

# Bitter Grounds

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We hope you enjoy this reprint, which first appeared in the Mojo: Conjure Stories anthology and subsequently in the collection Fragile Things.

## 1. “Come back early or never come”

In every way that counted, I was dead. Inside somewhere maybe I was screaming and weeping and howling like an animal, but that was another person deep inside, another person who had no access to the face and lips and mouth and head, so on the surface I just shrugged and smiled and kept moving. If I could have physically passed away, just let it all go, like that, without doing anything, stepped out of life as easily as walking through a door, I would have done. But I was going to sleep at night and waking in the morning, disappointed to be there and resigned to existence.

Sometimes I telephoned her. I let the phone ring once, maybe even twice, before I hung up.

The me who was screaming was so far inside that nobody knew he was even there at all. Even I forgot that was there, until one day I got into the car—I had to go to the store, I had decided, to bring back some apples—and I went past the store that sold apples and I kept driving, and driving. I was going south, and west, because if I went north or east I would run out of world too soon.

A couple of hours down the highway my cell phone started to ring. I wound down the window and threw the cell phone out. I wondered who would find it, whether they would answer the phone and find themselves gifted with my life.

When I stopped for gas I took all the cash I could on every card I had. I did the same for the next couple of days, ATM by ATM, until the cards stopped working.

The first two nights I slept in the car.

I was halfway through Tennessee when I realized I needed a bath badly enough to pay for it. I checked into a motel, stretched out in the bath and slept in it until the water got cold and woke me. I shaved with a motel courtesy kit plastic razor and a sachet of foam. Then I stumbled to the bed, and I slept.

Awoke at 4:00 AM, and knew it was time to get back on the road.

I went down to the lobby.

There was a man standing at the front desk when I got there: silver-gray hair although I guessed he was still in his thirties, if only just, thin lips, good suit rumpled, saying “I *ordered* that cab an *hour* ago. One *hour* ago.” He tapped the desk with his wallet as he spoke, the beats emphasizing the words.

The night manager shrugged. “I’ll call again,” he said. “But if they don’t have a car, they can’t send it.” He dialed a phone number, said “This is the Night’s Out Inn front desk again.... Yeah, I told.... Yeah, I told him.”

“Hey,” I said “I’m not a cab, but I’m in no hurry. You need a ride somewhere?”

For a moment the man looked at me like I was crazy, and for a moment there was fear in his eyes. Then he looked at me like I’d been sent from Heaven. “You know, by God, I do,” he said.

“You tell me where to go,” I said. “I’ll take you there. Like I said, I’m in no hurry.”

“Give me that phone,” said the silver-gray man to the night clerk. He took a handset and said, “You can *cancel* your cab, because God just sent me a Good Samaritan. People come into your life for a reason. That’s right. And I want you to think about that.”

He picked up his briefcase—like me he had no luggage—and together we went out to the parking lot.

We drove through the dark. He’d check a hand-drawn map on his lap, with a flashlight attached to his key ring, then he’d say, *left here*, or *this way*.

“It’s good of you,” he said.

“No problem. I have time.”

“I appreciate it. You know, this has that pristine urban legend quality, driving down country roads with a mysterious Samaritan. A Phantom Hitchhiker story. After I get to my destination, I’ll describe you to a friend, and they’ll tell me you died ten years ago, and still go round giving people rides.”

“Be a good way to meet people.”

He chuckled. “What do you do?”

“Guess you could say I’m between jobs,” I said. “You?”

“I’m an anthropology professor.” Pause. “I guess I should have introduced myself. Teach at a Christian college. People don’t believe we teach anthropology at Christian colleges, but we do. Some of us.”

“I believe you.”

Another pause. “My car broke down. I got a ride to the motel from the highway patrol, as they said there was no tow truck going to be there until morning. Got two hours of sleep. Then the highway patrol called my hotel room. Tow truck’s on the way. I got to be there when they arrive. Can you believe that? I’m not there, they won’t touch it. Called a cab. Never came. Hope we get there before the tow truck.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I guess I should have taken a plane. It’s not that I’m scared of flying. But I cashed in the ticket. I’m on my way to New Orleans. Hour’s flight, four hundred and forty dollars. Day’s drive, thirty dollars. That’s four hundred and ten dollars’ spending money, and I don’t have to account for it to anybody. Spent fifty dollars on the motel room, but that’s just the way these things go. Academic conference. My first. Faculty doesn’t believe in them. But things change. I’m looking forward to it.

