

DOWNRIVER

Goosey sprinkles of paint clung to the hairs on Jean's arms where the spray from the paint roller had tossed grey misting. It stiffened there, much as the humidity would allow. Close to the hot ceiling Jean moves, sweaty slick, so as to peel off the thin old tee-shirt, pressed liquid-y to his skin by the dense air; but then realizing that the same spatter might cling also to his chest, necessitating a later bath of paint thinner, he keeps it on, un-tucked from his jeans and still soaked with damp splotches. As alternative he climbs downward from the ladder's top, oozing across the bare floor to the ice chest where he scoops up a nestled beer-brown bottle. "You know, I've been contemplating," he says (deciphering his own soft chuckle snorting in the dampish silence), "—when I'm finished here with you I may just take off for a while. Get away, and travel; I don't

know. I've been thinking some about traveling, seeing some new places."

"That so?"

Outside a grey March dripped from the gallery overhang facing onto Rampart Street. Jean lays the cool wet bottle against the back of his neck. While they were painting the ceiling fans hung motionless, letting the air coagulate. The barroom's ceiling was slightly better than half-finished, receiving new management's fresh coat of paint and other renovations as an honor of celebrating the Bicentennial. Lots of places, catering both to tourists and locals, were getting an especial new coat of paint. That was not enough, however, of thorough re-alterations, of changing the scene, of somehow satisfying that gut-punching thrust of Jean's restlessness. "I think I'll take some time out, looking, traveling. May go, I don't know, Key West or out west. Maybe Las Vegas—or California. See beyond the old bend in the river. I know that doesn't sound like the old me..."

“Nope. Not you.”

“But times have most certain changed, maybe I need a change, too; need, at least, a break. A good while I’ve been down here; now each day it somehow seems a lot longer. Could be I’m just tired, tired of the same old routine. Although it’s anything but routine really—looking for...I don’t know. Strange, really, what must make you one day pick apple juice instead of orange—just remembering what it used to taste like long ago when you last had it, long time past.” Jean picks up his paint roller again. “When I came to New Orleans—in’70, January, that was—walking in the street opposite the French Market all the storefronts looked so real, authentic, like years old, wooden storefronts with real wooden doors, paned or plate glass windows, a little step and wood plank, or tile, on the floors, cans of imported Italian tomatoes on the shelves. If you walk there now it’s all slapped-up renovation, shiny and plastic, looks like pictures of Disneyworld, grossly immaculate, Hunt’s sauce

stacked on the shelves. At least they haven't yet changed the A&P on Royal Street."

"Only the prices."

"Yes, that. Old prices are surely gone! You know, before long probably things won't be the same anywhere, if even now they still are. I'm needing to see some things I've not ever seen before they change for always. I've never been further west, or any direction, past the state line."

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In that far summer—that fresh-baked, grainy, pungent and warm summer of love—Jean did not go to San Francisco or wear flowers in his hair nor did he go to New York or sit limply in fluorescent-painted doorways at Saint Mark's Place or sleep in Central Park. He did not go even so far as New Orleans in early previous spring for Mardi Gras. It was not that he did not consider daydreaming about those places, and the enticing life

that they might promise, the free spirit exhilaration of being there, massed in a spinning crowd of strangers dancing and singing and swaying, holding hands. It was simply that he did not venture far afield from Lafayette Parish, where the staid ordinariness of daily life seemed at once warmly comfortable and familiar—and he could remain snared into the gnawing preoccupation of *not* seeing too closely too much of some other parts of the world, most notably southeast Asia with its tentacles of jungle and putrid hazy pall. However his conscription loomed ahead so imminent—because as the mournful lyrics of the day had it: he was no senator's son, no fortunate one. There was such a bad moon on the rise. Lafayette Parish, relatively close enough to jungle itself, flat baked wide land, moist and black, grassy with paddies of fields that fell away beyond levees to low spots and bayous surrounded by swampy growths, was a spot where, as Jean sat unable to move, people passed through on their way to somewhere else. That so-aptly-designated "youth culture" that had coalesced out of the dorm rooms and

coffeehouses of distant fermented college campuses had in their manoeuverings to yet trickle through the dim maze of America's fragmented backroads nor hardly veered beckoning this far afield at all, hitchhiking, on the road to dewy utopias. People born in Lafayette Parish tended to stay there—unless as now displaced at graduation to the war-fields of southeast Asia—more or less caring for their plots of land among bayou waterways, as previous generations had done before them, and as subsequent others, if left to their own devices, might do afterward, not rocking the boat, poling the pirogue in the quieter waters clear of the faster currents.

