

*The
Black
Madonna*

by Claude Balz

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Serial-*

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-)Part One(-

JAMBALAYA JIM

"Une autre?" Paul asked me, holding up another frosty Heineken.

I nodded yeah and tossed back another shot of tequila. The José Quervo bottle was nearly empty. Paul poured a perfect head into a chilled Pilsner glass, set the bottle down among the others, then went back to his newspaper at the end of the bar, leaving me to my misery. I looked around the joint, liking what I saw, as always. The bar, like the hotel, was old and weathered and French in both architecture and motif. L'Hotel Creole sat virtually alone at a country crossroads an hour or so northwest of New Orleans, shaded by moss-covered oaks and a weeping willow. The deserted Chief gas station diagonally across the intersection closed decades ago, yielding to rust and weeds. You could make a film noire here about Algeria or Vietnam or any French colony and it would pass for authentic. The high ceiling fans cast moving shadows but offered faint relief from the hot, humid night. Heat lightning flashed on the far horizon, sending thunder rolling across the land. The rain was beating like drums on the roof and turning the sidewalk into a stream. The place was closed, all neon business signs out. The front screen door opened and slammed shut. I spun my head around to see it happen again. The wind was picking up. I turned back to the cold beer chaser. I was getting dead drunk, as usual. This was our favorite haunt, me and Julia, back when she was alive. The screen door opened and slammed again. I ignored it.

"Tyrone Sullivan?"

I looked into the mirror behind the bar to see two big gorillas approach. I talked to the mirror. "Uh, huh. Friends call me Ty."

"Well, Ty..."

"You can call me Mr. Sullivan."

The two goons flanked me now, smiling.

"Jambalaya Jim sent us to pick you up."

"I already have a date."

They glanced at each other and laughed. Some thugs like foreplay banter before they fuck you up. Adds to the fun.

"To give you a ride."

"Somebody's got their wires crossed."

"What do you mean?"

"His brother Sal called from his place not an hour ago and said he was on the way."

"Oh, yeah, uh, we was at Jimmy's when he called, said we'd save him the trip."

Ordinarily, their fancy Aloha shirts were generous enough in size to hide the gats they were packing, but not when they were soaking wet, clinging to their bodies.

Paul never looked up from his newspaper; just another disinterested bartender minding his own business. He rattled the papers a little to let me know he was tuned in. He was a short, wiry little French-Indian Cajun. Didn't look it, but he was damned strong and wicked fast, a former bantam weight boxing champ. He was also a deadly shot, never far from a gun, and he could gig you before you knew he had a knife.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Yeah, okay. Um..." I signaled wait a second with an upraised finger, tossed back another shot of tequila and lifted the beer to my lips. I drank a short draught then tossed the beer into the talking monkey's eyes, blinding him. I quickly shifted my grip on the glass, holding it by the butt, and shoved it into his face. The shattering glass penetrated deep. I snatched his belly gun from his belt with my right hand, laid it alongside my left ribs, pumped two rounds into the guy behind me, then jumped clear of the barstool. The goon toppled onto the barstool, knocked it over, and dropped to the floor. I slapped him in the back of the head with the revolver as he fell, then shot him twice in the head for good measure.

The talker was backing away, frantically trying to clear his eyes of glass,

beer and blood.

"By the way, asshole," I informed him, "Jimmy's got no brother and no telephone."

The last thing he ever heard was Paul's .45.

It's like they say. A friend will help you move. A good friend will help you move a body. We closed and locked up, loaded the bodies into the back of Paul's old Chevy pickup truck and headed for the bayou. Claudette would open first thing in the morning before we got back. She knew about such things and how to clean up blood without leaving a trace.

I slept most of the trip and woke up with a nasty hang-over. Paul handed me a pint of Canadian Mist for the cure. The sun was just rising over the swamp when we reached our destination. The rain had stopped. A low fog hovered over the algae green waters. A white heron was having a morning meal of frogs, and an owl was late wafting home over the placid pond to its nest. Two deer on a far shore slaked their thirst. The light breeze was a bit cool, but the air held the promise of another blistering hot day.

We dumped the bodies into a pool of quicksand and stood watching them sink while we shared the blended whiskey.

"Must be fucking deep," Paul observed. His French patois was as thick and spicy as a hot pot of gumbo.

