Deacon was sitting in the shade of an overgrown patch of bamboo that grew in a parched bed outside the coffeeshop. We used to meet there and embark on 60-mile bike rides, but we’ve gotten too old and lazy to do that anymore. I’ll still make a 20-miler on the levee road twice a week, but the best Deacon can do is wheel his cruiser the three miles from his mid-city neighborhood to the café.

Deacon rides his bike everywhere in town. It’s his main transportation. He abandoned the internal combustion engine long ago, partly because he didn’t need it anymore and partly because he couldn’t afford it on his social security check. He never gave up cigarettes and his fingers and teeth are yellowed from the abuse. We sit outside, away from the chatty college kids pretending to study and the neighborhood outcasts with their tattoos and piercings, so Deacon can smoke.

“Missed you yesterday,” Deacon said. He was rolling a cigarette between his jaundiced fingers.

“Yeah, I went to a funeral,” I said. I removed my helmet and glanced at my reflection in the shop window. I like to keep my long hair, now thin and gray, tied in a pony tail to the back. Most days I manage to believe that it helps cover up my ever-growing
bald spot. It was late January, but in South Louisiana the air was that of a mild spring day.

“Anyone I know?”

“Not really. I’ve mentioned him before. The guy who built our house back before Marie got sick.”

“The contractor you got in the fistfight with? He croaked?”

“Yeah. Rodman Castille.” I locked my bike to the rail and went inside to get my café au lait and beignets. When I returned, Deacon was crushing the remains of his latest cigarette in the ash tray he carried in his bike saddle bag. He used to throw his butts on the sidewalk, but he finally got tired of my shit and became what he sardonically termed “an environmental-friendly smoker.”

I settled in to my chair while Deacon rolled another cigarette. He pointed to a picture in the newspaper. “You see this? The Congressman was sending pictures of his wang on Tweetie.”

“Twitter,” I corrected.

“What?”

“The Congressman was sending pictures of his wang on Twitter. Not Tweetie.”

“Well, by all accounts, the Congressman’s wang was more of a Tweetie than a full bird, if you know what I mean.”
I shook my head. “I get all the news I need from the weather report and sports page.” I sipped on my coffee. “Where’s he from?”


“Figures. Why did he do that?”

“Dunno.” Deacon flipped the page.

“Rodman had affairs with married women.”

“The deceased?”

“Yeah.”

“If he was such a lover, why’d he chase married women?”

“I don’t know. The same reason the Congressman flashed his unit all over the Internet.”

Deacon stopped his cigarette roll in mid-roll. “And you were friends with this idiot?”

“A charming idiot. Not really a friend — an asshole, but someone who would bail you out of jail. Everybody needs an asshole like that. They’re few and far between.”

“He bailed you out of jail?”

“No, but he would have. He smoked Camels all his life and drank Jim Beam every night after polishing off a six-pack.”

Deacon returned to his cigarette. “My kind of guy, except for the Camels. I never liked Camels. I was a Lucky Strikes man.”
I bit into a beignet and spread confectioner’s sugar across the table and into my mustache. “Yeah, your kind of guy, except...”

“Except what?”

“Like I said, he was charming.” I grinned.

“You wound me,” Deacon said, placing his hand and his cigarette over his heart. He blew his smoke in my direction.

“Enlighten me. What did he have that I don’t?”

“He was a carpenter.”

“So?”

“Carpenters are inherently charming.”

Deacon chuckled. “I should have been a carpenter like Jesus.”

“He knew how to talk to women,” I said.

“Good looking guy?”

“Not at all. He was what the old Cajuns where I come from called a ‘p’tit noir.’ Dark skin like tasso, curly hair. Moorish Spanish, probably. He had that something. I don’t know. The women liked him.”

“I’m hating him more and more,” Deacon said.

I laughed. “You could dislike Rodman and want to strangle him but you couldn’t dislike him very long. He was too gregarious.
Don’t get me wrong, he didn’t take any shit from anyone. Got his ass whipped a lot but when the dust settled, you were best pals.”

Deacon dashed his cigarette in the ashtray. “Do go on,” he said with mock elegance. “I’m captivated.”

“Jackass,” I said, taking another messy bite of beignet.

“Rodman was a skilled little bastard. There was nothing he thought he couldn’t do, no woman he thought he couldn’t bed.”

“Even the married ones?” Deacon asked.

“Especially married women. Rodman would proposition your wife right in front of you.”

“Really? How’d that work out for him?”

