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# Heading toward legba

Jeremiah Donald Bodner  
*University of Iowa*

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HEADING TOWARD LEGBA

by

Jeremiah Donald Bodner

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Fine Arts degree in English (Nonfiction Writing)  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

July 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor David Hamilton

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Jeremiah Donald Bodner

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in English (Nonfiction Writing) at the July 2012 graduation.

Thesis Committee: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Russell Scott Valentino

To anyone who bothers.

If this be true, I know not.

Herodotus, *Histories*

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## CHAPTER I

## I WAS TOLD:

Heaven is not up in the clouds like we imagine, and God is a hermaphrodite.

There is a heaven, yes, but it is an ocean at the center of the earth. If you are in a Voodoo temple, if you see the altars, look for glasses of water. They are meant to represent the ocean, heaven. A glass of water in Voodoo is like a telephone—I don't know how else to describe it. When you want to contact the spirits—when you need help—you must communicate through water, because that is where they are. In this ocean, comprising two of the three levels of spirituality: there are spirits and there are deceased ancestors who become de facto spirits.

This is what Voodoo means; it means spirits.

Floating, indefinitely, in the celestial tide at the core of our planet: this is where they stay. Occasionally, they may be called upon in a sort of reincarnation—but, really, there is no reincarnation. And there is no heaven either; and there is also no hell; or there is only heaven. When you die, your soul simply goes.

There is a God, yes, but this hermaphroditic God is not here. The third level of spirituality, this God is detached, uninvolved in day-to-day life. Still the all-powerful creator of the universe and all of that, but just not here. Not anymore. No, this God has left us. The reason for this is, of course, vegetables. And it's vegetables that lead to a Voodoo genesis story, one that helps explain the relationship between God and the spirits and us.

It is one of many because, remember, Voodoo is not a written practice.



No definitive scripture exists.

Some have written texts and claim they are the decisive word, but you can find too many of those—there are too many. A mistake is often made that Voodoo is illiterate, but Voodoo is not illiterate. Voodoo is preliterate. It has been around since before the written religions.

It defies writing.

So, let me tell you about the vegetables. It is the story I pick and it is the story I like. It goes like this:

A long time ago God used to live here on earth, interacting with people one-on-one. If you had a problem, you didn't have to pray; you simply went down the road and saw God, who lived with a servant, Legba. God, though, also had a problem. Every night someone was sneaking into God's garden and stealing vegetables. As almighty as God might be, the one responsible for picking and uprooting the crops lingered as a mystery for many days and for many nights. In response, as more and more vegetables were taken, a plan was developed. God would make it rain overnight, so the thief would have muddy sandals and leave muddy footprints to be found the following day.

When that next day came, after the night of rain, God woke to find not only a few vegetables but every vegetable had been lifted from the garden. Seeing the plucked stems and holes in the wet and darkened soil sent God into a rage. Screaming, yelling, throwing things. Goddamn this, goddamn that.

In the midst of this indignation, Legba, the servant, who is known to be a practical joker, emerged in front of God, grinning and holding a pair of muddied

sandals. As God moved closer to Legba, Legba's grin grew wider; the sandals, in fact, were God's own. Humbly, Legba suggested that God must have gotten hungry in the middle of the night and sleepwalked into the garden but does not remember having done so. What else could explain the situation?

Knowing Legba to be a trickster, however, God immediately recognized what actually happened. It was Legba who had taken the sandals and then wiped out the garden, just to have a laugh at God's expense. The trouble with this is that God saw no humor in the act and became further enraged.

That's it, God said. I've had it. I'm gone. I'm moving to heaven.

Leaving the skin of the earth and humans behind, Legba attempted to follow God to the divine waters. Still angry, however, God refused to allow Legba into the ocean.

You don't understand, God said to Legba. I'm done. I'm not doing God work anymore. I quit.

Before entering the heart of the world God then told Legba, and all the other spirits, it would be their task to deal with the spirituality of humans. In order to facilitate this, God made Legba the gatekeeper between the spiritual world and the mortal world, between the spirits and mankind, God and everything else, life and death. You would have to go through Legba to get to any other spirit. And it would be through the spirits, the Voodoo, that mankind would discover its faith and faith.

CHAPTER II  
IN A COURTYARD, WAITING

It was June 23rd, it was St. John's Eve, and it was Day 65.

I was sitting in the courtyard behind the Voodoo Spiritual Temple off Rampart Street, in New Orleans, not far from Congo Square. It was night, or it was becoming night. The glow of distant streetlights filtered through the leaves of tall trees and tangled limbs, rubbing against patches of cracked brick. No more than forty or fifty white folding chairs, two or three rows deep, filled by no more than twenty people, made a crescent in the open space. We faced an altar constructed of two card tables draped with large pieces of velvety, dark purple cloth.

It was Day 65, because 65 days before there was an explosion that caused a fire. A bubble of pressurized methane gas surged through a conduit unlike it should have, we were told, followed by a spark that caused a flame, then another, and the conflagration began glowing on a Tuesday night. According to news reports, it occurred "at approximately 9:45 p.m." or "just after 10 at night" and "it came to a head at 9:56 p.m." One witness remembered hearing a "percussion" and seeing a "slight flash of green." Another said, "It looked like you was looking at the face of death. You could hear it, see it, smell it."

The fire grew.

It was "massive," according to one report, "major" according to another. It was "catastrophic," "a tragedy," "an aberration," and "the worst thing that could have happened." We were told, "A column of boiling black smoke rose hundreds of

feet over the Gulf of Mexico as fireboats shot streams of water at the blaze.” And so Tuesday night came and went, and so did Wednesday, and they shot the streams of water at the rising flames.

There were 126 people near the explosion that caused the fire, and 115 were “accounted-for,” they said. Ninety-four had “no major injuries,” ninety-nine “were ferried back to shore,” and ninety-six “were out of harms way.” Seventeen were injured, according to some sources, and sixteen were injured, according to others, and “there’s no telling how long it’ll take them to get over all the emotional damage.” Three were considered “critically injured,” and another six were “in the hospital, and all our thoughts and prayers go out to those men and their families.”

Eleven people went missing.

There was an explosion that caused a fire because approximately 40 miles off the coast of Louisiana there was a semi-submersible drilling unit. An oilrig. This oilrig was 396 feet long and 256 feet wide and sat in the Gulf of Mexico’s Mississippi Canyon, on the Macondo Project, named after the doomed city in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

“No one could know how miserably appropriate the choice would be,” said one writer. “The final twist of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is relevant, too. A text that had been impenetrable is finally deciphered at the end of the novel. Written one hundred years earlier, it foretold the events that destroyed Macondo. When it comes to drilling for oil [. . .] the texts that predict our future are accumulating.”

It was texts that told us this was an oilrig “operated by people and by a company that cares for its employees and cares for the environment.”

An oilrig that “had shown the need for some modifications and improvement but was ultimately more than capable of getting the job done in as safe a way as possible.”

One whose crew “may have been overworked and short of key personnel,” with at least “20 crewmen [that] had worked a 24-hour shift six days before the explosion,” opposed to the usual 12-hour day; and “only 18 people at work on the second shift,” that Tuesday night, “with zero engineers, electricians, mechanics or subsea supervisors.”

It was suggested that this was not a good thing.

It was an oilrig that “suffered a series of spills, fires—even a collision—because of equipment failure, human error and bad weather,” throughout the nearly ten years it sat in the Gulf. This included more than 11,000 gallons of oil spilt in 2002 when a hose failed, approximately 40,000 gallons in 2003 after floating off course among choppy seas and “poor judgment by the captain,” and another 3,108 gallons later that year because of an unspecified equipment failure.

It was one that received six enforcement warnings, one civil penalty, an official notice of violation by the United States Coast Guard. There were eighteen separate occasions when the rig was said to have been an “acknowledged pollution source,” in addition to the list of more than twenty “reported anomalies” in the 18 hours before the explosion. These ranged from low-pressure readings and “larger-than-expected returns of mud,” a drilling fluid used as a counterweight and lubricant, as well as the three “indications of trouble aboard the doomed drill rig” within an hour before any black smoke began to boil.

And it was also one whose alarm system had been “inhibited” for at least a year before that Tuesday night. Meaning, even if its sensors had detected toxic and combustible gases or fires, a visual or audible warning would not have been triggered and therefore would not have been seen or heard by any of the 126 men on board, including those eleven who went missing.

Why?

“They did not want people woke up at 3 o’clock in the morning due to false alarms,” we were told.

Yet they also said, “Any prior incidents were investigated,” and “any speculation that they were related to [this] incident is speculation.”

On a Tuesday night, 65 days before I sat in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple’s courtyard, there was an explosion that caused a fire. It continued to burn till Thursday. Till there were no more explosions and all the fire had receded, and the doomed oilrig sank down into the salty Gulf.

In the days immediately following, we were told no one knew whether oil was leaking from the rig, but that it “certainly has the potential to be a major spill.”

Then, by Day 3, “oil did not appear to be leaking out of the wellhead but that remote vehicles would survey the scene,” and “environmental damages will be minimal.”

So the scene was surveyed, and more than 72 hours after the explosion, by Day 4, we were told that while oil had not appeared to be leaking it was in fact leaking. Indeed, oil was leaking in two places, they said, “on the riser pipe extending

from the well's blowout preventer"—a five-story tall structure more than 5,000 feet below the Gulf's surface—"containing devices to enable rig operators to maintain control" of the rig's well that was nearly 14,000 feet further down into the murky water. A structure with many critical roles, yet "one of [the] most crucial roles is to stave off a disaster in a blowout—the sudden release of uncontrolled oil from the well." On this particular rig, it was a structure that had not been inspected for more than five years before the explosion that caused the fire—and it was suggested that this was not good a thing either. So the sudden release of uncontrolled, uncontained oil occurred at two places, they said—two places that were actually found within 36 hours of the explosion—leaking an approximated 1,000 barrels of oil a day.

By Day 8 a third leak was found, and those 1,000 barrels, or 42,000 gallons, of oil flowing into the Gulf might be more like 5,000 barrels, or 210,000 gallons, approximately.

By Day 13, "more recent estimates suggest the actual volume of oil could be far higher." "It was impossible so far to know," they said, "how much oil will eventually leak." To combat this predicament, an "armada of ships and aircrafts [were] mobilized to contain the oil slick" that was now 100 miles wide.

By Day 19, "estimates are growing but we still don't know," and "workers finish a containment chamber we hope will collect the escaping oil."

By Day 24, "You can't say with precision, but you can see there's definitely more coming out of that pipe than people thought," and "it's definitely not 5,000" barrels a day; and, by Day 25, it was estimated that approximately 70,000 barrels, or 2.94 million gallons, of oil were leaking from sunrise to sunset.

By Day 31, speculation as to how this could have happened was termed as “reckless behavior” and “likely represented gross negligence or willful misconduct.” After which, by Day 38, “A panel of government experts estimated the well is spewing oil at a rate of 12,000 to 19,000 barrels (504,000 to 798,000 gallons) a day.” However, by Day 44, “scientists double their estimates of the amount of oil gushing from the well,” approximating between 20,000 and 40,000 barrels, or 840,000 and 1.7 million gallons per day, despite a “containment cap.”

By Day 51, we were told, “officials now estimate the ruptured well in the Gulf of Mexico is spewing between 35,000 and 60,000 barrels (1.5 million gallons to 2.5 million gallons) per day,” and, so we would know, “that’s significantly more than the first estimate of 1,000 barrels.”

By Day 62, as much as 100,000 barrels of oil, or 4.3 million gallons, could be leaking each day, floating through the ocean like variegated ribbons of melted chocolate, a “higher worst-case scenario than previously reported.”

