

Livin' It Up in the Big Easy

*It's hard to live
Living it up down.
~A. R. Ammons*

The French market was aswarm today. Edna had never been here, but she somehow sensed that there were fewer people on a daily basis than there were today, likely in competition for the epiphanic antique that she longed so much to collect. Along one table, she observed a myriad of ethnic objects: little glass Buddhas in Santa-Claus robes, red elephants with black lines painted in to accentuate the wrinkles, African natives with primeval hunting tools, shiny blue gargoyles chiseled from stone, all worthy candidates for a place on her mantelpiece.

All the way from Greenwich to New Orleans, Edna's thoughts had fixed a hold on the French Market and everything it had to offer. Until now, the objects she had imagined were blurry and abstract. Having seen them in their concrete, tangible forms, she became petrified with a pathological indecisiveness. Her itinerant browsing strategy was to select ten items at random, and then, by process of elimination, reduce that list to a consequent one, but she quickly recognized this as burdensome. She whittled away three hours without buying anything. Her obsequious husband, Avery, followed her between ten tables.

One of these was supervised by an elderly Asian man. Perfumes, spices, candles, and a few jars of capers stocked his table. All of it must be from Malaysia or somewhere such, thought Edna. She knew that, somewhere amidst this peddler's inventory, an unseen object was beckoning her.

"My dear bird," said her husband, "I wish you'd hurry. Café du Monde is becoming more crowded as you stand here, trying to imagine your so-called epiphanic antique into existence."

Edna pssh'd her lips and waved the concern away. "Du Mond's crowd is stolid," she said. "Every waking hour, there are no vacant seats, and roughly a third of the guests are served standing."

"Please still," persisted Avery, "I'm tired of this slummy flea market. You can buy a dozen or so objects, and then decide which one is the best later."

Edna looked to the face of the Asian man. He was stoic. She could picture the man in an azure robe decorated with inorganic astronomical shapes. And yet, he gave her no moral support for her beliefs. His eyes darted from one Cabelle spoused to the next.

Edna turned and waggled a bony finger at her husband. "You know it doesn't work that way. It is only worth something if I discover it by accident, like it says in that poem by Shelley, 'Hymn to the Invisible,' or something like that."

If Avery demonstrated any sign of mutiny, she didn't see it. Her gaze fell upon the middle of the table, where a miniscule totem pole sat. Edna looked it over; yes, she was convinced. This was that very item, that artifact endowed with mystic properties that she had traveled the diameter of New Orleans to find: A cat totem pole, topped with a with three faces arranged in a triangle.

"Look at this, Avery," said Edna, and shoved it in her husband's face. "The head on top has a face in each direction, so it will never fall prey to an ambush. Oh, one wonders what animal that might have been."

"Do you think it's safe to bring that to the hotel, my bird?"

Edna heard no more. She turned to the Asian man, whose brow had descended upon the rest of his face in dank disapproval.

"I'd like to buy this pole, if you please."

"It was definitely for sale. Why else would it be on the table?"

Avery tapped her on the shoulder and whispered. "It might have a hex on it."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't think so."

"Not for sale," said the Asian man and held out his palm. A surge of defeat accentuated a vein in Edna's temple. She was reluctant to hand the item back, but a small grandchild huddled near to the peddler gave Edna some confident guile. She removed the pole from the old man's pocket and surrendered it. Edna smiled and gave her a fifty dollar bill.

"Is grand-daddy desperate for money?" she mouthed.

The young girl nodded, put her hand in her grandfather's pocket, and took out a bag of breath mints. The old man turned away to answer another customer, and the grandchild put the mints back into his pocket. Edna fulfilled her promise, and ushered her dumbfounded husband away.

"That went rather well, considering the circumstances under which we found it."

"True," said Avery, "But that old man unsettled me. I can't help but wonder about his motive for refusing to sell you such a thing."

"A family heirloom, perhaps, which makes it all the more worth having."

"Nonetheless, this city is undermined by specters of every dimension possible. That cat-stick might bring us to a bad end."

Edna shrugged.

