

## Road Tripping

Jim was sitting on the balcony, reality washing over him; the wind in the loose-leafed trees spreading paper about the streets and crackling, not unpleasantly, and the sun, obscured by cumulus that bespoke coming rain. The air, too, whispered inevitability with its layered wetness hinting towards detritus as the leaves taken from the trees the night previous sat rotting in the wet gutters of the street that Jim gazed upon. It wasn't a swampy smell, just a damp one, and he loved it. He closed his eyes to breathe the flavor fully and leaned further back in his chair, adding creaking to the crackling of the blowing leaves and the voices floating out to him from the sitting room inside. The voices were faint and coming through the skinny, half-opened double doors behind the chair Jim was sitting in with his drink and his senses and they seemed merely a distortion of his reality, an intermingling of two dimensions of person that touched one another but could not connect, and so he let them float, all around his head and through his ears and out to the leaves, maybe stirring the leaves as the wind themselves.

He couldn't be bothered with the problems of a couple right now because he was tired from his long trip down, way down South, and accent was thick in the distortion. But they were speaking, arguing really, and the voices were getting louder.

"You know I don't trust all that, can't let you do it, babe. You know how I feel about it. Ain't good, it takes you away from me for too long and it ain't healthy, babe, and y'all know it!" She was distraught in that motherly way and it was endearing, ineffective.

"Girl, you know I'll be fine, me n' Jim used to do this plenty, nothing bad ever happened and it's gonna be fine. Up North people do it, people do it here too, baby, and you know we're big boys. It'll be all right, I promise." But she was shaking her head, again in that motherly way, regretting the superficiality of the issue but arguing it anyway, and him just listening, waiting for her moment of weakness that would end in permission. It was coming and he was waiting.

The concession was made official by the sound of the bedroom doors slamming, chipped cream paint falling from the frame and his face falling a little bit too. The small fights always led to larger arguments and Jackson didn't want the thought of this to get in the way of the plans he'd made with Jim that night; bitterly, he retreated from locked doors and made his way out to the sitting room, the center of their little apartment.

"Jim, you out on the balcony?"

There was no answer. But Jackson knew his old friend well and, after a slight pause, made his way out to the porch.

"You didn't hear none of that, did you?"

"Mmrm" Jim asked lazily. "Nah... I mean, I heard you guys' voices, but I didn't really listen for the words. Sort of thought it was personal, you know? so I just let it ride."

Jim shifted a little bit in his chair and took a drink from his bloody mary, the surface of the concoction reflecting the lines on Jackson's distraught face as he stood over his friend.

"Besides, that drive really took it out of me. I was barely awake from my nap when all your, eh, ruckus, happened to start." He laughed a little bit.

"Well, I'm sorry about that anyway. Abby's fiery, got a fiery temper, you know, and... Well, you know me. I don't do a whole lot to keep her blood pressure where it needs be." Jackson laughed as well. They both just remained there in that way for a while; Jim lounging on the old wooden chair, looking out at the deepening sky; and Jackson just standing there, inspecting an interesting bit of flooring, both just there, on that screen-porch. Words weren't

necessary and so weren't used, two friends basking in the presence of that comforting aura of known humanity, alive with memory and presence, dancing in the wind and blowing their hair, finally awakening them to living, shaking them to speech.

"So what did you want to do tonight? Not so often you get yourself all the way down here, Jim, you know."

Jim's eyes broke from the clouds. "Well, you know what I've got with me. And I haven't ever been to these famous parades down here, the one's I hear so much about from my more 'worldly' friends..."

Jackson laughed again. "All right, asshole, fine. We can get you out to these damn parades. You know, when I talk about 'em, it's just to describe it to you, not to flaunt it or anything."

Jim just smiled at this and stood up from his chair, turning to Jackson and then past him, to the double doors into the sitting room. "I just need to grab my coat, then we can head out."

"And I don't call myself worldly like some pretentious prick!" Jackson called after him with a smile. "Ok, sure, whatever you say," came the faint, teasing reply, muffled then by the ruffling of a duffle bag.

