



Come Sit Out on the Banquette

IT IS SAID RAIN NEVER FALLS IN NEW ORLEANS UNTIL THE clouds stop moving over the river. Morning comes in New Orleans when the first rays of the sun fall upon the Mississippi and paint the gray waters bronze. But on this Saturday morning in New Orleans the sun, on its way to the river, skidded out Cairo Street, and stopped for a moment to peep into Mrs. Candy's bedroom window and light up her round pink face.

Mrs. Candy was dreaming. She had been lying on her side, but now she rolled over on her back and released a pleased little moan that changed to a titter. One of her short arms flopped about restlessly, then, at last, dropped over her eyes. Her lips twisted into a smile, and she sighed. "You're terrible," she said. "Go 'head, you!"

"You sure make a racket," said Blanche.

Standing in the door, Blanche crooked an arm behind her back and tried to reach the prickly heat between her shoulders with her long red nails. This did not work, so she rubbed the itching place up and down against the jamb of the door. Her eyes continued to watch Mrs. Candy with a queer fascination, and her expression continued to be contemptuous.

“Ah, come on,” coaxed Blanche. “That ain’t fair. I told you about the time I dreamed I busted my first husband over his head with a hatchet.”

Mrs. Candy found her palmetto fan near her pillow, where it had dropped from her hand when she had fallen asleep the night before. She fanned languidly, smiling to herself. The fan had a few holes in it and was bound at the edges with yellow-and-white gingham.

“It was Mr. Petit who poked me,” she said.

“Me, I’d like to see that.”

“First, he was tickling my feet,” said Mrs. Candy. “You know how ticklish I am. Then he come up and poked me with his elbow. Like this.” She leaned forward and poked Blanche. “Ain’t that crazy?”

“I’d like to see it.”

“He’d never have the nerve, him.”

“You can’t tell.”

“Get my cigarettes and matches off the mantelpiece, honey,” requested Mrs. Candy.

Blanche brought them over, and Mrs. Candy lighted a cigarette. The way she smoked made Blanche nervous. Mrs. Candy always put nearly a third of the cigarette into her mouth, holding it between her thumb and forefinger. “Mr. Petit is a quiet man,” she said. “Let’s go down and make our coffee.”

She crawled out of the damp and rumpled bed and stood up, her bare feet on the linoleum. “Get my kimono, darling,” she said.

“You,” said Blanche. But she took the garment with the big pink roses from the nail behind the door and held it for her.

Mrs. Candy almost fell down in the process of donning it.



"I'm always unsteady on my feet early in the morning," she explained.

She padded over to the dresser and looked at herself in the mirror, running her fingers through her short blond curls so that they fluffed out about her face. She picked up a pink ribbon and tied it about her head, making a limp bow on top. She poured some eau de cologne on a clean handkerchief that she took from one of the top drawers, and patted her double chin and her short, heavy neck.

"Come on," she said, her toilet complete. "I left my shoes down in the kitchen."

Blanche trailing her, she led the way through the hall to the stairs. As they passed the closed doors, they heard Mr. Krump snoring and Mr. Petit making a peculiar wheezing sound. At Miss Linsay's door Mrs. Candy shouted loud enough to be heard across the street, "It's six o'clock!"

She explained to Blanche, "She wanted to get up early this morning."

"I'm sure glad I don't have to work on a Saturday," said Blanche, who worked in a department store that closed on Saturdays in the summertime.

When they reached the lower hall, Blanche knocked on Eddie's door until he answered, "Okay!"

"You gonna have a hard time getting him up when you get married," said Mrs. Candy.

In the kitchen she opened the door leading into the back yard. The sky still displayed fading pastel stripes, and she could smell her night-blooming jasmine. She sat down in a rocking chair near the door and put on the house shoes that had been left beneath the chair all night, bending forward with effort, and grunting as she snapped the buttons. "Put the water on, precious."

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"I knew I'd do the work," said Blanche.

"Be sweet," said Mrs. Candy. "You know where the coffee is at."