Music, seeping under the fences and slithering into the corners of Lafayette Parish, bringing hints of the world, beyond Memphis and beyond Nashville even, a world of Philadelphia or Cambridge and Los Angeles. No longer was it a choice (Waylon or Porter?) between Pat Boone or Elvis, or even California surf boys or Johnny Cash. It was a day of entangling rage, of convoluted confusion, of the cracking song of Bob Dylan.

Jean, freshly a high school graduate, green, as if at length with a mortarboard and tassel closing the door on a summer cabin after a season, began to look for work, at least in an off-handed whatever-will-happen way. In general rebelliousness he instinctively shunned the farm work of his earlier adolescent years, stepping aside from the recurrent boring futility of fighting into submission the rather obstinately non-forgiving land always re-sprouting unwanted weed-jungle growths; he figured that eventually he might have to in desperation settle into that, but that was the definitive last resort. He still spent part of the long empty afternoons fishing, which at the least provided him, along with a few ears of corn from the patch, with a filling simple supper. Dishing it up himself, relishing the incomparably intense goodness of its pristine freshness, he only occasionally thought of it being a meal for only one. That lone and lonely thought bothered him no more than listening sans company to the sputtering of distant radio or merely reading the newspaper in the evening, listening to the insects and frogs tune up beyond

the darkened borders of the yard beyond the *garconniere*. Save for the stars the terrain was deep black infinity. Sitting limply on the front steps, Jean watched as fireflies stumbled into corners of darkness. The frogs burped a mournful harumpfing sound, sad as prophets foretelling a pitiable doom; the smaller ones chirruping choruses of pleading prayers. Across the field beyond the tree-overgrown lane he still went to his parents' house for Sunday dinner, now only every other week, and bowed out of the interrogatory conversation early, abandoning it with grateful exhalation to the further delving into his two younger sisters' current high school concerns. He rarely went into the village for he had, other than errands, no one to see there; and if one of the girls he had known in high school who had not immediately married after graduation ambled up to him he was overcome and pink with shyness. Most time he had little regret for being alone, because not even hardly did he notice those fleeting thoughts, like timid deer leaping behind a camouflage of trees.

In time, just about the midpoint of August when the heat was nearing the languorous wilting routine of being its most oppressive, after talking to a guy who talked to a guy Jean began work, going out as an extra on the road crews that moved about the parish. It was—after the initial pleasurable shock of having some assigned place to be present and active every day had worn stale—that much like the futility of hoeing a row, not a job that held much interest of thought or involvement beyond not allowing oneself to get hurt by inattentive accident or rote mind-wandering; but it was outdoor work, which gave it a sense of pleasure when able to catch a wan breeze, a not inconsiderable benefit. It was not always hard work, at times no more than waving a flag or motioning at the scarce rural traffic, other times more strenuous pursuits, trimming of tree limbs from the tangle of overhanging low roadside branches or removing trash and rock or rotted stumps or dense briar vines from ditches. The senior men were assigned the prestige of driving heavy machinery that graded the shoulders, pushed

aside old asphalt or leveled the holes and cracks for repair. The dirt-encrusted basic work, breaking of rock or pouring of tar, was laid onto the stout backs of the few members of the chain gang assigned with their watchman to a road crew; at the end of each day they were prodded onto trailers back to the parish work farm. Some times, in merely anticipated prolongment of some comradely joviality when the day was ended before yet another lone supper, Jean would accompany several of the other men on the crew, sweat-stained and covered with dust, to one of the local taverns where they wound down their workday before heading on home, all of them married and determinedly working on starting families though only a year or two older than Jean. In the further back bayou of Jean's mind was always a vague but hovering awareness, like a cloud of gnats, of the distant Asian jungle war. Jean chose to not avail himself of much other social life, appearing lackadaisically only once every month or so at the Saturday night dances where he leaned about the walls, an observer, dancing only once or twice when

