

TUBBY MEETS KATRINA

1

TWO SHEETS TO THE WIND, THE NIGHT JAILER AT THE Oldroads, Louisiana, Pointe Croupee Parish Jail castled his rook and his king. He had been playing chess with a state inmate named Bonner Rivette for the past three nights, and his score was one win, six losses. Playing games with the prisoners was against the rules, but this jail was beyond boring after midnight. The staff wasn't even supposed to watch television. Tonight the jailer had actually chugged a couple of beers in the Circle K parking lot on his way to work. He knew that was against the rules, too, but this place was driving him stir crazy.

Bonner, the prisoner, happened to be a night owl, and he sat up reading old paperbacks until he found out the guard liked to play chess. The guard knew that Rivette was a convicted murderer, and he placed no stock in Rivette's claim to be innocent. He also knew Rivette was here because he had won a retrial, and they had bused him back from Angola so he could see the same judge again. Good old Isaac Crane, His Honor, hadn't liked Bonner the first time around. This boy had sliced up his sister and the Church of God pastor, really bad, all in one "sudden emotional explosion," a psychologist said, over the issue of who got to drive a Toyota station wagon. The pastor had lingered but eventually he died.

The guard remembered all this because when he had been a senior in high school this was the biggest thing that had ever happened in Pointe Croupee Parish, and his own cousin had once dated Rivette's sister even though she went to Morganza Christian Academy and the cousin went to River Parish Regional.

The excuse for the retrial was that a state psychiatrist, not the one who had testified at trial, had said that Bonner Rivette was an extremely anti-social psychotic who had no normal mental faculties at the time of the crime. The psychiatrist had a high school guidance counselor's notes to support this theory. Yet the county attorney had filed the report in the wastebasket and never told Bart Crookedhawk, a recent law school graduate appointed by the same Judge Crane to defend the indigent Rivette, anything about it. That was called concealing exculpatory evidence.

But now District Court Judge Crane had the flu, and that was why Bonner Rivette's retrial had been delayed and why he was still in the parish jail.

Rivette, long curly brown hair and a deeply lined face for a young man in his twenties, looked intently at the chess board balanced on a folding chair outside the bars of his cage. The cell block smelled strongly of Pine-Sol and urine. The guard's brown uniform was crisply, annoyingly, pressed.

The prisoner moved his pawn and captured the guard's black bishop.

"Aw, shoot." The guard's mouth dropped open in mock despair before he grinned and brayed, "You just gave me your queen!"

He leaned forward triumphantly and lifted his horse delicately by the ears. Holding it like a dainty teacup the guard lightly flicked his man against his opponent's piece. Without hesitating Rivette whipped a towel around the guard's neck and roped it through the bars. He twisted it hard to cut off the air supply. The guard knocked over the chess set trying to make a noise and get to

his can of pepper spray. Bonner kicked through the bars at the guard's fingers and tried to knee him in the groin, all the while twisting the noose tighter.

When it was over the guard was lying unconscious and barely breathing on the concrete floor. His prisoner reached through the bars to steal the keys from the motionless officer's belt and unlock the cell door. He snuck out silently and loped down the hall. Another jailer was snoring at his desk up front. Rivette opened one door, which creaked but didn't wake the guard. He tiptoed across the room, and slipped out another door to the street.

It was a small, hot Louisiana bed-and-breakfast town. Rivette knew it well. It was one of many his family had passed through chasing the oil drilling business. There were two traffic lights. At one end of the strip a neon sign blinked MI LOEB. Even that light was too much. Rivette slunk around the jail building and ran down the empty street in the direction of darkness. There would be at least one police car somewhere, and he planned to avoid it. He ran from bleak alley to cherry laurel hedge to carport until he got away from civilization, out to where the doublewides are parked way off in the cotton fields. The night was pitch black except for a sliver of moon. The criminal took off jogging down the highway.

2

TUBBY DUBONNET HAD JUST GOTTEN OFF A PLANE FROM Bolivia the Saturday night before Hurricane Katrina hit, and until his feet touched down on Concourse D of the Louis Armstrong International Airport in New Orleans he had not even heard about the darn thing. But there it was, a red-tipped, yellow, organic swirl on CNN, like a cheerleader's flounced pom-pom and about as big as the screen. It was proceeding north through the Gulf of Mexico at a leisurely twenty miles an hour, and New Orleans was right in the middle of the forecaster's cone. Tubby lingered to stare at the hypnotic image. The wheel spun slowly counter-clockwise. The weary traveler yawned and went to collect his baggage downstairs.

This happens every year. Grin and bear it.

The familiar heat hit him when he exited the air conditioned terminal, and he quickly flagged a cab to take him to his house Uptown. All of his daughters were gone. The place would be empty. Yet it would be strange and wonderful to be home at last. Five months in Bolivia, the scene of so many events needing to be forgotten, was plenty. Now that Tubby's fears of being indicted by a federal grand jury in matters relating to the Cowappatack

Tribal Casino were less immediate, he had decided that Louisiana was the safest and best place to be.

Labor strife in Santa Cruz had almost prevented him from boarding his airplane for home. Barricades and burning barrels lit the streets of this prosperous metropolis, and various governmental officials were hanging in effigy from the tree limbs in the public squares. Big men and women sporting derby hats stared menacingly at him from behind the flames as his taxi driver honked through, humming a revolutionary vallenato pop hit by Carlos Vives.

“Es is okay for you are leaving today,” the driver announced. Tubby agreed with that.

Fourteen hours later he was in a United Cab rocking along the I-10 toward downtown New Orleans. All this driver wanted to talk about was the coming hurricane, but it still didn’t sink in with Tubby.

“See all those cars?” The cabdriver gestured to the outgoing lanes, which were filled with bumper-to-bumper traffic. “They all got the sense to evacuate. This is gonna be the big one, they say.”

