

## DON TROUBADOUR

*Z.Z. Boone*

I was three months into my junior year in college and just found out I was pregnant when I got the news of my parents' deaths. They'd both been shot by a neighbor who then turned the gun on himself. My parents and I were not as close as most; other than summers and major holidays, we seldom stayed in touch. Still, I was devastated by the news.

I went home where—thank God—my Uncle Brian paid for my airline tickets and made all the cremation arrangements. There was a two-day memorial service—Friday and Saturday—and that closed the book. Fortunately, I was able to hide my fourteen-week pregnancy under fall clothing and was back in Maine on a frigid Monday morning, only a few days of classes missed.

It had been my second visit in less than five months. Around Independence Day, I'd returned for a couple of weeks with the intention of telling my parents I'd married a man twice my age who wasn't exactly on a skyrocketing

career path. I flaked. My last day home, I decided it would be better to call them from Maine and drop the bomb from there, something I never did.

I'd grown up in a suburb outside Sarasota and, once I graduated high school, I chose a college as far away from the heat and mildew as I could find. It was a half-hour north of Augusta, a tiny school no one had ever heard of, where I decided to major in psychology. I made a few friends, bought a pair of fleece-lined boots, and learned to eat poutine. I dated from time-to-time, but New England boys had this idea that any girl raised in Florida was a sure thing. The unmarried professors proved more interesting, although they mostly adhered to the non-fraternization policy written in the faculty handbook.

Bored and restless, I'd married during my sophomore year, some ten months before my parents' misfortune. It wasn't the smartest move I've ever pulled, but at the time it seemed adventurous and, in a world as predictable as processed peanut butter, exhilarating.

His name was Donato Mancini, but he called himself Don Troubadour. Shortly before Christmas, I'd gone with friends to see him perform at a coffee-house a few miles off campus. I was in an extremely good mood—I'd already gotten my grades for the fall semester; they were excellent—and the first serious snowfall had covered the city of Waterville.

I first ran into him just outside the coffeehouse where he was taking a break between sets. He was leaning against a car parked at the curb, drinking something hot. There hadn't been much of an audience—most of the students had already headed off for the holidays—so he recognized me immediately when I walked out for a cigarette.

“Enjoying the show?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I lied. In truth, I'd been talking over the music so that my friends could hear me.

He asked my name and I told him. He wanted to know if I was doing anything after the show and I admitted I wasn't. He offered to show me his apartment and play some vinyl records that would change my life and I—always the naïve dope—said that sounded like something I'd enjoy doing.

We got married less than six weeks later.

## §

Donato was forty-four years old. He'd been divorced twice and worked a 30-hour week as a security guard at Maine General Medical Center. Not exactly every parent's dream. At night, he played guitar and sang in any place that would compensate him for his time and art whether it be cash, something from the menu, or all he could drink. He was self-confident (which I admired),

but not very talented (which I ignored). Despite his age, he had convinced himself he was the next Bob Dylan.

### §

Our troubles started shortly after the Walmart wedding rings were slipped on. Even with taking out school loans and some assistance from my parents, money was hard to hold. Donato Mancini had a below average income, and Don Troubadour went through cash like a termite through wood. He liked nice clothes and expensive cigars and restaurants with tablecloths. His performing “gigs” brought home fifty dollars during a good week. When my parents sent money for books, somehow Donato convinced me to buy them used and outdated and then pocketed the difference. When a check would be direct deposited from my part-time job at Home Depot, he was at the bank, withdrawal slip and ballpoint pen in hand.

He also liked betting on sports, another thing he wasn’t especially good at. He claimed it was only “a dollar here and there,” that he pretty much broke even, but I noticed our joint checking account—which I had reluctantly agreed to—dropping like our outdoor thermometer in winter.

I tried to economize. I bought day-old baked goods and cans of vegetables with the labels missing. I agreed to only use my cell phone for emergencies. I

quit smoking. We were living in Donato's apartment, a dark, squat little place close to the Kennebec River. Our furniture was second-or-third hand; the faucets all dripped; mice proliferated and ate better than we did. I wasn't raised in luxury, but at least our complete set of dinner plates and bed sheets matched.