severely coerced, which he noticed began to bewitchedly happen more frequently as time went on, and rather more probable from his months outdoors on the road crew as he grew a couple of inches and turned brown, hard and lean. He was no more comfortable at the dances than previously, or after the workday walking across the graveled parking lot of the *Later, 'Gator* while receiving complimentary glances from the barmaids, his flint hard arms and chest defining his appearance at heart as one and the same as the agile farmers, and as an alien being to the soft chortling of the beer-sotted good old boys fly-papered to the bar rail. With no apparent concerns, seemingly buoyant upon a gleaming young-manhood, he lingered day into day floating on the surfaces of the bayou, familiar, content, laying back, adrift with no pole. He had nothing in the way of a plan, a route, a passage to destination. He did listen yearningly to the music on radio but now made a conscious effort to stop listening to the news reports from Vietnam where they had daily tallies of body counts.

Sometime near the second Christmas of being on the road crew Jean received a letter of admonishing reminder from the Selective Service Board, to which he had only recently given paltry excuses, and paid a duty of a belated registration. The letter, seed of a bother that became a gnawing worry, though no matter Jean tried convincing himself that the black horn-rimmed reading glasses that he wore would put him low on a priority list; but it still loomed large that dozens, thousands of young recruits fell into the grinder of the military conscription every day. He was not at the moment contented in a place to apply for the possibility of a student deferment, but also knew he did not consider himself generally lucky enough to risk a stint in the jungles of military. He confided in no one, save for his grandparents Broussard who inargumentatively lay already in a bone-white sepulchre in *Cemeterie Notre-Dame*. Jean had recently taken to wearing a black motorcycle jacket, but had not yet put aside enough money for the cycle itself, a polished

portentious emblem which ignited his dormant fantasies of movement for the growing sake of change.

So one foggy day in January Jean, after leaving a briefly unsatisfying and confusing note in his family's mailbox, tramped into the mist with the determination to hitchhike however vaguely toward the nearest sizeable city—New Orleans. He did not know exactly what he might expect as he had never been to any town larger than Baton Rouge, but he was now engulfed in seeing what he could see on the other side of the fencerow, what appeared a mystifying and exotically enticing different world. Right now he could see nothing but fog, but given time he was sure that would change. His second ride, a welcome exchange from the outdoor shrouding damp, was heading for as far as Algiers where Jean could be let off able to catch the ferry.

Across that river. Arrayed in its spectacular crescent, what a phantasmagoric ensemble of landscape, cityscape—luscious possibilities, probabilities. It was most certainly true that Jean from the green bayous as unchanging as a turtle on a log had

never seen any place like New Orleans, a kaleidoscopic myriad of stores, worldly exquisite antiques alongside cheap gilt souvenirs, a cluster of tall offices, swank hotels and cheap cramped ones, restaurants and alehouses, hustle, blocks and spreading blocks of houses peopled by every combination of strangers, all extravagance of movement, but yet still at that easy casual trot of pace that exemplified the warm lassitude of the south where the traffic on the river was the most agile able movement of the afternoon. When the sun came out to brighten the entire cityscape, even the drab closet of a room at the YMCA where Jean first stayed warmed. He walked about the streets, trying to remain invisible as he observed all about him, at leisure plunging into the *Vieux Carre*, the old French Quarter, the very Creole heart embodied in the city, the *faubourg* of raucous drinking spots and peep shows and quiet houses on narrow streets and shadowed courtyards, cats lazing beneath leaves of banana trees. Jean explored the tourist-clogged walking tours' spots of historical interest, gazed into the river, rambled through the

marketplace stalls, rode the last streetcar past outer neighborhoods to the end of the line and back, looked in dusty shop windows, glanced at the street vendors, sat in the palmy lushness of Jackson Square Park and observed the colourful people ambling by. There was much to take in. It was a dazzling array, fantastic and careless, parading its casual and sensuous pleasure. At that, only once did Jean with the doorman's insistent enticing, peek into one of the dark shadow-enlaced strip clubs, somehow as menacing as a pickpocket and starkly as barren of certifiably less fun than the tamer VFW dances of Lafayette Parish to which he was accustomed; he did not wander back. In a few days he found a reasonable room in a rather dingy rooming house, eager to feel settling in, and knew that now he must give up his days of leisurely exploration and look for some work to sustain even this meagre rudimentary shelter that barely separated him from the "street people" derelicts. Street people crashed in waves over New Orleans, as of course they had always done, but new to Jean these ragtag