*Jackass*, thought Jackson as he picked up the drink Jim had left half-finished on the floor. He drank it down and stepped to go convince Abby to open up, just for a second, so he could grab his clothes as well.

Jim was smoking a cigarette on the stoop outside Jackson's front door waiting in the slowly-dimming light, still just looking around. The cars all seemed as different as the paint on the houses, the flashy colors completely contrasting Jim's perception of a normal color scheme. And the cars were just driving by, piloted by the owners of those homes and, Jim thought, they're a little bit different too, the people and their cars and their houses, probably even their jobs, just different from anywhere up North, and even the sky wasn't the same as Jackson tapped him on the shoulder.

"Man, you lose yourself anymore and won't nobody ever find you."

Jim had to laugh. "Maybe I've been taking these pills too much, you know? Won't ever get back to normal after all this."

"Boy, you ain't never been normal, and you know it."

"I suppose you're right. Damn, Jack, wait- is that what you're wearing out?"

Jackson didn't look even slightly happy wearing his soiled, somewhat holey sweater and faded jeans, and the look on his face told Jim just how deeply he felt about the outfit. "The flip-flops are a nice touch, though. Really rebellious for early spring."

"Shut it," he said, sighing. "Abby wouldn't let me in. I'm just lucky that my sweater was in the kitchen."

"You keep your shoes in the bedroom?" Jim was smirking

"Abby just- you know, I told you to shut it. Hey- hey! No one's whipped here, Jim, fella, no one at all. Damn it, stop!" But Jim just kept on cracking his whip and laughing. "Fine, maybe a little bit, all right? Now are you ready to get? Damn, I hope it doesn't rain..." They started walking towards the sidewalk, laughing and moping, and Jackson was heading them left towards the parade routes when a voice broke out from behind them. "Mr. Connelly!"

Jackson stopped suddenly, Jim only slightly ahead of him. He turned back. "Mr. Blythe?"

"Get on back here for one second, I need a word with you!"

Groaning, Jackson retraced his steps back towards the stoop, Jim following close behind. "What's going on?" he asked curiously. "Hang on," came the reply.

They stopped in front of the screen door to Mr. Thomas Blythe's porch and home, located directly below Jackson's little apartment, and watched as an old man, squat and balding but with a flowing mustaches, pushed up from his white wicker chair and placed his paper down in the white wicker basket with a crackle. He grabbed his cane from beside the chair and shuffled over to the door.

"Now y'all know, Jackson, how me n' the missus feel about the noise from up in there," he began with his lazy drawl, pointing above his head. "Y'all know when the missus has gone down for a bit of shut-eye and needs her quiet."

"I know, Mr. Blythe, I know it, and I'm sorry, it's just you know how women can be, yelling, and Abby is a loud one to be sure..."

Blythe gave Jackson a sort of half-smile, half-grimace and coughed, deep and wheezing. "Don't I know it. I just told the missus I'd have a word with you, boy, so here I am doing it. But try and keep them fights or yells or what-have-you down in the future, you hear?" And with that, he turned around and made his way back to his chair and the fern and the little tree and the ashtray on the white wicker table. Slowly sitting again, he picked up his still-lit cigarette and took a drag.

"Is that all, Mr. Blythe?"

"Yes-sir, that's all, Jackson. We're old down here, you know, and need a bit of quiet, especially the missus. You just remember that. Now, go on and get," he finished, not unkindly, picking up his newspaper from the basket that held all the old magazines and papers and clippings Mr. Blythe enjoyed.

"All right, sir, it won't happen again, I swear. Have yourself a good evening, now, Mr. Blythe."

"You too, Jackson, you and your friend there."

Jim and Jackson began to walk away from the house again, moving to the sidewalk under the big beech trees with wind in the branches, no words on their lips, only to hear that same voice cut at them across the breeze, not loud but there, almost laughing. It was hidden by a little distance and the early-budding bushes, yet clear as day: "You may want yourself a coat, Jackson. The weather in New Orleans can be a bit unpredictable!"

