

# Stay Up All Night

Noel Joshua Hadley

Stay Up All Night  
©2024 Noel Joshua Hadley

## MRS. HOLMES IN NEW YORK

THE ammonia-like odor of a nearby hot dog cart bled into the fresh ink of a newspaper stand, whereas the snakelike hiss of a steam vent was quieted by the growl of a passing subway, hurrying through the Earth beneath our feet. All along 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, a current of yellow cabs had slowed to a crawl. They must have driven with their hands on the horn rather than the wheel in this town. Their honks resembled curse words. Men hustled and bustled about the sidewalk in jackets, women in peacoats, many of whom were carrying shopping bags and Christmas packages already wrapped in bows. In Times Square, it was a brisk 49 degrees Fahrenheit and already rapidly dropping, as the sun had set moments earlier.

Welcoming us home from The Nam was a great big billboard, all aglow, which read: WAR IS OVER! IF YOU WANT IT. Included was an additional message from its sponsors, “Happy Christmas from John & Yoko.” It was a Thursday in December 1969. December the 11<sup>th</sup> to be precise. The very day in which David Holmes was thrown from a train, perhaps even the very moment that we were staring up at the sign, though the newspapers wouldn’t report on it. We were days away from the only murders that the Media cared about, and presently, commercial sponsors assailed us from every angle, though Mouse stared up at that one for a while, and I as well.

*Oh*, Mouse had a Christian name, alright. Phil, I thought it was, which may have been short for Phillip, though neither Sherlock nor I ever got around to learning his full name, as everybody who’d ever been to The Nam simply referred to him as Mouse, and he preferred it that way. For the record, Mouse was thin, though certainly not tall and lanky, falling a couple of inches under my own height of 5’11”. Already, he was trying his hand at growing a mustache and goatee, though true to his name, nothing seemed more promising at the moment than whiskers. Eyes bulged from their sockets, giving him a natural thousand-yard stare, and his two incisor teeth certainly played their part in the overall description. Come to think of it, not knowing the man on a last name basis might prove a problem, practically speaking, seeing as how I was a minister, a discharged Army Chaplain, and officiating his wedding in the morning.

My return journey to Driftwood, South Carolina had so far proved to be a long and arduous one, involving little sleep, and seemingly without end. The flight from Saigon to the States had but two layovers, first in Sydney, and then Honolulu. In San Diego, many fathers, none of which were Mouse's or my own, met their sons at the airport terminal with shouts of elation. My layover in NYC was elongated by something like 48-hours but only because I had promised to officiate Mouse's wedding, a soldier whom I had ministered to during the war, and also because, as a rule, I didn't travel on a Sabbath in peacetime. Afterwards, the final leg would involve a southbound flight to Driftwood, South Carolina, probably sleepless as well. Now, normally, if Nam had taught me anything, it was to find a place of rest in a paddy field. I should have done just as well nuzzling up to a dumpster in Hell's Kitchen, but this was different. My heart pulsated for the girl I was planning to marry back home. Her name was Elise and, had I bled out during the War, it would have been the last pronunciation from my lips, but one thing at a time.

Mouse had already gone out to buy a civilian shirt to go with his jungle khakis, though I was determined to hold out and remain in my officer's uniform until the moment that I kissed my girl on the station platform. The incident in question occurred just outside of JFK airport. Some long hairs accused us of being baby killers. They threw rocks our way, and afterwards, Mouse did not dare wear his uniform in public. Well anyways, he was done cocking his head up at John and Yoko's billboard, which he seemed pleased enough with at the time. He now turned about in a half circle, seemingly disenfranchised and disheartened, perhaps even disgusted at what he saw. More like what he didn't see.

“Where's the nurse?”

I said, “What's wrong—you sick or something?”

“Geez, Preacher. When the War's over, you come to Time Square to lock lips with a hot babe in a nurse's dress.”

“That was V-Day, Mouse. I don't think they're throwing one for us any time soon.”

Mouse's appreciation seemed to return again as he afforded a complete three-sixty turn, taking in a deep breath as he did so, though I didn't stick around for the photo finish. I was late for my dinner appointment and preferred not to keep the lady waiting. Which is why I began walking again up 7<sup>th</sup> in the direction of West 49<sup>th</sup> Street, knowing

that I would eventually need to turn east in the direction of 5<sup>th</sup>. Mouse caught up to me in a few seconds and said:

“You know, this is great. Two bachelors in the Big City, staying at the Y. Bros, hanging out, babes everywhere. A private and a gentleman officer. We spent the last couple of years trying not to get our butts blown off, and now, just look at us. Claiming the spoils of war. Sowing our wild oats. I say we stay up all night, catch a show, hit the bars, pick up a couple of chicks.” He nudged his elbow into my ribs at the last part, making sure to wink for added effect. “What do you say, buddy?”

I said, “I got a girl back home whom I’m getting married to as soon as I return, and you’re getting married in the morning to Betty. Prowling for dates at the bar hardly sound like the best idea.”

“Small complication,” Mouse said.

“I’m officiating your wedding.”

“Okay, I admit it, picking up babes with the pastor is a little strange.”

“I would say so.”

Mouse must have been distracted again, as he suddenly disappeared from my side. In another moment he was back and busily asking the questions. He said, “So, where are we going, anyways?”

“I’ve got a dinner date.”

“Who’s the broad? Tell me she’s bringing a friend.”

“Her name is Desarae, and I haven’t the faintest clue.”

“Huh, can’t you make up your mind?”

“You asked me two questions. I answered both of them in turn. And FYI, Desarae is Sherlock’s wife.”

“Hey, man....” Mouse stared at me in disgust.

“Relax, Sherlock and I go way back, even long before the war. Desarae and I go back just as far. She also happens to be Elise’s older sister.”

“Hey, that’s really sick, man.”

“Your mind’s in the gutter.”

“Can you blame me? Look at me, I’m miserable. I haven’t had a girl in...” He began counting the months in his head. “When was the last time that I had some horizontal refreshment?”

I looked at him for a moment.

“Hey, *bey*, prostitution may have been common among members of my platoon, buddy, but I stayed clear. Especially after what happened to Huey and Cactus Jack in Dong Thap. Everyone knew those guys caught ‘the clap’, the drippy dick. And let’s not forget Skippy. Skippy fell into bed with that Viet Cong assassin woman who wore a razor blade in her woo-hoo, God rest his soul. Nah, I’m only taking my chances with American made. And with the way things have been going, you’d think I took a vow of celibacy, no offense.”

“I’m not that kind of priest.”

“I’m not actually miserable. I don’t want you to officiate the wedding thinking that. It’s just, we’ve never had sex, you know. Betty and me. The irony is that we didn’t even meet until the weekend before I was drafted, but let me tell you, we were hot and heavy, Preacher. Hot and heavy. I was like, ‘Babe, I’m leaving for the war in the morning, and I don’t want to die a virgin.’ But then, Betty said she wanted to wait until the wedding night, can you believe that? She said she wanted it to be a gift for the man she married.”

“And why is that a bad thing?”

Mouse shrugged. “I’ve never stuck around for a girl who didn’t hand out a hot dog or two from her cart once in a while.”

“Mouse, if you left for Vietnam a virgin, as you say, then *nobody* ever handed you a hot dog from the cart.”

“Yeah, well,” Mouse cleared his throat at the discomfort of the thought, “Betty, she’s different, and totally worth waiting for. She’s part of one of them Protestant denominations, you know, or is she Catholic? Either way, I guess it’s part of their ‘theology’ or something. I mean, I’d normally wonder about girls like that, if they were hiding something about their nighttime habits, low sex drive or something, but not Betty. She’s a fox and a true belle, a regular World War Two pin-up girl. She could be painted on the sides of a B-17. A girl with a body and face like that...” Mouse formed a woman’s figure with both hands, making sure to dramatize the top portion. “...you figure she’s got to be some Grade-A

afternoon delight.” He paused to consider the possibilities. “She even let me reach up her shirt and feel her sweater-stretchers. That was nice. Quite the Jell-O molds.”

I turned now in the direction of 5<sup>th</sup>. If my acute sense of direction was as fine-tuned as I’d hoped, we’d arrive at The Understudy in a matter of moments.

“You know what else is messed up?” Mouse laughed as he said it. He waited for a response, one which I didn’t give, and then continued. “So anyways, there I was during the Tet Offensive, minding my own business. The Viet Cong attack and the APO slips me a Dear John letter, as if Betty had planned it that way all along. She said she fell in love with some guy named Bobo.”

“Hold on, this is Betty. The *same* Betty who sent you the Dear John.”

“Yeah, but we’re past that now. She wrote me a couple of months ago and said it was all a mistake. She said she wanted to get hitched right away, the moment I returned home.”

“And you haven’t seen her since.”

“Nah, she said she wants to keep herself a surprise for the big day.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little odd to you?”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

“I do put it that way. Not that it’s any of my business, but I would have thrown my arms around you and locked lips at the airport terminal—if I were Betty.”

Mouse widened his eyes even further at the thought, though they naturally bulged as it was, and his mouth gaped open. He stopped in his tracks, which was fine anyways, seeing as how I’d reached my destination, and he said:

“Yeah, I would too.”

I held the door open, “You coming in?”

“Nah, man. I gotta’ brush up for my big day tomorrow. Meeting Betty’s parents and all. They’re from Long Island. *Old money*.” Mouse not only grinned, but he also exponentially widened it at the thought, though I figured it was only to impress me. “Her dad runs a furniture company, got a big warehouse and everything, and he ain’t got any sons to run it

after him. He's setting me up with a desk job—big promotion.” Only now, Mouse seemed to slump down with each accumulating word, and to the point of a dejected spirit. “Betty said it wasn't the best timing and that we'd honeymoon later, which means it's straight into work, come Monday morning.”

I said, “Yes, well, see you at the Y in a couple of hours?”

“Yeah man, we'll catch up later.”

Mouse turned and began his slow slinking crawl into the city. I hadn't seen him this miserable in *The Nam*.

“Hang in there, buddy. We'll both be married to the love of our lives in a couple of days,” I said, and proceeded to enter the joint.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I heard him mumble, probably to himself.

## 2

MRS. Holmes was already intoxicated, though certainly not drunk, by the time I met her for dinner at *The Understudy*, an upscale restaurant in the whereabouts of Manhattan's theater district. She was seated at the bar drinking a Citrus Gimlet from a martini glass, probably not her first, impeccably dressed in a green peacoat and a mini skirt when I tapped her on the shoulder, looking slick in my officer's uniform. Finally, after multiple combat tours, my part in the Vietnam War was over, and I said,

“Excuse me, Mademoiselle. If I were to ask you out on a date, would your answer be the same as the answer to this question?”

“Oh lord,” Desarae sighed into her martini glass, and proceeded to turn around so as to swat away a sexual fly.

The short of my relationship with Desarae is that she was married to Sherlock, though she and Elise were also sisters. Specifically, half-sisters. Same mother, different father. Desarae's father was a pilot during the War and shot down during the Battle of Britain. Ira Chamberlain, the famed War photographer, met Amelie Bibeau after the liberation of Paris, she was a model, and *bada-boom, bada-bing*, Elise. My entire point being, not a single day had passed without thinking about Elise, *no*, not even an hour, particularly our inevitable reunion after my return from *The Nam*, and



yet, here I was in the presence of her brunette counterpart (Elise was a blonde), their noted commonality being that they were both the spitting image of their mother— from every conceivable angle.

Well anyways, I had trekked hundreds if not thousands of miles on both sides of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel up until about fifteen minutes earlier and my knees were strong, though they buckled now at the mere sight of Elise's other. Her face also was one of instantaneous transformation, seemingly from darkness and the void to a place of light, at the mere sight of my own, and she said, sighing with relief:

“Preacher, I should have known. Come here.”

Desarae slipped off the stool so as to throw her arms around my neck, eyes already swelling, though I thought she may have staggered in her step. She then proceeded to pat down my tie and jacket, running her fingers over the brass buttons and insignia, and alcohol was on her breath when she said, “Well, don't you look handsome in your officer's uniform. Michael came home with stripes, but I got to say, the silver bar looks nice. Believe me, my sister will not be able to contain herself—soon as she lays eyes on you. I give it a minute before your clothes are off.”

“That's the hope of every officer,” I said.

There was a kiss on the cheek, and then she added, almost with a snort: “I think we need to work on those pick-up lines.”

“I got that one from Sherlock.”

“*Sherlock?*”

“That's what we called Michael in Nam.”

“Oh lordy-lord.” Desarae sighed with an epic dosage of spousal sarcasm, planting her face in a palm. “He picked me up with something three times that bad, but I was young and naive and didn't want to die a virgin, so...”

“That's how we like our women. Young, ignorant, ethnic, and willing.”

“Stop it,” she said, slapping my arm. “I must have sat at that bar for an hour. I thought you'd never show. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Good, because our table is ready.”

DESARAE said, “I’ve been ravenous for a filet all afternoon. You?”

“I’ll have the same,” I told our waiter.

“Medium rare,” Desarae said, folding her menu.

“Same,” I folded mine. I looked at Desarae for a moment, and she at me, and then I said, “Elise tells me you were featured on the cover of LIFE Magazine last summer. You’ve quite literally become Driftwood’s homecoming queen.”

“Speak for yourself. You were quite the sensation last year, clicking your heels across the Bob Hope Christmas Special. We all watched you at The Lady and the Unicorn when you came on television. Elise was furiously taking down names of every show girl who draped her arms around you.”

“There were other girls on stage? *Strange*. I didn’t notice.”

“They were kissing your cheek.”

“It was to lift troop spirit. God and country.”

“Mm-hmm. Should I even ask? How was it—the War, I mean. When the TV camera wasn’t rolling on your tush.”

“My answer depends a great deal on how Sherlock is doing.”

Desarae carefully considered her answer. “He’s still recovering. He—he doesn’t want to talk about it. His experiences. The wound. I’ve tried. Believe me. He’s so collapsed within himself now. I can tell you that the man who returned isn’t the same man who left.”

“A piece of every one of us died there, Dez.”

“You don’t even know how glad I am that you’re *finally* home.”

“Not yet, I’m not,” I said, sipping on a lager.

Desarae knew what I meant by that. Her smile returned, deepened with permissiveness. She leaned into her blush and said, “So, what’s the plan, then? With you and Elise, that is.”

“She hasn’t told?”

“Oh, she’s divulged. I want to hear this from you, is all.”

“The plan is to get married immediately, posthaste, without delay, followed by hours and hours of...” I interrupted myself. ‘*Conjugating*’ is the word that I was going for. Desarae, however, had one better.

“*Faire l’amour*,” Desarae only seemed to blossom at the pronunciation of her words. “Keep talking.”

“Elise booked us a room at the Samuel Cotton Hotel, the idea being that we’ll move into her place after...” I punctuated myself again. “...we come up for air.”

“I didn’t think you could tell this story better than Elise, but I was wrong. Go on.”

I shrugged. “I think a hop and a skip across the Atlantic is in the cards, honeymooning among *your people* in Paris.”

Desarae leaned back into her chair with satisfaction.

“There’s only one problem with your plan,” she said.

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“I spoke with Elise, and she didn’t schedule any time for sleep.”

I nearly choked on the lager. Except that I didn’t. I managed to hold my composure well enough, and said, “I can sleep when I’m dead.”

“Speaking of which, not to change the subject or anything, I take it you heard about my parents. Our parents, I mean.”

“I did.”

Desarae stared into her martini glass.

“What do you know about it?”

“I know that Sherlock and I were still trying not to get our butts blown off in Nam when the News of their passing reached us. June, I think it was. The story goes that Ira pulled a 12-gauge shotgun on Amelie...”

“The love of his life,” Desarae interjected.

“And the mother of the woman I love, while on a fishing yacht off Paradise, Massachusetts, before turning it on himself. Investigators called it a murder-suicide.”

“That’s bull’s wool, Preacher. Nobody who knows them believes that for a moment.”

“I didn’t say I did.”

“Because if that’s what you were implying, Dad didn’t do it. It was a double homicide.”

“I’ll be sure not to make that mistake, then.”

“Good.”

“I take it there haven’t been any developments?”

Desarae shook her head. “David hired a private investigator a few months back. Nothing came of it.”

“That I did not know.”

“David and I are close, you know.” Desarae ran her finger along the rim of the martini glass, which was mostly empty now. “The fact of the matter is he’s far more than what the stodgy title of in-law might suggest.” She silently ruminated for a moment, and then: “In simplest terms, I married David’s son, David took me in, and with Michael off fighting the War in Southeast Asia, the two of us bonded as father and daughter. When Mom and Dad died last summer, there was nobody else but David. Well, there were a few others, but with David, it was...*different.*”

Desarae remained fixed upon her martini glass, staring at it with dissatisfaction for a time. “It hasn’t been easy around here, you know. With you and Michael gone. With Mom and Dad’s *passing*. And then with Michael’s return—the war wound.” Her eyes only seemed to undress the dark and lonely place while she added: “He hasn’t been any help.”

“Desarae, if you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing *here?*”

“Having dinner with you.”

I looked at Desarae silently for a time, saying nothing.

“You’re getting married in a couple of days. I thought it was only right that somebody threw you a rehearsal dinner.”

But still I looked upon her, exchanging my attention between the beer and a cigarette. Finally, I said, “No, that’s not it. Why are *you* in New York of all places?”

Desarae only seemed to tighten her lips as she sat back in her chair. “I didn’t invite you out to dinner to be interrogated, Preacher.” My stare continued. Her resulting confession was therefore short and blunt. She said, “Republican Blue is opening on Broadway.”

“I hear it’s been quite a hit back home.”

“It also happens to be closing.”

“And why would they do a thing like that?”

“Only because it’s been such a nationwide sensation. They’re moving the entire production up here. The new sets are already being built, and we have a premiere date set for the 1970 season. I’ve got to fly back in the morning to finish our final week. My understudy is performing while I’m gone.” Desarae leaned in, increasing her smile as she said it. It’s almost as if she thought I might be impressed by any of it. “Normally, we only do shows on the weekend, but with the recent turn of events, we’ve got shows every night just to meet demands.”

“And you’re here to be the cheerleader for the new cast and crew.”

Desarae sighed with the weight of a sledgehammer. Her finger circled the rim of her martini glass, and she said, no, she almost mumbled, rather awkwardly, “They want me for the lead. It’s only natural, given the move. I didn’t think it would be right to pass up on the opportunity.”

“It’s a shame that Sherlock couldn’t be here to take part in the celebration.”

“Michael, he—he doesn’t know. He thinks my run is ending with the show next week.”

“How is that even possible?”

Desarae opened her mouth and then shut it again. After twisting her lips for a moment, she said, “The man who returned isn’t the same man who left. What more can I say?”

“He’s not even remotely curious as to why you’re having dinner with me in New York.”

