

Moonshine in the Jar

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The place reeked of alcohol. The room contained a dozen tables, and vapors of homemade moonshine had almost replaced oxygen in the air. The bar offered no entertainment, except for an old jukebox playing dixieland tunes in the corner. Patrons were here to drink, but it wasn't the sweet taste of white whiskey they sought. I am not saying that all illegal alcohol was bad, but for sure good liquor wasn't found in this joint. This bootleg establishment was located in a basement, below an honest and legit clothing store. Behind the bar, Frank was wiping glasses. Frank was a tall and poorly shaved white guy. He had small dull eyes, yet he was known for his occasional moments of wisdom. Frank was no saint, but he was a good man. He believed in personal freedom and had started his business after boll weevils had destroyed all his crops.

He was acting calm and jaded that night, even though he was worried about a payment due the day before that he hadn't been able to honor. Missing payments in legal business is not an issue to be taken lightly. However it fails to compare with the risks of missing payments when dealing with the mob. And here in Louisiana, the Mafia was involved in pretty much everything illegal, especially bootlegging. Frank was afraid he would be made an example of. He feared they would go after him – he had no family – or close his speakeasy.

Frank never knew it wasn't the mafia that got him. Soon after the building had caught fire, it had become impossible to use the stairs and get back to floor level. The few drunks down there had panicked almost instantly. Ironically enough they had run for water or some other way out of the building. They had found neither.

I was there that night. Frank would pay me and some friends to play jazz in front of the building. It would cover the noise of the drunks and keep the police away. There was Thomas, who played the trumpet, Lafayette who played the drums and there was me, James. I played the saxophone, and I was good at it... But probably not as good as my young self thought. We were a fine trio. We played nice jazz and people tended to like us.

Thomas was a dumb one. It didn't make much sense when he spoke. That is, when you actually understood the words he had neglected to articulate. He didn't look smart either: his teeth were pretty bad and split and he squinted. In fact, there wasn't much good to say about him. He wasn't even a nice guy – none of us truly was. However, when he'd pick up his trumpet, no matter how pissed he was, this ugly fool was blessed by grace. Watching him play was truly hypnotizing. The music was profound and joyful, and he had such a focused look on his face! Lafayette, on the other hand, was a fine young man in many aspects, but he wasn't exceptional as a musician. He was a decent drummer, he could play a rhythm and follow a tempo, but he didn't have *it*. Considering how popular he was among ladies, he certainly was a handsome boy. Rumor even had it he had been “involved” with quite a few married white women.

To this day, I still don't know if I regret taking that gig. In hindsight, I figure I owe it the best and the worst moments of my life. We were playing in the street, making enough noise to cover up the brawl occurring in the basement now and then. It was a still night, with a full moon. The street wasn't too crowded, except for the usual night revelers. Some young couples would often get down the street and some of them would even stop on their walk and give us a listen. We witnessed what happened to the bar. It wasn't the mafia that burnt the building, it was the Klan!

It was the Klan and I was a young black man wearing a cheap gray suit and playing the saxophone in front of a bootlegger. There were a lot of things that the Klan hated: Catholics, Jews, Italians... But what they hated most were us “niggers” and bootleggers. Needless to say I ran like the wind. Thomas and Lafayette tried to run too, but the former was a bit dimwitted and the latter got slowed down by his drums. I didn't look back. It's not like I could have helped them anyway. And what would have been the point in joining this strange and bitter crop?

Besides, if I had gotten caught with them, who would have remained to mourn them? What witness would have had the guts to act on this infamy? After I had made sure that the men weren't after me, I went straight home and hid. My house was a small shack made of black wood, with only two rooms. The bedroom merely contained an old iron bed that creaked a lot. The living room had

an old and dirty kitchen corner.

I stormed in the kitchen and quickly got hold of a bottle half full of homemade booze. I then threw myself on the bed, which squeaked back as usual. I firmly intended to drink away all the fear and rage that had filled me. I took a long sip from the green bottle and my face twisted in disgust. Genuine forty-rod whiskey!

After a few more sips, my mind felt clearer. On the patio I lit a cigarette, thinking about Thomas, about Lafayette and about those Klan bastards. I couldn't let it go. I had to see. I had to see what they would do to my friends. How weird I had never considered they were my friends before that night! I also had to see who were these self righteous crackers who dared to believe they could kill in the name of the Lord. I had to find out where they lived and do upon them as they had done upon others.