Anthropologists from all over the world.” He named several, names that meant nothing to me. “I’m presenting a paper on the Haitian coffee girls.”

“They grow it, or drink it?”

“Neither. They sold it, door-to-door in Port-au-Prince, early in the morning, in the early years of the last century.”

It was starting to get light now.

“People thought they were zombies,” he said. “You know The walking dead. I think it’s a right turn here.”

“Were they? Zombies?”

He seemed very pleased to have been asked. “Well, anthropologically, there are several schools of thought about zombies. It’s not as cut-and-dried as popularist works like *The Serpent and the Rainbow* would make it appear. First we have to define our terms: are we talking folk belief, or zombie dust, or the walking dead?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I was pretty sure *The Serpent and the Rainbow* was a horror movie.

“They were children, little girls, five to ten years old, who went door-to-door through Port-au-Prince selling the chicory coffee mixture. Just about this time of day, before the sun was up. They belonged to one old woman. Hang a left just before we go into the next turn. When she died, the girls vanished. That’s what the book tells you.”

“And what do you believe?” I asked.

“That’s my car,” he said, with relief in his voice. It was a red Honda Accord, on the side of the road. There was a tow truck beside it, lights flashing, a man beside the tow truck smoking a cigarette. We pulled up behind the tow truck.

The anthropologist had the door opened before I’d stopped; he grabbed his briefcase and was out of the car.

“Was giving you another five minutes, then I was going to take off,” said the tow truck driver. He dropped his cigarette into a puddle on the tarmac. “Okay, I’ll need your triple-A car and a credit card.”

The man reached for his wallet. He looked puzzled. He put his hands in his pockets. He said, “My wallet.” He came back to my car, opened the passenger-side door and leaned back inside. I turned on the light. He patted the empty seat. “My wallet,” he said again. His voice was plaintive and hurt.

“You had it back in the motel,” I reminded him. “You were holding it. It was in your hand.”

He said, “God damn it. God fucking damn it to Hell.”

“Everything okay there?” called the tow truck driver.

“Okay,” said the anthropologist next to me, urgently. “This is what we’ll do. You drive back to the motel. I must have left the wallet on the desk. Bring it back here. I’ll keep him happy until then. Five minutes, it’ll take you five minutes.” He must

have seen the expression on my face. He said, "Remember. People come into your life for a reason."

I shrugged, irritated to have been sucked into someone else's story.

Then he shut the car door and gave me a thumbs up.

I wished I could have just driven away and abandoned him, but it was too late, I was driving to the hotel. The night clerk gave me the wallet, which he had noticed on the counter, he told me, moments after we left.

I opened the wallet. The credit cards were all in the name of Jackson Anderton.

It took me half an hour to find my way back, as the sky grayed into full dawn. The tow truck was gone. The rear window of the red Honda Accord was broken, and the driver's-side door hung open. I wondered if it was a different car, if I had driven the wrong way to the wrong place; but there were the tow truck driver's cigarette stubs crushed on the road, and in the ditch nearby I found a gaping briefcase, empty, and beside it, a manilla folder containing a fifteen-page typescript, a prepaid hotel reservation at a Marriott in New Orleans in the name of Jackson Anderton, and a packet of three condoms, ribbed for extra pleasure.

On the title page of the typescript was printed:

*"This was the way Zombies are spoken of: They are the bodies without souls. The living dead. Once they were dead, and after that they were called back to life again." Hurston. Tell My Horse.*

I took the manilla folder but left the briefcase where it was. I drove south under a pearl-colored sky.

People come into your life for a reason. Right.

I could not find a radio station that would hold its signal. Eventually I pressed the scan button on the radio and just left it on, left it scanning from channel to channel in a relentless quest for signal, scurrying from gospel to oldies to Bible talk to sex talk to country, three seconds a station with plenty of white noise in between.

