

Kate Flaherty

The Property of Water

It always amazes me how our waiter Reynard never spills a drop from the water pitcher when he refills our glasses. Reynard has this palsy he doesn't talk about, and it's nerve-wracking to watch him reach for the pen in his apron to take our order or move his trembling hand between lighted candles and full flower vase to pluck out an empty glass. I'm sure he's going to knock over everything within his reach or dump a bowlful of French onion soup in my lap, but in all the times Kelly and I have come to Café Degas and ended up with Reynard, he's never dropped so much as a salad fork.

All I can figure is he only gets the shakes when his hands aren't full. Tonight he managed not only the water pitcher, but also two rounds of martinis filled to the brim and two glasses of Beaujolais, one of which I spilled on the table myself on account of being sloshed. Reynard discovers the huge red stain when he removes my dinner plate, but ever the consummate server he says nothing, and I cover the embarrassing spot with my napkin after he's turned to go.

Reynard's odd grace fascinates me, and he has joined my list of favorite characters in New Orleans. I have lived here six months and have few friends – actually Kelly is my only friend here – but I have a running list of people to keep track of, if only to make myself feel less alone.

There is the old woman on the park bench I see every Tuesday on my way to work, feeding bread crumbs to the squirrels, and shy Sara at the Winn-Dixie whose line I always try to go through so I can hear her whisper thank you and blush if I tell her to have a nice day, and Malachi, whose band plays Thursdays at Bootless and Unhorsed, a bar on Decatur in the French Quarter. Malachi's fingers fused together when his car flipped and caught fire on I-10, and he plays furious drums with the sticks strapped to his

stumps with gauze and adhesive tape. I know these people don't see me in the crowd of others passing their way, but watching them keeps my mind off other, less pleasant subjects.

When Reynard returns with the bottle of Beaujolais offering to refill my glass, I shake my head no, and Kelly snickers after he walks off.

"You should have let him fill it up, Meg," Kelly says. "There are still parts of the tablecloth that aren't red yet."

"Ha, ha," I say, kicking him under the table. "I think we need to get out of here instead. If I'm going to make it all night, I'd better get some fresh air."

"All night and all day tomorrow," he says. "If anything, we need more wine, not more fresh air. You go outside and wake yourself up. I'll pay the bill and be out in a minute." Kelly gets up and makes his way to the bar, and I stand up and hold onto the back of my chair, hoping I present the illusion of being steady on my feet before heading for the door.

It *will* be a long couple of days. Kelly's treating me to dinner at Degas and dancing at Muddy's because I agreed to go as his date to his kid sister's wedding tomorrow in Mandeville. Going out tonight seemed like a good idea, but all I can think about now is how early we'll have to get up in the morning and how together we're going to have to look. The wedding is a big affair at an old plantation with a dozen attendants, five course meal, open bar, and swing quartet, and Kelly says the women here really do it up with makeup and hats and everything. I bought what I thought was a classy '50s dress at a vintage store and had shoes dyed to match, but the more I think about it, the more anxious I get.

Kelly comes out of Degas with a bottle wrapped in a paper bag, and I groan.

"No," I say, "no more."

"Oh buck up, darlin'. Beaujolais is no more potent than grape juice." He hands me the bottle and I take a tiny sip and try to hand it back to him, but he shakes his head. "Meg, we are going to a *Southern* wedding tomorrow, and unless you get going you are going to be rather unprepared."

He's putting his accent on thick when he says this, but I hand the bottle back anyway. This time he accepts it. "I, on the other hand, will be perfectly marinated and ready for the roast," he says, and takes a huge swallow.

Kelly's been complaining about having to go to the wedding ever since I met him, and he's been grumpy twenty-four seven

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since he got the official invitation four weeks ago. At first I thought he was just annoyed at having to wear a suit, so I was surprised when he grouched at dinner about falling behind. He's ten years older than his sister Reneé and says he doesn't know what he's doing wrong.

What can I tell him? Despite my new dress, the wedding has me a little rattled too. It'll be the first wedding I've been to since mine was called off, since I ran away to escape my horrible, failed life. The only good thing that's happened this year is meeting Kelly almost the minute I entered city limits.

