

The Jazz Lights of New Orleans

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The Jazz Lights of New Orleans

by [Gracefully](#)

Summary

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A shaken Sledge visits Snafu in New Orleans.

Notes

I'm glad I'm finally posting this, enjoy!

The nights of New Orleans are long and sticky and warm, and Snafu has become somewhat adept to sleeping through them. He remembers the humid aspect of Louisiana just fine; the bayou nights didn't teach him nothing, but the sounds are something to get used to.

The bayou was loud too, a constant orchestra of insects and water and muck and creatures that lived throughout. The war had sounds too, far too many for a good night's sleep. Snafu remembers the near constant sounds of gunfire, or explosions, or human screams, and really, when he thinks about it, jazz is nothing in comparison.

The Jazz nightlife of New Orleans is loud too, but it's a different sort of loud. People yell and cuss and laugh drunkenly. Singers entice their audiences and the musicians kick up a tune. Horn players give the night everything they've got, and the tenants are nowhere near quiet either. In this neighborhood, Snafu's ears are privy to far too many domestic rows.

Snafu shouldn't have been woken by a soft, hesitant knock on his front door at 3 am, but he was. He blinked awake, unaware of what woke him at first. The Jazz was a constant of New Orleans, that couldn't have woken him up. He sat up, feeling the soft night air on his bare skin. After a beat, there was another knock.

Snafu rose from his bed, feet padding softly across the rickety floor. The knock came again, a bit more insistent. Snafu crossed the living room and the kitchen, suddenly nervous. He paused in front of the door, staring for a moment. The person behind the door rapped again, now a little impatient.

Snafu found a scowl working his way onto his face, and he yanked the door open suddenly. All at once, the scowl was wiped clean from his face. He blinked, not sure if what he saw was an illusion. Eugene Sledge stood before him, looking unkempt and tired, even in the dim light from the street lamp outside. He was carrying a small bag and nothing else. He looked straight at Snafu and the look he sent him floored Snafu.

Snafu had no idea how to act, or what to say, or ask, or anything. He realized he had been holding his breath, and let it all out in a rush. "Sledgehammer." He said. Even Snafu wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement.

Sledge didn't smile, but one of the faint lines around his eyes softened, and Snafu counted that as a victory.

"I-um," Sledge began, scuffing the toe of his shoe against the floor. "I need a place to stay for a while." It wasn't a question, yet it wasn't a statement either. Snafu understood this somehow, and numbly stepped out of the way, gesturing for Sledge to enter.

Sledge stepped inside and Snafu shut and locked the door behind him, suddenly feeling the need to do something with his hands. "Want coffee?" He asked, sliding closer to the stove. He flicked on the kitchen light, bringing the small main room to light.

It took a second for the question to register to Sledge, who was blinking at Snafu's tiny apartment. He looked worse in the light. The deep circles around his eyes were pronounced, and he looked distant, like his mind was a thousand miles away. He was still gazing around Snafu's home, and Snafu suddenly felt self-conscious about his home, even though it was the best he could afford. "No, but tea would be nice." He said softly.

Snafu nodded, busying himself with first of all finding the tea he has stored in the very back of his cupboard. After a moment, he realized that Sledge was still standing awkwardly in the living room. "You can put your shit on the couch, Eugene." Using Sledge's first name sent a jolt of exhilaration down Snafu's spine. He didn't think he would ever get to say the name to Sledge again.

Sledge snapped out of his daze after a moment, setting his bag down gingerly on the couch, before crossing over to take a seat at the kitchen table. Snafu forced himself to look away, to look anywhere but at Sledge, busying himself with making tea. He filled the teakettle with water and set it on the stove, thanking his lucky stars the gas was working that night. He found a clean mug somewhere by the sink, and began sprinkling it with tea leaves. He frowned, trying to remember what combination of herbs and leaves his grandma used to make for him to calm his nerves. Something with chamomile?

As he worked, he became aware of Sledge fiddling with something in his hands. After a quick glance, Snafu confirmed that Sledge was indeed packing his pipe, the very one he carried throughout the Pacific. Sledge leaned back, a curl of smoke escaping his lips. He chewed thoughtfully on his pipe as he smoked, brown-eyed gaze boring a hole into the wall by the door.

Snafu found himself watching Sledge more than he looked around the kitchen as he pretended to do something productive.

Snafu found himself sliding down into the chair across from Sledge, only catching his attention when the chair squeaked underneath him. Sledge regarded Snafu wearily, like how an animal at the zoo in a cage too small for it regards a curious child. Snafu leaned forward, plucking the pipe from between Sledge's lips and taking a long drag before handing it back. "So," he said, leaning back in his chair and exhaling smoke, "what got you all the way from Mobile to here?"

Sledge's eyes darkened and the tiniest bit of a wince crept into his mouth. "Mobile wasn't--isn't the place for me." He looked down at the table, jaw clenching. He looked so dreary, so worn down in the harsh light of the kitchen, Snafu felt a part of his heart ache for Sledge.

"Am I gonna be in trouble with some broad if I keep you away from Mobile?" Snafu asked cautiously. He wasn't sure why he was so nervous to hear the answer.

