Amilcar

She was about my age, five or six, but had a diffuse yellow cast as she stood beside my bed at night, and when I reached out, my hand passed right through her. She seemed to be looking at me, yet had a faraway look and her face radiated a knowledge well beyond a child's years. Not sad, exactly. More like wistful. Her dress, not showing much color other than the cast, was not plain but was worked and gathered in a way that was well beyond my ability then to notice except in general form. I could tell she was blonde, or maybe it was the yellow. Her hair was in short curls done up neatly. Her face had intent and purpose. No words were spoken by either of us and I was unafraid. I'm not certain to this day that she was not.

This was in 1968 at 100 Amilcar Blvd. in Lafayette, Louisiana, in my bedroom at the southeast corner of the three-bedroom one-storey house, with a separate laundry structure across the carport, that my parents had bought and we had recently moved into. The house had been built the year before.

Despite being called a boulevard, Amilcar was a quiet one-block residential street, and our house was located at a dead end, with no building across the street and just one neighboring house, to the east. To the west were woods, and behind the house beyond the chain-link fenced yard, which had several mature pecan trees, beyond what we called a hurricane fence then, were the same woods. These were no Penn's Woods, but in the direction of jungle—very dense growth, and lots of snakes: rattlers, cottonmouths, also known as water moccasins, and little coiled snakes called simply *vipers* in French and said to be the most poisonous of all. Through the woods ran a stream, which later in Pennsylvania such a thing would be called a creek and probably pronounced crick, but of course this was a coulee, pronounced coolie, any past designation as *coulée* had passed along with most of the French language. My grandparents still spoke Cajun French natively but nobody could write it anymore, just English.

Written by Todd Doucet in 2024.

When my father was my age then and started school, he had never heard a word of English. That was the very end I think. In school it was only English. His parents spoke English just fine, but they never spoke it at home back then. This would be in the early 1940's, at that time not so distant temporally from the late 1960's, but distant culturally far, far more than the difference between that time of my memory and now, fifty-six years later.

For school in first grade, we were told to ask our fathers what he did for work. Of course it had to be the father, and just one of them, who worked and not the mother, again just one of them, and if she worked it didn't count. But that described our house and so it presented no drama or pain for me personally.

My father told me, in that same bedroom on a different night, that he was Chief Technician at All Channels Cable TV. Sometimes he'd take me to the head end, which was where the signals were beamed by microwave and then converted to regular TV frequencies and sent over coaxial cable to the subscribers, who wanted to catch all the channels on their TV's without using an antenna. Later in Pennsylvania, first at Teleprompter Cable TV in Johnstown and later still at Covenant Cable TV in Greensburg, the head ends were high atop hills, and the climb was an adventure in the snow of winter.

In Lafayette there were no hills and the only snow was the rare flurry in the odd year, which would put many a car into the ditch. Most roads had grass-lined ditches along the sides, to carry off rain water on the impossibly-flat terrain which was barely above sea level and sometimes not even. So a ditch was always nearby to break the slide of the overwhelmed motorist when it flurried.

We all knew how to make snow ice cream though: sugar, vanilla, and snow. They never heard of it in Johnstown, and my mother must have cut an odd figure outside in winter after a newly-fallen snow, in red boots, a cloth coat with large buttons, not yet thirty years old and would turn men's heads even on a sunny day, with a shiny ladle and a big gumbo pot, out there scooping up snow so we could make some snow ice cream.

On Amilcar, even though my father was Chief Technician, which meant he was the most senior technical person and basically most everybody's boss, we had no cable television service. Maybe because the house had been built the year before and it looked new like the other houses, so perhaps the subdivision itself was new. Maybe city planners had ambition for Amilcar Boulevard, and hence the name, and in that early time no one had yet strung up the coaxial cable for television service. Or maybe pockets had not yet been lined. Louisiana was not run by Boy Scouts and even in Johnstown in 1973 the founder of Teleprompter went to jail for 20 months because they said he tried to bribe local officials. He always claimed, then and after, that it was extortion he paid, not a bribe. And in Greensburg, I heard that some local politicians, who had power over telephone pole rights of way, really needed new, large color television sets so that they could conscientiously monitor the quality of the signals passing through the cable on those rights of way it was their custodial duty to regulate for the public good. They got those TV's. And permits were granted.

