

nigel, prince of darkness

Zachary Vaughan leant his elbows on the pock-marked and drink-stained table and quietly inspected the tall chaser of beer, its sides rank with condensation, as it loomed arrogantly above its tiny companion; a shot-glass of dark, musty bourbon. He threw the bourbon back and lit a Marlboro, leaning backwards in the rough, wooden chair which tilted slightly to the left as if it had only recently had a hip replacement which hadn't gone exactly according to plan. As he exhaled he noticed absent-mindedly how the cigarette smoke seemed not so much to disappear into but combine with the damp and foggy atmosphere of the bar. It was a small, rough place, with little choice of drinks other than beer and bourbon; a typical mid-west blues bar. Its crowd was mixed, rough-looking and unforgiving but seemed to be awash with a sense of anticipation. Zachary had heard about this guy on the grapevine. It was said that he was good. Damn good. As good as Zack himself, some said. Now, Zachary knew that this simply could not be true, so he had come down to The Long House to give him a lesson in humility. It wasn't just that he was good, oh no, it was that he'd been telling everyone how he was The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen. Zachary knew this couldn't be true, if only because he was The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen. But people were starting to agree with him.

Zachary looked down into the swirling morass that was his beer as the man walked onto the stage and started to play a solo piece, the band respectfully allowing him to start off his set by staking his claim. Zachary would give him staking his claim. He

had his guitar nestling close by his side, as always, the leather of the case gently touching his calf, sending an almost erotic charge through his body every time he moved like the less than innocent brush of a future lover's hand on a bare arm. He would wait until this upstart had said his piece. Then he would give him the signal. That 'my god I can't believe how good you are' look that steals across a musician's face when he is stunned and chastened by what he has heard. The callow youth would recognise it and, unable to resist, imperceptibly will Zachary to join him onstage for a jam; a duel. Now, the audience here knew Zack, so they'd love that. The upstart, however, might not be so thrilled with the result. Zachary thought back to the first time he'd pulled this particular stunt and basked in the warm, glowing feeling produced by the singular combination of recognising another's hubris and drinking one's own whisky. Then he looked up at the stage and the man who was laughingly being termed his 'competition'. Zachary was taken aback. This guy was good.

As his fingers caressed the strings, all the pain and sufferings of a lost generation seemed to pour out from the battered body of his '58 Strat: withering, stinging chords which alternately seduced and repelled the ears with their combination of sweet consonance and violent dissonance; coruscating, cascading lead lines which insinuated themselves into the soul with glassy subtlety whilst simultaneously penetrating the mind like hot worms of revenge, bitterness and gall, and all delivered with a tone as smooth as the smoothest bourbon yet as brittle as the glass shards of the argument-shattered bottle. This man was not a blues guitarist; he was the blues. Incarnate. The very physical and spiritual embodiment of the oppression of countless generations through the unrelenting misery of slavery

and poverty. This man had the very water of the Mississippi Delta coursing through his veins - his blood surely a synthesis of this and rough, moonshine whisky - yet he bore none of the lineaments of the stereotypical blues guitarist. His hair was short and neat. He was clean-shaven and his skin was taut, tanned and healthy-looking. His suit was immaculate, cut superbly and quite plainly bespoke. He looked more like a successful lawyer than a musician. And he was white. Zachary tried to imagine his name. Blind Lemon Litigation. Jelly Roll Advocacy.

The guitarist looked at Zachary as he sat, slackjawed, at his table. He had seen this look before, it was the look of a guy who reckons himself hot shit, but is suddenly confronted with Aaron King; The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen, bar none. This was the time to catch his eye, get him onstage for a duet, a duel even, before he recovered his reason and realised that such a move would be suicidal for his reputation, a little like Kevin Costner's decision to act alongside Alan Rickman. As he drew his opening statement to a close with a series of outlandish suspended chords the like of which Hendrix had never even considered and the crowd went wild, throwing hats in the air, whistling, whooping, hollering, he threw a disdainful glance at the forlorn figure sitting there in front of the stage, looking as if he felt more alone than he had ever felt before. The man looked up and their eyes met with a savage intensity which, just for a moment, scared Aaron. It was as if this man hated him more than anything on earth, and that if he couldn't be better than him (which he surely could never be), he would have to kill him.

