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THE PERFECT INSTRUMENT

by [Timothy R. Nunes](#)

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Most skills worth having, most arts worth mastering, require a significant amount of effort and dedication. And, if there were an easier way, the price might be higher than you'd think...

Jack leaned back against the old brownstone, trying to avoid the bitter Chicago wind. His overcoat, quite useful but a month before, was now practically worthless against the December cold.

He looked around for the first time in minutes, maybe hours, he didn't really know... He'd been wandering the streets most of the day, ever since the bank had called about the loan on his Lake Shore Drive condo, which he hadn't paid in months. They'd started repossession proceedings, he'd been told - surely he understood? They couldn't be expected to await payment indefinitely, after all, and he hadn't found another job, had he?

No he hadn't, of course he hadn't. He and thousands of other white-collar workers, maybe even tens-of-thousands, who'd all lost their jobs in the 'third quarter downturn' (not a 'recession', oh no, never that), and then had been forced to watch, over and over again, any hope of quickly getting their jobs back incinerated in the flames of September. He looked around, trying to place where he was. Nothing appeared familiar, the buildings more run-down than any part of downtown he'd ever frequented. He assumed he was somewhere south of The Loop, but where, he didn't know.

He shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his overcoat, away from the icy chill in the air. His right hand briefly fingered the 'C-note' deep in the pocket. His last... Just a few months ago he'd had gold cards, platinum cards, a gorgeous girlfriend with expensive tastes, even a parking spot in the North Loop for his BMW Z3 (the spot had cost him almost as much as the car). Now it was all gone, everything. His girlfriend had been the last to leave, which had surprised him somewhat. She'd left on the same day that he'd lost the car. Only that one tightly folded bill remained.

The sound of a police whistle pierced his pathetic reverie, caused him to look up the street, east, towards the lake. A traffic cop, cursing at some idiot in a Z3. His tired face broke into a lopsided grin as he listened to the steady flow of explicatives the motorist was being subjected to. He started walking again, towards the intersection, towards the lake, his mind turning to thoughts of whitecaps, icy spray scattering across Lake Shore Drive, dark, icy waters. He'd made it almost to the end of the block when something in a store window caught his eye.

Sparkling silver, open-holed, gold springs, B-foot... A flute, glittering and beautiful. Jack had played the flute long ago, back in High School. It had been his second instrument, after the saxophone, neither of which he'd ever played even moderately well. This instrument was like none he'd ever seen before though, in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. So intensely perfect in appearance, and glittering with a sheen that seemed to almost speak to him. Without

thinking he pushed his way into the store and was greeted by dim lights, stifling heat, and a plethora of unique and indistinguishable aromas. He approached what appeared to be the counter, though in the dim light it was difficult to tell, and addressed the old man standing behind it.

“How much for the flute? The one in the window?”

The old man’s face, a tired and apathetic mask but a moment before, transformed into a contrast of conflicting emotions: fear, hope, and... Guilt?

“No!” A quick response, followed by a fearful and guilty look toward the front window. “Go home, to family... To life!” The accent, he couldn’t quite place it, though it might have been oriental, maybe Chinese?

“I have no life, anymore” Jack responded. “The flute, dammit, how much?”

“You take, not bring back, ever?” A hopeful question, still mixed with guilt.

“Meebee... HOW MUCH?”

“You take... Free...Just not bring back...Okay?”

The old man ducked behind the counter, shuffled around for a moment or two, then reappeared wearing huge, thick gloves, like maybe a steelworker would wear. He shuffled over to the front window, reached out carefully, then quickly grabbed the flute like one might grab a snake. He held it in front of him for a brief moment, almost as if he was surprised he’d been able to pick it up at all, then proceeded to take it apart and place it in its case. He carried it back to Jack, hands held outward, fully extended away from his body. Jack reached out and took the case. It too was beautiful, made of rosewood, with a well-oiled sheen. He put the case under his left arm and reached into his pocket for the last of his money.

“No! Me no want your money!!! You go, take, free! No come back! Go now!”

The old man practically pushed him out the shop door. He stepped onto the sidewalk, reflexively drawing his overcoat tightly around him, expecting the bitter assault of the cold, and was surprised to find that it didn’t feel all that cold outside anymore. After being in that hot store, you’d have thought...? Still, maybe the weather’d changed, maybe it’d warmed up some while he was inside... This was the Midwest after all, and at least five minutes HAD gone by.

He turned back in the direction he’d been heading before, towards the lakefront...

*

Sitting on a park bench, surrounded by patches of white snow covering the park grass, his face towards the angry whitecaps of Lake Michigan, Jack took the smooth wooden case back out from underneath his coat and proceeded to open it.

The inside lining was a dark crimson, against which the glistening beauty of the instrument seemed even greater. He lifted out each piece and carefully assembled them: headjoint, body, foot... The metal didn’t feel cold, as he’d expected it to, but rather warm instead, with a smooth metallic surface that felt almost, oily? No, not oily... Not something this clean, this perfect.

He carefully placed his fingers over the keys, the holes, and lifted it to his lips, fully expecting something horrendously horrible to come out. Instead, he heard music. Almost without thought, the arpeggios and chromatic scales of his youth came back to him, only this time played so much more smoothly than he ever remembered playing them before. His fingers seemed to mold to the keys, even into them, his mouth and breath became like but another part of the instrument. He continued to play on, improvising, playing along with ethereal chord changes he heard, felt, in his head, his ears, his entire body.

