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# MISSISSIPPI BORDER



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sample first pages

translation from Italian into English

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Hello, my name is Jeremiah Saint John Pinkerton and I proudly lay claim to being born, raised and still living in Quintillia. A place where the county road vanishes in a half-moon bend in the belly of the Mississippi. The State has the same name as the river, and on the opposite bank, where the sun goes down, you are already in Louisiana.

We sweat a lot here. It's always a bit damp at the small of your back, between your butt cheeks and shorts. But come evening, when you sit out on the porch and gaze at the magnolia wood this side of where the river flows, there is a little breeze that you feel on your skin like nowhere else, and all the day's tensions pass. Those are the words of Jack Lungurdson; who has travelled half way around the world and can be believed about a lot of things, he's a guy who knows what's what.

We've been living together quite a while in this house with two porches, one on the front and one on the back; he inherited it from an aunt who died childless and decided to come and live here, giving up his job on the oil rigs. He strived for years in the Gulf of Mexico and the cold seas of the north and in the end, once he'd put aside enough to live decently, he took his chance. He's not from these parts, born and raised in Jackson, but he confessed to me that it wasn't the city for him.

One day he turned up at the garage where I work with my three brothers – the oldest is boss – asking if we could take a look at his pickup, which was clanking away like a kicking horse. It was mended within the day, nothing serious; that is one fine truck, still running along nicely today.

It was just about that time that my brother's twins were born. He's the second oldest and already had a string of four kids, born one after the other. His wife, Annie, is strong as a horse and drops them out as if she were pooping pearls, and then she just laughs fit to burst. Sweet, kind, strong Annie.

I was living at my brother's place, and so was our old man – Mom died bringing me into the world – because I didn't have a woman yet, or rather, I did have one when I was younger, but she went off with a guy from Chicago. Perhaps I'll tell you about that later.

There was no room for the two of us anymore so I left it to my old man; it seemed right, for the grandchildren too.

I got to talking about this with Jack, because, while my brothers were fiddling around fixing his pickup, he offered me a sandwich and we began to chat about what it's like to live on the river, about how sometimes you still want to get out of a hellhole like this, where the road gives out, but then you realize it isn't so bad. Anyway, in the end I admitted that I like it here, even if sometimes I feel like heading off and seeing the world. Well, to tell the truth, I'd only done it once. And I told him about it.

One day my cousin Daisy wrote me saying that there was a porter handyman's job going in a hotel in Chicago. She'd been living in the big city for fifteen years already, with her husband, who had taken her away from Quintillia after meeting her at Freddie's club one evening.

He had been touring with a band, playing the trumpet. Daisy's parents, an uncle and aunt with sound Baptist principles, locked her away for two days, so that the young man would cut bait and continue his foray through the clubs of the South without his prey. But then, all of a sudden, came the silver lining. It transpired that he only played the trumpet as a hobby; he played it divinely, it has to be said,

but in truth, the tournée with his friends in the band was nothing but a pastime.

They were nostalgic for early jazz and wholeheartedly loathed the modern neo-melodic black rappers with snow chains around their necks, stringy braids and the ridiculous little hats in the videos, where they fool around making cretinous gestures by the pool, alongside suntanned, anorexic white girls with plastic titties.

There are people who spend Thanksgiving in cabins on the lakes, fishing or hunting, in the tree-covered mountains, or big game fishing in hired boats. He spent his holidays like that, with his friends, playing good old wholesome jazz wherever they got the chance. The rest of the year he worked in a metropolitan post office in Chicago, and not just as a postman. He was high up the ladder, an area manager, someone who has a salary that makes you respectable even if you don't care to be.

The fact was that when he met Daisy, he had just been left. Unknowingly, he was being cheated on for a year. Seeing her at a table with her gal-pals, he quickly realized that the Lord in person had dropped him into the middle of Mississippi, where the road ends, with the sole purpose of making reparation for the pain he had gone through.

So he took her to the city, where there is almost always a breeze and it can be cold, but love won over

everything, even over Daisy's roots, and in a few years she turned into a will nigh sophisticated citizen, a busy mom, a wonderful wife and someone who shopped as if her life depended on it.

