

A person wearing a denim jacket and blue jeans is holding a worn, black leather suitcase. The suitcase is open, and a small white dog is visible inside. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

R.C. DUCANTLIN

GRIS-GRIS

A SHORT STORY

Gris-Gris

A Short Story

By

Ruairí Cinéad Ducantlin

Gris-Gris

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PREFACE

*"I NOTICED THAT ALL THE PRAYERS I USED TO
OFFER TO GOD, AND ALL THE PRAYERS I NOW
OFFER TO JOE PESCI, ARE BEING ANSWERED AT
ABOUT THE SAME 50% RATE.*

*HALF THE TIME I GET WHAT I WANT,
HALF THE TIME I DON'T...*

*SAME AS THE FOUR-LEAF CLOVER AND THE
HORSESHOE...*

*SAME AS THE VODOO LADY WHO TELLS YOU YOUR
FORTUNE BY SQUEEZING THE GOAT'S TESTICLES,
IT'S ALL THE SAME: 50-50.*

*SO JUST PICK YOUR SUPERSTITION, SIT BACK, MAKE
A WISH, AND ENJOY YOURSELF."*

GEORGE CARLIN

A Gris-Gris (Gree-Gree) is a talisman, amulet, voodoo charm, spell, or incantation believed capable of warding off evil and bringing good luck to oneself or of bringing misfortune to another.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gris-gris>

The inspiration for this little story came from the song The Guitar. Written by Guy Clark, Verlon Thompson, and nine guys from a guitar class.

You can buy the song wherever you get your music, or you can view the video at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHxOego2Sso>

Guy Clark's music discography and tour schedule can be found at:

<https://www.guyclark.com/>



PROLOGUE

*"I AM BETTER ABLE TO IMAGINE HELL THAN HEAVEN;
IT IS MY INHERITANCE, I SUPPOSE."*

ELINOR WYLIE

"Thank you all for coming. Ambrose asked me to start this reading with a quote from the play *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.

"What is past is prologue."

"Ambrose's intention with the quote is to

issue a reminder. Memories are long but they fade if you let them. Good deeds are remembered, the pain of longing forgotten.

Family is love.

In the end, at the end, he asked I read aloud and ask for an Amen.

“My friends, my family, my dear wife Marta, know that I loved you all and that I will love you from the beyond.”

The speaker paused, looked over the confused attendees, and waited for a staccato cacophony of “Amen” to fade before continuing.

“I am Delbert G. Myers Esquire. I am the duly appointed Executor for the Estate of the late Ambrose Myron Pellerin. I will commence with the reading of the will. Ambrose insisted the will be written and read in his unique style.



PART ONE

*"THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT THE FUTURE IS TO
CREATE IT."*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

THE DEAD SPEAK

“The legal crap first. I am Ambrose Myron Pellerin, the testator. That means I am the person making the Last Will and stating how my estate will be distributed. You are here because I am dead.

“Any challenges to the probate will result in my entire Estate reverting to the Veteran’s Charities I designated.

“My friend Delbert is the executor. For his lifelong friendship he is to receive the Bayou Glenmar ranch, all of its assets, and outstanding obligations.

“My cousin Merle Baron Mirgeaux will be the guardian of my horses and dogs for as long as they survive. Merle will see to the animals at both ranches until they pass. Merle will receive a stipend outlined in the attached schedule.

“Now to the part you all came to hear.

“Marta, we have not been married for more than twenty years, but I never stopped loving you. I should have been a better husband and father. You will receive a monthly stipend for the rest of your days.

“Lorianne, for being a good sister and letting me crash on your couch more times than we could count, you will also receive the monthly

stipend for the rest of your days.

“Alex, my son, it was not until you were twenty-four years old that I learned what it meant to be a father. I am glad we got to know each other and that you are fine musician and a good man. You will receive a monthly stipend until the month of your thirty-fifth birthday.”

“What!?! Are you kidding me? Who gets the big ranch?”

Looking up from the will, and down from the dais, Delbert stared down the outburst from Ambrose’s first son, Alex Martin Pellerin. Known as AMP, he is a disappointment to everyone.

“AMP, Ambrose anticipated your outburst, here are his exact words. ‘If Alex does not shut up, or challenges the will in any way, his stipend will revert to the Veteran’s Charities.’”

Alex slumped deeper into the unforgiving folding chair.

“Continuing ... Alain Justin Pellerin, AJ, I never married your mother, although I tried. When your mother and I were together, I was not the man I later became. She was right to refuse

me. Nonetheless, I have always tried to do my best for you. I have followed your career and it is a regret I did not know you better.

“The remainder of my estate, all of it, assets, debts, all of it, will revert to the name on the case.”

With the statement, and realization they were probably going to not receive a portion of Ambrose’s wealth, a series of complaints erupted from the assembled friends and family.

“What the hell, couillon Ambrose. He always believed that VooDoo tripe.”

“Beck moi tchew.”

“Ambrose was always full of the medre.”

