



Le
Journal
de
Julien
Delacroix

*The Journal
of
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Would that God grant me the power to substantiate these truths, but deep in my soul, I fear it will appear as lunacy to those who have not witnessed what my eyes have seen. The curse my greed brought upon my family will end with me. Surrounded by crucifixes and enough absinthe, I will remain up in this garret until death takes me and my soul returns to God.

Will my line survive? I know not. Who will read this missive in the years to come? My children's children, their children's children? Or no one? My heart is torn between leaving this as an open document at my death for the world to ridicule as the ravings of a lunatic, or secreting it away. But that choice is for the future. Now, I am compelled to put the words down for posterity, with the help of my elixir.

My wife and beloved children are safely off to France to not return until this is settled. I cannot guarantee their safety from her (or even me) as I can no longer fully control my thoughts or actions. Only intoxication can soothe me into peaceful sleep. Otherwise, my dreams— or shall I say my nightmares— are filled with blood. Dreams are only one of her venues to control me. I am hers to do with as she orders, her mere puppet. I have horrific ideas and

fear I could harm... NO! I will not even put that thought to paper. My remaining children are safe.

As God is my witness, I curse the day I arrived in the New World. I've asked myself untold times: Why did I leave France? Arrogance and greed, the answer comes back time and time again. I could not be content with the pittance made from my book illustrations. More infuriating, my portrait work was never recognized by art critics. I was temperamental, too arrogant, I heard say. I did not excel as artist or thespian, so they said. My only talent, a drunken cuckold told me at gunpoint, was in seducing foolish older women with rich husbands, and my so-called luck at cards. Perhaps he told the truth, though I did not see myself as such. Admittedly, I drew ladies like moths to flame, but to accuse me of chicanery is an outrage. My skill lay in reading people's faces, not in fleecing the gullible in a game of cards.

It was my misfortune that, beguiled by Soraya's beauty, I did not discern her true self. Truth be told, her generosity toward a dying stranger appeared the act of a Good Samaritan. Oh Soraya, I pray for thy forgiveness, and that thy spirit rest with the one true God of Christianity. He would forgive thy crime of ignorance, I truly do believe. Thou must know I loved thee above all women, but weak, blinded by avarice and a need to prove the equal of those in power who

derided my lack of lineage, I broke God's ultimate commandment.

Damned Solomon! I curse your escape. I did not whip you, yet your selfish need for freedom caused me to enter that evil swamp to hunt you down. Had it not been for your crime I may have died poor, but with my mental faculties intact.

But I see from what is written that it is all a jumble and I must put my thoughts in order. Begin at the beginning or none will make head or tail of it.

After my altercation with the cuckold, I used my savings for a passage to Louisiana. La Nouvelle Orleans, to be precise. My charm and skill at cards did not serve me well there. It is an environment infected by the ascetic religiosity of the Spanish culture. The Spanish and French Creole aristocracy of Nouvelle Orleans lacked the sensual *laissez faire* of my beloved France. They did not deign to welcome someone they considered a social climber into their midst. Before and after marriage, they kept their wives and daughters sheltered like nuns in a walled convent, while they themselves made mistresses of the most beautiful quadroons, who bore their mongrel children, yet were discarded when their beauty faded.

The only card playing venue open for the likes of me entailed gambling with cutthroats where only the

most depraved of both sexes congregated— the seamy dancehalls, bordellos and groggeries bordering the rat infested hell that those in power christened wharves. I valued my life too much to set my foot there.

With not enough money left for a return passage, my choices were limited to either labor as a white slave, or to find land and purchase a few Negroes to work the soil. Nothing in Nouvelle Orleans or its environs was within my financial reach. However, the isolated savage land on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain was there for the taking. I acquired a small plot near a mosquito-filled swamp where survival was nearly unobtainable. With three slaves purchased at a discount because of their age, I grew rice. Needless to say, it was backbreaking work with little return. However, determined to succeed, I drove them to their limits. In my defense, I worked alongside them from sunrise to sundown seven days a week and ate nearly as poorly.

When Solomon, the hardiest of my slaves, escaped into the swamp, I chained up the other two, and followed with a gun determined to retrieve him or die trying. But knowing nothing about such wicked places, I nearly received my comeuppance by wading into still waters inhabited by the venomous black snakes that natives had appropriately labeled cottonmouths.