Zachary saw the fear in the guitarist's face as their eyes met. He knew that he, Zachary, was the only one of the pair of them that knew. The only one of the pair of them who had the slightest

idea. He stood up, and saw the guitarist onstage start slightly before his grin returned as Zachary approached the stage, his guitar case gripped tightly in his hand. The crowd noise gently subsided as Zachary slowly opened the battered, gig-scarred case and took out a weather-beaten '58 Strat. Left-handed. As he stood up and plugged his guitar into the nearest amp, the guitarist held out his hand and smiled. It was a lawyer's smile; the one where they show you their teeth.

'Aaron King.' He said, matter-of-factly.

'Zachary Vaughan.' Replied Zachary. 'Let's play.'

Aaron started off the proceedings with a twisted, two-note lick, not unlike something Freddie King might have played; taut, tense and with a stinging vibrato. Zachary played it back to him immediately; perfectly. To this retort Zachary added a Stevie Ray Vaughan style run; all pull-offs and attitude. Aaron played it back to him immediately; perfectly. The crowd, the very same crowd which had, moments before, been delirious with joy and an almost febrile excitement, were suddenly rendered as silent as the grave as the two guitarists traded note-perfect copies of each other's licks. This was no ordinary duel, they could hear that, and they didn't want to miss a thing. No-one took so much as a sip from their bottle. Cigarettes burned slowly down to the fingers and seared flesh unnoticed until they fell, exhausted, from soot-blackened hands. The guitarists looked and sounded like mirror images of one another, but it was impossible to tell which was the genuine article.

Suddenly they both stopped playing, and there was silence. A hush the like of which the bar never experienced, even when completely empty in the dead of winter. This silence was the true, deep silence that is qualified by potential. The potential for noise. The two men smiled at each other, but this time

no lawyer's smiles; these were the warm, heart-felt smiles of recognition and acceptance. As one they played a gentle intro to a rub-shuffle and counted the band in.

As their fingers caressed the strings, all the pain and sufferings of a lost generation seemed to pour out from the battered bodies of their '58 Strats: withering, stinging chords which alternately seduced and repelled the ears with their combination of sweet consonance and violent dissonance; coruscating, cascading lead lines which insinuated themselves into the soul with glassy subtlety whilst simultaneously penetrating the mind like hot worms of revenge, bitterness and gall, and all delivered with a tone as smooth as the smoothest bourbon yet as brittle as the glass shards of the argument-shattered bottle. These men were not blues guitarists; they were the blues. Incarnate. The very physical and spiritual embodiment of the oppression of countless generations through the unrelenting misery of slavery and poverty. These men had the very water of the Mississippi Delta coursing through their veins - their blood surely a synthesis of this and rough, moonshine whisky - yet they bore none of the lineaments of the stereotypical blues guitarist. Their hair was short and neat. They were clean-shaven with taut, tanned and healthy-looking skin. Their suits immaculate; quite plainly bespoke. And they were white.

Forty-five minutes later, the crowd were reduced to a silently stunned, chastened congregation. Some were weeping. All knew that the thing they they had just witnessed, the thing they had just experienced, was something very, very special. These two players had improvised for three-quarters of an hour on the one tune, playing the exact same licks and chords and squeals and feedback noises as each other. Simultaneously. Without a pause or a mistake. Absolute perfection in the art of blues guitar

playing. Twice over. They had not traded licks, but shared them. No matter what either of them had played, no matter how off-beat or unpredictable, the other played it at the exact same moment. After ten minutes or so of trying to outdo one another, they had simply allowed themselves to be swept away by the music and had played the deepest, most sublime blues the world had ever heard. Both Aaron and Zachary still thought they were The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen, and they were right. They were. Both of them. They looked at each other, smiling as the audience melted in dumbfounded approval and appreciation, and as one they left the stage.

Aaron sank back into his chair, sweat-sodden, and chugged the beer handed him by Zachary, but not after first holding it up to him as a mark of respect. 'You are one amazing player.'

Zachary nodded. 'You too.' Zachary handed Aaron his pack of Marlboro and then took one for himself before he lit them both, drew the smoke deep into his lungs and blew it into the swirling, misty atmosphere of what passed for a dressing room. Already the house band were playing up a storm, but somehow the atmosphere had gone - that cross between disbelief and absolute conviction which had gripped the audience had disappeared the moment the two men had left the stage.

