

WAKE OF THE SANDMAN:

A Southern Gothic Tale

by

John Paul Campbell
circa 1969
New Orleans



"Leaving me for the evening?" Susan purred. Her usually seductive leonine eyes had transformed themselves into those of a kitten at play. He took her into his arms and told her not to worry. But he just couldn't tell her about the event to take place that night.

He opened the door to their balcony and walked down the stairs to the courtyard below. Unlatching the grilled gate, he stepped out onto Chartres Street. This hour in the French Quarter before a summer's nightfall had the preparatory intensity of a courtesan covering her aging face with the sharpened colors of evening. The St. Louis Cathedral bell tolled the faithful to Evening Mass, but the errant parishioners here had other services to attend, in worship of more demanding deities.

Robert strolled past the Presbytère toward the Old Absinthe House. Along the way he passed many glancing expectant faces, each with a gambler's eagerness for luckier odds. With a sigh, he quickened his pace. Entering the bar, he seated himself next to the front window overlooking Bourbon, hearing blasts of trombones from down the street. He ordered his customary Sazarac and settled into a heavy wooden chair to scan the room.

Next to him was an overly rouged woman he had seen here often, the half-smoked cigarette assuming its place as a sixth thin finger. Shaking a Ramos Gin Fizz, the watchful bartender quietly informed a be-ringed male bar customer of that afternoon's disembarkation of Norwegian merchant-marines. Across the room was a middle-aged couple from somewhere else, he bloated and drunk, she twisting her glittering wedding ring, casting occasional glances at Robert.

Behind the long bar, a montage of yellowing business-cards covered the wall, a venal mural for this growing assemblage of potential indiscretions. Robert sipped his drink and waited for Carol.

She appeared in the doorway and seated herself across from him. "It's all been arranged," she said. "We're to meet at Frederick's plantation at eight. It's time for us to leave." He nervously nodded his head and gulped his drink.

As they drove up River Road, she broke their silence. "I was in the Tulane Book Store the other day and bought your new book *Cajun Tall-Tales*. Must have been fun to write. I think I'll assign your book to students in my freshman social anthropology course next spring."

"Thanks," he said. "I got to hang out in a lot of dingy bars throughout the swamps listening to wild improbable stories. Although, you never know when one could be true."

"I just can't believe Frederick's dead!" she blurted, turning onto a long gravel road that led toward a large columned house overlooking the Mississippi River. "I suppose this is the end of our nightly *ménages à trois*?"

A heavy humidity weighed upon them as they walked up the path to the front porch. They were screamed at by hundreds of katydids that inhabited the old moss-hung oaks. An entire tree would sound-off in undulating shrill whistles, only to be repeated in stereo by trees all around. The only sounds to divert that unnerving orchestration were the soothing random staccato croaks of bullfrogs yearning rain.

At closer inspection the house was in a state of disrepair. The painted columns atop the steps had begun the hairline fracturing that gave them the appearance of aged white porcelain. The large branch-stumps of the recently pruned azaleas fronting the porch revealed the many years during which they had grown unrestrained.

The haunting ambiance was furthered by the opening of the front door by a handsome young man who said his name was Raphael and that he was to take them to the orangery where Frederick's casket was awaiting. By his averted smiles, he appeared relieved by their arrival, welcoming live human contact.

They followed Raphael into a huge glassed-in room alit in a faint blue light. As their eyes became accustomed to the dimness, they were amazed by the profusion of plants and vines overflowing wire trellises up to the high glass ceiling. Hundreds of perfumed night flowers bloomed throughout the mass of greenery, with moonflowers, evening jasmine, night-blooming cereus, and angel's trumpets.

With a wave of his hand, Raphael remarked, "Frederick once said these flowers can detect approaching darkness no less than the muezzin atop his minaret begins singing his chant to Allah when he can no longer tell a white thread from a gray one on his robe."

Reaching down to pluck a lavender waterlily from a large alabaster urn, Raphael placed the flower onto the chest of Frederick lying tuxedoed in an

open rosewood casket. Raphael whispered that Frederick loved waterlilies most, named *Nymphaeaceae* for the ancient Greek nymphs who seduced gorgeous young men into tranquil pools of water and drowned them in lust and passion.

