Dying is on my to do list
Between oil change and tomatoes
My private misery wasn’t written interesting enough for dramatic endings.

I make a list of how many things I could do
To pass the thousands of hours
Pointless, tick-tocking, pretentiously existentialist hours
Piling up incessantly on my face
Or I could pass less than one hour with my pile of glass shards
But slit wrists are for people with motivation.

The Will of Rutledge Johnson

By Bernard Herman

I once knew a man named Bill Johnson. He graduated from Vanderbilt University, and was in all the right clubs. He’s now in state prison. He hired a man to have his mother and step-father killed. And he did it for one reason, and one reason, only: tradition.

It was spring 1972, and I’d known Bill, then twenty-five, for about four years. I was in jewelry, and we were introduced through Toto Robinson, who was a client of mine and a friend of Bill’s mother. A fallen Jew, I met Toto while I was patron-scouting at the Anglican Church.

His mother, Trish, was a kind woman; meek and civilly involved. She was known only for her engaging manner and bob haircut. She had survived Bill’s father, Rutledge, who had passed in the fall of ’71. Trish remarried soon after his passing and lived with Judge Morgan Rousseaux in Bill’s childhood home, which had been in the Johnson family for three generations. Due to a clause in Rutledge’s will, Trish’s remarriage entitled her to the home instead of Bill, the only child. With his pride in being a Johnson far outweighing his love for his mother, Bill felt betrayed and was set on acquiring the house he saw as his birthright.

While a very bigoted man, Bill never minded my being gay. In fact, my attention reinforced his own sense of his prowess. Never did he object to being told that he was handsome and more handsome than one should be: not devastatingly, but severely. His nose was neither bumped nor pointy; his nostrils were too small to smell his own delusions. The lips he often chewed anxiously weren’t feminine but were better-formed than most men’s. And his hair and bangs, both the color of barley, were a wreath above his ruddy face. He even looked like a spoiled man, I’d often tell him. Some people are so pretty, so used to getting what they want, that they can’t handle it when they don’t. Their sense of entitlement is as inextricable from their psyche as their own face is from their body.
On our way to the New Orleans Country Club, Bill had to stop at the house to pick up his father's shirt. The New Orleans Country Club wouldn't let members in without club shirts or the company of another member, and Bill was used to joining with his father.

I lifted the antique knocker— it was a brass griffon—and let it hammer into the door. Every time I went to the Johnson's, such an announcement was necessary. The house was so cavernous that a standard pair of knuckles to the door was futile. For practical purposes, the Johnsons insisted that even relatives use the knocker, assuming they showed up in the middle of the night.

"Mo Jordan. Come in, please." Trish opened the door with a grin as sincere as there was in the city. Never, even with the memory of Rutledge's death, would she let herself become depressed, or depressing. Bill blew his mother off and walked past her open anus. "Oh well, never mind then, Bill. You seem to be in a rush." He ran upstairs to get his father's club shirt.

"Someone named Judith called. Judith Oudt, I believe." "So is the judge in?" I asked, to be polite.

"No, he's at the Charbonnet's watching the football game. Mo, I must say, you look fifty, not a day over thirty-five." "Close." I chuckled. At the time, I was almost fifty. I had gone to great pains for most of my life to keep my age a secret. Occasionally close friends would guess within a year or two of it, but most were way off the mark.

The house was impressive, I admit, but was only as special as it was spooky. What made it so important to the family, and to a certain circle really, was a day bedroom on the left side of the entrance hall.

"Mo, did I tell you that we're restoring the bed?"

"Are you, now?" She went to it with an awed gaze, and smoothed the white comforter embroidered with the names of the last six generations of Johnson patriarchs. She surveyed the beige carpet for dirt and dust, and rearranged knickknacks on a stand at the foot of the bed.

"Nobody has lain in this bed in about eighty-three years. Not since President Davis died in it." "President" Davis was Jefferson Davis, of the Confederate States of America. "I've kept it up, had it polished, re-varnished occasionally, as my duty as a Johnson wife. Rutledge would have liked to have it kept up this way.

"That's pretty remarkable though," I commented, "seemingly impossible that not a soul's been on that bed."

"Well, Rutledge used to joke that Davis was still alive, commanding us to this day."

"There may be something to that," I said, trying to console poor Trish. She may have had Judge Rousseaux to live with, but Rutledge was still the man she lived for.

Bill came down in a white shirt with a golden golf tee on it. "Mo, let's go. We shouldn't keep anyone waiting."

I followed him out with haste, so rushed that I forgot to shut the door. "Good seeing you Trish."

"Good seeing you too. Mo. Goodbye, Bill." Trish called, just below a shout.

Without looking back into the house, he sighed as he said, "Goodbye, mother," and kept on toward his car.

