

**The Boy and the Famous French Quarter Lady Writer**  
*(to FPK)*

It was around the time that the neighborhood grocer's Cocker Spaniel bit me and I had to get 16 rabies shots in my stomach at Charity Hospital. I learned how to detach my mind from my body in order to endure the perceived physical pain I feared would make itself manifest in such a precariously delicate dimension of my boyish, unseasoned physical self. The well-manicured doctor told me I couldn't flinch during the procedure or the needle might break, so I remained silent and still, squeezed my eyes shut, assembled every iota of courage I could muster, and took it like a man. The skill would sometimes serve me well later in life when my father would administer immediate and unrelenting corporal punishment by laying a leather strap (THE BELT) to my behind and beating me like a borrowed mule. My survival strategy would often fail because of his desire to not only inflict pain, but to also bear witness to that literally burning discomfort that would be evidenced by a progressive sequence of my high-pitched screams as confirmation of the agony and torment amassed from his punishing tanning of my hide.

The lollipop reward the doctor gave me after each visit helped a bit. I missed three weeks of school at St. Peter Claver Academy and had to accompany my mother to work at her job as a domestic for a preeminent, critically-acclaimed, reputable, well-traveled female author who lived in what (to me) was an immeasurably gigantic, well-preserved, antebellum home in the French Quarter. I wanted to stay by my grandmother's during the series of stressful ordeals, but the two adults who were the immediate commanding powers in my life determined that I was more than a handful for her and the world community's peace would be much more assured if I were to join forces with my white-uniformed mother as she went about her cleaning, polishing, washing, and dusting duties

in the quill pusher's time-honored domicile. The next morning I donned my buckle-up Buster Brown shoes, a pair of knee-length baggy shorts, a plaid-patterned shirt, and my black felt Hopalong Cassidy cowboy hat. I was ready for a day of exploration, discovery, and fantasy subsequent to my medical appointment.

The home, a spectacular slice of Southern culture and a monument to the region's time-honored architecture that was located across from a former nunnery, had a medley of adaptations effected during its duration as a testament to structural sanctitude. It served as the home of a Southern Civil War general, the birthplace of a world chess champion, a wine warehouse, a hostelry, a civic meeting place, a rest and recuperation center for soldiers of the Confederate conspiracy, the summer retreat of a world-ranked chess master, and as the restored dwelling of the romance novelist whose books were on the shelves of minions of highbrow, cultured and urbane readers worldwide (At least that's what her book jackets' back covers said). My mother changed into her work clothes in the lower region of the house in a servant's room adjoining the concrete-floored basement just under a rear wrought-iron upstairs gallery that extended the building's entire distance end to end. It is said that five men were met their demise on the covered passage in a shootout involving the notorious Black Hand when that underworld society was attempting to extort a former owner in the prior century. I noticed huge chains fastened to the walls of the one-time wine cellar to which uncontrollable captive Africans were tethered and secured lest they inspire bloody rebellion among their brethren. After my mother finished donning her well-starched accouterment and apron she allowed me to pursue play with my little green army men in the landscape I had so often heard about at mealtime conversations and garrulous gossip sessions. Admonishing me not to touch,

scratch, or otherwise disturb anything, she permitted me to explore the panorama of the residence's sweeping region and its legend and lore.