"You're sure a lazy woman," said Blanche. "You always got people waiting on you."

"It's technique," said Mrs. Candy, not without pride.

The hot-water heater hanging over the sink made a clicking sound.

"Listen to Miss Linsay taking another hot bath," she said. "Every day. That's what you got to put up with when you're in the business."

"Her," said Blanche, meaningfully, as she lighted the gas stove.

"All I got to say," said Mrs. Candy, "is that anybody that's got to take a hot bath every day in the summertime sure must be dirty."

Mary Agnes Linsay lay in the steaming tub reading a book. It was her conviction that a working girl had to make the most of every spare moment. One could absorb an immeasurable amount of knowledge and culture while riding on streetcars, waiting for one's dinner in Morrison's Cafeteria, or while soaking in one's morning bath. When she was not reading during her streetcar rides to and from work, she performed her eye exercises. People stared, but she didn't care.

A moment wasted was a moment lost, Mamma had often told Mary Agnes.

The book propped behind the faucets of the bathtub was *Japanese Customs, Folklore, and Religion*, by Hianoto Puki, and Mary Agnes was concentrating upon the chapter entitled, "The Art of Hari-kari, Its Meaning, History, and

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Spiritual Significance." She found the book fascinating. At her last address before the Delphians, Mrs. K. Clarence Bernard had said firmly, and had repeated it to Mary Agnes, when she had been fortunate enough to corner Mrs. Bernard for a few minutes of intimate conversation, "We can only hope to win our battle against intolerance when we fully understand the culture and folk habits of all peoples—even the Japanese. Knowledge is the foundation of understanding; it is the fount of culture; it is the seed of liberty. *Read! Study! Understand!*" Mary Agnes had gone to the library that very night to begin an intensive study of the Japanese.

You can't tell what's in a pot until you take off the lid, Mamma had often said.

The steam began to cloud her glasses, so Mary Agnes stood up in the tub, placed her book upon the top of the medicine cabinet, and laid her glasses carefully on top of the book. She was a rather tall girl of thirty-three, thin, with flat breasts and a slightly protruding abdomen, pale blue eyes that had a frightened stare when she was not wearing her glasses, and long pale hair the color of ashes, now pinned up and covered with a rubber swimming cap.

She sat down in the water again and began to scrub herself with a green washcloth. She had embraced the hot and vigorous bath after studying the customs of the Finns. If it had been practicable, she would have lashed herself with switches.

Her soaping completed to her satisfaction, she lay on her back. It was not characteristic of Mary Agnes to permit herself much physical enjoyment of her morning bath, nor any dalliance, but now, just for a moment, she lay still and

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watched the thick suds weave about her toes and glide and ooze over that portion of her that was above water. Then, with a forefinger, she traced upon her belly the precise line the knife would take if she performed the rite of hari-kari, as it should be done according to the approved and orthodox instructions of Mr. Puki.

After this Mary Agnes pulled out the cork, stood up in the tub, and turned on the cold shower. She sneezed.

Eddie Davis slept naked in the summer. After he answered Blanche's knock, he rolled over on his stomach and napped for five minutes more, reawakening with a frightened start. He sat up straight so he could see the clock on his dresser. It had really been only five minutes. Everything was under control.

He jumped out of bed and pulled on his pants. Then he stood before the dresser mirror and commenced his exercises. He was a small young man, as neatly made as if he had come off the assembly line of a factory for human beings in Detroit. He was enamored of his muscles and, at the moment, was concentrating upon the improvement of his triceps, so most of the calisthenics were devoted to pulling at imaginary ropes to the ends of which were fastened imaginary weights. Each time he felt the effects he received a thrill.

When he was finished, he lifted his head and listened. He heard Mary Agnes pull the cork and then the shower, so he knew he must wait a bit. This time he devoted to combing his thick brown hair, which he wore very long above his ears and with slightly exaggerated sideburns, and about which he was very vain. His head ached a little from last

night's beer, and he was a bit tired from afterward, when he had sneaked Blanche into his room when they came home. It had been after two o'clock before he could get her to leave.