And by Day 65, in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple’s courtyard, a small fire burned in a metal basin between the crescent of chairs and the velvety altar. Its smoke knit in the air like well-woven fabric. Sitting there, no one mentioned any of the details. No one mentioned any of it. Not the fire or the explosion or the 126 people, or the eleven. Not the “containment activities” that would “capture approximately 33.6 million gallons of oil,” and not the other approximately 172.2 million gallons, over the eventual 68,000 square miles of Gulf water—with approximately 45 species of mammals, 445 species of fish, 130 species of birds, and more than 1,000 species of invertebrates—that had yet to be “contained.” Nor did



we mention the estimated 8,000 square miles of seabed researchers would eventually label as a “dead zone”; a “dead zone” being exactly as it sounds.

Instead, we just sat there.

We were 65 days from that Tuesday night, waiting for the St. John’s Eve ceremony to begin.

CHAPTER III  
VOODOO IS (1)

Voodoo is Voodoo.

CHAPTER IV  
IN TIME AND SPACE: COUNTING AND SURPRISE  
(PART ONE)

In time we are quite removed from the spill, from Day 1. Years removed, in fact. The days are no longer counted in such a way. For at least a while, though, our distance from this event is how time was measured. June 23rd was not simply June 23rd; it was Day 65. June 13th was Day 55, and 34, 21, 13, 8, 5, 3, 2 . . .

The days ending in 5 were nice—25 and 75 being better than the others—but multiples of ten seemed to have more impact than those in between. Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty . . . Sixteen, thirty-eight, ninety-two had less of a ring.

Day 100 was a confusing accomplishment, an anniversary of a relationship you weren't quite sure you were in. Seeing the roundness of the two zeros after the one, printed in the papers, heard on all the channels. Was it good we were still counting? The days, the gallons, the deaths. Is it good that we have stopped? What good came of stopping?

When Day 101 arrived, I remember wondering if we would get to 150 or even 200.

CHAPTER V  
A PROBLEM,  
AND WHAT I KNOW (AND DON'T) ABOUT THE PRIESTESS

A Problem:

I don't want to like many of the Voodoo practitioners I met in New Orleans as much as I do.

What I Know (and Don't) About the Priestess:

I don't know if she deserves this space, this attention. She already receives, it would seem, plenty of attention.

I know at the ceremony she was the one who led the chanting, gave the instructions. It was her temple; we were her congregation. She was in charge and everyone knew it. She was Priestess Miriam.

I know I wanted to be part of the congregation, those involved, but often felt like part of an audience instead, watching a play unfold.

I know in August 2002, she performed a blessing at the wedding of Nicolas Cage and Lisa Marie Presley. This, coming after having been a "consultant" on Cage's directorial debut, *Sonny*, a movie that had something to do with a brothel and received mixed, though primarily bad, reviews. About the couple, the priestess was noted as saying, "They both believe the second time around might work better. They just needed time to be alone. They have a desire to make it work. There were problems, but now they're back together and the timing is good. Nic and Lisa Marie

had a lot of good times together in New Orleans before they got married and they want to recapture some of those feelings.”

I know any time the couple spent alone recapturing feelings or desiring to make it work was short-lived because, in November of the same year they were married, Nic and Lisa Marie would file for divorce.

I don't know if this story about a failed marriage is crucial, but I do know it altered my opinion of the priestess in a way that speaks to my problem.

I also know this, in many ways, is about failure.

I do not know, however, what is important about the priestess.

I know the Spiritual Temple's website tells us “numerous television programs and many articles have publicized her works,” which seems important—publicizing what you want people to know. Maybe it is simple, but it seems important. One of these articles said she was a “handsome woman,” and I could see that. In the courtyard, her hair puffed away from her head, a tiny Afro that tousled toward the sky. Her eyes were nice and big, had lots of lid, and slightly sagged with her cheeks. Others have seen her “dressed in fabulous African regalia,” they have seen her “in a striking black and white dashiki with a matching headdress.” On St. John's Eve she wore something that seemed appropriately, and perhaps similarly, typecast. It was the sort of outfit one could buy in a store that also sold factory-made figurines of Krishna and Buddha and “tobacco pipes” in the back. A store in a shopping mall called Outer Dimensions or Travelers Serenity or some such thing. Eyelet fabric, not white but maybe cream or pale yellow, made her sleeveless top and her long skirt that played contrast against her dark skin. A multi-patterned, tie-

dye shawl was wrapped around her waist; beads and other ornaments wrapped her neck and wrists, hung from her ears.

I know I wanted to find some deeper meaning in the way she looked, if only because I wanted to find a deeper meaning in everything. I didn't want to think she was simply playing the role of priestess #1.

I know there is a book written entirely about the priestess and her temple, where she says, "To identify how a person got started in any practice of spirituality, you would have to look at their childhood."

I know very little about how one gets into Voodoo, and so I followed this advice.

I know her childhood started in Pochahontas, Mississippi, on March 8, 1943, where she was not Priestess Miriam but was born and named Mary Robin Adams to a family of sharecroppers. I know this because the book tells us. It is written. Or I know it started in Jackson, Mississippi, according to another book, and "Date of Birth Unavailable," according to yet another.

I know she was simply the third of seven children, five girls and two boys, whose names are not written and so are unknown.

I know that among this anonymity of early age, she remembers thinking about "what it meant when my mother and father took me into the realm of spirituality." Her family "already recognized that I was to be anointed toward the spirit. At that time they did not call it voodoo. I was introduced to what I would become. The Baptist Church and the religious orientation of my family began my journey into the realm of spirit." A realm, says the Spiritual Temple's website, where

she “experienced the power of the mysterious forces,” and these forces were “more than I can put in words.” She “felt the presence that wasn’t relating to any physical structure. And I felt closer to whatever it was that caused me to get off by myself to pray, comprehend the time of quietness as a child.”

I know the fact that she wanted to comprehend the time of quietness makes me like her. It makes me want to like her, believe she brought something back from that hushed reflection.

I know that at that time, however, at the age of eleven, the physical structure of spirituality was still “within the confines of the Christian church” for the girl called Mary. She says she remembers one particular night when “we were sitting, [and] the minister had given the message and he went in silent prayer, and I remember kneeling and Rev. Jarret, he came and laid his hand on my back and I remember when he put his hand on my back, sort of like [a] spirit of electrifying forces went through me and I was like lifted up in a rapture. [. . .] And so it’s from those times, I felt a presence.”

I know I have never felt such a presence.

I know the only way I can see the priestess is to form her in spaces where I am not.

I know this spiritual structure “was mixed with the reality of hypocrisy.” She felt “those who professed Christ often treated other humans with little respect and concern,” all of which “negatively affected” the young girl who would become Priestess Miriam.

I know after her parents separated it was her mother and uncle who “worked

in partnership,” worked in fields where Jim Crow laws would still rule till 1965, where there was “very little difference between sharecropping and slavery,” she says. “When you reached six years old you went to work with chores and helping take care of the younger ones. Between seven and eight years old, you would have to go out and pick cotton or beans. We were trained to work from an early age; you had to start sweeping the yard or something. We had to learn to shell beans and cook them so some food was ready when my mother came home. Even when we weren’t in the fields we were working.”

I know it is work that seemed to be the predominant force of her childhood, spiritual or otherwise.

I know I want to believe this.

I know once in high school she began further work on plans to leave Mississippi. She would be one of the more than five million black citizens to escape the South in the Second Great Migration. She tells us: “During the school break that year I worked at the Robert E. Lee Hotel. I had this close friend whose name was James who worked at the same place. He always had a newspaper with him. I told him that as soon as I finished high school, I wanted to leave Mississippi. He asked, ‘What are you going to do?’ We started looking through the newspaper. In the want ads there was an ad that said, ‘Domestic Housekeepers wanted, free room and board, and a small salary.’ I said, ‘That sounds good.’ He said, ‘Why don’t you write and apply?’ I took his advice and wrote a letter requesting information about the job. I got a letter back that included a job application. I filled the application out. The agent sent me my ticket and instructions. I graduated on June 6 and I left Mississippi



June 10.”

I know I have never made such a decision sound so simple. It often takes me pages and pages to travel toward anything that isn't confusion. But even then, what have I done?

I know, catching the train in Jackson, she followed the Long Island Railroad to Hempstead, New York, and eventually to the agent's house, where she and other girls spent the night and waited for the next day. Her first glimpse of wealth was at that house. “I had never seen stuff like this,” she says. “The house was carpeted with plush lavender carpeting and richly decorated. We had to take our shoes off when we went in.”

I know this makes her a sympathetic character, but I don't know if she still plays such a role today. Nor do I know what I am supposed to think if she doesn't, how I am supposed to comprehend the space between Mary and Miriam.

I know I am still trying to decide the role I play. In the courtyard, it seemed easier. The question of congregation or audience shifted when two young people stepped out onto a small balcony overlooking the crescent of white chairs. Demarcations were more clearly seen: the courtyard was the stage, the two young people were the audience, and we—all of us—were part of the show.

I know the next day, after each of the girls was dressed, she walked down the stairs, feeling the lavish carpet with each step and, as she says, “I guess it reminded me of a slave auction.”

I know I can never know what this is like and, in many ways, trying to understand such a feeling is like trying to understand Voodoo, a mystery. I know I

want to see her as a mystery, even if she is not. I want to.

I know she was eventually hired by “a Jewish lady,” and would spend most of the next four years working and living and working in New York, where she “learned how to support myself and how to live independently.” She would also, by December 1964, meet a man she would eventually be married to for seven years and have two children with, a girl and a boy. Her children provided another opportunity for the “power of the mysterious forces” to present itself. They were “a symbol of a thought that I started pursuing just before I finished high school,” she says. “I wrote in our yearbook that I wanted two children, a girl and a boy. Each time I was pregnant, I had a vision of each one of my children. In those days, before sonograms, people would try to guess what the sex of the baby was. I must have talked this thought into reality.”

I know her marriage, paired with her ability to talk or think her children into being, eventually took her to Chicago. Once there, she continued to do what she had always done: work. This time, however, she worked as a seamstress and for the Zenith Company. By 1967, she began taking classes in a training program for practical nurses before switching to another program that trained operating room technicians. After receiving an associate degree from the Allied Health Program, as well as attending the Illinois Medical Training Center and taking more classes at Malcolm X College, she would simply continue to work. She served as an operating room assistant at Rush-Presbyterian Hospital for eleven years, followed by an additional nine years as a private nurse. She worked.

I know, particularly at this point in the story, I still want to find meaning in

her work. Want to believe it is work that has pushed her to where she is today. Even if this is a performance, it is one made for some form of sacrifice or discovery.

I know that throughout those years in Chicago she knew the “spiritual calling” was always there. “It is there beside you like an invisible rider, right there with you,” she says. “Although in the beginning you dismiss it, it stays there as an invisible force. It allows you to express yourself physically and financially. This not only helps you to grow, it provides you with the ability to contribute to the altars.”

I know when I first read the phrase “invisible rider,” after having also read about Priestess Miriam’s association with Nicolas Cage, I thought about the movie *Ghost Rider* starring the aforementioned. Just like *Sonny* it too received mixed, though primarily bad, reviews. I know when I made this association, between “invisible rider” and *Ghost Rider*, I then laughed. Tried to ignore the absurdity I felt not only toward the movie one reviewer said “acts like a kid who tries to snap out of a candy-binge coma by snorting lines of Pixy Stix,” but also to the fact that Priestess Miriam and her temple seem to fit all too easily in a similar and prosthetic candy-coma world.

I know it was in 1973 when the priestess, who was not yet a priestess, “visited an old spiritual lady on the Southside of Chicago.” I know, because it is written somewhere, the spiritual lady told her, “You will have many stars in your crown.”

I know the question, “How many stars are there going to be?” was then asked.

I do not know the number of stars she was told; it is not written. Though we do know that whatever the spiritual lady on the Southside of Chicago said, when

asked about the stars, “felt good” to the person who was still Mary or still nameless like her brothers and sisters, was still someone I don’t know. That much is written in one book or another, and so that much we do know. However, we also know that while it might have felt good, “her answer did not satisfy” the eventual priestess. As a result, she would find Chicago’s Whitley Memorial Temple, a “Spiritual church,” we are told, “where she began her journey into spiritual work.” According to one book, this “move from her Baptist roots” was also “in response to [the] hypocrisy” she felt as a child. It was a concern she strove to comprehend through “training in spiritual realities of the world” and “was combined with a concern for the physical body.”