Delbert resumed control and continued the reading of the will.

“Enough, we will continue. AMP, AJ, please come forward.”

THE MEEK ARE CHOSEN

While AMP and AJ stepped around the chairs in the overfilled conference room, Delbert turned to the sideboard, and pulled Ambrose's beloved guitar from a worn and tattered case. Turning back to the half-bothers, he held the guitar up for one of the sons to take. AMP stepped forward and grabbed the guitar.

AJ meekly stepped back and to the side. Delbert shrugged at AMP's impudence and resumed the reading of the will.

"I assume AMP took the guitar. He has always assumed it was his inheritance. We will see."

Crossing themselves with trepidation, one of the attendees interrupted.

"Pauvre Bête. Ambrose is speaking to AMP from the grave."

Resuming, the lawyer looked at AMP and, unblinking, recited the will from memory.

"AMP, AJ, you will both play the guitar. Play whatever you want. No more than three songs. When you are done, the name on the case will receive my estate."

Trying to see if he was the heir to the modest fortune, AMP quickly stepped over to the guitar case, pulled the lid closed, and turned back in surprise.

“It says Ambrose M. Pellerin. What is going on here?”

Without a hint of frustration, Delbert continued to read the will from memory.

“AMP play a song then give the guitar to AJ. When you have both played, the reading of the will is complete.”

“No! No way! AJ will play first.”

AMP took four quick strides and handed the guitar to AJ. Beaming with a massive grin, the lawyer pulled a director’s style chair to the front, motioned for AJ to sit, then continued the reading.

“AJ, please play something Ambrose would have been proud to hear.”

After testing the guitar for tuning, finding it in perfect tune, the nervous twenty-two-year-old stretched his fingers, strummed a few chords,

then played a flawless acoustic version of Dust in the Wind by Kansas. Not satisfied, without a gap, AJ continued easily playing Fire and Rain by James Taylor. Melding seamlessly, with an art and a worm comfort, AJ played Knockin' on Heaven's Door by Bob Dylan

Seeing the attendee's rapt attention and obvious joy in the appropriate choice of music, AMP stepped in front of AJ. "It's my turn."

AJ stood, waved shyly to the applause, and stepped back to the side and waited. AMP sat, checked the tuning, decided it was not perfect and twisted a couple of tuning pegs.

Confusing most of the audience, AMP's attempt to play Time in a Bottle by Jim Croce was less than stellar, with several missed notes and erratic timing. Incorrectly surmising it was a contest for the estate, AMP decided he needed to do more. Unfortunately, his rendition of Redemption Song by Bob Marley was muddled and distorted.

Frustrated, standing to a mild applause, AMP handed the guitar to the lawyer. Delbert returned the guitar to the case and closed the lid. AJ stood, quietly, waiting. Shaking, AMP stepped over to the case, mutely reading the name on the

cover. The lawyer spoke while AMP stood fixed, shaking his head, staring at the guitar case.

“AMP, what name is on the case?”

“No way! This can’t be true. All I ever wanted was to play this guitar. AJ, he doesn’t even want to play! He doesn’t want to be a musician. No way!”

“AMP, what name is on the case?”

AMP turned, glared at AJ with a dismissive wave toward the attorney and stormed from the room. The remaining attendee’s eyes ignored AMP and remained focused on the lawyer. Delbert retrieved the case, turned to the conference room, nodded for AJ to stand next to him, while he held up the case for everyone to see the name on the lid.

“Alain J. Pellerin”

Handing the case to AJ, Delbert returned to the dais and completed the reading of the will.

“The remainder of my estate is bestowed upon the name on the case. Challenges to this decision will result in all assets not explicitly directed reverting to the veteran’s charities.

“More legal crap. The witness for the Last Will of Ambrose Myron Pellerin is Judge Roylen Robert Ridgegate.’

“Signed: R. R. Ridgegate, Esq.”

The assembly stood, most shaking hands and filing out of the large conference room. Several attendees rushed toward the dais demanding answers. AJ stood to the side, quietly holding the guitar, wonder what had just happened.



PART TWO

*"PRAY: TO ASK THE LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE TO BE
ANNULLED ON BEHALF OF A SINGLE PETITIONER
CONFESSEDLY UNWORTHY."*

AMBROSE BIERCE

WONDERMENT

"AJ, you love teaching?"

"Aubrey, just like you, I do love teaching but I love music more. You know that I wanted to be a musician from the time I first heard my father play. Being a musician and making a living is a long shot. Why do you think I became a music teacher?"

Six weeks from the reading of his father's will, AJ, and his live-in girlfriend, were sipping wine while debating AJ's idea of quitting his teaching job to become a full-time musician.

"AJ, you play that guitar all day, every day. You know we can't afford this place on one salary. If you quit teaching, we will have to move again. We just got settled, we are building a life."

"Aubrey, you are forgetting something."

Topping up their wine glasses, with a sly grin, AJ waited. Aubrey Marie Richard did not bite. Sighing with joy, AJ was reminded why he loved the tough, blonde, fifth-generation Louisianan.

