

DUNTADA

By

Robert Priest

DeThomas had regrets but they had never been enough to make him want to go back and change his life in any way. He'd reached a point in his early ambitions where it was either banking or music and banking had easily won. He liked money and, anyway, there was a kind of music in money if you knew how to listen to it. The little bit of guitar playing he'd done earlier in life had been enjoyable, but he'd never been consistent enough with it to even develop calluses on the ends of his fingers. So what? He was rich. And that had been satisfying enough...until just recently. Until his ninetieth birthday in fact. Immediately after that he'd fallen into a notable slump which affected his normally ravenous appetite so severely, he began to rapidly lose weight. This did not go unnoticed by his favourite niece, Narella, who immediately set up an appointment with a specialist in elder care.

The young doctor, having made some subtle inquiries that touched on DeThomas' change of mood, quickly seized upon this early unfulfilled desire as the main cause of DeThomas' depression.

"Well guess what, Mr. DeThomas? You were born in exactly the right era to have your cake and eat it too."

"Didn't you just warn me off sugar?" deThomas asked with attempted levity.

"Not the metaphorical sugars," the doctor quipped. "I'm talking musical sugars. You could still be a great guitar player."

"I am ninety years old," DeThomas responded glumly. "It's way too late for that."

"Not necessarily. Learning new skills is very good for the ageing brain," the doctor continued.

DeThomas frowned and shrugged.

"You must've heard of neurobots."

"To learn new languages. Yes." DeThomas shrugged.

"O, much more than languages," the doctor smiled enthusiastically.

Examining the catalogue, DeThomas was surprised at the variety of guitar styles available. Flamenco, Roma, folk, blues, jazz, rock and roll, rock, disco, funk. It was a difficult decision. He was torn between rock and funk. The pretty nurse helped him.

“Where do you want to play?” she asked. “At home? In public? If you're going to want to play acoustically at all I would suggest you go for rock. You'd be surprised at how much rock music relies on a good rhythmic acoustic player.”

DeThomas managed a bitter, misunderstood chuckle. “I'm not doing this to play rhythm. If I'm going to do it at all I want to improvise. I want to be able to do solos.”

“Maybe this is what you want,” she said, reaching behind the counter conspiratorially. “It's just come in. It's called the Duntada.”

“For Long John Duntada?” DeThomas asked.

“Exactly. You like?”

DeThomas shrugged. “Sure, when I was a kid.”

The neurobot was easily installed. The correct areas of the brain, by now, a well-known terrain, were easily accessed. A microprobe so fine it could slip between the molecules of the skull and into its desired locations without pain or scarring implanted the tiny device during an afternoon session.

It took some days for the bot to achieve full function. The brain was not just in the skull. There were brain cells all over the body and for such a purpose as playing guitar solos, the bot had to extend its reach into his shoulders, down his arms and into his fingers—even into his hips. There was an attendant thrill feeling to this process and though DeThomas' heart specialist had advised him to take it easy, he felt like jumping the gun and turning himself loose on the very expensive Taylor acoustic guitar he had purchased.

Eventually he did pick it up and without fretting a chord ran the back of his nails over the open strings which responded with a jangly discord. He felt his left hand slip into a position that he knew was that of a ninth chord. He had never been fond of ninth chords but there was a great temptation now to press his fingers down on the required strings and let one resound. It didn't seem likely to cause any great harm. Once he had played the ninth chord, he realised that he still didn't like them, and he felt the need to cleanse his musical palate.

The teenaged DeThomas had always loved boogie music. Wrapping his left hand round the neck of the Taylor, he used his left thumb to mute the bass E string while the top joint of his index finger flattened out over an A chord shape. Now it was just a matter of a rapid but accurate down-up motion of the pick with

his right hand. From the first note it was glorious. It was hopping. It summoned an energy into his limbs he'd almost forgotten. He sat down, smiling, and played the simple boogie until his fingers were sore.

For the first month or two after the installation, as his appetite returned, DeThomas played the guitar privately and acoustically but then he purchased a large antique Traynor amp and an old but elegant Les Paul. For two days he left the Les Paul leaning against the wall untouched as his fingers spidered over the frets of the Taylor, executing intricate fast-paced rock licks. He waited till the desire was absolutely brimming over before he took up the new guitar and plugged it into the amp. Some joker had added the number eleven at the far end of the volume dial. He turned the dial around past ten and the amp buzzed loudly. There was a moment of delicious feedback and then his fingers began to move almost independently. He had sufficient calluses by now to allow him to bend and shred the strings high up on the neck, sounding notes that were almost beyond his aged hearing. But this wasn't noodling, this was ultimate blues-based rock — a language unto itself—and he felt it going through him like a deep, sad fire.

The next time his niece, Narella, came over she noticed that his speech was more animated than usual and that colourful antique phrases had slipped into it. He referred to certain people as *cats* for instance. She almost laughed. But when he referred to her friends as *chicks* in that dismissive way she'd heard in old movies from the 1960s her frown went unnoticed.

She wanted to discuss the purchase of the new property he had asked her to oversee but before this could begin, he stood up, grabbed the Les Paul, strung it about his neck and plugged it into the amp.

“Dig this,” he exclaimed. Was his usually exact diction slightly blurred? DeThomas pointed to something unseen in the distance, winked at her in a weird way, humped the guitar forward with his pelvis and began to shred. It was quite loud but when she grew used to it, she recognized it as fluid, fluent blues soloing. She might have taken a moment to sit there and enjoy it, but her granduncle now began to move his hips so jerkingly she grew concerned for his aged frame. He shifted into power chords, doubling the rhythm and before she could protest, his right arm began to windmill. Round and round the arm went meeting the strings perfectly. Her face clearly registered her concern, but his only response was to stretch his right leg forward and drop his left knee to the floor in keeping with the climax of the solo.

The quality of the music if it had been perhaps 12 DB quieter might have been enjoyable to her but when he began to strut and then executed a spin it felt so unseemly, she objected. Her voice though, was not loud enough to be heard over the wailing. He had rolled his eyes back into his head and was twitching his lips as

his fingers executed rapid-fire staggered triplets. *Duntada Duntada Duntada Duntada*. She waved her hands trying to get his attention, but he looked at her in a cocky arrogant way she had never seen before. “Uncle! Hey uncle!” she called out to him but in response he redoubled the rhythm. Was he ogling her? He winked again, smiled in a definitely leering way and, going back to boogie mode, stuck his tongue way out. She could now see the reason for his slightly slurred speech. His tongue was at least three inches longer than normal. DeThomas curled the tip of it upward and began to lick at the air suggestively in time to the beat.

Robert Priest is the author of four novels, fourteen books of poetry, three plays, lots of musical CDS, and two hit songs, including the recent top ten hit by indigenous balladeer, Julian Taylor, “Seeds.” His words have been debated in the Ontario legislature, posted in the Transit system, quoted in the *Farmer's Almanac*, and sung on *Sesame Street*. His book, *Reading the Bible Backwards* (ECW), peaked at number two on the Canadian poetry charts, its sales exceeded only by those of Leonard Cohen. *Rosa Rose*, a book of children's verse, in praise of inspirational figures, won a Silver Moonbeam award in the U.S. and was a book of honour in The Lion and the Unicorn prize for excellence in Children's Literature. Its sequel, *The Wolf is Back* (Wolsak and Wynn), won the Golden Moonbeam award for 2017. A new book of poems, *If I Didn't Love the River*, is out now with ECW Press. He is also the author of the celebrated fantasy trilogy *Spell Crossed* (Dundurn Press). For more see: <https://robertpriest.org/>.