

SPANISH GUITAR

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Tomorrow's my first day in college. I expect they'd call us freshmen: a presumptuous label that threatens the memory and the stories behind a student's chosen course. I was so sure of mine back then. I was to be a musician. I was to learn and relearn the masterpieces with hopes of composing my own. I was to savor the splendor of music with my fellows, with each movement, and with every note. We were to take our bows in concert halls before the curtains fell.

Maybe that's why I chose journalism. It wasn't exactly a discipline to me. It wasn't about passion either. The seed of journalism was sown way back during my elementary days, furtively nurtured through the years by eager accidents, frightened secrets, and cold, cold lies.

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Mama storms inside the room and screams *Fire! The house right beside ours is on fire! Forget the appliances! Take all the clothes you can! Now!*

With what seemed to be toy buckets, our neighbors douse the creeping flames as it licks the walls of our house. I try to help, but Mama keeps me away. Tongues of tangerine and gold leap and spit all around, spreading and rising in a rush. A siren fades-in: a whisper growing louder and louder until it blares all over the street. Water and fire collide. We keep our distance -

helpless bystanders loitering around the things that were spared, the things we held on to in the heat of panic.

I can't believe it was the first thing I went for – Papa's Spanish guitar, covered in dust with the years under my bed. I had used its case and stacked what little clothes I could grab before running out of the house. Mama makes the necessary calls. Our neighbor's house is burning. I struggle to remember the last time I played. As I gather my thoughts, a string of memories vie to tune one another.

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When I was in second grade I would enter my parent's room right after homework, kneel in front of their bed, and stoop to pull a guitar case from under it. With a folded cotton cloth, I'd wipe its black hide before unlatching the shining locks bigger than my thumbs.

And there it was - Papa's Spanish guitar, sleeping in red velvet. I'd smell the musk oozing from the bronze, the nylon, ivory, and wood. Intricate swirls curled and twirled around the sound hole while strands of metal and nylon hovered just above the maple fret boards. The tuning keys and string nuts were carved from ivory. Its body shone like caramel in the afternoon light. How many afternoons of patintero did I miss for this spectacle? How many times did I greet Papa from work with foot and back rubs - thinly veiled bribes – so he'd teach me to play at last?

"Your fingers are still too small, son. You can barely cover the width of the fret board with your index finger, see? Now, how are you going to play the F chord?"

So Papa taught me how to string and tune first. But my body couldn't manage the bulk either. My left hand scrambled to reach the headstock. My right strained at pulling the bridge-end to create a tension high enough for the twine to curl around the tuners. My arms and fingers were like new strings then, stretching and adjusting to the guitar's dimensions.

At first, I was reluctant to ask for Anita's help. But Papa insisted. Before long, Anita and I found ourselves waiting eagerly for those strings to either break or lose their timbre. It was easy enough to ask for money when a string snapped. But we had to wait before a set could be deemed 'old'. Papa was always the judge of that. I never understood how he decided though, never really cared, as long as we had the cash.

Anita and I would enter the music store, impervious to the glitter of instruments and gadgets. We'd skim through an array of gauges and make, pick something we hadn't bought before, and headed straight home with all haste. Under Papa's strict supervision, we'd carefully place the guitar on the table and loosen the old strings. Anita was in charge of the headstock; I manned the bridge. To avoid slippage, Anita developed a way of measuring how much slack was to be cut so the string could wound itself neatly around the tuners, free of overlaps and bumps. She'd wait while I tied that bridge knot - a knot Papa had been teaching me for weeks - teasing me every time my fingers got tangled up with the strings.

Before starting his tuning lessons, Papa would inspect the guitar, adjusting a bump in the headstock or tightening a loop feebly tied to the bridge. He'd show us how each string affected the other. He told us why he never used tuners and forks. He always insisted on training the ear to memorize the tune of E.

"Remember, if one string, just one string is off-key, you can forget about harmony."

After everybody had gone to bed, Papa would listen to that metallic, brittle sound only a new set could give. He'd go outside, sit behind the windows of our rooms and play. He seldom strummed everything at once. He'd pluck a note from a string here, then another one from a string there. If a melody was present in those fleeting tones, it eluded me. I could tell he enjoyed sustaining those notes until their echoes faded out of the night and lulled us to sleep.

One day, Mama and Papa had a fight. They did not talk for days. One night, Papa and his guitar sat behind the windows. But not a single note dared to sing against the festering silence. Not a sound protested, nor argued, nor explained. Before dawn, the sound of soft voices and hushed giggles came in through the window.

