

**Praise for Louis Maistros and his novel, *The Sound of Building Coffins*:**

"Louis Maistros has written a lyrical, complex, and brave novel that takes enormous risks and pulls them all off. He is a writer to watch and keep reading, a writer to cherish."

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"The Society of North American Magic Realists welcomes its newest, most dazzling member, Louis Maistros. His debut novel is a thing of wonder, unlike anything in our literature. It startles. It stuns. It stupefies. No novel since *A Confederacy of Dunces* has done such justice to New Orleans."

—**Donald Harington**, *winner of the Robert Penn Warren Award*

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* is easily one of the finest and truest pieces of New Orleans fiction I've ever read."

—**Poppy Z. Brite**

"Maistros creates a city that is part dream, part hallucination. His New Orleans embodies both the grim reality of a particular time and the city's eternal, shimmering beauty. And, with the book's title, he provides us with a new and unforgettable metaphor for the sound of hammers at work, whether boarding up for a storm or rebuilding after one."

—**Susan Larson**, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* a macabre and utterly hypnotic feat of literary imagination..."

—**Philip Booth**, *St. Petersburg Times*

"Highly recommended for all fiction collections, especially where there is an interest in jazz."

—**Library Journal**

"The multiple plot lines smoothly interlock like simultaneous horn solos in an early Louis Armstrong single, and the steady flow of closely observed details and dialogue are a consistent pleasure."

—**Joab Jackson**, *The Baltimore City Paper*

"This book sings out in true jazz fashion—wildly inventive, oddly formed yet perfectly made, and never a sour note."

—**The Anniston Star**

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* is riveting ... a remarkable first novel."

—**Endtype: A Canadian Literary Magazine**

"A sprawling, complex, and ultimately absorbing work."

—**John Lewis**, *Baltimore Magazine*

"Louis Maistros has an original and dark vision, full of power."

—**Douglas Clegg**

More reviews of *[The Sound of Building Coffins](#)* can be found at the end of this ebook, and at <http://louismaistros.com>.

**Anti-requiem:**

**New Orleans Stories by Louis Maistros**

Smashwords Edition

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The cover photograph was taken by the author at City Park in New Orleans in the summer of 2006. The little boy playing beneath storm clouds is his son, Booker Maistros.

These stories, except where noted, are works of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Reviews of [\*The Sound of Building Coffins\*](http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/1955) can be found at the end of this ebook, or at <http://louismaistros.com>.

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Anti-requiem

## **NEAR TRUTHS**

## Gwen

Ugly a little; that's Gwen.

Dumpy-small body, no hips, baggy brown corduroy jeans and the kinda combat boots gotta big round toe lika clownfoot. Close-cropped dirty blonde head almost hidden by a hunting cap a la Elmer Fudd circa Kurt Cobain but bright blue.

Hands: pink and steady.

Face: Well, kinda pretty. Strangely tattooless, pierceless—naked almost.

Gwen's gotta pencil and a buncha colored sticks, padda grey paper meant for watercolors: rough. She's walking round Kaldi's Coffehousemuseum staring soft at people, sometimes hard. Sometimes folks get stared at so soft they hardly feel the tickle, sometimes so hard it shoves 'em right out the front door.

Sometimes Gwen stares so hard she makes herself mad, takes out her pencil and colored sticks and draws em right in the face, sometimes in the gut, but never below the waist. That'd be unsportsmanlike. After she's done drawin' em good and hard she makes em pay. Five bucks a picture, take it home.

If they don't wanna pay then she really makes em pay: Crunches their picture inna little grey ball and eats it lika apple right in front of em, tiny pretty molars squeaking hard on the rough paper. They always pay somehowirrother.

A lady walks in with a fella, she's wearing a bright yella t-shirt sez:

Jesus died for your sins and.. YOU OWE HIM BIG TIME!! There's a cartoon of a wild-eyed, muscle-ripped Jesus gushing blood out of his side, pointing a pumped index finger at Gwen or whoever's looking. Monster-like.

Gwen stares soft awhile. Then hard.

It's the lady's turn in line: Two bavarian mochas, please.

Gwen walks up quiet lika cat, keeps her distance, close but far.

Stares hard and loud. Deafening.

She doesn't stare with anger or hate but with a sorta wonder—what's it mean? Gwen asks herself under the little blue hunting cap. All this jesus-talk. She knows what it's supposed to mean but what's it really mean? She's tricking herself thinking she doesn't understand, though. The answer to every question she's ever asked herself has always been there, twisting and stewing under the little blue hunting cap. It squirms around in there so bad right now that she is sorta mad. Sorta hateful.

The lady walks over to join her boy-who-grabbed-a-table, bavarian mochas in tow, acting like she can't feel Gwen's pointy little eyeballs. Fella-man can't act so good and looks damn uncomfortable. He: Who's yr friend? She: Sshhh, crazy girl.

Gwen's a little mad: doesn't like it when people pretend they don't hear when she knows damn well she's staring with perfect, crisp, high-fi audibility.

Gwen sits her dumpy self 3 tables from the 2. Brandishes pencil.

Draws that lady right in the damn nose.

The lady thinks it's creepy gettin' drawn by someone nuts: C'mon, let's go. They split.

Gwen tears the paper in a straight line from the edge up to the nose, tears a circle around the nose-picture. Crushes the little nose into a tiny ball, marble-size. Opens her pretty little mouth and

places the greymarblewad on the tip of her tongue, reels it in. Washes that fucker right down the hatch with two halfdrunk brown glasses of bavarian mocha. Closes her little eyes.

Smiles a little. Ugly a little.

Skips outta that coffeeplace singing.

Ugly but kinda pretty.

Like someone in love.

\* \* \* \*

Gwen darts down the sidewalk at topspeed, slappin' clownfeet loud and hard. Doesn't quite stop but slows alla sudden: feline-neurotic-like.

Hungry.

Gwen could stuff her whole belly full of little drawn-on chunks of rough gray paper and still feel hungry.

Walkslow.

Topspeed.

Slowalk.

People clearapath—

Topspeed zoom.

Gwen checks the trashpile in front of her favorite Nawlins fine dining establishment, singing something about it's a small world after all. All the good stuff is tainted with damp cigarette ash - Gwen finds this to be unacceptable fare. Near the bottom towards the left is a small white plastic bag, knotted shut. Pokes a pink finger in, rips it open.

A cat: the fluffy orange kind, dead from eating rat poison, tongue black and swollen, chin dotted by dried blood-foam, eyes yella and frozen scared. Gwen stares soft, same way she looks inna mirror when she's sad. Looks like a Joey, she thinks. Ugly little thing.

She brushes the cig ashes off Joey's damp fur with her hand.

A trash pile ain't a fittin' end for anything with a soul—Gwen is irrefutably certain of this one fact. She tucks the little scruff into her green backpack, being careful he don't get stuck by her colored pencils. She hauls him to the riverside. Joey. She hauls Joey. Little Joey.

It's only a block away, the riverside.

Joey's laying next to the water now. Gwen looks at him and flattens out a large grey sheeta paper. Holds an orange pencil. Sees:

*a big, beautiful lion, surrounded by toys and flowers and tuna fish sandwiches. a thousand tiny lions look on from the distance, wishing they were as large and beautiful and well-fed as the Joey picture. wouldn't be a need for munching any little rat killin' pellets with so many tuna fish sandwiches around...*

Gwen picks up Joey's sad little body, puts him in the center of the picture, wraps him in it. Teaches him to swim. Swim Joey, sez Gwen.

Gwen sits at the edge of the river watching Joey swim away. Cries a little. He swims into the sunset, the sky purple and torn with orange crust lika pie. Isn't it romantic? thinks Gwen.

Gwen skips back towards Decatur Street, feeling tiny drops of bavarian mocha splash around in her belly, splash against a million faces with two million blind eyes, faces crunched into balls. She begins to sing again, not hungry at this moment. It's a small, small

*world.*

*"Gwen" originally appeared in "Son of Brainbox" anthology, 2002, edited by Steve Eller. Written in 1995.*

## New Orleans, December 24, 1994

I've been in this city just nine days.

I was living a smothered life in Charm City; the kind of smother that's comfortable at first but starts to scare the hell out of you after a while. I talked about leaving all the time. "I don't need this shit," I'd say. "I'm with you," my friends would say. Everybody talks like that in Baltimore. No one thinks much of it. People don't actually leave.

Finally, I made a run for it. I swear I never thought I would actually RUN, but that's what I did. I damn well did run.

So it's Christmas Eve already and I'm still a complete stranger, not a friend in the whole state of Louisiana—which is ok with me really; socializing costs money which I'm low on. The music scene's pretty cliquish around here, too—could take a little time before I have any gigs lined up. I feel like playing, though.

I grab my guitar and head for Jackson Square. It's just getting dark.

I walk past the huddled figures of sleeping homeless and their piles of belongings, park myself on an iron bench to the right of St. Peter's Cathedral. Just left of the church there are two police cars facing each other and an ambulance with its spinning cherry-on-top light going but no siren. I take out my guitar and play a Randy Newman song to no one as I watch the spinning light; it feels good.

I play a song called "Glory" next and though I sing with my eyes closed I sense someone to my right. A man whose face and hands are covered with burn scars is taking my picture. I finish the song and he walks up to me; "The light, your shadow on the church, it looks.." He doesn't speak English so good but I figure he's trying to tell me that he was capturing some kinda dramatic Kodak moment. No problem, buddy. He strolls away without putting anything in my guitar case. That's ok, I tell myself, I'm not doing this for money. Not tonight, anyway.

A homeless guy with a red baseball cap tries to scam me, something about his wife's pregnant and he needs to get her to a doctor so if I could just spare thirty-five cents... The story makes me laugh. He laughs too. "Merry Christmas," he says, walking towards the church with a grin. "Merry Christmas," I say.

Fingers getting cold, not moving as quick as my brain wants, ignoring rhythm. Voice hoarsening, it's cold but the air is still thick: the air is always thick in this town. People passing. Nods and Merry Christmases. Some quarters. Then, I'm singing with my eyes closed again and I sense someone watching. Quiet.

I'm playing a song called "Lit Cigarette." I crack my eyes: the man's eyes are closed, too, like me. His complexion is dark, Mexican maybe. After a minute, he puts a hand in his pocket, feeling around for something. The act of searching his pocket throws him off balance; he goes down to his knees. He's drunk.

The hand comes up; he carefully counts the coins in it, taking inventory. He throws a small handful of coins into my case, mostly copper, says, "Play good." I'm not sure if it's a compliment or a request. I stop playing. I say, "Tell me, pal, is it Christmas, yet?"

"It gettin' there," says the man.

I play another song, the man dances crazily to it, complete with Elvis karate moves. He claps when I'm done. I clap, too. He puts out his hand. "They call me Chief Blue Eagle."

"My name is Louie."

"I be right back. You stay here?"

"Sure, pal. I'll be right here."

"You stay." And he was gone. Thirty seconds later he's back with a cart holding a scuffed up Rubber Maid cooler and a bundle of ripe clothes wrapped in a blanket. He sets up camp on the bench across from me. I think callously, great, I'll sure make a lot of tips with Chief Crazy Horse here scaring away all the tourists.

He pulls a can of generic beer out of the cooler, hands it to me. I say thanks, but tuck the thing under my coat, not wanting to get roused; there's a container law that says plastic only; no cans, no glasses. Chief Blue Eagle smiles at me, says, "Cup!" and hands me a plastic one that he pulls out of the blanket. "Chief, you are the man," I say.

"I am the man!" he agrees, grinning.

The beer is warm and good.

The Chief is a man of few words but he smiles and laughs a lot, except when he brings up the subject of his wife. "I come back home to New Orleans. Been gone three years. She not come with me." He sounds sad.

"Where is she?" Just making conversation.

"She my Indian wife," he smiles, looking past me, not answering my question. I figure she's probably dead.

"You like New Orleans, Chief?"

He brightens, "Yes. Like New Orleans."

"Me, too."

I play another song, something by Elvis, hoping to keep the Chief's spirits up, maybe inspire some more karate moves. The Chief:

"Louder."

I stop. "What's that?"

"Play louder. You play louder, you attract more customers, make more money."