I know the balance between such forces, spiritual and physical, is an important focus of Voodoo. It is why God is a hermaphrodite, why darkness and light are so emphasized, life and death.

I know it was also a concern she confronted through the other force that had been with her since childhood: the physicality of work, to sustain yourself and family—I know I still want to believe this. She was, after all, a working nurse, mother of two children and, by this time, no longer married.

I know that having moved from Mississippi to New York straight out of high school to escape the racism of the mid-twentieth century, Jim Crow South—not to mention a family struggling in poverty, with seven children, one mother, one uncle, no father—and then on to Chicago for a husband who was no longer a husband, because of this, I know it is not hard to imagine one would be in search of answers, in need of balance. Far less has left me weighted to one side more than the other. But that isn’t written anywhere, and so whether or not she felt this way remains a

mystery. What is written, in one of the books, is that she “began to feel an urgent need to get back to the world of spiritual expression.” So she went to the spiritual lady on the Southside of Chicago and learned about her stars. The same stars she would follow to New Orleans where she would meet Oswan Chamani, an Obeah priest from Belize, whom she would eventually marry and start the Voodoo Spiritual Temple with.

I know when the two first met, Oswan told her they were going to be together, but she “didn’t think anything was going to happen.” Nevertheless, as she says, “Things have a way of happening,” and, “when you try to resist, an inner voice will allow you to see both sides of the road. It makes you understand which road is better than the other.”

I do not know which road is better: Mary or Miriam.

I do not if they are the same.

I do not know the truth about her—“Our focus is ‘TRUTH,’” says Spiritual Temple’s website—if I am even after such a thing, or what it is. These are stories, written and told.

I know in March of 1989 Oswan then told Miriam, “I will die a long time before you, but when I die the Temple will be completely formed and you will do what is necessary to carry the Temple.” After the death of Oswan in 1995, she did just that, continued to work as she does today. Instead of shelling beans and picking cotton, the woman who is now Priestess Miriam fashions “Voodoo Self Help Kits,” among other items, for the Spiritual Temple’s Cultural Center. They “offer a variety of items,” in fact, “including beautiful crafts, voodoo dolls, mojo bags and more.”

They offer “resin sticks, powder incense, aromatic oils, candles, herbs, bath beads, talismans, dolls, statues, jewelry, CDs, tapes, art, books,” and “more.” More, like a “new documentary film” where “the history of the Voodoo Religion is interwoven with the life of Priestess Miriam.” Its title is *A Voodoo Queen in New Orleans*. On its cover we see the priestess slapping two machetes together, her mouth wide as a fish ready to be caught, and it can be yours for \$30.00. “These are not commercial made,” we are told, “but instead hand made by your Priestess.”

I know to get to the courtyard you had to pass through the two rooms that comprise the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Vibrant, almost groovy looking tapestries hung from the walls. In one corner, around the priestess’ personal altar: a phantasmagoria of shapes enclosing mazy patterns enclosing nothing that wanted to be fully palpable. At the center was a wooden chair embellished with painted webs of swirling and pointed print, its back beaded red and blue. In another corner, candles in every available color sat on every available surface and cascaded to the floor. Everything was draped with something: the tapestries on the walls; a coffee table covered by a green cloth displaying the zodiac circle chart; windows veiled by white sheers, in front of which a tangle of string lights dipped from the ceiling, and in front of the lights there were . . . just more things. Wooden statues and wooden masks and metallic masks that would stare back at you; golden frames framing images of saints or spirits or Voodoo, or something; bottles and glasses and jars filled with liquid and spices and gris-gris; pieces of fruit, straw hats, straw brooms; orange baubles, pink baubles, blue baubles, all sorts of baubles; shining strips and splashes of purple and yellow and green and red and black, like you were traveling

through the mist of an exploding kaleidoscope. With each twist the jagged pieces collapsed on themselves, forming a new and fragmented representation of what you were trying to see, of what you wanted to see. With one twist, according to the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, Priestess Miriam's temple is "the only formally established Spiritual Temple with a focus on traditional West African spiritual and herbal healing practices currently existing in New Orleans." Yet, with another, the priestess and her temple were all too reminiscent of Ina Fandrich's description:

The fusion between various African-based religious traditions is especially prominent in Louisiana, where "Voodoo" has become a generic term for any form of spiritual beliefs and practices remotely associated with the Black continent. [. . .] Miriam, who now runs her own Voodoo Spiritual Temple on Rampart Street, gets every day hundreds of visitors accompanied by their tour guides who introduce her as an authentic New Orleans Voodoo priestess. [. . .] She has no initiation into any African or African diaspora religion. Her eclectic temple includes statues and objects honoring every major Orisha, numerous Haitian lwa (Vodou spirits), some Egyptian deities, statues of numerous Catholic saints and a large image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, an altar with a picture of the Dagbo Hounon Houna, the late "Pope" of African Voodoo or Vodun from Benin, and an urn with the ashes of "Chickenman," a New Orleans Voodoo original who, like Priestess Miriam herself, was a self-appointed Voodoo priest.

I don't know what I want to see. I don't know which road to take. Everything seems to be at least worth one twist, the time to allow the fragments to settle. But what happens when the number of days, gallons, deaths begin to mean nothing; when you don't know where to stand or who to believe; when what is written only seems to matter as a more identifiable sign of some fallacy you know to exist but can never prove, can never see, is too far off the coast; when what is written begins to mean nothing; when in the search for clarity confusion is only found; when

everything begins to mean nothing? Tell me what happens. I don't think I would know what to do if any of it ever came into view.



CHAPTER VI  
VOODOO IS (2)

Voodoo is “it’s difficult to say” and “it’s hard to explain,” and “I just don’t know any other way to put it” or “how else to describe it.” It is an occultism. It is “conjure.” It is a parapsychology, a philosophy, maybe it’s just a cult, or African magic, a syncretism, and it might have similarities with Zoroastrianism.

Or, as one guy expressed to me while waiting for his family to exit one of the many New Orleans Voodoo gift shops, it is possibly a “tourist trap where you can spend a lot of fucking money on bullshit masks and other shit that just looks like a bunch of fucking paprika and oregano in those goddamn little bags they sell.”

This gentleman, a man of middle age wearing a grey and well-perspired-in tank top, red shorts that looked like a swimsuit, and brown leather sandals, was mildly annoyed when saying this. I think he was performing a bit, but he did actually seem at least slightly frustrated. His face was a similar hue to his shorts, either from the heat or the annoyance. And, to his credit, a lot of items sold in Voodoo shops do look a bunch of “fucking paprika and oregano.” He continued:

“I mean did you see those little bags in there? It’s all complete crap. Someone told me they had a fucking snake, but I didn’t see any damn snake. I don’t know, man . . . I thought I was going to see a fucking snake. You don’t believe in it, do you?”

Indeed. Voodoo is all of these things, except when it is not. This is because if Voodoo is anything, it is a space between belief and disbelief, between wanting to believe and actually believing, and it is a space where I found myself, sitting in a

courtyard behind the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum with Jerry Gandolfo, who was providing details about such a space.

It was June 24th and it was midday and there was very little shade. We were both sweating. Middle-aged and stocky, Jerry had a mustache of silver stubble and matching hair that horseshoed a baldhead. He is the Historic Voodoo Museum's owner and curator and historian, and possibly a few other things—I don't actually know. I do know Jerry wanted to distinguish himself and his museum from the other Voodoo museums, shops, and stands around the city. Because of this, every now and then, it was easy to think his talking simply became an act of onanism. This isn't to say he didn't mean it or that it wasn't in response to a question I'd asked, but it seemed onanistic nonetheless.

He said things like, "Let's be honest. Voodoo people in the Quarter are a dime a dozen. They got the card readers, they got Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo, Reverend Zombie's Voodoo, Voodoo Authentica, Esoterica, you know, Island of Botanica, House of the Seven Sisters—these are the ones that come to mind. But there are others, you know, and most of them are there for tourists, particularly the one around the corner. We get complaints constantly because people get them mixed up with us. I get e-mails—I get angry e-mails—people screaming at me, and I have to write them back and say sorry you got the wrong address, you know. I mean, there's this one I had recently where somebody told this guy he was going to die, and the guy goes home and he worries himself to death and he gives himself a heart attack and dies. And so the guy's roommate writes back and says, uh, you killed this guy and you shouldn't have told him this and dadada, you know. And I had to say,

hey, that wasn't us."

Before driving to New Orleans from Houston, my hometown, I contacted many of the places Jerry mentioned as being for tourists. For me, someone who only knows New Orleans as the city I grew up visiting, each of those places seemed relatively similar. One wasn't more or less touristy than the next, they all were; and while I'd hoped to find something more authentic, I didn't imagine it existed anymore.

I often connect such authenticity with that of French filmmaker Jean Rouch and his 1955 short film, *Les maîtres fous* ("The Mad Masters"), about the Hauka people in what was then colonial West Africa.

At the film's start we are prepared:

The producer warns the public that this document with no concession or dissimulation contains scenes of violence and cruelty, but wishes the spectator to participate completely in a ritual that is a particular solution to the problem of the readjustment, and shows indirectly the representation that some Africans have of our western civilization.

Then we are told:

Young people originating from the interior, arriving in the cities, are confronted to the mechanical civilization. So are born conflicts and new religions. So did, around 1927 the sect of the Hauka appear. This film shows an episode of the life of the Hauka of the city of Accra filmed at the request of the priests Muntyeba and Muykayla, proud of their art. No scene is secret nor is prohibited, all are open to those who want to participate. And this violent game is only the reflect of our civilization.

Of Accra, we are also told it is the "capital of the Gold Coast" and "a real Black Babylone [sic]. Here gather men from all Western Africa from Nigeria, Niger, Upper

Volta, Sudan.”

They gather, “to live the great adventure.”

The “episode” is a Hauka ceremony where its participants assume the identity of the bureaucrats in the French colonial government; they become possessed. It is a ritual not dissimilar to other early-twentieth century African movements—like the ones that eventually became modern New Orleans Voodoo—and, according to Dr. James G. Ferguson, it has been interpreted as “an exemplary instance of cultural resistance through parody and appropriation.”

Since its initial release, Rouch’s representation of such events has received both praise and condemnation. It was banned in some countries, we are told, “because of the threat it posed to colonial authority—specifically, it was ‘the insult to the Queen.’” Yet, as Ferguson also points out by looking at critic Mick Eaton’s description of the film’s screening in Paris, “Black students in the audience accused Rouch of reinforcing stereotypes of ‘savagery,’ and the film was banned throughout Britain’s African colonies because of its ‘inflammatory’ content.” Moreover, even the reasoning behind the Hauka’s rituals have been identified as both embodying “themes of mockery, parody, laughter, and anticolonial resistance,” as well as a “symbolic capitulation or attempt at assimilation.”

However it is viewed, Ferguson says “the central meaning of the film—and its great virtue—is that it takes the scandal of mimicry and reinterprets it as an ironic cultural practice that is both culturally defiant (and thus resistant and subversive) and authentically other (since it mimes Western forms only to appropriate them into a fundamentally non-Western cultural order).”

Perhaps the most prominent (and obvious) example one could designate as being from such an order, in addition to the moment I most frequently recall, begins to reveal itself just before the eleventh minute of the nearly twenty-eight minute film, and comes to fruition around the twentieth.

