



The Masque

A Novel

Matts Djos

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet . . .

And time for all the all the works and days of hands

That lift and drop a question on your plate . . .

From T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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Book I

Lilith

I

Seattle, 1970; Ginny and Nathan:

The city was shrouded in clouds; storm warning in the Straits; not much to do except wait it out.

They'd strayed. Married young, it didn't take long. First and last time, but they never got over it—couldn't let go, not a week or month--even through the worst of it.

"Trial separation," she once sniffed. "You got what you wanted. I got mine. We'll do our thing; come back in a year. Think of it as a test—no lies, no secrets. Might be good for us!"

"Can't! I love you too much!"

"Oh, *really?*" she snapped, "You should have thought of that when you ran off!"

She fled the room, and left him sitting alone.

"It happened once, and I'm sorry," he shouted. "I was drunk. Besides, what about you? I still think about it!"

She hesitated, pausing in mid-step as she looked back at him: "Think all you want! You'll never know. I could have torn your eyes out!"

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The other woman, six years wasted after she found out—driving herself crazy imagining Nathan with another, his body driven into hers and the lie even worse than the sex itself. She moved out, a solitary six months, while he called time and again and begged her to return until she could stand it no longer, loving him too much to leave him, too much not to; and the two of them suspended like a high wire act and the questions and secrets pursuing them both in a hollow curse:

They'd married in '59.

She looked like she'd been born to make babies. It never happened; stress, fate, estrogen, a low count. It wasn't completely hopeless--a super sperm might greet a super egg—motility and solidity. That's all they needed—and moderation.

Ginny started to chafe: one job too many and she hated it—paralegal for three lawyers, Rogers, Hahn & Cooper, correspondence, PR, meetings, expenses--her red-gold hair tucked in a bun; starched, white blouse, a closet full of suits. They felt like straightjackets. She still thought about singing and contemplated an occasional gig down at the clubs. Her musician friends kept calling. She finally relented, came home starry-eyed, and talked of California. It drove Nathan crazy.

“How about a 'special getaway," he suggested, "We could skip town for two or three days and celebrate our 'Tenth': New York, Banff, New Orleans? You choose!”

She scratched her cheek and gave him a funny look.

“You trying to pull something?”

“Not really! I just don't want to lose you!”

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"Interesting!" she laughed. "Beats R.H.&C.: *New Orleans to kill the doldrums!*" She grinned, her eyes a touch mischievous: "Food, jazz, Cajuns, Creoles, *atmosphere!*"

It was no place for alcoholics, drunk or recovered; but he was desperate to hold her, and it was worth the risk. Besides, maybe he could ply her and grease the wheels (so to speak). There's not a man on this earth who doesn't fear being routed by a competitor, and Nathan was no exception. The other guy: who was he, really; and was he any better? And Ginny: was she any different with him, and what had they done in secret?

"Two birds, one stone," Nathan thought. "Survive the year, probe her mind, and watch for changes. They might reveal something. Then, again, maybe not!"

As for Ginny, she could've cared less—or more, and she sure as hell wasn't interested in specifics.

It was bad enough just knowing; and she bit hard; at times, struck back where it hurt the most, given a chance with a second man and—who knows--maybe a third. "Tit for tat," she figured. It was a game. "You do it; I'll double down." It was part of her repertoire, always was, although she wasn't quite sure it mattered—not anymore.

II

Nathan took an extra day's leave from the College, Ginny took leave of R.H. & C.; and they reserved a suite in the French

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Quarter. They'd always lived in a fantasy: another time, another place, another love, a different bed; and they hadn't taken a drink—five years boozed; five years sober.

He wondered if he'd made an unwelcome contract—head cleared, reality check on Sundays; AA once a week. He dreamt of a furlough, a special night out, a drink or two—maybe, and said nothing to Ginny

They caught an early flight out of Seattle and rented a flat just off Jackson Square, *Place' de Ville*: bubbling, courtyard fountain; granite cobblestones; a bundle of exotic flowers--magnolias, orchids, lilies, and jasmine.

The lobby was generic: leather couch; fresh coffee, sugars and cream nearby. Ginny was mildly amused by a large portrait at the far end of the room: a nude: fair-skinned, golden, and beautiful; a large snake cradled her cheek—probably *Lilith*. She'd been thrown out of the garden because she was too independent. Not quite God's plan.

Ginny stepped back for a better perspective.

"Pretty heavy," she whispered.

"Yeah, Pre-Raphaelite, I think. They got hung up on goddesses, voluptuous women, poetry."

Ginny studied the portrait, eyes narrowed. "We're not just about sex."

"Tell the artist!"

Ginny was a bundle of contradictions. She resented Nathan for sexualizing her; and, vengeful or not, she used it to toy with him and teased him mercilessly. She looked again at *Lilith* and cocked her head.

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"Were the poems any good?"

"Not especially. They rambled a lot. Let's see if I remember anything:

'By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:

. . . The strange low sobs that shook their common bed

"I think I missed a line. Can't remember the rest."

"That's enough!"

Nathan dropped an octave, voice muted, like wool: "*You asked, . . . I remembered a poem, that's all.*"

"Yeah, right," Ginny snapped. "Let's just forget about it, okay?"

"Sure, maybe we could forget about a lot of things!"

They preferred isolation, left their bags with *Lilith*, and ended up in the old slave quarter. A far cry from its dusky past, it had been prettied up: shuttered windows, crystal chandeliers—electric teardrops flickering like candles. The place smelled of cigarettes and soda crackers. Ginny inspected the giant four-poster, especially the blue, silk damask (blond nudes and pink cupids). She settled over the nudes, spread her arms, and stared expressionless at the ceiling.

"Whad' *that* mean?"

"A chill, maybe—or something more: others, a woman. I'm not sure. Maybe I just felt something—or wanted to," Ginny murmured. "You wouldn't understand!"

Nathan studied the damask, tried to read Ginny's mind, and mumbled something about the 'hovering' velvet canopy, lost virgins (off-pink, like stained orchids)—*Lilith*, 'maybe'.

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Ginny made a face, floated over to the window, and peered into the courtyard: the fountain wavered in the wind, more jasmine, gorgeous, gold orchids--like Ginny's hair. They were surrounded by a two-story building with a wrought iron balcony. The apartments were squared around the fountain and towered over their cottage like a theater-in-the round. Everything was painted white.

He locked his fingers around Ginny's waist and searched the nape of her neck. She tilted her head, inviting more.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Just as I imagined—except maybe the slave bit. It wouldn't have been like this." She looked around the suite. "There's something dark here—captive spirits, maybe."

"I could ask for another room."

She hesitated, her eyes circling the room. They settled on a nineteenth century painting: a nude, Black woman in a brown turban. A green water snake encircled her ankles.

"Snakes again!"

"You sure you don't want to move?"

"No, I think we're supposed to be here, like some kind of omen. You know, the other side."

"I thought we settled that!"

"*Maybe!* Then, again, maybe not!"

"Wanna' go outside?" Nathan suggested. "Sit beside the fountain and sip Cajun coffee. I heard it has 'chicory'."

"What's '*chicory*'?"

"I dunno'—makes it bitter, apparently."

"I'm game." She laughed. "Who knows? Can't be worse than anything back home!"

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The porter dropped their bags with the turbaned woman, stalled for a tip, and disappeared. Nathan waved at the attendant and placed their order. A short while later, he reappeared with a tray full of French pastries, teacups, whipped cream, and two pitchers. It was all very formal, like a Japanese tea ceremony, the coffee poured simultaneously with warm milk and the two pitchers jogged up and down—to "aerate" them, they were told.

"Would you care for any sweetbreads—perhaps a croissant?"

"Ginny?"

"No, this is good."

She took a sip and made a face—lips puckered as if she'd been sucking lemons.

"*Jesus*," she sniffed. "It's *too* bitter."

Nathan tested his: molasses and chicory, a dash of rum. Ginny hadn't said anything.

"Still better'n' my coffee?"

A shrug--no answer. She rested her feet on a neighboring chair and studied a tourist brochure. He watched her for a while and sensed something dark--maybe the hidden rum: alcohol again! It worried him, especially the indifference as she read.

"There's a cemetery up on Basin Street," she said. "Crypts, nothing but crypts. They're lined up like houses. They don't bury the dead, at least not those who can afford to stay above ground. We're on a swamp. Everything rots."

"What about slaves 'n poor people?"

"Tossed in the river, maybe; or buried. God only knows!"

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"You don't suppose there's something under our cottage, perhaps a trap door?"

Ginny turned and locked her eyes to his: "Spirits wouldn't need a trap door. They'd come up through the floor!"

"How do you know, smarty."

"Because *I'm* a witch—but I'm a 'good' witch!" She batted her eyes at Nathan, crawly fingers up his leg. When he reached for her, she swatted him away and turned back to her brochure.

"It says here a lot of these mansions were owned by Quadroon women—one-fourth Black. They made a ton of money even though they were supposedly slaves. White landowners sent their wives home early to play around at their balls. '*Placage*' they called it. I admire those women. They used all they had, and they survived—it says a lot!"

"Call it what you will, given what it is," Nathan said. He tried to laugh: "Maybe you're a Quadroon Norwegian—that red hair."