“Probably hit ten percent. And if you ask every woman you meet, that’s not a bad return.” I thought about the deceased little bastard and surmised that Rodman would have agreed with what I said next. “It wasn’t so much a proposition for the woman. It was more of a test for the husband.”

“I’m not following.”

“That’s because you’re not from a levee town. You win your woman by showing you’re tougher than the next guy. Misguided chivalry and all that crap. Rodman would flirt with your wife. He’d do it all in code and right in front of you. He’d make it clear that he wanted to sleep with her. He’d laugh and flash that Mediterranean
smile and be ogling your wife but from the corner of his eye, he’d be watching you. A challenge. The correct manly response would be something like, ‘Rodman, if I ever catch you fucking my wife, I’ll kill you.’ If you had a gun on you, and a lot of guys did, that would be the time to show it.”

Deacon stopped in mid-puff. “How old was this guy when he died?”

“Sixty-eight. It’s a miracle he lived that long.”

“Cause I never met him,” Deacon grumbled. “He ever pulled that with my wife, he’d have seen the business end of my hunting rifle.”

I continued. “The fool wrecked six cars, fell off three horses when he was a bushtrack jockey and drank and smoked to the very end.”

Deacon was clearly pleased. “He was a carpenter, a bushtrack jockey and a lover?”

“And he served two tours on a carrier in the South China Sea during Vietnam, not to mention a passable mechanic, plumber, cabinet builder and woodsman.”

“How many jealous husbands didn’t kill him?”

“A shitload, but there was one woman who broke his heart. She was beautiful. I could never put them together. Her husband
was successful. She was well off, comfortable. Three kids. The husband knew Rodman was sleeping with her."

“How do you know?”

“Rodman never could keep his mouth shut when he drank and he was drunk a lot. I was too.”

We sat in silence for a while. A woman drove up in a Cadillac and parked right in front of us. I could tell she was a woman of leisure by her dress: high heels, white linen slacks, gold jewelry. She was forty-five or so and well kept. Sexy. She paid no attention to me and Deacon as she joined a party of other well-groomed women inside.

“Rodman’s type,” I said.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t know what to say to a woman like that.”

“That’s because you’re not a carpenter,” I said. Deacon looked puzzled. “Women love to have things built for them. They would ask the impossible and Rodman would give it to them — but not until he after he messed with them a little.”

Deacon raised his eyebrows.

“He’d tell them why their idea for the kitchen cabinet wouldn’t work. How difficult something would be to build and
install that it would take a very skilled craftsman to do that. He’d dash their hopes, make them vulnerable and then…”

“Take them to bed?”

“He’d deliver. The master craftsman. He’d let them get what they wanted, but implied only he could answer their needs. The women were always grateful and that was when he’d let them know he was willing to receive their graces. He was single. What did he care if he was fucking a rich, married woman?”

Deacon’s cigarette dangled from his fingers, forgotten.

“What about the married woman who broke his heart? What happened?”

“Damned near killed him. Rodman was a hard man — a hunter who could live on a houseboat and away from civilization for weeks on end. That woman laid him low. He begged the husband to let her go. He pleaded. He cried. He tried insulting the man. Rodman was especially contemptuous because the husband was afraid of him. Afraid of Rodman! Rodman was all of five foot five. Had the chicken-shit cuckold merely said he would kill Rodman, even if he didn’t mean it, Rodman would have let it go. Test of manhood passed. Case closed. In the end, the woman decided to stay with her husband. That was the ultimate
emasculated. Rodman offered everything he had and it was not enough to lure her away.

"Is that what killed him? Are you saying he died of a broken heart?"

I looked at Deacon incredulously. “Fuck, no. Rodman drank a bottle of Jim and went on to the next beautiful woman. He was free from social convention, never got married. He liked to goad you to the breaking point. He was canaille. Do you know that word?"

“That’s Cajun, right? It means mischievous or something?”

“Yeah. That’s right. When he told me about her it sounded like he was bragging at first, but I think it was his way of confessing. Getting drunk and talking about his broken heart was the only way he could cry.”

I slumped back into my chair and sighed. The tattooed children laughed at something they shared on their smartphones.

“There was nothing Rodman wouldn’t do to help a friend. Loan you his tools, help you build something, let you crash at his place. He was arrogant, passionate, ignorant and full of misplaced bravado. He represented everything about that podunk town that I loved and hated.” I lowered my eyes and stared at my cup. “I’m ashamed of the way I treated him the last time I saw him.”
“What happened?”

