

**Redwood Writers 2015 "On the Edge" Short Story Contest
Second Place Winner**

**"Scooch"
Mike Bartos**

When I was eleven, I saw a blues band with a fat man wearing a beret and blowing on the sax. I wanted to be that guy. Now I play the sax, a big tenor with deep growling tones and valves the size of silver dollars. It's a hassle to carry around and keep polished so it looks kind of dull. Sometimes the lower notes don't sound so good because the pads are worn. I'll replace them when I get a few extra bucks. I'm not fat, but I do have a snappy beret, which is most flattering.

My music echoes nicely in the BART station, sort of like in a symphony hall. *Body and Soul*, always a favorite for the commute crowd, nets me a few extra bucks. Today was a good day. The baseball crowd was happy about something, and so people were more generous than usual as they headed home from the ball yard; lots of money in my sax case. I'm planning to celebrate with a stop at a burger joint and get extra fries.

I emerge from my tile lined and urine scented underground venue with over forty bucks, mostly ones and change, stuffed in my pockets. It's summer in San Francisco, but it's going to be cold tonight. The cascade of fog that boils over Twin Peaks and dissipates on its descent into The City during the day is starting to settle at the bottom of the hill and spread its biting chill as the sun lowers out of sight.

There are some homeless men by the corner of Sixth and Market with chessboards set upon folding tables. They seem very focused on their games. I'm luckier than many of these guys because I have a city-subsidized apartment, actually a hotel room on the edge of the Tenderloin. My only bathroom is down the hall, but at least there's a roof over my head and heat that works more often than not. Sometimes I'll share my good fortune by buying into a game at five bucks. For folks who look like, and probably are bums, some of them play a pretty good game. There's no prize, just something to pass the time and exercise the brain.

There's a new guy here this evening, looking for a game. He has a full frizzy unkempt beard, a soiled overcoat and a stocking cap pulled down over his ears. He smells like a combination of exhaled alcohol and stale cigarette smoke. I'm hungry and tell him I'll be back after I grab some chow. He smiles and winks and says, "I'll be waitin' for ya."

My favorite café is just about three doors down. Cheeseburger, fries, onion rings and a coke run me almost eleven bucks, but it's all good and I'm happy. I return to the corner and see and smell my new friend. He pulls out a pint bottle of low end whisky and offers "an after dinner drink." I take it and swill a gulp, which burns good all the way down. He puts the bottle back in his coat without taking a drink of his own and offers a handshake, which I hesitate to return not knowing where this street guy has been putting his hands.

"Call me Scooch," he says. He explains his dad called him that when he was a youngster. It's short for *scocciamento*, which means pain in the ass, but I'm from an Italian family, so I already knew that.

Scooch continues his story. "Dad and his buddies would come over and watch the game and say 'Hey Scooch, be useful and bring a bag of chips from the kitchen.' Pissed me off a lot. So I asked what *Scocciamento* meant and one of his beer bellied friends said, 'What do you call a kid who sits in the backyard all day squawking on a saxophone he has no idea how to play?' Then they would laugh like it's the funniest thing anyone ever said."

“Interesting,” I tell him. “You know, I play the sax too, so I know what you mean.”

“No kidding, like I can’t see your giant sax case there.”

I offer to play a song, but no, he wants five bucks. At least I get to open the game, pawn to queen four. He makes his move and comments, “I’ve heard you play your horn, you deserve better than the subway.”

“Yeah, I know, but I can’t get a break.”

Scooch leans back and gazes right at me. “You need commitment, sacrifice, something to prove your worthiness.”

“I play great music, isn’t that enough?” I answer.

“Doesn’t seem that way, does it?”

I’m wondering, what makes him think he’s so smart. But then, he seems to know things about me, so he must have some kind of insight. My move; he’s kicking my ass.

“So what are you talking about?” I want to know.

“Greatness has its price,” he offers.

“What price?”

“People throughout history have made sacrifices of time, comfort, even blood to balance the books, be noticed, and get to the head of the line.”

I’m hoping he’s not trying to run a scam of some sort, that maybe he’s one of those so called magic people or psychics who’s going to ask for money the next time he opens his mouth.

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask.

“So you can act.” He answers

“What do I need to do?”

“It’s up to you. You don’t have to do anything.”

The drink he gave me is making me sleepy. Good thing I imbibed on a full stomach.

He makes a definitive move, smacking his bishop onto the board. “Checkmate.” He laughs, and then leans back. “Work on defending the center of the board next time.”

“One more game?” I ask. I pull out my small wad of bills looking for a five. I count out five singles and look up and Scooch is gone.

There are few other games in progress, but I don’t see my friend. How did he manage to slip away? So I just saved five bucks, just enough for a beer on the way home. I’m walking along Market, heading west, carrying my beat up music case, looking like a real musician after a real gig. I’m thinking about commitment and sacrifice. It seems to make sense.

I recognize some of the girls whom I often pass and chat with. Occasionally one asks if I want a date. I tell her that would be nice but I can’t afford what she calls a date. She’ll laugh. I wish she wouldn’t. Just because I’m looking for a good gig doesn’t mean I don’t have needs. It’s getting dark and the girls are out, leaning against the doorways, or getting into cars with their customers. I wish I had a car. Gloria, I think that’s her name, has always gotten my attention. I see her bundled in a coat with a big fur collar and a very short skirt. She has long dark hair with bangs, which make her look like a cat, and sapphire blue eyes. That combination has always made me crazy. I want to look into those sparkly eyes and smell her perfume. I know she has a neck tattoo, which I find exciting, but with her coat on, I can’t see it.