Jesus, she's hot, he thought. She's gonna kill me.

Mary Agnes banged the bathroom door.

Eddie hitched his towel over his shoulder, picked up his shaving things, went out into the hall and up the stairs. He heard Blanche's voice as he passed the kitchen door, and he called out, "Hello, sweet."

Blanche did not answer him. She was angry from last night.

Donald Krump, wrapped in his fraying cerise bathrobe, his red hair standing on end, crept out of his bedroom into the hall just as Eddie closed the bathroom door behind him. Donald's round eyes rolled first in one direction, then the other. He stole down the hall to the door of the room occupied by Mary Agnes, and put his ear against it. He heard the lovely slithering sound of Mary Agnes's black acetate-and-rayon dress being pulled over her bony hips.

He put his lips to the door and kissed it.

Then he hurried back toward his room. As he reached it, Henry Petit opened his door and looked out. Mr. Petit was wearing brown-and-blue pajamas in a striped pattern and a stiff straw hat upon his head. He narrowed his eyes at Donald, and Donald ignored him, entered his room, and closed the door.

Donald sat down on the edge of his bed and poured himself a drink of straight gin.

"Pest!" Mr. Petit said, sitting down upon his bed. "Nuisance! Politician!"



He picked up the pair of scissors he had left on his pillow when he heard Donald creeping down the hall, and resumed trimming his toenails.

Mrs. Candy sipped at her second cup of hot, sweet coffee and thought about her dream.

She had not disliked the dream. In it she had been sound asleep on the sofa in her parlor. Her shoes were off, and her feet were propped up on an arm of the sofa. Mr. Petit came into the room and began to tickle her feet, looking down with his warm dove's eyes. He said, "Wake up! Wake up, madame!" In her dream Mrs. Candy had tossed her head and tried to speak, but not a sound had come from her lips. "I've been looking for you a long time," said Mr. Petit, sounding just like a movie actor. He continued to tickle her, until at last she cried, "Now, Mr. Petit, you shouldn't do that." It seemed to her that then she sat up on the sofa and Mr. Petit sat beside her. He poked her in the ribs with his elbow, and said with emotion, "My God, you're lovely! What do you expect a man to do?" "You're terrible," Mrs. Candy had scolded. Then he had tried to take her in his arms, to kiss her neck, her lips. "Go 'head, you!" she had cried.

"Are you gonna tell me now?" asked Blanche, who was standing before the mirror suspended above the sink next to the hot-water heater, squeezing a blackhead out of her nose.

"Tell you what?"

"About your dream. What did Mr. Petit do after he poked you?"

"Oh, it wasn't nothing," said Mrs. Candy, yawning daintily. "I just dreamed we was talking and he kept poking me with his elbow."

Blanche released her nose and began to comb her hair.

"You like him, huh?"

"Why, he's a lovely man," said Mrs. Candy.

"Ah," said Blanche.

"Is there anything wrong in that? He's certainly a pleasure to have in the building compared with some I got."

Blanche looked at her. "Present company accepted, I hope." Blanche was very sensitive.

"You know I don't mean you, precious."

"I'm gonna go put on my clothes, angel-face," said Blanche. She had now washed her face and applied a thick coat of bright lipstick.

"Precious," asked Mrs. Candy, "when you come down you want to bring my clothes? They're all on the chair by my bed. I might as well dress down here. Then come sit out on the banquette awhile. This kitchen gets hot in the morning. It'll be cool in front."

"Yes, dear," said Blanche, rather sarcastically Mrs. Candy thought.

Blanche and Eddie met on the stairs. He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head.

"You forgot I'm mad."

"What's eating you?"

"You know why I'm mad."

"You didn't act mad when we got home."

"I was tight, but I ain't forgotten how you acted in Charlie's Place. Let me go, you."

"All right, but I won't forget."

"Ah, go to hell!"

Mary Agnes was descending the stairs. Eddie continued down and closed the door of his room behind him. Blanche

passed Mary Agnes without a word. Mary Agnes went straight into the kitchen.