"Bull crap," Ginny snapped. "It doesn't work that way. Besides, even if it did, you couldn't afford me. Be grateful for what you get." She started to giggle and kicked his ankle.

"Yeah, I 'spose," he muttered.

"'Spose what?"

"I should be 'grateful'."

She laughed, a cynical laugh; and they were silent a while and watched the fountain waver in the wind. A nightingale echoed in the distance.

"Never enough," Ginny thought. "They could make love twice a day, it wouldn't matter, and he'd still want more."

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Nathan tucked into himself and crossed his arms: "At your service, *Mam*," he muttered.

Ginny kicked him again: "You mean at your service!"

"*Dammit*, Ginny, cut it out!"

"Subject dropped?"

"Yeah, *dropped*."

They sat together like strangers and watched the leaves scatter over the square. 'Winter remnants,' Nathan thought. 'Had they ever changed?'

He gave Ginny a conciliatory kiss and tried to break the silence.

"What about dinner?" he asked.

"Any ideas?"

"Maybe! I've been thinking—first night down South; how about a kick-start on a Louisiana special: supper, New Orleans style?"

"*Meaning?*"

"*A la carte*: different courses at different places. You're supposed to order the house specialty."

"They do that?"

"Yup! You start the evening Creole style—a gumbo shop, then on to the main course—maybe *Arnaud's* or *Tortorici's*; dessert at one of the pastry shops."

Ginny searched the courtyard, mouth set, eyes narrowed.

"And--?"

"Nothing more, 'cept maybe a trip down Bourbon. How 'bout it?"

"Sounds like a lot of exercise. Let me think about it."

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"Later?"

Ginny laughed: "Yeah, *later!*—okay?"

He nodded, rolled out of the chaise lounge, and headed for the suite.

"Coming?"

"In a minute!"

"First come, first dibs," he mused; showered first, made it scalding hot, shaved, and studied his reflection in the mirror. He wondered how much he'd changed in ten years. They'd been sarcastic in the courtyard. It separated them--like the sulfur smell that hung around the apartment after they'd been drinking. The sex was still incredible; Ginny was impossibly beautiful: voluptuous and haunting with that hair. Sometimes he'd wander off, lose his concentration, and stare unabashedly in public—no shame, nothing circumspect. It was embarrassing for Ginny. He supposed he still wasn't house-trained.

He climbed into a black wool slack, matching turtleneck, black shoes and socks. He wondered if he looked imposing or just gloomy. He donned a gray jacket and stuffed the lapel with a white handkerchief. A shot of *Chanel Men's*, and he was ready. He hoped Ginny might notice: *scent of a man*, realized he'd been trying the same trick for more than a decade. Maybe it was getting tiresome: same thing over and over. He wiped the mirror and checked his image: clean-shaven, dark, hollow-eyes, 'kind of an outdoor look,' he supposed. He wondered what Ginny saw greeted her outdoors at the fountain. She gave him a quick kiss, sniffed the *Chanel*, nodded

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her approval, and disappeared into the steamy confines of the bathroom.

"*Christ!* No fan?"

"I forgot—sorry."

She slammed the door; and for the next half-hour, he could hear mystic 'goings-on': a tinkling shower; squeaky, sink faucet; a toilet flushed; something rasped; something dropped; a howling blower, total silence--

She finished up while he read the brochure, browsed a magazine, and gazed at the woman with the snake.

A sudden light, and she opened the bathroom door and leaned against the jamb.

"Okay?"

He looked up and nodded, tongue tied. He still wondered how he'd nailed her down. The silk gown was like a cataract—same as those new foldouts in Playboy mag. She followed his eyes and laughed.

"Too much?"

"*Liquefied*, perhaps, but I like it!"

"How about you? "Ready to go?"

She hadn't seemed to notice the 'all-black' attire, what were they called in French? '*Vetements*'. He supposed they still held her—no reason to change, not really.

Ginny slipped into a black, full length overcoat, fur-lined collar, pillbox hat tilted at a cocky angle--a 'mod' czarina.

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As they left the hotel, hailed a cab, and were greeted by an open carriage; roan mare and a handsome, Black driver in a top hat and winter coat.

"Wanna' rahd? Tou' da' Qwoda? Ah'll mayk'it funn!"

Nathan looked at Ginny. There was a touch of mischief in her eyes. It might have been the gaslight, the slave quarters—maybe the coffee and the hint of rum.

"Let's be reckless," she said. "I'm told New Orleans is a bust unless you empty your wallet. We have to begin somewhere! Besides, we might never come back."

The driver grinned, a sly grin, as if he'd caught something unseen. "Wanna' take da' long way?"

"That'll be fine!" Nathan laughed.

He pulled at the little door, and they climbed in.

"Ahm Cain," the man drawled. His voice was smooth as oil. "But most folks cawls me '*Angel*.'" He gently covered their knees with a scarlet shroud, tucking it beside Ginny's leg until the wrinkles were gone. She pretended not to notice, but it made Nathan uneasy.

"New Ahlins gets cold dis tahm'o yeer," Angel laughed. "Don' wanna lose ya'." He forced a smile and studied Ginny in the gaslight. "Wad brings y'all to the Qwoda?"

"Tenth Anniversary."

Angel studied them. "Yo sho' don' look dat old—da lady musta been a chile."

Nathan looked over at Ginny and the cocked, pillbox hat. It felt as if they were somewhere else—a different time, different

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place. He thought of Russia: the crazy stories he'd read: gypsies, vodka, the desperate hunger, and Ginny: so damned beautiful she was almost untouchable—by him, perhaps by anyone. He was astonished that another man had ravished her and left his seed.

"Twice," she confessed, just to bait him; and he wondered how long she carried it and said nothing.

"Remember The Brothers Karamazov," he snickered, "You look like '*Grushenka*'?"

"My God, she was wild as hell! I'd rather be Katerina. She's a little more proper."

"It doesn't fit you."

As they passed St. Mark's Cathedral, the tower chimed—eight bells. Angel pointed up the second alley: "*Pirate's Alley!* Legendry' duelin' grouwnd —insults, batrayul, luv'." He turned around and smiled at Ginny. "Beaudie trumps good sense," he laughed. "Lotsa' preddy ladies 'watchin', wonderin', betrayin'; lotsa' blood spilled."

Ginny giggled, forgot herself, and kicked Nathan.

"See!" she chirped.

They continued on, the horse walking at a lazy gait and the gaslight playing over Ginny's face. Angel pointed to a distant building. "*Quadroon Ballroom*," he said. "Quadroon beautees lahk *Madame John*. Revels' lasted til' dawn--full 'o ghosts now. Some claims a woman's singin' in da' thurd flo' attick. Da place was sole' to da St. Mark's choich--mudda' house fo' nunns."

Ginny was silent, her eyes tracing the ancient building.

"I wonder if they heard ghosts," she whispered.

They turned up St. Louis Street. Angel pointed to a modest building: soft blue, wrought iron balconies, wood-frame windows. "Antoine's," he said. "It's da' ollest restwant heah'. Oystas Rock-feller, uhmm-uhhm! Hav' to waid'n'houwa' jus' for a tabul. Don' worry. Ah' knows a place almost as gud." He pointed across the street. "Tortorici's! olless Eye-talian restwant in town. Y'all waid here. Ah knows da *maitre-dee*."

Ginny and Nathan waited in silence. 'Cornered,' Nathan supposed, but it looked nice and horribly romantic. Angel sauntered back to the carriage, opened the little door, and offered his hand.

"Gottcha' a tabul. Da bess in da houze. Deys ready! Y'all gedd da' scampi—reel gud! Ignore da' ghosts and you'll have a gread tahm." He laughed, almost cynically. "Ah tole 'em it's yo tent' annversry."

Nathan paid him and tipped him double.

"Wan' me ta waid? Ahm in no hurrey!"

"How far is Bourbon Street? You know, the jazz and the shows?"

He laughed again, a pocked and wicked sort of laugh. "Iss jus' a block up, an eazy walk, but y'all be careful—pickpockets an 'hoes. Ahl pwobly be over near St. Ann's if y'all need a rahd back."

Tortorici's was lost in time: Nineteenth Century velvet curtains, scarlet walls, flickering teardrop chandeliers, black, bentwood chairs.

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The room smelled of garlic and roses. They ordered the scampi. A Creole waiter cracked a bottle of champagne and slowly poured two shimmering, red goblets—Venetian crystal! They must have been at least a hundred years old.

"Fo' da' annaversry," the waiter murmured. "Wid compliments of da' House--Congradulations!" He left them, and Nathan looked at the glasses and at Ginny. She looked up at the ceiling, evading his eyes. Her voice was hushed.

"I suppose just one can't hurt."

"Well, we can't really say 'no', and I'm not going to ask him to take it back."

Ginny giggled mischievously. "Hell, we'd probably look like a couple of Mormons if we did—and what are we doing in New Orleans anyway?"

"Let's just take a sip, a toast, maybe—you know: 'to us'? Wouldn't that show our *appreciation*?"

Ginny lifted the red goblet to her lips, sipped quietly, and pursed her mouth. Nathan took a breath and followed her lead. The taste stunned him: like 7Up, but gentler and with a delicious bite.

