

The Busker

By Adair Broughton

For as long as memory allowed, her life had been a shadow cast in the afterglow of imitation. It seemed it had always been that way. That was, until she had met the busker.

From the nascent of years she would try and follow her sister, copying mannerisms and trying to dress similarly, even wearing stolen makeup that ran into tears that wiped away any recognition she would ever be as beautiful. All it would do was highlight a distance greater than age. There was no jealousy; just a confused and awkward puzzlement and frustration why two people with the same heritage could look so different.

Yet the shade of encumbrance was somewhere to hide and the branches of years had entwined themselves to something resembling comfort and gradually she began to feel at home with the lack of interest from other people in her life. Not being noticed was not necessarily a burden and unless it suited those around her, whether to run an errand or help with some baking for visitors whose names and faces she soon forgot, they did not interfere with her life. Her parents occasionally asked about school, distant relatives would speak on the phone but she never really felt ingrained, a part of the family. She was not treated badly. She had tried to be like her sister as a way of embedding herself into the family but they had not noticed her, had not recognised her attempts.

Forcing similarity was like swimming upstream he had said. Let the water of self do the work he had added. The busker had given her a new perspective, a new way of examining things.

The fire was both a beginning and an end.

For a long time, the freedom that came with being ignored had made her feel more grown up, when she really want to feel like a child. That she could be content with being a pale reflection of vitality and beauty like her sister, a servant of the mundane, had been surprising to the busker. She cared what he thought. She listened to him with rapt interest at his words that flowed like a fresh spring sparkling on a summer day. He knew so much, and she knew so little but he was not patronising to her. He also listened and nobody had ever really done that before.

Before she had seen him that night, moving slowly through her moonlit yard, the shadow life was her existence, and through familiarity also a place she could willingly hide. She could pretend it suited her, even if she was still living in the greater reflection of shade cast by a sister who was allowed greater freedoms and choices. Her sister always seemed busy, her days filled with phone calls and friendships.

Conversely, she always seemed to have too many hours in the day and would wander around imagining herself as a spirit free from youth and the knots of childhood that bound her wings, like a tree that could sway in the breeze but still be tied to the earth.

One of her fondest memories was being allowed into her sister's bedroom when she had some friends stay over. She had remained silent throughout, perched delicately on the bed, just listening and feeding off the excitement of life, smiling with equal enthusiasm to the parts of conversations she didn't understand as well as those she did. She giggled in unison; a nervous reaction to something profound and unknown she had become a part of and wished could last forever.

It was a complete change from wandering around her yard and the woods near her home. She had been for a brief time, like a butterfly in spring, more than the invisible daughter or sister, an equal to all those around her, basking in the warmer rays of life.

It had upset as much as confused her when her sister had never invited her into that room again. She had waited on the stairs, her eyes pleading with hope but her sister looking at her, not even smiling as she closed the door and once more entered the hidden world of friendship and laughter that had been so long in eclipse. She had sat staring at that door for hours until the laughter faded to whispers and she had gone outside for air. But she did have the memory of that room and she was thankful for that at least. She just couldn't understand why she would have been excluded, why she would feel so bad after something so good.

People did things she couldn't understand.

It was a summer night and the sky was basking in the remnants of the setting sun that cast a copper glow of tired energy but she knew a voice would soon appear, telling her it was time for bed. She pushed some flies away, mumbling their own futile explorations, finding the doorway a barrier to a new world.

Outside that door her father had been talking to a man about a mule that had been born, the sterile hybrid offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. Her father seemed stressed and on edge, not an unknown situation. It didn't take her long to realise they wanted to put the animal to sleep but the vet was out of reach and by all accounts costly. She sat down on the steps, listening intently, staring at the man in the chequered shirt and her weathered father, brown skin from days outside that had turned his eyes to blue gems in brown earth.

"I can shoot it now...if you need"

She stared at her dad, his hand scratching his stubble as if he was sanding wood, his troubled gaze looking everywhere but the other man.

"It might be a good worker, could help us somehow."

"It's lame. Look at its leg. It will be good for nothing except to eat the hay. Why burden yourself?"

They hadn't noticed her, so she sat quietly, listening intently to the grown men choosing life or death, no murmur of emotion betrayed in her eyes or face with the words. She stared at the dusty ground and the step she sat on, which was in need of paint. Crisp white flakes were peeling away that became addictive to remove,

revealing the dull and tired wood beneath. She would be blamed for that too, so she stopped and looked up at the men once again.