I had then and have today no delusions about why I associated with him as much as I did. Our aims were the same. Bill sought women, wed or not, for pleasure, and I sought them, or their husbands, for business. Once done with a girl, he'd pass her along to me as clientele. He tried to persuade his mother that he wasn't just being capricious, but was looking for the right girl. Trish knew better though and perhaps that's why she survived his wrath.

What made Bill twisted, even by his circle's standards, was that he lived not by stale bromides but by permutations of them. He never questioned them, either. Indeed, one Sunday afternoon I challenged his views on women. We were riding in his beige Cadillac to a meeting with Mark Warren, his lawyer, to discuss the acquisition of his father's home. Bill was saying the basest of things, and I finally had to challenge him. After I'd shot down one of his more specious theories on women, he responded with
mangled adage that proved him beyond reasoning with.

"Bill," I told him, "you can’t possibly think that a girl with a great voice is worth loving, let alone marrying. I mean shit, at least choose a body part! And straight men say we’re animals.” Bill always brought out the worst in me as I often fought the infernal with fire. The breeze coming through the open window soothed me.

"Mo, it’s better to love for the wrong reason than to not love at all." He didn’t laugh, and barely flinched as he said this. There was no room in him for self-inspection. "The most important thing about a girl is the sound of her voice. You can tell class and race, age and geography. These aren’t even the important things, though. You can tell whether she’s been robbed or laid in the past twenty-four hours, whether she suffers from chronic tonsillitis, or how much she enjoys life.”

Hoping he’d detect irreverence, slow himself or the car down, I asked, "You can tell all that, Bill?" I couldn’t believe I was hearing this ponderous nonsense on a Sunday when even the clouds admired the sky’s shade, something like a woman azure impure with history.

He went on resolutely. "I’m not rambling, Mo. This matters to me, to the extent that I’ve fallen in love.”

"How do you know the voice is authentic?” I challenged. "In this society, when the nose on a woman’s face isn’t always the one she was born with, how do you distinguish between whose voice is embellished and whose is real?”

Still he pressed on, conjuring half-truths. "The comfort with which the voice is used. A woman wearing an overcoat because it’s nice, for instance, will wear it differently than a woman who uses it to hide her hips.”

"How does this girl you’re fixed on use her particular voice?" "Like a wand.”

"Who is this woman?" "Her name is Judith Oudt.”

I admit that I’m not proud to have consorted with Bill for clients, but as a gay man in New Orleans, it was necessary. In the scheme of preserving the aristocracy, where an elite patriarchal few pass deeds and domiciles, surnames and secrets from generation to generation, someone like me wasn’t just abhorrent but useless. Bill was an intermediary, a bridge really, between my world of supposed decadence and his world of clandestine malevolence.

For reasons of necessity, I accompanied him on trips like these, to meetings with people of means. Perhaps this Warren man could become a client, or at least, his wife could. We went up the large marble steps beneath a green awning that led into the New Orleans Country Club ballroom. From the ballroom, then vacant, Bill and I passed through the dining room, paying our respects to a dozen or so attorneys in golf gear. Each one knew the importance of standing to shake hands with Rutledge’s son. Bill looked agitated once we walked outside to the patio.

"Not one of them will call me Mr. Johnson. I’m twenty-five years old, and it’s still ‘Bill’. I’ll never be Mr. Johnson in this city, and certainly not without that home.” He ran a hand through his pristine hair.

The patio at the New Orleans Country Club, situated between the dining room and the golf course, always startled me. When Bill made me linger in it to admire its chief attraction, a shudder came over me.

"Let’s go get a good look at it. This is the only thing in the world that brings me peace anymore,” Bill said.

In the back of the patio, near the grass of the course, were the totemic roots of the country club, a two-hundred year old oak dubbed “The Tree.” Whole families gathered out by the tree, a robust five feet in diameter, and watched their sons and daughters run around it freely.

"Well, it’s such a pretty day, Bill. What’s not to enjoy?” Girls in gingham dresses chased each other around the trunk, giggling as they slid into the course’s grass, and boys fash­ioned mud pies from the tree’s soil to toss at each other.

"My father used to bring me out by this tree,” Bill said. I tried to pat him on the back, but he didn’t want people to get ideas.
Because as I looked at the red and blonde-headed angels play, and slide, and allow grey doodlebugs to captivate them, I knew that one day they'd be taught the word "coon" and "kike" and "fruit".

"Forget it, Mo. Let's go say 'hello' to Mark's daughter."

I knew that Emma Warren, Mark's five-year-old, smiling by the Tree in a white jumper with a bow in her hair, would one day be sat down and told why she'd never date a Jew. All of these girls, now unfettered by the yoke of indoctrination, would be taught to be pretty, and to keep themselves from questioning.