"Aubrey, we can move to the ranch. The ranch is self-sustaining, and I have the inheritance. We can put all of your salary into savings."

"It is the studio. It is the guitar."

“Yes, Aubrey, the studio at the ranch is state-of-the-art. I can practice and record. If you want, you can quit working also. We can live the life we dreamed. We can do this, with thanks to my father.”

Realizing the argument was lost, Aubrey smiled, tilted her wine glass in acknowledgement, then sipped. AJ felt more love than he had ever known. Setting his glass down, reaching for the guitar, he decided to play a song for Aubrey, something she would remember.

When the song was over, AJ looked up to see Aubrey set her wineglass on the side table. Standing, she slipped her summer dress from her shoulders letting it fall to the floor. Stepping over to AJ, looking down, Aubrey was surprised by her own questions.

“I didn’t know you knew that song. It was beautiful. What is it called? When did you learn it?”

Leaning the guitar against the arm of the overstuffed chair, AJ turned back and put his hands on his love’s hips and looked up at her face shadowed by the afternoon light.

“It is song by Van Morrison titled Tupelo Honey. I just learned it.”

“You just learned it? When?”

“Just now.”

"You played it by ear? Just now? It sounded perfect."

"Yes, it was in my head. I played it."

Leaning forward, placing her face an inch from her man's face, Aubrey committed to their life together.

"I will move to the ranch. Just remember, guitar man, 'An ounce of performance is worth a pound of promises.'"

"Did you just quote Mae West?"

"I sure did. 'Always remember to smile and look up at what you got in life.' Marilyn Monroe said that. What I got is you. That is enough for me."

AJ pulled his love to him and the overstuffed chair.

PRACTICE

"AJ, we are going to dinner with Mitch and Alva. You promised. If you are not ready in ten minutes, I am leaving without you."

"Okay. Okay. I need to change my shirt and brush my teeth."

AJ put the guitar in its stand, walked toward the master bedroom. Not believing AJ would make it to the car. Aubrey shook her head, turned, walking toward the front door she

hollered at AJ.

"Ten minutes! I'll be in the car. Ten minutes and I am driving away."

Zippering down the long gravel driveway with AJ holding on too tightly, Aubrey loved her new Mercedes SUV. Turning on the highway, toward Thibodaux, she decided to bring up the only topic she and AJ fought about.

"AJ, it has been almost ten months. You have been practicing non-stop for ten months. Everything you play is perfect. That guitar and you are ... I agreed to come out here, to live at the ranch, and you agreed to become a musician. All you do is practice. I need more. You need more. What is your plan?"

"Aubrey, we have talked about this, over and over. When I am ready, I will book a gig."

"No, AJ. No. You need to plan. A schedule. Open the glove box."

AJ opened the glove box and took out the obvious sheet of single folded paper. Unfolding the sheet, reading in silence, AJ was both angry and more in love than he thought possible.

"You did this?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I called Delbert, he told me to call Marcus Thibaut, your father's manager. He told me what

I needed to do, who to call. I made a few calls.”

“What does Marcus want for helping you?”

“He wants to talk to you if the gigs go well.”

“He wants fifteen percent.”

“Yeah, probably more like twenty. What do you think?”

Waiting for Aubrey to complete the turn on to Route One, three miles from Thibodaux, AJ knew this was a tipping point for Aubrey.

“These are two small clubs. I did not know Dead Billy’s was still open. Isn’t Margie’s Beaux up in Metairie?”

“Dead Billy’s is still open, and it is still a dive. It is perfect place for your first gig. Yes, Margie’s Beaux is in Metairie. Before you ask, neither gig is paying you. One set, acoustic, forty-five minutes, at Dead Billy’s. Saturday, three weeks from today.

“Margie’s Beaux is also on Saturday, five weeks from today. Two forty-five-minute sets. They wanted amps but I told them mic’d acoustic.

“Also, they both wanted you to go on at ten, but I insisted on a nine o’clock start time. So, guitar man, does that plan work for you?”

“Aubrey, I do not know what to say ... Do you think I am ready?”

“AJ, you have been ready since you received that guitar.”

Pulling into the parking lot of the Thibodaux’s newest and trendiest restaurant, Aubrey waved at Mitch and Alva who were climbing out of their car. Parking, Aubrey looked to AJ with a raised eyebrow. AJ’s smile told her all she needed.

“Aubrey, I read somewhere, I don’t know if it is true, but I read a good story. The legend is one of love. Ian Anderson’s first wife, Jennie Franks, refused to marry him until he became a successful musician or changed his career choice. He locked himself away, writing and practicing, for months. The result was the album Aqualung.

“Jennie helped Ian understand his life. If you believe in me, then I believe in me.”

Aubrey pushed away a tear, leaned over, kissed her love, then pushed open the door. Waiting for AJ to come around the car, she smiled and reaffirmed their love.

“AJ, I believe in *you*, but I believe in *us* more.”

