

“There is a house in New Orleans, it’s called the Rising Sun  
Where many poor boys to destruction has gone  
Great God, and I for one”

-Rould Folk Song Index number 6393, origins unknown

I was a kid when the ship returned. Decks once pristine and shining, now covered in moss and rot; tattered sails hanging limp over creaking timbers. And the crew.

Nobody knew how she got there, stuck deep in the bayous of Terrebonne Parish, in some Louisiana backwater even the census man forgot. A ship her size couldn’t sail up any of the shallow channels, much less maneuver her masts around the moss-laden trees, yet there she was; half-capsized, hull filled with infected, brackish water. We just accepted it. Strange things happen all the time in the swamp, and the less you question them the safer you’ll be.

But the New England men she’d belonged to didn’t see it that way, and when word got out about the mysterious ship appearing in the Bayou they sent down lawyers and investigators to assess the damages and deal with the crew.

God, the crew.

When they found the men, the New England lawyers called their bosses, who called the families, who sent down more lawyers demanding a proper burial away from the muck and mosquitoes of the strange land they found themselves in. The lawyers called the coroners, who called the morticians, who couldn’t get down from New Orleans in time but asked that the bodies be moved onto dry land to prevent any further decay. So they were.

Eight coffins. Lined up in town square, suspended on wooden pillars to keep them above the soggy ground. Eight men, faces briefly glimpsed by the doctors, who wrote down chicken-scratch notes in their endless pocket notebooks; by the lawyers, who turned away nauseous after a precursory glance; by the family who could make it down, who turned away sobbing, only to turn back again a moment later; and by the townsfolk, who kept a stony expression throughout. They’d seen worse. We all had. All of us, that is, except the youngest of the kids, of whom I was a member. They kept us away from those pine boxes and sickly-sweet smells, forbidding us to go anywhere near them. But go near them we did, and some of us came back with wild stories of gross oddities and decaying wonders that our parents had kept hidden from us. Looking back, it’s obvious to me now that it was nothing more than the bragging pride of youth still too young to fully understand the concept of death, but it seemed real to me then. Filled with ego and morbid curiosity, I went to go take a look for myself one night. I snuck out the window, tiptoed into town, and making sure nobody was watching, opened the lid to the nearest coffin, which someone had forgotten to nail shut, and peeked inside.

Pale eyes, half-open.

When they found me the next morning, I didn't remember much. Still don't, other than that I've never been in so much trouble in my life, and likely never will be again. I grew up and left the bayou first chance I got; followed the lawyers to New England, and never once looked back. But as anyone who's left their birth home can tell you, even the most deplorable of locales hold onto you long after you've gone, and even though I tried to forget about my early life in Louisiana, the Southland called to me, black water pulling my soul to the New Orleans home I'd long neglected. Like a siren at sea, it sang sweet nothings to me, words hanging in my ears even after they'd passed the horizon. And like the sailor soul I was, I found myself turning around, hoping to catch one fleeting glimpse of what I'd passed by, finding only rocks and vultures in my wake.

New Orleans is a siren in the Sea of Mississippi; singing a song of glamor, freedom, and a new start, but delivering only rocks and vultures. I stepped over and around a few of them as I wandered deeper and deeper into the French Quarter, their gnarled hands clawing out to me, asking for change with varying degrees of rudeness and insult. I ignored them, heading further and further past tilted houses, cast-iron gates, and upturned cobblestones under flickering gaslamps growing ever brighter beneath a dimming sky.

I couldn't tell you where I was going. Couldn't tell you why I was there. I still can't, but at least now I have the hindsight to see my folly in full. Back then it was the most reasonable thing in the world, wandering down the French Quarter one lonesome night, miles and states away from my adoptive Northern home. If one of those bedraggled haggards had dropped their steady stream of insults for a millisecond to ask where I was heading so late in the evening, my answer would have been simple;

“Looking for answers.”

I eventually found the place I was seeking. On the corner of Rue Arambour and Rue La-Bas, a dilapidated townhouse stood shrouded in a mist emitting from the sewers, bayous, and cigars of every bouncer on the block. Stank like the deepest pit of Hell, and through boarded windows the pulsing lights made her seem like the proudest hall in Lucifer's Pandaemonium; while the house's boards were covered in moss and neglect, her brilliant woodworking and ornate painting still shone over the burning throngs of sinners stretched along either side of the river of fire they call Bourbon Street. Turning off the main road, past the neon lights and down the alley with no name, I pushed open the door engraved with a rising sun and headed inside.

I still couldn't tell you why.

