

New Found Land

Herbert F. Hopkins



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"Let us pretend in order to make the pretence into a reality."

—C. S Lewis

It was St. John's Eve and Angéline LeBlanc was standing on the Magnolia Bridge over Bayou St. John. Fort St. Jean was just up river. The name of her Newfoundland home seemed to be everywhere in New Orleans.

Angéline was swaying along to the drums with the rest of the white-clad worshippers on the footbridge. The old walking bridge seemed as organic as the water that flowed beneath it. She had been here so many times before. Too bad Papa was so old and stuck in his ways; he could be here with her, in a white suit and top hat. She smiled at the thought.

The young woman beside her stopped singing long enough to whisper, "You look lost, *sha*."

"Lost in thought," Angéline whispered back, turning her head to look at her companion in the ritual.

"I'm Rosella," the woman said.

"A beautiful name."

"Thank you. And yours?"

"Angéline, Angéline LeBlanc."

"White Angel."

"Sure."

A blonde woman leaned over a makeshift shrine in the middle of the bridge and lit some candles. She, like the entire congregation, male and female, was dressed in white, her head covered in a white kerchief. In the middle of the shrine was a statue of the famous voodoo queen, Marie Laveau. Around the statue were piled gifts: wine, hair, ribbons, barrettes, candles, flowers and *gris-gris* bags.

Angéline leaned towards Rosella and whispered: "She is so lovely, Mambo Sallie."

The voodoo priestess raised her arms skyward. A snowy egret flew overhead.

A drummer played an African rhythm while another man tapped an axe head with a machete. The

congregation began to sway, locked together by their arms and their belief. A chant welled up from deep inside them:

Papa Legba ouvre baye pou mwen, Ago eh!

Papa Legba ouvre baye pou mwen

Ouvre baye pou mwen, Papa

Angéline could feel the energy build as they called on the keeper of the gate, Papa Legba, to open the portal to the spirit realm so that the *lwa*, the spirits, could come down. The fingers of Angéline's hands pinched the outer layer of her long white skirt as she swayed from side to side like a pendulum. Her own spirit seemed intent on flying out of her body to meet the spirits halfway. The spirits were in the breeze, in the birds, in the stars that were coming alive. The drums were in her chest; her heart and mind were soaring.

Rosella leaned over and placed a kiss on Angéline's cheek. Angéline took her hand and squeezed it. How comforting to be here once again, with her fellow *voodooists*.

"Such a beautiful ring, Angéline. Where did you get it?"

"A gift from my *shoushou*. The stone is labradorite. Have you ever heard of Labrador?"

"Not really."

The drums died away. Angéline opened her half-shut eyes and watched as Mambo Sallie knelt next to Marie Laveau's shrine. Rosella pulled a purple cloth bag from her left pocket, a *gris-gris* bag. She loosened the drawstring and a heap of objects spilt onto the shrine: a blue flower, a lodestone, dust, a feather, a red ribbon. A piece of paper also fell, landing face up; the word *angel* had been written seven times, each 'angel' connected to the next, and the first connected to the last in a full circle.

Angéline felt a sharp jolt; she had forgotten to bring gifts for Marie. She had come all this way and had nothing to give. The ring, her beautiful ring; it was all she had. But she had promised Luke she would never take it off, it was the symbol of their bond, their life together. It made her feel connected to him in ways she hardly understood. And it was beautiful, bought from a street vendor a world away. Thick silver, it was soft and hard at the same time. It felt solid on her finger; she liked the weight and the way the light played on the stone, making the colours change. It reminded her of Luke's eyes. The shrine's candles reflected

their own energy from the stone, and it danced as it never had before.

Luke first owned the ring and would twist it when he was nervous. Sometimes he twisted it while he read a poem he had just written, so in fear of her response that he could hardly get the words out.

She noticed she was twisting the ring herself now. Just one more go round and the ring would slip past her knuckle. She felt the release and looked down: it had fallen into a bouquet of white flowers.

Rosella whispered in Angéline's ear. "You are near the crossroads—we will go together."

Angéline felt as if she was on a threshold; it was like being at the edge of sleep, ready to fall into a dream, unaware of herself, her ego. Like her ring, the material world was vanishing: it meant nothing. "Papa Legba, Papa Legba."

A cross appeared in front of her, hanging in the ether. A cross at the crossroads.

Cross, crossroads, where is this place? The bayou was still there, but it was now a spiritual world, where consciousness was no longer a state of mind but rather an elation of the soul. Time and space were gone, the weight

of life had disappeared. Angéline was suspended on a swing at the edge of up and down. When she closed her eyes a valley appeared, a river ran into the sea, and a great white egret soared overhead. The primal beat of a drum sounded throughout the valley. She had arrived at the cross—the crossroads. Wrapped in Luke's arms was the happiest place she had ever known before this.

With both hands, she reached out to the valley.

Cross, crossroads—I'm ready.

Luke Delaney doubled up a piece of cardboard and wedged it under one leg of the barroom table. Everything seemed off kilter. He wondered if he'd ever be happy, always wanting something that was just out of reach and not even knowing what it was. At least—no, at best—there was Angéline. Even though a short skirt could still fondle his thoughts, he wasn't tempted. If he and Angéline so much as touched the same branch together when they were berry-picking, Luke could feel the connection between them. That kind of love didn't come along every day. Never, for most people.

Tonight, though, he was spending time with his old friend Mossy. A few pints and a couple of stories. Lies, Mossy called them. Sometimes they played the guitar and sang, Luke taking the melody and Mossy singing the high harmony. The top notes seemed counter to Mossy's size, but then everything had a surface that belied reality.

