

## A TRAVELER'S SONG

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The old Traveler sank into the overstuffed chair, grasping its arms until his knuckles turned white while the lids of his eyes protectively hid the gentle weariness which his eyes would have betrayed. He sighed and creased the lids together even tighter. Then lurching forward as if the effort had caused him pain, the man placed his elbows on his knees and cradled his unshaven face in his hands. Slowly, the tips of his calloused fingers worked their way from his temples over to his closed eyes to spark them open. The Traveler raised his head to reveal quiet, contemplative eyes.

"How have you been, my darlin' children, while I've been away in the West? Though you're strangers, I feel like I know you—by the way that you greet me and offer to feed me and eagerly ask if I'll stay for a rest!"

The Traveler's words echoed through the house as if they were lyrics of a forgotten road song. His left hand rhythmically moved, playing an imaginary guitar.

"Now sit yourselves down in a pile here before me. I wish I had presents for each of your smiles. But I've been travelin' without much to carry—just a broken guitar case with tape on the sides, a bag and a few signs to help me hitch a ride."

With these words, we gathered around the welcomed stranger with hesitant expectations of gifts and treasures from his travels, Knowingly, he smiled and reached inside his bag.

"Now, here is a strange European guitar string. I found it on the floor of a club in Marseilles. It's fat for the third string, but skinny for the fourth string. But I kept it in hopes that I'd use it some day. It's funny how people just keep things that way."

We didn't think that the misfit guitar string was much of a treasure, and disappointment silently invaded the excitement created by the stranger's words. Sensing, this, he leaned back in the chair and looked us each in the face. His eyes blazed and a semi-mocking grin covered his face. His fury quickly died, however, as he shared the story of the strange European guitar string.

The string had been one of the original twelve from an ancient, handcrafted guitar. Made from a white pear tree, the instrument's back symmetrically bowed out to capture the resonance of the silver, thread strings. The guitar's shape allowed the player to caress it to his body, in an act of love rather than in an act of musical creation. Pearl inlays did not grace the frets. Instead, the graceful neck was left naked for the player's hands to seek the proper cord and response.

The pale, fragrant wood of the white guitar complemented its master, Simon. The boy was as symmetric as the instrument with a tall and muscular frame. His face was that of a Roman patrician with a distinctive nose and firm chin. The brown curls which fell from the boy's head onto his face softened these features, however, and left his face as naked as the guitar's neck.

When the boy gathered the guitar into his arms to play, a union occurred between the two. Striking the silver strings to produce a sound which was a combination of music and his soul, Simon was able to dream. Simon played the guitar and became the proud maestro of a symphony orchestra. He played the guitar and became the wealthiest man in this town. He played the guitar and became a world traveler. In turn, the guitar became his mother, sister, friend and lover.

Simon did not actually become the maestro of a symphony or the wealthiest man in his town. However, he did become a traveler of the world and the guitar remained his constant companion. Upon his sixteenth birthday he said good-bye to a home and family he had never loved. They had taunted him for daring to master the primal beauty of the guitar and her music. They tortured him with proclamations that he did not deserve the guitar. And they scared him by doubting his ability. But Simon left before they could convince him of their contrived truths.

The boy became a man during his travels. He not only saw the great cities of the world, but he allowed each to become a part of him. And in turn, the cities each left a formative mark on him. In Madrid, Simon met a classical guitar player whose hands were crippled by arthritis. Simon became his student and learned to master the guitar from the man's words alone. In Munich, Simon learned of hunger. He had run out of money and could find no work. So he lived in Munich's streets and gutters until he got a job playing his guitar. After that Simon was never hungry again. He fell in love in London and experienced the total joy of abandoning himself to a woman. In London, he also learned of total despair and the desire to die when the woman left him.

In Marseilles, Simon took a lover. She was a singer in a club and he became her accompanist. He fell in love with the woman's voice and the aura which surrounded her when she sang, but he cared for nothing else in her. She intuitively knew this. Yet she loved him and dreaded the time he would inevitably leave her. So she sang for him and waited.

"You'll leave me soon."

"Yes, soon."

"And who will play for me?"

"Who played for you before me?"

"You know, many men have."

"And many more will play for you after me."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Yes."

The two continued to perform together in the club under the hot lights for a crowd that could not hear. They crescendoed and then breathed. Pausing, the woman would glance across the stage at Simon as he caressed the guitar more gently than he had ever caressed her. Realizing that the brilliant instrument would always mute her presence before him, she desperately vowed to possess the guitar if she could not possess him. Simon knew this.

That night as Simon slept, she crawled from his bed over to the guitar. As she reached for it, the moonlight flooded the room and Simon stirred. Commanding herself not to move, the woman froze until a cloud covered the light and Simon lapsed back into a deeper sleep. Then she held the gleaming guitar to her body and crept into the night.

Simon knew who had his guitar and why. He also knew she would not leave the city. So he set out to find her. It was not difficult, for she proudly performed with it every night in a different club. Several days later he found her. Another man accompanied her on the guitar.

Fury consumed Simon as he saw his guitar handled by another man. His face contorted with each cord of the plaintive instrument and his rationality gave way to insanity. Simon toppled tables, spilled drinks and punched at people in the way as he marched up to the stage. The singer stopped singing and frantically reached for the guitar before Simon could step into the stage lights. As he reached for her neck, the woman violently ripped the guitar's silver strings from their casing. Then with bloody fingers, she triumphantly waved them above her head. The audience applauded and she fell to the floor sobbing.



Simon felt like retching. The pain slowly passed, however, as he looked upon the broken, sobbing woman who hoveled at his feet. He reached down and gently touched her hand. Slowly, the man lowered himself down onto his knees and reached for her bleeding hand. She unsuccessfully tried to pull it back. Mastering her, Simon pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it. She timidly smiled and relinquished the blood-stained guitar. The next day he left for New York with a stringless guitar and half his soul.

“And that, my children, is the story of this string,” the Traveler concluded as he pulled the silver string to pieces.

We sat wide eyed and puzzled at the Traveler’s feet. He sensed our devastation, but made no attempt to verbally qualify the story. Instead, he reached for the guitar case and opened it. We gazed inside it upon the same beautiful, white guitar with the bowed back and the blood stains. He held it to his body for a moment with his left arm stretched out to grasp the neck and with his right-hand fingers poised above the perfect, shining strings. He confidently studied our faces until he was sure that we understood. And then he caressed the guitar tighter and sang.

“How have you been, my darlin’ children,  
While I have been away in the West?  
Though we are strangers,  
I feel like I know you—  
By the way that you treat me  
And offer to feed me  
And eagerly ask if I’ll stay for a rest.”

