

# John

BY DIANE FORMAN

As usual, I saw John today, guitar and body perched on an overturned, industrial-sized paint pail. From the distance I heard his voice first — the soft, off-key, but familiar John Denver words mixed with the howling winds: “Almost Heaven...West Virginia...” His entire repertoire is this song, plus two others, which he plucks over and over again with blackened fingers in black fingerless gloves.

Usually, I stand for a moment and listen or hum a few bars, then drop a dollar or two in his open guitar case, littered with a few other coins and bills. Sometimes I buy him a coffee from Dunkin’ Donuts — light, two sugars, though he prefers cash. Sometimes I talk to him — he listens, though he prefers to sing or drum.

It’s mid-January now, and the gray skies and usual freeze are here. Our colonial brick sidewalks are nearly empty, slippery from the patina of overnight ice. In the summer, tourists crowd the bricks, carrying colored bags with magnets and mugs and other souvenirs, filling our shops and cafes and riverside boardwalk. They mill to the side and half-listen to our John. But they’re gone now, in the midst of the biting wind and icy sky. Most locals pay him no attention, especially now, hastening on (still careful of the ice), in their dark uniforms of zipped puffy coats and tight wooly hats. Their faces lack expression, obscured by the coverings. I’ve almost forgotten what people look like, hidden behind these coats, woolens, and masks.

I asked him his name a few years ago, this guitar player, who sometimes doubles as a drummer banging on a few paint pails, one of which doubles as a chair. He told me he goes by John. A regular name, he said. It’s funny that my name is John, he added, just like

John Denver, only I'm kind of forgettable, unlike John Denver.

This John is missing two teeth, only noticeable when he smiles. You can't really tell when he sings because he doesn't open his mouth all that wide.

My mother would have told me not to talk to a stranger like John. No one knows exactly where he lives. He might camp in the woods outside of town where a bunch of homeless men sleep. I've heard that the Salvation Army picks them up for a warm meal and a bed if it's below 20°. It's probably 26° now, colder with the wind. I don't know for sure if John lives in the woods. I do know he needs a shower.

John isn't a stranger, though, not really. He's in town just about every day. Everyone knows his spots: outside Richdale Market, or sometimes further down toward the waterfront — especially in the summer when the tourists are here, because they toss more coins in his open case.

John's face is ruddy and maskless. He wears no dark puffy coat. When he stops singing, I ask if he wants a coffee today, because I'm getting one for myself. He pulls a dark bandanna up over his mouth, but it rests under his nose. An effort, I think, to protect me. Yes, he says, he'd really like one today: his usual. It's cold out here, he says, but playing music for the residents of our little town makes him warm. And maybe them too, he adds. He looks up and smiles a little, carefully, revealing just a glimpse of his missing teeth.

This memorable regular named John plays some John Denver songs on a winter day in a small New England town, hoping to add some comfort. I hear him strum for me as I carefully navigate icy bricks up the street on the way to get our coffees. He's crowing "West Virginia, Blue Ridge Mountains" again, familiar words that soothe and warm me. I smile and quietly sing along.