The graceful architecture of Doric wood columns lorded over the edifice's street entrance. A flagstoned courtyard with a triple wrought-iron pagoda near a double stone staircase leading to the rear gallery was framed by immaculately-clipped boxwood hedges. Ivy planting beds and magnificent magnolias flanked each corner of the quiet, idyllic garden-pathed surroundings. Black Moor, Bubble Eye, and Pompom goldfish shared residence with painted turtles in a cherub-themed cast-iron fountain in the middle of the enclosure near iron-railed granite steps. The slave quarters, now empty of the flesh of its human bondage, sat ghostly and grim, the accumulated dust therein attesting to the souls of those who once endured lives of malady and want within its now-reverential confines. Living quarters for the one percent reflected a life of freedom, fancy and fortune in an era of conspicuous prosperity in Southern custom, creed and tradition. Gaslight fixtures hung merrily under wire-glass skylights in a grand ballroom and gaily-colored Spanish tile-covered walls. An iron lace winding staircase near a handsome parlor set dominated a room where the old Creole general spent his honeymoon soon after the war's ceremonious conclusion. Legend has it that he was buried in his stockingfeet after he died the next week and he now rides a ferocious steed through the halls demanding that someone bring him his boots. It is also said that a slave woman, whose value was estimated at \$350 and given to him as a dowry by the bride's family, also haunts the halls while hiding the general's boots from his ghost. A sitting room for editorial conferences eventually became the site for the suicide of the present caretaker's wife who came upon her husband in a compromising position with the colored cook,

tightened a plastic bag over her head and breathed her last. A nearby parlor-reception room was rumored to have its own apparition of a couple that returns every year to the scene where their Civil War-interrupted private wedding was to take place. The would-be groom was killed in action in 1862 when men under the command of Union Flag Officer David G. Farragut battled past Mississippi River forts and took control of New Orleans, the Confederate legion of indecency's most transcendent port and trade center. The chess champion often used the well-lighted room for marathon practice sessions, its aura reminiscent of rediscovered romance fueled by memories of past pleasures.

"Howdy, partner," I heard an unfamiliar voice beckon to me as I went about as playful as a puppy, leaving no stone unturned in my fanciful journey of this newer and bravest of worlds as I played near a Georgian inlaid mahogany tall case clock that sat on a French provincial carved elm double door armoire accented by a pair of centennial .900 silver urns in a sitting room designated for editorial conferences. I turned and saw a bespectacled figure clad in a canary yellow, rounded neckline waist length blouse; a classically-wide, full-looking, natural-waistlined, cream yellow skirt; maroon kitten peep-toed heels and a Navy Blue fascinator hat accented with a handmolded rose. It was an outfit that Dita Von Teese would give up the ghost for.

"You must be --" she started.

"-- And you must be Miss --" I began.

"--Yes. I guess I am who I am," she said, offering me an ambiguous handshake.

"You the lady writer!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she shrugged. I imagine that's an apt description of me."

"My momma work for you. She clean up everything," I said.

“Yes...Leola is quite a help around here. What school do you attend?”

“I go to St. Peter Claver...wa-a-a-a-ay away from here...in the 6<sup>th</sup> Ward,” I told her as I relaxed and removed my cowboy hat and let it dangle on its cord. “I can touch my ears with my toes,” I blurted. “Watch,” I said demonstrating my elastically supple skills. “I can make my ear click too,” I said, taking my right ear between my fingers and making a series of synchronized snaps.

She hesitated, reminisced, then said “How interesting. There was a time when I could do that too”.

“Now *you* try it,” I challenged.

“I don’t think that -- ”

“Who dat? That yo’ boyfriend?” I asked, pointing to a picture of a well-dressed gentleman of another age and era that was hanging on a mantle over a set of French three-branched bronze candelabra.

“No. That’s someone I’m writing a book about. He was a chess player. He was born in this house.”

“I was bornded in Charity Hospital,” I offered.

“Well, he was born here. This was his favorite room. He’d play practice games of chess here.”

“Me and my Uncle Willie play checkers, but he always cheat. Did yo’ chess player cheat?”

“No. I doubt it. He was awfully good at the game. I’m emphasizing how good he was in the book.”

“*Wo-ow-ow-ow-ow...*” I wide-eyed. “A real lady writer... *Wo-ow-ow-ow-ow...*”

“Yes,” she reflected through her professorial glasses. “A real lady writer.” *When I can think of something to write*, she mused.

