

Stealing Life

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For Sloan

Notes

The towns of Bays, Port Beau, Brinkley, Barco Island and the Bord de L'eau Plantation are composites of real places but this story is fiction. Barrels and gallons are mentioned frequently but not interchangeably; a barrel contains forty-two US gallons. Lastly, a *Coomass* is a Cajun person.

ONE

Bays

The bay was surrounded by marshlands that formed the southernmost border between Texas and Louisiana. The Leonidas Boudreaux's shack sat a few miles north of an ocean pass that connected bay (more properly, a tidal inlet) to the Gulf of Mexico. Ships have sailed Bays Pass for centuries carrying everything from slaves to unleaded gasoline and its opportunistic geography has been attracting pirates since pre-Columbian times.

Thistle was spending his birthday the way he'd spent most of them, alone in the three-room shanty that was more tarpaper than wood. The floor was fashioned from discarded lumber and a burn-barrel smoldered in the front yard. Thistle sat in the kitchen staring through the structure's lone window at a rusting Model-T marooned in a briar patch out back. The shack sat next to the two-lane state highway that traced the bay's western shore.

There were no presents, no cake. Thistle's folks were passing the evening in one of the beer-joints dotting the waterfront. Leo generally ignored his son, though the interactions they managed were pleasant enough. Candace comforted or annoyed or terrified her only child depending on how much she'd had to drink.

Thistle had been born with a cotton-top gone mostly brown and he was short for his age. An old Cajun woman in Bays Town once told him he'd live long enough for his hair to

grow white again. She also told him that if he'd give her a dollar she could arrange for him to die a rich man. He watched her bury a duck egg and an onion under the full moon while mumbling something in French.

A little after nine it came on the radio that Japan had unconditionally surrendered and the announcement filled the new teenager with a crass optimism. Even though he didn't have all the money put together just yet, he had enough, and Thistle decided it would be a good night for him to leave.

Leo and Candy were never home before the bars closed and Thistle took his time getting ready, even heating water for a long bath. He dressed himself and removed the cash from its hiding place. The bills were worn from constant handling, laden with his brief history. The wad was mostly ones, spiked with larger denominations. He'd have the whole hundred by now if the store in Bays didn't charge a nickel for paper money. The shopkeeper knew what Thistle was doing.

At first, he only stole from his parents, rising before dawn while their hangover sleep was still sound to rifle Leo's frequently empty pockets. Candy was more careful of her money but if she was passed-out when he got home from school Thistle usually robbed his mother, too.

Last summer when he found almost two hundred dollars in Candy's purse Thistle assumed (correctly) that she'd stolen it, herself. Had he known the money was for his tuition he most likely would have taken it all and bolted that very afternoon. But he took only a

single twenty and Candy assumed it had been Leo and kept her mouth shut, just as her son knew she would.

He counted the ninety-six dollars a few more times while reflecting on exactly what might await him beyond the marsh. Thistle had read a lot of books but never been further than twenty miles from Bays Town. He thought of the word he looked up the day the war started, the entry had spoken to him: *Infamy - the state of being well known for some bad quality or deed.*

Getting out of that marsh was the only thing Thistle Boudreaux ever prayed for, on the off chance any of that bullshit were true. A few days after Pearl Harbor when the Monseigneur spoke passionately about the meaning and everlasting import of the events on Golgotha, the old priest's homily had inspired Thistle, who began to plan his own escape from tyranny. Since he'd only be saving the skin of one soul (his own) the nine-year old atheist's enterprise would require neither crucifix nor credo. Thistle figured he'd just hitchhike to Mexico with a pocket full of money and if there was a God, He could take it from there. The young thief was pretty sure Mexico was about as close as anyone was ever going to get to heaven, anyway.

He began sitting next to the rich kids at Mass on Wednesday mornings and palming a few of the coins they ostentatiously dropped into the collection basket. Soon he was attending Sunday services where the take was larger and the pickings easier. Her son's newfound interest in the Church delighted Candy, who would've described herself as a devout Catholic had the topic ever been broached.

Thistle put away a couple of dollars a month for the balance of the war. He never spent much of it except on the old fortune teller. And even though he stole at least a little something every day, not once during the entire three years, eight months, and twenty-six days of World War II was his larceny detected. Except by the old heavy thumbed grocer in town who knew his kind when he met them. But the man had simply taken his cut his mouth shut.

If one can be born to such things Thistle likely was. Leo was mostly a gambler which meant he was mostly a thief, and everyone in Bays knew to watch their pockets around Candy Boudreaux.

He divided the cash into equal piles then folded them in half and slipped one into each sneaker which added an inch to his height. He fried a can of Spam and ate supper, scraping the mayonnaised white bread from the roof of his mouth. He put a rind of rat-trap cheese and what was left of the bread into a doubled grocery sack and threw in a change of clothes and a library book.

Before he left Thistle began to pace slowly through the dingy little rooms he'd lived in his entire life. It is difficult to know whether the boy was saying goodbye or simply searching for some final thing to steal. Most likely it was both.

The screen door's clap spooked an egret dozing in the front yard and Thistle quickly crossed a rickety two-by-ten over the ditch to take up a spot on the side of the highway. He waited there for a while then turned back to face the marsh. Stars were crowding the briny

coastal sky like glowing salt. He looked up and performed an exaggerated sign-of-the-cross then held up his hands solemnly the way he'd seen the priests do it.

