

Geordie McCallister hadn't gone out looking for a new guitar that day. All he wanted was a beer.

It had been four days since Geordie had even left his apartment complex, save to walk around the corner to the Kwik Pik on Levitt Street for another twelve pack of Iron City and whatever snack food caught his eye on the way to the register. And those trips hardly counted; the Kwik Pik shared a wall with the apartment block's office, so Geordie could tell himself he was not really going out to get anything. Not that it mattered. Four days earlier Geordie had walked away from yet another job, factory work this time. The job was putting plastic shower caddy kits in boxes, sealing them up with tape, and stacking them on a cart, eight hours a day plus a half hour break for lunch and two fifteen minute "coffee breaks." For this he had been pulling down the princely sum of \$9.28 an hour, plus benefits after a year if he stayed that long, which he never would.

The foreman, that's who's fault it was, Geordie reminded himself for the hundredth time; jerk's too stuck up to take good advice. Geordie, drawing on the vast experience of his two-and-a-half weeks on the job, had decided there was a different, better way to pack shower caddies, and informed the kid working on the other side of the packing counter that he was doing it wrong. The kid, Davy, was a gentle behemoth with an IQ of about 70 who had been hired through a work program. Geordie was in the middle of explaining his new improved packing method to Davy for about the fifth time, and getting a bit heated, when the foreman tapped Geordie on the shoulder, took him aside, and explained to him in plain and forceful terms that it was not his job to confuse Davy, nor was it his job to have ideas about packing boxes or anything else; rather, his job was to pack boxes and shut the hell up. "If you don't like it," the foreman had concluded, "there's the door." Geordie offered the foreman some unsolicited advice, primarily concerning his hygiene, his personal relationships with his mother and sister, and most especially what exactly he should do with his factory job, and concluded by taking the foreman up on his kind offer of directions to the egress.

Geordie had walked the twelve blocks home to his apartment, grumbling and steaming, with the intention of staying there indefinitely and nursing his funk. And he had made a good go of it, for four days, until he visited the Kwik Pik and discovered the last of the Iron City being loaded back onto a beer truck by a man in coveralls, with a patch on one side of his jacket bearing the logo of Fortress Granite distributors, and another on the other side proclaiming him "Stu." "Ayuh," said Stu, "taking back the entire batch. Some fella over in Lewiston got a bad can, he's inna hospital, story is he's growin some kinda mold on him. Iron City's pullin the whole lot."

Geordie was not pleased by this sudden turn of events. Jobs came and went, but Kwik Piks and beer were constants, fixed, immutable. A visit to the Kwik Kooler to check his options revealed O'Douls (non-alcohol fake beer trash, Geordie thought to

himself), Old Milwaukee (almost worse), and two or three brands of fancy-pants imported stuff in shiny green expensive bottles. He walked over to the counter where Stu was shoving a clipboard and a pen at Carmela, the Kwik Pik's sweet-faced and chubby clerk (I'd hit it anyway - the thought flashed across Geordie's mind and was gone) and stood beside Stu waiting for his attention. "Hey man, can I get you to let me have a case or two before you take 'em back? They're just throwing it out anyway, right?"

Stu chuckled. "No can do, my man. See this form?" He waggled the clipboard in Geordie's face. "I show up with a bottle less than what it says on here and I'm out of a job." Geordie didn't see what was so scary about that, but Stu was continuing. "Tell ya what, though. Just dropped off a fresh shipment at Arnelli's, 'bout 20 blocks from here. Gonna be drivin back that way on my way back to the warehouse. Give ya a lift, if ya want, but ya gotta get back on your own. Least I can do to help out a customer."

Geordie knew Arnelli's; it was a big place, with carts, and he figured they might not mind if he "borrowed" a cart from the parking lot, if he were discreet about it. Five minutes later he was riding shotgun beside Stu, and twenty minutes after that he was rolling a cart full of five cases of Iron City down the sidewalk, taking the occasional anxious glance behind him for an Arnelli's employee wanting his cart back. This worthy obligingly failed to appear, and gradually Geordie relaxed. He wasn't quite sure what street he was on - he had taken a couple of quick turns in case he was being followed - but he was pretty sure he was headed in the right direction and expected to hit Levitt eventually.

Then he saw it; or rather, he sensed it. Geordie suddenly got that funny tingling between the shoulders that says, someone's watching me. He wheeled around, irrationally certain that he was about to be booked for grand theft shopping cart, and instead found himself facing the window of a music store across the street. STAN'S MUSIC, said the sign, and was that a gap after the S? Geordie didn't care, didn't even notice the sign, because what was in the window was... captivating.