\* \* \*

The next day I played with my army men as a slight river wind blew billowing floor length curtains when I heard highheeled steps coming towards the doorway. “Hi again,” the lady writer greeted me. I ceased my play and approached her. “I see you’re playing with your toy soldiers,” she said. “Yeah. I like my army men. I don’t see my friends at school no mo’, so they my *new* friends.... What you doin’?”

“Oh...I’m just undergoing a little writer’s block and just taking a break.”

“Writin’ blocks? What’s that?”

“It’s kind of...kind of...kind of like when you run out of stories to make up for your toy soldiers.”

“I *never* run outa army men stories. I let *them* make ‘em up.”

“Hmmm,” she mouthed. “Perhaps I’ll try that too.”

“Where you goin’?”

“I was just about to check on my doll collection.”

“You got dolls? You play with dolls?”

“No. I just collect them.”

“Why you got ‘em if you ain’t gon’ play with ‘em? You just got ‘em and don’t play with ‘em? You just look at ‘em?”

“You know...that’s a very good question young man. Would you like to see my dolls?”

“I don’t play with dolls. I’m a boy!” I charged.

“You need not play with them. I just wanted to show them to you. They’re collector’s items.”

“You must have a lotta money...mo’ money than my uncle. He got a *lotta* money,” I whispered. “He got a girlfriend always givin’ him money. She come from the country, but now she a BIG CITY woman. She dance on Bourbon St. She ain’t supposed to.”

“Why not?”

“You *kno-o-o-ow*...” I started.

“No, I don’t. Explain.”

“She colorstruck. She colored, but she makin’ like she white,” I said, reflecting a generational comprehension of official edict. “She see us on the bus and don’t even say nuthin’.”

“Oh,” she said as she ushered me through the great hall to the room containing her doll collection.

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We entered the room where her treasured assortment of antique and then-modernesque dolls lived their motionless, silent lives. The space was accented by period furnishings, a French pine and maple faux bamboo doll’s bedroom suite, and shelf upon

shelf of collectibles of every size, shape, nationality and age. There were Asian dolls, Hawaiian dolls, American Gothics, mammy dolls (one of which resembled my Aunt Willameena), Madame Alexanders, Marie Antoinettes, Little Miss Angel, Miss Nancy Anne, Storybook and Dress Me dolls, Ballet dolls, walking hard plastic dolls, and a Bourbon St. B-girl doll.

“Wow!” You got a whole room just for yo’ dolls!” I said, astonished.

“I have two roomsfull at my home in China,” she said.

“You got *another* house...in China? That’s where chineyballs come from! You so lucky. You got a big house with turtles and everything! I still don’t like yo’ dolls, but I *do* like yo’ turtles.”

“You’ve seen the turtles in the fountain?”

“I play with ‘em all the time...My daddy showed me how to kill a turtle...First, you take a hanger...put some meat on it...put it in front him...and when his haid pop out he gon’ grab it and he ain’t gon’ let go...That’s when you take a big knife ...or a hatchet...and you chop his haid off...blood be squiggin’ all over the flo’...”

“Oh my. Goodness gracious,” she gasped.

“It ain’t so bad. The lady turtles have eggs in’em. They *some* good.”

“I imagine they are....What do you want to be when you grow up?””

“I wanna be a magician -- like Poppa Red.”

“*Musician*...Poppa Red? You know about Poppa Red?”

“He my uncle...He do jazz music ‘round the cordner. He play the washboard, the clarinet, the drums...and he sing too. My momma and daddy cain’t go see him, but when my auntee go she gotta sit on the stage in backa the band. She don’t like that. He sick

now and ain't got no money for the hospital. They say he gon' die. "What's that?" I asked pointing to a long, scarred wooden, boxlike object in the corner of the room.

"That's a period piece," she explained.

"A period piece? They got question mark pieces?"

"You know," she said dryly. "One day you're going to be a great comedian".

"What is it? What's up in there?" I asked, indicating an elongated container near a corner of the room.

"I'll show you, but you have to promise not to touch."