I went to the Bayou, because it was where everybody knew the Klan met. It was a misty place. You could not see ten feet in front of you. Pretty much anything could be lurking around without you noticing. The silence was filled with loud insect noises and you could barely hear your own thoughts. All in all, the oppressive atmosphere was reminiscent of some creepy voodoo ritual. I figure most of our local tales originate from the eery mood of the Bayou,

For that exact reason, few would dare to venture far after nightfall, and indeed the men of the Klan didn't feel like exposing themselves to the violent awakening of some ancient African spirit. After a dozen minutes, somewhere at the very border of the swamp I caught sight of the faint light of a bonfire. My whole body suddenly felt numb as I mentally pictured what I hoped I wouldn't find in this clearing. I hid behind a tree and observed the gloomy ceremony.

The Klansmen were gathered around a tall old tree. Here were my friends, all tied up, a slipknot around their necks. And right next to them, a big guy. In a few pulls, he had gotten them up there. *Pastoral scene of the gallant south!*¹

There was no mercy for us "niggers". We didn't even have the right to a clean and quick neck snapping. I was shaking with rage. It took every bit of wits I had not to yell at those butchers and attack them with my bare hands.

Tears were rolling on my face as I made eye contact with Lafayette. I still don't understand how he saw me from this far, through this mist... Good Lafayette didn't look so handsome anymore. His eyes were bulging from his skull and his mouth had taken a crooked shape, as he was probably trying to scream with rage and breathe air at the same time. His legs were kicking in the air for a floor that was a few feet below. My buddy's last dance was a *Danse Macabre*.

For his last seconds, he looked at me as solemnly as he was capable of. He wanted vengeance, and I would be the avenger. I looked back and nodded: we had an agreement. As he realized his last wish had been understood, he let go. I was staring at a corpse.

After they had shared a few laughs and I had puked out everything that was in my stomach, the klansmen went their separate ways. The big one that had handled the rope left on his own. I followed him.

He had a big house outside town. It was probably a hundred years old. It was one of those nineteenth-century settlements. Slaves had undoubtedly worked and died there – they might even have belonged to his grandfather, for all I knew.

Blinded with hatred, I picked up a shovel that was lying around. Things then happened so quickly I felt merely like a witness of the scene. I got behind him in no time. At the last moment, he heard me and was about to turn around when he got hit in the back. He fell on his face, but he wasn't unconscious. He rolled on his back and screamed his head off as the weapon was aimed at his neck.

In a way, I gave him a merciful death. Thomas and Lafayette weren't so lucky and had to endure long minutes of agony before life evaded their bodies. By the time I was done with him, a woman had opened the main door. She started screaming while running towards me.

1 Strange fruit – poem written by Abel Meeropol and sang by Billie Holiday

I stood still. I was stunned and amazed by what I had just done. The sound of a Colt fired in my direction snapped me out of my daydreaming. She was shooting at me. I wasn't sure I had the time to run to the treeline before she would manage to aim accurately.

She was no innocent. She wasn't there in the clearing, but she was definitely in the know. She couldn't have been ignorant of her husband's actions. And his hood surely had been crafted by someone, hadn't it?

I decided to smite her too – not that I had much choice. I ran to her, hoping the bullets wouldn't hit their target in time. One did, but in the heat of the moment, it didn't slow me down. Actually, it gave me the rage I needed to slaughter a woman.

First I struck her hand, getting rid of that gun. She fell on her knees and muttered something that sounded like “maybe...” in a muffled cry. Then, I swung my weapon one last time. Again, a clean cut. I was getting the hand at it.

I put down the shovel and walked around, feeling dizzy. I didn't regret what I had done. But I had never been an executioner before, and there were a lot of new emotions for me to process.

I felt powerful. I had stood up to the man, and I had avenged my friends. It had been so easy. Why on earth did we let them slaughter our brothers like animals when we could just fight back ?

Since I obviously couldn't go home after that night, I pictured myself as a crusader against the Klan. I would live on the road and take out local cells. Bring new companions into the fight here and there. I could use the bayou as a lair and there would be no tracking me!

I also felt sick and wicked. I had taken two lives, I had beaten up a grieving widow with a shovel and I still felt proud and righteous. What had gotten into me? What would my mother say? Yet again, what would these people have done to my mother, had they gotten their hands on her? All in all, I felt confused.

