

A Song of Hearts



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No matter how hard I try, I can't resuscitate it. My fingers pluck each chord deliberately, but no music comes. Each sound is empty. I try again, my fingers working furiously to bring the chords to life. When it doesn't work, I grip the neck of the instrument tightly -so tightly it hurts my hand. Before I realize it, I'm strangling the remaining life from it.

I raise it.

Above my head.

Smashing it.

Into the floor.

Into the wall.

Into the past.

A twangy whine cries from its belly. Wood splinters explode around me in slow motion. I slump to my knees as the rain patters the window. Hard. Steady. Furious.

I stare at my trembling, useless hands. Not useless, I guess. Good for destroying, but not creating, I decide.

"This is your fault," I say to no one, nearly choking on the accusation.

And I wonder...

Is it alright for me to be this angry with my brother?

Even if he's dead?

Yesterday I murdered my guitar. Today, I find a new one waiting for me on my bed when I come back from school. I throw my backpack on the floor and walk carefully to the instrument, finger skating around its contours, feeling it for what it is meant to be: a do-over. A pencil eraser to my breakdown the day before. But it really isn't that easy, is it? What happened happened, and no amount of new gifts will change what I did.

I should be grateful -I know that. But this thing on my bed felt like a buy-off. I march down the hallway to the kitchen where ma was on her tiptoes reaching inside a cabinet for what I can only hope is an explanation.

But there will be no explanation. I know how this goes.

If it were Ryan, they would be having an animated conversation at the table while sipping on coffee. Since it's me, Cameron, this is what I'll get:

"Ma." The word arrives far more forcefully than I mean, but here it is nevertheless.

"Cam?" She reacts, turning to take a good look at me, and when she sees me, a shock of surprise spans across her face. Or is it disappointment?

Is it that painful to look at me and not see him?

Her expression yanks the wind out of me. The anger I felt vanishes and is replaced by an awkward silence. I wrestle with it a moment before finally asking, "Need a hand?"

"No. Thank you." And we stand staring at the floor while time lurches between us. "Did you find it?" A tight lipped smile forms suffocating the question.

"Yeah, yeah. It's... it's great, ma."

"Will you play it?"

"Sure," I say because what else would I say?

She nods and turns her back to me again returning to the cabinets, rummaging for a reason to not engage with me further.

I bite my lip.

Talk to me, ma.

Why won't you talk to me?

Back in my bedroom, I take in the guitar one more time. I know this untarnished object is another opportunity to be better. To try again. Instead of a second chance, this gift is a reminder I will now carry with me wherever I go.

Another corpse I'm lugging around in a guitar case.

A week passes by. I scan the classroom and see a bunch of people struggling to find reasons to care. My teacher paces the front talking excitedly about Achilles' all-consuming rage while next to me, Lacey Erickson smacks her gum and checks her Instagram for an update on her likes. She scrunches her nose at me when she catches me looking. Inevitably, my eyes fall on my best friend, Susanne, in the front row. Perceptively, she tilts her head so that she's looking over her shoulder. Hair, the color of sun, cascades down her back. A pair of slender legs peek out from her summer dress, peppered with bruises from softball practice.

She locks eyes.

With me.

Me.

Is it alright for me to look at this girl the same way he did, when he was alive?

Is it alright?

Is it?

I've had a crush on this girl since the first day we met in elementary school. But Ryan was the one with the confidence and the smile. He was the one to ask her out. He was the one she said yes to, while I'm the one who kept all my feelings buried.

She winks and blows me a kiss right as Mr. Campbell passes in front of her desk. For a moment, I imagine her kiss drifting through the aisles and finding its way onto my lips. I close my eyes and feel its warmth. I fall into the kiss, drowning. Drowning in her. The green of her eyes. Her crooked smile.

When my eyes open to reality, Susanne is leaning in her desk pantomiming a growling tiger. I stifle a laugh and look away from the absurdity. Not to be ignored, the growls and purrs awaken from her throat drawing the attention of our classmates.