“Preacher, come on, Vietnam couldn’t have jogged your memory that bad. You *know* clothing is a passion of mine, and to the point that I opened up my own boutique, Aurora Couture. As Driftwood’s haute couture representative, I used to make regular trips to New York and Paris. I was

a fashion buyer. Michael never questioned that. And let me tell you, I picked a heck of a decade to give that up. The fashion industry had become borderline stagnant after the War. There were a few pick me ups along the way, like Audrey Hepburn's iconic black dress, but ever since the Kennedy assassination, it's been a rollercoaster ride of color and fabric. With the war raging in southeast Asia, and the love revolution counterbalancing it, it's enough to make anyone believe in the natural law of duality."

"Yes, but how long do you suppose Desarae the *actress* can use a shopping spree as cover with Sherlock?"

"Michael doesn't know I'm in New York. He thinks I'm in Paradise."

"At Ira and Amelie's estate," I said as clarification.

"We left together at the airport—yes."

"David didn't fly to New York though."

"No, he did not."

"I'll ask. *Is* David in Paradise?"

"He is."

I said, "And what business would David Holmes have at your parents' estate?"

"He's—he's following a lead. The private investigator I told you about, David thinks he may finally be onto something."

"Regarding the double-homicide."

"Yes."

"Has David shared those details with you?"

"Not yet, he hasn't. The trail was cold until it *wasn't*. It went suddenly hot again, and he was in a bit of a rush getting out."

"And your backup plan, I take it, is to not have Sherlock and David compare notes. Regarding Broadway. Lies require commitment."

"David *knows*. He knows all about the production. He isn't pleased with my decision, but he's supported me the entire way. I was rather hoping you would do the same." Desarae sighed heavily again. "Look, while you and Michael were off galivanting around southeast Asia—"

“Swatting at bullets rather than mosquitos is more like it.”

“David and I became close. I confide everything in him.”

“That may be so, but then, shopping sprees in Paris was another thing altogether. How do you suppose David’s son is going to take the news, that his wife has got a permanent gig on Broadway?”

“I didn’t ask you here to argue.”

“We’re not arguing. We’re having a chit-chat, is all.”

“I remember that look, and you’re angry.”

“I can’t say I’m pleased.”

“I may be Elise’s sister, her older sister, mind you, but I’m not *your* fiancée, and therefore, not accountable to you. I’m not talking to you while you’re angry.”

“Sherlock is my best friend. I’d never do anything to hurt him.”

“What is that supposed to be, condescending or something? I’m his wife.” She spoke loud enough now for others to listen in. Indeed, an elderly man and his wife turned to face us now. “Hurting him is not what I’m after, either.”

“Running off to New York is a hell of a way to express it.”

Desarae lifted her drink for medicating purposes, but the martini glass was dry. She then flagged the waiter with a single raised finger, waving her dry glass in a circle soon as he saw her. It was all she could do to contain herself. “Can I get another martini?”

He turned to me and asked, “Beer?”

“No, I’m good.”

Desarae then spread both hands out on the table. Her eyes spoke of loneliness, loss and sorrow. There was a long breath, and then: “So, where were we? You and Elise were planning to honeymoon in Paris.”

“How does Elise feel about your starring role on Broadway?”

Desarae leaned in, careful to control the volume. “She doesn’t know yet, and you’re being ridiculous. *We’re* not having this conversation right now.” Once more, she collected herself. Unrolling the cloth containing

her silverware, the youngest Bibeau sister whipped the napkin at her side and then laid it bare on her lap.

Clearing her throat, she said: "How was the War?"

4

THE half-empty martini glass that had hinted at Desarae's intoxication was old news now. Seated in the backseat of a taxi, Sherlock's wife was hammered, plastered, and sloshed, and she wasn't remotely interested in hiding that fact anymore. She said, "You gonna let a lonely girl go off alone in a big city, drunk?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. It's why I'm here with you in a cab, making sure you arrive safely at your hotel."

"You'll accompany me to my hotel, to my room, to my bed."

I said, "Not in a million lifetimes."

Desarae draped both hands onto my chest, planting her forehead there while she was at it, and said, "*Oh husb*. I'm married and nobody is pretending like I'm not. You and Michael must have been plucked from the same tree. You're the most chivalrous men that I know. You will deliver me to my destination, good sir, as no doubt are Michael, er, I mean Sherlock's orders. But first, there is something that this lonely drunk girl wants to show you in the big city."

"We're not going to your hotel?"

Desarae touched my nose. She employed a single pointer finger; it was more like a *bop*. Her breath was hot and soggy, reeking of alcohol, and she said, "Not yet, we're not."

We had started out with a westward projection, though the cabbie just as quickly took a turn, as per Desarae's directions; he looked to be of Egyptian descent; and was heading now in a northbound direction, up Broadway. Surrounding us were titles of theater productions, names like '1776', 'Coco,' and 'Oh! Calcutta!' none of which I'd heard of before. None except for one. Whatever happened to 'The Sound of Music' and 'South Pacific'?

Desarae said, "Cabbie, you can pull over here."



The cabbie pulled over, as per her command, and Desarae lurched out of the backseat, pulling me along by the hand. I nearly ate it, the sidewalk that is, but managed to find my footing regardless, which is a good thing, seeing as how Desarae needed my arm and shoulder as a crutch. Before us was a marquee as big as life itself. Imprinted upon it was the title 'REPUBLICAN BLUE', whereas, directly underneath, we were given the additional information:

DESARAE BIBEAU AS ISLA ELLIOTT.

Towards the end of our meal, Desarae was having a difficult time focusing upon anything. Her eyes were glossy and heavy, drifting around the room as her gaze floated with her surroundings. That trend continued in the taxi. But this was something that she could apparently latch onto.

Desarae beamed with delight. "Well, what do you think?"

I said, "They made a mistake. They're using your mother's maiden name rather than Sherlock's."

To which Desarae replied, "Fine, be condescending then, see what I care. I thought you could at least be happy for me, all the same."

"But then that would make me bipolar."

"Save the psychoanalysis for my sister," she said, already climbing back into the cab. "Get in and take me home, I guess. Or don't."

"Home?" I spoke mostly to myself, though Desarae overheard it. She was employing a noun and that didn't sound quite right. Home for me was Driftwood. Home was moving in with Elise, whereas Sherlock, by no small coincidence, lived directly across the street. I said, "Home is where your heart is."

To which she added, "Home is also where you hang your hat."

Desarae had crawled so far into the back seat by this point that I'm almost certain she didn't hear my follow-up, which was more of a self-inflicted mumble anyways. "I hope you know what you're doing, Dez. Lights attract moths." I most definitely spoke to myself when affording one prolonged glance at the marquee, adding with a sigh, "And stars may be imprinted upon sidewalks, but they're also fallen from heaven."

WELL, anyways, the cabbie started back up Broadway until Columbus Circle, veering onto 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, with Desarae's mood slowly improving the entire way. He then continued northbound alongside Central Park, finally making a lefthand turn onto 72<sup>nd</sup>. Only it wasn't a hotel that he pulled up to. Not by a long shot. Before me stood the southside entrance of The Dakota, and what was The Dakota, exactly, but a towering 19<sup>th</sup> century apartment building of German Renaissance design? The Art Deco associated with the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings had already come and gone, whereby the old-world facade before me felt strangely out of place.

In the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a homeless man with a beard, thick and tangled. He was across the street on 72<sup>nd</sup>, fast asleep on the sidewalk right near the entrance to Central Park. I'm not ready to talk about him quite yet, but I thought you should at least know he looked familiar. A little too familiar. Anywho, I half expected Desarae to take my hand and lead me across the street to some other apartment building, was The Americana and The City Squire nearby? Except she didn't. She led me by the hand towards The Dakota's double-height archway, measuring something like 16x20 feet. It was flanked by pedestals with metal urns and a guard gate and, back in the day, was large enough to pull a horse and buggy through.

"*This* is your hotel?"

She said, "Lauren Bacall lives here, you know."

I said, "I'm pretty sure Bogie had something to do with that. Who's flipping *your* bill?"

6

THE door to Desarae's apartment swung open, though not fast enough, as the phone could be heard ringing within. The TV was on too. What happened is, I struggled lining the key up with the lock, but only because she was three sheets to the wind, and with those sea legs of hers, somebody had to help her in. It was a race against the clock, given the shrill cry of her phone, and Desarae, one arm hung around my neck, slurred her words into my ear, reeking of alcohol.

She said, "Here, allow me. I've had a lot of practice."

Regardless, and despite her best efforts, Desarae struggled sliding the key into the lock. The phone was still ringing on the other side, and I could faintly hear the arousal of laughter resulting from the voice of Johnny Carson. At any rate, reaching down to help in the guiding process seemed like a good idea at the moment.

“Naughty,” Desarae swatted my hand, though I managed anyhow. She then sopped her fingers over my cheek and chin. “Sherlock would not approve.”

Opening the door, I said, “Let’s get you into bed.”

“Hold that thought.”

Releasing herself from my arms, she dropped her purse on the floor where she stood, and instantly began clip-clopping in heels in hopes of pursuing the rotary phone in one room or another of her apartment, and what an apartment it was. A hallway branched off into a multitude of other rooms, all of which were laid down with solid wood floors. But before I was able to enter and explore any of them, Desarae tripped in her heels, thereby mandating an immediate removal of them. Stripped now of her heels and dressed down to her hosiery, she then took an immediate lefthand turn into a sprawling parlor room, compete with a mantle and fireplace, only to stumble forwards onto the sofa. Her arm grasped around at the end-table for a time, where a half-emptied bottle of wine and a dirty glass sat next to the rotary phone, though her face remained planted, and her hand never managed to venture beyond the curved arched of the sofas arm rest. Finally, the phone went quiet.

“Bummer,” she said, face still planted.

The furniture in the room is what I would describe as old. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the look of it. Victorian. Not antique, mind you. In fact, the entire room looked new but certainly not contemporary. The walls were emerald green and paneled. The sofa which Desarae found herself on was tufted and mounted with legs and a skeletal physique of wood. Even the mirror over the mantel piece, thickly framed, looked as though Alice might rise up and peer through at any given minute. Thick crimson curtains likewise framed an entire island of darkness some four stories below. The darkness was surrounded by the electric-lit steel and concrete mountains of eastside Manhattan. Must be Central Park. Desarae actually had a view of Central Park.

I said, “I suppose this is goodnight, then?”

The door in the hallway already had my attention. She lifted her entire head off the sofa, though she seemed to be having a difficult time doing it, as it seemed heavy, and also, the tufted backside formed a divider between she and me.

She said, “Just answer me this one question, Captain.”

“It’s First Lieutenant. What’s that, sweetheart?”

“What time is it?”

On the television, Alfred Hitchcock was presently being interviewed by Johnny Carson. “Nearing midnight, if I had to guess.”

“Now, why would somebody be calling me ‘nearing midnight’, do you think?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“What time would you say it is in Paradise, right now?”

“Same time as here.”

“And in Driftwood?”

“Are you expecting a different answer?”

“You’re cute when you’re not inebriated.” Connecting her vowels with consonants had become a challenge, making the five syllables associated with ‘*inebriated*’ a dreadful slur. “I’m thinking there’s a development, what about you?” ‘*Development*’ was only four syllables, though it fared no better, and ‘*you*’ was more of a ‘*ene*’. “Hold up, I didn’t get around to my question yet.”

I must have stood there for a moment, leaning against frame leading from the hallway to the parlor, while she attempted to crawl on her elbows up and over the backside of the sofa.

She said, “Where are you staying?”

“I already checked in at the Y.”

Desarae stared at me for a time. “The Y—.”

“I’ll have you know, it’s a perfectly respectable letter of the alphabet.”

“No, no, no. I simply won’t have it. No. You’re not sleeping on the floor at the Y. No. I have a floor here, already.”

“They have beds, you know.”

She kept shaking her head. “No, on the beds at the Y—no.”

“Got any suggestions?”

“You’ll accompany me to my place.”

“You’ve already succeeded in that part of your plan.”

“My thoughts, exactly.” Desarae patted the sofa. She was capable of pushing up with both arms now and, legs folded beneath her, skirt nearly hiked up to her thigh, she settled into a seated position. Wrestling to take her peacoat off now was an exercise to behold. One might suspect she were handcuffed or wearing a straitjacket in reverse as she stiffened her back, skirmishing something terrible with the invisible enemy behind her. In the end, the pea jacket flailed onto the floor. She even managed the bottle of wine and dirtied glass on the end table, though the pour was a sloppy one. “I usually don’t invite strangers up. But for you, big boy, I’ll make an exception.”

“How much were you planning to drink tonight?”

“Only a little.” Desarae set the bottle and the glass down on the end table, held two fingers together, grinning, and then spread them far apart. “A little of a lot.” She stared at me, face sloshed, her smile seeming only lip deep. She then patted a cushion. “Come on, sailor, have a drink. I won’t bite. It’s strictly platonic, I promise. You can report me to Elise if you want.”

“You’re vulnerable and drunk.”

“All the better reason to climb onto the furniture with me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh gosh.”

“I’m going home, Dez. Goodnight.”

“One more thing.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

The wine glass was returned to the table, and just as suddenly, Desarae's arms and neck draped over the tufted backside of the couch. Her face went sour.

"I think I'm going to throw up."

7

WE didn't make it to the toilet.

It didn't exactly help that I needed to carry her, and I hadn't the faintest clue where the bathroom was. The asparagus and grains of rice as well as the filet mignon that she'd been craving all afternoon spilled out from her mouth, running down her neck and breasts, but then just as quickly spilled out across the bathroom floor, filling up the cracks between tiles, forming puddles of puke. I held her hair back the best I could as she hung her head into the bowl, groaning miserably. She gagged but then nothing came. Her bowels gurgled something horrible. Seconds later, she gagged again, and nothing. Silence. No warning was given when she let out another emission. There was a third and a fourth heave and a hurl, and then, when the uproar from the untold number of drinks which had poisoned her blood was appeased, she said:

"Oh god, the whole room is spinning."

"Congratulations, you've just proven the Copernican Revolution. Let's get you in the shower and then get to bed."

"Oh sure, take advantage of a girl while she's down."

I stood her up, turned her towards the claw-foot tub, pulled the plastic curtain on its rod, and then helped her into it, clothes still on. "Preacher and Elise. Michael, *er*, Sherlock and Desarae. The Four Musketeers, The Four Amigos." She rolled her sentences and blended her words together. "The Four Stooges." She then tried to think up another while struggling to unzip her dress. "The Four Compadres. The Four...."

The fact that she was drunk was a given. Being naked was the next to check off on her clipboard of fun. Desarae's nakedness was Sherlock's nakedness. Her dress was vomited upon and out of the question, where modesty was concerned. My only battle plan involved slipping out of the room before hers slipped off, which I barely managed.

“I’m a chaplain, not a nurse. You’re on your own.”

Back on the tube, a commercial break. Johnny came on again to introduce a comedian whom I’d never heard of before—Rodney Dangerfield was his name. He proceeded to bemoan his wife and the fact that she’d recently gotten her driver’s license. I paced the room, listening to the shower and Desarae’s groaning, watching Carson, not really laughing, but only because I was wondering what the hell was going on.

And then I began digging into things that were probably none of my business. In the corner was a stack of magazines, two dozen if I had to guess. They drew my attention, probably because they constituted the only mess in the room, and therefore seemed out of place among the otherwise immaculate. A girl named Gracie Avner graced the cover of nearly every one of them. Parade, Photoplay, POST, CINE Revue, VOGUE, and Seventeen. I had heard the name among the boys in The Nam but had never paid her any mind. She looked youngish and dark haired, about the same age as Desarae, though unlike Desarae’s hourglass figure, Avner had all the bodily proportions of Twiggy. The cover of Garbo depicted Avner poised with her husband, a movie producer named Terry Lawrence. Never heard of him. But then, the cover of Confidential asked:

WAS GRACIE AVNER FORCED TO MARRY HER LOVER?

Still another magazine titled ‘Screen Stories’ depicted the first maternal pictures of Gracie Avner. The happy father of course being producer Terry Lawrence. Most of the mags held recent dates, but that one was the closest publication to my own, being only a month old. Well anyways, I was detecting a trend. Gracie, Gracie, Gracie, somebody was a fan. Desarae did happen to make one appearance in the stack. It happened to be the one where LIFE Magazine featured REPUBLICAN BLUE and its leading actress. There were a couple of Playboys in the stack, but nothing else to report. Nothing satisfied the question regarding how Michael Holmes wife managed to land a pad such as this one. Sure, Desarae managed to land on the cover of LIFE, every girl’s dream, *whoop-dee-doo*. The life of a theater actor, particularly a theater actor in Driftwood, might hope for a champagne lifestyle on a beer budget. Call girls don’t even have it this good.

Eventually, I stood in the hallway just outside of the bathroom, listening to the sound of plumbing and streams of water splashing down upon porcelain and cast iron. Pressing my face up against the door, I said:

“Feeling better?”

*Uhhhhh*, came her reply.

“You have my curiosity. Is there anybody else living here?”

*A gentleman caller, perhaps?*

“Nobody,” came her next reply.

“Quite the, *uh*, real estate agent, you’ve got, Dez. How much are your producers paying you to make the move?”

“A lady never tells.”

Well, down the hallway I walked. I went in the direction of the kitchen, inquisitive as to what might be found. Just as I suspected, appliances. I popped my head into one doorway, it was a bedroom, rather drab and bareboned. But then the dining room was a thing to behold. My shoes were by no means soft on the hard floor. Each footstep echoed through the home. Desarae could probably trace my steps from the shower. It was upon returning into the parlor that I wondered what Mouse was up to and figured it was high time I returned to the Y.

The rotary phone rang.

On its second ring, Desarae cried from the shower:

“Is that Paradise calling?”

There was a third ring, and then I said, “I wouldn’t have the faintest clue.”

“Can you be a dear and find out? Oh, never mind.”

The bathroom door swung open, and Desarae emerged wearing panties, thank God, whereas a towel hung from her breasts. Still though, the towel was dangerously loosened, held up by a single arm, and her feet proved somewhat of a juggling act. She may have stuck the landing onto the cover of LIFE but managed to fall flat onto the sofa, an acrobatic feat that she’d performed earlier. Except this time, I was able to pick up the phone in between the fourth and fifth ring and hand it to her (it was more of a toss than a baton race) precisely as her face collided with the arm of the couch. Now that’s teamwork.



DESARAE managed to employ as gruff and masculine a voice as possible as she spoke into the receiver, “*Whada-ya want?*”

The voice on the other end was of a slower articulation, giving long spaces between sentences, and seemed calculating but not cold. I thought it might be a woman and that furthermore the woman was her sister, The Psychologist, difficult to tell though. Desarae managed to answer my inquiry anyways when adding:

“*Elise*, I’m here in the Big Apple, in an apartment at The Dakota, with another man, and he *isn’t* Michael.” Her pronunciation of ‘Elise’ seemed to be dramatized for my exclusive benefit. “Preacher is being difficult and insists on sleeping at a sleaze motel. Tell him to be gallant and spend the night with me.”

I couldn’t make out the words on the other end though the woman’s voice continued its composure in stride. Desarae grinned with self-satisfaction as she handed me the phone.

“She wants to speak with you.”

“Thanks,” I groaned to Desarae, though I didn’t mean a word of it, and then into the receiver I said, employing my best Hitchcock accent, “To Catch a Thief Dating Service. Do you want a leg or a breast? You make the choice.”