I thought for a while before accepting the invitation. Yes, I wanted to go to Chicago, but I was also a bit scared. It was my old man's look that convinced me. He doesn't speak much. He ordered me to go with his eyes, once and for all, even if it was only to have a look see. I should have got married some time before, like my elder brothers, but I was still there loitering around between the river, the garage and Freddie's club. So I made up my mind.

Meeting the gaze of my cousin Daisy was no small achievement. A few years older than me, she had been the object of obsession of us boys in Quintillia. Already a woman of sixteen, she was a true goddess, she had the most beautiful breasts, someone even ventured to say, in the whole county.

On a summer's afternoon, one of those days when even the divine evening river breeze found it hard to dry the sweat, I, two of my brothers and a kid from school actually saw her breasts. She was washing under her arms in the cubbyhole bathroom on the second floor of their house; there was a larger one downstairs, but it was always occupied by her sisters.

My brother Jeremiah Saint John I – I am Jeremiah Saint John II – had heard their aunt being told that

the new curtains for the second floor bathroom had arrived at the general store. There were always workmen passing by under the windows on their way to the building site of the neighbor's new house, and she was fed up of having them look in every time.

Jeremiah I was always the smartest of us all, according to our old man, and said that now was the time to act, because, once the curtains were up, it was goodbye to the show.

A morning of skulking, the voices of the sisters from downstairs arguing over the big bathroom and who should fortune send up to the cubbyhole on the second floor but Daisy herself, the most desired. No one was the slightest bit interested in the others.

Ecstasy, enchantment, doltishness.

She sure took her time washing in the frame of the cubbyhole window. She was singing softly. For years afterwards, Jeremiah I declared that on that day he had seriously risked losing his sight. But it was worth it. We ended up masturbating on the banks of the river, while the twilight watched us from Louisiana.

A pink and bluish calm reigned everywhere. We were together and alone, in the world and outside the world. Earth, water, sky and Daisy's nipples merged together in a «divine breath». Don't worry; of course I could never make that up myself, like the poets. But the week after, during the sermon, the Baptist pastor pulled out this thing about «divine breath», and I



couldn't help remembering the pink and blue of the sunset over the river and my cousin's breasts.

Basically, you see, many years have gone by, but my cousin Daisy still intimidates me, because of the thing about her breasts. As soon as I got to Chicago, I hugged her, and there they were, larger and still more enveloping if possible; but her smell had changed, it wasn't the nice smell of before, when I was small and felt her hands run over my shaved head to my lips. Now she smelled of perfume, yes, and good stuff, I don't dispute that. But there was also the smell of tobacco encrusted in her throat from all her smoking, and mixed with the perfume it made me uncomfortable. Goodbye «divine breath».

The job at the hotel was quite pleasant, and not at all tiring. But as time passed it got to me and the boredom became as rigid as my penis in the lonely Chicago nights. Sure, I went to the discothèque and the parties given by Daisy's husband's relations, on the hunt for someone, but it wasn't that easy. I'm not difficult to please, but I don't reckon I'm that easy either. The fact is that in the end, increasingly, I found myself lost in the dark, sunk deep into a seat at the back of the movie theatres where they play one porno film after another.

Never in my life have I felt as alone as I did then. And I couldn't go home, just like that, not without a valid excuse. The old man would have shot me one

of those deadly looks of his, silently, for the umpteenth time calling me: «Good for nothing!»

It made me feel bad just thinking about it, but I felt bad staying there too. Don't get me wrong, at Daisy's house, where I was treated like one of the family, everything was great, but I always read the same question in her husband's eyes: «When is this guy going to find himself a life that befits a man?»

Then something happened that was so way out that even today I wonder what the heck got into the adored Daisy, for her to make such a monumental hash of everything.

The years were passing for her and her magnificent breasts, although she still turned the head of any man in the area.

She had raised two kids who were now sufficiently well groomed and independent to remove any worries she might have had about their future. A husband who was increasingly absent as he climbed to the top of the post office's vertiginous pyramid of command. Her friends, her shopping, the odd trip to Florida, but perhaps also the abyss that exceptionally beautiful women stare into before being forced to chill out. Anyway, something inexplicable propelled her to ask to join the staff at the hotel where I worked, thanks to her. It belonged to her husband's uncle. He, her husband, energetically opposed Daisy's plan.

