

The Flute Player

by Chris Underwood

The man who plays his flute every day under the archway near Powell station is not very good. He never plays a real tune, just a series of random notes. There is no rhythm or melody either. In fact, it's not even a flute he plays; it's more like a recorder, an instrument that some elementary school children are given to teach them music appreciation and that ends up irritating the hell out of parents who have to endure their feeble attempts to play it.

However, the flute player is anything but a child — he's an old man, probably in his early seventies. Nonetheless, he plays like a child learning the recorder. He spends his days blowing squeaks and shrieks with that old piece of wood, rarely pausing to even take a breath. An old brown stained cap sits near his feet, just far enough inside the protection of the arc so that it doesn't get wetter than it already is. It rains quite often this time of year. The flute player has the appearance of a tired traveler. His clothes hang off his bones like the wet fur on a half starved dog that has no place to go to get out of the rain. His worn Reebok sneakers are covered with plastic to keep his feet dry. The old stained cap at his feet is for small donations, but like most days, there is very little money in it.

The archway is located at the head of a staircase that descends from the main street to the metro station. Many people pass by, but because he plays so poorly, most ignore him. Across from the archway, there is a popular vendor cart where people buy coffee and newspapers before they start their day. Most of them see the flute player but pretend they don't. The rainy day makes them cranky and uncharitable. Two baristas make coffee and sell newspapers from early morning until two in the afternoon. The owner arrives promptly at nine in the morning and works until five. Just before five, the flute player packs up his instrument, shuffles over to the vendor cart and asks politely for a black coffee. Yi, the owner, always serves him free, and the flute player always takes a dollar from the meager amount he's made and leaves it in the tip jar. It's a

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private ritual they share in secret. Then he carefully takes his coffee and vanishes into deepening shadows in the alleys south of the main street.

On this particular morning, the baristas are busy making coffee and selling newspapers when the flute player arrives. There are more people than usual, and they are more aggressive and more agitated because of days of rain. Many of the people hustle quickly, but carefully avoid puddles, black mud, and smelly trash as if they were lethal. The flute player slowly sets up under the arch. His clothes are wet from the early rain and his walk to the arch. He plays his instrument terribly, even worse than usual. He's aware that he's performing badly, but he tries his best.

There are two police officers making their way down the street near where the player is performing. The officers stop at the archway, and one of them says: "Excuse me, sir. You can't play here without a city permit. The city requires that all street performers obtain a permit from the Department of Art and Culture. Here is a form with more information. Now, I'm going to have to ask you to pack up and move on."

The flute player reluctantly stops playing and looks dumbly at the two officers. Then he bends over, retrieves his cap and places it on his head. The hat is all askew because it is still wet from his walk to the arch earlier that morning. He tucks his flute into his wet coat and slowly moves off. He passes the two officers but his face shows no recognition. He walks slowly, paying no attention to the puddles, the mud or the trash. He walks directly through the weather's refuse, rather than around it. Suddenly, he vanishes into a crowd of people trying to get out of the now pouring rain.

He slowly zigzags his way through back streets and alleys behind the department and specialty stores that sit on the south side of the main street. Finally, he reaches an especially small alleyway that is littered with old car and machine parts from businesses that have long been closed. He makes his way deeper into alley. Water from the puddles splashes on the plastic bags fastened tightly around his shoes. He climbs up and behind an old rusted printing

press that was once used by a prominent but now defunct newspaper. Behind the machine he climbs through a hole in the wall of an old warehouse and into a small space that is his home. There are some blankets, a few water bottles filled with rainwater, and a small box for his flute. A small grey cat climbs out of an even smaller box nearby and sits down next to the flute player, giving his hand a nudge. The flute player takes off his wet coat and cap, reaches his hand into a pocket, and retrieves a small piece of bread. It is the last of his food, and he feeds it to the cat, slowly petting her as she eats. He takes the form the police officer had given him and he looks it over briefly before setting it aside. For some reason, the flute player thinks about the war and a close friend who died in a far land. Then he looks out a small dirty window. He knows that it is going to rain even harder.

