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He lazily bounces the cigarette up and down with his lips, a thin line of smoke trails from the end of the cigarette and snakes its way up his left nostril. He doesn't inhale, he doesn't exhale. He taps a dirty finger against the polished counter to the rhythm of Cher's Waterloo that blares from a karaoke machine in a corner at the back of the bar. He winces when the woman in front of the karaoke machine hits *waterloo* two octaves too high. The hand that is not tapping to Waterloo is caressing a whisky glass.

"Another one?" the barman asks him.

"This one is still kicking thanks," the man at the bar says.

The bartender scratches through a beard that seems like it has been trimmed with tweezers, gives a disapproving nod and continues to polish a cheap looking wine glass that he had been rubbing for the past fifteen minutes. Cher stops singing and it looks like the karaoke women had passed out next to the karaoke machine. The only sounds that I can hear is the whirring of the ceiling fan and the occasional clink of alcohol bottles or glasses behind the counter as the barman lazily makes his way around the room.

It's as if the quietness starts to gnaw on the bartender so he starts fumbling with the knobs on the dusty radio in the corner. After a few minutes of static, noise breaks through the speakers and instead of the loud music that feels like it's pulsing through your chest, John Denver's voice fills the empty room and 'This Old Guitar' starts playing.

This old guitar taught me to sing a love song...

"I used to have a guitar once," the man at the bar replies to the radio.

Before the confused bartender can reply the man continues, "A 1945 Martin 000-28 Herringbone."

"I used to sit on the porch of our farm house in the evenings when my pop lit his tobacco pipe. My momma sat in the rocking chair by the wooden railing. She sang along when I plucked upon familiar tunes on my 1945 Martin," the man at the bar says with a strange tone of confusion in his voice. I can't exactly place if it is the brown coloured liquid that is beginning to speak or if it is bittersweet memories surfacing.

The bartender, who is probably used to this type of late night rambling by now, lets out an inattentive grunt. This time he is vigorously rubbing the counter as if it had never seen a cloth and cleaning supplies in its entire career of being a counter in some tiny backstreet bar before.

This old guitar gave me my lovely lady...

"It was a 1945 Martin 000-28 Herringbone with a Spruce top and Brazilian rose wood covering the back and sides.

I used to play until my pop's tobacco for the night ran out and he said he ain't want no more noise on the porch."

The clock on the wall above the rack with the wine glasses turns to midnight and before the bartender can bring this under his attention, the man at the bar pulls out another cigarette and after lighting it he starts bouncing it up and down again. He doesn't inhale and he doesn't exhale, the smoke trails up his left nostril.

"It was on one of those nights that my momma stopped singing and said that it was time for me to get myself a decent farm girl. She said that it would do me good to speak to a woman other than her," the man at the bar says while tracing circles around the edge of the empty whisky glass.

Instead of telling him to call a cab and get out, the bartender asks the man if he would like another one.

"I guess it won't do any harm," the man at the bar says without really registering anything other than the memories that are playing off in his head.

This old guitar gave me my life, my living...

"I stopped playing and layed the 1945 Martin down on my lap. I looked my momma in the eye. My momma's eyes were a soft green color, she loved me. She worried about me, because I was 38 years old and I've never kissed a woman that was not family before. My great aunt Miranda used to press my body against her breasts as she

smacked a big kiss across my lips. My momma used to kiss me good night before bed. In 1984 people thought you were crazy if you still stayed with your momma. Momma told me not to get sad over anything strangers said, she said that they didn't know nothin. Even though momma always said that, I could see it bothered her, so I looked my momma straight in the eye and promised her that I sure would find me a decent farm girl if that's what she really wanted. My momma then said that Louisa from the farm next door seemed like a nice girl. A little shy, but real proper," the man at the bar says while an empty smile crawls across his lips.

The bartender slides a glass of whisky over the counter to the man and sweeps away the empty one. He suddenly notices that I am still in one of the booths behind the bar stools.

"Can I get you anything?" he asks me tiredly.

"Just a glass of tap water please," I reply and then I remember that I forgot to mention the slice of lemon again.