I had taken my apartment sight unseen, believing the agent when he said Uptown was the only place to rent. I signed forms, wrote out checks, and dealt with my parents' worried faces as they realized I was serious about leaving New Hampshire for New Orleans. My father said he regretted ever telling me stories from his old days in the service about how intoxicating the city was.

After surviving an exhausting road trip, I pulled up to the address typed in on the Mapquest directions and dissolved when I realized the apartment was over a bar in the midst of Tulane University's Greek row. I had no one to complain to, I could hardly afford another security deposit, and I had nowhere else to stay.

Kelly saw me outside from behind the bar – sweaty and sobbing on the hood of my fully-packed Ford Fiesta – and he pulled me in and made the biggest gin and tonic I had ever seen. Although I'd resolved to leave my past in New Hampshire, I drunkenly told him the whole pathetic story of Phil, my massage therapist fiancé, and his affair with the girl in the aromatherapy shop next door to his office, the dress yet to be fitted, the dozens of notes I'd had to send and phone calls I'd had to make, and a hundred other humiliating details I'd planned to bury away forever.

After Kelly's shift ended that night, he joined me at the other side of the bar and shared his own down-and-out story – a failed graduate school career in history that he tried to pass off to his parents as an existential crisis, but which they knew was due to too many bourbons and too few books, and then a number of years lost in perfecting the role of drunken mooch. He alienated his friends as he moved from couch to couch until he asked for one favor too many from the wrong person. He lost part of a finger and gained a crook in his nose and an intimidating scar above his left eyebrow after a nasty fight that sent him sprawling down a flight of stairs. His wounds hadn't completely healed when I met him.

Kelly still drinks, but under the stern watch of Sam – owner of the Boot and my landlord – he spends more time behind the bar than in front of it. Kelly's stories that night served as a complement to mine, and neither of us has brought up the particulars since. I did try to figure out Kelly that night though, as we drank and shared our sob stories; I had to wonder why he fixed on me in my sad little state.

Though Kelly wears faded jeans and t-shirts and an old Baltimore Orioles cap every day of his life, it is clear the costume is temporary. He comes from money, the kind of money that results in a mouthful of a name like Francis Kelly Barrett IV and an attitude where buying a twenty-five-dollar bottle of Beaujolais to stuff in a paper sack and drink while you're walking along the sidewalk is no big deal. And despite his broken nose and missing finger, Kelly has the distinctive features of a man too good-looking to trust. I was familiar with faces like his, so I've been surprised and a little ashamed of my suspicions after how kind he's been since we met.

Kelly and I stop to get sweaters out of his truck. Our ritual after Degas is to walk though the nearby cemetery and clear our heads before driving to our next destination, and while it isn't raining anymore, the nights are getting blissfully cool. It's the first week of November and the street is quiet except for drips from rain gutters and a passing car or two – wet tires on the pavement spitting up a rainwater wake. Kelly and I start down Esplanade passing the bottle back and forth between us.

"Did I tell you my Aunt Delilah is the spitting image of Jackie-O?" Kelly says, and I shake my head. "From the Kennedy years – pre-Aristotle. The outfit she'll wear tomorrow will be Kennedy era too, and she'll be sure to let you know it's authentic Chanel. Hold your breath when you're near her or you'll pass out from the mothball fumes."

"I'll try to remember," I say, and take the bottle he hands to me. I take tiny, furtive sips, paranoid about drinking out in the open, even though it's perfectly legal here.

"And don't ask her if she's married. It only lasted five days and was fifty years ago, but any mention of it makes her cry at the drop of a hat." Kelly takes the bottle back, downing another huge swallow, then takes it out of the bag to hold it up to the streetlight and see how much is left. "I'll tell you the story later. And if Reneé or any of her bridesmaids ask if you were in sorority, just say they didn't have them at your school."

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"But you know they did – "

" – just say they didn't. Reneé and her lovely Greek sisters think if you weren't in a sorority in college it's because you were a loser and couldn't get in. Trust me, it'll make it much easier for you."

"Should I be taking notes?" I ask, and Kelly stops for a second as if he's actually considering it.

"No, I'll be there. I can whisper in your ear like Cyrano, and everyone will fall in love with you – an exotic little bird from the North."

