One Simple Song

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For Tilly



One - Outside the train station.

She picked up the guitar. All of eight years old. And begun strumming. Beauty poured out of her guitar like a Heavenly light. And yet the small crowd of onlookers could not recognise the song. Each, in their own thoughts, believed it to be a song they must not have heard.

Little did they know, that it was the song’s world premiere. The girl had composed it herself. She began humming. Her voice merged with the sounds as natural as creek water over rocks. Harmony. A symphony of one. Her gift to the people. A gift to her dear friend Joshua. He was in hospital. He has cancer. He’s only nine. It was both a sad song and a strangely uplifting one. The people were moved, the girl could tell. One woman put her hand to her heart, as though to keep it from breaking. The girl knew at that moment, that she had done a good thing. She had done a good job. She had created a song. She did not even know where the tune had come from. She had been mucking about recently, and the chords seemed to fall together all by themselves. She knew instantly that she should dedicate it to her friend, and that she would like to perform it for him. To him. She had grabbed a pen in haste, as though in danger of forgetting it, and wrote the chords down. When she was finished, she played it back. It sounded so good, so simple yet wonderful, that she could not believe she was its creator. All she needed was practice, and an audience to test it out on. If others liked it, then she would perform it to Joshua, who was stuck in the Ward in the children’s hospital where he had been for weeks now. Felt like forever to her. It must feel very long for him. Poor boy. Her playmate and best buddy.

At the end of the song, the people outside the train station clapped. Very loudly. It made her smile. She had played only once before in public. Her father had stood off to one side to make sure she was safe. The people clapped then too, but she got the feeling that they were clapping for the simple fact that she was a performing child, much like a performing monkey or dog. She may be young but she wasn’t stupid. She had been singing covers that day. Cyndi Lauper’s Girls Just Want To Have Fun, The Beatles Hey Jude and Katy Perry’s Roar. She had grown up listening to her dad’s record and CD collection, so she had a wide knowledge of music from different decades. She liked some of the older songs best.

A man stepped forward and dropped a five dollar note into her upturned hat. Wow she thought. She had never received that much in one hit before. Usually it was a dollar coin or two at most.

‘Was that your song?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘I thought so. I play guitar too. The arrangements sounded unusual. I thought it must be in the original.’

She smiled.

‘Well done. That’s fantastic.’ He turned around to the crowd that was beginning to disperse. ‘Original song folks! She made it up herself! How fantastic!’

She could see the surprise in a few faces. More people started to come towards her, digging in their purses and pockets. She looked to her father, who was walking towards her. He had a big smile on his face. She needn’t have been nervous. Her performance had been a big success.

Two - Inside the hospital.

Clara, the eight-year-old, walked in through the main hospital doors, her father by her side, as he often was but not always. Her parents had separated when she was 5. She spent time with her mum too but her dad was the musical one in the family. They often played and created together.

They walked to the front desk but had to wait behind two other people. It was very busy. People were criss-crossing all about, some in a hurry, some with flowers, clearly visiting, some patients in Pyjamas, shuffling along or being pushed in wheelchairs. There was a lot of activity to seize her attention. When they reached the desk her father said, ‘We are here to see Joshua …’

She didn’t take much notice of the instructions. She merely readjusted the strap of her guitar case on her shoulder. She hoped he would like her song. She was sure he would. Everyone else did. It was from her heart. Her soul. Whatever that really meant. It sounded good. Her father had said how immensely proud of her he was. He was always saying that, so often in fact, that she had stopped taking much notice. But she believed it this time.

They made their way along a corridor until they reached the lifts. They proceeded to the 4th floor and out into the cancer wing. Her breathing was faster. She knew that her heart must be also beating faster. She was both excited and nervous. She couldn’t wait to play and to see the smile on his face. Her old best friend. She had other best friends but Joshua had been her best friend in year two. They sat next to each other in class. They played at lunch times. They even had weekend playdates. He went to her birthday party. She didn’t go to his because no-one did. It was cancelled. He had gotten sick. That was the first time. He did get better but earlier this year he was sick again. For a long time it seemed. Then he came back to school. Even though he was in a different class, they were still able to hang out together at lunch times. Play dates didn’t happen anymore as his mum said he gets too tired, even though Joshua said he was fine.

