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## A Strange Request at a Piano Bar

Wil A. Emerson

Moments before he died, their father made one request. His passing anticipated, the sisters promised they would do their best to abide by his wishes. They didn't expect him to say, "It's about your mother," and then he added, "Don't share our story."

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Grace and Adelle listened with sadness and wonder. Of course, they never expected unreasonable demands. He'd been a tender father and a dedicated one. Wanted him to complete his mission on earth in a peaceful manner. Most, they wished he'd reveal those secrets he held close to his heart. Which now put them on the spot. They loved their mother, too, and never understood his ongoing angst toward her.

During his waning days when he talked, at times it was barely a whisper, sometimes with tears. The girls clutched hands tightly as if one or the other would also be taken away. They feared they couldn't bear the days without him.

He started with 'I love you, Grace and Adelle, but never intended I'd tell you at the end. But this pain. Maybe it will end if I tell you.'. And then he continued.

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I had little interest in a conversation with the young girl in the booth directly in line of my vision. Not only did she have this strange, juvenile air about her with constant fidgeting, she wore a strikingly odd outfit for a casual evening at Josephine's Piano Bar. The tight pink and white polka dot dress didn't match the white tennis shoes, but the laces ended in satin bows. Someone trying to be deco fashionable? Or was she underage, trying to pass for fifteen if not a twenty-one-year-old. She held a green apple in her hand and spun it so it twirled and landed in the other hand.

I tried to keep my eyes on the menu, determined to not be distracted by her awkward actions and relentless glare. At me and then at the wall behind me. The feigned 'not interested' wasn't working.

"A Strange Request at a Piano Bar," Wil A. Emerson

The waitress approached, looked her way and said, "Still not ready to order?" The girl didn't answer. So, it seemed she'd obviously had been seated for a while.

"And you, sir?" A quick turn from the girl.

I didn't hesitate to answer. Hungry, tired after a long drive, bag unpacked, ready to relax. Music would take care of the rest of the evening

"Bud on tap, cheeseburger, onion rings," I said and handed her back the menu. I would have added 'make it fast' but knew the waitress had little control over the cook's priorities. Plus, this wasn't a fast-food joint. In fact, it had a little more class than I might deserve at the moment. The menu offered a variety of down to earth dinners, but I really wanted a burger. Warm, held in my hands, it would help me let go of present thoughts about a woman who loved me unconditionally. The best way to get to the other side with the only person who had accepted my flaws, was, also, through the music she listened to. I'd heard the Overland Hotel and Grill had a piano player in the bar. Lucky me if it were a female entertainer. Could she play or sing soulful, joyful Josephine Baker tunes? How about *What Can I Say after I Say I'm Sorry*.

Several minutes passed. I sipped my beer and flipped through the USA Today I'd taken from the hotel lobby. Then a squeaky voice interrupted my read.

"Sassafras tea is better than beer."

With a slow nod, I said, "Beer is oxidation," and turned the page.

"Causes liver disease." she squeaked again.

I tried to mask my anger by keeping my eyes fixed on the paper. I would read until the entertainment started and then move to the lounge area.

"Did you read about the controversy at the carnival down the road?" The green apple moved fast from one hand to the other.

"Controversy? Big word for a kid."

"Busted the owner for human trafficking. Some kids ran away. Some taken away in cuffs. Can you imagine? The kids didn't do anything wrong."

"That so," I said.

"Yep, I got out with only a sprained ankle but no money to buy a burger."

Scam flashed to the forefront of my mind. This is what the world offers now. And all I

wanted was a burger, beer and music. Who put this kid up to this deceitful tactic? I took a quick glance around the dining area.

“I’ll buy you a burger and then you better go away. Don’t even start with a plea. ‘I need money’ won’t work on me. Someone will not be so nice the next time you do this.”

“Thank the Lord for good Samaritans,” she said with a smirk. “Maybe I should have stayed where I came from.”

I motioned to the waitress who was quick to come to my table. A smile and nod, “What can I do for you, Sir?”

“Can you take this young girl’s order and charge it to my room?” The next part I whispered, “Her dinner, nothing more.”

She eyed me suspiciously but turned to the girl, “Okay, honey, what would you like?” No need for a note, the girl asked for a plain hamburger with mustard. No cheese, no mayo, no tomato. Water.

