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## Gravity

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## Gravity

by McKenzie Watterson

*I tried not to cry as a grin stretched across my face. If I gave into the tears filling my eyes, people would start staring at the girl bawling in the middle of Centennial Park. I could not believe the phone call had been real, but I double-checked and googled the number. So, it was true. I had a meeting with Tom Harrison. After everything, the months of floundering in a strange city, Tom Harrison, the biggest music producer in Nashville, wanted to hear my voice. I imagined showing up on my father's doorstep, contract in one hand and champagne in the other. He would finally understand why I left. I freed my tears, slung my guitar from my shoulders into my hands, and began to strum. Let them stare. Soon they'd have to buy a ticket to hear my music.*

...

Four years later, I focused on the last chip of paint left on the door, illuminated by the Maryville Bar sign flashing above. Tying my starched apron around my waist, I stole a few moments in the crisp air. At home, dad was probably playing *Candyland* for the thousandth time with Sara. Hands destined for guitar strings, wasted on plastic pawns, I wanted to crush that damn candy cane forest. In the bar, patrons clamored for drinks. But in the cold parking lot, I was free. When I opened the bar door, years of cigarette smoke and spilled liquor washed over me. For a moment, I drowned.

"You really suck, you know that?" Laurie brushed by me, empty glasses in hand.

"Why are you still on shift?"

"Jim wants you to sing tonight. Some bigwig just walked in. Guess who is stuck with your tables."

I pulled at my burgundy polyester waitress uniform, not exactly what I usually wore on singing nights and definitely not what I used to wear to perform in Nashville. French maid/diner chick crossover would have to be the look for the evening. Wonderful.

"And I have been dealing with Mr. Higgins over there all night." Laurie huffed after another table of smudged glasses.

"I'll cover one of your shifts next week, ok?" I offered. An extra shift next week meant eight more hours, about fifty dollars before tips. If tips were good, I'd hide away as much as ten dollars. To hell with the awful uniform, bring on the microphone.

Raucous laughter from the bar pulled me from my calculations. Jim and his regulars were never hard to find. I debated whether or not to tell him that one of the strings of ceiling lights was flickering.

"Hey Jim," I crossed over to the bar, "it usually works out a lot better for the both of us if you let me know more than five minutes before you want me to sing." I decided to let him figure out the lights on his own. It could be my new experiment.

"How was I supposed to know Roy would be back in town?"

"Roy? Since when did anyone in this town care about him?" I hadn't thought about Roy in a long time. I remembered watching his soft brown hair in the back of biology class, and English, and calculus—it was a small school. He always wore a Ramones t-shirt and muttered the correct answers below his breath.

"Apparently he's working for some producer now. Harrison or something? Anyway, thought I'd show him our local talent!"

...

*The butterflies in my stomach got worse with each lurch of the bus. Jesus, did the bus driver get out of training yesterday? If everything went well, bus L19 would arrive at Mr. Harrison's office at 11:37, twenty-three minutes early for my meeting. And I had a backup plan. If something happened with the bus, I brought all \$46.25 I had to my name to pay for a cab. There was no way I was going to miss that meeting. Some busybody in mom jeans glared at me, then at my guitar, resting in the seat next to me. My gaze met hers as I pushed the guitar even further into its own space. Today, it*

*deserved to take up a seat.*

*I forced air down deep into my lungs. Nervous and tight windpipes would not bode well for my performance. Someone on the bus had pungent takeout. What was that? Chinese? Italian? Sewage? The bus stopped abruptly and my stomach flipped again. I could not remember ever feeling this lightheaded or nauseous, not because of nerves anyway. I took more deep breaths, sure to suck air through my mouth instead of my nose. Nerves didn't usually upset me this much. The schedule flashed above the bus window, only two more stops to go. My knees began to shake when I stood. With only one stop left, I lifted my guitar and moved toward the bus doors. The brakes of the bus screeched. Suddenly the floor was rushing towards me, then nothing.*

...

Harrison. The name loomed large. Jim turned back to serving his friends and I rolled my eyes. Typical. I began the familiar motions of preparing the stage for my set. Speakers, a microphone on a stand, a lonely light. It would have taken all of five minutes if the speakers had been working right. Dad's Gibson called to me from its stand at home. My fingers itched for mahogany curves and strings across the maple bridge. But last week, Sara knocked it down. Now a crack crept across its side. Without the guitar, I had to resort to thin karaoke tracks. With each passing minute, more people trickled into the bar, everyone asking their neighbor just who this Roy was.

"Oh, he's Cheryl and Dean's kid, remember?"

"Oh, he was that shy one."

"Well, he's not so quiet now! I wonder if he is single? You know, my Maureen broke up with that awful boyfriend of hers..."

I think a few people even pointed. Roy was off in the corner nursing a drink and ignoring their looks. I left him alone. I remembered the weight of stares from my own homecoming. Jim ambled up to the stage, adjusting his belt as he moved.