“Really?” The lawyer was bushed from his flight. “It’s called Katrina, right?”

“Means cleansing hand,” the driver informed him. He was a young guy, wearing heavy black-framed glasses and a baseball cap backwards. It advertised Ezra Brooks Bourbon. Tubby figured him for a UNO student. “That’s what the internet says.”

“Well, I hope it cleanses the Yucatan Peninsula instead of us. Not that I wish any ill . . .”

“They say it’s coming right here, though, tomorrow night.”

“Why are you around then?” Tubby yawned again. He was ready for bed.

“My girlfriend is supposed to sing for mass in church tomor-

row morning. We're staying here anyhow. We're in an old house in Mid-City. It stood up to Camille so I guess it can stand up to this."

"Camille? Betsy was the one hit here."

"Whichever. I wasn't born yet. But the house was built in 1920. I know cause it's been in the family, and it never had any trouble before now."

"Same with me," Tubby said. Of course you always had to take hurricanes seriously, but this one was still twenty-four hours away. Its trajectory would likely change. The projections would all be different by morning. It was way too early to worry about this particular storm, much less pack up and leave town.

If you did leave you'd be caught for days in traffic. Tubby didn't need that. He needed a drink and a good night's sleep. Living in South America was a demanding experience. Good or bad, he couldn't yet say. He was just happy to be back in the Big Easy, in the Bayou State, in the "Sportsman's Paradise," in the good ol' US of A.

Speeding down the Interstate, this was one of those times he wished he had a cell phone. If he had a cell phone he could call his daughters while riding in this taxi. Having been out of the country for so long he craved human contact. But if he had a cell phone his ex-wife or his clients would call him whenever they felt like it, and Tubby had always valued as many buffers from the world as possible.

The taxi deposited him in front of his house. It was dimly illuminated by streetlights obscured within the live oak trees that shaded the entire block. The driver helped him with his luggage as far as the sidewalk and accepted his pay. "Good luck," he called as he sped off.

"Same to you," Tubby said. Good luck? For what? Oh, right, the hurricane.

His house keys remained where he had hidden them under one of the flagstones on the walkway laid across an unruly monkey-grass lawn. Crickets hummed outside. The air was hot and sweet. He savored the magnolia-scented aroma of his city. The keys were a little wet and dirty, but worked the door just fine.

Thanks to its many cracks and drafts, the house did not even smell as though it had been closed up for months. The lights came on when he flipped the switch, which was one major improvement over Bolivia. His next-door neighbor had been collecting the mail, but that could wait until tomorrow. Right now, let's see what there is to drink.

Tubby sat in the kitchen, savoring a large bourbon over old ice. The neighborhood seemed quieter than he remembered. Maybe he had better check in on the kids.

They weren't really kids. The oldest, Debbie, was married and had a baby. Second came Christine, the wisest, who had just begun her sophomore year at Tulane, Tubby's alma mater, the week before. The youngest and least pegged, Collette, still lived six blocks away with her mother, Mattie, Tubby's ex. None of them had officially lived with him for about ten years, not since the divorce. He picked up the phone.

"DADDY!" CHRISTINE SCREAMED. "Where are you?" There was loud music in the background.

"Right here in New Orleans, at the house. I'm back home."

"When did you get here?"

He told her.

"Don't you know there's a hurricane coming? Everybody else is leaving."

"I didn't know about it till I got here just a little while ago. Where are your sisters?"

"Collette and Mom are in Disney World in Orlando with

some of Collette's friends from school. They are supposed to come back tomorrow night, but now I don't know. Debbie and Marcus and the baby drove up to Uncle Harold's in Hattiesburg this afternoon. He said he had plenty of room."

Probably because his girlfriend left him, Tubby thought. "What about you?" he inquired.

"Tulane closed the whole campus yesterday. Everybody had to get out of the dorms. They've got a bus taking kids to Jackson, Mississippi, tomorrow if they don't have anywhere else to go."

"Why don't you come over here to the house?"

"They say there might be twenty feet of water Uptown, Daddy. You've got to leave, too."

"I'll see about that tomorrow," her father said wearily. "You think you'll take the Tulane bus?"

"Possibly. Brent is thinking about staying at his mother's apartment on Spain Street in the Marigny. It's on the second floor."

Hmmm, Brent was her boyfriend, a junior and pre-med student. Tubby had only met him briefly before departing for Bolivia. There was something about him Tubby didn't like, couldn't say exactly what except he had never been especially fond of any of the girls' boyfriends.

"Where's Brent's mother?"

"I'm sure she'll be there, too. She never leaves for anything."

"Perhaps you should get out of town on the Tulane bus," Tubby repeated. "Sounds like it could be fun." Lots more fun than staying with Brent.

She ignored him. "It's great to hear your voice, Daddy. When was the last time you called?"

"Last month, wasn't it? On your birthday?"

"That was two months ago."

"Yeah, sure. But did you get my letters?"

"I got a cute little postcard of some furry pig."

“That’s actually a rodent called a capybaras, and people eat them. They have a couple at the Audubon Zoo.”

“Yuck. Tell me about your trip.”

He didn’t take the offer seriously. The music was getting louder. “I’d like to. Maybe we could have lunch tomorrow and . . .”

“Don’t forget about the hurricane, Daddy.”

“Right. Well, in a day or two, after this all blows over, let’s get together.”

“Okay. Is everything all right?”

“Great. Everything’s fine. All I need is a good night’s sleep in my own bed.”

“Let’s talk tomorrow, so I know where you are.”

“You can bet I’ll be right here.”

“Okay. Good night. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

So he was alone in a quiet house. And he was beat. Tubby freshened up his drink and dragged himself upstairs.