"Nope, no girl will come chasing after me. Sid and his fiancée might, after a couple of days, but they're wrapped up with the wedding." Snafu caught the bitter note in Sledge's voice, but he decided to ignore it, in favor of contemplation. Snafu was somehow glad that Eugene has stayed single.

"You're skipping town on your best friend's wedding?" Snafu asked, slightly incredulous. Sledge winced. Snafu let out a low whistle. Things must have been bad.

The tea kettle whistled, softly at first and then more insistently, and Snafu rose after a moment to pour the drinks. He carried the two mugs to the table, setting one in front of Sledge. He watched through the steam as Sledge took a tiny, cautious sip. He hissed at how hot it was, but his face relaxed a tiny bit, and Snafu hid his smile in his own mug of tea. "You want something stronger with that, Sledgehammer?" Snafu asked. It was a dark question and he knew it, but he hid it with a smirk, and was immensely relieved when Sledge shook his head.

They sat for a moment, enjoying the tea and one another's company. Snafu decided that though he was not his grandmother by any means, he could make her classic tea halfway well, and serve it nice and simple for his guest. As the silence continued, Snafu felt the urge welling inside him to say something, anything, to get Sledge to talk. He started simply,

"How long'd it take you to get here?"

Sledge glanced up over his cup, eyes darting. Snafu worried if he might have pushed him too far, then Sledge cleared his throat and replied, "Just an afternoon and a night. Mobile's not that far, when you think about it." It was that far, but Snafu didn't say anything.

So Sledge had left directly from Mobile after all. Snafu nodded, picking at a chip in the mug. He watched Sledge out of the corner of his eyes. Sledge stared at the table, a blank look on his face.

All at once, Sledge looked up at Snafu, a hint of emotion trickling back into his skin. "Why'd you leave?" he blurted out all at once. Snafu felt his heart leap into his throat, his panic surge as Sledge's dark gaze bored straight into him. His tea stuck in his throat and he had to cough to clear it.

"I—" Snafu got out, but he had no answer. No answer he could verbalize, at least. He broke their eye contact, looking guiltily at his tea. The leaves floated gently to the bottom of the mug. He felt awful, he felt like the scum of the earth, and Sledge was still looking at him, and when Snafu glanced up expecting anger, all he could see was the sadness drawing down the corners of Sledge's

eyes and that was so much worse.

Sledge leaned back in his chair, and said, very quietly. “You fucking left me. No goodbye, no address, just...left.” His words hung in the air between them like smoke. Snafu had seen Sledge's anger and Sledge's sadness, and he knew that the sadness was always worse. The anger often made him irrational, but sadness cleared his head. Snafu wished he could clear his.

Snafu wanted an excuse, he wanted this to be easy. He wished Eugene knew without Snafu telling him why it was so hard. Why he got up in the middle of the night and left Sledge all alone. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut and did not look at Sledge. He could feel Sledge's gaze slide off of him, he could hear a soft, defeated sigh.

For some reason, that felt like the final nail in Snafu's coffin. He could feel the tension in the room dissipate. Snafu slowly opened his eyes. Gazed up at Eugene through his eyelashes. Eugene was chewing at his pipe and gazing off at something Snafu couldn't see. Snafu was surprised Sledge didn't just storm out of the room altogether.

“How did you find me, anyway?” he asked. Snafu didn't give his address to anybody, not even Sledge.

Sledge smirked, a hint of his old liveliness seeping into his gray exterior. “The Marines keeps very proficient records. You had to file an address with them, if you wanted them to send you stuff.” Snafu did have a bag of treasures from the Pacific sent to his home. The bag reeked of rotten seaweed and salt. The things inside; torn flags, teeth, Japanese weapons; it all sent a wave of nausea through Snafu. The things he had guarded so carefully in the Pacific, things he had bartered and stolen and cut out, they all brought back far too many bad memories for what they were worth. He had ended up trading it all with a Creole woman for three dollars and her blessing. Snafu learned from his grandmother never to pass up a good trade and a sprinkle of old hoodoo. She had recoiled when he set the items on her sticky formica table, she waved a hand in their direction. Looked him over and promised to clean him, to clean the items of their bad energy. Snafu wasn't one to take a witch's cleansing for granted.

He had kept his dress blues and his regular uniform. The uniform had teeth in the pocket that he had been unable to sell. Snafu was sure the woman would have bought the other teeth, but he didn't want to even look at either of his uniforms.

Snafu grinned then, resisting the urge to reach across and touch Eugene's hair. He had the feeling if he touched Eugene, he would like it too much and then he wouldn't be able to stop. “Hungry?” he asked, feeling his stomach twinge. He had only a light dinner the evening before.

Sledge began to shake his head, then reconsidered. “Yeah, actually. I think I am.” Snafu rolled his eyes at how even after the war, Sledge still had a hard time taking care of his most basic needs. He got up and pawed around his mostly barren fridge. Snafu finally dug out a loaf of bread and a half-empty jar of peanut butter. He pulled out a knife and set the ensemble in front of Sledge with a plate, feeling sheepish. He had so little to offer Sledge, and his home was a rat's nest, probably, compared to Sledge's lavish mansion back in Mobile.

