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Strings

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STRINGS

BILL BRADLEY

Streetlights exposed snowflakes falling from Barcelona's evening sky. I shuffled up the steps, head down, fighting the wind that sucked into the metro tunnel. A gypsy peddled Kleenex on the black marble steps and grabbed at my leg, ripping the frayed strings off the bottom of my jeans. Her nightmarish eyes shadowed by streaming scarves. Amidst a mass of nameless faces in transit, I paused at the top—resting my hand on the iron railing—and gazed across the street into an alley where a woman played cello beneath an archway, sheltered from the snow. I followed the resonance of the cello across the street, dodging passing cars and motos. The eloquent notes dictated my stride, pulling me into the alley. Her fingers pressed against frigid strings. Notes floated with the snow, flying past birds etched in graffiti on the opaque walls. A student entered the alley, walking towards me, a bag slung over his left shoulder. I strolled, eyes tilted to the slice of sky that cut between the yellowed brick buildings. Lost in my musings, I bumped into him, sending his bag to the ground with a crash. The breaking glass coupled with his poignant Spanish startled me. Splotches of liquid stained his canvas bag. As he disappeared I heard a sharp "Americano!" echo off the walls. Electrified, I leaned against the cavernous wall beneath a balcony draped with damp clothes.

The cellist never broke the movement of her bow slicing the strings. I began to walk again, fresh snowflakes sticking to my jacket. I ambled with the cobblestone—her cello echoed in the background as the alley poured into the street.

Passing the bodega on my left, I waved to Adolfo as he signed for cases of red wine waiting on a silver dolly. A tall, older Spanish woman, fresh baguette tucked under one arm, passed me. Her frigid eyes distanced me in a glance. Gray hair fell on the back of her thin frame as she lifted her hand to light a cigarette. I turned to watch her pass wondering if anyone else noticed her stray hairs cascading over her peacoat. I stumbled into Eva's Panderia and set fifty-five cents on the counter.

"Hola amigo. ¿Quieres lo de siempre?"

“Si, un baguette, Eva.”

Eva turned around and pulled bread out of the stainless steel oven, wrapping it in brown wax paper. Leaning over the top of the dark oak counter, she winked, handing me the steaming baguette. In the year I spent in Barcelona, Eva was one of the few Catalans who treated me as if I lived there. She proofread my papers on Sundays and, in exchange, I tutored her ten-year-old son. I waved with a simple “Gracias.” As I walked out, street lamps flipped on, splitting the street.

Outside Eva’s, an alleged cripple leaned against empty crates of clementines strumming his guitar, his legs folded underneath him, the guitar case at his knees shouting out. The blue and orange awning of the fruit mercado overshadowed him, the faint white light from the *Fresc* sign sprayed over his hunched shoulders. I stared into the man’s arid eyes protruding from his dark, weathered skin. He slid his grimy hand off the neck of his guitar, the scabs on his hand screaming at me for change. The man grabbed at my jacket muttering something unintelligible. His stench followed me down the street. I turned the corner, staring into the park: framed by one-way streets, it covered an entire block. Street lamps watched over it like giant wrought-iron swans. The older Spanish woman drifted across the sidewalk strung through the heart of the park. Her large white scarf flew with her gray satin hair, and her cigarette smoke exploded into the chilled air as she crossed the street, entering the cellist’s alley. Antoni stood in a cloud of cigarette smoke in front of the café underneath the omniscient glow of the city. I strolled up—Antoni began speaking before I was in earshot.

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“Robby, how are you friend?”

“I’m well.”

“What do you think of the snow? First time it snow here in Barcelona in eighty years,” he asked sticking out his palm, holding it under the sky.

“Si?”

“Yes, I have lived here my whole life and this is the first time that I see snow here in Barcelona. I’m sure it’s not different for you. Lots of snow in Midwest, right?”

“Yeah, it snows quite a bit in the winter.”

“You must like this snow then.”

“Yeah, it just seems strange in Spain.”

“This is true. But look, we have snow and American in the neighborhood,” he said, laughing, pointing his index finger at me.

“I’m the first American in the neighborhood, really? Makes sense, with the way people stare at me around here. I love Barcelona, but some of the people are just so cold. I know I’m an American, but I’m not walking around with an American flag draped over my shoulders.”

“You are always welcome at my café. You live in Barcelona, too, Robby. It is my pleasure—you work on your Spanish, I work on my English—I enjoy your company.”

“Gracias, amigo. I’m going to eat this baguette while it’s still hot though. Te vaya bien, Antoni!”

“See you tomorrow, Robby!”

Walking away, I glanced into the café where tables and chairs hibernated in the back room, waiting to be let into the street. Snowflakes melted as they hit the pavement. I walked the half block to my apartment, hot baguette tucked under my arm, meandering with the uneven cracks in the pavement. The sound of the cello began to diminish with the breeze. I unlocked the door of my flat, propping it open with my back. Illuminated, the snowflakes and street lamps crashed down on me like a falling chandelier—momentarily free.