This girl is a right disgrace, too brave for her own good, but she makes me smile. She's the only one who can these days.

Mr. Campbell grabs a ruler from the whiteboard, glides back to Susanne's desk, and cracks it across the surface. Susanne jumps from her seat, startled.

"Mr. Campbell, how dare you!" she proclaims in mock agitation. "I was stalking my prey."

My heart thumps uncontrollably at the word "prey." I know she's teasing, but I can't help it.

"I was protecting your prey from you, Ms. Susanne."

"Ugh, you wound me, Mr. Campbell." She places her hands over her heart in a dramatic gesture.

"Please don't ever refer to me by that foul name again. Lesson learned."

"And which name is it you go by these days? Su, Susie, Anne? I can't seem to keep up."

Susanne slaps her hands on her desk leaning aggressively toward Mr. Campbell. "Don't play games with me, Mr. Campbell. You know all of those names are too basic for the likes of me!"

This lightning bolt in human form dancing toe to toe with our teacher, goes by San. The other names, as she stated, really aren't enough to hold her burning personality. It's ridiculous, I know, but I tend to agree with her. I'm the only one she allows to call her Susanne. She says it's because we've seen each other piss our pants, back in our play date years, so we share a unique camaraderie. She's full of crap, but I like that about her. There's a lot to like about her.

She has her own orbit; we're all drawn to her. I think this is because, unlike the rest of us, she knows exactly who she is. She is somebody to a lot of people.

Whereas I... What exactly was I? Am I anybody? To *anybody*?

The bell sounds followed by a clatter of closing books and moving chairs.

San waits for me by her desk. "Walk me home?"

Home.

What waits for me at home?

A hollow room, filled with my brother's belongings, that swallows me from across the hall. A graveyard that consumes my writing and my music, killing every creative pulse that seeps from my fingers.

Cameron.

A mom who doesn't know how to talk with her only living son?

Cameron.

What's left of him?

Cameron.

What's left of me?

Cameron.

All I see are the bloodied remains of my guitar. The rain striking the window. A room of darkness.

"Cameron."

The word, my name, pierces the fog in my mind. I hear it, but I can't look away from my hands. They're cold and they won't stop shaking.

"Cameron!" A grape strikes my forehead with a plunk.

The dark room surrounded by rain and the corpse of a guitar fades back into my memory. I'm soaked with dim fluorescent lighting as I find myself sitting in the school cafeteria waiting for San. It comes alive with the chatter of my peers very quickly. I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose, not because I need to but because it's a nervous habit, and focus on the grape, slightly smashed and leaking juices, wobbling on the table.

"I think I called your name about twenty times, dude. Come with me, Cameron." A hand attached to the voice reaches out, but I stare at it blankly. "By the way, you now owe me a grape."

I know I should move, but I don't. I can't.

I know they're not there, not really, but I see them as if they are -the tendrils of darkness from my room, my thoughts curled around my ankles, inching their way up. Holding me in place.

"Grab your guitar, and let's go," she says more forcefully this time, still holding out her hand.

How can I put my hand in hers? These useless hands of mine. They could never fit in yours, San. "Erm, uh..." The almost-words tumble out because I should say something. Anything. But it's just... it's so easy for you, isn't it? To just get up and go wherever you want with no fear of the unknown. I don't know how you do it.

"Cameron." My name becomes a bullet.

"Yes?" You don't understand, San. If I take your hand... I... I'll be the worst person I know because

...

She grins, "You're upset. I can tell."

...because I'll fall in love with you and I won't stop falling.

"And that's why we're taking a detour to play terrible music in the band room. Mr. Pierce said it's cool if we jam for a bit." She reaches out her hand again. "So come with me now."

"But it's..." It's not fair to him. It's not fair to Ryan that this popular, adventurous, generally awesome girl is inviting me to play music with her, let alone speaking to me. Because if you were here Ryan, it would be you that she was inviting.