– But why bother? What are you looking for? Aren't we happy and carefree, now that the boys are grown up?

Yeah, happy and carefree. But can anyone really call themselves those things, I mean, truly; lots of people believe or want to believe they are sitting pretty, but then they discover it isn't true.

In the end, she won. It wasn't going to go any other way, given how stubborn she was.

Daisy found her first months in the job thrilling, while for me it was just the same old drill. Sometimes she'd scold me because she reckoned I had a frown stamped on my face that was putting off the guests. For whom she had become a star. She commanded everyone from reception, kitchen menials included. Her husband's uncle even began to think that his nephew had planted her there on purpose, to try and steal the hotel from under his nose, sooner or later. But he didn't let on that it rankled, apart from the occasional forced smile in the direction of his somewhat overzealous member of staff. He was prepared to wait. And the time to act came long before he thought it would.

One day, a man turned up in the lobby wearing a silk foulard around his neck, like a yachtsman. He wasn't very tall, but good-looking and above all elegant. A male quality that had always sent Daisy into raptures. Clearly mulatto, one of those crosses that

had come out well, nicely balanced. To cut it short, my cousin lost the plot for the man with the silk foulard. Who knows, maybe she was desperate for a job she could easily have done without because she nourished the secret hope of finding herself in a love story she'd dreamed of for years. But women are like that, impenetrable to the rudimentary fathoming of men.

At first, he appeared to enjoy her not-so-subtle advances; although it seemed to me that something was wrong, I don't know... there was something weird about the whole thing. Did you ever see a woman having flowers sent to her lover's room? Ok, he was a guest, but this was hardly the Drake Hotel. I've never seen the like even in the most cockeyed films.

He was in town on business and pleasure; and after a month of asphyxiating courtship, disaster happened!

That day I got to work a bit late, although I'd let them know. When I came out of the changing room in my uniform, I saw Daisy walk downstairs between two cops, who were holding her by the arms.

She looked at me with eyes like saucers. She was leaning forward. Her breasts, those eternally marvelous breasts, were jumping with her labored breathing. She opened her mouth, but didn't manage to say a word to me. She walked downstairs, and she and the cops passed me as they headed to the exit, so it

was then I saw that her hands, cuffed behind her back, were dripping with blood. The shock!

I was paralyzed. I couldn't decide whether to go upstairs to see what the hell she'd gone and done. I could hear Daisy's husband's uncle cursing like a trooper from somewhere up there. As Daisy left, the reporters' flashes lit up the windows from outside.

To put it briefly, Daisy went upstairs, as she did every morning, to the man with the foulard's room, to take him breakfast. She had to be the one to do it, and only her; there'd be trouble if anyone tried to deny her the honor. The evening before, the man had been joined by his lover from Florida.

To say lover is incorrect, because in these cases the word is *companion*. Exactly, because the man with the foulard had spent close on a decade with another man with a foulard, and the two of them even looked alike. They lived in a nice villa in Florida and one joined the other in whichever state he visited on family business, which must have been thriving. It seems that they were even married, somehow.

Now, it was probable that the first man with the foulard had not mentioned the situation to Daisy; perhaps he was amused by the misunderstanding and was sort of playing her along. He was probably even a bit excited by it. But Daisy, like me, came from Quintillia, and here situations of the sort were un-

heard of; whether black, white or mulatto, in these parts people don't do certain things, in fact, they don't even want to know about them, apart from the odd case seen on television, but precisely, those are things you only see in programs.

They were in bed together, naked and in each other's arms. Before they knew what was happening my poor cousin had threatened them with a knife. She managed to sink her first blow into the stomach of the man with the foulard for whom she'd lost her head, and the second blow level with the first rib of the other.

As luck would have it, Rick, the elevator operator on shift that morning, was walking towards the elevator at that very moment. Rick was a smart guy, one who didn't baulk at intervening in a dangerous situation – I wonder what happened to him. He had even trained at the police academy, before getting caught with marijuana. These things aren't forgiven from a black kid like him. And it was lucky he was passing just then, otherwise poor cousin Daisy would now be shut in prison with the key thrown away, or worse...

