

“I do declare I can’t stand another minute of this heat.”

Tossing aside the wrinkled linen dress in hand, I moved toward the pair of windows on the far side of the room, their panels of dusty glass glowing with white, yellow light. The crank stuck like it always had, but after a moment’s effort the casement slowly swung open. Leaning across the window ledge, I breathed a sigh of relief, thankful for the light breeze, and looked out across the front yard and what lay beyond it.

The swamps of New Orleans had always made for a pretty picture, even now, in the summer of 1967 when all that had once bloomed green was scorched and burnt brown by the merciless sun. With its ancient Cypress trees, their branches weighed down with gray shag and its marshy waters, blanketed with frothy green moss, I often thought that the swamps much resembled the landscape of some other worldly planet.

There was little change in the stillness of the bayou. Seasons came, vegetation flourished and withered accordingly, trees fell and others grew in their place. While wars were waged, while cities burned, while time wore away the world like water against a rock on the shore, this place was left untouched like a miniaturized scene found beneath the glass of a snow globe.

So how was it that so much had changed for me in such a short amount of time?

Bad luck, momma would say and if I had been as naïve as I once was, I would’ve agreed with her. But I knew now that luck and fate and all of that other nonsense had no hand in what became of me or my husband. Bad luck didn’t start the war or send Jack into battle. And bad luck certainly did not kill him. No, the telegram had said KIA: killed in action.

I remembered the men in their dark green suits and how they had come to call that one ripe afternoon in May. I remembered their apathy as they handed me the yellow slip of paper marked *Western Union*. But, most vividly of all, I recalled the way the tires on their black car had scattered the gravel of the driveway when they finally retreated from my door step, leaving me in my grief, a new widow standing alone in the house her husband built.

And that was why I had to leave, why I had to pack my things and move back in with momma: because Jack was a part of the house. He was in the walls and in each of the rooms and in every dark nook and cranny. I could hear his laughter ringing in the halls and the lingering scent of his Salem cigarettes clouded the atmosphere like an ominous fog. And when the very house sighed, settling in the latest hour of the night, I could hear him whisper my name.

I had made the decision a week or two after getting the news; after I had admitted to myself that Jack was dead and that this wasn't just another one of his practical jokes that had gone too far. Packing up was the easy part; leaving the house was another thing all together.

I was abruptly pulled out of my thoughts by the pithy honking of a car horn. I brought my gaze away from the sun-bleached stone bird bath sitting in the front yard, which I been idly staring at for the past few minutes, just in time to see a luxurious light blue Lincoln roll up the driveway, the gravel crackling beneath its white wall tires.

*Momma's car.*

But momma was not behind the steering wheel. The driver's door opened and outstepped a familiar face: Ronald Ellis. Or as I had always known him: Sugar.

There was no particular reason for this nickname other than the fact that he was a sweet natured man, though his slightly menacing and generally silent demeanor suggested otherwise.

Sugar had worked for my family for as long as I could remember, doing a number of odd-jobs around the house: gardener, chauffeur, a butler, and for a time, a baby-sitter. And when father left, the year I turned seven, he became the patriarch of sorts. He was short in stature, compact, and had a curiously molded face with high cheekbones and a funny mouth.

He didn't notice me at the window and I watched him make his way up the driveway dressed in his usual attire, which I thought impossible for July: leather jacket, collared shirt, slacks, and a black fedora, that both shielded his eyes from the sun and hid his receding hairline. In his left hand, he carried a plastic grocery bag. I withdrew from the ledge as he disappeared from view, having reached the doorway.

"Miss Blanche?" I heard him call, over the muffled sound of the front door opening and then closing, followed by the clack of his footsteps. Sugar had a thick accent but after all these years, I understood him perfectly.

"I'll be right there," I replied, moving from my old bedroom and out into the hall, only after casting a dejected look at the remaining piles of clothes on my bed that I had yet to fold.

I found him in the kitchen, emptying the contents of the grocery bag: two glass bottles of orange pop.

"You always did know how to treat a lady," I smiled, strolling in and taking a seat at the green linoleum table in the center of the room. He looked up, surprised at my sudden appearance, but returned with a smile.

"Did momma send you?" I went on, as he settled into the seat opposite me.

"She sure did," he replied, opening one of the bottles and pushing it my way. "She was worried you'd never finish packing. By yourself, that is."

I pouted playfully. "Now, that's not fair. I've gotten quite a bit done without any help." I waved a hand about the kitchen, gesturing to the barren cabinets, shelves, and drawers and the empty spaces where appliances once convened.