Kelly and I stop at the entrance to the cemetery, and this time I take a real drink from the bottle before handing it back. Drinking wine in a cemetery – I certainly thought those days were over – but my whole life these past few months has been a complete regression. Less than a year ago I was working two jobs, planning my wedding, and putting a down payment on a piece of land for the dream house Phil and I were going to build. Now I live in a tiny apartment above a frat boy bar, barely make over minimum wage at an indescribably boring data entry job, and spend most of my free time with a man whose only current goal is keeping his shaky status as a functioning alcoholic from slipping back into the gutter.

The big iron gates of the cemetery are closed and locked, so we go through the small door to the left that squeaks as it opens. Kelly stops inside the entrance and hands me the bottle, leaning against the closest monument to light a cigarette. "Go say hello to our friends," he says, and I wander off by myself.

I don't think the cemetery's gloomy, not even at night. The mausoleums and tombs are a quiet retreat, a village of granite and marble cottages watched over by angels on the roofs or on by-standing pillars. Dozens and dozens of angels, all different: little boys with big loose curls; tall women with long flowing hair and rosaries hanging from their delicate hands; mischievous-looking cupids with round chubby cheeks. Most are dwarfish figurines, faces uplifted in prayer, but others are life-sized, carved out of the same block of marble as the tombs. Their bodies are draped over the tops, arms wrapped around them in silent and solemn protection, faces hidden in mourning and despair.

I go to a mausoleum surrounded on three sides by a short iron gate, one I always visit when we come. A vase of wilted chrysanthemums sits in front of the door. All Saints' Day was a week ago and shadows of dying flowers fall on every tomb, curled and bent under the weight of rain-filled blossoms. I press my palm against the marble inscription on the door, feeling the stone's cool kiss and

the worn-round edges of the letters. Too dark to see the names clearly, but I've read them so often before.

PROSPER W. FOY
aged 72 years
MARIE ANNE LA BRIERRE
wife of Prosper W. Foy
aged 58 years
Drowned in the storm that swept away
L'île Derniere, Louisiana
August 10, 1856.

Kelly told me the story of L'île Derniere – Last Island – and the Gulf storm that came from all directions washing everything away, even two of the steamers that hung close to the shore, trying to rescue the swimmers who frantically jumped from the dock that had broken from its moorings. All they found alive after the wind died down was one cow, who somehow kept her head above water through it all. I wouldn't trust even Kelly with such a story, but the bit with the cow is so absurd it must be true. The Gulf swallowed the women in their heavy silk dresses and lace pantalets and the men in their cutaway coats, yet one cow was spared.

I imagine the Foy's together on the veranda of the hotel, watching the water pitch and rise from the doors thrown open to the weather, sipping drinks from large glasses trimmed with orchids, sweet as nectar. Sometimes I see them dancing, Marie whispering in his ear while the water inches across the ballroom floor. Amused, content, certain of their survival.

Kelly's always telling me stories of people who lived in New Orleans – the scandals of the rich hidden behind the Audubon Gates, the mysterious and exclusive Crewes who put on the parades at Mardi Gras, the painters and the musicians, the soldiers and voodoo queens. I tell him stories of my New Orleans – Malachi the drummer, Sara the supermarket cashier, and the old woman feeding the birds every Tuesday. I think that's why we became such friends; we can talk for days and never have a conversation about ourselves.

While I spared Kelly details of the pathetic conclusion of my engagement to Phil the massage therapist, I have told him how Phil still haunts me in New Orleans. I glance up from my shopping cart in the Winn-Dixie and there Phil is, slipping around the corner.

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I'm ordering a drink at Chuck's Tavern and I catch him looking at me in the mirror above the bar. I'm combing the used CDs at the Record Bin by my apartment and I see him ducking out the door. He's like the dark spot I get in the corner of my eye after I stare at the sun too long. Blink all I want, I can't get rid of it.

I'll forever despise Phil for what he's done to me, but I can't help but feel a sick reflex of anticipation every time I think I see him. Before my brain can remind me there's absolutely no possibility Phil would be in New Orleans following me around, I think, "Oh God, Phil's come for me, Phil's here," and bam, my day is ruined.

I whisper goodbye to the Foys, and make my way back to the entrance. Kelly is where I left him, leaning in the shadow of a monument topped with one of the more majestic angels. Her arms are outstretched, her face upturned, plaintive under the floodlight from the gate. The curve of her lips looks wet as if she's just licked them with a little marble tongue. Kelly looks at me, his eyes a sudden flash from his match as he lights another cigarette.

