

Hidden Gardens, Truman Capote

Hidden Gardens

SCENE: JACKSON SQUARE, NAMED after Andrew Jackson—a three-hundred-year-old oasis complacently centered inside New Orleans' old quarter: a moderate-sized park dominated by the grey towers of St. Louis Cathedral, and the oldest, in some ways most somberly elegant, apartment houses in America, the Pontalba Buildings.

Time: 26 March 1979, an exuberant spring day, Bougainvillaea descends, azaleas thrust, hawkers hawk (peanuts, roses, horse-drawn carriage rides, fried shrimp in paper scoops), the horns of drifting ships hoot on the closeby Mississippi, and happy balloons, attached to giggling skipping children, bounce high in the blue silvery air.

"WELL, I DO DECLARE, A boy sure do get around"—as my Uncle Bud, who was a traveling salesman when he could pry himself away from his porch swing and gin fizzes long enough to travel, used to complain. Yes, indeed, a boy sure do get around; in just the last several months I've been in Denver, Cheyenne, Butte, Salt Lake City, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Boston, Toronto, Washington, Miami. But if somebody asked, I'd probably say, and really think: Why, I haven't been anywhere, I've just been in New York all winter.

Still, a boy do get around. And now here I am back in New Orleans, my birthplace, my old hometown. Sunning myself on a park bench in Jackson Square, always, since schoolboy days, a favorite place to stretch my legs and look and listen, to yawn and scratch and dream and talk to myself. Maybe you're one of those people who never talk to themselves. Aloud, I mean. Maybe you think only crazies do that. Personally, I consider it's a healthy thing. To keep yourself company that way: nobody to argue back, free to rant along, getting a lot of stuff out of your system.

For instance, take those Pontalba Buildings over there. Pretty fancy places, with their grillwork façades and tall dark French-shuttered windows. The first apartment houses ever built in the U.S.A.; relatives of the original occupants of those high airy aristocratic rooms are still living in them. For a long time I had a grudge against the Pontalba. Here's why. Once, when I was nineteen or so, I had an apartment a few blocks away on Royal Street, an insignificant, decrepit, roach-heaven apartment that erupted into earthquake shivers every time a streetcar clinkety-clacked by on the narrow street outside.

It was unheated; in the winter one dreaded getting out of bed, and during the swampy summers it was like swimming inside a bowl of tepid consommé. My constant fantasy was that one excellent day I would move out of that dump and into the celestial confines of the Pontalba. But even if I had been able to afford it, it could never have happened. The usual way of acquiring a place there is if a tenant dies and wills it to you; or, if an apartment should become vacant, generally it is the custom of the city of New Orleans to offer it to a distinguished local citizen for a very nominal fee.

A lot of fey folk have strolled about this square. Pirates. Lafitte himself. Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. Huey Long. Or, moseying under the shade of a scarlet parasol, the Countess Willie Piazza, the proprietress of one of the ritzier maisons de plaisir in the red-light neighborhood: her house was famous for an exotic refreshment it offered—

fresh cherries boiled in cream sweetened with absinthe and served stuffed inside the vagina of a reclining quadron beauty.

Or another lady, so unlike the Countess Willie: Annie Christmas, a female keelboat operator who was seven feet tall and was often observed toting a hundred-pound barrel of flour under either arm. And Jim Bowie. And Mr. Neddie Flanders, a dapper gentleman in his eighties, maybe nineties, who, until recent years, appeared in the square each evening, and accompanying himself on a harmonica, tap-danced from midnight until dawn in the most delicate, limber-puppet way. The characters. I could list hundreds.

Uh-oh. What's this I hear across the way? Trouble. A ruckus. A man and a woman, both black: the man is heavysset, bull-necked, smartly coiffed but withal weak-mannered; she is thin, lemon-colored, shrill, but almost pretty.

HER: Sombitch. What you mean—hold out bread?! I ain't hold out no bread. Sombitch.

HIM: Hush, woman. I seen you. I counted. Three guys. Makes sixty bucks. You onna gimme thirty.

HER: Damn you, nigger. I oughta take a razor on your ear. I oughta cut out your liver and feed the cats. I oughta fry your eyes in turpentine. Listen, nigger. Let me hear you call me a liar again.

