

## ENCORE

By

Andrew Shaughnessy

Warren Jennings squeezes a lemon wedge into the cup of tea he's just poured from the teapot that has sat idle between us for the last ninety minutes. Those hands. I remember the left one and its calloused fingers that could form magical chords on the fret board of any guitar as the perfect muscle memory of his right hand worked the strings. There is nothing melodious, however, about this moment. His apartment, a walk-up above a sporting goods store on College Street West in Toronto, seems smaller, more dated, mustier, than when I'd arrived two hours ago.

I'd given myself an hour for this visit. I don't know what's made me stay longer. Maybe it's the memory of the three-quarter size guitar he has hanging from the wall. Maybe I am waiting, as I used to forty years ago, for him to light a fire, pull it down, crack the perennially bad "what do you get when you cross a ukulele with a guitar" joke—the answer was always the same: "a girlfriend"—and watch him play it for old time's sake. There's always the sting of truth in jest.

"I should go," I say again, this time with all the resolve fifty-eight years of strong, independent womanhood have given me.

"It's raining," he says. That's better than the *I always thought you'd end up a spinster* line he delivered, in jest, just a moment ago. He adds milk to his cup. I can't tell whether he is absent-minded or deliberately trying something on to extend the moment. The milk curdles—a metaphor if ever there was one.

"I have an umbrella from the hotel." He knows this. I arrived with it. I look to the kitchen, wondering whether I take my cup out. I like to be polite, but I don't care about cleaning up. I am looking for an escape route.

He pushes his cup away with an accusatory look as if something else is to blame for the mess he has made—always someone else but never him. "At least grab a cab," he says.

Always the gentleman. Like the summer before university when we returned to the summer camp we worked at in our teenage years. We had driven to

Temagami together from our hometown for a reunion—of sorts. Him riding shotgun, playing that three-quarter length guitar the whole way—a three-and-a-half-hour drive that felt like a courtship for me. It was just a lark for him. After the weekend, he drove back with Susan Elliott, and his beloved guitar. I drove home alone—another metaphor were I in the mood to count clichés.

The crumpled note I wrote at the hotel with the directions to Warren’s apartment lies on the table beside the tuna and egg sandwiches—the kind one might find in the takeout aisle in a grocery store. The kind one might find at a funeral. The ones cut into triangles with three sides. I’ll stop counting metaphors.

“I’ll take the streetcar.”

He doesn’t look up. “Do you need directions?”

“I got here, didn’t I?”

“You did. The instructions I gave you must have been pretty good.” Now he looks at me with that smile, and I am the one that wants to look away. He says: “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

After that remark, I do look away. “I wasn’t sure either.” I’m being honest but only partly so. I did accept his social media invitation a few months ago. We’d not been in touch in ages, since before his wedding—to Susan Jennings (née Elliott). A flurry of “friend invites” had gone out among those of us in the old high school class. I had accepted his as if a wind of nostalgia had knocked the sense out of me. It’s like memories of summer camp—all pine boughs and bonfires, guitars and theatre night, Capture the Flag and *Kum Ba Ya*, canoe trips and camp coffee, the dining hall and homemade bread—and how those memories wash out that which is better left forgotten.

I regret coming now. I regret letting him know I’d be in Toronto on business. I regret saying it would be “nice to catch up” in response to his “hey, let’s get together” invitation. I had thought we would meet over a drink, maybe at Murphy’s Jazz Bar (like the old days, when he would jump on stage and jam with anything on offer—even his least favourite, a fretless bass) and reminisce about the old times. I didn’t think that he’d invite me for an afterthought of stale finger sandwiches in his apartment.

“Can’t you stay?” He means “stay and chat some more.” He doesn’t mean “stay over.” I was never “stay over” material. I read and edit and publish romance novels for a living. You can’t be too cliché about this stuff, but nobody could make up a romance story this bad.

“No, Warren. It’s been nice to see you. I’m sorry that life didn’t turn out for you the way you’d expected. I’m sorry about Susan. I really am.”

“Can I see you again?” He smiles.

They say that a smile can convey a range of emotions, from warmth and compassion to contempt and dismissiveness. This smile is reckless, lacking trustworthiness. I remember him now. He was always the one incapable of having an unexpressed thought, an unshared moment. In high school and at camp, his smile and his broad interests attracted me. And there was that guitar. When he, Steve Saffir, Peter Duke, and Sol Mayer sat around the campfire playing their songs, there wasn’t a single woman—well, girl—among us who didn’t have a crush on at least one of them. When he said his small guitar was “good for the ladies,” he didn’t mean that it was easier for smaller hands and fingers to manipulate the shorter and narrower neck. It attracted them all—*us* all. Still, I never saw anyone other than him play that guitar—until Susan. But I can see through it now. It was more than just the attention. He just can’t be alone.

Coming to see him has been a mistake. I try smiling kindly. “I’ve got work to do before my meetings tomorrow.”

“Will we see each other again?”

I look at him. This time there is no smile. He’s lonely. And guess what? So am I. I look beyond him to the mantle above the fireplace and its framed items—wedding pictures, travel photos, a funeral tribute. All Susan Jennings. Beside the mantle, the guitar hangs on the wall, a pink triangular pick woven through the strings at the first fret. Susan’s pick. He’s enshrined it. This guitar probably hasn’t been played since her passing. I look down at his guitar-playing hands again to look for callouses—or signs of a continued musical life. They are crossed in front of him. He’s still wearing a ring.

