

ARMOS'S SONG Prologue

The reporter walked down the steps slowly, eyeing every bump, every wrinkle in the concrete. He'd twisted an ankle on a stairway just like it the last time he'd been to a basement bar in Manhattan. Reaching the bottom step he turned the knob and pushed gently. The door was stuck, but the sign notified one and all who approached that the bar was indeed open. He shoved inward—the door swung open and smashed against the wall with a bang alerting the lonely barman wiping the counter for the tenth time that day. It was three in the afternoon. Not a customer in the place. Just the cat, slinking around the booths, seeking what only another cat would be interested in. The stink of stale beer and sweat that permeated the place reminded him of every other saloon he'd ever been in—the sharp, nostril crinkling smell of an empty tavern. The bartender looked up with a smile. Anyone walking in was a welcome relief from the boredom. He motioned the man to a stool.

“Take a load off your feet friend. What can I get you?”

The man waved an ID card. “Nothing right now, just wanted to ask a few questions.”

The bartender stiffened. “You a cop?”

“Reporter. New Yorker Magazine.”

“No kidding? I'm impressed. I love that magazine. Can't understand anything in it but there's something about it that I just love. Its the city. You know what I mean?”

The reporter nodded. He'd heard it a thousand times. He pulled a picture out of his pocket. “Ever see this guy before?”

Scrutinizing the photo the bartender shook his head. He took the picture from the reporter and studied it. It was vaguely familiar. He squinted as though bringing his eyelids together would make a difference. Still shaking his head he asked, “Who is he?”

The reporter reached for the photo but the bartender, still staring, stopped shaking his head and with his eyes on the face in the photo said, “He looks like someone—I may have, I don't—wait a minute, wait a minute.”

The bartender grew excited. He looked into the reporter's eyes then back to the picture. “Does this guy play the guitar and sing?”

It was the reporter's turn to get interested. “Yes. You know him?” he asked.

“If it's the guy I'm thinking of I sure would like to know him. My boss would give his left nut to find him. You know where he is?”

“I wish. Where did you meet him?”

The bartender wiped up an imaginary spot in front of the reporter. He looked up at the entry door at the bottom of the steps and threw an arm in the direction of the light teeming in.

“He walked in one night.”

The bartender stared at the brightness pouring into the alcove at the entrance. He thought back to a time that was carved into his memory. “We had a full house and our feature attraction was a dimwit who played a half-assed guitar. Berryman, the owner of the place always hired rotten musicians. They were cheap and no one could hear them anyhow with the racket. People come here to drink and talk. They don't give a damn about the music. Anyway the talent never shows that night. People are yelling ‘Where's the guitar player.’”

It's a lot of crap. They don't listen but they want something thumping away in the background."

The bartender walked around the bar and closed the door. He was used to the dimness. It was comforting. He sat on a stool next to the reporter.

"Then, out of nowhere this guy walks in with a guitar under his arm, plops down where you're sitting and orders a drink. He looked like he'd been told he had an hour to live. I mean he was like in shock or something. Never found out why but I figured he was a jump ahead of the river. I asked him if he could play that thing and he nodded. So I yell out for Berryman who offers the guy a C note if he plays for a couple of hours. Well the guy comes to life like the money was a pint of blood. He walks over to the stand and starts strumming. Not wonderful, but then again not terrible. About the quality everyone in the place is used to.

I remember looking at him when he first started and I swear there were tears in his eyes. "Then he starts humming for a while, and then after a bit he sings. Real quiet like, but still, loud enough for those nearest the stage to hear.

"Mister, you have never heard a voice like that in your life. The place got so quiet you could hear the cat.

"No one ordered anything while he sang, no one said anything, no one did anything. Berryman was standing with his mouth open, near the bar, holding a glass of ginger ale, staring at the guy. We looked at each other and then back to this guy singing like an angel. No not like an angel, more like the god of music. I am telling you his voice went through me like syrup through a pancake. I remember walking around the counter like I was in a daze. I sat on one of the stools and forgot the bar, forgot the joint I was working in, forgot my girl friend who was waiting for my shift to end. I forgot my name. Mister, my mind was totally wrapped around that voice, and that's the way it was with everyone there.

"He sang another song. And then another. One was better than the other—no it wasn't better—it couldn't get better. On a scale of one to a hundred those songs were ten thousand. The whole place was like in shock. This guy made Sinatra sound like a buzz saw. Comparing him to anyone else is like comparing velvet to a wire brush. I mean the guy was uncanny.

"And then before you know it he packs up his guitar, walks over to Berryman who stares at the guy like he's hypnotized and hands him a hundred. Everyone turns around to watch, but the place is still so quiet you could hear a needle pushed through a piece of cloth. We were all stunned.

"The guy walks out and Berryman comes to life. He runs after him wanting to know his name, offering him a job, giving him his choice of days, anything to get the guy to come back but he just disappears. He walks off into the night just like that.

"Who was it Mister? Do you know the guy?"

The reporter from the New Yorker nodded and said quietly. "It was Armo."

"Armo? You mean *the* Armo. The mystery man? Armo performed here? Here? Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Armo performed here. Armo himself, in person. And I heard him. I heard him."

The reporter nodded. He put his notes in his pocket and walked up the stairs into the street.

“Son of a bitch.” The bartender repeated. “Wait till Berryman hears this. Wait till Berryman hears who sung in his night spot.”

The bartender gazed at an invisible spot on the bar. His damp rag made a slow circle as he stared. He sighed. Thinking back to that night, he drifted into a minutia of images. He heard the sound drifting up through the dark passages of his mind. Catching a grain of what he had heard that night a smile came across his face. Eyes closed, his body moved slowly from side to side like a wavelet lapping the shore of a quiet beach.

The voice came to him as though from a far distance. The bartender’s body relaxed. He was immersed in the memory. It was enough. It was Armo’s song.

