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COVER ART

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MANAGING EDITOR EMERITUS

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Winner of the Climate Fiction Competition

The Drowned City

Sara Davis

The first blush of twilight was blooming in the Old Quarter as Stella led her guests into Jackson Square. Magic hour: against the violet-streaked sky, the soaring white spires of St. Louis Cathedral glowed with soft pink tones like the inside of a seashell. Guests strolled along the walkways in twos and threes, stopping to watch one of the gold-painted human statues or browse the canvases leaning against wrought iron park fences. The tall gates were open so that guests could walk among the hedges leading toward the fountain, where buskers were strategically positioned so that one's merry strains of accordion didn't compete with another's melancholy horn. Some guests were eating beignets in a café across from the square, and the smell of hot sugar clouded over the brackish humidity and acrid undercurrents of citronella.

"Welcome to Jackson Square," said Stella warmly, walking backwards for a few steps in order to face her group: fifteen guests from all around the country with little in common aside from a checked box labelled Ghost and Voodoo Tour. "This is the perfect place to begin our journey into the unknown. Fortune tellers and palm readers from the bayou and beyond have been drawn to the heart of the Old Quarter to practice their mystical arts for hundreds of years." She paused for a beat as the tour guests absorbed the gaslit square, dotted with wrought-iron benches and tables. "Who's ready for a glimpse into the future?"

An upbeat chatter rose from the guests as Stella led her group directly to the table where her housemate Jared was seated, wearing harem pants and a great deal of silver jewelry. Jared grew up in the multicultural melting pot of Houston, more "beyond" than "bayou," but his grandparents were from Opelousas and he played up the regional accent. Stella herself grew up in a landlocked town in Tennessee, and admired Jared's insouciant intimacy with Louisiana folkways, as well as his expansive knowledge of the Old Quarter, where she still felt like a novice after four months. *New New Orleans*, Jared and the other workers called it. That was a joke: the point of the Old Quarter is that it is exactly the same as the old New Orleans, or part of it anyway.

"Good evening, *mes amis*," says Jared. "My name is Jerrick, and I am here to initiate you into the arts of chiromancy—that is to say, how the shape of your hand can tell me who you are and who you might become. May I have a volunteer?"

About half the group raised a hand: a gaggle of boyish tech bros from Nevada, some Generation Alpha finance guys from Albany, two distinguished couples wearing fine linen and expensive-looking watches, and a quiet, solitary woman who might be in her late sixties. Jared chose one of the linen-clad wives, and held her hand gallantly as he interpreted the lines of her palm for the group. The tech bros elbowed one another and snickered, but even they grew quiet and attentive as Jared read the woman's palm. Stella always enjoyed watching the transformation; she had trained in fortune-telling herself, and it was probably her favorite Tour and Transport rotation after the ghost and voodoo tours. In her short time in the Old Quarter, Stella had also spent a rotation on one of the pedicabs, and in a pinch she could fill on a shift as hostess or dishwasher—although Corporate preferred those roles to be staffed by workers in the Hospitality division.

Not workers, Stella reminded herself; that's what the employees called themselves in their own bunkhouses off the clock. Corporate called them *characters*, as was the convention in their flagship amusement parks. Visitors to the floating city were called guests, because no one wanted to be a tourist. In front of guests, workers called one another by their given names, or *mon ami* if they couldn't remember the name they had been given. Stella had gotten to keep her own name; the Tour and Transport agents had chuckled when she introduced herself at open auditions.

Jared concluded his demonstration by asking everyone in her group to hold up their hands so that he could read the angle of their thumbs. There was good-natured laughter from the group as he pointed and called them out by turns: cooperative, codependent, cantankerous. Stella made a mental note to try this on her next fortune-telling rotation; exit reports have shown that personalized attention can substantially improve guest experience. Walking backward to lead her guests onward, she observed her guests talking among themselves in a low hum of excitement. The solitary older woman was the last to follow her out of the square; perhaps she would return to "Jerrick" for an extended reading after Stella's ghost and voodoo tour.