THIEVERY

"That's odd, the alarm was not set."

Hearing Aubrey's comment alerted AJ who bolted around his love, dashing from the garage to the music room. Aubrey could hear AJ's anguish before she reached the music room.

"Where the hell is it? It was right here! It is always right here! Aubrey, I know AMP took it."

"AJ calm down. We will find it. Let's check the security cameras."

"Good idea!"

Racing out of the music room, toward the office and the security control panel, AJ was sure his half brother had taken the guitar while he and Aubrey were at dinner with Mitch and Alva. AJ took the seat and pulled it up to the monitor and the security control panel. Aubrey stood behind AJ with her left hand on his right shoulder.

"Look! Right there! That's him. Look at the time. He must have been waiting for us to leave, he is walking up as we are driving away."

"You don't know that is AMP. Whoever it is, he is wearing dark jeans, dark shoes, gloves, and a dark hoodie with the hood pulled over his face."

"Whatever. It is him, look!"

The images showed the dark figure

approach the rear of the main house from the direction of the lake. The figure walked right up to the security panel on the outside of the mudroom room. Clearly pressing the correct code, the figure pushed open the door and entered the mud room.

Quickly pressing the correct icon, the images from interior cameras synced and appeared in a six-box grid. Rewinding the images, the hooded figure was standing in the mud room. Pressing play, AJ and Aubrey watched the figure walk through the mud room, across the kitchen, down the hall, turn left and stop in the music room.

Double-clicking the correct box on the image grid, the music room filled the monitor. AJ and Aubrey watched as the hooded figure walked directly to the guitar. The figure removed the guitar from its stand before turning to the case. Placing the guitar in the case, the figure closed the clasps, lifted the case, and exited the house reversing the path he used to enter.

“We should have changed the security codes.”

“Yes, Aubrey, we should have changed the codes. Let’s go get it back.”

Standing, AJ’s face was an expression Aubrey had never seen on her love. Realizing her

kind man was going to do something rash, she blocked his path.

"AJ, you and I know that is AMP in the images. We also know he had the security code. We can't prove it was AMP. Before you do something stupid, let's think about this."

"Think? What is there to think about? He has my guitar and I am going to get it back."

"Honey, you are a little wound up, you need to calm down and think. Where is he and where is the guitar? You don't think he went straight home with it, do you?"

Standing still, calming his breathing, AJ realized Aubrey was correct. He did not know where AMP was or whether he had the guitar. The feeling of loss was so immense, AJ recognized he was considering irrational acts. Realizing she had gotten through, Aubrey pressed forward.

"How about this, we call AMP. I'll call AMP, he is more likely to take a call from me. I'll tell him we have his face on the camera. I'll offer him a deal, if he returns the guitar and we won't press charges. Does that sound good?"

Thinking, slowly sitting back in the office chair, AJ looked up before nodding affirmative.

"Our phones are on the kitchen island, mine is in my purse."

Walking from the office to the kitchen,

they realized AJ's phone was ringing but it stopped before he could pick it up. Checking, they were shocked to find five missed calls. AJ doesn't get five calls in a week. Five in a under and hour was a slight shock. Staring at the phone, it was Aubrey who connected the dots.

"That says TMRC. Thibodaux Regional Medical Center. AJ, why is the hospital retying to reach you?"

Pressing the dial icon, AJ then pressed the speaker button so Aubrey could hear.

"Thibodaux Regional Medical Center, how may I help you?"

"My name is AJ Pellerin, Alain Pellerin, I received a few calls from this number."

"Yes, Mister Pellerin, let me transfer you to the ER."

Aubrey mouthed the words "Emergency Room." AJ shrugged.

"Mister Pellerin?"

"This is AJ."

"Thank you for calling us back. I am Doctor Broussard, Alex Pellerin came in badly injured. He told us to call you we started the procedures."

"Badly injured?"

"Yes, Mister Pellerin, Alex is hurt. Can you come down to the Medical Center?"

"Yes, of course, we will be there is twenty-five minutes."



"I am sorry Doctor. I don't think I understand. Can you repeat what you said?"

"Mister Pellerin ..."

"Everyone calls me AJ."

"AJ, your brother ..."

"Half-brother."

"AJ, your half-brother has suffered a severe laceration to his face. His face was cut but he refuses to tell us how he received the cut."

"Okay, he is cut bad. What does that have to do with me?"

"AJ, Alex said you would know why he got hurt? Do you know why he was cut?"

"No, Doctor, we where at dinner with another couple. We got home to find we had been burgled."

"You were robbed?"

"Yes, someone took the guitar my father bestowed to me."

"Oh. I see. Alex keep saying the *guitar hurt him*. Does that make sense to you?"

"The guitar hurt him ... No, that makes no

sense. It is just a guitar.”

“Okay, well, let’s ask Alex. We have stabilized the wound while we wait for the helicopter to take him to a facial surgeon in New Orleans. He is in a bad way.”

“Got it, he is hurt.”

“AJ, your half-brother may lose his eye.”