This time was Sickness number three. He been stuck in hospital for ages. He must be so bored Clara had thought, as in Year Two they were both on the move like chickens with their tail feathers on fire. So she had made him this song. Her very first! And what a cracker it was too! Her dad’s words. A cracker. Haha

Her dad reached a doorway, looked next to it to check that the room number was correct, and walked in. She followed. The room was large. It had four beds. A girl was asleep in one. Opposite a boy sat in a chair next to his bed, reading a comic. An adult, probably his mum, sat on the bed, busy texting. It wasn't Joshua. There was a curtain hiding the next bed. There were a few adults there. They went further into the room. She became aware of the sounds of crying. Her father slowed. There were people around the final bed. Adults. Teenagers too.

Her father stopped and put out his hand to stop her from getting closer. She could see part of the figure in the bed through a gap of people. She leant to the left to get a better view. A boy, with his head to the side. His face was pale and very thin. Joshua’s age. Asleep. A wire was attached to his arm. Another to a clip on his finger. A lady, the one that was crying, quite loudly in fact, slumped down and covered the boy’s body with her own.

Clara’s father took her arm and tried to pull her back.

‘Dad don’t,’ she said.

The nearest people looked around at them.

Clara thought the boy looked familiar. ‘Dad?’

He let down and whispered, ‘We should go. This is not a good time.’

‘But I want to see Joshua,’ she said, too loudly, as more people looked around at them, including the lady, her face red and glistening from tears. She frowned. Then reached out to Clara. It was Joshua’s mum.

It was only then that Clara realised what was happening. She took a step back. Then another. All of the people were looking at her now. All except one. The sleeping boy. Who was not asleep at all.

She turned and ran from the room.

Three - At the service.

Seven days later, she sat in the church pew, listening to the priest, but not really hearing or understanding what he was saying. He was talking like it was all normal. Just another day. Everyone else too. Quiet. Well dressed. Not smiling. She didn't understand any of it. Was Joshua really dead? Was this all for him? How could a kid die? He wasn't fat or lazy or anything like that. He was healthy. He did exercise. Well, usually. Maybe not this year so much. But he was already sick by then. It just didn’t make sense.

She sat like that, her head full of thoughts, as different people, she assumed from Joshua’s family, came up and spoke. The words sounded like something out of the Bible. She wondered who they were talking about. Some of it sounded like Joshua but most of it didn’t. Maybe she was the only one who knew him properly. Nothing had been better as last year. They had had so much fun. They were the closest of friends. Now that it was all over, she wondered if she would ever have anything like it again.

Her father nudged her. ‘Off you go sweetie. Just relax. You’ll be fine.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes. Take your time. Remember, it doesn’t have to be perfect. Okay?’

She stood. She began moving out of the aisle, edging past people’s knees. She was aware of the silence. Of all the people sitting. She felt watched. And alone.

She walked to the front and up onto the platform that was like a stage but wasn't. A chair, her guitar on its stand and a microphone awaited her. She sat. She picked up her guitar from its stand. Her breathing was fast. Someone coughed. She placed her fingers on the C chord. She looked to the people. She saw Joshua’s family in the front row. Some were looking at her, but not the parents. She was glad for that. She looked to her dad. His familiar face made her relaxed.

She strummed. She looked to the strings, concentrating on the chord changes. Suddenly the music took her over. She forgot where she was. All there was, was the song. And Joshua.

‘Ohh my friend. My best friend.’ The words spilled out.

‘I will miss you to the end.’ She hadn’t written lyrics.

‘Joshua. I miss you.’ The words slotted in naturally to the music, like putting on a t-shirt that fitted perfectly.

‘We had fun. Ohhhh, so much fun.’

‘I was number two. You were number one.’

Her eyes were closed. She strummed and hummed. And when she reached the end, she played it over once more, repeating the words as though they had always been there.

After the last strum, as the sound dissolved into the air, she leant closer to the microphone and whispered, ‘I love you Joshua.’

She placed the guitar back into its stand, stood and walked back down the aisle. Joshua parents were looking at her. Faces full of tears. As she continued walking she noticed that many others would crying too. It's seemed every second person was. When she reached the aisle, the people stood up to let her in. They hadn't stood to let her out when she first went up. Some touched her back or her shoulder as she shuffled past, as though she was special. It made her feel like she had done something worthwhile. That Joshua would be happy.

She reached her dad. His face was wet too. His eyes were like crystal. She sat and he embraced her. ‘You did really good Clara. I'm so very proud of you.’