But if Sledge felt any disdain for Snafu's rudimentary meal, he didn't show it. “I'm uh, I'll go grocery shopping tomorrow.” Snafu said, sliding back into his seat. He quietly made himself a peanut butter sandwich and pretended that he wasn't watching Sledge carefully, because the man looked thin, and Snafu wanted to get some more meat on his bones.

Sledge must have really been hungry. He wolfed down the sandwich, and prepared himself a second while Snafu was still gnawing on his. Sledge glanced up, a little embarrassed, but Snafu

shrugged. "You need it." and Sledge continued to dig in.

After they had finished their meal, Snafu rose and cleaned up. He felt a wave of tiredness wash over him, and suddenly remembered that he had work in the morning. "Sledgehammer, I got work tomorrow, so I'm going to go to bed now." He plucked his extra key from underneath the front mat. He tossed it to Sledge, who barely managed to catch it. "Feel free to walk around or something, I start work at seven am and I get back here around four."

Snafu then tried to offer his bed to Sledge, but Eugene denied the bed so vehemently that Snafu didn't even really feel guilty when he slid down into his soft sheets. He gave Sledge a pillow and a blanket, and bade the man goodnight. That night, no nightmares plagued Snafu. Instead, only his positive memories of the war; the times when they were on the winning side and Sledge's smile was as bright as the hot, hot sun above them.

Snafu left the next dawn, and crept around his apartment, scared to wake Sledge. Eugene was asleep, but he had dark bags under his eyes and his skin looked waxy. Snafu felt a twinge of worry when he saw just how thin Sledge was, how he genuinely looked unhealthy.

Snafu left a couple of dollar bills on the table, and a note reminding Sledge when he would be home. Snafu left his apartment with a weight in his heart and his keys heavy in his pocket. He had a hard time concentrating at work that day, he slipped and cut the side of his hand when he stopped paying attention for a moment. He cursed and mentally chided himself for being so distracted. The pain helped him focus on his task at hand. The bayou was hot and Snafu came home nearly drenched in sweat.

He stopped at a little boucherie and picked out some chicken and some spices. He didn't know if Eugene even ate all day. Snafu nearly ran up the rickety stairs in his hurry to get back to Eugene. He unlocked the door and walked in to find Sledge reading. In Snafu's chair, in the late afternoon sunlight, Sledge sat bathed in light and though he still looked worse for wear, he looked rested.

Snafu breathed out a sigh of relief he had been holding in nearly all day. Sledge looked up and smiled at Snafu, who leaned back against the closed door, the relief flooding through his body nearly taking him down to the floor. Sledge slipped a bookmark inside his book and set it gingerly on the coffee table, crossing towards Snafu. "How was work?" He asked.

"Fine," Snafu shrugged. "Construction is pretty cut and dry, so there's not too much to worry about." Snafu set the food he bought on the counter, and asked, "Did you eat?"

Sledge looked a little embarrassed. "Only some bread. I didn't want to take anything from you, when you're already letting me stay here for free."

Snafu crossed and jabbed a finger into Eugene's sternum. He had the thought that this contact might have been their first since the war. He leaned in close then, like he used to do to the newbies to scare them. Eugene was the only one who ever leaned back. "Stupid." He said. Eugene blinked in surprise at the comment.

"You gotta eat, Eugene," Snafu said, backing away and achieving personal space between them again. He could feel the protective instincts that rose up something fierce in the Pacific swell back, almost to full force. It was bad when they were at war, as Snafu saw Sledge become more and more self-destructive and dangerous, Snafu ceased to take care of himself. After every attack, his eyes were on Sledge, whenever they were short on food, Snafu watched Sledge out of the corner of his eye, made sure he was eating. Every time Sledge spaced out, got that look in his eyes after

another horrible event had happened, Snafu made sure to just touch Sledge's shoulder in passing. A small squeeze, just to remind Sledge that he wasn't alone.

Sledge sighed. "Are you sure I can't help out at all? I feel bad that you're giving me so much."

"Trust me, 'hammer, if I didn't like having you here, you would know." Snafu said, preparing to cook the chicken. He could feel Sledge's eyes on the back of his neck, but he ignored it and pulled out a frying pan and a knife.

After a palpable silence, Eugene asked, masking any emotion in his voice, "Then why did you leave in the middle of the night?"

Snafu almost dropped his knife in his surprise. He felt his body flood with ice, his mouth dried. He was literally being confronted by his past and Snafu didn't know how to handle it. The oxygen in the room was sucked out almost instantly. He turned around, very slowly. Eugene was leaning against the counter, trying to appear nonchalant, but Snafu could see where his knuckles were white, he could see the set to Sledge's jaw and the fact that Sledge's pupils were blown wide.

He stared Eugene in the eyes, hard enough to make anyone else uncomfortable. He knew Sledge could meet his gaze unflinchingly for hours, this was nothing new. Snafu set the knife down on the counter and said very quietly, "Some things shouldn't be talked about, Gene."

Eugene's jaw tightened and he looked away. Snafu knew that Eugene chose to look away, he chose to break their eye contact. Snafu turned around and leaned his forehead against the cool paint of the cabinet, his eyes slipping closed. He took a deep, shaky breath, feeling like he might crumble apart at any moment.

