

## No Safe Harbor

**We had just** returned from a spaghetti dinner at church when everything went to hell. Mama and Dad had fights all the time, but this was different. Mama insisted Dad was flirting with Miss Carla, the pastor's wife. Dad said that Mr. Bob, one of the deacons in the church, wanted to ride mama like a pogo-stick. Then it was as if Jesus tapped them on the shoulder because they stopped and looked at me.

"Get to bed." Dad said.

I didn't hesitate or let him know that it was only eight o'clock. The arguing didn't stop after I went to bed. Then I heard one word clearly.

"Joe?" Dad said.

Joe was Mama's older brother. He lived down near New Orleans and owned a shrimp boat. When I heard his name, I got an inkling of what Mama was going to do. I decided I was going to stow away, and so I packed my knapsack. I tried to figure out a way to get it in the trunk of Mama's car without them seeing me. The only choice was to sneak pass their bedroom, but with the mood they were in— Instead, I lay on my bed and buried my head under the pillow, waiting for the fighting to stop.

Sometime later, my bedroom door opened. I saw Mama's silhouette in the doorway, the hallway lights splashed across my face and made me squint. She came in and stopped. I couldn't see her face— it was hidden in a shadow—but I could see she tilted her head.

“Where are you going?”

She'd seen the knapsack. I tried but couldn't answer. I reached out and hugged her, pressing my face against her midsection. In her arms, I felt safe, as though nothing or no one could harm me.

"It'll be okay."

I don't know what she said to Dad after she left my room, but the next morning she said I could come with her to Uncle Joe's. When we left Birmingham, Mama let me sit in the front seat with her. She looked over at me. “Are you ready?”

I nodded.

As we turned onto the street mama looked over at me and said, “I'm glad you're coming with me.” At the top of her arm, through the short sleeve of her white blouse, I could see bruises—four fat lines that looked like fingers. I was about to ask her about them when she reached over and turned on the radio. “Sweet Caroline” burst out of the speakers and we sang along as we drove away.

It was early afternoon by the time we got near New Orleans. We drove over a huge bridge that crossed the Mississippi and landed us in St. Bernard parish. Uncle Joe lived on Bayou Dupre, a little community just off a canal that runs between the Mississippi and Lake Borgne. We traveled down a narrow road atop an earthen levee to where Uncle Joe docked his boat. Mama said he was more likely to be there than at home. Small white shells that had been dredged from the bottom of the lake covered the parking lot. The shells crunched under the tires as we turned into the entrance of the tiny harbor and parked. Some boats had already returned

and rocked gently in their slippers. Lines beat against the steel booms that held trawling nets hoisted above the decks. Seagulls swayed from side to side in the air as though tethered with a kite string. I felt a strange stillness. After having spent most of the day in the car, the absence of the sound of the engine made it seem like something was missing. It was peaceful, but I felt something else with it. Kind of how keeping secrets can make you feel special and lonely at the same time.

Mama stared off into the distance, hanging onto the steering wheel as if she were still driving. I followed her line of sight to the emptiness of the horizon. A gentle wind pushed through our open windows and rustled her hair. At that moment, she looked younger, and a bit scared.

"Can I get out?"

She nodded and I jumped out of the car and ran toward the wooden dock. A large pelican sat atop his perch, an old creosote pole capped with hammered tin. The bird looked at me with his large grey eyes and spread his wings as I ran by. My Keds pounded on the sun-bleached slats that separated me from the algae-green water.

"Be careful," Mama warned from the car.

Beyond the inlet of the bayou, a trawler put in for home. Tufts of dark diesel exhaust rose from a small pipe above the steering cabin. The boat rode low in the water under the weight of its catch. The curve of the bow and the way the leading edge of the keel cut through the water moved something inside of me.

I searched up and down the canal for Uncle Joe's boat. The sun was setting and the line that separated sea and the sky was becoming faint. I turned and my eyes squinted as I looked back at Mama, who sat in the car with the windows open and leafing through a magazine. Her

reddish brown hair drifted across her face and she smoothed it away. She seemed at ease, but even from a distance, I could tell something was weighing upon her.

At the end of the dock, there was a boat moored next to another creosote post. On the boat was an old shrimper. His hands were busy darning the mass of green nylon netting piled between his white shrimper boots. I waved and he nodded. When I reached the post, seagulls took to the safety of the sky and peered at me with their small black eyes. I wrapped my arm around the pole, careful to avoid the lumpy white blobs the birds had left behind. I lowered one foot down to the green water, trying to set my foot down on it. The swells moved too fast and my foot was under and then above the water quicker than I could adjust. I wondered how Jesus could walk on water if it wouldn't stay still. On that thought, my fingers were suddenly pruned away from the post, and I hung over the water at an impossible angle. I was going in.

I tried to pop back up, but my head hit something slimy and solid. Above me, air bubbles formed a liquid mirror. I was caught up under the dock. My chest began to rise and fall as my body hungered for air. In a panic, I kicked my legs and pounded the underside of the dock, but then things faded.

When I opened my eyes I was on my side, warm water spewed from my mouth as my stomach convulsed. I coughed. More water came out. Stabbing pains in my chest made me wince. I lay on my back on the dock, and my mother's long hair was dark and dripped water on my face. Her eyes were wide and white in the shadow of her face. I heard the seagulls squawking. It sounded like laughter. I closed my eyes.