'I don't know about you, but I almost feel sorry for those guys. I mean, imagine having to follow that.' Aaron said before grabbing another beer.

Zachary smiled to himself. 'How long ago?' he said. Aaron looked up.

'Oh, about three months. Down in Louisiana.' He paused. 'What about you?'

'Six, and it was here. You were a lawyer, right?'

'How can you tell?' Zachary smiled once more, a broad,

knowing smile. 'Oh, I see. You too. What field?'

'Contractual mainly, I worked for a lot of musicians. How I got into this lark.'

'I was libel, but the same area. Funny, really.'

'What?'

'Well. We both wanted to be the greatest blues guitarist in the world...' Zachary interrupted,

'That the world has ever seen. And in capitals.'

'Yes, absolutely. We both wanted to be The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen, so we do the obvious thing.'

'Exactly. Let's face it, most people would reckon we got a good deal.'

'Some would say we committed fraud. After all, whoever heard of a lawyer with a soul?' They both laughed. There was a pause while they both assessed their situation.

'The complete lying, cheating bastard.' They said. In unison.

'We really should complain. I mean, we are indeed The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen, but, well, we both are, and that doesn't really count.' Aaron said, scratching his chin. 'Zachary?' he asked.

'Call me Zack'.

'Zack. You're in contractual law.' He corrected himself. 'Were. Wouldn't the definite article imply a singular case?'

'Most definitely so, if you'll pardon the pun.'

'So there's no room for sharing joint honours?'

'Not so far as I can see.'

'Fuck it, let's sue the bastard.' Aaron said, jumping up from his chair.

'For what?' Zachary asked.

'Well, for our souls for one thing, and then compensation for the stress and humiliation caused. I mean, we can only lose. I

presume you checked out the contract fully?’

‘Watertight. If it wasn’t for the definite article.’ Zachary paused. ‘You’re right. Let’s sue him.’ Both men went silent. After all, it wasn’t every day that you file a suit against the Prince of Darkness. Not least of their problems was how to get in touch with him. There was a knock at the door. They were surprised, as the band had stopped playing some time ago and most of the audience had left to spread the tale of the night they saw The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen. Both of him. The door swung silently open and in walked a small, nervous man with a squint. They stared.

‘May I sit down?’ He asked in a tremulous voice. They nodded their assent and he sat, took out a small cigarette case and lit up a cheroot.

‘Jesus, it’s you.’ Stammered Zachary.

‘Not quite, and I would be grateful if you would kindly moderate your language.’ Said the small man with the nervous countenance. He looked the two men up and down. ‘Oh, for pity’s sake,’ he roared, ‘I can hardly walk around town with horns and pointy tail, now can I?’ There was a flash and a slight smell of sulphur and the little man disappeared, replaced by a large, broad-backed beast which might have resembled a man if it hadn’t been for the deep crimson colour of his skin, the fact that his lower body would plainly have felt more at home bounding up and down mountainsides and had the addition of a long, whiplash tail and two appropriately evil-looking horns. ‘Better?’ he enquired, menacingly.

Zachary recovered some of his poise first, and managed to stammer. ‘Sorry, I didn’t recognise you at first. And, well, it doesn’t feel right talking to the Prince of Darkness when he looks like the third accountant from the left as you walk

clockwise.'

'Well,' said the devil, 'you obviously have no idea of what, exactly, constitutes hell for most people, now have you?' he smiled, as much as the Devil can smile and gently metamorphosed into a dapper, sharp-suited man of about fifty, powerfully built and with thick, black hair shot through with pure white. 'Now, what seems to be the problem?' He drew deeply from his cheroot, exhaling a thick, red smoke. And he smiled.

'Well,' Zachary started, 'it's like this.' He paused.

'Yes?' Inquired the Devil.

'Sorry. Look what should I...' he hesitated, 'I mean we, call you? Satan? Mr Devil? The demon formerly known as the Prince of Darkness?' He laughed nervously. Then less so when the Devil laughed along with him.

'Look, as demons go, I'm pretty reasonable, being all-powerful and so forth.' He smiled once more. 'And that wasn't bad. You've certainly got balls.' Zachary wasn't happy about the way that he smiled after he had said that. 'Close friends call me Nigel.' Aaron looked at Zachary, and Zachary looked at Aaron.