### §

Back in Waterville, after the memorial, I found Donato sitting in our apartment watching Judge Judy on TV. He told me he'd lost his job, but that it was a blessing since he could now devote everything to his performing career. I asked what we were going to do for money, how the rent was going to be paid, and he tried to convince me this was all part of what was called "artistic suffering." This was simply a bridge that needed to be crossed. On the opposite shore, he insisted, were people burning money and bathing in champagne.

"Plus, I've decided to start praying," he said.

I made the mistake of suggesting that maybe he should look for something to tide us over until the Lord came through. I told him about a woman I worked with whose boyfriend was part owner in a commercial cleaning company. They were looking for someone to work third shift at the community center to buff the floors, empty the trash cans, and vacuum the office rugs.

Donato bristled. He got up and turned off the TV just as Judge Judy was about to rule.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed,” he said, turning to face me. “I *already* work nights.”

“Well maybe you need to put that on hold.”

“Give up, you mean?”

“Just for now,” I told him. “At least until the baby arrives.”

He shook his head, walked to the window, and looked outside. I suppose he was collecting his thoughts. He turned back to me, both hands on the back of our duct-taped recliner like a pastor at a pulpit.

“The music world is fortunate. If you married Pete Seeger,” he said, “you’d have him pumping gas?!”

## §

The real shocker came a couple of weeks later. It was a Friday night, and I was home studying while Donato played at a place called Tubby’s Tap Room. The kitchen phone rang. It was Uncle Brian calling to tell me he was the executor of my parents’ will. I don’t know why I thought this, but I had had in my mind that they would have left me nothing, but they had left everything to me, including the house, and a substantial amount of cash. He explained it would

likely take months for everything to go through probate, that I wouldn't see any inheritance before then.

"Is it a lot?" I asked him.

"Including the house, we're talking mid six-figures."

I steadied myself. My uncle asked me how I was holding up financially, and I told him what I should have told my parents. That I'd been secretly hitched and wasn't exactly living *la vida grande*.

"Let me send you something to tide you over," he said. "I'll hold it as a loan against the estate."

## §

I didn't want Donato spending money we had yet to receive, so I didn't tell him. But he was there the afternoon the Federal Express envelope was delivered to our apartment, looking over my shoulder when I tore it open, reaching out when I drew my uncle's five-thousand-dollar check from inside.

"Ho. Lee. Shit," he said. He asked about my uncle, who he was, why he hadn't rained cash on us earlier.

I told him the truth. The partial truth. I said my parents had left some money, but I didn't imagine it was much more than the check I was holding.

“Five thousand dollars is five thousand dollars,” he said. “This is what I prayed for.”

“It’ll pay off some bills,” I said. “And allow me to get a few things I need for school.”

Donato was quiet for a few seconds, but I knew what he was thinking. This money was from God, and God intended Don Troubadour to use it to advance his career.

“Think about it,” he said, almost on cue. “What good is a psychology degree really going to do us?”

I told him I was putting the money in a personal account and I would dole it out as I saw fit.

## §

A few days later, I’d just gotten back from classes and was getting ready for my shift at Home Depot, when Donato told me that God had provided the answer to everything. He handed me a brightly colored, glossy sheet of paper about the size of a business envelope.

“I picked this up at the music store,” he said.



**ATTENTION ALL PERFORMERS!!!****ARE YOU READY TO BE DISCOVERED BY A LOS ANGELES TALENT AGENT?****THEN TAKE THE SAME STEP AS MUSICIANS LIKE****HARRY CHAPIN AND DIANA ROSS, AND STEP OUT OF THE CROWD!**

According to the flier, "stepping out of the crowd" involved being auditioned by someone calling himself Oscar Espinosa, "for one week only," at the Punta Huacas Hotel and Convention Center in Ensenada, Mexico.

Donato followed me into the bathroom and stood there as I got out of my clothes and ran the shower.

"Sounds like a scam," I said.

