

RHAPSODY IN BLUE

From across the wide river a fine pelting grey mist slanted along the cross streets of the Quarter. Lined on each façade in staunch regimented *allees* along deepening shadows of the ironwork-festooned balconies, and under them along the wet-polished sidewalks of the street level, drenched shutters were clasped against the seeping damp, as well against the thickening blue grey closure of late afternoon where the darkly glistening antique iron street lamps, just now beginning to wake, wore dainty halos flickering against the whisper of seductive twilight. At this usually busy time at the end of the workday, when the old Quarter would re-awaken with a thump and click of meandering footsteps, people on this particular cool wet evening past Epiphany remained dawdling indoors, reluctant. Empty but for where the sweeping gusts pushed along stray remnants of left-over tinsel, the streets

remained disheartenedly unoccupied. Along Rue Ursuline Sugar, and that was her true name, as much or more for her smooth caramel colour as for any over-sweetness of disposition (though she had been assured of that, too, by the great-aunt Zizi who had brought her up), was alone. Not even could she hear the itinerant trombone-man—who sometimes during showers retreated creeping to under the arcade of the Presbytere down from Jackson Square, but today had floated away altogether. No one passed her; and only one someone scooting around a corner crossed her at where the streets met. Even so Sugar, solitary under the opaque skies, felt impending sensations of the familiar bouncing vamp of hastening foot-tapping hum, the beat, the staccato, the thrill and taut-strung tension of accelerating expectancy that came beckoning upon her at this escalating point where the evening was about to open out wide like the gates at a yellow-incandescent-bulb strung amusement park. She shivered a bit inside the dreary old raincoat, huddled closer under the

dripping old umbrella that she had barely remembered when she left the little rooms in the Faubourg to cross the Quarter. Dark and massive speed-propelled evening was fast approaching now, and it was the damp shining headlamp in mist atop the black bustling locomotive of night that toted Sugar upward toward her anticipated and welcoming destination: all the far spread sparkle of city lights a-shine as crystal prisms at the end of the Mississippi River bridge or ,for some, the Algiers ferry.

From the dimness of Ursuline Sugar turned into the green and red neon buzz at the far and ragged end of Bourbon Street. Even here, few dared the slinging wet, the open street; but it was, she reasoned, early yet, amid this however-hesitatingly sparse stretch toward the later darker less-cooly-flirtatious shadowed hours. A featureless wall along here, before the stucco became a cigar-store near the corner of the block, held only, set in a shallow recess, a black door with a window of diamond-paned coloured glass and framed by

entwined neon that imitated a spun striped stick of sugar candy rising to spell out "Carnival Carousel" on the wall under a petite high canopy, soaking skirt rippling in the pelting gusts. It was here that Sugar paused, her ritual even in this dampness to take one reassuring look, for herself at least, at the glossy eight-by-ten photograph illuminated in a frame at the door. It was of herself, a *paillette-ed* en-gowned shimmering other self. She liked this photograph, though there was the usual something not quite right about the mouth, caught in elongated mid-note. Still, through a filmy black-and-white glow it made her look to her eyes as *tres elegante*, intense and glamorous—and radiant as some heavenly messenger.

At the far end of the building, from where an iron gate locked off a passageway, a crumpled old man, creased and folded, with enormously long crumpled hands slowly swung open the gate and poked his grey head, mostly in fact an ancient denim cap, from around the wall. Squinting into the street, hand raised above eyes, he shook his head. "Miss

Sugar," he moaned in a softly audible hoarse plea, "get out that damp." She lingered one last look toward the mesmerizing photograph, waving its way; and darted past the gate and rainspout into the passage where the old man, flapping a long loose hand, shoo-ed her into the back stage-door. He muttered, with much groaning, something about the dampness and foolish young girls, more a breathy rant to himself or the open air than conversation; but finally in this small cubicle of a broom closet where the call desk was wedged, as he was peeling Sugar out of the wet raincoat, he offered with a solemn caretaking smile, "Good evening, Miss Sugar." Then he chuckled, shaking his head once more, softly, "--such as it is." He hung the coat on a rack, above some old newspapers which he had spread on the crinkled linoleum floor; then shook the umbrella out fiercely splattering loose water over the floor and Sugar's legs. She smiled a benign grin at the shaking old man, "Good evening to you, Pops. How are you this evening?"