In a drop-dead working class British accent, Thistle carped loudly into the darkness:

“THIS IS SOMETHING UP WITH WHICH I SHALL NO LONGER PUT.”

He signed the cross once more and said, “Or this.”

It wasn't that he didn't respect Sister Fiona (and even share her notions about Churchill and terminal prepositions) but her religion was nonsense and he'd told her so. This disdain for churches and the church was the only thing Leo had ever really given his son other than eyes that were the color of thunderheads.

Their lack of shared faith hadn't prevented a bond from forming between Thistle and Fiona. She supplied him with books that weren't in the St. Joseph's school library, even as she frequently warned him that rejection of Christ's mercy was a mortal mistake.

“Say a few magic words and I'll never die? You've got to admit that it's a pretty wild tale. And the gentlemen selling the notion dress in women's clothes and speak half the time in a language nobody understands. I'm sorry, Sister, I don't buy it.”

It was Leo, verbatim, right down to the man's expansive sneer.

Anyone else at would've washed out Thistle's mouth and marched him to the office. But the young nun took Thistle's heresies philosophically, sometimes even wondering if her gifted pupil could be right about things.

Fiona had invited Candy to the school for a conference before third grade started.

“Thomas is an extremely intelligent boy, Mrs. Boudreaux. A very creative boy.”

The meeting had been cordial until Sister Fiona revealed to a tipsy Candace Boudreaux some specifics regarding her son’s creative nature. Things ended badly and when she got him home Candy issued a beating (and a nickname) to eight-year-old Tommy.

Standing there in the darkness, Thistle traced the two-thousand-year-old geometry of Christianity for a final time as multitudes of mosquitos and horseflies witnessed the investment of his new ministry.

This is something (*In nomine*)

up with which (*Patris et Filii*)

I shall no longer (*et Spiritus*)

put (*Sancti*).

A-fucking-men.

He felt like a wet dog shaking off a fall thunderstorm.

A big black car stopped as his roadside benediction concluded and Thistle's eyes grew wide. The driver let him settle in and gawk for a few miles before allowing that they were riding in a 1942 Fleetwood Sixty Special.

"Last Caddy before the war. I guess they'll start building them again next year, you heard the news?"

"Yes, sir. The Japs called it quits."

"Where you headed?"

"Matamoros. Or as far as you can take me."

The driver raised an eyebrow and gave his young passenger a look.

Thistle knew the city from a book Fiona had slipped him about a lady artist from Mexico. Kids could drink beer in Matamoros and the streets there were lit year-round with Christmas tree bulbs. The sprawling metropolis sat just across the river from Brownsville,

where Texas ended. The Mexican lady artist called Matamoros a border town's border town and Thistle had always wanted to find out what she'd meant by that.

He offered his hand to the driver.

"I'm Thistle Boudreaux, sir."

"Fish."

Fish's grip was painful, brief. He could have been twenty-five or forty-five and dressed in all black with thick hair and a thicker accent. He had a gold ring in each ear and the man was wearing the first eye patch Thistle Boudreaux had ever seen.

They passed a highway sign.

Port Beau 53

Corpus Christi 201

"I can get you to Port Beau."

"Gracias, amigo," Thistle replied brightly. Fish raised another brow and cracked an enigmatic smile. The two chatted a little and took a cautious liking to one another. The boy was impressed with the Cadillac and the eyepatch, and the man had harbored a soft spot for runaways ever since he'd been one.

Thistle had never felt air conditioning before and shivered as he stared out the window into the passing marsh. Mexico was still three-hundred-miles from where Fish was

going to drop him off, maybe he'd spend a few days in Port Beau before heading south. He watched anemic patches of swamp gas escaping into the starlight while he practiced Spanish silently in his head.

Escoge una persona que te mire como si quizás fueras magia.

The constable said no bodies had turned up and that he'd get in touch right away if any did.

"I doubt he's dead, Candy. But wherever your boy ran off to, I wager he'll be better off when he gets there."

"Fuck you, lazy-ass." Thistle's mother snarled fearlessly at the red-nosed lawman and rose abruptly to leave. A deputy made a move to stop her but constable looked at him and shook his head.

Back in the marsh Candy cried and drank herself to sleep on the constable's mean talk. She came to at dusk and dammed her tears with fresh mascara to join Leo at the tavern where they supped on pickled quail eggs and sausages from big glass containers on the bar that look like specimen jars. They washed everything down with Falstaff and Old Crow boilermakers, wincing through the whiskey burns until they couldn't feel them anymore.

“Even if they find the boy and bring him back here he’s just gonna run off again. You know it and I know it. That constable knows it too, baby-girl. Thistle’s damn near grown anyway. He’ll be fine, Candy-Lou.”

“His name is Tommy,” Thistle’s mother said with resigned defiance, her lip trembling a little. She would never again referred to her son as Thistle, and she worried and fretted about him every single day for the next couple of years, which was as long as Candy managed to stay alive.

Leo was right about his boy and so was that old Coonass witch. Thistle Boudreaux passed away peacefully in the Nevada desert at ninety-six years old, a thousand miles from the nearest marsh. The little swamp-rat from a tarpaper shack outside Bays, Texas left this world for parts unknown with a full head of snowy hair and a nine-figure fortune. Neither of which – just as Leo had predicted – was he able to bring with him.