Not me.

Annoyed at my hesitation, she grabs a fistful of my shirt and yanks me from the cafeteria table. I quickly grab the handle for my guitar case and we're off wading through the remnant smells of Taco Tuesday. I receive a few concerned and amused glances from classmates as Susanne drags me through the empty hallways.

Scurrying toward our destination, I catch my reflection in a display case. My heart refuses to beat.

Behind the glass is a picture of Ryan beaming with a first place medal dangling around his neck, and his violin resting securely in his arms.

The image turns my blood to ice. You look so happy and... alive. Like you could still be here. I

remember the day you got this medal; it was the same day you forced me to start playing guitar.

Suddenly, San stops, turns on her heels so quickly that her and I are almost nose to nose. I stare at her lips and my heart punches my chest rapidly. There is no transition time between my reminiscing about Ryan to staring at San's lips. My shoulders slump from the shame of it.

She doesn't notice, but jabs me so strongly that I stumble backward.

"I know what this is about, Cam." She plants her fists on her hips and glances at the display case.

"You do?" How can I possibly explain my feelings to this girl?

"You've been sulking. You've been spacing out. There's a tiny little rain cloud over that big head of yours that's constantly storming." San points to the imaginary cloud for effect as I swat her away. "You need to *live*, Cameron." She skips around the hallway and twirls, tripping over herself and falling to her knees. She giggles and says in a sing-song voice, "Live, hermit man. Emerge from your cave of sorrow and let the sun shine on your pasty soul. And pasty skin!"

"You're so weird," I mutter, but I can't hide my smile because at least she's brave enough to be weird.

"Now grab your guitar. The band room is literally eight steps away and we're running out of time."

I avert my eyes. "I just... I can't play anymore."

"Are you kidding me? What's that in your hand right now?"

I look down at the guitar case I'm holding.

She continues. "Unless you're hiding contraband in that case, I believe it's storing a guitar, is it not? It doesn't take a psychologist to figure this one out, Freud. Come on. You want to play, you're just looking for the push to. *I'm* the push."

Embarrassment blooms across my cheeks because she's right. Of course she's right. It seems pretty stupid now carrying my guilt around in this guitar case like I have been.

San smiles so easily, and it breaks me. It breaks me from my reverie, my sorrow. She nods her head toward the music room. "Your brother would want you to do this."

My brother. The words escape my lips before I can think.

"Do you miss him?"

The question is dangerous, like a bomb between us.

Ryan is my brother and best friend, and if anyone deserves to be missed, it's him. But I don't want San to miss him. If she misses him, it would mean she still thinks about him, and I don't know if there's enough room for her to think about my brother and to think about... me.

"Of course I do." Her answer, easy as it comes, lands a killing blow, but I stay standing.

"The two of you are my besties. I'll always miss him, and everytime I think about him, I think I might cry. And if I start crying, I don't know that I'll be able to stop. So I don't."

It dawns on me -I wasn't the only one who lost him.

“Instead, I choose to live in the now and to do what makes me happy. And right now, a jam session with my buddy Cameron is what’s going to make me happy.”

The least I can do is give her that -a moment where our world hasn’t been shattered.

We enter the music room. San prances to a stool by the whiteboard, hops on it with a crash, and spins in it once. As it slows down, she stares directly at me with her elbows on her knees and her chin planted in her hands. “Now play for me.”

I unlatch the case and drag out the guitar. It feels heavy in my hands. “I haven’t played this since…”

“I know. Since you made the last one burst into little itty bitty splinters of wood from your epic breakdown.” She is not gentle with her words. “But I’d bet it would make Ryan real happy if you tried. At least one more time. Now serenade me with your mediocre guitar skills before I have to head home, puh-lease.”

My fingers strike a few awkward chords and their notes ring hollow with me just like they did that day. My hands shake again.

I look to San who is leaning forward in her stool, eagerly. She grins and nods for me to continue.

This girl.