And of course, I felt like my left arm was catching on fire. I looked at it. It was covered with blood. A bullet had hit me right above the elbow. Luckily, the wound wasn't too bad. I needed to stop the bleeding quickly, but I could probably get it fixed after that.

I picked up the Colt and staggered my way to the house. I was swearing loudly in an attempt not to faint. I needed something to perform first aid on myself.

The rooms were richly decorated, with a lot of old and classy furniture. The lounge was ridiculously vast and contained several fireplaces. Most of them seemed not to have been used for decades. I went up the stairs in search of clothes to tie around my arm.

I was on the verge of passing out when I finally found what I needed. I grabbed the first piece of fabric I could get my hands on and made a tourniquet. I then dropped in an armchair and dozed off.

I woke up at twilight in utter confusion. The first things I noticed were the sun rising, a rooster calling and a baby crying. I was sitting in an old comfortable armchair. A first glance through the window showed me I was on the second floor of a huge house, with an immense garden. I was in a small yellow room. It contained several old wardrobes. Most of them were empty. In one of them I found a few baby rompers, similar to the one I had tied around my arm.

I was feeling weak and my arm was so painful I couldn't move it. I was covered in blood and I wasn't sure it was all mine. How odd. And I also had a terrible headache. What a nice hangover! And those baby cries persisted. They resonated in my head, making it all worse. That's when it hit me. As I spotted the source of the nuisance, a crib, I remembered what had happened. The ceremony, the hatred, the murders... The vengeance! But the baby didn't care about how righteous my vengeance was. It didn't care that its parents were cold-hearted monsters. It was hungry.

I bent over the crib and bumped my head on some fancy mobile hanging from the ceiling. The migraine mistook it for a signal and I could have sworn my head exploded.

Before my eyes lied a small creature. It was almost bald and quite chubby. Its pink skin looked almost elastic. Its toothless mouth was wide open. It was producing a high-pitched noise at an uncanny volume. How could such a tiny thing yell so loud? Its arms and legs were randomly waving in the air. It seemed furious. I stared at the thing for some time but it didn't react to my presence. After a while, I decided I couldn't take this ruckus any longer. It had to stop. I picked up the child and went downstairs.

The wooden stairs creaked a lot. It made the headache almost worse than the pain in my left arm. Since the house was so old, it didn't have an electric system, but the owners did use iceboxes to keep their food refrigerated and I could find a few formula milk bottles. After I had met the baby's needs, I filled my own stomach. Since the little creature I was carrying had stopped its crying, I was able to think clearly for the first time that day.

What had I done? What had I gotten myself into? I was holding a child I had just orphaned. I couldn't leave it there. I had no idea how much time would pass before someone noticed the deaths of its parents. I couldn't bring it to town and give it to a nurse. It would have been tantamount to giving myself to the Klan. I couldn't even imagine what they would have done to me. Yet, as much as I hated white people, I couldn't bring myself to hate this little girl. She was innocent – pure and simple. She didn't know what “white”, “black”, “Klan” and “lynching” meant. But I was still feeling vengeful. And what better way to punish her parents than to raise their child as my own?

I needed to hide, I needed to see a doctor and I had to take that baby with me. So I would go where people go when they want to disappear and where the Klan wouldn't chase me. I didn't know exactly where this place was – the Bayou was vast – but I packed some food and baby stuff. Enough to last for the day.

This sure was a bold and very stupid decision. But I was blinded with fear and pain. I walked back to the clearing. The crows had begun their cleaning duty and the bodies had started to rot. The stench woke up both the baby and my migraine. I told her about white, black, Klan and lynching. I explained those words to her, and I promised I would protect her from the white man.

I collected my memories of tales about fugitives and criminals hiding here and there in the swamps. They led me further south and east. After a while, I stopped to feed the girl and changed her diapers. As I was throwing away the dirty package, I heard a faint sound somewhere around. I took the baby in my arms and lulled it so it would stop crying. No doubt, I could distinctly hear a man singing. There was no telling whether this man would be a savior or a threat. I decided to keep my presence concealed and try to get close to him. I needed to get a look at him before I would show myself and my precious burden.

I crouched and took a few steps toward the source of the noise. I ran to a bush for shelter. This was when I caught sight of him. He was only a few feet away from me. He was an old small white guy taking a leak and singing a classic Irish song. He had a deep broken voice, as you would expect from a man his age. His hair was gray and he wore a dirty overall. A glass bottle was sticking

out of his pocket. A little bit further, there was a small wooden building, possibly his house. It was bigger than mine, which was odd for some hidden shack in the bayou. Since he was unarmed and seemingly weaker than me, I decided to step out.

