Word Count: 2330

Rolling on the Bottom

State Detective French Calhoun spit big then kicked dirt that was happy to get moving. The Louisiana sun cooked so hot it made asphalt brand new soft. French tugged on his Oxford. It sucked back. He’d ditched the sport coat by nine. The lead was dried up like the old gator claw French wore around his neck.

Only the trail was cold.

 French stood under an I-10 overpass by the long bridge over Whiskey Bay. The last place Kinsley Ashton’s phone pinged. The case was closed, still French kept returning. After 48 hours the family had a wake. Higher-ups thought French could best serve the department by going out to pasture with severance. French wanted to leave the higher-ups some crow to eat as the door swung.

French remembered picking up the phone with a gloved hand. A pink case, covered in dew, a sliver of battery left. A text notification read: *Wanna double with John and Brandy? John’s getting his dad’s car. I can buy the tickets if you can buy…* Then trailed off. French couldn’t see it without a passcode. Fog had crept off the swamp and hung until the sun sizzled it away. French thought he saw gator eyes under the slime on the water’s surface.

French felt wobbly and walked over to the underpass in search of shade.

He believed the culprit to be a man named Randall Short, but he was the only one. The lone witness saw a black truck racing away from the scene. Randall Short had a black truck.

“Shit, a lot of people have black trucks, French,” the deputy director said. “This is Louisiana.”

French sat across from him scribbling in a notepad.

“Maybe do some actual police work before you start sticking your nose in people’s business,” the deputy director continued. “Remember what that is?”

French made some violent scratches, flipped the page and continued.

“What is it, a hunch?” the deputy director asked. “Look, I agree, he’s a slimy little bastard. Scares people, but he’s been living here all his life. Never caused trouble.”

French kept scribbling.

“God dammit, French,” the deputy director said. “Go see him if it’s that important to you.”

French stopped scribbling and held up the notebook. Written on the page in big letters: *Thank you, sweetheart.*

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Randall Short wore his name. He was a pitiful little fuck; a monster since birth that even hell didn’t want. He survived the respirator and lost vision in his right eye to childhood cancer. St. Jude couldn’t handle him. They found fosters. Backwater Louisiana coon-asses with liver spots and a combination of basic meth-cooking-know-how, ambition and stupidity.

Things ended explosively for them.

French drove out to Randall Short’s ramshackle house on stilts by Whiskey Bay. He stepped out of his cruiser and stared over the water at a sunset that was eerie pretty. The carcass of a dead dog rotted on the bank.

Randall Short pushed through a screen door as French climbed the porch steps.

 “Why wouldn’t you do something about that dog?” French asked.

“Ain’t mine.”

“Smell doesn’t bother you?” French said, sitting in a rat-eaten chair.

“Just cause the winds blowin’ in,” Randall smiled, filthy teeth.

“Where’s Kinsley Ashton’s body?”

Randall lit a cigarette and chewed on the filter.

“You think I did somethin’ to that little girl on the news?”

Randall glanced at French and held his gaze before staring out over the water.

“Know what happens when something sinks to the bottom of Whiskey Bay?”

French moved his hand closer to his waist.

“It gets covered up,” Randall continued. “See, there’s a layer of loose sediment at the bottom. Tide comes in and out real slow, barely notice, but it’s strong on the bottom. Over time, things get covered up and buried. Impossible to know how many things been covered up under there. How deep that soft sand goes.”

French stood and left.

“Got a daughter don’t ya, French?”

French stopped halfway down the stairs.

The stink from the dead dog floated by.

“What did you say?” French said, not bothering to turn around.

The sun resembled a giant bobber being yanked into the bay by something big in the endless dark underneath, stealing the light from the world.

“Shit, it’s a little town, French,” Randall said. “I know about ya. She’d probably be about the same age as that missing girl, wouldn’t she?”

French continued down the stairs.

“Don’t see her much though, do ya?” Randall said. “Wouldn’t even be able to protect her if somebody came for her. How you expect to solve this case, boy?”