"Oh, tolerable. Tolerable." He smiled back, somewhat like an automatic wind-up toy, tipping his cap.

"Well. That's good." Sugar reassured him. She gathered up her heavy bag from the desk where she had placed it. Along the passageway brick wall there ran a long narrow hallway, barely wider than a doorway, which led off to the warren of other little halls and rooms and ended at its far termination at the hot cave of a kitchen. Sugar wondered what might happen to navigation through here if they should ever change that light-framed photograph, and get one of those older wearier been-around, in her own expansive black sequins, singers many times heavier than she. So,—it wasn't likely to happen soon. She made her own way down the suffocating drab tunnel plastered with faded yellowing posters toward the doorway that was her own cramped dressing room, next to a patched-up alcove that held the clunking ice machine.

Nevertheless, despite its uneven dimensions and no window—which Sugar had tried to disguise by hanging a cheerful little curtain anyway—this little beurre-coloured overgrown closet, with its rack holding the rainbow of glitter and chiffon and a tiered shoebag stuffed with many bright-coloured folding fans which she chose to hold on-stage nightly for effect and an occasional cooling breeze, was her own little significant corner of home away from home. She flipped the switch that cranked on the brigade of glaring mirror lights and the electric-coil heater. The little room popped into the lavish brightness of intense sunlight across a summer river. Sugar loosened every third lamp, dimming the bright candescence until later when she would need to screw them up again for adjusting her make-up. It was several hours yet to pass until the half-hour call before the nights' first set. There was barely room in one corner for a tilting thread-worn stuffed chair mercifully swathed with an afghan, and the hard floor was covered with a piece of old carpet and some fringed rugs. A

straight-backed stool was Sugar's waiting place before the vanity mirror, the counter top of which held all the debris of jars and packets, brushes, cassettes and papers—and a stemmed cocktail-glass memento of New Year's eve. Sugar eased her damp feet into her dry slippers. She retrieved from her bag the brown paper sack of rotund French Market lemons and a lime for which she had momentarily stopped, entranced in their cheery colour. They wafted a faint citrus-y essence, like the subtle salt of an island breeze. Alone in her mossy sanctuary, this was the luscious time she hoarded like some grasping secret miser, this moon-splashed time dashing to board the plush-seated night's train that hurtled swaying, whistle a-scream, past the white silent farmhouses scattered in the dark onward to a starry-glittered sacred far land where Sugar alone, bathed in a piercing shaft of crystalline blue spotlight, stepped through midnight velvet curtains and stands to sing *the only music that makes me dance* in those late carefree hours of *honeysuckle-rose saving my love for you time*

*to call it a day mon amour telling myself that I'm time after
time utter wild-again beguiled-again when they begin the
beguine you give me fever what you do to me 'round midnight
it's magic for the luckiest people in the world--somewhere in a
land where lucky bluebirds fly. That midnight special. Oh—
Lord-y.*

Sometimes Sugar would read here in this spinning
pirouette of hours alone with her thoughts, or pause through
pictures in magazines, or listened to other music, or rarely
vocalized—having spent most of late afternoons already
absent-mindedly humming minute to minute here and there.
After two sets a night she and the quartet rarely rehearsed
unless they were adding new material. The quartet was
mostly old-timers with an incalculable repertoire; and Sugar
liked to re-order her own rather vast—incredible for her
somewhat-tender years—memory of accumulated standards
according to her evolving mood. On the other side of the wall
the ice machine rattled like a clanging trolley-car. It was a

sound so familiar and constant that, except for those chunks of ice bursts of clangingly arrhythmic eruption, the clamor was simply another frayed part of the room. Sugar had occasionally with a bubbling of determination tried to impose a gracenote of wishful cheer on some spot, the afghan, a crocheted pillow, a carafe of chocolate kisses, a clump of summery daisies. Even once or twice, other delicate congratulatory bouquets had arrived, bright colourful spectacles from some patron. As Sugar sat now facing the wide anciently stained mirror, she could see reflected from the opposite wall beyond her bared shoulder her most extravagant object of decoration in the room: a framed print in a primary-bright abstracted naif-style of a young black girl watching small children playing over a mule-wagon beside a patch of white fluffed-out cotton plants. It was the glowing colours and simple shapes and the angular figure of the little girl that appealed most to her. Sugar had never worked in a field, other than some miniature vegetable garden patch, not even

