

The Tin Roof Blowdown

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Extract

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My worst dreams have always contained images of brown water and fields of elephant grass and the downdraft of helicopter blades. The dreams are in color but they contain no sound, not of drowned voices in the river or the explosions under the hooches in the village we burned or the thopping of the Jolly Green and the gunships coming low and flat across the canopy, like insects pasted against a molten sun.

In the dream I lie on a poncho liner, dehydrated with blood-expander, my upper thigh and side torn by wounds that could have been put there by wolves. I am convinced I will die unless I receive plasma back at battalion aid. Next to me lies a Negro corporal, wearing only his trousers and boots, his skin coal-black, his torso split open like a gaping red zipper from his armpit down to his groin, the damage to his body so grievous, traumatic, and terrible to see or touch he doesn't understand what has happened to him.

"I got the spins, Loot. How I look?" he asks.

"We've got the million-dollar ticket, Doo-doo. We're Freedom Bird bound," I reply.

His face is criss-crossed with sweat, his mouth as glossy and bright as freshly applied lipstick when he tries to smile.

The Jolly Green loads up and lifts off, with Doo-doo and twelve other wounded on board. I stare upward at its strange rectangular shape, its blades whirling against a lavender sky, and secretly I resent the fact that I and others are left behind to wait on the slick and the chance that serious numbers of NVA are coming through the grass. Then I witness the most bizarre and cruel and seemingly unfair event of my entire life.

As the Jolly Green climbs above the river and turns toward the China Sea, a solitary RPG streaks at a forty-five degree angle from the canopy below and explodes inside the bay. The ship shudders once and cracks in half, its fuel tanks blooming into an enormous orange fireball. The wounded on board are coated with flame as they plummet downward toward the water.

Their lives are taken incrementally -- by flying shrapnel and bullets, by liquid flame on their skin, and by drowning in a river. In effect, they are forced to die three times. A medieval torturer could not have devised a more diabolic fate.

When I wake from the dream, I have to sit for a long time on the side of the bed, my arms clenched across my chest, as though I've caught a chill or the malarial mosquito is once again having its way with my metabolism. I assure myself that the dream is only a dream, that if it were real I would have heard sounds and not simply seen images that are the stuff of history now and are not considered of interest by those who are determined to re-create them.

I also tell myself that the past is a decaying memory and that I do not have to re-live and empower it unless I choose to do so. As a recovering drunk I know I cannot allow myself the luxury of resenting my government for lying to a whole generation of young men and women who believed they were serving a noble cause. Nor can I resent those who treated us as oddities if not pariahs when we returned home.

When I go back to sleep, I once again tell myself I will never again have to witness the wide-scale suffering of innocent civilians, nor the betrayal and abandonment of our countrymen when they need us most.

But that was before Katrina. That was before a storm with greater impact than the bomb blast that struck Hiroshima peeled the face off southern Louisiana. That was before one of the most beautiful cities in the Western Hemisphere was killed three times, and not just by the forces of nature.

CHAPTER TWO

The centerpiece of my story involves a likable man by the name of Jude Le-Blanc. When I first knew him he was a nice-looking kid who threw the Daily Iberian, played baseball at Catholic High, and was a weekly communicant at the same church I attended. Although his mother was poorly educated and worked at menial jobs and his father a casualty of an oil-well blowout, he smiled all the time and was full of self-confidence and never seemed to let misfortune get him down.

I said he smiled. That's not quite right. Jude shined the world on and slipped its worst punches and in a fight knew how to swallow his blood and never let people know he was hurt. He had his Jewish mother's narrow eyes and chestnut hair, and he combed it straight back in a hump, like a character out of a 1930s movie. Somehow he reassured others that the earth was a good place, that the day was a fine one and that good things were about to happen to all of us. But as I watched Jude grow into manhood, I had to re-learn the old lesson that often the best people in our midst are perhaps destined to become sojourners in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Ordinary men and women keep track of time in sequential fashion, by use of clocks and calendars. The residents of Gethsemane do not. Here are a few of their stories, each of them touching, in an improbable way, the life of a New Iberia kid

who grew into a good man and did nothing to invite the events fate would impose upon him.

On Friday, August 26, 2005, Jude LeBlanc wakes in a second-story French Quarter apartment, one that allows him a view of both the courtyard below and the spires of St. Louis Cathedral. It's raining hard now, and he watches the water sluicing down the drainpipes into the beds of hibiscus, banana trees, and hydrangeas below, pooling in the sunken brickwork that is threaded with leaves of wild spearmint.

