

Barbary Coast Nightworld · *Julie Regan*

NIGHT FOG clung to the cobwebs that hung thick as torn stockings in the corners of the wharf tavern, slipping in through a window cracked to let out the whiskey thick breath of the thieves, pimps and sailors. Fog slipped in and stories slipped out, became fog, circled gas street lamps and floated back down into the sea or were wiped from the brow of a harbor patrolman, standing in his small boat still and silent, a pale form in dark robes, listening to the splash of brine against the rotting dock posts, cleats on the halyard whipping a mast in the wind, listening for the low bells of the ships of opium merchants who chose nights thick as these to dock their wares.

Was it merely a sea fog or the stories in the fog that made the night watchman groping and blind? That made each glint of moon on the water seem a blade in a sleeve of black Chinese silk.

No one knew exactly where the edge was. The waterfront kept shifting. Once the pirates and wanderers touched foot to soil they were bewitched by the fog, the hint of gold in the lamplight and back alley smiles and they could never return to the sea nor the other worlds. Abandoned boats linked by plank walkways became brothels, bars, hideouts for bandits and were eventually buried in their landlocked slips to extend the night world. Men were buried with them. Some murdered and tossed. Others just walked off into the fog.

There were no days. Everyone disappeared just before daybreak. Dawn was a baleful word. No one knew where it came from but it was surely out of the past; slinking across land stripped with wheel tracks, deserts and bare fields. Its first light made everyone uneasy, as if they had pushed the night too far and it was their sobering breath that made the sky pale.

Here it was the night that was clear and defined. The sun sunk right into the ocean and bottoms were slapped and rounds were called and curtains rose on the ruffled leotards of the Mademoiselle Louise Labelle, concert artist.

So the story goes. There was always a story going somewhere, and always a fog.

Frank had no story. He could only hum tunes. Frank had no language. His parents spoke a French stretched thin across the ocean, mired in Louisiana

bayou, that kept finding its way through new worlds and things with no names until all the old words were broken and the new words like weeds and all they could speak was of an imagined realm between them no one else could understand, part memory, part possibility. It had no present tense.

Frank was the first child born in San Francisco, and hoping he would pick up something to speak, some Spanish-Chinese or Sidney Duck English, they taught him nothing at all. When at 18 the bemused Frank still had nothing to say, they decided to send him back to France, hoping some pure genetic pool of meaning would ignite him, but Frank only got as far as Kearny Street and a saloon beneath the sidewalk where he spent all the gold for his passage on a couple of rounds and wound up piano player.

Music was the perfect language of the present tense, especially when it was difficult to record and hardly anyone could write it down. Frank played by ear. They said he could play anything, and if he couldn't play it he'd make it up. Frank played the old songs his parents hummed in the kitchen, twirling each other around. He played the faucet dripping. He played the squeaky bow scratching of Chinese lutes, slow footsteps in the alley, Spanish fandangos and his heart strings. It went in one ear and out a window. That was all.

Everyone loved Frank, his smooth face, pretty as a girl's, his silent, delicate ways, his songs. They wanted to tell his story. Some said he was an Arabian sailor who'd had his tongue cut out for its license. Others thought he was a young preacher from the gold country camps, whom God, the Devil or the wild ways of men had silenced. That he had no story except for walking down the hill, Frank could not tell, but even if he could have, the nightworld habitués would have invented others because they loved him. All the best people had at least two or three themselves.

Louise Labelle, concert artist, who, in her own peculiar way loved Frank most of all, probably had the most stories. Since women weren't allowed beneath the sidewalk between the hours of 6 PM and 6 AM, Louise wore breeches, a top hat and a fine watch and fob. She smoked French cigarettes when she had them, which made her voice gravelly and low. Some said she was really a man. Others said she'd had the favors of all the kings left in Europe. It was whispered she had run off from New Orleans with a knife sunk in someone's heart and changed her name. She laughed at all the tales and never denied a one but told them they ought to put their minds to

figuring out her present, not her past, that that's where the wild story was really to be found.

Louise knew that at the end of a story you were always sunk, so she didn't believe in them. She preferred to take off her stories each day with her female clothes and just sing who she was, whomever she borrowed from the song, pure and true.

Frank's songs let out a part of her she'd never sung before, and she felt like they were saving her from something, she didn't know what: who she was, who she had been, perhaps the past, all the damned "true" stories and their ends.

They were inseparable those evenings underground. "Frank and me're pirates ain't we Frank?" she said, resting her large hand on the piano for support against the whiskey, hip cocked, bushy eyebrows raised. "Play them that song, Frank, we took from old Bluebeard, you know, that rummy song."

And Frank would wink and smile and play a sea chantey to which Louise would add the words on the spot, sometimes about drowning, sometimes about love.

After hours Frank let Louise crawl inside the piano, beneath the black top, while he played. They said she liked the way the strings tickled and buzzed.