It was at that moment something changed inside her, a feeling she could not describe, or distinguish into a known response. It was like she had suddenly noticed an inherent hollowness to life if it could be chosen on a whim so easily. It made her feel sick and shallow to know that these decisions had been going on for years and she would never have known, had never known of them. It made her feel detached and despairing to recognise that these decisions filled the world on a daily basis while she was hidden with her own quiet and dull monotony. Awareness was outside of her bubble and she had to push through that barrier. She would do what she had never done before and interfere.

The man had always made her feel uneasy, as if he was looking at her in a certain way that he shouldn't, because it was somehow wrong. She felt she could read his thoughts and know of his intentions without comprehending that instinct into recognisable facts or actions. There was something in his eyes that betrayed him, but she could not form a representation of what that was. She had not shared in the giggles when her sister's friends had mentioned his name.

Her hatred of him was now more tangible. She couldn't understand how someone could take a gun and shoot a defenceless animal. That mule was new to life, itself unaware of its surroundings, like she had been for so many years. She could relate to it, know what it was like not to be given a fair chance.

Her dad must have made a decision that released her from a silent anger that swirled from the dust of her movements as she rose and burnt into flames of sadness and frustration, knowing there was nothing she could do. She stood, about to turn round and go to her room, when thoughts encroached on every emotion she had ever encountered.

She wished she had not sat outside, or heard the conversation. Life was simpler when she didn't have to know. But she knew also that she had to act on what she thought. She didn't trust the man, despised him even more for his nonchalance with the newborn animal and its grip on life but now there was a chance for the man to prove her wrong. She would stop him from shooting the mule.

"Ok shoot it. I'll take her back into the field." was all her father said.

"I'll get the gun."

The two men went separate ways, dispersing like a muddy river approaching an island downstream with no opportunity for her to swim to it. She watched their chequered backs and faded jeans as the man walked swiftly to his truck, enticed and excited by the power of a bullet and her father, off to take the tired filly back into pasture from the barn.

She had not known it had been there, oblivious to many of the occurrences on the farm. I am blind, she thought, to so many things.

She wanted to follow her dad, plead a case for keeping the mule she hadn't even seen but something held her back, knew her pleas would vanish as quickly as the mule's life.

She stayed standing on the step, a sickness in her stomach making her recoil into thought about how she hated so much of her life but mainly because of other people. Why did it seem they could never see the beauty contained outside of the human shell? Why did it feel like she was the only one who could appreciate every footstep and thought that took her somewhere new?

She devoured the smell of wet grass following rain. She felt embellished by the comfort of a warm blue sky and sought peace from the shade of blossoming apple trees. It always seemed other people missed that, when she tried to describe it, they just looked at her strangely, as if she was making them aware of nothingness. Even the dusty and barren yard following weeks without rain had its beauty. Its colours gave the feeling of thirst, were a foundation for the future rains that would come in autumn. But for now the beetles and ants could roam free and use the evening as personal shade from day. She would miss things until she concentrated on the tiniest part of the world, and suddenly new life would spring up everywhere, hidden to eyes that never really noticed. She would become absorbed in the small animals indifferent to her gaze.

She realised she had also been blind, to the realities of farm life and what decisions had to be made. She felt sorry for her father but also knew his reluctance to shoot that animal was about the work it could have done for him, rather than the beauty in a new born life about to lose its mother forever. Any misgivings her father had were economic. She wanted to salvage the young boy that would still live inside the man, just as she wanted to become a young woman free of the girl she still was. She didn't want to be an adult if it meant decisions like this. What could she do? Was life really so cruel?

There was another tear but luckily there no make-up.

Her father was leading the horse back into the fields where he let the horses roam in summer. He would be some time if she had ascertained the speed of the six languid legs heading onto the horizon. It was a picturesque scene, but how many illusions of something so beautiful are in reality only moments away from acts of evil. The dust and the sky could have been Mars but she knew the peace of that world was lost here, a different world entirely.

The other horses had stables of their own, and she wondered why the mule had not been born in one of those. Her questions had no answers.