the ones of Auntie Zizi's brother, Uncle Claud, on summer visits upriver; but she knew instinctively and without a doubt that the repetitive desolation, that futile application of every day concern, of tending the slow growing plants and their constant weeding was never to be contemplated for her--*sometimes, in this world of ordinary people, way down yonder in New Orleans, where summertime livin' was easy with fish a-jumping and banana boats a-comin' across the river around the bend she might, willow weep for me, feel like a motherless child like the sound of the men working on the chain-gang.* What she did remember, perhaps more than any other single thing besides the Christmas window-shopping expedition up glistening Canal Street, was the countless hours—years—spent at church where dressed up like a doll, frilled and starched, her hair held down in a thousand ribboned braids, she had grown to sing shyly in the beginning but then full-out and steady, a grinning little girl, voice alight, at the center of all eyes with that message of hope. Oh happy day. Inside that echoing

whitewashed sanctuary of long ago *in the wildwood her little light shone, one single candle, to rescue the perishing and care for the dying some glad morning for a thousand tongues to sing when we've been here ten thousand years searching for a city where we shall never die and lay down that burden down by the riverside swinging low at work for the night is come while waiting for the harvest and to come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves. Oh happy day. Glory.*

However, at present moment, in a drab and much different sanctuary, determinedly secular and downright raucous, now was that time when she must apply her face—her spectacular face of the evening, romantic, glossy and magic—*tres magique*. Her day-face waited in the mirror. She always examined it, closely, noticing each blemish or dry spot. She thought it like some excellent maple tabletop that with lemony oils and vigorous rubbings she would polish to a fine glow, ultimately to center on its reflective surface a bowl of fresh roses. As she sat staring, thoughts lost in the mirror

world, chin resting on hands, contemplating what procedure to begin—there was a rapping on the door, and just as quickly it opened. The ice machine rattled a clunk. Entering was, of course, and always punctually, Just Rawling. Justin Rawling leapt, as ably as was possible, confined in this tiny space, into his spot on another tight-fitted stool in the compact room. He was Sugar's accompanist on the piano, as well as every evening here in the dressing room where they would recount the days major or minor event and talk and giggle. "Others here?", she asked him, especially glad to see his face on a grey dripping evening. Tonight they would sing for fun, for the moment of joy it could bring themselves. The few dampened patrons would be coincidental.

"Only Earl." She would probably soon begin to hear him softly warming up his trumpet. "They're coming in—you know. This weather's harsh." After dressing she would later wander out to the tucked away area where the quartet changed into their evening clothes to say hello. Now she

crossed to wash her day-face clean, a smooth prepared canvas, at the tiny rust-stained sink. The run of tap water made the ice machine loudly whine as if scalded.

"Tea?"

"Yes," Just thought aloud. "Yes. I think so. Thanks." He was already dressed in his tuxedo, his thin sand-coloured hair wet and combed flat against his head to dry. He had the habit whenever waiting, so as to not sit idle, of rather unconsciously performing finger exercises pressing delicately against whatever handy surface, listening to whatever tune inside his head. Sugar could sometimes stare for a minute or more while Just, unaware, practiced the unheard by others arpeggios—or, perhaps, overtures. She placed the tea kettle on the hot plate. Sugar would have some tea as well, but she would not eat until after the last show, when she could relax into a warm meal. Often Just accompanied her, himself having a nightcap before heading home or occasionally to some more distinctly specialized pub.

Sugar gleamed with obvious colourful pride as she, like a magician with a colourful magic hat, brandished before Just the glossy beautiful lemons. It was then that, under a daub of greasepaint make-up, she noticed the splattered purplish bruise at the left side of Just's cheek and near his reddened eye. She in surprise reached out toward the spot, but stopped without touching it as Just almost winced, even startled. "Oh-h-h, baby," she cooed, "What has happened to you?" She leaned close to examine the flesh-tinted disguise; but Just pulled back, reddening, and looked away into other space. "Does that hurt?" she examined. Just frowned as if she had gone daft. "Now what happened?" she asked again. "Tell me."

Just simply continued to stare away, into another world. He seemed to search in the air for some word. Finally he said, "I guess...some accident." He turned to the mirror for a look at his own reflection. The bruise was as visible as a shadow. But once out on the tiny platform stage, and in the half-light at its

far edge, it would be his right side that faced out toward the ringside audience anyway.