"Emma, do you know where your daddy is?" Bill asked. She exposed a snaggle-toothed grin and ran off. And I knew that each boy, his shirt dirty with bark specs, would be taught that the only thing worse than bringing home a Black girl was being queer. I knew all of this, the way I knew my own name, and I prayed for these children every time I saw this hallowed tree.

"We'll find him Mo. Let's go look on the links."

We saw Mark kneeling in a huff between the six feet of green separating the ball and the cup. The sight of his heaving, paunchy middle, outfitted in an Easter yellow sweater, somehow ill the confines of the rolling green space. The thirteenth hole was situated such that it overlooked the canal behind the club, across which was a run-down neighborhood.

"Good to see ya:' he panted. "How the hell are you, son? How's your mother and your daddy's house?"

"That's what I'm here to talk about, Mark. How are you?"

"I'm, well... I'm alright. These two little colored boys stole my ball after it went over the fence. Pisses me off." He pointed across the canal to a group of five children playing stickball in the street. "These little jigs wait for you to hit one over, and then they come and pick the thing up like it's nothing. They don't even offer to throw it back over. They just take it."

The kids cheered in the distance, someone having hit a homerun.

"Mr. Warren," I interrupted, "what's a golf ball to a man in your situation; it's not even a dollar. They're just kids," I suggested politely, trying not to challenge him.

"You know, it's the principle of the thing. First it's your golf balls, then it's your job, and then before you know it, one of 'em'll want to be mayor! Anyway, I've got bad news for you Bill, about that house of your daddy's. The will's lawyer-proof. So long as your mother and that Judge Rousseaux are married and alive, that house is theirs."

"That's it?" Bill replied impassively.

"Yeah, son. That's it. Sorry. Oh, Mr..."

"Jordan," I said.

"Mr. Jordan, pardon my rudeness." He ungloved his hand and extended it to me. "Mark Warren. Pleased to meet you." He gave me a good look up and down. "Wait, 'Mr. Jordan', that name's familiar. You Episcopal?"

"Why yes," I lied. "As a matter of fact I am."

"I thought so," he exclaimed. "Toto Robinson just says the nicest thing about you and your jewelry. Can I call you if my wife ever needs anything?"

"Certainly, Mr. Warren. Anytime." I smiled at this creature. Bill was still unsettlingly indifferent about Warren's conclusion. I began to worry for him.

Warren grinned back, writing his home number on a business card. "And you call me if you ever need anything. Man. It's so good to find a diamond guy in this town not tryin' to Jew you down."

"Tell me about it," I hit him full on the shoulder, chuckling even.

"Alright Bill. Good to see you, son. Nice meeting you Mr. Jordan."

"It was a pleasure, Mr. Warren. A delight."

Bill called me the next day sounding distraught. "I'm going to have to tell Judith that I can't marry her. All of the last six generations of Johnson children, up to and including me, have been raised in that home. This isn't about me being selfish Mo; this is
about upholding tradition. And now I’m going to have to break
Judith’s heart. Meet me at Café Du Monde at six. This is news I
want to give her in person, but not alone. I can’t bear the brunt of
her reaction, and she may curb it if a third party’s present.”

The positions I didn’t put myself in for the sake of friend­ship, or business, or whatever this was. “Sure, Bill, I’ll see you at
six.” I was glad, at the time, that I’d be leaving the next day for
London.

On my way to meeting Bill, I drove through the Quarter,
thinking about what this city was founded as and what it had
become. Several fixtures of the area called to my car.

“Say man, you need some blow?”

As of the early 1700s, it was an outpost for French fur
trappers, useful to them as high land in a lower Mississippi port
region given to flooding.

“Hey, come see the girls dance, man. Everybody likes
girls, right?”

When it was sold to the Spanish roughly half a century
later, they sent their dirtiest dregs, dispatching the diseased, the
indigent, the criminal and the whoring, to New Orleans.

“Watches, man, watches, all legal! As legal as it gets!
Buy ‘em while I got ‘em!”

Before 1803’s Purchase came, it was at one point Ameri­can,
and briefly, French again, indicating that the city wasn’t to be
protected, or cherished or kept by anyone. But, as a fertile port, it
was to be used, owned, and shucked like an oyster.

Witnessing self-styled kings, criminals in judge’s seats,
citizens happy to have natives and tourists alike piss in the streets,
and a widespread appetite for precariousness, I wondered, what is
so different about this city now, in 1972, as compared to two
hundred fifty years ago? Does it resist evolution? Is it, six feet
below sea level, incapable of anything but amphibious lubricity?
Would it ever lift itself out of apathy and onto higher ground, or
would it drown, tarnished and exploited, in a state of neglect?