"The Foys still there?" he says, blowing smoke out in a cloud. I nod, and he takes the half-empty bottle of wine from me and drops it in a can by the front gate. "Ready to go then?"

"Yeah," I say, "yeah," but I'm spent. Two martinis and too much wine plus a walk in the air thick with the promise of rain make me want to lie down beneath cool sheets with a damp washcloth pressed to my eyes rather than go dancing. I want to sleep and sleep, not wake up until we've already gone and come back from Mandeville, candied almonds in a little mesh bag on my bureau, a slice of cake wrapped in foil under my pillow.

"Meg," Kelly says, unlocking my door, "I'm sorry I've been complaining so much about the wedding. It won't be so bad, I promise. It's my crazy family, not yours." He pulls me to him for a quick squeeze, lightly patting me on the head – pat, pat, pat – like I'm his little Labrador puppy.

"Are you kidding?" I say, pushing him away to jump in the truck. "A dinner at Degas on Friday and a five course meal Saturday night? I've been looking forward to this for weeks."

"Really," Kelly says. "Maybe I should have made you pay tonight then." He slams the door on me and we smile at each other through the window before I reach over to unlock his side.

We don't talk as he drives, and neither of us reaches for the radio. I roll down the window and lean my face out, trying to wake up and lose the feeling of dread that's creeping up on me. Kelly and I have been so comfortable ever since we met – lying on the

sofa together reading the Sunday paper or watching a movie. Going out to get bites to eat, taking in a band, watching *Jeopardy!* on the big screen tv in the bar when Kelly's working the slow week-nights, wagering who will know the final question.

But going to a wedding together is such a pain in the neck for fakers like us. We won't be able to avoid the idea that there might be something we owe now for how easily we've let ourselves be together. There will be parents and aunts and uncles and cousins who will be witness to the fact that Kelly brought a Yankee girl in a completely inappropriate dress to his sister's big deal wedding and that they must be a couple because why else would she be there? The Yankee girl wonders herself.

Kelly slows the truck down to turn onto Maple and look for a place to park. The wet black streets are lined with cars on both sides, a sure sign Muddy's will be packed. Muddy Waters, like Tipitinas or Café Degas or the Maple Leaf Bar, attracts an odd combination of locals and tourists and college kids, and everything's cool as long as no one gets too obnoxiously drunk. Kelly prefers taking me to places just for locals, but I feel more comfortable where I can be who I am with one foot in one world and one foot in the other.

When I first moved, I went by myself to places like Muddy's or Tip's, or some of the easy-to-find alternative bars on Decatur where people drink too much cheap liquor and slam into one another on the dance floor dressed in their black clothes and heavy boots. I'd go to the middle of the floor and let myself be pushed around by the flailing mob just to keep from forgetting what it was like to be touched, and I liked being around people who acted as angry as I felt. Then I saw Malachi at Bootless and Unhorsed, beating the hell out of his drums, sweat soaking through the gauze and tape wrapped around his melted hands until a drumstick slipped out and flew into the audience. The band took a break while the lead singer changed Malachi's wraps and the guitarist held the glass of bourbon to his lips so he could suck it down with a straw. I've gone every Thursday ever since.

Kelly pulls over to the curb and turns off the engine. "Looks like this is as close as we'll get," he says.

We lock the doors and start down the dark sidewalk; we're two blocks away, but can already hear the music, faintly. Kelly's favorite locals are playing, *Tabula Rasa*, the opposite of angry. They play that kind of music that wraps around you and picks you up, that makes you want to sway even when you're sitting in the

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corner with your drink or your cigarette, trying your best to hold a conversation. They show old psychedelic '60s flicks on the ceiling during their sets and pass out cherry-flavored Kool-Aid at their breaks. It's unspiked, though Kelly told me it wasn't always that way.

"Meg! Run!" Kelly shouts, and grabs my hand to drag me down the sidewalk. The sky suddenly opens up, and rain starts coming down in sheets, the road quickly turning into a fast and shallow river, the water all rushing God knows where.

Kelly and I make it under the awning in back of the stage, but it's too late – we're soaked. Kelly looks at me and shrugs, and he pulls out some milk cartons stacked by the wall for us to sit on and look through the wide open back doors at the backs of the band and the glowing faces of people dancing down front.

