

Mona Lisa

by

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Dexter James was a very driven young man. He had been in care since he could remember and didn't want to know his parents. If they gave him up they weren't worth knowing he thought. He had been out of the system working in a fast food café for a couple of years now, just trying to keep himself afloat. But one day, was it fate or destiny, he saw an advert for a singing course. It was a series of night classes but it was expensive. Dexter loved music. He would listen to music, read about musicians, sing whenever he could. He knew he had a good voice but also knew that he needed training. There was always room for improvement. He decided to go for it.

That afternoon he found himself at the job centre asking for anything unskilled that would pay him the extra money that he needed. He could only work at night because he already had his other job.

'What kind of thing you interested in?' asked the tired looking woman behind the plastic window.

'Anything' said Dexter resolutely.

And that is how Dexter James found himself with a broom and a bin sweeping a square mile of streets in East London in the dead of night. He had some hassle - drunks leaving the pubs, bored kids wanting entertainment but he just kept his head down and did the job at hand.

By the end of his first week, Dexter was tired. He was getting very little sleep but he only had six weeks to make the money for the course. It was something he desperately wanted to do so he forced himself to keep going. He soon found that once the party-goers had gone home there was something quite calm and peaceful about the streets. The traffic would slowly thin out and often he would be on his own, sweeping. He would sing quietly to himself to keep his spirits up, practising the melodies and harmonies that he loved, humming to keep himself warm.

After a few more days Dexter began to know the movements of the streets he swept. There was a man at number 75 who came out of his house every night at ten and walked briskly towards the bus station. He had a plastic bag with him and a paper. A night worker. Like him. There was a lady at the house with the pink door who watched tv with the curtains open till the early hours and fell asleep on her sofa every night. There was one woman who intrigued Dexter. She looked about his age and came home to her flat every night at 2.30am. She wore a long dark coat and always looked very preoccupied and contained. She never seemed to notice him. Dexter named her Mona Lisa and whenever he saw her he'd sing quietly under his breath, 'Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa men have named you,
You're so like the lady with the mystic smile.
Is it only, 'cos you're lonely, they have blamed you
For that Mona Lisa strangeness in your style?
Do you smile to tempt a lover Mona Lisa?
Or is this the way you hide a broken heart?

Many dreams have been brought to your doorstep,
 They just lie there
 Then they die there
 Are you warm are you real Mona Lisa?
 Or just a cold and lonely lovely work of art?'

As the days passed Dexter found himself looking out for Mona Lisa. Sometimes she had company, never the same man but most of the time she was alone. They never spoke. They were strangers. But there was something about her that made him understand the song and sing it better. He couldn't explain it but for him she was Mona Lisa.

A few weeks later and Dexter had almost made the money he needed. One more week of sweeping the streets and then he could stop. And it was that week that Mona Lisa came home crying. She cried all the way down the street and Dexter could hear her as she walked past him towards her flat. He wanted to ask her if she was alright but didn't. He muttered something under his breath but she didn't hear him of course and then she was gone. He felt stupid. Useless. He comforted himself with the fact that in a few days he wouldn't be here any more. He didn't mean anything to these people and vice versa. He just cleaned their streets. He continued cleaning and sang.

'There was a boy,
 A very strange enchanted boy
 They say he wandered very far, very far, over land and sea.
 A little shy and sad of eye
 But very wise was he.
 And then one day, one magic day he passed my way
 And as we spoke of many things, fools and kings,
 This he said to me
 The greatest thing you will ever learn
 Is how to love and be loved in return'.

'That's lovely,' came a woman's voice behind him.
 Dexter spun round and saw Mona Lisa standing there with two steaming mugs.
 'I bought you some tea. 'S cold isn't it?' She handed him a mug.
 'Thanks,' Dexter muttered, embarrassed.
 'You have a great voice,' she said. 'I hear you sing every night, that same song'. She hummed some of Mona Lisa and Dexter thought he would die. He thought he'd sung so quietly. She must think he's an idiot.
 'My name's Connie,' she smiled a sad smile.
 'You were upset.' Said Dexter trying to think of something to say.
 'Lost my job.' She looked into her tea. 'Never mind,' she shrugged, 'there'll be others.' Dexter looked at her and saw she was older than him. She must have been in her thirties but had a young air about her.
 'I hope you're not going to sweep streets for the rest of your life,' she said. 'Don't waste that voice.'
 'I'm just earning some extra money. There's a course I want to do. Singing.' Dexter hadn't mentioned the course or his singing to anyone. No one had ever asked him.
 'What kind of singing?' she asked.

He was off. Dexter told her about how he loved the old crooners Donny Hathaway, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn. How modern music had taken their style and changed it into something more urban. Connie listened and sipped her tea. Dexter talked and talked.

‘Sing something for me,’ said Connie. ‘Please. I’d like to hear you properly’ Dexter thought hard, he was embarrassed but really wanted to sing for her. No one had ever asked him before.

He put down his broom, stepped back into the glow of the nearest street lamp and began,

‘Trailer for sale or rent
Rooms to let fifty cents
No phone, no pool, no pets,
I ain’t got no cigarettes,
Ah but, two hours of pushin’ broom
Buys a eight by twelve four bit room,
I’m a man of means by no means king of the road.’

For dramatic effect, Dexter flung his arms out to the streets he swept and bowed as Connie clapped and laughed.

‘I gotta go,’ she said. ‘Nice to finally meet you.’

‘Hope you find another job,’ said Dexter as she walked away.

‘I will. No skills but resilient that’s me.’ She turned by the door to her flat, ‘I envy you. Don’t let your voice go to waste. You’ve got something there that people would kill to have. You’re a lucky lad. Night.’

Dexter picked up his broom, realising how cold it was suddenly. The odds had always been stacked against him, he had never thought of himself as ‘lucky’. He suddenly felt calm, that he was going to be alright. He smiled, began to sing and went back to work.