"I should have guessed you'd stand in my way."

"It has nothing to do with standing in your way. It has to do with going to Mexico for an audition."

"You go where opportunity is," Donato told me. "Look at the list of this guy's clients on the back."

It was an impressive array of famous names. Not only musicians, but people from film and TV along with fashion models and athletes. I noticed, however, nowhere did it say Oscar Espinosa represented them. Only that they were "legendary and you can be, too!"

“Auditions start on the fifteenth and only run until the twenty-first.”

“Which I guess gives Mr. Espinosa time to cash the checks and get out of town.”

“What ‘checks?’ It doesn’t say anything about ‘checks.’”

I called his attention to a small paragraph on the bottom of the paper. It said, *A nonrefundable registration fee of \$150 will be required.*

“A hundred-and-fifty-dollars. Big deal.”

I stepped into the tub and pulled the plastic curtain, asking, “How are you going to get there? Where are you going to stay?”

“I’ll find a cheap flight. I’ll sleep on the beach if I have to.”

“You’ll be arrested for loitering.”

“I just need a few hundred, maybe a thousand dollars.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Let me tell you!” he called over the noise of the shower. “Every morning when I wake up I hear this crunching sound! At first, I’m never sure what it is! But then it comes to me! It’s you crushing my dreams!”

I could have prevented it. But I didn’t because I welcomed the thought of being alone for a few days, of not being accused of becoming pregnant to spite him, of sleeping through the night without getting up to make dinner for a

man infuriated by being ignored. Before the end of the week, I'd arranged his round-trip flight, booked him a two-night stay in a decent motel, and withdrawn enough cash so he could eat and drink like a human being.

§

Donato had only been gone a few hours when the kitchen phone rang. It was a man with an accent looking for him, and when I explained he wasn't here, the guy hung up without another word.

Donato called that night to let me know he'd arrived safely. He said there was no cell phone reception, that he was calling from the hotel lobby. His audition was the next afternoon, after which he would spend a final night in Mexico before flying home.

"I'm going to do that song you love," he said. "The one I wrote about the dog daydreaming in the tree."

I told him I thought that was a good choice, even though I had no idea what he was talking about.

That same evening, I ate at a nice restaurant and read a Stephen King short story while sipping my after-dinner herbal tea. I got home and watched a sitcom on TV where a high school nerd was dating a hot girl and making a mess

of things. It was stupid, but I laughed out loud. I ate a piece of cherry cheesecake and drank a decaf espresso, then I went to bed and slept well for the first time in weeks.

I was awoken by the phone around seven the next morning. It was that guy again, the one with the accent. I told him Donato wouldn't be home for a couple of days.

“Is this his wife?” he asked.

I hesitated, but admitted it was.

“Okay, wifey,” the man said. “You tell him that if he doesn't have what belongs to me by the end of the week, his next trip might be one he doesn't want to take.”

## §

I couldn't concentrate at school, and at work I kept looking at my watch. Donato phoned me as soon as I got home, more enthused than I'd ever heard him. He told me he'd sung “Doggie Daze,” that the audition had gone wonderfully, that Mr. Espinosa could not believe such “a diamond in the rough” had gone undiscovered. “Sinatra with a guitar,” was how Espinosa had described it. Now all it took was a little guidance and some access to Espinosa's many show business contacts.

“What will that cost?” I asked.

“It won’t cost anything,” Donato promised. “Oscar gets 20% of whatever I take in, but that’s standard.”

He told me he planned to celebrate with a couple of other new Espinosa clients. Beer and bullshit, tequila and tapas. He said he couldn’t wait to see me and told me to be at the airport when he came in late the following afternoon.

“We’ll do it up,” he said. “Just the two of us.”

I said I was happy that he was happy. I never mentioned the guy who’d called.

## §

I never heard from him again. The next day, I cut classes and called into work sick. I borrowed a classmate’s car, retrieved my cell phone from my sock drawer, and drove fifty-five miles to Bangor International Airport. I stood outside the security area and watched the passengers file by, but Donato wasn’t among them. At the American Airline Information Desk, I was told that his name was on the roster, but that he’d never boarded. I asked if there was a flight scheduled after that one, and the attendant checked her computer and told me there was nothing due for the next twenty-four hours.

