

The Beat of My Heart

I love music. I love making music. When I pick up the sticks, I feel it, deep inside me. Throbbing, pulsing, begging to be heard. How can I deny it? I can't, and I don't even try. I've never wanted to.

These drums are a part of me, an extension of who I am. Maybe I'm an extension of them. It doesn't really matter; when I sit down, we are one. Whole. This is where I belong, sitting here on this stool, surrounded by rhythm. Surrounded by music.

Getting noticed by Mitsuzuka-sensei was the best thing that ever happened to me, the best thing in a long, long while. I just needed to vent, get the weight off my chest, and that store let people try the instruments, even if they weren't buying. I wasn't buying; how could I afford a brand new snare set? But they were so beautiful, and I was so angry. So angry at *him*.

I don't think about that when I'm sitting here. All of that garbage gets left behind, cast aside. It doesn't belong in the music. Music frees me from the weight; I can forget for a while, lose myself in the beat. I gave into the rhythm that afternoon, there in the shop, just let the music pour out of my blood, through my hands, out on the heads.

Yeah, I guess some of my anger slipped through that day. I knew it was there, even if I didn't admit it, so I pushed myself harder, further than ever before. If the music's loud enough, it drowns out the pain. The pain in my arms, my hands? The blood blisters, the strained shoulders? That's nothing. That's the love I have for what I get to do. When I play, the love is so much bigger than the pain.

I buried myself in the music that day. I didn't care who heard me. I didn't care what would come after, when the shop owners got mad because I'd "abused" a floor model. I didn't think about whether I'd break a stick or dent a cymbal. You can't think about that when you're playing. You just surrender.

But someone did hear me, and I wound up caring. I wound up caring a whole lot. When Mitsuzuka-sensei walked up to me and gave me his card, I didn't believe him at first. You get this rush, this

incredible high, when the music flows through you; it takes a while to come down from that. I honestly didn't hear him at first, didn't know why I was taking a business card from some random guy. It's better than drugs, the euphoria I get from a good session.

I just stuck the card in my pocket and left the store. I felt a lot better, and I didn't want the shop keeper ruining that, so I slipped out as soon as I could. Almost forgot about the card until I found it in my pocket. When I actually read it ... Wow. I mean ... what are the odds of a guy like me getting noticed by a guy like Mitsuzuka Tsuyoshi? Of course I called him, as soon as I found my cell.

He could teach me to make more music. I could learn more about rhythm, meter, composition, things I'd scraped up my own education on. I'd had basic lessons, sure, but nothing like Mitsuzuka-sensei gave.

And then I found out he was the manager for a band. They were still basically getting started, had barely played any gigs, but they were a band. And they wanted to hear me play. Wanted to hear my music.

They liked what they heard. When Miyabi asked me to join, it made me kind of giddy inside. To make music with a band, a *good* band. I'd heard some of their stuff; they were good, except for their drummer. He was all right, but I knew I was better. I knew I could be better. I knew that this was what I'd always wanted.

Orochi turned out to be a great group. Shuya does more things with a bass than I ever thought possible. Bass players tend to get a short stick, but they're as important as drummers. Together, we create the foundation for the music to build on, the beat and the underlying structure that songs need to rise to the top. You think only regular guitarists can shred? Watch Shuya's fingers sometime. You'll be amazed.

Not that Akito can't hold his own. That kid's got power in his fingertips. Sure, he acts like a little baka, but you put his axe in his hands, and he can set the world on fire. And underneath his screaming strings, I keep the song going. I give him the beacon to home in on when he's done with the licking. It's absolutely amazing to know, really *know* that we can each do our own thing in our own way and *still* come back into perfect harmony.

That's music. That's what I love.

Miyabi lives music in a way I can only dream about. I thought I was passionate about music until I met him. He's obsessed with it, consumed by it. If he didn't have music to escape to, he'd probably kill himself. I didn't know him before he lost his mother, so I don't know if he was ever able to take a break, give himself some space to breathe and relax. Even I have to take some time off, step away from the drums, every now and again. You need that perspective.

But he is talented. Insanely talented. I'll bet he could play any instrument in the world. The songs he writes are crazy awesome. He challenges me every time we practice, dares me to be good enough to play his music. It's a challenge I thrive on. I love it.

This band is like a second family to me, not quite but almost a replacement for the one I lost. Shuya, Akito, and Miyabi are practically my brothers. Before them, I'd never met anyone who felt the way about music that I do, who is so passionate, so intent on perfecting their offering to it. When we play together, it's like the world realigns and becomes perfect, for just a little while. When we make music, everything is right.