Elise said, “Have you both been drinking?”

“Only a little,” I looked to Desarae as I said it, “and a lot.”

Desarae did that thing with her fingers again.

“Is she drunk?”

“I’ve got Pepé Le Pew over here.”

“Is there a couch to sleep on?”

“Desarae’s currently on it.” I then afforded another panoramic glance around the room. “You could park your entire loft in here, Elise.”

“I don’t know what either of you are up to. And maybe I don’t want to know. But *I trust you.*”

“Babe, I’m not staying. I only brought her to her *apartment* in a gothic castle with a view of Central Park and was just heading out when you called.”

“You may want to rethink leaving after hearing what I have to say. Are you sitting down?”

I tucked my tush onto the arm of the sofa.

“Yeah, I’m sitting. What’s going on?”

“Is Dez sitting down?”

Desarae was on her side, lying halfway vertical and horizontal, still working to keep the towel from splitting open, and I said, “She’s down for the count.”

The plastered grin she’d been wearing since handing me the phone had only now begun to wear away as she considered the gravity of the situation. Desarae managed to push up with her arms again and position herself in a seated position, hinged upon the narrative that was presently unfolding.

“How did you even find this number?”

Elise said, “I got it from Josephine.”

“Josie knows?”

“Long story. I can give it to you sometime but I’m afraid the news isn’t good.”

Desarae crawled up to my side as I said, “What’s going on?”

“He’s dead,” is all Elise managed to say.

My heart plunged into my legs, and I said, “Sherlock.”

It was unclear whether or not Desarae could hear Elise on the other end. The pronunciation of her husband’s nickname, however, brought forth a sudden gasp. Her hand lifted to her nose and mouth, where it remained for the rest of the conversation. The fact that the room was still spinning seemed only like a sidenote now, as her eyes settled into the blackness and the depth of the abyss. I thought maybe I needed to throw up.

“No. Michael’s doing alright. I just got off the phone with him.”

“*Thank God.* It’s not Sherlock,” I sighed in Desarae’s direction, holding a hand to my chest. To Elise I said, “Then who?”

Desarae said, “Preacher, what’s going on?”

“His father,” Elise said.

“David.”

Desarae’s fingers trembled.

“What happened?”

“He boarded a southbound train headed from Paradise to Driftwood, and never made it home. They said he *jumped* somewhere along the track. New Jersey, they said it was. *Jumped*. That’s how they put it.”

“Oh boy.”

“But not before he loaded up on enough alcohol to drown a fish. They even found a bottle of bourbon near to his body. His neck was snapped on impact. That’s as much as we know at present. His body is already being flown home to Driftwood. You need to get here. We’re burying him first thing on Sunday and could use a minister.”

“Are you asking?”

“I personally requested you. The *others* agreed.”

“You know I was planning to be home by then.”

“I’m counting the hours.”

Also, I had a pretty good idea who *they* were, her reference to the *others*, some of them anyways, though I thought I might as well ask her about them anyways.

“Who are the *others*?”

“The usual rondeau. Hooper, Pierre, Estelle, and Jack. They’ll all be there. Look, Preacher, there is no other voice that I’ve wanted to hear, but given the circumstances, I’ve got a couple more calls to make.”

“I understand.”

“I take it you’ll give Desarae the news?”

“I think she already knows.”

Desarae’s hand remained fixed over her nose and mouth, and her eyes misted. “Preacher, what’s going on?”

“I love you,” Elise said.

“I love you more than life itself,” I said.

“*Je t’aime plus que la vie.*”

I sat there for a moment in the solitude of silence so as to let her words marinate in my soul, and then I said, “Does this mean our nuptials are getting delayed?”

Elise thought about it.

“I’m not sure,” she finally said, leaving room for a breathing space between us. “I’ll be waiting for you at the station.”

“That’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Hopefully not *everything*,” she said.

9

A *click* was followed by the drroll hum of a dead line, undoubtedly magnified by the fact that the handset remained clutched in my fingertips. I looked at Desarae, and she at me. The shrill cry of the receiver returning to its cradle had a sense of finality to it, whereby her eyes swelled, and she said, instinctually:

“It was David.”

“*Yeah*,” was my response.

Desarae instantaneously buried her eyes into her hands. At the mere affirmation of his name, the floodgates gushed forth, and snot exploded from her nose, wetting all sides of her fingers. She just as quickly dropped into my chest. The towel loosened itself in the front, much as a zipper might on a jacket, though Elise’s elder sister didn’t seem to notice, nor care, and I certainly wasn’t interested in using my peripheral vision. Her lamentation resembled something in between a boo-hoo and a wail, which only seemed to be magnified as I stood. She fell forwards now, landing kind of sideways on the mattress (conscious of her immodesty, if I had to guess), while I sought out the peacoat that she had carelessly flung aside. I not only retrieved it from the floor but hung it over her shoulders from behind. She accepted it warmly without saying anything, and then proceeded to fasten a couple of the buttons with those shaky, snotty fingers of hers.

“What happened?” She finally managed to say.

“He—never made it home from Paradise.” The outpouring of tears and the snot intensified, as well as the wails, and a sudden pronunciation of ‘No,’ but I continued anyways. “They said he *jumped* from the train somewhere along the tracks in New Jersey. He, *uh*—Elise described his alcohol content as enough to drown a fish. That’s how she put it.”

Like I said, Desarae inserted a “No” in between my sentences. That trend only continued. “No,” she said again while I described his alcohol content, followed by another inconsolable “No” when making mention of the fish, and then finally a “No, no, no, no,” on repeat, shaking her head back and forth as she did so, thereby drowning out the relayed description of what I or anyone else had so far come to know. Her cries continued as she stood and reached for the phone. Lifting the handle, she then struggled to place her finger into each hole of the wheel as she dialed a number.

“Who are you calling, Dez?”

“Mom and dad,” she gasped, nearly hyperventilating.

“I don’t think they’ll be answering.”

“No—but David—will. I know—he will. He’s—there.”

Desarae heaved and wheezed between nearly every word. The last of the numbers rotated on the dial and then she sat there listening to the phone do its thing. It rang. Six times, seven times, up to a dozen times. “Pick up,” she said, followed by another “No, no, no, no,” spiel, and lastly, one more “Pick up.”

“Dez, there’s nobody there.”

“I know. It’s what—you said. But I have—to try.”

Up until now, I let the scene play out. It needed to. Desarae deserved every possible assurance that David was dead. She was also Elise’s mirror image, as you already know, being in the likeness of their mother, which had me standing there overcome by the fact that tears and smudges as well as running eyeliner only made her more beautiful. I laid my hand upon her hand, the one that was holding the headset, and led it gently towards its base. Once more, the shrill cry of the receiver returning to its cradle had a sense of finality to it. Desarae folded back onto the cushion, collapsing her head into her hands, and wept. She slouched into my

shoulder, soon as I sat down beside her. I wrapped one arm around her and said,

“I take it you don’t believe that story, either.”

“No, do you?”

“Not for a second.”

I held her for a while like that, wondering where Michael was and why he didn’t make the call, or why she didn’t seem interested in calling him in return, or why she was sitting alone in a plush NYC apartment, the Dakota of all places. Basically, not having the faintest clue what was going on.

I said, “I’ll be sure to see you to the airport, first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you,” she said, *adding*, “Stay the night?”

“You know I will.”

“Preacher?” She said after a time.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“You’re covered in puke.”

## THE HONEYMOON SUITE

### 1

THE girl was a cutter.

Not that I knew anything about cutting on a personal level. Come to think of it, I can't even recall where I'd first heard the phrase. Seminary? No, that can't be right. Elise was a psychologist, recently graduated from Harvard. Perhaps I had picked up the term in one of our conversations together. No, that's not it, either. Her arms were the giveaway, is all. I counted maybe a dozen slashes running parallel with her wrists, some nearly as high as her elbow. A couple of them were fresh.

But then, getting back to my inquiry, how did I know what 'cutting' was, again? The only way I could explain any of it has more to do with my overbearing sense of having witnessed the same unfolding scene hundreds of times before, same exact street corner, underarms scarred. *A hundred times*. Mind you, it was only a dream, *I think*, and a solitary one at that—a one-off if you will. More like a misplaced memory. There is a word for that. They call it Déjà vu.

### 2

THE headboard is what initially woke me from my rapturous vision of the little weeping girl. Pulsating in the room next door, smacking the wall—repeatedly. It was synchronized of course by a woman's moans, thereby beckoning the question as to my whereabouts. Because frankly, I hadn't the faintest recollection. Saigon or Bangkok, was it? Sydney perhaps. Maybe even Hue or Da Nang? A hotel room, if I had to guess. Wait, was I in New York, lying on Desarae's bed at the Dakota? No, that wasn't quite right either. It wasn't a boat, it wasn't a plane, and it wasn't a train. Must be my honeymoon suite, then. Was I waking up with Elise? I patted down the bed and the sheets were cold.

A box-shaped television with bunny-eared antennae sat on a dressing table, angry with static. A movie shone through the electronic blizzard

anyhow. ‘Salome’ starring Rita Hayworth. In the opposite corner, I spied an arc floor lamp and chaise lounge. French doors led out to a narrow iron balcony. It was dark outside, and the bed sheets were still made. In fact, I was lying above the duvet in my civilian clothes, hinting at the likelihood that I hadn’t intended to fall asleep. How long had I been down, minutes or hours—days even?

On the end table was a flip clock, complete with a decorative starburst design. The time rotated from 12:00 to 12:01. Next to the flip clock was a phone and an ashtray, littered with the crushed corpses of cigarettes. Doris Day smiled at me from the cover of TV Guide. It was a Sunday. Sunday, December 14, 1969, according to the Gregorian. Yes, that is what it was. I sat up in bed, barefoot, hung my legs over the edge of the mattress, pressed my toes into the shag carpet, and relit a half-smoked cigarette. Next door, the headboard continued its rhythmic wall slapping, backed by the woman’s cries of ecstasy, making it awfully difficult for a man to think.

A Texas-sized cockroach lay dead on its back a couple of feet away from my toes—or was it? On second glance, having pulled another long drag, the cockroach had managed to inch closer to my toes, though it still remained dead on its back. Where was I again—in hell? No, that couldn’t be. Hell had a name, complete with a number of zip codes. We called it the Nam, and this wasn’t it.

Now it was all coming back to me in rushes.

### 3

DROWNING out his sorrow in booze was a last-minute improv, certainly a deviation from the plan which, for Mouse, had capsized some thirty hours earlier, by my reckoning. It commenced at a rinky-dink bar in midtown Manhattan, only moments after his botched wedding to Betty, and continued on throughout the weekend. The ceremony was held at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral of all places, directly across from Rockefeller Center on Fifth Avenue, which also happened to be right around the corner from The Understudy. Saint Patrick, with its stunning array of symmetrical spires and cloisters, looked to be far older than the city which surrounded it, certainly older than the time stamp of its 19<sup>th</sup> century



construction, but that was just a passing thought while Mouse and I positioned ourselves within the chancel.

Mouse had managed to scrounge up a gray suit; it was cheap cloth, but he looked pretty good in it regardless. And I, of course, remained in my officer's uniform. Desarae's puke resulted in a trip to the dry cleaners immediately after dropping her off at the airport, but why focus on bygones? Even more curious was the fact that I was officiating a wedding in a Catholic church, and I wasn't Catholic. Mouse wasn't kidding when he had earlier stated that Betty's father had come from 'old money', though this is just a guess—a wild one at that—he also seemed desperate.

Our first tip-off was the bridesmaids, though come to think of it, the red flags were everywhere. Kind of like how the benches assigned to the groom's side were completely empty whereas only two rows were filled on the bride's, creating a bleak emptiness within the stunning spaciousness of the arched ceiling and stained glass. Occasionally, a few of them would let out a cough, which pretty much described the extent of their conversation. It was the bridesmaids however (there were only two of them), who refused eye-contact with Mouse, no matter how much he smiled at them. They kind of just hung their heads low on their entire journey down the aisle, which was further dramatized by their hurried stride, and their bouquets of flowers were held limp in their hands.

Mouse said, "They're probably just nervous."

In another moment, the old lady transitioned to Wagner at the pipe organ and Betty's father emerged through the massive bronze doors in the back, which were large enough to welcome a giant, a fifteen-footer, with his daughter Betty. Mouse wasn't lying. She was indeed voluptuous, exhibiting all the curvature which one would expect of a pin-up girl on a B-7 bomber. She was also wearing a blue gown rather than a white one, hmmm. What struck me as especially odd is the fact that she was bulging in the middle. Betty may have been many things, but I wasn't convinced volleyball player was one of them. Betty had a bun in the oven. She was eating for two, in the family way, knocked up, expecting, preggers, and unless Betty had been part of a singing trip in southeast Asia, then soldier boy had an alibi.

Mouse tugged at his collar. Already, he had begun to transpire, and he said, "Is it just me or is it stuffy in here?"

"A little drafty, maybe," I said.

“Won’t somebody open a window?” Mouse looked about at the stain-glass windows, probably seeking his escape. He loosened his tie, but even that wasn’t enough, as soon began wrestling with the top button. “Hey Preacher, you perform many of these ceremonies?”

“This would be my first.”

“You think other grooms are as confused as I am, right now?”

“Probably not,” I said.

Betty and Betty’s father had nearly traversed the entire length of the center aisle now, honing-in upon and constricting Mouse’s entire world with each additional step. Betty’s father narrowed his eyes upon Mouse. His stare was that of a hawk, and Mouse said, “I don’t know about you, Preacher, but I could use a smoke and a drink. You coming?”

4

WELL anyways, Mouse sucked down the first of many more beer bottles to come. We were at that rinky-dink bar in Midtown Manhattan, smoking cigarettes, drinking, cracking peanuts, sometimes attempting to talk over the juke box. His tie was unstrung, his collar unbuttoned, and his gray coat was hung upon the stool next to him. We were only seconds into The Temptations, ‘Ain’t Too Proud To Beg’, when he sighed and said, “I’ll probably never get laid.”

I said, “What about Love?”

Mouse said, “Huh—what’s that?”

“You didn’t say anything about Love. Look, there’s sex, and then there’s good sex. There’s probably even great sex. But I’m willing to stake everything on the best sex of all...”

“I’m listening.”

“...which is the expression of love between a man and a woman after he has taken her in as her protector and guardian. That’s what I’m holding out for. You should too.”

Not sure what he heard of that because, as I was saying, we were competing against Motown, but Mouse waited until I had finished to let

out a shrug, seemingly with indifference. He pulled away from the bottle long enough to murmur, “Yeah, whatever,” though I didn’t believe his apathy for a moment. He was hurt. He was embarrassed. He was alone and probably afraid. His eyes spoke of things which words alone could not hide. “It’s only a little convenient that you’ll be spreading the butter with that girl you got waiting for you back home before the weekend is over.”

‘*God, I hope so,*’ is what I wanted to tell him, regarding the butter, that is. ‘*Buttering the biscuit. Laying it on thick as well.*’ I didn’t though. I sat there for a while longer attempting to think up something else regarding his situation which might be deemed helpful. Nothing came to me. Aside from Elise, that is. ‘*A little horizontal refreshment while we’re at it.*’ It had been a long war, okay?

“Do you think I’d make a good father?” Mouse finally said. “To Betty’s baby, I mean. I could be her Bobo. I could make it work.”

“You can try. But then you would also have to reconcile the fact that she coaxed you in under false pretenses. She deceived you. That sounds like a terrible foundation for any relationship. I don’t see Love there. Even the ‘conjugating part’ which you so desire is in question. You want my opinion on today’s events?”

Mouse pulled a double portion from the bottle and said, “Sock it to me. I can take it.”

“There’s only two types of women. Wives and potential wives, and women of pleasure. You dodged a bullet.”

“Hey, you’re the preacher, Preacher.”

The bartender delivered his second bottle. I too accepted my second but would refrain from another. Mouse gladly nursed from his for a moment, and then said, “I’m so glad Bahstin and Spanky weren’t there to see that debacle. Sherlock, Sugar Bear, and Ashkenaz. Can you imagine if Alphabet was present? I’d never hear the end of it.”

“I can. Every one of them would have had your back. They would have even formed a line of defense if Betty’s father had made a sprint in your direction. Nobody would have thought any less of you for it.”

“Yeah, well. I’m through, Preacher. I’m through with Loser Town, U.S.A. New York, New York my ass. There’s nothing left for me here.

I'm through with Vietnam, I'm through with the furniture business, and I'm through with Betty."

"Glad to hear it."

"From now on, I'm going where *you're* going."

"Come again?"

"You and me, buddy, and Sherlock. You two are the only guys I know who are *real*, if you know what I mean."

I nearly choked on my cigarette.

"I'm not sure I understand."

Mouse gave his bottle a little extra attention before answering anything, thereby leaving me in the suspense of the moment. Beer spilled out over his chin. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, let out an 'Ah!' of satisfaction, and then finally said, "What time does the plane leave tomorrow morning?"

"Night. It leaves tomorrow night."

"You mean you're planning to just sit around all day—why the wait? Let's ditch this lovesick hellhole and get home."

"You know I don't travel on a Sabbath in peace time."

Mouse shrugged. "You're the preacher, Preacher."

5

MANHATTANHENGE refers to the aligning of the setting and the rising of the sun with the east-west facing street grid of Manhattan. Not sure who coined the phrase, as nobody at the local drinking hole seemed to call it that, though I had heard it years earlier from Hooper, the old barkeep in Driftwood, and the name stuck. It only happens with the summer and the winter solstice, to which we were still a week removed. The sun setting aspect wasn't perfect, given our premature calendar date, but it disappeared over Jersey and the Hudson regardless, 4:29 according to my watch. Time of departure was 5:50, via JFK. Barely enough padding to purchase Mouse a ticket and check in our bags, but we had been in far

more frantic bush fights than this. They must have been training exercise for our journey home.

I looked to Mouse and said, "Light em' up."

A cab was instantaneously hailed, thanks in part to Mouse's industrial strength whistle, and within forty-five minutes we were stepping out onto the curb of the PAN AM terminal. I was too preoccupied pulling our Army-issued duffels from the trunk to notice the pilot stroll by, locked arm-in-arm with a row of stewardesses. Mouse, however, did. He whistled to himself, having surveyed their pass with a desirous appetite. In full disclosure, their backends entered my peripheral vision, and even I was enchanted. There were at least six of them, three on each side of the pilot. Their skirts and their white gloves and their go-go boots were a fragile ecosystem, all of which may have been singularly held up by the navy-colored silk scarves adorning their necks, or maybe just their adorable hats.

Mouse slapped both hands on his thighs, and said, "I should have been a pilot. I knew I *forked* up at the recruiter's office. And to think I could have made 153A my MOS."

"I don't think stewardesses hand out coffee and creamer to Huey pilots while they're launching Hellfire missiles at the North Vietnamese, Mouse."