"Not unless that belligerent bellhop gives me more qualms," she said. "I almost had to punch him in the face. The fact that I told him that Attila's name is the same as his own (by the way, I don't remember if I've told you, but our parrot's name is Watson now) wasn't enough to make him relent. I tried to explain to him that none of our neighbors know how to care for housepets."

"Watson, eh? I liked Attila better."

"Oh, it's not your say, you old funny-duddy."

They both were in a considerable hurry to distance herself from the French market.

Edna was right in her assessment of Café du Monde. The Cabelles, if they expected to be served, must stand along the railing. Despite Avery's laments, Edna lost herself in wonder of her own achievement. She might even use it again while in the restaurant. She couldn't wait to tell Martha what a magnificent feat it was for a fifty-one year old woman to play her hand in a little game of espionage.

Throughout Avery's complaining, Edna inspected from her position the various patrons and devotees of Café du Monde. Along the railing where she and her husband stood, a hispanic family argued over something she couldn't understand. Two nearby tables conflicted when a child from one took a chair from the other without permission. Adjacent to the hispanic family, nine white men crowded a table, sharing one plate of beignets and singing festively. All in all, the famed Cafe pulsed with the diversified voices of a thousand cafe-terians.

The lone mute, Edna noticed, was a formally-dressed Middle Eastern young man sitting in the very corner of the shop. He sat alone. From his eyes to the corners of his chin, a dark, raw trail of tear stains violated his supposed age. There was a chrysanthemum fastened to the breast pocket of his gray suit. This flower was chosen without the least evidence of care; it was withering.

The man slapped some rectangular object on the table and left. Edna, eager to see the object, dismissed all the aforementioned fancy details. She dragged Avery to the abandoned table and picked up the object, which was a small tile with a jewel in it. Costume jewelry, no doubt, she thought. Even so, finding this would make a good story.

"He might come back for it," said Avery.

"I'll grant him ten minutes," said Edna. She also took the man's chair. "If he doesn't return to this table, demanding to see this treasure, then I will assume that it is the end result of a long-suffering romantic adventure, and that he wants to dispose of every smidgeon of a reminder. If you asked me, I would say I'm doing him a good turn. After all, a young man caught in indecision is a terrible thing."

"There is to consider also, my pet, the tile in your hand might also be quite filthy."

Edna looked at the jewel piece, and then at the hispanic family, who, she detected, had been sliding dirty looks edgewise at her.

"You're right," she said. "Do, let's go and cleanse it."

Edna placed the tile into her purse, between a stick of unwrapped mints and an open canister of lip gloss. They wanted to take a trolley back to their hotel room, where they would not only wash off the jeweled tile, but leave it behind, along with the totem cat. They would then prepare themselves for dinner on the riverboat.

A crowd much louder and more dense awaited them on the trolley. Most people were of an extremity of age: the youth, the insecure infants screaming for the comfort of domestic life, or the seniors, the veterans, the weary and heavy-lidded folk men competing over the sound of their fellow passengers. The enclosed walls reverberated the sound. Edna and Avery, as they had at the Cafe, stood with their hands on the railing.

Edna had to dodge a boomerang that came from somewhere near the front of the trolley. Avery picked it up and looked toward the front of the bus, where all of the children seemed preoccupied with harassing one another rather than desecrating the old.

"I think I've found your third antique, my dove," said Avery.

"No," she replied. "I have."

She looked at a small boy (whom she estimated to be eight years old), flicking an old-fashioned cigarette lighter on and off. His face was distorted with the most abject misery Edna had ever seen. What a burden it must be, thought Edna, to have something so pragmatic, and yet have no discernable use for it. So, relieving her husband of the boomerang, she pretended to drop the packet of mints.

It was to her advantage that she was closer to the middle of the age-spectrum than most of the passengers; this made maneuvering to the lighter-kid much easier and subtler.

"You seem to be rather along in your years," she said as she picked up each individual mint.

"Yeah, sure.

"I mean, to be so young and able to work a cigarette lighter. You can't possibly be as old as twelve."

"Yeah," he said.