cliques, the more picturesque among them with tie-dyed gauze shirts and flower-painted faces and long floating hairstyles, the higher echelon who roamed the sidewalks, camped after dark near the riverbanks plucking guitars and singing amid vapors of foreign tang-sharp smoke, and gravitated toward the campus of a somewhat less than welcoming Tulane.

Jean, near penniless himself and panic-prodded, with very little desire to return castigated to Lafayette Parish sidled into that neighborhood of spacious homes with lushly abundant gardens known as Garden District and to go knocking door-to-door asking for yard work or odd jobs. Often enough, despite the already accounted gardener, Jean found people willing to give him something to do, there always being growth and cleaning and repairing in a swath of capacious lawns and walkways and flower gardens and antique fences where the jasmines and palm trees stayed green throughout the winter.

It was, however, in a short time, Jean who blossomed. Each day, dressed in a white tee-shirt and blue jeans, wearing

his motorcycle jacket on damp days, Jean crossed solitarily past the somnambulant streets of the riverfront warehouses, or sometimes riding the St. Charles Avenue streetcar, into the Garden District—and seeking out the work available. Such came from the kind ladies of that neighborhood who procrastinate dressing until near lunchtime, or occasionally a fastidious gentleman who leisurely puttered around, fanning himself with a Panama hat. Often someone among these inquisitive residents, after observing the young man performing his chores, would ask him also to come back the following week. Soon there was an expanding circuit, neighborly genteel and gracious, of large creamy shaded houses to which Jean visited services. After a respectful while some of the kind women would linger around in the mid-afternoon to look delicately at Jean, straining upon some chore, his damp tee-shirt stuck clinging to his torso, sweat dripping from where his damp black hair had curled upon itself, and they would offer him, when in summer just before the usual thundery late afternoon cloudburst would sprinkle the city,

ginger ale or 7-up while he could sit with them in the patio and then on the wide verandah discreetly and eventually, of course, on the gallery. They would say things like, "What is a nice-looking boy like yourself doing in New Orleans?"; and Jean would tell them about being new in town and growing up a farm boy and that he had not been much place else. "It must be lonely in a big strange city?" they would say. "Or maybe not, for a young good-looking boy like you?" Then they smiled. One, or two, of the soft-handed gentlemen, after finding some reason to go inside and have Jean climb a ladder to change the lampbulbs in the chandeliers or such, would say the same thing. After the first time or so, the newness falling away like a discarded shirt, Jean, also noticing the over-generous appearance of his envelope, began to think of the friendlier circumstances, the sympathetic hand-holding, the willing ear, perhaps a discreet kiss, as just a part of his work, lagniappe for well-performed job. At the beginning, returning to the Quarter, he would sometimes creep into the cathedral, kneeling there red amid the

luminousness and guilt, and soliciting guidance, perhaps absolution for weakness; eventually, however, just infrequently pausing to gaze at the wide doors before passing on. He was grateful enough for the money he earned, for it provided his sustenance even in the shabby rooming house; he tended to save, somewhat sentimentally by colour or scent or some other note of beauty, the various richly-filled envelopes of delicate suppleness or weighty grain or smooth creaminess and adding the collection to the only other decoration of his room, an Audubon reproduction.