After what seemed like just a few moments of joyous playing, though it may have been hours, a sound interrupted him, drew him back. He looked up to see a tall, well dressed man in a dark suit walk up.

“Man, that was cool... I haven’t heard chops like that in years!”

Jack tried to lower the flute, but it was almost as if his lips were somehow attached, sealed to the instrument. He jerked it away and put it down on his lap, dismissing the small flecks of red he thought he saw around the mouthhole as figments of his imagination.

“Yeah, thanks,” he responded, licking his lips tasting...salt?

“I mean it, man... You gotta come down to the club tonight and jam with us, okay? We’ll have a great time! We’ll buy you dinner, drinks, whatever you want, okay?” He asked, as he passed Jack a card with the club’s address and phone number on it.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll be there. Got no place else to go.”

*

The night was magnificent, better than any Jack could remember... Wahid, the man he’d met in the park, was the leader of the band and their bass player. He kept encouraging Jack to stay on stage, through four full sets. That was fine though, as Jack was having the time of his life. He felt like one with his instrument, molded into it’s very metal, so much so that there were times when he wondered whether he was playing the flute or the flute was playing him. Everything was effortless, his fingers, his diaphragm, his embouchure, everything... As if he’d been practicing and playing ever day of the twenty-odd years since High School. He’d never felt this good about anything, ever, in his entire life.

Still, at the end of the night he felt so utterly drained, so incredibly tired and weak... He almost had to pry the flute out of his hand and, maybe it was his imagination again, but he could’ve sworn he’d seen slight red rings around the keyholes, and on his fingertips. When he finally stood up from his stool, he found that he could barely walk.

“You want some food, man?” Wahid asked. “You look tired and hungry... Hungrier than I’ve EVER seen a man look before.”

Jack just shook his head. “No, I feel fine. I just need some air - I’ll catch ‘ya in a few...”

He staggered out of the bar, out onto the cold dark sidewalks of the city, stumbling constantly. After a block or two he felt he couldn’t go on another step, so he veered into a dark alley. His back against the grimed bricks, he slowly slid down, down onto the pavement, totally exhausted. He was almost asleep when he heard the voice, from further within the alley.

“Haaaay... Haaay, buddy... You got some more on you? Maybe somethin’ you could share?”

Jack turned, drawn inexplicably towards that weak voice in the darkness. He stood back up, almost against his will, and walked further into the inky darkness, into a nightmare. His last thought was of a voice, surprisingly similar to his own, whispering in the darkness.

“Yes, of course I’ve got something to share...”

*

Morning light shone through his eyelids. Jack woke and stretched, feeling amazingly, utterly refreshed. He hardly gave a thought to the fact that he’d just awoke in an alleyway, in Chicago, in the winter, without shelter, still alive. As he stood up, he noticed a crumpled shadow across the alleyway and walked over to take a look.

It appeared to be the body of a homeless man, with graying hair, and of indeterminate age. Probably froze to death, Jack thought. But before he could turn away he noticed something. The man's eyes were open, frozen in a mask of fright, of utter terror. Then he noticed something else. The pale, drained, almost white pallor of the man's skin, and the small round circles on each side of his neck, four on each side.

Without thinking, Jack looked down at his own hands, at the bloody circles on each fingertip, each about the same size as the fingerholes of a flute, or the circles on the deadman's neck. It was the instrument, he'd just played it too much last night, he thought to himself. It had nothing to do with this dead derelict... Then he remembered last night's dream, last night's nightmare, and screamed.

He reached into his overcoat and grasped the smooth wooden case, ripping it open in a panic. Yet once he'd opened the case, he found that everything slowed. He saw, as if through a far away looking glass, his hands, tenderly removing each piece, lovingly assembling it, raising it slowly to his lips. Then he caught sight of the dead man once again, of that look of terror of utter terror on his pallid face, and the small red circles on his neck. In a mindless rage, he whipped the flute around his head, intent on smashing it against the brick wall of the alleyway.

*

"So, waddaya make a'dis' one, Chahley?" The speaker wore the uniform of the Chicago PD, and the name tag on his chest, just under his badge, read "Ryan".

"Well, Ryan 'me boy, I don't rightly know," answered the older officer. "The poor bastard was obviously strangled, that's for sure. Still, look at the pattern 'round his neck. Have ya' ever seen the like?"

"Yeah, when I was a kid." The younger officer's face wore a puzzled look. "My sistah, she used ta' play da' flute back in school, and da' keys, dey looked kinda like 'dat... Sept' 'ya can't wrap a flute 'round a guy's neck... Hey, didya hear 'dat?!"

"What? I didn't hear nuthin'."

"Sounded kinda like slitherin'. Like a snake or somethin', 'ya know?"

"Ha! There ain't no snakes in these alleys, kid. Probably just a rat. Call the coroner on the radio to pick this guy up, and then maybe we can grab us a couple a' RedHot's for lunch, okay?"

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Though an amateur writer since childhood, [Tim Nunes](#) is new to the world of printed publication. A native of Central California for most of his life, Tim is a graduate of California State University, Stanislaus, and his 'day job' for the past fifteen years or so has been in Information Technology.

Tim currently resides in the Chicagoland area with his wife and daughter, has blondish hair, brownish eyes, a graying beard, and a penchant for bad poetry writing and even worse clarinet playing... All else is subject to change without notice.

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