Snafu carefully kept himself in the same way he kept himself from losing it back in the Pacific. He counted to five, carefully, and then opened his eyes. The lights were flickering and Sledge's skin was tight with anger. Snafu's apartment was crappy and his relationship with Eugene was hanging by a single thread. If one of them were to snap, the thread would break with it and send them falling into the darkness below.

Snafu picked up the knife and with precise movements, began to cut the chicken he bought just hours earlier. The silence slowly became less like cracking glass and more like the heavy white noise that constantly settled over New Orleans. Sledge moved off eventually, busying himself with something on the table. Snafu made a delicious stir fry and served it without much ceremony.

He was careful to keep the conversation away from anything too meaningful.

After three days of Sledge sleeping on the couch and Snafu taking the bed for himself, he suggested a small trade. Every couple of days, they would trade back and forth, just to keep things fair. Snafu didn't want Sledge to get a sore back from sleeping on the couch for too long. Sledge, of course, protested fiercely and insisted that he had taken enough already, he didn't want to take Snafu's bed along with it.

But Snafu knew of Sledge's stubbornness and he wasn't going to let it stop him. He knew he could be the more stubborn of the two. Snafu took his pillow and a blanket and planted himself firmly on the carpet in the living room. Sledge rolled his eyes and kept the couch for the next couple of days, until he realized Snafu was serious. Then, instead of taking the bed for himself, Sledge pulled his pillow and blanket onto the floor next to Snafu.

Snafu laughed when Sledge stretched out next to him. “What do you think you’re doin’, Sledgehammer?”

With his back to Snafu, Sledge answered, “I’m keeping you company. Besides, that couch is shit.”

Snafu hummed his agreement. The horn player from the bar down the street started a new tune, upbeat and raucous. Snafu gazed out the window and looked at the purple haze of lights reflect up into his building. He fell asleep counting Sledge’s breaths, an old habit from Okinawa, when he was half convinced that every breath Sledge took would be his last.

Back in the Pacific, Sledge and Snafu rarely slept at the same time. Only if Burgie or whatever replacement was with them was on watch did both of them sleep. They slept pressed together, often with one resting his head on the other’s shoulder. Sledge was particularly fond of slouching down into the crook between Snafu’s arm and his body, until Snafu was forced to put his arm around Sledge’s neck or shoulder instead. When they slept at the same time, they slept with arms or legs or backs pressed together; they always had to have some kind of contact. Snafu realized somewhere in a shithole in Okinawa that it was because he was worried if he couldn’t feel Sledge when he went to sleep, Sledge could be gone when he woke up.

Later, in a cruel twist of fate, Snafu was the one who left Sledge in his sleep.

Snafu cherished the memory of Sledge’s face the first time Snafu pillowed his face in Sledge’s lap to take a nap. Sledge’s face was soft from lack of combat and the dredges of youth, he had dirt smudged on his cheeks and flecks of dried blood near his eyes. He was tired too, hell, they were all tired. His eyes were red and his skin was pink from the overbearing sun. When Snafu announced he had had enough “of the goddamn fucking heat,” and that he was “taking a fucking nap”, a tiny smile graced Sledge’s face.

When the other replacements shied away at Snafu’s vulgarity, Sledge only leaned closer. When Snafu took off his helmet and stretched out, resting his cheek on Sledge’s thigh, Sledge’s eyes had gone wide and his mouth sort of fell open. Snafu would have laughed, if he hadn’t felt like stabbing someone.

He woke up with Sledge’s fingers tangled in his hair. Sledge had fallen asleep whilst combing out Snafu’s hair. Something about that solidified Sledge’s place in Snafu’s heart. No matter the nature of Snafu’s feelings for Sledge, having Sledge fall asleep while running his hands through Snafu’s dark curls, his head curled to his chest like a bird tucking his head underneath his wing, it all went straight to Snafu’s heart.

When they slept on the floor together for the first few nights, they didn’t touch. Snafu was too scared, too apprehensive to reach out and bridge the gap between them. There were accidental brushes of contact, when one turned over in his sleep, but nothing purposeful. Snafu woke with his back sore from the floor, creases from the wood pressed into his spine. Sledge woke and looked less tired as the days went by. Often, he woke up at the crack of dawn with Snafu in order for them to have a cigarette and a coffee together before Snafu went to work. There were good days.

There were bad days too, when the tension between them surged back into place and left both parties sulking, backs turned to each other and only a curt, “Goodnight,” tossed between them like mortar fire.

Then, of course, there were the nightmares to contest with. Snafu got nightmares fairly often, and mostly they just startled him awake in a cold sweat. Other times he was disoriented, he didn’t know where he was, he could feel Sledge’s name on his lips as he knew the Japs were closing in, the wash of red was too much to bear--but then his heart would slow, and Snafu would realize

where he was. He would remember that the war was over, that he had stopped physically fighting the Japanese a long time ago.

Recovering from those nightmares was the worst part about it. Often Snafu would be drenched in perspiration, trembling and weakened. He would drag himself into the shower, turn the hot water on full blast, and lean against the wall, waiting to feel something other than regret and terror.