'Ok, er, Nigel. It's like this. We both signed a contract with you.'

'Indeed.'

'Guaranteeing us that we would, for the small price of the pledging of our respective eternal souls to you in perpetuity, become The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen.'

'And that you have, have you not?' The Devil, sorry, Nigel inquired.

'Well, yes and no.' Said Aaron.

‘Yes and no?’ Asked Nigel, stressing his conjunction to indicate his inability to understand the statement. ‘Are you or are you not The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen?’

‘Well, yes I am.’ Aaron paused. ‘But so’s he.’

‘The problem being?’

‘Well. The use of the definite article’ Zachary began, but Nigel interrupted.

‘Sorry, you’re querying your contracts on the basis of semantics?’

‘Absolutely. Though maybe more on the grounds of syntax, but anyway. What’s the point of a contract if it fails to stipulate exactly what it is that you are gaining, and for exactly what price? Now, we both know the price; the pledging of our respective eternal souls to you in perpetuity. Sadly, you have failed to deliver on your promise, namely to make us The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen, as there are two of us, and we play exactly the same way. And we mean exactly, don’t we Aaron?’

‘Indeed we do. It’s uncanny.’ He looked at Nigel. ‘Well, it would be were it not for your involvement.’

‘Therefore?’ Nigel asked, still calmly smoking his blood-red cheroot.

‘Therefore you, the Devil, Nigel, whomever, have reneged upon your side of the deal. We cannot both be The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen; that would be tautologous.’ Zachary looked at Aaron who nodded in appreciation.

‘All right, maybe I was a little hasty.’ Nigel started. And then smiled. Malevolently, obviously. ‘But look, I’m the Devil, so you can both fuck off.’ He smiled.

‘So you’re saying that the contracts are null and void?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well you can fuck off then; you can’t have our souls.’ Zachary smiled. ‘If you could just take them, there would be no need for this contract business, right? Or is it just a lark that you and God cooked up between you to see who’s gullible enough to go for it?’ The Devil frowned.

‘All right, I’ll get my people to look them over for you, I can’t say fairer than that, now can I?’ The Devil shrugged and looked over at the two men. ‘I couldn’t scab a beer off you, could I? I’m parched.’ Zachary looked at Aaron, and Aaron passed him a beer. The cap flew off in transit. The Devil looked at them both. ‘What, you think I need a bottle opener?’

‘No. Not good enough. Seeing as we can’t both have what we want, we want our souls back, plus some compensation for disappointment.’

‘Compensation?’ Nigel shouted, and small flashes of his previous incarnation crossed his countenance. ‘I’m the Devil, for God’s sake. I’m not giving you compensation.’

‘That’s how the law works. Trust me, I’m a lawyer.’ Even the Devil raised a smile at this.

‘OK. How about a sideways stylistic differential.’ The Devil suggested. The two lawyers looked at him blankly. ‘I’ll make one of you The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen, and the other The Greatest Classical Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen. How about that?’ They shook their heads. ‘All right, how about a sideways medium-based differential movement, one of you can be, say, The Greatest Novelist The World Has Ever Seen?’ Aaron smiled.

‘Oh, and I suppose that means I’ll end up writing Don Quixote again, does it?’ The Devil looked at his feet. ‘Touched a nerve, have I, Nigel?’

‘I’m the Devil again, let’s get that straight.’ He snapped.

‘There’s no need to get shirty, devil or no.’ Zachary grinned.

‘I don’t suppose Pierre Menard was a, how can I put it, client of yours, was he?’ The Devil started to look a little stressed.

‘Well, maybe he was, what of it?’

‘I don’t suppose he realised what happened to him, does he?’

‘No, I got Jorge to sort it out. Do you think I don’t know my way around a library? Anyway, that’s not really relevant.’

‘Well, I think it is. Maybe he should be told, maybe there are others who’ve been conned; miscarriages of injustice if you like?’ Zachary was on a roll.

‘You’re not trying to blackmail me, are you? You do realise to whom you speak?’ The Devil looked somewhat surprised at the turn of events. After all, it was usually he who indulged in this sort of behaviour. ‘I invented blackmail.’ He stammered, indignantly.