AJ looked to Aubrey, a little shocked. She took his hand and waved for the doctor to lead them to AMP.

Propped up on a gurney, bandages covering his face, leaving only his left eye exposed, AMP was teary eyed.

“AJ, I am so sorry. It hurt me. I am going to lose my eye because I took it. I am so sorry.”

“AMP, relax and tell me what happened.”

“I took it.”

“Yes, we know, we saw you on the cameras.”

“I went to Amanda’s. I told her we made a trade, but she knew I took it. She said nothing. I started to play but nothing sounded right. I tried to tune it, but it stayed out of tune.”

Tears flowing from the visible eye, the nurse reached up and dabbed AMP’s face before he continued.

“I figured it needed a new string. The first, e-string. I pulled off the old string and threaded

the new string. It was threaded and I was beginning to tighten the string when it happened.”

More tears caused the nurse to step up and dab AMP’s face again.

“What happened AMP?”

“AJ, the sting broken and hit me in the face.”

“AMP, how much tension were you using?”

“AJ, that’s just it. There was no tension, I had not wound the entire string. The guitar did this. AJ, that guitar is evil.”

“No AMP, you must be remembering it wrongly.”

AJ was interrupted by two orderlies in medical flight suits striding into the ER.

“Is this the patient?”

“Yes, I am Doctor Broussard, here’s your paperwork.”

Without asking permission, the flight medics, secured the IV to the gurney and began pushing AMP from the ER. Watching the swinging doors close behind the flight medical, AJ looked to the Doctor.

“Will he lose the eye?”

“I don’t know. That is why we are flying him to New Orleans.”

The doctor turned and walked away. The

nurse walked up and handed AJ a clear plastic bag containing a wallet, a can of dip, several guitar picks, and car keys. Taking the bag, AJ nodded toward the door.

“Amanda must be in the waiting room.”



In the parking lot, Amanda, Aubrey, and AJ stood behind AMP’s car.

“Amanda, we will follow you to the house and get the guitar.”

“No need, the guitar is here, in the trunk.”

“What?”

“AJ, AMP insisted I put the guitar in the trunk.”

“He was cut badly, and he insisted you put the guitar in the trunk? Why?”

“AJ ... AMP said the guitar told him to take it with him.”

THE SHOW

“Are you ready?”

“Aubrey, same as when you asked two minutes ago, and the two minutes before that, I am ready.”

AJ and Aubrey were sitting to the side of

the small, uneven, stage at Dead Billy's dive bar. Ten minutes before his set was scheduled to begin, Aubrey was fidgeting and unable to remain calm. Realizing Aubrey was nervous about the gig going well, AJ changed the topic.

"It is good AMP did not lose the eye. But that scar is ugly. It is thin but it runs from his forehead to his jawline. It split his eyebrow in half. It is going to require several surgeries to remove."

"AMP can't afford the plastic surgery."

"He can if we help."

"AJ, he tried to steal your guitar. He has never once been kind to you. Why would you help him?"

"I dunno ... maybe ... Aubrey, doing the right thing is never wrong."

Smiling, Aubrey leaned forward, kissed her man, patted his knee then pointed to the crooked stage. Nodding, AJ stood, leaned to kiss Aubrey again, before walking to the stage.

Pulling the wooden chair forward and the mic stand back, AJ seated himself. Strumming a few chords, before looking out at the small crowd, AJ was surprised to find he was not nervous.

AJ felt at home on the dingy stage.

"AJ!"

Looking up, AJ was shocked to find Aubrey standing next to him on the stage. She was shaking his shoulder, hollering over the din, trying to get his attention. The crowd was overflowing with a deafening applause.

"Oh sorry, I guess I was into the music. Where did all these people come from?"

"AJ, they started texting and calling their friends. People rushed over to hear *you*."

"Oh. That's nice ... what time is it?"

"AJ, it is midnight."

Stunned at Aubrey's response, AJ stood, waved, and mouthed *Thank You* to the crowd. Turing right to exit the stage, he felt calm and happy. Silently, he placed the guitar in the case and looked up to the find Dead Billy's manager holding out a check.

"It is twice the normal amount for a two-hour set. Can you come back next week?"

Taking the check, AJ nodded to Aubrey for a response to the manager's request.

"He played for three hours. Next week will not work. We have several shows scheduled, how about I call you with a couple of open dates?"

Disappointed, the manager nodded, handed Aubrey his card, and walked away.

Between the back of the dive bar and the front door, two dozen people requested AJ's autograph. Turning right on the sidewalk, Aubrey and AJ reached their car after a short, silent, six-minute walk. Closing the hatch, AJ climbed in the passenger seat. Aubrey was pulling out of the parking stall before AJ had closed the door.

"What's the hurry?"

"AJ, do you know what just happened?"

"Well ... no ... I was kind of lost in the moment. Did I really play for three hours?"

"Yes, three hours. Do you not remember the set?"