Despite having both my legs attacked by several of those evil creatures, I managed to crawl to shore where my limbs quickly reddened and swelled to near twice their size from the effects of the venom. I tore away my pantaloons but had no strength to drain the poison or remove my boots. The intolerable itching from the wounds was maddening. I trembled with the chills that racked my body. My heart beat to near bursting. Unable to move, I leaned against a tree, waiting for the succor of Death to extend its cold, cold hand toward me.

Soraya found me near unconsciousness. Naturally, I did not know her name then. In my delirium, I imagined her an Angel sent by God to help me reach the Other Shore. I would not find out until much later that this was no Angel of Mercy. But forgive my digressions. Allow me to continue in order of the events.

With the help of a black wolf that followed her everywhere, Soraya managed to drag me to her shack. In vain, I resisted the foul-smelling draughts and poultices she administered, then lapsed into unconsciousness for how long it was impossible to know.

Eventually I returned to consciousness, but in such a weakened state, I could barely move my head. She fed me like a babe in arms, and though it shames me to admit it, cleaned up my necessities without revulsion. I

despaired when, in pidgin French, Soraya explained I had been unconscious for more than a fortnight. I knew then I was bankrupt, as the other two slaves would have taken flight at first opportunity. My rice crop would stand in ruins.

When I regained my strength, I took Soraya as my mistress. She knew much in the ways of love and taught me pleasures that with all my experience I did not think possible. Where or how she learned such expertise, I know not. Soon she grew great with child. The pain during her brief labor was assuaged by the extract of a plant with similar effects as the opium poppy. I delivered her of a healthy boy, whom I named Nicolas after my father.

As he grew, Nicolas began to resemble me in visage, but was blessed with Soraya's quiet temperament. Bright and curious, he watched with fascination as I drew on bits of paper. By the time of his third birthday, I had taught him his letters, and to scratch his name in dirt.

Despite Soraya's passionate nature, I grew restless. I wanted more of life than living like a savage in a one-room shack in the middle of the swamp, despite the delights that awaited me at night. I desired to rebuild my plantation into a profitable endeavor, and took to wandering there to gaze at its poor remnants. Sensing

my unhappiness, she secretly followed me to what was left of my humble house.

“Do you miss your former life so much?” she asked, with a tear gleaming in her eye.

When I admitted so, she was silent, then nodded. The next day she guided me to a native village, spoke to the chief in their language and offered him a gold coin. The chief selected six strong braves, who joined me.

“They will work your rice crop. Take this and buy the seed.” At this, she put another gold coin in my hand.

I could not believe my eyes. “With this I can buy seed and slaves.”

Her face grew dark. “No. My Lady forbids slaves. These men are strong and will work hard if you treat them well.”

I was too ecstatic at this fortunate turn of events to argue. Women lack common sense and are too sentimental to understand the needs of running a business at a profit. It is an abomination to beat slaves for degenerate enjoyment, but savages are inherently lazy and must be disciplined to work for the good of civilization. In time, I would do what was needed.

When I returned from the city with the seed and other necessities for the planting, I brought Soraya a betrothal ring made of silver, a curious design of two vines coiled together which would come apart with a twist. The larger one was meant for me to wear, the smaller one for her. Then at marriage, the two would be soldered into one to make her wedding ring. That was my plan then, I swear to God in Heaven.

As Soraya promised, the silent natives worked steadily and we harvested healthy crops the first season. But they worked at their own pace, and took two days a week of rest. This vexed me to no end. They refused to work a larger area, and the chief told Soraya he could not spare more braves. (He would not speak to me directly, though I felt he understood French well enough.) Two more years went by. The harvests were good, but never increased in volume. I grew frustrated with the lack of progress and began to think more about the gold.

Soraya was a simple herb gatherer who traded with the natives. Illiterate except for some illegible chicken scratches she occasionally drew in the dirt. She knew a little French, and a bit of the natives' tongue, but woefully lacked the most rudimentary education. She knew nothing of her mother who died in childbirth, except that her papa had told her, "Your mother was beautiful and kind, and wanted you named Soraya,

because it means star of heaven." Her papa, she told me, had worn a gold ring in his ear, and told her many tales of sailing the oceans of the world and visiting lands where horses flew and evil spirits lived in bottles. She grew sad when recalling his death. Precisely what he died from or how long ago, she could not calculate, as she never learned her numbers. From her description, I surmised he'd suffered a sudden cardiac arrest before she reached full womanhood. Miraculously, she had managed to survive mostly on her own, with occasional assistance from the native tribe. I gathered from her simple-minded stories that her father, a weaver of tall tales, had been a pirate. The coins must be part of his booty, but where had he concealed it? Not in her shack, I was absolutely sure. I resolved to track her when she went to gather her medicinal herbs.