I knew exactly where I was going. I passed through the crowd of dancers high on the rush that comes with ignoring the consequences of one's actions; through the energetic crowd in the living room, and past the masquerade that twirled around the edges of my view. It was a Mardi Gras party like no other, and I walked through it all, not bothering for a second glance. I had my hand on the doors to the secluded courtyard, as all true New Orleans houses have a secluded courtyard hidden from public view, when I felt something grab my ankle. Looking down, I

noticed a vagrant dressed in rags apparently having snuck in without getting caught, taking up residence along the floor. His hat covered his face, so I couldn't make out any features, but I stared at him as I spoke.

“Sorry, friend, but I don't have any money on me...”

“You don't have to go in there.” Their voice startled me; I'd mistaken them for a he, though their tone gave away their gender. The lady on the floor spoke like a mother to her son, soft and assuring, but firm nonetheless. “Turn back now and go home. To your real home. Away from here.”

I paused, unsure what to do. She'd broken me out of whatever stupor had brought me down from Massachusetts, breaking whatever call I'd heard pulling me down here, to this city, to this house, leaving confusion and fright.

I was lost. I was scared.

And just like that it was back again, pulling me, even harder than before, through that half-open door into whatever lay beyond. With a sigh and a tensing of my nerves, I pulled away.

“I have to.”

The lady also sighed, pulling back reluctantly. As I closed the door behind me, I heard her shout into the void I'd left;

“Be not afraid!”

The game was already set up for me. A table sat in the middle, cartridges placed off to the side; the silver wheel sitting in between the three players, and an empty chair saved.

Roulette.

The man on the right beckoned me forward. He wore a velvet robe over a dark suit. Hair matted back with enough gel to shine in the dim citylight, the smoke from his cigarette holder trailed around him in a heart-shape.

“Lust,” he said with a voice dripping with faux niceties. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The man opposite him wore a white three-piece suit, golden rings dazzled around the massive cigar he'd left smoldering in his fist.

“Greed,” he sneered. “Surprised we haven't met already.”

The man on the end stayed silent, his bird-like mask concealing his features, black cloak shrouding his figure.

With a jerk of his holder, Lust spun the smoke into a serpent-like formation, which wrapped behind him, pulling out of a dark corner a tan, trembling man. He was sat at the empty chair and pulled to the table. Shaking, he tossed a pair of dice he was handed, and spun the wheel the according number of times.

Click.

Gasping, crying with relief, the man was thrown back into the darkness and vanished. Lust muttered angrily to himself; “I was hoping he'd go.” Greed snickered at him, using the

smoke of his cigar to pull another man, this time dressed in a silvery tuxedo, though still trembling with fear, out of the dark corner, setting him in the again-empty seat.

He rolled the dice.

He spun the wheel.

BANG: He won.

Slumping forward, I watched in horror as smoke poured out of the man's eyes and mouth, trailing back into the cigar held by Greed, who relished in the burning smell of the man's soul as it flowed into the smoldering end.

Lust and Greed turned to me, both grinning devilishly as I shook my head.

"No, no, NO! I'm not playing, not whatever game this is, and certainly not for you!"

I tried to run, but that force overcame me again, that morbid curiosity, keeping my feet planted on the floor despite my protests. Both of the demons laughed.

"Now, friend, it's nothing to be afraid of," Lust snickered at the remark. "It's just a game of Serpent's Hand Roulette. The souls playing it are already grasped tight; there's no hope for any of them. It's just a question of when and how." He took a drag of his cigarette before continuing. "But you, you don't play for us. You're *his* property," he gestured to the costumed, silent stranger, "And he'll be the one vested in your chances. Matter of fact, you're the only one he brought here tonight.

I stared at the man. Everyone here was dressed in some sort of elaborate costume, but he was the only one without any sequins of accouterments. A simple black cloak, black, wide-brimmed hat, and a black plague doctor mask.

Behind the tinted goggles, I could feel his eyes watching me.

I rolled the dice.

I spun the wheel.

Click.

"Who are you?" I demanded, staring pointedly at the dark figure in front of me. He didn't answer.

Lust pulled another soul out of the inky blackness behind them, keeping half an eye on me. "I don't know why you only brought one, Maldoror. He'll be out before we've even gotten through half our souls." He gave an oily chuckle. "But whatever, I guess. Doesn't matter to me if you lose."

Roll.

Spin.

Click.

Thrown back into the blackness.

Greed summoned another. "One less player is fine by me. It always comes down to us two anyways." His words were directed at Lust, but his eyes glanced back at me. Despite their bravado, both were wondering how long I'd last.

The sobbing man Greed had summoned played his turn.

Roll.

Spin.

BANG: Win.

Smoke poured into the cigarette holder, and Greed took a deep breath, his eyes seeming to glow with fire. He turned to me.

My turn.

Roll.

Spin.

Click.

“Why do you think you own me?” I demanded at the costumed figure. “Who are you?”

No answer.

