

EVERY LITTLE THING GONNA BE ALRIGHT

By

Ian Forth

I'd pictured shady, colonnaded pavements, scents of saffron and cumin, whitewashed houses, and churches with blue Byzantine domes. I'd cool off during the day on beaches fringed with palm trees while drinking retsina and emerge in the evening to play candle-lit restaurants, while a girl with an olive complexion and dark, curling hair danced round with a hat. And when I got home, I'd have stories to tell.

My ideal was soon punctured. In the strength-sapping heat of August, Athens is a city on the edge; the tarmac roads bubble and melt, the sky is hazy with Saharan sand, the air thick with traffic fumes, faecal smells, and cheap perfume. Taxis blast out call and response blues from Smyrna about Death fishing for souls, harpy women, and love as a double-edged sword. The pavements are packed with the stained bedding of rough sleepers and the plastic wares of suitcase shops; streets are patrolled by overweight policemen dripping with sweat. Fake wise guys on mobile phones flock and disperse in clusters around the main squares. Welcome to the real Athens.

My wallet was empty, and I ate little. I bedded down in parks or train stations with one hand wrapped around my guitar. If the busking was good, I slept in cheap hotels in the Psyrri area but always with one hand wrapped around my guitar. If I ever 'settled down', I'd hang my guitar on the wall like a painting.

Everyone tries to rip you off in Athens, even the street beggars. I was playing at the central train station when an American with an asymmetrical face approached me:

'Hey man, great guitar. Can I give it a try?'

I was inexperienced and thought it churlish to say no. He played a show-off arpeggio, letting his fingers glide up and down the neck. Then he started to sing with a big voice, which was surprising given his scrawny, undernourished state. Passers-by stopped and dropped coins in my guitar case. Then he walked off into

the crowd taking my guitar with him. I gave chase. He wasn't strong so I managed to wrestle my guitar back, but I learnt my lesson; busking in Athens is cut-throat. To survive, you have to have a heart of steel and never let your guard down.

The best time to play is in the evening when the temperature drops a few degrees and people gather under the shade of a restaurant awning. It's not easy to find a good place and the squabbling between buskers over a decent pitch can quickly turn to violence. Unless you play classical, there's no point performing in front of expensive restaurants; the customers stare into the distance as if you don't exist, or they complain to the waiters who shoo you away.

That night, the square I played in was noisy with the hum of chatter and laughter. The street colours had revived after being bleached out by the sun. Shadows were starting to form, and the restaurants were filling up, tourists and Athenians arriving and ordering pitchers of wine. As the evening darkened, the restaurants turned on their coloured string lights. Other musicians—some solo like me, some ensembles with drums and horn instruments—were tuning up. I found a good spot where I could play both for the customers of a restaurant and the people idly strolling around the square. I hissed and showed my teeth at any rival buskers who came near.

Some nights I play better than others; everything comes right and you're in tune. It was one of those nights. I started my set with 'Brown-eyed Girl'; it's jaunty and if I forget the words I can just la la la the lyrics. Two young girls took a step forward and gave me a few coins and retreated giggling. I calculated I had about fifteen euros in loose change, still not enough for a hotel room. I was wearing flip-flops, a pair of shorts and my last clean t-shirt. My feet were black.

I'd done three songs when the beggar turned up. He shuffled in front of me, holding out a cardboard cup. You'll think I'm exaggerating, but he really did have shifty eyes and a sweat-caked face. He'd put on this Quasimodo act for the tourists, but I'd seen him revelling in a small bar in a side street with a straight back and broad shoulders, a shapeshifter.

He eyed up the change in my case dismissively. Then he started to strum an air guitar and gave me the universal wanker sign. I glared back. He broke into laughter—he had no teeth at all—and waddled off, his trousers half-down his bum crack. I concentrated on my set and the crowd. There was a slight breeze from the Aegean. Couples passed holding hands or with their arms around each other. As I

watched them, I wished I had someone to hang out with once I'd finished my set, and then while having that thought, as if by magic, she appeared.

She was wearing a green cotton dress with a necklace of blue and yellow shells, nothing pricey, just the kind you find in tourist shops. I couldn't make out her face very well as she was wearing sunglasses, but I knew she was pretty. It was uncanny; if you asked me to draw a sketch of my ideal woman, it would look just like her: sun-bleached hair, small with a rounded figure, tanned face, full lips.

She observed me closely as if sizing me up for an audition. I was excited and apprehensive at the same time. Then she smiled as if she knew me. There was something familiar about her. I tried to think where I had seen her before, perhaps at the train station or in a café by the port area. Then I realised I'd seen her both here and back home, in shops, supermarkets, airports, pubs, parks on a summer's day and in the rain, on buses, in taxis, in galleries; I'd seen this woman everywhere throughout my life.

A group of young guys teetering and laughing hysterically, blocked my view. After they had passed by, I tried to pick her out in the crowd, but she'd vanished. I played a version of Robert Johnson's 'All Your Love in Vain' and then some reggae: 'Three Little Birds'. The crowd was generous, and my guitar case was filling up. As I was playing a Latino take on 'Trust in Me', I became aware of a powerful scent of citrus and patchouli, and there she was again, right in front of me. I nodded. She began to move her hips and tap her foot to the rhythm, nothing showy, just subtle movements. I was flattered and it showed in my singing.