So one day one of the men from All Channels came to our house on Amilcar and helped my father put up a television antenna, high atop a pole, located just behind the carport in the back yard, very near the carport entrance to the house, and near the separate entrance to the laundry building across the way, underneath the covered part of the carport.

The antenna was a horizontal directional one, mounted at the top of a long pipe. This pipe was slid over a narrower pipe driven into the ground, the fatter pipe being a rotatable sleeve over the thinner. The rotating pipe had a pointer affixed at its base, which pointed, probably, where the antenna pointed. Around the base there were stakes driven into the ground which corresponded to each of the TV stations. You'd grab the large pipe with both hands and rotate it so that the pointer would line up with the desired TV station, and then the antenna would point to where the signal was strongest for that station.

I was too young to do this. When *Captain Kangaroo* came on, I'd watch the snowy image turn to perfect black-and-white clarity as my mom rotated the antenna out back into position.

We watched *Dark Shadows* too, and had been watching it for about a year, even before Amilcar when we lived across Lafayette on Knollwood Drive. I was a fan, and Barnabas Collins was my hero. He was a vampire. But Barnabas was a good vampire. He regretted having to bite all those people. I even named my pet turtle Barnabas, who lived out his days in a clear plastic bowl with a hump in the middle and a water moat around the side, until one day he seemed to be getting sick and we gave Barnabas his time, releasing him at the coulee behind the house, into which he swam away free for the first time in his life. Or her life, maybe.

My sister and I would walk in the mornings to J.W. Faulk Elementary School, then located mere blocks from our house. Sometimes in the surprisingly-cold Louisiana morning air I would give a full-throated and full-lunged howl, just like the recorded wolves on *Dark Shadows*. The neighborhood dogs would respond in kind, doing their best to imitate my long-tailed lunar bay, but it was out of their natural yappy register and it was hilarious to hear them try. What an actual wolf would have thought of my projection is unknown.

We did not have cable television service at Amilcar, but there was a piece of coaxial cable I remember playing with, what I'd learn when older to be 75-ohm coax designed for CATV use, with low loss but little power handling capability. What I did with it on Amilcar was to tie it into a noose, climb the trellised support at the northwest corner of the carport, tie it at the top and slip it around my neck, then start to climb down and feel it tighten around my neck. Just for fun, just playing. Probably saw a hanging on TV. Maybe *Dark Shadows*. When I felt the cable tight around my neck I realized for the first time that I could slip, and I realized for the first time that I could die and this was dangerous, and I was afraid. I took a step back up the trellis, took the noose from around my neck and climbed down. I don't remember if I untied the cable or left it there. Or maybe I simply untied it from

the top and climbed down with it still around my neck. I just don't remember.

If I had in fact slipped and accidentally hanged myself, my parents and everyone else would have wondered why a first-grade boy committed suicide in the driveway at home. Blame television. But I must have been an odd child.

I don't think I happened to mention this to anybody. But I did mention the girl in my room, I know, because years later my mother repeated it back to me and said that she had been uncertain how to respond. On the one hand, she very much wanted to know the details. A good ghost story right there at home maybe. On the other hand, she didn't want to frighten me with her questions. Why would I be frightened, I asked? Because the girl was dead, or that was what I thought I was seeing, my mother said. Dead girl, really? I didn't know she was dead. First I had heard about it.

When my hand went right through her I was not surprised. I even expected it. Had I touched a substantial radiating being standing next to me, alone at night while I lay in bed I would have been afraid. But she could do me no harm, so I thought. She was exactly what she had to be.

The house was brand new, having been built the year before by a builder for his son. It had been built with thought and care. For example, this new house had four mature pecan trees in the back yard. They had not been cleared out to start a new lot, but had been preserved. The pecans were small and the shells very hard. It was known that the best pecans were the ones with all the flavor packed into a small space and guarded jealously, encased in hard wood. You'd need a tool or a rock to get inside, forget about squeezing two together or, horrors, using your teeth. In that one year that we lived on Amilcar, the pecan trees dropped so many pecans, and all at once, that we gathered them all up one day into paper grocery bags to take to the nut store to sell. I had casually tossed one or two into a tiny bag—I was not into it—but my older sister, older by four years, enthusiastically filled bag after bag. And at the nut store they paid fourteen dollars for them! If that

seems like, well big deal, consider that fourteen dollars in 1968 is worth more than $126 today. I was given one of those fourteen dollars for my meager efforts, which I recognized at the time for the generosity it was.

