

The Distance Between Echoes

By Dean Ellis

It is not well known, but Stella was my girl before all that crap with Stanley. I'm neither bitter nor remorseful; things happen for the best, or at least the way they're intended. And, to be honest, they worked out far better for me than either of them.

I met her late one night after my bartending shift at the back end of the Quarter. Okay, it was early one morning. Very early. I poured drinks at the Doghouse nightclub at Rampart and Bienville, mostly for the bee drinkers and their shills, and well, sometimes Stella took a gig there when she was down and out. This was an old saloon scam from way back. The owner, Eddie G., would hire good lookin' gals to solicit expensive drinks from the male patrons. I poured overpriced drinks for the men and iced tea or colored water for the ladies. Stella, by the way, was a bee drinker, not a taxi dancer. Can't stress that enough. The taxi gals were something else: ballroom dancers who could sometimes be, for a price, let's say, "generous with their affections." Stella had wandered over from Laurel, Mississippi, I never asked her why. (Her last name, in those days, never really came up, but I do recall it was something French-sounding. I was never even sure of her real first name either, since most of the ladies at the club used aliases). But one night, okay early one morning, she was still at the bar as my shift ended and looking a bit outta sorts, so I invited her out for breakfast up at the Clover Grill. She half-shrugged in agreement and we strolled over for some fried potatoes and gravy just as the sun was climbing up over the levee, casting sweet shadows over the Quarter.

"I'm given to such light," she said, rather abruptly, as though awakening from some dark daydream. She had a poetic way of putting things. Such utterances she attributed to the influence of her older sister who, she claimed, could have won the Pulitzer for her offhand parlance alone.

“She dashes off these pearls without a thought. Some enterprising publisher with a pen and notebook should just follow her around, gather up her bons mots, and make himself a fortune.”

To be honest, the tales she told about her sister were so outlandish, I doubted the woman even existed. But I never asked much about her family or her past; just let her tell me whatever she wanted and whenever the mood struck her, which wasn't often.

We ate heartily, both of us, and she perked up a bunch after her belly was full. “I need to see the river,” she said, so we strolled on over. My buddy worked at one of the warehouses that blocked access to the Mississippi, so I got him to let us pass through, promising him a round the next time he came into the club. Stella and I stepped through the dust and whirring metal and sweaty men to the back of the building, then out onto the batture, where we came upon the green-gray water glistening in the cockcrow light.

“I think you better kiss me now,” she said. And so I did. This was the beginning of us.

As we walked back through the warehouse, hand in hand, we passed a burly man with tousled hair working the lathe. He slipped his goggles down off his swarthy cheeks and gave Stella a look. In that look I saw something menacing and hungry. He didn't see me at all. Stella's hand slipped from my grip.

We lasted awhile, me and Stella, considering everything. Even with the random way our lives passed, lives spent mostly by night. This was, after all, New Orleans, and it seemed everyone lived this way: half-thriving, half-dying at the edge of the water, everything akimbo, going this way and that. We danced sober and breakfasted drunk. Our friends were just like us, and utterly different, because no one, really, was like anyone else, which is why we all chose to live in this Caribbean outpost at the bottom of the country. After all, does a city care what happens within its borders, or is the city itself the thing that teases out all that blooms and festers there?

She came less and less into the club, and once she got hired at a WPA office upriver, I rarely saw her, except on our ritual Saturday night at the theater. A floor show, a play, sometimes a concert by a big band. Once even ol'Satch came through with his orchestra. When Armstrong blew his horn, Stella's eyes turned to big blue coins, all round and wide and shimmery. She squeezed my hand so tight she almost broke the bones in my fingers. I didn't mind, thinking this would seal it for us. Of course it didn't. Instead, later that night, after the performance, something else was sealed: our end. And it came quick.

"Let's go to the club," she said, even though it was my night off. I wasn't happy about the idea, and wasn't sure where this notion of hers came from, but relented. It was just before midnight.

The Doghouse was dead when we stepped inside. One of its customary brawls had cleared the place, though this time there were no fatalities, only a few broken bones. We headed to the bar, and ordered up a couple martinis from Paulie the Scot. She guzzled half of hers down, coughed, and sputtered, her eyes gleaming:

"This is my first real drink, I'll have you know. Quite refreshing. I could get used to these."

"You'd better not," I said, subtly nudging her glass in my direction. She blocked my fingers with hers, and nudged it back.

"And why do you say that?"

"Not good for you, is all. I've seen some things. Especially from late-in-the-gamers."

"Well, my sister likes her sidecars. And she didn't start till she was—"

"From what I gather, you've got a better head on your shoulders than she does."