Nights in the Quarter, when he was not too exhausted, Jean wandered up and down the streets, looking into the shop windows or into the lighted windows of apartments where people lived other cozier lives, watched the passers-by and street people; sometimes wandered into a bright chatty bar for a cheap beer, places where they tried to avoid talk of commitments to domino theory or religion or crime or running to Canada or war on the far side of the world, avoiding bemoaning

the kids who died there like virginal martyrs while sweethearts waited at home anticipating resignedly or not the imminent return while elder satiated men in Washington decided fates by debating about saving face. But in these bars, especially the ones Jean found the most attractive the talk was of good times, and Chicago, and hair, and Tammy Wynette, and great beer, and Robert Redford, and fishing and perfect *remoulade*. Months flowed by in a rushing tide. One of these rambling conversations led Jean to discover other evening's work, though not well paid, doing carpentry and odd things for a theatre group performing in a dilapidated storefront in a grimy area north of Canal near to Magazine Street. They performed plays in sometimes exotic interpretations; and youthfully partied in equally boisterous and exotic extremes as well. Jean embraced some rising degree of creativity participating around the productions, safely backstage, and fell in nicely with the assuring informality of the group, its easiness and flux. Everyone was agreeably compelled to fondness for Jean, for his mysterious

quietness, not least of all for the magnetic intrigue of his dark good looks and innocent gazes. Disparate cliques reassembled themselves around the mounting of productions and good times—*'le bon temps'* meaning different things, of course, to different people—enjoyed by most all those who passed, however briefly, through the constantly drifting *mise en scene*. Jean still had his rounds of bread-and-butter day jobs and spent many of his evenings working in the shop at the rear of the theatrical storefront. It was there that Jean met Kitten.

Kitten—who went by only that name and very few people even knew her other name was Thorsen—considered herself a free spirit, despite having to hold onto a part-time job in a Walgreens, favored peasant blouses or batiked cotton caftans with her long straight blonde hair, and was enticed with mildest affection with the idea of being onstage as an actress who could sing a bit. She lived in a large ramshackle house a few blocks from the far side of the campus with a motley assortment of young people who collected there, coming or going often,

whether or not they had any connection to the university. Convinced that her free and child-like expressiveness would carry her talent Kitten found an accepting place in the theatrical group, lolling in their friendliness, and warming to the participants and especially to Jean so much her opposite, dark and quietly mysterious, shy and aloof, rock-silent inside the shell of his motorcycle jacket. Whenever their paths accidentally crossed she would engage Jean in a tentative conversation, eventually as weeks passed easing into pleasantries which became routine and anticipated while yet struck with a frustrating lack of momentum.

Of course, it was among the actors that Jean also met Reg, even more expansively outgoing than Kitten, a beacon of bright auburn hair above smiling eyes and a bubbling fount of overt declaratory expressions. Among others of the artsy group these three passed each other in various phases of the evolving projects, floating about the swirls of viney pathway amid the sideshow of life's circus; drifted into easy camaraderie of shared

drinks and long late talks and the happy idleness of hours spent in the serious-or-not speculation of constantly questioning philosophies. Kitten looks upon Jean with the fascinated eyes of an explorer in the obscured dark maze of a jungle, elusive shadows and overgrown paths. Oppositely Jean construes a vision of Kitten as a sparkling stream, the bright sunshine of a clearing, yet maintaining for himself a wariness of stepping into the open. Jean could continue to wend his proletarian way along the paths through the fern beds and ground cover and flower-strewn coverlets of the Garden District by day, as indeed it seemed to Kitten only to add to his handsomely beclouded allure, that of the wandering man working the earth to fund his simple quest. Following her plea, with no apparent wish for any hesitation, he would accompany her to music *boites* and jazz taverns, remembering always a respectful distance, despite pitcher upon pitcher of beers. The trio often shared suppers, and lingered into late evening over steaming coffees at Café du Monde. At one point Jean would sit feebly in the darkened

auditorium during one of the theatre troupe's infrequent talent show nights, impromptu thrown-together efforts at hilarity and blatant self-promotion, staring into the dimness at the top of the proscenium as he listened to a sincerely plaintive Kitten and a rather camp Reg sing a simultaneously haunting and flamboyant duet: "...if you don't want my peaches, honey, then why would you shake my tree?" Thereafter Reg began to look at Jean with hungry eyes, with concentrated effort resembling only warily the patience of a fox. Their evenings as a group together remained casual and confine-less and cozy, but in time became overlaid with an uncertain unidentified frisson. At times Reg would escort Jean to bars about the *Vieux Carre*, not the flashy show-bars of Bourbon St., but neighborhood-y closely crowded bars of dubiously lusty tendencies where Jean's arrival precipitated a tingle of emotional charging like the flashing heat lightning that often times lit the city, patrons stunned into remaining conscientiously blasé but nevertheless in cruising gear. Reg observed these jaunts, carefully, still with implacable patience.