*...Lazarus, who was dead, you make no mistake about that, he was dead, and Jesus brought him back to show us, I say to show us...*

*What I call a Chinese dragon, can I say this on the air? Just as you, y'know, get your rocks off, you whomp her round the backatha head, it all spurts outta her nose, I damn near laugh my ass off...*

*If you come home tonight I'll be waiting in the darkness for my woman with my bottle and my gun...*

*When Jesus says you will be there will you be there? No man knows the day or the hour so will you be there...*

*President unveiled an initiative today...*

*Fresh-brewed in the morning. For you, for me. For every day. Because every day is freshly ground...*

Over and over. It washed over me, driving through the day, on the backroads. Just driving and driving.

They become more personable as you head south, the people. You sit in a diner and, along with your coffee and your food, they bring you comments, questions, smiles, and nods.

It was evening, and I was eating fried chicken and collard greens and hush puppies, and a waitress smiled at me. The food seemed tasteless, but I guessed that might have been my problem, not theirs.

I nodded at her, politely, which she took as an invitation to come over and refill my coffee cup. The coffee was bitter, which I liked. At least it tasted of something.

“Looking at you,” she said. “I would guess that you are a professional man. May I inquire as to your profession?” That was what she said, word for word.

“Indeed you may,” I said, feeling almost possessed by something, and affably pompous, like W.C. Fields or the Nutty Professor (the fat one, not the Jerry Lewis one, although I am actually within pounds of my optimum weight for my height), “I happen to be... an anthropologist, on my way to a conference in New Orleans, where I shall confer, consult, and otherwise hobnob with my anthropologists.”

“I knew it,” she said. “Just looking at you. I had you figured for a professor. Or a dentist, maybe.”

She smiled at me one more time. I thought about stopping forever in that little town, eating in that diner every morning and every night. Drinking their bitter coffee and having her smile at me until I ran out of coffee and money and days.

Then I left her a good tip, and went south and west.

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## 2. *“Tongue brought me here”*

There were no hotel rooms in New Orleans, or anywhere in the New Orleans sprawl. A Jazz Festival had eaten them, every one. It was too hot to sleep in my car, and, even if I’d cranked a window and been prepared to suffer the heat, I felt unsafe. New Orleans is a real place, which is more than I can about most of the cities I’ve lived in, but it’s not a safe place, not a friendly one.

I stank, and itched. I wanted to bathe, and to sleep, and for the world to stop moving past me.

I drove from fleabag motel to fleabag motel, and then, at the last, as I had always known I would, I drove into the parking lot of the downtown Marriott on Canal Street. At least I knew they had one free room. I had a voucher for it in the manilla folder.

“I need a room,” I said to one of the women behind the counter.

She barely looked at me. “All rooms are taken,” she said. “We won’t have anything until Tuesday.”

I needed to shave, and to shower, and to rest. *What's the worst she can say?* I thought. *I'm sorry, you've already checked in?*

"I have a room, prepaid by my university. The name's Anderton."

She nodded, tapped a keyboard, said "Jackson?" then gave me a key to my room, and I initialed the room rate. She pointed me to the elevators.

A short man with a ponytail and a dark, hawkish face dusted with white stubble cleared his throat as we stood besides the elevators. "You're the Anderton from Hopewell," he said. "We were neighbors in the *Journal of Anthropological Heresies*." He wore a white T-shirt that said "Anthropologists Do It While Being Lied To."

"We were?"

"We were. I'm Campbell Lakh. University of Norwood and Streatham. Formerly North Croydon Polytechnic. England. I wrote the paper about Icelandic spirit-walkers and fetches."

"Good to meet you," I said, and shook his hand. "You don't have a London accent."

"I'm a Brummie," he said. "From Birmingham," he added. "Never seen you at one of these things before."

"It's my first conference," I told him.

"Then you stick with me," he said. "I'll see you're all right. I remember my first one of these conferences, I was scared shitless I'd do something stupid the entire time. We'll stop on the mezzanine, get our stuff, then get cleaned up. There must have been a hundred babies on my plane over, Isweartogod. They took it in shifts to scream, shit, and puke, though. Never less than ten of them screaming at a time."