French wanted to pull out his pistol and walk up the stairs, grab Randall Short and cram the barrel down his throat until he confessed. But he knew better than to think he wouldn’t pull the trigger and walk right into the swamp dragging Randall Short’s body with him until it covered them both.

Instead, French headed for the dog carcass.

“Fuck you doing?” Randall said.

French reached the dog and gagged. He scooped up the carcass and ran toward the water, but it fell apart. The torso and head stayed in his arms. He tossed them as far as he could. They landed with a slap. He went back and forth, tossing the rest in the bay, piece by piece.

Randall Short kicked at his deck railing, and spit Shiner out in the bay breeze. French waded in until he was neck deep, trying to remove the smell and get rid of the flies. He never took his eyes off Randall Short as he tore his soaked sport coat off and stalked towards his cruiser.

“I’ll be back, you little shit bird.”

“Best have a warrant next time, law dog,” Randall Short said. “Or I’ll be greeting you with the barrel of a shotgun.”

French drove away, sliding and skidding and kicking up dust as he went.

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French labored up to the interstate and climbed in his cruiser. Through the front windshield the long bridge that led to New Orleans rolled out swampy on both sides. The black trees poking out of the muck reminded French of every bad night he’d like back. Suffocating under the water’s surface were the memories, growing murkier by the day.

The city skyline rose demonic in the distance.

He’d lost Jules for trips there. Ironic it’s where she chose to settle alone.

 French hit the A/C and it blasted hot, but after a minute, blew fresh cold.

In the rear view, cars kept coming.

A photo of Anne, their only, spun below the mirror. Her junior year would soon end. She’d returned French’s last birthday gift with a note attached: *Seeing you would have been a better gift.*

French popped the glove box and a bottle of Jack tumbled out.

He tossed one back then another. After a third, he punched the gas and merged onto the interstate. He hit eighty, then ninety, weaving in and out of traffic. All he could think about was sliding into the filthy bowl that is the French Quarter, letting his head get tight, and seeing if he could crawl up the sides.

As he drove roughshod towards New Orleans, passing cars at dangerous speeds, his mind drifted as it often did to Jules.

She had her prom, her first love, and her first broken heart before she met French driving his El Camino down a side street in Scott. Jules and her best friend, Sally, were riding their bikes in middle of the street. French honked and they waved him by. French slowed to their speed. Jules was wary.

 “How old are you?” she asked.

 “Old enough to know how to treat a lady.”

 Jules blushed. They kept rolling. French kept pace.

 “Lemme call ya sometime.” French said.

 “Got some paper?”

 French didn’t.

 “Hey, stop for a second, would ya?”

French got out.

 “Tell me the number.”

 “How you gon’ remember it?” Jules looked at Sally and giggled.

 “Just tell me.”

 Jules scrunched her mouth trying to figure French out. French leaned against his El Camino. Jules said the number and he keyed it into the paint.

 They got married on a Monday because Jules didn’t think weekends were serious. When he pulled the veil up, French could have called it a life. Keeping her was the challenge and somewhere deep inside, he always knew he wasn’t up for it. But every day he could have was worth the pain coming. He kept her for a good spell.

 They didn’t go far for the honeymoon. The casino in New Orleans. French won $600 on Blackjack. Jules had three margaritas one night. French chased her as she danced and spun through the casino. When he finally caught her, she fell into his arms. He gave her a hundred, told her to pick a color on Roulette and she won. Six months later, French gave her the picket fence. He was just Scott police then.

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French’s cruiser floated into New Orleans. Forks of lightning stabbed through grey clouds behind the skyline. Heat waves rose from the asphalt, dulling the city’s façade in a dim haze.

French took the Carrolton exit and headed toward Mid-City. He drove by Lusher. School was about to let out. He settled a block away and angled the side-mirror to see the entrance.