Except that everything isn't quite right. Miyabi may be the best friend I've ever had, but sometimes I want to hit him. Just haul off and punch the crap out of him. He gets into his little pity parties and has to drag everyone else down with him. Just like--

No. Not thinking about him. Not going to let that bastard ruin my life again.

But most of the time, it's awesome. Not only do we make music, we get to share music with others. We have fans. I still can't get over that. Honest to god fans. They like our music, and they like us. We're becoming celebrities, recognized musicians. Every day, we get a little more recognition, a little more fame. If you're not careful, it'll go to your head.

I don't want anything in my life that would get in the way of the music. It pulses in my heart, pounds in my veins. It's the air I breathe; I'd die without it.

There was one day that something really did interfere with the music, someone who completely threw off the beat. That new girl. The one who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The one Miyabi decided to dump all his anger and pain on.

I knew it was a bad day for Miyabi, so I was already keeping a closer eye on him. That's what friends do. If I knew that my mother was dead, I'd probably be pretty raw on that anniversary, too. But why he had to take it out on some girl who didn't mean to hurt him was beyond me. I stepped in, reasoned with him, tried to take his mind off what had happened. Not that it helped.

And I got a good look at her. She wasn't that pretty, not beautiful. She looked so scared, so bewildered. She didn't know any of us, had never heard of Orochi, had never heard of Miyabi's temper. When he unloaded on her, I was just trying to keep him from doing something stupid, honestly. I didn't think anything of the girl.

Except I did. I couldn't get her out of my head. I don't know what it was about her that I noticed. Maybe it was how vulnerable she was. I've had girlfriends before, and I know how to act around girls. Mother would skin me alive if I didn't have good manners. If she were here. I wish I knew where she was.

Anyway, the whole incident really rattled me, and I couldn't play. For the first time in ... ever, I couldn't play. The fact that I couldn't stop thinking about it, about how Miyabi had acted ... how she had looked ... it made me angry. Anything that got in the way of the music was something that had to go.

She didn't go. We kept running into her, again and again. And I began to realize there was more than just the obvious about her. She was genuinely nice, really cared for her friends. And smart. Wow; smart. It was really embarrassing, sitting next to her in chemistry and realizing just how smart she was. How much smarter than me.

I don't know exactly when it happened. The realization hit me hard. Music has always been my life, the rhythm that my heart beats in time with. Even with the other girls, all of whom were great girls and wonderful to know and spend time with, there was always the knowledge that they were second to the music. When it came to the line, I always chose music. They knew that, I knew that, and we were fine with it. I always tried to part on good terms.

So it was a real shock to realize that the music had changed. It was still there, still just as strong ... but it was different. At first, it was just a little different. A small change in the tempo. A slight retuning. Nothing to worry about.

But when I heard Miyabi talking about his "little mouse," something snapped inside me. I couldn't breathe. And I knew, then and there, that just like I couldn't live without music, I couldn't live without Yumi. She'd become part of the music.

Yumi fit into the music in a way no one but my band mates had. She was her own cadence, her own counter-melody. She was a harmony the deepened and enriched the chords I played to. She wasn't competition, she wasn't a threat. She blended. She fit.

And I will do everything I can to hold on to her. I know what not to do, for sure. That bastard who ruined my life, who drove my mother and little sister away because he couldn't keep-- Damn it, I said I wasn't going to think about him. The only time I'll think about him is when I need to make sure I'm not screwing up. If he did it, then I won't.

I won't betray Yumi. I won't hurt her or allow her to be hurt. I'll protect her, just like a man should protect the woman he loves. I made a mistake once, but I won't make it again. I won't forget to think about things from her point of view. I got so wrapped up in my own pain that I didn't see, couldn't see, what she was going through, too. He's selfish like that, so I won't be.

I've made mistakes in music before, and I always made sure to work through them. When I get a cramp in my leg or break a blood blister on my hand, I deal with it. When Miyabi goes off on one of his idiot, self-centered binges, I wait for him to come to his senses. When I want to die inside because of some thing that happens with Yumi, when she hurts me ... I'll face it like a man. I'll be better than he ever was.

It sounds weird, but I've got a lot of love in my life. I've got music. I've got the band, my brothers. I've got Yumi. Together, they all come together and create the beat of my heart.