JFK to Driftwood promised a two-and-a-half-hour flight. The plane taxied down the tarmac by 5:55, whereas tower gave us clearance within minutes, thereby giving us an 8:27 arrival time. We were seated alone in the rear of the plane, and the cabin was dark except for the sparse reading light. Outside our window, the earth stretched out motionless, rising upwards like an immense bowl, the flat horizon always climbing to eye level. We couldn't have been more than ten minutes off the ground when Mouse collapsed his Magazine and said, scowling with disgust:

"I can't believe you're reading that garbage. They might as well take the 'F' out of LIFE and call it LIE Magazine."

"Excuse me?"

I folded my magazine into my lap. It was the November 7 issue. On the cover of LIFE, or rather, LIE or whatever, Paul McCartney posed with his wife Linda and their two children, presumedly on his Scotland farm on the Mull of Kintyre. A caption read: "THE CASE OF THE

'MISSING' BEATLE. Paul is still with us.' I was also wearing pneumatic headphones. In turn, they were connected to the arm rest, by which I was able to sample a dozen channels with a built-in dial, all of which were pre-programmed in the reel-to-reel. Those I had to slip off.

Mouse's magazine, on the other hand, was provocatively titled 'PAUL McCARTNEY DEAD: THE GREAT HOAX'. It featured a sad-looking Paul separated from the other three Beatles, and contained tantalizing subtitles like, 'PAUL'S MYSTERIOUS DOUBLE—Who Is He?' and 'WHY DID THE BEATLES KEEP PAUL'S DEATH A SECRET?' It also promised to reveal within its pages 'THE DEATH CLUES' and 'THE BEATLE DEATH CURSE.'

"Haven't you heard? Paul is dead. It's in all the papers."

"Not all of them, apparently," I pointed to the one I happened to be reading from.

"In all the legitimate ones, he is." Mouse opened his magazine again with a snap. He seemed agitated and had been for a while. At least since the tarmac. Something else was bothering him. Women was my guess. "Go ahead and crack your jokes."

"I didn't think I was making any."

"Back there at the terminal. What I needed was a wing man, a deputy dog, and did you co-pilot? No, the girls from Ipanema come walking by, and you shot me down with your coffee and creamer comment. I have feelings too, Preacher. You've already got a woman waiting for you on the other end. Knowing you, she's probably stacked. I'll bet she's waiting to take you on a drive down Lucky Street where you'll be swapping spit at the Submarine Races. You've got your whole life ahead of you. Me, I'm a bachelor, a jockey playing the field. The horses have left the starting gate, and I don't have a single betting ticket in my hand. I'm willing to wager any one of those sexy skirts had a cold lonely bed with my name scribbled all over it."

"They write '*Mouse*' on their pillowcase and comforter?"

"Ha, ha. Spare your jokes, Preacher."

"Again, I wasn't making one," I said, turning once more to the pages of LIE Magazine, and my headphones were returned into my ears as well. I flipped a page, and then another, making sure to wet my finger before

doing so. Mouse wasn't pleased. I could feel his vitality, pent up, twisted and knotted as it were, coiled up in a snake nut can and waiting to explode all over me. And so, turning another page, I spoke the obvious, "You seem agitated."

"Can you blame me? I'm a man, Preacher. A flesh and blood man. Not a golem but a man. No, I'm more than just a man. I'm a jockey from a long line of horse-mounting jockeys. My papa was a jockey. My grandpappy was a jockey."

I said, "I take it you're not merely speaking in metaphor."

Mouse continued his commentary in stride, as though I had never interrupted him. "I was deemed too tall to be a jockey. And look at me now, why don't you? I'm the washed-up son of a jockey who hasn't saddled a mare or been to the steeplechase races in *ages*." I looked at him from over the page of my magazine. He saw me look at him, which was of course my intent, thereby causing him to correct his statement. "Longer than I or anyone else can remember, anyways."

There was another moment of silence between us, a short one, albeit a moment, nonetheless. He finally said, "I'm in love, Preacher."

I slid the headphones to my cheeks.

"What's that?"

"I'm in love. I can't hide it anymore. I could sing."

"Already? We just went through this with Betty, and not more than a day ago."

"You're living in the past, Preacher. Get with the *now*."

"My apologies. I'll try to keep up."

"When those stewardesses strutted past us at the airport terminal, I know there were several to choose from. That's probably what you were thinking—that I was ogling all of them. Not so. I made my decision pretty early on. I looked into the eyes of this one vixen. Dark hair, green eyes, olive skin tone, Mediterranean. It was love at first sight, Preacher. Speaking purely metaphorically, I made my bed, and now, I'm willing to lie in it."

Apparently, I was still living an hour in the past. Two at the most. Everything was moving so fast, though the earth remained motionless

below, and I was trying to keep up, with the present, that is. I said, “Has she expressed the same feelings towards you?”

“I think she might have shared a moment.”

“Ah, well, keep me posted.”

As I was saying, I was listening to one program or another through the pneumatic headphones. The Association had sung ‘Never My Love,’ and then afterwards, The Monkees’ ‘I’m a Believer’. What can I say, I was simply trying to keep up with the kids these days. It was right about when The Beach Boys came on, ‘I Get Around’, that someone lifted the headphones from my ears, and the cutest, most feminine voice imaginable sang the words:

“Round-round get-around, I get around.”

An olive-skinned stewardess leaned over the headrest in front of me, revealing the top button of her blouse, and just above that, an eyeful of something else. She sang her words softly and out of tune, which, call me unimaginative, couldn’t have been any more perfectly executed by a bard in a Homeric Odyssey. Mouse immediately lowered his magazine.

“I’m doing the rounds, seeing if you want tea or coffee—” She leaned in even further. “Or maybe just *me*.”

“Coffee, Delilah,” I said.

Delilah perked up. “Come again—was that coffee *and* Delilah?”

Mouse’s eyes widened.

“No, just coffee, Delilah. I’ll have coffee.”

“*Damn*. Well, I was just saying to the other stewardesses, I haven’t seen Preacher in a while—and then here you are. Wherever did you run off to?”

“I decided to try and find myself and take a long hike along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.”

“Hmm, well, the last time you were in *my* plane, either being too coy or too damned gentlemanly to get tangled up in the web that I weaved, you were listening to the Beach Boys. Isn’t that funny? I said, ‘Stop. Please. No. Don’t go. I’ll be your Surfer Girl. I’ll be all the Fun, Fun, Fun you’ll ever need.’ And you know what you told me?”



I opened my mouth to respond, but she continued anyways.

“You said, ‘Sorry Delilah, you may be my favorite stewardess, but *alas*, my heart belongs to another.’”

“Which was true. Every word of it.”

Mouse began striking a match in hopes of lighting a smoke but seemed to be having a terrible time accomplishing the task, as the darn thing never did seem to blaze. I too retrieved a cigarette and, shelving it into my mouth, made a similar attempt with a chrome lighter. I too seemed to be having trouble.

“But is it *still*—?” Delilah seemed to lean in further. She bit her lips and said, “Seems this hometown heartthrob couldn’t keep you away from the war. But then, neither could I. Tell me, does your affection still belong to that Harvard school girl, that—*psychologist in training*?” The thought of Elise seemed to put a bad taste in her mouth. She was more like an aftertaste that had yet to be washed out. Regardless, Delilah retrieved the chrome lighter from my fingers, flicked the spark wheel with her thumb, and held it only inches from my mouth while she concluded her thought, “Or have you finally gone on to break other hearts beyond my own?”

Mouse waited for Delilah to light his cigarette. She did no such thing.

I said, “She’s a PhD now.”

“Don’t say it. It’s not like I didn’t warn you. I said this would happen. She—”

“She and I are getting married as soon as I return home.”

Delilah’s head dropped onto the headrest. “*Damn*. How many hours do I get with you, before that other ‘*woman*’ carts you off the bachelor farm for good?”

“What time does the plane land?”

Delilah seemed to slump down, dejected. “That soon, huh?”

“Can’t you tell the pilot to go any faster?”

“Such a shame,” Delilah sighed. “I’m tempted to say the love revolution was wasted, though certainly not a bore.” She then set about running her fingers over my arm and shoulder. They continued on down to my first button. “Desarae decided to trade in the life of a stewardess for the theater. Me, on the other hand, have landed my best roles up here,

sky-high, miles and miles and miles above the earth. Meanwhile down below, where does a girl stay in town but a lonely hotel room? And I haven't packed any change of clothes. I can tell you, as an experienced traveler, that I have grown accustomed to wearing many different uniforms, but I have yet to try on the coat and tie of a First Lieutenant."

"Just coffee, if you please," I said.

"*Damn, damn.*" Delilah scooted back out to the aisle where a silver bar cart, stocked with the coffee I'd longed for, awaited her return. Coincidentally, the cabin bounced, but only after she managed to iron out her skirt. It was more of a violent shaking. A patch of turbulence had set in, clanging the dishes on her cart. "Usually, my Greek accent has the power to hypnotize men into buying me a steak dinner—and dessert."

I said, "You should see my Bogie impression."

"Perhaps you can show me sometime."

"Sorry, love. My power must be used for good, not evil."

"*Damn, damn, damn,*" she said.

## 6

NO sooner had Delilah disappeared into the dark of the cabin, probably to weave another one of her tangled webs, than Mouse collapsed the magazine onto his lap. He was disgruntled, though I did hold my lighter up for his cigarette, and he said, "Well, that's just great. I pour out my heart to you and then you stomp all over it. How did you know she was 'The One'?"

A plastic tray was unfolded from the seat in front of me, complete with the cup of coffee that Delilah had poured. The plane dropped and swayed due to a disruption in air currents, shaking everything within the cabin, including the coffee. I traded my attention somewhat equally between that and the cigarette and the magazine, though Mouse's identity crisis apparently needed juggled as well, and said, "That was Delilah that walked by at the terminal? Strange, I didn't even notice."

"I *said* I was in love, Preacher. Who do you think I was talking about, Hedy Lamarr? Geez, what was that between you two, anyway?"

“Casual conversation.”

“Nuh-uh. You can’t just pick up a magazine after a talk like that.”

“Watch me.”

I did just that.

“You were flirting with *my* girl.”

“I was not. I was being polite.”

“She didn’t even look at me.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“So, you two have a history together.”

“No, we do not,” I said.

Mouse gazed at me with dissatisfaction.

And so, I said, “We were an item for like fifteen minutes, is all. It was February of ’64, the month of the Beatles invasion in America, their weapon of choice being to inject steroids into every young woman’s hormones. The problem with Delilah is that Ringo started drumming and she never stopped being lascivious.” The magazine suddenly grew limp in my hands. My mind’s eye rediscovered a pleasant thought that had been misfiled in the cabinet and then latched onto it for a time, settled into it even, as I said, “Imagine that, Delilah. I haven’t even thought about her in years. I saw her last on the day that I left for the war, and then, there she is again on the night of my return. I’m not one to believe in coincidences, but what a coincidence.”

“So, you do have a history together then.”

“When you put it that way,” I shrugged. “Yes, I suppose we do have a history together.”

The situation was one of unrest and disorder, specifically because of the turbulence, which had begun to grow violent, and I was beginning to think Mouse’s mood was affected by unpredictable air movements rather than those of a woman. Come to think of it, his cheeks looked suddenly discolored. He simply didn’t realize that fact quite yet.

He said, “Have you ever—*slid* the hot dog into the bun?”

“I have not.”

Mouse gave it a moment. His initial look of relief once again turned to dissatisfaction and disgust. “Why not?”

“Because I didn’t think she was wife potential.”

“You keep saying that.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t keep bringing it up.”

“You heard her. A woman literally throws herself at you, and your plan is to completely ignore the love revolution?”

“No, I intend to live it the only way I know how.”

“So, let me get this straight. You’re only interested in purchasing one hot dog cart.”

“Must it be a hot dog cart in this analogy?”

“What if you save up all your money for an exclusive hot dog cart and she’s already handed out one or two for free—or ten, even?”

“I can’t force other people’s decisions. All I can do is live my life the only way I know how and hope to inspire according to my example. A Man’s prerogative, according to the Edenic vision, is to inspire woman to be Woman, just as a Woman’s purpose is to inspire man to be Man.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a decade late, Preacher. People were buying hot dog carts in the fifties. They all started going out of business after Kennedy was shot.”

I said, “That’s a very profound statement, Mouse.”

Mouse seemed pleased with himself, though very little managed to become manifested, as the discoloration only seemed to magnify itself. The plane dropped. It dropped again, whereas the wings outside our window gave the look of a bird flapping its feathers as they bounced. Mouse held a closed fist up to his mouth as everything within the cabin shook. His eyes seemed to bulge from his skull as he said,

“Hey, Preacher, you know how I wasn’t cut out for the Navy because I’ve got land legs instead of sea legs?”

“I seem to recall something along those lines.”

Mouse worked to unbuckle his seat belt. Butter fingers is what I think people might describe them as. I had just enough time to nab the coffee

and pull up the tray before he scrambled over my lap, and said, “I think I remember now why I didn’t make 153A my MOS.”

7

ELISE was waiting for me along the tarmac path when I stepped off the last of the airstairs, looking slick in my officer’s uniform. Mouse lumbered several steps behind me, still feeling noxious, though the night air felt good. More than likely, the mere sight of Elise had that effect on him, and already, he was rediscovering his land legs. In New York, I had spent a night at The Dakota with her Bibeau counterpart, though truly, undeniably, and without any doubt, my part in the Vietnam War was over.

“*Bienvenue à la maison,*” she said, throwing her arms around my neck. The kiss between us was a long and passionate one. Her hair was long, golden, and delightfully fragranced, her neck towering, her breasts gloriously rounded and sloped, her figure far more curvaceous and Womanly than when I’d left for the War.

“*Chaque jour je t’aime davantage.*”

I didn’t speak a lick of French and therefore had no clue what she was talking about, and was totally in over my head, though my Boston and New Jersey as well as my British and Irish accents were a thing to behold. Also, my Richard M. Nixon and Bogart impressions were coming along phenomenally, among others. So, I said, employing my best Sean Connery:

“Can you say it again with a southern accent, Money Penny?”

Elise’s second salutation of lips was mixed with mirth. She said, “I have much to teach you about the language of love.”

I said, “Why wait?”

Mouse whistled to himself again, though Elise apparently didn’t notice. Gene Kelly could have been tapdancing across the tarmac with Debbie Reynolds and she wouldn’t have noticed. Throw in Bing Crosby in a song and dance number with Rosemary Clooney and I would have remained just as delirious. Mouse and I also happened to be the last passengers off the plane, giving Elise an exceptionally long wait. As if my latest tour wasn’t stretched thin enough already. The flight attendants

were presently moving down the airstairs for the tarmac and the airport terminal. We kissed, Elise and me. Delilah passed by while we exchanged breath without saying anything, though the added wavelength of energy pressed into me, and then Mouse said, “I—*uh*, I’ll see myself out.” At least, that’s what I think he said. And come to think of it, Delilah may have had words as well. Only the Universe knows. The Universe, which was wholly present in that moment. We kissed, and then the floodgates gave way. Elise covered her cheeks with her hands, though I removed and replaced them with my own so as to mop up the wet. Her lips trembled, and she said, rather comfortably,

“I told myself I wasn’t going to cry.”

“Because of you parents, and David.”

“I’m crying because of the thousand lonely nights and the tens of thousands of telegrams with the opening line, ‘We regret to inform you.’ I didn’t think I’d have the courage to survive it—if they knocked on my door. I’m crying because you’re home at last.”

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”

“There’s something else.”

Her tears steadied though the fixated stare into the dark and dreadful place intensified. My return question was a purely instinctual one. In fact, I began asking without knowing how it was going to end.

I said, “Is the body count stacking up?”

“You’re not going to like what I have to say.”

My heart took a plunge from my chest.

“It’s Sherlock.”

“Michael, he’s—,” Elise pressed both hands upon my chest. “Desarae arrived home yesterday, and—nobody knows where he is.” She turned away in the direction of the railroad tracks and the lamplit darkness. I thought the tears might gush out again, and she even sniffled as if they would, but they never came. “We’ve already begun to fear the worst.”

My response was equally instinctual.

“He’s not dead,” I said.

“I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear.”

“Elise, he’s alive.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ll find him.”

Elise kissed me on the cheek.

“I know you will,” she said.

“Is Desarae safe?”

“She’s with Pierre as we speak.”

“And who’s keeping you safe?”

“I’ve got Pierre looking out for the both of us. You’ll at least understand why I’m keeping company with Dez tonight, given everything that’s happened. Thank you for taking care of her in New York. She told me all about it.”

“Then you know that she doesn’t intend to stay.”

Elise clasped her eyes shut. I thought it might be to hold back the tears which, once again, failed to come. “Perhaps Michael will not be found, and she will not have the opportunity to break his heart.”

“Am I right to assume our honeymoon will have to wait?”

“Yes, I think that would be best,” she said.

“I’ll find a place to stay.”

Elise took hold of my hands and pressed something hard and cold inside of them. It was the key to our hotel.

She said, “You already have one.”

SLEEP paralysis is not exactly how I would describe it. My brush with the Cutter, I mean. That was Elise’s initial suggestion, though I remained unconvinced. What haunted me about our encounter is that I stood there while she passed, doing absolutely nothing to aid her plight. I didn’t know her age, where she lived, or where she was going for that matter. Twelve

or thirteen, if I had to guess, fourteen at the oldest. I was also disoriented and completely out of my element, though that is no excuse for an Army Chaplain. She was quite literally crying out for help, given her cuts, and I did absolutely nothing about it. But that's just the thing. I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried.

There's a scene in Carroll's 'Through the Looking Glass' where Alice enters a curiosity shop. The shop is stocked full of material items. Whenever she looks hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf sits always quite empty, though the others round about it are crowded as full as they can hold. The White Queen, transformed now into a Sheep, sells her an egg. The Sheep places it upright on a shelf on the other side of the shop. Alice reaches for it. The egg grows larger and continues moving further away from her, no matter how much closer she walks in pursuit of it.

So, there I was, standing in front of the Samuel Cotton Hotel, lighting up a cigarette in the dead of night, when the girl emerged from under the iron arch leading in and out of Cremieux Park. She then crossed Levett and continued southbound down Liberty on the opposite side of the street from where I stood, sobbing silently into her hands. It's like I said, the *déjà vu* was strong with this one. *No time to think*. I started immediately in her direction, determined to reach her. My left foot stepped off the curb onto Liberty, and then my right foot, but then my left foot stepped off the curb again, followed by my right. A third and a fourth pursuit saw me taking a step off the curb only to start up from the sidewalk again. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a homeless man hunched under the iron fence of Cremieux Park, blanketed with newspapers, staring at me. And then I sat up in bed. The flip clock rotated from 12:00 to 12:01. The TV hissed with static. Salome. A cockroach lay on its back. Doris Day smiled at me from the cover of TV Guide, while Mouse snored like a freight train, and next door, a woman cried out to God.