“I spoke to him in true anger. When we fought years ago it was nothing more than a challenge. That wasn’t anger.”

Deacon shifted his girth in the metal chair. “These chairs sure are uncomfortable.”

“Well, if you’d quit sucking on those goddamned cancer sticks we could sit inside like regular folks.”

Deacon turned around and peered through the window into the café. “Prick, they’ve got the same kind of chairs inside.”

“Yeah, but at least we’d be sitting next to those women, those grand dames. We’d be in the same ballpark.”

Deacon laughed. “Hell, son — same ballpark, yes, but we’ve got bleacher seats while those broads are sitting in the owner’s box behind first base. I guess you don’t want to tell me about the guy who slept with your wife.”

I reached over and knocked Deacon’s ashtray off the table. The ashes spilled onto the sidewalk.

“What the fuck, man? What you do that for?”

“Because you’re an asshole.” I started collecting my things while Deacon bent over to pick up his ashtray.

“Sorry, man. I was just yanking your chain. I went too far. I’m sorry.”
“I never said Rodman slept with my wife.”

“OK. OK! I’m sorry. I take it back.”

“Asshole.”

“Yeah, I’m an asshole,” Deacon said. He affected a sheepish look. “Sorry, man. Don’t go. Finish the story.”

“What?”

“Finish the story. I want to know what happened between you and Rodman. Obviously something happened. Did you finally just kick his ass? Did you get arrested? Did you spend the night in a Cajun jail for disturbing the peace? Did you...”

I cut him off. “Alright, alright. Shut up already. I’ll finish the story.”

“Oh, goodie.” Deacon clapped his hands in mock glee and rolled himself another cigarette.

I stared at the lines of my face reflecting in the café window. Was I really that old? “It was during Katrina. I’d been a week without electricity and I drove to his house across the Basin and asked if he had a generator I could borrow. I should have known better than to go to his house. I knew he’d be drunk after six, but I went anyway. And yes, he was drunk. He said he didn’t have a generator so we went to the Waterfront Restaurant to eat. My temper was short because I was hot and tired and Katrina had
worn me down, but I didn’t have any real problems. My house wasn’t flooded or destroyed. I had plenty of food, water. I just didn’t have any electricity and with the way things were in New Orleans, I had no idea when Baton Rouge’s power would be restored. I felt completely helpless.

“So I’m feeling like shit and all the while Rodman is insulting me, telling me what a baby I was for complaining when so many people had lost so much...”

I paused, embarrassed to be revealing all of this to Deacon. It seemed like I was always revealing things to Deacon and I didn’t even know where Deacon lived.

“Maybe I could have taken the criticisms from a sober person, someone conscientious, but Rodman was drunk — insulting me to my face. The folks at the next table were embarrassed and tried to ignore Rodman. Then he said, ‘That’s why Marie left you. You’re nothing but a whiny-ass bastard.’

“I reached over and grabbed Rodman by his shirt and I growled, I mean, I literally growled. ‘Rodman, if you don’t get away from me right now I’m going to beat the hell out of you.’”

Deacon crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and hurriedly rolled another one. “What happened?”
“Rodman thought I was kidding and started to laugh but I tightened my hold on his shirt and said, ‘I mean it, Rodman. You better leave or I’m going to jump across this table right now and beat the living shit out of you.’ I wasn’t loud. In fact, I was extremely quiet but I was coiled up like a bobcat. Rodman knew he was heading for a major ass whipping so he excused himself and left the table. I regret that the last words I said to my asshole friend were in anger.”

Deacon leaned forward and put his hands on the table. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, man.”

“That was the last thing I said to Rodman and then he died. He didn’t die by the hand of an enraged husband. He didn’t die in a car crash. He was baling hay, they told me. He got off the tractor, draped his arms over the tire and died standing up.”

Deacon leaned back in his chair and took a quick puff on his cigarette. “I think Rodman was proud of you.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Well, no matter how fucked up, you passed Rodman’s test. You laid down the law, man.”

I flashed back to the time I caught Marie in Rodman’s bed. “Fight for her,” Rodman said, but I walked away. We never lived in the house that Rodman built for us and she never spoke of
Rodman again. What Rodman didn’t get is that it wasn’t up to me and it wasn’t up to Rodman. It was up to Marie. I did fight for her, only not in a way Rodman understood. I got sober.

“Yeah, I laid down the law, all right.”