By the time her burger arrived, I’d finished my beer and the last of the newspaper. Folded it over and thought it was better to toss it than save it for another reader. Same old stories, same problems, all splattered on every TV broadcast. Polls, voting rights, political agendas, crime increasing. Injustices. I looked at the bows on the shoes of the young girl and wondered ‘what if her story were true’.

My waitress came back to the table, “Anything else I can do for you, Sir.”

“No thanks. So, who’s playing in the lounge tonight?”

“Oh, a favorite on Thursday. Gloria Rawlings. Golden voice and smooth fingers. She does a lot of older tunes. Heck, none I know, but if you’re into old stuff, well, what can I say.” She chuckled.

“I’m going to give her a try.” Said with a smile. How many twenty-year-olds knew good music? Music from the past where every word was sung with emotion and style. Where the lyrics were sweet or sentimental. No violence, no killing. I sighed as I pondered the change.

My grandmother, who loved the classics, soft jazz and Josephine Baker had left me a great gift. The memories of sitting with her and listening to her favorite music. Gran would say Josephine Baker was made with only heart and soul. I later learned she’d lived her life with zest.

Yes, a trail blazer, a warrior for women's rights, and had a great love for humankind. Her grace was the peace I sought after a hard day. I needed it more than ever this particular night. Nothing could be worse than the events of this day.

"Mr. Connors," the waitress whispered, "I thought the child was waiting for her parents. That's why I didn't ask her to leave. Looks like she's alone. The manager says she has to go if unescorted."

"Well, she'll leave with a full stomach, won't she?"

I heard the piano. A run of the keys. The entertainer on board, warming up. I signed the charge slip with a flair. Bradley Connors. Each letter distinct as if to shout, 'it's me world and I'm not alone'. The sounds from the lounge were inspirational so I left a tip that didn't match my inner mood. Enough to show kindness to the young waitress who probably needed extra cash. I and the girl in the foolish dress were her only customers.

*'You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn't hurt at all...'*

What a way to start a session. Right on target. I ordered Jim Beam Double Oak on the rocks and settled back to meld into my own pity party. But my melancholy didn't last long. I wouldn't let it. Nor would I want to say goodbye to grandmother in that way. If this entertainer had true talent and a long play list, my heart would be filled in a matter of minutes. A dose of reality at the start, lively stuff in the middle and then she'd send me home with an all-is-okay ending. Songs to stay with me long into the night. If the entertainer was only so-so at playing what I liked to hear, I'd go back to my room and reminisce in the dark until I feel into a peaceful sleep.

I'd said goodbye to two people I loved. One way or the other I had to deal with the aftermath.

*'I was all wrong but right or wrong I don't blame you...'*

That struck another chord. What if it were true?

I took another sip and studied the woman at the piano. Sturdy back, well-tended long brown hair. Probably in her fifties. Not slim, not overweight either. Someone on the edge of a generational change and still drawing attention. Good looking by every standard.

After a couple more songs, Gloria paused, sipped from a wine glass that appeared to

have the real thing in it. "Ladies, gents, thanks for your attention tonight. Glad to have you with me. Anyone else have a birthday tonight?"

"How old are you?" A portly guy sitting at the bar asked. Not clever, but his tone was smooth enough to think he wasn't being unnecessarily rude. Probably half the room wondered the same thing.

"Oh, it's not my birthday. It's the birthday of the lady whose music I love to play. Besides, I don't put personal numbers out for grabs. Every day is a beginning." She did a run of the keys.

It got a chuckle out of most of her audience, even me.

"I am celebrating her birthday, though. She's been a good friend of mine. In spirit and in deed." She rattled the keyboard again.

"It's mine, too," came a voice from the entrance of the lounge.

I turned to see who had chimed in. To my surprise it was the polka dot dress and lace in her shoe girl. She hadn't left the building. And without an adult, she was too young for attendance.

"Well, happy birthday, darling," said Gloria. "Two special birthdays. Bring your parents in and I'm sure someone will buy you a nice virgin drink with a cute umbrella in it."

"Can you play *Pretty Little Baby*?" the young girl asked.

All too soon, the manager appeared and within seconds the girl disappeared.