She grunted loudly so as to make herself seem more vulnerable. "Could you hold this for me?" She dropped the boomerang in his lap. The kid snapped from his hazy concentration and stopped flicking his lighter. It was the first time he ever truly acknowledged the world he was in. Edna could tell. The misery in his face was replaced by rage, and he threw the boomerang with extreme force at the bus driver. The weapon bounced off his head, and he stopped abruptly. Everyone shifted two feet forward. Edna noticed most of her mints roll down forbidden crevices of the bus. The desired lighter knocked two seats forward. The driver was on lighter-kid in an instant; he dragged him to the doorway and pushed him out, all the while screaming about the last straw.

Edna crawled to the lighter's location, pretending to recover her mints. Once she picked it up, she abandoned her search and returned to her husband.

"That was rather easy," she said, "although quite unexpected. I admit, I pity the person who cleans this trolley." She covered her mouth to conceal her scornful giggling. "He'll be at it for hours, trying to remove each individual mint."

"Tell me, my goose," said Avery. "Was it really necessary to have that poor child thrown out?"

"It wasn't my intention," said Edna. "I was going to make a trade. But he threw the boomerang, not I." Edna glanced at the Bus driver. The man was bald and capless, and he rubbed a red mark on his head where the boomerang had struck. Edna wondered what it might look like at close inspection. A palm leaf, perhaps? Or a train seering through a musky fog, any number of possibilities.

"What matters now," she continued, "is that I have happened upon three antiques of epiphany."

"And, having collected them, we will have our dinner this evening on a riverboat."

"I've been meaning to tell you," said Edna. "Suppose we were to run into that secret Asian man."

Avery groaned. "Well, it's not too late to go back to the French market and return it. We could also go back to Cafe du Monde and leave the tile where we found it, and give the boy his lighter back."

"Don't talk nonsense. I was thinking that you might be right about these items having a hex on them. Just look at what happened between that poor boy and the driver. And that young Jewish man! It wouldn't surprise me if the tile *was* what brought him to a bad end."

"What are you suggesting?"

"That we should find some way to check these things for supernatural properties. I regret only this: that I didn't ask the Asian man for reasons of his obstinance."

"Well, why don't we take it to a witch doctor and get it appraised for its voodoo value?"

Edna sniffed. Apart from this sardonic show of impatience, the lone suggestion that they venture into the uliginous areas of New Orleans was sick.

"We're already going to have dinner on a river-boat," she said. "I'd much rather forego the witch doctor."

The subject was dropped until they reached the hotel room, where the familiar bellhop, Watson, was caught standing outside their door. Edna shooed him away.

Watson-formerly Attila-was perky as ever to see Edna. She opened the cage door to allow him fifteen minutes of freedom before they set out for their romantic evening. Avery took the tile and scrubbed his hands raw trying to remove every last germ unit. A second bellhop, one slightly older than Watson, came to the door, asking for their third room key. "For security," he explained, while giving sidelong glances to the forbidden bird.

Edna gave in readily enough, but she retracted the key as he reached for it. "You are sure," she said, "that you will stir up no unauthorized activity while I am out tonight?"

"We will do nothing that violates hotel regulations," he assured.

Edna was not convinced she could trust the hotel staff. While Avery completed his washing, she put Watson back into his cage, and then locked him in the closet. This key she would keep to herself throughout dinner. She placed both of the other antiques under the bedsheets, and hung the "do not disturb" sign on the outer doorknob for good measure. Then she read her magazine until Avery finished, when she instructed him to put it with the others.

The atmosphere of the riverboat had far superseded Edna's mental profile. The deck of the ship was entirely dark, lit only by flickering stars behind the branches of the trees. Edna and her husband ate duck and sausage gumbo with champagne, while a moody jazz band moaned their horns. Truly, it was a reward to the noon's accomplishments. Edna began to think she belonged in New Orleans, and she told her husband so.

"What would you think of living here?" she said. "In this city, coming to this boat every night?"

"Why, I wouldn't advise it, my bird," said Avery. "After all, we do belong in Greenwich. It's as decided as that."

"Oh, you're not put off by the bellhop, are you? I told him not to bother anything in the room. I don't think he'd stake the reputation of the hotel on some silly little outdated custom. Excuse me-"

Edna sipped her champagne, then went across to the deck to spit it out. There were approximately eight other tables on deck; Edna brushed against three of them. After spitting, she waited until she heard the plop of the salivary unit hitting the water. That satisfied her. She returned to her husband.

