

*Vinoad Senguttuvan*

**Street Performer**

The guitar is out of tune. I think of pausing between songs to tweak it. But I am afraid the dozen people standing in a semi-circle around me will drift away to the hot dog vendor five paces away or to the Mister Softee truck across the street. The traffic stops on Fifth Ave and taxi cabs roll over 42<sup>nd</sup> street in a wavy yellow stream. In the distance a fire truck blares.

I go on playing, shifting between James Brown, Chuck Berry and Johnny Cash. The crowd stays and swells by a few more. Sundays are good, and something about a warm fall day, with crimson leaves twirling on the sidewalks, makes people generous.

Four teenage girls in cutoff jeans stand in front of me and to the left, giggling and whispering. On the other side, a wealthy, old couple cling to each other. These people don't realize my guitar is wack. To them I am a curiosity – a homeless guy on the streets of New York, unbathed, scruff-bearded, in a grandpa hat. A European family of five, in soccer jerseys and skin pink as salmon, flash their camera in my eyes. A sleazy guy in business suit is staring at the teenage girls.

I feel that chronic urge rising up my arms, I want to touch someone. Not in a perverse way, but a simple physical contact – a punch on the arm, an interlocked finger. But my hair is caked and clumpy, and the smell of dead rodents wisps off my clothes, off my socks – the price of being homeless. No one will cross the border set by my black guitar case, which is gaping its mouth at the crowd, hungry for small change.

Coupled with my yearning for physical contact, the awkward buzz from the third guitar string begins to annoy me. After an off-key rendition of *Brown Eyed Girl*, I take a bow, and standing at the same spot, begin to fiddle with the pegheads on the top of my guitar. There is a scattered applause, and I see dollar bills float into my guitar case, and a smattering of coins. The people on the outer circle disperse, resolute that they didn't hear enough to owe me anything.

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"That was wicked."

The teenage girls have lingered, and so has the guy in business suit. I take a close look at the one who spoke, her black top is tight and long, falling to the middle of her thighs, and her jeans, metallic rust. A leather designer bag dangles from the crook of her elbow.

I bow again, a deeper, longer one this time.

"Can you play *Strawberry Fields*?" It's the same sultry girl as before – the clear leader of the gang.

But I don't play The Beatles. "Don't know that one," I say, trying not to sound rude.

By now the ogle of the business guy, patting his gelled black hair, is getting too obvious, and with no attention from the girls, not even an annoyed glance, he struts away, hands buried deep in his pockets and not a penny for me. With the corner of my eye, I see him climb up the stairs of the New York Public Library behind and to my side, and disappear between its massive Corinthian columns.

"How about Simon and Garfunkel?" This one has a layer of black mascara surrounding her eyes and covering her lashes, the appeal of which I cannot comprehend.

"Sure can. What song?" I pray it's not *Sound of Silence*.

"*The Boxer*," says the third girl, tall, lithe and with freckles.

Giving her an impressed smile, I begin to strum the taunt strings, feeling their vibration on my chest.

*When I left my home and my family I was no more than a boy,  
In the company of strangers,  
In the quiet of the railway station, runnin' scared.*

I lower my voice and with it the sound of my guitar. The girls move in

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closer and in this hushed state, I attract no one from the passing crowd to stop. Sometimes when a dreamy couple, on their first trip to mid-town from Alabama or Chelsea, stop to listen, their arms crossed behind the other's back, fingers caressing, I lull my voice, leave out the rest of the world, and give them a personal performance.

*Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters,  
Where the ragged people go.  
Lookin' for the places, only they would know.*

The shadows are getting longer, and I begin to look forward to the Wings and Thighs Platter at KFC. The harvest has been good today. I think of taking a break tomorrow, sit in Battery Park and trying to fish with my makeshift rod. On a weekday, I can't make a third of what I did today.

*Asking only workman's wages I come lookin' for a job,  
But I get no offers,  
Just a come-on from the whores on Seventh Avenue.*

The first girl, in the black top, has her eyes closed. The evening sun catches her cherry red hair and makes it glow. I name her Eleanor. And I want to stroke the curls of her hair, where they scrape the back of her shoulders.

"Woouo," the girls holler with arms raised high, as I finish the final verse. "Can I try?" With a hop, Eleanor passes over my guitar case and stands next to me. "Pleeese."

I surrender the guitar, and when she slips it over her shoulder, the strap is too long, making the guitar fall to her knees, its round, spruce body massive against her slender frame. Beyond her are the two stone lions flanking the base of the stairs leading to the library.

"This is the only song I know," says Eleanor.

I step back and stand facing her. For a minute, imagining myself to be the passing by observer, a filthy rich one. She begins to play, *Do Re Me* from *Sound of Music*. And the friends cheer. But her fingers are one fret off, on

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the neck of the guitar.

Moving closer, I shift her bony hand up the guitar. As she smiles, I smell the bubble gum flavor of her lip gloss. The locks of her hair are inches away but I dare not touch it.

"We gotta go." It's the mascara girl.

Eleanor, who was still playing, looks up as surprised as I am. The tall one has hailed a cab that is now idling right in front of us, the back door open and the fourth girl stepping in.

Eleanor wiggles out of the guitar strap and hands it to me. "Thanks."

I take it in my right hand, and with my left, I reach out to her hair, barely brushing the strands by her cheek with my fingertips. "Now you be good."

*Now you be good?* I chide myself, while she run after her friends.

As the car door slams shut, my eyes fall on my guitar case and my hands shiver. It's like a wishing well, full of scattered coins – pennies, quarters and nickels – but not one green bill in sight.

We are on Fifth Avenue, didn't anyone see those slimy creatures reach into the guitar case and grab my crumpled money in handfuls, like candy wrappers? Why did they do it, I wonder? They didn't need the cash, not with the kind of handbags and bracelets they had on. It was probably a game to them. A bet. A dare.

Sitting down in front of the guitar case, I stare into the black velvet inside that's peppered with coins. Maybe there is a few bucks in here. But that will go for beer and Advil, I'll sleep hungry tonight. In the corner of the case, I see a shiny new quarter and pick it up – it has a huge buffalo and few sunflowers – and I stare at the odd juxtaposition for a long minute.

Holding that one quarter in my hand, I slam down the guitar case with my heel, leaving the coins in place. My foot still resting on the case, I

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begin to laugh, a deep throaty one, my tummy quivering. If I can have a day like this once a month, heck, once a year, my life wouldn't be so bad after all.