

An Ode to Those Who Believe in Luck (And All that Lovey-Dovey Stuff)

I fancied myself a rugged, Roving Roustabout, so busy dodging Cajun Queens there was no time for mundane things like homework, hobbies or friends. In reality, I was a gangly, lean teen, bored and biding my time in a one-horse, deep-fried southern town, salivatin' while waitin' to be released from my school daze forever. I couldn't wait to bid adieux to everyone I knew. I'd been careful not to get tripped up by a temptress. These Bayou Babes had ways of keeping the adventure-struck stuck in the swamp. Dawson Delareux, older than me by a mere year, spelled it out.

'They cast hoodoo on you. Before you know it, you're caught.'

'You mean voodoo?' I asked.

'Nah,' he said. 'Hoodoo. When you're weak they ask, *Who do you love?*

You say their name, hear the snap. You've just been caught in their honey trap. Prolly sounds strange to an outsider like you, but that's how it works here in the bayou.'

He saw my look and added, 'It's not so bad – hoodoo can do you good.'

I dismissed Dawson's words. This town was not my final stop. Just because Papa's muddled mind brought us here five years ago didn't mean I had to stay. I was like Momma, a wanderer. Her mistake was getting tied to a man who'd made her put down roots. I'd watched her wilt away and die. I swore I'd do it different and live the larking life.

I was glad for my awkwardness and ignorance of Southern ways. My status as a northern newbie served as a successful repellent against these booby traps. But at

the beginning of my final year, I found a Delta Darling resting against my Reno Supremo. In that drawl they all have she said, 'My name's Juicy Lucy, what's yours?'

She knew my name. Just like I knew hers. And what people said: *That Lafayette girl think she highfalutin', she nothin' but low-down, brash trash that'll crash and burn out young.*

And: *She looking for the Big Bucks Sucker to tease, squeeze for all he worth, then leave without saying goodbye.*

This femme fatale would know I wasn't interested from the get-go.

'I don't need a tag-a-long,' I said, but she smiled and asked me to take her for a drive. I wasn't gonna oblige, but she sashayed my way, fixing me with her bright green eyes, shaking her hips, licking her lips, and tossing her long dark hair to show she wasn't gonna take no for an answer. Her perfume filled the air, got me high. This was a beauty who'd be difficult to deny.

'How about a partner in crime?' she replied. 'One with something more in mind. Like going to different places, checking out new spaces.'

She got in on the passenger's side.

'I work alone,' I said, but complied, sliding behind the wheel and taking her for that drive. I wondered if there was a type of hoodoo a man could survive.

We drove around the town square in circles that day, staring at the same old scene. Then sat for a spell in the park, listening to cars whiz past. Streaks of plastic, steel and wheels travelled in the distance down those highway byways. She enjoyed watching them from the green.

'Moving,' I said. 'That's my thing.'

'I dream. 'Bout where everybody's going.'

'Gotta do more than dream, Juicy.'

She smiled and said, 'I dream about my Daddy. Momma says he's either in Heaven or Las Vegas. Then she cries a bit.'

I nodded, contemplated this. The consequences facing menfolk wanting to roam and flit.

'I looked 'em both up on a map,' she said. 'They aren't that far apart. Seem like good places for making new starts. Specially for those whose heart is set to lark.'

I got a bit jittery, not sure what to make of this talk. It was as if she could read my wanderlust thoughts. Was she wanting to come along on my forever road trip ride? That was something I could not abide.

She moved my hand up high on her thigh and the world fell away. There was only the green of her eyes, the black of her hair and the heat radiating from that glorious white thigh sizzling in my mind. I got dizzy, giddy. She looked me in the eye, said, 'Or maybe you wanna sit tight...'

The *whoosh* of cars broke the spell. They sounded like alarm bells. I removed my hand from her thigh.

'Come June I say goodbye. Nothing's changing my mind. Don't care who cries.'

Patting my knee and adjusting her skirt, she said, 'You stick to your plan, sugar. Wouldn't have it any other way. Don't mind me being sweet on you. Things aren't gonna go sour.'

I was certain I'd remain capable of resisting her powers.

By late autumn we'd settled into a routine of cruising through town, then sitting in the park. She'd come up with stories for the cars that passed as we sat holding hands in the dark.

'That's a family going to look at a new house.'

'That's a man rushing home to see his new wife.'

'That's a couple heading to Las Vegas to elope and start a new life.'

She saw me shake my head and said, 'What wrong with letting luck and love decide your fate.'

'Love dries up. So does luck. You gotta *make* your fate.'

'Do you?'

'I do,' I said. And Juicy smiled.

A breeze stirred the leaves just then. Their rustling sounded like *hoodoo*. On guard, I peered at Juicy. That placid face revealed no trace of mischief or malarkey.

Gesturing towards the cars, I asked, 'Where'd you go?'

Without hesitation she said, 'Lady Luck's dealing my hand. I'll go with her plan. Follow her lead. See what treat she has in store for me. I told her *What I want is right here – to hold my Yankee Doodle Crackerjack near*.

I got confused being called a kid's sweet. She laughed at my look, said I was mistook. She wasn't saying I was the chewy caramel popcorn or the salty peanut hook.

Leaning in she said, 'You're the prize hidden inside, the best bit in the box, the only real destination I got.'

She squeezed my hand and kissed my lips. A deal, it seemed, was sealed.

