

Strangers Within

by Tom Harmeyer

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For Terri, Jackson, Emilie and all the strangers

This is a story written by a young man, immersed in the joy of being a husband and father. Winds have blown, the cuckoo has persisted, the children have grown. In a distant land, new roads lead to the same place. New strangers come; old strangers revisit.

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I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

Blanche DuBois

1.

A Beginning

Nothing happens unless first a dream.

Carl Sandberg

It was a glorious October morning in New Orleans, the kind of morning locals dream about each scorched day throughout the six months of sweltering purgatory we know as summer. For the first time since April, the air was cool and crisp, and the sky was that certain vivid blue, the blue that signals fall here, a blue most of us can't quite describe but that artists here have observed for generations, have commented on, have painted about, have tried to recreate on canvas, a blue so rich and full of light, it tells us locals that it is safe to go out again, triggers an instinct among us to head for our porch swing or stoop, City Park or the Quarter, the batture or lakefront or any place else where it could touch us and stroke us and fill us again with a *joie de vivre* the long, yellow summer had drained from us.

I got up from my porch swing, where I was sitting with my kids, soaking up the blue, laughing and playing and singing with them:

Johnnie, on his way to school
Saw the storekeep, Mr. Poole,
Waved at jolly blacksmith Ollie,
Passed the postman, Lou O'Malley.
Johnnie, Johnnie, answer me,
Which one do you want to be?

I kissed each of them, one precious forehead after another, then my wife, and off I went – cup of coffee in one hand, briefcase in the other – on my way, into that crisp October in New Orleans blue, leaving additional verses and giggles and pattycakes to them and her.

It was a dizzying blue, a mystical blue, a blue that hypnotized, that made things happen in broad daylight in work-a-day places to work-a-day people that we often relegate to kooks in back alleys on fog-shrouded nights. In other words, it was just your average beautiful fall day – happens all the time – just we don't notice it, won't admit to it, can't acknowledge that mysticism and alternate realities are common and real, that identity is fleeting, that strangers live within our own skin, lie within us, just we can't or don't or won't see them, us, we, me.

The designers at the Ford Motor Company of Dearborn, Michigan may never have seen that blue. Maybe that color blue isn't in Michigan. Maybe they had never traveled here or anywhere where that blue existed. Maybe the expense

account just doesn't cover this kind of junket. It's a long way in a Ford product, or any motor vehicle, I suspect, from Dearborn to anywhere where that blue does exist. It does exist in New Orleans. But, maybe you can't get here from there.

In any case, clearly the designers had never seen it, seen that blue. Or they wouldn't have settled for the blue of the Crown Victoria that flashed in my rear-view mirror, then passed quickly in the left lane, heading riverbound along Wisner Boulevard near Filmore Avenue. Theirs was a pretty blue: just a shade bluer than a Lambeth House coif, yet not so blue as the stripes on seersucker trousers from Perlis. Truth be told, it was probably as good as might reasonably be expected from Ford, GM or anyone. But, it was not a blue to dream of, to conjure up, to commit canvas to, or to digress over, as we do in New Orleans for the restorative blue of such October mornings, some of us more successfully than others, each seeking words or gestures or acrylics to capture the essence of a light, a wavelength, a formless, massless quality that nourishes, refreshes, and heals.

Where the blue Ford was going I could not know. But, I knew where I was going. I was off to work, so I was not hurrying, not on this kind of day, not when I was only to trade the coveted blue and its soul-juicing essence for fluorescent tubes and a computer screen.

It was a bad habit, I'll admit, to drift off while driving – or, rather, to drive while drifting off – but I suspected there was more adventure in the blue Ford than in my car. I suspected there was more there than what my commute offered. So, drift off I did, changing lanes, you might say, into the spaces of that car and

the lives of its occupants, as one is inclined to do on a day like this, if one will only admit to the existence of days like this. Drift off I did, to explore that suspicion.

2.

Dempsey's Habit

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.*

Marcel Proust

Dempsey had a bad habit. “Look, look, look!” he said, pointing out the driver’s side window of his blue Crown Victoria. “A pelican! A pelican, Giff! Hadn’t seen one of them on Bayou St. John since I was a boy!”

Calvin Gifford took only a quick glance at the spectacular sight, the sight of a lone brown pelican cruising just above the bayou’s surface. The unhurried flaps of the bird’s long, graceful wings were lost on Mr. Gifford. He did not watch long enough to make a connection between the bird’s rhythm and, say, James Booker playing *Come Rain or Come Shine*.

“Good catch, fellah,” Dempsey said, still admiring the bird as he swooped down to place a lunch of mullet in the fleshy pouch beyond his large bill. Dempsey couldn’t see a pelican in flight without hearing James Booker in his

brain, although it is unlikely Booker and any pelican were ever in New Orleans concurrently, each suffering essentially the same fate, only decades apart.

Much to Gifford's consternation, Dempsey looked long and hard at the pelican, taking only quick glances at the traffic around him. "Not since I was a boy," he repeated.

Admiring nature is not a bad habit, Dempsey would argue. Especially where nature intersects humanity, in stunningly beautiful places like Bayou St. John, with its cypresses and willows, egrets and herons, live oaks and crepe myrtles, ducks and, once again, pelicans, in the heart of New Orleans, right alongside Wisner Boulevard.

Admiring nature while driving – say, 50 – along Wisner Boulevard, speed limit 35, that is a bad habit!

"Skylark!" Gifford screamed.

"Where?" asked Dempsey excitedly.

"Right in front of us, fool! Gray. Buick. Stop, Dempsey. Stop!"

Dempsey brought his car to a quick stop, "with six, maybe eight, inches to spare," he would say nonchalantly.

Those aren't the words Gifford said between gasps. His words were not so nonchalant, nor so analytical. Gifford did not measure the nearness of the miss in inches. Rather, Gifford measured it in heart rates, in degrees of fear, of terror, of rage, and in expletives which flew from his lips. Indeed, those were the words Gifford used mostly – expletives!