HIM (placating): Sugar—

HER: Sugar. I'll sugar you.

HIM: Miss Myrtle, now I knows what I seen.

HER (slowly: a serpentine drawl): Bastard. Nigger bastard. Fact is, you never had no mother. You was born out of a dog's ass.

(She slaps him. Hard. Turns and walks off, head high. He doesn't follow, but stands with a hand rubbing his cheek.)

FOR A WHILE I WATCH the prancing spring-spry balloon children and see them greedily gather around a pushcart salesman selling a concoction known as Sweetmouth: scoops of flaked ice flavored with a rainbow-variety of colored syrups. Suddenly I recognize that I am hungry, too, and thirsty. I consider walking over to the French Market and filling up on deep-fried doughnuts and that bitter delicious chicory-flavored coffee peculiar to New Orleans.

It's better than anything on the menu at Antoine's—which, by the way, is a lousy restaurant. So are most of the city's famous eateries. Gallatoire's isn't bad, but it's too crowded; they don't accept reservations, you always have to wait in long lines, and it's not worth it, at least not to me. Just as I've decided to amble off to the Market, an interruption occurs.

Now, if there is one thing I hate, it's people who sneak up behind you and say—

VOICE (whiskey-husky, virile, but female): Two guesses. (Silence) Come on, Jockey. You know it's me. (Silence; then, removing her blindfolding hands, somewhat petulantly) Jockey, you mean you didn't know it was me? Junebug?

TC: As I breathe—Big Junebug Johnson! Comment ça va?

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON (giggling with merriment): Oh, don't let me commence. Stand up, boy. Give old Junebug a hug. My, you're skinny. Like the first time I saw you. How much you weigh, Jockey?

TC: One twenty-five. Twenty-six.

(It is difficult to get my arms around her, for she weighs double that; more. I've known her going on forty years—ever since I lived alone at the

gloomy Royal Street address and used to frequent a raucous waterfront bar she owned, and still does. If she had pink eyes, one might call her an albino, for her skin is white as calla lilies; so is her curly, skimpy hair. [Once she told me her hair had turned white overnight, before she was sixteen; and when I said "Overnight?" she said: "It was the roller-coaster ride and Ed Jenkins' peter. The two things coming so close together. See, one night I was riding on a roller-coaster out at the lake, and we were in the last car. Well, it came uncoupled, the car ran wild, we damn near fell off the track, and the next morning my hair had grey freckles.

About a week later I had this experience with Ed Jenkins, a kid I knew. One of my girl friends told me that her brother had told her Ed Jenkins had the biggest peter anybody ever saw. He was nice-looking, but a scrawny fellow, not much taller than you, and I didn't believe it, so one day, joking him, I said, 'Ed Jenkins, I hear you have one helluva peter,' and he said, 'Yeah, I'll show you,' and he did, and I screamed; he said, 'And now I'm gonna put it in you,' and I said, 'Oh no you ain't!'—it was big as a baby's arm holding an apple. Lord's mercy! But he did. Put it in me. After a terrific tussle. And I was a virgin. Just about. Kind of. So you can imagine. Well, it wasn't long after that my hair went white like a witch."]

B.J.J. dresses stevedore-style: overalls, men's blue shirts rolled up to the elbow, ankle-high lace-up workman's boots, and no makeup to relieve her pallor. But she is womanly, a dignified figure for all her down-to-earth ways. And she wears expensive perfumes, Parisian smells bought at the Maison Blanche on Canal Street. Also, she has a glorious gold-toothed smile; it's like a heartening sunburst after a cold rainfall. You'd probably like her; most people do. Those who don't are mainly the proprietors of rival waterfront bars, for Big Junebug's is a popular hangout, if little known beyond the waterfront and that area's denizens.

It contains three rooms—the big barroom itself with its mammoth zinc-topped bar, a second chamber furnished with three busy pool tables, and an alcove with a jukebox for dancing. It's open right around the clock, and is as crowded at dawn as it is at twilight. Of course, sailors and dockworkers go there, and the truck farmers who bring their produce to the French Market from outlying parishes, cops and firemen and hard-eyed gamblers and harder-eyed floozies, and around sunrise the place overflows with entertainers from the Bourbon Street tourist traps. Topless dancers, strippers, drag queens, B-girls, waiters, bartenders, and the hoarse-voiced doormen-barkers who so stridently labor to lure yokels into vieux carré sucker dives.