Following her was easier said than done. The wolf caught my scent immediately and turned on me. He stood mere centimeters away, silent but with teeth bared. When Soraya spoke to him in a strange tongue, he obediently trotted to her side. "You want to see the hidden places?"

"Hidden places? No. I want to be with you. You disappear so often and I grow lonely," I replied.

"I must gather medicines at the right time and season, day or night, or they will fail." She studied me

to ascertain my sincerity. "It seems your thoughts are more on the growth of rice than on me or our child. You no longer caress or entertain him. Is that not so?"

Nicolas looked at me with suspicion and clutched his mother's hand.

"It is true I have of late become preoccupied. I wish to build a house for us, out of the swamp, where there is less chance of fevers and other illnesses to befall us. I grow impatient with the lack of progress."

"No illness will befall us. My Lady protects us from all that. What is it you lack?"

Wealth and power, I was tempted to admit, but wisely kept my silence. She would not have understood. "A proper house for us with many bedrooms, a dining room, a parlor and piano to entertain friends. With Negroes to do the work so we can spend more time together."

"My labor is a secret I will pass down to my daughter, and my daughter will pass to her daughter. It is not to be shared with any others."

"And what if you have only sons?"

"Then my son's betroth will learn the path."

I understood immediately that a different approach was needed, and played the trump card. "I come from

a different world, Soraya. If you close the door to me, I feel that, regrettably, we must part."

She stood silently for many moments, face immobile. "I must think on this and ask My Lady for advice. Go home for now," she finally said, then turned her heel. The wolf waited until I left before trotting behind her.

She was gone for several days. I feared she had guessed my avarice, and abandoned me to my own devices. Then, in the fullness of the night, she awoke me with a soft kiss. "Thou are my beloved, Julien. Though She warned me thou were not to be trusted, for the first time I did not obey. But be forewarned, do not break my heart." She kissed me again, this time passionately, and we soon merged into each other.

I had no intention of betraying her. I loved her, and knew that once she understood the comforts of civilization, she would be eager to become a proper lady. I imagined presenting her to French society dressed in red velvet, her lustrous black tresses upswept to show the elegance of her neck and jawline. With only a bit of training and if she kept her silence, her comeliness would override any questions of schooling. I would prepare a complete history of her as obscure royalty from the Ottoman Empire. Wealth, particularly when combined with rare beauty,

transforms the most barefaced exaggerations into Gospel Truths.

Over the coming weeks, I accompanied her on her walks. She taught me the difference between herbs that healed and herbs that killed, some of them identical to the inexperienced eye. She showed me that the boiled bark of a specific tree would bring down fever. Strangest of all, that the defense against a viper came from milking the venom from the fangs of the wicked creatures themselves to brew an antidote. It disturbed me that her concoctions bordered on witchcraft, but said nothing waiting for her to reveal the secret of the coins. But before she did that, I discovered something far more frightening: the "My Lady" Soraya spoke of was not, as I so naively surmised, the Virgin Mary.

Reverentially, Soraya showed me the clay statuette she kept wrapped in a piece of soft cloth. "My Lady," she whispered kneeling in front of the small figure. It represented, crudely but vividly, a nude female suckling a babe at her left breast. The standing figure had an elongated body more snakelike than human, with joined legs and female organs represented by a simple crosshatched V. The head of both mother and child were hideously pointed like a viper's, with mere slits for eyes and mouths. I have never seen anything so wicked in my life.

"Did you make this?" I asked, controlling my revulsion.

"Oh, no," she answered in all innocence. "This belonged to my mama, who was born in the land of flying horses. It was passed from mother to daughter for longer than I understand time. Mother told papa I was to be taught her ways."

"What is her name?"

"I only know her as My Lady, but this is her sign." Soraya then took a stick and scratched this into the dirt: ♪ΛΛ.

"That resembles the scar on your left arm, and the one on Nicolas'."

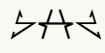
"On her command, I cut her sign into our bodies. It is to show the animals that we are under her protection, so they will not harm us. For you, I must wait for her permission."