It was the end of June. Me and Juicy sat in the parking lot of Daddy D's Donuts, watching cars dawdle past, waiting for a breeze to move the heat that shimmered off the road. The summer stretched into the distance blurring sky with sun. It was 10am. The day was sticky and old, like a sweet left too long in a pocket. That heat clogged

the air, my throat, and my thoughts. It was time to think of something to do, somewhere to go, but my head wasn't working. Thoughts floated in slow, hazy-lazy circles, beach balls in a swimming pool. I had a memory of wanting to leave, but the effort felt too great. Juicy sat next to me fanning herself with a deck of cards, looking cool as a mint julep, while I melted away.

Laying down her cards she said, 'Now that schools out, Daddy-O, I been thinking.'

I turned and saw her hand was full of hearts. It gave me a start. The sun shone directly in my eyes, making me half-blind, when I blocked the light, I saw stars dancing round Juicy's head. A voice came through then, loud and clear. A chant, a hum, words meant to be dear: *Why not stay here?*

An idea came to me then, floated in from outta all that hot, heavy air. I wanted to open that idea, like a cold bottle of sarsaparilla. Drink it down. On my own. But Juicy was right up in my face, invading my space.

Asking me a question.

'Who do you—'

'No.' I yelled, turning away. I switched on the radio, held my hands to my ears, shouted along to the tune. I didn't know what it took to keep the hoodoo at bay, but I couldn't have it clouding my thoughts, making me stay. I took a deep breath, then looked Juicy's way. She had that lopsided smile on her face.

'You gotta relax more honey,' she said. 'Try a change of place.'

I declared the idea mine all along. Juicy just looked pleased, but not surprised when I proposed we head out west for some poker-chip kicks under the lights of Las Vegas. I didn't look at her legs or her thighs, used the sternest tone I could find and said,

'Don't get up to any tricks. Pack light. Don't take white, there'll be none of this 'I-do' hype.'

She chuckled with delight, threw her arms around me and said, 'Alright.'

Her Mama held onto her tight. They quarreled late into the night.

'Two Vegas wrongs don't make a right.'

But I knew who'd win this fight.

I didn't bother talking to Pappy. He was still lost in a maze of grief and booze. I used the money that came to me from Momma's passing and when we left that bayou, Juicy cheered. I didn't know if it was this new start or ending that old life. If it was the latter, did it really matter?

We cruised for weeks through cloudless skies, pedal to the floor, eating doughnuts, sipping soda pops, caring less about the cost. We country crooned with the radio up and the windows down, finger-snapping Dollywood ditties and Johnny Cashola tunes like loons. At night we'd sit together, holding hands drinking Southern Comfort while looking at the moon.

Just outside Heaven, Juicy turned to me and said, 'I could sit right here forever. Couldn't you?'

I shook my head, folded my arms, sighed.

'We keep moving Juicy. It's not time to sit.'

She looked at me for a bit, gave her crooked smile.

'Las Vegas, it is then. Where all good men go to—'

'Juicy, I swore I'd not get tied down.'

'I swear too,' she said pulling out a small, clear tube. Inside something sparkled.

'Brought us some stardust luck,' she said, sprinkling it over us.

'And now?' I said.

'Now we're larkers, letting luck and love decide our fate. Committing ourselves to wanderlust, cavorting through life 'til we turn to dust.'

I laughed and shook my head. 'Sounds good if it's true.'

'It can be! It's up to you! Choose!'

I couldn't reply. Something funny was going on with my insides.

'To lifelong larking,' she said, clinking my glass.

Something gently came down, circled round and landed light. Something soft and warm and right. Looking up, I saw the stars shimmering that shade of Juicy white. If this was hoodoo, maybe there was no need to feel affright.

Las Vegas was a funny place. Where people made bets on money and love to decide their fate. Hoping to be winners, that their love would last. But under its glittery, glamorous surface, I smelled desperation and misery, the scent of losers and loners. Maybe these were warnings I should take. Sent from Momma, to avoid her mistake. All those Vegas neon signs shrieked *Stardust turns to rust in a blink*.

Down to the last of our dough, a sudden urge came over me to go, to leave Juicy to her own means. Keep her Daddy's company. Or figure out who she was meant to be. She'd get mad, feel had, but in the end we'd both be glad we'd gone our separate ways. I'd told her from the start, I wasn't one to give my heart. If she hadn't listened, how was that my fault?

At the craps table, she held the dice. She must've seen my leaving thoughts tumbling from my eyes. Pulling me close she said. 'Darling, don't be afraid of the roll. It's all just part of the thrill.'

I shook my head. 'Juicy, it's love that kills. It's time for me to go.'

'No!' she said, jabbing a finger into my chest. 'It's time to throw.'

She set our remaining chips on the Queen of Hearts. A waiter splashed down two Mint Julips. Looking at her, then me, he warned, 'Only fools bet the house on love.'

Juicy didn't bat an eye.

'We got a sure thing. This ain't no fling. We sealed a deal with Lady Luck. We're betting all our bucks. Blessed by my Daddy's kiss, we're aiming to get hitched. We'll be Mr and Mrs Larker -- of love and bliss!'

Her words held me in a trance, floated 'round me in a strange dance. I swayed and held on to her tight.

'Doll,' she said, 'when the hoodoo's right you don't need to fret. Or fight.'
She blew on the dice, handed one to me. 'We throw on *three*. You'll see.'
Then she winked. 'Here's to a good life!'

Whatever it was luck, fate, hoodoo, she was right.

All those years ago, when we were young, we threw the dice.

And won.

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