"You're supposed to swallow it," he said.

"Were it appropriate for our meal, I would have had water. But I was brought up never to allow champagne to pass my throat."

"Amazing how you cling so fervently to old teachings. Anyway, I'm more put off by the possibility of encountering your alleged antique benefactors."

"Oh, I shouldn't worry about them. After all, c'est melting-pot du monde. He probably wouldn't tell the difference between myself and any of the people around here."

"Provided said people were our age and race. It's hard to tell in this light."

"Still," continued Edna, "it would be a pity if you were right about the certain objects having hexes on them, which I doubt you were. It would be such that anyone who came looking for us could find us, by the scent of one of them."

Avery tutted. "I don't call that superstition if pheromones are used. I call that espionage."

"Don't be a buffoon, Avery."

A low caw-cawing alerted the people on deck to a crane swooping overhead. As dim as it was, Edna glimpsed its lethal looking beak and intimidating stature.

"My word, look at that!" she said. "Isn't that the state bird of Louisiana?"

"I'm not sure what it was," replied Avery, "but the state bird is a pelican. I don't think that pelicans sound like that, though."

Edna thought of Watson. Watson, what a feeble, spineless name. It brought to mind a flabby, bespectacled census taker caught in a barroom, with no personality or character to admire. That bellhop deserved every insulting characteristic of that name, but her own pet, her parakeet, her Attila, did not. She thought of the bellhop trying to get into their room while she was away, to confiscate it. What use was the name "Watson" now anyway? What use would it be in the scenario of getting caught up in the avian wildlife of Louisiana?

"Avery," said Edna. "I don't think I took adequate measures to keep the hotel staff away from my parakeet. The sight of that monstrous bird has made me shudder on behalf of Watson."

Avery's answer was preceded by a delay. Whether he was sipping wine or choosing his words, time was being drained.

"Watson-I truly can't believe I'm agreeing to that name-is safe in his cage in the hotel room. He's a quiet bird, he bores easily. He doesn't squawk like the average bird. I insist that you have some more champagne, but this time, actually swallow it.

Edna sipped loudly, and then got up to spit it out again. "Oh, come now, you can't hold off from drinking all evening," said Avery. This time, Edna heard faint murmurings of the people at various tables. She spat over the deck. In addition to the plop, she heard a low growl, as if the flying amoeboid had slapped the eye of an irascible alligator. No, it wasn't an alligator. An alligator would be chopped up in the riverboat's propellers.

"I don't like alcohol either," said Avery, "but we didn't order anything else."

Nevertheless, Edna persevered in her teetotaler convictions. Through the influence of thirst, though, she became less rigid about her premonitions of Watson. She also prodded the topic of supernatural qualities to her antiques. The evening on the ship was truly something to alter her perceptions of the swamp. She wondered about her items, their origins, their purposes; she delighted in the charms of the city, and she anticipated the blessings of a voodoo Creole.

Edna and Avery were the last to leave their table. The solitude encouraged them to remain, but Edna's thirst began to put her to sleep. She held to her culinary beliefs to the very last, and Avery was forced to cancel their elongated stay. He aided her the entire walk back to the hotel. Once there, he collapsed onto the bed. Edna was free to drink from the sink now. While the table had restrictions, hotel rooms certainly did not. Now to check on Watson.

The closet door, where she had kept him, was open.

"Avery!" Edna shoved her husband brutally, to no avail. Trying to wake her husband from sleep roused from her the worst herculean efforts. "Avery!" Avery stirred a little, but resumed his immobile state. Edna began to pound on him with her fists. "Wake up! This is an emergency!" No success. She turned away and sulked. There was no doubt about it; the birdcage was empty, the window had been opened, too. The latches were left undone. Perhaps he'll come back, thought Edna. Birds have an instinct. They know to come back.