‘And very grateful we are for it, too. Of course we’re not trying to blackmail you,’ Aaron cut in, ‘We’re just suggesting that with a few alterations to your business practices, you can run a far more successful and watertight operation, that’s all, and also trying to warn you of the possibilities which may occur should your little, how can I put it, marketing faux-pas become more widely known.’ Aaron lit another Marlboro.

‘Those will kill you, you know.’ The Devil said, ungraciously.

‘Well there’s no need for that attitude, now is there?’ said Zachary, suppressing a smirk.

‘Look.’ The Devil began. ‘You guys. You just swan around playing the guitar without doing so much as an afternoon’s practice, oh, it’s only a soul and haha, he’s fucked up the admin. Do you know how difficult it is to get good admin staff down there? Most secretaries and clerks go straight to heaven on the

grounds that they've spent all their life in hell already. Hell's full of moody bastards with rampaging egos, all bickering and whining. Adolf wants his own apartment, away from Genghis, because he can't stand the way he smells. How did that man persuade a nation to do all those things? He's such a pathetic little prick. I mean, he should by rights, be upstairs with all the other pathetic bastards, but no, I've got to have him. His paintings are awful, too. Good job I've got Caravaggio to do all my interior design. The only decent admin guy I've got is Albert, and he's on holiday. I suppose Florence isn't too bad, though she's got a tongue on her like you wouldn't believe. Joe keeps airbrushing my best demons out of the end-of-year photos and Millhouse automatically destroys any sort of record on sight. It's a bloody nightmare, and you wonder why I make a mistake like this? I'm not omni-bloody-potent, you know. I'm immortal, and if I happen to have made you both The Greatest Blues Guitarist The World Has Ever Seen in the same era, well I'm sorry. You can have you souls back. Fine. I'll get some more somewhere else.' He sank further down into his chair while Zachary and Aaron looked at each other in amazement.

'Look, Nigel.' Said Aaron. 'Let's go out, grab a beer, maybe a bite to eat. Our treat. Looks like you could do with a night off.'

The Devil nodded his head sulkily and started to get out of his chair.

'Oh, and we'll get back to you about our compensation for loss of life-long dream, as well.' Zachary added.

'Whatever.' The Devil said, and they all trudged out to Zack's car.

'Where do we fancy?' Aaron said.

'There's this little blues bar over on the West side. Should be hopping by now, especially as our exploits will be all over

town, and it seems appropriate. What do you say, Nigel?’

‘Whatever.’ They climbed into the car and drove silently across town, the Devil sulking in the back seat, mumbling occasionally about what a bloody awful job he had and they should try being the Prince of Darkness for a while; see how they liked it. They arrived, got out of the car and were stopped at the door.

‘No can do, boys, not dressed like that.’ Said the doorman who was three hundred and fifty pounds of slightly smelly and greasy bad attitude with a cut-off leather waistcoat with ‘Hell’s Angels’ embroidered on its back. Nigel stared at him. He sat down. Nigel was cheering up.

‘Well, being The Devil does have certain advantages.’ He said, smiling. ‘I ask you, embroidered?’ He continued to no-one in particular. ‘Do they really think they’ll make it? Oh no. They’ll all go straight upstairs. Jesus wants them to embroider him a sunbeam. Stupid bastard. Imagine how embarrassed he’d be at the next meeting if it gets out that he tried to refuse Satan entry to his club?’ He chuckled to himself, took out a small, black notebook and scribbled in it. Aaron and Zachary found the idea of a chuckling Devil somewhat unsettling. As they walked in, a table suddenly cleared in the packed club, just to the left of the stage, and strangely enough, no-one tried to sit in it before the three men were there. They ordered beer and some nachos, Nigel giving specific instructions that his should be without jalapeños, and they sat down to their beers. Zachary looked at Nigel’s cheroot inquisitively.

‘What’s that?’

‘You really don’t want to know.’ Nigel said. They were aware that people were whispering and occasionally pointing, and noticed as the hum of anticipation gradually increased until the

room was at a fever pitch. A young man took to the stage and looked over at their table.

‘Let me guess,’ said Zachary, ‘Pig Boy Grunt’ and he and Aaron laughed, not noticing the young man smile at Nigel just before he started to play.

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Nigel blushed and shrugged his shoulders, sheepishly.

Nigel, aka the Devil; formally known as the Prince of Darkness.