Other times, Snafu would be paralyzed with fear, the kind that didn't allow him to even consider going to work or making money or having a family. This was a primal, deep-rooted fear that overtook any sort of civilized nature in Snafu. He would lay there, eyes fixated on the ceiling, aching to turn over and find real human comfort, but petrified that he would turn over to find a monster sleeping beside him. Somehow, Snafu made it to the morning, although he often went to work bleary-eyed and fatigued.

The doubt set in sometimes, where Snafu would worry that Sledge actually died in Okinawa or Peleliu or any of the other godforsaken rocks they fought their battles on. The uncertainty would gnaw at him for hours, until the first rosy fingers of dawn chased away any and all of the shadows from his nightmares.

Snafu soon found out that Sledge got nightmares too. Bad ones, that left him wide-eyed and trembling, eyes focused on the ceiling so hard Snafu thought the ceiling might burst into flame. Snafu never quite knew how to handle the situation. He had never been one to simply slip in and have the other person feel comfortable. When Sledge got nightmares, Snafu was only more aware of that. The first time it happened, Snafu was woken up by Sledge mumbling and tossing. Snafu propped himself up on an elbow, still half-asleep and worried that something bad might have happened.

Sledge let out a startled cry, and Snafu shook him awake. He didn't know if that was the best thing to do, but he was willing to give it a shot. Sledge sat upright so fast he almost knocked Snafu over.

His chest rose and fell in erratic, shallow breaths. His eyes roamed over the room, skipping right over Snafu. "Sledge," Snafu said, gripping his biceps. Sledge didn't seem to hear him. The whites of his eyes stood out against the darkness. "Sledgehammer, snap out of it," Snafu was beginning to panic a little. He shook Sledge, but he was still unresponsive. His eyes were locked on the opposite wall, his jaw was clenched and his teeth were locked. Breath hissed out of his nose. Snafu felt fear spike in his heart, he was afraid that Sledge would pass out or that he wouldn't snap out of his spell.

"Eugene, please, you're scaring me," Snafu said, placing his hands on Sledge's face. He wouldn't dare do anything of the sort in the daytime. He felt his voice shake and tremble a bit. Sledge froze. His eyes latched onto Snafu's face, too piercing, searching for something Snafu knew he wouldn't find. Sledge was like a bird in his hands, he was scared that Sledge would alight at any moment.

Though Sledge's eyes bored straight into Snafu's, Snafu got the sense that Sledge wasn't really seeing him. He was looking right into Snafu, but he wasn't seeing a thing in the present. His eyes were on the past entirely.

Suddenly, the ice drained out of Sledge's form. He went limp under Snafu's arms, his face bowing towards Snafu's shoulder. He gazed up at Snafu, and Snafu was startled to see tears filling up his eyes. He felt a silent sob wrack Sledge's body.

"Eugene?" He asked, scared that his sledgehammer wasn't all the way back yet.

"I'm here, Mer. I'm here." Sledge began to cry, horrible, aching sobs. Snafu didn't hesitate at all. He pulled Sledge close to him, and Sledge tucked his face into the crook between Snafu's neck and

shoulder.

Snafu shushed Sledge, rubbing his back and rocking slowly. His heart felt like it was being slowly pulverized, such was the pain of watching Sledge and knowing what he was experiencing.

No one as good and as sweet as Eugene Sledge deserved to go through the nightmares.

Eventually, Sledge calmed down and was able to get up and blow his nose. Snafu stayed close to his side. They laid back down on the floor, much closer than before. "I just can't seem to get it out of my mind," Sledge whispered.

Snafu swallowed. "I know exactly what you mean." He gazed up at the ceiling. "Okinawa is the worst," he confessed.

Sledge nodded. "Same for me. I keep dreaming about getting sucked into the mud, swallowing it, drowning in it." He was silent for a moment. "But then I also remember more than is probably healthy."

Snafu could only turn over and run a hand up and down Eugene's arm, in what he hoped was comforting. What he really wanted to do was press a kiss to the crown of his head, but anything more, he thought, could scare off Eugene. "Let's try to get some sleep, okay? The war is won, we're home, we're safe." Snafu wondered how in just under three weeks, Snafu's home had become a shared home between them.

Sledge had nodded. He had turned over and gone to sleep. That night, Snafu didn't get any rest.

Another night, about a week later, Sledge woke up crying and shaking. It was almost time for Snafu to get up anyway. He hauled Sledge to his feet and pulled him into the bathroom, where he took off all of his clothes except for his boxers. Sledge stood, shivering and pale, while Snafu turned on the water in the shower. He made it hot, then stripped in a similar fashion. He led Sledge into the water, coaxing him to sit on the floor. The tile was cracked and the water pressure was crappy, but the water was warm and the comforts it offered were more than the hard floor.

"Let it out, 'hammer, let it all out," Snafu whispered into Sledge's shoulder, pulling him close underneath the warm water. Sledge curled up against Snafu's chest, an arm wrapped around his waist. Sledge cried into Snafu's bare chest, not embarrassed to show such emotion.

