

HARTON WOODS

My name is Paige Plant, and I'm a singer-songwriter. I have fourteen paintings to prove it—one for each song I've written. Thirteen Möbius strip watercolors where I painted the song's story on the strip. What can I say? I was good at science back in the day. The fourteenth, done in oil and not on a Möbius strip, depicts the only love song I've ever written. Not that I've had only one lover or anything—I'm quite attractive in a B+ kind of way—but only one worth an oil painting. Plus, oil makes the other guys, and an occasional girl, work a little harder at pleasing me. Everybody wants a love song written about them; almost everyone wants to see their song in oil.

Today, I'm going to meet this guy named John Bustin. He's older, like pensioned, and, well, from the whisper-whisper out there, he was a decent songwriter in his time. No one that most people would know, but he's well respected in a few east coast music circles. A buddy of mine saw John's ad online and set us up. I guess John has this million-dollar recording studio in the woods forty miles west of Boston, and he lets singer-songwriters use it for free if he vibes on their stuff. Who knows, maybe I'll get a few paintings out of the place if things go well.

Watercolors. Not oils. I don't do the daddy thing. Already have one of those, and he's great. When I was five, he told me I would front the next Led Zeppelin. Even legally changed my last name to prove he was serious. "Paige Plant" he would sing over and over to a little nursery rhyme of a tune he'd written for me. I still play it every now and then as a reminder, as a future eulogy.

Main Street in Harton, the town where John lives, is a throwback to a different era. Boutique shops line both sides of the extra-wide street. A

general store. A potter's showcase. A cucina. A coffeehouse. An old marquee cinema. Too many churches and a small inn surround a large green. On any given weekend, I bet the sidewalks fill equally with townies and tourists, though there's hardly anyone around today.

After coffee at The General, as the townies like to call it, I make my way out of the center and down country roads with sickeningly panoramic Mount Wachusett views toward John's. Nature girl I am not. Almost miss my turn onto this long private gravel road that splits a field in two. Probably a cornfield, which is a common crop in this part of Massachusetts, though now all you can see are snowmobile tracks. After about a mile, I'm swallowed by a deep oak and evergreen forest. Inside, I wind through trees, which occasionally give way to fifty-foot-high rock formations that must be thousands, if not millions, of years old. I'm back in the time before humans—at any moment, a giant raptor might jump out from behind the rocks and keep me from my destiny. Finally, the road stops at a large clearing with a wooden building, the studio I'm guessing, which looks like a modern version of a barn. Big doors in the front. A high angled roof with solar panels. Lots of glass. A large silver-backed dog, or maybe a wolf, circles my car as if it's searching for its next meal. A moment later, the barn doors open.

"Hi, I'm John. That's Solly. He's harmless." Almost on cue, Solly wags his tail for a bit, then sits in front of my car door.

I slip out. Palm up, I reach forward and pet Solly under his chin. "Paige. Nice to meet you. I like your dog's name."

"Short for Solidarity."

John is tall and wears a charcoal-gray suit with a red silk tie. He's in relatively good shape for his age, which I guess is around sixty. Brown hair with just a touch of gray on the sides. Not much of anything on the top. Probably was a B+ himself in his prime. But none of that stuff much matters—it's his face that grabs me. John's playing tour guide and showing me around the place, talking about this and that capable-of-sonic-wonder

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black box, but all I can think about is his face. It's a steady state of sadness, like he's seen too much, read too much, like he's touched the big wide calm from only a few parts of his life. Maybe his children, if he has any. Or work. Yeah, work for sure. Probably a big executive for years, he's using the money he made to do the frustrated-artist-who-is-now-a-patron-of-the-arts thing. For sure, he hasn't reached the big wide calm with a woman. At least not for long. They've left him. Or he drove them away. Those deep grooves on his face are all that remain of his loves.

In the span of a few minutes, while he's talking about Pro Tools or an Avalon preamp or his rack of reverbs, his face morphs a few times like he's judging me, himself, or the entire world for crimes against, well, I don't know what yet. His eyebrows scrunch down, or one side of his mouth flashes up, or his face pales. I don't even think he knows he's doing it. Slips into his judgment robes, does the thumbs-down thing, slips back out into sadness. I bet he turns a lot of people off when the robes are on. I bet that's why he lives by himself out in the middle of Harton Woods.

