

Prologue

It's a pub that could be anywhere — as forgettable and ordinary as any other small town dive. Shoved in the middle of an aging strip mall stuck between an alleyway and a 24/7 laundromat whose clients like to frequent the bar between loads of laundry.

The inside is not much more than a long hallway with a few high-top tables flanked by barstools against one wall and a sticky bar along the length of the other — all made using wood that once covered the basketball court at the rec center before it closed years prior. Most things in this dim stretch are a similar patchwork: repurposed materials, second-life items. Everything was something else first. Stamped tin panels on the ceiling. Scratched up mason jars, holding warm light bulbs, dangling from the ceiling. Below them, lit golden, are the bar's few weekday regulars, mostly older guys in canvas jackets and work boots looking to get in a quiet night of drinking before the weekend.

It's a place I know well.

Every Thursday, I get here about an hour early and park beneath the same flickering streetlight on the very edge of the parking lot, as far from the front door as I can get. I sit behind the steering wheel in the shadowed interior of a rusting hatchback, stare at the bar's glowing neon and blue facade, its dark wooden door, working myself up enough to get out and go inside. The radio's off and the engine cold as I count out loud to myself in a whisper, trying to slow my mind down, the numbers curling out in quick little puffs from my warm breath. I readjust the visor to try and make it darker, then close my eyes. I tell myself "Don't move just yet. You have a few more minutes before you have to go inside. No one is ever at this bar anyway. Stay right here. One, two, three..."

The low buzz from the yellow light above me starts creeping into my ears. I shift my body around, trying to get comfortable and small. Empty plastic bottles chatter under the passenger seat.

"That's just a noise. Keep focus. Four, five..."

Endless drones bounce around my forehead, tapping on my skull looking for cracks they can work their way out of. Not finding one, they pick up speed and slam against the brittle bone riddled with scratches that read like the words I have to repeat every night.

“Calm down. Six, seven, eight...”

I beg them to stop but the pounding grows until I start to hear faint music. Suddenly, I’m in front of the room with the lights down, but — somehow — a glare off the guitar in my hands pierces my eyes. The house music is still on so I yell out to the bartender; they don’t notice. I try to walk over but the floor is beer-slick, so I settle back on my stool. They want me to sing, so I get louder, my voice thrashed and hoarse and barely a whimper escapes. No one is listening, their pint glasses clinking out of time. “Keep counting...”. Off-rhythm, the beat flips around. Voices rise to heckle me.

“Where is it...” My feet keep slipping. “Too much noise, can’t hear my own words...”. The drone beats with violent purpose. “Stop, let me catch...”. I slip, grab the stool, and they laugh, louder and louder, the thunderous roll of the uncaring drumming between the folds of my brain. “Why can’t they all just stop for a god damn...”

A knock against the car window shakes me loose. I straighten up in my seat. The noise stops.

“Hey man, you coming in? Your set starts in like five minutes.” I look up to see a tall, stocky, twenty-something man in flannel bent over to look at me through the passenger side window, his breath fogging up the glass. After taking a second to get my bearings, I recognize Josh, the young guy who tends bar on Thursdays.

“Yeah, yeah, of course, just running through the setlist in my head.”

He chuckles. “Whatever man, the PA’s up and the mic is hot. Just plug in your guitar and turn the main up when you’re ready.”

“Alright, thanks. Give me a sec to grab my gear then I’ll head in.”

He nods and goes back inside.

Looking down at my phone to check the alarm that didn’t go off, I see “9:54 PM” in bright white numbers. I throw back a nip of cheap whiskey, grab my stuff out of the backseat, and head across the frozen

parking lot mouthing the lyrics of my first song as I walk, making sure I remember the words, open the door, turn to the corner by the window where they have me set up. Cutting through the darkness, the neon beer signs light up a small table, a stool, and a mic stand in hot pinks and blues.

In quick, muscle-memory succession I plug in my guitar, put out a tip jar, and strum a couple chords to check the levels. Nobody notices me but I see their heads perk up as the house music dies down. As they look around for the reason why, I start singing.

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Regular gigs don't come by a whole lot, but I happened to be playing here a few months ago when another guy came in asking for more money on his night, and the owner slid his slot my way. Now I fill the late set, 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. every Thursday as long as a big football game isn't on. Nights like this usually only bring out a handful of regulars who have by now accepted with some resignation that I'm a part of their tradition. Our mutual understanding: I get to come play songs they don't like, and, in return, they can toss out insults at me a couple times an hour. I grit my teeth while they howl with laughter coming up with new ways to mispronounce my name, but at the end of the night the cash in my hand dulls the sting.

Staying sane at these places can be tough, but the more gigs you do, you start picking up tricks to make it easier. I've found it helps to have a little bit of low shelf whiskey, neat, on the table next to me in a nice heavy glass so I can take a quick pull between songs if I need to calm my nerves or soothe my throat. I've learned to place the tip jar in what little light I have so people can see it, and I even put a note on the side saying that I'll play a love song for a five dollar bill. At the time, I figured I might get a few more tips that way, but in a room full of quiet loners and guys coming off hard shifts I'm lucky if I hear loose change clink against the glass. That's pretty much how it's been for every gig lately.

My mind wanders as I autopilot through the songs that I try to hit every week, running off of muscle memory and vaguely familiar lyrics that feel like jumbled letters falling out of my mouth and into the microphone. I think back to my days fresh out of school, when I was ready to try myself out on the road, full of passion and a misguided sense of how good I actually was. Packed up what was then a lightly used Jeep and headed out on the road to take a shot on a life that I thought I would love, but it wasn't long before I saw how far running on dreams alone would take me.

