STONE MOTEL

MEMOIRS OF A CAJUN BOY

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So there we were sitting at a little table at the Peacock. The *Purple Peacock*. Just Momma and me. Unlikely as that may seem, she was the one who suggested it. It was early in the evening, not yet seven. The crowds wouldn't start coming in till ten at the earliest, and we'd be long gone by then. It was pretty much just us, a quiet waitress, and the bartender.

For years I had been coming home on weekends from LSU in Baton Rouge, and then a few years after that, from grad school in Lafayette. I'd get my stuff out of the car, take my clothes out back into the laundry room, and if the washer was clear, start a load. Then I'd go inside the house and say hey to everyone, hang out for a while, gradually finish my laundry, and later head out again to go visiting friends in town. Pretty much every time I went in for the weekend, that was my routine.

"When you gonna take me with you?" Momma asked each time I headed out the front door for the night. Always assumed it was just talk, just a joke. It hit me one day that maybe she was not joking. Why *not* take her with me?

"All right, then, come with me tonight," I replied on a particularly warm April Friday night on my way to town to play cards with Wayne Arceneaux and his wife, Vicky. I had served in their wedding five years earlier.

That I was obviously serious with my invitation for her to join me caught Momma off guard.

"Oh," she said. "I can't tonight. I was just joshin' with you, anyway. You know I can't go and leave your daddy here on such a short notice."

"Well, let's do it another weekend, then. How about we make a date for next time I come in? That way you can prepare him for the shock of having to spend a few hours on his own."

"Okay. It's a date, then." There was a lilt in her voice; her eyes smiled. "How about we go to the Peacock for a coupla drinks? I haven't been there in twenty years."

"Um, sure. That sounds like fun," I replied, even though what I was envisioning was just having her come with me when I stopped in at Wayne's or the home of some other friend's who needed visiting that weekend. We'd have a drink with whomever, sit a while and talk, maybe play a hand or two of cards, then get back to the motel in time for Daddy to have an evening nap before the late-night customers kept him up.

I thought about this little turn of events on my way to Wayne and Vicky's. Lately, she had been feeling down. Like she was lonely. She was sad. She was tired. She was definitely not herself. There'd been a lot of ups and downs in her life. Seems she had been married for a million years. She gave birth to nine babies. She ran her own business for a decade. Now her children were all gone except for the youngest, Alisa, who herself would be on her way to college after she finished high school next May. Of course she was feeling off.

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As planned, the next time I went home, Momma and I headed out for a drink at the Purple Peacock.

The waitress brought us our Tom Collinses. Though neither of us really smoked, to accompany our drinks we each had a lit Marlboro Light from a pack I bought at the cigarette machine near the bar.

"If only we could sell that place," she said before I asked how she was doing.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's too much for us. Round the clock. All these years we had all y'all kids. I don't know how we're gonna keep it up by ourselves."

"You think he's really gonna sell it, then?" I asked.

"I keep telling him that we need to do it, that twenty years was a good run. That it's given us a good life and did what it was supposed to do. But now with Alisa leaving next year, we won't need to keep at it forever."

"He should know that," I said.

"I think he does, but he's also afraid that he won't know what to do with himself if we sell. His excuse is that the market's not good right now. He wants to get a good price for it. But the market hasn't been good for several years."

"So y'all are not likely to be able to get a good price any time soon," I said.

"That's what worries me. We have to get a good price, or we won't leave with enough to retire. We could live for another thirty years. Social Security won't be enough, that's for sure."

But that's not all there was to the story.

"Motel or no motel, if it wasn't for y'all kids, I would have left already," she continued, staring blankly over to a dark corner in the expansive, quiet nightclub—it would be throbbing with disco in a few hours, drawing people from all over the state.

"Really?" I asked, a bit shocked and not sure if I should press her for more. I didn't have to.

"He's been hard to stay with all this time. I've thought about leaving many, many times—especially back when he was so violent with you and the others. But I couldn't imagine making it work with all the kids with me, and I wasn't about to leave y'all with him. So I stayed put."

"Wow," I said quietly. "I wouldn't have—none of us would have—blamed you for leaving. We would have made it work somehow."

"You're probably right, but I was so scared of what could happen to us. It's never easy on the woman. The men always make it out of that kind of situation okay, but the women don't. Believe me, I've heard plenty of stories from the women in my shop. It's a common thing, unfortunately. So many women stay with men that aren't right for them because they have nowhere else to go, and especially if they have kids."

I took a long drag on my Marlboro Light, which made me cough. Even though I had a cigarette every now and then, I was not a practiced smoker, so I hadn't built up my inhalation skills like the pros do. She was even less of a smoker. She took a drag on hers, and like me, she coughed up a few clouds.

We talked about Mémère and her fear of being alone; about Pépère dying and leaving her behind way too soon; how that devastated her; and then how Mémère then endured Billy Joe Olberg for so long simply because he provided some company, and because she did not want to be alone in her little world. She told me about how she met Daddy all those years ago when she was the bookkeeper at the department store in Ville Platte, how she had a sixth sense that he was not what he seemed, how he in fact turned out to be mean and quite violent. How that violence affected their first five children, born before he mellowed enough to better control his temper.