"Gotcha," I say, banging out a too-loud version of "Somethin' Else" by Eddie Cochran. The Chief dances and whoops like a man deranged. I know there won't be any more "customers," but that's ok. I'm grinning like a fool for the first time in months.

The guy in the red baseball cap comes back, slaps the Chief on the back; "Hey Chief!" he says. Then to me: "You know my friend, Chief Blue Eagle?"

"Yeah," I say, "We're buddies."

"Be nice to the Chief, he's got beer."

"He's a good man," I say, raising my cup.

The Chief and Red Cap start shouting and laughing about a previous adventure they had shared, something about that motherfucker won't fuck with us no more, will he? We sure told that motherfucker where to go, didn't we? Next time we'll kick his damn ass, won't we?

A sexy girl walks by, probably a dancer from one of the clubs on Bourbon Street. The Chief: "Hey, baby, sit down and talk to me for a minute."

"Stay away from me or I'll cut it off," she snarls.

I glare at the girl as she passes. "Merry Christmas to you, too," I say. The Chief just laughs.

Red Cap: "It's ok, I know that girl. She's just messin' around."

I play a song about Frances Farmer. The Chief and Red Cap laugh and shout while I play. A third man joins them, a little guy with a red sore on his nose. Some do-gooders with a thermos show up, dispensing cups of hot chocolate to the homeless. "Don't forget my friend, Music Man," says The Chief, slapping me on the back. The do-gooders pour me a cup while I sing something about "I hope that God will help you find your way," not really listening to my own words.

After a while The Chief says to the little guy with the sore, "You watch my stuff?"

"I'll watch," the guy says.

Then to me: "You be here, Music Man?"

"Dunno, Chief. Probably be heading out soon."

"We leave." Meaning that he and Red Cap were gonna go make the rounds, looking for charitable "customers." "Be back though. If you not here, Merry Christmas."

Red Cap: "Merry Christmas, pal. They call me C.C."

"Merry Christmas, C.C."

Chief Blue Eagle: "You don't forget me, Music Man."

"I won't."

They left.

I played some more for the guy with the hurt nose, whose name I didn't catch. After a while he says, "Do you know any Guns and Roses?"

"Sorry, Boss—don't know a single tune by those guys. Mostly do my own songs."

"You write songs?" he says, sounding amazed.

"Yeah, sure. Here, I'll play you one." I play "Glory" again. And I pack my guitar.

"Merry Christmas," the guy says, sounding sad.

"Merry Christmas, boss." I put out my hand to him, but he only stares at me like I'm gonna play some mean joke on him. Reluctantly, he puts out his hand to me. His hands are meticulously clean, but his face tells me he's embarrassed by the sight of them.

"Goodbye," he says.

"You'll watch the Chief's stuff?"

"I'll watch."

I walk to Checkpoint Charlie's. Some guy who sounds like Tom Waits is singing Slim Harpo songs. White trash girls in stretch pants gyrate on the dance floor. I order a Guinness and close my eyes.

Christmas morning Danielle calls at ten, wakes me up. Asks me if I miss her. I do.

I tell her about my good deed Christmas concert for the homeless the night before. Then it occurs to me.

*you don't forget me, music man.*

Chief Blue Eagle, C.C., the Guns and Roses guy.

They gave me beer and hustled me hot chocolate, listened to my stupid songs, let me into their little group. They were my first friends in this strange city. I didn't belong in their sad world, but they recognized sadness in me, recognized loneliness. And they let me in.

It was not me who had done a good deed that Christmas Eve.

I pull some clothes on and walk out onto Decatur Street, thinking.

The streets are crowded though most of the shops are closed. About every fifth bar and coffee house is open and packed.

By chance, I see Chief Blue Eagle walking past Kaldi's Coffee Museum. I'm about to call out to him when we make eye contact. And then I know.

In his eyes, I see that he does not remember me.

Suddenly the thought of this old fellow being kind to a stranger on Christmas Eve means even more. Because to the Chief, acts of kindness flow out into the air, soon forgotten. He knew his own mind, and he knew that he would not remember.

And so he knew that I had to be the one who did.

*you don't forget me, music man.*

No way, Chief.

*"New Orleans, December 24, 1994" is previously unpublished. Written on December 25, 1994.*

## Gleebly Rhythm is Born

Marine Boy stared glommy-eyed like a lover at the blackish storm clouds forming outside, their creamy bodies thickening by the second in the whipping wind. With a slight twist of imagination, which Marine Boy had plenty of, the clouds became a swarm of overfed rats, greasy and agitated, looking for a good place to give birth.

The sky filled with pregnant black rats at least once a day this time of year in New Orleans.

*August...*

It was gonna rain real damn hard, real damn soon, Marine Boy thought to himself as his eyes probed the tall thin windows that lined the coffeehouse. Smiled a little. Marine Boy liked the rain. Rain was one of three things that Marine Boy gave a shit about, the other two being Screaming Jay Hawkins and Louis Prima.

Talkin' Tom sat quietly across from him in the near empty java dive, slurping at the edge of a jumbo cup of black something and wearing a t-shirt that said "if they call it tourist season why can't we shoot them?" In a slow lazy motion, he raised a tattoo covered hand to his crewcut head and scratched just above the row of assorted metal pins and rings that chewed his right ear all to hell; slowly, severely. In the cloud-bruised sunlight that shoved through the long, lean window, Talkin' Tom's tattoos looked like day old motor grease.

"You don't understand, Marine Boy, I'm telling you you just don't fucking understand. No one does. No-fucking-body" Tom's rants always started with something about somebody not understanding. Ho hum. All the gutterpunks in New Orleans seemed to come from wealthy homes with tons of petty angst and minor Greek tragedies.

"My old man built rockets, man. He was on the Gemini team, bigshot in the space program, rubbing dicks with motherfuckin' John Glenn and shit. He had it all, everything you could want. But the really important things in life he never had the stomach for, he was just full of fear, I mean full of it, man. That was what got him, man—that was why he offed himself. It was the fear. It was always with him"

Marine Boy was familiar with this line of jabber. Tom's dad really was a bigshot Aerospace executive in the sixties. But no one really knew why he blew his brains out one day in his Woodland Hills mansion. Especially not Tom—who was only three when it happened. But Tom liked to speculate—and occasionally even talked himself into believing that he'd aced the mystery. No one would ever really know, though. Tom's Dad had left no note.

"Fucking rockets, man", Talking Tom intoned dramatically, water in eye.

Then all at once the black bellied rats ripped themselves open and dumped tons of dark water on the city.

\*

Funny how you're still aware of the sting of cut skin even after the knife begins its see-saw into bone. The bone-pain is certainly more profound, it just doesn't *sting* like the flesh-pain. Funny. Ampirella pushed harder on the knife, putting all of her hundred and ten pounds into it.

"Almost through the hard part—you okay?"

"Shuttup and hurry—goddam motherfucker!" The boy's head swam in pain, the pain itself no longer stinging or throbbing but sort of washing over him like tidal wave of warm flame. Funny

how the smell of your own raw blood has no mysterious quality—it smells exactly like the meat section at the A&P. Funny.

\*

Much to Marine Boy's relief, the sheer volume of booming thunder and pounding rain punched a neat little hole in Talkin' Tom's train of thought. He jumped into the dead air like a Mexican hat dancer:

"C'mon Tom, I can't stay inside when it's like this. I get too fuckin' gleeby,"—GLEEBY referring of course to the prophetic 1934 Louis Prima tune which foretold the birth of Gleeby Rhythm. Marine Boy loved a good downpour but it gave him a kind of trapped feeling if it hit while there was a roof overhead. A strange strain of claustrophobia you might say; when it rained hard Marine Boy had to be *in* it. It's one of the reasons they called him Marine Boy. The other being the fish-like appearance that his thick eyeglass lenses and equally thick lips conspired upon his face.

"Shit, Marine Boy. We're gonna fucking drown out there." The drops had already begun to fall and they were as big as softballs—water balloons without the balloon—splashing onto the pavement. "You're a fucking masochist, man."

"Fuck you, Talkin' Tom," Marine Boy grinned, getting up and taking the taller thinner boy with him, pinching firmly at the largest ring that pierced Tom's left brow. "You're the fucking masochist. I'm the sadist".

"Leggo, gleeby bitch!"

The two walked out into the black sheet of water, laughing.

"You know Tom, I been thinking." Marine Boy had to raise his voice over the applause of water and cement colliding. "You torture yourself over your old man everyday. You think he killed himself 'cause he was afraid of being himself—maybe that's true. But you try to over compensate by living like a damn freak. You're covered in tattoos. Every loose flap of flesh on your body is pierced, branded or nailed. It's almost like you're punishing yourself for what your dad was—or wasn't. I mean, I know lots of degenerates who dig pain, but you take it to an extreme—"

"Hey man," Talkin' Tom butted in, "all you know about pain is the kind that you inflict on your eardrums with all that Screaming Jay Hawkins crap. There's a reason that noisy fucker was a one hit wonder, you know."

"Correction: 'Constipation Blues' hit number one in Japan."

"Japan don't count in baseball or rock and roll."

"Point," Marine Boy conceded.

\*

There was a high timbered THAP as the knife hit the cutting board.

Ampirella tried to brush away the boy's severed thumb but it was still somewhat attached by a bit of skin and vein. Annoyed, she hastily yanked it free and tossed it to the ground all in one swift motion.

"*Fuck!*" the boy shrieked, as the vein connecting his thumb and hand stretched then snapped.

"Sorry, man," she answered with nigh a trace of damn sorriness as she slipped on the oven mitt. Suddenly, the boy was aware of the sheer quantity of sweat flowing from his every pore; GALLONS it seemed...

The new thumb—the one made of 100% surgical steel except for the gold plating, the one shaped like a FUCKIN' ROCKET as requested—was sitting joint first like some weird vegetation in Ampirella's heating receptacle—the edge of it white hot. She picked up the shiny-hot rocket-thumb with the oven mitt, exposing what looked like the pointy end of a coffin nail protruding from the center of the base, also white hot. With her free hand, she held up the boy's squirting thumbless hand by the wrist, held it an inch from the rocket-thumb under a bright light, eye-balled the metal and flesh to-be-joined with a squint. The blood jumped out of the boy's hand with the rhythm of his pounding heart.

"*Do it!*" the boy squeaked through clenched teeth, wanting it over/not wanting it over.

"Pay attention to me," she said, " This is very important: be completely still. Don't jerk back. This is gonna hurt. I mean really, really hurt."

\*

"Anyway, if you're so hopped up on harming yourself, I'm surprised you haven't gone to that freak maker over on the West Bank."

"I've gone to her lotsa times but that ain't no way to talk about your mom, Marine Boy."

Talkin' Tom thusly received one sharp knuckle punch to the left shoulder.

"Fuckin' ow, man!"

"I'm serious man, this chick is bent. They call her Ampirella cause she looks like that cartoon vampire babe only instead of sucking blood she *AMP*utates pieces of people in the name of fashion."

"Hmmm, the next logical step, I guess. I mean what's left? We've done it all. Fuckin' rockets, man."

"That ain't all."

"Stop teasing."

"I'm telling you this girl is the High Fucking Priestess of Gleeby Psychosis. Not only does she render obsolete the old fashioned pierce, brand and poke school of self destructive fashion, her trip is to hack, remove and *replace*.."

"Replace?" Tom's mouth began to water.

"You know how rappers knock their own teeth out so they can put in some nice fancy gold ones.."

"Fuckin' rockets."

\*

As the boy's quick, sharp gasps degenerated into the violent shudders that ER physicians look for in cases of extreme shock, Ampirella pressed hot metal to skin and bone, pushing hard so that the coffin nail would take permanently into the center of the thumb-joint, piercing and cooking tender bone marrow. With a brief *hsssss* and the instantly recognizable aroma of a Burger King Broiler the bleeding stopped, the wound instantly cauterized. She wrapped her oven mitt around the

newly joined gold thumb and purple throbbing hand, held on tight as the boy spasmed then went limp in the chair. The last thing he remembered before losing consciousness was the sight of his former digit on the floor next to a litter of orange peels and the tinny sound of a portable tape player with a blown speaker blasting in the next room; "The gleebs are rompin'/ The gleebs are stompin'/ Oh, gleeby rhythm is born."

