

First Place Winner, John P. Abbott

### **Far, Far Down the Road**

Mercifully, the beginning had faded away. When McKenzie did hear the odd note of a song he recognized on the television that was never still, it seemed a fragment of a dream, conjured from his fever and delirium. The early strain of drawing breath, the nails in his throat, the first runnel of panic; he could not remember. But when the orderly entered his room and screwed open the blinds to a window that looked upon an empty field, it reminded him of what limits life had imposed.

The orderlies were indistinguishable in their masks, gowns, and gloves. Just as he would learn the name of one, she would disappear and not return.

“Did Eleanor come to visit?”

“You can’t have no visitors,” the orderly said. “Nobody can have visitors.”

“She missed her lesson. She needs to work on the four-bar middle.”

“Ain’t no lessons anymore, Mr. M. Open up.” She proffered a thermometer.

“I heard they’re not counting the dead anymore.”

“Ain’t nobody dyin’ here. Let me take your temperature, Mr. M.”

“*Yesterday*,” he began to sing, “*all my troubles seemed so far away*.” He raised his voice in a ragged tenor that sounded alien in his ears. “*Now it looks as though they’re here to stay---*”  
A dry, wracking cough lifted him from the bed.

“Now see? You got yourself all worked up, didn’t you? What’s that you’re singin’? I heard it before?”

“It’s a song I wrote.”

“Uh huh.” She made a note on the chart that hung by the bed. “You write songs like that?”

“Paul McCartney wrote it.”

“He a friend of yours?”

It was a restaurant in Mayfair called Tiddy Dols. At a table in the corner, a sudden exchange of loud, livid voices. A chair scraped the floor, a man stood up, and there was Paul McCartney, shaggy and bearded, wagging his finger in the face of another. He lowered his head and strode away as inconspicuously as he could. McKenzie pursued him outside and nearly ran into the illustrious songwriter, who had stopped to hail a taxi.

“Mr. McCartney ....”

“What is it, lad?” he said. The former Beatle seemed as affable as his reputation, despite what had just happened inside. “Would you like me to sign something?”

“I just wanted to say ... to say ... your music ....”

McCartney smiled at him. “Ah, well, the music’s all we’ve got sometimes, isn’t it? We have to protect it.”

“It changed my life,” McKenzie told him, but the taxi was gone, hurtling through the darkness towards Knightsbridge.

The orderly smoothed the dismal blue blanket around his legs. “Get you anything else, Mr. M? You hungry? Get you some applesauce?”

“Would you open the window? I’d like some fresh air.”

“No, sir, you know we can’t open no windows. We gonna get you a ventilator, Mr. M. Got a special nurse gonna come and set it up for you.”

“I can’t talk if you put a tube in my throat.”

“Can’t sing, neither. But it’ll help you breathe a whole lot better.”

The doctors told him that most of the people who contracted the virus would display no symptoms, or at worst, those resembling a common cold. Only a small percentage would experience serious infections. The old, infirm. Smokers and asthmatics. Patients who had been prescribed ACE inhibitors. Less than one percent of the people infected would die ... but the talking heads also said as many as 60 million people would get sick.

*Pandemic.* That was the word they used. The only way to stop it was to flatten the curve.

He had been in quarantine for two weeks ... or was it three? Helping to flatten the curve. Drowsy and numb, weary of the opiates that had stolen his taste, he felt that part of him had already dissolved. As the orderly made a final note on his chart, he saw a blurry reflection of his bedridden body in her visor. He was seized by the fear that he would never be able to teach again, that even if he recovered, his instincts might be so damaged that he would be unable to comprehend and articulate the expression of artistry necessary to inspire his students.

“I want to see Eleanor,” he told her. “Can you please tell me when she gets here?”

“I told you, Mr. M. Ain’t nobody coming to visit. Everybody supposed to stay home.”

“What day is it?”

“Saturday.”

He swore at the ceiling. “I missed the recital.”

“The what?”

“Eleanor’s recital. Her recital was last night.”

“Eleanor your daughter?”

“She’s my student. She’s the best student I ever had.”

She had worked so hard, practicing the complex chord progressions. She was not his most technically proficient pupil, but she had the innate ability to understand a composer's sensibility. The intuition she possessed could not be taught.

"You try to get some rest now, Mr. M. You sure I can't get you nothin'?"

Left alone, the sound of the television muted, he sought the music he loved in the cobbled memories of his life's work. Beethoven's sonatas. Debussy's *Prelude*. The opening chord of *A Hard Day's Night* and the concluding E major of *A Day in the Life*. They had been revelations to his youthful ears, and so they remained upon every listen, even now, far, far down the road. Music was the way in, the way out. It was the gift that he must preserve for his students – for Eleanor – so that one day it might sustain them just as it sustained him. Through loneliness and despair, through sorrow and sickness.

He would make the music last. For Eleanor.

He drew a shallow breath and began to sing softly, "*Once there was a way ... to get back homeward ....*"

He dreamed he was walking through a long, curving building with immense windows overlooking the beach. Raging waves broke in foamy torrents a hundred feet offshore, the ripples rushing against the foundations. He passed people he seemed to recognize, and they seemed to recognize him, but he was embarrassed because he could not recall their names. Past kiosks and alcoves littered with sheet music, past risers with microphone stands, beyond boxy, terraced seating where small crowds watched the surging ocean, he wandered in distress, late for an appointment. Could he ask one of them to take him home, someone who knew the way? The day was falling and he had stayed too long, smitten by the memory of having been there before, of traversing familiar territory he once called his own.

He opened his eyes.

The glaring light made him wince. He turned his head with some effort towards the voice that had brought him awake.

“Mr. M? Mr. M?”

Broken lights again in his eyes. His breath a harsh rasp. He felt his way through the threshold of consciousness until he found a body in a bed that still answered to the name he had been called.

The orderly was at his side. “Mr. M ... wake up.”

He waited for instructions, the thermometer, a needle poised to draw blood. But she came around the bed with quick footsteps and spoke of something else.

“Lookit, Mr. M. Look out there. Can you see?”

She turned the bed to face the window. The lawn that had always been deserted was now full of – his students. He knew them at once. There were a half-dozen of them, perhaps more, none of them with instruments in hand except for bright, beaming Eleanor, who stood in front with an acoustic guitar strapped across her shoulder. She came forward and put her hand on the glass.

“They cancelled the recital, Mr. M. Did you hear me?” She raised her voice. “They. Cancelled. My. Recital. So I decided to bring the recital to you.”

He raised his hand but could not speak.

“We came to play for you! Just for you....”

With professional dispatch, she drew the group together in formation. Satisfied with the arrangement, she smiled at McKenzie. *For you*, she said soundlessly. Then she counted the time – “one, two, three ...” – and on the fourth began to sing:

*“The long and winding road*

*Thaaat leads to your door ...”*

Her fellow students sang along in gospel rhythm, building momentum, straining for each soulful note. McKenzie could feel their presence beyond the glass, singing in full-throated joy.

*“I’ve seen this road before*

*It always leads me here*

*Leads me to your door.”*

How beautiful it was. Impossible not to sing along. But he had no breath left.

The sweet, majestic notes grew faint, almost imperceptible. He thought he could feel himself smiling. He closed his eyes, hearing the music as clearly as if they were playing it by his side.