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The Guitar

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The Guitar

I was having sex for the first time in my life. Robert's parents were working late and we were in his room – this crazy attic triangle with a window that looked out into the park. From his bed, I had this straight view of his walls, all layered with anti-globalisation posters and ticket stubs and notes like he was giving the finger to his neat-freak parents. Every bit of space was covered.

He unbuckled my belt and grinned: he could feel me. I didn't know whether to be proud or embarrassed but he laughed and I laughed, too. And then he was taking off his shirt and his arm got caught and he made a face, so we were laughing again, and you know the whole thing made me think of being little. How I used to strip my t-shirt off after soccer practice, inside out, so the round collar circled my forehead and the body of the shirt trailed after me like a wig. Robert was guiding my hands now but I was still thinking about that stupid t-shirt. And you know, in a moment like that, when you're finally having sex with another boy, you don't want to be thinking about anything stupid like being a kid. You just want to be in the moment and remember every fucking boy-on-boy detail. So when Robert's mouth landed on mine, I was grateful to be brought back to his bedroom. The tangy smell of our socks. The battered guitar, leaning against the wall. The music stand at attention. His body was so immediate. So available. Whatever happened, I was ready: I'd been waiting for this.

"You okay?" he asked, turning me around, hands pressing onto my back, and I was thankful one of us knew what we were doing. I nodded. The mattress was a raft. Jesus fucking Christ, I thought. How could anyone wash dishes? How could you go grocery shopping or wait in line at the canteen when you could be doing this?

That evening when I got home for dinner, my parents were already seated at the dining table. It was way too small and falling apart but it'd been passed down through generations, so of course we had to cart it with us every time we moved, cramming around it for family meals. I sat down, aware of my quads pressing into the chair, my tailbone against the wooden frame.

"You're late." My mother looked at me and I shrugged. My younger brothers were arguing about whose television night it was.

"Something with lots of explosions." Tom, ten years old, was hardly the family intellectual. He was pointing a finger gun at a make-believe bad guy in the kitchen and making sound effects. Pow-pow-pow. I felt detached from it all, like an alien sent to planet Earth to document human family behaviour.

“Come on, Tom. This is dinner,” my mother sighed, reaching over me for the potatoes. My brother ignored her. His gun magically changed to an AK-47 and he started mowing down his imaginary enemies. I was willing him to take aim at our table – nothing pissed my mother off more than being imaginarily assassinated.

Our father set his cutlery down. “Tom, listen to your mother.”

Felix, the youngest, was humming and thwacking his feet against his chair like he was making a joke at our family’s expense – adding more mayhem to rile my parents – and it made me snicker. We had them outnumbered.

My mother was serving up our plates and staring at my father with the expression she used when he needed to be authoritative. I thought he was going to grill me about being late. I was ready: I’d borrowed books from Robert for my library alibi. But my dad wasn’t looking at me. His hair had been cut by my mother, and there was a wispy bit she’d missed near his ear. He cleared his throat and I just focused on that chunk of hair. The man looked ridiculous. His voice lifted as he tried again: “We have an announcement.”

The boys stopped clamouring and I put on my ‘listening seriously’ face. My mother cut him off. “We’re moving.”

My father shook his head like there was a better way to break the news. He was watching me.

“Moving, where?” Felix tilted his head.

My mother held the spatula like it was a weapon. “Adelaide.”

“What do you mean, Adelaide?” They couldn’t do this to me, not now. Why did they have to ruin everything?

“Why?” Felix asked.

In response, my father started singing the Beatles – ‘Money (That’s What I Want)’. His life purpose was to find the perfect Beatles song for every occasion. The guy spent a fortune on the spiffiest guitar he could find so we could have family sing-alongs. He was now belting out the chorus. Tom joined in I wanted to chuck cutlery at them both.

Even my mother looked irritated. “Congratulate your father. He got a promotion. He’ll be a professor.”

This wasn’t the first time my family had moved – we’d been all over the country for my dad’s jobs. We’d even spent a couple of years in the Bay Area of the United States so he could check out geographic fault lines and the rest of us could ‘expand our cultural awareness’. But Adelaide? I was

pretty sure it had something to do with Robert. Of course my dad wanted a promotion and all that – but it'd be an added bonus that Robert and I were separated.

The first time I ever saw Robert, he was sitting cross-legged on top of a table in the cafeteria, just playing the guitar like there was no one else in the room. It was a bashed up three-quarter thing and his hands seemed enormous. I stood there, lockers behind me, focused on his fingers, too shy to look him in the eye. The bell rang, and I was aware of people rushing around us.

“What do you have next?” Robert asked. He had these intense blue-green eyes that were just staring at me.

“Huh?” My mouth was completely dry.

“Class.”

“Oh. Physics. Then Chem.” I was aware that I should go, that I was going to be late for class but I also knew I would never have this moment of meeting Robert again.

“A scientist. We'll need you.”

“Really?”

“They've ballsed up the environment pretty bad. Someone has to fix it – capture sunlight with more efficiency, sort out recycling technologies. You're the man for the job.” As he said this last bit, he struck three dramatic chords that made me think of Superman hovering in the air, outside a skyscraper.