"Yes indeed," he nodded in agreement, glancing around at my progress, "You sure have. But your momma won't let me come back to the house if you and your things aren't in the car with me."

"She's had her say in the matter and I guess that's that! She always was so stubborn," I laughed, shaking my head, "But I suppose it was right thoughtful of her to send you. I haven't got much left to pack-Jack and I never saw a reason to own much-and with you here, I'll be finished by sundown at the latest. But first," I raised my bottle of pop as if to toast, "I'll take a much needed break."

We sat for half an hour or so, chatting and relishing in our cold beverages. I hadn't seen Sugar since Jack's memorial which had been held a few weeks ago at my childhood home, which stood regal and slightly grey just a couple miles down the road from here. He apprised me of the daily goings-on of home, of momma, and of my sister, Adelaide and her husband who had come to celebrate the Fourth, in keeping with the DuMonde tradition. To my immense relief, the conversation never once touched on Jack.

I didn't know if this was due to Sugar's subtle ability to manipulate a conversation or simply his kindness, but I was grateful nonetheless.

And with our green-glass bottles empty and with nothing left to say, we set to work, I returning to the bedroom and Sugar toddling off to pack up what miscellany remained in the front room. The house was silent as we went about our business, save for the endless somnolent drone of the cicadas and the occasional bark of a heron.

An hour or so later, when my now-folded belongings were ready to be packed away in an array of unmarked cardboard boxes, I stopped to rest at the doorway, peering across the hallway into the parlor. Sugar was standing near the window, studying an ugly knickknack that I had left on the uppermost shelf of the bureau. I noticed that he had abandoned both his jacket and his hat.

"What time is it?" I inquired, pushing a few wispy blonde fly-aways from my sweaty face. He checked the battered silver watch on his left wrist.

"A quarter past three," he reported, taking up a swatch of old newspaper to wrap up the distasteful curio.

"No wonder I'm boiling," I murmured, more to myself than to him. I eyed the radio sitting near Sugar on the window ledge that he had yet to pack away.

"You see that radio there, Sugar?" I called. He turned, tapping it with his index finger and I nodded in accord. "Turn it on, won't you? Maybe a little music will dilute some of this heat."

He did as I asked, clicking the small metallic knob to the left, and with a minute hum the radio came to life, the stern voice of a news broadcaster filling the parlor.

*"-to report on the steady rising numbers of the death toll as escalation in Vietnam continues to augment. For illumination on the American effort, we turn now to-"*

Sugar's fingers quickly found the dial and with causal haste, silenced the newscaster, instead honing in a popular music station. He cast a furtive glance my way and I shrugged, fixing my face with indifference. I made to turn back to my work when I suddenly caught wind of the familiar tune bubbling from the radio; and I couldn't help but smile at the somewhat morbid coincidence.

The song was nothing new, an older song of Chuck Berry's entitled *"You Never Can Tell"*. It had been hugely popular back in 1964-the year Jack and I were married.

I could almost hear him then, laughter in his warm voice. *"It's our song, baby. Our song."*

The levees of my mind were ruptured by the weight of reminiscence and very suddenly all of my purposefully repressed memories of Jack, the ones I'd stifled to save myself from pain, came flooding back to me and they held me there in the doorway, transfixed.

The fever of our marriage, both of us so young and so in love. The sticky summer nights spent in his arms, out on the porch, after we'd danced and laughed ourselves into a drowsy bliss, letting the radio play on through the night. And he would croon along with that old song that seemed, at the time, as if it had been written just for us.

*"C'est la vie", say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell..."*

I turned away then, wandering back into the bedroom in an almost dreamlike state, a wistful smile on my face.

Standing in the honey-dew light of the afternoon bleeding in through the windows, I recalled then something momma always used to say, that when one door closes another opens. And as this chapter of my life with Jack came to an end, I hoped that another would begin. That I wouldn't be forever caught in this interlude of heartache and ambiguity. I hoped that I'd be able to close this door of my past in the same way I would soon close the door of this house: quietly, reverently, withdrawing only after slipping the key under the mat knowing that when I eventually returned, things would be as they always were, preserved and unscathed just like the swamps.

But for me, change was inevitable. It had already burned through my life like a voracious flame, leaving me blistered and alone in the ashes. And I could feel it once more, hear it thundering towards me. Whether it brought happiness or grief, life or death, I hadn't a clue.

Fate and luck aside, you never can tell. And such was life.

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