As for this "Jockey" business, it was a nickname I owed to Ginger Brennan. Forty-some years ago Ginger was the chief counterman at the old original all-night doughnuts-and-coffee café in the Market; that particular café is gone now, and Ginger was long ago killed by a bolt of lightning while fishing off a pier at Lake Pontchartrain. Anyway, one night I overheard another customer ask Ginger who the "little punk" was in the corner, and Ginger, who was a pathological liar, bless his heart, told him I was a professional jockey: "He's pretty hot stuff out at the race track." It was plausible enough; I was short and featherweight and could easily have posed as a jockey; as it happened, it was a fantasy I cottoned to: I liked the idea of people mistaking me for a wise-guy race-track character. I started reading Racing Form and learned the lingo. Word spread, and before you could say Boo! everybody was calling me "The Jockey" and soliciting tips on the horses.)

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: I lost weight myself. Maybe fifty pounds. Ever since I got married, I been losing weight. Most ladies, they get the ring, then start swelling up. But after I snagged Jim, I was so happy I stopped cleaning out my icebox. The blues, that's what makes you fat.

TC: Big Junebug Johnson married? Nobody wrote me that. I thought you were a devout bachelor.

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: Can't a gal change her mind? Once I got over the Ed Jenkins incident, once I got that view out of my noggin, I was partial as the next lady for men. 'Course, that took years.

TC: Jim? That's his name?

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: Jim O'Reilly. Ain't Irish, though. He comes from Plaquemine, and they're mostly Cajun, his people. I don't even know if that's his right name. I don't know a whole lot about him. He's kind of quiet.

TC: But some lover. To catch you.

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON (eyes rotating): Oh, honey, don't let me commence.

TC (laughs): That's one of the things I remember best about you. No matter what anybody said, whether it was the weather or whatever, you always said: "Oh, honey, don't let me commence."

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: Well. That kind of covers it all, wouldn't you say?

(Something I ought to have mentioned: she has a Brooklyn accent. If this sounds odd, it's not. Half the people in New Orleans don't sound Southern at all; close your eyes, and you would imagine you were listening to a taxi driver from Bensonhurst, a phenomenon that supposedly stems from the speech patterns idiosyncratic to a sector of the city known as the Irish Channel, a quarter predominantly populated by the descendants of Emerald Isle immigrants.)

TC: Just how long have you been Mrs. O'Reilly?

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: Three years next July. Actually, I didn't have much choice. I was real confused. He's a lot younger than me, maybe twenty years. And good-looking, my goodness. Catnip to the ladies. But he was plain crazy about me, followed my every footstep, every minute begging me to hitch up, said he'd jump off the levee if I didn't. And presents every day. One time a pair of pearl earrings. Natural-born pearls: I bit them and they didn't crack. And a whole litter of kittens. He didn't know cats make me sneeze; make my eyes swell up, too.

Everybody warned me he was only after my money. Why else would a cutie like him want an old hag like me? But that didn't altogether figure cause he has a real good job with the Streckfus Steamship Company. But they said he was broke, and in a lot of trouble with Red Tibeaux and Ambrose Butterfield and all those gamblers.

I asked him, and he said it was a lie, but it could've been true, there was a lot I didn't know about him, and still don't. All I do know is he never asked me for a dime. I was so confused. So I went to Augustine Genet. You recall Madame Genet? Who could read the spirits? I heard she was on her deathbed, so I rushed right over there, and sure enough she was sinking.

A hundred if she was a day, and blind as a mole; couldn't hardly whisper, but she told me: Marry that man, he's a good man, and he'll make you happy—marry him, promise me you will. So I promised. So that's why I had no choice. I couldn't ignore a promise made to a lady on her deathbed. And I'm soooo glad I didn't. I am happy. I am a happy woman. Even if

those cats do make me sneeze. And you, Jockey. You feel good about yourself?

TC: So-so.

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: When was the last time you got to Mardi Gras?