Jean smiled, and conversed and jostled, then, after late Cafe du Monde coffee, retreated to the still and cherished sanctity of his dark room in the delapidating rooming house.

In New Orleans most every August afternoon thick with heat a thunderstorm drenches the streets and alleys. Then steamy moisture lays along the gutters, and after the briefly momentary respite of refreshing-while-falling, becomes the heavy water sprinkled asizzle on sauna stones. After on those warm evening rambles when Sheila, another friend from the theatre ensemble who also considered herself a budding singer, and oftentimes accompanied by her boyfriend Moe, joined Jean and Kitten and Reg they would randomly start out on a roundabout in an ordinary jazz club, alert to the music and the newness of the evening, and then as the night hours wore down might wander under Sheila's guiding protection into the half-submerged wet log underside of the city to other dark smoky and rambunctious joints in scattered neighborhoods of questionable safety where Sheila, and especially Moe, could pass

strutting freely and un-confronted. Those sticky neighborhoods spilled like gelatinous molasses outward from the flame lights of downtown New Orleans and the French Quarter, spread into the distant web of streets same as dark and moss-swamped bayous where time stood still and watching eyes peered from behind the foliage. Most each of these murky tributary neighborhoods had a street that held a shuttered shot-gun residence, darkened and discreet, with perhaps only a single blue porchlight no brighter than an oil lamp, guardedly known to those in the know, where musicians gathered in the late hours, where liquor might be served without benefit of license, where a singer snapped to the band, where jazz and blues partied together, where the occasional weekend cockfight was staged, where dancing was the suggestion, where smoke layered like purple fog, where the authorities dared not bother to come, where care was shoved away, where assignations were contemplated, where the table candles illumined intense eyes and the C-sharped laughing embellishment of a gold tooth, and the farther inside of the

watched door good times were had by all that entered in. A young woman, spotlighted, in a wine-red dress, soft liquid-y charmeuse, vamped among the tables, pausing to give a wide eye to the male patrons; she sang: "I'm a stout lovin' mama; I'll sup with sweet rolls tonight—I'm one stout lovin' mama, I need to sup you right. When you sup my grits, You'll find that syrup's gold and light". All those assemblage enthralled nodded to the insistent chords; smiled aside to those others gathered at the tables, watching the woman singing and swaying from one to another. Blue light punctured with red shafts dappled the close hot room. In these neighborhoods of the secretive city music and good times were a little rawer, a little shakier, a little precarious. The pop-crackled firecracker atmosphere kindled reminiscence for a holiday, like on the first night of Mardi Gras with ropes of coloured beads, fluttering like swarming Brazilian butterflies by swampfuls, undulating, flung at your head, enticing invitation to good times. The moon gloated over all, trailed feebly by a few fireflies above now a vacant lot and then

past the weedy cramp of passageways toward backdoors. The window-shade-shadowy shutter-softened music floated out moth-like to reach toward the moon's glowing dust just barely a hand-reach above, the same moon that hovered at that moment over the tidy gardens and darkened verandahs and late-hour velvet-robed nightcaps of the Garden District while beyond the masses of treetops the distant streetlamps of the riverfront sputtered—far out. Especially through Moe's "business acquaintances" it was easy to become familiar with the popular playthings and party-drugs of the street, with the faintly illicit and mysterious, and even at times, with Sheila scouting, to witness the surreptitious and secret ceremonies of voodoo, with its chanting and powders and potions. In certain hidden addresses of the city behind carefully shuttered doors, practitioners could be found who still conjured the ritual and incantations and admonitions of *ancien* voodoo for those who were desperate for believing, a secretive number who grew in times of tense uncertainty, searching for any omen of hope in a