Before the eleventh minute, we see clusters of Hauka begin to convene at a designated area in the woods away from town. The ceremony commences with the “presentation of the new one,” a man who “has been having crisis for a month,” sleeping “in cemeteries and unearth corpses [sic].” Then there is the beating of the “new one” by one of the “old ones.” There is the gathering around a concrete altar and public confessions of sin—“I have had sexual relations with the woman of a companion,” says one; “Never I perfume myself, never I wash myself, I am dirty, I am not elegant,” says another; “We swear not to do it again,” they say—for which a chicken is given as payment. A whistle blows and the Hauka gather in two rows, those who are punished and those who are not. “We swear not to do it again, if we do it again, may our Hauka punish us with death.” Eggs of sacrifice are broken on stairs; wooden guns made from the fan belts of trucks are swung in the air, clapped against one another. They begin to designate who will be which colonial official and who will not and, just before the eleventh minute, “It is 10 a.m., it rains.” A monochord violin player plays his songs as the men wait for all the Hauka to arrive. They wait. One sleeps, framed by the blood-splattered walls of the chicken’s sacrifice, and they wait. “They wait for a dog. Because”—and I do not speak French, so whenever I watch this film the subtitles are jammed at the word “Because,” and you have to wait for the reason why they wait, wait for the “Because”—“it is totally

prohibited to eat dog.” And “if the Haukas kill and eat a dog, they’ll show that they are stronger than any other black or white men.” We see them dance, and they dance to become possessed, we are told. They “must become possessed.” And when the twentieth minute arrives the dog is brought into frame, having already been skinned, held at the neck by one of the Hauka; and the skinned dog is then cooked and eaten, its head eventually gnawed at by one of the men who looks down at the fresh brain every few bites with something like adolescent curiosity.

I think about this film as Jerry tells me how becoming possessed by the spirits is the point of a Voodoo ceremony. How Voodoo, in New Orleans, has actually assimilated quite well with its colonial powers; how it even goes “hand in glove,” according to him, with many of the governmental and religious ideologies that occupied the region before Voodoo first made its presence, and after.

I think about this film when I think about how New Orleans Voodoo is nothing I wanted it to be.

This isn’t to say I’m for dogs being skinned, boiled, and eaten—though I do enjoy seeing the transcendence of the oppressed, even when it’s debated, even when I don’t know what I’m seeing or I can hardly look. But anything where dogs are boiled in hot pots then consumed isn’t as salable to the general public as, say, love. This is understandable. I understand this, I do. Love is more pleasant than boiled dogs—though, I suppose, this too is debatable—and it is love that Jerry says much of today’s Voodoo is all about. Why many of Priestess Miriam’s patrons contact her, they need help with love. And when I needed help finding a St. John’s Eve ceremony

to attend, it was also Priestess Miriam who Jerry suggested.

Several days before he told me, “If you want a real Voodoo ceremony, go to Miriam’s. You should call her.”

When I called the Voodoo Temple, she picked up.

“Hi,” I said, and then my name, that I had spoken with Jerry and he had suggested I attend her ceremony, “would that be okay? I don’t want to intrude on anything, but I’d love to be there.”

“What would you intrude?” was her response.

I couldn’t tell if she misunderstood me completely—meaning, not only my intent but the actual words (was the reception bad? my phrasing?)—or if she knew some underlying question I didn’t know I was asking. Some basal desire I didn’t know was there.

My attraction to Voodoo, the reason I wanted to go to any ceremony, was superficial in most regards. For me, Voodoo was, and in many ways still is, the images I saw as a kid while visiting the city.

I can remember my dad and I walking down Bourbon Street late one evening. I wasn’t older than middle school age. It was no special occasion in New Orleans, and it probably wasn’t even a weekend, but Bourbon Street was busy and everything about it was how you’d imagine. Lights were flashing as beads were being tossed and breasts were being flashed. Drunks were stumbling and yelling and vomiting down side streets, or just where they happened to be. Two or three “exotic dancers” hovered around the entrance of their respected clubs and offered

tantalizing suggestions of what could be seen, if the appropriate cover charge and drink minimum were met. Predominantly black children no older than high school age—though often no older than ten or eleven, if not younger—tap-danced on sidewalks, as predominantly white groups of people formed circles around them, clapping with or just off the beat and tossing money in the children's hat on the pavement. After which, the children would grab the cash and add it to the neatly rolled cylinder from their pockets, the width of a cardboard paper towel tube.

As we walked, my dad and I would give nudges to make sure the other saw everything, noticed all the exhibits. We were visitors in this museum.

In the air: an amalgam of live jazz or blues or Dixieland, 80s pop rock being covered by the house band, drunk karaoke, and some sort of Cajun-Creole-Zydeco refrain heavily pushed by an accordion zoomed through each ear as we toured the streets. I saw the storerooms full of wooden masks with wide eyes, horns and lips, carved grooves. There were three kids who seemed to be siblings: two boys, maybe seventeen and thirteen, and a girl who was somewhere in between. They walked barefoot on the sidewalk, and on each of their shoulders a rat kept its balance like a parrot on a pirate's epaulette. The tail of each rodent dangled down and flopped against the dirtied and torn T-shirts of the three. Even this, while having no connection to Voodoo I am aware of, was still Voodoo. Because Voodoo is what you don't know. It is the mystery, or magic, all such things. It is whatever you want to think it could be.

Responding to the priestess's question—what would you intrude?—and with



some uncertainty, I slipped on a few words before laughing to relieve the tension. I said, “Well, no, I hope that I wouldn’t be intruding. I definitely don’t want to intrude or anything. I just don’t know that much about Voodoo—I don’t really know anything about Voodoo, but I’m eager to learn—and everyone has told me this is the ceremony to attend, that yours is the best one. Is that okay?”

“The best,” she said. “Well, this is something I don’t know. That is fine. We have people here, and they come to the ceremony and we have it. Will you be here? I don’t know. I don’t know what the best is. We have people that come, they attend, from the outside, and they are here. The ceremony will be tonight.”

I still didn’t have a clue whether we understood each other, but I was getting close to the Temple and trying to find a parking space, so I said, “Okay.” I said, “Well, I’d really love to come, if that’s all right with you. I know I’m from the outside, but I’d really love to be there. I know it starts soon—and I apologize for contacting you with such short notice—but as long as it’s not an inconvenience, I definitely want to be there.”

“Okay,” she said. “There is not an inconvenience. This is fine.”

“Okay,” I said, having gotten the answer I wanted. “Thank you so much.”

## CHAPTER VII

## VOODOO IS (3)

Voodoo is Vodoun, and Vodoun is the Fon word for spirits. It is a word used by the Fon people in the West African country of Benin, a territory established as Dahomey in the fifteenth century. While Benin's official language is French, its nearly ten million citizens speak more than fifty other recognized languages. More than half speak Fon, which is also called Dahomeen, Fon-Gbe, Djedji, Fogbe, Fongbe, Fonnu, and Fo, depending on where you hear it.

In the southern part of the country, near the Bight of Benin, the route taken by approximately 20 percent of those individuals sold as slaves during the Atlantic slave trade, Fon is the most common vernacular. It is part of a larger language group known as Gbe, which is composed of some twenty languages spoken from eastern Ghana to western Nigeria. Gbe is one of the thirty Left Bank languages, which are part of the Kwa that number as many as seventy-nine. All Kwa languages are then considered to be Volta-Congo languages, and there are more than thirteen hundred of those, each deemed an Atlantic-Congo language; and each of the more than fourteen hundred Atlantic-Congo languages are part of the Niger-Congo language family, one of the largest language families in Africa. Fon also has at least four dialects we know to exist.

So, by the time the Fon language and the Fon people crossed the Atlantic; by the time Benin's shoreline became known as the "Slave Coast," shipping those individuals to the New World and the Old World; some of them happened upon Haiti

and Cuba, across the Bahamas, to Florida and other parts of the Southern United States, including the territory we now call Louisiana.

1719: This is the year, we are told, many of those African individuals arrived on the shores of Louisiana. It would still be another eighty-four years before Thomas Jefferson would buy this territory from France, from Napoleon, just after the eighteenth century became the nineteenth.

We call it the Louisiana Purchase; the French call it *Vente de la Louisiane*, the “Sale of Louisiana”—whatever it is called, it is about money.

We were young then; we were younger, looking to expand. This territory, after all, swelled through what are now parts of Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, all of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska; it waved up the eastern edge of Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, helping to establish the state borders we have today; and it kept going, billowing through portions of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana, past the Canadian border, rising like boiling black smoke gently blown by the wind to the West.

New Orleans would have been where the tepee of logs was constructed, where the flame first sparked and began to glow.

France had controlled this area from the late seventeenth century on into the mid-eighteenth. By 1762, the land was essentially given to Spain, its ally, before Napoleon reclaimed it again in 1800 with the hope of constructing a “North American empire.” Because of this, the population of New Orleans and the surrounding area was largely French and Spanish, largely Catholic—one of the

reasons so many modern Voodooists also practice Catholicism—and, as we've been told, Africans had been piled into ships and were being sent throughout the continental region and the Gulf islands for some eighty years by this point.

This included Saint-Domingue, the French colony on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola where, in the early light of the nineteenth century, the island's natives had had enough. There wasn't adequate food, the conditions were bad, they were being treated poorly. So, they revolted. So, Napoleon sent soldiers, then Napoleon sent more soldiers, and then a few more. Yet, as we know, the conditions were bad—they were really bad—and yellow fever and other diseases broke out. Only two years after the turn of the century, nearly half of the French soldiers sent to Saint-Domingue had died.

During these years, and several miles away, the Declaration of Independence was signed; the Constitution was adopted and ratified and amended.

After the revolt in Saint-Domingue, combined with the possibility of conflict with England as well as the Napoleonic and French Revolutionary Wars—we were, don't forget, just rounding off what some call the "Second Hundred Years' War"—the Louisiana territory was sold; it was bought.

The monetary price: roughly 11,250,000 dollars, or 60 million francs, with 6 percent interest, paid to France by the United States, as well as the cancelation of 3,750,000 dollars, or 18 million francs, worth of French debt—this is about money.

New Orleans, we are told, is one of the primary motives Jefferson disregarded a fair amount of domestic opposition on the basis that the purchase was unconstitutional—we could say that now—among others reasons.

“The critics in Congress complained about several aspects,” writes historian Walter Nugent. “Was this or any purchase constitutional? Was it too much money? Was it proper to grant citizenship (as the treaty apparently did) to the French Spanish, and free black people of New Orleans, so foreign and so unacquainted with democratic government? Was it just to uproot the Creeks and other Indians east of the Mississippi and remove them to the ‘howling wilderness’ of Louisiana, as some were advocating? Should the French and Spanish receive duty-free access, which seemed to favor Louisiana’s ports over other states’?”

A century later, Henry Adams would write, “The sale of Louisiana to the United States was trebly invalid: if it were French property, Bonaparte could not constitutionally alienate it without the consent of the Chambers; if it were Spanish property, he could not alienate it at all; if Spain had a right of reclamation, his sale was worthless.”

Nevertheless, in Paris, on a Sunday in April of 1803, Robert Livingston, the former and first U.S. Secretary of Foreign Affairs, alongside eventual president James Monroe, met with French Treasury Minister Francois de Barbé-Marbois.

They signed their names on behalf of their countries.

“We have lived long,” said Livingston after the signing, “but this is the noblest work of our whole lives.” He said, still using the plural, “The United States take rank today among the first powers of the world.” This is what he said, and it is also what is chiseled in stone beside the 50-foot high main entrance of the Louisiana State Capitol—this is about money, and it is about power.

Because having New Orleans, and the rest of the roaring and wind-blown territory, meant having secure access to its ports and, therefore, also the Mississippi River. The ports that today stretch 172 miles along the Mississippi's banks, allowing cargo movement to some 33 states. The ports that, beyond those 33 states, are ranked near the top of lists for export tonnage and import tonnage and total tonnage in the world; that have been called the "center of waterborne commerce"; that handle 60 percent of the country's grains, most notably from the Midwest, and soybeans and maize and molasses, rice and coffee and sugar; that handle nonmetallic minerals like coal and lignite and coke, salt and marble and clay; iron and steel, metal ores, vegetable oils, vegetable fats, natural rubber, fertilizers, organic chemicals, inorganic chemicals, steel coils, forestry products, and petroleum; that help to keep the economy afloat, employing more than 20,000 people directly and an unknown number of people indirectly, bringing in more than 12 billion dollars of new capital investment—this is about money and it is about power and it is about doing whatever you want, despite opposition, "neglecting obvious concerns"—and, beginning in 1719, when that first individual arrived on the shores of Louisiana, people too became a product in this market. An import, as they say.