"What a sweetheart. Happy birthday, kid." Gloria said, "I can do that for her. Tonight, June 3<sup>rd</sup>. If not for this special woman's birthday I wouldn't be here." She played a short but witty verse and sang with it.

*'Pretty little baby, yah,yah. Pretty little baby, yah yah.*

*Pretty little baby, you say that maybe, you'll be thinking of me, and try and love me.*

*Pretty little baby, I'm hoping that you do-oooh-oooh-oooh...'*

Of course, it could be a coincidence that this was the date of Gloria Rawling's mother's birthday, but I knew it was also the birthdate of Freda Josephine McDonald.

"It's the birthday of one great, great lady whose songs I'm singing tonight. The Siren of the Tropics, the one and only Josephine Baker. If not for her, I wouldn't be at this grand piano."

With that, she did another rendition of *What can I say, after I say I'm sorry*.

She stopped, paused again, "Josephine Baker was celebrated by artists and intellectuals of the era. They called her the 'Black Pearl'. Yes, she was a gem but much more than that. An artist, a French Resistance agent and civil rights activist. Oh, what a gal. Who wouldn't want to follow in her footsteps?"

And then we all got lost in another hour of the richest, most enduring songs of the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age. No one left the room. I had another Jim Beam and felt like I was sitting next to my grandmother who had been an advocate, fan of the famous woman from St. Louis, Missouri. The birthplace of my grandmother, too. Ironic to be laid to rest on the day of the admired woman's birthday.

Most men of forty plus can admit they are fond of their grandmother. But I'd venture a guess, most men my age wouldn't say their grandmother was also their best friend. She had been a constant in my life since I was four until these last few days when she slipped into a coma.

Yes, I felt her presence that night and perhaps always would. Volumes could be written about what she taught me. Through her silence, resolve, understanding, forgiveness for others, she led the way for me. Her will, her tenacity. Bull dog relentlessness, she never gave up. Yes, a match for Josephine Baker. I longed for their kind of strength.

When Gloria Rawlings tipped her wine glass to the audience and said good night, I waited until she left the stage to approach the vase that had been placed on a small table with a rose bud in it. Beside it, another clear, crystal tip jar. I put a few folded fives in the jar. It struck me odd this entertainer with so much talent still relied on gratuities to make her way in life. Much like the famous Baker who would not have lived well in the end without the help of kindhearted friends. I remembered the story Nona told me about Princess Grace of Monaco providing an apartment for the down-on-her luck Ms. Baker. It wasn't long after, too early to leave a world that she'd helped shape, that Josephine expired. A sudden cerebral hemorrhage ended a magnificent life. Just as it did my grandmother's.

What made the ending more difficult was the fact my wife of seven years did not attend the funeral service. A final, scissor statement. Go alone, we are no longer married. Rejection.

Bitter acceptance.

As I left the lounge, I saw my waitress from dinner standing at the front door. Waiting for a ride, I guessed. I passed and headed to the elevators.

“Sir,” she said in a soft voice.

I turned and saw she had her finger up, beckoning me forward.

Why me? Much too late for a flirtatious encounter. In the past, I might have taken up the offer. Part of my flawed character. Looking for something that wasn't about me or us or them. Something that didn't stick like glue and fill you with guilt.

I shook my head and pointed to the elevator bank. “Up, alone, goodnight.” I mouthed.

She shook her head, “No.” She pointed outside. A vigorous thrust of her finger.

What in the world was so important? But I sauntered over, curious. More so, to let the gal know I wasn't the least bit interested in any offer she made.

“The manager has left. I'm on my way out. I sent that girl away two hours ago and there she is.”

“The tween-ager? Pink dress?” I stared into the darkness. Several rows of cars, intermittent overhead lights, two couples heading to a car in the distant lane. Then I spotted her. Leaning against my car.

“Has she been out there for two hours?” I asked.

“I think so. I gazed out a couple of times. Then got busy with closing the last half hour. What are we going to do?”

“We? I'm not equipped in any way to help her. Take her to my room? Suicide, if you ask me. She could say anything and ruin my life.”

“What if it's true about human trafficking? They find her and she's lost forever.”

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When I look back on that night, I chuckle but count my blessings.