“Are you still playing the guitar, Warren?”

“I’ll play again if I have someone to play for.”

I smile, dismissively this time. “I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Why’d you bother coming then?”

Years ago, this barbed hook would have hung like a shiny lure in a sparkling stream, waiting for the innocent—the fish that so wanted to be eaten—to lunge, bite, to be pulled ashore fighting and bucking, to be hooked and flopping on the dock. But this fisherman is no longer the attractive, temperamental teenager with long, jet-black hair, and braided leather bracelet who could make tuning a guitar sound like a love song. This greying widower in flannel shirt, wasting away in the shadows of his past, has no hook on offer.

I’m ashamed to think that he thinks I am shopping. “*You invited me.* I thought it would be rude to say no.”

“I invited you for a proper visit.” He turns on the *faux* disappointment that would have worked so well on me years ago. “I didn’t expect you to show up just to make a proper good-bye.”

“I thought it better to say it face-to-face.” I don’t smile. “I was wrong.”

When Warren and I were younger, even during the time that he was dating Susan—“three peas in a tripod,” he would joke—he and I would head to Toronto, after camp and before the start of the school year—me at the University of Ottawa to pursue journalism. He would come across from the University of Windsor, the only school that would let him in, according to him. We both knew it was the closest school to Susan’s (to which he could gain admission).

We would scour the downtown, walking for miles, in and out of record shops, Queen Street guitar shops, cafés and bars, Dundas Street guitar shops, talking for hours, him looking for ideas, new experiences, nifty tchotchkes (always for her), and new guitars. Sometimes, Susan would join and I, in the name of maintaining what I thought would be life-long friendships, would play the third wheel, thinking my time would come. I see now that I was content wasting my time bathing in a sea of infatuation trying to turn around a one-way relationship that was headed in the wrong direction. While we would sit up until dawn, on the grassy slopes of High Park or Christie Pits, writing out song lyrics, it turns out he

was marrying Susan before I figured it out. After that, I pulled back, cut him off, and disappeared. I never really said good-bye.

Outside, after my final good-bye with Warren, I walk the gaslights of Palmerston Avenue to Dundas Street where I cross to the south side to wait for the eastbound streetcar. In the distance, the shimmering towers of Downtown Toronto are lit up. Somewhere down there is my hotel where I will sit with an advance review copy of the work of some young, soulful author trying to describe, in words, a stain on their heart. (In my professional life, I've given up counting clichés.)

There is a bus shelter at the streetcar stop—a bench with glass on three and a half sides offering about as much protection from the rain as my umbrella. There is a homeless man curled up inside. I give him his space and stand behind the shelter on the sidewalk. Behind the shelter is a bar and I can see myself in the reflection of its misted window. I see two of me—the strong independent self, the one who refused to bend to a love interest unless it met a standard I felt I deserved, and the other one burdened by a continuing yoke of unrequited love—of an image that set the standard. That image has just come crashing down. I look past the reflection on the frosted pane to the inside of the bar where a young man in a woolen hat is playing an acoustic guitar. He is perched on a stool, moaning into a microphone. None of the patrons are paying any attention—none except a young woman who sitting at the bar, facing the wrong way so she can watch the singer on stage. It's as if he is singing just for her.

My mind drifts to Warren and his guitar and the campfire. I can almost see the illuminated faces of two young women—girls really—basking in adoration. How was I to know that these would be my formative moments? How was my young heart to know then that he was singing just to her—and not for me?

The tram pulls up to the stop and the streetcar driver calls out: “You coming? Downtown?”

“Downtown?”

“This is eastbound,” he says, pointing down the greasy tracks. “Unless you want to end up in Roncesvalles, this is going downtown. If you want Roncey, you need the other side.”

Roncesvalles. There's another place that's parked in the recesses of my memory. Warren and I used to stroll among the shops of Roncesvalles before retreating to a cozy jazz bar, where we would stay until the wee hours, sometimes with him jumping on the stage to play a borrowed guitar or jamming in sets with other bands. He played solo in between sets and took requests from the crowd. The bar would stay open after hours and we would stay to talk with the musicians. They would talk about their guitars as if each had its own origin story. Later, with me mistaking this for intimacy, we would walk until daylight picking up pastries at one of the Polish bakeries along Roncesvalles when they opened for the day.

As I think back, while Warren asked me to hang out, he never asked me to sing along. I just kind of did. He'd never asked me whether I played the guitar. He never offered to teach me to play. I suppose I never asked. Maybe that was Susan's secret. I never even taught myself to play. Now the only guitar in my life is one hanging on a wall. I should have taken it when I left. I have an origin story too. At the very least, I could do with a shrine.

“You coming?” It's the tram driver again.

I shake my head. The tram driver gives me a nod and a smile. This smile is genuine. Maybe he's seen this before. Maybe he's just kind. He closes the door, rings the streetcar's bell, and I watch him go.

I cross the street to wait for a westbound tram. The window of the bar across the road is fogged over at this distance. The homeless man in the bus shelter has rolled over. I am sure he's lonely too. But he reminds me that there is peace in solitude.

I look at my watch. The romance novel can wait. So can work. I've something to walk off. Maybe tomorrow, I'll walk Queen Street, see if that guitar store is still there—and see if I just can't buy a three-quarter length guitar, for myself.

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