Jim laughed with the voice on the wind as Jackson grumbled inaudibly, and they both stepped in time to the distant drums that beat the presence of the first parade of the evening, leaves still blowing and clacking and that damp smell still lingering as the clouds built up higher and higher in the early-evening sky.

The crowds of St. Charles were swelling and swaying like a giant undulating wave, people walking and eating, waving and talking. They were all as one and the bright and shining reflections of myriad colors were projected with the aid of a dying sun floating unsteadily under a mass of steel. The wafting smells of spicy cooked red beans and boiling oysters mixed with laughing jazz horns and gruff, beautiful sing-song voices of bands that had all come out in celebration of carnival older, it seemed, than time itself. The street was chaotic and beautiful and exactly as Jim had always pictured it, had always lived it through the glosses in magazines and frames of video that captured the essence, if not the entirety, of the Mardi Gras season. Jim was smiling.

“This way,” Jackson pointed out to him as they reached the crossroads and both stepped flat-footed into the craziness.

“First things first,” Jim started as he pulled out a wad of plastic wrap from his jacket pocket. “We need to find a restaurant or porch or something where we can catch a little quiet, maybe a drink. I’m seeing all this right now,” pointing towards the people and noise, the life, “and I’m at least going to need a little pit stop before heading out into... Well, all that. Know a place?”

Jackson was nodding. “The perfect one. C’mon.”

Jim followed Jackson through a convoluted obstruction path, flowing in and around the conversations and grills and grins, shooting eventually towards an old neo-Victorian construct with gabled, pillared porch, where beads and threads cascaded, covering its every opening. Attached to the side of the house and separated by a black rusting fence was a pleasant and near-obscured beer garden.

“After you,” Jackson said, holding the door for his friend, and Jim crossed the threshold first (first), immediately lost in the throng of occupants. He followed the signs created and colored just for the occasion, bedecked with Greek masks and emotion, and eventually found his way to a pedestal manned by a flustered and frustrated looking young lady-goddess.

“Bathroom? Or are you actually gonna eat here?” she asked quickly, pulling menus hopefully from below. She looked at Jim directly, daringly.

“Me and my friend...,” he trailed off, looking behind him for Jackson amongst the gathered masses. “Well, I know what we need,” he decided, turning back to the aggravated worker. “Could we just get a spot in the beer garden? Just for drinks and-”

“Right this way,” she said, turning rapidly. Jim followed. “If my friend asks, Jackson’s his name, could you tell him ‘Jim’s in the garden,’ please?”

“Sure.”

She placed him in the garden at a wiry metal table near a warm light(ing) that shone on the tiny, cobbled pavilion. He took a seat and waited as dusk was falling under a dangling vine of wisteria, (un)blooming, watching the movement and cheers and the human waves crash again and again against the gutters of St. Charles. A waitress sauntered up to the table in that Southern belle sort of way and asked him, what’s your pleasure? She was a blonde and had a pleasant smile, but there was something about her that was different, something out of place in her face. Jim shook himself. “I’ll take a triple-Beam Manhattan, and don’t scrimp on the vermouth, if you wouldn’t mind, please.” She bounced away and Jim went back to watching the little section of street seen through the bushes of the garden and the trees that stood overhead. The leaves were waving fast.

“Sorry, Jim, I had to go to the bathroom. See those lines?”

“What? Oh, yeah, it’s crazy in there, man. Did you talk to the waitress yet?”

“No, figured we’d want to be outside. Anyway,” he said, scraping a chair back from the table, “did you order some drinks already?”

“Got one for me; wasn’t sure what you drink these days. Here she is now.”

The waitress placed Jim’s drink on a coaster that tried to sell him the importance of sipping other liquors while Jackson placed his order.

“Suppose I’ll have a screwdriver. Strong as you make it, please, ma’am,” he finished with flashing teeth. She smiled back at them and told Jackson she’d be right back, sugar, and then

sauntered away. Jim then turned to Jackson. "Pretty girls down here, Jack. Abby's quite a looker, too. Well done," he finished with a laugh.

"Only the best, Jim, only the best. Now let's take a look at that action- and keep it quiet, man. Cops all out in force tonight, you know."

