

### **Once Upon A Streetcar**

(Memoir of New Orleans by Elaine McDermott)

Sometimes it's a familiar refrain that wraps itself around your heart, and try as you may, you can't escape it. Sometimes it's a subtle scent that lingers in your mind, calling you back to some elusive time and place. With me it's ligustrum, a fragrance more intoxicating than any drug, that fills my soul with a longing for the home I left behind. And once more I am in New Orleans, uptown on Hillary Street, sitting on the gallery with my grandmother drinking iced tea as sweet as syrup and watching the neighborhood characters parading on the banquette below.

One of the frequent passers-by, a bearded man known in the neighborhood as Billy Whiskers, always stopped to talk when he passed by our house. Although his talk made no sense, Grandmother politely listened. He had been kicked in the head by a horse. Henry lived down the block from us. Because he refused to shave or cut his hair, rumor had it that he feigned insanity to avoid the draft.

A favorite of mine was the potato man. He wore a homemade burlap wrap of sorts draped around his shoulder. He begged for potatoes but expressed gratitude for anything given him. The tapping of his cane preceded the appearance of the old, blind man, always led by a small boy. One day my brother, Jimmy, declared that the potato man lived on the levee. In my imagination, I would picture him there with the boy, boiling his potatoes in a black kettle over a fire of sticks and twigs. Whenever we rode past the levee, I looked for a sign of smoke.

Excitement grew when we heard the music of the hurdy-gurdy announcing the approach of the organ grinder. Smartly-dressed in red jacket and cap, his monkey companion danced

to the music and passed his cap around for the few coins we threw in it.

Some days a peddler, known only as the vegetable man, rode down our street in his horse-drawn wagon filled with fruits and vegetables. Hearing his melodious voice ring out from a block or two away, "I've got watermelon, red to the rind," my grandmother walked to the curb to meet his wagon, with me following behind.

The arrival of the vegetable man also meant there would be a lot of cooking that day. Nothing to me was more aromatic than my grandmother's kitchen. I sat for hours to watch her cut, chop, boil, and bake. Of course, I got to sample everything. Nobody could cook better! In the mornings, I looked forward to her chicory coffee sweetened with lots of condensed milk and paired with hot French bread and butter.

My grandmother also took me grocery shopping with her. We walked to the Hill store, the A & P, and Spooner's Grocery on Maple Street in search of her favorite brand names: Bond bread, Big R tomatoes, Contadina tomato sauce. Once home, I had the job of stacking the cans in rows in the pantry.

The fall of the year was always an exciting time. That's when fruitcake baking took place. I watched in amazement as Grandmother turned pans of delicious smelling dough, packed with pecans, cherries, citrons, and various other fruits and nuts into rows of fruitcakes drizzled with a trace of brandy.

Our street dead-ended to a cemetery. Whenever we heard the sounds of the funeral dirge, we hurried outside to hear the music and view the procession. The brass band played doleful music while the locals followed along. We eagerly waited on the gallery for the burial to be over so that we would not miss a moment of the return procession. In a

totally transformed mood, the jazz band, played “I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal You.” Following the band on the banquette, second-liners sang along and danced with umbrellas held high.

Ice was delivered to our house by a neighbor named Butch who kept his horse in a stable behind our garage. My grandparents did not own a car; therefore, the horse presented no hindrance. Since the horse lived with us, so to speak, we felt privileged and didn’t hesitate to ask Butch to let us ride on the back of the ice wagon, our feet dangling.

In our backyard was a shed with stairs that led to the loft over the stable. It became one of our favorite playgrounds. For a time, we sheltered five rabbits that we kept hidden. I have no idea where they came from, but we managed to keep them watered and fed until one day they just as mysteriously disappeared. On the back of our house stood a small room surrounded by windows. In it were my grandmother’s Singer sewing machine and two daybeds. One night my sister, Carolyn, and I lay sleeping in “the little room,” as we referred to it, when we heard a terrible banging beneath one of the windows next to my bed. It turned out that the horse had escaped the stall and had begun kicking on the side of house. My grandfather called on Butch to return the horse to his stall.

Grandfather was a kind and gentle man who owned a grocery store on Freret Street around the corner from our house. One day during the depression, a man came into the store and stole some bread. Becoming frightened when my grandfather walked behind the counter, he pleaded that he only stole because he had nothing to eat. My grandfather had gone behind the counter to slice some ham to go with the bread.

Ernest and Tom worked for my grandfather in the

grocery. I became very fond of those two teen-aged boys. When they weren't busy in the store, they spent their spare time outside entertaining me. I constantly pestered them to pick me up and swing me around or lift me up to sit on the bread box that stood near the curb. Each morning a driver from the local bakery dropped off loaves of French bread, fresh from the oven. I loved everything about the grocery store, the large aluminum cans filled with dried beans and rice, the smell of fresh bread, of kerosene, of sweet potatoes roasting on top of the kerosene stove.

Play was simple too. With no television and no electronic games or cell phones, we amused ourselves out-of-doors. We spent hours making mud pies or cutting down weeds to sell in our imaginary fruit stand. As we grew older, we played "kick the can" on street corners and football in the middle of the street. We rode our bikes to the park and cycled down Monkey Hill. Once we pedaled down River Road to Jefferson Highway all the way to the Huey P. Long Bridge, with intentions to ride across it until a family friend happened by in his car and ordered us home, much to my relief.

How we loved March! Uncle Joe, my mother's brother, taught us how to build and decorate our kites. We raced up the levee and ran with the wind while our kites climbed to the clouds, only to come crashing down. Undaunted, we would start over and over again until breathless and giddy, we returned home.

To go downtown or anywhere on St. Charles Avenue, we walked four blocks down Hillary Street to the avenue and boarded the streetcar on the neutral ground lined with rows of colorful tulips and azaleas. We stepped on the streetcar at the back door and exited the front door. The fare was seven cents and exact change was required. Frequently we rode to Audubon Park, where we walked around the lagoon, sometimes riding the Swan Boat.

I was a big fan of the movies. It didn't matter if the same movie was playing that I had seen the night before, I never passed up a chance to go to Mecca Theater three blocks from home. As soon as my younger brother, Tommy, was old enough, he came along with me and became a avid fan as well. A ticket cost twelve cents and popcorn five cents. No soft drinks were available at the concession stand, so we drank from a water fountain, oblivious of the germs we ingested.

We played, but as we got older we also worked. After school and on Saturdays, I worked in my cousin's dry-cleaning store. I earned \$3.00 a week. When I was in high school, I worked in a drug store. I attended St. Joseph High School on Tulane Avenue. To get there, I walked five blocks down Freret Street to Carrollton Avenue and road the streetcar to Claiborne Avenue, then transferred to the Tulane bus. My sister, however, chose to attend Dominican High, much nearer home, and rode her bike to school. Many mornings, I regretted not following her lead.

Today, Audubon Zoo has become quite a showplace different from the monkey cages and elephant yard we used to visit. Mecca Theater has been torn down. My grade school, Mater Dolorosa, has been converted to a retirement home. A parking lot stands where St. Joseph High once stood. My parents and grandparents now rest in Metairie Cemetery, and the old homestead is gone.

Sometimes after a summer rain when steam rises from the sidewalk, I smell the musty burlap, hear the tapping of the potato man's cane, and I am home.