"It's good."

Ginny nodded. "Pour me. Let's have another."

They were on their way: so subtle, they hadn't even noticed, but the sudden urge for a second drink was irresistible.

Nathan poured a second round and lifted his glass to Ginny's. "To us, to ten—*no*, to all twelve years." Ginny nodded and emptied her glass. They were beginning to unravel, not as planned, but as hoped: the secrets they dare not share, the 'other' side, the 'other' Ginny; and maybe she'd change, disclose her heart, and reveal something more.

The scampi arrived—impossibly good with a kind of grape-like sweet and sour mix that had been ladled over the giant shrimp. They were a beautiful pink, massive, and impossibly tender. The sauce had to have come from an age-old recipe. They wolfed the scampi, decided it was more 'polite' to finish the bottle, tipped the waiter, and signed off on the bill. Nathan hadn't had a drink in five years, and he was astonished. He'd once killed whole quarts of hundred proof canadian in less than two hours and here he was, as tipsy as a debutante.

He helped Ginny from her chair, and they held hands and headed up toward Bourbon Street. He knew she had to feel like him: the floating sidewalk, the gentle high, his impulse to giggle. He heard Ginny snort.

"My God," she chuckled. "I'd forgotten. We better be careful—this is too easy, like those new cash machines. What do they call them: "automated tellers"? You can run 'em up and go broke in five minutes!"

"I know. Step easy. But *it is* fun—just for tonight! After all, we *are* headed for Bourbon Street, and we're full of scampi to soften the blow. This should wear off in an hour or two."

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Ginny started to giggle and waggled her hips. "Let's go hear some music—maybe watch a show."

The last remnants of Mardi Gras lay everywhere, and Bourbon Street was a carnival: jazz joints, strip joints, bars, peep shows, gawkers, hookers, and tourists—like them.

"So much to choose from," murmured Ginny.

"First door, first choice," teased Nathan.

"Fair enough!"

A half a block more, and they peered into a small lounge—candlelit, bentwood chairs, checkered tablecloths, a mirrored ceiling.

A Black female was seated at a baby grand and was singing *Speak Low*. Her voice was throaty—a heavy sound, filled with soul and decades of pain. A bass player leaned over his instrument, seemingly oblivious except that every note complemented the piano. An alto sax waited his turn.

"Boy, that didn't take long!" bubbled Ginny. "Okay?"

"Gawd, yes!"

They were seated close to the vocalist, although she barely noticed—as if she was remembering something and singing to herself.

A small sign on the table warned of a "*Two Drink Minimum*". Nathan looked at Ginny and shrugged his shoulders. She took off her coat and kept the pillbox hat. It was still cocked, Russian style.

"Shall I be your *Grushenka*?" she teased.

Nathan laughed softly and turned back to the singer. Their server quietly approached their table, and kneeled beside them.

"Champagne," whispered Ginny. "A bottle." She looked at Nathan and smiled. "What the hell—just a night. I'll give the dregs to you."

"Keep 'em!"

"Sir?" asked the waitress.

"Double scotch and soda—White Heather or Dewar's if you have it."

Nathan felt terribly guilty. Ginny's breast was flush: the same look when they made love. Somehow it felt both right and wrong—the leash cut, their wings clipped, Nathan's demons wandering the bar, and the 'other side', the 'dark side', hiding in plain sight.

The vocalist transitioned to *Don't Explain*. She sang it like Billy Holiday, her voice witchlike as it cracked and broke to a lower octave. "*Hush now, . . . right or wrong don't matter when you're with me, sweet . . .*"

She didn't finish the last lines, dropping her hands to her side as she surrendered the piano and stared down at the keys. The sax picked up the last bar, a soft sound, whispered almost, like someone comforted. He held each note, letting it fade into the next, his eyes settling on the pianist and then—on Ginny.

Nathan wanted to cry. The music, the night, the bitterness of loving overmuch, and all of it mixed in hazy, brown glass with a tiny parasol for a stir-stick. The group continued: *Lush Life*, *You Go to My Head*, and Ginny's signature piece, *My Funny Valentine*. She'd sung it in the clubs in L.A. and 'sat in' a number of times in Seattle. Nathan killed a second double, freshened Ginny's glass until the

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bottle was empty; and they left half way through *Beautiful Love*. The trio hadn't taken a break. Time meant nothing, only the hunger and the music that cried of love and betrayal and silenced the room.

As they left the club, Ginny was in tears. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Where are we? I feel so pinched deep inside, and I know this is wrong, but I can't help myself."

"Finished?" asked Nathan.

Ginny shook her head: "Can't—half a mile to go, maybe a mile to St. Anne's and there's so much more. It's like a drink half finished. Let's carry each song to the next club and maybe the next, add a trick or two, and see what happens!"

They dawdled in the middle of the street for an instant, checked a prospect or two, and crossed the street to an open bar. It sounded just right: a French door flung wide open, a woman playing with the mike; her long, graceful fingers holding the mouthpiece like a teacup. She was singing something heavy, blues maybe. The pianist was watching her, timing each note to complement her voice without leading her. It was like a marriage—a perfect union, but with harmonic differences. Four other musicians waited in the shadows. They found a table toward the back of the club. A card warned of a *'two-drink minimum'* and faced them head on.

"What the hell," said Nathan, and he seated Ginny, searched the room, and gestured toward a waitress in a miniskirt and lowcut blouse. He averted his eyes so he wouldn't offend Ginny and checked her on the periphery. 'Nice', he thought, 'but Ginny was 'better'.

"Let's stay. I want something stronger," Ginny said.

"Hudson's Bay 160?"

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"That'll be fine."

Nathan placed their order: a double on lime and 7Up, and they leaned back and listened to the vocalist:

"Love is funny . .

A good thing or it's bad . . .

. . and if you fall, you fall . . ."

An alto sax chimed in, a mellow sound, whispery and smooth as he pushed the song into heavy, minor key. He paused, breathless, for an instant while the keyboard picked up the broken notes; the tenor sax waiting his turn, running in harmony with his companion until he gathered the song and chained it an octave lower where the sound was sweetest. He was lost in the music for an instant, played a riff or two, and turned slowly away so the vocalist could pick up the final lines:

"I'm thinking if you were mine

I'd never let you go . . ."

The quartet changed key and slipped gently into straight ahead jazz. Nathan almost didn't recognize the piece, it was so smooth:

"Never let me go, love me much too much-- what would I be without you?"

Ginny killed her drink and stood up: "C'mon," she chirped, "I wanna' dance. We could be dead tomorrow!"

She took Nathan's hand, and he followed her to the back of the room. They blended with the other dancers, and Ginny rested her elbows on his shoulder, pressing his hip as she tucked a toe between

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his shoes. It was a smooth movement, set perfectly and so gently one might never have seen it.

"Somethin' goin' on?" she snickered.

"Wouldn't tell you if it was!"

Nathan dropped a hand in his pocket, shifted very slightly, and revoked the cramp.

"Might have been more fun the other way," Ginny laughed.

"If you dig pain!"

Ginny was still laughing when the quartet advanced again: fusion jazz, a subtle mix of Jamaican rhythms, and Ginny twisted away and slipped behind him, a woman's movements, snakelike, but beautiful as she rolled with a kind of syncopated swing that left Nathan dizzy. She pulled away and studied his eyes; a smile played over her lips, like *Lilith*.

They returned to their table at the break, killed their drinks, ordered another round, and danced a second set before leaving. Nathan took their drinks with them as they entered Bourbon Street. The music was everywhere—Latin rhythms, Dixie, Rock—a cacophony of sounds, each competing with the other, and they wandered the street like orphans.

A bubbling sign with circling arrows announced "DANCERS: LIVE MUSIC". They crossed the street and peered into the darkness. The room was packed: men, women, gigolos, hookers, couples, and table mates. A rock quartet was hidden against the far wall—a guitar, trumpet, and drums, their music syncopated and soulful. A Black vocalist sang of exotica and hunger: *Popcorn, Too Hot for Words*. Nathan felt as if he'd stumbled through a keyhole.

The far stage was dominated by a thirty-something dancer. Muscular and dark, he high-stepped the stage like a drum major.

"Let's," said Ginny "This could be fun!"

"At your service," Nathan croaked. They were edging dangerously close to a boundary, playing with it, and the adrenaline like fire, pressing at his throat, like a test.

They pushed through the swinging doors and found a table just beneath the stage.

Ginny watched the nude male with inordinate curiosity as she was seated, and Nathan wondered about her other side and the hidden woman. It was unsettling, like some kind of unsated hunger, and he ordered a Hudson's Bay for two and and looked at Ginny. She glanced at the drinks, laughed at Nathan, turned back to the dancer while leaning against Nathan's shoulder—a kind of "*you're the one*" gesture that wasn't especially helpful. He'd been watching a pale, strawberry blonde nude, her figure much like Ginny's, her movement not so subtle, perhaps a bit more provocative. A brunette had taken the pole, one knee raised as she spun. She didn't particularly interest him; but he was partial. Ginny watched his eyes, and patted his cheek with her fingertips.