My fingers pluck the chords again. As I touch the strings, they breathe. I breathe. There you are, old friend.

My fingers skip across the strings. The music that sings from my guitar saturates the room with it all. My pain. My guilt. My brokenness. I lay everything bare -each note a different piece of my heart.

The room around me dissolves, and it’s just me and San surrounded by the sky, the clouds, the stars, our memories: San and Ryan bringing me along as the third wheel on their bowling date, the three of us dancing at prom in an awesome display of awkwardness, the day Ryan was rushed to the hospital.

As my fingers and heart slow, I feel for the first time tears trickling onto my hands.

The walls of the music room emerge again around us from the mistiness of my memories.

San’s mouth is agape and tears threaten to spill from her own eyes. “Cameron. Holy crap.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” She moves from her stool to me, laughing and sobbing, wiping away the tears before they crawl down her cheeks. “That’s all you have to say after *that*?”

I set the guitar against my chair and walk towards San.

No, that’s not all. There’s another thing I need to say.

It’s now or never Cameron.

She told you to live.

So live.

I stand before San. Her gaze walks up to my own teary eyes. "You showed me how to be brave."

This time, I held out my own hand to her. "Come with me."

We walk along the broken sidewalk, guitar case in one hand, her hand in my other. Her fingers hug mine.

"Before I take you home, can you make one stop with me?"

"Anywhere," she says.

We stand outside my house, her and I. Frozen in time. She slides her hand, from my own, across my back and leans her head against my shoulder.

"Will you wait here for me?" I ask.

"You sure you don't want me to come with you?"

I shake my head. "I'm not sure of anything, but I think it needs to be this way."

"Will you say hi to him? For me?"

I nod. "I won't be too long," I say and take a few clumsy steps into the house. Before I go where I need to, I notice ma in the kitchen. She's slouched in a chair at the table. Wounded from life. Barely able to hold her own head up in her hands. Tired from holding our crumbling family together all on her own.

It's time for me to carry some of the weight, I decide.

I set the case down gently at my feet, move behind her, and rest my hand on her shoulder. She looks at me, wrinkles cradling her eyes, smile cresting across her face despite the weariness.

"The guitar is beautiful, ma. I never thanked you."

She patted my hand warmly. "I'm glad you think so."

"About the other one." I looked down at my feet searching for the right words but only finding these: "I'm ashamed."

She cupped my face in her grip so that there was nowhere to look but her eyes. She sees me. I see her. Her eyes hold me. "Sometimes we fall. No need to be ashamed of that."

The words aren't much, but they're what I needed to hear.

I bit my bottom lip for fear of losing myself in her tenderness. I nod and retreat from the kitchen, picking up the guitar and heading for the hallway. Before turning the corner, I look back over my shoulder because she deserves more than I've given her.

"You're a good mom," I say and I look directly into her eyes so she knows I mean it. I hold up the guitar. "I won't waste this."

I stop in front of Ryan's room. I feel the familiar darkness lurking just behind the door, clawing at me, reaching into me. Then I think of San, and I think of ma. How they continue to walk forward despite their pain, and I hold the words they've said to me close.

I push the edge of the door open with my guitar case and enter. I set the instrument down on his bed, unlatch the locks and open it.

I stare at my trembling hands.

Useless.

Destructive.

But.

These are the same hands that carried the guilt around for so long.

The same hands that held San's.

The same ones that held her heart not moments ago.

The same hands that will carry this weight for my mom.

Not useless.

An admission awakens inside my gut. The words yawn and stretch working their way slowly to my mouth. "I'm sorry. I was holding myself back, not you. It was never you. This is my fault," I say to no one. To everyone. To Ryan.

I reach inside the case and gently rest the guitar in my lap. A stream of light peeks through the window blinds illuminating my calloused fingers.

"Can I play you something?"

I play notes of light, and the darkness goes to sleep.

I breathe in the music. Fill my lungs with their sound.

And I know...

We're going to be alright.