Blessings from a Woman of the Good God

by Hardy Jones

Great-aunt Gertie, all four-feet six inches of her, tried to teach me how to say God in Cajun French. It was around nine on a weekday morning in July and we sat around her kitchen table as rich coffee perfumed the air; its caffeine in addition to my nervousness, made my hands sweat. I was afraid of stammering out some awkward French that Great-aunt Gertie would not comprehend, and worse, think me a fool for trying.

As part of my recent Cajun self-education, I'd been listening to Father Jules Daigle's "Cajun Self-Taught" tapes and had learned a few set expressions such as, *Aujourdi c'est ma fete* – Today is my birthday; a saying which only comes in handy once a year. But that July morning, alone with Great-aunt Gertie, I was going to see if my past couple of years of studying Cajun French had paid any dividends.

I refused, however, to use one of Father Daigle's set sentences. While visiting Mom that summer, she had taught me to say rabbit: *lapin* – LA-pah(n), which had been eating the tomatoes from her garden at dusk each day. From Father Daigle I knew how to say "at dusk" and "to eat," while Mom taught me "rabbit" and "garden," so I combined the two: "*A la brun la lapin manger leur jardin*."

A knowing nod and quick smile from Great-aunt Gertie. I was relieved. Then she corrected me. "*A la brun le lapin manger dans ma jardin*." In the evening the rabbit eats in my garden.

With that somewhat successful attempt under my belt, I moved on and asked her a question that had plagued me for close to a year. I knew the Cajun French expression for the Almighty translated in to the Good God. But as much as the word intrigued me, I'd never heard it pronounced, so I asked Great-aunt Gertie.

"*Le bon Dieu.*"

The "d" came out soft as a "j," and made a sloshing sound. I closed my eyes and soaked the sound into my brain, but I still had difficulty getting the exact pronunciation. The combination "d-j" sound at the beginning gave me trouble. To explain from where my limited French derived, I said: "I've been studying Cajun with Father Daigle's book and tapes."

Great-aunt Gertie jumped out of her seat and hurried to the far wall of the living room, and pulled a plain maroon book from a shelf. "The little grandson got that for me last Christmas." She did not have the book that accompanies the tapes, but the dictionary. She opened it and a black and white glossy photo of Father Daigle fell out. A thin lipped man with shiny black hair parted down the center with gray grazing his hair line. His black framed glasses covered dark, sharp eyes. Kindness, humility, wisdom, and a penchant for not taking guff is the type of man his photo presented. He was in his eighties and nineties when he wrote the books and recorded the tapes. His eyesight was less than good, causing him to skip a few words or read a page number incorrectly on the tapes. But the sound engineer would gracefully catch Father Daigle, who then quickly apologized, righted his mistake and moved on. Listening to his tapes is truly like learning Cajun from a delightful grandfather.

Father Daigle was a parish priest east of Lake Charles in Welsh. Clovis, Mom's first husband, was a distant relative of his; they were third or fourth cousins from what I hear. After becoming a priest, Father Daigle learned seven more languages, including standard French. Toward the end of his life he began writing down the Cajun language, and what resulted was a permanent written and oral record.

Before my summer visit, all I knew about Great-aunt Gertie was that she had married into the family through Great-uncle Gus, *Grandmere*

Felice's baby brother. I'm told I met Great-aunt Gertie once as a toddler. In high school, just before Great-uncle Gus passed, she came by the house, and allegedly that's when I met her for the second time. But in 1998, I am certain I met her at Saint Michael's Church in Iowa, at the wedding of her baby girl, Michelle. Extremely petite with short cropped hair graying around the ears, Great-aunt Gertie, clad in an emerald-colored dress, greeted me with a hug and familial friendliness that I'm not accustomed to receiving.

Great-aunt Gertie's lack of height was her initial noticeable quality. And she was the first person I saw Mom, all five-feet three inches, lean over to hug. In July, I paid Great-aunt Gertie another visit and brought along Mom.

"You remember when they was making that roll in the hair in 1940s?"

"Yeah," Mom said.

"Well, I was the beautician and had to fix my stepmother's hair. She was not too glad when I got married. But my daddy said: 'I'm glad because I couldn't have give you a wedding.' We went to get the license. I was just 15 and we went to Lafayette. My husband was ten years older. The priest questioned him. My husband came back from the service and went back to school for his diploma, that's where I met him. We got married and went to get the clothes. My stepmother didn't want me to take too much."

"Was this Great-uncle Gus?" I asked.

"No. David Bellard from Church Point. We were married for twenty some odd years, then he died from a brain hemorrhage in '68."

"David, when he went in the service for World War II was an interpreter. He went to Italy and knew French, English, and Italian. Now that was Cajun French, not the big French. But I guess you can talk with the big French. A lot of the Cajun soldiers went and come back and claimed they couldn't talk French anymore. Like my husband say: 'You don't forget that easy.'"

Until recently, I never knew that Cajun men were interpreters in World War II. When we teach our children about war heroes, should these men be mentioned? They didn't do anything quite as impressive as the Navajo Code Encrypters, who have only recently received their deserved recognition. At least I don't think these Cajun men did. All I know for certain is that these men were interpreters for American officers. By wartime hero standards, they were just doing their jobs.

But when you consider that for many of these men, the military was their first exposure to a totally Anglophone world, and then their service seems extra ordinary. Many had never been too far from their small French communities in southwest Louisiana, and then one day there was a drill sergeant barking commands in their faces; if they were lucky, they understood a few. Perhaps that was why many of them, once they mastered English and returned home, claimed to have forgotten French.

"How'd you meet Great-uncle Gus?" I asked.