She looked intently at the barn, a far away look for such a nearby place, and moved with graceful motion from the step and began to walk to the barn. Swirls of dust gathered round her feet. She was walking slowly because she wanted to think of a plan that could save the animal. The barn looked yellow from a distance, faded from the green it once was. The setting sun having its affect like it had on the worker's faces, to gradually wear away, unseen and unknown. It was not big, large enough for

a tractor but no more. She opened the door, the creek of the door adding to the tension she could feel.

The animal was dead in less than ten minutes unless she could do something about it. She thought of that shot ringing out and the shudder of life as it ebbed into a running trail of blood. She could already see the man's face and that tepid smile content with its work, pleased with power.

It smelt of oil, the kind that formed tattoos on her father's arms that never really seemed to disappear but there was no machinery here to warrant that specific aroma. The musty smell soon gave way to the frankness of a new birth. Cobwebs decorated the ceiling, glowing and dancing to the gentle breeze from the open door. The light of a single lamp cast a rugged glow onto planks of wood with long forgotten purpose. An old spade, worn but its edge gleaming with recent use stood as a monument to hard work but it made her think of digging a grave. A tin of oil stood in the corner, a misplaced throne for whoever needed a seat.

She wiped a falling cobweb from her face and stood looking like a pallid priestess dressed in a white summer dress far from her natural places of security. It was her first time in the barn, an alien place compared to the fields and woods she would endlessly roam. It was too quiet. It was Mars after all.

It lay on the floor, breathing with a shallowness that exhaled the sullen nearness of death. A thin cover of blood covered it, providing sheen to the sorrel coat she was surprised it had. She had presumed it grey in her mind, as if its colour would match her imagery of its chances to live. There was a congealed mess on the floor and a strange smell she could not recognise but reminded her of iron.

She bent down gently, not wanting to frighten the animal but she knew the soft and subtle movements were also to signify respect, that she was not in control and that this was foreign to her also.

She used her only handkerchief to wipe down the body. She saw its head rise up with interest but it must have been tired as it soon lay it back down. The mule's breathing laboured and even she could sense its tenuous grip on life. She was frustrated with its weakness, but also her father's for not giving it a chance.

One of its legs seemed twisted and limp. She tried not to look at it, as if reality only existed for things she could see. She thought of how unfair life was and how lucky she was to be healthy. She wanted to swap positions have a sacrifice worth living for.

The barn door creaked again and she turned round. The man was staring at her, a look of shock on his face that soon turned into a smile. She preferred the angry look to that smile. It denoted anything but friendship. He had good teeth but he still made her feel uncomfortable. The other helpers smoked, he never. She looked at his boots, shining and pointed, and his tight jeans, faded and dusty.

He always kept his boots clean, no matter what the state of his other clothes. She had always noticed that, maybe because looking at his feet was an instinctive response to not looking at his face. She moved her eyes to his side, noticed how he held the gun

so comfortably, as if it was an extension of him, a familiar friend. She knew of the power guns had, knew of the feeling of security they gave to people, could understand why he had that need or more precisely, that weakness.

She turned her face away, not wanting to speak to him, to somehow delay the inevitable and it took all her strength not to stand up and run away. Maybe he would see how caring she was and realise he could not shoot it and walk away explaining to her father how his daughter should care for it. Dreams are easily broken by a few brittle words.

“Hey little lady, you will have to leave.”

He walked over to her watching her hands wiping down the mule but she remained bent down, her knees now sore from hard earth freed from rain. She felt a hand on her head that made her shiver; only accentuated by the silence that followed. She hoped he had not sensed the involuntary movement. She wished her father was here, one of the only times she felt a need for him. Then again, if her father were here, the decision would be his to make and she would be told to leave anyway. The very fact he wasn't would be a small ray of hope in saving the mule.

She spoke as if a plan had already been formulated.

She surprised herself and spoke with confidence. “My father knows I am here. He told me to tell you that he is going to keep the mule after all. He is going to wait for a decision from the vet when he returns. Oh, and he said thanks.”

She felt the smallest increase in pressure from his hand, a squeeze that reminded her of kicking white ashes in a dying fire that hid the red glow still burning beneath. Unable to breathe, thoughts of the animal's welfare raced through her mind. Time was suddenly still; she couldn't even sense the irregular noise of the mule's breath. Now she was thinking of the man, knew he would be staring down at her. She wished she were older, not so soft and young and weak. Her heart pounded and it felt like the continent could hear.

