

Bowls and Beignets

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She stood there with her knees bent and her arms spread wide. The earth below, muck that had grown hard beneath the twirling sun, waited for her. She was going to fly.

In the 1700s, the Europeans came and did their thing. The specifics are hard to find. No, that's not true—they're just boring. A man named Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville established the city of New Orleans. After Jefferson bought the land and the South seceded and the south receded and the South freed its slaves, she was born. In 1968, my mother was born into a family of seven. She was the youngest and smallest, so instead of calling her by her real name, they nicknamed her Minnie.

She grew up in Gert Town in New Orleans. It is a small slice of the city that had been left to the Blacks. I read somewhere that it rests lower than the rest of the land, and that when hurricanes barrel through, the town becomes a swampland again. She lived in a shotgun house with her parents and four other siblings. Their house was a narrow pale blue creature that groaned every time you stepped down the hall. Even indoors, the warm moist blanket of summer would seep into the house, it always smelled like old wood, sweet and strange.

Once, she stood on the roof of her home, with her knees cocked and her arms wide, and fell. No, jumped. Her older brother had told her that he would catch her, that he would keep the ground from breaking her legs. He didn't.

When I asked her what happened, she shrugged, "I was fine." She fell silent then, nothing left to say. My mother works in facts, an iron fortress. When I asked her why she left, she said that she didn't want to be stuck in Gert Town. At the time, I found this absurd. I had only spent a few summer days there and found its snares charming. Despite the moody rains and the flying cockroaches, I had grown to love the way the damp air clung to my skin and transformed things.

My memories were all rainbow stained palms and melted chocolate bars. The delight and uneasiness of attempting to neatly eat beignets still fresh. Powdered sugar would stick to my clothes, a light dusting of snow, and the heat would work to make my hands sticky. New Orleans was summer, and summer was sticky. It had to hold on to you to be real. I never said this to her, though. My words felt too small to fight her quiet.

When Katrina came and drowned New Orleans, Gert Town drowned too. I can't remember where I heard it, but someone said that Louisiana was shaped like a bowl. After the levees failed, my mother's town sat at the bottom of a rapidly-filling bowl. She told me that a part of her was glad about it. "It helped a lot of people get out. Some of them would've never left." That's what I remember her saying.

On a dare, my mother climbed onto her home's roof and jumped. I wonder if her hair was wrestled into plaits, or if she was wearing her school clothes. I wonder if she was disappointed by her brother's failure, or if she was relieved to find the soft earth waiting to catch her. I wonder if she stuck the landing. I wonder if she got tired of being called Minnie, when she was so much larger than everyone.