We had central air, and a nice kitchen which was not hidden away but meant to be part of life, with a Formica counter adjoining the living room with its big picture window facing front. There was plenty of room for a dining table too. The carport entrance to the house was right at the confluence of the kitchen and the living room. It was at that Formica countertop that I would procrastinate endlessly, to the point of tears, doing my first-grade arithmetic homework, trying to engage passersby in conversation, finally giving up and doing the little problems in a few minutes, I am told. And on Christmas Eve, in the middle of the night, it was at that Formica countertop that my father ate the big piece of lemon cake we had left out for Santa Claus, so we, or I, could be shown the empty plate on Christmas, along with my new blue spider bike, a two-wheeler with a banana seat and high-set handlebars, which I would learn to ride on the infinitely flat Mississippi Delta plain, which for me consisted of the three blocks around my house.

The house at Amilcar was a nice, new, middle-class brick home done well and designed for living. Nobody had had time to die in it yet, my adventure with the cable on the trellis notwithstanding.

So the girl was not dead. No Evangeline maid wraith from the forest primeval was needed. Her face was the key. She looked like no one I knew. It could not be my mother's face, in which I'd expect to see only nurture and safety. It could not be the face of any adult. Nor could it be the face of another boy. I'd want to be friends, to go have fun, to catch some lizards and watch them flip between green and brown until we finally let them go, or try to catch a metallic green dragonfly but never succeed. That was not what I needed then.

She was my projection and she was reading me, and I was reading her reading me. And in her face I could see something I needed to see, which was not nurture, adventure, or safety. It was nuance, possibility, and even danger.

Amilcar ends on the day the moving van came early one morning. While they worked, my sister, mother, and I had breakfast at the pretty house on the corner, where my mother's friend Diana, and her daughter Lisa lived. Before Lisa it was Peggy who lived in that house, with whom I had my first ever theological conversation, and whose dog bit me one day when I petted him while he was eating, and for weeks after the two puncture wounds on my finger would not close. We ate delicious biscuits made from scratch. Diana tearfully hugged my mother, then the four of us piled into our little 1966 navy Volkswagen Beetle, 1300 written in back, and headed north to this place with such a strange, foreign, and tantalizing name, Pennsylvania.

It was just one year, bought and sold, in and out, but it was one of the most concentrated years of my life. It was the year I learned to read, the year I learned arithmetic, the year I learned to ride a two-wheeled bike, to have friends at school, learned what my left and right was, at first so mysterious until I invented a trick. It was the year I started to think of myself as smart, straight A's except for handwriting which was straight C's. It was the year I ran alone through the woods, or ran with a friend, and threw a board over the coulee and quickly slipped across before it had time to sink. The year I dodged a viper at the carport door, who refused to yield ground and I didn't think to just use the front door instead. It was the year I learned that I could die for real. In that year of assassinations on TV I learned that black people weren't scary, and it wasn't the bad guys getting killed. But most of all I learned the beginnings of how to create—to project myself out into the world, experience it there, and take it back inside again and be changed.

The woods which communicated with our house on Amilcar are all gone now, and the coulee is gone along with them. In its place is a system of engineered flood control channels lined with concrete, some of them quite large. Two such channels meet at a confluence right at the southwest corner of the back yard, a short distance from where the coulee ran and where I ran over it.

The pecan trees are gone too. They were mature pecans, no telling how old, and unlike most city trees a pecan can live for centuries if the conditions are right, and some pecans in the Mississippi Delta might be a thousand years old.

With the woods backing it no longer, the back yard has given way to additions from the house which now occupy much of that space.

When viewed from the street, the house on Amilcar looks exactly the same as it did fifty-six years ago, as do all the other houses on the street. It is a pretty brick house, with a perfect concrete carport which terminates under an overhang with two cars parked under, and with the laundry building to the right, which might be a teen's bedroom now. At the corner of the overhang is the very same metal trellis, painted by now, black as it happens.

In the front yard near the trellis sits a small swing set for a child.