"Don't be such a worrier. Hardly anyone else out here but that old lady (greyhair) sitting by the fence there and doubt she knows what the hell is going on anyway(ways). Just flashing lights and flashing noises and," he smirked, "flashing women. We'll be fine." And with that he pulled out the package again (tiny little thing), wrapped up tight in plastic and then some more in a bag.

"Told me this was some heavy shit, Jack, so should be fun." He handed Jackson two capsules full of dealer knows what, and before God and their drinks they pounded them down and strapped in; Jackson wore a big grin that grew wider than his face, and Jim just smiled his wide smile too, and they both sat there under that vine in the grown dark (ominous) with lights all around, and especially that warm one above. Until the drinks were finished they sat there and then it was time to leave the old lady at the fence. They waved both to her and to the waitress with the out-of-place-face and the saunter and stepped out through the swinging black metal fence, and behind them they heard "Careful in this weather, boys, it can be a bit unpredictable!" And they turned back just in time to see the full mustaches of the woman in the wheelchair before jumping into the middle of madness once more. The thunder was crashing after lift-off.

The green-eyed fuzz was a television channel and it tried to give Jackson a hand, turning into a claw, turning into a jello mold that began to consume his fingers with furious abandon and Jim forced Jackson to rip it (tear it!) out of the vicious pile which had found its teeth on his flesh.

"Where is the marking? Where's my hand?!" Jackson grabbed at the air where his hand had been and found nothing but a sleeve, the old stiff-moving sweater sleeve, and Jim took his arm and showed him again (and again we saw the hand) where it was.

"You found it for me, Jim! With your smile, you shined light on my hand!"

"Wasn't looking at you, what's all that?"

The dancing brass had found their voices along the edge of a box that moved with sanguinity and the people were fading in and out of the edges as the sun broke the clouds above but only for a flashing second and suddenly the people were back. Back and forth and out and around, and there was a cheering for the dancing, singing brass but these were drowned by the flashing sun because each time it appeared it yelled down to the mortals in a booming voice-boom and Jackson and Jim could feel their cheeks, damp from the beauty of the performance.

"Don't let it stop!" Jim cried, his smile as wide as his eyes, and then wider still.

"We need to get back to where we were," Jackson's lined face was crevassed now, intense. "Back to the place that was so easy and hidden (I want); to hide!" They had to hide from the marauders that ran amuck in the wet sun-flashed street gutters and Jackson knew it before Jim had even seen the menace.

Terror was in Jim's voice. "What do they look like? Do they wear the flashing gem-necks of the box riders? Do they move with bounces like the metal sticks? Do they sing? What if we sing, Jack? Will they go away and disappear?!"

Jackson was gathering his storm around him (thoughts his storm, a flash of my brash wording words) to answer the questions (What do they look like, Jackson!) but it stopped short as the bright flashes became more brutal, harder to hear through, and Jim screamed the wetness of his cheeks and hair. "Where did this ocean come from?"

“The better question here is, where did all this weather come from, boys? Awful sudden, wasn’t it?”

The haunting voice broke over him but Jackson didn’t know the answer to that either (displaced Gulf waters of the air, I saw) and (I can’t help them, not anyone!) just looked to Jim and then past Jim at the heavysset wavering figure of an old man with a cigar in his hand; a specter, a vision (is he real?). Terrified, Jackson shook Jim’s shoulders of the dew drip that dripped harder with each second, and the clocks on the walls of the dilapidated hollows cried out ghostly-cold to Ja(my)n’s mind to “Get back! Get back!” Jackson knew where he had to be, had to get Jim there too; more importantly, had to be away from Blythe, rid of Blythe, the haunt, the evil. He grabbed Jim’s arm with his hook and pulled him along, fast along the current of the river shores of St. Charles.

“Where are we going? The metals were dancing and singing again and the faces, the drooping faces- you saw the droopers, right?- they’re singing again and smiling with the metals that dance! The music, Jackson, we have to stay!”