We stopped on the mezzanine, collected our badges and programs. "Don't forget to sign up for the ghost walk," said the smiling woman behind the table. "Ghost walks of Old New Orleans each night, limited to fifteen people in each party, so sign up fast."

I bathed, and washed my clothes out in the basin, then hung them up in the bathroom to dry.

I sat naked on the bed and examined the former contents of Anderton's briefcase. I skimmed through the paper he had intended to present, without taking in the content.

On the clean back of page five he had written, in a tight, mostly legible, scrawl, "*In a perfect perfect world you could fuck people without giving them a piece of your heart. And every glittering kiss and every touch of flesh is another shard of heart you'll never see again.*"

"*Until walking (waking? Calling?) on your own is unsupportable.*"

When my clothes were pretty much dry I put them back on and went down to the lobby bar. Campbell was already there. He was drinking a gin and tonic, with a gin and tonic on the side.

He had out a copy of the conference program and had circled each of the talks and papers he wanted to see. (“Rule one, if it’s before midday, fuck it unless you’re the one doing it,” he explained.) He showed me my talk, circled in pencil.

“I’ve never done this before,” I told him. “Presented a paper at a conference.”

“It’s a piece of piss, Jackson,” he said. “Piece of piss. You know what I do?”

“No,” I said.

“I just get up and read the paper. Then people ask questions, and I just bullshit,” he said. “Actively bullshit, as opposed to passively. That’s the best bit. Just bullshitting. Piece of utter piss.”

“I’m not really good at, um, bullshitting,” I said. “Too honest.”

“Then nod, and tell them that that’s a really perceptive question, and that it’s addressed at length in the longer version of the paper, of which the one you are reading is an edited abstract. If you get some nut job giving you a really difficult time about something you got wrong, just get huffy and say that it’s not about what’s fashionable to believe, it’s about the truth.”

“Does that work?”

“Christ, yes, I gave a paper a few years back about the origins of the Thuggee sects in Persian military troops—it’s why you could get Hindus and Muslims equally becoming Thuggee, you see, the Kali worship was tacked on later. It would have begun as some sort of Manichaeian secret society?”

“Still spouting that nonsense?” She was a tall, pale woman with a shock of white hair, wearing clothes that looked both aggressively, studiously Bohemian, and far too warm for the climate. I could imagine her riding a bicycle, the kind with a wicker basket in the front.

“Spouting it? I’m writing a fucking book about it,” said the Englishman. “So, what I want to know is, who’s coming with me to the French Quarter to taste all that New Orleans can offer?”

“I’ll pass,” said the woman, unsmiling. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Jackson Anderton, from Hopewell College.”

“The Zombie Coffee Girls paper?” She smiled. “I saw it in the program. Quite fascinating. Yet another thing we owe Zora, eh?”

“Along with *The Great Gatsby*,” I said.

“Hurston knew F. Scott Fitzgerald?” said the bicycle woman. “I did not know that. We forget how small the New York literary world was back then, and how the color bar was often lifted for a Genius.”

The Englishman snorted. “Lifted? Only under sufferance. The woman died in penury as a cleaner in Florida. Nobody knew she’d written any of the stuff she

wrote, let alone that she'd worked with Fitzgerald on *The Great Gatsby*. It's pathetic, Margaret."

"Posterity has a way of taking these things into account," said the tall woman. She walked away.

Campbell started after her. "When I grow up," he said. "I want to be her."

"Why?"

He looked at me. "Yeah, that's the attitude. You're right. Some of us write the bestsellers, some of us read them, some of us get the prizes, some of us don't. What's important is being human, isn't it? It's how good a person you are. Being alive."

He patted me on the arm.

"Come on. Interesting anthropological phenomenon I've read about on the Internet I shall point out to you tonight, of the kind you probably don't see back in Dead Rat, Kentucky. *Id est*, women who would, under normal circumstances, not show their tits for a hundred quid, who will be only too pleased to get 'em out for the crowd for some cheap plastic beads."

"Universal trading medium," I said. "Beads."

"Fuck," he said. "There's a paper in that. Come on. You ever had a Jell-O shot, Jackson?"