"Aubrey, I remember sitting down. I strummed a few chords. There were not very many people in the club. Then I played. The next thing I remember is you shaking me. Did you record the session?"

"What? Record? Yes, I recorded it on my phone. I had to you use your phone when mine filled up. AJ, you played songs I have not heard you practice."

"What? Which songs?"

"AJ, someone yelled Navajo Rug. I had to look it up. You played Navajo Rug by someone named Tom Russell."

"Tom Russell? I thought Robert Earl Keen wrote Navajo Rug. Hmmm...."

"Have you ever practiced that song?"

"No, I don't think I have practiced that song. But I know the Robert Earl Keen version."

Aubrey glanced sideways before continuing.

"That is not all, you did not stop playing. No breaks for three hours. Do your hands hurt?"

"Hurt? No. I feel good."

"I think if I had not interrupted you, you might have kept playing."

"Do you think so?"

Pulling on to the highway, Aubrey looked over to AJ with a feeling of uncertainty.

"Yes, AJ, you were in another place."

"Where did all the people come from?"

"AJ, after your second song people were on their phones. They were screaming at their friends to come down and *see the guitar player*. You started at nine o'clock, the place was full by ten with a line forty deep on the sidewalk."

"Oh. That's nice."

"Nice? Nice? AJ, it is phenomenal. People love your playing."



PART THREE

*"SUCCESS IS PEACE OF MIND WHICH IS A DIRECT
RESULT OF SELF-SATISFACTION IN KNOWING YOU
DID YOUR BEST TO BECOME THE BEST YOU ARE
CAPABLE OF BECOMING."*

JOHN WOODEN

GOOD JUJU

"Really? How many?"

"At least eighteen thousand. It is the same setup as George Strait's shows. Except they are putting you on a rotating platform. It'll be the same as always, you, a chair, an amp, and two mics. But the revolving platform will slowly turn, three-sixty, letting everyone in the arena see you."

"Oh, wow. Aubrey, did you do all this?"

"Yes, AJ, but I had help. Marcus helped. Before you get all worked up, I pay him a flat fee for advice. He has the contacts and the experience. He also thinks you should cut an album. Your shows sell-out in minutes. You could expand your fan base with an album."

"You know what my father said."

"No, I know what you told me your father said."

"Aubrey, I think my father knew the guitar would come to me. He never said much about it, but he did tell me, when I was about thirteen, to never take the easy road. Albums are the lazy way. People want the shows. They want to feel they are part of something by listening in person.

"No band. No light show. Nothing but me, the guitar, and the songs. That is the way it is

and the way it will stay.

"Of course, I know, the shows are recorded. After my death, you can release albums. Until then, I will keep playing the shows."

"How many shows do you think you can do in a year? AJ, you need to slow down. You have been averaging two shows a week for two years. Two years! I told you I am not going anywhere but I worry about you."

"Do I look tired? Aubrey, this is what I was meant to do. This is who I am. But ... Okay, how about a compromise? We will cut back to no more than one show per week and only venues with at least five-thousand seats?"

"Counteroffer. One show per week and only three weeks in any given month. I will adjust the schedule so we have two weeks off every three weeks."

"Deal."



"Did that just happen?"

Backstage, AJ was wiping the guitar clean, prepping to close it up in its tattered case.

"Yes AJ, eighteen thousand people stood

on their feet for seventeen minutes demanding an encore. They love you and they love your music. All of the vendors, security, and maintenance personnel stopped and stood watching the encore. Five songs seem like a bit much for an encore, but the crowd was happy. The arena scheduler came to me, told me they have a Friday and Saturday in November available. I told him I needed to talk to you first, but he said he would hold it for a week.

“AJ, we can double the fee for each night. They will give us a suite and all expenses except gambling.”

“Aubrey, do we need any more money. If my mother or AMP’s mother knew just how much dad left me, they’d sue tomorrow.”

“AJ, in less than three years, you have made more than your father did in thirty. There is nothing wrong with making money.”

Pulling the dressing room door open, speaking over his shoulder as he exited for the limo, AJ shocked Aubrey once again.

“I play because it is who I am. Money or no money, she it calls me to play.”



"How many views?"

"Three point five billion in forty-five days."

"Aubrey, do you know how much money that is?"

"Yes, AJ, I know how much money it is. You were right to suggest videos instead of an album. They tell me there are people who have viewed the song more than twelve-hundred times. They have it on a loop, playing for hours.

"I have looked at the recordings, there are at least three more high-quality videos we can post. We will spread them out, six or eight weeks apart. Try to keep the momentum.

"I could get used to this driver thing. Tonight's show sold out in eleven minutes. This is the first time you have back-to-back nights in a long while. Are you going to pace yourself tonight?"

"No, Aubrey, no old songs. I have another song. Tonight, will be like every other night. I will play what comes to me."

"That is what people love about your concerts, no two are the same playlist. You wrote another song? Prince was a prolific song writer but you ... do you, write a song every day?"

"Not every day."

"How do you remember them all?"