Stella led her tour guests down a narrow, cobblestoned alley alongside the cathedral that opened onto Royal Street, which glowed amber and gold from string lights and glittering shop windows. Stella stopped in front of an art gallery and waited a moment for her guests to pool around her. "Look up," she told them, and lifted her own gaze past the shuttered dormer windows as an example. "On a cold, dark night—colder and darker than this—you might see the ghost of the octoroon mistress pacing back and forth on the roof." Of course there hadn't been a cold night since Stella arrived in the Old Quarter, but that wasn't the

point.

The ghost stories were fun, Stella thought, but it was the architecture and history that inspired her to audition for a tenancy in cultural preservation. When Stella told her parents she wanted to take the tenancy, they had been worried—about the hurricanes, about the mosquitos, about her living and working full-time in the floating city. “We just want you to be happy, honey,” said Dad. Papa sighed, and told her that if it didn’t work out she could come home anytime. But it is working out, Stella said to herself as she led her tour group away from the octoroon mistress’s fateful rooftop. Few of her peers had landed tenancies as fulfilling as Stella’s, where she could put her art history education to use interpreting a site of great cultural importance—even if only for the benefit of a few thousand wealthy guests each year.

So as Stella marched her guests through the Old Quarter these last few months, she taught them the terms for the wide galleries and narrow cantilevered balconies that shade the walkways, wreathed in ornate ironwork and hanging plants. When her groups crossed Orleans Street, she asked them to turn slowly in a circle and feel themselves in the very center of the Old Quarter, and she stood with her arms out to show that the street was wide enough to allow two lanes of carriage traffic. There were no carriages in the Old Quarter now, of course. The experiment of ferrying mules into the floating city was deemed a failure; their upkeep was negligible compared to the dry goods and perishables shipped into the Old Quarter every day, but the mules didn’t poll well with guests in the early days of the Old Quarter rebrand.

Since this group responded well to their introduction to the mystical arts, Stella decided to follow Orleans Street lakeward for a few blocks. The old directional terms—lakeward, riverward—don’t mean much anymore, but the Tour and Transport workers still use them to orient themselves in the Old Quarter. Beyond Royal and Bourbon Streets there is less activity and architectural beauty to dazzle her guests—but they signed up for a supernatural experience, Stella reasoned, and the residential blocks grow eerily quiet as you walk further from the Hospitality and Entertainment hubs. She can show them Marie Laveau’s house and transplanted crypt, still marked up with red X’s all over. She can point to one of the many houses which may have been a House of the Rising Sun.

Periodically walking backward, Stella pointed out the shuttered stately homes of the central Quarter and explained the Spanish style of architecture: the outer windows are blocked by wooden shutters and shaded by galleries, while the inner windows open onto a cool courtyard where tropical trees spread their broad leaves over fountains and keep the house cool. Some of the guests nod; most of them are staying in old hotels of precisely this structure, albeit ones that blast cold air during

the endless summers. As the group got closer to the lakeward banks, Stella called attention to the changing surroundings; the palatial homes gave way to narrow pastel shotgun houses. Historically, Stella said to the group, this is where the less well-off residents lived in the Old Quarter. This is a private joke: while a few of the central shotgun houses were converted into luxury single-bedroom suites for certain eccentric guests, most others serve as storerooms or bunkhouses for the divisions, or both. Stella herself is staying in a pale green shotgun house during this rotation, along with five other workers in the Tour and Transport division. They share a kitchen and a bath, and there are two light-filled bedrooms that sleep three each. Of all the far-flung tenancies that took her college friends after graduation, Stella privately thinks that hers is the most glamorous.

The quiet woman in her sixties seemed to stumble over the uneven sidewalk, and one of the finance guys caught her arm to steady her.

"I'm all right," she said.

"It's a shame, really," said one of the linen-clad guests, casting a critical eye on the cracked concrete. "Why don't they fix things up over here?"