Anne stepped out alone. She favored Jules. Thank Christ. She wore a floral sundress. Her hair was in a long ponytail and she had on what looked like combat boots. French wasn’t sure what to make of that. She glanced in French’s direction. He could have sworn she saw him. Then she bounced down the stairs and hopped into a shiny Black Challenger. French didn’t have to wonder if a boy was driving.

He followed them through traffic. They cut a right on Orleans and headed for Bayou St. John. French cruised by and parked. The boy ran inside. He wore all black. Tattoos crawled up his arms. He came out with a brown bag.

French scooted past as they parked by the bayou. Anne and the boy crossed a bridge and settled under an oak. The boy spread out a blanket. He leaned in for a kiss, but Anne turned away. A group of friends approached. French liked that she turned away.

They sat in a semi-circle and passed the bottle around.

French curled around the bayou and hooked a right on Esplanade. In a mile he’d be in the quarter. He waited at the red light on Rampart and saw the sign for Buffa’s. A haunt, one of many.

Outside Jules’s shotgun in the Marigny he took two whiskey swigs before getting out. He stood on the sidewalk in front of the house. Gardenias wrapped around two pillars on the porch. French imagined Jules sitting out there every morning having coffee, reading and smelling those Gardenias.

He knocked, but no answer. He opened the gate and walked around the house.

He stepped into the backyard and marveled at what Jules had done, a little garden oasis in the middle of a concrete jungle. The wood fence in the back was covered in honeysuckle. A patio table sat in a patch of perfectly mowed grass. Jules knelt, digging in a flowerbed. She turned, sensing French’s presence and slid off her work gloves. She wore cut-off jeans and a tank top, hair wild and frizzy. French melted again.

“What are you doing here, French?” `

“Just wanted to get a look at you.”

“What do you think?”

“I like the honeysuckles.”

Jules plucked a blossom and slid it behind her ear.

“You here drinking?”

French pulled out the bottle from his back pocket.

“Saw Anne,” French said. “Watched her leave school and drive off with a boy.”

“He’s too old for her, but who am I to judge?” Jules said.

“She looked happy.”

“You want some coffee?”

“No, I know the rules,” French said, “I’d need to add a little Jack.”

“Why’d you come here, French?”

“I told you,” French said. “Wanted a get a look at you.”

French turned and walked back down the stone path, through the gate and back to his cruiser. He climbed inside and drove away.

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French parked on Chartres and strolled to The Chart Room. Darkness settled during his walk. Gas lanterns lit the streets. The bottle of Jack was history.

French slid onto a barstool and ordered a Sazerac. The bar was populated by eccentric locals and tourists. French liked that he could be anonymous, drink alone and not answer questions. A drunk woman, probably late forties, stepped to the bar and touched French’s arm. She wore a cowboy hat and a leather vest.

“You look so serious,” she said.

French motioned to the bartender to put her drink on his tab.

“What’s your name?”

“French.”

She took her drink and moved closer.

“Mom!” a girl in her mid-twenties tapped her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Just meeting a new friend.”

French spun away on his barstool. The daughter cast a worried glance in his direction.

“Mom, we have to go.”

“Can our new friend join?”

French spun farther. The lady spun him back.

“I don’t care,” the daughter shrugged.

“Do you care?” the woman asked French.

“I don’t care about anything,” French responded.

“Perfect.”

A frat guy moved up behind the daughter and wrapped his arm around her waist. French sensed they’d just met. The bartender placed a drink on the counter in front of her and French watched him drop a pill in it. A trail of bubbles rose as the pill dissolved. When the girl reached for the drink, he grabbed her and kissed her neck. By the time she picked up the drink it looked normal.

The woman led French out by the hand. The girl kept glancing back with a worried look as she held the frat guy’s hand. They were headed to Bourbon. French carried a fresh Sazerac. The sides of the quarter felt steep. Rolling on the bottom felt like the task at hand. He’d worry about climbing out later. He had his eye on the frat guy. He’d been one step behind as long as he could remember, but he had the jump this time.