"No."

"Me neither. Bet they'll be disgusting. Let's go and see."

We paid for our drinks. I had to remind him to tip.

"By the way," I said. "F. Scott Fitzgerald. What was his wife's name?"

"Zelda? What about her?"

"Nothing," I said.

Zelda. Zora. Whatever. We went out.

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### 3. "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere"

Midnight, give or take. We were in a bar on Bourbon Street, me and the English anthropology prof, and he started buying drinks—real drinks, this place didn't do Jell-O shots—for a couple of dark-haired women at the bar. They looked so similar they could have been sisters. One wore a red ribbon in her hair, the other wore a white ribbon. Gauguin could have painted them, only he would have painted them bare-breasted and without the silver mouse skull earrings. They laughed a lot.

We had seen a small party of academics walk past the bar at one point, being led by a guide with a black umbrella. I pointed them out to Campbell.

The woman with the red ribbon raised an eyebrow. “They go on the Haunted History tours, looking for ghosts, you want to say, dude, this is where the ghosts come, this is where the dead stay. Easier to go looking for the living.”

“You saying the tourists are alive?” said the other, mock-concern on her face.

“When they get here,” said the first, and they both laughed at that.

They laughed a lot.

The one with the white ribbon laughed at everything Campbell said. She would tell him, “Say fuck again,” and he would say it, and she would say, “Fook! Fook!” trying to copy him, and he’d say, “It’s not *fook*, it’s *fuck*,” and she couldn’t hear the difference, and would laugh some more.

After two drinks, maybe three, he took her by the hand and walked her into the back of the bar, where music was playing, and it was dark, and there were a couple of people already, if not dancing, then moving against each other.

I stayed where I was, beside the woman with the red ribbon in her hair.

She said, “So you’re in the record company, too?”

I nodded. It was what Campbell had told them we did. “I hate telling people I’m a fucking academic,” he had said, reasonably, when they were in the ladies’ room. Instead he had told them that he had discovered Oasis.

“How about you? What do you do in the world?”

She said, “I’m a priestess of Santeria. Me, I got it all in my blood, my papa was Brazilian, my momma was Irish-Cherokee. In Brazil, everybody makes love with everybody and they have best little brown babies. Everybody got black slave blood, everybody got Indian blood, my poppa even got some Japanese blood. His brother, my uncle, he looks Japanese. My poppa, he just a good-looking man. People think it was my poppa I got the Santeria from, but no, it was my grandmomma, she said she was Cherokee, but I had her figgered for mostly high yaller when I saw the old photographs. When I was three I was talking to dead folks, when I was five I watched a huge black dog, size of a Harley Davidson, walking behind a man in the street, no one could see it but me, when I told my mom, she told my grandmomma, they said, she’s got to know, she’s got to learn. There’s people to teach me, even as a little girl.

“I was never afraid of dead folk. You know that? They never hurt you. So many things in this town can hurt you, but the dead don’t hurt you. Living people hurt you. They hurt you so bad.”

I shrugged.

“This is a town where people sleep with each other, you know. We make love to each other. It’s something we do to show we’re still alive.”

I wondered if this was a come-on. It did not seem to be.

She said, “You hungry?”

I said, a little.

She said, "I know a place near here they got the best bowl of gumbo in New Orleans. Come on."

I said, "I hear it's a town you're best off not walking on your own at night."

"That's right," she said. "But you'll have me with you. You're safe, with me with you."

Out on the street college girls were flashing their breasts to the crowds on the balconies. For every glimpse of nipple the onlookers would cheer and throw plastic beads. I had known the red-ribbon woman's name earlier in the evening, but now it had evaporated.

"Used to be they only did this shit at Mardi Gras," she said. "Now the tourists expect it, so it's just tourists doing it for the tourists. The locals don't care. When you need to piss," she added, "you tell me."

"Okay. Why?"

"Because most tourists who get rolled, get rolled when they go into the alleys to relieve themselves. Wake up an hour later in Pirate's Alley with a sore head and an empty wallet."

"I'll bear that in mind."

She pointed to an alley as we passed it, foggy and deserted. "Don't go there," she said.