\*

"I think Tom'll be back, sis. He still talks about his dad a lot. He'll want to take the next step."

"Poor guy. Good thing we're here to help him out. I mean as long as he's got the dough..."

"Rocket Daddy left him a bundle. He can afford all kinds of hardware..."

"Good thing we're here to help, little brother. Sounds like he's got a lot of inner anguish to work out..."

"Good thing there's lots of poor little rich boys and girls in this city looking for a pricey way to self destruct."

"At least we're drug free and fashion conscious. The Gleebs certainly do romp and stomp, don't they?"

"Just like the song." A sound as big and no frills as a trailer park slamming to earth rattled the windows. Once again, the black bellied rats committed hari kari and all was beaten and wet. "Time for me to go, big sis."

"Hey, Marine Boy -" Ampirella called after her kid brother.

"Yeah?"

"I got an umbrella if you want -"

"No thanks, babydoll. Don't believe in 'em."

Marine Boy walked into the indifferent storm, his soul consumed by water.

*"Gleeby Rhythm is Born" originally appeared in Grue Magazine, 1999, edited by Peggy Nadramia. Written in 1995.*

## Twitterheads

Through the crackly speaker of the little wooden box, The Lady Doctor On The Radio advised the blue-eyed child's parents:

"Introverted children sometimes only need a creative outlet to break a spell of terrible, quiet seriousness". The message felt a warning, its voice slightly salted.

Although the revelation put the parents' worried minds at ease somewhat, along with it came the problem of what to do. Then Mother had an idea.

The idea would entail a process of painful scrimping and saving—but she believed they could do it. And, in fact, by Christmas Eve they had accumulated enough cash in their little Maxwell House coffee tin to take home the second hand piano.

But holiday joy can be complicated for children unaccustomed to receiving spectacular gifts—and on Christmas morning the mysterious appearance of the large musical instrument, which sat like an alien monument in the middle of the family's tiny living space, seemed only to disturb the blue-eyed child further. He appeared unusually anxious as he suddenly pushed his focus away from its presence.

With a stutter that passed for fright in his parents' concerned ears, the blue-eyed child soberly informed them that he'd seen what appeared to be Santa's sleigh hovering above the house the night before—had witnessed said alleged hovering-sleigh activity through his bedroom window at approximately twelve thirty-seven a.m. Mother speculated quietly to herself that even The Lady Doctor On The Radio might be stumped by this unusual display of Hovering-Santa-Fright. Then again, The Lady Doctor On The Radio never showed undo concern. No, reasoned Mother without a word; it was much more likely that The Lady Doctor On The Radio would—in her usual calm manner—explain how the parental charade of Saint Nick deceitfully sneaking presents into place in the dead of night can be not only strenuous for the parents but confusing for an intelligent child. Unable to consult the radio for exact instructions, the parents winged it; gently interrogating their son in hopes of settling his churning little-boy-soul.

The brief interview seemed to work. After a few moments, the boy's uneasiness turned to curiosity—allowing the special gift to do the job for which it was intended. The blue-eyed child sat at the old upright, brushing the keys with little fingers for long minutes, then finally: pressing down. Searching for notes that sounded right together.

There was one more present to be given.

With the boy still exploring the keys of the wonderful piano, Mother made her smiling approach. She withdrew three rectangular pieces of paper, white and light blue in color, from a bright red stocking. The blue-eyed child was a year or so away from being able to decipher the characters of the alphabet proficiently, so she read the words that appeared on the top ticket aloud to him: "ADMIT ONE: January 1st, New Year's Day, 1946. Barker Brothers Six Ring Circus. Showtime 6:00PM Sharp! Come one, come all!" Being only four, the blue-eyed child could not fake enthusiasm well. He wasn't sure what a circus was.

New Year's Day brought a chill.

The day-sky turned from yellow and blue to orange and purple as evening fell and the family of three made it's long walk to the Civic Center. As they shoved through the crowd towards their assigned seats at the rear of the arena, a strange man's hand suddenly clutched the arm of the blue-eyed child's mother. Startled, she turned to face the man.

"Hello, Maria," the man said.

She returned the gaze of the stranger's smiling blue eyes with odd intensity. Her expression wasn't of fear, or even surprise, it was... something else. The boy had never seen this new look on his mother's face before, and so he considered it very carefully. But just as suddenly, before the child had had a chance to consider it as closely as he would have liked, the look was gone. Without a single word of response, she yanked her arm from the man, refocusing on the urgent business of locating seats YY12, YY14 and YY16, dragging the blue-eyed child along. Father had seen the odd exchange between Mother and the man, but said nothing.

They found their seats.

The blue-eyed child sat between his parents and watched the elephants and lions and the men and women who flew through the air without wings. He listened to the strange calliope music and smelled the cotton candy and popcorn and heard the shouts of the other children. And he too began to shout. Had he not been so taken by the magic of the circus he might have heard the warning silence that hovered between the parents who sat on either side of him.

The walk home was quiet except for the circus organ hum that lingered in the blue-eyed child's head. By the time they reached the little stucco house where they lived, the sky had faded from gray to black.

Mother put the blue-eyed child to bed. As she pulled up the soft blue cover to his chin, the look on her face was one he had only seen only once before. The child, who was normally subjected to an almost unwholesome amount of motherly attention, felt a sting at the absence of her hugs tonight. She failed to stroke his hair, to kiss him goodnight as she normally did. Even more hurtful was that, though their eyes met; she seemed to look past him.

He had no way of knowing—and never would know—that she was not seeing him at all at that moment, *could* not see him; that she had found someone else's eyes in his, someone she had lost, then found, then lost again. And she knew there were no Lady Doctors On The Radio who would be willing to offer advice regarding her pain. For her pain, she believed, was born of immorality and weakness. Of wrongful love.

Tears welled in her eyes. The blue-eyed child turned away from her, fixing his confused gaze to the window instead, to the starless black sky. She left him.

Through the wall the blue-eyed child could hear a sound from his parents' bedroom. Voices hushed and angry.

Whispering, twittering.

The blue-eyed child could not make out any of the words. Not until after several long minutes when his father's voice began to rise: "...*one lie too many*," he stated clear and even, no longer angry. Sharply, his mother's voice: "*No!*"

A shot. Then another shot.

The blue-eyed child sat up.

Walked out of his little bedroom. Past the closed door of his parents' room and down the steps to the living room. He sat at the piano, brushing the plastic keys with tiny fingers, then: pressing down.

Searching.

\* \* \* \*

Carlos thinks it's funny that the other homeless guys refer to the tourists they relentlessly pester as "customers." Like they're providing a service of some kind. Hell, maybe they are in a way.

Carlos doesn't need customers, though—he can always find food somehow—people throw a ton of it away every damn day. He doesn't want money, either. What for?

But sometimes he'll stop someone passing by:

*Lookit the sky! Will ya juss looka that? Look!*

Sometimes the sky over the French Quarter is knockout gorgeous—most folks don't look up, though. Carlos likes to share his knack for looking up—it's his version of a public service announcement. He doesn't get it when people answer someone else's question—sorry, I don't have any money, they say. He only wants them to see the sky. At night, Carlos sees the sky and it makes him sad, makes him remember when he was four:

It's Christmas Eve...

He's looking at the sky, watching for Santa's sleigh, refusing to sleep. He wants to be the ONE, the only kid who doesn't fall asleep, the ONE who sees Santa cut through the blackness. He is determined to stay awake—but he's a sleepy little kid and his eyelids sting with effort—he rests them a while. In the morning he's mad even though he knows Christmas morning is a lousy time to be mad. Tells Mom and Daddy that he *did* see Santa in the sky last night, embarrassed at having slept through the event. Are you sure? they say with skeptical, worried smiles. Yes, I'm sure, says four-year-old Carlos. What did he look like? they ask. He was fat. Red suit. Deers and a sleigh. Didn't see any elves, though. Yup, that's him they say—elves were probably back at the shop.

*one lie too many.*

The lie that Carlos told that morning about seeing Santa when he did NOT has nagged at his stubborn conscience for five decades now. It doesn't make it better that the little lie was spawned by the other, bigger one; the one that Mom and Daddy told him about Santa existing in the first place. Doesn't matter.

It spoils the night sky.

But during the day the sky is beautiful. It's his love for the day-sky that endears him to the kids who work behind the counter at the coffee bar. But they are nervous now. He is freaking out. No one wants to bounce the old fuck. They like him usually; but not today, not right now.

The 2 girls in the coffee bar sitting by the middle window are out-of-towners—everything about them screams it. Their tight expensive clothes yell about hidden wads of unspent vacation dough in their bras & boots. Their hair is tall and awful, stunned frozen, paralyzed by spray; perfect. Their faces display various stages and types of fake pinkness: shiny gloss, powder, deep, pale, creamy. Their smell is as strong and stony as a virgin urinal tablet: sweet.

2 girls. Sitting by the middle window. Whispering, twittering. Shooting looks at the locals. Laughing quiet; not quiet enough.

Carlos' eyes are bright blue and normal but his ears are unscrubbed reddish black lumps of flesh that are impossibly sensitive; they hear everything, tiny details crowd into the grimy head-holes, dozens at a time, perfectly retained and sorted inside.

Carlos begins swinging two thin farmer-tan arms in circles like dueling-retard-windmills, whipping the air, an explosion of gray hair and beard sprouting from his purple-brown head, swaying slightly in the tiny windmill breeze. The girls won't quit. Whispering, twittering.

The counter kids keep a close eye. They're kind of sensitive for a bunch of punks but can't know, can't understand the profound snowballing of images triggered inside Carlos' gray mop-head, pictures triggered by the sneaky feather-sharp tongues of the twitterheads. Little feathery sounds doing damage a little at a time.

Just a little, a little at a time—like a thousand cigs chipping at a lung over years. Invisible almost. And it starts so tickly in a feather-breath, an angry whisper through a bedroom wall. Like a

tiny child's victimless lie, setting into motion a lifetime of searching gazes at an inky, empty sky, filled with nothing but sparkly, leaky pinpricks, useless stars, satellites, space junk. No miracles, no interventions, just doomed stories of something magic, doomed by years of magicless existence and nagging hidden memories too painful to recall; black. All that's left of the memories are ghost images that dance through his mind; lions and elephants and jumping people soaring through the air wearing bright colors. And something about elves back at the shop.

Windmill arms chop nearer the twitterheads, out of town eyes miraculously unaware. The counter kids watch Carlos' eyes: they are darting and wild, cutting squiggly laserpaths around the stiffened little twitterheads.

An inanimate savior, an old out of tune upright piano sits Clark-Kentish in the corner of the coffee place, poised for drastic action if it comes to that.

It has come to that.

The upright joins psychic force with the counter kids, willing a space between the spinning arms and the offensive chicks. A sudden magnetic pull collides the piano bench with the seat of Carlos' pants. Leather-hard fingers brush old ivory keys, then: pressing down. The counter kids sigh inaudibly, together.

The sound is not a functional music, not meant for entertaining—the notes don't sound quite right together. It is a music of undoing. Undoing impossible mountains of damage, human disaster. It is a snowball in reverse, a little at a time, just a little, just enough. Somehow the infinitely large snowball must be made to roll backwards, far enough, long enough till it does not exist, gone without melting, without a single drop of water or blood. Carlos knows this isn't possible, knows this as he plays.

But there is a piano in the coffee house.

And some kids who refuse to toss out an old crazy guy who might be dangerous.

And a bunch of mean twittering elves back at the shop who can't let a small boy, now a man, forget about a tiny lie told fifty years ago.

*"Twitterheads" originally appeared in "Dreaming of Angels," 2002, edited by Gord Rollo and Monica J. O'Rourke. Written in 1996.*

## Calisaya Blues

Well, little miss, I do appreciate wisdom in the young. And that's just what you done showed me tonight.

Pretty little miss like you coming round to Doctor Jack asking about a cure, sure nuff. Not asking *for* a cure, but asking *about* a cure—the difference between the two being larger than you might expect. One question show caution—the other just quick and dumb. And I do appreciate you for it, little darlin', indeedy I do.