Tonight, laughter would kick the shit out of his blues. He hadn't seen Mossy in a month. It was a Friday night at the Ship, a pub on Solomon's Lane. The lane was

named after Simon Solomon, a watchmaker and jeweller who had been the first unofficial postmaster of Newfoundland, making his own stamps by hand. The place was still about communication, but by song, poetry, and prose now; the Ship was the worship centre for the arts. Late at night, Bill, the bartender who loved Tom Waits, would allow him to growl through the stereo speakers and send you home singing his tunes. But not before you talked to the smokers outside, who were inhaling fresh air and an assortment of dried leaves. A bright red awning hung above them like an umbrella, but other than looking good it did little else; in this city, the rain squalled from the side. The painted floor of the Ship had been chafed clean by the soles of a million shoes—wild women and men shaking in the night. The Ship had the best stage in St. John's, maybe the world. It was one of the few things in the City of Dreams that never changed. Artists came from everywhere to play the Ship, but mostly it was local acts, strutting down over the hill to bury themselves in the night. The sound was always good; a big man took care of that. He seemed to live there, fitted into a corner in front of his board. Backstage was a kitchen, a tight muddle of fridges and fryers. Barely enough room to turn a phrase. Some of the Ship's

performers blossomed, others died on the tree, and some fell from grace. But everyone came back.

Luke liked the hand-painted mermaid that graced a support post. He believed this post held up the city. If it fell, so too would the City of Dreams. But tonight, the post was not even holding him up. He was in a rotten mood. His head was throbbing. Everything was annoying him. And a woman at the bar wouldn't shut up. Three rum and Cokes hadn't even begun to put a dent in it. He needed something else, but he didn't want to think about that.

"Hey, Mossy; sorry, I'm just not into this. Going to make my way home." Luke leaned towards Mossy and made a vague gesture towards the rest of the crowded bar. "You enjoy."

"Aw, come on, Luke—stay for one more."

"Naw, I'll finish this and be gone. I just don't feel right. I'm a little lost tonight." Should he tell Mossy? Not now. Maybe not ever.

"Angéline?"

"No, we're good. Listen, this is just funk, melancholia, whatever. It will pass."

"Perhaps the fault is in your stars, old buddy. I've got a friend who's into astrology. Interested?"

"Don't think so. Not really into that shit. Anyway,
I'm going. I'll give you a call tomorrow."

"Okay. Take care, Luke."

Caleb Buckle never worried about the night. Day, night, it was all the same to a blind man. Memories got him around. He knew all the streets and the coves by heart, but it was the alleys he'd played in as a kid that he knew best. East and west were easy; the wind almost always blew from the west and when it didn't Caleb knew from the feel of it where it had come from. The southwest wind was best, up from southern waters, warm and humid and strong. North was cold and came from up the hill. An east wind was even worse, like the old saying went: "When the wind is in the east, 'tis neither good for man nor beast." But he and his beast, Blackjack, made out okay no matter which way the wind was blowing. Blackjack was a boxer cross, white from tip to tail. Cops ignored the leashless dog; no one had ever complained about him. "Caleb, Blackjack, how's it going?" was a common Water Street refrain.

Before Caleb lost his sight, he had sung country songs in bars around the bay, for drinks and tips—just like the song said. Despite being blind, or more likely because of it, his voice had gotten better; thick as cream, someone

said. But getting gigs in the city was a pain, and he didn't like the late starts; besides, no one wanted a ratty old mutt around. So instead of having the people come to him, he went to the people. He made more money on the streets than he had in the bars—over a hundred a day. And no liquor bill. Only once did someone try to steal his money, but Blackjack had taken care of that. Word travelled fast: you'd lose your hand if you stole from the blind man.

The day was closing in. It didn't really matter to him as long as he was dry. Right now, he was beside a building that had a ledge or an awning above it; something that was trying to keep out the drifting rain, anyway. He didn't mind being outside most of the time; in fact, he liked it. Sometimes in the summer he even stayed out all night, on a bench or on the ground with a couple of blankets. The fresh air made him sleep like a dead man.

"Caleb—over here, it's Luke."

Caleb felt Blackjack stiffen and then relax. "Jesus, Luke, sneaking up on a blind man. Lucky, you still got your nuts. Got something for me?"

"Yeah, the usual."

"The usual's just fine. Thanks, Luke."

The handshake was short. Luke was reminded of the first time he'd met Caleb. It had been on McMurdo's Lane when two thieves had stolen his wallet and phone. Caleb had overheard the encounter and set Blackjack loose. The men had run off, leaving Luke on the ground. When he'd looked around to see where all the barking was coming from, he could hardly believe his eyes—saved by old blind Caleb's dog. Luke's back had hurt like hell, he couldn't move, and his vest had been ripped off him.

“Should I shout for help?” Caleb had said.

“No, just get me my vest, please; it's right there by your left foot. There's two pills in the inside pocket, and I'm going to need one of them.” Luke always kept two pills with him; he never knew when the pain might return.

Luke had watched Caleb kick around until he found the vest, picked it up and slipped his hand into the pocket. Watched him hesitate and fondle the pills before he handed them over. Luke had managed to summon up enough saliva to swallow one of them. It took twenty minutes to kick in, and by then he had dragged himself over to a set of concrete steps. He had given the second pill to the blind guy, as a way of thanking him. Luke had figured the old man would take it home and crush it up before he ingested

it; that was the way to get the heroin-like high. He remembered thinking that if he were blind and homeless, or even one of these things, he would do the same. There were days he thought about trying it anyway.