"With a slice of lemon please, if you have some," I say.

The bartender looks at me for a few seconds. I can see the gears shifting inside his bald head. I'm not sure if he is confused by the fact that I'm sticking around in the bar after midnight for some tap water with a slice of lemon in it or if he is puzzled by the fact that I said 'please' twice in a perfectly sober voice.

"Sure man," he remembers to say after a while and turns around to busy himself with a glass and tap water.

John Denver's voice disappears from the room, and the voice of what sounds like a middle aged man takes his place.

"If you just tuned in, this is 107.8 fm and you are listening to Golden Oldies hour folks! Next up, we have La Vie en Rose by Louis Armstrong," the man on the radio says.

"The next day just as I was about to walk through our front door to deliver milk to the farm next door, my momma said to be extra nice to Louisa. So I pulled the loose strands of hair out of my face, tucked my dirty shirt into my pants, pulled my shoulders back and walked through our front door down the gravel road to Louisa Baker's house," the man at the bar says.

Hold me close and hold me fast...

"I marched up the front steps of the Baker house and knocked on the door three times. She opened the door a few seconds later, she had red roses in her hands. Louisa smiled at me, she asked me how I was doing. I said I was doing swell and I asked her what the roses were for. She said that she had just cut them from the rose bush that she had been nurturing, said she would show her garden to me some time. I gave her the milk and she smiled at me again. I made sure to remember everything that happened, so that I could report back to momma. I wanted to tell her about Louisa's brilliant white teeth, the red roses and the warm look in her eyes when she spoke to me. I got home and I told momma everything about the girl that was supposed to become my wife. My momma said that Louisa definitely liked me," the man at the bar says. A cough erupts from somewhere in his body, it echoes ominously through the building. When the eerie feeling dies down, Édith Piaf has the small bar in the deserted alley behind an abandoned grocer to herself again.

When you kiss me everyone sighs...

While she sings about the promise that a man had made to his beloved, the man at the bar circles the rim of the whisky glass, the bartender polishes a wine glass. The bartender shuffles out from behind the bar to bring me my glass of tap water with the slice of lemon in it. He keeps his eyes pinned on the man at the bar.

"Here you go," he mumbles to me.

"Thank you," I reply.

"Me and Louisa became good friends, I delivered a fresh bottle of milk to their house every morning and sometimes we talked real long. So long that momma had to come out lookin for me. Me and Louisa would go for walks and I'd teach her about birds, she said I'm a good teacher. I taught her about their migration patterns and about how they take care of the baby birds. We once found a baby sparrow that fell out of its nest. Louisa picked it up and said that we couldn't just leave it there and so we went back to her house and put it in an old shoe box," the man at the bar says and it's almost like he's cupping his hands as if holding the tiny bird.

"On the last afternoon that we went on a walk together, I asked Louisa to marry me. I knelt down on my left knee in the meadow between the creek and her house. I gave her red roses exactly like the ones she had in her hands that morning when I first decided that I'd marry her and I told her she was real pretty and I told her that I loved her, just as me and momma planned it out. I didn't have a job, but I told her that I could get one," the man's fingers are moving faster now, urgently running around the top of the glass as if it would reverse the memories into something better.

"When she finally looked at me her blue eyes were distorted by tears and her voice was real raspy, like when I played a new song on my 1945 Martin for the first time. I didn't really know where my fingers had to clamp down on the strings, but somehow I managed to play *Where Have All The Flowers Gone* and somehow my momma managed to sing along. Louisa was sobbing, she didn't really know how to make the words line up in the right way. She gripped the doorhandle in her left hand as if it was supposed to help her stand upright and somehow she managed to

say that she loved me, but not in a husband and wife way. She said somethin like I was a nice boy and all, but she was seeing this other guy. Some accountant with a house and everything,” the man at the bar says. The circular motions of his finger around the edge of the empty whisky glass becomes even more frantic. I’m waiting for the glass to tip over and spill its nothingness all over the shiny counter.

Give your heart and soul to me...