I close my eyes and let the sound fill me up. The melody is thin because the amps are turned the other way, but the percussion goes right through me as if every time the pedal goes down for the bass drum the sound thuds inside my chest. The rain beats down so hard I'm getting more soaked just from drops ricocheting off the sidewalk. The scrape of Kelly moving his milk cartons closer to the wall startles me and I open my eyes to look back in. Sweat flies from the forehead of the lead singer as he throws his head back to finish the last note of the song. His body goes slack and someone throws him a towel from the side of the stage.

The air is cool and new and I'm not so tired anymore. The lights shining through the rain make it look like snow, though it seems forever since I've seen it. Kelly says he only remembers it snowing once in New Orleans during his lifetime. He was eight years old and it came at night; he stayed out as long as he could before his parents called him in, then he watched from his bedroom window until he fell asleep. He says it disappeared before it touched the ground, and the next day he felt it all had been a dream.

Snow in New Hampshire never goes away. Storms start as early as October and last through March and even April some years. The county road crews shove fluorescent orange markers in the ground every fall, ten feet tall so the snowplow drivers will know where the roads are come winter. The snow can get so high on the sides of the roads that those sticks will poke out only a foot or two sometimes. I thought, as I looked out at them from the living room windows on days school had been canceled, that the whole world would just forget where we were if those sticks ever became buried.

Kelly leans in one of the back doors, holding onto the wall and pointing in at someone, then holding up two fingers in a peace sign. I look in to see who he's waving to, and I see Phil for a split-second before he ducks into the bathroom. I lean over and press the heels of my hands into my eyes to keep the tears from coming. I whisper, "Phil is not here, Phil is not here, Phil is not here." I take a deep breath and blow it out, forcing myself to relax, trying to keep my whole body from tensing up with anger as I always do after realizing how much I still hurt.

"Meg?"

I rub my eyes quickly and look up at Kelly with a smile on my face. He's holding two Dixie cups full of Kool-Aid, and he sits on his milk cartons and hands me one. "I had them passed through the crowd. Jimmy the bassist handed them back and gave me a hard time for skipping out on the cover charge." He looks pleased with himself until he gets a better look at me.

"Got the spins?" he asks, and I shake my head no, trying to snap out of it. I wipe my nose with the wet sleeve of my sweat-shirt, and raise my Dixie cup to his. "Cheers," I say, and we both down them in one shot.

Kelly looks at me again like he's going to ask me something else, but instead he lifts his arms and checks out his sleeves, heavy and stretched low like wings with the water. "I don't think we can go inside like this," he says. The Rasa is tuning up to play again, squeaks of the microphone and a pound of the drums to make sure the soundboard is still set.

"We could stay out here," I say. I know Kelly wanted to see the whole show and we've only heard one song.

"No, let's go. We have to be up early tomorrow anyhow," Kelly says, pulling me up. "Besides, you're a mess."

"You're no prize yourself," I say, though he doesn't look so bad. His hair is sticking up this way and that and his jeans are streaked and muddy, but he looks young and fresh. I rub a Kool-Aid stain from the side of his mouth and he smiles and touches me on the head, running his hand down a wet rope of my hair, and squeezing out all the water. He takes my hand and we walk to the truck, which is waiting patiently for us in the ankle-deep water.

We climb in, busy ourselves with seatbelts, and Kelly turns on the engine and puts the heat on full, though the first blast of air is like ice and only makes me colder. Kelly leans his head back against the cab, staring at his two hands on the steering wheel. The

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air is heavy and still, our clothes are slick and tight and cold, and our shoes are swollen.

When Kelly pulls away from the curb I look out at the dark streets, and then the neon signs as he turns onto Carrollton. I find myself reading each special advertised at all the fast food places along the way. "Rally's burgers 2/\$1," "Popeye's 12 piece Family Sz Dinner \$6.99 Love that Chicken!" "Super Sizzler Buffet, Buy One Get One Free 3-5 p.m." I keep staring out as Kelly turns onto my street where there's nothing really to look at, but even less to say. The rain has kept the frat boys from partying on the lawns of their houses, and kept the Boot Bar crowd from spilling onto the sidewalks. I am grateful for at least the illusion of desolation.