She sat by the window, gazing out. She could wait. That was her responsibility, to care for her beloved. That was what she and Avery had agreed to do once they decided their marriage would involve no child-bearing. Now, her heart was sore. Somebody seemed to have pricked it with a harpoon. The bellhops, yes, they did it! She would complain, first thing in the morning, regardless of Watson's-of Attila's-whereabouts.

She checked the clock, and it was one-thirty. She had forgotten when she and her husband went out to dine. Nine-thirty, wasn't it? Or later? The walk to and from the riverboat dock totalled an hour and a half. At least,

that is what she thought. She was so thirsty she couldn't concentrate. The restrictions on what to drink when eating gumbo made much less sense now. And the crane... and oh! Attila, I hope you didn't pay attention to silly me, and accept your fate to be named Watson, all in a vain attempt to have the Bellhop let off. It's all very silly, isn't it? If the manager...

...acking off the cobblestones and the juggling monkeys and the parachutes and the youth all the way. all the trolley way. all the voodoo. juggling monkey parrot face no not a parrot but a crane no not a parrot but a beetle. Yes Yes I all three beaks all three faces all tree all tree monkey cat juggle pole. All three "BE Careful dimit, !." Dorp! Dorp! all three, breaks all voodoo. Crawl out of the ground like little ants. shouldnt have done it. "Shouldn't not from behind." "This debt will not on your part go free." Monkey face juggling go went fly go away went fly. Glue. Glue together broken pieces twelve. All in little pieces. all crawling from ground all away. Voodoo parrot floy go went...

Edna awoke to seven o'clock in the morning. Her husband had seen the loss, and was shaking his head. Edna was brought to her senses by her symbolic dream. She had seen a parrot-faced monkey juggling her antiques. She had surprised him, he dropped and broke the antiques, and she spent the rest of eternity trying to glue the pieces back together, but more pieces kept crawling from under the tiles. It could only mean one thing, and she told her husband what it was.

"These antiques are bewitched."

"My dear... I suppose you might have seen that our parakeet has gone from us."

"Yes, it's because of these confounded antiques. You were right, I never should have taken them from the people they belonged to."

"I agree. Let us go and give them back."

"But what misfortune shall come to the people to whom we return them?"

"Nothing more than what's already happened."

"I don't like it." Edna crawled from her bed, and looked at the undone window latches. Her bird had never returned. I'm undone, she thought.

"We must get these antiques to a voodoo witch," she said. "She will know if they are indeed possessed."

"This has already gone too far," said Avery. "We have already caused one poor child to be thrown off a bus. I don't know how the Eastern discipline system works, but I dread to think of the fate of that peddler's granddaughter."

"But Avery, if we simply give back these cursed items to their original owners, something far worse might happen than mere disciplinary action, of which there is a desperate shortage nowadays, anyway. Just look at what they've done to us!"

"Watson or Attila or Scape-Goat or whatever you're calling him now is gone because we don't trust our neighbors enough."

"And now you don't trust me?"

Avery stared hard into Edna's eyes. She could not have her parakeet back; maybe the disillusionment had not yet sunk in, but her resolution to a specific course of action had. If she could only adjust Avery to her reasoning, then she might put an end to these malign powers. Really, they should not have come to New Orleans in the first place.

"All right," he said. "I'll take you to a swamp witch. But any cost from now on is coming out of your purse."

The Cabelles journey to the swamplands was by no means quick. They spent their entire morning asking for directions, consulting maps, getting lost, and trying to avoid people who looked like Asian peddlers, the lighter-kid or the Jewish bachelor. When they eventually did find the swampland ferry, Avery had to drag a squirming Edna on board. She was concerned for the safety of her clothes. After all, she had not brought any cheap dresses; she did not own any.

"For heaven's sake, it's a swamp, Edna. What did you expect?"

The ferryman had no teeth. Flies circled around his straw hat. Edna imagined that there was some sort of lethal insect nest underneath, and the man's own body odor had rendered him oblivious to the fact. He sang sea shanties on the way to an enormous elm tree with a house built into it. The very words of his song seemed to carry revolting smells. Had she not felt responsible for Attila-Watson, she would have demanded the ferryman turn around and take her back to the dock. She imagined the Voodoo mother to be equally intolerable.