"The Old Quarter is designed to preserve the city's unique history and vibrant culture," Stella recited, and explained that most of the neighborhood's buildings and infrastructure were maintained in the state of repair they had been in when Corporate, well, incorporated the city. "Otherwise, how would you choose what to preserve?" asked Stella, sensing a teachable moment. "How would you commit to one particular moment in time, knowing that would erase everything that came after?" And every moment in time has its dark side, Stella thought to herself. If you restore the neighborhood Marie Laveau knew, you get slave quarters and no indoor plumbing. If you restore the era of glamorous cotillions, you also get the octoroon ball and restless spectral mistresses.

"I would have thought the sidewalk would be in worse shape," said another guest. "Why isn't it more damaged?"

Stella took a moment to consider what the guest might mean by that. "Why isn't it more what?" she asked.

"Damaged," said the guest. "I thought this part of the city was damaged by the storm surge."

"Oh, no," said Stella, and explained what she knew about topography: that New Orleans was shaped like a basin, hence the Basin Street Blues, and that the oldest parts of the city were built at the riverward lip. When the levees broke, the water flooded the deepest part of the basin. The Old Quarter escaped the worst of it.

Stella realized belatedly that what the guest meant was, "I thought you said this is where the poor lived, and we all know how the poor fared in Katrina and Maria and Betsy II." But as she opened her mouth

to explain, one of the tech bros cleared his throat. “Where do we go to see the worst of it?”

Stella suppressed a physical cringe—the gracelessness of it—and forced herself to speak calmly. The floating city preserved everything exactly as it was for posterity, and hired divisions to manage Hospitality, Tour and Transport, Entertainment, and every other foreseeable need that guests might have. As it happened, it was completely foreseeable that some guests would feel the need to look upon the ravages of nature and despair, or stare back at the void or experience the Romantic sublime or whatever—Stella hadn’t quite figured out the motive. Nor had she been able to find out where Corporate took guests who wanted to see the drowned city, since the whole point of the Old Quarter was to protect New Orleans history and culture from the rising sea and increasingly chaotic hurricane season. But she did know the phone number for the Disaster Tourism division, which she gave to the Nevada man without further comment.

“Now, who here is familiar with ‘The House of the Rising Sun?’” she asked, and as the more inebriated guests launched readily into a rousing chorus, she picked a pale blue house at random for them to address their tuneless jubilee.

The ghost and voodoo tour always ends at a bar, although not always the same one every night. Tonight, Stella had been instructed to take her guests to a hotel where the bar counter is installed inside a full-size carousel; some of the guests gasped with delight as they entered and lifted their arms to take wristwatch photos. Stella regathered her group for a quick wrap-up—a pleasant ghost story about a childish spirit who manifests mostly by giggling and slamming doors in the carousel hotel—and bade them good night. “It has been a pleasure to share this remarkable city with you,” she said to the group. “I hope you have a wonderful stay in the Old Quarter. I will be here if you have any questions about reaching your next destination.”

As the group dispersed, the solitary older woman who had stumbled on the sidewalk lingered and looked as though she had something to say. This often happened; after spending an hour hearing Stella talk about the Old Quarter and ghosts, many guests find that they want to confide in her about supernatural experiences or ask her for restaurant recommendations. Sometimes both. Stella didn’t have a read on what the older woman would ask, though; she didn’t look like the Old Quarter’s usual guests. She was not dressed like the grand dames and pampered wives whom Stella usually encountered on her pedicab shifts, nor did she exhibit the entitled langor of someone who has never had to punch the clock. This woman had kept pace throughout the walk and had seemed engaged with Stella’s stories, although she kept to herself.

She actually seemed to have come alone, which was unusual. Airlifting to the floating city is expensive, and most of Stella's tour guests were wealthy couples and families with the means to purchase a unique cultural experience, privileged young people who wanted to party, or groups arranged by conferences for employees in the few industries that still had money to burn.

Stella's face hurt a little from smiling, but she composed herself to look friendly until the solitary woman approached her.

"That was very well done, dear. Lovely stories," said the woman. She gestured to the carousel bar. "May I get you something?"

"No, thank you," said Stella, who had cause to establish a personal rule never to accept drinks from guests. But she did feel a little worried about the older woman being on her own, and decided to offer her a little personalized attention. "What brings you to the Old Quarter?" she asked warmly.