First stop was New Orleans, but I didn't take well to the scene. I couldn't hang with all the players around and although everyone tried their best to help me out, I was a lost cause, only heeding advice I gave myself. I busked around town trying to scrape together what little money I could until the moment I heard somebody talking about wanting to head to Los Angeles. Decided I'd be better off going that way, too, but when we got into town, I could feel the pace was going to be too much for me. After struggling for a couple months I got a whiff of some decent gigs happening around Kansas City so I went to make one last stand there. Two months in, a new exhaust system cleaned me out and, with nothing lined up, it was time to head back home. Defeated.

When I was driving back, as I was pulling onto the New Jersey turnpike towards I-95 North it hit me that this whole trip had been a gamble. A game that I thought I was ready for until I realized everyone else was playing with a different set of cards than I had in my hand. They had it all figured out before they first picked up an instrument, and then there was me: still looking at my hands while I played, forgetting the words I myself had written while my voice barely rose above the people talking at the bar.

Riding the highway in the dark, the engines of vacationers and long haul truckers whirring past me, gave me time to revisit and reconsider everything I thought I knew. Chances were that I just wasn't cut out to be a big-time musician, that maybe a life on the road was more than I could handle.

Besides, a dingy bar at night in California looks pretty much the same as it does in Rhode Island. So I got home, called in a couple favors to scrape together some decent paying gigs, and figured out how to settle for "good enough." Playing late night gigs for a couple hundred bucks, free beer, and chicken wings is not my dream scenario, but it gets me through the days.

As I play, I keep my eye on the clock, try to stay mindful of how much time I've got left in the set. Once I see the bartender flick the lights for last call, I'll pull out one more big song. Something that people can sway in their seats to, with words that are a bit melancholy but can end up

stirring when sung by a chorus of half-drunk people making their way out into the cold night air. Looking out at the dim lights, I know that even though right now there may only be one or two people at the bar who are actually listening, some day those same people will be huddled under a bright marquee with my name on it, waiting to get into the sold-out show at the finest theater in their city, just like the crowd the night before and the night after.

They'll smile as I walk out draped in the hot glow of stage lights and whisper to each other about the time they walked past me when I was nobody, sitting quietly at the bar counting gig money under a green, fluorescent shade.

They'll know then that I'm more than the bar tabs I rack up or the beat-up guitar leaning against a stool between sets. That I'm somebody. Someone who's bigger than an old country song they've heard a hundred times or the tiny name they saw written on a flier outside some forgotten pub. Bigger than the untethered heart of a fool that sings songs to uninterested barflies every night.

Right around 11:15, I take my first set break. I catch Josh's eyes and give him a little nod to let him know he can turn the house music back up. The sounds of townie rock rise across the room. The pub is mostly empty except for Josh, a kid running barback, a couple at a high-top towards the back, an older woman drinking by herself near the crook of the bar close to me, and four guys taking up adjoining stools in the middle. I grab a stool two down from the woman and wave to Josh, who's daydreaming against the mirrored wall behind the bar, to come over so I can order a beer. He obliges and we lean towards each other to hear over the music.

"Hey man, what's free for guys playing?" I ask.

Josh looks into the small fridge behind him.

"Right now I have tallboys of either PBR or Narragansett. Usually we have more to pick from but a band came through from North Carolina a couple nights ago and cleared those out."

I shrugged, "Ah, no worries. I'll take a 'Gansett."

"Need a glass?" he asks as he pulls out a can.

“Nah, can is fine.”

“You got it.” He throws down a coaster in front of me, cracks the beer, and sets it down, with the label facing me. A thin layer of foam bubbles up near the mouth of the can.

The first sip is cold, sweet at first but a little bitter on the back end, and soothes my throat which is a little hoarse from trying to sing above the limits of the PA system. In the relative quiet I can feel my ears humming a little bit from being so close to the speakers earlier. I take small sips to try and drag out my break, which is typically fifteen minutes, but on slow nights Josh doesn't seem to mind me stretching it a bit. Drawing curly designs in the condensation, I try to think of the next few songs I want to play, but mostly I'm just too worn out to care.

Before long, I've knocked back a third of the tallboy and, as it mixes with the bits of whiskey in my gut, a feeling like a warm jacket starts creeping over me. The knots in my shoulders from wearing the guitar strap start to loosen up, my forearms get a little bit heavier against the wooden lip of the bar. My body relaxes, slumps a little on the stool as the lights above the bar grow hazy.

A slow fog spreads in my head, dampening the noise around me. I feel my breath slowing down as my pulse beats its hushed bass in my ears mixing with strands of far-off voices starting to pick up, replacing the bar's waning din. I look up at the mirrored wall, expecting to see my face but finding, in its place, a shadowed figure. Though there's something strangely familiar to the silhouette, I can't see who they are. All I can make out are strands of long, flowing hair glowing in red and golden hues at the shadow's edges. They stand just beyond the reach of the hanging lights.

All at once, both a calming joy and an aching sadness wash over me. The murmur of voices grows louder and the figure starts to lean forward. A darkened shape extends towards me and as it hits the light, I recognize the soft, pale skin of a familiar hand reaching for mine.

Out of nowhere, I hear “You don't sound half bad up there tonight.”

It's spoken softly but, in my boozy state, jars me. Almost deafening.

I turn to find the woman once alone two barstools down now right beside me, gaze piercing, her glass of amber beer tilted slightly my way..