Most gals come around to Doctor Jack just hoping for a quick fix to what they view as an imminent crisis or a state of impendin' personal doom. Figgerin' a cure is a cure and don't reckon much that a cure might turn out bad. But sometimes a cure can make things best for short and worst for long. So it truly is wise to ask *about* before asking *for*.

I'll answer your questions best as I can, little one, though, truthfully, my answers can't possibly be right for no one but myself. No, my answers are for me, but maybe I can point you in the direction of your own. Then, once you decide, we can go on talking 'bout curin' and such, if you still have a mind to.

The cure is a thing called calisaya. Bark off a shrub that come here on a boat from South America. Can grow pretty good in New Orleans, too, if you get it down in good so the roots take hold. Just grind up the right amount then put that powder in a tea. Once that calisaya get inside ya, little girl? The cure is on.

Sets your insides to contractin'. Might be some bleedin' and might be some dyin'. Lungs'll contract too, making it hard to breathe. Bladder too, making you wanna pee. Retina too, making it hard to see. Heart too, and that's where the real danger be. But if you get past all that, then past is past, and that—for some—is the cure.

But you didn't just ask on the how. You asked on God, too. What God might think of all of this curin' talk. Hmm.

Well, hell, I don't know what God thinks. But I do know this:

God has occasion to talk to each of us directly at one time or another—and all along he be telling us the same thing, to be sure. We just listen different is all.

Some folks turn away from God because he won't answer a peep when they ask him questions through diligent and heartfelt praying and such. He quiet as a mouse, that ol' God, when the prayers come out—almost like he ain't there. Well, maybe, just maybe, that's on accounta God waiting on us to answer a few of his own questions first. Bet you never even thought of that, eh? That's all right, little sis, not many do.

I see you scratching your head and I can't say's I blame you. But let me go on for just a bit and maybe it'll make more sense by the time I get through. If you got a few minutes, why dontcha take off your hat and have a little sitdown?

Typhus? Be a good little fella and make a cup of tea for our pretty little company.

I'd say coffee, sweetheart, but I don't believe coffee to be good for a gal in the family way. In case you decide agen' the cure, that is.

So, I was talkin'. That's right. Thank you, Typhus. Thank you.

Try this one on for size, little sis:

Try and think about God before he made the world. Before he made the saints and the angels and the puppies and the gators and the babies and the mothers. When all he had to mess with was

planets and stars and moons made out of cold dirt and hellfire. Try to think of God as just a regular fella in that situation.

Now then. I bet you thinking he was powerful lonely.

He warn't lonely, sister. No, ma'am, he didn't know to be lonely. Before you can get lonely you have to miss someone, and if you're all there is and ever was then you never get the chance to pine—or even to imagine the pining.

But God's a smart feller and had plenty of time to think about all kinds of things out there in the universe all by himself with nothing to do except making stars and moons and swirlin' dirt. And I imagine somewhere down the line he mighta thought, "What if?" What if he weren't the only one? What if he didn't know all there was to know—as might be the case if there was another being he warn't aware of with thoughts he couldn't see. So God mighta considered the possibility of not knowing—and that possibility would be a foreign thing to someone like God, the only being ever was. And, to God Almighty Hizzownsweet Self, would such a possibility be a good thing or a bad thing, a right thing or a wrong thing? Which brings up another thing altogether.

When a creature is so utterly alone in the universe, such a creature got no use for right and wrong, good and bad. If there's only you and no one else, then there's only what comes to mind—and if what comes to mind don't affect no one but yourself, then right and wrong don't exactly apply. So right and wrong never occurred to God just as wings never occur to catfish in a river.

But when God got to thinking about the possibility of maybe not being so alone, then the idea of right and wrong logically sprung to mind—like the idea of wings might spring to the mind of a catfish plucked from the river and thrown up into the air. These earliest thoughts of morality didn't digest easily, though—for God had no way of knowing what morality might mean except in theory. I suppose this notion might've seemed more interesting than stars and moons and swirlin' dirt, so he hunkered down to business and threw some flesh and blood into the mix.

Flesh and blood. That'd be us; you and me and that little baby in your womb and ever'one else to boot on this big green earth. Ever'one ever was or will be, too.

And this thing that he put in our hearts might've been our very reason for being—the inner knowledge in each and every one of us about the difference between right and wrong. And the power to act on this knowledge in a meaningful way.

Y'see, little sister, God ain't a naturally moral being because he got no use for morality. It don't apply to his personal situation. But questions do arise and answers do beckon.

Now, being God might very well mean to know everything. But you must understand that *even for God* the knowing don't come easy. So when a question come up that stumped his big ol' God-brain, he set about finding an answer. And that's where we come in. He invented morality and planted it in our breasts. And only through our actions could he ever hope to learn about that particular thing.

Now, if this be so, then it'd be a maddening thing for the human race to reconcile such a notion in its collective heart and mind. But what I'm saying is this here. Might be this. Just might be.

Typhus, boy, where's that tea? Make mine special like always. Just a touch but don't be stingy. And keep it clean for the little gal. Hard liquor ain't good for a gal in the family way, I s'pect.

Now, where was I going? That's right. I was talkin' might-bees. Might be this. Might be this, indeedy.

Now, listen up and let your own self decide, little darlin':

Could be we're here to answer God's questions and not the other way around. Follow?

God is learning from us, little sister. Giving us free will and waiting to see what we do with it. He don't give us no details, because the tellin' would taint the answers. He needs us to be straight up with him about this stuff. He don't even come right out and admit to being there, don't even supply us with proof-positive of his very existence. Just give us enough smarts to recognize the possibility, then let us ponder it out on our own. Folks call that sort of pondering "faith." Nothing wrong with that because, truthfully, it don't make a licka difference.

The problem of morality is something that God is inclined to know about, but can only learn from creatures with a need for it. So we must oblige. We've got to do our very best to show God what's right. Only a man can do right, little sis. Only a man can save. Jesus, little sister, was an earthly man. Could be Jesus was God's way of testing out the waters.

But the question of right and wrong that's been put to us by God is sometimes a tricky one—because right and wrong don't always wash as clean as black and white. All kinds of grays in the hearts of men, little sis. What feels right in the heart of one might feel wrong in the heart of another, and so forth and so on. But there are some exceptions that stay mostly constant. Some things stay mostly light—like loving. And some things stay mostly black—like killing.

And since you come to talk about a cure, I guess that means we're talking about both. The cure is the trickiest kind. Because the calisaya cure is surely killing—but it can be about loving, too.

You've got to ask yourself a question, little missy—and try to find the answer in the deepest part of your soul.

If a second life resides within your own body, a life that has no choice whether to live or die on its own, do you have the right to make such a decision by proxy? Is that second life close enough to your own life that you can treat it as your own? If that child is doomed to live a life of hurt, would it be truly right to keep that life from touching air and earth and water, never to draw a natural breath?

It's a question that only breeds more questions, for sure. After all, how can you know that the life of this child will not be a good one? How can a person know whether taking that life, before it's even had a chance to show itself, might be a right thing or a wrong thing? Can the morality that God put in your heart even begin to decipher such a thing? Of course, this might smell like a question best put to God himself. And now we're back to the beginning.

Because if what I say is close to true, then we're here to answer God's questions and not the other way around. And even if I'm wrong, well, do you think that God could even answer a question like that?

Hell, I don't know. But I do know this:

God ain't tellin'.

So the answering is left up to you, little sister. And when you make your answer then things do unfold, and then God might learn from the unfolding. And when God gets enough unfolding, then the unfolding might start to look like answers, and then, maybe, just maybe, from these answers he can make the next world a better one for every eternal soul that come back around.

But there you are with that little second life in your belly right in the here and now and wondering about a cure. Not even thinking about this world or the next. Stuck in a situation and wanting to know what to do. Right now, this very minute. And so you have a decision to make

about killing—and it ain't a decision with an obvious answer, nothing purely black or white about it, child.

The decision must be a hard one. And it must be answered very carefully. So you must draw on that thing that God gave you, the thing that God has never felt for himself; that thing about right and wrong. You must teach God from your own suffering. And you will suffer.

You only get to decide how.

So close your eyes and listen deep, little sister. Listen to the thump of that second life in your belly. Try to hear if it's talking to you—and pay attention to what it has to say. And listen to your own heart, too. When you've pondered long enough, you come back here and see Doctor Jack again. If you're still looking for a cure, then I will gladly oblige. And I'll oblige just like so:

Your tea will be just as sweet, but it will have a bitter aftertaste and that taste will be calisaya. Typhus will make your bed and you will lie on it. Then you will be sick, as I have explained. The second life will come out of you, and then it will die. There will be pain for you and for the little one, too. Typhus will take good care of that baby, bring him to the river for nightswimmin'. And I will do my best to ease your suffering. It will be your saddest day. And there will be more sad days to follow.

If you go by that path, little sister, after listening to all the love in your heart, then you may take solace in knowing this one thing:

All life is eternal because all souls are eternal. Even little lives taken by calisaya tea. Little lives like that stay with you always, and sometimes even visit you in ways you don't expect. That's because even little lives come from the will of God, and there is a mysterious joy in that fact. For God is learning about love from you, little sister. And he is eternally grateful for the lessons that you give. Through your pain you teach God right from wrong.

It is never the other way around. Never has been and never will be. It's the reason we are here on this earth, little sister. We are educating God.

With a pain that he could never feel.

*"Calisaya Blues" is an excerpt from the novel, ["The Sound of Building Coffins."](#)*

## Unpublished Interview With Buddy Bolden

*Transcript of unpublished interview with Charles "Buddy" Bolden, conducted by Marshall Trumbo at Bolden's place of residence, the Louisiana State Asylum for the Insane in Jackson, Louisiana, recorded and transcribed by Benjamin Price on August 13, 1923*

Trumbo: Mr. Bolden, I appreciate you giving me your time this morning.

Bolden: Don't see many white folk in this place. 'Ceptin' the doctors. You look familiar to me. I know you?

Trumbo: Mr. Bolden, do you feel all right—I mean, do you feel up for this interview?

Bolden: Whatcha mean do I feel alright? 'Course I'm all right. Do I look like I ain't alright?

Trumbo: No, no, of course not. I mean, you look fine. It's just that—

Bolden: Just that since I'm in a place for crazies must mean I'm crazy, and so maybe I ain't alright. Crazy folk scare you, mister?

Trumbo: Well, no—

Bolden: Don't lie. I kin tell if ya lie. Us crazies got a sense for such things.

Trumbo: This place makes me very ill at ease if you must know.

Bolden: (smiling) Well, if you must know; kinda makes me ill at ease too. Thought I'd get used to it, but I ain't yet. Been a coupla years too.

Trumbo: It's been sixteen years, Mr. Bolden.

Bolden: That long? Really? Shee-it. I guess time flies when yer havin' fun. (laughs) Well, my sense of passin' time done got messed up long ago. Call me Buddy, mister. You are white, ain't ya? Makes me nervous when white people start callin' me Mr. Bolden. White folks start callin' a niggra "mister," usually means something bad gonna happen.

Trumbo: All right, Buddy.

Bolden: Doc says you from the newspaper.

Trumbo: That's right. I'm from the New Orleans Item.

Bolden: Must be a slow news day, you comin' all the way out to the crazy farm just to talk to an old beaten nigger like me. If you come to hang somethin' on me, I sure hope it's somethin' ta get hung for. Dyin's all I got left 'bout now, and I don't see much point in waitin' around.

Trumbo: What I came to talk to you about....(long pause)

Bolden: Take yer time, mister. Got plenty of time, me. Don't get much company, neither.

Trumbo: Well, jazz, of course.

Bolden: Don't sound like yer too sure about that. Why'd anyone from the news wanna talk about no fuck-music? Don't make no sense. Maybe you crazy, too. (laughs) Well, if you are, you come to the right place. Make yerself ta home, Mr. Reporter.

Trumbo: Mr... I mean Buddy, I get the feeling you're unaware of just how big jazz music has become in the last few years. Storyville closed down permanently six years ago, but the music of those halls has become a national phenomenon. International, in fact. It's become quite the sensation in England and France.

Bolden: You shittin' me?

Trumbo: No, I'm not.

Bolden: Well, I'll be damned. How'd such a thing come about exactly?