I would die before putting a pagan mark upon my body, but bit my tongue at her absurdities. Soraya was like a child, not at fault for being raised in savagery. In time, the good nuns would instruct her in the ways of the One True God. However, I could not move forward until I found her cache, so I replied, "I have much to learn. It will take time."

It did not take as long as expected. A few weeks later, I told her I needed to purchase a horse, feed and build a stable. Together, Soraya and I headed deep into the swamp. For the first time, I saw the sacred tree, where the gold was hidden.

The tree itself was unlike any other I had witnessed. Over twenty feet high, the bark was nearly black, hard as stone and, though midsummer, lacked foliage. The trunk was twisted every which way, with the main part wider than a great oak joined by other thinner twisted areas resembling kindling bound together. The boughs multiplied and tapered into snakelike branches. The roots sank deep into the water, with 'knees' projecting above, similar to the common swamp cypress.

"What type of tree is this?" I asked.

"I only know it as My Lady's sacred tree. See, there is her mark." Soraya pointed to the  carved into the trunk.

"Thou carved this?"

"No. My Lady carved it with lightning during a storm."

I heard a hiss, looked down. Slithering near my foot was a cottonmouth, mouth agape. I stood frozen with fear. Soraya picked up the viper, spoke a few words

in a strange soothing tongue, then placed the snake into the water. "Are there more?" I asked, heart caught in my throat.

"Many. They guard her tree. But the medicine I gave you will protect you for some time. They do not like the smell."

"Thou pray here, offer sacrifices?"

She looked puzzled. "I do not understand those words."

"Kill animals as offerings, beg so she grants you favors."

Appalled at the very idea, she shook her head vigorously. "Never. My lady does not desire offerings of dead things. I ask for guidance. Most times, she is silent, but sometimes she answers. She... she..." Soraya struggled for the right words. "My Lady lived before land and water. Never does she need to eat. I will answer what I know later, but must get what we came for."

Soraya knelt down by the tree, reached deep into the roots, pulled out what appeared to be a simple gourd secured by a rope. I gasped when she gave a twist and the top opened. It held hundreds of gold coins. "They are pretty are they not? But papa said they must stay hidden because some will kill for them."

"The gourd will rot underwater. Best to bring it home."

"It is safe here. Look."

I examined the gourd. She was correct. It was sealed inside and out with a thick oil that made it impervious to water, and a clever interlocking top that fitted so snugly nothing could leak. "So much I do not know," I told her, knowing I must hide my time.

The opportunity came on Nicolas' sixth birthday. On special occasions, Soraya made a remarkable liquor out of fermented blackberries and sugar cane. Light and sweet to the tongue, yet powerful in its effects. That night she cooked a delicious meal of rabbit grilled with tomatoes, herbs and spices, baby peas, rice from our last harvest, and the sweetest strawberries God created. After putting Nicolas to bed, we sat by the open door watching the rain and drinking blackberry wine, to which I had secretly added a few drops of her opium-like extract to her cup. Soon she fell into a deep sleep. I carried her to bed, making her as comfortable as possible.

My story, as imagined at that moment, was that I would gather the booty, hide it in the barn. The next day, I would tell her I had to travel to Nouvelle Orleans for more feed. I would establish myself in the city, then return for her and the boy in less than a

year. So are the best laid schemes destroyed by happenstance. Or perhaps, fate.

Setting out, I was slowed down by rain. Overconfident and having imbibed too much wine, I perhaps did not tread as quietly as imagined. At any rate, I was unaware that my son awoke and followed me to the tree.

I reached into the water, praying to God that Soraya told the truth when she said the snakes guarding the tree would not harm me.

I nearly panicked when the deadly cottonmouths slithered around me but, as promised, they did not bite.

The danger came when Nicolas saw me retrieving the gourd. He gave a high-pitched cry that carried despite the rain, then ran to warn his mother. I caught him easily enough but he would not stop his shrilling. When I covered his mouth, he clamped his teeth on me, his very own father! Enraged I pressed my thumbs to his throat to silence him, but he struggled and kicked like a demon. I pressed harder until he grew limp in my arms. Realizing he had given up the ghost, I tossed the little wretch into the water.

I heard Soraya's heartrending scream when she threw herself in the water to rescue him. She tried to breathe life into him but he was gone from this world.

Weeping, she laid him on the shore, held him as I watched too numb to move. Suddenly, she raised her arms to heaven. "My Lady! Avenge my child!" She then leapt upon me, clawed my face like a savage beast.