"I've been meaning to come back to New Orleans for years," said the solitary woman with a slight smile.

"Did you grow up here?" Stella asked with great interest. Asking for cultural research, she told herself, but the truth is that there was a whiff of the forbidden in talking to displaced New Orleanians, like looking up photos of the floods.

"I lived here when I was your age," said the older woman. "A long time ago, before Katrina."

"How old are you?" asked Stella—thoughtlessly, she realized immediately, although the guest didn't seem perturbed. Hurricane Katrina happened long before Stella was born—possibly before Stella's own parents were born. When they quizzed her with the flashcards she'd made to prepare for her Tour and Transport exam, she discovered that Papa hadn't even heard of Hurricane Katrina. "There have been so many hurricanes!" he said defensively when Dad teased him for being oblivious. Dad had grown up in Memphis and known children whose families had relocated after Katrina. "It's my root," he had joked; he was a sociology professor and studied the cultural traditions of displaced populations, although not specifically climate refugees. It's Stella's root, too: she had grown up with the devout faith that cultural traditions were to be stewarded and preserved.

The guest was taking her question at face value. "Sixty-nine," she said.

"Nice," said Stella, again without thinking. She must be tired. The older woman pursed her lips, or maybe dimpled with a smile. Stella wasn't sure. "Have you been back to visit since then?" she asked quickly.

"Oh yes, many times," said the woman. "For hurricane relief now and again. For Mardi Gras once or twice, when that was still going on. It was supposed to help, we thought. Stimulating the economy with our

tourist dollars.” She pursed or dimpled her face again. “I flew down with all my girlfriends for my 39th birthday. It was supposed to be for my 40th, but the seas were already rising and so were airfares, so it didn’t make sense to wait.”

Stella’s parents are in their late forties now, and she can’t imagine them arranging a destination birthday party for their staid professorial friends, let alone parting with the cash it would take to charter a flight south from Tennessee these days. “That must have been wild,” she said.

Now the older woman was smiling genuinely, her papery cheeks rounded with muted mirth, and when Stella smiled back it didn’t hurt.

“I shouldn’t linger,” said the woman. “I hope to walk to the lake-ward bank and meditate awhile before I turn in.”

“I could walk with you,” Stella offered. “My bunkhouse isn’t far from the lakeward bank.” That was true, although not why she offered. Whether out of courtesy toward a senior guest or penitence for her conversational stumbles, Stella felt responsible for the quiet woman’s happiness in this, one of the happiest places on earth. Her guest nodded, and the two exited the carousel bar into the breezeless night.

Stella expected to take her guest along the same streets as the tour to keep her from losing her way, but soon found that she was not directing their path at all. The older woman moved with surety and familiarity along the streets. When Stella pointed out landmarks of historical interest, her guest already knew them well. She even drew Stella’s attention to a few architectural details that weren’t on the Tour and Transport exam, like the thickets of thorny iron spikes that crowned certain gallery supports and were once intended to fend off burglars and aspiring Romeos.

“Did you live in the Old Quarter when you lived here?” asked Stella.

“No, in Riverbend. All the way at the other end of the streetcar line.”

Stella had seen a streetcar—not on the rails, obviously—but her mental map of old New Orleans got fuzzy past the banks. In her defense, some of the neighborhoods outside of the Old Quarter changed drastically over the years. Once, a leering tour guest asked her if she could take him to Storyville, but she recalled enough from her flashcards to primly inform him that the old red light district had been razed to the ground one hundred years before the sea rose, and in any case adult entertainment would fall sensibly under the Entertainment division and not Tours.

“Did you lose your house?” asked Stella, trying to sound more sympathetic than curious.

“I didn’t own a house,” said the older woman, “and I moved out of the city one month before Katrina made landfall.”

“Wow,” said Stella. “You were lucky.”

"I was." The woman wasn't looking at her. "Others weren't."