Snafu felt like he was falling apart. It was hard to see Sledge in such a state. It was hard to see the person you cared most about shaking and crying, haunted by forgotten ghosts.

Sometimes, Sledge awoke to find Snafu sitting up, staring straight ahead. If it was the middle of the night, he would ask what was wrong. Snafu didn't trust himself to speak. Sledge would shuffle forward until he could drape himself over Snafu's back. He would press his cheek into Snafu's shoulder, sometimes when it was really bad, he would press a kiss into the soft brown skin of his shoulder. They never talked about what a kiss like that could mean. There wasn't any heat to it, but the fact that Sledge would do that often kept Snafu up, thinking.

Snafu wasn't ashamed to show emotion in front of Sledge, especially in the dark of night when the nightmares held them both in their grip. There were times when Sledge was the one who dragged Snafu into the shower to sit on the floor, those were the times when Snafu cried and let all of his emotions out. After a month, Snafu allowed himself to kiss Eugene's forehead, to press his head close to Sledge's and whisper directly into his ear, "You're alright, you're alright, you're alright." He wasn't ashamed to press his forehead to Sledge's, to hold him close in his arms.

Inevitably, things always looked better in the morning. Sometimes Snafu didn't get really any sleep, because he was helping Sledge or because the memories wouldn't let him sleep. They wouldn't talk about whatever intimacies were exchanged the night before, they wouldn't comment on the bloodshot eyes of whoever was crying just hours earlier.

When the rent check came, Snafu tried to keep Sledge from pitching in, he really did. The stubbornness Sledge possessed wouldn't let him. Snafu also wondered if it had to do with how he was raised. Good Southern families didn't raise their boys to be ungrateful, and Sledge sure wasn't. He did the dishes and cleaned the apartment and even though Snafu put up a good fight to keep his pride, Sledge ended up paying half of that month's rent.

After a month and a half of sitting around all day, Sledge decided that he wanted to do something productive. He told Snafu over dinner one day that he was going to sign up for college. He would study botany or biology, he hadn't decided yet, he could commute by bus, and be home in time for some of Snafu's delicious cooking.

Snafu listened and was pleased. He knew that it wasn't healthy for Sledge to waste away at home all day while he broke his body building houses, and he always knew that Sledge was smart. He was glad that Sledge was finishing his education, as Sledge had told Snafu back in Okinawa that going to college was one of the first things he was going to do when he got home.

When they were in the Pacific, Snafu never thought past the next hour when it came to his long-term planning. Thinking out any farther seemed naïve and selfish. Men died every minute, it seemed, and to even consider a life outside of the mud and blood was akin to spitting on their bodies. Sledge's optimism always caused Snafu pause. He sometimes forgot that there were people that untainted, that pure. Snafu hoped the grime on his hands didn't stain Sledge too much.

Snafu went with Sledge to the college when he signed up for classes one muggy and miserable Saturday morning. The campus was nice enough, and Snafu saw several men in uniforms walking around. "What did you do with your uniform, Eugene?" Snafu asked, lighting a cigarette.

"I put it in a closet and locked the door." Snafu glanced over, surprised by the emotion in his voice. "I'm never wearing that thing again, Snaf." Sledge said, shaking his head. Snafu understood where Sledge was coming from. His own dress blues, and his basic uniform both hung in the very back of his closet. No matter how many times he washed his basic uniform, he couldn't get the scent of mud and blood out of it.

"What did you do with all of the teeth you collected?" Sledge asked, reaching over and taking the cigarette from Snafu's mouth. He took a drag and blew the smoke in Snafu's face as Snafu answered,

"They're still in the pocket of my uniform." Sledge looked surprised. "I tried to sell them when we were on leave in Peking, but they weren't following the standard exchange rate, and so I waited. I thought I could get more money in the States." He let out a soft laugh. "None of the places I went to would take Jap teeth, no matter how much gold in them." He took a drag and blew the smoke back into Sledge's face. "I was able to sell some of them, and a flag and some weapons to an old Bayou witch."

"I don't blame the ones who wouldn't buy the teeth," Sledge quipped. Snafu shrugged. If he could have it his way, he would have done away with everything that had to do with the war. It left him enough emotional baggage that he didn't really need anything physical. During the fighting, Sledge had become his one token, the one thing he had actually hoped to hold onto when the fighting stopped. Snafu didn't surprise himself when he left Sledge on the train. He only disappointed himself.

After finishing Snafu's cigarette, Sledge and Snafu wandered inside. A bright, smiling woman helped set Sledge up with all of the right paperwork to sign up for classes. Sledge signed up for the bare minimum classes to get his degree, but he still had a full schedule. Snafu noticed his excitement as they walked around campus, mapping out where Sledge would walk to travel to his different classes.

Snafu couldn't help but feel uneducated and dumb in comparison. He joined the Marines to get good pay and to be one of the best, Sledge probably joined the Marines of the sole reason to be fighting alongside the best. Snafu knew how Sledge talked about his home, he knew that Sledge came from old plantation money. Snafu's humble beginnings never looked rougher than when Sledge mentioned their servant, Alma, and the big white house he grew up in.