I'd never thought of myself as in the world, let alone making it better. High school seemed like preparation, but for what? The world was fucked. If nuclear power stations didn't melt us into the ocean, we'd blow each other up. You only had to watch the six o'clock news to see human beings were the new dinosaurs.

Robert shrugged, his fingers picking a scale. “You're better than me.”

“Why?”

“I'm just going to write songs about how people need to fix things. A song's not going to save anything.”

I couldn't help myself. My voice was so loud it surprised both of us. “Are you crazy? Musicians can change the world more than anyone. Look at The Beatles. Look at Dylan.” I was embarrassed by my father's brainwashing, but Robert smiled.

Robert was the popular new kid, and weirdly he was also my best friend. My parents didn't like him for a lot of reasons but getting picked up by the police for disturbing the peace didn't help. We'd been smoking weed and 'shifting' cars. It was one of our favourite post-midnight pastimes: hotwire

anything we could and move it half a block down the street. That way, the owner gets a shock and appreciates the role of the motor vehicle in their work-life routine but no harm's done; they just have to walk an extra hundred metres in the morning. We always left little business cards on the dashboards: "Appreciate every kilometre – you're driving us closer to global warming."

Robert clutch-hopped us through the three am darkness – hands steady on the steering wheel. That night in the car, the half-darkness made me bold. I stared at him, studying his face. His lips and nose, almost too big for the rest of his features. The tendons in his neck. His collarbone. I'd spent a lot of time watching my guy friends in high school – looks that lasted a couple of seconds too long – but no one ever watched back and I'd make myself turn away. So when Robert pulled over, and the car stalled, and he ignored that and just looked at me, I could barely breathe. Thirty or forty seconds passed. Maybe even a minute. He didn't say anything, nothing happened. But we sat there, under a flickering streetlight, watching each other.

It wasn't until later, as we were walking home, that we got busted. We'd parked the truck and were making our way along the street. Robert had been laughing so loud I didn't hear the police car behind us. It was only when the spotlight flared on that I realised we weren't alone. The officer was suspicious but he couldn't get us for theft and that was lucky because Robert and I didn't have licences. But the officer did insist on driving us home: Robert first, then me. I waited in the back of the car, staring as he strode across the lawn. Robert's house was secluded, with a posh marble entrance and these tall trees close in on either side like security guards. The door opened as soon as the automatic yard light clicked on as though his father had been awake inside, waiting. I glanced up for a moment to see him peering at me, sending some kind of warning through the upper-end suburban darkness.

And then the officer slipped into his seat and slammed the door closed. "You ready?"

And then, too soon, we were standing on my porch – the front step crooked, Tom's bicycle limp on the ground. The officer's gloved fist rapped on the door until my father, in his fraying robe and sheepskin slippers, finally eased it open.

When the officer left, my father insisted on making cocoa. He poured milk into the saucepan and stirred it on the stove. "So, what happened?"

"I told you. We were just hanging out." I was standing at the breakfast bar. The kitchen was super-illuminated against the night-black windows.

He nodded like he was amassing all of the relevant information and wanted to double-check the facts. "At three in the morning?"

I shrugged. I couldn't help myself: I was smiling. Robert had looked back. Even if we met at our lockers the next morning and everything was stock-standard, I'd always know there was almost a full minute in a truck when he'd looked back.

My dad took a long sip from his cup. "We love you, you know."

I wanted to go to my room, stare at the ceiling and replay the last four hours in my head. I did not want to be stuck in the kitchen having a heart-to-heart with my dad. "I love you, too."

He was staring at the side of the fridge like it was broadcasting a family slide show. Under his breath, he was humming 'Help' until he turned to me. "Remember when we'd swim at the beach? I'd lift you higher and higher and drop you into the water? You'd scream bloody murder and then beg me to do it again."

"I get it. I love you, too, dad. Really. I love you."

He couldn't help himself. "All your loving?"

"Eight days a week."

He laughed, so easy to please, and pushed his glasses up his nose. "You were so little."

"You don't have to worry about Robert. He's not a bad influence."

"I think I understand that."

"We okay?" I asked.

He nodded.

So when my parents made the announcement we were moving, I figured my father had betrayed me. He'd told my mother everything about the police, and they'd decided things were definitely *not* okay and we needed to move. To make matters worse, he'd finalised the paperwork from the university so we'd be leaving the last day of school. Give us the whole summer to settle into Adelaide. I'd looked into staying put under the guise of scholastic commitment, but my parents didn't even hear my arguments out: "I know it's tough but families do things together," my father had said.

Over the next month, Robert and I spent every spare moment together. But it was tricky. I wasn't allowed at Robert's house and there was no way I was going to bring him to mine. My brothers were feral and my parents were stuck in the '60s, which didn't even make sense – they were in nappies for Woodstock. Robert and I were at a loss until I found a vacant apartment in-between rental tenants. We'd climb in the bathroom window and go for it in the empty bedroom until we had to rush home at dinnertime. The carpet was some acrylic scratchy blend that made me break out in hives so I had to stash a blanket there – a quilt my mother had made. I remember lying on it, naked, as Robert walked his fingers down my spine. The peach-coloured walls watching us.