"Yeah, or it woulda filled years ago."

"Who's after you now, Ty?"

"Who isn't?"

"Specifically."

"Fuck me if I know."

"NOPD?"

"That was a long time ago."

"Some memories never fade."

"Yeah." I thought of Julia. "Let's head over to Jimbo's. Got a bad feeling."

When you come to the end of the world, then go just a little further, you get to Jim's place deep in the bayou. After traveling miles along unmarked secluded country roads in the middle of nowhere, then leaving the pavement, it's five or six miles on dirt and sand before you can't drive any farther. There's always an ATV parked there for visiting friends and family. The bayou people don't steal from one another, and a stranger may as well slit his own throat as to fuck with the swamp rats or their shit. Winding around through tough country, you find his shack on the shore of a sizeable lake, if you know where it is. There's nothing and nobody around for miles.

We climbed off the ATV as I switched it off and looked around. Chickens protested our intrusion, scattering in panic. Moss-festooned cypress trees sheltered the cabin all round and marched well out into the water. A johnboat was tied to the end of a rough-hewn pier running about seventy-five feet out from the rickety front porch facing the lake. Several fish lay on the cleaning table. They'd all been gutted, but not scaled or filleted. A cloud of flies buzzed around and mobbed the fish. It looked like Jim had been interrupted. There was too much blood for fish, and the axe on the ground, like the stump used for splitting wood, was bloody.

We drew guns and approached the shack cautiously. I took the front door, while Paul went to the back. I tapped the gun twice on the door post and Paul responded with one. We went in tactical and swept the place. No intruders and no Jimbo. The kerosene lanterns were still lit. Morning light streamed into the windows, illuminating a rustic interior with a wood stove for heat and cooking, some ratty-ass furniture, and lots of guns, fishing gear, and traps. After harrowing experiences in the jungles of Vietnam, Jim chose to live as a recluse in quiet solitude. A Louisiana native, he still loved jungles and swamps, though.

"Let's check outside," I suggested.

"Oui. D'accord," Paul agreed.

I found a double-barrel shotgun just off the porch with both rounds expended. Paul found a body nearby in the thick brush among palmettos within a pine stand. The face, ears, and most of the scalp were missing. Scavengers had continued where the buckshot left off.

"Bon. At least he got one son of a bitch," Paul observed. "Killed his dogs, goddamn it!" He hooked his thumb back over his shoulder to indicate where they lay.

"Yeah, but where's Jimbo?" We searched all over to no avail. I walked out to the johnboat, found nothing, and headed back. That's when I saw the severed hand lying in shallow water near the bank. I recognized it by the thumb stump. The top joint had been blown off during a skirmish in the war. I turned back along the pier and studied the clear water carefully. A gator broke the surface, tossing and chomping on a man's lower leg from the knee down. "I found Jimmy!" I called.

Satisfied that we were alone, we went back into the shack, blew out the lanterns, and started a fire in the wood stove. An iron skillet on a back burner was full of Jambalaya fixed with mudbugs, Jimmy's specialty. I dumped the spoiled food into the lake then cleaned the skillet with sand and lake water. We helped ourselves to Jim's food cache. He wouldn't be needing it, and he wouldn't care anyway. We had venison steaks and potatoes fried with wild leeks. I scrambled eggs Paul robbed from hens' nests, smothered in Tabasco sauce. After eating, we sat out on the porch drinking percolated chicory coffee and smoking Marlboros as the sun rose above the tree line. I was feeling a hell of a lot better physically, but sick and angry at our discovery of Jim's demise and the gruesome way he died. We tried to sort things out, tossing ideas back and forth like lobbing Ping Pong balls.

"Le premier question est, why the fuck did those assholes kill Jimmy?" Paul wondered aloud. His tone was indignant. I knew he intended to find out, just as I did, and God help anyone involved.

"You mean the goons at the bar last night?"

"Oui. Bien sûr."

"They didn't kill Jimmy."

"Vous pensez que non?"

"No, I think not. If they had been out here, it would have been perfectly obvious that Jimbo had no telephone. Jimbo's murder was rather messy, and those pin-heads were clean. Driving all the way out here and back, stopping to shower and change somewhere along the way, puts too many implausible factors in the time line."

"Ah! Oui! C'est vrai!"

