

Guitar Hero

A Stilly Story

A morgue would have had a more cheerful feeling. The day was overcast, the light in the house was dim, our voices were subdued when we spoke at all. There had been a death in the family and our futures looked grim. Our provider was dead and our livelihoods had been taken from us. Our airline had perished and all of us were out of work.

We had just returned from collecting our first unemployment checks. For someone who has not done it, the feeling of degradation is hard to understand. On top of that, the money was not enough. Nan and I were pregnant with our first child as were Chris and Anne Head, both due in three weeks. We now had no medical insurance and were in the process of applying for Medi-Cal, the California Welfare program, at the Monterey Peninsula Hospital, one of the most expensive in the state.

Employment prospects in aviation were grim due to the recent firing of striking air traffic controllers by President Regan. This had also been a factor in our airline's demise. In response, a small group of us had gathered at our house to basically have a pity party and wallow in our collective misfortune.

Then, there was a knock at the door. Stilly Sprague, erstwhile airline Captain, had arrived, a guitar case slung over his shoulder. As he sauntered into the living room, he allowed as how he used to sing a little in bars and clubs to supplement his income. Now, he figured, that talent might come in handy again. With nervous chuckles, we all agreed.

He turned on a few lights in the living room and laughed about needing to see to tune his instrument. Somehow, the room seemed a bit warmer and more inviting. I brought him a beer and soon, all of us were there, beers in hand, draped over couches and chairs or lounging on the floor.

As always, Stilly was yucking it up, cracking jokes and making snide remarks about our former management. We all joined in and for awhile the poison of anger, remorse and uncertainty flowed out of us, to be swept away by the tuning of the guitar and the beginnings of music. The conversation was buoyed along on the chords of a few well known tunes and finally, Stilly began to sing. A poignant song or two quieted our talk. Just warming up, said Stilly. Then a couple of fast paced songs set our feet to tapping. He was grabbing his audience. Eventually, Stilly allowed as how he had written a few of his own songs, if we would like to hear them. Enthusiastic agreement greeted his suggestion.

He sang for awhile, about different things. About life and love and people, particularly pilots. I don't remember the words today, but I do remember the feeling, and that is as it should be, for music is an art and art has the purpose of evoking emotion. In the midst of loss, uncertainty and fear, Stilly and his music evoked the emotion, the feeling, of hope. He helped us believe that we were pirate Captains, spitting in the face of overwhelming odds and leading our swashbuckling crews of hopeless miscreants to overcome the greedy enemy and finally win the prize. We were the lonely fighter pilots, facing certain death in the face of superior forces and suddenly leaving the fray newly minted aces as the surviving enemy retreated in awe. We were the cowboys, wounded and outnumbered by outlaws, knowing that our only chance of survival was to attack, not withdraw. It was time to stop the pity party and start the celebration, to shrug off the mantle of despair and take up the flag of victory. Finally, the game was getting interesting! The A-Team needed to takeover and win!! What was required was a hero from the ranks to brandish his weapon and inspire us to greatness. Stilly, whether he knew it or not, stepped up to be that hero. His weapon was not a cutlass or a fighter plane or a six gun. His weapon was a guitar. He wielded it with skill and cunning and with it he carried the day, vanquishing the enemies of anger, remorse, uncertainty and fear.

Many heroes go unsung in the daily battles of life. Many have no idea they even qualify for the title. For them, I believe there is a special place in heaven where their deeds are written in stone, so as to be remembered for all time. In that place there is an engraving which reads:

Stillman Sprague
Guitar hero