The floor lamp and chaise lounge as well as the French doors leading out to a narrow iron balcony, you already know about. Directly below the balcony was Liberty Street, giving me the exact same view of Cremieux Park, nearly, if only two stories higher. Was it a dream or was it real? The girl was missing though the same homeless man remained hunched up under the iron railing, blanketed with newspapers. He wore a grungy pair of slacks and a flannel coat with a hole about where elbow padding would typically go. His skin was leathery as a baseball glove, marked by a few



distinct scars on his cheeks and hands with a grizzled beard to warm his chest, and he wore gloves. Only now, he was sleeping, and I the woken.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen him, either. I was quite positive of that fact. Unlike my misplaced familiarity and one-time encounter with the Cutter, I distinctly saw the homeless man on my last day in Saigon, thinking his insertion into east Asia only a little strange. He was sleeping. I then spotted him in Sydney, and again in Honolulu, *strange*. On the flight, I dreamt of him. That time he was alert and staring at me. But then, there he was in San Diego, and again, just across the street from The Dakota, *sleeping*. Albert Einstein once said of déjà vu that it was the experience of mystery, when mixed with fear, which engendered religion, but what did that guy know? Einstein was a humbug.

I then considered the plausibility that he was a professional hitchhiker or something. Of all the possible scenarios, the hobo with his bindle seemed like the most credible, if not wholly silly interpretation, especially since I'd seen something along those lines in an episode of 'The Twilight Zone'. No, this wasn't hell, the outer darkness, purgatory, or the fourth dimension, and I wasn't dead. But then, how does one go about proving that, exactly? *Oh god. I'm going crazy. Shell shock. Yes, that must be it. This must be what shell shock is like. At any moment, Sherlock, Mouse, Babstin and the guys, alongside the captain of the Titanic and Harriet Tubman, will pop out from behind bathroom door and the closet, yelling: 'Surprise! You've been committed.'* The room had become stifling hot, now that I thought about it. The woman next door wouldn't shut up. And to think Elise could have given her a run for her money had this truly been my honeymoon night.

"Tell me I'm not the crazy one," I told Doris Day.

Across the room and on the wall was an antique mirror, clouded in parts and framed, giving me ample opportunity to practice my thousand-yard stare from the bedside. Doris Day was too busy smiling back at me from the cover of TV Guide to say anything.

THOUGH dead and on its back, the cockroach had maybe managed to move another inch or two after having crossed the shag carpet for the balcony. The time read 12:04 on the flip clock, and apparently, I wasn't

the only person in the world who needed a breath of that crisp Dixie air. The starring voice from one room over had finally quieted down, as had the board banging, and was already leaning against the iron railing when I arrived, draped in a single bed sheet. She was thin though curvaceous, colored with an olive complexion, of an average height, her hair being proportionate in length, and dark. I immediately recognized her from behind even if it didn't happen that way at the airport.

Delilah—

Further down in the night, the homeless man slumbered under the iron bars that surrounded Cremieux Park. From The Dakota, I hadn't asked Desarae about him. But now I wondered if Delilah saw him as well, and if she was as captivated with mystery as I was. I lit a fresh cigarette and then sucked on that for a moment from my railing, and she on hers. The gap between both balconies was something like three feet, an arm's reach. I didn't say anything, neither did she, though she must have known I was there because, without turning to look my way, the PAN AM stewardess said,

“Where's the—*wife?*”

“We prolonged the engagement.”

Delilah seemed to shrug with indifference. Her gaze was a continual forward facing one. “Ah, well, *darn*. Things looked to be going so well between the two of you at the airport.”

Mostly, it was her eyes that grabbed my attention. They had eluded me on the airplane but now I was quite certain about it, they'd changed since last we met. I'd seen eyes like hers in in Bangkok and Saigon and a dozen other cities, though she herself were Mediterranean, and also notably of a different profession. Not a single moment went by that the love revolution had me fooled, even if the rhetoric was intended to trip me up. Business transaction or not, a woman like that would offer you everything except what remained in the lockbox directly beneath them—her eyes, I mean—which were more often than not black and impenetrable. They had become a maze rather than a labyrinth, and she was the one that was lost in them.

I said, “You want to know something crazy?”

Delilah said nothing in return.

“There’s this dead cockroach in my room, sprawled out on its back. And every time I look for it, it’s somehow managed to move.”

“The world’s going to hell in a handbasket.”

Delilah spoke as though she didn’t mean a word of it, and then proceeded to suck on her tobacco. The tip of her cigarette glowed with red embers, illuminating her impenetrable eyes.

“I don’t want to intrude, Delilah. I was simply wondering *if*—”

It was her heavy sigh which cut me off. “It’s late and I’m on a date. I’m sorry you’re feeling ‘*alone*’ but you can save the effort. Find another girl. I’m making a round trip to New York in the morning. Perhaps you can try me again tomorrow night.”

“You misunderstand my intentions.”

“Not here to relive old times, then?”

I said, “I’m here to pick up where I left off, if that’s what you mean.”

Delilah stiffened her shoulders, perhaps from the cold. Though more than likely it was an unpleasant thought passing through her. Fastening the sheet around her neck, and with one arms tightly bound across her bosom, she turned to face me, and said, “The funny thing is, I didn’t even realize I should be angry with you until you showed up in my life again, pretending like nothing had happened between us. On the day you were deployed to Vietnam, you were on my plane. We spoke for a while and then you followed me to the back. You let me know *exactly* what you had in mind. That night, we just so happened to stay in the same hotel. You gave me that spiel about there being no such thing as coincidences and all that, and I believed you. I waited, and I waited, and then finally, somebody knocked on my door. When I answered, nobody was there.”

“Delilah, I—” I started to say only to close my mouth again and think things over. Nothing else came to me. “I’m sorry for what happened, though I can’t say I’m sorry for what *didn’t* happen between us, either. I was uncertain about my future and afraid. I sidestepped my calling. Following that through to the end would have been a mistake.”

“If you think I had intended your assertion as a casual romp in the sack, then you’re grossly mistaken. I could stand here and tell you ‘you missed out on the greatest *forking* night of your life’, but the fact of the matter is, I was foolish enough to think it would have been mine as well.

I thought we had something—you and me. All that talk about how you could be dead in the morning. How many other men fed me that line? Boy, that got old fast. It didn't even occur to me that you ditched me for some other hussy until tonight. And yet, here you are, standing on the balcony, *loveless*, seeking my attention."

"Look, Delilah, I would be lying if I said I came out here expecting to talk about this, but if we have unsettled business, and its closure that you want, then just know that I did go to your room that night. I can remember every detail like it was yesterday, even down to your room number, 33. It took all the guts within me to knock on your door, and it wasn't for lovemaking purposes. Not sure if you noticed the individual walking double time around the corner in the hall, but that was me as well. Since that time, I've been in many battles, and I never once lost the courage. I should have been mature enough to let you know my decision, that my heart belonged to another, but in that moment, I was weak, and desperately trying to remain loyal, and perhaps above all else, embarrassed by my actions. You may be angry with me. Hell, there may very well be a million women angry at me. I should probably just put up some traffic cones and form a line. But I can tell you *this*. Not one of them can blush for having known me."

Delilah stared at me long and hard, sucking on her cigarette, analyzing. Her eyes narrowed into the shape of diamonds, as if she were still expecting *the question* to spring into action. I gathered men rarely remained gentlemen in her presence for long.

She said, "Why are you standing here, then?"

"This is going to sound stupid."

"Probably," she said.

"I woke up from a nightmare a few minutes ago, and came out here wondering if you could tell me what you see over there."

I waved my cigarette in the general vicinity of the homeless man.

"What is this—a game?" Delilah's jawline seemed to tighten.

I once again considered my answer, but nothing came. And so, I started speaking without knowing how it would end. "I'm being as serious now as the night I knocked on your door."

Delilah coolly shelved the cigarette to her lips, inhaled, released another steady stream of smoke, and then grappled it between her fingers. She said, “I see parked cars and a lot of trees.”

“Is that all?”

“Lamp posts and a gate, what do you want from me?”

“But do you see *anyone*—like perhaps right over there?”

I directed her attention stage right of the arched entrance to Cremieux Park, where the homeless man was presently sleeping. Delilah once more squinted her eyes, sucking on her cigarette as she did so.

“Nobody. Sorry to disappoint.”

My heart sank into my stomach.

“I don’t get to say that too often,” she said, reminiscing about her choice words, and somewhat pleased with herself.

“Then maybe I am crazy,” I said, mostly to myself.

Delilah tightened the single sheet around her breasts, closing in the gap as high as her neck. “That’s not very reassuring.”

I tried not to shift my eyes over the balcony towards the sleeping homeless person. But then I did it, and she saw me do it. Delilah grinned with amusement.

“This *isn’t* a game. He’s down there, right now, isn’t he?”

“I’d be lying if I said no.”

“And just when I had decided that you were no longer interesting.” Delilah leaned over the railing, filling the void between her railing and my own. “Does he talk to you and tell you to do stuff? Naughty stuff. Is he talking to you right now?”

“He sleeps most of the time.”

Delilah unlocked her lips and grinned. “Sounds like, how do you say it, *schizophrenia*. Or dementia maybe. I mean, it is a waste of a disease if he won’t even bother talking to you. Have you confessed yet to the shrink whom you’re engaged to?”

“We haven’t had that discussion quite yet.”

Delilah nearly choked on her cigarette as she laughed. “Perhaps she will not be too quick to put all her eggs into one basket—after your first pow-wow.” She then thought about it some more, and said, “I read somewhere that you can’t be crazy if you think it is a possibility, or something like that. And besides, I have met plenty of crazy people.” She pointed her cigarette at my nose. “You don’t have the look of it.”

I must have stood there silently for a moment, because she then asked, “Is he still sleeping?”

“Yes,” I said.

Delilah laughed. “You’re not telling me everything. Please, we’re two adults here, enjoying a smoke. Men confess to me many things. And you don’t have to lay down on a couch.” She then managed to catch the irony of her words. I detected a blush. “Though most choose to.”

“I suppose it would be pointless to ask if you saw a little girl walk by—” I held my fingers containing the cigarette up to my chest for measurement purposes, “about *yeah* high.”

“Mm-hmm, a few minutes ago.”

“You saw a girl—”

Delilah shrugged. “She came out of the park. She was crying. I felt sorry for her. But what could I do? I was—*occupied* at the moment.”

“How old would you say she was?”

Delilah twisted her lips as she recollected.

“She looked young. Twelve. Thirteen.”

“Did you—did you see any bruises on her, per chance?”

“It was dark, and I was—occupied. But yes, under her arms. She had many of them. They may have been knives, maybe scissors, or something else. She was what you might call a ‘Cutter.’”

“There’s that phrase again. *Cutter*. Who would do something like that to a little girl?”

“Nobody,” Delilah shrugged again, seemingly with indifference. “She did it to herself.”

“And why would she do a thing like that?”

“A young woman’s urge to cut might be triggered by many things. Strong feelings that she might not otherwise be able to express. Anger, hurt, alienation, or shame.”

“I take that to mean she has many wounds, and that not all of them are self-inflicted. How would you even know about *cutting*?”

“I read a little in my spare time. A little here, a little in New York. In between my active social life, that is. I would say you’ve seen her before if it wasn’t your first night back into town.”

“This is going to sound crazy.”

“Probably.” She once more laughed at her own irony, and before even saying it as well. “*Try me* anyways.”

“It’s more like a sensation. That I’d stood here on this very night watching her pass, dozens if not a hundred times before. I don’t even know if I was awake or dreaming when it happened, it was the strangest thing.”

“There is a word for that. *Déjà vu*. We all get it sometimes.” Delilah sucked on her cigarette with satisfaction as she considered the matter. Her lips were full and comfortable. She blew a coiling trail of smoke in my direction. “You know, I had the same feeling.”

“Of *déjà vu*,” I said, more as a question than a statement.

Delilah nodded. “Yes. Like I’d seen her before. Many times.”

“And what do you make of that?”

Somebody shouted from within Delilah’s room.

“Who the hell are you talking to?” He said, obviously male, and more western-sounding in accent than southern.

Delilah tightened her shoulders and rolled her eyes, annoyed at the intrusion. Her next drag from the cigarette seemed somewhat therapeutic. She said, “*Déjà vu* means you cannot locate the time, place, or context of the previous experience. It’s a strong feeling of something having happened, nonetheless.” She pulled again from her cigarette, exhaled, and then, “Common logic assigns it to an illusion, a false memory. But I don’t believe it. That’s just another copout term intended for the junk box. I believe *déjà vu* is very real, and that we should pay attention to it when it arrives.”

“You’re saying our memory is real, and that it has happened before, even if it’s a misplaced file from the filing cabinet.”

“That’s precisely what I mean. That it is real. I don’t know how else to explain it. Perhaps it’s reality that is lying to us rather than our subconscious.”

I flicked the cigarette off the balcony with the full intent to leave. What remained of its embers exploded on the street two floors down.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, turning around for my room, and with the full intent to take my chances with the cockroach.

She said, “You’re going out to look for a misplaced memory.”

“Perhaps I can still catch her.”

“Get back in here, woman, I’m thirsty! Who the *fork* are you talking to? How long does it take to smoke a cigarette for Christ’s sake?”

Delilah tightened her lips, and in fact, recoiled her entire body. Her eyes clamped shut for a time as well. Upon opening them again, and having filled her lungs with night air rather than nicotine, she said, speaking softly, “Do you really intend to go through with it?”

My response had something to do with the Cutter. I opened my mouth to respond only to have Delilah clarify her statement.

“—with the Harvard girl, I mean.”

“Elise is my final destination, Delilah.”

“Such is my lot in life.” Delilah leaned back against the iron railing which faced Liberty and Cremieux Park beyond, arching her shoulders and neck backwards over the edge as she did so. “The very thing that makes me so endeared to you is the very thing that makes me angry. It will be just like old times again, won’t it?”

“I haven’t changed, if that’s what you mean.”

“Except you’re forgetting one thing.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m not the crazy one.”



THE long and the short of it is that the homeless man had vacated the premises before I managed to zip my civilian shoes and exit the Samuel Cotton Hotel, no surprise there. Nor was the little girl found on the streets of Driftwood at any time during or after the midnight hour.

My present wardrobe consisted of whatever my fiancée had given me to wear. Hip hugging jeans and a paisley button-up collar painted with probably every stroke of the rainbow, drivers-cap for the noggin and for boots the sort of Italian zip-ups with pointy tips and heels that the Beatles wore. I hadn't yet decided if the look was me, but I'd win medals on the pommel horse for her kisses, that and more, so I guess you could say the decision was made.

My first stop was the Lady and the Unicorn, the finest pub in town. It was also an ancient establishment in these parts, pre-dating the American Revolution, as the story goes, and had remained mostly untouched in the intervening decades. The pub itself was overlaid with mahogany wood, a wall-sized mirror, chrome-lined bar, hand-crafted pillars, rose windows, cloisters, an arched ceiling, and booths that glimmered in the light of Arthurian knights staring back at us through panes of glass which, as I mentioned, were of a gothic tracery design.

A notable feature of The L&U was a small octagonal stage which stood as an island unto itself in the center of the floor space, surrounded on all sides by tables. Another larger stage, the main stage, hugged the north facing wall. That one was often employed by musicians and the like, though Irish dancing was a staple here. It was the octagonal stage however, or the *rondeau* as it was often called, where an Irish performer might dance the jig to glory and back. And of course, medieval portraits of knights and ladies dancing the 'carole' hand-in-hand could be located throughout the establishment. The carole was likewise known as the 'rondeau,' the French word for *round*, or 'reigen' in Germany, also *round*. It is a dance long lost to the ages. Scrubbed is more like it, as not a single lyric has survived. Though Irish dancing is believed to have its roots among the Celts of the Middle Ages, and therefore, a surviving remnant of what was removed from public consciousness.

There was good reason for seeking Intel there, and not simply because the place was still hopping at 12:35 in the morning. David

Holmes, you will recall, had a skydiving accident while riding onboard the southbound train to Driftwood, and he had been a co-owner. Hooper was the other one—its second co-owner. He was an older gentleman, late fifties or early sixties, maybe older, though nobody around these parts seemed certain. His hair was still dark in places and woolen. Age spots flanked his skin. The fact that a colored man of African descent, or a negro as he was referred to among the locals, co-owned a business in the American South in The Sixties, and a fine establishment like The Lady and the Unicorn of all places, was nearly unheard of. The decade certainly hadn't started out that way but the times, they were a-changin', as the folk singer put it, and the citizens of Driftwood loved him all the more for it.

If the pub did not bring me an immediate sense of nostalgia, seemingly unchanged from the moment I'd left, the black and white photo, matted, framed, and hung over the bar, was the clincher. It was that of a fair-haired woman lounging around in a claw-footed bathtub. She wore a trench coat for warmth, whereas a scarf covered half of her head. Mounds of rubble surrounded her. There were hints of a burnt-out building, undoubtedly due to Allied bombing, and even the tub was riddled with bullet holes and blown in half. The scene was Berlin. She was laughing flirtatiously at the man taking her picture. The woman had a name, as did her photographer. Amalie Bibeau, they called her then. Hooper had kept a portrait of Elise's mother in the bar, and of course, the actual camerawork was Ira Chamberlain's personal signature. She also happened to be pregnant with her when the photo was taken.

Hooper abandoned bartender duties the moment I entered. He had been standing directly underneath Amalie's portrait, precisely where I'd seen him on my last visit. I alternated glances between Amalie and Hooper as he hurriedly rounded the bar so as to throw his arms around me in bear hug fashion. All the while his hand slapped my back, and he said, beaming with delight,

“Preacher, I heard you were in town. The first time you entered my life, you came through that door in your tap-dancing shoes, following the rhythm of your feet. Don't you come back in here pretending like you weren't going flap and shuffle, riff, glide and stomp on stage with Bob Hope, representing The Lady and the Unicorn to the free world. Where's the flap in your step? Get your shoes on and let's have a therapy session.”

“I seem to have misplaced those.”

“No problem, I got a pair of clown shoes in the back.” He gave my feet a good evaluation. “I think they just might fit. Hey, wait a minute. You didn’t come back just to run off with the Chamberlain girl, did you?”

I said, “If she’ll have me.”

“If—? What’s wrong with you? You go getting the nuts and the bolts in your head all loosened up? You’d better be careful, a cuckoo’s bound to make his nest in there. She’s head over heels for you, man.” He then pulled back far enough to inspect the various insignias and patches on my officer’s uniform. “What the hell have you been up to all these years, when you haven’t been showing off for Old Ski Nose, winning presidential medals and shit?”

“Trying not to get my butt blown off in the Nam is more like it. I guess it’s time to open up the tab, huh?”

“I already did. I take it the little lost puppy up there is with you?”

Hooper nudged his chin towards the main stage, whereupon Mouse was presently singing a most terrible rendition of the Chairman of the Board. Bellowing is more like it. He was caressing a microphone as if it were a woman, soused on Scotch, whiskey, or hops, howling:

“Come fly with me, let’s fly, let’s fly away. If you can use some exotic booze, there’s a bar in far Bombay!”

The ‘*Bom*’ in ‘Bombay’ had started out strong but then the ‘*bay*’ drifted off, but only because he took a bit of a stumble, nearly falling sideways and then backwards onto the stage. After a quick pull of his rocks glass and a wisp of his hair, he pointed at the crowd and said, “I’m gonna live till I die!” Rather than turning on him, as I thought they might, several patrons in the crowd howled with approval. Though in their defense, they were equally stewed. Heaven knows if he sounded like Hildegard of Bingen to them.