Besides, when the French discovered it, they were hesitant
to build in the first place. Perhaps this city was never meant to
exist, let alone last.

Café Du Monde was an open-air patio situated adjacent to a
busy produce market in the Quarter. The din of cups on plates
mingled with the miasma of grease and powdered sugar, giving the
cafe a busy feel. With both the walls’ and floors’ tiles colored
cream, the patrons were able to make as much of a mess as they
wanted. All of this interference made Judith’s voice only somewhat audible, but as far as I could hear, it was not mellifluous but
commanding.

“But Bill, I don’t understand,” she said. A sound emblem­
atic of refinement so ruined by noise was like a piano concerto on a
broken phonograph. Judith was sitting with her back against the
chair and her head angled up, proudly displaying her

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We all have obligations.

When I came back from London a week later, Bill was in prison and Trish was in her home, carrying on as if nothing happened, even though she lived in a crime scene. Her reaction to Bill’s deed was more unnerving than the deed itself. Trish had become ice cold: not nearly as engaging as she once was, but neither shocked nor startled in the least. The Monday I got back, she and I went to Café Du Monde to discuss what exactly happened. Before we were seated, a waiter reeking of scotch threw an order of beignets on her navy pants. The plates broke on the tile floor, the damage inaudible against the tourists’ clamor.

“It’s somehow charming,” she conceded, staring down at the powdery mess. After she cleaned herself up, we went to our seats.

“So how was London?” she asked, sipping her coffee cautiously. “It’s hot.”


“I can imagine,” Trish replied sharply. “It’s funny Mo, because my priggish leanings saved my life.” She had no inhibition discussing her near murder.

“Hm.”

“Bill was always a spoiled child, and a spoiled teen, and a spoiled man, and always ignored the bliffl’n Nile. He never learned it, never internalized it. So when he sent this hoodlum into my home to kill me in the middle of the night, Bill must not have told him that all guests in my home knew to use the griffon.”

“Let alone,” I felt the blood drain from my face, “let alone a visitor—Trish finished my sentence, “let alone a visitor coming late at night. All of my closest friends knew that they could show up at three in the morning, as long as they used the griffon. But a knock, a knock at eleven at night?”

I saw where she was going. “Sounds like an uninvited guest to me.”

Trish finished her coffee and grabbed me by the back of the neck. Pulling me close enough to insure that I heard her over the tourists, her breath was in my ear. “Morgan stood in the Jefferson Davis room with a shotgun while I stood with my back against the wall space adjacent to the door. When I pulled the door open, that killer Bill sent over was greeted by an empty house, and before that bastard could get behind the door to grab me, Morgan shot him in the back.”

I started choking on my own spit, shocked by her zeal. The tourists, their cups, their screaming babies, and the lazy waiters suddenly became even louder. They way she had allowed herself to think in the name of survival was dizzying. “Oh Mo, come on. Don’t act like such a naif. Some traditions are not meant to last.”

She called the waiter over. “More coffee,” she said, pointing at the empty cup. “Bill’s womanizing and malice came as no shock. Mo. Hell, amongst Johnson men, it was standard. Rutledge was, if anything, a total aberration. Rutledge’s father? A drunk. He used to beat poor Rutledge’s mother so bad, it scared Rutledge away from bars for life. Rutledge’s grandfather? A lawyer, politician, and embezzler. The judge gave him a light sentence because, as the judge said at the trial, “It would be a crime to keep a name that golden behind steel.’ Rutledge was just one of the good ones in his family, and that’s why I married him. Bill will be in prison for thirty years for having planned this, because nobody, not even the country clubbers, want to help him out of this one. He was my own child, but I never felt like much of a mother. Rutledge tried to be a good father while he was alive, but, the culture in this city just sort of swallowed Bill up, like a quagmire.” She started to slump in her chair, exhausted from the ordeal she was forced to relive. “Take me home, Mo.”
As we drove out of the Quarter area, I stopped at a red light. While sitting there, Trish and I eyed a topless man stumble toward the intersection, walking parallel to my bumper. He collapsed in front of my car, a flask in his back pocket. Cars behind us started to honk, so I just drove around him. I looked at Trish. "Charming," I said, rolling my eyes.

When I pulled up in front of Trish’s house, she yawned and stretched her arms in front of her. "I’m going to go rest. Mo. Hopefully this is the last time I’ll ever have to tell this story. That Davis kid’s calling my name. I’ll see you later, Mo. I must lie down.”

I stared at her, wondering what she was made of. "Trish, are you serious? What about everything you said about ‘history and tradition and the way Rutledge would have wanted it’? Was all that empty?" She yawned again, failing to cover her mouth. She was quite tired.

"Mo, some traditions are meant to end. I think I’ll give the bed to my maid. She could really use it.”