"OK. I promise. My momma told me never to touch anything in the whole house. But she say I can play with the turtles if I be real careful with 'em."

She stepped to the case, sat it on a table near the window, opened it and my uninitiated eyes were dazzled at the sight of a recently authenticated and appraised, bejeweled Confederate staff and field sword that she lifted from the blue velvet interior of the carton. It shone brilliantly, dazzlingly in the afternoon sun that streamed through the curtains. "It belonged to the general who lived here...a long time ago," she said.

"Wow! That's wicked! I wish Thaddeus could see this!"

"Thaddeus? Who's Thaddeus?"

"That's my friend. He live next do' to us. He always beatin' me at sword-fightin'. We don't use *real* ones like this. We use gobbidge can tops and old mopsticks. Sometimes when we don't have the nickel to git a baseball -- we roll up some newspaper, tie a string around it -- and it's *on!*"

"That's quite creative," she said tucking the sword back in its casing and placing it carefully into the protection of its almost century-old home. *I wish my creative juices*

*could be so easily stimulated. It just hasn't happened lately,* she confessed to herself.

“Hmm,” she said glancing at a polished aluminum electric wall clock. “It’s just about lunchtime. Why don’t you run and ask your mother if you can go around the corner with me to pick something up. Be sure to ask her what she’d like to have. The cook’s out today.”

“You have a cook? You got a lady to cook for you? Why cain’t yo’ momma cook?”

“Because” -- she began to respond, Then, politely, -- “Just go and get Leola’s...your mother’s permission to come with me. be sure to ask her what she’d like.”

“OK,” I said and scampered off to get my mother’s consent for me to accompany the lady writer to a nearby store for some of the delectable neighborhood cuisine that the city forgotten by care (but remembered by cookin’) had to offer in practically every block of every proximity.

\* \* \*

After I found my mother and received her permission, her directive to be certain to hold hands when crossing the street (and her order), the lady writer and I left the premises and headed for a corner market adjacent to the outer garden’s red brick, soaring walls. We paused to read a sign indicating the day’s menu outside of the store’s windowfront with its dangling display of varied brands and breeds of sausages, spices, vegetables and cheeses. It said:

## – FOOD –

STEAK AND POTATOES	\$1.40
HALF CHICKEN	1.25
PORTION CHICKEN	.75
OYSTER LOAF	1.25
OYSTER SANDWICH	.50
BARBECUE	.75
HAM	.40
HOT SAUSAGE	.30
WEINER	.30
MUFFALETTA	.40
STUFFED CRAB	.35
PORK CHOP	.40
HAM, EGG, GRITS, BISCUITS	.60
MEAT BALLS AND SPAGHETTI	.50
EGG, SAUSAGE, GRITS	.60
STEW AND RICE	.50
COFFEE AND MILK	.10
SOUP	.25
GUMBO	.35
CHICKEN DINNER	.75
SOFT DRINK	.05

A sign attached to a hitching post at a washateria next door to the store said:

WE WASH FOR WHITE ONLY

We were about to enter the store when I told her, “I cain’t go in there. I cain’t go in that sto’”

“Why not?” she asked, puzzled.

I pointed at another sign. It said:

NO COLORED

“That is ridiculous....Come on,” she said, taking me by the hand. We went to the counter to place our order with a man in a crop top purple sweater, a tan camel hair blazer, and well-maintained slick, sideswept dark hair. “And just whattaya think y’all want?” he asked with the sunny disposition of a crypt keeper.

“We’d like to place our order. Give me a -- ” she began.

“He cain’t come in here. We don’t have that here.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t serve ni-- ...*colored*,” he said glancing down at me as I surveyed the mountainous medley of colorful penny candy in the display case next to the counter.

“He’s a *child*,” she delicately protested.

“He’s *colored*. We don’t serve colored in here. Let him go where he came from. In here we don’t have no dogs, no Jews and no niggers...not even no pickaninny nigger chirren.”