He startled as he saw me. He jumped back and wet his boots. He looked at me furiously and quickly closed his zipper in an attempt to regain some dignity. I spoke first, trying to calm him down. In return, he showed me the fist and shouted more insults than I would be able to remember. He stopped when he heard the baby cry, and crossed himself.

“What are you doing here with that baby?” He yelled. “It sure ain’t yours! Where did you steal it from?” His accent was so strong I could barely understand what he was saying. “That’s none of your business you drunk fool!” I yelled back: “Now if you really care about that baby, maybe you’ll let us in before it gets cold!”. We kept on ranting at each other for a while before we decided it best to take this conversation inside. We set up a nice crib for the baby with some clothes I had in my bag.

The house was in fact a moonshine still and the old guy turned out to be the producer of the nastiest whiskey that quenched New Orleans endless thirst. The building solely consisted of one big room that he used both for sleeping and producing his hellish beverage. It was filled with moisture. How the planks maintained the whole structure up was beyond understanding. We shared a cup of coffee – Irish, of course. Our staunch hatred for the Klan sealed a friendship that would last for decades. I felt safe to tell him my story.

This is how I met Rian. His simple views on life led him to accept the strange duet I formed with the baby in his home. Most of our conversations were reminiscent of the first we had had. Despite the endless gratitude I held toward him, it seemed we couldn’t speak without cursing at each other. I would call him a drunken fool and he would call me a worthless parasite. It was simply our way of sharing our appreciation for each other.

We named the girl Janet and raised her together in the distillery for the following fifteen years. She turned out to be blind, as we found out one day. It explained her inability to play ball and the difficulty she had grasping colors and shapes. We figured it would be best to hide from her the story of her origins and we had her believe she was my daughter.

For so many years, she knew nothing but the still and the bayou. The Klan was a distant monster we would use to scare her during bedtime stories. But her blindness didn’t stop her from becoming a smart and playful girl. She would ask a lot of questions about the “outside world”, this dangerous place ruled by the Klan that she was to avoid under all circumstances. Of course, after a few years, prohibition stopped and the dreaded sect virtually ceased to exist. But in her world, it remained a terrible threat and a reason to limit her explorations.

Our business barely suffered from the legalization of alcohol. Moonshine remained tax free while legal whiskey was an expense few bartenders could afford. The mob was our link to the city and kept selling our production long after President Roosevelt had abrogated the Volstead Act.

Rian was a drunk but he wasn’t a mean one. He was actually the sweetest uncle this girl could have wished for. He taught her a few traditional Irish songs and dances, which she would perform with absolute grace... provided there wasn’t a chair or something standing in her way.

After a few years, I purchased an old tenor saxophone from some musician that had retired in the bayou after some weird scandal involving a mobster’s wife. He swore he had done nothing wrong and it was but a misunderstanding. When you live where people go underground, you learn not to ask too many questions.

I started the saxophone again and decided to teach Janet how to play. She was blind but she sure wasn’t deaf. I learned when listening to her that I had no actual talent for music. I taught her the few old standards I could remember. She mastered them quickly and began inventing her own tunes. It was a mix of Irish Folk and New Orleans Jazz. An odd combination only *she* could play right.

The old guy was the softie and I was the strict parent. Not that I did not act sweet from time

to time, but I never let her forget how tough the world was. Every time she would ask to venture further from the house, I reminded her of the Klan. How it had slaughtered her mother when she was just a baby. How there were barbarians with nothing but hatred in their minds. How they would leave her no chance should they find her.

As she was growing older, we would fight more and more. Mostly about how I couldn't keep her safe in the bayou for her whole life, about how she needed to see the world and find out for herself. About how we always told her the same stories – we had run out of original material long before.

For the night of her sixteenth birthday, we threw a little party. We invited quality individuals from our peculiar neighborhood. Marginals like us, hiding from something. Either their past or society. We stayed up late and put together a small band with the few musicians among our friends. Needless to say none of them could play like her. She even had her first drop of alcohol. We gave her Rian's latest whiskey to make sure she wouldn't try and drink another glass before her late twenties. Those of us who weren't playing danced like mad. An insane jig with an undertone of tribal Africa.