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Anita hailed from Surigao where Papa was born and raised. Her dark skin always glistened in the sun, and the frizzy strands that was her hair were always kept braided. Her Tagalog wasn't quite there yet, so I'd teach her a phrase or two every morning while she cooked breakfast. She'd bring me lunch every day, since our house was only five blocks from school. After class, she'd fetch me with an umbrella, even when skies were clear.

On school nights, Anita would finish washing the dishes quickly so she could join me in studying. She was saving up so she could resume her studies. Her parents were raising eight siblings and there just wasn't enough for tuition. She'd give me a hug every time we came up with the same answer to a multiplication or division problem, pleased to know that her arithmetic was still there. She'd teach me some history. She'd give me tips on memorizing, schemes that helped her associate names and dates with familiar words and trivia. *When did Magellan discover the Philippines? 1521. Just like I was born on the 15th and you were on the 21st. 1521!*

Anita loved the city. The province was too quiet and easy-going for her. Too much time, and no opportunities. The first time she entered a supermarket, she marveled at the bevy of fruits and vegetables. Unable to contain her excitement, she promised us a new kind of dish every day. She chatted with the vendors in the wet market that morning. She told them where she lived, who she worked for. On the way home, Anita poked her head out the car window, basking in the sights and sounds of the city.

Mama and Papa must've been satisfied with Anita's work. They must've been impressed with her passion for learning, too. One night after dinner, while she was clearing the table, Papa gave her the news. But good news didn't seem like news at all when Papa was the one giving it. He simply handed Anita an envelope. Inside was tuition money and a hand-written map to the public school. *Of course, if your work suffered . . .* But Papa didn't finish his sentence. Instead, he stood up and called it a night. Anita almost threw the tray of plates and glasses in the air. She ran to the sink and washed those plates with shivering hands, crying, then laughing, then crying again.

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Anita graduated high school with flying colors. She would've graduated with honors and would've qualified as a scholar in the state university, but she was a transferee, and that was against the rules. My parents knew it was pointless to protest, so they offered her an arrangement that would allow her to continue her studies as an accounting major. Papa said they always needed good accountants in the agency. Without warning, Anita threw herself at Papa, squeezing him as she jumped and jumped. She gave Mama her share of the squeeze as well, then she jumped some more.

All this time, I had been begging my parents to enroll me in music school for the summer. I tried to convince them that I was ready. I was practically a grade four student. Mama said music had to wait. *Wait for what?* And every time I asked, she'd only rumple my hair or kiss me on the forehead.

One morning, I woke up home alone. Papa was at work. Mama and Anita were probably doing groceries. I sneaked into my parent's bedroom and smuggled the guitar into mine. Instead of resting the guitar on my sitting legs, I propped it against my body, in a standing position. My left hand cradled the neck, just below the first and second frets as the back of my right forearm pushed the guitar's body against my hip - a practical posture for strapless guitars. I wanted to see myself in the mirror, so I made

for the bathroom. I didn't rush it, couldn't rush it. It was too heavy. And no sooner had I taken my first step inside when the guitar's polished backside slipped from my shirt. I saw my stare breaking from the mirror, turning in vain to catch my left hand as it instinctively choked the neck, unaware it would only serve as the guitar's fulcrum. It swung sinistrally and slammed on bathroom tiles whiter than a young boy's conscience. I scouted for damages immediately. When I found a crack somewhere near its butt, I rummaged the house for an adhesive.

Crust and flakes formed with the drying glue, so I smothered it some more, hoping its color would mix with the guitar's sheen. But my shaking hands only smeared it, and everything stuck out.

I laid in bed that night, restless. I prayed that Papa would come home tired, dead tired to even think about playing his late night lullabies. My prayers were answered, but no comfort could be found in the silence of night.

In the following days, I steered clear of the house. Flores de Mayo, basketball, bike, sleep-outs, a birthday party. There was always something else to do during summer.

On Labor Day, I found my parents and Anita sitting around a table on which a guitar patiently waited. I couldn't tell whether Anita was puzzled, desperate, confident, or simply letting me know that she was there for me.

"Take your seat, son."

"Do you know why this is here," Mama asked.

"No, po."

"Look at that," she said.

"Oh no."

"Do you have anything to say, son," Mama asked.

"No, po."