I said, “I found him in Saigon. Wandering the streets. He had nowhere to live and needed a home.”

“Mm-hmm, and you decided to drop him off here, as if I needed a pet. That boy has been singing Rat Pack standards since he arrived. He’s also been drinking my booze all night—on *your* tab.”

“There must be some mistake, he’s with Sherlock.”

“David Holmes’ boy?” Hooper immediately understood the inanity of Michael’s nickname and let out a laugh. “Well, I hope he’s got a place to stay, because he ain’t bedding here tonight. I ain’t running no hotel. Do I look like I’ve got a vacancy sign hung from my window?”

Mouse must have located me among the crowd now. He held a hand over his brow, forming sliver eyes as he peered in my general direction, and then spoke into the microphone, “Hey, there’s Preacher, everyone! Let me tell you, this guy—this guy right here, he’s real. He’s the only real person I know. Get this, he follows me home from Viet *forking* Nam.” Only he didn’t say *fork*. “He follows me all the way to the Big Apple to stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life.”

Hooper said, “Oh lord, don’t break into ‘New York, New York.’”

Which he absolutely did. Just not right away.

Mouse’s speech continued, “Most people—most people talk to you in mere words, but not this guy. This guy taught me about love from the heart.” He tapped his rocks glass against his bosom. What remained of its sloshing ice was picked up by his microphone. “And let me tell *you*, I got to meet his fiancé on the tarmac tonight. Quite the Georgia Peach, if you know what I mean. And she’s got two of them.” He then howled like a wolf. “Come on up here, Preacher. Say hi to the crowd. Let’s hear your Smoky impression. Mr. Candy Man!”

Mouse immediately began making large sweeps with his hand, as if signaling for my approach. I decided to smile and wave back to him from where I stood until Mouse shrugged me off, whereby he immediately started up his rendition of ‘New York, New York’, complete with the ‘Ba-Da-Bada-Ba!’ of trumpets. But not before first giving his dedication.

“This one’s for Betty.”

Hooper shook his head. “I know *you* know, being in tight with the Chamberlain girl and all, but does *he* know?” He nudged his chin in Mouse’s direction again.

Mouse clamped his eyes shut as he bellowed out each word, exemplifying the length of his vowels whenever possible. “Start spreading the news! You’re leaving today! I want to be a part of it, New York, New York! *Thank you*. Your vagabond shoes, they are longing to stray!”

I turned once more to Amelia, hunched down within a Berlin bathtub and hung over the bar. “No, I haven’t gotten around to telling him yet.”

“You don’t believe that dribble about a murder-suicide scenario.”

“A unicorn doesn’t lay his head on the lap of a lady, and he certainly doesn’t give his life for that luxury, only to turn around and kill her.”

“That-a boy.”

“Which reminds me, ‘the situation’ is why I’ve come. I’ve got to ask, has Sherlock shown face?”

“Man, I haven’t seen David’s boy in days. Believe me, if I did, and the very moment that I do, Ira Chamberlain’s little girl will know, and then you’ll know. I take it you’re out looking for him at this hour.”

“I’m making the usual rounds. I thought this would be as good as any a place to start.”

“Yeah, well, if I were you, I’d grab Chamberlain’s little girl by the hand and—where were you two honeymooning again?”

“We thought we’d start in Paris.”

“I’d get nice and snug in a Parisian bed and stay there for a while if you know what I mean. With that being said, welcome back to Driftwood, friend. Try not to get your butt blown off. Lots of bodies have been stacking up as of late. I’d hate to see yours added to the list. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back to work before the crowd turns.”

I said, “Hooper, one more thing.”

Hooper had already turned for his return trip to the bar. He spun around regardless, and said, “Yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m keeping an eye out for a girl. She couldn’t be more than twelve or fourteen at the oldest, and *yea* high.” I held a hand to the whereabouts of my neck and shoulders to illustrate her measurement. “She passed the Samuel Cotton maybe thirty minutes ago and was heading in a southbound trajectory down Liberty from the Panhandle. She was weeping into her hands, and Hooper, her arms probably had dozens of cuts up and down them. Some of them looked fresh.”

“Southbound down Liberty?” Hooper didn’t even need to think on it. “She happened to be heading in the direction of the youth shelter. Though a commune wouldn’t be out of the question, given the recent rise

of 'The Counterculture.' You might want to try Magazine and Ashton. That's where all the kids go to catch herpes, nowadays."

A youth shelter—

"Driftwood has a youth shelter?" I tightened my eyes while asking the question. Hooper even employed bunny-ear quotations with his fingers when pronouncing "The Counterculture'. His distaste was evident. "What the hell happened to Driftwood while I was off nearly getting my butt blown off in the Nam?"

"A whole damn lot," was Hooper's only reply.

Hooper wasn't talking out of his butt, either. My midnight hour reconnaissance mission saw a Driftwood overrun with longhairs and teenagers, arriving just in time for puberty and the counterculture. The city had changed, and not simply because Mouse had arrived. Her streets were strange and foreign, and in many ways, unrecognizable.

Saigon felt more like home.

## 11

CATTY-CORNERED to The Lady and the Unicorn was the Royale Palmetto Theater, an equally ancient establishment in these parts. Both buildings straddled the corners of Royale and Dixie, whereas Cremieux Park, complete with iron gates and gaslit streetlamps, ran an entire mile east and westward, directly across the street. Quick history lesson. The Royale Palmetto had its beginnings in the mid-18th century, when it was intended as a center for opera and the performing arts. The British were running the show back then, and to testify to that fact, the theater still had 'The Lion and the Unicorn' emblem hung over the stage, varnished in gold. Quick history, The Royale Palmetto succumbed to the silver screen during the silent era only to fall into disrepair some three or four decades later, though that is not the end of her story. The theater had most recently been restored to her former glory by the SSL, an acronym for Society of Southern Ladies, though the rumor is that they were funded by the Hollywood invaders.

In 1968, one year earlier, the fully restored theater premiered its own original; a musical; an instantaneous hit which was still proudly

announced in bold letters upon its marquee, REPUBLICAN BLUE. Sunday showtime, 5pm. And of course, I had two tickets. It would be my first viewing, given that Sherlock and I were away fighting the war, but that much you already knew. Most recently, the musical had been featured in LIFE Magazine, another fact that I've probably already mentioned, making Republican Blue a household name—as if the critics weren't already singing its praises. Seemingly overnight, people were streaming from all over the country to nab a performance, making Desarae Driftwood's darling child. Anyone paying attention knew it was only a matter of time before they made the move to Broadway.

Suffice to say, “REPUBLICAN BLUE”, all bold print, saluted me from its marquee. Additional letters and numbers communicated the name of its leading lady (she was a Bibeau rather than a Holmes here as well), along with its various showtimes and an announcement: “FINAL PERFORMANCE 12/17”. That would be a Wednesday, and this was a Sunday. Was The Dakota a permanent apartment and how long did we have before Desarae said ‘Sayonara?’

I said, “I hope you know what you're doing, Dez.”

The girl with the cut arms was a wash but you should at least know that my last meeting with Sherlock, months earlier, was at the 95th Evacuation Hospital just outside of Da Nang. I locked onto his position at 1:03 AM sharp, and within sight of the Magazine and Ashton street signs, no less. He was on the move, looking neither to his left nor to his right as he went, slowly advancing forward, as though he himself were trailing someone. *Who* is was what I wanted to find out. The streets were mostly vacated, though Driftwood's redlight district, where we found ourselves now, had managed a notable number of window shoppers and predators. A simple deduction assigned the little man in the trench coat some twenty yards further. This wasn't my first rodeo. Calling out his name would blow his cover.

Sherlock continued an entire block down Magazine, he crossed Lehigh, and then managed half the length of another, still on Magazine. I followed him, whereas he in turn may or may not have been trailing the little man in the trench coat, still too early to tell. The little man passed an establishment advertising an acid test but then immediately turned into a peep show joint, with The Green Apple for a title, all aglow in neon, the letters XXX below it (if there was any doubt as to the product). Three sailors came up the opposite end of Magazine, looking skunk-drunk and

horny as hell. They entered. And then Sherlock entered. The time on my wristwatch read 1:07AM.

Across the street, I spied a bench with a direct line of sight to The Green Apple, and directly behind that, a donut store, perfect location for a stakeout. On closer inspection, the donut store had closed by 1AM. *Darn*. Several minutes too late. Such was my lot in life. Neighboring the donut store was a record shop which had gone by the name of Big Al's before I left for the war. At the time, Perry Como, Henry Mancini, and The Four Freshman had been displayed in the window. Only now it was called The Rec Ward, and albums which featured The Who and Led Zeppelin were prominent in the window. Rumor had it that Big Al made one too many visits to the donut store. If only Big Al could have held on a little longer. But then, on the other side of the donut store was The City Muse, a first of its kind bookstore that I recalled from the Kennedy era. It specialized in independent publications, poetry chapbooks for beatniks and such, much of which was deemed vulgar, even back then. Also closed for the night. Finally, something was going my way.

In its window, The City Muse was featuring what I took to be a new release, seeing as how a dozen or so hardback copies were stacked into a pyramid, with only its capstone facing the window shopper at full salute. The book's title read, 'BABIES ARE ATHEISTS'. Its jacket depicted a blushing woman seated down, unclad, naked as a jaybird, *au natural*. She was barely covering two baby-feeders with one arm, her only other free arm holding a crucifix at full mass over her inner-thigh, and beaded rosaries trailed from her neck in-between the crack of her breasts. I figured it had something to do with the fact that she was reverting back to her inner baby atheist or something, with the guilt of religion desperately attempting to clothe her.

"Mm-hmm, I get metaphors," I said to myself.

Wait, hold up. The naked body I was not intimately familiar with, but the face of the woman, I knew. Her name was Solange. Solange St. Marie. And you'll never believe it, but we dated in Seminary. Another long story made short, she abandoned the faith in favor of agnosticism, which apparently became a case of atheism, and the two of us broke up before we chanced to go the conjugating route, ancient history. I hadn't the faintest clue she'd become a cover girl though. Looks like the rest of the world saw everything below the neck before I did. But wait, there's more.



The name of the author was Dr. Solange St. Marie. I'd only ever courted two women and they both became doctors.

"You've got to be kidding me."

What a night. Well, I plopped my caboose down on the bench, crossed my legs and got comfortable, despite craving coffee and a donut, determined to enjoy myself in my paisley shirt and Italian zip-up boots. At the entrance of The Green Apple was a doorman, college student aged. He was short and somewhat box-shaped, though not pudgy, with shaggy hair, youthful spots, and thick rims over his nose. A sign advertised a cover charge of a dollar, and he looked to be collecting. Somebody entered and then another entered, both middle-aged men. They paid their cover charge, whereas others exited. And so, I waited longer, watching peeps enter and leave every few minutes.

Five minutes passed, and then ten minutes passed. An older lady in a leopard print skirt swooped in at my side and said, "Looking for a good time, honey?"

"I'm having a great time already, thanks for asking," I said, and continued looking forward.

Twenty and finally forty minutes passed. More people began exiting than entering, none of which were Sherlock or the little mystery man. The college-aged kid stared at me for a time, and then I at him, wondering how long he would continue staring at me, he probably the same. He continued doing so, as did I. We stared a little longer. I tightened my lips and puffed my cheeks, flaring my nostrils for added effect. It was a staring contest. The time read 1:53 on my wristwatch, whereas The Green Apple promised to close by 2AM. *No time to think*. What needed to be done, I thought to myself, is action. I stood up from the bench and crossed the street, pulling a wallet from my pocket as I did so.

I held a dollar up for the kid without slowing my stride, though he refused to take it, and said, "Woah, there, buddy. Where do you think you're going?"

"It says right here that there's a cover charge of a dollar."

"Your point being?"

"I'm entering and here's my dollar."

“Maybe if you’d pay attention to the time more often, rather than sitting there at the bench for the last hour, then you’d know we close in seven minutes.”

“How I get my kicks and how long I like my dollar to last is none of your business.”

I made a second attempt at handing him my dollar. He took it. I then tucked my wallet back into my pocket, but his hand remained steady.

“News flash, we’re closing in six minutes. Babylon Bazonga is nearly done with her last dance. Your cover charge has just gone up.”

I pulled open my wallet and handed him another.

“There had better be sparklers for tassels and the 1812 Overture, backed by cannons and fireworks,” I said.

“Have fun, sicko,” he said.

Once inside, only a sad-looking fat man and a couple of other pervs in sunglasses, sitting way back in the dark, remained. Babylon Bazonga sure didn’t look to be having a good time. I performed a quick sweep of the room and then ducked into the bathroom, examining both stalls. A discreet peek into the manager’s office and also the staff kitchen aroused nothing of interest. Sherlock was missing, and there was no sign of the little man having even entered. Babylon Bazonga was already robbed when I entered the dressing room. She paid me no mind but then the nerd with glasses, he was apparently a stagehand now, yelled: “Hey, you can’t come back here!” though I was already out the back door and in the alleyway by the time he had said it.

AGAIN, the short of it is that I didn’t have another Sherlock sighting for the remainder of the night. There is good news, however, in that he was very much alive. Before 2AM, that is. Which is why I didn’t give up on the quest. I looked high and low, up and down Driftwood’s front and back alleyways, even long after the streets were emptied. The time read 5:03 on my wristwatch when a woman whizzed down the street in a Chevy Corvette convertible, hair blowing behind her. She was headed in the direction of the Atlantic Ocean, which only now emerged on the horizon.

I still had another block to walk and finally arrived at the beach at 5:07AM. It had a parking lot complete with maybe two dozen metered spots, all of which were vacant at this hour save for the Corvette, which had been parked under the glow of a streetlamp. Its driver wasn't in it.

Above my head, the Gemini constellation was still visible in the western sky of the crystalline firmament. I was perspiring from my long and grueling death march, though the salty breeze felt good and refreshing. My next sighting of the woman was on the beach. She was petite and wore a flowing gown which was split down the middle, exposing each leg as she walked. Her stride was a slow one, as though she were deep in thought or sad, despairing even. The weight of the world seemed to be upon her. Or maybe, just maybe, she had held her tongue out for some of them sweeties and was presently suspended in orbit, only seconds away from splashdown.

She walked on towards the threshold of the ocean, with the wet sand finally squeezing between her toes. It looked to be a high tide. The ocean then washed over her ankles. She certainly didn't seem detoured as the waves swirled about her torso, and within seconds, her bust, prompting both arms to spread out like the wings of a plane as if to maintain her balance, and still, she continued on. Her back was turned throughout the entire episode though she must have been staring blankly into the abyss as she stood there, contemplating the darkness. In an instant she lurched forward, headfirst, embracing the next wave that promised to pummel her. The wave passed and she didn't surface. *No time to think.* I lurched forward, thinking only to strip my shoes and socks off in the pursuit. I was soon splashing in the water, next wading through it, and then, in a little time, pulling her from the port of the leviathan, the spiritual entity which she appeared to be calling upon.

Rather surprisingly, she didn't fight back. I fully expected her to, though. Quite the opposite, she threw her arms around me, burying her head into my chest as another wave pummeled over us, being committed apparently to the rescue. Her hair clung to my neck like seaweed. The light of the available constellations cast their light on her sopping face, and I said:

“Solange—Is that you?”

Indeed, the author and the model on the cover of ‘Babies Are Atheists’, Dr. Solange St. Marie, had become my bondwoman.

“No, you must be mistaken,” she spoke in a daze. “The name’s Salome. I had John the Baptist beheaded, and now I must suffer for it.”

“Snap to it, honey.” Another wave pummeled us, nearly knocking Solange out of my arms. “It’s Preacher. Don’t you remember?”

Solange gazed upon me in confusion.

“Who?”

“What are you doing out here at five in the morning?” Not even that adequately expressed my astonishment, and so, I added for clarification purposes: “What are you doing in Driftwood? I thought you hated this town. You were always running from one thing or another and couldn’t get out of here fast enough.”

Speaking strictly in the monotone, she said, “I’m looking for the ice to fall through and impale me. I must pay for my sins.”

“I saw the movie too sweetheart, and that’s not how it ends.”

We were close enough to the continent now that the water swirled around our knees, allowing me to stand her up and lead by the hand rather than carry her in my arms, though she still needed help out of the maze that she or somebody else had created. At one point she turned around, tugging only a little in the opposite direction. I straightened her out and we continued on, and then, not more than several feet away stood two men, smiling obnoxiously. To say they were pleased at her rescue would be a wrong estimation.

I said, “If it’s ice fishing you’re after, might I suggest you try Wabasha, Minnesota this time of year.”

The creep to my left was tall and sinewy, blonde-haired and hazel-eyed as well, built like a belfry though not necessarily muscular. I’d have to aim high if this turned into a boxing match. His associate on the right however was dark-haired, gray-eyed, and shorter than me, almost to the point of being dwarfish. Built like a Pit Bull and ugly like one as well. New game plan. Aim high and low, giving extra attention to the little guy, as he might bite.

“Get your damn dirty paws off the doctor,” Bulldog said.

“I thought she was Herod’s daughter.”

“*Whatever.* Hand her over, asshole.”

“I will not. Hey, you guys wouldn’t happen to know any diners or donut shops open at this hour. The lady here could use a tasty splashdown rather than a literal one, as could I.”

Belfry chucked my shoes and socks into the ocean. Not nice.

“The only shop that is closed at this hour is *you*,” he said.

He grabbed Solange, or rather, Salome, by the arm, inciting Bulldog to nab the other, though I still hadn’t let go. A sudden blow to my chest, courtesy of Belfry, sent me staggering back a step and Solange plunging face down into the cold water. I steadied myself ankle-deep in the ocean only to get cold-cocked by Bulldog. It all seemed perfectly timed with the next wave, a particularly strong one, which swept me off my feet and sent me spinning around in a barrel. Even Bulldog struggled his way out of it. I was soon back up on my feet and at the angry Bulldog. I knocked him down only to be slapped by another wave from behind. Geez, even the ocean was throwing her punches. Well, I fell directly on top of him. He snarled, and I’m somewhat certain tried to bite me, which I was able to fend off, but in fending off his incisors he kneed me in the groin. Belfry gave a swift and definitive cleave to my back with his hand, whereby my mouth filled with sand.

Belfry said, “Try that again and there will be a *second* body swimming with the fishes.”

I spit out the sand, some of it anyways, certainly not all, and then said, “Ah, so you were trying to kill her.”

My face hurt, my stomach hurt, and my back hurt. Drinking salt water wasn’t what I had in mind earlier that evening. And my groin you know about. That stung like an entire nest of agitated hornets. Still though, I was still not so incapacitated that I could not manage a fight. My guard was down, is all. I climbed back up to my feet, painfully groping at the treasury that I had hoped to offer to Elise earlier that evening and started towards the beach after the two men who had taken Solange captive. Hobbling is more like it, and quite suddenly feeling the need to vomit, which I managed not to do.