I drove away with two strangers in my car. Both driven to their homes. I never saw the waitress again, even though I returned to the hotel several times that year. Different days, different hours. She probably moved on like a lot of college age women. In a job only for a semester's worth of pocket money. I would have thanked her for helping me, for staging the dramatic

change in my life.

Time passed. My daughter, no pink polka dot dresses in her closet now, is planning to attend college. Not my choice but she insists on going to Washington, St. Louis University. Strength in truth, she says. She repeats the school's motto and now claims it as hers. Strength in truth.

Stay close by, I've asked. Roots and fondness to historical events in her life, her grandmother and, yes, my origin. Relics, why the interest in relics? I laugh. When I was her age, I only wanted to escape my Mill Creek Valley neighborhood. Pine Street, where my great-grandmother worked as a waitress, had seen its worse days and was on the verge of gentrification a second time around. My Grace, one-time pink polka dot dressed, says she'll buy a condo there when she graduates and revisit Josephine Baker's early haunts.

I'm sure my grandmother would tell her 'no, child, move on'. Open your eyes and heart to the world, sing, dance and never look back.

So how did it evolve that a melancholy forty-plus man end up with a daughter old enough to plan on college when she'd been fatherless during the hardest times of both their lives?

On the drive that eventful night, I urged her to tell me where she lived. It was that or directly to the police station where protective services would take over, to detain her while they found out where she really belonged. It took Beth, the waitress's help, to cajole the silent girl into telling us.

Reluctant to give me the exact address, she said, "Drop her off at the corner, a block away, on the next street."

"Not gonna happen on my watch," I said. "Home or police."

She finally revealed she lived with her mother but had run away.

Which led to a discussion on the pros and cons of taking to the streets. Teenage anxiety the source of her 'run-away', a burden to her mother. First explanation, she'd been prompted by adventurous stories she'd read about woman striking out on their own. Second rendition, independence the goal.

Fiction and reality at odds.

“It’s a dangerous world, you know. Probably not a good idea to wear a party dress and white tennis shoes when you leave home. Attract too much attention.”

“I love my dress. I got it when I was twelve. It’s the best I have.”

“It’s a charming dress,” Beth said. “Save it for a costume when you’re older.”

“It got me a free hamburger,” the girl laughed. Tension gone. “My jeans were in the washing machine.”

She was silent for several minutes and then chimed in with, “I know all the words to Pretty Little Baby. In fact, to a lot of those songs. I like old stuff.”

“That’s a favorite of mine, too.” But considered this might be another con.

“So, this was a spontaneous decision? Leaving home?” I asked. “Not planned ahead?”

“Yes, no. It’s just I get sad about my mom and the work she does all the time. She’s a nurse. Two jobs. Maybe I could make it easier for her.”

Grace pointed to a door with the porch light on, and I pulled my car to the curb. The woman who opened the door appeared to have been crying. Her eyes red, hair disheveled, a sweater clutched to her chest. When she saw Grace her eyes lit up as if it were Christmas.

So, I said the first thing that came to mind, “Merry Christmas.”

“Grace, you’re safe, thank god.”

She invited us in but I declined, “This other young lady needs to get home, too.” I don’t know why, but I handed her my business card. Whatever she would do with it, didn’t cross my mind. A card from a guy who sold equipment to police departments across the Midwest was hardly a service she needed.

As it turned out, she did reach out to me two days later.

“Mr. Connors, I want to thank you again for bringing Grace home. She’s a handful, too smart and too emotional for her own good. Just thankful she found a good Samaritan.”

I didn’t confess that it took a little nudge from Beth to get me on the Samaritan track. But Josephine’s music, or should I say Gloria Rawlings, the soulful singer, had brought me closer to balance. Back to the basics, trust, hope, gratefulness. My grandmother, always down on her luck, too, never had anything but kind words or deeds for anyone who crossed her path. Luckily, she was with me, on my mind, in my broken heart, that particular day. What I thought

was the worse day of my life.

“Would you join us for dinner the next time you are in town? A home cooked meal, if you don’t mind?”

What did I have to lose? I missed home cooked meals. And I wondered how Grace might be doing in her home environment. Curiosity left over from my own early days.

Two weeks passed and there I was knocking at the Targee Street address again. Grace’s mother answered, this time with a smile.