"I see what interests you," she whispered. "I'll take it as a sign."

"You're not going to pull something?"

"*I might*," she said. "Depends on you!"

"I'll try to remember," Nathan whispered. "Just don't push it!"

Lilith - 23

Ginny looked around the room and peered into the darkness beyond the stage. A single light, broken at intervals by a red spinner, was focused on a small dance floor.

"Yesss!—" she hissed. "No *fools*, no pushing, just *foolin*!"

She stood up, killed her drink, and pulled Nathan through the crowd and onto the floor. It was a savage hideaway—strangers, strippers, and gigolos. Nathan didn't quite remember the music; it just fit. There was a lot going on, but Ginny didn't care. She locked her fingers to Nathan's palm, rolled her hips over his knee, and 'marked' him with a kiss. They slowed to a merengue, and Nathan held tight—brains and body like a hot iron until he almost lost control. It got embarrassing, and Ginny started to giggle.

"Maybe a little too much?" she laughed. "I'll let you go—for now!"

They settled into an easy rhythm, held each other close, lightened up, and Nathan gripped Ginny's palm and kissed her cheek. She tickled his neck and glanced at the male nude. He'd continued to high step, and he stared at Ginny while Nathan spun her into the crowd, gripping her hip with his palms and warning her with a quarter turn before he spun her away, wrapped his arm around her waist, and unreeled her a second time. She snatched his palm, and closed with a kiss. He could still feel her breath when she pulled away.

He thought that was it, but she wasn't done, not yet; and she rested an elbow on his shoulder, dropped her other hand, hooked her thumb to her sheath, and brushed Nathan's chest. The pink and

white areolas cuddled the hem like lambs, and she swayed for an instant while the sheathe dissolved.

Nathan was spellbound, his fingers still locked to the small of her back and his mind scorched while she laughed and pursed her lips.

"Only for you, sweet love," she whispered and poked him in the ribs: "Penny for your thoughts!"

She kissed him again, the red spinner flipped away, and the quartet pulled to a stop. The vocalist ran out the final note, and Ginny took Nathan's arm and headed for the street. She checked him as they passed the stage. He could see the nude strawberry blonde, and Ginny winked at her and flicked her fingers. She was still laughing as they entered Bourbon.

"Did you know her?" Nathan mumbled.

"Nope, never saw her." Ginny looked critically at Nathan: "Never hope to . . ."

A street vender was selling corn on the cob: "I'm hungry," she snipped. It caught Nathan totally off-guard, and he bought an ear—stripped, salted and buttered, and she bit into it, wiping the salt and butter from her lips with her glove as she attacked the outer edges. It was incongruous: Nathan's dancer and soulmate, the woman he could never leave; and here she was, caught and caged on Bourbon Street in a gorgeous black sheath, satisfying herself and her impossible hunger with corn on the cob—but it fit. Nathan wondered if I was beginning to think of her as a savage, perhaps something more!

Lilith - 25

Ginny chased the last of the cob with her drink, tossed her cup and the empty cob into a nearby garbage can, and led Nathan up to St. Ann's.

"Having fun?" she laughed.

"Gawd yes!"

Angel was gone, and they walked the last few blocks back to the *Place' de Ville*, danced a two-step as they crossed St. Ann's, and headed for the hotel, the wavering fountain, and their cottage. As Nathan unlocked the door, Ginny leaned against the jamb and nodded toward the hotel lobby.

"Get something," she said. "Our 'special' night." She giggled. "—like I promised. I'll check the radio. I'll need a moment anyway."

When a woman says she'll '*need a moment*', it's like an eclipse—stars kill the moon, the sky turns red, and the morning star flashes and is gone.

Nathan hurried over to the lobby, bought a quarter pint of Hudson's Bay and a Coke, emptied half the cup, filled it with ice, and rushed back to their suite. He felt strange somehow, as if he'd touched an exposed wire; and he wondered why he was in such a hurry.

Ginny'd found the right station alright: sexy, a bit dark, mildly outrageous, especially the lyrics. An unknown vocalist sang of love: *Tell Me How-- let me show,-- the time is now!"*

She was still in the bathroom, and he poured their drinks, killed the bottle, and gently knocked on the bathroom door. She opened it very slightly, snatched the rum, and withdrew. He was

not yet 'allowed' to see her, although he caught a glance in the mirror: "Artists and painters," Nathan thought—"no wonder they loved the Turks—harems, concubines, the languid nudes, a fountain or two, and a truckload of cushions."

Ginny's mind was spinning—a dozen images kicked into gear: Nathan's body, her power over him, the sense of total control, the nude male back at the club, the women in the street. It was a feeling of total liberation: she could do as she wanted—tease, seduce, overwhelm, even terrify. The thought almost frightened her: to reduce Nathan to an object that he might service her pleasure and greet her however she cared. She liked the idea and started making plans. She wasn't even sure they had anything to do with love—needn't, at least not for the moment. Besides, love was probably a given; and she gave herself a stage look: shimmering white eyelids and a blue pencil—deep plum and a lighter shade of purple to highlight the corners. She played either image again: slightly enlarged lips, even a beauty spot and pink rouge and talcum to highlight her body. This would be a game, and she giggled at the private drama that was about to unfold. She understood Nathan, understood his eyes and his heart, and it was like victimizing an unsuspecting soul. She giggled mischievously, curled her hair over her shoulder, stepped into the glass stilettos, and pondered her first move.

Nathan had tossed his clothes over the TV, sat quietly on the damask, and had finished his drink; but he felt strangely

Lilith - 27

helpless. If anybody knew drama, it was Ginny. She could turn him in any direction she wished, tease him, lead him, and he would follow—as predictable as a puppy; he knew it, and she knew it; and yet it was part of their 'game', always had been. He studied the bathroom door as if it was a stage curtain and waited.

What new trick was she up to this time?

There was a slight, squealing sound, like something caught; and Ginny opened the door and steadied herself against the jamb. Her hair had been wavered over her breast, and she rested a palm on her hip and smiled, a secret smile, and gazed gently down at him.

Nathan was lost and stone silent.

"Expect the unexpected," he'd been told, but this was almost scary.

Ginny killed her drink, splashed a drop or two over her belly, and ruffled Nathan's hair with her fingertips.

"Dance with me," she murmured.

Nathan could feel the strange tickle as she rolled her hip, reached to gather him with her thigh, and pressed closer. He backed away.

"Are you okay?"

"I was just, uhmm, almost a . . ."

"Premature?"

He nodded, and she laughed and studied the bed.

"Let's see. The headboard's over there!" She pointed beneath the turbaned woman. "And the foot is there." She smiled and bit her finger. "Which way shall I face?"

She cocked her head, smoothed the sheets, and settled beneath the turbaned woman.

"Come here," she said. Nathan started to climb into the fourposter. "No, come *here!*"

He didn't know if she was thinking of the burly dancer or was simply curious; but she leaned on an elbow and studied him.

Nathan felt like an exhibition. He'd seen Ginny a thousand times, but he never thought she was especially interested in the 'flip' side. Of course, she might have been simply toying with him; but he was intrigued by her curiosity. She had taken a moment to really study him, the change in color as he darkened toward the base and dissolved in a black, curly mass. She was intrigued by the proportional difference—a bit larger than she might have expected, perhaps not, but much like the rest of his body: strong and yet tender. It struck her like a hidden power, capable of discovering a secret world she barely understood herself, and she cradled it in her palm and kissed it.

"A part of me," she thought. "Secure and yet distant, as if it belonged and might change her body, leaving a remnant in its wake before it withdrew."

She was mildly amused at the thought. Nathan was both pleased and undone, and Ginny was all too aware that she'd sexualized him just as he'd sexualized her. '*Tit for tat,*' she thought: 'no longer a victim of his lust, but rather a victor. As for the other woman, the proper 'Katrina', she was irrelevant, at least for the moment; and she stretched beneath the canopy provoking Nathan while he kissed her thigh, lingered a moment longer, and tickled the

Lilith - 29

pink rose with his tongue. It was his usual ploy, no surprise, nothing new; and she lifted as usual to greet him, knotted his hair with her fingers, and forced him to shift slowly upward until she could taste his lips. He thought of the portrait of *Lilith* in the lobby; the serpent only made it to the Goddess' cheek; but, no matter. He drew Ginny's breath to his; and she reached below her waist with a fingertip and disclosed the translucent gold that he might pierce the delicate gate within. The very touch almost carried him off, and he tried to hold back, mindlessly brushing the petals like a frightened intruder if only to withdraw from her finger and begin again.

Ginny took a breath, pretended indifference at his cupidity, lifted her head to watch him, shook her head in amusement, and dropped to the pillow. She stared mindlessly up at the turbaned woman the moment he entered her; and, for an instant, she was insensible and helpless. She could feel him deep inside as he wandered through her body, withdrew as if grazing for more, and quickly returned to press even harder and more desperately. She opened her eyes in surprise, pressed him to her lips, and settled beneath canopy in languid invitation of surrender when her body suddenly uncoiled and turned back on itself. Her movements were much the same as a dance, but quicker, her nerves demanding and as she relished his invading warmth and the sudden, unexpected wave as it surged through her belly, one after another until she was strangely helpless. It was not enough, and she ceased to struggle and remained with him even then, waiting nervously for him to climax, a dream within a dream, her body indifferent to any

Matts Djos - 30

memory of the past except for the anguished recollection that once destroyed their love before subsiding to a fallen leaf.