"I don't know, I just do. At the show

tomorrow, the fifth song will be the new song. The crowd may be loud, tell the video operators to be ready."

"AJ, the crowd is always loud. You just never hear them."



"They offered you a residency. It is the new thing. You play one weekend per quarter. Two shows, one on Friday and one on Saturday. AJ, they offered you more than Elton got his first residency."

"Aubrey, it is not about the money. I am called, she calls, it calls, to play and sing the songs. If you think a residency is smart move, then we will do it. But and this is important, I will continue to play around Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi between gigs in Las Vegas."

Ignoring the increasing frequent, yet obtuse, reference to *she* Aubrey, continued in her manager persona.

"The residency contract prohibits you playing anywhere else without permission."

"Change the contract. I will play small venues, unannounced, not advertised, and at my discretion."

"You sound like a lawyer. What is a small venue?"

"Under two hundred."

"I think I can get that into the contract. AJ, have you thought about us?"

"Us? What about us?"

"Is this our life? Is there more? What about kids? What about a family? My family feels left out of my life. I love you and I know you love me. AJ, is there more?"

Staring out of the limousine's dark window at the crowd of autograph seekers, AJ knew Aubrey's question was important. *She loves me as much, maybe more, than Aubrey.*

"I understand. We have neglected your family. I don't have much of a family, but we have neglected them also. Schedule a fais do do. Invite everyone from your side and my side. It will be spectacular."

Holding AJ's arm, preventing him from opening the door, Aubrey let him know her true thoughts.

"It does not love you more than I love you."

BAD JUJU

"AJ who are you talking to?"

"What? Talking? No one. Myself."

"AJ, honey, you are starting to worry me. That guitar is never out of your sight. Honey, listen, there is more to life than music. I know it is important to you. Is it more important than us? AJ, we have more money than we can spend. We have a warm home. Family and friends that love us."

When Aubrey stopped talking, AJ realized she had tears on her face. *Something important must be on her mind. She never interrupts me in the music room.*

"Aubrey, what is it?"

"I want to ask you something."

Wiping her face, Aubrey could not look at AJ. *She is very worried.* Standing, putting the guitar in its stand, he walked over and hugged his love.

"Aubrey, you are scaring me. Tell me what it is."

"AJ, I want to go on vacation. Just me and you for two weeks. Somewhere warm and far away."

Laughing, AJ missed an important clue.

"Of course, we can take a vacation. Anytime you want. We can lease that private jet the casino sends for us."

Looking up at her man, Aubrey recognized he missed the point. Speaking through new

tears, she clarified her request.

"AJ, you, me, an overnight bag with our toothbrushes. That's it. Nothing else. We will buy clothes and whatever we need when we get there."

The look of realization on AJ's face resembled someone being shot. At least what the movies want you to think being shot looks like. Stepping back to arm's length, he mumbled two words.

"I see."

"Do you? Do you understand what I am asking?"

This is important, she is telling me something. I need to make the right choice.

"I think two weeks in the Maldives will save our souls."

"Really? The Maldives? It will take us a full day to get that and a full day to get back. Did you just quote Jewel?"

"Yes, Aubrey, the Maldives. We can do this. I can do this. For you."

Through her tears, stepping up and hugging AJ tightly, Aubrey quoted from the same Jewel song.

"'Who will save your soul if you won't save your own?' Thank you. I know it will be hard for you to be away for two full weeks."

Hugging tightly, the only person he ever loved, AJ knew this was the beginning of something that could turn out to be painful. *She won't like me leaving her here for two weeks.*

THE INHERITANCE

"I love you so much."

"AJ, you can hug me, I won't break."

"I know, I just don't want to hurt the baby."

"Silly man, I am *maybe* five weeks along. It happened when we were in the Maldives. You know me, every month on-time like a German train schedule. When I missed, I knew. I waited a week and TaDa!"

Picking her up, turning slowly in a circle, AJ's pride in his girlfriend grew to new levels.

"Let's get married."

Pushing away so that he let her down gently, Aubrey looked up at AJ's radiant face.

"Married?"

"Yes, Married. Saturday. We will make it a *fais do do* to top all parties! I'll get judge Ridgeway to come out of retirement to perform the ceremony.

"Aubrey, I love you so much."

"I'm in if you promise one thing."

"Anything."

"You can't play at the wedding. This is for us and no one else. Family, friends, they can have fun, but it is our day. You and me. Do you understand?"

AJ's smile slid sideways while he slowly nodded affirmative.

"You know?"

"Yes, AJ, I know. I want her to understand she can stay but she has to share you. I was here before her, I am here today, and I will be here tomorrow.

"I need you to understand what I am saying. Do you?"

She is making a deal.

"Yes, I understand. Eventually, she will pass to someone else. Someone worthy. You are telling, when that happens, when she leaves, you will still be here."

"Yes, that is exactly what I am saying."

"Do you understand, she will not allow us to give her away? When she was pawned, she became angry. She hung in that window for too many years. I made a promise. She will always be loved."