“Welcome,” she said, “to my humble home.” A grin followed. “No Christmas tree.”

“Four more months to go. I brought a bottle of wine instead. Hope you don’t mind.”

“White or red goes with meatloaf, doesn’t it?”

There’s not a lot of coincidences in life that takes your breath away. But this night was an exception.

Freda, Grace’s mother, had sat the table in blue and white patterned plates and thick, cut-glass water goblets. The music in the background was all soul. No need to say it was a collection of my grandmother’s favorite tunes. Maybe it was Grace’s cunning that led to the selection. She knew I had listened to it in the lounge that night. But I didn’t question motive or intent. I sat down and enjoyed the first home cooked meal I’d had in months. On plates exactly like my grandmother had when I was growing up, when she was the only constant in my life.

It’s not often a forty-plus year-old man wanes poetically about his grandmother, a marriage that turned sour or the melancholy nights that followed. But I let it all spill—a warm environment with an empathic woman and her daughter to listen. A difficult divorce it turned out to be. Property, entitlements, revenge.

After that evening, I let the past go and let myself sink into a newfound joy that had come unexpectedly into my life. A chance to live the real me. Identify the subject, the inner soul.

Grace needed a father-figure, too. We bonded immediately, let this strong attachment grow. More like a big brother, uncle, those first two years. Ballgames when I was not working out of town. Who lives in St. Louis and doesn’t go to a Cardinal game? Shopping a few times, but not my cup of tea. Walk and talk sessions about the big Mississippi or movies, Field of

Dreams, Girl Interrupted, nostalgic things, nothing important except being friends together.

Freda and I became friends, too. Sometimes we'd go on antique hunts. That's how she found my grandmother's favorite dinner plates a few months before I brought her daughter home.

Marriage not in the broad picture. Yes, she was a 'single' mom but refused to identify as such.

"I'm a mom. No qualifiers, no excuses, no explanation necessary."

I agreed. I liked her spirit. And it grew on me. Mine on her's, too, it seemed. It was a no-brainer for Grace that we become a family. I heard a few arguments between mother and daughter about what each one's needs entailed. Grace talked about destiny, fate, in the cards, meant to be. Her mom talked about opportunities.

And now I've come to the end of waning nostalgically about the past. All the reminiscing done with bittersweet love. On what I thought was the worse night of my life, divorce papers, laying my grandmother to rest, a young girl had caught my attention. Then the music began. The beginning of new love. Every day, April in Paris. Almost.

Reality is what it is. But there's little need to say I'm sorry.

Freda and I didn't marry. A matter of timing. But she gave birth to Adelle. A sister for Grace. I thought Freda only wanted to be a mom. Circumstances hadn't allowed the luxury in her past. No more outside work. A new place to live.

Two years as a family and then she stated she missed her old life; wanted to go back to her old ways. All a game for her. She admitted Grace had been the bait. Two daughters now, more luck. Sort of like human trafficking. She taught her daughter how to set the trap, then Freda pulled the trigger. She hadn't expected me to become so attached, hadn't expected that she'd like the attention, the security. And then the need disappeared. Boredom set in.

Somehow, I'd failed Freda. But gave Grace and Adelle a life without scams. Hostile times. Sad times. My gain, two beautiful daughters.

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"Dad, it's important to us. We want to find her. Maybe she'll make amends now that we are alone."

“I have had you all to myself for all these years.”

Adelle agreed with Grace. “We don’t know why she left. It’s time to find out.”

“Sometimes there are legacies that do more harm than good.” Said with a struggle for breath.

Bradley woke out of a dream. He and Freda, dark night, down at the river’s edge. The murky water, her last plea.

Beads of perspiration on his forehead, he said, “You were right, Grace, that night in the restaurant. Beer can lead to liver disease. I’m ready to die. Have reconciled it is my punishment. Strength in truth.”

Grace and Adelle clung to each other.

“I want to be remembered as a good father.” Bradley Connors wheezed.

“To have so much and then just throw it away. It took me over the edge.”

“We don’t know why she left us,” said Grace.

“My last request. Don’t share our story. If you ask the police to help, they’ll no doubt find out how she died.” Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Merciful or cruel? Who’s to judge?” A shallow breath and then Bradley Connors closed his eyes.

End