"Now how would you know, having never met her?"

"Just a sense I have."

“Your sense, as you call it, is nonsense.” She slurped down the rest of the drink and motioned to Paulie for another.

“Have it your way, Stella,” I said, nodding at Paulie. He shook up a lather with a wink in my direction, letting me know her next drink would be fit for the bee drinker she once was. When he set it down, she raised the glass in his direction. “Here’s to you, Paulie,” she hiccupped, then

downed the mocktail with one long swallow. “Now *that’s* a drink,” she murmured, and set her hand on my shoulder.

The club began to fill again. A old shill of Stella’s slithered onto a barstool next to her, and after eyeing her with unseemly recognition, slurred out some words:

“Hey sweetie, steppin’ out on me, eh? This your brother, or your guardian?”

“He’s just a guy,” she said, squeezing my thigh playfully. “How ‘bout a drink, fella?”

“I know your game, lady. We’re all in on it. Nobody here is fooled. If I buy you a drink, it’s gotta be a real one.”

“A martini then,” Stella cooed.

“Paulie, the lady will have—”

The drink was in front of her before his sentence was finished. As I nodded at Paulie, the man slipped a finger in the glass, then brought it to his lips to taste. He picked up the glass, tossed the liquid in my face, and smashed the glass against the bar mirror, shattering both.

“I told you I wanted a *real* drink, Paulie. I’m paying good goddamned money for it.”

By now I was on my feet. I wiped my face with one hand, grabbed him by the collar with the other, and throttled him. I must confess I was, despite the fact that it was against my nature, quite vehement about it.

As I planted him back onto his bar stool, I spotted a curious stranger in the shadows, beyond the counter, wielding a cigarette holder, who appeared to be scribbling in a notepad. Christ, a newspaper man. I dashed over to confiscate his notebook, but he vanished in the confusion like a ghost from an unseen future.

The club was cleared again, and as the bouncers hustled everyone out onto the street, Paulie kept me and Stella behind the bar, pretending we had nothing to do with it. The offending patron found himself in Central Lockup for the night. Something told me he'd be back; tourists never came to the Doghouse, except by accident.

"We better go, Stella," I said, clasping her elbow. "I'm not liking the air in here tonight."

"Don't be such a jellyfish. Let's dance."

"I don't think you can keep your balance."

She broke away from my grip and spun out onto the dance floor, collapsing in a heap moments after. I gathered her up and took her to my Dad's old Packard, the one I'd inherited, parked in the back. On the way we were met by a familiar looking fellow, burly with tousled hair and swarthy cheeks. He snarled a greeting. My instinct, of course, was to keep going, but Stella clutched my forearm and held me there.

"Hello," she purred, to the man. "How are you?" But she uttered the phrase so softly I couldn't quite tell if she had said "How" or "Who." The distinction seemed, at the moment, quite significant.

The man snorted something unintelligible, which Stella seemed to find endearing. She blushed, producing an unseemly purple hue on her face.

“Come on, Stella,” I said, “Let’s be on.”

“No hurry,” she replied, distracted, cat-like, by this sideshow freak, this goon, this heaving specimen of a man. “Go on ahead if you like. I’ll catch up with you somewhere.”

I don’t know why, but I obeyed. To this day I’m not sure why. On the other hand, I guess I am.

As I said, we lasted awhile. You may be wondering what I mean by “awhile,” when it came to us. But last we did, even in the face of such early, oblique threats. I went on ahead and met her later at our favorite dive in the Marigny. She was a bit unsteady on her feet when she arrived, lipstick smeared, smelling of absinthe, but she claimed she had tripped over a curb, breaking a heel on her shoe, and the scent of the green fairy was nothing more than her new perfume. I didn’t press her on the lipstick. We had a reasonably cordial breakfast of burnt bacon and rubbery eggs, and continued on this way, night after capricious night, until, well, we didn’t.

I suppose I loved her. This was how things went back then; everything hazy and undefined; days and nights and people and events slipped through your grip before you could get a good, firm hold on them.