TC (reluctant to reply, not desiring to evoke Mardi Gras memories: they were not amusing events to me, the streets swirling with drunken, squalling, shrouded figures wearing bad-dream masks; I always had nightmares after childhood excursions into Mardi Gras melees): Not since I was a kid. I was always getting lost in the crowds. The last time I got lost they took me to the police station. I was crying there all night before my mother found me.

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: The damn police! You know we didn't have any Mardi Gras this year 'cause the police went on strike. Imagine, going on strike at a time like that. Cost this town millions. Blackmail is all it was. I've got some good police friends, good customers. But they're all a bunch of crooks, the entire shebang. I've never had no respect for the law around here, and how they treated Mr. Shaw finished me off for good. That so-called District Attorney Jim Garrison. What a sorry sonofagun. I hope the devil turns him on a slooow spit. And he will. Too bad Mr. Shaw won't be there to see it. From up high in heaven, where I know he is, Mr. Shaw won't be able to see old Garrison rotting in hell.

(B.J.J. is referring to Clay Shaw, a gentle, cultivated architect who was responsible for much of the finer-grade historical restoration in New Orleans. At one time Shaw was accused by James Garrison, the city's abrasive, publicity-deranged D.A., of being the key figure in a purported plot to assassinate President Kennedy. Shaw stood trial twice on this contrived charge, and though fully acquitted both times, he was left more or less bankrupt. His health failed, and he died several years ago.)

TC: After his last trial, Clay wrote me and said: "I've always thought I was a little paranoid, but having survived this, I know I never was, and know now I never will be."

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: What is it—paranoid?

TC: Well. Oh, nothing. Paranoia's nothing. As long as you don't take it seriously.

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: I sure do miss Mr. Shaw. All during his trouble, there was one way you could tell who was and who wasn't a gentleman in this town. A gentleman, when he passed Mr. Shaw on the street, tipped his hat; the bastards looked straight ahead. (Chuckling) Mr. Shaw, he was a card. Every time he come in my bar, he kept me laughing. Ever hear his Jesse James story? Seems one day Jesse James was robbing a train out West.

Him and his gang barged into a car with their pistols drawn, and Jesse James shouts: "Hands up! We're gonna rob all the women and rape all the men." So this one fellow says: "Haven't you got that wrong, sir? Don't you mean you're gonna rob all the men and rape all the women?" But there was this sweet little fairy on the train, and he pipes up: "Mind your own business! Mr. James knows how to rob a train."

(Two and three and four: the hour-bells of St. Louis Cathedral toll: ... five ... six ... The toll is grave, like a gilded baritone voice reciting, echoing ancient episodes, a sound that drifts across the park as solemnly as the oncoming dusk: music that mingles with the laughing chatter, the optimistic farewells of the departing, sugar-mouthed, balloon-toting kids, mingles with the solitary grieving howl of a far-off shiphorn, and

the jangling springtime bells of the syrup-ice peddler's cart.
Redundantly, Big Junebug Johnson consults her big ugly Rolex wristwatch.)

BIG JUNEBUG JOHNSON: Lord save us. I ought to be halfway home. Jim has to have his supper on the table seven sharp, and he won't let anybody fix it for him 'cept me. Don't ask why. I can't cook worth an owl's ass, never could. Only thing I could ever do real good was draw beer. And ... Oh hell, that reminds me: I'm on duty at the bar tonight. Usually now I just work days, and Irma's there the rest of the time. But one of Irma's little boys took sick, and she wants to be home with him.

See, I forgot to tell you, but I got a partner now, a widow gal with a real sense of fun, and hard-working, too. Irma was married to a chicken farmer, and he up and died, leaving her with five little boys, two of them twins, and her not thirty yet. So she was scratching out a living on that farm-raising chickens and wringing their necks and trucking them into the market here.

All by herself. And her just a mite of a thing, but with a scrumptious figure, and natural strawberry hair, curly like mine. She could go up to Atlantic City and win a beauty contest if she wasn't cockeyed: Irma, she's so cockeyed you can't tell what she's looking at or who. She started coming into the bar with some of the other gal truckers.