Most of them would have been Fon. They would have been speaking one of the Fon language's four dialects we know to exist.

Most, but not all.

No, not all of them would have been Fon, or even from Benin.

Some of them might have come over during the Saint-Domingue revolt, having already established local jargon and customs, and even the ones who were Fon might have vocalized their thoughts with a different tongue. Dissimilar pronunciations, accents, words.

Some of them might have come from a place where one of the other fourteen hundred Atlantic-Congo languages, within one of the more than thirteen hundred Volta-Congo languages, within the as many as seventy-nine Kwa languages, within the thirty Left Bank languages and the some twenty Gbe languages, all of which are part of the Niger-Congo language family, was spoken.

They could have come from a place where another of Africa's language families was spoken.

Because of this diaspora, Voodoo is not all Voodoo.

As Jerry told me, "Legba is not always Legba. He's called Ellegua, he's called Damballa, he's called Papa Laba, and there are others too."

New Orleans Voodoo is dissimilar to Haitian Vodou as it is to West African Vodun. While Santería, from the Yoruba people of Nigeria and best known in Cuba, might be the closest to what we call "Voodoo," it is not the same. Neither is Candomblé, Umbanda, Macumba, Obeah, Pocomania, or Palo Mayombe, all of which also have similar African roots.

## CHAPTER VIII

## IN A COURTYARD, WHERE THERE IS NO ORGY

In her 1993 essay, Wendy Dutton describes Voodoo in the early twentieth century as “still widely regarded as a cult of superstition that involved ritual orgies and serpent worship.” She goes on to mention one particular Voodoo ceremony, where “a large number of white women of respectable middle-class families were found almost completely disrobed.” Dutton takes this story from Newbell Niles Puckett’s *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, published in 1926, who took it from the third volume of *The Journal of American Folklore*, published in 1890. The publication cites that a correspondent sent the following, “without naming the journal from which the dispatch is taken”:

“New Orleans, August 13. — A big voodoo [sic] festival was given last evening at the west end of the Lake Pontchartrain suburbs of New Orleans by an assemblage of mixed white and colored. Dr. Alexander, the colored voodoo doctor, presided. The police showed no disposition to interfere. A decided sensation has been caused here by the discovery that voodooism [sic], or rather belief in the power of the voodoo doctors, is increasing, and is accepted not only by the negroes [sic], but by the whites. A raid on Dr. Alexander’s establishment discovered a large number of women there, most of them whites, who visited him because they believed his incantations improved their health. Surprise was increased to horror when it was found these, almost completely disrobed (for a voodoo séance requires the ‘patient’ to dance without clothing around the fire or snake which represents the devil), were of respectable middle-class families. Since then the voodoo belief seems to have spread, and a number of meetings have been reported, that last night being the largest yet.”

In the Spiritual Temple’s courtyard, many years from the suspected and roaring Voodoo orgies of the early twentieth century, everyone was fully clothed and no one was *orgying*. I say this assuming Dutton intended “ritual orgies” to mean



what Robert Snangard calls the “declaration and performance of not one or two but many individuals and their desire to undertake in unrestrained and excessive activities with one another, especially those of a sexual nature.”

In Voodoo, according to Jerry, sexuality represents life. It is what “brings lightheartedness back to the day.” He also tells me that in the city—away from the novelty shops where one can buy keepsakes that say, “I went to New Orleans”—Voodoo is “very real.” You simply have to know what to look for.

I, however, did not know what to look for, so I viewed everyone through a lens of uncertainty in the orgy-less courtyard.

Though, maybe it’s better to say any orgy that might have been taking place was undetectable, especially to someone like me. I am not a Voodoo practitioner, never had I been to a Voodoo ceremony. Similarly, I have never been involved in an orgy. This isn’t to say I am against orgies, or Voodoo, or that I would have immediately dismissed the idea if someone were to have brought it up. I was there to partake in the ceremony, to do whatever the others did. Yet, much of my willingness to have even contemplated whether to “completely disrobe” would have depended on who was making such a libidinous proposal.

The number of men and women was fairly even, no race overly prevalent. Sitting near one tip of the crescent of white folding chairs, I couldn’t help but think: Who would I want to participate in one of my orgies, if I were ever to have one? What would I do if one suddenly broke out? Keep the girls and get rid of the guys would have been the easy choice, but I didn’t want to make that choice. I don’t want to make choices simply because they are easy. Still, if the gentleman sitting almost

directly across from me would have walked over and said, Hey, do you wanna have an orgy? or Hey, I'm thinking about getting an orgy started, you in?; basically if he had said anything to me that included the word orgy, I probably would have said, No. No, but thank you for asking. I would have appreciated the bluntness and the courtesy of his solicitation before disrobing himself and jumping right into the act.

I wanted to appreciate these people.

Still, I would have said no. A definite no. No, with a stare that also said, Why are you asking me about orgies, stop it. Truthfully, it's an answer I would have given to the majority of the people there.

A few minutes before, while trying to find the Temple, I'd seen two girls just old enough to be called women walking separately on the street. Both wore light colors. One had on rope sandals and a sort of sundress that was white and hit her at the knee. It seemed too white for everyday wear, a holy white, I remember thinking. The other was wrapped in several layers of flowing, cream-colored cloth that draped down to her feet, and this too seemed holy. I wanted everything to seem this way.

In the courtyard, the same two young women sat next to each other and chatted quietly before falling silent again. Body language and facial expressions suggested they were not much more than acquaintances, but it was difficult to tell in such a setting. There was no orgy, after all, nothing to break the tension. So everyone, more or less, just sat and stared and readjusted their posture several times. Human legs folded and unfolded; chair legs scraped the concrete with each

readjustment. It was the idle time that occurs before most services or ceremonies of any designation, when you're unsure whether it's okay to talk or if you have enough time to go to the bathroom.

I didn't know what I could do, what I was supposed to do, what I wasn't.

So, I sat and I looked:

There was a man who wore a black beret, a black T-shirt that no longer had sleeves, black jeans. I can't say what shoes he wore, but I can say this: I bet they were black. Just like his jeans, just like his sleeveless tee, his black beret, and the scraggly black hair that shot down from beneath its headband.

He looked like a weasel. Or he looked like an elf. He looked like a weasel elf, maybe—I don't know. This isn't to say he was either of these two things, but he did look like both. His ears were pointed, and his chin and lower jaw clung to his neck. He had the kind of nose that looked like its bridge was a thin twig that somebody had flicked, snapping the twig in the middle, making it crooked like his nose. He had a thin, thin goatee. It was a full goatee, but it was thin, pencil thin, and it was also black. His frame, too, was thin.

He would play the drums. In fact, he was the leader of the drummers as well as Priestess Miriam's right hand throughout the ceremony. He was the first one to laugh at any of her jokes, the first to say "That's right, that's right," whenever she said something worth responding to, making him always seem happy. Extremely happy, perpetually happy, the kind of happy that verges on being too happy—this is what he was. When the priestess told him to drum he drummed, and he was happy

doing it. He counted in the other drummers and they would drum. They would pull out their bongos and congas and Ewe drums and begin to play.

I know this very well because I, unknowingly, sat in the middle of the drum section. He, the Weasel Man, wasn't standing there when I sat down, with his drum that was wider than he was and strapped to his torso. There were no section markers. No signs read, *If You Won't Be Playing A Drum Tonight, Maybe Don't Sit Here; There Is a High Likelihood You Will Feel Incredibly Awkward, If You Do Not Have a Drum.*

There were no indicators at all.

So, I sat. I looked:

On top of the altar's cloth were several lemons, so many lemons, at least fifty bright yellow lemons, and nearly as many red onions. There were garlic cloves too, though fewer. People had brought the produce with them and placed it on the purple cloth as they entered the courtyard.

This is not what I did.

In fact, when I entered the courtyard, I placed no lemons or anything else on the altar. I had brought a backpack with me, but inside this backpack there were no lemons. Nor were there any red onions or cloves of garlic. There was, however, a pen and notepad as well as several blue-and-white Hanukah candles inside a clear plastic sandwich bag. Because of the heat these candles had already begun to melt, fusing into a single chunk of blue-and-white Hanukah super wax.

Why did I have several blue-and-white Hanukah candles? This is an appropriate question. The reason is this: I had not planned to go to the ceremony at

the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. I had not planned to enter its courtyard and see such a large amount of lemons and red onions. And because I had not planned to attend this particular ceremony, I didn't know produce was the altar garnish of choice. I *had* planned to go to another St. John's Eve ceremony held by another New Orleans priestess, Sallie Glassman. For that ceremony, I was told, "Bring an offering for Marie Laveau, the original Voodoo Queen. She likes flowers, blue and white candles, Creole foods, hair ribbons and hair dressing supplies (she was a hairdresser), Vodou-esque items (Voodoo dolls, potions, gris-gris bags, etc), or images of Marie Laveau."

As this was to be my first major Voodoo ceremony, I didn't want to show up empty-handed. Because I own little to no "hair dressing supplies," or any of those other items, the candles were a more convenient choice—before I left my parents home in Houston, my mother had given them to me—yet they were still a wrong choice for this particular ceremony in the Temple's courtyard. I felt bad about not having produce to place on the altar. Still, I didn't want to draw attention to myself, and it felt like placing a giant chunk of Hanukah super wax among the lemons and red onions would have done just that. So, I took my seat and stayed there.

As the ceremony progressed, the produce played a larger role. At one point, the Priestess grabbed several of the lemons and red onions off the altar and began shaking them forcibly, whipping her forearms and hands like she wanted the lemon seeds to dart through the yellow rinds. She chanted something that appeared more conscious than tongues but also seemed to be getting at a similar idea. She was trying to connect with something I couldn't see, so I just stared.

“Do you know what you can do with these, these items I have? Do you know?”

Indecipherable shouts flickered through the courtyard, but no one really knew.

“You take them. I want everyone to take some lemons, take some red onions, take them home with you tonight when you leave. You cut them up. You chop them, if you like to chop them. And then you put them in a bowl and you add some of that red wine or you add red wine vinegar, and oooohhhh!” Her voice went up an octave and her lips puckered during that last bit—oooohhhh!—like she was sucking on one of the lemons, just before her lips released and her smile widened, before the lemon sweetened, before she continued. “You let the red the onion sit in that wine or vinegar, and sprinkle some of the lemon juice on top. You let it sit there. You can let it sit there for weeks in the fridge. And then you take home your girl or you take home your guy and you two, the both of you, you eat some of that onion and then you—the man’s got to do this, you see—you can then put your seed in that beautiful woman. Oh yes, yes, yes.”—and it’s hard not think about orgies when you hear things like this.

She kept shaking the produce till she swayed near the guy at the tip of the crescent opposite me—the one I wouldn’t want in any of my orgies—and handed him one lemon and one red onion.

“Take these,” she said, or maybe sang. “Take these,” and so he took them.

The guy was thin and pale. He wore glasses he poked up the bridge of his nose just before taking the lemon and onion. He looked nervous. Still, he also looked

far more comfortable than I would have been had the priestess thrust anything toward me. He even looked like he knew what he was doing. I was as impressed as I was surprised. While it's easy to think everyone else knows exactly what's going on when you don't, it might be just as easy—or at least more comforting—to think everyone else doesn't have a clue either.

“Yes,” said the Priestess. “Feel them, move with them, yes.”

He placed the lemon or maybe the onion by his hip. It was dark by that point. Any space that wasn't blushing with the fire from the basin or the street's filtered light, a street that seemed farther and farther away, was almost too dark to fully decipher.

You had to focus on the darkness to see anything clearly.