She could sense the change, his body stiffened and paralyzed like a steel manikin, and she could feel the sudden, strange movement deep inside while his seed pursued her through a mystery far beyond her understanding and slowed to an avalanche.

And then it was done.

She gently slipped away and gazed indifferently at her champion. He was lost in another world and toyed with her as if to recapture a memory, not as he dreamt in that beautiful moment of starshine, but in a dream—not in Ginny or the strawberry blond nude at the club or any supernal goddess no matter how perfect. Their union would never last, the dream would slowly fade, and he would have to begin again. Of that he was certain. '*Ginny*' would again be Ginny, nothing more; and he would be left alone with his illusions.

He kissed her cheek, removed a strand of hair from her forehead, and rested quietly at her side, their union bonding them in ways they could not fathom except from the heart and the terrible, beautiful hunger that had driven them thoughtlessly into each while the flickering chandeliers played over them like ghosts. He looked over at Ginny, amazed that she was not a specter, but alive and warm; and she closed her eyes, her breathing steadied, while she gripped his hand and seemed to fall asleep. When the Cathedral chimes marked three, he shifted to hold her and searched her translucent gold with his fingertip. Awake or asleep, she didn't seem to mind, permitted a token revelation, removed his hand, and snuggled closer.

Lilith - 31

They slept soundly beneath the waning light of the stars, a dream within a dream as their breathing steadied and visions of the night passed quietly into oblivion. A breeze stirred through the suite and brushed over Ginny's face, waking her for an instant, and she shifted closer to Nathan and snuggled against his chest. A woman's voice, hollow and somehow broken echoed somewhere distant, shifted to the far window, and dissolved into the wall:

"Ma, baby! Massa, who took ma' baby? Oh, God, please bring her back!"

Ginny lay paralyzed and helpless while the wavering gaslight played through the curtains and dissolved over the turbaned woman. The voice trailed away: "*Ma' baby, ma' baby!*-
- "

And then it was gone. The woman in the painting seemed to look down at Ginny in pity; and, for an instant, she thought of the baby she never had and the specter that had wandered the suite in anguish.

Ginny never told Nathan about the lost baby or grieving woman: couldn't! It wouldn't have made sense anyhow—the sisterhood into the past, her own, barren womb, and the echo of someone lost and helpless.

III



Nathan awoke late the following morning, a bit muddled, a

boozy aftertaste pickling his mouth, and the memories of the night before poisoning the suite. A.A. was on the shelf, but he'd have sold his soul to live it again.

'Blasted from a perfect dream of Ginny,' he thought. 'Or was it a dream and where had the black carriage really taken them?' He tried to pick up the trailer in his fancies, resume where he left off, and failed wretchedly. The sun peered through their window, and Ginny was still asleep.

"Best leave her alone," he thought. "She was likely as sensitive as him!"

He scribbled something on a piece of paper, crossed it out, started again; and dressed and headed down to the French market for Cajun coffee and beignets. He thought about warming them in the microwave if she wasn't yet awake.

It wasn't necessary. She was wandering the suite in her peignoir, and when he entered with the Styrofoam cups, she grinned and sighed.

"I thought you were gone—skipping around the quarter, taking pictures, or something."

"No, I'd have left a note."

"I'm guessing we must have had fun. I'm feeling kind of squishy."

Nathan laughed. "Not tender, I hope. I tried to be gentle. Truth be told, I'm pretty tender myself--!"

Lilith - 33

"What'd we do? I remember some of it, but not everything, snippets, maybe: the last club; I think we danced; I sort of remember getting tangled up and making love."

"That's about right," Nathan said.

"Aren't you going to tell me more?"

"Well, let's see. I only remember that you wore a lampshade for a hat, kissed me in public, stole my heart, and tore off all my clothes. Other than that, it's all a blur."

"Seriously!"

"Seriously? You were beautiful, of course, a bit naughty, and very, very wicked."

"C'mon, Nathan. Did I do anything stupid? I don't remember that much, and I have a slight hangover. Actually, it's more than *slight!*"

"You do? Funny, I have one too! Of course, I don't quite remember *everything*, and I probably wouldn't tell you if I did."

"C'mon, that's not fair."

"Okay, we had fun; you were insolent; and we danced and made love!"

"No particulars?"

"No particulars."

"You don't want to go anywhere?"

"I don't want to go anywhere—just be with you, relax, sit beside the fountain. Maybe write a little."

"Shower?" she asked.

"Not till I have to. I like the feeling."

Matts Djos - 34

She touched herself delicately. "Me too, let's just carry each other around for the afternoon—wait till we go out before we do anything."

"Secrets," Nathan thought. "Whether Ginny remembered or not, she wanted to draw a curtain. Their lovemaking had always been a mystery: she had no interest in mirrors or movies, as if she'd groped through an untraveled secret, discovered a second sister, disclosed her for an instant, and locked her away. She seemed focused only on the moment, the stirrings deep within her body, and her sense of the moment fulfilled. That's all that mattered—the rest was not material to her interests."

Nathan spent the next few hours lolling around the fountain, writing, and napping beside Ginny. She'd been reading Creole lit--George Washington Cable, *Madame Delphine*. It was pretty dull: New Orleans disinfected for squeamish readers. It took less than an hour before Ginny tired of it, dropped it to her lap, and studied the fountain and the orchids. The afternoon started to wear down, and she got itchy, her toes curling and one foot dangling back and forth from the chaise lounge. Nathan looked up at her and studied her eyes.

"Bored?"

"A little. It'd be nice to remember last night—nice to be there when you're having fun!"

She looked down at Nathan's notebook.

"How about you?"

"Pretty much the same—memory's shot, I suppose. The highs are wearing me out; the lows are depressing. I'm getting old."

Lilith - 35

"Is this turning into a low?"

"Not quite." He tried to laugh. "It's still our anniversary and you're still here."

"*Jesus*, Nathan, cut it out!"

"That bad?"

She nodded, and he went over to the lobby, shoveled some ice into a courtesy bucket, and bought a pint of Hudson's Bay and a couple of Cokes.

Ginny checked him as he returned—especially the bottle and the Cokes.

"No champagne?"

"I'll go back."

"That's okay. Later, maybe."

He walked over to the suite, scooped a little of the ice out of the bucket, and mixed the Coke and rum. Then he put the half-empty bottle on the nightstand and returned to Ginny.

She was back at her book.

"Happy Anniversary, *Baby*," he said, and gave her the drink.

"You promised never to use that word."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"Wasn't thinking. Professor wasn't thinking. *Christ!*"

He plopped beside her, and they sat silently together and sipped their drinks. Nathan's crotch was itchy from the night before—'liquids drying and crusting up,' he supposed. Sex in the aftermath can be a bummer. Ginny at midnight was like a shooting star. Now, in the morning sun, they faced a new day—

friends more than lovers'; and he wasn't quite ready for the switch.

They showered long and hot, and Ginny slipped into a tight, blue turtleneck, decided that 'bells' trumped modesty since 'it' was New Orleans, and climbed into a pair of satin, bell-bottom slacks, skin-tight to the knees where they flared out.

"Jesus!" Nathan said.

"It's the style," Ginny said. "Haven't you been paying attention?"

She draped the fur-lined overcoat over her shoulders, and they headed down to the French Market for coffee. A snatch of rum killed the headaches; the accompanying beignet was something new: a hot, super-rich donut doused in powdered sugar—no center hole. Nathan had three. Ginny tried one.

"Don't like it?"

"Sure!—a million calories, that's all. I can't afford them!"

"The hell you can't!"

She watched him and shook her head: "No self-control," she said. "You're full of sugar—a *genuine* sugar daddy: clothes, lips, cheeks!"

"Want a kiss?"

"No! You'll get it all over me!"

"Sugar baby?"

"No!"

They strolled the public market—veggies, flowers, tropical fruits; the fish stalls were an inferno: the shouting and good-natured competition were like a sing-song racket of greed and

Lilith - 37

good nature. Survival was at stake, but the vendors were nonplussed: the dead and dying were laid out like kindling, their mouths gaping red as if they had struggled for one last breath before oblivion. Nearby, a dozen trays of bottom crawlers shimmered beneath the caged lights—clams, oysters, squid, their bodies ripped apart and bleeding like pus. It didn't matter. They'd been laid out to be consumed.

The stench was overwhelming: a fishy, sulphuric odor that attracted the master chefs of the Quarter like bees to a flower. Nathan wondered how anyone could even visit this place, collect whole cartons of rotting flesh, and carry it off to their sculleries on Royal Street. That it could be transformed into something beautiful was a complete mystery.

Ginny was sickened by the smell, and they escaped into the street and wandered into the heart of the Quarter. It was littered with superstition: green doors to ward off evil spirits—the dead were apparently everywhere, and a touch of voodoo and garlic might keep them at bay. Nathan was mystified; Ginny was intrigued. The brass plaques bordering the sidewalk said it all: "lavish banquets, courtyards, absinthe, Creoles, *Placage*."