“But I’m -- ”

“I know who y’all is. You’s wanna them Northern scallywags done come down here and don’t rightly unnerstand how things *is* and *gon’* be. So you best git outa my place o’ business or I’ll call them paddy boys with the wagon on you!” he warned.

\* \* \*

We returned to the halcyon haven of her home, prepared a lunch of finger sandwiches and sat in her office contemplating and discussing the afternoon’s caustic confrontation. “What do you know about politics?” she asked me. Do you know what that word means?”

“I won the spelling bee at my school,” I said. I know a *lotta* words. I can spell ‘anti-disestablishmentarianism’. My sister cain’t even *say* it! I done even memorized the Decoration of Independence.”

“Awesome...I’ll bet you have,” she said thoughtfully.

“Ooh --“ I beamed. “These sammiches *some* good. This the kinda food make you wanta slap yo’ momma.”

“Why would you want to hit your mother?” she asked.

“No...not like *that*. You wanta give her a slap on the back ‘cuz it’s so good.”

“Oh -- she laughed. “But do you know about politics? Do you know why people do bad things to one another?”

“Politics? I know I like Ike.”

“You ‘like Ike’? Why?”

“‘Cuz my daddy friend gave me a pretty button with that on it. I can read.”

“But what do you think about what happened today? Doesn’t that feel hurtful? Don’t you feel sad?”

“No,” I said shaking my head.

“But you *do* know that people are mean sometimes for no reason...or at least for a reason they think is OK...like what the...*gentleman*...told us today.”

“I’m still lil’,” I spoke with wisdom far beyond my years. “I just make bad things go away. I make the bad things go away from my haid...like the time I went to the git some water at the playground Uptown by my cousin’ house. They had a sign over each wanna the faucets. One said ‘COLORED’...the other one had ‘WHITE’...I thought the ‘colored’ water was gon’ taste like KOOL-AID...but it didn’t...it was just like water from the ‘WHITE’ fountain...If I coulda changed it, I woulda...I don’t work at the water place...Why you sit there all day and be writin’?”

“That’s a good question. I often wonder about that myself.”

“You got a big house to play in, turtles, good sammiches...all you need is a bike.”

“I probably do,” she laughed. “Perhaps exercise *will* generate some ideas,” she sighed.

“What you writin’ on now?”

“I’m just doing a little work on a project.”

“Project? Which one? The Lafitte? The St. Bernard?”

“No,” she laughed.

“There’s a who-o-ole lotta things to work on besides a project,” I said.

“Yes,” she said thoughtfully. “There are. There are many, many more things of much greater importance.”

That afternoon as I napped she ordered her secretary to cancel an appointment with an up-and-coming city councilman involving a new nine-story addition to a downtown hotel for which he was lobbying, a project that would guarantee her initial investment of realizing a 300% profit. He was assured the prospect of becoming mayor if the deal went through. “The old windbag, white shoed, Pat Boone Special-wearing klutz can attend to his themed fundraising events without me,” she told her administrative assistant. She also made inquiries on founding a medical facility for financially-strapped musicians, eventually donated quite an expanse of time reading to the children of Peter Claver, and began work on a soon-to-be-heralded novel about race relations in the Deep South. That same afternoon (and many naps, night visions and years later) I dreamed of the house’s spirits known and unknown...of the ghosts of the couple whose marriage was deferred by the onslaught of imminent hostilities, the chess player whose birth took place in the same superannuated bed in which I napped...the luckless slave woman donated as a dowry...the general and his raucous rides through the hall in search of his boots...the caretaker’s wife who took her life...the tortured souls of the African captives as they dwelled in an unfeeling abyss...the Black Hand’s bullet-riddled bodies...and the two flesh and blood beings, dissimilar in the artificialities of race, age, sex, experience and

station in life whose animating forces once and forever interblended in an antiquated age  
on a tiny droplet in infinity's ocean.

**Arthur Pfister aka Professor Arturo**  
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