"Alrighty folks," the mic spiked when Jim spoke, "tonight our girl June's singing again. Enjoy." He was already on his way back to the bar. The patrons fell silent as all eyes turned to me. The opening chords of the music crept out from the speakers.

...

*I nearly ripped the IV out of my arm when I woke up. "My meeting! Did I miss my meeting?" my voice sounded distant, scratchy.*

*"Whoa there," the nurse changing the drip bag gently pushed me into the bed.*

*"Where is my guitar?" This time a wave of nausea sent me back to my pillow. My eyes scanned the room, but everything was sterile, white and straight, with no familiar mahogany curves.*

*"No one had a guitar when they brought you in," the nurse at least tried to look concerned. "Hey, wait! Would you just lie down? You're going to faint again."*

*"Again?" Well, fainting would explain a few things.*

*"Lie down! It's not good for the baby."*

*That stopped me. "What baby?"*

*"Oh my God, you didn't know?" This time her concern was real. "Honey, you're pregnant."*

...

My voice rose to meet the music. *Something always brings me back to you / It never takes too long.* With the opening stanzas, I was transported back to a time before Sara, when there weren't sticky hands and Maryville bake sales to anchor me, back when escape seemed possible. *Set me free / Leave me be / I don't want to fall another moment into your gravity.* My cheeks pulled back awkwardly, the smile unintentional.

Then someone coughed. Another table returned to their conversation. Noises of clinking glasses and shifting chairs washed the smile from my lips. The enchantment lifted. My voice drowned beneath the patrons and their drinks, stuck singing lyrics and melodies crafted for someone else. I gave in and sang crowd favorites for the rest of my set. At least then a few people nodded with the rhythm. I guess artistic integrity wandered the streets of Nashville with my lost guitar, far from the patrons of Maryville Bar.

Laurie left within seconds of my last song. I don't think I was even off the stage before she was out the door.

Roy was still at his table, but Jim had him cornered. I could hear him demanding tales from the "big city" from across the room. Roy's feet drummed under the table. Anxiety or irritation? I cleared tables, making my way

across the bar to them.

“Hey Jim,” I interrupted, “I think your pals need help staying on their stools.”

“Those drunks!” he laughed as he pushed away from the table and made his way back to the counter.

Roy almost let me leave before he said, “Thanks.”

“Anytime. It’s easy forget how intense they are.” I moved to the next table, but caught his grin out of the corner of my eye. Before long, all the patrons trickled out. The people of Maryville could only handle so much excitement on a Saturday night. They had church in the morning, you know. Soon, Roy was the only one left.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” my voice startled him.

“Whiskey, neat,” he purred then added a hasty, “Please.” I felt his gaze follow me until I returned with the drink. “You want to sit for a while?” he asked.

I thought of Sara’s laundry waiting for me at home. The broken guitar. “Won’t all my other customers feel neglected?” I laughed at the empty bar as I sat.

“You know, you’re not half bad.” He looked at his drink.

“Well, it’s not hard to pour whiskey in a glass.”

“I meant your voice,” he warmed. “We always knew your dad could play like the pros, but I had no idea you sang.”

“No one did. Not until I left, anyway.”

“Well, if I had heard that voice in high school, it would have destroyed my teenage heart.”

Really? I doubted the kid in the Ramones t-shirts would’ve even noticed my voice. “Good thing you’re a worldly music producer now,” I tried not to smile, “immune to my siren call.”

“I mean it, though. You’ve got something. I think Mr. Harrison would really like you.”

“He did,” I felt a hint of pride swell, “I had a meeting with him the day I found out about Sara. She’s my daughter.” As we talked, hours passed in minutes. I felt a long-forgotten spark alight. Maybe I had saved enough. Packing up my life would take only minutes. If Roy could get me another meeting with Harrison, it would change everything. I could get out of this town, go on tour, see the world. I stopped myself. I had to take this one step at a time.

...

*The payphone clashed as I slammed it down. Why the hell wasn’t anyone answering today? I called Mr. Harrison’s office three times, my father eight times. That’s fifty-five unanswered rings. I dug into my pockets. No more loose change, just the emergency seventeen dollars. I refused to think about using that. If my guitar hadn’t been off roaming the streets of Nashville without me, I could have played a few songs, filled my open case with a few dollars. The management at this bus station never bothered buskers. I looked down at my still-flat stomach. I wanted to scream, to pound my fists into the station walls until they bled, make such a scene that absolutely no one in Nashville could ignore me. Instead, I curled up on the bench behind me, seventeen dollars and two unwanted lives protected by the curve of my spine. When I woke up, the bench’s pattern echoed on my skin. The corners of my eyes stung as I walked up to the ticket window.*

*“One ticket to Maryville please.”*

*“That’ll be seventeen dollars.”*

*I gave him everything I had.*

...

“June,” Jim interrupted, “I’m headed out. Close up when you go home.” The faulty string flickered goodbye as he shut the door.