But Jim had missed the marauders again, the blues of deepest and shallowing shade, different blues for different types, but all of the same purpose, the hive mindset, to grab, snatch. He had also missed the Blythe specter. They were trooping the shores- Jackson was sure- along with Blythe, patrolling the waters (protecting river trade from the dilution of my multitudes), keeping the unlawful under-wraps. Wraps were not anything Jackson wanted to be under, he refused to be under. (I can’t help Jim get back Jackson!) And Jackson kept hold of Jim’s self as it blew away as dust. Jackson focused his mind on becoming dust to blow away too, him and Jim in the wind, back to the safe place, away from the marauding blue menace, away from Blythe. They would not (cannot help them, control lost) be captured so Jackson and Jim blew back, back down the way, in the steadily increasing (further furious) wind...

(It tears at me too, now, traveling by Jackson, the self, blown-

The music throbbed then as the storm fell heavily on their cheeks and the masked marauders were out to capture the on-looking (something). All around, they seemed, just looking on impossibility. The rain was multicolored and hard, more like hail, and it came from the giant moving creatures who swayed and held more impossibility on-lookers behind their unnatural ridges and it was as though they were God, all gods, throwing down weather on the conglomeration of hands and necks and bodies that cried for more because they were parched, parched beyond belief, and the succor was needed in mind, body and spirit. Especially in that town of spirits, that town (this town), it of the voodoo and the changes and snakes whose heads had been cut off, but they were still on St. Charles, and the music blared.

But blaring even more was the blurring, it of visions at once clear and never, and

Jimwas

in the middle of a

groupofpeople

who were all asking (me what the issue is) questions. Jim was gone, disappeared, almost around the corner, but you can't disappear around the corner or the corner disappears you, into the lore of Louisiana

policereports

for good and then the mothers all cry for those disappeared by the corners and

Jimwas

trying to turn one when Jackson stopped him (Stop him Jackson!) And spinning Jackson was stopping Jim at the corner.

"It's too much, Jim, I feel myself slipping," as he fell, supine, on pavement as the walls of buildings deteriorated and

allofasudden

Jim was helping Jackson (or was it Jackson and Jim?) stagger into the group of bodies that were all fluctuations of reality. "Where have all the people gone?" Jim cried and Jackson didn't have an answer, except there she was, the person, the only person among all the things, and Jackson

pointedather

and told Jim, "This is it, there it is, it's her!" (Not her, that!)

The old lady in the wheelchair was clear as day in the night and shone with a light that was

brightwithforesight

that Jim and Jackson could barely look at, had never looked at, because she had seen them take the

dealernodeal

challenge and they were losing, knew they were losing (and me, with me), but she was clear. Her glassy eyes were human size and she sat there in the moving chair with her grey hair strewn to the sky and her mouth open, calling lightning to them, at them;

jitteringjargon,

a spell, Jackson knew, and was terrified of her witchery and the blanket that covered her withered old tentacles. She was

nolonger

clear, had transcended, become more, and it was crying, “The weather! The weather!” as Blythe’s bald head pointing its wings towards them and Jim was screaming, Jackson was screaming (I’m *screaming*), both terrified of what had come to pass and the room is red the room is red the room is

(Red.)

(We are present at the junction of reality and fiction, suspended in a mixed solution of varying reddish hues whose two components will not dilute into one another. The solution calls for a stir but no such stick exists and so we remain, organized by attendants who all wear red uniforms with suspenders, and black shiny brimmed hats. Their skin moves around- lumps and mounds and wiggles- all move in constant mockery of what we first thought to be human; no longer.

(We’re waiting for something, anything, but I- my group, us- we don’t want it to come. The attendants do. They’re anxious and they flash their charcoal smiles at me with smoldering eyes and pat my back with jagged edges. I desperately want them to show me- us, show us a way out. We hear a presence unannounced, the idea of hearing; abstract of sense; think we can hear as I see it approach and then the sound flattens me.

(Jackson and Jim are standing in a line defined by velvet rope and burnished gold stands and they’re not the only ones fading. I have lost all control of my world, invention, and I am lost.