Hundreds of people were passing by, but for some reason this one man, a metre behind her, stood out. I remember clearly how he looked; dark, bearded, waxy bald head, with an ironed white shirt, in his forties with a sullen face. As I was singing the chorus—'*slip into silent slumber, sail on a silver mist, slowly and surely your senses will cease to exist*'—he stepped forward and dropped a fifty euro note in my guitar case. It was a casual gesture, like flicking away a cigarette butt. There was no smile, no acknowledgement. If anything, his expression said that he didn't like the song, and my playing irritated him. However, I nodded to show my thanks. The woman put one hand on her hip, made a bemused face, and smiled as if to say, 'What a jerk'.

It's not often you get notes when busking and it's rare you get fifty euros, except when someone has been drinking too much and wants to show off to their

friends. I now had enough money to invite her for a drink, maybe something more. My mind flooded with ideas. We would form a duo. I was sure she had a warm, husky voice. We'd escape the cauldron of Athens, get a ferry to one of the Cyclades, and breathe again. She would lead me to a strange and mystical place where I would rest my head on her tanned stomach. I'd realise my dream of wine and moonlit seas.

As soon as this fantasy started to take shape in my mind, the beggar returned. He crouched low, snatched the fifty euro note, made another gesture with his hand, and hustled off, sending tourists flying. I was tight with rage; it's the first rule of busking not to leave a large amount in your case. I really needed that money, but I was indecisive. If I ran after him, I'd lose my place. What would I do if I caught up with him? He looked the type who might carry a knife. What if he bit me? What kind of infection would I get? How would I pay for treatment? My head was swirling with questions.

Then I felt her full lips brushing against my ear. The perfume was overpowering.

'Go. Go after him,' she whispered.

She placed her hand on my forearm. Without her sunglasses, her brown eyes had flecks of amber. Her face was older and more weathered than I expected, but she was still attractive. Her smile told me I could expect more from her. I hesitated, but I didn't want her to think I was a ditherer, so I set off in the direction of the beggar. Weaving my way between the tourists, I was certain that she shouted:

'I really like the way you play.'

I looked over my shoulder and waved.

'Come back to me soon.'

Away from the bustle of the square, the streets were dark and narrow, the air less heavy. I had glimpsed the beggar turning into an alley. When I caught up, he was nowhere to be seen, yet it was a cul-de-sac, and all the houses were shuttered and closed. I stood hunched over trying to get my breath. I couldn't fathom how he had vanished into thin air, but he had.

Turning back towards the square, I heard fragments of discordant music like a radio tuning through different stations; some accordion, some bouzouki, some drums too, snatches of lyrics that made no sense. I tried to contain the waves of nausea that washed over me.

Arriving at the front of the restaurant that I had been playing at just a few minutes before, the tables were teeming, glasses clinking, diners throwing their heads back in loud laughter. There was a duo—a young man and woman—playing an up-tempo song in my spot. The woman had a low, raspy voice and was nailing the song. When they had finished, I went up to them.

‘You haven’t seen a woman in a green dress, have you? With a guitar?’

‘Sorry?’

‘A woman in a green dress?’

It was like talking to a brick wall. They couldn’t hear me because of the noise of the customers. They were eager to start playing again and I sensed that I was an irritant, an irrelevance to them. There was no sign of my guitar or my guitar case. I stayed still for some time, eyeing the crowds closely, thinking she might return, telling myself she had placed my guitar somewhere safe, or that she had been to book a hotel for the night. I begged her to appear, smiling, reassuring, holding out her arms to me.

The cacophony and confusion of the square became unbearable. I wanted to throw up. Her last words, ‘*Come back to me soon,*’ echoed in my head on repeat, driving me insane. The line was tawdry and over-rehearsed; words she had used hundreds of times before. I couldn’t believe how stupid I was to have fallen for that line, yet the little insertion of ‘*to me*’ was a clever, personal touch.

Every day, I walk slowly through the crowds; invisible, filthy, and hungry, searching for a flash of colour or that familiar scent among the silhouettes and ghosts. I tell myself not to think about the events in the square that night; it was a hallucination, a bad dream that didn’t really happen. But however hard I try; the night haunts me. In a city of millions, where people are constantly on the move, I know I will never find her. But I can’t stop myself. It’s all I have left.

Ian used to be an academic, but now he writes short stories.

His short story, '*Leaf Relief*,' was published in June 2023 as a podcast on *Yorick Radio Productions/Scintillating Stories*.

Another story, '*Squirrel*,' which combines the points of view of two characters, was published on December 9th, 2023, in *The Mocking Owl Roost*.

His stories are simply but vividly told and contain unconventional characters as well as a degree of humour and pathos.

Ian lives in France and Wales. He plays the guitar badly and cycles a hell of a lot. You can follow him on X (formerly Twitter): <http://twitter.com/ianforth4>.