They caught the seven o'clock train home, and on their way back to Snafu's apartment, Snafu decided to treat Sledge. He took him to one of his favorite places to eat, a little joint called Mimi's. Sledge ordered something spicy and spent the meal chugging all of his water, and then all of Snafu's, while Snafu laughed until his sides hurt. Sledge sat, tongue out, fanning his mouth with a menu while Snafu wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. They shared a bowl of pistachio ice cream and that seemed to help Sledge's obliterated taste buds.

Afterwards, they walked along the dock until they got to the end. Snafu sat and dangled his legs over the edge. Sledge sat gingerly next to him. "I always loved the sunset in the bayou," Snafu said softly, closing his eyes to feel the orange light of the sunset against his skin.

"What is it like there?" Sledge asked.

"It's old. That's the sense you get when you're there. Everything there is ancient, and some of the old women seem to have witnessed everything under the sun," Snafu grinned. "The place is tricky if you don't know it. You can lose your way so easily,"

"I'd love to see it someday," Sledge said wistfully.

Snafu turned to look at him. "Really?" He asked. Sledge nodded. Snafu slung his arm around Sledge's small shoulders, drawing him close so that their heads knocked together. "I just might have to take you there," Snafu conceded. He stood and pulled Sledge up, and together they walked back to Snafu's apartment in the warm night. Snafu felt lighter than he had in weeks.

Sledge dove headfirst into his classes. Snafu was delighted to see the way his eyes lit up when he talked about what he was learning. He rambled on about organisms and stamens and how such and such plant was so evolved compared to how it was ten thousand years ago. Most of it went over Snafu's head, but he appreciated it anyway. Sledge got home before Snafu, and his new schedule seemed to motivate him to do other things around the house. Sledge got home and ran a bath for Snafu. Snafu got home dirty and sweaty more often than not, and he gratefully took a bath every night. The hot water helped soothe his aching muscles and clean off any dirt of the day. Snafu liked to make Sledge blush by stripping as he walked across the house, and even though he was half-naked most of the time in the pacific, Sledge blushed like the southern belle he was anytime Snafu's tan skin was revealed.

Sledge, though he greatly enjoyed Snafu's food, took to cooking their dinner once or twice a week. He bought a weekly magazine for five cents and tried all of the recipes in the booklet. More often than not, the food wasn't the best, and Sledge admitted that wholeheartedly. Snafu called up his mom and asked for more old family recipes, she chided him fondly and told him that he should come and visit her more often. Snafu hung up feeling only slightly guilty.

Though things had taken a turn for the better, the nightmares still plagued both men. Sometimes, all Snafu could do was snake his arms around Sledge's middle and hold on tight until the nightmare left. Sometimes, they were both awake in the middle of the night, shaken and unable to find sleep. Sledge sometimes stayed home instead of going to class, so that he could catch up on his missed hours. Snafu got very few vacation days, and he took them only when absolutely necessary. Sometimes, he napped during lunch so that he didn't drop anything while they were building. The men at work chatted about their wives and their kids and their mistresses as if they were living their best possible lives. Snafu felt sorry for their wives, even more so when their husbands bitched about them like they were balls and chains. He hoped he never sounded anything like that.

Sledge had been living with Snafu for almost two months when he received a letter from his mother. He stared at it for a long time before opening it. Snafu stared at Sledge for the whole time, while pretending to prepare dinner. The letter was addressed to Eugene Sledge, at Snafu's address. Snafu wondered how Mrs. Sledge found his address.

Sledge finally tore the letter open with a knife that was sitting on the table. It was only one page of thick, expensive paper. Snafu could see that only half of the page had writing. It only took Sledge a minute to read it. Snafu stopped pretending to cut chicken into bite-sized pieces. He leaned against the uneven countertop and crossed his arms over his chest. He suddenly wanted a cigarette desperately.

Sledge's eyes traveled back to the top of the page. They wound their way to the signature on the bottom much faster the second time around. He set the letter down, gently, like it was a bomb. Or a flower. He leaned back in his chair and stared at it for a long moment. His eyes snapped to Snafu. Snafu held his gaze unwaveringly.

"She wants me to come home," Sledge said. It was somewhat unnecessary, as Snafu had already assumed what the letter said.

"And will you?" Snafu asked, his heart in his throat.

Sledge shook his head slowly. "No, the most I would do is go back to visit." He was quiet for a moment, and Snafu turned back to dinner, relieved and disappointed all at once. "I did leave in the middle of the night, Mer," Sledge conceded. Every time Sledge used Snafu's real name, it sent a pleasant warmth down his spine. It was even better when he used the shortened version of it. It was familiar and intimate. Sledge only used it when they were alone.

"Does it matter what time you left?" Snafu asked, with surprising venom in his voice. "All they care about is that their baby boy is back, safe from the war."

"They care about me, Snaf, I can't help that," after a moment of tense silence, he said with a softer voice, "I was a mess before I came here. I'm surprised it took them this long to call on me,"

Snafu grunted in response. He was scared, he was too scared to even verbalize his fears. He was worried that Sledge was going to leave and go back to Mobile. He was scared Eugene had recognized him for the unloveable fuck-up he knew he was. Snafu was the most accurate name he had ever been called. Their dinner was spent in silence. Sledge was deep in thought and Snafu was deep in self-loathing.