Sugar, returning to her stool placed before the mirror, shook her head and exclaimed, rather accused, "Accident, huh? It doesn't seem to look like an...accident."

Just almost attempted a smile, but the upward movement in his jaw sent a little crease of sprain across one side of his face. He resumed his finger exercises. "Last night, on the way home, you know it was late. And I, without even a thought about being alone, of course—well, I ran into a gang of kids on one of the dark streets. I tried crossing out of the way; but they were determined, rabid. There were four or five of them; you know, the snotty so-fake-butth fourteen-year-olds. I guess they didn't like the way I looked."

"And they did that? They attacked you?"

"Little punk creeps...well, you know. Many times, very many times this little old world's not a safe place. It's a

treacherous path. You still have to be more than careful.

Thank God it wasn't worse."

Sugar nodded, with an exasperated frown. "Can you do anything? Report something?"

"Squeal?"

"Report it."

"It was quick, maniacal...I couldn't identify really anything, except of course, they were creep evil blood suckers."

"But they got away...they get off."

Just tried concretely not to allow a strained smile now.

"Let's just not talk about it."

"But you really should tell someone. Alert them." Sugar faced him directly. "You should."

"What good would it do?"

Sugar poured the tea, and they sipped some of the pale steaming liquid in silence. She began her face. The mirror was unflinching. She examined once more the angles, the puff

under the eyes, the as-yet-unmarred streaks of twenty-four years, not quite yet half of Just's age. Still, the first step of this routine was, as ever, a predictable nourishing slather of moisturizer to smooth and soften; just the thought was a refreshment, smooth and soften—like a meditation. *Like the tick-tick-tock, aglow again, lucky star's above, seems like dreams, eliminate the negative, first time ever I saw your face —use your mentality, under my skin.* With the moisturizer she rubbed and smoothed, massaging forehead and cheeks and neck with the intense mastery of a hypnotist; then quickly laying on foundation, also smooth and flawless, flourishing a dusting of powder. Throughout Just sipped his tea, continued his finger exercises; now and then he glanced into the mirror to observe a finer point in the process of transformation. At some times Sugar, examining this unadorned face that stared back nightly from the mirror, could wonder what might happen when—if—perhaps—in some bleak future no people wanted to come hear these old songs—songs already antique.

Would that be a kick to the head?! *Come to me, my melancholy baby. Oh, blue moon.* Sugar rarely spoke through the concentration of her routine. Afterward she could bubble up with the innumerable comments and joking around that would jolly her preparation for her entrance, but this was a serious studious moment. Now came the painting—the glazes of colour and shine: brushes of floral and coppery blushes, deep rosy lip-gloss, and lavender-y charcoal eyes. Examining all the angles again, from left to right, up and down, oblique, with a satisfied approval Sugar laid aside her brush. Ladies and gentlemen, she thought, we are pleased to present—and with a start of calculation at only how many might be settled into the house on this wet evening, though it was not anyway a large room, it could seem cavernous when half-empty. *We'll let it rain;—embrace me, irreplaceable you ,that's what you are, heart-breaker, dream-maker ,the likes of you, funny valentine, how about you, a lucky star's above, big and strong, I'll do my best to, hey there, little girl, make him stay, no day or*

*two—but constantly, drink your sweet wine, go to my head,
going out of my head, forget your troubles, yesterday,
wondering in the night, if you love me, no sorrow, no sighs,
really love me, at the end of lonely street, let me take you by
the hand, and maybe then I'll know, now my love,...At last,
cloudy days, life is like a song.*

The clunking ice machine rumbled through the wall. "Some day they're going to fix that damned ice machine." Sugar gulped the last tea in her cup. "Then it'll run smooth as a Cadillac." She chortled out loud, sweeping through the few laces on the clothes rack. Just let his finger exercises sweep through a dramatic crescendo. Sugar stared cool as iced coffee at him, "Well, maybe." She picked up a pair of black sheer pantyhose, laying them across the dressing chair. There were shoes somewhere under the counter. "I suppose by then I'll be gone. Gone to a big grand ballroom. I'll be out somewhere--and I'll have a real, a beautiful dressing room

covered in pink satin and there'll be a silver fox throw on the chaise."