Trumbo: The first record was made in New York City in 1917. The sound became popular very quickly after that. Many thought it a fad and predicted its popularity would fade, but it actually gets more popular every year.

Bolden: Some New York boys made a record of it?

Trumbo: No, a New Orleans outfit. Dominick Carolla and the Jim Jam Jump Orchestra. Theirs was the first big success, but they're already considered passé. Carolla recently announced his retirement, and the new big star is a man called Jelly Roll Morton. Colored man. Creole, I think.

Bolden: I remember that kid. Name of Ferd, but insisted everyone cal him Jelly Roll. Cocky little piss. But he could play all right.

Trumbo: Buddy, do you remember Dominick Carolla?

Bolden: You mean Jim Jam Jump. Yeah, I remember that punk just fine. Stole my horn, that kid. Well, I guess technically he bought it—I mean, he left some money after he hit me over the head with the damn thing and run off. I did spend the money on a pricey hooker, but I didn't actually consent to the sale of that horn. I loved that horn. Wanted to leave it for my son. Guess it don't

matter much since West died, though. Died so young. I wasn't much of a daddy to that boy, sorry to say. Woulda been nice to leave him that horn, though. Only thing I ever had what meant anything. (tears visible in Bolden's eyes)

Trumbo: I'm sorry about your son.

Bolden: Nuffa that. Why'd you come here?

Trumbo: Well, there's great interest in the jazz phenomenon and a lot of rumors about its true origins. A good many of the older musicians who had played in the tenderloin say it was you who originated the sound. But others take credit for it.

Bolden: By "others" you mean Jim Jam Jump, I suppose.

Trumbo: Yes. Him and a few more.

Bolden: Well, he can have the credit. I don't want it. Thass just fine with me. Sure would like that horn back, though.

Trumbo: Don't you think, I mean, for the sake of historical accuracy, that the record should be set strai—

Bolden: Historical accuracy? (laughing loudly) Sonny, I'm about to bust a gut on that one. Who in their right mind would give a hang about the historical accuracy of "Fonky Butt"?

Trumbo: Well, the commercialized version of the music has lost some of its original vulgarity. But its sound is unique—and it's struck an emotional chord with a lot of people.

Bolden: (becoming more serious) Ya keep calling it a sound, but that ain't quite right, y' know. I wouldn't call it a sound at all. More lika feelin'.

Trumbo: A feeling?

Bolden: A feelin'. And ain't nobody can take credit for a feelin'. Feelin' is something—well, either you got it or you don't. Can't invent no feelin'.

Trumbo: Well, I suppose you can invent a way to express a feeling. Jazz might be just that; a new method of expressing—

Bolden: No. The method don't matter. Listen, this jass thing—it mighta passed through me its first time round, but that don't make it mine. Or nobody else's neither. It just is.

Trumbo: Some people say it's a matter of heritage. They say white musicians are trying to take credit for something that belongs to the coloreds.

Bolden: I say let 'em have it. With no problem. They want the credit? They got the credit. I'm the easiest credit man in town. I say, I say, I say, I say, who-say-I-say! That won't change what's true—and the truth have a way of revealing itself over the long run, anyhow. I guess you could say jass enriched my life in some ways—lotsa fine women looking after me, and some pretty good money from time to time—but also it brought me low; brought me to a place like this. And maybe I was meant to end up in this place. 'Course, it won't sound the same nor as good if black folks ain't playin' it. One thing fer certain; that jass music can mess with a man's spirit, and if they ain't careful, could be some white folk end up in a place like this, too. Y'see, most white folk think black folk is weak of mind and spirit, and this belief makes 'em feel superior. That superior feelin' can keep a man from being cautious, can cause a man to slip, to fall. They can grab up all the credit they can carry, but there's a price goes along with it.

Trumbo: I see.

Bolden: No, I don't think you do see. No matter, though. I don't want no damn credit for this "phenomenon," as you call it. Too much damn responsibility. I do miss the ladies, though. Jass was definitely good for that. (smiling)

Trumbo: About Dominick Carolla—

Bolden: Jim Jam Jump, you mean. (scowling)

Trumbo: Yes, Jim Jam Jump.

Bolden: Damn punk stole my horn.

Trumbo: I was wondering what memories you may have of him personally. Any significant interactions between the two of you that you can recall?

Bolden: (pausing to think) Nah, I don't wanna get on this. Why don't we change the subject, sonny?

Trumbo: Soon—but I do have a question about a particular instance, if you don't mind...

Bolden: (sighing) Alright, then. Out with it.

Trumbo: In 1891 when you were just fourteen years old—you were questioned as a witness to a murder—

Bolden: Now I'm rememberin' how you look familiar. Son of a bitch.

Trumbo: A man called Morningstar, a preacher, was killed that night. And Caro— I mean, Jim Jam Jump was also there. But he was only a baby.

Bolden: (far away look) I seen some things that night.

Trumbo: What do you remember about that night?

Bolden: I was just a kid. Old man now. Can't remember much of it.

Trumbo: Mr. Bolden, please...

Bolden: (angry) Goddamn it, I told you not to call me that!

Trumbo: I'm sorry, it slipped—

Bolden: What's this about? Why you here really? You was there that night, too. Why you askin' me? Ask yer ownself about that night. You were there. Shoulda damn known this had nothin' to do with no fuck-music. You been playin' me, aintcha, Mister Reporter?

Trumbo: No, no—not at all. It's just that I've had dreams since that night—

Bolden: You been having dreams? Could be you're lucky those dreams ain't bought you a bunk next to mine. Anything I got to say to you I already said. Maybe you askin' the wrong questions, or maybe you ain't listening to the answers right. You want to know about all that crazy stuff, why dontcha go talk to the gravedigger? That fool nigger loves to flap his gums.

Trumbo: What gravedigger?

Bolden: You know—Marcus. From Girod Street Cemetery. Ugly son of a bitch with no nose.

Trumbo: Marcus? I remember him. What was his last name?

Bolden: Nobody Special.

Trumbo: Excuse me?

Bolden: I don't know his real last name. Everybody call him Marcus Nobody Special. That's all I know. Go talk to him. He remember everything. At least he tell me so in my sleep. I think we're done here, sonny. (Getting up to leave) Thanks for the company. I got a busy day of being crazy to tend now, if you don't mind.

Trumbo: Thank you for your time, Buddy.

Bolden: Shit. (walks away quickly through main corridor)

*"Unpublished Interview with Buddy Bolden" is an unpublished excerpt from an early draft of ["The Sound of Building Coffins."](#)*



## You and Yer Big Goopy Brain

What started as a minor annoyance is now officially full-fledged bothersome.

Don't be so goddamn smug, Dear Reader, 'cause you just got on my wrong side is what. And that ain't no enviable place to be; no-how, not-now, kung-pow, brown-cow, and-how, nippity-now, zippity-zow. Ya done slipped up and now yer innit good.

Think ya got old Jim locked up tight? Think ya got me all figgered out? Think ya done spotted my 'killey's heel? Well, could be some folks think a whole lot and never stop to consider much. Betcha never thought 'bout such a thing? S'posin' not, what with you sitting there holding these damn pages in them nasty fingers of your'n, readin' hard and thinkin' easy just like always.

You. Thinking this relationship ain't no two way street. Smug is what.

Thinking without proper considerin'. Not knowin' jack-doodly-squat-times-one.

Damn if you ain't just a regular smuggle-dee-bug so and so. Smugbug is what.

Thinkin' you know.

Think I don't know? Think you kin read these words offa page and make deductions 'bout where I been and where I'm gonna go, what I'm about? About who THE FUCK I am, even? Puh! Thinking you know All About Jim Jam Jump just 'cause ya read a chapter with such a title. Thinkin' once you put the bookmark in and wander off to the toilet that I temporarily cease to exist, maybe even never really did exist. Well, maybe it ain't exactly the way you figgered, smugbug. Or maybe it is, but maybe there's somethin' more. Maybe when the bookmark goes in it's yer own dumb-thinkin' self that stops bein and not me. Maybe fer me that's exactly how it is.

Maybe without each other aint neither of us fer nothin'. Maybe the book bein' open is all that either of us got. Maybe ever was. Maybe you n' me need each other in a way. Two twins sharin' a heart. Like good and evil, like Ida Mae and Becky.

Yeah, go on. Keep bein' so smug. Bein' smug don't change nothin' and never will, I 'spect.

What you think you know:

You think ol' Jim Jam Jump is just a diseased fictional varmint pickin' the pockets of drunks and splattin' innocent rats fer fun and profit. Think I ain't got a natural sense fer fine music, think I'm some kinda hanger-on to Buddy Bolden, trine to soak up some glory by hangin' round 'im with too much rye in my belly, tootin' his worthless horn in the street for a pity blow only ta make a screechin' bunch o' rat-ghost-drawin' noise.

Thinkin' you know the nature of my double-blink.

Thinkin', also too, that I'm just a twisted up figment of some damn writer's imagination. Well, let me tell ya, buster, that Maistros fuck don't do nothin' I don't tell him to. Somethin' he don't accept none-too natural-like, neither. That's 'cause he just like you. Thinkin' till his brain hurt without never considerin' much. Not too much, anyway.

What you think I don't know:

Think I can't look straight back atcha when these pages held open, figgerin' you out just like you think ya got me figgered. Think I can't see yer hair ain't sittin' on yer head exactly how ya like it. How yer weird lookin' thumbs got a nail slightly longer on the right one. Clip that damn thing, wouldja? 'Bout ta make me sick so awful damn close to my eye, sittin' right at the edge of this page. Yucky duck hissy-pissy hucklebuck fuckfuckfuckety fuck. You, with that folded up phone number tucked away, the one without a name written above or below it, scared to throw it out 'cause it might be important. Well, I'll tell you what; it is important. Call that number, smugbug.

Never know who might answer. Might be some fictional boy pick up the phone. I await yer call, right here, right now, Dear Reader. Bein' that you need proof o' what I say. What I say, Jim.

Thinkin' when the book done closed I can't bother ya no-more-no-how; that I can't open my own damn book anytime I want and have a peek inta yer own greasy-pink soul. You, Dear Reader. Thass right.

Presumin' to peek into my own little soul and thinkin' that fact puts you a step above yers truly. Yers truly, Jim Jam Jump. The fictional boy. Harmless little wisp of imaginary man. Just a character in a book by a two-bit hack. Finish reading it or don't; slam it shut, toss it in the trash or pass it to a friend or sell my cranky psycho ass on Ebay for a dollar and a dime. Fuck you.

Well, if I'm so dang fictional then how is it that yer hearin' me now? Words don't just appear outta nowhere, Smugbug. Someone talks em. That'd be me.

My words. Right here. Right now. Offa the page and inta yer eyes. Kickin' holes in yer big goopy brain.

You see me, Smugbug. My dreams is stupid and thin, my future bleak, the fabric of my bein' not even fer real. Sure, sure. My methods might be nasty and mean, ya just might be right about that. But I'm only lookin' out fer number one like every other son-of-a-gun on God's green earth. Can't get by in this hard world without such a way. Just like you, is what. Jim Jam Jump weren't born with no privilege slippin' back on his pink-baby tongue. My Daddy dead, dead, dead; devil pulled outta my heart by the otherworldly music of Bolden's horn, this scar over my heart, down and kicked around, fightin' back the only way I know how, killin' sometimes if I gotta—and even if I don't gotta but just feelin' ornery. Got plenty of shame and a tiny little remorse 'bout all that. Just like you. But just maybe now I be mad enough to develop a method beyond the random. Modus operandi the coppers call it. Frequency modulation say me.

I see you too, Dear Reader.

You see that devil lingerin' in me, sure—but don't be so proud, 'cause I see one in yer own sweet self. You ain't so pure, Smugbug. You done killed some rats. You done wronged a friend. You got the taste of blood and went back for more.

On the sly. Thinkin' no one looking. You've pissed on innocence; yer own and of others.

You smelt yer own shit and pretended it ain't yer'n. Yer fingernails is dirty. You got blood. In yer veins, on yer hands. You done worse than me a hundred times over, only with less style. You got yer own damn frequency modulation of sorts, say me. Sayin' it ain't so don't make it not.