The gourd fell from my hands, scattering the coins into the mud. The pain from the deep scratches sent me into a blind rage I could not control. I struck back, knocked her to the ground. Her head hit an exposed root. It stunned her only for a moment. I could not reason with her. More animal than human, she tried to gouge my eyes out, attacked my genitals. I had to stop her. I grabbed her by the neck, and though it now horrifies me to admit it, I took pleasure in squeezing until she no longer resisted.

Rage spent, I searched for signs of life, but there was no pulse, no breath. Lightning as bright as day illuminated the terrible bruise around her neck.

Sobbing, I embraced her limp body, kissed her cold beautiful face. Tears of regret streamed down my face as I pushed both bodies into the water. To this day so many years later, how I wish I could undo that night of horror.

Lightning illuminated the bodies as they floated by. Suddenly, a burst of light exploded from inside the tree. The light arced, hit Soraya's chest. Her eyes

opened, then closed. I backed away in horror as her body convulsed, glowed with light, then stilled.

I snatched as many coins as I could gather, then dashed to find my horse. As I ran, a female voice shook the ground like thunder. "Take heed! Unto the end of your line, all thy firstborns and most beloveds will die by their own hand. Their brood will live with me as mine own children."

Decades later, her curse came all too true. At the tender age of sixteen, Andre, the light in my life, first-born from my marriage to Clotilda, became intimate with the young scullery slave and put her in the family way. The innocent boy was so smitten he confused lust with love, ignoring his responsibilities. Miscegenation would have imperiled our status. I was culpable in part, as I indulged his every whim and did not prepare him for what was demanded of our kind.

When I finally put my foot down and sold her and her unborn to a faraway plantation, he took his life. I was the one who discovered him hanging from the rafters of his bedroom. My life became a shadow no amount of wealth could brighten. My wife and other children became invisible to me. Only absinthe could block my nightmares, however briefly.

One night, as I dressed for dinner with a friend, I peered into the looking glass to adjust my cravat.

Behind me I saw not my bedroom, but the 'Lady's'
swamp and sacred tree.

Frightened out of my wits, I smashed the glass. It
sealed my doom. Through the broken part, a dark
swirling mist filled with sparkling lights oozed into my
room. She now could pass at will.

Cursed coin! Bargain with the devil will only bring
the grave.

I follow thee in dreams. Intoxicate me like a
delicious poison that will not leave my body rest.

Nicolas pursues me, and I

the moon thou draw me

suffer a witch to live

it destroys me

ensnared by looking glass

addled me

cannot forgive myself and will perish

Bargain with the devil.

power over water fear to

beg forgiveness, and pray

I hear her tapping on the window, whispering my name, particularly when it rains. Sometimes her breath blows playfully on my candle creating monstrous spider-like shadows threatening to surround me. Other times, her breath creates a whirlwind. The gold coins fly out of the pouch, roll into every crevice. My candle falls, my papers scatter. I hear her mocking laughter when I attempt to gather them. They float near the ceiling until she tires of the childish game and lets them, one by one, fall to the floor.

To tempt me, she takes on the form of my Soraya. Though my heart knows it as nothing but a simulacrum, my body responds to her seduction.

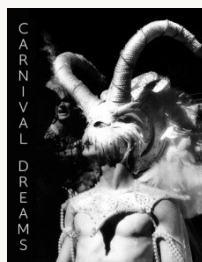
I can no longer bear my confusion, and must conclude this missive. What will become of me, I know not.



OTHER BOOKS BY MARTA

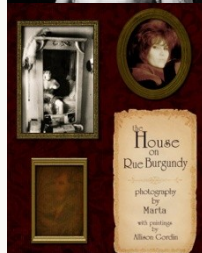
Carnival Dreams

Photographs exploring transcendence and isolation during Mardi Gras.



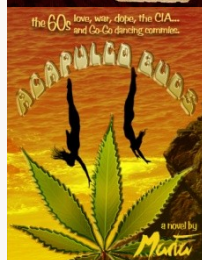
The House on Rue Burgundy

Nude infrared photos, poems, and paintings evoking Storyville in New Orleans.



Acapulco Buds

A dark comedy set in the late 1960s about love, war, dope, the CIA... and Go-Go dancing commies.



The Journal of Julien Delacroix, an excerpt from the novel, *The Return*
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