Outside baggage claim, I tried his cell. Nothing. I phoned The Siesta Grande where he'd stayed and was told that he checked out at ten that morning. I thought that perhaps he'd arrived on an earlier flight and hopped in a cab. Maybe our paths had crossed and he was waiting at the apartment. I called, but no one picked up.

When I got home it was close to seven and some serious concerns were setting in. I notified the Waterville Police Department, who advised me to contact the Maine State Troopers, who told me to get in touch with the FBI office on Harlow Street. I called and talked to a woman who told me to "sit tight," that in most cases the missing person "strolls through your door a day or two later."

That night, when what passed as sleep finally overtook me, I pictured Donato in some dank backroom, sitting at a table. He was battered and a trio of hooded captors stood behind him as he was forced to write a ransom note with the stub of a pencil. He would stop and begin to complain, and when he did, he would be struck repeatedly.

In the morning, I again called the Waterville Police Department and explained that I'd gotten nowhere with either the Maine State Troopers or the FBI. The person on the other end of the line was more sympathetic and asked

if I'd be able to come in and file a missing person report. When I explained I had no transportation, he said he'd be happy to come by and take my statement later that day.

He showed up just before noon, a young, uniformed cop who introduced himself as Officer Everett Thompson. He was my height, sandy-haired, already a bit paunchy. He sat across from me in the kitchen, accepted the coffee I offered, unzipped a brown leather case the size of cutting board and took out a computer tablet.

"First time I've actually used this thing," he said.

I gave the pertinent information which he slowly punched in. Twice he was forced to start over, and once he deleted all the information he'd collected.

"Fat fingers," he said. "I'm better with a paper and pen."

"I can do it if you want."

"That would be terrific," he said, handing me the tablet. "You just need to fill in the information in the boxes."

As I completed the report, Everett stood—coffee mug in hand—and walked toward the kitchen window. He turned to face me, half-leaning against the wall.

"Is it okay if I ask a question or two that isn't on there?" he said.

I told him that would be fine.

He asked me if Donato had a history of substance abuse, if there was any chance he might have a second wife. I told him my husband was a moderate drinker who occasionally smoked weed. That I was relatively certain there was no phantom wife, or secret second family.

“There’s a number of other possibilities,” he said. “If he had too much to drink the night before, he could have passed out from dehydration. Maybe he slipped in some public restroom, banged his head and experienced amnesia. The cab he was in on the way to the airport could have been in an accident. He could be in a hospital somewhere.” Everett gave me a few minutes, then approached and held out a hand. “Let’s see what we’ve got so far,” he said. I handed him the tablet and he used his finger to flip the electronic pages. “I think this is probably enough,” he said.

I asked if he was sure; I was only halfway through the section headed “Reporting Person’s Narrative.”

“If we need more, we always ask for more,” he said, as if he’d just come up with that. He added, “We’ll need a picture.”

I walked into the bedroom where Donato keep his publicity photos. A small stack of black-and-white 8x10s with his resume stapled to the back. The



shot itself was, I thought, far from flattering: Don Troubadour in a white turtleneck, seated on a stool with his guitar, mouth open and eyes scrunched as if something heavy had just landed on his foot.

“This is him?” Everett asked when I handed him the photograph.

I nodded.

“No offense,” he said, “but he looks like he could be your dad.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Well...”

“All right,” Everett said, zipping his leather case closed. “I think that’ll do it for now.”

“There is one more thing,” I said. “Somebody’s been calling and looking for him.”

“Who?”

“No idea, but he sounds threatening.”

Everett suggested I stay with someone for a while, promised to check in until things settled. I told him I appreciated his concern.

“Are you kidding?” he said. “This is real police work. You know what I was doing this time yesterday?”

I shook my head.

“Pumping six shots into a rabid raccoon outside the Waterville Country Club.” Leaving that image behind, he headed out.