I'm just sixteen years old today, but for me the year is 1906—so I guess that makes me older'n you. The year is what it is fer you, and that don't matter a lick to me, not one itty bit it don't.

When you close this book I'm gone fer you, but yer gone too. Figment of my imaginary imagination. Gone. You and yer ugly, lopsided thumbnails, yer funny hair, yer spooked eyes, and yer smirkin' lips.

Think I can't see?

Clip that damn thing.

What I say, Jim.

Well, damn then.

If this ain't just too damn much.

Damn, damn, damn.

Clip it.

Someone 'round here got themselves a whole lotta nerve is what.

And I thought we was friends.  
Poo times two.  
You done pissed off the wrong hunk-a-lunk, Dear Reader.  
Jim.  
Jam Jump.  
Say hoo.

*"You and Yer Big Goopy Brain" is an unpublished excerpt from an early draft of ["The Sound of Building Coffins."](#)*

## **HARD TRUTHS**

## Sense of Place

Kaldi's closed down long before the big storm.

We used to call Kaldi's "the living room of the French Quarter." It was a place where you could go to be alone in a crowd, find peace amidst chaos, seek and always find some kind of inspiration, where you could work through a bout of boiling rage or dream or write or sing out loud or wear pajamas without raising an eyebrow. It was our place.

Who are *we*?

We are the transients who came to town looking for a place to belong, a place that accepted misfits and rejects, no questions asked. We are the locals who have been here for seven generations. We are the face-tattooed mongrel pups copping a European shower in the bathroom tagged "gutterpunks" by the locals. We are the heart surgeons and computer geeks just passing through for the convention. We are the secret rich and the proud homeless who need a joint where we can finally just blend in. We are the artists, musicians, street performers, phony psychics, pick pockets, con artists, yuppies, French Market vendors, car mechanics, strippers, insurance agents, T-shirt salesmen, secretaries, bikers, drug dealers, whores, lawyers, plumbers, scumbags, saints, thugs, Irish, Greeks, Italians, Pakistanis, Nigerians, Jamaicans, and Vietnamese who thank God we've found a place, at least for a moment, where it's easy to believe that we are all exactly the same—even if we can never quite believe that anywhere else in the world.

Kaldi's was just a place. But it was *our* place.

It closed, I think, in 1999. I figured another coffee joint would take its place; that this mystical mixture of humanity would somehow migrate en masse to some new location. That never happened. Not in spirit, at least. There's plenty of coffee joints around the Quarter/Marigny/Bywater area now, but they all have a very specific feel to them. These are places where you know almost instantly if you *don't* belong.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I now believe Kaldi's was the main reason I moved to New Orleans. Before I came here for good, I'd save my pennies for a vacation, take a train all the way from Baltimore, and wind up spending most of my time in that place—just sitting and watching people, sipping coffee and scribbling stories half made up in my little spiral bound notebook. When I finally moved to New Orleans for good, I practically lived at Kaldi's. I was totally alone in this city, didn't know a single soul—but in that sacred place I could feel not so alone, could pretend I belonged somewhere and actually believe it.

When I first started writing New Orleans fiction it was there. In Kaldi's there was a world of possibility from the inside out. In Kaldi's nothing mattered but my own imagination.

When I finally worked up the nerve to ask out my future wife, I took her to Kaldi's for a cup of coffee. I think I might have fallen in love with her in that place.

Although I'll always miss Kaldi's, I feel proud to have been a part of it—and I know it's important to remember these things. The building is still there and is still gorgeous—a marble looking, bank-like structure at the corner of Decatur and St. Philip Streets—but now it's used as a tourist information place. You can get discount coupons for the cemetery walking tours there. Most people walk past it and have no idea. But not everyone.

*"Sense of Place" was published in the blog "These Things May Not be Right, But They Are True" in March, 2008.*



## How Much For This?

The young man with the black Louisiana Pizza Kitchen T-shirt was hurriedly shopping the market for Christmas gifts—he had already scanned my table once, eyeing a necklace or two rather closely, then darting over to a neighbor's table. These Pizza Kitchen guys never buy anything, I thought absently. But almost as soon as the kid disappeared, he reappeared, snatching up a necklace from my table and holding it up to me with a grin. Dangling from the stainless steel chain was a small pendant bearing the likeness of St. Bernadette; a young woman in chains, engulfed in flames, staring defiantly upwards.

"How much for this?" he said.

"Ten dollars," I replied, thinking maybe the price was a little high, prepared to haggle a little.

"Great," he said with a big smile, reaching into his pocket. No haggling.

"Wanna bag?" I said coolly—we market vendors tend to turn a bit chilly once the sale's been made.

"Yes, if you don't mind, it's for a present." He grinned some more, probably thinking about the expression on the recipient's face when he or she opened it Christmas morning.

I cracked a smile too. The kid's good vibe was infectious.

"Thanks a lot, now," I said. "Have a good one."

"Thank you", he shot back, still grinning. He walked quickly to the Pizza Kitchen, maybe thinking up something to say to the manager about why he was a little late.

It was a few minutes past ten a.m.

About forty minutes later, a few of the vendors were making comments about the fact that there was a guy with a video camera sort of lurking about the restaurant thirty feet away. It was the big kind - not the kind that tourists carry. This was a news camera. Can't be anything bad, I thought to myself; there's no police.

Then the ambulance arrived. And a few minutes later there were police.

A rumor was born and began to evolve. By about three o'clock it went something like this:

There was a robbery last night. Four people were shot and left to die in the freezer. Two had died, two survived. They discovered the victims this morning.

This was horrifying to all of us, but there's still a certain comfort that we take in knowing that heinous crimes happen at night in the city. That bit of knowledge comforts us somehow, insulates us. There are rules even in the criminal world we tell ourselves. Travel in groups. Be careful where you walk at night. Exercise common sense. Follow these rules and you'll be okay; bad stuff happens to those who are careless.

At this point it had not even occurred to me that the fellow who had bought St. Bernadette that morning might be involved. It did not occur to me because in my mind it was not possible—the one aspect of the rumor that I didn't doubt was that the shooting had occurred at night, during those insulated, cautious hours.

It wasn't until nightfall that I got a version of the rumor that was closest to the truth. This version included one startling fallacy; that all four victims had died (when in truth one had survived), and one startling accuracy; that the shooting had occurred not last night but this morning. In broad daylight. While hundreds of people milled about outside getting ready for the day.

The shooting happened this morning?

With a chill I remembered the boy I'd sold St Bernadette to. And it became very important to me what time the murders had occurred: I had sold the necklace to him just a little after ten. If the shooting happened before ten then he was alive. If it happened after ten then he was dead. It was that simple.

I could not get an answer, even from the trusty rumor mill.

My own concern felt strange and somehow inappropriate. I had just met this fellow, didn't even get his name—and my contact with him lasted maybe three minutes. He was still a stranger, so why did it matter to me whether he was the victim or some other stranger? But it did matter. Because maybe my terse attitude was part of the last conversation not involving a gun that he ever had. His last conversation should not have been with a surly bastard of a market vendor like myself, should have been with a friend, a parent. Maybe, had I been in a better, more talkative mood I would have kept him standing around at my table a bit longer, made him late for work—at least late enough. I know these kinds of thoughts are unfair to my own conscience, but I can't help thinking them.

I confided with one of the vendors about the boy and St. Bernadette, about my fears—she remembered him, too. She furrowed her brow a bit then said she didn't think he was one of victims. After a moment she added that if he was, then at least his last act was a kind one; buying a present for a loved one. I choked up a little at that thought. And maybe St Bernadette helped him, she said.

Another vendor who was listening in said sadly, "If he was in that place this morning, St Bernadette can't help him now."

\*

Two years ago, I moved to New Orleans from Baltimore, so I'm certainly no stranger to the concept of people getting shot in the streets for stupid reasons, no stranger to the fear of walking in your own neighborhood at night. When I came to New Orleans I had the attitude of acceptance: I'm moving into another high crime area, I told myself, better be ready for trouble. But since I arrived, it's gradually—actually, not so gradually—gotten worse. And somehow I've been okay with that; I've been okay with the horrendous problems within the police force, the relatively small improvements that have been implemented while the criminal element slowly take over the streets. Shamefully, I've been okay with it all.

Violent crime has become such a fundamental part of our lives that we are essentially numbed by it. We still carry some emotion about it; mostly fear and sorrow, but we are lacking in the one area that should be a knee-jerk. Outrage.

There is a sickening lack of outrage in the general community regarding the murder rate. At times we are almost tongue in cheek about it. We should be ashamed. Why did these children need to die before we felt genuine outrage? The answer to that is really simple.

It's all about proximity.

The projects may be close to the Quarter, but they seem a world away. When Hoda Kotbe informs us of the latest killing at the Iberville housing project we stare glassy-eyed at the tube not really sure where that is, a little saddened by the news but not incensed by it. It is not our neighborhood, we did not know the victims. Why the people of Iberville do not march on City Hall demanding police protection I do not know. Maybe the feeling of hopelessness there is so ingrained

that they accept the murders in their neighborhood the same way that we in the Marigny have learned to accept armed robbery as an everyday occurrence.

The truth is that these killings were simply too close to home for a community that thought itself immune to such things.

The outrage of the French Quarter community regarding these killings is not about black and white, as some very well intentioned people insist—it's about proximity.

It's about blood on the sidewalk instead of inside the TV.

Monday night there was a community meeting at the Royal Street police station regarding the killings. Most people had come to voice their anger and fears, I had come for a more personal reason.

The only new revelation that came up at the police meeting was from the homicide detective in charge of the case who filled us in on some of the details of the case. The killers had used potatoes as silencers, he said—that type of thing, forensic stuff. To me, the one important detail was the exact time of the shootings; I simply had to know.

Finally, the homicide detective provided the answer: between 10:20AM and 10:40 AM.

And then I knew that the kid I had sold St Bernadette to was dead.

The next morning's paper would run a picture of the victims, confirming what I now knew. The boy's name was Santana.

\*

The next night, following a march on City Hall and an emotionally charged City Council meeting, there was a candle light vigil at Jackson Square. The event was so clouded with emotion for me and my small family that there is very little specifically that I can recall about it. I remember singing Amazing Grace. I remember a lot of tear dampened faces of strangers and friends. I remember our baby's reaction to the sight of all the lit candles in the dark. She, with the innocent profundity that two year olds miraculously possess, began singing "Happy Birthday To You."

I remember feeling a little better.

*"How Much For This" originally appeared in the New Orleans Times-Picayune in December 1996, under the title "The Fate of a Young Man With a Medal."*

## Hot 8 Here Now

This is the kind of scene you occasionally find yourself stumbling into when you live in the greatest beat-up beat-down city on earth.

Me and the wife are minding our own business, performing our evening ritual of snagging some joe and peace along with Chalmette the misfit pooch down at the Sound Café a few blocks down, and what do we happen upon through pure serendipitous dumb luck? Maybe the best brass band on earth slamming down right there on the coffee shop floor. As if this weren't heaven enough, jazz legend Dr. Michael White is there, too, sitting in on clarinet. Moments like this cannot be bought with mere cash-money—and that's alright, because in New Orleans the best moments always come free of charge.

The Hot 8 Brass Band matters. Everything that is good about New Orleans is embodied in this little band of regular neighborhood guys. They've been to hell and back, have even lived through the senseless murder of their friend, teacher, leader and drummer Dick Shavers, and yet they keep on with this music, this amazing, uplifting, truth-giving music. This is cool jazz, funk to the core and set ablaze, but it's something much more than that. It's the rawness of the street shot out through the business end of a tuba. It's Tabasco spiked with tears and gasoline. It's love. It's war. It's life and God and the devil and everything else in the world that matters and some things that don't and a few that fall in between and ask me if I give a damn about whatever it is because the reasons, the causes, the rationales, if there are any, can't possibly matter in this singular moment that puts this whole fucking mess in one simple context, on one single page, down and clear and all right there. These guys are not always in tune. They're not always sober. They're not always tight. But they are always, always just right. In the moment. In the pocket. In the heart. My heart. Yours if you're lucky.

So the night is cool and rare, the sun's creeping down the sky, and it's one of those gray, gray pissy southern skies with a dirty tint of orange twilight like a slow-rotting peach that I've only ever seen in New Orleans, and I'm having an epiphany moment.