He then placed the other hand holding whatever it was holding near his cheek. He started dancing. Everyone watched, and he started smiling and dancing like this was the moment he'd been waiting for. Something about his smile was creepy but also innocent. It had a creepy innocence to it, or an innocent creepiness—it's hard to say, it was just weird. As he danced, people began clapping and shouting or testifying: “That's it, that's it!” and “There you go, oh yes! There you go!” or even just strings of vowels at high volume, “Aaaaahhhh . . .” “Oooooohhhh . . .” “Uuuuuuhhhh . . .”

I clapped my hands with the others and listened to the shouts.

CHAPTER IX  
IN TIME AND SPACE: COUNTING AND SURPRISE  
(PART TWO)

Surprise is intimately connected to the idea of acting in accordance with a set of rules. When the rules of reality generating events of daily life separate from the rules of thumb expectations, surprise is the outcome. Surprise represents the difference between expectations and reality, the gap between our assumptions and expectations about worldly events and the way that those events actually turn out. In essence, surprises are the end result of predictions that fail.

John L. Casti, *Complexification: Explaining a Paradoxical World Through the Science of Surprise*

In space, too, most of us were removed. When it happened, the closest ones not directly involved were still some 40 miles away.

We are removed.

I am even further removed, now, many states away. Some 900 miles south is the nearest New Orleans courtyard of any kind, almost a straight shot down. If I were to look out my window there would be no Gulf of Anything, no salty air. There are some large lakes nearby, but I don't think they drill for oil there. This doesn't make me like them less, the fact that no one drills for oil in their water, but I don't like them as much. I don't know them. They seem just as far. Ideally, I could look out my window and down, to the South, drop something, a baseball, a pin, a match, and know it would keep falling those 900 miles.

I write about it now, here, because others still write about it elsewhere, because it is still happening.

So far removed, yet it is still happening.



The most recent headline I've seen reads something like this: **Feds Let Oil Company Off Probation Despite Pending Safety Violations**

Nothing about this surprises me.

Does it surprise you?

I can't imagine it does.

To be surprised means to be attacked without warning, to be taken unaware. It "represents the difference between expectations and reality, the gaps between our assumptions and expectations about worldly events and the way those events actually turn out."

There is mystery in a surprise: you don't know something is coming and then, with a slight flash of green, it is there.

Surprise.

Surprise!

There is no mystery in **Feds Let Oil Company Off Probation Despite Pending Safety Violations**.

The article states, "Like the investigations into [the] Deepwater Horizon accident in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, a series of reports analyzing the refinery disaster found that the company had failed to follow basic steps to avert a disaster, had not installed or maintained equipment that would have helped prevent the leak and the explosion, and generally had a poor safety approach."

It says "Like the investigations" because a few words before, the article was discussing another investigation of another explosion at another of the oil company's sites. This time it was at a refinery not *in* but along the water. I bet the

fire glowed in a similar way though, its reds and oranges and blues, where it was really hot, reflecting off the sheen surface it sat along. I bet there was boiling black smoke too, columns of it. It's a common sight of chemical fires, they say, and that's no surprise.

I bet after the 15 deaths were confirmed, the company was still remorseful. Still said, "Our thoughts and prayers go out to all those men and their friends and families."

And, "The company has addressed the most serious safety deficiencies exposed by the accident and satisfied the terms of a felony plea agreement to settle charges that it failed to protect workers from known risks."

And while "[t]he move closes a controversial chapter for the company," I bet it still "leaves an array of worker-safety issues unresolved."

Yes.

There is no surprise in that.

We know the company failed, just like we know that to be surprised means our predictions have failed us.

We know basic steps weren't taken.

We know any number of things could have been done to prevent any bubble from surging and causing the flame that caused the fire and the leak that never seemed to stop.

We knew these things on Day 7. We knew them on Day 13, 21, 34, 55 . . .

We know there was gross neglect and willful misconduct.

We know the oil company "had been repeatedly warned that its facilities

were in need of repair,” and we know the company also “declined to replace ailing equipment—including the unit that failed the day of the explosion—in order to cut costs.”

The explosion occurred on a Tuesday.

Remember.

This is about failure, and what we are supposed to have learned from it.

And what we haven't.

We knew before that Tuesday, didn't we?

We knew.

We know these things.

And how can you be surprised when you know what is coming?

## CHAPTER X

## ROYAL BLUE

In memory: she seems taller, and is probably nothing that she actually is. Her eyes are almonds of dark green and her skin is the color of something so much better than caramel.

She is not Priestess Miriam, and I think this is what I liked about her.

She was a good deal younger than Priestess Miriam but garnered a sort of respect or even fearful reverence from the start. She wore a royal blue dress that fit tight around her chest then loosened and flowed till it reached her ankles and bare feet.

She was a mystery, and I know this is what I liked about her.

Before the ceremony began, she stood mostly out of view. Every now and then, she would walk out and arrange something on the altar or do something to the basin where the fire would eventually glow. She did something that told you she knew what she was doing. Even though it was Priestess Miriam's temple, she knew she had some form of control, and so did we. She would sway out and everyone adjusted their posture, hoping to be noticed or called on to help.

When she swayed, I watched her sway. At the beginning of the ceremony, when we were all still shy and just sat there or maybe tapped our feet and fingertips, it was she who took big steps to the middle of the crescent of chairs, next to the fire. She started moving exactly how she wanted to move. Her body rocked or it bounced back-and-forth, she would balance on one foot and then the other, turning in circles,

sweating, arms extended, then down to the curves of her well-sculpted, royal blue sides, then up in the air, hands open, eyes closed.

She knew what she was doing, and I liked this about her. It was, at least in that courtyard, something I didn't know about myself.

I would learn she too was a Voodoo priestess. One who did not have a temple or shop of her own, but one who was in demand and had a name among the city's Voodoo community. She would turn people away, I was told, if she felt they weren't ready to receive the news she had for them. People who were clients, people who would pay, she would decline.

Even when I learned she was a legal assistant during the day, a sharp dart to her ballooning anonymity and exoticism; even away from memory, away from fondness, in that part of the psyche that sees things more as they probably were, as they probably are; in a space far from the courtyard, where Royal Blue was likely wearing a darker shade of blue, more like midnight, in a tone where it's difficult to see, and her eyes were a color I didn't actually care for, her skin obscured by the fire's flames and shadows; even then, she would remain a mystery, the enigmatic figure I wanted Voodoo to be.

## CHAPTER XI

## VOODOO IS (4)

Voodoo is, for the uninitiated like myself, as much about the ephemeral images thrust in one's direction as anything. They comprise something like a devilish mask that grins of homage yet seems more like an ambiguous insinuation of what Voodoo once was, or what it might be, if it could only stop being whatever it is.

And what is it?

In a city where tourism is the largest industry—as well as the second largest in the state, only behind the business of oil and petroleum—it takes many forms. Ones that can be seen in the more commercialized parts of the city where, just as in the commercialized parts of any city, everything has been branded into one trite platitude more precious and inane than the next. Still, New Orleans is a city that has been hit by disaster—both manmade and natural—and must look somewhere for economic backing.

There is the arena football team, the New Orleans VooDoo, whose logo is a grinning skull beneath a black top hat shaded purple and red, and sunglasses obscure the cavities where eyes would be. There are Voodoo festivals and Voodoo T-shirts and drinks—the “Voodoo Bomber,” the “Mystic Voodoo,” the “Voodoo Surprise.”

However, more than anything, there is the curio found in the Voodoo shops and stands:

There are chickens feet used to reverse hexes.

There are black candles and black gris-gris bags for evil and harm, to be burned at the start of a new moon; purple candles for domination and power.

There are snakeskins that represent the Voodoo serpent spirit—and if you add a gris-gris bag or pin it to a candle, it only becomes more powerful.

There are mojo balls, alligator claws, and alligator heads. There is dove's blood ink, actual brimstone, raccoon penis bones, and zombie bottles meant to contain the spirits of the deceased.

There are cast iron cauldrons where poisoned entrails, fillet of a fenny snake, eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, tongue a dog, and who knows what else could boil and toil by the hands of one, two, or three witches, after the hedgehog has whined and the cat has hissed, when it is time, it is time.

Yet for every black gris-gris bag and purple candle, lacquered alligator limb or penis bone of any species, there are pink candles for love. There are white candles for peace, yellow for luck, orange for creativity, blue for healing, even brown for "legal matters."

There are Hand-Blended Practitioner-Made Potion Oils that, they tell us, are "blessed for magical purposes." Purposes like "Come to Me," "Draw Your Mate," "Fertility," "Lucky Lotto & Gambling," "Win in Court," "Love Potion Number 9," and "Yummy Boy." Oils described like fast food fried chicken: "These potions are truly special and unique," they are "hand mixed by our authentic practitioners, using our time honored family recipes. Each batch begins with the finest roots and herbs," then into the fryer until it reaches a crispy golden crunch.

And the black candles aren't just for evil and harm, they are also for meditation; purple isn't only for domination and power but leadership too; and brimstone, with its fire and eternal damnation for the unbelieving is, after all, just sulfur. The same element used in fertilizer to help grow tulips and lilies, flowers like the ones I saw printed on postcards in a one of those many Voodoo shops. In this same shop, sitting in the corner, not even knee-high, was a trashcan shaped like a white calla lily. Its edges dipped and curled, they were turned away, like a rolled spathe around a spadix of waste.



CHAPTER XII  
ABOUT THE WORD "ARMADA"

It's difficult to hear it and not think about fleets of ships tumbling through the open sea.

It has a lot to do with everything, this tumbling through the sea.

I associate it with the word inquisition, which I associate with far-off worlds and far-off times. Salty water, salty air, the horizon, a scraggly guy with a scraggly beard looking through his pirate spyglass and shouting: "Enemies on the horizon, captain!" or "Hoist the flags!" or "Land ho!" when they finally get to where they are going—I think of that sort of thing. High-crested helmets worn by conquistadors, tunics of chain mail, chest plates of polished iron and steel, even those three-pointed hats like Haman used to wear—that stuff too.

I think of what I've been told, the stories, the ones I never saw on a page.

I associate it with adventure, and maybe this is why I am here. I want adventure.

Not long after the day that started the counting, people asked me, Are you going to go down to the Gulf? They said, It's crazy. They said, Everything happening down there, it's just crazy. It's insane. I can't believe it.

They asked, Did you see the latest totals?

What are they going to do?

Have they done anything?

The further removed we became, as the gallons continued to flow, the more

people asked: Are you going down there? What are you going to do?

After a certain number of days, balls of tar were found on shores from Florida to Texas. To anyone not from the Gulf Coast, this seemed to mean we were all suffering. Because there were balls of tar the size of nickels or quarters or silver dollars—this is about money; it is always about money—because those balls of tar grew larger and larger and then began to coat all the life it came into contact with, the beaks and gills and wings and shells—it is about loss.

People asked, Are you going to go down to your Gulf?

I want adventure, so I said yes.

I am not from New Orleans. I am from Houston. I have no claim on this place, but the two cities are not far from each other, and both sit near the Gulf: this is the connection. This is why people asked. Why I felt some strange sense of place or pride or something when they phrased it “your Gulf.” It provided identity, a balance, the answer to a question—and isn’t this what we want? Isn’t this why we turn to Voodoo or anything else, to give us some distinction, to provide answers? To reinforce the illusion of reality we choose to represent to ourselves.

Though, by all accounts, this adventure is far from anything altruistic. I can see no enemies, with cannons drawn, on the horizon. They are too far away, too far out; too far up, beyond reach.

What good would it do to name them, the ones responsible?

Who is responsible?

Who is responsible?

I can’t find it in the papers or hear it on any channel.

I am fighting no opponent that can be viewed through a collapsible lens, a lens of any kind, and I am not fighting for queen and country or anyone else whose bust has been painted and framed. I don't want my form to hang in a hallway with dimly lit air.

My blood has not been spilt. My wounds have not been washed by salty water without any hope for recovery.

I am not one of eleven.