Kelly pulls into the parking lot of the Boot, and turns off the truck, but neither of us moves to do anything.

"Did I warn you about Uncle Leonard? He's ninety-two, and he'll feel you up any chance he gets. Don't dance with him," Kelly says.

"Okay."

"And my cousins Jake and Lila will try to corner you so they can tell you all sorts of horrible things about me that aren't true. They're just jealous because I was Granddaddy's favorite."

"Mmmhmm," I say. Both of us are looking at the windshield as we talk, and my mind, at least, is elsewhere.

Instead of thinking about lecherous and jealous relatives, I can't help but imagine the picture perfect wedding tomorrow in a beautiful old mansion, a full set of china and silver, a honeymoon in Italy. Cute Reneé and her cuter fiancé. Not that Reneé's life will always be smooth sailing, but it can still feel like a slap in the face to the rest of us who are slightly irregular, who are damaged goods. Although even for the imperfect, weddings give hope, and that's what I'm afraid of most.

"Well," Kelly says, and he reaches behind his seat moving his hand down and sideways, screwing up his face. "Yes," he says and pulls out a pair of jeans. "I thought there were some behind there. From the last time I did my laundry." He laughs a bit, putting them on the seat between us, and clears his throat. "Thought I'd come up for a while, okay? I'm not too tired, are you?"

"That sounds fine," I say looking down at my hands. "Fine," even though it's late, and we have to get up so early, and I'm not sure we have anything more to say to each other tonight anyhow.

"Look - " Kelly says, "I wish - " Kelly is running his hands up

and down his wet jeans, trying to smooth them flat, until he stops himself by grabbing onto the steering wheel.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Kelly says. I'm looking up at the window of my apartment, at the light I always leave on for myself, so I don't fumble once I'm in, so I don't feel so alone when I come home at night. It seems far away, and I wish I were already inside, clicking it off.

"What?" I say.

"I don't mean like that, I mean I just want to stay here with you, just sleep here. I'm sorry, Meg, this is stupid, I'll just go. I'm sorry."

"Okay," I say, "It's okay. It's no problem." I look at him. He's still gripping the steering wheel, staring at it as if he's going to start banging his head against it. "You don't take after your Uncle Leonard do you?" I say, and Kelly smiles at me and shakes his head.

"I don't think so," Kelly says, "but I can't promise anything. I'm not ninety-two yet."

I grab his jeans and get out. The rain has all but stopped, and Kelly follows me silently upstairs, into my apartment, into my bedroom. I give him his jeans and find him a t-shirt big enough from my bureau, change into sweat pants and shirt while he's in the bathroom. I'm so cold from all the rain my feet are like ice, so I put socks on and get into bed pulling the covers up to my nose, breathing in the familiar smell of my sheets. I'm lying on my side, looking out the window. I can see the rain-spattered reflection of my room and Kelly coming in, shutting off the light. I shiver when I feel the rush of air from him lifting the covers to lie down. He moves to put his arms around me. "Is this okay?" he says, and I nod, feeling his chin on top of my head.

"It's okay," I say, my voice muffled from under the covers. I can feel the wrinkles of Kelly's jeans through my sweat pants as he brings his knees in to meet the backs of mine.

"Did I tell you my father has a lazy eye?" he says. "I'm just telling you now, so you won't get distracted when you're talking to him."

"Can I tell you now to shut up?" I say.

"Sure," Kelly says. "It'll all be too late this time tomorrow anyhow." He kisses my hair, and I close my eyes tightly, will myself to relax, and try to think about something to put me to sleep, but I can't.

Instead, I think about driving to the wedding tomorrow, leaving early, our dress-up clothes in their plastic bags behind the seat

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of Kelly's truck, my dyed-to-match shoes in a box by my feet. I wonder if I will cry at the wedding, even though I've never even met René, and if Kelly and I will have a chance to dance together before we get too drunk, because I know we will get drunk.

I think about leaving the city of my new life with the only friend I have here and getting on the Ponchartrain Causeway that will take us to Mandeville. It's the longest bridge I've ever seen, and I see it now, stretching for miles across the lake. I see the signs that warn you to gas up before you get on, just in case, and the ant-sized cars much farther away, still crawling across. I'll be nervous as we pull on – as I always am – because I'm unable to believe a bridge that long, stretched out over the water, can possibly hold so much up.