Mrs. Candy was scrubbing her dentures in the sink. Mary Agnes attracted her attention with a cough.

"Hello," said Mrs. Candy. "You're out early this morning." She surveyed briefly Mary Agnes's neat black dress with freshly starched white collar and cuffs and the large black hat that was too girlish for Mary Agnes and at the same time reminded Mrs. Candy of a witch's hat, as she recalled one from an illustration in a story book she had read when she was small.

"It is really embarrassing," said Mary Agnes.

"Huh?" asked Mrs. Candy. She hated to talk without her teeth.

"That young couple were practically kissing on the stairs as I came down," said Mary Agnes.

"Oh, was they?" Mrs. Candy laughed. "Blanche and Eddie. They're cute. Don't mind them, Miss Linsay."

"I don't think so," said Mary Agnes. "I find that sort of exhibitionism rather repulsive."

Mrs. Candy frowned, but said nothing.

"I am very broad," said Mary Agnes, "but public love-making repels me."

"Well, some people are like that, and some ain't," said Mrs. Candy.

"I just thought you should know," said Mary Agnes. "Good morning."

"Good-by," said Mrs. Candy.

Mary Agnes tripped down the hall. When she found another place she would certainly get out of this awful house. But rooms were so scarce these days, and so expensive.

Beggars can't be choosers, Mamma always said.

Blanche returned dressed in red slacks, a green shirt, black pumps with very high heels, and wearing a red ribbon around her dark permanent wave. On one arm she carried Mrs. Candy's pink underwear, yellow dress with brown flowers, and a pair of stockings with a run in one leg. In the other hand she had Mrs. Candy's powder puff, her lipstick, and a large flower that was half chrysanthemum and half rose and was made of brown velvet. Blanche had often done the same chore.

Mrs. Candy dressed slowly and with many wheezes and grunts, making up her face before the mirror over the sink and pinning the brown velvet flower in her hair. When she was finished, she spread her nightgown out on the kitchen table so that the perspiration would dry.

"Let's go," she said, when she was ready. "It's hot."

The sun was already streaming in at the open kitchen door.

She and Blanche went out to the front gallery, picked up two bright red rockers and carried them down to a shady place under the chinaball tree that grew in the strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street. Mrs. Candy settled herself, lighted a cigarette, and rocked. For her taste, except when she had a late and exciting evening, and on Sunday, when she went to early mass, this was the best part of the day. Here she could be cool for an hour or two and she could rest herself, and, at the same time, see what was going on.

Usually her mind was placid at this hour, but just now it was harassed by several things. One of these was in reference to Blanche and Eddie. It was not that she cared what Mary Agnes thought as much as for other reasons. Mr. Candy used to tell her, she recalled, "It don't make no dif-

ference what the roomers do as long as they keep the shades pulled down," and, privately, Mrs. Candy agreed. She thought Blanche and Eddie were cute, and she liked to know they were having fun, but she knew the neighbors had other ideas.

"Blanche, precious," she said, to open the subject, "what you and Eddie gonna do?"

"What you mean?" asked Blanche.

"I guess you'll be getting married and leaving me," said Mrs. Candy tactfully.

"I ain't sure I'm gonna marry him at all." Blanche sounded sad.

"You been fighting again?"

"Oh, he makes me tired," said Blanche. "I got other angles to think about, too. I got to think of my kids." Blanche had two children by her former marriage.

"You and Eddie make a nice couple," said Mrs. Candy.

Blanche looked at her. "Are you trying to hurry me?"

"Of course not, precious. Don't be touchy."

But Blanche still eyed her. "I guess Miss Linsay came and told you she saw us this morning. We wasn't doing nothing."

"She didn't say a word," said Mrs. Candy.

"Her!" said Blanche. "She wants a man herself so bad she's almost crazy."

"Now, I'm not sure of that, precious," said Mrs. Candy.

"I don't think she ever studies about men."

"That's the crap," said Blanche. "She's so hard up she'd marry a Protestant."