"Out. At the dancing thing."

"And Uncle Gus could dance so smooth," Mom said.

"Yes, he was a good dancer," Great-aunt Gertie said. "We went to this little bar and we were a bunch of widows."

"And he picked you?" Mom asked

"Someone else had eyed him to the table." Great-aunt Gertie's voice dropped momentarily to a whisper, "But I'm not gonna say who. He danced with everybody at the table. So it went on, every week we'd go. Finally, me and my friend, she died now, we'd go together. Me and my friend, Gus bring us both to the thing and then one day she said: 'No. You go by yourself.' I was thirty something odd years old and that went on from there."

Since I grew up primarily in Florida unaware and unaccepting of my Cajun heritage, I wondered if Great-aunt Gertie, who had grown up during the times when Cajuns were discouraged from having ethnic pride, ever felt the same. "It didn't bother me none," she said. "And I was never

ashamed of my French heritage. Long time ago when I was selling Avon, there was a lady in the trailer park on Broad Street in Lake Charles. She was French Canadian, from Quebec. She told me: 'I have never let nobody in my house. But you speak French.'"

"You were one of them," Mom said.

"I guess that's what she thought, even though I was from Louisiana. I could speak and we chatted a little while. In fact, I don't believe she bought nothing. But we had a nice little visit. It took me awhile to remember my French with her because I was raised speaking French, but then kinda got away from it. But me and my first husband always talked French and talked to the children in English."

"When Hardy and I moved to Pensacola," Mom said, "I still had a bad French accent."

"Really? But did y'all talk French, y'all?"

"Yeah. Grandma Cummings, Mama, Aunt Laura, Aunt Florence..."

"You think Aunt Florence?"

"I don't know."

"I don't believe," Great-aunt Gertie said. "Or if she knew, she lost it. She married that German guy and I don't believe he talked French."

"When she was with Uncle Tom, she didn't talk French?" Mom asked.

"That's Marsalise you talking about."

"Who was Florence married to?"

"Bruce Stozel," Great-aunt Gertie said.

"Yeah, Uncle Bruce," Mom said. "No, he didn't talk French either. Maybe Aunt Florence knew just a little, because I remember her and Mama saying something in French. You know when they would talk about pregnant women, it was always in French. But Mama and Aunt Laura used to spit it out. I asked Mama one day, how come y'all speak English a little bit, then y'all go to French. She said: 'It's something you shouldn't know.' Really, when I married, I didn't know anything about sex. I was just dumb. That's like when we started our periods. Mama didn't come and explain nothing. Oh, one morning I woke up and my bed was bloody and I was scared to death. I went and told Mama I got blood everywhere. She said: 'Go let your older sister fix you up.' I said: 'But Mama, what's the matter?' She said: 'You'll understand.' She was ashamed to tell me."

"It wasn't spoken," Great-aunt Gertie said.

"I can't understand why they didn't," Mom said. "And I started so early, nine years old."

"I was twelve," Great-aunt Gertie said. "But the lady that washed the clothes noticed it, you know. Other than that, I was attending to myself and what I learned at school."

"They didn't tell us anything at school," Mom said. "I was in the bed crying I cramped so bad, and Grandma Cummings came to the house and she said to Mama: 'Ada, warm a plate and wrap it in a towel and put it on Nell's stomach.' I was tiny then, nothing but skin and bones. So Mama warmed up a platter in the oven and come and put it on my stomach. I passed clots and everything. Really, I should have went to a doctor."

"Normally it ran and if something happened, you died," Great-aunt Gertie said. "A sad situation. Not educated and didn't want to be educated, I guess."

"Daddy could read," Mom said, "and write a little bit. Mama couldn't do none. She could sign her name and that was it."

"My brother says we come from not too good of a family," Great-aunt Gertie said. "I told him, what we make of ourselves is what we are. My mother had brought us to her old aunt and they had to go to the soup line; he said he remember that, and my mother died when he was five years old. But he said: 'See, I remember going to the soup line with my little bucket to get some food.' I didn't go because I was too small. I was still on the bottle I guess."

Great-aunt Gertie poured us all another cup of coffee and began telling us about a documentary on handfishing. "My first husband he fished like that. Him and his brothers, they all fished by hand."

"What do you mean, fish by hand?"

"Go along the walls, and if there is an old stick there, you go underneath and the fish is there. The catfish make a hole and back up in there. So David put his hand in there and when the catfish opens his mouth, he catches him through the gill and pull him out."

"What was your job when y'all went fishing?"

"I'd bring the sack. Me and my sister-in-law would follow them on the bank. They'd come back and put us our fish in the sack and then go back in the bayou."

"Did y'all eat and cook out there?"

"Only on Good Friday. We all jumped into a wagon: David's sister, the husband, and the mom. The poor mom, she would bring a bag of Irish potatoes and her grease to make sure she fried some potatoes for the children because they was going to be hungry if they didn't catch no fish. And then they made homemade pies and brought that. But then if we didn't catch no fish, we ate that and hightailed it back home. Whatever they fished we cleaned and cooked and ate in the woods. Fried fish and coubillion. It was very good. So much better outside. Cooked rice out there too. Put some bricks down to put you pots on and make a fire underneath. I still have my black pots."

Talking with Great-aunt Gertie and hearing of her handfishing exploits showed me how we Cajuns are folk of European stock who weren't afraid to adopt Native American ways: Handfishing, Native activity; Good Friday, Catholic holiday. I was born distanced from this union by geography and time, but Great-aunt Gertie is my link; the sparkle in her eyes as she tells her stories, her gay gesticulations, her rapid speech: all blessings from a woman of the Good God.