She was thinking of his reaction, how he was deciding things in his own mind, about whether to believe her and risk questioning her father. She forced herself to keep stroking the mule, a small but significant act of defiance. She felt intimidated, scared and angry but she would not show it. Truth was not always the best shield.

The disappointment was evident in his voice but it still sounded like he would follow through on his required act, as if he had seen through her lies.

“Your father would never say thanks.”

She closed her eyes and took a slow deep breath. She wanted to scream at him but knew she would break down and cry if she did. In one evening her life had changed so much. Back in her sister's room she would have been on that bed, laughing at the much smaller world of boy's names.

The man's hand was still on her head. His hand felt a weapon hanging over her life, strong enough to crush all feelings and youth from her. His hand was more frightening than the gun; at least she knew what that could do. She thought he would never leave but the few seconds of wait and silence became a slight push of his hand and steps away from her. His boots tapped against the hard earth and she felt at least some of the tension dissipate with the footsteps. He pushed the barn door hard, like a child would who had not had his own way.

It seemed life rather than death was a disappointment to this man.

The tension instantly filtered into a calmer nuance, the atmosphere lightened from the physical unsettling ambience evident moments before. She felt it strange that people could carry that round with them in the air. People were bodies but surrounding them was an aura that seemed to defy anything physical, as if presence could emanate from a source like heat from the sun.

She could not swear to it, but at the very moment his hand had pushed her head it was like the mule could breathe that little bit easier, as if too had known that it had been spared, even for a short time. She patted it and smiled, relief washing over her like the cooling rains of a summer storm. Her own shadow now had a glow. She looked at the lamp that flickered sprites of light. She would wait for her father to return.

Moments later and she heard the engine start, and the man's truck quickly drifted into her unconsciousness.

Her father, if he had visited the shed had not woken her.

Her eyes opened to a dawn that streamed light into any available cracks in the wood. She had fallen asleep, her head resting on the shallow breathing mule. She had no name for it, but its tail gently flicked recognition as she lifted her head and patted it with gentleness as meaningful as eternity.

She needed food or milk or even water for the mule. She would have to talk to someone. She could only pray that they would listen.

She shivered, shaking off the remainder of the night and rubbed her eyes into the quiet and still rhythm of a new day. The gentler morning sun, less angry than its afternoon brother, greeted her as a friend, welcoming at least the prospect of possibility. Hope seemed less forlorn at the beginning of the day. Even so, her walk to the house was slow, battling a desire to help the mule with the realisation that even the sun could not warm hearts.

She walked onto the steps, noticing the flaked paint she had picked off the previous evening and could hear talking. She stopped and listened to the raised voices. She heard her name and talk of the mule. Her dad was laughing nervously, a strange reaction that didn't seem to fit with the words but it was more because he wanted to cajole support from his wife than anything else.

“I thought it would teach her a lesson; that she would come in when the night cooled. Besides that, the animal is not even healthy. We were going to shoot it to ease its suffering. It won’t survive the night anyway.”

“Is that safe, for her to be asleep with a dead animal?”

“I don’t know. You were too tired to argue last night. Why now?”

There was a few moments pause.

“Well you should go see her. Explain it to her.”

It was a good point for her to speak up.

“Don’t bother,” she replied to both her parents as she stepped into the kitchen. “And for your information he is still alive.”

She was attacking those people who would be able to help her but she had felt the words cruel and heartless, even if she knew she should not be surprised. She had to move away from that shadow just for once. She needed to help him.

“Can you help me feed him please?”

Her mother and father stared at each other. She alternated a steady and penetrating gaze equally between them. Her mother’s response was to cast a glaring look at her father and to turn her back on him. The decision was now his, that much was clear, but his response was either to annoy his wife or he did genuinely admire his daughter’s commitment to her newfound course.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll show you what he needs.”

It was now late autumn and the busker was beginning to find it uncomfortable sleeping under the stars. His blanket was too warm in the summer but now it seemed to draw the cold from the air as it surrounded him. Only rarely did he make enough money to afford a night in paid accommodation. He was homeless but he didn’t consider himself a beggar. He earned whatever he could through music, playing wherever he was allowed but always steadily moving westwards through the country.

The blanket of sepia leaves was little comfort against the penetrating cold as it twisted its way through fibre and onto flesh.