The aged row houses and cribs were lined up row on row—once a refuge for whores and the destitute who, long ago, sat on the stoops to invite strangers for a moment of pleasure that they might reassure themselves of some kind of meaning in the illusion that the age-old ritual of life and reproduction might shelter their premonitions of mortality.

Matts Djos - 38

Sex has a way of suggesting that we are not entirely temporal, and Ginny and Nathan realized that they were collaborating with their own flesh and the dreaded passage of years without the guarantee of a child. As it was, their lovemaking was a mockery as they spat in the face of their sterile future, prayed for a miracle, and hoped perchance for one insane moment and that would carry them into the semi-eternal with offspring of their own.

It was, of course, an illusion; and, had they bore children, they'd have known full well that they'd only delayed the "end" for one more generation and, with luck, the probability that a speck of each other might even be carried along from there.

A funeral band danced down St. Ann's street and headed up toward the cemetery. It was the same ritual, the same, slow procession that had been that had been practiced for decades, the trombones, cymbals and drums, trumpets, and clarinets playing in a kind of moaning, musical gesture of grief, unhurried by the demands of time, as if reluctant to bury the coffin which followed. A collection of Black people followed in their wake and stepped slowly in time with the music, their shoulders and arms wavering like bandmasters as they scuffed beneath a collection of umbrellas to shade them from the sun. They would return after the burial, pretending joy as the dead soul ascended into the arms of Christ, a fair enough defense against the terror of oblivion. Nathan held Ginny's hand and squeezed tight.

Death is the mother of love; and it was no different for the two of them. They would eventually lose one another and face the terror of emptiness once abandoned.

Lilith - 39

Nathan pulled Ginny closer; and they left the procession to meander past Creole homes and mansions, each of them filled with ghosts of a sort and memories of the past. The public market forgotten, they found a dozen, tempting restaurants on Royal Street, gourmet palaces that could—and would—destroy their senses in the pleasurable diversions which were their mortal inheritance. New Orleans is a city of temptation—enough, indeed, to destroy the will of Adam and Eve had they lived so long, although Nathan was not so sure

about *Lilith*, described, typically, as a close friend of the Serpent. Food and sex are unquestionably the foundations of the Fall; and, if, indeed, that was the case, Royal was the capitol of mortal denial. She served up temptation on a silver platter, and Ginny and Nathan inspected the menus like two 'innocents' trying to figure out the quickest and slickest way to Perdition: roast Duck, shrimp, 'Boef en Brochette', 'Cole d Veau'.

Nathan wanted to see the streetcar named *Desire*, and they slogged past Dumaine Street where Stanley bellowed "*Stella!!*" Ginny pointed toward *Elysian Fields* where Blanche DuBois sought comfort and reassurance from her sister. There was no bowling alley 'around the corner'—probably never was, and they hiked to St. Charles Street where the infamous streetcar had been parked on a spur. Rumor had it that the original had been sold to San Francisco; but, either way, it lacked the pathos of Williams' play.

Reality has a nasty way of shattering our illusions.

"Dammit, *dammit*," Nathan swore. "It's just a streetcar!"

"So, what were you expecting?"

"I dunno', something more—a fantasy, Marlon, Vivien, Blanche,

a lost dream?"

"It's not going to happen, Nathan. Dream your dreams on your own!" They caught the St. Charles the streetcar and rattled through the Garden District: row on row of exquisite, ancient plantation homes lined the boulevard in a kind of antebellum fantasia. It would have been paradise for a history student or architect; but it got old. Roman

columns, white stucco castles, manicured gardens, magnolias, wrought iron fences. Opulence has its downside: it can get boring.

"Had enough?" Nathan asked.

Ginny nodded, and they hopped off and caught the westbound car, reviewed the District from the south side, left at Royal, and slogged back to the hotel. As they passed through the lobby, Ginny spotted a liquor tray.

She'd started to feel like a tourist and the afternoon was a bust: dawdling, gaping; like reading someone's bio, but it got old, and she lost interest—everything dead, decadent, or rotten, and about as dull as a Denver subdivision.

"I've had enough of walking tours, night or day," she said. "I saw a bunch of people last night on Bourbon--huddled together like scared rabbits while some guy in a Gray Line cap hustled them from club to club. I swear, he must have had a cattle prod, they were so damn naive. Safety in numbers, I suppose. They could peek through a keyhole, watch the strippers, and tell their friends. *Jesus!*"

Ginny rested a palm on her hip and stared blankly out at the fountain.

"If you can't deal with it, don't come!" she snapped. "They're worse than whores. At least the *prossies* are honest. These people say one thing and do another." "What about tonight?" Nathan asked. "What do *you* want to do?"

"I sure as hell don't want to wander Royal and study history. I could do that at home. Get a bottle of pink champagne; we have two more nights. Let's make them count!"

Ginny was feeling rebellious and locked in—bristling conformity on the one hand; coyote hunger on the other; and she was caught between the two.

They were on the cusp of something—like travelers. A drunken spree, the past disclosed, *him, her*, another test, if only for kicks. Anything was possible—with a little imagination.

Nathan bought two bottles—just in case—and a pint of Dewar's for himself. "Backups," he figured, "in case Ginny's' went stale."

She was stretched on the four-poster and was looking up at the Black woman with the snake.

"Cool?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah, cool," Ginny murmured. "Of course, it takes a certain mind state of mind—snakes and turbans, deep set eyes. She knows something!"

"Like what?"

"Ask *Lilith*. I think they're sisters!"

"And you? What do you know?" Nathan teased.

Ginny laughed. "I'm not sure. If I think of something, I'll let you know. Then again, maybe I won't!"

That hit hard: secrets and masks. Ginny was far too deep to probe. *Love* and *need*? They were much the same and the hunger was far too deep to understand. Ginny was no fool. She'd learned to survive long before she met Nathan.

He shrugged his shoulders, cracked the champagne, offered Ginny a goblet, and poured the canadian straight up over ice.

"So how do you like New Orleans?" asked Ginny.

"Like what?"

"Today? Your streetcar, cemeteries, The Garden District, Royal Street! "

"I dunno'. Williams got it right: 'death and desire'. The city's full of it—a bit much for Yankee sensibilities. We're all in denial. New Orleans sees it head on. It's everywhere, and you can't escape it."

Ginny nodded and sipped the champagne.

"I've never seen so much rot," she burred. "They say your heart skips a beat when you climax. Some call it a 'small death'. I think I've seen 'skips' all over the place!"

"Might be right," said Nathan. "Half the time, I black out!"

"I didn't know!--really?"

"Fraid so!"

"I better go easy," she laughed.

"Don't bother!"

They sat quietly in the shadows, saying nothing. A nightingale echoed in the distance, and a breeze ruffled the orchids. Nathan shifted uncomfortably and looked over at Ginny. She'd tucked into herself—nothing shared, nothing masked, not a twitch or even the shadow of a smile.

Inferno

I

The porter approached their table and handed Nathan an envelope. It looked like a parchment greeting card. There was nothing on the front, and he wondered about the delivery: who knew them, where, and did it have something to do with Angel?

Ginny snatched at it, and he dropped it in her lap.

"You open it," he said. "Maybe it's a con!"

Ginny shook her head at him, slit the envelope, and pulled out a white card—fancy script, no picture except a tiny engraving of a Southern mansion in the lower left corner. She was silent for a while and bit her lip.

"Somebody has invited us to a party," she said. "A mansion. Here, I think. *Belle Anjel*." She showed Nathan the tiny engraving. It's 'preferably' formal.

"Wear a mask," it says, "if we wish. Angel will pick us up at 8:00."

She looked up at Nathan, eyes narrowed, her face quizzical: "Do you know anything about this?"

"Hell no. Doesn't it say anything more."

"No! What's going on?" She paused for an instant and rubbed nose.

"You don't suppose someone saw us at the strip club: you know, our dancing. I remember teasing you."

"You said you didn't remember much."

"I didn't say that, and I don't want to talk about it!" Ginny's voice was bitter and defensive.

"So, what do you want to do?" Nathan asked.

"I'm not sure. I've had enough jazz for a while. Gourmet food is okay, but I've had enough."

"Well, it's up to you," Nathan said.

"Up to me; *up to me*?" Ginny snapped. "No opinions?"

"No!"

Nathan could feel a shock of adrenaline. He didn't know if it was fear, anticipation, a natural warning, or some kind of trick. Maybe they were being set up. Their little experiments and the heavy drinking were getting uncomfortably close to ground zero.

"So you don't want to be responsible?" she challenged.

"Not necessarily!"

Nathan studied Ginny's expression and tried to read her eyes. He knew he was on dangerous ground—short fuses, swamps, strip clubs, God knows what. Ginny had another side, and he wondered if he was out of his depth. She was perfectly capable of a deception; and he'd harnessed her to a marriage long before she was ready—if ever.

Inferno - 45

He stared at the note, but it was like scouring a purloined letter—like Ginny. She hadn't curled her toes or clenched her fist—nothing hidden or covert. She simply looked blankly at him.

"Terrific actress," Nathan thought. "Woman of mystery; always has been; always will be."