And for hours, it went like that. Greed, Lust, winners, losers.

Roll.

Spin.

Click.

Who.

Silence.

As the night wore on, Greed and Lust became quieter and quieter, their rage giving away to confusion and fear as, despite all odds, my luck held out and I stayed in the game. Eventually, Greed reached back into the inky blackness and came out empty-handed.

He'd lost.

Lust sneered, seemingly victorious, but when he too reached back and found nothing, his face paled.

They both turned to face the silent man at the head of the table.

“Serpent’s Hand,” he began, his voice muffled behind his plastic beak, “Is a game played by demons. A version of roulette where instead of chips, souls are wagered. For while a demon’s power comes from the souls they gather, these souls can be cast into Hell, revitalizing the demon at the expense of some of their power.” He continued, leaning forward, staring directly at me. “Some souls would spend their eternities bound to a sin, rather than face the fires of their consequences. Their struggle and faith determines their luck; the greater their commitment to ruin, the less likely they are to ‘win,’ if you can call it that. These fellows and I,” he gestured to his companions, “were discussing who between us was the more powerful, each claiming that their hold over mortal souls was stronger. This game was meant to determine who had a more total control over humanity.

And the answer was me.”

Then he took off his mask. And I remembered.

Pale eyes, half open.

“I am Fear.”

The demon's face was an ungodly pale, whiter than the purest snow and somehow more evil than the most unrepentant sinner. It was the face of death, of the dying, of the young and old alike. It was my face, it was your face, it was the face of humanity condensed and purified into its most base form.

Afraid.

I'd seen this face years ago, in that coffin. Pale skin, dead eyes. I'd seen it in the lawyers, as they discussed concepts of liability and fault. I'd seen it in the families as they'd marched towards those boxes, however much they tried to hide it.

And I'd seen it in the townsfolk. When they lied about the ship appearing, about the secret channel through the bayou. About the illegal alcohol stored in the swampy hold they'd scuttled when the ship ran aground one stormy night.

I'd seen it in myself every time I looked in the mirror.

And here it was now; staring straight back at me.

The demon grinned, relishing his victory. I mustered up my remaining willpower and stared him down.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tried for a confident chuckle. "I'm not afraid of you, and I'm sure there's a lot more people in the world who are braver than I."

The demon laughed, and I winced.

"You honestly think I believe you? You honestly think that I can't see your limbs trembling, hear your voice shaking, smell you sweating, that I cannot *taste* your fear? Don't lie to me, boy, I don't want to deal with Lies tonight any more than I do these two clowns." He gestured behind him as Greed and Lust disappeared into the shadows of the wall.

"And trust me, there are plenty of souls braver than yourself. I could easily have picked one of them tonight instead of you. You truly are lucky, I suppose. But you confuse bravery with fearlessness; one is the ability to act *despite being afraid*, and the other is a lie meant only for fairy-tale heroes. Every man, woman, and child on this green Earth knows fear, knows ME! From salarymen in Japan, farmers in Minnesota, soldiers in Ukraine, *not one of them lives without fear!*" He began to laugh, *really laugh*. "And you? You're one of the most fearful of them all. You've spent your life running. From the death you saw in your childhood; from the society of thieves and robbers you grew up in; from your background as a poor Southern boy. YOU ARE AFRAID! Your ENTIRE life has been dictated by fear! You've abandoned your only home, left for the North, *running away from me. BUT YOU CAN'T.*

YOU.

ARE.

MINE."

I screamed. Cried. Spun, spun, spun the wheel, hoping for escape. Nothing.

A sound came from behind me. I didn't see it, I was on the floor sobbing. Next I knew there was a bright light, and I was in the arms of the angelic vagrant who'd been waiting by the door. She reminded me of my mother, though I hadn't seen her in years. Wiping tears from my face, she ran with me through the staring crowds out into the street.

"Be not afraid."

I don't know how I made it home. Don't know where I spent the rest of the night. Don't remember what I told my family when I came home disheveled and two days late. Don't remember what I told my parents when I called them for the first time in decades later that week.

I don't remember at all.

But what I do remember is the feeling of terror that night. The feeling of dread, hopelessness, and suffering I felt while Fear, Maldoror, that demon of hate, slavery, and panic laughed, towering over my collapsed frame.

A fear so overpowering it cannot be put into words.

He's been calling me again. I don't want to go, know I must resist.

But I can't.

I have to know things only fear can show me. That's why I'd followed his call; hiding from my past too long, time had let me forget why I'd run.

But he'd remembered.

Because his call is a sirens' song, promising answers to your worries.

Leaving only rocks and vultures.

I don't know if I'll survive this time, but I'm going back to New Orleans, to the House of the Rising Sun. It's chained many poor men to the promise of relief.

Great God, and I for one.