world covered by darkness of despair. The rhythms of the voodoo danced with unremorseful manic abandon then in the torch lit night before the break of gloaming announcing another sleepy morning, the cathedral bells extolling another pink-washed day. Often Jean, though not thoroughly thinking it was a good idea nor particularly necessary, could be tempted in those times, for the sake of sociability, for intensifying excitement at the revels of the evening, into trying the otherwise inexplicable to him experience of some beneficent party drug and for a while floating in another world alongside the moonglow, pulsing and spinning; but he, alternatively at the same time, stepped back repulsed yet fascinated at the akimbo undulating stab of sweating arms, long and wiry and fierce, and the shameless crying of the voodoo. Kitten brazenly flirted with its promise, the fluttering offering of its wild hope and deep desires, seeming at times to need the reassurance of its embrace. Reg thought of it all as an amusing slight-of-hand. Kitten smiled, lowering her eyes as demurely as a praying angel,

sighing, "Don't be a cynic". With each encounter more mystifying and strange than the last, peculiar and to the cliff's edge of frightening hysteria, Jean informed Sheila that he thought it intolerable to witness more, and he told Kitten that he would gladly continue to frequent the jazz joints, but not return to any covens of voodoo ceremony. Kitten responded with confusion; she clung, she pleaded in a panic, for random moments she was aloof, she feigned sorrow, she coaxed time alone with Jean. "Please come with me", she pouted. An unnoticed before whisper of rankling coldness, uncustomary, crept into her voice toward Reg, who retaliated with sharp and stinging pecks. Once again she clung to Jean, manoeuvring as much as possible toward seeing him alone. She insinuated more than ever ways to clutch his arms and lean into his shoulders. Jean, himself confused—somehow inexplicably trying to file his common work-a-day exploits in the Garden District away from this his other daily life—attempted to establish a peace, to keep Kitten consoled and her temperament even. She sometimes

looked into his eyes or touched his hair or face as if she expected to find him feverish, yet it was she who would go off into a delirious ramble, and a few times he felt compelled to kiss her in a way, so he felt, that was huggable and comforting and calm.

When April came round, like a ragged cat sauntering from alley to alley searching for early morning milk, Kitten was in a distant corner of moodiness, sulking about at one moment and whinging the next. Distraught, she drove Jean also to distraction, he spending more time alone or searching out more constant and frequent work or commiserating with Reg in his circular tours of the nightlife, centered less on the deep bottomless night exile into far rowdy enclaves and as much on the bright familiar raucous glittery fringes of the Quarter. It was evident to most, at any rate, that the social inclinations of the further neighborhoods had brazenly crept out of the shadows, druggy and lurching, and crossed into every part of town, one corner or another; it was about this time that a crime spree

began to be widely whispered about in the Quarter. More common than ever, as common as artificial doubloons at Mardi Gras, were the wafts of strangesmoke clinging around the night-shuttered doorways off Canal St. or the riverside benches or the damp and leafy courtyards of Quarter mews. Even the dingy rooming house had its own cluttered piece of alleyway where Jean would sit, shirtless to the humid night, in vain searching for bright stars or moonlight, catching whiffs of neighborly smoky haze wafting down from a balcony, trying to determine musingly if certain weed, perhaps affordable, was preferential to only beer. Many evenings, with music tossed lazily from the street corners into the porches and stoops of the Quarter, could be passed, added on at the ends to trail the chore-obsessed days, in this essentially aimless careless manner. Life, indeed, did flow along as quickly and ceaselessly as the great slipping river, sweeping past the piled levees that tried to reign its course. As though swirled by hidden tides Kitten and Jean drifted upon different currents and on the occasions, mostly at Jean's clumsy

manoeuverings or by accident, when they collided now there was a moment of tense unease, the shadow of a thundercloud passing. One of those nights as it happened to turn out was when Jean, on a ramble through the gurgly amber glare of the bars, first unequivocally encountered Antoine. Jean might have somewhere among those environs seen him before—distant and pulled back somehow as Jean himself, and shadow-cloaked and disturbingly provocative—perhaps complied in tossed-away conversations passed idly between the bar-rail mates, passed like freighters plying along the turgid river while each eyeing the other's rippled wake; though beforehand both had passed nearly unremarked and unassailable; but on this evening in particular Jean noticed him as if for the first time, radiant, his too-black hair and the tan-smoked rosy honey skin of his cheeks and a soft black motorcycle jacket of his own as dark as the darkness out of which he stepped, the black wires of eyelashes returning Jean's intent astonished stare. This evening now was a different inexplicability. On this evening, however, their passing