"Okay," he said. "What the hell; let's go. We can always leave; they're not going to bar the door!"

Ginny stood up and looked down at Nathan with a kind of disdain, as if she knew he was asking for something he didn't really want.

"You shower first," she said. "I'm going to need time. 'Formal', my God! I'm glad I brought the white gown!"

Nathan stumbled off to the bathroom and wondered if they'd made a terrible mistake. They were vulnerable as hell: no contacts, no friends, no one to bail them out; and they could be headed to an inferno. Ginny was angry enough to take chances and test him—test herself, for that matter; and he wondered if he was in over his head. It'd be a hell of a way to lose her.

He shaved and showered, turned the bathroom over to Ginny, and climbed into the black slacks, white dress shirt, and tie. Then he mixed a Hudson's Bay for himself and passed another through the door to Ginny. The steam was rich with the aroma of Chanel and perfumed soap.

He tuned the radio to something mild and contemplated their future. The music played over his mind: *Don't Take Your Love From Me, Lonely Nights*. Something didn't make sense: maybe a warning-

-the thing under the floor or a distant voice. He turned off the radio, sipped his drink, and contemplated the woman in the turban. She stared back, her eyes following him wherever he moved. He lit a cigarette, stuffed the pack in his inside pocket, and stared again at the turbaned woman. Nothing—except her moving eyes as if she was searching his soul. He dismissed the image. It was probably just the rum or artistic liberties—a similar effect when someone looks in the camera: they seem stare at the viewer no matter what the angle. Maybe he was just a bit drunk—or delusional.

 Ginny was lost in her own wonderland: a 90's style formal, a Southern mansion, a masque. They intrigued her—a border never crossed, a boundary tested, although they'd likely be in company. The prospect was hardly routine, but rather like a special drama, Southern style; and she thought of *Gone with the Wind* and the fancies that might keep her entertained for a brief interlude and soften the boredom. She was determined to put up a whole new façade—a masque—and play the role to its very end. The very thought almost frightened her: she would be Ginny but *not* Ginny, as if she had a twin who waited to be released, and this was her chance.

 When she made her 'entrance' at last, Nathan was tangled in barbs: the tight, strapless gown, her hair in a French roll, the long curl embedded by a diamond-studded comb. A pearl necklace rested on her breast.

 He didn't want to take her anywhere, just sit and look until he could stand it no longer, and then they would make love by candlelight.

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Ginny cradled his cheek and smiled, a mysterious, distant smile, and he inhaled the Chanel, and dissolved into a misty light. A dream or not a dream? He didn't know, except that he was enchanted and helpless.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

The confounded gravel in his throat stifled his voice, and his childhood habit of stuttering kicked out of nowhere.

"N-no," he choked, "Ice m-maybe. I'm okay!"

He killed his drink, swallowing hard so he could get some air.

"Nathan?"

He gathered himself and studied his shoes. "I'm okay," he mumbled.

She quietly stole to his side and kissed him. He could feel the gentle touch of her lips and smell the Chanel; and he snuffed a tear, lost another, and turned away. Ginny was confused.

"Is something wrong—with me?" she asked.

"No, it's the other way around. You're so damned beautiful. I'd almost forgotten. I'm sorry."

He held tight to her hand and caught himself.

"Would you like one l-last 'sip' before we l-leave?" he sputtered.

"Besides, I have a little something for you."

Ginny sank into layers of velvet on the chair opposite him and wiggled inquiringly: "So?" she asked. "Big or small?"

Nathan reached in his inside pocket and gave her a small, velvet box. Ginny's eyes sparkled, and she studied it for a moment: "Something to wear?" she murmured.

"*Maybe*," Nathan mimicked.

She slowly opened the box and peeked into the tiny, silk bed.

"Hmm? Something shiny," she giggled, flipped the box, and shook it. A delicate, gold ring dropped to her palm: five diamonds and five rubies—a second wedding band.

She laughed: "I thought it might be a necklace!—or maybe a gold chain!"

"No, something more: ten precious stones," Nathan stammered. "Ten years, good and bad, happy and sad. I used one of your dress rings to size it. I made it one size smaller to lock the other two in place." He tried to laugh: "Feeble fealty I guess--to claim you forever."

Ginny slipped the ring over her finger, pushing hard to get it past her knuckle.

"Caught me, I suppose," she chirped. "Just as well! How about you?"

"I can't even get mine off to service the cars. See? It's badly scratched, and one of the diamonds is missing!"

She took his hand, played with the ring, and kissed it.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"I've got something more!"

He pulled out a card: a photo of the hotel, and, inside, a brief poem.

"I wrote it this morning just before you woke up." He stumbled a moment. "Last night: it was so crazy. I had to write something."

Ginny studied the photo for an instant and opened the card, cradling it between her fingers as she read:

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My beloved Ginny,

Last night—I remember this: You!

The gaslight, firegold, flickering through the shadows;

Your eyes, like teardrops, searching, searching

I watched you as you walked: oh, God, so brazen and beautiful,

Gathering stars with every step; the river, like a brown god,

*stirring a midnight gust that teased your hair; the two of us,
wandering the night among the chaste and unchaste.*

I stole kisses and pressed your cheek to my breast.

I'd have doused the morning star for the sake of one more hour!

Nathan

The porter approached their table and handed Nathan an envelope. It looked like a parchment greeting card. There was nothing on the front, and he wondered about the delivery: who knew them, where, and did it have something to do with Angel?

Ginny snatched at it, and he dropped it in her lap.

"You open it," he said. "Maybe it's a con!"

Ginny shook her head at him, slit the envelope, and pulled out a white card—fancy script, no picture except a tiny engraving of a Southern mansion in the lower left corner. She was silent for a while and bit her lip.

"Somebody has invited us to a party," she said. "A mansion. Here, I think. *Belle Anjel*." She showed Nathan the tiny engraving. It's 'preferably' formal.

"Wear a mask," it says, "if we wish. Angel will pick us up at 8:00."

She looked up at Nathan, eyes narrowed, her face quizzical: "Do you know anything about this?"

"Hell no. Doesn't it say anything more."

"No! What's going on?" She paused for an instant and rubbed nose.

"You don't suppose someone saw us at the strip club: you know, our dancing. I remember teasing you."

"You said you didn't remember much."

"I didn't say that, and I don't want to talk about it!" Ginny's voice was bitter and defensive.

"So, what do you want to do?" Nathan asked.

"I'm not sure. I've had enough jazz for a while. Gourmet food is okay, but I've had enough."

"Well, it's up to you," Nathan said.

"Up to me; *up to me?*" Ginny snapped. "No opinions?"

"No!"

Nathan could feel a shock of adrenaline. He didn't know if it was fear, anticipation, a natural warning, or some kind of trick. Maybe they were being set up. Their little experiments and the heavy drinking were getting uncomfortably close to ground zero.

"So you don't want to be responsible?" she challenged.

"Not necessarily!"

Nathan studied Ginny's expression and tried to read her eyes. He knew he was on dangerous ground—short fuses, swamps, strip clubs, God knows what. Ginny had another side, and he wondered if he was out of his depth. She was perfectly capable of a deception;

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and he'd harnessed her to a marriage long before she was ready—if ever.

He stared at the note, but it was like scouring a purloined letter—like Ginny. She hadn't curled her toes or clenched her fist—nothing hidden or covert. She simply looked blankly at him.

"Terrific actress," Nathan thought. "Woman of mystery; always has been; always will be."

"Okay," he said. "What the hell; let's go. We can always leave; they're not going to bar the door!"

Ginny stood up and looked disdainfully down at him, and he wondered if he'd set her up without knowing it--.

When she made her 'entrance' at last, he was tangled in barbwire: the tight, strapless gown, her hair in a French roll, the long curl embedded by a diamond-studded comb. A pearl necklace rested on her breast.

He didn't want to take her anywhere, just sit and look until he could stand it no longer, and then they would make love by candlelight.

Ginny cradled his cheek and smiled, a mysterious, distant smile; and he inhaled the Chanel and dissolved into a misty light. A dream or not a dream? He didn't know, except that he was enchanted and helpless.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

The confounded gravel in his throat stifled his voice, and his childhood habit of stuttering kicked out of nowhere.

"N-no," he choked, "Ice m-maybe. I'm okay!"

He killed his drink, swallowing hard so he could get some air.

"Nathan?"

He gathered himself and studied his shoes. "Means nothing," he mumbled. "Just *me* being me."

He tried to force a laugh, and Ginny stole gently to his side and kissed him. He could feel the gentle touch of her lips and smell the Chanel; and he snuffed a tear, lost another, and turned away. Ginny was confused.

"Is something wrong—with me?" she asked.

"No, it's the other way around. You're so damned beautiful.

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"*Maybe*," Nathan mimicked.

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and shook it. A delicate, gold ring dropped to her palm: five diamonds and five rubies—a second wedding band.

She laughed: "I thought it might be a necklace!—or maybe a gold chain!"

"No, something more: ten precious stones," Nathan stammered. "Ten years, good and bad, happy and sad. I used one of your dress rings to size it. I made it one size smaller to lock the other two in place." He tried to laugh: "Feeble fealty I guess--to claim you forever."