My life was on a timer – when it reached zero, I'd follow my parents onto a plane and my life would be over. I'd never get another blowjob. I'd never be slammed against a wall and spend the afternoon wrestle-fucking. I'd never feel so safe at school. In a weird way, I was resigned with losing all of that. When you're just floating through year eleven, angry at everything, you don't think the popular new kid is going to be your best friend – you certainly don't think he's going to let you fuck him. I'd had more than my share of luck. But I wanted to give Robert something monumental, something so big I'd never be forgotten.

It took some planning. I skipped lunch and bicycled all the way home in the rain. I broke the basement window with a rock and slid it open so I could fit through. The washing machine was sitting there, bored and stupid, with the lawn mover parked next to it. The walls smelled of mould. I took the stairs slowly, one at a time and enjoyed being a stranger in my house.

Upstairs, the living room looked like a set from a movie about my family. I pushed over a pile of mail on the dining room table and turned a chair upside-down. I made my way to the guest room where my dad practiced all of his Beatles songs. There on the floor, his guitar was waiting. In the velvet-lined case at the bottom of the bed.

It was a beautiful instrument. Of course it was. The front panel was pale – the colour of straw. The sides were darker – mahogany, I think. And it smelled of the trees that had been cut down to make it. I didn't know much about guitars but my father bought it from a friend of a friend who owned a music store. It was going at-cost to make way for new stock but even so it was twice what my father could afford.

When I picked it up, the hard shell whacked against my leg. I was halfway down the hallway when the cuckoo clock in the living room started bleating, frightening me so much I almost fell over. Outside, it'd stopped raining but the leaves on the trees were heavy with drops. I stood on the porch, scared and impressed with myself. On the pavement, my bicycle was leaning against a telephone pole. I used a bungee cord to strap the guitar to the rack and teetered my way to the empty flat where Robert was waiting. I was so busy giving myself high-fives in my head I didn't see my father, parked three cars down, listening to the hourly news report.

Robert loved the guitar. Of course he did. That afternoon, we took turns fucking and listening to him play. I had to get back for the end of fifth period because my parents were picking me up from school, but Robert decided to stay all afternoon and practice. He watched me getting dressed, and stayed there – cross-legged and naked – on my mother's quilt. He was working through a series of minor chords and singing along. I didn't recognise the words or the melody – he was making them

up. I closed my eyes and tried to picture every detail, from the muscles in his back to the seams in the carpet. I wanted to remember this.

“You okay?” Robert asked.

I nodded.

We were all crammed in the car when my father pulled into our driveway later that afternoon. My brothers were swiping at each other, ninja-warrior style, and my mother was shouting at them to be quiet. I’d forgotten the house was a crime scene so it wasn’t hard to act surprised when I followed everyone inside. My mother went straight to the bedroom for her jewellery. “It’s all here.”

She called out to me: “What about you? What about your room?”

I ran down the hall to see what was missing and for a moment I had no idea what I’d find. It didn’t make sense – I was the thief, I hadn’t taken anything except the guitar – but I was filled with this uneasy doubt. The door was already open. Rock star posters stared down at me. An Escher print was busy drawing itself. My single-bed was unmade. “All good.”

Back in the living room, my mother was opening drawers and stocktaking the house. She didn’t know it was me – she really had no idea, I realised. And this filled me with equal parts relief and guilt. My brothers were pretending to be police officers, casing each room, waiting to be ordered into the bath. Only my father was still, sitting on the couch, surprisingly nonplussed.

“Just my guitar,” he said, watching me. “Funny that.”

* * *

My father didn’t mention it again for years – well after I had moved out of home and brought boyfriends round for dinner. It was Boxing Day and we were sitting in easy chairs, watching the cricket. My brothers were horsing around in the kitchen – something they’d never grown out of – and my mother was watering the garden.

The batsman on-screen whacked the ball so it bounced just outside the rope and into the stands. The crowd was cheering and waving signs.

And just like that, with no preamble, my father cleared his throat. “Whatever happened to Robert? He still playing?”

It’d probably been three years since Robert and I had last emailed. He’d been busy with his band, locking down studio time, scoring a bit of airplay. I was distracted with end-of-session uni exams – a double degree in physics and engineering. The friendship drift had been gradual,

thankfully. Even so, I still thought of him whenever I had time to stop and listen to the radio. "Yeah, sure."

The image on the television froze for a moment and then the bowler was shaking his head, rubbing the ball against his shirt.

My father was nodding. "You think he appreciated that guitar?"

I kept staring at the screen, wondering if I'd heard him correctly.

He continued. 'Just wondering, you know. It was a lovely instrument.'

I was too shy to look at my dad. But I thought of Robert's face when I presented it to him. His mouth open. His hands reaching out. "Yeah..." I said. "I think he did."

The Guitar

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