She was red. The curves of her body were red, and her long slender neck made Geordie's fingers itch to curl around it. Gleaming metal decorations glittered, not plain chrome, oh no, but gold (jewelry she has jewelry) tuners and bridge. The day was full sunlight but somehow the guitar GLOWED, as though there was something underneath the paint, some life that was brighter than simple daylight, awakened (just for me just for me it's just for me) by Geordie's attention. The black pickguard against the red body was deeply, infinitely black, looking for all the world like Geordie could just reach right into it and grab - what? A star? Or just a handful of night?

Geordie let go of the cart's handle; it rolled to the curb and then off, two wheels hanging over the edge, one spinning lazily. He stared across the street for a long frozen moment, almost not breathing, and then stepped out and jaywalked, not hearing the horns or seeing anything except the window. He stepped up on the curb

and walked straight to it, feeling as much as seeing its strange glow. One long moment more and then he reached for the door handle.

The handle made the empty click of a locked door.

For the first time Geordie saw the sign. "Sorry! We're CLOSED." His heart dropped, and he jiggled the thumb tab of the worn brass handle up and down, as if it might fan the sign around on its fraying string to reveal the "Come in, We're OPEN" side. Nothing. Regretfully he let go of the handle and moved back in front of the window. She was still radiant, lovely, and he just had time to begin to wonder what to do next, when the thought struck him that he had left five cases of beer unattended on the other side of the street. He had just begun to turn and look at his beer when he heard the click of a lock and stopped dead.

His cart full of beer forgotten permanently, Geordie looked back at the door. The sign now said OPEN and, true to its word, the door was indeed open a crack. Geordie pushed it; it creaked open, and he stepped into the dark cool of the shop. It was much larger than it looked from outside; in fact, it was hard to see where the back wall might be. Geordie squinted and tried to focus, but the effort hurt his eyes oddly, and made the instruments look strange and distorted. Surely no one could play a guitar like the one that seemed to be hanging near the ceiling just at the edge of vision; you'd need very odd fingers, too many of them, to make that work. And what was that in the corner past the counter? Geordie couldn't quite make it out, but it looked like a leather guitar. Surely not...

"Can I help you?" Geordie actually jumped. He felt his heels leave the worn wooden floor for a moment. His pulse, already racketing away in his ears, hammered to a new peak, and he managed an unsteady "Uhhh" - and then couldn't think of a thing to say to the small man with the slicked black hair and incongruous Grateful Dead t-shirt who had unexpectedly appeared beside him. The man seemed to take no notice of Geordie's imbalance, and fixed him with a suave and ingratiating smile. "Was there something you wanted to see?"

Geordie regained his voice, though it felt a little like someone else had been using it. "Uh, in the window." "Ah yes, a special choice for a special player. Let me take it down for you." Grateful Dead Man (as Geordie had already labeled him in his mind) reached into the window, farther than it seemed like he should be able to reach, and brought out the red guitar. He held it forward to Geordie like a new mother presenting a baby. "Beautiful, isn't she? All handmade of course, a one of a kind instrument. You're a man of taste. Shall we plug her in, so you can try her out?"

Geordie's heart plummeted. He had actually forgotten, until that moment... "Uh, I'm sorry, I don't know how to play." "Nonsense, sir. Anyone can play." He slid up a three-legged stool with a pointed shoe and motioned to Geordie to sit down, which Geordie did, feeling oddly helpless about the whole thing. Grateful Dead Man

produced a sinuous black cable - seemingly from nowhere, though Geordie decided it was simply too dark to see where it had really come from - and flipped the switch on a pitch black amplifier that said simply HOT ROD DEVILLE on its leatherlike case. A red light blinked on, sparkling. G. Dead Man plugged the cable into the amplifier then slid the other end smoothly into the jack at the guitar's base, and placed it in Geordie's hands. "Go ahead, sir. Rock the house."

The guitar seemed warm and alive to Geordie's touch. His hand went to the strings as if by instinct, his fingers on the frets as he struck the strings randomly, cringing in anticipation of a raucous discord, but a sweet chord sang its way sensually out of the speaker. Geordie almost dropped the guitar in astonishment. He moved his fingers and tried again; another chord, mournful and sad and lovely. "You see, sir?" smiled G.D. Man. "You CAN play this instrument, and very beautifully, I might add. It was made for you."

Geordie sat astonished at what his hands were doing. It was him, and yet not him; music poured from the amplifier, his fingers moving over the strings, feeling at once natural and distressing. He couldn't stop, didn't want to stop. He kept on playing, wild improvisations intermixed with soft chords, until a sudden CLICK and the speaker went silent. Geordie looked up in distress. G.D. Man, still with the smile on his face, took his finger off the switch. "I trust you have had a sufficient demonstration of our merchandise, sir. I hope you understand that we need to keep shop wear to a minimum on all our instruments." He lifted the guitar out of Geordie's outstretched hands; Geordie felt a huge and unexpected sense of loss. "However, may I assume you are interested in buying it? We offer... creative payment arrangements. Please, come into my office and we'll discuss it."

Geordie rose from the stool and followed G.D. Man toward the mysterious back of the store.