

Affair on Crozat Street

by Julie Failla Earhart

I felt like a fool carrying that pillow into store after store, but there was no other way to describe the scent to the sales clerks. I was truly at a loss for words, which, for those who know me, only deepened my misery.

All I can say for fact is that that scent lingered in the pale pink pillowcases, in the sheets, in the towels, and in the air of my efficiency apartment on the edge of St. Louis Cemetary for months after Jelka left me. Though I washed the linens over and over and scrubbed the walls and floors till my hands were raw and chapped, her perfume kept filling my nostrils. I even washed all my clothes, although I don't think we ever dressed during the two weeks we were together.

Our last night, a night of thunderstorms during which we collided with the lightening, she said the gypsy in her was calling and that she must follow.

"Where?" I asked, propping my elbow on my pillow and untangling the damp sheets so I could face her. She was so beautiful! Her long, long wavy black hair, fanned across my chest, drifted slowly like errant feathers in the heavy air when I moved. A few strands, too heavy to float, clung to the hairs of my chest where the beads of moisture had collected, connecting us like one, as we had been moments earlier.

"I don't know." She was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. Her voice was thick and held deep secrets I don't think that even she understood.

I can still smell her, even when I'm not in my apartment. I press the pillow to my face and breathe, life filling me once again. I didn't want to talk about her leaving so I asked about the perfume.

It came, she told me, from a little shop. I can hear her say "New Orleans," in her Croatian accent, then something else, but my mind had raced ahead, wondering what she was doing in such a bad part of town. I know she said the name of the store, or was it the perfume itself? right after that. No matter how hard I try, I can't make out the words. Still it's a start, but the seedy side of New Orleans is a big place. And dangerous for a guy walking into store after store carrying a pillow and pleading, *smell this; tell me what this is*.

"It's okay," I say when the clerks pull back in fear. "It's a cologne. Or a perfume. I'm not sure exactly. I'm looking for this scent." Most refused, but every once in a while, one would take a small whiff. Then intrigued, they would pull the pillow from my hands and bury their faces in it, only to shake their heads no. Nothing like that was carried in their store. Once, one of clerks, a man, quickly wrote down a phone number. "Call me," he said in a hushed voice, "when you find it. I, too, must have this fragrance." The pool of black circles under his eyes rippled across his cheekbones. He was gaunt and pasty, as if he hadn't seen the sun in months, although it was shining brightly through the large plate glass window.

My mind wanders back to that last night as I leave the shop. "I have something for you," she said. She sat up quickly, her hair flying behind her and brushing my face and arm, and leaned toward the dresser. She grabbed her long flowing skirt and searched its pockets. She pulled out a golf-ball-sized piece of crushed paper. She held it out in the palm of her hand. "Take it," she urged, "for your words."

I had come to New Orleans to write ghost stories. I thought the city with its history and hauntings would inspire me to greatness, but in the year I had been there all I had written was a telegram to my mother in Chicago asking for a rather considerable loan. Then I met Jelka in the Quarter.

"Open it," she said. Her black eyes glinted with the lightening.

I took it from her hand by my fingertips and turned it over and over looking for a seam. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her brush her hair with her hands while I contemplated her gift. "I don't understand."

"Your words," she said. "Your words are here."

While I slowly picked at a corner, Jelka cuddled against me and fell asleep. The paper ball fell apart. It was dirty and whatever had been written on it had smeared. I didn't understand, but she looked so happy, curled and sleeping by my side, that I was content to wait until morning.

When the pouring rain had stopped and the sky had cleared, Jelka was gone. All that was left were the dirty pieces of paper and her perfume.

I walked the down side of town for almost two weeks before I turned the corner and saw a little shop, a storefront really. Inside were vats and vats of oils. Lavender. Cinnamon. Rose. Vanilla. And many, many more that I never even knew existed. I opened several, inhaling and exhaling deeply to find the one that matched.

The clerk was tiny and blonde. I could see she was barefoot. I handed her my pillow. She was the only one who never shrank back in horror.

"No," she said. "That's nothing that comes from here."

"Are you sure?" I began to move different barrels.

"I make special blends," she said as I worked my way to the second row.

"Formulas created specially for individuals."

"Can you duplicate it?"

"I can try, but it might take a while. Only the owner knows the exact mixture."

"How long will it take?"

The clerk sniffed the pillow again. She held it at arm's length and repeated the process several times. "Weeks," she said. "Maybe months. There's something here I don't recognize; something I've never smelled before."

I grabbed a pad of paper by the register and wrote two numbers. "The first one is my apartment on Crozat Street," I said while she continued to look puzzled and smell the pillow. "The second is my parents home in Chicago. Will you call me when you find it?"

The clerk nodded. "Can I keep this?"

I was reluctant to hand Jelka over so easily, but her scent lingered in other things on Crozat Street.

I waited by the phone for a week, but I never heard from the clerk. I tried to make my way back to the little shop, but I could never find it again. I tried to find the shop during the day and at night, I stared at the pieces of dirty paper and searched my soul for the words that wouldn't come. After six more weeks, my mother refused to send any more money unless I could prove that I was writing. I had no choice but to return to Chicago and get a job in a meat-packing plant.

Ah, that was thirty-five years ago. In all this time I have never heard from the clerk. Never smelled that fragrance again. The pieces of paper are in an envelope in the

nightstand next to my side of the bed. I rarely look at them. Nor do I think of Jelka. Only occasionally. When I help my wife change the linens on our bed every Friday night.