A “Big Easy” Sunset

by Laura Callahan

Late one sultry summer evening I got stuck at the top of the highest bridge in New Orleans. Already late for a date, ill-tempered, sweating, my gauze sundress sticking to the cracked vinyl bucket seat of my fifteen-year-old Volkswagen Beetle, I certainly did not think that a massive traffic jam was a fortuitous occurrence—at least, not immediately. But I soon resigned myself to my predicament and ceased cursing the Fates that had placed me westbound on this particular stretch of I-10 (in the inside-lane of four, no less!) at this particular time. I opened the car doors to better catch the breeze, thankful that I was at the top of the bridge rather than stuck at the bottom, hemmed in by factories and shopping centers, choking on exhaust fumes; I began to look around and see what I had been able to only glimpse before.

Sitting atop the “High-rise” (as we locals call it), I could not see the Industrial Canal far below me or its locks leading south to the turbulent Mississippi River. I could, however, easily see north to Lake Ponchartrain. From this vantage point her shallow waters looked clear and pure, glistening in shades of blue, green, silver-gray; her white-capped surface teemed with watercraft of all sorts and sizes. Gulls and terns soared and swooped, chasing their dinners and each other, as children played and splashed near shore while their parents dined alfresco.

As I watched, a freighter left the salty waters of Pontchartrain (the land-locked remnant of an ancient bay) and entered the canals brackish waters, which were iridescent with spilled fuels. Even this tattered giant, with her chipped, rusting paint and ragged pennants, was beautiful in her unexpected grace of movement. Farther out on the lake, speed-blurred “cigarette” boats buzzed around more leisurely moving vessels; commercial fishers dragged their nets in search of shrimp and other delicacies. Sailing boats of all sizes tacked before the wind, sails billowing. The staid white sails of a sixty-foot ketch; a vibrant melange of red, white, blue, yellow, green in the sails of smaller boats; the occasional non-conformist purple or hot pink or other Day-Glo color, usually on a tiny Sunfish or Windsurfer; all combined to create a glory and grace I had never noticed before. How could I, always whipping over the bridge at sixty-five-miles-an-hour, always in a hurry to get somewhere?

Looking south-southwest, toward the French Quarter, I could see the dying rays of the sun reflecting brightly off the gilded twin spires of St. Louis Cathedral. From there my eyes were drawn to the gleaming whiteness of the Superdome, huge and squat amidst the Central Business District’s towering office buildings and hotels. Barely discernible between these two landmarks was the arching superstructure of the Greater New Orleans Bridge, largest of the only three bridges—in the entire metropolitan area—that cross the Mississippi, linking “Eastbank” to “Westbank.”

Then, with the suddenness common in mid-summer, the sun set. The horizon flared blood-red and orange, crimson and magenta, looking like hungry flames licking at the city below. The vivid reds, yellows, and oranges gave way to delicate rose, misty mauve, lavender, lilac—all streaked with fuchsia and violet; fluffy cumulus clouds high above the horizon seemed to be lit from within, glowing goldenly against the darkening indigo heavens. They formed an ethereal corona, fitting for a city so identified with saints—and sinners. Soon man-made lights began to glitter all over the city: fluorescent neon advertisements, pin-point house lights, harsh sodium vapor street lights, gentle gaslight-lights too numerous to count, twinkling across the face of my beloved city, like lights on a tree at Christmas.

Sitting atop the bridge, I stared in awe at the beauty so fortuitously revealed to me. I took a deep breath, drawing in the scents of New Orleans so familiar and dear to me: the fishy tang of salt air, honeysuckle, magnolias—even the miasma of the swamps. My senses awakened and aware, my soul soothed and calm, I shed all vestiges of anger and impatience. I got out of my car and joined an impromptu tailgate picnic of crawfish and jambalaya. Feeling reborn in spirit, I watched people around me dance to a lively zydeco tune and remembered, once again, why New Orleans is also called “The Big Easy”.

1