He could easily have returned home but he had found a purpose in life. It wasn’t just about the music anymore, about seeking a freedom from the city of rain that had washed away his slavery to working entrapment. Everywhere he went he found could help people, gave advice and they appeared to admire him, jealous of his freedom and asked him for his opinion about things. He was valued, different and welcoming. He saw a lot of people, began to understand people that felt more comfortable telling strangers things they could not to those closest to them. It was funny how secrets only really existed between those that shouldn’t have them. Maybe it was not so funny after all.

He had become adept at finding barns and lofts and sheds and outbuildings that could sleep the surreptitious for just one night. The sky was a delight but he had to be sensible, care about his health.

Tonight he had walked into the glorious moon, seemingly within reach as he stretched his hand, but he knew it was only because it was lower in the sky that it looked bigger and closer. The lack of cloud cover made things a few degrees cooler than normal, he would need to rest soon, find a warmer respite from the cold that was speaking in teasing whispers to his bones.

He saw the large house from a distance; the solitary light a good sign most of the house was asleep. He would find some shelter there, hoping as always that the dogs, if there were any, needed their rest too. If they barked too much, he usually backed away. He did not like to make people feel uncomfortable or even to put himself at risk.

The moon cast shadows on autumnal trees that had almost been robbed of their leaves. The trees shook too but the nakedness served them well, it suited them and they danced with barren abandon, talking to each other in secret ways.

He liked the still of the night, listening to animals in the distance that he had never met. One of the most beautiful sights he had seen was waking to a young deer gazing at him with interest in the dawn light. He didn't even breathe, lost to the moment of succumbing to nature's charm. Despite living rough, those moments were still rare and priceless in soothing the soul. Sometimes he too, needed a respite from people, and finding solace in nature was a close friend he would communicate with whenever he could.

He was miles from the city now; his legs still tiring after long walks through woods and hills and even crossing streams. There was a peace here, even with the symphony of nature that embellished him. He had felt choked in that city, could feel the vines climb up his leg to try and root him there, swallowing him into a society he secretly despised. People threw coins that were a burden in pockets rather than recognition of appreciation to his singing and guitar playing. The money had been good, but it was city money and he needed lots of it to afford accommodation and food. City money was much easier to lose than find. The gutters had magnets.

The cycle was hard to break, waking to days that rained even in summer, down at the tube station until midnight collecting drunken coin, his voice echoing melodies long forgotten by communities with only distant relatives from places where folk music still existed in its truest form. He earned as much money outside the old book shop, the owner bringing him tea every now and again if he played quietly, not disturbing the people seeking comfort in the quiet shop. He could not play there for very long anyway, before the rains would drown his enthusiasm.

He was reborn in doorways when he played, becoming confident and assured. He liked the smiles as strangers past by, knowing he existed at least as a response on someone's face. Occasionally he would take a request, enjoying the looks on people's

faces as he played songs meaningful only to them. He saw music as a treasure chest to memory but it was not always gold that shone the brightest or was worth the most.

The city was two months ago but a lifetime of small villages and gradually cooling days and nights lay in between. This was where he found himself. A full moon on an October night walking across a yard into someone's shed. He would be gone by dawn, before the first motions of life emanated from the house opposite.

The girl watched the man cross the yard into the shed. She didn't recognise his movements but they seemed graceful and at ease. Still, it made her feel no better. For three months her mule had lived in that barn, never seeing daylight, except when she opened the door enticing him out. He wouldn't move, preferring her company to the scarier world outside. He did not seem unhappy and her parent's comments had become snide remarks and talked of 'waste'. She had learnt to ignore them and spent many hours reading to the animal, telling it stories she had read herself the night before.

So who was this man walking into her barn as she stared from her bedroom window?

She worried about the mule, knew she had to do something but her parents were out and her sister, who she knew had been told to look after her was also out, she had walked to the top road to be picked up hours before.

She had been in the barn most of the night and had only looked out the window to take one last look at the moon because it had been so big and bright in the sky, lighting up the lepidoptera that basked in moonbeam and night. She liked the pale glow.

She remembered the night she had first seen the mule and how near death it had been. The man's face came back into her mind; she sensed once again the hand on her head and the gun that had been so close to its angry shout. This man had been carrying a case. Was it also a weapon?

She knew it was not the man she hated. She avoided him with professional detachment, not wanting to gloat that the mule was still alive in case he lost his temper. She cared more that her parents had not let her build a bigger barn for it. It was reluctant to walk, preferring the shade and her company than the fields and grass. She knew in its eyes that in its own way, it had a profound love for her, unconditional and a respect to life that nobody else she knew appeared to share. A friend was someone who listened and that's always what the mule did.

