

Sue Ellen finished Martina McBride's "Independence Day" strong, hammering the chords, head back for the final chorus,

Roll the stone awayyyy
It's Independence dayyyyy

She held her pose as the final chord rang, then inclined her head to acknowledge the scattered clapping from the half dozen people around her, shoppers at the Boise Farmer's Market who had paused between picking out bell peppers and thumping watermelons to listen to Sue Ellen and her guitar and boom box.

Her fingers were sore and her throat felt raspy from 40 minutes of busking at the edge of the busy Saturday market. She leaned over her open guitar case and pushed the few crumpled bills in it down flat. Laying her guitar over them, she snapped the case shut. Guitar case in one hand, boom box in the other, she threaded her way through the crowd to the opposite side of the market.

Here Baptiste stood like a stone idol, if a stone idol wore camo, behind a tiny counter that was sandwiched between a meat vendor ("Home cured ham from happy hogs") and the stall where two elderly men with wispy white ponytails — possibly Boise's last hippies — sold home-made herbal soaps.

Sue Ellen looked around. Nobody was close. She leaned her guitar case on the counter and said "Good... good morning."

Unmoving, Baptiste looked down from his 6-7 height and said "Mornin'."

Sue Ellen again looked left and right, fiddled with an olive oil bottle, and said, "I, I been told you..." and stopped.

After a moment, Baptiste said, "You lookin' for somethin' to smoke, try them folks." He nodded toward the soap sellers.

"No, not grass. You know, um... medicine"

Baptiste was quiet for a moment, then said, "Look at me."

Sue Ellen looked up.

"I seen you before."

"I play here every Saturday?" She patted the guitar case.

Baptiste pondered this for a long moment. Sue Ellen held her breath. Then the tall man nodded, and she began to breath again. He leaned a little, closing the gap between them. "What week are you?"

"I, what week?"

"You know what I mean."

"It's been..." She frowned, calculating.

"How many periods you miss?"

"What? Oh, two. I mean, it should have been this week, so..."

"So you could be week eight. Even nine. You running' it close, girl." He stared at her for a moment; she twisted her hands together. "OK, the special olive oil is eight hundred. You got it?"

Sue Ellen looked stricken. "Oh god. No. Eight?"

“Cheaper than spending next week in a hotel in Winnemucca, and co-pays to a clinic. Assuming they’ll take you.” He watched her a moment, then said “OK, seven hundred.”

Sue Ellen balled her fists together under her chin; took a deep breath; and said, “OK, shit! Take the guitar.”

“What, I don’t need no guitar.”

“It’s a Martin DX1, cost me nearly a thousand last year, you can sell it for that.”

Baptiste looked at her, then pulled the guitar case into the booth and laid it on the grass. He flipped the latches and opened the case, lifted the guitar out, looked it over. Leaning to put it back he paused.

“There’s money in here?”

Sue Ellen choked a laugh. “Sure, my pay for today.”

Baptiste scooped the loose bills, compressed them in a wad and handed them to her. She made as if to push the money away, then had a second thought and took it, pushing the wad into the hip pocket of her jeans.

Baptiste disappeared under the counter. Sue Ellen could hear bottles clinking. He emerged, holding a bottle of olive oil in each hand, which he set carefully on the counter. The bottles were sealed and had foil wrappings around the neck, like wine bottles.

“Listen up, ok?” She nodded. “This one, it says bottled in Chico? That’s the ‘stone. The other, says first pressing, Sacramento? That’s the ‘stol. Take it 48 hours after.”

“What, I have to drink all that oil?”

“No, no, look.” He held out one bottle and inverted it, pointing to the bottom. She peered; floating in the oil was a tiny glass vial containing a pill. He re-inverted the bottle and the vial disappeared, floating up behind the foil wrapping.

He pushed the bottles toward her. “And don’t waste it, it that’s good damn oil.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” She held the bottles under her left arm, took the boom box in her right, and walked away into the crowd of people buying vegetables at the Boise market.