First off I reckoned she was a dyke, same as most of those gal truckers. But I was wrong. She likes men, and they dote on her, cockeyes and all. Truth is, I think my guy's got a sneaker for her; I tease him about it, and it makes him soooo mad. But if you want to know, I have more than a slight notion that Irma gets a real tingle when Jim's around.

You can tell who she's looking at then. Well, I won't live forever, and after I'm gone, if they want to get together, that's fine by me. I'll have had my happiness. And I know Irma will take good care of Jim. She's a wonderful kid. That's why I talked her into coming into business with me. Say now, it's great to see you again, Jockey. Stop by later. We've got a lot to catch up on. But I've got to get my old bones rattling now.

SIX ... SIX ... SIX ...: the voice of the hour-bell tarries in the greening air, shivering as it subsides into the sleep of history. Some cities, like wrapped boxes under Christmas trees, conceal unexpected gifts, secret delights. Some cities will always remain wrapped boxes, containers of riddles never to be solved, nor even to be seen by vacationing visitors, or, for that matter, the most inquisitive, persistent travelers. To know such cities, to unwrap them, as it were, one has to have been born there. Venice is like that.

After October, when Adriatic winds sweep away the last American, even the last German, carry them off and send their luggage flying after them, another Venice develops: a clique of Venetian élegants, fragile dukes sporting embroidered waistcoats, spindly contessas supporting themselves on the arms of pale, elongated nephews; Jamesian creations, D'Annunzio romantics who would never consider emerging from the mauve shadows of their palazzos on a summer's day when the foreigners are abroad, emerge to feed the pigeons and stroll under the Piazza San Marco's arcades, sally forth to take tea in the lobby of the Danieli (the Gritti having closed until spring), and most amusing, to swill martinis and chew grilled-cheese sandwiches within the cozy confines of Harry's American Bar, so lately and exclusively the watering hole of loud-mouthed hordes from across the Alps and the seas.

Fez is another enigmatic city leading a double life, and Boston still another—we all understand that intriguing tribal rites are acted out beyond the groomed exteriors and purple-tinged bow windows of Louisburg Square, but except for what some literary, chosen-few Bostonians have divulged, we don't know what these coded rituals are, and never will. However, of all secret cities, New Orleans, so it seems to me, is the most secretive, the most unlike, in reality, what an outsider is permitted to observe.

The prevalence of steep walls, of obscuring foliage, of tall thick locked iron gates, of shuttered windows, of dark tunnels leading to overgrown gardens where mimosa and camellias contrast colors, and lazing lizards, flicking their forked tongues, race along palm fronds—all this is not accidental décor, but architecture deliberately concocted to camouflage, to mask, as at a Mardi Gras Ball, the lives of those born to live among these protective edifices: two cousins, who between them have a hundred other cousins spread throughout the city's entangling, intertangling familial relationships, whispering together as they sit under a fig tree beside the softly spilling fountain that cools their hidden garden.

A piano is playing. I can't decide where it's coming from: strong fingers playing a striding, riding-it-on-out piano: "I want, I want ..." That's a black man singing; he's good—"I want, I want a mama, a big fat mama, I want a big fat mama with the meat shakin' on her, yeah!"

Footfalls. High-heeled feminine footsteps that approach and stop in front of me. It is the thin, almost pretty, high-yeller who earlier in the afternoon I'd overheard having a fuss with her "manager." She smiles, then winks at me, just one eye, then the other, and her voice is no longer angry. She sounds the way bananas taste.

HER: How you doin'?

TC: Just taking it easy.

HER: How you doin' for time?

TC: Let's see. I think it's six, a little after.

HER (laughs): I mean how you doin' for time? I got a place just around the corner here.

TC: I don't think so. Not today.

HER: You're cute.

TC: Everybody's entitled to their opinion.

HER: I'm not playing you. I mean it. You're cute.

TC: Well, thanks.

HER: But you don't look like you're having any fun. Come on. I'll show you a good time. We'll have fun.

TC: I don't think so.

HER: What's the matter? You don't like me?

TC: No. I like you.

HER: Then what's wrong? Give me a reason.

TC: There's a lot of reasons.

HER: Okay. Give me one, just one.

TC: Oh, honey, don't let me commence.

The End