They were moving swiftly up the beach towards the parking lot, always dozens of steps ahead of me. Belfry’s stride was enough to keep Bulldog at a brisk jog, whereas Solange could barely keep up, and seemed to drag behind. They soon had her in the parking lot and, within seconds,

in the backseat of the convertible parked under the streetlamp. Bulldog helped her in rather forcefully, with Belfry shoving her head downwards for no additional purpose other than to express his cruelty. It was, after all, a convertible. Solange didn't struggle.

The engine started up, with the Belfry in the driver's seat. The Corvette sped off seconds before I could throw myself onto the hood, which was my only plan, being a part of my *'No Time To Think'* campaign. It exited the parking lot without even so much as slowing at the stop sign and sped recklessly in the same direction that Solange had arrived from.

"Asshole!" Bulldog cried.

So anyways, that's how I began the five o'clock hour of my day, which had barely even begun. The hour walk back to the Samuel Cotton Hotel was a drag, in large part because Solange's life had been exchanged for my socks and shoes. The pack of cigarettes had also taken a dive in the rescue and were of no use, despite my best attempts at lighting them. Also, I managed maybe half a block before realizing my nose was bleeding, and that the blood had colored my only civilian shirt. And even still, every donut shop in town was closed, could my life get any worse? I didn't return until sometime after 6AM, empty-handed, barefoot trying to remember if there were any other girls from my past who might be let loose on the streets of Driftwood and feeling dejected. It was probably closer to seven, with the promise of sunrise arriving in twenty minutes.

Déjà vu was waiting for me in the hotel lobby.

THE Samuel Cotton Hotel had a ground floor dining room, though it was closed at this hour, and would likely remain closed, being a Sunday and all. In Driftwood, as well as the American South, and most of America for that matter, everything shut down in observation of Constantine's Day, including the naughty establishments. Over the front desk in the lobby, where I entered, I paused to appreciate the painted portrait of Samuel Cotton. The man, the myth, the legend. Over the fireplace mantel in the parlor room, near to the grand piano, Mrs. Cotton posed for the painter. Eleanor was her name. I appreciated her portrait for a moment and then turned again towards the lobby.

In the dining room, stage left of the lobby, a man roughly ten years older than me sat in solitude, back pressed to the empty bar. He was dressed in slacks, pink with white stripes, complete with a red button-up shirt and a neckerchief, and his hair was sandy and curled, long enough to touch his collar. He was buried behind the morning edition of *The Driftwood Daily Breeze* when I saw him, reading the funnies section, mumbling silently with his lips as he did so, followed by the occasional laugh. I didn't know his name, but he looked familiar. Too familiar. As though I'd known him all my life. *Odd*. If only I could put my finger on it. Well, there was that *déjà vu* that I was telling you about.

He looked at me and I at him, which only seemed to intensify his return stare, and then Delilah strutted down the Grand Stairway leading from the upstairs rooms to the lobby of the Samuel Cotton Hotel in her PAN AM blouse and dress, looking groggy though refreshed.

She said, "You forgot your shoes."

I said, "When do you sleep?"

"I was going to ask the same of you. After asking about your shoes." Delilah tightened her lips as she looked me over, adding, "Somebody bled onto your shirt. Just like old times, indeed."

The man in the dining room collapsed the newspaper and then abandoned it on the bar and said, "Do you two know each other?"

"You'll have to excuse me," I said without ever answering his question. "This is my first morning back in town, and you look awfully familiar. Have we met?"

"I'm not sure..." he smiled with uncertainty, not convincingly, and then spoke more as a question. "...*maybe*...?"

"Call it *déjà vu*, but you didn't happen to fight in Nam, did you?"

"Hell no," he returned fire.

"We went to school together, then."

The man started to say something but then stopped himself. He dropped his head, managed a bulldozer of a breath, and then lifted it again, grinning this time. "And you'd be Preacher."

"How did you know...?" Delilah.

"You have me at a disadvantage," I said.

“And so, it appears.”

His grin remained, to which I immediately repeated Delilah’s question. “How did you know my name?”

He was already on his way out, with Delilah locked in one arm, and he had yet to scrub the grin from his lips, when he said, “Must be that *Déjà vu*. Sometimes it goes both ways. Maybe we knew each other in another lifetime.”

“During the War,” I said as clarification.

“Hell, no.”

“Before the War, I mean.”

“Yes, that must be it,” he said, unconvincingly. Only his follow-through seemed self-assured. “Or afterwards.”

Well anyways, the man had yet to give me his name which, frankly, wasn’t a concern at the moment, as my thoughts were pressed almost entirely towards bed. That was about to change. He brushed up against me (it was more like my hand collided with his), instantly sending the electrons of dozens of pictures pulsating into my skull, or were they displaced memories? It was a memory bomb all the same, and its shrapnel ricocheted into my skull. All at once, and without warning, maybe a hundred incongruous images dogpiled upon the other, more like a thousand, no, ten thousand, a hundred thousand even; so many that it would take pages to recount each in turn, maybe even a book, though far more I reckon were immediately lost in the blitz. They all contained scenes, captions really, involving the strange character before me. We were in a bush fight in the Nam together, Memory Hole and me. And then we were washing down a cold one at *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Curiouser and curiouser, I was a priest at his wedding, and the bride was *Desarae*.

The fact of the matter is the brunt of the imagery unfolded at the *L&U*. The nameless man and me were drinking beer and then in another we were drinking beer, and so on and so on. Nothing additionally peculiar about that except for one minor detail. It was the picture of *Amalie* in the *Berlin bathtub*, which was now hung over the bar, that kept changing—but only slightly. In one, her legs would be raised a little higher over the edge. In the next, her legs would be raised but then she might be groping at the pearl necklace around her neck. Afterwards, she might be moving



to steady the handkerchief over her head which was tied around her neck. The photographer's angle might begin to change too.

The changes were so slight that I probably wouldn't have noticed except, as I said, there were thousands upon thousands of memories dog-piled onto the other which, come to think of it, fails to truly capture the experience. The Clamshell Mutoscope was the forerunner of the motion picture and had long been a relic of a bygone era though I obsessively stared into one at a penny arcade as a child. They would contain a wheel of still photographs that rotated by hand, giving the illusion of movement. Indeed, Amalie Bibeau came across like a living entity in the tub, laughing, moving about, flirting with her lover.

But that is not all—

Even Delilah reeled a step or two backwards. Holding a single hand to her breasts, she gasped for breath. Her hips and thighs quivered, whereas her cheeks flushed. And I know why she did it. At least another hundred scenes involving the two of us were instantaneously thrust into the pile-up, and every single one of them depicted the night I knocked on her hotel room door, years earlier. I knocked and, rather than fleeing out of loyalty to Elise as I recall, I stood there while she answered, not a stitch of clothing on. I knocked, she answered naked, and pulled me in. I knocked, she answered naked, and pulled me in. I knocked, she answered naked, and pulled me in. Rinse and repeat. One carbon-copy event stacked upon another, upon another, upon another, like an image within the image of an identical image, perpetually pulling me from the hallway into a room with a hallway into a room with a hallway. And then it occurred to me, among the hundreds of thousands if not millions of memories that sprang upon me, coiling the infinity of space and time into a graspable moment, not a single one of them involved Elise.

Delilah spun around at the door, having survived her own voyage through a cyclical eternity, and this is what she managed to say.

“Did you find the weeping girl?”

“No,” I said.

I haven't the faintest clue what flickered to life in the stranger's skull but based upon his jerk reaction; it was far more of a violent flinch than what I managed; I'd say he received a Clamshell Mutoscope show of his own.

He began walking backwards, and with Delilah still locked in his arm, he grinned. “This hotel is haunted. It was probably just a ghost.”

But not even he believed it.

14

CALL it Second Wind, an experience like that will do it to you. I probably could have run a marathon had I wanted to. A quick shower and a shave and I was back on the balcony of my room with an immaculate view of Cremieux Park, which we sometimes alternatively called the Panhandle. The sun was but minutes away from eliminating the purple horizon. I happened to like sunrises, particularly the blue hour, which is why I stood there with a fresh cigarette and coffee, praying silently to the Father of spirits, perked and ready for the marathon sprint of another day. The homeless man was asleep again near the arching entrance. Nothing out of the ordinary there. The figure of a person or what I'd describe as a shadow emerged from the park. That caught my attention. Was it the girl?

The eyes of the homeless man rolled open, locking onto my own. I then found myself standing on the sidewalk two stories below, no coffee or cigarette, and the shadow was already moving southbound down Liberty. *No time to think.* My left foot stepped off the curb, and then my right foot, but then my left foot stepped off the curb again, followed by my right. That time I managed, only it wasn't a street that I landed upon. I happened to find myself ankle deep in a low country marsh, surrounded by acres of sweetgrass.

I wasn't certain but if I had to take a wild stab at it, the Annabelle River is where I found myself. It was an educated guess, in part due to the sprawling green lawn and the gothic manor on the far side of the marsh. I was intimately familiar with the view. That was the Davies Estate, further implicating that the Chamberlain House was pressed to my back. I'll have plenty more to say of the Chamberlain House, as it was the plantation home of Ira and Amelie, and of course, Elise presently lived in the Stables out back, but one thing at a time. I turned to verify my coordinates, and in fact managed a 180, only to find myself staring at the Annabelle River and the Davies Estate on the far end again. Another 180° rotation produced the same results.

Directly ahead of me and to my left, some one hundred yards away, a blue heron moved about among the silhouette of plant life, seeking a perch and its fishing spot. But then, a little to its right, a formless clay-shaped body rose up out of the water. It was black and lifeless and had what must have been a humanoid head attached to shoulders and two arms. Knowing what I did of the Annabelle and my present location, it was standing in water not more than two feet deep, further indicating that two and a half or three feet of its body was exposed.

Something like a minute passed while I sat there, breathless, and the clay figure didn't move, nor did the heron show the slightest alarm at its intruder. Eventually, the sun, which had still yet to peek over the Atlantic skyline, illuminated the purple sky with enough strokes of reds and oranges that I could see the formless clay-shaped body was indeed that of a person, that the person was Caucasian, a *she*, and on closer inspection, that *she* was the girl with the cut wrists. The girl opened her eyes. They were white and without pupils. She stared at me, and I at her, somebody snored, a lock turned in a keyhole, and then Elise touched me on the shoulder and said:

“Wake up. You’ve overslept.”

Rain splattered against the windowpanes, whereas the balcony beyond glistened from the wet, and my immaculate tree-lined view of Cremieux Park advertised an equally gray sky. The homeless man remained precisely where I had seen him in my dream (if that’s what it was). He was asleep under a poncho and a cardboard box, though not surprisingly, the girl with the slit wrists had vacated the premises. I looked up at Elise, dressed in a black dress, and then at my wristwatch, though my eyes were still too fuzzy to discern the short from the long hand. I needed coffee. A cigarette would do. Sitting up, I found myself on the bed, right next to the flip clock and TV Guide. The ashtray was full.

“How’s my guardian angel?”

“What time is it?” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“It’s nearly nine o’clock. Come on, get dressed. You’ll miss the graveside. We need a minister and you’ve been volunteered.”

“I must have fallen asleep,” I said, yawning.

“I take it you were up all night, waiting for Michael.”

“*Searching* is more like it.”

“You went out?”

“I did.”

“Those boots weren’t made for walking, you know.”

“Nor were they for swimming, which is what happened.”

“Don’t tell me, the blood on your shirt was from a shark attack.”

“Compliments of the Driftwood Welcome Committee,” I said. Elise opened her mouth to say something, and I added, “Don’t ask.”

“Very well, then. Any news?”

“He’s alive,” I said, lighting a cigarette.

“You saw him.”

“I did.”

“That explains why your shirt has blood all over it.”

“Compliments of the Driftwood Welcome Committee,” I said. Elise opened her mouth to say something, and I added, “Don’t ask.”

“Very well, then. Any news?”

“He’s alive,” I said, lighting a cigarette.

“You saw him.”

“I did.”

“Care to kiss and tell?”

“You’ll have to tie me down and beat it out of me,” I said.

“That can be arranged.”

“I saw him only for a moment, Elise.”

“Was he safe?”

“I couldn’t say. Difficult to tell.”

“Desarae will be relieved to know, nonetheless. They all will.” Elise sat down at my side, on the very mattress that we had intended to initiate our marriage with. She stroked my hair and said, “I take it you’re going out looking for him again.”

“I am. Right after I refuel on tobacco and coffee.”

“Last night was supposed to be our wedding night.” Elise turned my chin with her fingers and then gave me a slow kiss on the lips, the first of the day. “If only you had arrived home under better circumstances.”

“I can’t rest until this is resolved.”

“And I love you for it,” she said, delivering her second kiss of the day. “Now get up and get dressed. Everyone’s probably already waiting around at the graveside.” I must have sat there, bedside, savoring that thought with my eyes closed, because she was already halfway across the room, and heading out the door when she said, “Shower up. Where were you last night, the Booze Hound?”

“More like the den of iniquity,” I said.

“Should I ask?”

“The story is a developing one.”

Elise began to close the door after her. She then popped her head back into the room and said, “Oh, and *uh*, be sure to brush your teeth while you’re at it.”

“It’s called morning breath, babe. Even we guardian angels get it.”

“Oh, lordy-lord,” she said.

# THE RONDEAU

## 1

TAP dancing was never intended to take me anywhere in life. It was more of a hobby, albeit a passionate one. Sherlock and I had long shared a similar devotion, though I knew him exclusively as Michael back then. That's how we initially became acquainted, via a mutual love of the Irish jig, and also, because we were too heavy on our feet for ballet, as they say. We were young and of the same age, barely men, still sporting spots on our chins, though men we most certainly were. He was a dancer at The Lady and the Unicorn, to which I had never been, in love and engaged to one of Ira and Amalie's two daughters, neither of which I'd met. *Until one night.*

So, there I was, standing in the bathroom at the L&U while Michael lobbed a grenade into the toilet. He was scheduled to go on in a matter of minutes and the flu had caught up with him, imagine that. The Universe was a matchmaker and had other plans.

“You'll have to take my place,” he said, hurling into the bowl.

“I'm on it,” I said, already on my way out and into the hall.

“And Preacher—”

“Yeah, what's that?” I popped my head back through the door.

“Sing—sing like you've never sung before with your feet.”

“Believe me when I tell you, they'll be glad they don't live under me before the evening is out.”

The routine, I was vaguely familiar with. The two Chamberlain girls were to take the main stage in their emerald dresses and black stockings, bows adorning their hair, while Nolan and Connor unleashed The Kesh Jig in the key of G and in 6/8 time by way of flute and fiddle. Another girl, a red head—Caroline was her name, would complete the trio. Elise was still a teenager, Caroline as well. Technically, all three were, seeing as how Desarae was only a month away from turning twenty, though in truth, Elise was in every which way a woman. A woman who would ripen with age. Together, the redhead and the brunette and the blond, they were

expected to do their usual thing, stomping and gliding on their toes, occasionally lifting a hand from their hips to flick their hair backwards, only to have Michael emerge from the small octagonal stage in the center of the floor, competing for their affection, via masterful footwork. Which is how it happened, *mostly*.

Imagine their surprise when the dancer who emerged was a dashing handsome stranger in a white button-up shirt, slick fitting black vest and slacks. I tapped like I'd never tapped before, stomped like I'd never stomped. It was a rat-tat-tat snare drum of trebles and clicks intended to outperform the tapping and stomping of my own heart. The legwork was not my own. It may have started out that way, but the Universe reached down, sparking and inflaming what was formerly hidden within. Beginners dance the Treble jig at a traditional speed of 92 beats per minute. Within seconds, I was an untamed animal, having fiddled my way down to a slower 72 bpm, the speed of professionals. The Vikings had a term for it, *Berserk*. The Confederates knew it as something else. This was my unanticipated field of battle, and therefore, my unexpected *Rebel Yell*.

Hooper was working the bar alongside David that night. Ira and Amalie Chamberlain were in the audience as well, seated with Estelle at their usual table. They were witnesses of His-Story making. That much was apparent long before I finished my initial routine. Letting out one last galloping stomp, matched with a holler and a clap, I held out a single hand as a gesture for the ladies to continue.

Gliding, tapping, kicking their feet above their heads, leaping, and stomping, Amalie's two girls began their follow-up routine with Caroline. I must have stood outside of space and time, steadying my breath in defiance of my heart, which recklessly raced on, poised like a statue, hand still gesturing to the ladies from the octagonal stage, completely mesmerized by the youngest Chamberlain daughter. Eventually, Time reached down and grabbed me by the heels, inciting me to plunge back into the fray of frantic footwork. All Caroline and Desarae could hope to do was keep up with my peripheral vision as I zeroed in upon Elise's eyes, penetrating them, and in return, she my own. We went back and forth like that for a while until Caroline slowed to a stop, and then Desarae stepped to the side. Only the two of us remained in the spotlight, Elise and me. The Kesh Jig ended abruptly, but Nolan and Connor immediately broke into 'The Rattlin' Bog', nearly seamlessly, and afterwards, 'Soon May the Wellerman Come', thereby prodding us to continue on, legions beyond

the rehearsed routine. My legs ached, and my feet throbbed. My shirt was drenched with sweat. Together, we spanned the gulf of darkness between the light of two separate stages, perfectly in cadence with the other—skip, stomp, and spirit.

Head still hung in the toilet, Michael said afterwards the applause was enough to bring down the house, but the Creative Force *within* was a gale force wind and far too inflamed to notice, thereby muting everything. They might have been applauding, as was the report, breaking a leg even, or both of them, but the audience had already melted away from my mind's eye. Only Elise and the sound of her panting remained. Sweat glistening over her brow, mouth hung open, breasts heaving. Man was created from the dust, but Woman originated from heaven, and mine had penetrated through the firmament into the Womb of the Earth.

It was love at first sight.

2

EVERYBODY had thought to bring an umbrella to the graveside but Mouse, thereby prompting him to huddle under my own. It didn't seem to bother him in the slightest that I held the Holy Bible in my hands, or that I was dressed once more in my Army Officer's uniform, just as it was at his wedding ceremony a couple of days earlier. One small clue and then another, mixed with yet another, that he was huddled up next to the individual who was expected to recite the funeral rites.

"It would rain on a funeral," he said, holding one arm out. "A little morning mist might be nice. But no—rain. Hey, why didn't you tell me you went out looking for Sherlock last night?"

"You were incapacitated. And keep your voice down."

The burial of David Holmes was a private affair, consisting only of myself and several others. Even the cemetery was a reclusive one, as it straddled the old tabby church, with its ruinous arches of brick, and very few people came out this way except to follow a travel brochure. I counted maybe two dozen gravestones enclosed within the rectangular iron fence. The birth and death dates inscribed upon them ranged from the 1700s to the present, the latest addition of course being David. His wife Barbara



had died several years earlier, in 1963 to be exact. She was presently awaiting the lowering of his coffin into their shared plot of earth, but they weren't the only recent comers.

Not more than three feet away from David and Barbara were the polished graves of Elise and Desarae's parents, Ira and Amelie Chamberlain. Their death date read April 10, 1969, a most recent event. Sherlock, Mouse, and I were still trying not to have our butts blown off in Nam at the time of "The Incident", as we called it. What are the chances that David Holmes would take the flight of a sparrow from a moving train only after investigating their supposed murder-suicide, and coincidentally before reporting his findings to anyone? That was something I was hoping to find out.

