonic flow. It reaches its peak, so lost in the music that the world has fallen away from me. People, stages, stools. The echo of my guitar was just a backdrop as the notes quieted, growing lower and more somber as the song comes to a close. What felt like hours of unleashed emotion had merely been minutes. Seconds that had stretched themselves outwards.

The crowd was still. Silent. Tense. My eyes were still locked onto the guitar cradled against my chest. I had missed this. The warm smell of wood wafting upwards, my fingertips burning with new calluses, and the warm blossoming deep within my chest. My gaze rises once again, broken free from it's trance. And yet, my fingers still plucked away, slow and somber as I wind downwards. Awakening from a trance that had captured me so many times before. Something primal and cathartic that has extended generations. The last note falls, a minor chord that falls over the hushed crowd. My eyes meet theirs, vibrant and full of life. Each own having slipped into their own trance, broken only by my quiet two words as I step down from the stage.

"Thank you."