But here's the thing. Yeah, yeah, his face is all old and brown-spotted, and when he smiles, the wrinkles around his eyes are like Grand Canyon deep, but his eyes could heal the planet if he would let them. When he looks at me and isn't judging, even for a short time, I have to look away. It's too much. Too much power. Too much x-ray vision. Too much something-that-scaries-the-Zep-out-of-me, and at the same time makes me want more. That's probably why one of his eyes is lazy. I mean, who wants that much responsibility? Better not to see so much. An occasional half-glimpse of something real, but mostly a view thriving on distraction. What a good title for a song.

Today, I'm dressed in layers, as the fashion girls would say, not because I care about that stuff, but because there's two feet of snow on the ground and it's freezing, and, at the same time, I tend to get really hot indoors, especially in recording studios, which are gateways to my greater-than-Zep future. Part of me wants to take my leather jacket off, my Ani DiFranco *Dilate* sweatshirt, but I already feel naked around this guy, so I keep them both on and bake a

little. Baking in John's studio. Three hundred fifty degrees for a time, then—Pop!—I'm a rock star.

"So, what do you think?" John asks.

"It's cool."

"Do you want to play one of your songs?"

I set up in his plush, wood-paneled studio that smells like a just-cut Christmas tree and guitar polish. My old beat-up 1968 Martin D-28 has so many cracks in it that sometimes I wonder why it plays at all. I doodle a bit up and down the neck. She's still a siren. I'll never give her up because she was the first real guitar Dad gave me after I outgrew the baby ones.

When my fingers touch metal in chord formation, John looks up from the mixing console through the control room glass. At first I can't hear him through the glass, but he catches himself and pushes a button.

"That guitar sounds fantastic! I've never heard one with such a rich tone."

I nod once. Through the speakers, he sounds like the wizard from Oz. Though I'm certainly no Dorothy, I'm grateful I've passed the whiz-bang instrument test. All of us songwriters give each other the test, since a musician's choice of guitar says so much about them. Like mine is all about the sound and the tradition, not about the cracks on the outside, not about a pick guard that's almost worn away, not about so many scratches that the finish seems more matted than glossed.

Anyway, I better cut right to it and play my best watercolor. I ad-lib for a bit off the intro to "Latecomer." One night I woke from this nightmare where I was old instead of twenty-five, where I never caught a wave, where I never passed Zep. Scared me so much that I had to create something on the spot, so I reached for my guitar and notepad, both stationed right next to my bed for moments just like that one, and wrote "Latecomer" in one pass. *I'm a latecomer / You're a latecomer, too / We have waited long enough.* That's the main gist. I must admit it's my only as-good-as-Zep watercolor. But here's the thing: each time, right before I play it, there's an uneasiness in my back and right below my heart, a tightening, a knot. I have no idea why. Each time I

try to squash it. Push it down. Figure out some way to kill it. I never have any luck. If I could unwrap it now, I'm sure it would tell me something, but I can't, so I tap the soundboard of my guitar four times and launch into "Latecomer."

Four fast minutes later, the last chord rings out, and—abracadabra—poof goes the tightening. Before I look to get John's reaction, I sync-up that the tightness I'm experiencing during "Latecomer" serenades is the same tightness I saw earlier on John's face, except his has an unending quality to it. How does that happen? I mean, no one aspires to grow up permanently tight. Do they? You know, there's a lot underneath his tightness. Emotionally, he's Stephen Hawking. Where's the software program to interface with those eyes and figure out what's on the inside? Maybe I'll put my college education to use for a change and write one. After all, he seems to be a songwriting treasure trove, and I'm a songwriter; the inside story is what I'm all about.

I look up at John, and from a distance, I'm convinced his eyes have teared over. Pretty good. I untangle myself from my guitar, the wires, the headphones. Must be ninety, so I take off my leather jacket. A moment later, I join him in the control room. The tears in his eyes have drained, if they were even there in the first place.

"Great song."

"Thank you."

"You're very talented."

"Thank you." Modesty isn't my thing, but it seems like the best way with John. He's fumbling with the controls on his mixing board, like he's doing something important, but we both know he's just figuring out the big yes or the big no. He fumbles for a long time. Normally, I have little respect for people, guys especially, who hesitate. With John, though, I'll make an exception. I mean, the eyes, the recording studio, the sadness trump the fence sitting.

"I'd like to work with you, if you're interested," John says.

"That would be fantastic."

"Would you like to have a cup of coffee up at the house?"

“Sure.”

“I live by myself, so please excuse the messiness.”

“No problem.”

