

VOODOO MAN

By John Atkinson

“Voodoo Man” won first place in adult fiction at the 17th Annual Chesapeake Writer’s conference in 1998

Thick patches of clouds moved swiftly while the full moon of August glimmered on black water. It was strange, because while I stood beside Lake Pontchartrain, somewhere near Akers, Louisiana, there wasn't a breeze. Akers was the last road sign I had seen the day before.

The year was 1957 and I was a runaway man-child from Virginia. I had left the road to find shelter and the full moon provided me enough light to keep moving. Pastures gave way to swampland and I became disoriented and scared.

Sometime later that night when the moon was straight overhead, I saw a dim light in the distance. Bull alligators growled, but when the frogs croaked I assumed it was safe to wade through waist deep water to get there. Twenty minutes later I stood and gazed through a window of a one-room cabin. The light from an oil lamp looked inviting. I called, "Hey there! Anyone home?"

"I hear you," a feminine voice replied. "I've been expecting you."

How could that be, I thought? I was a total stranger and had never set foot there before.

"Ma'am, you don't know me but I'm lost and hungry."

"I know," she replied. "Come onto my porch and I'll give you some clean clothes. After you've bathed, I'll give you something to eat."

Her back was to me when she rose from a high-back, zebra-skin chair. Without making a sound, she circled the oil lamp that was on a small bamboo table beside her

chair and stood before me. I looked for someone else, but she was alone.

"How far am I from Akers?" I asked.

She laughed. "Fifty miles."

A tall black woman, with hair shorter than mine, passed the clothes through the screen door but all I could see was a white dress that reached her ankles. I could tell by her figure she was young.

"There's water over there," she said, as she pointed to a washbasin and pitcher pump at the end of the porch. "You smell like the swamp."

While I was still bathing, she asked from the cabin, "What took you so long to get here?"

I was stunned. "I came through the swamp."

"Of course," she laughed. "How else would you travel, Voodoo Man?"

What did she call me?

She spoke again, "I expected you last year. What happened?"

I didn't answer her. When I asked sensible questions, she acted as though I should know the answers. But she was friendly enough that I didn't get annoyed with her vague replies.

After I bathed, I slipped on what felt like a hand woven cotton robe. I wrapped it around my naked body and tied a thin cord at the small of my waist. It absorbed my perspiration making me more comfortable than I had felt in weeks.

The pitcher pump made a gurgling sound when it lost its prime. Again I stared through the window at strings hanging from exposed beams. At the ends, she had tied feathers and the small bones of birds.

"What's your name?" I asked, as the squeaking screen door closed behind me.

She laughed but didn't answer.

The feathers moved in unison when I circled the high back chair and stood three feet in front of her. Her legs were crossed and her hands rested in her lap. She looked

comfortable sitting perfectly erect. Her eyes were blacker and prettier than any I had ever seen, but her smile caught me off guard.

"Are you still hungry, Voodoo Man?" she asked, never losing her smile.

"Why do you call me, Voodoo Man?"

"Because only the Voodoo Man could have survived, coming here alone through the swamp. Let's not mince words," she said. "I have waited a long time for you, and there's much to tell about your future."

"You have me confused with someone else. You see, I got lost and blindly stumbled upon your door."

Showing concern, she stood at once, and the strings that held feathers and bones started swinging wildly. The bones made a dull, low, clinking sound when they struck one another. The oil lamp flickered and its flame raised and lowered itself. I tried not to show fear, but I could feel the hair rise on the sides of my head.

"Your skin is light," she said, "but I know you are the Voodoo Man even if you don't know yourself. Please be seated."

I felt a chair touch the back of my legs but there was no one behind me. When I sat, all the bones that were swinging to and fro became still. Looking up, I stared into her face and was smitten by her beauty. Immediately I fell in love. She sat down and reached for a doll on the table next to her. I felt the wind expel from my lungs when she squeezed it.

"I've looked after you all the while," she said, showing me the doll that looked somewhat like me. She called my full name.

In awe, I asked, "How could you know my name?"

"That doesn't matter. It's more important that you know who you are and what you will be doing in the years to come." As she spoke she filled a saucer with what looked like boiled whole oats. "Eat this," she said softly, "and be full."

She held a spoon and motioned for me to eat. I leaned forward and took the food

cautiously. I chewed only one spoonful, but even before I swallowed I was full like never before. An empty glass beside the tiny dish of food began to fill with wine. I stared, but she smiled at me again and my fear was gone.

"Drink it," she said. "You will stay with me tonight, Voodoo Man, but tomorrow you will leave and never return here again."

The oil lamp faded after I drank from the glass. The wine tasted like the smell of roses. Moonlight filtered through Spanish moss hanging on live oaks and brightened the threatening swamp outside, but I could only see it with my imagination. My eyes could only behold her beauty. We touched and fire flew.

The next morning she was gone and I panicked. I wanted desperately to find her. My old clothes were clean and folded neatly in the chair where she had sat. I was naked and there was nothing but an empty room. It looked old. One set of tracks was on the floor. They were mine. I dressed and walked outside to the pitcher pump on the porch, but the pump that had brought water the night before was useless because there wasn't a pipe coming from the ground. I had planned to search for her but before I left the porch I saw a feather and a tiny bone on the windowsill, the kind I had seen tied to strings the night before. I reached for the feather but a puff of wind blew it high into a cloudless sky. When my eyes returned to the windowsill, the bone had turned to dust.

I vowed to find her. Reluctantly, I walked away in tears. I listened to dried brown grass crinkle under my boots. Suddenly I heard her soothing voice chant, "Voodoo Man! Voodoo Man!" In a mad fit I swung around, looking back toward the cabin, but it had vanished. Steam rose from the ground as though the swamp had swallowed it. Heartbroken, I left.

She said I would not get over her, and it's true. More than forty years have passed since I visited Lake Pontchartrain, but the journey there is as plain as the scars left upon my flesh. But the lady with unimaginable beauty is not assured to me most of the time. I shrug her off as if nothing had ever happened. That works until the full moon of

August. Then in a dream she comes to me, her face appearing in the blend of shadow and moon glow. At those times I tell myself she is real, and the desire to be with her runs mad as horses from a burning barn.

The crow's feet around my eyes have deepened into riverbeds that carry tears of August love. I have aged, yet she has remained young. Don't be an old fool, I yell. But no matter, another year rolls around marked by August and my weary soul is doomed to search for her.

Am I the voodoo man? Have I found myself? I don't know. I do know she saved my life in the swamp that night. Is the payment for her goodwill my endless search for her? Only time will tell.