

## Love's Archive

The first time he read the letter he was on the toilet, where he'd brought the morning's mail. He sat rereading it until his thighs went numb pressed against the cold porcelain, then stood shakily and found his shoes. There was to be a visitor. He would have to hurry.

It had rained for six straight days. The French Quarter was sodden, its brightly colored houses like rows of soggy party hats. Will walked back quickly, down Bienville, eyes to the ground. At the last shotgun house before the river he paused, fishing his keys from his back pocket, and crossed the narrow porch in one stride. He let himself in to the dark kitchen. It seemed as he entered that the room let out a breath it had been holding since he'd hurried out that morning, leaving on the counter the bowl of oatmeal with raisins he'd made but not had time to eat. The raisins had absorbed moisture and lay like bloated corpses on the beach of congealed oatmeal, closer now to their original shape as grapes.

Will dropped the heavy shopping bag to the floor and retrieved the letter from the garbage, scanning it once more. 'Department of Social Services'. 'Tuesday June 25<sup>th</sup>'. That was tomorrow, why did they not give more notice? 'It has come to our attention...'. Someone had reported him. The electrician surely, no one else had seen inside. He had arrived, toolbag in hand, to find the source of the power outage but there was no way to reach the fuse box, blocked behind a wall of newspapers piled almost to the ceiling. Neatly stacked in rows by year, 1989 to 1991. A hazard, he'd said. Hoarding. Unsafe living conditions. Will thought of him going back to his van, phoning someone, the Sanitation Department maybe. He felt no malice for the man, simply made a few private observations on the importance of self-reliance and let the impact sink through him like a lead line.

From the doorway he surveyed the living room. It was layered, wafered in newspapers. There were stacks covering the windows, only slivers of light blading through here and there. There were lopsided piles on desk and chairs that had yet to be sorted, shifting and slipping like the scales of a just-cleaned fish. May to July 1992 were curled into a set of old box-files braced against a wardrobe, the thicker Sunday editions in the wardrobe itself. 1995 to 1997 were heaped on the couch, its springs poking angry fingers through the fabric. In the bedroom beyond it was the same, stacks surrounding the double bed, more slotted between it and the wall and leaning in crooked towers towards the ceiling fan, the pages of some drifting down to lie like open carcasses on the floor. Every copy of the Times Picayune since January 17<sup>th</sup> 1983, they seemed to rise up and stick to him whenever he moved, comforting him, a soft gray glow when he woke in the night to an anxiety that left him rocking knees to chest in the lettuce-fold of sheets. After an hour or so the frenzy of feeling would exhaust itself into nothingness and Will would slip back below the surface of sleep.

He turned now to his task. The shopping bag by the door contained eight boxes of four-inch galvanized framing nails. In the crawl space beneath the house were the two-by-fours he'd nailed over the windows when he rode out the hurricane. The hammer would probably be under there too. He had six, maybe seven hours of daylight left. If the neighbors asked, he was securing the house before leaving for the hottest months. They hadn't spoken two words to him in years anyway, since the accident.

By late afternoon he'd worked his way around two sides of the house, fast but thorough. The old nail holes were visible around the windows but Will made new ones, deep ones, right through the clapboard to the timber frame beneath. The house shifted slightly on its mossy haunches. His hands were made raw but he continued, methodical as always, under a low sky that gathered and bunched like gray netting. Dusk would come early. Plank by plank the first floor windows were covered in neat lines, running top to bottom like the segments of an earthworm.

Only at the front door did he pause. He would have to nail this shut from the inside. Carefully Will carried in the remaining two-by-fours. The house was utterly dark, save for the circle of light coming through the doorway. He lit the candles that he bought in boxes of fifty now the lights didn't work. Closing the door, he felt the fear subside. Almost finished. Twenty minutes later only the doorknob was visible, the planks neatly tucked around it. No social worker or clean-up crew would be coming in here to rearrange, to make fun.

Cocooned now, Will snaked between the papers to the bedroom. He lit more candles, softening the crisp folds of the papers, blurring the headlines. Now all was enveloped in creamy, honeyed light, lost definition, became a glowing paper meringue, a whipped cream éclair of faded ink. His breathing slowed. There was time now to sort and stack.

The candles burned down; nine, then ten o'clock passed. He worked his way through a pile, October and November 1993, not yet sorted by day. The pile shortened, fanned out, toppling a nearby stack. Will winced. Those would be from 1985, when the pain was still fresh. He would rearrange them when he finished this pile.

He was almost through November before he noticed he was peering through smoke to read the dates. Will turned. 1994 was ablaze, flames already licking the ceiling. Now 1999, 1987. Burning paper swirled as he danced among the stacks, pushing them to safety. 1996 set fire to 1985, 1991. Will ran for the door, a window. Now all was alight, delivered into one great flame.