In the end, the lovers with the foulards got by with a few weeks in hospital, a fright big enough to bring on premature aging, and having learnt the lesson that you don't play lightheartedly with the female universe.

I'll leave you to imagine the chaos unleashed by the event. For two days it was on the news and there was even a special report on a national network. All her shopping friends took part, as well as her husband, children, her husband's uncle and representatives of the Chicago's gay community of. And I, Jeremiah Saint John II, took the opportunity to go home.

The old man looked at me and nodded his head to say «yes». But most likely, he really wanted to tell me that besides being a good-for-nothing, I had now also become a loser.

– Yeah, friend, would you believe it!

Jack Lungurdson listened to my account with his mouth ajar and his eyes fixed on the garage where my brothers were gutting his pickup.

Jack knows how to listen; he doesn't seem to be taking much notice, but then you realize he heard all you said. In fact he doesn't miss a thing. He has travelled the world and knows about people.

– Listen Jeremiah, I don't know if you're interested but it would be no problem for me to put you up for a while in my new house down by the river. Basically, I've just arrived and I don't even know if I'll manage to settle in. And then, there'll be a few things to fix, so when you've finished at the garage you could give me a hand with them. What do you say?

Oh, jeez! No one had ever made me such a generous offer. And it came just at the right moment, giv-

en the situation at my brother's place. On the other hand, such an anomalous situation was likely to provoke a whole load of complications in Quintillia.

Now, however, transparency is needed with regard to this situation. Given that even among you, listeners to my gentle rant, there are entirely pure and innocent souls, as well as the occasional hopeless idiot, for the majority it is clear that I am a Negro and Jack is a white.

If we really want to get to the bottom of my negritude, I should tell you that I came out ninety-nine per cent bitter chocolate, almost inedible, while in my brothers there are decided shimmers of a lower cocoa rate than me, not to speak of their children, who are all pretty much milk chocolate – the evolution of the species. Then on Daisy's side we're talking about full-blown *caffè latte*, elders included.

Like an albino among whites, I stand out like a beacon. If I had been Nigerian it would have been different, I could have blended in easily; but I've been American for I don't know how many generations, I'm more American than lots of new Americans who brag about it, and even if they invented the name Afro-American, I'm still something unique. A wedge of pure black slavery planted in the hillbilly flank of the United States.

When I look in the mirror, my nearly sixty years can all be seen in the grizzled curls that increasingly



smolder in contrast to my absolute negritude. Sometimes I surprise myself jokingly pretending to be an alien.

Jack Lungurdson is ten years older than me and looks exactly like Robert Redford.

When he appeared in Quintillia, the window of the hair salon reflected onto the street the pointed fingers and eyes on stalks of the three ladies under the hair dryers, and not long afterwards Albert Partanna appeared, armed with notebook, tape-recorder and microphone.

Albert is a young reporter at the County paper who harbors dreams of becoming a great television journalist. One of those angry smart alecks, with a mission in life: to nail VIPs for their responsibility of people sworn to the psychophysical wellbeing of their fans.

As soon as he realized that, at most, the stranger who appeared at the garage with the pickup was a lookalike of the actor, he turned on his heels, as huffy as a cat who after doing it and covering it up shakes its paws to get rid of the annoying little grains of sand from the litter tray.

Jack has skin like a golden crust, hardened by the years on the oceans, small blue eyes like the actor and the same playboy smile. He still has remarkably good teeth. Fully aware that he is as good looking as a seasoned Hollywood star, in his youth, who

knows how often he made use of the fact to break women's hearts? But now he seems to have hung up his boots, or at least he'd like you to think so. He almost never talks about his past, and when he does he isn't very expansive. Whether you are born beautiful or ugly, bliss and beatings still come your way in life. Who knows how much he's been through in his.

Well, you will have got it by now, although Ku Klux Klan, the fight for civil rights of the sixties and those that came afterwards are now storylines for the movies, in our neck of the woods the question is so twisted and kinked that you never know what people are driving at, when they make certain decisions.