"Corporate doesn't teach us about those times," said Stella after a moment of respectful silence. It's true, although of course she knows all about it. Workers look up video footage and aftermath photos on the internet, share them, try to scare one another with the most abhorrent and unearthly. Houses sitting inside other houses as if dropped by a tornado into Oz. Walls sheared clean off, interior rooms sliced open like a dollhouse: clutter on the hall table, shoes still lined up on the stairs. The entire drowning city seen from above: wheat square rooftops floating improbably in a bowl of brown water. When Stella drinks too many sugary cocktails with the guests, she dreams that the shoe-lined stairs and sandwiched houses still lay under the salt-laced currents that cover that land now.

They were getting close to the lakeward bank, Stella realized at that moment, and she started to wonder how to peel off and veer toward her bunkhouse. It made her uneasy to be so near the end of the Old Quarter and the ragged edge of the sea—especially at night, when the dark water met the blank face of the sky to form a fathomless void. It was worse on the riverward bank, which was usually oriented toward the unimaginable expanse of the Gulf without any faint pinpricks of light from ships or rigs. But the lakeward bank faced all the rest of what had been New Orleans. What had been Treme, Riverbend, Algiers, and other neighborhoods Stella had only read about. What had been the lake, too, before it and the river became undercurrents of the rising sea. Or, depending on where the floating city had steered, what had been Galveston, Houma, Biloxi, Pensacola. Stella felt something like vertigo when she looked into the moving water, knowing that the Old Quarter sailed over a sunken coastline crisscrossed with ruined highways.

"There was a cemetery here once," mused the older woman. "The oldest cemetery standing, full of wonderful old stories."

"They moved some of it," volunteered Stella. "We didn't get to Marie Laveau's house on your tour but her crypt is there. And Bernard de Marigny and Homer Plessy were moved into the Cabildo."

"I see," said the woman. She didn't sound as impressed as Stella hoped. "I'm sure they enjoy each other's company."

They had reached the low guardrail at the end of the Old Quarter. On the other side of the rail, rubber-treaded steps descended to a catwalk that permitted the Maintenance division access to the Old Quarter's bulkheads and engines. Beyond the catwalk, darkness. The low susurrus of waves brushing the hull. A disquieting smell like moss, burnt rubber, and salt.

"I moved here to teach high school English," the quiet woman said suddenly, and Stella felt guilty for failing to ask her. "For two years, at Mac."

“At where?”

“A high school,” said the woman. “It was on Esplanade Avenue, but not near the Old Quarter.” She pointed across the water and to the right, where the east bank of the Old Quarter might meet the shore, if they could see the shore. Her pointer finger looked oddly bent, arthritic; Stella briefly wondered whether fingers could be read, like a palm. “Mac was up past the Degas House,” the older woman continued, “if you know where that was.”

“I know where the Degas House is now,” said Stella. “It’s in France.” She had watched archival footage of the relocation in her college conservation course, marvelling that the entire historical edifice could be deconstructed into thousands of neatly labelled boxes and then reconstructed as far inland as you can get in France.

“That’s one way to do it,” said her guest.

“Maybe not the most cost-effective way,” admitted Stella.

“That’s just the problem, isn’t it,” said the woman. “The cost-effective way would have been to keep the seas from rising. When it was too late for that, what were you supposed to choose?” Her voice sounded rough. “How would you commit to one fraction of the city to preserve, knowing that everything else would be erased?”

Stella felt defensive. She heard the echo of her own words but she had studied this, too. The question made for lively debate team arguments in high school and dreamy late night philosophizing in college. What would you save, and how would you save it? When the United States officially recognized the rising sea level, the public answered in the form of enormous political pressure to preserve the folkways and cultural touchstones of its coastal cities. Alaskan fishing villages. Wild pony colonies in the barrier islands. New York City, in all its majesty and hubris. Countless other histories, traditions. But there was limited federal funding and little time to act, so the government was compelled to work with foreign powers and private investors who were willing to sink money into cultural preservation and protection. Some national treasures were purchased outright and moved to landlocked regions around the world, like the Degas House and many little pieces of the New Jersey boardwalk. Other investors engineered elaborate structures to prevent coastal erosion and flooding. The floating city had been a compromise, the brainchild of a Corporate partnership with the Dutch research centers that had spent decades perfecting floating farm acreage and entire neighborhoods that would rise with the tide. Now, a crescent-shaped sliver of a mobile island dodging storms across the Gulf, New New Orleans remained afloat.