When I woke up next morning, Rian was already working in the distillery, as always. But when I called Janet for breakfast, she didn't protest. I went to her bed to check her out. It was empty.

The place reeked of alcohol. The room contained a dozen tables, and vapors of homemade moonshine had almost replaced oxygen in the air. The bar offered no entertainment, except for myself and my saxophone. I couldn't understand why people would spend their nights in a bar like this. From my experience, whiskey was among the worst things that could be tasted. But I lived off their strange love for that disgusting beverage – hellish, as dad would have said.

Duke, the bartender, had hired me to play there every night. He sounded like a nice person. He had a deep voice that would sometime break and turn into a high pitched yell at his patrons. He smelled of whiskey and cigarette, just like his joint.

In between songs, I could hear him wash glasses among the usual ruckus. Always hard at work. I figure he liked my mix of Irish songs and Dixieland tunes. At least that was what he had told me. The clients liked me too. I had arrived two weeks earlier, but in their drunken stuttering voice they would call me by my name and ask for some songs from my repertoire. They had adopted me. I named my songs for them, which I hadn't done before, since they were simply songs. When I thought about one of them, I would just hear the music, and when I talked about one in particular, I just called it “the one that goes dum dum dadada!” But it was simpler for everyone if the tunes were named, Duke told me.

I had just finished playing *Moonshine in the Jar* when I sensed a fine mixture of sweat and white whiskey getting closer. That was Robert. Robert was one of the regulars. He would come to me at least once a night – twice when he had forgotten he had already been once – and confess his love for me. He had the fluet voice of a shy thirty-year old guy. As far as I knew, he worked in a factory downtown, and had no hobby apart this place. At first, I didn't know how to react. I would tell him how sweet he was, but that I was merely a girl, too young for that sort of things and that I was only here to play the sax. Duke didn't like his behavior and most nights he was the one that ended our conversation with a rant.

I rented a room above the bar. My wage was enough to cover for housing and food. Every two days I would go to the market place. I loved it. It was so full of fragrances! Fruit and vegetables I had never tasted before. Of course, usually I could only afford corn, the most current commodity at that time. Corn was our staple diet in the bayou too, so I knew several ways to cook it.

On every occasion, I would hang about the whole place for hours. I would just take in as many new aromas as I could. Peaches here, zucchinis there...

One day, as I was pacing up and down the rows, I bumped into someone. It had happened a lot before, since sound was my only way to locate obstructions in crowded places. I dropped my groceries and apologized eagerly. A slow, handsome voice answered me. He was a little bit older than me. He wore some tasteful perfume which gave him a spicy tang.

When he realized I was blind, he offered to buy me a cup of coffee. We sat in front of a café and chatted for a while. His name was Arthur. He was a medical student, wandering around to get some rest between classes. I decided not to mention the Klan and told him that I had grown up in a small farm outside town. I had left home a few weeks earlier to come and live there. I wanted to step out of rural life for some time and get to know the city. I worked in a small bar, playing the sax. He offered to take me around the French Quarter for a stroll.

We followed Chartres Street up until Jackson Square. Arthur then described the equestrian statue of President Jackson. There were no horses in the bayou so I had never touched one. But I needed to cover my lie so I kept quiet and acted like I knew what he was talking about.

From where we were standing I could hear the Mississippi flowing pass. At least I knew what to do if I ever got lost around this place. It also reminded me quite a bit of the ambient noise of water surrounding the distillery.

All around the square, musicians were playing. From times to times, I would recognize one of the standards Thomas had taught me. But most of the music they played was entirely new to me.

*Blue moon you saw me standing alone
Without a dream in my heart*

Without a love of my own²

We then agreed to have a Beignet at the Café du Monde. As the custom has it, I blew the powdered sugar off mine and made a wish to the blue moon.

Arthur took me to several other places. We entered St-Louis Cathedral and the Cabildo, where the Louisiana State Museum lies. I was having so much fun!

On our way back to the marketplace, he confessed he was confused by the way I spoke. “Just like a black girl”, he said. I laughed. “What do you mean?” I asked. “How do you figure I'm white?” He hesitated. “What are you talking about? You're white as can be! The fact that you play black music doesn't change any of that.”

I said nothing, trying not to betray my inner turmoil. We kept on walking and I acted as if nothing had happened. Thinking about it, I had never been subject to the furious racist insults dad accused white people of spouting at all times. I had even been allowed to play in a white people bar.