My wanting is a bit superficial—perhaps more than a bit—like wanting to be anywhere you are not. Though it is only wanted due to circumstance, and this sort of pressure can carry such heavy weight. The need to feed a family, the need to have a job, the need to get to work—they are reasonable needs, but ones I don't yet know. Not fully. I still want adventure, the kind from the stories I've been told, and the emergence of disaster provides opportunity for adventure. Is this bad? I don't know. Is it doing harm? It isn't the same question, but I still don't know.

In some countries, Spain and Portugal and maybe a few others, it essentially refers to being "armed" or to the "armed forces"—an "armada of ships and aircrafts [were] mobilized to contain the oil slick"—and what does it mean to be armed? To be "furnished," is the way it was phrased in one printing I saw. Furnished with weapons. Furnished to provide security, strength. Furnished to provide efficacy.

What do we want our effect to be?

Do we not have the power to dictate such things? Is this not why we have created the stories we tell ourselves?

Who do we want to be?

CHAPTER XIII  
VOODOO IS (5)  
THREE STORIES

1. Chunks of Love

Mrs. Jessie May Akins, a woman of Chandler, Arizona, who was given a five-year suspended sentence and ordered by state Supreme Court Judge George M. Sterling to stay away from her ex-husband.

His name was Frank.

The order came after a jury convicted Jessie May, a month earlier, of assault with a deadly weapon—the weapon being some sort of firearm. Jessie May had wounded Frank during an argument at their home while “under the spell of a voodoo doctor,” she told the court. She was not in her right mind and it was not her fault.

Why?

It was Voodoo.

She also said that her former husband had himself torn out a chunk of her hair and had then given it to a Voodoo doctor in the Chandler area. She testified that the doctor had hexed her and she shot Frank to “break the spell.”

It was the only thing she could do.

## 2. A Liberal Sprinkling

“The district court trial of a suit contesting the will of a late Negro landowner was disrupted Friday by an old Negro woman who sprinkled the court room [sic] liberally with ‘voodoo’ powder,” reads an AP dispatch from Conroe, Texas, to The Dallas Morning News on July 13, 1957.

The defendant in the case was Abe Alexander, a “52-year-old Negro,” according to the dispatch. Alexander accused his family, who were also the plaintiffs in the case, of hiring the “old Negro woman who sprinkled the court room [sic] liberally with ‘voodoo’ powder.”

Why?

“To cast a spell and make him lose,” we’re told.

The “old Negro woman who sprinkled the court room [sic] liberally with ‘voodoo’ powder” was a woman Alexander understood to be “a leader of Negro voodoo rites in Houston.” In the courtroom, she was “clad in green” and acted “as though she was performing a ritualistic rite.” She sprinkled the powder everywhere. On seats, on windows, on “witnesses in the presence of a fascinated twelve-man jury.”

Alexander told a reporter that the woman even tried to sprinkle him with the powder. It was a powder he had heard of all his life, says the dispatch, and he was afraid of it.

“It’s supposed to make people crazy and then they linger on and die,” the dispatch quotes him saying.

Thankfully for Alexander, while the “old Negro woman who sprinkled the court room [sic] liberally with ‘voodoo’ powder” tried to also sprinkle him with powder, he “managed to elude her.”

After leaving the courtroom, some of that same powder was found on Alexander’s car. Consequently, “He would not drive home,” we are told, “until the car was washed at a service station.”

### 3. Scratches and Cake

A New Orleans housewife found three pieces of cake under her doorstep. When she found them, “she didn’t even look back. She went straight to St. Louis cemetery No. 2 and scratched a sign of the cross on the tomb of Marie Laveau.”

It was the only thing she could do, she said, and her neighbors and the police agreed.

Why?

Those three pieces of cake meant Voodoo. It was gris-gris, “or the manifestation of the kind of hocus-pocus brought by slaves from Africa,” we’re told in the December 22, 1947 edition of the State Journal from Lansing, Michigan.

Marie Laveau, whose tomb was scratched, is the most significant Voodoo queen or priestess or practitioner of any designation in the history of New Orleans. She “practiced voodoo in the 1830s,” says the State Journal, “but still [has] power in her tomb today, still able to overcome the power of a bonafide [sic] gris-gris.”

“She’s the greatest,” one person told me, “and the best.”

In her 1931 piece *Hoodoo in America*, Zora Neale Hurston describes her as “the great name of Negro conjure.” She is also considered to be “somewhat of a poster child for the mixed races that emerge from New Orleans as she is said to have been a free person of color and part Choctaw.” Or, as the State Journals puts it, she was “big, handsome, banana-colored.” The Journal also says she used to take “baths in the blood of a chicken.” Today, she is in paintings on walls and posters and postcards and even playing cards. She is figurines and key chains, on brochures.

Her tomb, in St. Louis Cemetery, is just down the street from the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, and that is where the housewife who found the cake went to do her scratching.

This housewife was also a landlady, and police suspected one of her tenants was responsible for placing the cake at her doorstep, was “trying to voodoo her because she had filed an eviction notice.”

While “genuine gris-gris can be almost anything,” while it can be “a hideous monster made from candle grease and match sticks, or pennies in a circle,” on this occasion it was those three pieces of cake. And whatever it is, according to the State Journal, “it bodes nothing but ill will for its victims, usually death.”



CHAPTER XIV  
A TODDLER,  
AND THE INESCAPABLE NEED FOR CLEANLINESS

There are reasons why Voodoo has lost the formula that made it such a mysterious hit in earlier years.

In one particular Voodoo shop, the sun shone through the window, its rays illuminating floating particles of dust in the air before hitting your skin with just the right amount of warmth. It was brilliant.

It was at this time of brilliance that a child of maybe three stumbled into the store, closely behind his mother, surrounded by ominous air. This air, however, had nothing to do with any black candles or bags of gris-gris. Instead, it had everything to do with the toddler's inability to wait, or his inability to speak up—he was a toddler after all—or his inability to locate a more proper place to shit his pants, which is exactly what he did in the middle of the store.

His head cocked like a big brown-eyed cocker spaniel that had just heard a high pitched noise and didn't know what to do about it or what it was even supposed to mean. The troubled look at the curve of his brow said it all:

Why?

Before going to his mother—who was looking around the store and now several feet away, positioned among “Voodoo Soaps” the scent of Pinion Pine for “Healing, Protection, Banishing & Prosperity,” Sweet Grass that “Spiritually Cleans & Sweetens Sacred Space, Safe Travel, Attracts Good Spirits Before Performing Spells,”

and Juniper Berries & Leaves for “Love, Protection From Theft & Male Potency”—the toddler also looked around. Staying stationary, one can also assume so as not to further disrupt an already uncomfortable situation, he simply turned his head from wall to wall, ceiling to floor, as if in a daze of both confusion and wonderment:

Why?

Speckles of sunlight sprinkling his youthful skin, and he must have felt warm standing there. I can’t help but think he was also hoping he could undo what he had already done. Perhaps, if there was a Voodoo Soap that could spiritually cleanse and sweeten sacred spaces, there was also an item to be used to un-plop the small briquettes of crap now resting in his undergarment.

And it was just like that—for a reason that seems obvious, but one I truly believe is rooted in something beyond my grasp—that the store was no longer draped with mystery but, instead, with the excremental.

The woman at the register—who I recognized from being at the St. John’s Eve ceremony—saw the toddler’s worry too, his dipped brow:

Why?

By this time, the young boy had waddled over to his mother, “Mom, I . . . Mom, I . . .” squeaking from his mouth and loudening at a fast pace. His mother turned from the soaps to tend to her young son. It was obvious she recognized the toddler’s brow, its question, bending her knees immediately to be closer to her son.

The woman behind the register bent her knees too, reaching beneath the register’s counter, down and then back up again, emerging with a package of Wet Ones Sensitive Skin Hand Wipes in a plastic cylinder the color of mint chocolate chip

ice cream. She walked a tight line to the mother and son to help where she could.

As the minutes passed the situation was, eventually, handled.

It's not that I'm upset with the boy or with the store's employee. While some are worse than others, we all have accidents. I understand this. It's just I don't want my Voodoo practitioners to use hand wipes that come in plastic cylinders the color of mint chocolate chip ice cream, let alone have them readily available. Maybe this wasn't the first time a young child, or anyone for that matter, had had an accident inside the store. But still.

Shouldn't mysterious powers be able to dwarf shit-covered children?

Is there not a spirit for this?

## CHAPTER XV

## CINNAMON

Jerry tells me he has a real good friend named Cinnamon—yes, Cinnamon—and that Cinnamon is one of the women who dances in the streets on Fool’s Day, Mardi Gras, half-naked. She is the head of the Baby Dolls, he says, who “dress like baby dolls, but they’re are a lot more adult.” He tells me that Cinnamon will join five or six or maybe even more girls, and “they wear fishnet stockings and stiletto heels, and they wear little tiny skirts that don’t cover anything because they wear those little, fancy ruffle panties and stuff that’s meant to be shown,” and “they sexually dance and they sexually taunt both men and women.”

Why?

Balance is needed.

Because the night before another group, known as the Skull and Bone Men, will dress like skeletons, “because they represent what’s called the Ghédé spirit, that’s the skeletal spirit, and he is the spirit of the gateway to the graveyard.” They are similar to the *Egungun*, a secret society in honor of the spirits, the ancestors, the Voodoo.

He tells me the Skull and Bone Men will enter Congo Square through the front gate, in the middle of the night before Fool’s Day. They will hold a Voodoo ceremony where they will ask the spirits to possess them—and, remember, that is the object of a Voodoo ceremony, to become possessed, he says. After they have become possessed—fully possessed, not simply in costumes and bone colored face

paint but transformed into the spirits themselves—they will leave Congo Square out the back gate. The back gate because a transformation has occurred. They will go to Tremé, one of the oldest neighborhoods in New Orleans. Once there, they will proceed to certain houses “by prearrangement,” he tells me. They will find the houses with unlocked doors, turn their knobs, and they will enter these houses. They will quietly navigate the dark halls till they have found the children’s bedrooms, and the gaunt figures will turn the knobs of these doors too.

And then?

“They burst into the rooms in the skeleton getups, and they’re chanting and drumming and dancing and everything,” he says. “They wake the kids up from a dead sleep and scare the hell out of them.”

Yeah?

“Oh yeah. You know what they do after that?”

I don’t know what they do after that. What? What do they do?

“They tell them to stay in school.”

Oh. Really?

“Yeah. They tell them: do your homework, listen to your parents, don’t take drugs. And they’re most concerned with kids joining gangs. So they tell them that if you join a gang, we’re going to come and get you and take you to the cemetery before it’s your time.”

Really.

“Oh yeah. And what they mean by that is that they’re like the grim reaper, and that if you join a gang you’re going to die early and we’re going to have to take

you to the cemetery.”

Please don't misunderstand me. I don't want small children to be snatched from beneath their covers in the middle of the night. It's not that telling children to do well in school, to stay away from drugs and gangs is necessarily a bad thing either. Maybe it's even good. But nothing about Voodoo had been what I wanted, and the Skull and Bone men story had such promise. They are, after all, called the Skull and Bone men. A bunch of guys dressed like skeletons, roaming between the headstones of a moonlit cemetery. *Where are they going?* To the homes. *What homes?* To the homes of children. *They're going homes of children?!* That's right they are. To homes, where children are sleeping, peacefully sleeping, just waiting to be snatched, taken from comfort. A blinding black hood flung over their tiny child heads—or maybe their blankets would be used, those very layers of soft cartoon animal print security, to render them sightless. Windows would be broken. Teddy bears would have acid thrown in their cuddly, button-nosed faces. *It would be horrific.* Indeed, it would be. And I'm not saying I want such horrible acts to happen, not at all. But it would have been nice, at least, for a story. No, nothing about Voodoo had been what I wanted, though I still don't know what it is I wanted to hear.

So, there is life and there is death: the skeletons of last night to the skinned bones that make the curved hips of the girls like Cinnamon who sway throughout the next day. And her hips will sway, and her legs will move her through the streets as she dances. Her thighs, her arms and shoulders, her head and chest will move.