The night watchman's ears pricked up like a dog's. He could hear the splash of hands in the water. Unmistakable, the sound of sea pulled through fingers, a slight ruffling kick and the knifing of forearm and elbow into the still, black surface.

Jack Rotter, sometime pirate, escapee, pulled his lean, drenched body up onto the dock. The shadow of a night's growth glistened on his chin with the brine, and dark wet curls linked at the neck of his open collar. He shook the weight of the water (that might have drowned one less determined) from his clothes like sails, and did not shiver. Parting the fog with a blade in his hand, he made his way toward the gas lamps of Dead Man's Alley.

The poor night watchman could do nothing but bob.

The night was approaching that hour when it turns to tears and Frank played on in a silence of key thuds on velvet, Louise's body muffling the music, taking the music inside her. It was a song only she could feel. She

couldn't come up with the words. It sent shivers over her skin and went straight to her heart, and she clung to the ridge above the keyboard, rapt.

Her eyes were deep and wide and her wig slipped slightly off, exposing her round bald head, powdered with white talc. Frank paused a moment to straighten her wig as if it were a boy's cap.

She put her finger to her lip. "Frank, listen: it's those damn birds that sing in the middle of the night. Don't stop playing, Frank. Don't let them do it."

Frank played on but he couldn't make any sounds. The sounds were all inside of her. He smiled sleepily and traced her lip with his long pale finger. His eyelids fluttered demurely towards slumber.

"Don't leave me with them, Frank," she said. "Don't go."

Louise pulled herself out of the piano and climbed into his arms, pressing her full soft breasts to his thin ribs and twisting off the gas lamp that was swinging shadows on the damask walls around them.

Louise pressed so heavily against him that the two fell off the piano stool and onto the floor. The thud and the whiskey were enough to put Frank right out, snoring, and Louise lay on top of him, eyes wide, all night, listening for fleeing footsteps in his heart.

At dawn he was still sleeping. She put the bowler over his face before the sun could rise and slipped pale into the last wisps of fog.

Day was sneaking in under the mist where the wings of the birds had swept room. Pigeons cooed and enameled windowsills with jade and opal. Parakeets sung the insides out of houses and seagulls raised a wing over the ocean and brushed the darkness off the sea.

The night watchman dragged the end of the night under with his oar. It sunk deep below the shadow of the boat, to sleep there until the sun got so close it disappeared, and the same wood pulled it up again.

The coast itself vanished in the day like a streetlamp left burning. Daylight clung to the streets like dirty linen. The breath that had fogged a night window was reduced to dust, and all the blinds fell until there was nothing but walls. Even the alleys, with no foot traffic to keep them open, closed up to the eye.

In one of those day-locked passages, Jack awoke bedraggled, with his manhood hanging out of his pants. It looked like a worn tether which had pulled him around all night, from brothel to bordello to strangers suddenly

familiar in the back-street light. He tucked himself in and scratched the dust from his head. He was as solid and scraggly as the wall beside him, and he would find her if he had to worm his way through every keyhole on the coast.

Frank spent the day in his hat. Its dark bowl trapped the night there where it swam around his eyes with dreams like bright fish. He drew the darkness in and out of his nostrils with velvety breaths, while the bartender swept up all the stale leftover voices of the night before.

There was no music in the air now, and Frank woke into it as if his blanket had been snatched from his breast. He grabbed the air over him where Louise's perfume had left traces and caught only a chill he'd never felt before. For a moment he had no idea who or where he was, then he realized it was her.

Each night, following the afterhours sets Frank played until the exhaustion crawled up the keys and into his fingers, she had always left him, but suddenly he felt lost. He realized this was the only place he knew to find her. He'd never questioned where she came from, but now he wondered where she'd gone.

Jack's blade was dulled to stone by the daylight. It was bootless to look for her now. The Coast was closed. The air was flat and clear and there were too many textures in it.

Night had a way of floating stories and dreams in the air, and if you wanted to, you could try one out. Just step into it and follow the half-conceived adventure someone else had left hanging on the corner. The day's possibilities, piddling journeys to the bank or market, weren't dark enough to take him to his end, so Jack decided to bide his time below.

Chinatown extended several stories beneath the ground. Some claimed there was an entire city beneath the city into which the thousands of Chinese arriving daily were slipping: colonies of slave girls in bamboo cribs, illicit trade shops and opium dens lit by smoldering paper lanterns, where dreams could be exchanged with ancient wise men for the price of smoke.

Jack let his rough hands slide from rung to rung down the ladder, relishing each step into the smoky, lambent darkness. Eyes in a pile of clothes watched him fearfully from a cage. He let go one hand and shook

the bamboo bars, faintly snarling, so that the garments fell around the body, revealing shoulder, calf, breast, and the stifled cry he wanted most of all.

Jack had learned the hard way that the true purpose of brothels wasn't sex but robbery, and he felt suddenly at home down here amidst the bandits and smugglers. Opium especially warmed him because it had to do with stealing souls. Now it was his turn. There was only one soul Jack wanted and it wasn't his own.