Standing on the opposite side of the grave was the Frenchman, Colonel Pierre Auclair. To Pierre's immediate right was Maleda, a woman of Ethiopian descent. To Maleda's right stood her husband, Hooper, whom you already know about. He too was black, but his country of origin was anybody's guess. Just to the right of Hooper was Josephine, a stern but attractive woman nearly ten years older than me. A lawyer, actually. She worked in the prosecutor's office, often in partnership with Charleston, which was almost unheard of. She may have even been the first to hold such a position. And lastly, to her right was Estelle, the old frail Irish woman lived in the slave house on the southeast end of the property, though it had been referred to as the servants' quarters for a couple of decades now. She had been tending to the rose garden longer than anyone my age could remember.

How all five were related to one another, not forgetting the sixth and seventh members, David and Ira, both Englishmen, (eighth and ninth if we include Barbara and Amelie), can only be explained by a mutual meeting at the Samuel Cotton Hotel, precisely ten years earlier—or so my understanding of the story goes. That is all the intel that I ever received on the origins of their relationship, and to tell you the truth, never thought to pay it any mind until now. Far more provocative was the title of their group. They called themselves 'The Rondeau', and I wasn't in the loop.

Desarae was just to the right of Pierre, according to where I was standing, or rather, to his left. Her dress was black, her shoes were black, her pillbox hat was black, even her hair was black, though her ocean eyes shone through the black veil. In turn, Elise stood at her side, also in black. The two were sisters, as I have already stated—half-sisters. Same mother,

different fathers. Why bring it up again? Because, with the way Desarae carried on, grieving into her laced gloves like so, also black, it occurred to me right then and there that she had lost three fathers. To be sure, two of them in as little as a year. And with her husband MIA, she might even be a widow as well.

That is to say, nearly everyone present was connected with ‘The Rondeau’ in one way or another, by relation or friendship. Mouse’s entanglement, on the other hand, had much to do with his spending the night at the L&U. How he pulled that off, nuzzling up next to the tap, is anybody’s guess. Charitability is the less likely answer. The more probable explanation had Hooper feeling responsible for letting him loose into the night, given his association and with all that was transpiring. That, or he wanted to keep a close eye on the newcomer. Come morning, Mouse emerged from Cremieux Park, and incidentally under the same archway where the cutter emerged, looking wet and soggy and miserable from the rain, but also from all that alcohol abuse. Hooper and Maleda had apparently removed his tush from the premises on their way to the burial (they lived in the top floor apartment), though not without first brewing him a cup of coffee. Well, he apprehended me, loaded with questions, many of which I was able to fill him in on. His inquiry continued nearly uninterrupted at the graveside.

“How long has Sherlock been missing again?”

“Nobody has seen him for days,” was my best answer.

Mouse leaned into the underside of my umbrella when he spoke, utilizing an indoor voice for added discretion. The rain played its part in muffling him, though I suspected that everyone on the other side of the grave were listening in anyways.

“Aren’t you worried?”

“Very.”

“Then what’s the plan, Lieutenant?”

“We’re putting Mr. Holmes into the ground, and then you and I are going out on a reconnaissance mission.”

Elise turned her eyes, hinging them upon me for a time.

“Copy that,” he said.

Mouse stood silent in thought. The rain came in at an angle, it was more of a wet drizzle than a shower, wetting our shoes, mostly. Cypress trees and their knobs, or Cypress knees as they are known, grew up out of the mud banks and littered the landscape. Among the marshes surrounding the Annabelle River, a blue heron stood among the sweetgrass, and even it was watching.

Hooper said to Pierre. “Do you think he’ll show?”

Pierre shrugged, “He said he’d be here.”

And then Mouse leaned back in towards my ear, “Who are they waiting for—Sherlock?”

“They’re waiting on Jack, I think.”

“Who’s Jack—is he in ‘The Carousel’ as well?”

“I don’t know, and *no*, but also *yes*, though I couldn’t say for certain.”

“Huh—can’t you make up your mind?”

“You asked me two questions. I responded to both of them. I don’t know who Jack is because I’ve never met him before. And they’re not called ‘The Carousel’, though you had the general idea. They call themselves ‘The Rondeau’, though I’ve heard them interchangeably referred to as ‘The Carolers’ as well.”

“What is that, French or something?”

“It means *circle* and refers to an ancient Medieval dance.”

“Like those pictures at The Lady and the Unicorn.”

“Correct. And how do you know about ‘The Rondeau’, anyways?”

“You and Sherlock got to talking about it while on R&R in Sydney—don’t you remember?” Mouse said. “A little liquor in you two goes a long way. Loose lips sink ships, you know.” Pierre turned his eyes upon me now, perhaps curious as to what either of us would say next, and Hooper was probably listening in as well. Mouse continued, “So, what is this, some sort of secret society thing? Like, are there secret codes in dance steps? Because, if so, I want in.”

“They meet at the Samuel Cotton Hotel once every decade,” I spoke nearly at a whisper, hoping the conversation might be contained between us.

“Come again?”

“The Samuel Cotton is the hotel I’m staying in.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, Preacher.”

“They make an appointment there every ten years.”

“That I did not know.” Mouse said, eyeing Josephine with curiosity. She was perhaps only ten years older than me, a few additional more than Mouse. He counted up the math on his fingers and then scrunched his face together. “What are they doing, dancing the hula?”

Perhaps further explanation was needed. “I wouldn’t have the faintest clue. Their last meeting was in 1959. And for whatever reason, don’t ask me why, their reunion apparently can only land on the winter solstice.”

Mouse then raised his voice with alarm. “That’s like one week from now.” Even Hooper looked our way. “So, are you telling me David here missed out on their circle dance, or their *reunion* or whatever, by mere days?”

“It appears so,” I said.

“You’re not holding back on me, are you?”

“That’s as much as I know.”

Mouse said, “You don’t seem to know a whole lot.”

I turned to him, “What do you know of it?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“My point, exactly.”

Mouse considered the matter further. The condensation turned more into a mist now than a rain shower, though occasional acorn-sized drops were pelted from the twisted knobs of the Grand Oak, which we stood under. Across the grave, Desarae’s tears flowed continuously. Elise seemed unable to subdue them. And then Mouse said:

“So, what’s the deal with all of this?”

“You’re full of questions today,” I said.

“The tabby church, and this cemetery that we’re standing in—what’s its significance again?”

I nudged my chin towards the graves of Ira and Amelie Chamberlain, with their mutual 1969 death marker, and said, “It was his. Everything here belonged to him.”

“The guy who shot his wife and then committed suicide afterwards?”

Neither Hooper nor Pierre disguised the fact that they were interested in our conversation, and even Josephine lifted her eyes in alarm. Estelle on the other hand had wandered off to the opposite corner of the iron fencing so as to confront a completely different tombstone. Paper-thin skin made it transparently clear that she was an elderly woman of heightened age, and dementia had long ago devoured the tissue in her brain. The tombstone of her fancy was faded and cracked, with a root of the oak having done its part to disrupt its foundation. The name read Joshua Chamberlain, and with a death date of 1779, it may have been the oldest grave in the cemetery. Not far from J.P.’s stone were the markers of Samuel and Eleanore Cotton. Anyhow, nobody stopped Estelle as she laid half the roses she’d clipped from the garden onto it.

“I don’t believe that story for a second,” I interjected, nearly cutting Mouse’s question off.

“Granted. I’m just saying—he owned all of this?”

I nodded. “It belonged to Ira’s fourth great-grandfather; he was a Revolutionary Patriot; a man whom Ira Chamberlain just so happened to be named after. Ira was the first Chamberlain to own these grounds, and Ira right *there*,” I nodded towards Ira and Amelie’s tombstone, “was the last of them, as descendants go.”

“Who owns it now?”

I shrugged and then nodded towards Josephine, which she saw, and then said, “Ask our resident lawyer. It’s in some sort of a Trust.”

“And where do you come into this, exactly?”

“I don’t,” was my response.

Mouse didn’t seem content with my answer though. He studied me long and hard with those bulging eyes and incisor teeth of his, and then nudged his chin in the direction of Ira’s grave marker. “I thought you were engaged to the dead guy’s daughter.”

“That would be a true statement.”

“Doesn’t that give you any perks?”

“I’m what you might call the ‘Security Chief’. That’s what it says on paper, at any rate. I don’t know, Ira wanted me to watch over the grounds, I guess. Keep a lookout. Bury the dead and say a benediction when the time comes for it. Pierre over there is not too pleased about the job title, but I see it more of a spiritual title. He inherited the Plantation Home, whereas Elise was given the Stables out back.”

“He gave the house to a French dude rather than his own daughter?” Mouse studied the tabby church with disdain. “That’s messed up. And this is where you intend to start your church.”

“It is,” I said. “As part of my ‘security’ duty.”

“There’s no roof on it.”

“I noticed.”

“What if it rains?”

“I suppose we’ll have to improvise.”

Hooper looked again at Pierre and Pierre at Hooper, though Maleda stood between them, and then Hooper said, “I don’t think he’s going to show, and David ain’t gonna bury himself.”

“I agree,” Josephine said.

Pierre turned to me now. “Very well. Let’s begin.”

“And then there is the matter of David’s son,” Hooper continued, as if mumbling to himself. “Where has that damn fool gone?”

### 3

DAVID Holmes joined his wife in the ground, six feet under. I spoke the words associated with such an occasion, being sure to improvise where needed, and then everyone contributed flowers into the grave, though as I have already mentioned, Estelle had planted half of her roses over the grave of a certain Chamberlain, and nobody thought to correct her. Pierre, Hooper, and I then set about with the shovels, though Mouse also lent a hand. Otherwise, no further insight to the origins or the intended purpose of ‘The Rondeau’ was given, much to Mouse’s chagrin, as very few words

were spoken. The day was young, not even 10AM. We were wet and tired, though the sun had finally broken through the clouds, and anxious to depart. Michael was nowhere to be found.

“Call me if you need anything,” Josephine said to Desarae, though it seemed as though she intended her message for Elise, Pierre and Hooper as well, and probably even Estelle. Whether or not I was being inferred to remained in question. She kissed Desarae on the cheek, and then Elise on the cheek, and then Pierre, Hooper, and Estelle on the cheek, in that order, and then I said:

“Don’t I get a kiss on the cheek?”

“No,” she said as a matter of fact, and then turned to leave.

The ruinous tabby church stood next to the cemetery as well as the grand oak firmly rooted above and below it, feeding from the nutrients of the dead. Bordering the tabby church and the cemetery on two connecting ends, its south and east side, was the Annabelle River. Broken seashells formed a narrow path from the church to the cemetery to a wooden plankway which, in turn, connected with Oak Row and Chamberlain House on the other end. It was certainly the direction which Josephine was headed in. We all intended to cross the plankway though she was the first to depart. She only managed a single step though, which seemed loose and carefree enough, but then stopped in her tracks, rather stiffly, almost with a cringe. The blue heron flew away, and then, turning around, she said, “I overheard you saying you were going out looking for David’s son, Michael.”

“He wouldn’t have missed unless something was wrong.”

“Don’t you think that’s a matter for the police?”

“It is. And also, it’s a matter for me.”

“I thought you might say that.” Josephine sighed with discomfort. “I have heard much about you, Preacher. Elise thinks the world of you. Apparently, Desarae does too. And Hooper holds you in good report. I will reserve my own critique for the time being. Take care of yourself. Try not to fudge it up.”

Well anyways, she left without giving me a kiss on the cheek, which I was holding my hope out for. Perhaps another day. She started across the wood plankway, being the first to leave, and was nearly to the other

side of the marsh when Sherlock appeared, looking ragged and disgruntled. She said something to him, and he to her, and then she to him again, though nobody could make out their words, given our distance. Elise squeezed my hand. Josephine hugged Sherlock and before planting a kiss on his cheek. What did I need to do to receive one of those? He started up again in our direction, whereas she continued on, looking behind her as she went.

“I found him!” She called back, obviously relieved.

Desarae quickened her pace across the planks, and Mouse, speaking now from behind her, was the first to state the obvious.

“You look like shit, man!” he said.

Nobody thought to add commentary of their own, as Mouse was absolutely correct. He most certainly did. Look like shit, that is. His hair was disheveled, and the skin under his eyes were dark and heavy. A shave and a shower wouldn't have won him a beauty contest, but this world would have been better for it, all the same. He probably hadn't had a wink of sleep. And the shrapnel which was even now lodged in his right hip gave definition to his stride. It was the first time that I'd seen him walk anywhere since Hamburger Hill. Sherlock's spirit was hushed, perhaps even snuffed out, but certainly not lost. Indeed, quite suddenly, I was sitting at a restaurant in New York again, staring at Desarae from across a table, and she said, 'I can tell you that the man who returned isn't the same man who left.'

“We have a change of plans,” I told Mouse.

“Drinks at the Lady?” Mouse inquired.

Sounded good. What better way to reminisce about the war than beer on a Sunday afternoon at Hoopers. Blue Laws were a hinderance, but we'd manage. I even started to nod in appreciation of our present circumstances. But then Elise ran her fingers alongside the lower portions of my back, and I said, “I'll take a raincheck.”

Hooper asked Pierre, “Where has that damn fool been?”

Pierre shrugged silently in return.

After a moment Sherlock recognized my presence. He stared at me for a moment, and I at him. He said rather stoically, “Back from Nam.”

“I went back to the hospital looking for you, and you were gone.”



He said, “My papers came up. I was thrilled to finally get out of that hellhole. You going back?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ve seen enough killing.”

He said, “Looks like the killing has followed you home.”

Hoper said, “You missed the funeral.”

He said, “Something came up.”

Pierre said, “I assume your absence has nothing to do with David.”

To which he said, after careful consideration, “No, I don’t believe it does. Now, if you all don’t mind, I’d like to pay my father respects.”

Sherlock began his stride across the wooden plankway again, his limp being evident again. Desarae thrust her hands onto his chest, perhaps fighting off the urge to pound them repeatedly upon him. She settled for throwing her arms around his neck in the end. Her cheeks were still wet when she said, loud enough for everyone to hear:

“Where were you?”

Holmes looked at her, saying nothing.

#### 4

ELISE lived in the upstairs loft of the old Stables, a seventeenth-century carriage house which had long been converted into a garage. The original owners, a certain Dr. Chamberlain and his wife, British colonials, had once owned horses, but those days were long over, as the paddock was sold off sometime in the Twenties to make room for the neighbor’s estate. The Plantation Home, dating back to an even earlier decade, was architecturally designed with all the signature southern charms that one would expect of a plantation-styled home nestled halfway between Savannah and Charleston, hugged in every corner with broad wrap-around porches, and flanked with floor-to-ceiling shuttered windows. Perfect for sipping mint juleps on a soggy summer evening. And of course, on a side note, it had evaded the fate of so many other plantation homes during Sherman’s northbound march through Georgia. Though originally several times larger, what remained of the property was

something in the ballpark of 1.5 acres, perfect for a spacious lawn, pool, garden, and tennis court. And also, Estelle lived in the servants' quarters on the north end.

Oak Row, as it was named, had originally been the grand driveway leading up to Chamberlain House. It served now as a cul-de-sac, a narrow one lane road for the decade-old homes, mostly in the plantation style, though the original oak trees remained. Each additional home was manufactured in the post-Civil War South, reconstruction era, after early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chamberlain House owners had begun to section off and sell plots of land. Hard times.

It was a peninsula, though an island might be a better description for it. The Annabelle River wound on Elise's east-facing side of the island, looking far more like a sprawling marsh at times, stocked with acres of cordgrass. That same river forked on the south-east corner of the tabby church, just north of Chamberlain House, and ran along the western side so that in-between, on the little island of paradise, no more than a dozen homes straddled their banks. This was the Carolina low country and wetlands surrounded us, though the Atlantic Ocean was less than half a mile away, indicating that all rivers, including the Annabelle, ebbed and flowed with the tide. Nearly every home was shyly tucked behind conservative garden walls and iron gates, and, as I started out saying, two rows of grand oaks, dripping with Spanish moss, straddled the street, forming a unifying canopy.

Which is where Elise and I found ourselves now, underneath the canopy of oaks. Josephine sped off in her shiny red Corvette, and then Hooper started up down the same street with his Ethiopian wife, walking being their usual mode of transportation. Desarae had already returned to the graveside with Sherlock, whereas Pierre helped Estelle along to the Servants Quarters, as they were called, leaving only Elise and me alone on the cul-de-sac. Mouse's whereabouts was anybody's guess. With her arms draped firmly over my shoulders, Elise leaned in only inches from my ear. Her breath was a warm and welcome addition to my neck.

"I suppose you won't be going out looking for Michael, now that he's *safe*." She bit her lip at the conclusion of her sentence.

"I suppose not," I said, absorbing her warmth. "How do you suppose he'll take the news?"

“They can work out their own problems. Right now...” Elise ran scissor fingers along the ridge of my shirt buttons. “We have a few interests of our own that I’d like to... *iron out*.” She bit her lips again. “There’s been a slight change of plans.”

“Care to tell me about them?”

“I spoke to Father Williams this morning. He’s on standby.”

“To marry us,” I said.

*Mm-hmm*. She kissed me on the lips. “Soon as I return.”

I was dizzy from the kiss, and said, “Return from *where*?”

Elise pressed a finger to my lips and said, “*Shh*, you’ll ruin the mood.” She kissed me on the lips. “...Come into my house... I’m famished and could use some lunch...” She kissed me again. Its aftertaste was sweet and savory. “...I’ve got a few hours and don’t know if I can wait any longer...” Another kiss and then “...You’re moving in tonight. They can wage a hot war against Russia for all I care. I’m never letting you leave again.”

“Um, I’m standing right here, guys,” Mouse said.

Our lips were still interlocked when I said, “I’ll grab my bag.”

“You will not.” Her breath passed from her own mouth to my own. “We’ll have someone bring them over from the hotel. There’s little time. Every minute counts.”

I reached into my pocket and retrieved the key to our room.

“Mouse,” I said.

“*Yo*.”

“Bring my bag over from the hotel. Room 211. Afterwards, it’s yours for the week.”

Mouse retrieved the key and said, “Thanks, Lieutenant.”

“Oh, and Mouse.”

“*Yeab*.”

“Don’t bother ringing the bell. Just leave it on the front porch.”

He saluted me and then I waved him off with my hand. Elise led me past Chamberlain House towards The Stables with my other one. The driveway was elongated, a seemingly eternal path which had begun hours, days, weeks, months, even years earlier than my tours of southeast Asia. The final leg was paved, the finish line in sight. I had my eyes on the prize. She was absolutely mesmerizing in her black dress, even from the back end. In little time, that view would change, and I would be initiated into the Mysteries of Woman. Funerals have a funny way of arousing the mortality, or contrarily, the immortality within each of us. If digested acutely, they can even incite the grail quest.

We were nearly to the front door when it occurred to me.

“What do you mean by *hours*?”