The place we wound up in was a bar with tables. A TV on above the bar showed the *Tonight Show* with the sound off and subtitles on, although the subtitles kept scrambling into numbers and fractions. We ordered the gumbo, a bowl each.

I was expecting more from the best gumbo in New Orleans. It was almost tasteless. Still, I spooned it down, knowing that I needed food, that I had had nothing to eat that day.

Three men came into the bar. One sidled, one strutted, one shambled. The sidler was dressed like a Victorian undertaker, high top hat and all. His skin was fishbelly pale; his hair was long and stringy; his beard was long and threaded with silver beads. The strutter was dressed in a long black leather coat, dark clothes underneath. His skin was very black. The last one, the shambler, hung back, waiting by the door. I could not see much of his face, nor decode his race: what I could see of his skin was a dirty gray. His lank hair hung over his face. He made my skin crawl.

The first two men made straight to our table, and I was, momentarily, scared for my skin, but they paid no attention to me. They looked at the woman with the red ribbon, and both of the men kissed her on the cheek. They asked about friends they had not seen, about who did what to whom in which bar and why. They reminded me of the fox and the cat from *Pinocchio*.

"What happened to your pretty girlfriend?" the woman asked the black man.

He smiled, without humor. "She put a squirrel tail on my family tomb."

She pursed her lips. “Then you better off without her.”

“That’s what I say.”

I glanced over at the one who gave me the creeps He was a filthy thing, junkie-thin, gray-lipped. His eyes were downcast. He barely moved. I wondered what the three men were doing together: the fox and the cat and the ghost.

Then the white man took the woman’s hand and pressed it to his lips, bowed to her, raised a hand to me, in a mock salute, and the three of them were gone.

“Friends of yours?”

“Bad people,” she said. “Macumba. Not friends of anybody.”

“What was up with the guy by the door? Is he sick?”

She hesitated, then shook her head. “Not really. I’ll tell you when you’re ready.”

“Tell me now.”

On the TV, Jay Leno was talking to a thin, blonde woman. IT&S NOT .UST T1½E MOVIE said the caption. SO H. VE SS YOU SE¾N THE ACT ION F!GURE? He picked up a small toy from his desk, pretended to check under its skirt to make sure it was anatomically correct. [LAUGHTER], said the caption.

She finished her bowl of gumbo, licked the spoon with a red, red tongue, and put it down by the bowl. “A lot of kids they come to New Orleans. Some of them read Anne Rice books and figure they learn about being vampires here. Some of them have abusive parents, some are just bored. Like stray kittens living in drains, they come here. They found a whole new breed of cat living in a drain in New Orleans, you know that?”

“No.”

SLAUGHTER S ] said the caption, but Jay was still grinning, and the *Tonight Show* went to a car commercial.

“He was one of the street kids, only he had a place to crash at night. Good kid. Hitchhiked from L.A. To New Orleans. Wanted to be left alone to smoke a little weed, listen to his Doors cassettes, study up on Chaos magick and read the complete works of Aleister Crowley. Also get his dick sucked. He wasn’t particular about who did it. Bright eyes and bushy tail.”

“Hey,” I said. “That was Campbell. Going past. Out there.”

“Campbell?”

“My friend.”

“The record producer?” She smiled as she said it, and I thought, *She knows. She knows he was lying. She knows what he is.*

I put down a twenty and a ten on the table, and we went out onto the street, to find him, but he was already gone.

“I thought he was with your sister,” I told her.

“No sister,” she said. “No sister. Only me. Only me.”

We turned a corner and were engulfed by a crowd of noisy tourists, like a sudden breaker crashing onto the shore. Then, as fast as they had come, they were gone, leaving only a handful of people behind them. A teenaged girl was throwing up in a gutter, a young man nervously standing near her, holding her purse and a plastic cup half full of booze.

The woman with the red ribbon in her hair was gone. I wished I had made a note of her name, or the name of the bar in which I’d met her.

I had intended to leave that night, to take the interstate west to Houston and from there to Mexico, but I was tired and two-thirds drunk, and instead I went back to my room, and when the morning came I was still in the Marriott. Everything I had worn the night before smelled of perfume and rot.