I've had days where I've pondered the wisdom of staying here, days where it seems best to pack up the kids and take them somewhere/anywhere up north and just be done with it already. I've had days like that, and I guess I'll have a few more.

But today is not one of those days.

Thinking about leaving is something I sometimes do. Staying is what I do every day without thinking.

Today my heart is clamped to my sleeve and bulletproof. I'm seeing and hearing this neighborhood band, these normal guys, blowing out through those horns, wailing away, kicking through songs of the 1920s like "Girl of My Dreams," ripping them to pieces for this modern-fucked-sideways world, I'm hearing the hopped-up rage of their own songs, like "Ray Nagin," a song that can make you cry and scream and dance all at the same time, and I'm hearing the pure funky hotgoddamn of "Let Me Do My Thing." I'm going all the way back then fast-forward to here, ten minutes past now, with outrageous brassed-out covers of everything from "High Healed Sneakers" to Marvin Gaye's disco sin, "Sexual Healing," and I'm hearing my wife say over and over, "I never liked this song before, but I love it now." I'm knowing that they've been through so damn much, these guys, these normal fucking guys, much worse than the troubles suffered by me and mine, but they just won't stop, they can't or won't, they just keep going, taking all those hits—

from behind and above and below—and they still come back up again, over and over, these guys, these normal everyday fucking guys, still raging, still preaching, still high, still defiant, still towering in spirit like it's just another day at the office. And now I'm thinking: How dare I bitch about a single bad day? My problems are reduced to shadow tonight and these guys have lighted the way. I've done nothing for them, but they give me this. They give me this without even knowing who the fuck I am or that they are giving anything to anyone at all. They're just playing. They're just doing what they do.

And that's New Orleans tonight.

Here's the thing:

Some types of truth cannot be told in the usual way.

*"Hot 8 Here Now" originally appeared in HumidCity.Com, 2008*

## Wild West Down South

A little over a year ago, there was a march against crime in New Orleans.

The date was January 11, 2007. This was about one and a half years after the big storm.

Here are some interesting statistics that were current on that day:

On January 11, 2007, less than 100 "Road Home" federal aid checks had been issued to citizens who had lost their homes in the great flood.

Also on January 11, 2007, nearly 200 murders had been committed in the city since the day of the storm.

This means that on January 11, 2007, you were twice as likely to be murdered than you were to get help rebuilding your home, which was likely destroyed due to the federal governments failed levee system.

Again: If you were a resident of New Orleans, you were twice as likely to be murdered than you were to receive enough aid to live in your own house.

What we were angry about then was the apparent complacency of our leaders in the face of an out of control murder epidemic. New Orleans has always had a crime problem, but this was ridiculous. And by that time we had all been through too much to just lay down for it. There comes a point where you just can't allow yourself to keep being a victim.

So, over 3,000 of us, myself included, decided to be heard by way of a march and took it on down to City Hall.

The last straw for many of us was the murder of two young and talented people, gunned down, typically, for no reason at all.

Helen Hill was a vibrant young filmmaker and artist. She, her husband Paul, and their very young daughter lived about four blocks from my own family. In the middle of the night, a man entered their home. He shot Helen and Paul multiple times. For no reason. Their small child witnessed the whole thing. Paul survived. Helen did not.

There are no suspects in this case.

Dinerral "Dick" Shavers was the drummer for the Hot 8 Brass Band and a high school music teacher. Like Helen and Paul, he was one of those rare people who gave of himself to his troubled neighborhood. He was actively making a difference for the better and was loved by many. Dick applied for a home in Habitat for Humanity's famous "Musician's Village" which is supposed to provide safe housing for the city's great musical resources, but was turned down because of credit problems. You would think Dick would be considered the perfect candidate for the Musician's Village—I have never met a musician or artist with stellar credit in my life—and had he been accepted he might be alive today. Like Helen Hill, Dick was shot and killed for no good reason.

There was one suspect in this case. A teenager.

This past Friday, April 11, 2008, the only suspect in Dick Shaver's senseless murder was acquitted of all charges, and now walks the streets of New Orleans as if nothing happened.

Why?

The only eyewitness to the killing was a frightened 14-year-old girl. Frightened because everyone knows that murder witnesses who testify in New Orleans have a short life expectancy. The police won't protect them; they say they don't have the resources. Her mother didn't want her to testify. The girl didn't want to testify. But she did.

When she was on the stand and was asked to point out the man who pulled the trigger, she lost her nerve. What she said was this: "I don't see anybody. I must need glasses."

I don't blame her.

I have a 13-year-old daughter. If she were to witness a murder, I would be devastated by that alone—and so would she. Would I want her to place her life on the line for the possibility of justice? Absolutely not. I wouldn't even consider it.

You cannot blame this child.

Even had this girl identified Dick's killer, this does not necessarily guarantee a conviction. Eyewitness testimony is easily discredited in a court, especially if the witness is a child.

Here's another interesting statistic:

In New Orleans, the conviction rate for murder is only 7%. So if you decide to commit a murder in New Orleans, you have a 93% chance of walking free. Statistically.

I'm sure this all sounds terrifying, but the reality of the root cause is much worse.

After the storm, many families were forced to relocate. When people began to trickle back into the city, a strange phenomenon revealed itself. Many of the returning residents were children—usually teenagers—coming back home without their parents.

These are lost children. They have no real parental guidance. They look after and provide for their younger siblings on their own. They're too young to get jobs, so they sell drugs. And they carry guns. They are without hope and they are angry. Eventually they become grown-ups. By then, all is lost.

The crime problem is not about the kids themselves. It's not about our lousy school system. It's not about the crippled and sometimes corrupt police force. It's not about our ineffective district attorney's office. It's not even about our racially divisive mayor. Those are all contributing factors, but all that finger pointing distracts from the bigger picture.

The big picture is this: There's a serious breakdown of the family in this city. There's a serious shortage of parents who give a damn about their own flesh and blood.

It's the parents.

If I could, I would take every parent of a teenage murderer and lock them up for the rest of their lives. There is nothing more heartless and unforgivable than to let a child grow up on the street, to fend for themselves, to only find a sense of belonging and family in the arms of the nearest gang. Absolutely unforgivable and unconscionable. Criminal? Technically, no. And that's a mistake.

We do need a better police force, school system, criminal justice system, economic reform, and all those other things. But as citizens we can only do so much to make those things happen fast (or at all). There's one thing that we can do, and it's a thing we can do without delay.

We can start loving our kids more. Love them enough to let them be kids. Love them enough to teach them right from wrong, to teach them to love themselves enough not to throw away their own futures. We have to teach our children to have hope. We have to teach our children not to kill.

We need to be better parents.

*"Wild West Down South" originally appeared in HumidCity.Com, 2008.*

## The Case For Kindness During Hurricane Season

Hurricane season has always been a source of anxiety in New Orleans, but it hasn't always made us so angry. I can remember a time, not long ago, when there was a distinct camaraderie that went along with the nail-biting, an almost jovial good sportsmanship associated with that universal fear of the so-called Big One, a certain comfort in the comfortable uncertainty of how it might play out. We were only guessing then, and the guessing felt like a game.

Now it's different. We've all seen how a big storm can play out for ourselves, up close and personal. There's not a whole lot left to guess about.

Of all the changes we've faced since then, perhaps the most dramatic has been in our collective state of mind. Remember when a storm had to inch its way so far up the radar screen that it was breathing down our necks before we even got the tiniest bit antsy about it? That was really not a bad way to go. Nowadays, everyone shifts way down low into mental meltdown mode as soon as the tiniest swirling bit of goo forms off the coast of Africa. It's really ridiculous how we all watch these grainy electronic abstractions like hawks, as if such obsession can possibly do anyone any good at all.

The truth is simple enough. All we really need to do is decide whether we'll be staying or going if the unthinkable happens again, and how we'll act out that decision if and when it's go-time. I know it's very difficult to be methodical and rational about this, considering all that's happened. But if we're going to keep living here, we've got to start integrating these possibilities into our psyche in a smoother fashion and stop taking out our frustrations on each other. And we have to do this even when we're feeling the heat and the fear and the anger of bad memories far too recent to dismiss gracefully or easily or, really, at all.

Let's make a summertime resolution to get a grip. Really, we all have to learn to just kick it like we used to.

Do like this: Put together your little riding-it-out-like-a-crazy-person survival kit, or your getting-the-heck-out-of-dodge-like-a-sane-person escape kit, then tuck it away for that rainiest of days and forget about it till you need it. Fire up the barbecue or berl up the crawfish, reacquaint yourself with your neighbors and try to remember that we're all in the same leaky boat—and also remember that the day may come when that cranky neighbor who's name you keep forgetting might turn out to be your best friend on this earth. Brush up on your hurricane humor. Remember how we used to crack each other up before a big storm, making light of a bad situation? That was healthy. As long as we're prepared to deal with it realistically, it is very healthy to laugh. So yuck it up, bond with your fellow inmates, and strike up the band. This is New Orleans, and we all have a lot to be proud of here. We've come a long way down this rough road of making things right again, and the government promise-breakers—be they city, state or federal—have had very little to do with that. This city has been regenerated one roof at a time. It's you who have accomplished this. And your neighbor. So treat each other right. Every one of us who came back and swung a hammer in trembling fists is a national hero. Know that. And don't forget it. You and I brought an American City back from the brink. We did that. We might have been forgotten by most of America now, but we absolutely embody the American can-do spirit. So be proud—because you're a fool if you aren't.

If we've learned anything from the past it's that, at the end of the day, we can only truly depend on each other. And that's just fine because it's enough, and it works. So let's all take a deep breath, put on our goofy devil-may-care Southern grins, and love thy neighbor like it's an idea that

really means something—because if we don't know the truth of that by now then we surely never will.

Experience is a tricky thing. I once knew a guy who'd played the trombone for twenty years but just never got any good at it. I asked a friend, "Has this dude really been playing twenty years?" The answer was, "Well, it's more like he's been playing for one year, but twenty times."

Let's not let the benefit of our experience be erased every year, only to start from scratch with tempers flaring and guns blazing in a blind war against whoever or whatever is handy. Let's build on what we've learned, every year and every day, let's toughen our skins and sharpen our wits—but also let's soften our hearts towards each other. Because if we don't reach out to our neighbors, if we don't prepare to help and be helped by each other, then we'll just wind up herded in another sports arena, waiting for another Godot who will not come till it's all too late, another demoralizing spectacle of pity and ridicule for the world to gawk at—and that, my friends, is not us. And it never has been.

So here we are again, about to run through one of those mind-numbing psychological gauntlets, another Orleans Parish pressure cooker, and make no mistake; stand or fall, it's all on us. And just like always, we'll either rise to the challenge or be diminished with the tide. We really can't do both.

*"The Case for Kindness During Hurricane Season" originally appeared in the New Orleans Times-Picayune, June 2009. Written in May of 2008.*

## Random Thursday Night at the Gold Mine

The Gold Mine is one of those French Quarter joints where the tourists dare not tread.

It's not so much a hole-in-the-wall as it is a smoke-filled brick cave where mysterious moisture drips randomly upon the heads of patrons and brilliantly disturbing works by obscure artists stare down from mortar-crumbling walls positioned above bluntly printed placards bearing the artist's last name in bold print, military style, and no other information whatsoever. It's a joint where barrels stand in place of tables, where charming degenerates merrily hit on your wife right in front of you, where the men's room features an old-fashioned urine trough that affords anyone with a penis the opportunity to mingle his piss with that of the dangling stranger beside him in real time—a weirdly intimate thing for people to be doing in the anonymity-driven electronic 21st century if you ask me. It is a rough and tumble joint, but also a haven for poets and artists; a relative rarity in this town. Musicians have havens aplenty around here, and I'm glad of that; they have their own free medical clinic, a "musician's village," and more city, state and corporate-sponsored charitable causes named for them than you can shake a stick at. Meanwhile, if you're a writer or an artist you're mostly on your own, expected to stop fucking around with your silly hobby and get a real job—or else you can get your drunk on at the Gold Mine on a random Thursday night and meet up with a tidy mob of compatriot sorry-ass artsy motherfuckers who gather with sooty smiles and know the score.