synchronic meeting flashed, reverberated like a thunderclap. Reg, eyes always brightly at the ready, had noticed a charge between them—Jean and Antoine--electrifyingly snap in the air, and retreated disheartenedly to another part of the room; the walls had seemingly fallen back to allow the mob to let them pass in some expanding bubble filled with a frisson incandescence. Jean felt that way, in certainty. Antoine's smile, slow to flicker, shy, held back in the tight corner of dubious darkness; but his hand brushed near the hair of Jean's arm where a sparkling charge again leapt. Their eyes searched each other, hungry for a memory, for a possibility. Jean, his innards leaping, like a fish entangled in a line, dived, flopping, heedless, into the dark bayou pool, lost in a depth, spellbound, hearing only himself saying, "You might be surprised what I would do", the most level-headed and giddy statement he had ever remembered making. His nerves were a mass of tangles. The fear, fear of not accomplishing everything in all the momentous perfectible aspects aligned just perfectly for this so tenuous

connection, so abrupt, so sought, so sublimely imminent, pounded in Jean's head and caused Jean's heart to pound against the walls of his chest as if banging on the bars of a cage. Antoine stood before him, swaying, a most beautiful vision. Eternities passed, until Jean felt the solid fingers of Antoine's hand slip tentatively but firmly into Jean's hip pocket. And they left together, helplessly smiling, into the moist May river fog.....

When the dim morning light rose through the leftover fog which lay as visible wisps bunting the empty streets at the crossing corners, Jean, bare against the cooled sheet, turns luxuriantly splayed in the crumpled bed. Stupendous ecstatic bliss—what a bliss it was, to lay with arms entwined listening to some incalculably exquisite body, bronzed with the glow of infatuation, breathing in the bed, easily as sleeping in darkness, the serene sympathetic breathing of two bodies laid as one. A whispering memento of smile crinkles about his face. The bathroom door was closed, and the water running. Jean reaches

for his abandoned jeans and shirt and shoes. At this rising, strangely new now to him, his tossed clothes were like utterly new and transferred treasure, caressed golden raiment bestowed to him by grace of fate. A tinge of chill damp blew into Antoine's room through the cracked window. If Jean skipped across to Rue des Ursulines for them he could take croissants still warm from the bakeshop there. Quietly, he readied, and with arms outflung a final stretch across the bed, left. The stone of the street glistened with dampness in the oyster-coloured air. It was a beautiful new day. The banana leaves stirred and the far streets with the chockablock shops were waking. Hurrying, Jean leapt along the street, still dreamy, carrying the white bakery bag of croissants. On the miniature porch he remembered having to ring the bell. Impatient, he stood waiting. Moments—more. At very long last Antoine, in a bathrobe, shrugged toward the door and cracked it.

Jean smiled, "I've gotten us some..."

Antoine cut him off, "I thought you had gone already. Dammit! I've got to get going. What are you doing here?"

* * *

Jean swigged the last of the hand-warmed beer from the bottle; but he hesitates at the paint bucket. His co-worker plies on. Jean chortles a half-remembered broken laugh, a rasping thin sound that bounces to the floor in the empty room. "Everything, of every moment, a day, a month, becomes just a memory—like a stack of old photographs, thin papers of old moments. Were those really the colours? Or less faded?" Reticently, like reaching for a slowing moment to open the confessional door but hesitating then to step inside, "What are memories anyway? Can you tell me? Once—I've had my heart truly irrevocably broken only once...that was enough, most likely...anyway, a story for some other night of sad bottomless whiskies..."

Jean climbs his ladder again, into the thickness under the ceiling. "I guess it mightn't hurt to see new things—or the old disappearing things—or perhaps just different things."

"Maybe not."

"Times you wait, and then one day it dawns you don't know why you've waited; or it doesn't actually matter which way you had turned—one direction or another. The important thing is to just walk on—keep walking."

The other worker, swiping his brush back and forth, looked toward Jean, then up to the ceiling, "Maybe you'd better get down off that ladder—the altitude, it's made you pretty reflective."

"Might be the weather. Clouds."

They both smile. For minutes then the only sound became the slopping roll of the paint.

--J. F. Lowe