(I stand outside of the velvet ropes and the attendants fix their gaze on me. Their skin moves fluidly along groping arms as their hands reach my body and I am forced to the precipice, only a car with a bar in front of me. The sign to my left is read like the room: “Admit one.” I am first, I am the only. Jim and Jackson are still fading from the velvet and disappearing as I am forced into the worn wooden seat of the coaster cart and the attendant pushes the bar down over my waist. There is no escaping this reality, this true limit of being, and the steam erupts from the motors below as my car is expelled out, forced into a hole, and all I hear: “There ain’t no escaping this weather, either, boy.”

(My eyes bulge as I scream back to Jackson, back to Jim. I scream back at Thomas Blythe, the attendant, my harbinger, he of the moving flesh, the Terror- I scream. They hear my screaming, they’re screaming too, and they call back to me with laughter perpetuating my fall. My creation falls away just as reality dissolves and the solution, the suspended mixture, forgoes the stir and just spills me down, down the hole, Jim and Jackson too, and down we go, all of them in me and myself; all of us manifest in I, tumbling red.)

(And I am lost to the darkness; completely and utterly gone.)

“Jesus Christ, Abby’s gonna fucking kill me!”

“I know man, I mean, you’ve been saying that since we woke up.”

“And it’s true!”

Jackson and Jim were walking down Jackson’s street on the broken, cracked sidewalk and under the beech trees. The sun was brilliant above and the clouds were wispy, cirrus to a point, and that damp, deep South smell in the air still. Jim just told Jackson to breathe. “Aww, shit... Shit!”

“Well, bud,” Jim said, stopping in front of Jackson’s apartment. “Moment of truth. Here we are.”

They looked at the house for a little while before turning up the path from the sidewalk. They slowly approached Jackson’s front door. “Hang on,” Jackson said, pale in the early-Spring sun. The wind ruffled his hair and shook him slightly.

“Just think how lucky we’ve been so far, Jack. Those cops last night were awesome to us. And look at all these beads!” he added, lifting a hefty pile that hung around his neck. “That luck has got to hold out, right?”

Jackson thought on that for a second. “Shit, man. Ahh, well, there’s no delaying the inevitable. Might as well face the music, I suppose.” They covered the remaining short distance to Jackson’s stoop quickly.

“You just...just stay down here for a bit, Jim. This ain’t gonna be pretty.”

“Why, hello there, boys,” came that old, cigarette-gruff voice from the screen door. Thomas Blythe set down his newspaper in that old white wicker basket and placed his ice-filled lemonade on the table. He laced his fingers over his expansive girth.

Jackson and Jim shivered along their spines.

“Hey, there, Mr. Blythe,” Jackson started, tentatively.

“You boys just getting back? My, my, now that’s a long night right there. Abby’s sure to be in a towering temper, I’ll bet.”

“Yeah... I was just telling Jim... Nevermind. Best to get it over with though, right?”

“Right you are there, Mr. Connelly. Go on and make it up to your lady.” Blythe gave Jackson a smile and leaned back in his chair. He picked up his paper again, snapping it straight open.

“If you don’t mind, Jack, I think I’ll just come up with you now,” Jim said quietly.

“No problem, man. I totally understand.” Jackson placed his hand on the door and began to turn the knob.

“Yessir, best keep your lady happy in New Orleans,” came Blythe’s languid voice from behind his wall of print. “You just never know when the weather’s gonna change.”

Jim and Jackson gasped as the front door cracked down the center, opening to a monstrous yawning pit of ever-changing color-dark. The wind whipped through trees come alive and marching in a ring towards the apartment, bark-faced, contorted into looks utterly venomous, and Jackson and Jim looked to Thomas Blythe’s porch and there he was, leaning on his cane, smiling that charcoal smile at them, eyes aflame. “Weather’s *always* changing, boys.”

The wind gusted with finality and ripped the two boys from reality, Jim tumbling head-over-heels after Jackson down, down that big black gaping hole, trumpeting a thunderous demise into oblivious nothingness and Blythe’s laughter, become the wind, howling ever-after them on their eternal fall.