Raphael directed Robert and Carol to a large wrought-iron table with chairs placed nearby. "*Votre repas,*" Raphael bowed. On the table were crystal goblets and a bottle of 1966 Brut Imperial Moet Chandon, surrounded by silver trays of *pâté de canard en croûte*, *quiche aux fruits de mer*, *pissaladière niçoise*, *galantine de porc avec gibier*, and *recettes de baba et fruits*.

"I guess it's time to begin our wake," Robert said, raising a glass of champagne. "Here's to Frederick!"

"I'm curious. Do you recall the first time you two---how shall I put it---met Frederick?" asked Raphael.

"I think it was a night in the Chihuahuan Desert," said Carol. "The hugeness of the sky, the yellow flowering cacti, the barren mountains in the distance. I felt so lost. And then suddenly Frederick appeared dressed in golden tights, daring to compete with the cactus flowers! But Robert, you also had a handsome physique when you entered that circular red cage on the mesa. When you snapped your whip, rattlesnakes appeared and hissed at you."

"But then they changed into huge monsters," added Robert. "And they ate my whip."

"How could Frederick have summoned me into that nightmare?" said Carol. "I was absolutely terrified. I woke up in cold sweat."

"Well, your dream last month about swimming in caviar certainly was disturbing," replied Robert.

"Yes," remembered Carol. "I was opening a jar of Buluga when suddenly I became tiny and fell into the jar. Suddenly a cat showed up, trying to gulp down as much of the stuff as possible. Since I was only about a centimeter high, I was somewhat afraid of being eaten myself!" she laughed.

"I suppose our very last time together" recalled Robert, "was when Frederick and you were lying together on that blue silk chaise-longue. The

noises you two made were absolutely shameful. But then suddenly I found myself underneath Frederick!"

"And then you just disappeared!" Carol blurted.

"I woke up fast!" Robert smirked.

"I can't believe," said Carol, "all the weird phobias and fantasies you've both been subjecting me to this past year!"

"Well, I endured weeks of psycho-analysis after Frederick brought you and me into his dreams. My analyst had a field day with them!" Robert exclaimed. "When I discovered the truth, I wanted so badly to tell him, but he would've thought me truly crazy!"

"What's all this weird stuff about cliffs you've been subjecting us to every night lately?" asked Carol.

"Well, I'm on a long, narrow sailboat along the Atlantic coast off Morocco," replied Robert. "My boat is tossed about in a terrifying storm, finally crashing on the rocks beneath yellow cliffs. I swim ashore and begin a long climb to the top."

"I recall that Frederick and I were watching from a seaplane!" said Carol.

"I manage to reach the top ledge and climb over," continued Robert. "In front of me is an old Roman fortress in ruins. There are eerie noises as the wind swirls through the broken columns and statues."

"What else did you see up there?" asked Carol.

"I think someone was on the cliffs," Robert replied, suspiciously glancing at Raphael, "trying to join our dreams!"

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At midnight, Robert and Carol strolled down the front path to her car. The night animals had begun to quieten, searching for sanctuaries. There was even a peaceful silence from the katydid.

Back in New Orleans, Carol stopped at the corner of Canal and Chartres. Robert got out of the car and waved good-bye. He quickly walked the

narrow sidewalks of the French Quarter to his apartment amid the noise of street-sweepers clearing away evidence of last night's revelries.

Climbing the circular iron stairway to his balcony, he entered the bedroom where Susan was sleeping. Undressed, he got into bed next to her. He pondered the intertwined pink climbing roses on the faded old wallpaper, intermittently alit in streaks from slatted shutters, by car lights passing on the street below.

Susan quietly stirred from her sleep. "Will I see you again on those yellow cliffs in Morocco?" she whispered in the darkness.

Robert laughed in surprise. He reached over to embrace her tightly, laying his head next to hers. "Let's make it Dover this time," he whispered back, drifting gently to adventurous sleep.