

Proud Old Lady with Broken Teeth

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Creative Nonfiction

Translated from the German by Tim DeMarco

“I don’t want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth.”

—Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams’

A Streetcar Named Desire

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

When I came back from the record store, Flo was sitting shirtless on the sofa, opening his third Pabst Blue Ribbon. He had been guzzling the shit like water; plastic bags full of crushed beer cans littered our path across the South. I uncorked a bottle of white wine. We sat barefoot on the stoop, drinking and taking in the humid spring air. Somewhere over the Mississippi, fireworks exploded in the dusk sky. They were probably part of

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the French Quarter Jazzfest, which had prevented us from finding any affordable rooms during the final days of our three-week tour. Luckily we were able to find this wonderful shotgun house online in The Marigny.

We got dressed and went out to eat. Afterwards we headed to R Bar. “No Beer Bikes! No Happy Birthday Singing! No Crying!” a sign behind the bar demanded. There was a tasteful selection of soul, jazz, and guitar music on the jukebox and half-price drinks during “Angry Hour.” Hank had also been here. At least that’s what he scrawled into the

pavement outside in the early sixties. I couldn’t find the inscription, but could easily imagine the young Bukowski here, drinking beer and sweating, while his first publishers, the couple Jon and Louise Webb, sat in their apartment in the French Quarter working on their literary magazine, “The Outsider,” which had just crowned him “Outsider of the Year.”

A half century later, New Orleans was one of the last cities in the US where you could drink on the streets and smoke in the bars. They simply had bigger fish to fry. New Orleans always stood for poverty, racism, corruption, and crime, but after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, it owed it to its residents that large sections of the city weren’t bulldozed and turned into a huge amusement park. Some sort of Las Vegas of the South, as some businessmen and politicians had suggested.

“How would a Beer Bike even fit in here?” Flo asked, as we left the loud and sticky dive after two drinks.

We walked through the narrow streets that ate through the quarters of this city and invited you to linger, to stroll, to hang out, unlike the streets in other cities in this country

that just existed to lead extra-wide vehicles from point A to point B. A brass band was playing at Washington Square. On the sidewalk across from them sat two young men from Georgia with a guitar case in front of them full of Mason jars of homemade booze. We had met them the night before when they were trying to peddle their liquor to us near the house where we were staying.

“We’re moonshiners,” the smaller one said. “We believe it’s our constitutional right to produce our own booze.” It sounded so romantic—like film noir, speakeasies, and Land of the Free—that we immediately bought a glass off them. Back at our place, we dumped the undrinkable swill in the flowerpots.

The two of them greeted us like old buddies. We sat down next to them. They wanted to know what we thought of their moonshine.

“Great,” said Flo.

“Excellent,” I agreed.

A Polish squatter came by, tossed a ten dollar bill into the guitar case and passed around a jar. She told us about a hip-hop party north of St. Claude Ave. When the jar

was empty and the guys had hawked their daily ration of hooch, we headed off together. A spontaneous gang, united by fate.

In the St. Roch Taverna, tough kids with one-liter pitchers of beer in their fists cheerily bounced to sultry, funky hip-hop. Flo stuck to his beer; I drank vodka. We lost our friends from Georgia and Poland on the dancefloor.

On the way back to The Marigny, we started to argue. Flo absolutely needed to grab a burger and had to wait a half hour in line for it. It was Saturday night; I wanted to experience something. It didn’t even have to be anything special. Wandering around, listening, and watching would’ve done me just fine. Even just sitting around on the curb and breathing, for all I cared. But definitely not wasting away the best hours of the night in the best city in the country in a fast-food joint two days before our flight back home.

“We’re gonna miss our fucking flight because of your fucking burger,” I hissed.

“Don’t get your fucking panties in a bunch,” Flo dished right back at me.

We got some bewildered looks from the people waiting in line. The combination

of the hard German language and English expletives must have sounded pretty brutal to American ears. Or maybe just ridiculous. Then it was Flo's turn, and he ordered his burger. To go. We managed to tolerate each other and walked to Mimi's Bar. It was packed. When I came back from the bathroom, Flo had disappeared.

Ariana struck up a conversation with me at the bar. She wanted to know my sign. She believed me right away when I told her I was a Gemini; after all, so was Don Draper from *Mad Men*, and I was obviously a Don Draper kind of guy. I couldn't tell if this was her way of flirting or if she really believed in that nonsense. But it didn't matter to me. She was amusing; I was drunk. In addition to being hypersensitive and in need of harmony, as a result of this city, this trip, the approaching flight back home, and just everything, I was an easy target and loving it.

"Yeah, I'm the most Don Draper-ish guy ever!" I claimed, knowing that Don Draper would never say something like that. He

barely said anything, but that didn't matter to me, either. We were staging a play here, Ariana was the director and lead role in one, and she played her character with the greatest of grace. Effortlessly and incoherently, she changed between topics like the signs of the zodiac and what the current TV shows meant for literary studies, all the while drinking a heavy-handed cocktail and drumming along on the bar to a Howling Wolf song. She was wearing sneakers with her sequined dress, blonde locks struggling to free themselves from their prison of hair ties and barrettes, and when she laughed, she would first open her eyes wide before tossing her head back ever-so-slightly, touching my shoulder gently with her right hand, and letting out a few deep, rhythmic noises.

One heavy-handed cocktail later, we kissed. Various forms of lightness danced inside me. Various forms of alcohol, too. As Mimi's Bar emptied, she asked me if I'd walk her home.

"Don't ever tell an American girl she's complicated!" Ariana yelled theatrically.

Yet I wasn't claiming that *she* was complicated. It was just that the American dating system seemed a little tricky to me when she told me in front of her door that she'd love to invite me in, but it was a no-go, since we'd have to go on at least one date before we could sleep together; after all she wasn't "that kind of girl," although she said she was really into me.

Nothing was further from my mind than begging for a night together. I just wished Ariana would have made her principles known to me before we walked the twenty blocks to her home in Bywater. On the other hand, it was a really nice stroll, necking the whole way down Royal Street at the crack of dawn. Besides, our little fling was much less about the prospect of a wild night of lovemaking, but more so about the eroticism of the moment, a closeness and affinity that doesn't have to be proven by sex. And so I walked the twenty blocks back at first light with a moist kiss-mark on my cheek and a phone number in my pocket. A number I'd probably never call on account of it being my last day in New Orleans, and I'm *not that kind of boy*, anyway.

The city came across as even more



tantalizing at this hour. The empty streets. The honking freight trains. The air, still cool but noticeably warming. The cracked pavement on Royal Street. Some of the wooden houses were still shuttered and boarded up, tattered and flooded by Katrina. Ah, New Orleans, I thought, you battered beauty, you proud old lady with broken teeth.

At every intersection I stopped for a moment and enjoyed the wind wafting over from the Mississippi. On France Street, Mazant Street, Bartholomew Street, Alvar Street, Pauline Street, Independence Street, Congress Street, Gallier Street, Desire Street. And Desire was a one-way street.