

The First Two Pages of “The Rock Star” by Frances Aylor

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An Essay by Frances Aylor

“The Rock Star” was written for the Malice Domestic’s 2020 anthology, whose theme was “Mystery Most Theatrical.” This murder mystery takes place in a dinner theater in rural Virginia. The setting is modeled after an actual colonial tavern which has faced many of the same funding issues as the one in the story.

The protagonist is Buck Wheeler, a community leader and responsible businessman who has never forgotten his early success as a rock & roll singer. Years ago he walked away from prospective stardom so that he could support his family. I want the reader to empathize with this man who sacrificed his own dreams to take care of the people he loved.

In the first paragraph, Buck is singing in the shower so his teenage children can’t hear him. This scene tells us that Buck is old enough to have teenagers and that he has a typical relationship with them—they are embarrassed by their father’s antics. Since singing combines both sound and movement, I used auditory and visual elements to describe the scene: *swirling steam, loud whoosh of water, warbling falsetto.*

He practiced hitting the high notes in the shower, where the swirling steam caressed his vocal cords and the loud whoosh of water gave him privacy to belt out his warbling falsetto, without his teenage children complaining that he was “pitchy.” They had picked up that criticism from one of those television talent shows where amateur singers waited, with wide eyes and nervously clenched fists, for the judges to decide if they were on their way to stardom.

At the end of the first paragraph, I refer to a popular television show where singers are hoping for stardom. I repeat the word *stardom* in the first line of the second paragraph to transition into a bit of backstory, which is always tricky because backstory can slow the action. To maintain a high energy level during this flashback, I use active verbs such as *crisscross*, *corral*, and *prance*. The visual implies that Buck, like those singers on the television talent show, also had *wide eyes and nervously clenched fists* when he performed. This provides another link between the first two paragraphs.

Buck Wheeler wasn't looking for stardom. At least, not now. Back in his early twenties, his band had crisscrossed through the South, playing small towns and clubs, wherever they could corral together enough fans for a road trip that was tantalizingly close to breakeven. He'd pranced in tight pants in front of a microphone, guitar firmly in hand, standing center stage with his drummer and keyboard player as they grinned at their adoring audience.

The third paragraph lets the reader know that although Buck was talented and enjoyed performing, he realized he could not make a living with his music. He understands that the accolades the band received are a *treasured bit of hyperbole*. Many of us have ambitious dreams from our youth which we never accomplish. Just

as with Buck's newspaper article, we hold on to our dreams for a while, then safely tuck them away in our memories. I use the phrase *not good enough* in three consecutive sentences to focus on Buck's disappointment.

Their band was good. Everyone said so. Buck still had the newspaper clipping that proclaimed them "the best new rock band of our age," a treasured bit of hyperbole that was carefully framed to protect it from wrinkles, yellowed just a bit after being proudly displayed for years on his bookshelf before he finally shoved it to the back of a drawer. The band was good. Just not good enough. Not good enough to justify the expense of months on the road. Not good enough to support a wife and new baby.

Buck returns to his hometown and accepts his new role as family provider. He joins the family insurance business and devotes himself to protecting his customers from life's misfortunes. He is a model citizen: he coaches Little League, donates to charitable causes, and is elected to the county Board of Supervisors, where he is determined to safeguard his constituents' rural way of life. Safety and security, both in his own life and in the lives of others, take top priority.

Suddenly he is given a second chance at stardom—he's asked to perform in a musical fundraiser for the community dinner theater. Although he was never nationally famous, he's still a hometown hero who captured the hearts of his contemporaries. I use the image of teary-eyed *quivering teenage girls* to create a strong visual of rock concerts and adoring fans. Many readers have experienced these concerts firsthand and can identify with the emotions of Buck's audiences.

Older residents of Foreman still remembered him as the long-haired high school heart throb whose penetrating high notes once caused tears to run down the cheeks of quivering teenage girls. When local thespians scheduled a summer musical, they pressed him to take the lead part.

However, the svelte young man with the mesmerizing voice doesn't exist anymore. Buck is overweight and his voice is well past its prime. He's afraid he'll make a fool of himself in front of his friends and clients. But eventually the pull of bright lights and adoring fans is too strong. The colonial tavern represents the solid traditions he has always supported, and his insurance company provides coverage on the property. How can he say no?

At first, he turned them down. He was too old, he said. Too out of shape, with a softening belly and prominent love handles. And his voice tended to squeak out on the high notes. But they insisted. It was for a good cause—a fundraiser to support the 18th century building that began life as a colonial tavern and was now home to a popular dinner theater.

Back at home, Buck pulled the old newspaper clipping about his band from the back of his sock drawer. A bittersweet rush of fond memories reminded him of the heady days of his youth, when anything seemed possible. And he said yes.

For a few magical moments, Buck gets a second chance to realize his dreams. But this is a murder mystery, after all, which means happy endings are hard to come by. Reality intrudes as a fire rips through the theater, devouring the dried-out timbers of the centuries-old tavern. Buck behaves not only as the rock star he once was but as the responsible adult he has now become.

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Frances Aylor (www.francesaylor.com) wrote the financial thriller *Money Grab* to prove that investing, when wrapped in a fast-paced story with captivating characters, is both easy to understand and exciting. The book won the Ingram Star Rising Star Award. Frances worked in the investment industry, holds the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation, and is a past president of CFA Society of Virginia. She has done numerous presentations on money management. Currently president of SinC–Central Virginia, Frances has published two short stories: “The Girl in the Airport” in the *Deadly Southern Charm* anthology, and “The Rock Star” in the *Malice Domestic 2020* anthology. She is working on her second novel as well as several short stories.