It could never stand for very long. Although one leg was a lot worse than the others, both its hind legs were weak. She often lay with it, her head resting on its rising and swelling torso, calming her like a boat lost on the ocean.

Her thoughts soon returned to the present and the man who had entered the barn. If only her parents had stayed in and not gone to the meeting at the local village hall she could have informed her father of the man entering the barn. Her sister had spoken a few words, to tell her to behave and that she would be home before her parents would be.

Her concern for the mule was more powerful than that of her own safety. Part of her was glad that it was not the man she hated in the barn, but what if he had sent someone to do the killing he had long wanted to do. There was no contact phone number for her parents, undoubtedly given to her sister if it existed. Her tears were hidden with the worry that now subsumed her common sense. She was dressed only in a nightgown that matched the pale glow of the night and was already walking with stealth before she gently opened the back door. That too was not even locked.

The full moon acted like a searchlight, lighting the yard. She stuck close to the building, her soft footsteps now soft in the autumnal damp soil of the yard. She reached the edge of the barn and tried to find a small crack to peer inside. She could see a small lamp and the large shadow behind it and then a hand reach out into the light now on the mule's soft skin. The hand touched the mule but it did not flinch. She saw the gentle strokes and an infinite sadness welled up inside her because there had been no one else who had ever shown an interest in him.

She sat down, her back leaning against the barn door while deep breaths forced recognition of the situation on her. Minutes passed and she had no plan, knowing there was still a stranger in the barn that prevented any semblance of comfort. It was also cold and the chill now began to crawl up her body. There was as much imbalance as a firework, beautiful colours ruined by loud noise. Here she had a beautiful serenity ruined by the unknown and the season.

A different noise could be heard.

Her head leaned back against the barn straining to work out whether imagination or reality was producing the music. It was so soft, as if melody was made of air and each note was a harmony that nodded an acceptance of serenity to the soul. She had to listen intently and place her ear on the wood to make sure this was inside the barn and not her mind. The gentleness was soothing and intoxicating. She wanted to hear more, to get closer to it. The case the man had been a guitar, nothing else.

The barn sounded as warm as she knew it would be inside. She stood up and slowly walked round to the front. The light from the gap in the door was welcoming. The music instilled a confidence, had already made a companion of her thoughts. Instinct floated away on the melody and she slowly opened the door and edged inside.

The man, if he had seen her movements, gave no recognition of the fact and continued to play. It was so soft; his singing as light as a whispering angel, she was surprised she had heard everything so clearly from outside.

The orange glow from his lamp, directing shadows that teased the eyes would show only that he was a young man. She sat down, her hand resting on the mule, her fingers tracing patterns to the hidden beat.

The song finished and the man looked up, slowly but directly at her. His smile grew steadily beckoning one of hers. She felt special and calm.

“I’m sorry I woke you. I was just taking a short rest for the night. I’ll leave if you need me too.”

“No don’t leave. And you didn’t wake me.”

She looked down at her nightdress and realised her hair had not been brushed, realising it must have looked as if she had come straight from bed. It suddenly made her shy but for some reason she didn’t want to lose this moment, or see the man leave.

“Can you play another song?”

She was surprised at her sudden confidence and added “only if you want too” as a way of softening her obvious wish.

He never said anything but looked her in the eye as he sang, his guitar picking notes that seemed to fit together and welded by a magic she had never felt before. She had listened to music on the radio but nothing had been directed to her before. Music became a universe at that moment and she was lost inside it.

The last note trailed off in her thoughts and she knew there was something special left in her mind right then, something to access in the future that was personal and pure.

She asked more questions, building a picture of the man, creating a bond with him that felt impenetrable. She felt as if she was the only girl he had ever spoken to. She sat nearer, waiting for a wave of light that would light his face and allow her a glimpse of his eyes.

She envied his freedom even though he had been honest about its difficulties. She listened to his worries and his ambitions and found an emptiness she thought she could fill however momentarily. She felt less alone and realised what companionship was, what it meant to speak to someone had a completely different view on life as everyone else she knew. He seemed to understand something within her, as if everything he said was somehow directed to her, teaching her about life but not giving away enough secrets that she wouldn’t enjoy it.