§

Everett called a few minutes before five P.M., said he was just getting off, and asked if he could stop over. He wanted to know if I’d eaten yet, and when I told him I hadn’t, he asked if it was okay to bring pizza. I found this unusual, but I told him that would be fine. He showed up around six with a pizza box and a six-pack of Heineken.

“I should have asked what you drink,” he said. “I hope this is okay.”

I looked like hell. I’d been cleaning the apartment in search of something to do, nervously scratching my scalp as I worked. I had yet to shower and dry flakes of skin had settled on the shoulders of my black sweatshirt like ash. In an effort to appear civilized, I found a couple of plastic placemats, two plates, and some napkins.

“I wanted to catch you up,” Everett said as he doled out slices. “I called the hospitals around Ensenada to find out if there were any new admittances. There were, but none fitting your husband’s description. I called the Punta Huacas Hotel and Convention Center where the auditions were held and was

told they had no information, that no one named Espinosa was currently registered.”

Everett drank his beer straight from the bottle, and although I was tempted, I dug out a container of OJ from the fridge. Everett told me he tried to enlist the Mexican authorities, all of whom were courteous but not particularly helpful. He called the Ensenada police, the jails, the morgues, every lead came up empty.

## §

A few pizza slices in, Everett wiped his lips and stood. He said he had to babysit his two-year-old daughter while his ex-wife went to her “Chinese for Beginners” class. He said if I was going to stay in the apartment, I should lock the place up. That if I needed a ride anywhere, I should call him instead of Lyft or Uber. “Even if you just want to drive around and get your mind off things,” he said.

It felt a bit like he was flirting with me, and I suppose I should have been offended, but I found his behavior touching. A grown man with the social skills of a fourteen-year-old.

The next morning, the kitchen phone rang at the crack of dawn. It was Everett. He said he had news he thought should be delivered in person. I didn't have a class until 11:15 that morning, so I told him that was fine, then put on the same clothes I'd worn the day before, and tucked my hair under one of Donato's trucker caps that had "Captain Cocktail" embroidered on front.

He didn't say good morning when I opened the front door. He said, "I wish I brought better news."

I invited him in and offered him coffee. Before I had the mugs down, he told me he'd heard from the Ensenada Police. Cadaver dogs had found a body in a wooded area not far from The Siesta Grande and they suspected it was Donato.

I braced myself against the kitchen counter. "Oh God," I said.

"Personally, I have my doubts." Everett got the mugs and set them out. He got the quart of milk from the refrigerator.

"Doubts?" I asked.

"First of all, when I asked about identifying the body, I was told it had been mangled beyond recognition."

"I need to sit," I said.

“Second, we’re talking about a place where people have been known to disappear.” He looked around. “Sugar?” I pointed to the cabinet over the sink. Everett continued, “It’s not that difficult. A few well-placed pesos and an individual with problems can easily have himself declared dead.” Everett poured the coffee. He sat across from me, both of us back in the same chairs as the day before. I was speechless. He filled the silence saying, “Additionally, we picked up somebody last night who I suspect may be the person you’ve been talking to. He’s a known loan shark. We confiscated one of his ledgers and your husband’s name was all over it.”

I took a long sip of coffee. “I don’t imagine you smoke,” I said.

“You know what’s better than a cigarette?” Everett said. “Fresh air. And it’s not so bad out.”

“Maybe later.”

He stood up from the table. “C’mon,” he said. “Take a walk. We’ll be back before the coffee’s cold.”

“Look at me,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere without a shower first.”

Under the warm flow of water, I felt faint trying to process everything Everett told me. At first, I mistook it as exhaustion, hours of wakefulness finally catching up with me, but that wasn't it. It was more like some form of elation so strong it made me feel weak. It could have been the medicinally scented bar of soap, or the realization that a big question was answered and now maybe I'd be able to sleep. It could have been that I no longer pictured Donato bound, or suffering, or wandering strange streets. I'm not sure what it was. I lathered my hair and watched the foam swirl around my feet, pause at the drain, and eventually disappear to who-knows-where.

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