Aubrey had prepared for AJ to argue and cajole. She was not prepared for open and raw honesty.

"AJ, does she talk to you?"

She thinks I am nuts.

"No! Well not exactly. When I am playing or writing songs, ideas and thoughts appear in my head. Something is pushing me to be a better musician. I think she likes being held. Held when I play her. She is trading my music for companionship."

Slowly sitting in the worn leather chair, eyeing the guitar through the open door, Aubrey turned her face back to the standing AJ.

"AJ, please, sit."

AJ complied. *Here it comes.*

"AJ, my Grand-mère told me when I was seven that I would know the truth of the JuJu. Maw-Maw said I had a destiny. As a child, she learned the readings from their housekeeper.

"She told me ... she said, 'One day you will fight for your man, but you can't win.' She scared me and I demanded she read it again. She took pity on a young girl and read again. I have never forgotten the look on her face after the second reading. She did it third time, and the same thing came up.

"She said, 'One day you will fight for your man, you can't win. You can make a bargain.' To Maw-Maw, it meant I was destined to make a deal with le démon. Before she died, last year, I

went to her. Told her what I knew. She read again and the same thing happened.

“‘You can make a bargain.’ She said. It took a while, but I figured it out. It is not a *deal per se*. The *bargain* is an agreement. The Maldives were the key. I knew it was my cycle and I was probably going to get pregnant. Getting pregnant confirmed I have control and can stand my ground.

“She stays. I stay also. Our child will know our love and her love also. The agreement is we protect her, and she protects you. By protecting you, she will protect me and our child.

“There it is. A bargain. An agreement.”

AJ sat granite still, thinking. *She really does know. She must have the sight. Is she being truthful? I wonder ...*

“Do you have the sight?”

Beaming, Aubrey adored the idea her man came to the correct assumption on the first attempt.

“Yes. Maw-Maw saw it in a reading when I was not yet born. She taught me when, and when not, to use it. She said without the sight, I would not be able to make the agreement hold. She called it the bargain.

“AJ, I can make it hold. This is our life and she is part of it just like you and me. I know you

don't much go for all of this stuff ... Do you appreciate what I am telling you?"

She knows I have changed.

"Until she came, I did not believe. I had no faith. It was not who I am or who I wanted to be. My life was teaching music and loving you. Now ... I believe in something. What I believe, exactly, I do not know.

"How do we confirm the agreement? Is there a reading or something?"

"I don't do readings. I do not know how we can confirm the agreement."

I know how.

"Play the guitar."

"What?"

"We will know if there is agreement if you can play the guitar."

"AJ, I don't know how to play the guitar?"

"Sure, you do, remember the chords I showed you?"

"AJ, that was three years ago. I don't remember the chords."

Without responding AJ walked to the music room, picked up and returned with the guitar. Handing it to the seating Aubrey, he nodded *take it*. Sitting forward, taking the guitar, Aubrey's eyes showed fear but did not leave AJ.

Grasping the frets, feeling a sense of

warmth and love, Aubrey began playing. Aubrey's expression of wonder and awe accompanied the beautiful notes of *Teach Your Children* by Crosby, Still, Nash & Young



"But mom, I want to go fishing?"

"Ethan, I told you yesterday, you can't go fishing until they come and remove the gators."

"Miranda says it will be okay."

"No fishing until the gators are relocated."

"You never let me have any fun. Miranda would let me go."

"Miranda is not the mom, I am, and I say no fishing."

"But ..."

"Ethan, enough. This topic is closed. Where is your father?"

"On the back porch, learning a new song."

"Go tell him lunch is ready."

As Ethan bolted away to retrieve his father, Aubrey hollered at their twelve-year-old son.

"Don't ask your father to go fishing and leave Miranda on the porch!"

"Aw mom."

THANK YOU!

“When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.” – Willie Nelson

Dear reader, please accept my sincere gratitude for spending your precious time reading the words I was able to cobble together. The story of Miranda will continue with *Die a Good Death*.

Also, I am reminded often of how lucky I am to be able to write and do so much.

“Be grateful for what you already have while you pursue your goals. If you aren’t grateful for what you already have, what makes you think you would be happy with more.” – Roy T. Bennett

I have my health, a loving family, a wonderful wife, and a desire to keep them all.

Thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fortunately, in secondary school, my interest in reading was sparked. A close friend and an instructor, who took interest in a boy he later called 'The rebel without a clue.,' were instrumental in my learning the value of a good book. Both piqued my interest in reading. My lifelong friend inspired me to read J.R.R. Tolkien and I became addicted to the fantasy genre. The instructor required I read interesting historical novels for academic credit. Frank Norris, Leon Uris, and Ken Follett are inspirations and fuel my love of history.

Born to a military family, it was only logical that I follow the military tradition. However, after four years of "yes sirs" and scraping the wax off floors I decided there must be more fun in a corporate career.

Thirty plus years of work experiences across the globe, the corporate career landed me in Colorado where I live with my wife and I can be close to my children and grandchildren.

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