Edna lost patience as she neared the house, and hopped into the shallow water. In doing this, she prompted a growl from a nearby alligator. The lunging animal ripped open her purse, spilling the three antiques into the water.

"A curse!" she screamed. "It's a curse!"

She fell upon her knees to search for the three items.

"Edna, get out of the water!"

She grasped something rectangular and solid: the jeweled tile. The other two, had they sunk?

"Edna!"

She heard him splash into the water. She had just grabbed a long, cylindrical wooden feeling object when she was grabbed. She thrashed at her husband, but it was no use. She had strength of mind, not body. He took her to the porch of the elm house. She rested a few seconds to admire the man's agility. He was sixty-two, but well-preserved. Then she railed at him.

"What were you thinking, you dolt! Now we're all doomed, thanks to you! I could have had that totem-pole, but now it's lost!"

Avery was panting. He might faint or have a stroke any minute, all because she only had one third of the doomed objects. But he survived. He sat down on a bench.

"It was probably just a branch," he said. "If it is that important to you, feel free to go back and look for it. This time, I won't interfere."

Edna looked at the swamp. It was no use. The alligator was sitting there, watching her, beckoning her. It couldn't climb the steps to the house; they were too well-elevated. This was a clever design.

"What all dis racket is?"

A young Cajun woman with a white turban emerged from the house. She might have only been thirty, but she had the exacerbated aura of a cantankerous eighty-year-old woman. She wore a pair of enormous earrings, almost four inches in diameter. She was swift in her movements, like a little bird, like a kildear. She glared at Avery, and then at Edna, and then at Avery again, and then at Edna.

"I'm so glad to see you," said Edna.

"Why is you is here?"

"This object," Edna gave her the tile, "is cursed. It has engendered a dire loss on my part."

"You wants my advice? Gets rid of it."

"But you don't understand," protested Edna. "It made my parakeet, Watson, fly away."

"And now I is gon' make dis fly way."

She wound up her arm. Edna grabbed her.

"No you don't! Not until you have a good look at it! It's not even really mine, it belonged to some love-sick Jewish boy, somebody I don't even know!"

The Cajun wrested her arm from Edna, then sneered at her. She examined the tile closely. She nearly touched it to her eye. Her expression gradually softened.

"Dat man can never sees this," she said. "But you cans. Looks close wid your eye."

Edna squinted at the jewel within the tile. The numerous faces on it made anything the Cajun saw nearly invisible. Like she had with herself, the Cajun woman put the object so close to Edna's eye that she flinched and backed away. "Holds still!" she said. Edna obeyed. She squinted harder. Some bits seemed darker than the rest in the jewel. It formed a sort of shape. Edna dared not blink for fear of losing it. Then she saw it: A man hunched over with a fork in his neck.

"What does it mean?" said Edna.

"Means dis."

A toss, and the jeweled tile was in the water.

"Means is gone, and you is not never get it back."

The woman went back into her house and slammed the door. Avery stood and guided the stunned Edna back to the ferry.

"This cesspool city clearly doesn't share our idealism," said Edna.

"Three antiques," said Avery. "And what happens to them? They all end up in the swamp. I'd say our idealism, no, your idealism, is the last thing anyone in this city has on their minds."

If Edna had lost everything else that constructed her personality, she had not lost the notion that she and her husband maintained a common goal, no matter what that goal might be. That is, until he stated his opinion on her idealism. They didn't ride a trolley. They didn't do anything exciting or entertaining. They were embarrassed. All four days of their travel back, the number of words they said amounted to some double-digit number. Not one of these words was spoken in humor.

On the very last train trip, the one leading directly to Greenwich, Edna attempted to reconnect with her husband. She opened her mouth a few times, then stopped. The look on his face said, Don't talk to me.

Edna entertained herself by looking out the window at a flock of geese. One of them seemed to be quite smaller than the rest, especially its beak. Of course, it was too far away to tell for certain. It looked as though it might have been hooked. This odd-man-out also seemed to have many more feathers on his head and neck. She would have pointed it out to her husband, but he had fallen asleep. She couldn't shake the feeling that this flock was following the path of the train.

She had kept Watson's cage. She would put it back in its proper place when she came home to Greenwich.