

When Opportunity Knocks You Down

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Louellen walked down Columbus Avenue in San Francisco with worry on her mind. She was on her way to interview for a waitress job at a busy Italian restaurant in North Beach. She really needed the job.

Louellen had \$4.23 in her purse, and rent was due on the tacky, low-rent walkup where she lived.

She'd been told the restaurants in North Beach got crowded with tourists, and a girl could make good tips.

At least she hoped so.

It was thoughts of bills and money preoccupying Louellen's mind, as she briskly made her way toward Stockton Street. At the corner she looked up and saw that the light was green and the white walking-figure was lit up. Louellen stepped off the curb just in time to hear a squeal of tires, as a cab suddenly whipped around the corner.

A screech of brakes rang in her ears when the cab's bumper made contact with her body. The force was enough to knock her down, but not enough to inflict any real damage.

Louellen lay in the street for a moment, dazed.

She was shaken out of her reverie by the sweaty, dark-haired cab driver yelling at her in a language she didn't understand.

The police arrived quickly. The middle-aged and war-weary officer insisted she should go to the hospital. She told him she was fine. She didn't want to admit that she had no insurance and no way to pay. "It didn't hit me that hard," she explained to the politely concerned officer, "I'll be fine."

He shrugged and walked away. "Victim refused ambulance" later typed into his report.

Louellen walked away from the scene shaken, with a bruise on her left thigh, but otherwise undamaged. She wasn't even late for the interview.

As the brief meeting concluded, Louellen walked back down Columbus Street to catch the Muni bus home. She noticed something odd. Her ears were ringing, only not quite. She stopped and put hands over both ears. Music. She could hear music. As if there were a radio lodged in her brain. The sounds reverberated pleasantly throughout her cranium.

She'd never heard anything like this before, and couldn't imagine where it came from.

When did it begin, she wondered, this symphony in my brain? She tried to remember and thought back through her day, trying to pinpoint when it started.

"Aha!" she shouted, startling her fellow Muni riders waiting on

the corner. It was the moment that cab had hit her. That was it! When she got up from the ground, there began the first notes of the exquisite music playing in her head.

But she didn't hear it then. It started out like background noise, errant musical notes leaking out from passing vehicles and open-door restaurants.

This music could no longer be ignored. It took up all of her attention.

The same song resonated in her brain for days, willing her to listen, never leaving her alone. But she didn't weary of it; quite the contrary.

After a week of this delicious agony, Louellen realized that she had the strongest of urges to share this song. She wanted other people to hear what only she heard. The world needed to know the beauty that was playing on her cerebral turntable.

So she took what money she had to a pawnshop and signed a note and bought a battered acoustic guitar. The frets were good and the strings were new.

Louellen took her new possession home, tuned it up, and spent hours on her couch figuring out and fingering out the simple song from her head.

When she had it worked out, she could play it as flawlessly as it played in her head. This was it! This was her song!

She took to the streets, playing her guitar for passersby, singing in a wavering voice. Only the one song, over and over. Strangers would stop to listen, moved by the melody. They threw money in her scuffed guitar case and congratulated her on the beauty of her music.

Louellen could only grin in return.

Unfortunately, playing on the streets, though profitable, was not fulfilling.

The music wanted more.

Louellen had a friend who worked at a recording studio. With a little cajoling, her friend sneaked her in the back door at two-thirty in the morning.

It was just Louellen, her guitar, and a microphone. Her playing was inspired, and she sang with a voice that she didn't even know she had. It was perfect in a single take.

Her friend burned five copies onto the blank CDs Louellen had purchased at the corner convenience store.

Guarding her copies like her life's savings, Louellen's next stop was the main San Francisco public library. The head librarian helped her look up the addresses of record companies.

Louellen bought padded envelopes and sent off four of the five copies, with a heartfelt letter to the companies she'd chosen at random.

To her surprise, they liked it. They all liked it. They began outbidding each other to get the rights.

Suddenly, Louellen had a record deal. Her new management team took charge and rushed her into a professional recording studio. She did it again. Perfection in one take. Playing the song was just that easy.

The engineer added a B3 organ and mixed it down. Then it was done. Her very own song, ready to greet the world.

Now, with The Song done, finished, down in digital moments for all posterity, Louellen thought she could relax.

That was it, right? She'd done what The Song demanded.

Only, she couldn't relax. Now that The Song was done, there was an empty space left in her brain.

It was quickly filled with a new song. An even prettier, more heartrending song. So back into the studio she went. When that one was recorded, another song showed up.

Each song was more beautiful than the last, begging her to listen, compelling her to share.

Within three weeks, she'd recorded eleven songs. Her record company was elated. That was enough for an album. The first single, The Song, hit the media and rode a tsunami wave up the charts.

Her song. It was everywhere. Louellen heard it played in restaurants, bars, and elevators.

The album of her songs was released, and suddenly she was an overnight success. Her record went platinum. She was number one on iTunes. She was nominated for a Grammy.

There was money to be made, so the record company sent her on the road.

Suddenly she was playing the songs that played in her head, to the delight of thousands of screaming fans. They knew all the words and sang along with her.

Louellen did the talk show circuit, the dance club circuit, and quickly headlined at all the big halls.

She was a star. A superstar. A mega-colossal superstar.

She was surrounded by agents, promoters, accountants, and managers. They booked her time and promoted her story and scheduled her life. She didn't have to do anything but play her songs. Over and over and over.

She rode the wave of success.

She was in demand!

In demand. For exactly one year.

At the end of that year, the noise surrounding her music died down. The "next big thing" was on the scene, and Louellen was yesterday's news.

Her record company suggested she needed to do a new record.

Then they demanded a new record. “One just like the last,” they said, as though it was that easy.

Because it was just that easy the first time.

But Louellen noticed something odd. The music had stopped playing in her head.

She couldn’t recall exactly when it happened. She clamped her hands to her ears and listened. This time there was no “aha!” It was more like an “oh, no.”

It didn’t happen suddenly. The music had died gradually, somewhere out there on the road.

Somewhere where her fame was still rising. Somewhere where the music still mattered.

Maybe it had quieted when she started drinking too much. Perhaps it was when she did that first line of cocaine. Possibly, the glorious music went mute the day she just stopped caring about the music, and just started playing her songs by rote and cashing big checks.

The music had died when her heart wasn’t in it anymore.

Louellen had lost the gift granted by an errant taxi.

The record company sued for breach of contract. Her manager, promoter, and accountant dropped her.

Her sudden fame was over, just as quickly as it had begun.

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Two years after the cab hit Louellen on the street in San Francisco, she finds herself again, worrying over money, wandering the streets of North Beach, looking for a job.

She’s crossing streets without looking and against the light, hoping she’ll get hit by another cab.

THE END