I kept quiet for the few minutes that it took us to get back. He didn't ask about it but he could undoubtedly feel that something was wrong. We parted on the place and promised to see each other again.

As soon as I got into my room, I fell on my bed. Thoughts were racing through my head at an insane speed. Was I white or black? What about dad? Was he even my father to begin with? Why hadn't Rian told me anything about it? Why hadn't anyone told me anything about it?

After a while I dropped asleep. Disturbed as I was, no wonder I had one of the worst nightmares in my life. I was standing on a soft ground, quite like that of the bayou. My surroundings were direly quiet. I took a few silent steps. Suddenly, out of nowhere rang one of those country tunes the jukebox would play in the bar from time to time:

*Wherever you wander on land or on sea
If you really love me be honest with me³*

I had never paid much attention to it. It was “white people music.” *Moonshine in the Jar* followed. But as the song went along, it was losing its bluesy notes. When the time came for the last verse, it was merely the old Irish song Rian had taught me. It was *Whiskey in the Jar* I was hearing.

I woke up in the morning with a feeling of loss. I couldn't find the strength to leave my house, and stayed home until the beginning of my gig.

I went down that night, as I used to do, and started playing. But it wasn't right. I wasn't able to play anymore. It sounded bland. The Irish part was okay, but the shuffle rhythm wasn't there. The magic was gone. I tried another few of my tunes with the same result.

Playing a shuffle rhythm was like walking a tight rope, all about losing balance and getting it back at the last moment. And I kept falling.

Of course, the regulars noticed the change. At first, all I could perceive was some concerned muttering among the usual noise. After a few songs, it turned into discontented growls that took over the rest of the conversations. It wasn't long before someone put a dime in the jukebox, forcing me to get off stage.

I took the chance and left the bar. On my way out, I could feel Duke's annoyed and confused stare burn on my back. I walked down the street, toward the marketplace.

I only slowed down my pace only I had put enough distance between the bar and me. I wasn't in a hurry since I was going nowhere in particular.

“Janet?” It was Arthur's voice. It was completely inconsistent with the cold mood of the night. It sounded warm and comforting. I went to him and broke down in tears. “What's going on?” he asked.

2 Blue Moon – Richard Rogers and Lorentz Hart

3 Be honest with me – Jim Reeves

I looked for Janet everywhere in the Bayou. After a few days, I decided to face my fears: she had left for the city. For the first time in fifteen years I went back to New Orleans. It had changed a bit. The Klan had vanished, but I could still feel their rampant corruption lurking around. Black people were still discriminated against. Those white bastards just didn't have the guts to act on their hatred anymore. But deep inside they only wished to hang or burn me.

It took me a bit more than a week to find her. I heard there was a bar where a blind girl would play a mix of Jazz and Irish songs. I went there one night. Of course, it was white people only. I found a hiding place in front of the bar and waited there for a while.

A lot of old drunks entered the place. To think these scumbags were listening to her. Looking at her! I had to bring her back home. The whole city was wicked and hostile. It was no place for my girl.

An hour or so after I had gotten there, I saw her. She was leaving the bar in a hell of a hurry. Stunned at first, I managed to run after her. Unfortunately, some golden boy showed up before I could reach her. She then burst into tears.

They knew each other. He was gently comforting her while she was ranting about not being able to play anymore and being lost. I slowed down a bit and calmly walked past them. What I heard increased my sense of foreboding: "You remember, yesterday, when you said I talked like a black girl?"

However curious I was, I couldn't stop there and listen to their whole conversation. I kept going and turned into the first dark alley I could find. From there, I watched them. They left after a while and I followed them. We passed through a little square. It smelled like hell. It was covered with rotting fruits.

As I got closer to them, I was able to spy on their conversation again: "Is he even my real dad?" I went mad: "Hell yeah I'm your dad! Who do you think gave you that sax? Who lulled you to sleep when you were scared of the Baron Samedi⁴? Who wiped your tiny little white ass after your parents died?"

James? James here? I was still recollecting my thoughts when I heard a gun being armed. I jumped in front of Arthur: "Don't!" I faced James and let it all out: "The only reason I was afraid of the Baron is because you told me about him in the first place! You kidnapped me and kept me in the Bayou for sixteen years! You lied to me about every single thing! Is there anything you said that was true? Does the Klan even exist or is another of your boogeymen stories? I don't want to talk to you. I don't even want to hear your excuses. Just go!"