I put on my T-shirt and pants, went down to the hotel gift shop, picked out a couple more T-shirts and a pair of shorts. The tall woman, the one without the bicycle, was in there, buying some Alka-Seltzer.

She said, “They’ve moved your presentation. It’s now in the Audubon Room, in about twenty minutes. You might want to clean your teeth first. Your best friends won’t tell you, but I hardly know you, Mister Anderton, so I don’t mind telling you at all.”

I added a traveling toothbrush and toothpaste to the stuff I was buying. Adding to my possessions, though, troubled me. I felt I should be shedding them. I needed to be transparent, to have nothing.

I went up to the room, cleaned my teeth, put on the Jazz Festival T-shirt. And then, because I had no choice in the matter, or because I was doomed to confer, consult, and otherwise hobnob, or because I was pretty certain Campbell would be in the audience and I wanted to say good-bye to him before I drove away, I picked up the type-script and went down to the Audubon Room, where fifteen people were waiting. Campbell was not one of them.

I was not scared. I said hello, and I looked up at the top of page one.

It began with another quote from Zora Neale Hurston:

*Big Zombies who come in the night to do malice are talked about. Also the little girl Zombies who are sent out by their owners in the dark dawn to sell little packets of roasted coffee. Before sun-up their cries of ‘Café Grillé’ can be heard from dark places in the streets and one can only see them if one calls out for the seller to come with the goods. Then the little dead one makes herself visible and mounts the steps.*

Anderton continued on from there, with quotations from Hurston’s contemporaries, several extracts from old interviews with older Haitians, the man’s paper leaping, as far as I was able to tell, from conclusion to conclusion, spinning fancies into guesses and suppositions and weaving those into facts.

Halfway through, Margaret, the tall without the bicycle, came in and simply stared at me. I thought, *She knows I’m not him. She knows.* I kept reading though. What else could I do?

At the end, I asked for questions.

Somebody asked me about Zora Neale Hurston's research practices. I said that was a very good question, which was addressed at greater length in the finished paper, of which what I had read was essentially an edited abstract.

Someone else, a short, plump woman, stood up and announced that the zombie girls could not have existed: Zombie drugs and powders numbed you, induced deathlike trances, but still worked fundamentally on belief—the belief that you were now one of the dead and had no will of your own. How, she asked, could a child of four or five be induced to believe such a thing? No. The coffee girls were, she said, one with the Indian Rope Trick, just another of the urban legends of the past.

Personally I agreed with her, but I nodded and said that her points were well made and well taken. And that, from my perspective—which was, I hoped, a genuinely anthropological perspective—what mattered was not what it was easy to believe, but, much more importantly, the truth.

They applauded, and afterward a man with a beard asked me whether he might be able to get a copy of the paper for a journal he edited. It occurred to me that it was a good thing I had come to New Orleans, that Anderton's career would not be harmed by his absence from the conference.

The plump woman, whose badge said her name was Shanelle Gravely-King, was waiting for me at the door. She said, "I really enjoyed that. I don't want you to think that I didn't."

Campbell didn't turn up for his presentation. Nobody ever saw him again.

Margaret introduced me to someone from New York, and mentioned that Zora Neal Hurston had worked on *The Great Gatsby*. The man said yes, that was pretty common knowledge these days. I wondered if she had called the police, but she seemed friendly enough. I was starting to stress, I realized. I wished I had not thrown away my cell phone.

Shanelle Gravely-King and I had an early dinner in the hotel, at the beginning of which I said, "Oh, let's not talk shop," and she agreed that only the very dull talked shop at the table, so we talked about rock bands we had seen live, fictional methods of slowing the decomposition of a human body, and about her partner, who was a woman older than she was and who owned a restaurant, and then we went up to my room, and her naked skin was clammy against mine.

Over the next couple of hours I used two of the three condoms. She was sleeping by the time I returned from the bathroom, and I climbed into the bed next to her. I thought about the words Anderton had written, hand-scrawled on the back of the typescript page, and I wanted to check them, but I fell asleep, a soft-fleshed jasmine-scented woman pressing close to me.