For just a moment he almost forgets the ball of pain that lives twenty-four hours a day in the base of his spine. The Hispanic woman whose name is Natalia is fixing coffee and warm milk for him in the tiny kitchen off the living room. Her cotton sun dress is dark purple and printed with bone-colored flowers that have pink stamens. She's a thin woman whose strong hands and muscular tautness belie the life she leads. She glances at him over her shoulder, her face full of concern and pity for the man who roaches back his hair as Mickey Rooney did in old American movies she has rented from the video store.

When she hooks, she works with a pimp who drives an independent cab. She and her pimp usually find johns in the early a.m. along Bourbon and take them either to a private parking lot behind a burned-out building off Tchoupitoulas or a desiccated frame house owned by the pimp's brother-in-law on North Villere, thereby avoiding complications with their more organized competitors, most of whom enjoy established relationships with both cops and the vestiges of old Mob.

Natalia brings him his coffee and warm milk and a single powdered beignet from the Café du Monde on a tray. She draws the blinds, turns the electric fan on him, and asks, “You want me to do it for you?”

“No, I don’t need it right now. I’ll wait until later in the day.”

“I don’t think you got no sleep last night.”

He watches the rain water feathering off the roof and makes no reply. When he sits up on the rollaway bed, tentacles of light wrap around his thighs and probe his groin. Natalia sits down beside him, her dress dropping into a loop between her knees. Her hair is black and thick and she washes it often so it always has a sheen in it, and when she takes it down on her shoulders she is truly lovely to look at. She doesn’t smoke or drink, and there’s never a hint of the life she leads in her clothes or on her skin, not unless you include the tracks inside her thighs.

Her face is lost in thought, either about him or herself, he’s not sure. To her, Jude LeBlanc is a mystery, one she never quite understands, but it’s obvious she accepts and loves him for whatever he is or isn’t and imposes no judgment upon him.

“Can I do something else for you?”

“Like what?”

“Sometimes I feel I don’t ever do you no good, that I can’t give you nothing,” she says.

“You fixed breakfast for me,” he says.

She changes her position and kneels behind him on the rollaway, rubbing his shoulders, clutching him briefly to her, resting her cheek against the back of his head.

“They got drugs in Mexico the pharmaceutical companies don’t allow on the market here,” she says.

“You’re my cure,” he replies.

She holds him, and for just a moment he wants to release all the desperation and hopelessness and unrelieved sense of loss that has characterized his life. But how do you explain to others that a false Gleason score on a prostate biopsy can result in so much damage to a person's life? Most people don't even understand the terminology. Plus he does not wish to rob others of their faith in the exactitude of medical science. To do so is, in a way, the same as robbing them of the only belief system they have.

The Gleason scale had indicated that the cancer had not spread outside the prostate. As a consequence the surgeon had elected not to take out the erectile nerve. The positive margins left behind went into the lymph nodes and the seminal vessels.

Natalia flattens herself against him, pressing her loins tightly into his back, and he feels desires stirring in him that he tries not to recognize, perhaps secretly hoping they will pre-empt the problems of conscience that prevent him from ever escaping his own loneliness.

He gets up from the rollaway, trying to hide his erection as he puts on his trousers. His Roman collar has fallen off the nightstand and a tangle of animal hair and floor dirt has stuck to the bottom rim. He goes to the sink and tries to clean it, rubbing the smudge deeper into the collar's whiteness, splashing it with grease from an unwashed pot. He leans heavily on his hands, his sense of futility more than he can hide.

Outside, the velocity of the wind is fanning the rain off the roof in sheets. A flower pot topples from the balcony and bursts on the bricks below. Across the courtyard, a neighbor's ventilated wood shutters rattle like tack hammers on their hinges.

"You going to the Ninth Ward today?" Natalia asks.

“It’s the only place that will have me,” he replies.

“Stay with me,” she says.

“Are you afraid of the storm?” he asks.

“I’m afraid for you. You need to be here, with me. You can’t be without your medicine.”

She calls it his “medicine” to protect his feelings, even though she knows he’s been arrested twice with stolen prescription forms and once with morphine from an actual heist, that in reality he is no different from her or any other junkie in the Quarter. The irony is that a peasant woman from the Third World, one who works as a prostitute to fuel her own addiction, has a spiritual love and respect for him that few in his own society would be willing to grant.

He feels a sudden tenderness for her that makes his loins turn to water. He puts his mouth on hers, then goes out into the rain, a newspaper over his head, and catches one of the few buses still running down to the lower end of the Ninth Ward.