

Dixun Cui (he/him)
2700 Le Conte Ave
Berkeley, CA 94709
(510) 990-7027
dixuncui@berkeley.edu

About 1700 words

Broken Chords

by Dixun Cui

He scribbled across the tiny notebook clenched in his hand, jotting down the notes and melodies that came into his head. In the hot afternoon sun of the warehouse parking lot that he spent his days, Ryan hunched over his usual post, sitting in the folding chair next to the security booth that housed his office. The heat of the black pavement only accentuated the sweltering glow of the sun, but through his years of experience, Ryan knew that the cramped office only made it worse. As beads of sweat rolled down the side of his face and his neck, he gripped his tiny pencil furiously, scrambling to write down his ideas before the melodies disappeared from his head. In all the songs that he had written, Ryan knew this one was going to be the breakthrough he needed; all he ever desired was a single breakout performance, a catalyst to relieve him of his day job and catapult him to the stardom he always dreamed of.

In between his occasional gigs at whatever low-end joints that would pay him even a penny, he found himself lost in thought, dreaming of what he wanted. Sold-out crowds, chanting his songs, yelling his name. And after each daydream, Ryan would wake up again in the real world, driven with more motivation to write the world's next big hit, born within the tiny pages in

his hand. He was so focused on his notebook that Ryan didn't notice the familiar, yet awful cigarette smell approaching him. Only when he heard the dragging sound of another folding chair being pulled across the pavement did Ryan look up to see his occasional lunchtime companion. He greeted her, putting his notebook away as she began ranting about the heat.

“Well for my own sake I don't know how long I can keep working this job. I'd rather be doing anything at this point. Anyways, how'd that big audition go last weekend?”

Ryan took a deep breath. It was good to let go, he remembered, as his therapist had told him. It was good to tell close friends about what was going on. Particularly Krystella, as she had been in his shoes before. He began recounting the event, about the signup and awards, to his performance of his original song and the results that transpired afterward.

“Another miss,” he said defeatedly. “They took a damn kid over me.”

“Sucks. Well if it makes you feel better -”

“Another god damn time!” Ryan interrupted, not noticing that his hands were almost crumpling up his notebook. “And the worst part is, you know what the damn judges told me?”

Krystella sat and listened, having grown used to Ryan's frustrated outbursts over time. Though she was past her days of morning ragers and evening crack dens, she knew what it was like to relapse, haunted by your own demons.

“They made me sound like I was the next coming of Buddy Holly. Seriously. One of the dudes, this bald fucker, even said to me that I was made to be a performer, from head to toe. Had me so mad when they rejected me.”

Ryan took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said. “You know, it’s just that I don’t know how many more beatings I can take. And it’s like I can’t even do any better. I’m just sick. And now I gotta go fix my guitar again. Punks made me so mad I banged it up in the trunk.”

Krystella took a puff of a newly lit cigarette, as Ryan felt the familiar scent drift into his nose. Though he wasn’t particularly fond of the smell, it was a light bother compared to her ghastly stench of alcohol, years ago when they first met.

“Well, like I was gonna say before,” she said, giving him a glare that anyone but close friends would see as hostile. “I’ve got a friend with a plug for you. Not really what you want but you should check it out. We still on for dinner tonight? He said he could tag along. Come check it out.”

“Fine,” he replied. He pulled his notebook back out and began flipping through his pages.

“I’ll see you then,” Krystella said, dragging the chair back where she got it.

Ryan relaxed with the putrid scent finally fading away, as she walked away in the distance.

That night, Ryan checked into the restaurant early, dressed in his nice button-up shirt, eager to hear what opportunity Krystella might be showing him. He got to their table early, taking time to review his notebook should he need to share anything, before spotting her at the entrance, followed by a shorter man with large round glasses and curly hair. He reminded Ryan of one of those nerdy bothersome boys you would see at the arcade, not the kind of person who would be a record label producer or a talent agent.

“So, Oscar, this is the guy I was talking about, the musician.”

Singer-songwriter , Ryan thought in his head, correcting Krystella. They exchanged greetings, sitting down and ordering their drinks before Oscar began talking.