“I’m sorry” he said again, “I bet you are bored listening about my life. It’s usually me listening to other people.”

“I’ve enjoyed it. Are you staying here tonight?”

He knew he couldn’t stay after she had told him her parents were due back that night, and also her sister who had driven out with a boy. He wanted too, the girl was beautiful, and a blossoming flower and he felt at peace when he spoke to her.

“There is something about you” he said, “something mysterious.”

She looked down at the floor, knowing this was a compliment but that it had been intended as something natural, a truth she had never seen.

He stopped, as if answering a private discussion and then shook his head gently with a smile.

“Tell me some more about you” was all he said.

She talked like she had never done before. She felt as if a cage of constraint had been taken away from her and she could finally be a person, saying things because she believed them and not because they were the expected answers.

All this time one hand had been on the mule the other resting on her stomach. She felt like crying, from love or beauty, happiness and sadness. The man looked away to give her time to compose herself.

“And my dad won’t build a bigger barn for the mule, yet he spends all his time here and he needs space because he doesn’t have a field.”

Recognition fell on the Buskers face. Once more he knew why he was here, that he could offer help. He would not tell her directly, allow her to find the answer. He could give her confidence. She needed to be held but it was not his job to do that.

“Sometimes people have to make tough decisions, have to sacrifice and do something conceived of as bad to produce an end result that makes life better for someone or something,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, take fire for example, it causes so much damage but it is something everyone needs for warmth and for cooking food. It can be a bad thing and dangerous but often good can stem from it. Like in nature, a good fire allows the land to grow again, redevelop, and rejuvenate it. It is a cleanser for nature. Trees will always grow back and who is to say not bigger or more healthily.”

She knew he was giving her a message but not what so all she did was look at him. He took his jacket off, put it round her shoulders. He would be warm enough and she had been out here far too long already. His work was done and the seed had been planted in her head. He had done some good again. He felt happy, content. There would always be other barns, other people, even if he could never quite feel that enigmatic uncertainty and covered charm she expressed unknowingly.

He picked his guitar up and placed it carefully in his case. She watched him, knew she could not beg or ask him to stay. She had things to think about, and it was better him leaving now than risk being caught by her father.

He reached over and patted the mule one more time. He saw her look down, but understood she was not being rude. Leaving was sometimes easier than at other times. This was not one of those occasions. He was leaving something behind and he was glad his travelling could allow him to meet people like this. It did not make saying goodbye any easier and indeed, sometimes words could only spoil a moment.

He left without saying anything. She sat still for a long time, not wanting to close the barn door. She then realised she was still wearing his jacket. The man with few possessions had given her one important one. She would not find him now, would not even know where to look. The dark road was his path alone, not a journey she should take right now.

She would give him a signal. He had lit something within her and she would allow him to recognise that. His message was a simple one. She felt guilty and knew it didn't have to be a bad feeling. Guilt was another word for freedom, the effect of choice and she had a big one to make. Guilt was bittersweet and it made her feel alive.

It would be hard work taking the mule into the field. She would wrap a blanket around him, just like someone had for her. They could watch the fire together, the burning of her childhood, the light of a brighter future, and the warmth of a new home.

The moon was still high in the sky as if time had somehow stopped when she had been with the busker. Her sister would be home anytime so she had to act quickly. It was hard work moving him but slow progress was just a reflection of her panic. She patted him, told him about his new home, that good things would happen. Her father would rebuild the barn bigger and better. He had already allowed her to keep the mule. He could not refuse it a home.

Her arms ached under the support she had to give the mule to walk even a few paces. She wanted desperately to quit, the effort to move him draining her of natural strength, allowing a hidden pit of gruelling effort to break the surface of constraint. She was satisfied he would be far enough away from the barn. If the flames could lick to this distance they would only be warming hands anyway.

She raced back to the shed, found the canister of oil that had retired to the corner years ago, dark glue that gurgled annoyance as she kicked it over. She spilt some paraffin from the lamp onto the straw that was a bed and also a home to her as much as the mule.

All she needed was a light but she had blown the lamp out when she poured the fuel out. The yard increased in size as she ran to the back door. Still no one was home, and she had to thank that particular small mercy. She found the matches and paused at the back door to take one final look out the window at the barn. Moonlight created it as a dark temple. It looked small and fragile but maybe she was looking at it from different eyes now.