It occurs to me that she may hold my future. I stop as I pass and look at her. I’m not trying to be rude, I just want to admire her. She returns my gaze and smiles. She asks, “Do you want to be with me?”

Yes I do. “I have money tonight.” Not very much money, but technically I’m not really lying. I tell her, “Let’s go for a walk, I live six blocks from here.” Gloria looks over to a nearby doorway and makes eye contact with a middle-aged man wearing a loud sports jacket and skinny tie. He returns her look and nods slightly. She takes my hand and walks with me.

I like walking with her on this cool damp evening. This is like having a girlfriend. The fog makes halos around the streetlights. I hear jazz coming from inside one of the clubs we pass. I might be playing there soon.

I want her. My heart is pounding with excitement, but I remember what Scooch told me about sacrifice and commitment, and he was right. Her hand is warm and I imagine that hand touching my body, but I cleanse the thought from my mind. I say out loud "Sacrifice."

She turns and asks, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was thinking about baseball, you know, the game today."

She says nothing until we reach my building which some call a residential hotel.

My room is on the second floor. Not much to it; bed, hot plate, small fridge and a radio. I don't have one of those modern flat TV's yet, but it's on my list. This is not the kind of place that would impress a lady, but there is my music, and that should be impressive enough.

She unbuttons her coat. I lean forward to kiss her on her shiny pink lips and manage to score just a very light peck before she backs away. She says, "I'll need three hundred dollars cash before we go any further."

Seems kind of steep but she explains home visits are an extra hundred. I tell her I don't have three hundred dollars or two or one hundred dollars. I don't need it. She is part of a much bigger plan, worth far more than three hundred lousy bucks. She backs away, moving towards the door, but I have commitment, yes, that will make all the difference in the world. I ask her to stop, but she keeps retreating. I take her by surprise and quickly clasp my hands around her throat, partially covering her magic neck tattoo, which sends energy into my arms and hands. She is unable to scream, a pitiful gurgle emanates from the back of her mouth. I squeeze harder as I feel myself ejaculate. I gasp, loosening my grip ever so slightly. I hear a click and see the flash of a blade, which she drives into my neck right below the jaw line. The pain is like a lightning bolt. I go limp and collapse, trying to cover my gushing wound, but the blood flows through my fingers and onto my shirt and the floor.

The woman walks to the sink, finds a paper towel, rinses and wipes the switchblade clean, snaps it closed, and returns it to her pocket. She stands over me and spits "bleed to death, goddam motherfucking psycho" before she clip clops out the door on four-inch heels.

That's all I remember.

Cops don't have a lot of respect, never have, never will.

I'm lying in an emergency room, and don't know who called 911. I think I may have staggered into the hallway. My neck and jaw hurt like hell and I'm sutured and bandaged. I can't talk and damn sure won't be playing my sax anytime soon. A nurse tells two policemen including one plain clothes detective, that they can interview me now. They speak to each other first. The uniformed cop says, "Yeah, we know this guy. He sits all day in the BART station, sometimes on Market blowing racket out of his horn. Sounds like a bunch of wild geese. Anyhow we don't know who did this, no weapon, no one on the street is talking."

The plain clothes detective adds, "Apparently he came in his pants before someone took him down. It was just one upward knife thrust into the lower jaw area. Probably someone short, I'm guessing a woman. There were spike heel marks on the soft wooden floor.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, Romeo over here had just a smidgen of pink lipstick on his lips. He doesn't have any in his place."

"So we're looking for a woman with spike heels and pink lipstick."

The detective laughs, "Well, that doesn't narrow it down a whole lot in that neighborhood."

The cop in blue looks at me, "So, can you finger who did this?"

I point to my bandaged throat and sutured mouth and gargle "Can't talk."

“One more thing,” the detective turns his attention to the other cop. “In his cabinet we found a couple bottles of meds a few months old. Looks like he wasn’t taking them. One is Haldol and the other is lithium, used for schizophrenia or mania”

I don't need them. They get in the way of my creativity.

The man in blue says, “Okay, we’ll run a sheet on this guy. I’m sure he’s shown up before.” Then he turns to me. “Hey, you’re going to be alright, but they’re going to keep you a few days and make sure everything is okay.”

Next thing I know, I’m getting wheeled up to the psych ward. They tell me the surgical doc will drop in and visit me, make sure everything is healing the way it’s supposed to. Looks like I’ll be sucking milkshakes through a straw the next few days since I can’t chew or swallow very well. The psych nurse who’s very pretty and friendly recognizes me. “Hi, Scooch, welcome back. We have the chessboard all set up and ready for you.”

Her name is Lisa, cute as a button and no wedding ring either. Tomorrow I’ll ask the social worker to see if someone can pick up my sax since I figure Gloria and her goon buddy know where I live. I’m guessing it’s gone by now since the ambulance guys probably left my door unlocked.

Sure, everyone believes the shrinks are going to figure it out. How will they do that? They can’t hear my music. Maybe I’ll get my sax back tomorrow and I’ll show them. I’ll take the meds when they’re looking over my shoulder. I always do. Then if this is like all the other times, I’ll spend a month or two at a halfway house, but then it’s back to work.

No more *Scocciamento*. Who do those bastards think they are anyhow? I won’t call myself Scooch anymore either. Like the man told me on Market Street, I’m too good to be playing in the subway. All I need is just a little more practice, commitment, and a lot more sacrifice. I can be up there with guys like Coltrane, Bird, and Dexter Gordon. I’m almost there.

Nobody ever promised my musical journey would be easy. But then, as I always say, greatness has its price.