She told me how hard it was to lose a child, Thomas, her fourth son. How that really surprised her and caught her completely off guard, especially after having six perfectly healthy babies before him with no problem. To

then have one with encephalitis, who died after just two days. Having to bury that little boy without having had a chance to hold him in her arms.

We talked about her beauty shop. How she set it up from scratch after beauty school, how the ladies there became a circle of friends she may have never known otherwise. And how their lives, when compared to hers, were in many ways, much harder. And how that fact made her see her situation as more manageable. How, when she got to her shop each day she was in control, not only of a successful business but of her own life. About being able to travel a little by her own means, because Daddy never honored his courting promise to take her with him to see the world. The few parts of the world she did see were because she made those trips happen: trips to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the New Orleans World's Fair, and the mountains of Tennessee.

I was intentionally steering the conversation to her life, because I wanted to know what was going on with her. But we did talk about me a little. She asked if I was happy, if I had an idea what would make me happy, and if I did, could I share that with her. How I approached romance and what I thought about *forever* love. She said she'd known since I was a boy that I would have a difficult life because of the gay thing. But that she had no idea that some of the hardest battles I would have to fight in my life would happen early on, right at home. That the man she married would show himself to be my biggest threat because of that, and how she tried her best to calm him down; to get him to accept that nothing he did could change me; that this was not something to fear, but rather something she believed I could learn to handle with strength.

"I saw early on, when you were just a toddler, that you could find ways to go around things," she said. "If something gets in your way, you have a knack for getting around it and coming out on the other side unfazed. I think that is pretty remarkable. I would wish that skill for all of my kids."

And then we talked about her, personally. About how she had lived her whole life fulfilling other people's needs.

"I have no problem whatsoever doing for my kids," she said. "But it took me a long time—years and years—before I figured out that I can be that kind of a momma, and I can *also* give myself some time to enjoy life. There's a whole life inside me that I haven't lived. That's what pushes me now. I want to live that life. I want to do things that interest me. That make me feel alive on this earth. Before I die. Before I am too old and it's too late."

"Alisa's about to graduate," I said. "When that's done and she's in college, you won't have that holding you back any more. You should come live with

me in New Orleans. It's my turn to take care of *you*. You deserve a good life, and you're right: that needs to start now."

And I meant it. I was not telling her this to make conversation. She was at a critical point in her life where someone needed to help her see it was indeed possible to escape that man. I did it and was more than confident that I could help her do the same.

I could already envision having her living with me in New Orleans. During the day she'd keep herself busy with the many things the city has to offer: touring, shopping, or just reading in a comfortable chair on the back balcony. We would sit together on the front balcony in the evenings listening to the magical city's nightly performance: people laughing in the house next door, someone playing a saxophone across the way, the clanging bells of the streetcar as it went by every few minutes. There would be smells of seafood gumbo wafting up from the apartment below, enticing us to make our own pot.

On weeknights we'd cook and watch TV, or go out to dinner, to the movies, to hear live music in any one of the venues that punctuate each neighborhood of the city. And on weekends, we'd have beignets in the French Market, just like the tourists did, have a good long walk along the rousing Mississippi's banks, or take car trips to the malls on the outskirts.

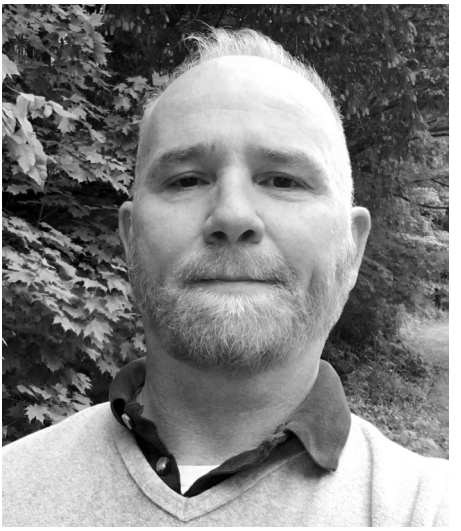
"That sounds so good," she said. "But I'd not be able to visit Momma as often as I do now. You know, that's pretty much the only thing that keeps me sane. If I didn't have my Momma, I don't know what I would do. I can't imagine being in this world without her. But after she's gone, I can see myself getting out of this place and living in New Orleans. Wouldn't that be an adventure!"

It was approaching eight thirty. We'd had two Tom Collinses and smoked, or puffed and coughed through, three cigarettes each. The cocktail waitress asked if we wanted anything else. I told her no thank you. We had to be getting back.

"If only we can sell that place," she said once more, as we walked back to the car.

This oft-repeated lament my mother made in her last years on earth still haunts me as a cry for help that none of us—not my siblings, not me, and not our father—were fully able or willing to hear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Morris Ardoin lives in Manhattan, and Cornwallville, New York, with his husband, Aubyn, and their dog, Hugo. He has spent his career working with nonprofit organizations focusing on health care, global migration, family poverty, and education. Cooking, writing, reading, painting, and travel keep him amused and excited to be alive.