“Let me tell you about this gig. It’s a little bit away from here, so you’d have to do some traveling and probably even some moving. From what Krystella told me, you’d be fine with it. Passion’s always what’s most important.”

Ryan listened intently, trying to ignore his squeaky, fast-paced voice. He thought about traveling for the job and being able to leave his day job behind. He thought about performing all over another city, having the freedom and money to explore wherever he wanted while having the backing of fans and supporters along the way.

“Essentially, this other buddy of mine, they’ve had a band for a few years now. They’ve been doing pretty alright - went on a tour across a few states opening for festivals just this summer.”

Ryan salivated at the idea, writing songs, singing, and performing with a band. Though his dream had always been to be a solo performer, having a backing wasn’t an issue.

“So last week, they hear that a dude in the group, he’s calling it quits. Wife got pregnant, wants to settle down with a family. They’re holding auditions to replace him and a good rhythm guitar man isn’t easy to find.”

Ryan felt a shiver down his back, as Oscar talked on, but Ryan was no longer hearing what he was saying. A guitarist? The shiver down his back turned into trembling running through his arms and into his hands. He felt an uncontrollable rage, like knives were piercing all over his body.

“What!” he yelled, stunning the others and bringing Oscar’s talking to a sudden halt. “A rhythm guitarist? Really? Is this a joke to you? Is this all a joke to you?”

Ryan pulled out his notebook, furiously flipping through the pages in front of them.

“All this? Krystella, what? Did you know about this? You damn punks! Do you know how hard I work, compared to you? How tiring it is, how late I stay up to write these songs?”

Krystella immediately pounded the table, startling both the men.

“Did you even listen to him, man? All the things he just said? Ryan, hasn’t this been what you’ve been looking for? We’re giving this right to you and you’re throwing it away?”

“I don’t give a shit! A backing guitarist? You can go find a guy off the streets for that. I’m done here. You’re wasting my time!” Ryan put his notebook, now damaged with loose pages back in his pocket, preparing to leave.

“You’ve always been this way Ryan, and let me say this because I’ve always wanted to. Is this your dream or not? Do you actually want it or are you just in love with the idea? Have you not realized now that it isn’t easy? That you need to stop looking for the easy way out? You’re not going to be a superstar overnight. No matter what you think. If you don’t wanna take it because of the travel or because of the money to get there, that’s fine. But your ego? Your pride? What do you even want, Ryan?”

Krystella sat back down, letting out a grunt. Standing already, Ryan looked at her, now in silence. She never yelled like this before and Ryan felt a creeping of guilt, having antagonized one of his only friends who stuck with him after all this time. From their first support group meeting together, to their struggles for help later, Krystella had always been there for him, never expecting anything in return. Still, anger flowed through his body. He tried to breathe, to calm himself down, but he knew the situation was beyond fixing. Seeking escape and wanting to clear his head alone, Ryan left the table, swiftly walking to the door.

“Fine! Leave!” Krystella yelled, piling with frustration. “Just think of all we’ve done for you!”

Ryan could hear her faint, continuing shouts as he got through the door, now lost amidst the noise of the city nightlife. Mixed feelings rushed through him, of anger, of guilt, but also of acceptance. He knew Krystella was right, and he knew what the right decision was, but his pride wouldn’t let itself be shut away. He promptly walked down the sidewalk, indifferent to the direction, her voice still ringing through his mind.

Estimated time to arrival: 3 hours 45 minutes, his phone announced.

Ryan steadied his phone in the car dock, glancing at the bright blue sky, through the windshield in front of him. He felt a knocking on his passenger seat window, rolling it down and greeting his friend.

“So you’re off then?” Krystella asked, the glimmering sun shining behind her. “You should probably go now, before the morning rush.”

Ryan smiled as he looked at her.

“Sorry again. I know it’s been -”

“It’s fine, Ryan,” Krystella interrupted. “I knew you’d come around. Just don’t mess this one up, ok?” she said, jokingly.

“Thank you,” he said, as she began to walk away from his car. “For everything.”

Ryan rolled up the window and took a deep breath, taking one more look at the waking sky. He turned to check that his guitar was strapped in safely and set out for the long road ahead.