We leave the recording studio and follow a snow-covered walkway a long way up to the main house. The front of the house is all glass, one of those super modern designs you sometimes see in *Architectural Digest* when you're waiting for your semiannual cleaning in the dentist's office. Does anyone other than dentists, doctors, and therapists subscribe to that magazine? Anyway, here's this guy living by himself in an all-glass house in the middle of the woods without another house or road or anything manmade visible in any direction. It's scary beautiful. Maybe it would be better to take my songs elsewhere. Maybe he's some psycho killer and I'm never going to pass Zep, never mind leave Harton Woods alive. Okay, Paige, genius, goddess, use some of that innate wisdom you have and get the frack out of John's woods. But then, as he holds open the front door, those magnetic eyes do their pull thing. I go in.

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The inside isn't at all what I expect. Books are everywhere. In floor-to-ceiling cases along the walls of the living room. On the floors. On tables. Except for the books, it's not that messy. I notice a pile on the floor, maybe ten hardcovers, with a yellow sticky on top that says, “Happiness.”

“All of my books are grouped by topic,” John says.

“You've read them all?”

“I have a lot of time.”

I look around the room at all of the yellow stickies. Death. Star Wars. Love. Quantum physics. The Beatles. Peace. Charnel grounds. What the . . . ? “What are charnel grounds?”

“Buddhist burial sites. In Nepal, the ground is frozen, so the custom is to chop up the bodies of the deceased and put them in a charnel ground until the vultures eat the dead body parts. Needless to say, they're very scary places for most.”

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I nod, swallow dryness. Okay, so now I'm convinced I'm going to die, but instead of freaking out, I walk around the living room, head down, and study the other towers of topics. Guitar making. Alice Walker. Soccer. Best to appear calm in these situations. Best not to let him see my face. Best to . . . ah, fuck it. Just ask him. "You're not one of these guys who abducts young women and chops them up, are you?"

A flash of I-would-never horror consumes John's face until he can steady it. "No. No. Sorry. I didn't mean to . . . I'm more interested in emotional chanel grounds. We all do a pretty good job of creating them."

"Ah." Okay, so I have no idea what that means, but there is a story here, and at least a few songs. Fact: John eats knowledge for breakfast. Fact: he's wealthy and alone. Potential fact: he may be able save the world. What else is under the covers? Every great songwriter has a muse. Mine's going to be a lonely guy in the woods who seems to have pieced together all human knowledge for some unknown purpose. No wonder his face is sad; it's too much. "How about that coffee?"

John moves a few stacks of books from his dining room table and chairs and eye-directs me to one of the open seats. A moment later, he's back with the coffee and a box of Dunkin' Donuts Holes.

"You eat that stuff?"

"Yes. Holes are one of the great American treasures. I have fruit if you prefer."

"Just coffee. Thanks."

"Do you live in Boston?"

"Yeah. In a studio, if you can call it that, in the North End."

"And work?"

"I'm still trying to make it. It's been hard. I play a few gigs around town when I get them. Sometimes I play on the street in Harvard Square. And I waitress, which pays the rent."

"Ah."

So this time, instead of dialing knobs on his mixing board, John is playing with his spoon and popping Holes in his mouth at a heart-attack rate. How

can such a smart guy not know the nutritional value of donuts? And does he always fidget when he decides something important?

“How seriously do you want to do your music?”

“It’s my life.”

“Are you sure?”

“More than sure.”

“I see.”

John pops up from his chair and disappears into another part of the house. Two cups of coffee later, just when I’m about to cave and end my little prehistoric adventure, he returns. His hair is all wet and slicked back, like he just got out of the shower. What the . . . ?

“How about this? Why don’t you quit your job and move out here for a year? I have a spare bedroom in the house or another one in the studio if you prefer more privacy. You can live and eat here for free. I’ll pay you a generous monthly stipend so you have spending money. Over the year, we’ll record all of your songs, and maybe write a few new ones. Then I’ll help you get them out into the world when they’re done.”

Okay, who does something like this? All of my songs? Free room and board? And free money? Dad is whispering in my ear to walk away. Hell, all of the relatives are whispering in my ear to walk away. Instead, I reach over and pop a Hole. Surprisingly good. I study every inch of my coffee cup for clues on how to answer. Is he for real? Is it safe out here? After two frustrating years, is this finally my big break? I look up and there’s John with those eyes, those big calm eyes that somehow hold the keys to everything I’ve ever longed for, wanted, needed. I rise out of my body and hover above the table like I’m watching a movie from a distance, like I somehow know this is my first big life decision and I need to observe it from far away. From there, I watch myself say, “I’ll move into the studio tomorrow.”