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"I can't even get mine off to service the cars. See? It's badly scratched, and one of the diamonds is missing!"

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"I've got something more!"

He pulled out a card: a photo of the hotel and, inside, a brief poem.

"I wrote it this morning just before you woke up." He stumbled a moment. "Last night: it was so crazy. I had to write something."

Ginny studied the photo for an instant and opened the card, cradling it between her fingers as she read:

My beloved Ginny,

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Last night—I remember this:

You!

The gaslight, firegold, flickering through the shadows;

Your eyes, like teardrops, searching, searching

I watched you as you walked: oh, God, so brazen and beautiful,

Gathering stars with every step; the river, like a brown god,

stirring a midnight gust that teased your hair; the two of us,

wandering the night among the chaste and unchaste. I

stole kisses and pressed your cheek to my breast.

I'd have doused the morning star for the sake of one more hour!

Nathan

"Thank you," Ginny said. "*Doused the morning star*". Pretty wild! Did we really have so much fun!"

"You doubt me?! It was incredible—I don't know where you get your ideas, but my God!"

Ginny laughed, "Get *my* ideas? Look who's talking. But thank you. Last night *was* fun. You were so damn cute—and hungry."

She giggled again.

"It's almost eight," he said. "We should go."

Ginny blinked hard, tilting her head to see his eyes. He could feel her cool hand on his forehead, and something deep inside started to shatter.

"Is there something more?" she asked. "Something I should know?"

"No, it's just you—the magic or maybe the gaslight. Don't pay any attention; it's just me—as usual!"

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Ginny shook her head. Nathan supposed she was used to his moods, his ups and downs—it'd always been that way. He wasn't interested in counseling, and he didn't want pills. It was probably little more than some kind of 'circularity'. Besides, the highs were too good.

He dropped her fur-lined, black coat over her shoulders; took her hand; and they walked slowly out to the carriage. It felt like some kind of farewell. A gate opened, a lock released; and Nathan wondered if they would ever be the same. It was hardly a surprise. The more he loved Ginny, the more he desired her and the more she changed until he could barely keep up. She had become so many women and had tricked him with so many changes that he never knew which was which or what to expect from one day to the next: seductress, counselor, friend, lover. He couldn't even tell which he loved the most, which mask she wore or if he knew her at all—except she' been a mystery from the night he met her.

II

Angel was waiting. The roan mare tossed her head nervously; and the kerosene lamps flickered for an instant and wavered in the wind.

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"Mah goodness," Angel said. "Y'all fogive me, suh; but da' lady—she lahk a' angel frah' heafen."

Ginny smiled, a knowing smile—understanding, somehow, the handsome, inner man with his black carriage and aged mare; and he helped her step over the sidebar, covered her with an extra blanket, and urged the mare into the street.

A gust scattered a handful of leaves over the carriage and sent them scurrying through a nearby fence, a nightingale whistled in the distance; and the moon broke over St. Mark's Cathedral. Nathan felt a chill: a strange premonition, as if they'd been led through the backstreets of a faded memory, and he looked at the crushed flowers beneath the carriage wheels and felt lifeless and alone. He pressed Ginny's shoulder to his, but she was stiff and unyielding, and it didn't do any good.

They gazed absently at the passing the antebellum homes. Marble-white, their curtains pulled, they looked secretive though softly lit, as in a dream. The largest and most imposing had been set back from the street away from the traffic, their Roman columns glittering in the moonlight, while a streetcar rattled by in the grassy center of the parkway, its lights sparking and flickering as it crossed the intersection.

Nathan looked down at Ginny, and he felt a pang of guilt: perhaps he'd dallied overmuch and his fancies had been carried to a darkening suspicion.—or were they were simply being carted to a masqued ball in a black carriage and nothing more?

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Ginny was lost in something, her lips and eyes almost unmoving, as if she'd been caught in a Pre-Raphaelite painting. As usual, in her deepest moments, she said nothing, tucked inside herself, and left Nathan to contemplate the magnolias and the decadence of the St. Charles mansions on his own.

They continued past Coliseum Street, Third Street, Camp, and stopped in front of a grand, marble edifice at Prytania Street. It was flooded in gaslight, the lamps flickering gold against the columns and massive, curtained windows. Angel turned around and studied them, his eyes shifting between Ginny and Nathan.

"Ah hope y'all escuse me fo' bein' so fowahd, but ah wants y'all to be keerful. Y'all ah new ta' dis pahricula worl', an' dere's good tings'n bad. Dis place iss a lil'o bot."

He opened the little door; and, as Ginny got out, he took her hand and tipped his hat very slightly. Nathan had never seen him do that before. Then he climbed back into his black carriage and drove away.

They never saw him again.

Nathan wondered if he was a messenger or an agent, grappled with his illusions and a fancy or two, and followed Ginny up the pathway. A tarnished, bronze fountain blocked their way. It was twisted and grotesque, and Nathan barely recognized it: remnants of a boat, a tortured figure, a labyrinth of iron waves and drowning figures.

"What is it?" asked Ginny.

"I'm not sure. Charon, I think."

"Charon?"

"Yes. An ancient myth—Greek, Roman, Etruscan, Italian: he ferried the dead across the River Styx. Pay no attention. It's a sick joke!"

"No laughter?"

"No laughter!" And he spit on his palm, burnished Charon's head, and spit on it.

"I wouldn't do that," snapped Ginny. " You might offend someone."

"Screw it," Nathan muttered.

They climbed a granite staircase to a massive, bonze door. Someone peered through a small window; and a tall, Black man in a tuxedo and tails greeted them and bowed.

"Good evenin'," he murmured. "Welcome ta' *'Belle Anjel'*." His voice was smooth as ivory.

"May ah' tahk da' laydee's cote. Ahl keep it save heah!" He gestured toward a small cloak room at his back. "Woold y'all cah' fo' a mask?"

Ginny shook her head, offered her coat, and they followed the valet into the Great Room. It was candlelit with hundreds of mirrors, at least seven flickering chandeliers, and smelled of cigars, Chanel, and raisin sauce. A massive table was crammed with sweetmeats, shortbreads, croutes, canapes, crawlers, and glazed exotica.

"Carnal buffet in the round," Nathan thought. Costumed and theatric, a throng of eaters shuffled around the table and picked at the food like spiders. The women were draped in gowns of satin and lace and wore their masks over their foreheads; the men were

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dressed in tuxedos—black tails, wing-tip collars, silk vests, white gloves, and black bow ties. The seniors among them wore beards; the youngest bore carefully trimmed mustaches.

Nathan felt as if he'd crashed the wrong party.

The women eyed him with a particle of curiosity, perhaps even amusement. This, indeed, was a special ball; and everyone dressed the part. Masked or not, they were buried in velvet and satin--pleats, bustles, sashes, and bodices. Here and there, he noted a massive pompadour, bows, feathers, ribbons, a see-through corset, or, in some cases, nothing at all, their breasts pinched together in a shoelace bodice. Some had applied an excess of make-up in imitation of a female harlequin and their vertical hair was ornamented with ribbons, bows, feathers, and jewelry. They were amused at Ginny's 'costume'.

"Very original," they said. "*Quite lovely!*"

Ginny winced. Perhaps the white gown wasn't sufficient.

A coterie of servants stood guard at a far stairwell, and a small group of celebrants leaned against the bannister and gazed indifferently at the eaters.

A man in a grey tuxedo and tails approached them. He carried a mask and glove in his palm and extended his hand with the other.

"Welcum, wealcume," he drawled. "Ahm so vevy glad y'all could come. Waelcome ta' *Belle Anjel!* Ahm *Azrae.*" He swept the hall with his arm: his arm. "Ma' home! Y'all kin' find prahvit suites in da' vault if ya' wish. Jus' aysk any of ma' servants."

Matts Djos - 60

He studied Ginny for an instant, but his eyes were quick as fire.

"Ma' repots is pale compahd ta da' rreal ting." He smiled, a twisted smile, and turned to Nathan.

"Would y'all be offended iff ah' tole you da' lady is ravishing?" He bowed at Ginny. She forced a whisper of a smile and curtsied very slightly. *Azrae* smiled, blinked his eyes very slowly, and turned to Nathan.

"Now, pleeze," he said. "Enjoy yo-selves; whatever y'all desire is yowze fo' da' askin'—jes ask ma' assistants. Da' entatahnments will be along showtlee'."

Nathan wasn't especially hungry, nor was Ginny; and they loitered beneath a massive candelabra and surveyed the hall. One of the servants brought a high-back, velvet chair and seated her. He nodded at Nathan, and he shook his head, preferring instead to stand at Ginny's side. For the first time, he had a chance to look carefully at the crowd. They were mainly in their forties, the age of budding success. A careless few were a bit older; and, here and there, he noted an elderly gentleman and lady. The youngest of the men were stiff as a ramrod and surveyed the hall with Confederate arrogance. Their chins were slightly raised, their eyes churning the room with marvelous indifference—until they spotted Ginny and Nathan. Their sudden interest suggested that they had discovered some kind of prize, and they scoured Ginny from head to toe, making note of her hair and lips as if she was merchandise.