Spring 1955

Mardi Gras

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"But Andy, I should give up something for Lent. I always used to when I was a little girl. Maybe I'll give up smoking, or maybe I'll give you up." She waited for his answer. "No, I'm not kidding, Andy, maybe I'll give you up—give up you. Which is it?" She listened intently, the smile slowly vanishing from her lipstick-smeared face. "Of course it matters. Should I say, 'give you up,' or 'give up you'?" Lenore paused again. "Well, you can come and knock on the door in an hour and I'll let you in—if I haven't given you up for Lent." She slammed the receiver viciously into its black cradle and flopped onto the bed.

Simultaneously she lit a cigarette and kicked off her shoes; one into the corner by the bathroom door, the other into the open suitcase on the luggage rack. Looking at the ceiling she mumbled to no one; "Sure, Andy, sure, call around in an hour. I'll be here if I haven't given up you for Lent." Laughing shrilly, without humor, she reached for an almost-empty tumbler on the night table, cursed when she saw the worn ice cube and smelled the sticky sweet odor of cheap whiskey and tepid ginger ale. She drained it slowly, sloppily, dribbling the mixture on her blouse, then she threw the glass across the room. It fell into a pile of soiled stockings on the floor near the dresser.

Lenore lay on the white chenille spread and gazed about the room and wondered idly whether that joke Andy had told upstairs had offended anyone. Not that she really cared, she told herself; she simply wondered how thin-skinned the others at the party were. At the moment she couldn't recall exactly how it went, but there was something about a man in New York on a Sunday morning who asked a cop where everyone was. The cop replied that since it's a Sunday morning, the Catholics are all in church, the Protestants are in bed, and the Jews are in Washington. She fretted a moment, sensing she had left something out. Everyone in the room had laughed when Andy told it, so she decided not to let it worry her again.

"The Saint Charles Hotel, New Orleans, Louisiana," she mumbled, closing her puffy eyelids to the yellow ceiling. "Romance in a romantic southern city with romance-filled nights and romance-filled in-betweens." She tore the gold bracelet from her arm and flung it against the dressing table mirror. Apprehensively, she raised herself
to see whether she had done any damage and as she looked around
the room, it occurred to her that it was disorderly.

A crumpled copy of the *Times-Picayune* with the orange and
purple “Hail to Rex” article on the front page lay on a chair; on
the floor near it was a brown and white menu from Antoine’s; red
and black spools of film stood on the dressing table. Leonore won-
dered if they’d turn out, if she had used the camera properly, if
she had bought the right kind of film for the camera. She decided
immediately that she wouldn’t have them developed. There was only
one shot she wanted: the family of five dressed in red satin devil’s
suits. She had snapped the group in front of the hotel. “Mama devil,
papa devil and three little devils,” she muttered.

“But what should I give up for Lent?” Her tired voice asked the
question thickly. “I’m here with another woman’s husband because
I’m too damn stupid to catch one of my own and I’m too damn
weak to say ‘no’ when he asked me along on this joyride. Travel,”
she hissed as she ground her cigarette into the ash tray, “is so damned
broadening.”

Reflecting on the last couple of days, she admitted to herself that
she had seen some interesting sights: the flambeau procession through
the narrow streets of the French Quarter, the Ursulines peering ner-
vously through the half-shuttered windows of the convent; the gar-
bage cans on the sidewalk in front of the houses; the jostling, drunken
Negroes on South Rampart Street; the Zulu Parade; the white-hulled
ship at the river front unloading bananas by means of a fascinating
conveyor; the Dixieland blaring from those doors on Bourbon Street.

“That piano player in the bar on Bourbon Street. In the place
where Andy complained about the price of beer. ‘A buck for a Bud!’”
She mocked Andy’s incredulity. “The piano player had eyes only
for me. And he played *Sweet Lorraine* and dedicated it to me. Just
because Andy didn’t say ‘Lenore’ to him loud enough. I know if I
go back there he’ll play one for me and if there isn’t a song called
Lenore, he’ll make one up.” She picked up the phone and asked for
Andy’s room. “Yes, yes, of course I’m okay. No, no, I’m almost sober
again. I’m fine. Just thought I’d go to bed early. See you at break-
fast. No, I’m not giving you up for Lent; I’ve decided on candy be-
because it’s fattening and because I don’t eat much anyway. Good-
night.”

She was in no mood to coo and gurgle and linger over her good-
night. She took her coat from the hook in the closet, collected her
shoes and bracelet and handbag and steadied herself into the cor-
ridor. “I will give Andy up for Lent.”