After midnight I woke from a dream, and a woman's voice was whispering in the darkness.

She said, "So he came into town, with his Doors cassettes and his Crowley books, and his handwritten list of the secret URLs for Chaos magick on the Web, and

everything was good, he even got a few disciples, runaways like him, and he got his dick sucked whenever he wanted, and the world was good.

“And then he started to believe his own press. He thought he was the real thing. That he was the dude. He thought he was a big mean tiger cat, not a little kitten. So he dug up... something... someone else wanted.

“He thought the something he dug up would look after him. Silly boy. And that night, he’s sitting in Jackson Square, talking to the Tarot readers, telling them about Jim Morrison and the kabbalah, and someone taps him on the shoulder, and he turns, and someone blows powder into his face, and he breathes it in.

“Not all of it. And he is going to do something about it, when he realizes there’s nothing to be done, because he’s all paralyzed, there’s fugu fish and toad skin and ground bone and everything else in that powder, and he’s breathed it in.

“They take him down to emergency, where they don’t do much for him, figuring him for a street rat with a drug problem, and by the next day he can move again, although it’s two, three days until he can speak.

“Trouble is, he needs it. He wants it. He knows there’s some big secret in the zombie powder, and he was almost there. Some people say they mixed heroin with it, some shit like that, but they didn’t even need to do that. He wants it.

“And they told him they wouldn’t sell it to him. But if he did jobs for them, they’d give him a little zombie powder, to smoke, to sniff, to rub on his gums, to swallow. Sometimes they’d give him nasty jobs to do no one else wanted. Sometimes they just humiliate him because they could—make him eat dog shit from the gutter, maybe. Kill for them, maybe. Anything but die. All skin and bones. He do anything for his zombie powder.

“And he still thinks, in the little bit of his head that’s still him, that he’s not a zombie. That he’s not dead, that there’s a threshold he hasn’t stepped over. But he crossed it long time ago.”

I reached out a hand, and touched her. Her body was hard, and slim, and lithe, and her breasts felt like breasts that Gauguin might have painted. Her mouth, in the darkness, was soft and warm against mine.

People come into your life for a reason.

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#### 4. *“Those people ought to know who we are and tell that we are here”*

When I woke, it was still almost dark, and the room was silent. I turned on the light, looked on the pillow for a ribbon, white or red, or for a mouse-skull earring, but there was nothing to show that there had ever been anyone in the bed that night but me.

I got out of the bed and pulled open the drapes, looked out of the window. The sky was graying in the east.

I thought about moving south, about continuing to run, continuing to pretend I was alive. But it was, I knew now, much too late for that. There are doors, after all, between the living and the dead, and they swing in both directions.

I had come as far as I could.

There was a faint tap-tapping on the hotel room door. I pulled on my pants and the T-shirt I had set out in and, barefoot, I pulled the door open.

The coffee girl was waiting for me.

Everything beyond the door was touched with light, and open, wonderful predawn light, and I heard the sound of birds calling on the morning air. The street was on a hill, and the houses facing me were little more than shanties. There was mist in the air, low to the ground, curling like something from an old black-and-white film, but it would be gone by noon.

The girl was thin and small; she did not appear to be more than six years old. Her eyes were cobwebbed with what might have been cataracts, her skin was as gray as it had once been brown. She was holding a white hotel cup out to me, holding it carefully, with one small hand on the handle, one hand beneath the saucer. It was half-filled with a steaming mud-colored liquid.

I bent to take it from her, and I sipped it. It was a very bitter drink, and it was hot, and it woke me the rest of the way.

I said, "Thank you."

Someone, somewhere, was calling my name.

The girl waited, patiently, while I finished the coffee. I put the cup down on the carpet, then I put out my hand and touched her shoulder.

She reached up her hand, spread her small gray fingers, and took hold of my hand. She knew I was with her. Wherever we were headed now, we were going there together.

I remembered something somebody had once said to me. "It's okay. Every day is freshly ground," I told her.

The coffee girl's expression did not change, but she nodded, as if she had heard me, and gave my arm an impatient tug. She held my hand tight with her cold cold fingers, and we walked, finally, side by side into the misty dawn.

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