She shook me. "Jerry! Are you okay?"

She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me, burying my face in her wet hair. I smelled the stagnant water of the bayou and my stomach lurched. I didn't want her to let go of me, but I pushed her away and wretched again.

"He'll be alright," I heard a man's voice say. "Just a little waterlogged."

The shrimper who had been mending his nets stood behind my mother. His wet black hair pressed tight on his head like a stocking cap and his wide belly pushed out against his soaked white t-shirt.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said.

"Tain't nothin', ma'am."

She picked me up and carried me, and with each step she took, I felt like I was falling. I leaned my head into her shoulder. The warmth of the day had slipped away and I could feel her shivering.

"Sorry," I said.

She looked at me and tried to smile. She put me in the front seat of the car and got an old blanket from the trunk. The coarse cloth made my skin itchy. My Keds were wet and I felt little puddles underneath my toes. She got in the car and began to dig in her purse. I looked out past the dock, hoping to see Uncle Joe's boat.

"Goddamnit!" she said.

"Sorry, Mama."

She shook her head. "I can't find my keys."

She kept digging and I kept hoping to see Uncle Joe's boat. If I could just see it come back to the harbor, I knew everything would be alright. He'd know what to do. I could imagine

him laughing off the accident. His smile would melt the seriousness that we were so tightly wrapped in.

“Jesus Christ! Where the hell are they?”

I looked over at the ignition and pointed. She didn't see me right away, but I held my arm outstretched. When she saw the keys dangling from their place on the steering column, she began to laugh. And I smiled. She really thought it was funny. And then, I couldn't tell exactly when, she began crying. She banged her hands on the steering wheel, hitting the horn like exclamation marks. The old shrimper glanced back over his shoulder at us. She stopped beating the horn, rested her head against the top of the steering wheel, and sobbed. I reached out to her and she pushed my hand away and pounded the front dash. Puffs of dust kicked up in the fading sun. She grabbed me and pulled me to her. It scared me at first, but she buried her face in my shoulder and cried, heaving at times, holding me very tight. Her warm breath went right through the blanket and the heat was sudden.

It got dark and mama gave up on waiting for Uncle Joe. We drove to a small motel, got out of our wet clothes, and cleaned up. For dinner she took me to a roadside diner and we sat in a booth that had its own little jukebox. "Sweet Caroline" was one of the selections, but we didn't play it. Mama let me get a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. My food came on wax paper in a little red basket. She sat there and watched me eat.

"You want a fry?" I held one up to her and she shook her head.

"I just need some coffee to warm my bones," she said.

I saw her hands shaking, even though she tried to hide it.

"How about we go down to the Audubon Zoo tomorrow," she said. "I hear they've got a white tiger."

I thought she was fooling me and I gave her a doubtful look.

"I'm serious. White with black stripes."

"Like a zebra? How could that be? Wouldn't it get spotted by hunters or something?"

"There are more things in heaven and earth," she said.

I took another bite of my cheeseburger and my stomach rumbled. I still had some of that bayou water in me. I brushed my forearm across my forehead and sighed.

"You don't have to finish, honey. Just eat what you can," she said.

I nodded and took another fry for good measure.

"Honey?" she said. "Do you think it'd be alright if we didn't tell Dad about your dip in the bayou?"

"He'd get mad. Wouldn't he," I said.

She nodded and took a sip of her coffee.

"Okay," I said.

We went back to the motel after dinner and Mama tried calling Uncle Joe. She stood, wrapping the phone cord around her fingers. There was no answer and she returned the handset to the cradle, letting her hand rest on it for a moment. I thought she might try calling Dad next, but instead she turned on the TV and sat on the bed next to me. The long day hit me all of a sudden. The bed was hard and the springs squeaked every time I moved, but my eyes were heavy and I drifted off to the sounds of laughter from the TV.

Sometime during the night, I heard sirens. The dark room glowed orange. I got out of bed and pulled aside the curtains. Across from the motel, a house was ablaze. Fire trucks were in the middle of the street with lights flashing and firefighters pulling hoses. I could feel the heat

through the window and saw a mama with her two kids, a boy and a girl. She held onto to them tightly, one on either side. The little girl had a stuffed animal of some sort that she held to her face and twisted from side to side under her mama's arm. They were all in their pajamas. Arcs of white water curved into the house and orange cinders streaked through the black smoke. There was a commotion and the firemen hollered to one another. The roof collapsed and the house fell in on itself. Sparks and embers filled the sky. Just then, Mama stood beside with her hand on my shoulder. "Good Lord," she said.

The next morning we packed up the car. Across the street were the remains of the home that had caught fire. I stood there for a long moment.

"The important thing is everyone got out, honey," Mama said.

"But where will they go?"

"I'm sure they have family they can stay with," she said.

The black jagged beams that had held up the roof looked like a pile of burnt toothpicks. How something so fragile looking could have ever been so sturdy was a mystery. At the front of the pile was a concrete stoop that led to a door no longer there. The charred chimney still stood at one end of the debris, like a lonely finger pointing toward heaven. We just stood there in the parking lot for a long time, me and Mama, looking to where it pointed.