Right in the door, our friend and good neighbor GiO the Burlesque Queen of New Orleans introduces us to the proprietor, the Poet Dave Brinks. Dave's passion is clearly to seek out and shine a light on the ever-elusive art of the every-man—I liked him right away. Regulars ranged from the shy to the surly; an interesting cross-section of two-legged animals from all walks of the city that shared exactly one thing—the desire and need to tell their stories through the art of the written word.

The evening's theme was to pay tribute to a fellow poet who'd recently died; a man I'd never met named Paul Chasse. Today was his birthday. From what I gathered, Paul was a biker, a jailbird, a Haunted History Tour guide, a dyed-in-the-wool Quarter rat, a gleeful troublemaker, a friend, a husband, a resistor of all things mundane, a decent man with a good heart—but mostly he was a poet.

Dave started the night by reading a few of Paul's poems aloud (all of which were brilliant), along with Paul's wife Beth, and closed by stating the following truth, "If you didn't know Paul, you do now." Because the work was that good.

Paul's poems were the carefully chosen words of a survivor. One was about his time in prison, contrasting good days from bad in the form of a laundry-list-diary-from-hell that balanced fleeting rays of heaven with heavy slabs of hell, as in; "Today this happened. Today was a good day. Today that happened. Today was fucked." Never overstating, always just enough so that you got it, and I mean really got it. Another poem was about his experience of shooting abandoned refrigerators for sport in the aftermath of the big storm, and why that maybe wasn't such a good idea after all. Another, called "No Pain on the Highway," was about how he only felt free and completely without pain while riding down one. Another was an even-tempered response to the casual cult of religious bumper-sticker slogans we all love so much, and included a line I'll never forget, that being;

"My redemption is none of your concern."

Which, ironically, would make a hell of a great bumper sticker.

I never knew Paul Chasse, but I miss him anyway now, and I'm glad to have gotten to know him in this strange way. It's my understanding a book of his collected works will soon be released. I'll buy one and so should you.

Members of the audience were encouraged to come forward and take turns reading from a stack of Paul's poems. Even the lovely Elly (my wife) took a turn, moved as she was, and read a poem called (at least I think it was called), "Farewell, Big Easy." She finished by singing a Haitian prayer for the dead that translates loosely thus:

"The angels are here at last, and now all is well again."

The tribute to Paul was followed by the open mike ritual, hosted by a cat named Jimmy. The readers came up one by one, some clearly nervous and some wildly confident, while Jimmy supplied humorous or insightful commentary in-between. Surprisingly, there were few displays of raw ego along the way.

Imagine standing in an endless line at the DMV, and instead of viewing the people in front of you as a parade of nameless drones intent on sending a few hours of your life into a deep black hole called wasted time, that you could look into the soul of each and see something beautiful, meaningful and worthwhile. These are the angels of the DMV. These are not bongo-beating cool-shade-wearing hippie poseurs; these are real people with real hearts on real sleeves.

Some read for laughs, and some to air out their wounds, while others were just riffing on imagination—but all offered something needed saying as far as they were concerned—and I tend to agree. Some wrote well but read poorly, some read well but wrote poorly. The good poems were often stunning while the bad ones were often better still; the ones that tried too hard or missed their mark or didn't seem to have a mark in mind at all; just random attempts at cleverness lined with hints of unique and private pain; these were the ones that cut to the bone and revealed most about the writer, about the listener, about the city, about the joint, about the moment.

In the course of the night, the good and hopeful name of Barack Obama was not mentioned by any. It was almost a relief.

Too wrapped up in the moment to comfortably read my own stuff, GiO stood up and read a short chapter from my book, a page and a half about the endless circle of life and death, as it exists in New Orleans. She dedicated her reading to the memory of Paul Chasse with no complaint from me.

GiO is pure charm and grace; she introduced the piece briefly then dove right in. The crowd was restless at this point and so she had to raise her voice slightly, but 30 seconds in and there was a hush followed by complete silence. The fact that these people were listening—really listening—to these heartfelt scribbles of mine touched me greatly. And what writer can ask for a higher honor than to have his work read aloud to a roomful of unruly working class poets by the one and only Burlesque Queen of New Orleans?

Let this be today's reason for loving and never leaving the City of New Orleans.

*"Random Thursday Night at the Gold Mine" originally appeared in HumidCity.Com, November 2008.*

## **CODA**

## Anti-requiem

In New Orleans, a cemetery is a place where life is welcome.

Here lives music and art and wild mystery, a place where children may remain children and puritanical rituals of gloom are run off on a rail. Here a stand is made against the passing of time, where rare splendors partner-up with dust and ash, where sadness cuts to the bone but is banished before long - and a first line of defense is drawn against the inevitable gone-too-soon.

In New Orleans there exists a delicate truce with all preconception of mortality and hereafter; be they scripted, scripted, believed, doubted, lied-about or wildly-guessed. It is a truce renegotiated every hour of every day over chicory and smoke and liquor and sometimes something stronger but always with love and always with respect.

Here is where life's brevity is acute, where the dead share altitude with the living, where the waters rise too soon, too fast; taking, taking; but sometimes to give back, to guide the sorrow-blind and ghostly to and beneath the short and chopping waves that surround, to a place of mysterious finality called Spiritworld, where grand reunions are awaited, where ancient and bittersweet prayers are at long last addressed in no uncertain terms.

The divine is made human in this juncture of beauty and decay, and so the heavy brows of Catholic saints are aligned and have sameness with African Iwas, their holy burdens shared and lightened like the music that connects them, standing together as one, with upright backs and shoulders broad enough to carry us through the rain and into the sun-crazed light of day.

The grieving who enter this yard of plain brick and stone, humble and holy, on hands and knees; these ones will give themselves over. Caught up as they are, helpless and trembling as children, they will let go. There is no way for them but to surrender in sound and spirit, to fall backwards into the arms of un-provable faiths, to allow their souls the momentary luxury of deathly plummet; through to the hollow bounce of rock bottom, to suffer ecstasies unreal shot out through the business end of a trumpet, soaring ever skyward to the waiting arms of life, of love, of having survived the unthinkable a hundred times over, and now once more.

And still yet again.

In New Orleans to run from death is to leave life behind. They are intertwined, these things. We know this, we accept this, and this is who we are.

In New Orleans everything that has gone to ash only serves to inspire and invigorate the living. In death, we weave our souls into the fabric of the collective memory. In death we invent life anew.

*"Anti-requiem" is soon to be published in "New Orleans: What Can't Be Lost," edited by Lee Barclay, tentatively scheduled for release in 2010. Written in 2009.*

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***The Sound of Building Coffins* is also available in hardcover format from The Toby Press, available from fine booksellers everywhere.**

### **Praise for *The Sound of Building Coffins* by Louis Maistros**

"Louis Maistros has written a lyrical, complex, and brave novel that takes enormous risks and pulls them all off. He is a writer to watch and keep reading, a writer to cherish."

—**Peter Straub**

"The Society of North American Magic Realists welcomes its newest, most dazzling member, Louis Maistros. His debut novel is a thing of wonder, unlike anything in our literature. It startles. It stuns. It stupefies. No novel since *A Confederacy of Dunces* has done such justice to New Orleans."

—**Donald Harington**, *winner of the Robert Penn Warren Award*

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* is easily one of the finest and truest pieces of New Orleans fiction I've ever read."

—**Poppy Z. Brite**

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* is filled with the music of New Orleans -- the richly imagined siren song of Buddy Bolden's horn, cacophony to some, sweet inspiration to others; the lapping waves of the Mississippi; the clamor of Storyville barrooms; the banter of street corner

"This is a novel about love and life and death, New Orleans-style, when a cure can take the form of a healing or an abortion or an exorcism; where a hand on a heart can be a blessing or a burden; where the dead walk among the living and are known and listened to; where spirits live on and on, to torment or to love.

"Maistros creates a city that is part dream, part hallucination. His New Orleans embodies both the grim reality of a particular time and the city's eternal, shimmering beauty. And, with the book's title, he provides us with a new and unforgettable metaphor for the sound of hammers at work, whether boarding up for a storm or rebuilding after one."

—**Susan Larson**, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* a macabre and utterly hypnotic feat of literary imagination, an extended tale of voodoo and jazz in the Crescent City, circa the turn of the 20th century. The novel is so fluently delivered that it sometimes feels as if it were being channeled via the same spirits - evil and good - that inhabit these richly drawn characters.

"Maistros, a New Orleans record-store owner and former forklift operator with no formal training as a writer, has crafted a work spiked with historical characters and events, so striking and original that it probably deserves a place on the shelf of great fiction from his adopted hometown."

—**Philip Booth**, *St. Petersburg Times*

"One has to write with considerable authenticity to pull off a story steeped in magic and swamp water that examines race and class, death and rebirth, Haitian voodoo, and the beginnings of jazz in 1891 New Orleans... The plot is complex and magical, grounded in the history of the city, without being overly sentimental. There is a comfort with death as a part of life in this work that reveals deep feeling for the city and its past. Of course, every novel about New Orleans must have a good hurricane. Like the one in Zora Neale Hurston's classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this hurricane destroys the city while making hope possible. Highly recommended for all fiction collections, especially where there is an interest in jazz."

—**Library Journal**

"The multiple plot lines smoothly interlock like simultaneous horn solos in an early Louis Armstrong single, and the steady flow of closely observed details and dialogue are a consistent pleasure."

—**Joab Jackson**, *The Baltimore City Paper*

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* is set in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, where, explains Maistros, residents have 'a long and curious relationship with death, a closeness, a delicate truce.' In spite of all of the death and violence and betrayal, *Coffins* is also filled with love. Love moves characters to commit terrible acts, but it also drives them to right their wrongs. Love offers second chances, sometimes in this life and sometimes in the one beyond."

—**Atlanta Journal-Constitution**

"This book sings out in true jazz fashion—wildly inventive, oddly formed yet perfectly made, and never a sour note."

—**The Anniston Star**

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* manages to be surprising and deeply inventive through to the end... For those of us who were schooled in the refined belle-lettres traditions of American literature, this novel is a raw and unsubtle example of what it means to open a vein and write. To wit: 'Like a hurricane party or a jazz funeral, an embrace of some fast-coming and brilliantly inevitable (if unjust) end, an open invitation of the last and wildest party on earth, a high stakes gamble with neither certainty nor hope'."

—**The Alabama Press-Register**

"A writer of lesser ability would have been swallowed up in the swirling complexity of such a plot, plunging it to the level of a silly period piece regional novel. However, *The Sound of Building Coffins* is different. Maistros keeps his head above water and pulls off an admirable story because of his keen research into the history of New Orleans and his compelling style that is fired by his use of foreboding imagery. Readers can never guess what is coming next as the various threads are revealed and followed. The story, although complex, rings true because of its meticulous backdrop and immediate reader sympathy with the Morningstar family.

"Maistros' story is not a fantasy tale. It is about life and the timeless theme of how people integrate living with the good and the bad around them and how they can emerge with newness as a result. *The Sound of Building Coffins* is riveting. It is a good read and a remarkable first novel."

—**Endtype: A Canadian Literary Magazine**

"If Maistros was a traditional storyteller rather than a writer, he would be one of those gifted individuals that you would listen to raptly, late into the night."

—**The Roanoke Times**

"Maistros succeeds by populating (the novel) with hoodoo queens, jazzbos, tricksters, rounders, and various folks with one foot in reality and the other in the spirit world. Such an approach richly underscores his overreaching themes of life and death, salvation and damnation, birth and rebirth, as his lively cast of characters struggle through troubled times with equally troubled souls... A sprawling, complex, and ultimately absorbing work.

—**John Lewis, *Baltimore Magazine***

"Louis Maistros has an original and dark vision, full of power."

—**Douglas Clegg**

"*The Sound of Building Coffins* is a soulful work from a writer of the weird. Maistros does more than make you feel for his characters, he makes you *want* to feel."

—**Paul Tremblay**

"One of the best New Orleans novels I've ever read, Louis Maistros' debut seems dictated in a fever dream of automatic writing."

—**Patrick Millikin, *The Poisoned Pen***

More reviews, excerpts, freebies and information can be found at <http://louismaistros.com>

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