Just wanted to smile, a maybe just wry smile tinted with *la vie en rose*. His eyes beamed brightly, though through some fog. He took Sugar by the shoulders, and facing her straight ahead, looked into her wide-painted eyes. "I'm going to tell you a little story," he said. "Years ago when I was young in New York, much younger, playing around, I once had a day-job at one of the big costume houses for Broadway shows. It was pretty interesting—the intensity of a part of BROADWAY theatre, and you'd see all the big-time actors and stars who'd come for fittings for their stage clothes."

"I didn't know you had done that," Sugar interrupted, while as quickly Just turned her toward the mirror and continued to stare into the reflection of her wide-painted eyes.

"Well, one of the things you don't know...Anyway, listen, you'd see come and go really great actors, important stars or flashy celebrities, and lots of chorus kids bouncing like

hyperactive bunnies about having a job, but they were at the least all working, focused like ordinary working people with their job to do. I mean some of these had been for years people who were gigantic amazing stars like Lillian Gish or Elizabeth Taylor, Jessica Tandy or Rex Harrison, Baryshnikov— But working, and having a tea and breathing just like, like people." Just poured himself another cup of warm tea. For a moment he gazed into it as if he could see the past swimming there. "In the beginning I might sometimes show them to the fitting room, or retrieve a sample fabric, or whatever—these people whose names and faces were known by thousands. I was so young then, tenderly so. To me one of the first legendary astounding people I met was Katharine Hepburn. Do you know who that is?"

As she gazed into the mirror, Sugar searched her memory; and began to re-ignite the vacant lamps for a check of make-up and hair. "The missionaries' daughter from The African Queen? Right? Yes, yes, I've seen that."

"Yes—among other things," Just continued, accelerated like a public relations testimony, "Stage Door, Philadelphia Story, Adam's Rib, Shakespeare, Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?, Coco, Bringing Up Baby,—ah, again with Cary Grant—The Lion in Winter. At that time I hadn't seen a lot of her early pictures, but was amazingly mesmerized with her Eleanor of Aquitaine—and up-powerful joust with Peter O'Toole's Henry. When I was in school I had seen the television interview, a very rare occurrence, she had given for hours with Dick Cavett. Fantastic. She was an incredible talent, with a remarkable career, and a stringent mind—an absolute legend, really the definition of legendary persona. At any rate she was about to appear in what would be her last play on Broadway, a great star for over forty years, from the old Hollywood, and a perfectionist. To everyone, just being in the same building with her was an event; but by that time she was extremely shy about being around crowds of people. It was arranged that her fittings would be at lunch time so there would be less

people in the workroom mob; and she was to be ushered off the elevator and directly into the fitting room, but even those subdued few seconds were like a royal passage."

"Wow" was Sugar's astounded comment. "Just like a Hollywood movie."

"Sort of, but in New York." Just's tentative half-smile was stifled again. He leaned back in the tilting armchair, and stretched his hands. It would be another fifty minutes until half-hour. "She was really very nice. After one of these fittings when she was asking about accessories, she had an old candy box which she asked Jane, who was the costume designer, if it could be locked in the office. It was some jewellery. So this faded old candy box was put in the lock box there, locked like an icon, a reliquary. I was awed, truly fascinated. It had to be legendary, too. I was sure this was Harry Winston, Cartier, antiques, maybe something from Howard Hughes, at the very least pearls, owned by Katharine Hepburn. After a couple of days, like a curious cat, after I could stand it no longer, a few of

us decided to look inside the box to see Miss Hepburn's jewels."

Sugar turned to Just, her own face a reflection of worshiping awe and, even under layers of applied sophistication, child-like astonishment. "What was it? Diamonds? Emeralds?"

"Slowly I opened the box like a treasure chest. My hands were as nervous as my head. All of us peered into the tissue. I can only imagine how I looked. Inside were only a few pieces of costume jewellery, rhinestones, artificial beads, old and well-worn. Nothing extraordinary, except for the person who had worn them. And on the backs of the ear-clips were those foam pads like your grandmother would have—little soft foam pads."

"Oh," Sugar sighed, fallen. Then she looked into the mirror back at Just, her smile collapsing, as he shook his head in a cloud of past remembering, key-light glare enveloped by

fog; yet another pianist exercise ready at his fingertips. "And the point of this story is?"

"Well,—I suppose, that no matter what it looks like, how shiny, or how it might appear to someone, fame—you know, fame, real fame— isn't always what it seems.—And sometimes, it just hurts your ears."

--J. F. Lowe