The effluvium made him sway a little in the doorway and slowed his boot soles on the straw mats. He had to navigate with an unwonted grace to get between the bodies lying in dusty smoke and pillows, and it was the heavy drug in the air that danced him through. At the end of the room, finally, he stretched out on top of another man, completely flattening him, though the other did not seem to notice. His arms stuck out casually like bear rug feet beneath Jack's trunk.

An old man stared for a very long time at the awkward freebooter. At last he nodded, as if to acknowledge that Jack had taken the other's place, and he offered him a pipe. Jack drew the embers' vapors into his hairy nostrils, and sucked greedily on the nib. He coughed, and smoke escaped in little cloudlets to the pallet where the old man watched. The sage inhaled and began to hum. Then he spit Jack's smoke back out, and nodded for him to begin again.

Lying there on top of Frank all night, Louise had heard his heart tap out a song, so constant and true she felt like a fraud. So many years singing so many old standards, and here it was right here inside of him. Her song. It went on and on, without a scratch, yet there was no way in.

All the way home, the grey stones Louise stepped on seemed to cry out like gulls. The city had become a minefield of them. She tried to tiptoe and whispered a shush of silence, imploring them not to sing. At the edge of the gates that marked Chinatown, pigeons by the dozens blocked her path. She stopped abruptly, shivering in her tracks, but it was too late; they took off in a flock around her, their wings and beaks issuing: "fly!"

When the flutter had passed, there was only one man left in the street. Louise and the man stared at each other for a second, then the man began to laugh. It was the laughter of opium. The more he laughed, the less Louise

could see him, until he began to frighten her so much, it seemed like he was someone she *had* seen. Someone she had put so deep into the dark of her memory, even face to face, he could not quite come out.

She turned and ran. Jack let her go. She was his now. He could smell out that trail of fear like a dog.

Night fell and Louise was still off-stage, somewhere in the wings. They kept bringing up the curtain, announcing her name, as if it were a magic show, but she didn't appear.

And Frank grew sorrowful, poised at his keys, his gin glass weeping a ring into the dark wood like a welt on his own skin. He played the same plink-plank of a rag again and again. Her favorite song. Until some suspected it was just a piano roll player and Frank himself a doll with painted eyes.

Osgood, the proprietor, tried to shake him out of it. Threatened in his Hungarian accent to set Frank up as dishwasher if he didn't change his tune, but Frank could not be moved, and Osgood finally gave up trying, wiping the salt from the corner of his own sentimental eye. After a while no one minded about the song. They listened and wanted to hear it again too. Soon the whole barroom was filling up with tears.

Passing strangers heard the song through the grate and began to hum the wistful melody; others, picking up the bastard version caught on too. Until eventually, the sad rag had covered the city with a tinkling of resonant drops.

Louise set the needle down on the victrola and played the song again. It was the only thing that could take away the feeling she was sinking. She had played it all day long, going down occasionally to open the door and see if there were somehow another world there.

The first time she looked: the air was white and everyone was wearing white clothes. They didn't see her as they passed.

The second time: everything was underwater.

The third time: night had fallen like a locked gate.

The record stopped and suddenly she heard it: her song playing in the rain. She lifted her voice to meet the tune, but she could barely attach her chant to the notes before the water took it. Her voice fell into the puddles, ran down the hill and washed into the bay.

Its sad strains beat against the prow of the night watchman's boat, until he could no longer see past his own inexplicable tears.

The fourth time: it was the pirate.

She had left him floating a long time ago, and now he was determined to finish the story.

Her hand petrified on the doorknob.

"I told you, Jack. I ain't got your treasure," she said.

"But Louie, you *are* my treasure," said Jack. "And now I'm gonna have to bury it." He stalked her to the wall and thrust his entire body and blade into her, listening for the scream. He thought he had her, like he'd always wanted. But she had already slipped out.

Frank's song filled him with silence. Every time he played it, the music inside him emptied out a little more, until he was only playing to keep the music quiet, to keep the world quiet, to keep the city covered in a dampening shush. The crowd in the bar was nodding into a stuporous state as well, all their stories and dreams and braggadocio drained.

Near the end of the evening, when the room itself had all but collapsed, something began to flutter between the piano strings like a kite stuck on a laundry line. It made the notes suddenly so flat they buzzed.

Frank fished his fingers in and pulled out a white sheet of music with a picture of a moon at the top. He set it in front of him stiffly, blinked his eyes and tried to play. The moon was broken, and the music sorrowful, but lovelier than anything he had ever heard.

He could feel it inside him, a different kind of song, licking at his eardrums, warming his chest and tickling his throat with a raspy purr he could not clear away with his cough.

It was the words. There was no escaping them. They were part of it, and he held them back like smoke, not knowing how to exhale, until they forced themselves out and over his lips. The voice was husky, low and sounded almost worn out, whispering as he played:

"It's over. . . ."