"That's enough Janet! You went away, you saw the city. You got what you wanted. We're going home, now! New Orleans is a place of sin and filth. There's nothing good here. Yeah, I lied to you, but I was protecting you from all this. Weren't you happier in the distillery? Now, let go of that cracker, we're leaving."

He took a few steps toward us. "You stop right there! Can't you see the lady doesn't want to go with you?" Arthur yelled.

"Are you gonna let that tough guy threaten your father like that? I will smack you both and drag you home myself if I have to."

"It's not my home anymore! It never was, was it? Take your goddamn sax and get back to your swamp. I never want to hear your voice again."

And so he left. We remained there, silent.

"You didn't have to pull a gun."

"Don't you worry. You can finally have a life of your own. You're not like that old fool, you don't belong in his hell. Having been raised by that nigger doesn't make you one of his kind."

4 Haitian spirit of death

I couldn't believe what he had just said.

"You know, you probably won't have to hear from him again. I figure he's just going to crawl back in that bayou and drink himself to death."

One of *his* kind? What was that supposed to mean? Was there really such disdain in his voice?

"His kind? He still raised me. That's a part of me you're talking about!"

"It doesn't have to be anymore, you got rid of that stain. Don't hold on to him."

"He's my dad, for Christ's sake! I need to talk to him."

I tried to leave but he held my arm: "What are you doing? You're not going back to him, are you?"

"*Feis ort!*⁵ I'm not one of your hateful lot!"

I left Arthur there, without turning back.

I stopped in the middle of the bayou. What was I doing? I couldn't go back without Janet. There was no point. I sat under an old tree and tried to play *Moonshine in the Jar*. It sounded terrible. No wonder she had left me. I went back to the standards. These I could manage. It was still mediocre but I had the balance right. I didn't deserve to call myself her father. The key in the balanced rhythm is to trip but never fall. Remain focused but keep loose. I was never going to see her again. I took a sip of whiskey. Disgusting. To think Rian actually sells this poison. Goddamn criminal! Maybe it's for the best she left.

I was getting back on my feet when I felt a sharp pain tearing my ankle. A snake. And not the good kind. From what I knew, I had about an hour. I ran toward the distillery. Rian always kept some medical stuff. We knew how to deal with bites. It wasn't the first time it had happened, and it sure as hell wouldn't be the last.

But I tripped. And this time, I fell. The water was cold. So cold it burnt.

I was headed home. I had no time to lose. I had to see dad and Rian. I rushed into the bayou, thinking about what I would tell them. Of course, I was still mad. But I loved them. I walked on something and heard a small creak. It was an old tenor saxophone. One of its keys was broken. "Dad?" Nothing. Was he around? "Dad! I'm sorry! Answer me, please!" I went looking for him. As he wouldn't reply to my calls, I decided to play. Maybe he would sing to it, like he used to.

The shuffle rhythm wasn't a problem anymore. I blew in the saxophone with passion, hoping to hear back the lyrics of his favorite song.

But I could only hear the song echoing in my head. It was James' voice. I was fourteen, we were at the distillery. I had just adapted an old Irish tune that Rian had taught me. I had changed the words so they would fit with the scenery. James loved the idea, he sang and danced and begged me to keep playing all night long. We made so much noise we woke up the old man. He yelled at us, called us "goddamn parasites". He had to work the next morning and we were killing him with our pagan nonsense. His mood turned in the blink of an eye when he saw us laughing. He joined us and we only went to bed at dawn.

I remembered one other night. I was even younger, about six or something. Dad had told me the story of Marie Laveau⁶ and I was afraid to go to sleep. He had ended up so pissed by my cries he had screamed that voodoo was just a pile of bullshit and that if a stupid ghost was coming for me he would kick its transparent ass back to the pit. I didn't sleep that night. I was laughing too hard.

I remembered these nights. It wasn't a lie or a fraud. It had happened, and it was my happiest memory. No doubt, James was my father.

⁵ Irish for "fuck off"

⁶ Famous Voodoo priestess from the nineteenth century

And I sang our song.

*As I was going over the far famed stinky bayou
I met with old Petterson and his money he was counting.
I first produced my rifle, and then produced my sharp knife.
Said give me all your money, for I am a voodoo witchey*

*musha ring yippee yay yippee yo
whack for the daddy 'ol
whack for the daddy 'ol
there's moonshine in the jar⁷*

⁷ Adapted from Whiskey in the Jar, a traditional Irish song