“She said we were too many years apart, and she said that it was a little odd that I still lived in my momma’s house. I took her right hand in mine, the softness of her skin made me fall over my words. I told her that I’d look after her. I promised. I would have earned lots of money by performing songs on my 1945 Martin 000-28 Herringbone. I wanted to build her a house with a big garden in the front, just like in the pictures. She asked me to let her go and I did,” the man at the bar replies to no one in particular. He makes it sound like he let her go like a leaf in a gust of wind, just swept away. I have the urge to ask him how he simply just let her go if he truly loved her, but then he continues.

“I walked back to my momma’s house. Momma was wearing the yellow dress with the light blue flowers. The dress gently rustled in the wind around her tiny frame. She was standing there, waiting, as if she knew what the answer would be even before I walked over to Louisa’s house. She took me in her arms, she smelled like the jams that she was always busy making. Her waist was soft and her skin warm. She had that worried look in her green eyes again, but I didn’t really know why. I told her that Louisa said she liked someone else, not me. My momma brushed over my head like she used to do when I was little and said that Louisa didn’t deserve a good boy like me and that she was sorry for introducing the idea to me. Momma said that I would always be her everything and that she would always love me no matter what. Other people don’t understand me like she does, my momma said and kissed me on my forehead like she did the time that the other boys and girls laughed at me in seventh grade when I still couldn’t ride my bike without side wheels,” the man at the bar’s lips curve into an unsettling smile as if the obnoxious seventh graders are standing in front of him. His left foot starts tapping lightly against the bar stool.

To my surprise the barman puts the glass that he has been polishing down and looks at the man, “Did she get married to this other guy?” It looks like this midnight misery has finally spilled over into the young man’s heart, the question seems genuine.

The man at the bar doesn’t really acknowledge the bartender as he answers the question. He stares out in front of him at a scene that only he can see.

“Louisa looked real pretty on her wedding day. Her momma showed me the pictures. I wasn’t invited to the wedding, Louisa said that it was better that way. I wrote her a song. I practiced everyday, I wrote out the chords to play it on my 1945 Martin 000-28 Herringbone. She didn’t want to hear it, said it would hurt too much. *Roses for Louisa* was the first and last song that I ever wrote.” The man at the bar curls his fingers as if holding a 1945 Martin 000-28 Herringbone, closing his eyes while humming a melody that sends a twinge of pain across his face.

“Two years after Louisa got married, I was working on the last line of my song to momma. I wrote the words for her to sing with me at night on the porch when I played on my 1945 Martin. I was about to finish it when me and pops got a phone call one night. The phone rang hollow through the house around seven. Momma was out to buy groceries from town, it always took a while for her to come back because she usually stopped by Aunt Cylvie’s house. When my pops put the phone to his ear the voice on the other side said that my momma’s car rolled off the side of the road and she was trapped inside the car when they found her. The cop said it folded in around her like a metal blanket that wouldn’t let go. Someone told my pop ‘she didn’t make it.’ I didn’t finish the song,” a tear rolls down his cheek, it seems like he doesn’t notice.

La vie en rose...

The song ends and the bar is quiet, except for the ceiling fan that is still whirring. The man’s right leg bounces up and down in an unsettling way against the barstool. I look down at my watch and notice that it is 3:35am. It seems as if the man at the bar finished his life story with the music, nothing more to say.

“I better get going now, it’s momma’s birthday tomorrow. She would want me to put red roses on her gravestone and play *Where Have All The Flowers Gone* on my 1945 Martin 000-28 Herringbone,” the man at the bar says. He slides a few dollars to the bartender and starts getting up.

His movements are stiff and slow, painful as he pushes himself off of the barstool. I watch him shuffle forward, almost tripping over his left shoelace. His clothes are haggard and his beard has clearly not been shaved in at least six months. It takes him about three minutes to walk the short distance from the bar to the door. When he passes by me he stops. His eyes are bloodshot and void of any emotion. Goosebumps creep up my forearms, I rub over them. Smoke is still trailing up his left nostril and he doesn’t inhale, he doesn’t exhale.