Late one Carnival night, while tilted in the direction of a deep Bywater counter, I felt someone (or something) flutter past me. I looked up and saw two fairies, one purple, one pink, traipsing toward the courtyard. The purple one appeared to be wielding a tumbler of whiskey. I pushed past the crowd, onto the mottled bricks, confronted at once by a cluster of banana leaves, one of which tore into my eyebrow. I was pretty looped as it was, so the pain was not as dreadful as it would prove to be the following morning. I parted the palm leaves with my fist, and searched the courtyard through doubly distressed vision, blurred by my aggrieved condition and my advanced state of inebriation. The fairies appeared through a tangle of color, clamor, and muffled sounds. It had to be them; Stella and her sis, though I’d never met the latter, but something about that tumbler of whiskey, sticking out from her purple forewing, told me it was. I muscled my way through the crowd, unaware

that I was bleeding from my sliced eyebrow, and gazed into every face. The faces gazed back with drunken indifference (likely believing the blood dripping down my cheeks was merely Mardi Gras makeup), bemusement, or abject disgust. The fairies had vanished; the pain above my eye began to manifest itself. I snatched a bottle of beer from a random drunk, and swilled it down. Expecting a punch in the face, I steeled myself, but received a smirk instead.

“Sorry,” I muttered, and continued my quest, not knowing what, exactly, it was. After pushing my way further, I submitted to the pain and collapsed, exhausted, on a wooden bench in the back of the patio; my head sinking into my chest, smearing my shirt with blood. A tarnished voice next to me, redolent with a theatrical drawl, appeared out of the shadows.

“Oh dear. You do look a mess. Here, have a taste of some medicine.” A tumbler of whiskey found its way into my hand, and I took a long grateful swig. I coughed a thank you to the voice, and handed back the glass. “My name’s Blanche,” it said, “What’s yours?”

My career at the bar ended in late March, in the fallow time between Carnival and Easter. The doldrums, such as they were, had nothing to do with Lent, mind you: the Catholics in New Orleans are even less respectful of this abstemious tradition than are Catholics in other cities. It had to do with Stella. Everyone said she was the least erratic of the two sisters, but their respective irrationalities seemed to feed off each other; the capriciousness of one fueled the inconstancy of the other. And I, long before Stanley, got caught in the middle.

It happened on a slow night. A slow night in a slow season. This is always when the most dramatic and tempestuous things occur: when they’re not supposed to.

The usual denizens. Ralph the behatted layabout, Joey the jivemeister, Becca the aerialist without a circus, Martino the stagehand, Sally the fan dancer, Clyde the trombonist, Cecil the poet. They drifted in, one by one, hour by hour, over the course of the night, eventually

ending up all together at the bar, some drunker by degrees than others (depending on when they arrived). No one made too much of a fuss. Until, that is, Stella's sister showed up. There was something at once distracted and present about her, as though she were there and not there, half sitting in front of me on the barstool, half in some faraway realm. She gazed at the ceiling as these words slipped from her mouth, as though said by a ventriloquist on a nearby stool: "I'd stay away from that baby sis of mine if I were you, young man. For your own sake. But me, well, I'm free as a fairy..."

Not long after that, Stella appeared, clinging to the arm of that burly man with the tousled hair and swarthy cheeks. I jumped over the bar, and just missed knocking Blanche off her stool. Not long after that, the club was cleared...

Things turned topsy-turvy, even by New Orleans standards, where everything is already upside down. So maybe they turned, by the way we see things here, and gather them in through our blinkered vision, right side up. Streets buckle; sewer lids rattle and pop; friends vanish, then reappear, as if out of nowhere; the temperature gives up and gains fifty degrees in a single day; the river rises and falls and rises again; people age backwards, then forwards; lovers clutch on balconies and tumble off. The last time I saw Stella was on one of those balconies, with that burly man with the tousled hair. Okay, yes, Stanley. It was up on Royal Street; I saw them as I

strolled late one afternoon to a new bartending job I'd picked up over on Toulouse and Burgundy. They were either having one of their scorched quarrels or flirting in some frivolous fashion. By the way their bodies engaged with each other, all turbulent and twisty, it was hard to tell which. I ducked into a café across the street, to either hide from their sight or to spy them with my own, I wasn't quite sure. Perhaps I saw them through some sort of kaleidoscope, the past, present, and future all jumbled together.

On the way into the café I passed a curious gentleman sitting, slightly atilt, at a cast iron table just outside the entrance. A minty odor wafted off his glass. He wore an odd disposition, had a high handsome forehead, inquisitive eyebrows, and a pencil-thin

mustache, and wielded a cigarette holder with an unlit cigarette attached. I had seen him somewhere before. He was gazing intently up at the couple on the balcony and scribbling some notes. I nodded at him as I passed, not wanting to look back at the scene above, and he acknowledged me with the barest flicker off his brow. He appeared at once exceptionally familiar and completely unknowable. Suddenly I heard a crash, of glass or bone or iron, from somewhere up on that balcony, and stepped inside.

I knew enough already; I didn't want to know anything more.

*even their footsteps are timed
like the precise distance between
echoes*

—excerpt from “Where it Came From,” by Margaret Kent