"Anita, didn't you ask for glue yesterday?"

"Yes, but as I told you señorita, it was for a summer school project."

And just like that, they dropped the whole thing. No further question, no suggestions, no suspicions. Exactly a week after the kitchen talk, Papa played his guitar just like he did on any other night, as if nothing happened at all.

One night, as May drew to a close and schools were getting ready, I was wakened by the sound of doors. Of footfalls and hinges, of locks and doorknobs. Doors opening, doors closing. I froze in bed, just like I froze the night Papa played the guitar for the first time after the accident. It was an accident. And everybody's always on the receiving end when accidents happen.

The following morning, Anita was gone.

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Grade four saw me joining every extra-curricular activity I could: I placed fourth in the spelling bee contest. I made the soft-ball and table-tennis team reserve. I auditioned for the school play and made it as a Boy Scout. I even submitted a science project for the school fair.

And I really believed I was forgetting the lie.

During the summer vacation before grade five, Papa came home with news. He had just enrolled me in music school. Anita's salary paid for most of it, Mama added.

I practiced relentlessly. I practiced before and after class. I'd go straight to my room after a hurried dinner and lock myself up until the wee hours. I rehearsed my recital piece with tenacity. By the second week, I was reading music sheets with ease. By the third, my plucking was flawless. The tips of my left fingers had thickened, and my wrist had grown strong. When Papa handed me a new set of strings for the recital, I bound them in his presence. I tuned and stretched them with a series of sharp tugs, releasing them with a snap so the loops and knots would tighten and wouldn't slide. Then I tuned them again. I cleaned up after my work, hoping my precision caught his attention. To

my surprise, Papa cross-checked the strings. I had memorized the tune of E so well I thought it was a joke.

Just before bed time, I saw Papa with a trash can on his lap. He drew the old strings from the bin and wound the strands to a coil before burying them back inside.

On the last day of music school, the teacher gave her final lesson. We went over my piece three times. Three times I played with fervor. Still, her reaction troubled me. *There's nothing wrong with it, but it isn't quite right either*, her gestures seemed to say. I demanded for comments. She was my teacher after all. *Virtuosity is useless without grace*, she professed finally, right before she left the sound-proofed room and closed the door behind her.

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I was sitting behind a white curtain, listening to a student's piano piece. It seemed to flow from her fingers like a humbled stream - Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. She was a prodigy and I was going on stage right after her. It didn't matter. I had arranged a rendition of Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence*. The bass line, the vocal harmony, and the beat were all incorporated and written as a solo piece for guitar. I began tuning and caught a glimpse of the scar. The sound of doors seized me then, knocking at the memory of that fateful night. I struggled to ignore it, but the knocks were incessant. They would not be refused that night. I tried to recapture the tune of E, but I knew the sound forming in my mind's ear was off. In panic, I tuned the other strings based on the note I was hearing. I strummed a chord and cringed. I prowled the backstage in a hurry, searching for my teacher and her tuner.

I probed the crowd as I walked on stage. My parents were brimming with pride. I sat on center stage and tried to relax, taking deep breaths. The floodlights were killed as I exhaled. A spot light set its gaze upon me. Drained of colors, my audience turned into silhouettes. Then, silence. There was a familiar presence among them. I singled out a shadow in front of me, its

kinky hair spouted from its head like a fountain. I knew its skin was dark, but it did not shine. How could it? The light was pointed at me. I couldn't see them, but I knew the eyes were locked on me. At that moment, I felt as if I was playing for the first time.

The silhouettes were still waiting. They were starting to clear their throats. Finally, I began. And as my left shivered and tripped on the shining fret board, my right fingers twitched and stuttered on what could have been a beautiful parade of melodies.

We went straight home after the recital. Papa came in just as I was sliding the case under their bed.

"Keep it under your bed, son. It's yours now."

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The fire men, their trucks, and their sirens are gone. I saunter across our house. I find myself inside Anita's room. Save for a bed, a desk, and a fan, the room had been left empty for more than a year. Being the room closest to where the fire had started, only its ashes remain now. The rest of the house is spared. It's the first time I see Mama cry.

I'm on a bus headed straight to school. They say it's one of the finest universities in the country. Anita would've graduated by now. She would've taught me a thing or two about accounting. She would've been proud to explain the things one was likely to encounter in balance sheets, if ever at all one was inclined to bother with balance sheets and what it was supposed to declare: assets and liabilities, credit and debit.