Stella considered carefully how to modulate her tone, mindful of her responsibility to maximize her guest’s exposure to positive Old Quarter experiences. “At least New Orleans still exists,” she said finally.

"You can still go to Preservation Hall and hear jazz. You can dance in a second line through the Old Quarter and walk among real old historic homes on a beautiful moonlit night." The moonlight tonight was negligible, actually, but Stella pressed on. Feeling a surge of protectiveness for the city she had spent months studying and serving, she added, "I guess it would have been more cost-effective to let the sea swallow everything up, but they didn't."

The woman turned her gaze away from the brackish black waves and fixed Stella with a watery stare. "They did," she said. "You don't see any schoolchildren here, do you?"

Stella didn't know what to say. She felt that the conversation had gotten away from her and wasn't sure how to steer it back. It didn't seem right to go, but the older woman didn't seem to want her to stay. "Why did you come back?" she asked, finally.

The solitary woman had turned her faded face back toward the water. She looked at old New Orleans, or wherever they were facing, for a long time before she spoke.

"Because I can't forget," she said.

Stella slept fitfully that night, and dreamed that the floating city sailed over a web of crumbling streets and decaying neighborhoods that lay along the seafloor. Houses sagging open like wounds, table legs and chair rails spilling out and suspended in the silty depths. On the lakeside bank of the floating city, a solitary figure gazed into the water. The figure stood as still as a human statue for a long time, then stepped from the bank into the water without a splash. In the dream, it seemed that the figure glided toward the drowned city as though descending a flight of stairs. Helicopters crossed the black sky like whales in the open sea, and the relentless thump of spinning blades roared over the cry of crashing waves.

Stella awoke with a start. She could still hear a helicopter, and also someone was knocking on her door—not softly, but the sound was nearly drowned out by the pounding blades. "Stella! Are you awake?" called Jared in a stage whisper. Stella squinted in the dark bedroom and saw her roommates stirring; one put a pillow over her head. Stella threw off her bedsheet and fumbled for something to cover the worn shirt she slept in. She pulled on the filmy vest she wore for her fortune teller shifts and went to the door.

"Man overboard," said Jared. "Or person, whatever. Let's get outside and watch where the choppers go."

Stella followed him numbly to the porch and down their front steps. They stood barefoot on the sidewalk and looked up into the sky. It was just one helicopter, heading away from the floating city. Stella wasn't sure which direction that was, or where the nearest coast would

be. “Why wouldn’t they just bring the person back to the Old Quarter?” she asked. There was a medical center converted from one of the less illustrious hotels on Canal Street. The staff there mostly dealt with alcohol poisoning and minor injuries, but surely they were prepared to administer first aid.

“Protocol,” said Jared knowingly. “Corporate doesn’t want word getting around that someone took a swan dive off of our pleasure cruise, and it’s protocol to wing them off to the mainland.”

“Someone *jumped*?” cried Stella. “Why?”

Jared shrugged. “Drunk. Depressed. Survivor’s guilt. Financial ruin. It happens more often than you’d think. Hence the protocol.”

Stella thought of the solitary woman—she hadn’t gotten her name.

“Is there a way to find out who?” she asked Jared.

“Absolutely not,” he said affably. “Confidentiality, waivers, bad press, angry guests, you get the idea.” He glanced down at Stella, who had clenched the hem of her flimsy fortune teller’s vest with a white-knuckled grip. “Hey, are you okay? Let’s go back inside.”

The watery chartreuse hues of daybreak were lighting the eastern banks when the Maintenance division arrived to open the floating dock. Stella was already there, seated on a bench with her backpack on her knees. She watched as the first supply boat of the day docked and the boatmen unloaded ice chests packed with crustaceans, foam crates filled with fruits, and case after case of liquor. She waited until they took their Corporate-mandated five minute break to ask for passage. As the supply boat backed out of the floating city and chugged across the Gulf, Stella stood at its starboard rail and looked into the water as if she could see all the way down.