She walked back over, giving herself a brief respite and to draw breath. It was also a chance to change her mind but she knew this was what had to be done. They still cared nothing for the mule. They would have to build it a new shed. They would not know she did it if she could help it. If they found out she would explain why and maybe her actions might show she could stand on her own two feet. They would understand what she was serious about, what she cared for.

That was all guesswork, the job was to do it rather than think of it.

One small match could destroy so much. But in a way it could create so much. She gave a silent thank you to the busker. I hope you see this, she thought.

The fire spread quickly, eating away at one small corner of the barn but suddenly springing to life as the first flame crept inside. The orange and yellow glow lit up a large circle of light around her, the warmth reaching out and absorbing all the cold that surrounded her. She stepped back, the heat too strong, skin warm with its ferocity. The fire wanted to destroy the barn more than she did. The wood had served its purpose and its history would soon be burning embers and grey ashes.

She walked over to the field to check the mule was not frightened but it had gone. She called its name even though she knew it could not come to her. But where was it? It had taken too long even with her help to walk from the barn, there was no possibility it could have gone back could it?

The busker turned round. He had already walked a few miles and the gradual uphill slope of the road gave him a cold view of the valley he had not realised he was in. The orange glow became a beacon of light, an answer and justification of his visit. He felt a marvellous sensation that he had changed someone's life for the better. Despite the cold, the warm burning glow was infectious and he felt it too. He turned round. There was more music ahead and more people for him to help. His job was done.

The mule was confused and it was cold. All he cared for was his shed and she had left him in the field alone. He wanted to be back in his home where nice people lie with him and he heard beautiful sounds. Out here was different. He dragged his legs, the pain only slightly less than the urge to be back lying down on his hay. He wanted to be warm and safe and covered. His legs hurt but he could walk. He saw the girl run into the house and it gave him an added urge to be in his own home.

Her sister pulled her mouth away from the man.

"I have to get back. It's late. If anyone sees you my father will find out and kill you."

The man never said a word. He started the truck. His shiny and polished boots pressed down on the gas as he turned the truck around. She was just a girl but he had enjoyed the giggles from her and her friends as he worked at the farm. He liked her confidence and knew she was finding ways of spending time with him, making sure she was at places he worked.

He had enjoyed touching her legs, knowing that the smoothness was years away from him. He hated her when she always went home so early. He hated her father but he paid the money that let him get drunk at weekends. Kissing his daughter was good revenge.

He noticed the fire from the house more than a few miles away.

"Isn't that the farm?" was all he could say.

"Oh my god" was the only answer as his foot pressed harder on the pedal.

He only just caught a brief glimpse of a man with a case walking up the road, enough to swerve away from him and struggle with the truck for a few seconds. He thought nothing else of it, did not even bother checking the mirror. The two people in the car bounced up and down like rag dolls but he still raced towards the house. He didn't know why he was panicking too; he cared nothing for these people really. Maybe he just liked the feeling of a conflagration.

He locked the wheels and braked as quickly as he could. His headlight showed the young sister kneeling as if in prayer in the field. He turned his face to the other sister sitting in his car, her face as pale as moonlight, whether from worry for herself or her sister he could not tell. Nor did he care. He opened the door and stood next to the truck staring at the barn, glad of the light that lit up the broken child lying on the field as if she was about to be beheaded.

The young girl looked up, not caring about the heat of the fire. She had tried to get close but no matter how hard she tried it was a physical impossibility to walk into the fire. She heard an engine in the distance, could recognise the awful sound of the man's truck as it neared. Even with everything else going on she could distinguish that sound, as if it was the revving of a nightmare. She watched it pull in, caught a glimpse of her sister in the passenger seat staring incredulously at the barn.

Thoughts raced through her mind but she refused to settle on them. There was a distinct fear in each of them.

She knelt down, her energy disappearing as fast as dried wood. Her head hit the ground, and it felt cold against the heat that had burnt her only love in life. She saw the busker's smile and didn't know if she hated him or felt an urge for him to be here greater than anything she had experienced before. She would have a long time to think of that.

The busker managed to dodge the truck by inches rather than metres, his heart slowed down enough for him to turn round and forgive them for racing into the fire. In a way they were all connected, all through the young girl. He was jealous of that but knew his life had a purpose he could not really control. You have a beautiful girl waiting for you there was all he could think about.

Some people don't realise just how lucky they are. At least he had given the young girl a chance of happiness too.