She will move. She will dance on the day of life that follows the night of death; and she will move and dance on other days too, ones that don't rub the delicate interstice so closely, because she knows how to move. She moves quite often, as men and women stare at the stage where she presents herself hidden in the glow of bright lights because "Cinnamon," Jerry tells me, "is also a stripper."

"Is she?" I say, trying to sound surprised.

"Yeah, you know, she's a dancer," he says, smiling both coyly and proudly like a schoolboy telling his friends about seeing a naked girl for the first time. "She's an exotic dancer."

"Are they all strippers, all the girls who dance in the streets on Mardi Gras, the Baby Dolls?"

"Well," he says with the same smile, "Some of them are, you know. They might be, but I'm not sure." He pauses before continuing, "But I don't want you to get the wrong idea or anything like that. They're good people."

"Oh no, no," I say. "Definitely not. No, I'm sure they are good people."

And I'm sure Cinnamon and the rest of the dancing girls are fine people, as good and bad as the next. Still, for whatever reason—though more likely and more simply, because what he'd described to me so far was a bunch of strippers dancing around half-naked in a way that seemed consistent with what I considered to be typical stripper behavior, if only in a shallow and uninvestigated way; not to mention that all of this would be happening on a day like Mardi Gras, a day when thousands of people dance in the streets of New Orleans, people who are not strippers but who also, on that day, might be half-naked—because of this,

everything he was telling me about the world he wanted me to know, about the world I wanted to know, reached a new level of general uncertainty.

Still, I wanted to believe in this world. I wanted to believe the sort of magic I encountered as a kid existed somewhere. I wanted to believe that 40 miles off Louisiana's coast, swaying in the Gulf's waters, there wasn't approximately 42,000 gallons of oil or approximately 800,000 gallons of oil, or approximately however many gallons of oil there was—because “our original estimates were not as severe as the situation actually is”—spewing from the earth that spewed from the rig, where there was an explosion that caused a fire where eleven people went missing and eleven people died.

Eleven people I would eventually forget.

Eleven people I never knew.

Eleven people I have forgotten.



## CHAPTER XVI

## CAPTAIN CLIFF

Captain Cliff knows a lot about knots. He knows that if a bad section of rope needs to be taken care of, a Sheepshank knot will shorten the rope and therefore isolate the problem. He knows a Cleat Hitch will secure a mooring line to a dock cleat; a Carrick Bend can be used to join two towline hawsers; and a Butterfly knot will create a secure loop in the middle of any rope.

I, on the other hand, don't know a lot about knots. Basically nothing. While I did grow up spending my fair share of time wandering outside and by water, the complexity of the various forms a knot can take had very little to do with anything I did. There was never the need to know that a Constrictor knot will fasten bundles of things in need of bundling, say sticks or other things like sticks; that a Cow Hitch is more secure than a Slippery Hitch but will come apart if the tag end is pulled. I don't even know what a tag end is. Never did I need to know about a Girth Hitch, a Half Hitch, a Clove Hitch, a Sheet Bend, a Poacher's knot, a Chain Splice, or an Eye Splice. I did, however, discover that I knew how to tie an Overhand Knot. It is one of the most basic of all the knots. The one a majority of non-fishermen would tie, if they were told to make a knot. But knowing how to tie an Overhand Knot, I would also learn, means you don't know how to tie knots. As I said, I don't know a lot about knots.

It is just one of the many ways Captain Cliff and I are very different. Yet knots are also my go to conversation when I don't know what else to talk about with

Captain Cliff. I'll say something like, "Hey, what kind of knot is this?" or "That's a good looking knot," and then he'll tell me all about it.

Indeed, Captain Cliff and I are very different. I was not born in Pascagoula, Mississippi, and I haven't been working on a boat since I was eleven. I don't have a wife named Marie who, when I leave the house to go fishing, says, "Don't bring that smell back in here like you did the last time. That smell was alive. It was stinky and alive! I almost had to bug bomb the whole goddamn house after that," and then looks around to make sure the children aren't there before giggling. Nor do I have those three children, Christina, Michael, and Abigail, who is the youngest, who does not have my same brown eyes. My eyes are green; Captain Cliff's eyes are brown. And they were the only other human eyes I'd see on and off for the better part of two weeks, while floating aboard his shrimping trawler in the Gulf of Mexico.

His trawler's name: Marie.

Marie is mainly white, has cream trimming, and a dark blue keel. She is 50 feet long. All her rigging is galvanized. Her nets are called trawls, and her trawls are red and hang from green outriggers like theater curtains of mesh when not being used, waiting for the show to commence. She has a 6,000-gallon fuel tank, a 2,000-gallon water tank, and has the ability to haul in more than 1,500 pounds of shrimp per day.

She hadn't caught any since the spill.

Captain Cliff is one of the 20,000 people who benefits from Louisiana's ports and wildlife industry. Despite not having caught anything for several weeks that

turned to months, he believes that if you work hard enough good things will happen. I enjoy thinking he is naïve in this way.

How do you know when you've worked hard enough? I asked him.

"Oh, I guess when good things start happening," he said, and then he laughed and looked down to the rope where he was tying something I could never know.

What are good things?

"Oh, you want everything to work out, you know, good for your family, your wife and kids, and your friends. You want to be able to send them to college—and you hope they want to go to college, so they don't have to do what you're doing. Not that I don't want to be shrimping and don't enjoy it or anything. My dad fished and now I'm doing it and I hope they, well, you know . . . I hope they know it's part of who they are, and I think they do. I guess you just want to be able to be there to help. You know, I love shrimping, it makes me feel alive and it's just real nice, but it'll be nice to be at home more also. There are things you miss. The other day Christina, my oldest, made the cheerleading squad. It would've been nice to be there, at the house, when she got home after school and told everyone. I mean, I got back in just a few days later, but it would've been nice to be there. It can be hard, you know. But this is what we do. It's hard."

I do believe Captain Cliff is a saint in the way you call good people saints. I don't know if it's true, but I believe it. I believe he means well when he leaves the house and doesn't see his wife or his children for weeks at a time, and I believe him when he says he's doing it for them. I believe him when he says, "It's hard."

## CHAPTER XVII

## HEADING TOWARD LEGBA

You're asked, "Why did you come, why are you here?"

Well, you think, "Well," you say, I'm here for a couple of reasons. There are a few. There is the oil spill. That happened, and it seemed important. I wanted to see the spill, its effects. I assume there are effects, but it's easy to assume. They tell me the effects are drastic, major, unlike anything we've ever seen, but I still wonder where they're being felt—maybe in Dawn commercials, where nice people wearing rubber gloves scrub ducks with toothbrushes. The ducks seem to like it, but I still don't know.

Just yesterday I was at a restaurant on Iberville Street, near the French Quarter. It was busy inside, raining outside. The restaurant's glowing sign buzzed orange letters framed by neon green: Oyster House. All the checkered tablecloths were full and everyone was talking. Most were smiling. Families that looked like tourists sat next to people that looked like locals; I sat at the bar. The oysters sat at the ready, abed a mound of small ice pellets, before each one was slurped down. If they wanted more oysters or more shrimp or more of whatever was on the menu, they got it. They asked and they got it. And when I asked the bartender if they were having trouble getting anything in, do you know what he said?

"Nah."

He said, "Nah."

He was holding an unopened oyster and talking to some guy at the other end

of the bar. They were talking about golf, or they were talking about something. The guy asked, "Watch this weekend?" and the bartender said, "No, didn't watch." He was standing with the oyster in one hand and a small knife in the other. "It was alright," said the guy, "About how you'd expect." Standing and talking, the bartender slid the tip of the knife in the split of the unopened oyster. He flicked his wrist and popped the crackling shell, discarding the upper half in a bucket. Left in the small chamber was a pale, cream-colored lump that looked like it could be both delicious and still beating. "Want this one?" asked the bartender, and the guy said, "Why not." He sprinkled it with hot sauce, put it to his lips, and slurped. The bartender walked over to me.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked.

"I'm ok right now." I said. "Actually, I'm just wondering, have y'all had any trouble getting anything in, with the spill and everything?" I pointed down to still unopened, still tightly closed shells.

He grabbed a white rag from the counter and cleaned his hands and said, "Nah." He said, "We get them in everyday. No trouble at all. Might be serving more now than ever."

"Really," I said.

"Oh yeah."

Why am I here?

To learn about Voodoo, to learn about something, to see something. Because, as a kid, I came here and saw those storerooms full of wooden masks with wide

eyes, horns and lips, carved grooves that looked like they came from someplace else. I saw the sagging skeletons hanging in rows and rows with no other choice but to smile a skinless grin. They are smiling. White teeth, bony tooth amongst bony tooth and bony limb. Hanging skeletons like marionettes to be controlled, made to move by yanking the strings, and they'll flop and they'll dance. I saw the shrunken heads and pinned dolls, and I wanted to believe in them, in something that didn't solely belong to this world. I still do, though it's harder now. I want to believe in the witchdoctors. I want to believe in the Voodoo priestesses that smile with lips that splintered a million times from one corner to the next, each crack like a crevice you could wiggle down into and find a world you didn't know was there. I want to know where that world is, where they are from.

I want to believe in something.

I want to know why.

When you're asked why you're here, you say something like that. You say you want to believe in something or see something or learn something.

And then there is a sort of twisted beauty I don't quite know how to reconcile. It happens when the fire's smoke starts to knit and the drums start to do their drumming and the thought of people watching, of you playing some sort of role in a play, only matters because it adds fuel to something that has little to do with performing for another. No matter how much you try to deny this—tell yourself it's about capitalism and deception or some burgeoning crisis, the one that has already begun with an end that never seems to come—it is now about you and whatever

knits in your head. Nothing else.

This performance is for no one but you.

So, when you're caught between the bricks of the courtyard, and the Priestess says, "Let us all rise and start to move how we will move," you do. You rise, and she begins to hum. She hums, and it starts soft and it starts warm, you want to believe it is warm. That's why we are here; we want to believe. She hums and it is deep, it is a drone, it is at a distance and we are at that distance, adrift. It is something like the cellist's bow being pulled across the instrument's lowest, deepest string. Dusk barely gone, the inked night is now here. The rattled vibrations make their way through the thick air to you, and you wait with patient anticipation for them to move closer, closer, and closer. They start as though she wants to enter through your roots, wants to slide in through the soft skin at the tips of your toes, letting her hum boil down in the feet before surging up through ankles and calves, through thighs, through hips and belly and back, rattling against bone, through chest and collar and neck, then swirling, like a galaxy, in the head. She hums and it swells and it glows like a burning flame, till it's taken away or leaves like a receding tide, and you think it's gone. But the swell returns, as swells return, and you can feel the vibration again like a fluttering of cavernous thumps. She hums, "Children," she says, "Children," and we become her children. It's easy. It seems simple in that moment. "Children, let's close our eyes now. Let's do this together, here, as we sit listening to those drums play their beat." And before this there are no drums, only thick air, only her humming. Then, and without hesitation, the Weasel Man nods and goes "dum dum-dum dum," counting in the drummers, and the drummers begin to drum *dum*

*dum-dum dum*, proliferating with each beat. Others, who you thought were only sitting, now pull drums from beneath their chairs and from bags and seemingly from nowhere. They are all around you. They hold their drums between thighs, and they hold their drums between arms and sides, and they sway. Steady, they drum *dum dum-dum dum*. It's easy to sink beneath this rhythm: you, watching from the seafloor as the ceiling floats by; or it's easy to become stuck, its cadence a viscous eddy with no embankment or branch to grab hold; or maybe, simply, it's easy to float above and look down as the sound waves and thickens in the thick air, seeing yourself lying on the sea's floor beneath the gathered ceiling of thumps. She hums. She hums, and you can no longer imagine the courtyard without her humming. "We are here," she says, "are we not?" Her phrases crescendo to a point before sliding back down to a whisper. She hums, "Yes, oh yes, we are here. And if we weren't, where would we be?"



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