“I should get back to Sara.” I stood to leave and Roy stood with me. I let him walk me to my car. The stars fought against the neon-pink bar sign as it flashed.

“This place hasn’t changed at all,” he lingered.

“You’re lucky, Mr. Producer Man,” I kicked the parking lot gravel. “You have somewhere else to go.”

“They don’t have stars like this in Nashville,” he shrugged. I watched a fly bash again and again into the neon-tubes. His shy fingers reached out to brush mine. I took his hand.

“Do you really think Mr. Harrison would want to see me?”

Roy pulled me to him. His kiss was gentle, made to match his soft voice and careful smile. I wove my fingers into his soft hair and for a moment, I felt like the June I was in Nashville, full of promise. I pulled a breath away.

“You didn’t answer my question.” I smiled under his lips.

He laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re just kissing me to get a meeting with Harrison.”

“Me?” I flirted, “Never!”

“Good.”

He smiled and kissed me again. He pulled me closer, his lips growing frantic, desperate. I coaxed him to a calmer pace and broke away.

“I better get going.” I knelt to pick up my purse, wondering when I had dropped it. “Sara’s at home.”

He nodded, but caught my arm as I turned to leave.

“Can I tell you something?” he asked, eyes brimming. I nodded.

“I’m not home for just a visit.” He avoided my gaze. “I lost my job. With Harrison. I’m back for good.”

“Oh,” I pulled my arm from his grasp.

“So, since I’m going to be around for a while, I was hoping maybe you’d like to get dinner with me sometime?”

In that moment, I saw our future. A few dates and then he would meet Sara. My dad would love him, so he would invite him to Thanksgiving. Next year, he would propose to me at his mother’s Christmas Eve party. Wedding invitations would go out by hand, and of course, the rehearsal dinner would be right here at the bar. My whole world zoomed in to the town borders.

...

*When my father opened the door, he didn’t say a word. I suddenly wished I had picked up the phone just once in the hundred times he called. New worry lines spread across his forehead, inspired by a runaway daughter. He loomed in the opening.*

*“What are you doing here?”*

*My mind raced, scanning for reasons to turn around, searching for other options. I smelled the ten-year-old mix of potpourri and coffee wafting from the house.*

*“Well?”*

*“I don’t have anywhere else to go,” I looked down, but saw him cross his arms, filling the doorway even more. “You’re,” I forced the words, “You’re going to be a grandfather.”*

*For a moment, disbelief crossed his eyes, then they brightened and he smiled. He suffocated me in a hug and drew me back into the house.*

...

“No.” I whispered. Confusion crossed Roy’s eyes. “No,” I repeated and pushed him away. Tears welled in my eyes. “You were out!” my voice raised. “You were out. Why the hell did you come back here?”

I strode for my car across the parking lot, ignoring his calls. I was so foolish to have placed my hope in him. He was clutched in the town just like everyone else in the county. He had it all, everything he needed to stay out, and he still came crawling back to this hellhole. I jammed my keys into the ignition and started doing the math. If I spent a hundred on a pawnshop guitar, I had enough to make it a few weeks if I lived at the Y. Busking would stretch the money further. My heart raced. I imagined the Leaving Maryville sign disappearing behind me.

Light from the hallway fell across Sara’s sleeping features as I opened the door to our shared room. The clock flashed 2:43am. Dad’s snores shook the house. Crossing to Sara’s bed, I nearly tripped over a stuffed dragon. Sara breathed deeply, and I knelt to smell the sleep in her hair.

I grabbed the suitcase from our closet and threw clothes into it. I shoved my diner uniform in the garbage and slipped into a dark hoodie and jeans. Sara stirred in her sleep. I watched her for a long moment.

“Mamma, you’re home,” she murmured into the covers.

“Sorry I woke you, sweetie.” I sat at the edge of her bed. “Did you have fun with grandpa tonight?”

“Mhmm,” she yawned.

“Better get back to sleep,” I snugged the blanket up around her cheeks.

I was already reaching for the suitcase, tears flowing freely, when the question rose from the covers.

“Can you sing me a bedtime song?”

“Sure, honey.” I moved back to the edge of her bed, reluctant. *Something always brings me back to you / It never takes too long.* As I sang, I stroked her cheek, waiting for her eyelids to droop. Instead, her eyes widened. She

rose with the melody, sitting up, mouth agape. A neighborhood dog barked, a car horn honked, but she rested enraptured in my song.

“I want to do that,” she whispered when I had finished. Her fingers reached out to trace my lips. “Will you teach me, mamma?”

“In the morning,” I promised. Forgetting about the suitcase, I crawled into bed with her and pulled her close and warm. For the second time that evening, I felt promise return, the future beating in my chest. As I cradled Sara, our world expanded across town lines, mountains, cities, and oceans.

Sara’s breath slowed to an even rhythm.

“Let me tell you a story,” I whispered to her, “about where you are from. We’re going to go there again someday. You and me, we’re going to Nashville.”