

The Gift

I learned to play guitar as a young boy; while that's seventy-five long years ago, there are days when it seems that I learned even before there was such a thing as time.

Those days are rarer and rarer now, like snow in August or an honest politician. But they do happen and I rejoice privately in my own fashion. Well, not really privately, in the truest sense of the word. Private like, I suppose.

They wheel me down to the reception area, past the desk where the nurses sit and gossip about us and the doctors and themselves, down to a spot where the sun comes in through the main entrance. One of the nurses always laughs and says, "hey, Mr. Sunshine is here".

They bring me the shiny old guitar that's stored in the locked closet in the manager's office and take it out of the old case with all the stickers on it. The new nurses will always ask me about the stickers; "when were you in New York Pete?", or "were you really in all these places?".

I always give them the same answer and the ones who've heard it before, well they roll their eyes. But they all smile and laugh. "Honey", I say, "this old guitar's been to heaven and hell and everywhere in between".

When they hand me that old guitar, I like to take a few minutes to feel the strings under my fingers; like a painter feeling his brush or a woman holding her man close after he's been away a while.

That old guitar's got some magic in her, for real. I can feel it even after all these years. When one of those days comes along, I think she feels it too, sitting in that case all alone. My hands feel real soft and strong those days and I can feel her eager, wanting to make some loving noises.

So, I sit in that old wheelchair, playing old songs on that old guitar. I'll play me some Mississippi John Hurt, or Son House, or even some old Bascom Lunsford. The nurses like to hear me play and they like it even more when I sing. Can't do that too much anymore now though, because the breath is leaving me. I sing one old verse and I'm about to go to sleep. But they like it, so I try now and again.

People coming here to visit their older folks, well they like it too. They come through those big glass doors with the sun following behind them and you know, it can feel dark and kind of sad in here. But they see this old man in the old wheelchair playing that old guitar and they seem to look hopeful again.

They always smile and listen to this old man anyways, which I rightly do appreciate. Most of them think I'm sitting here playing for them and they're right in a way. I'm waiting here for someone, the right someone to hear me, indeed I am.

Can't explain it better than to say I have a duty to honour. Like I said, I learned to play this old guitar when I was a young boy. An old man, old like I am now, he gave me the gift, you see.

This old guitar was his and he stuck a lot of those stickers on that old case and he played her in many of those places. But that's not the gift, you know.

Anyone can give you a guitar. That's nice and all and you might come to like that guitar just fine. They can teach you how to play some chords and even some melodies and songs and that might be just about all you want.

But he showed me how to love that guitar and how to treat her so that she might love me back. And that's different than playing, you understand. When you love someone and they love you back, well that's a whole different thing than just making some nice sounds together.

Anyways, I wait here by the desk in this old wheelchair, playing old songs on this old guitar and I know that someone's coming along who's right ready for the gift. Just like that old man knew I was ready, way back before there was even time.