"Goddamn right it's true. However, I'm sure they're in cahoots with the killers, whoever they are. Another thing: whoever these people are, they are well outside our circle of friends, family and associates."

"What makes you think so?"

"Anyone who knows me, or knows anything about me, knows that strangers who have come looking for me have gone missing. If those guys last night wanted me dead, they would have come in blazing. If they were sent to interrogate me, they should have snatched my ass without all the social amenities and subterfuge. I figure they were intending to take me to someone else who would conduct the interview."

Paul laughed. "You still think like a cop. No wonder you are such a successful crook."

"Pas du tout. You've got it bass ackwards, mon ami. I've always thought like a criminal, which is the secret to my success as a cop."

Paul shook his head and laughed in amusement. "Mais, who are these people and what do they want?"

"And, how the hell did they find him way out here?" I countered.

"Somebody talked."

"Obviously. Had to be someone close to him. My guess is, they led the killers here."

"Pourquoi?"

"You can't find this place without a guide. Dogs would have torn 'em up if Jimbo didn't recognize someone in the party and call 'em off."

"Oui, je le crois. Makes sense, I guess. Mais, he didn't have any enemies."

"A few personal enemies in Vietnam, all dead."

"Drugs?"

"Marijuana ain't drugs, and he didn't grow enough to worry about, let alone kill him for it."

"I figure they chopped him up piece by piece."

"Tortured his ass."

"Bien sûr. They wanted something."

"Or, they wanted to know something."

"Well, he didn't have anything and he sure as fuck didn't know anything."

"Poor, dumb bastard."

We laughed at the inside joke. We often called him that to his face. He didn't have much of an education, but he was surpassing intelligent and clever, an adept survivalist. We envied him his bliss. He was as happy in his swamp home as a fat baby suckling his momma's tit. It wasn't for everyone, but for him it was heaven.

"What connection between you and Jaime might they have drawn or inferred? Do you suppose he talked, said something about you?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I'm married to his sister, remember?" I caught myself.
"Or, was."

"Yes, of course. Mon Dieu, I'm so fucking tired my mind is in a fog."

Jimmy had a very efficient little still in the corner by the stove. I took one of the mason jars from the shelf above it and we enjoyed corn liquor while mulling things over in silence. It had been a long, tiring night without adequate sleep - none for Paul, our full bellies made us sleepy, and the white lightning knocked us out.

I awoke as long shadows from the setting sun played out across the swamp. The lake was a pot of gold, the vegetation a mix of purple and orange. I sat up from the lumpy couch, trying to stretch out cramps. Paul stirred awake. He had slept in the easy chair, his hand gripping the .45 resting on the arm. We stared at each other like zombies while we tried to regain our senses. Paul was the first to his feet, stretching and yawning. "Merf!" he exclaimed. His spine made popping noises from his neck to his ass as he twisted and turned this way and that, trying to limber up.

I shuffled over to the stove, stoked up the coals, and added wood. Paul lit the kerosene lanterns. We had a meat-on-meat meal of venison and wild boar washed down with more chicory coffee.

"Let's shake this place down," I suggested. "Maybe we'll find a clue."

"Oui, monsieur le gendarme. Alors, looks like someone got a head start on us, mon ami."

He was right. Jimmy always lived in squalor that looked as though a what-the-fuck? bomb went off in his shack, but the debris was far more chaotic now. Hunting and fishing magazines littered the room. His beat up old desk was buried in papers, scraps of paper, and trash spilling down onto and out across the floor. I methodically gathered them all up and began the tedious task of studying each and every one. A lot of personal letters had been scattered about. I placed them in a separate pile, to pore over later. There was nothing useful among the scraps of paper, although one bit of writing looked somewhat tantalizing. I fumbled as I reached for it. It slipped from my fingers and floated gently down out of reach under the desk. I bent over and reached out to retrieve it. The chair slid out from under my ass and I pitched forward, slamming my head into the back of the desk. Embarrassed, I tried a quick recovery and banged my head on the desk drawer. I dropped back down again.

Paul laughed so hard he was in stitches.

Glaring back at him while shooting him the bird, something caught my eye. I was surprised to find a poem, penned by Jim, taped to the underside of the desk. "Hey, Paul! Did you know Jimbo was a poet?"

"You make the jest, non?"

I crawled back out, sat back down, and read the poem aloud.

.....to be continued