

Truth, Beauty

a short novel

by

G.T. Hogan

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Epiphytes, or bromeliads, live and grow on other, larger plants.

Examples are orchids, algae, and Spanish moss.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

- J. Keats

Prologue

Every once in a while an acquaintance rips a new hole in you, and leaves it bare, dry and open to the wind. In the springtime, we want love and life and growth, not ashes and urns with maybe a few nice words thrown in for future days. The move to New Orleans was great. But the departures I almost witnessed were as tragic as it gets. That recent March, I met the best decision-maker the world will ever know!

In five weeks time, I came to know pretty well those who left us—and was a bit confused when they were gone. But no, this is not about a team captain, the leader of a strategic thinking group, or the benefits of being a bad-ass. The subject is love, actual love. And yes, sometimes you feel it strong even when it isn't yours.

And no, this is not about the dangers of hurricanes, the worst one yet that broke through the big levees built by the Army. Nor is this about the big plastic hurricanes that people drink—or about beignets, café au lait, casinos, or strippers in the French Quarter. And no, this is not a *House of the Rising Sun* drug story. We're talking—almost precisely—about a month and a half in Mid City. And let me say in advance that the accident on N. Broad was nothing but sad circumstance.

In wonderful and absolute contrast to New Jersey, the world in New Orleans is simply dripping—dripping because it rained recently, or from the warm, soupy, humid air, or from the Spanish moss dripping down from all the Live Oaks, making them look like Weeping Willows. So many buildings, drinking holes, cottages, etcetera, have grown very old in the very wet air. Pipes,

trees, streets—it's all dripping, and I think there's honesty, let alone beauty to that.

Aside from getting to know a significant person or two, or three..., I am now very very lucky to have a few special ladies in my life—plus the little one of course. The story is not about me, but my life has changed quite a bit since then.

“You’ve got to live your life!” Miss Carol McNolan said to me in May. “I mean it—you’ve got to live your life,” she repeated.

I am not smart or knowledgeable about the truths of womanhood, but I’m pretty sure Miss Carol’s announcement would not have happened anywhere else. Truth is in the air, and it gets to be transparent. When you move to a new place, love might be already there. You have to pay attention to it, or else you’re a step behind.

And then maybe big sad events happen.

The grand significance of things took me many nights to fully process, but then it smacked me hard across the face.

After the “bad girl” hurricane Katrina hit a couple years later, there were so many heart-breaking stories, with all the desperation of city or likewise parish people, all the grievous situations and the deaths. There are so many inspirational stories of survival as well the rebuilding of houses and lives and whole neighborhoods. These days so much is written and told about the big easy-dripping city. It puts this miniscule tragedy in its place.

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Up in Jersey City, Mani called and told me to come see his dad and mom's new cottage.

"You'll love it," he promised. "It's like a totally different world down here!" He was staying with them during Mardi Gras.

"Okay then," I said to show amplitude. I was very ready to quest for love somewhere new. So I left my flooded month-to-month in the scenic Columbus Ave basement and the job I didn't like at the accounting co. and got on the Amtrak Crescent in Newark. The apartment had taken on used water from a flipping washer drain-hose, and my dehumidifier was also recalled for a "serious risk of fire and/or personal injury." "Unplug your unit immediately, Mr. Acheron. Do not use your unit until an authorized service tech..." So I followed instructions, and Mani's recommendation, and got on a train heading south.

Sadly though, it was a week after Mardi Gras—and I didn't have a girlfriend either.

Mani and I met at the Giants summer camp when we were eleven. When we were sixteen, his parents moved to Upper Saddle River from Rutherford because they could afford to. When we were twenty-three, they bought a "cottage" a block above Bourbon Street and called it their "winter house." They said they couldn't handle the dirty black snow and ice anymore.

At the New Orleans train station—a week before I bought the used Volkswagen—I stepped into the drippy, wet warm air and

walked to the French Quarter. Though I quickly discovered I would have sweated less if I lower-case lyfted or ubered it. My friend Mani's dad and step-mom live on Orleans Street—known as The Avenue a few miles north. As it happened, with Mani and his girlfriend there, the four of them were more or less expecting me.

Mani had flown down again from La Guardia, which he has done many times. His step-mom grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana. His dad grew up on the mean streets of Greenwich, Connecticut. These days, his parents are known to people in upper Jersey as residents of an exotic locale, like members of a distant, exclusive club. But, they're pretty much posers to the smart younger ones, like my own touristy self. Stoked I was to be down in the famous Big Easy. On the train ride down, I thought of them, and potentially my new self, as hip domestic ex-pats.

In the Killjoy kitchen I said hello, then Dana moved with a tall lanky step to the center. She and Mani started dating when he was at Tulane Law School. But she still lives in the Easy because of all her spokes-model work. The first time I met her was in the Big Apple.

Mani's step-mom is Marta, known to her friends simply as Killjoy, Mani's last name, but somebody's little daughter ten years ago revised it to Killy. To old friends of Mani, she is either Ms. Marta, or Aunt Killy if the occasion is a party—as that evening turned out to be.

Mani's real mom, slightly older but not much, is Catherine, and she still lives in Hudson County. Mani's dad and Ms. Catherine divorced in the early days when Mani was two or three. That's all I know about Ms. Catherine, and Mani doesn't know much more than that.

Miss Dana then leaned her hips into the counter and watched Aunt Killy's hands while she cut a big green bell pepper, the cutting board spattered with white pepper seeds.

"Hey, Jon boy!" Mani's dad then said. "Dana, have you met Jon?" Tall Dana nodded to me and smiled and then crunched again on her celery stalk. "We've been serving Jon late dinners for almost a decade now. Hey Jon, we know it's not the food. So what is it, the company?"

I answered by not answering and gave everybody a quick smile.

"Here's your drink," Mani said, handed me a spilling tumbler. He glanced at the magazine-mess I'd stirred up on the back windowsill. "Let's go downstairs. Hey, sweetie," he said to Dana. "Leave the old folks alone."

I took one sip from the overflowing drink, and then wanted to answer Uncle Bob's question. I let the glass down and stepped closer to the kitchen again. Dana whispered something in Mani's mom's ear. Then I spoke past them over to Mani's dad at the sink.

"Can't figure it out myself. All these years...." I paused and took another small sip. "I must have more problems than I thought."

Uncle Bob nodded and chuckled. Aunt Killy smiled at the pepper parts in front of her and Dana then looked at the doorway right at my chest, grinning at whatever it was she had just whispered. Uncle Bob then suggested that the lovely Dana leave them to their work.