The next night, Snafu was woken by Sledge scrambling, moaning, on the verge of tears. It became clear that Sledge was more panicked than afraid. "Eugene, I'm here," Snafu said, grabbing Sledge's forearms.

"You're gonna leave, you're gonna leave," Sledge said in too-fast breaths.

Snafu felt ice stab at his heart. He wasn't sure if Sledge was remembering the train or not, but he hoped he wasn't. Snafu prayed that he hadn't fucked up Sledge bad enough that he had nightmares about Snafu leaving. "Eugene, I'm here, Sledgehammer, you're going to be okay, I'm here, Sledge, I'm not going to leave you," That seemed to calm Sledge a little so Snafu repeated it again and again, a mantra that solidified in his heart until he was sure of it, more sure than he had been of anything. "I'm not going to leave you ever again, Eugene."

Afterwards, when the tremors had died down and Sledge lay, silent, he asked quietly, "Why did you leave?"

Perhaps it was the absinthe-green light that filtered into the room from the bar across the street that made everything look a little surreal. Perhaps it was the fact that Snafu had gotten fed up with feeling guilty and doing nothing about it, but that night he decided to explain, at least a little. "Sledgehammer," Snafu began, running a hand through Sledge's red hair, "you really shouldn't ask things like that."

Sledge closed his eyes, assuming defeat.

"I left because..." Snafu paused to gather his words. Sledge opened his eyes again, bright with curiosity. The green light made his eyes look dark yellow. "I left you when the war was over because I didn't deserve you," he looked Sledge in the eye and Sledge was still, perfectly still.

Snafu felt his eyes begin to prickle. "I left you because, Eugene, have you seen yourself? You were too bright, you had too many possibilities. I didn't want to tie you down to New Orleans, I didn't want to invite myself into your home, I knew that there was more for you." He felt his eyes begin to water as he stared at the ceiling and felt the long-held guilt unwind in his chest, letting him breathe easier and easier.

"I'm a fuck-up, Eugene, and you deserve a pretty young lady who will give you five children and cook your food and impress your parents. I can cook your food, but I can't do the other two," a laugh bubbled out of his chest and he sniffed, wiping a tear off of his face. He didn't dare turn to look at Sledge. He was afraid that if he did, he would look and find disgust, horror, fear. He was afraid that he would be thrown out by the person he loved most in the world.

Instead, Sledge reached over and put his hand on Snafu's cheek. "Hey," he said, softly. Snafu turned to look at him. Sledge had a soft look on his face, a look that radiated acceptance and trust. "Bullshit," he said, with a hint of ferocity. "You deserve me, you idiot." Snafu laughed, but he was glad that the Sledge that felt righteous about things was back. "Meriell, you are the best thing to happen to me, both during the war and after it. You saved my life so many times, and you're still saving it today. When I left Mobile? I was thinking some dark thoughts. Being with you helps that more than you know."

Snafu couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe that he had helped Sledge after the war in the slightest. He laughed and Sledge reached out and wiped a tear off of Snafu's cheek.

"You meant that, right?"

"Meant what?" Snafu asked.

"When you said you wouldn't leave me again," Sledge said, a hint of timidity creeping into his voice.

"As long as you want me, you have me," Snafu said, pressing his palms to Sledge's chest.

"The only place I want to be is by your side, Snaf." Sledge said, lacing his fingers with Snafu's. Snafu smiled, feeling light as a feather. Under the green light and a sense of security, Snafu leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Sledge's eyebrow. When he pulled back, Sledge's eyes were closed and his eyelashes fanned out against his cheekbones. Snafu suddenly remembered that Sledge had stayed a virgin through the war. The thought sent a thrill down his spine and into the depths of his stomach. They finally decided to go to sleep, because Sledge had class at eight am and Snafu had work at seven. In the morning, they didn't talk about what had been shared the night before, but they did sit closer together, and Snafu was prepared to settle for whatever he could get.

"I want to go visit Mobile," Sledge said, one Sunday evening. Snafu paused, put down his newspaper, and looked at Eugene.

"Okay," he said slowly. "When were you thinking?"

Sledge shrugged. "Next week? When can you get some time off?"

Snafu thought for a moment. "I have five days built up, we can leave this Friday and then stay over the weekend and into the week." Snafu was surprised that Sledge wanted to bring Snafu with him. He suspected he wouldn't fit in with the rich in Mobile. Sledge, however, was opening his home to Snafu. Snafu was never one to turn a good offer down.

Sledge sent Snafu a bright smile over the dinner table, and that made everything worth it.

Stepping onto a train with Sledge sent a wave of unpleasant nostalgia through Snafu's body. Leaving Sledge on the train was one of the hardest things he ever did. He suspected that it wasn't pleasant for Snafu either. They sat across from each other and their knees brushed underneath the table. Sledge looked beautiful with the Louisiana sunlight hitting his cheekbones and his eyes and his hair.

Sidney Phillips picked them up at the train station. He clapped Sledge on the shoulder and commented on how much better Sledge looked than when Sid had last seen him. Sid eyed Snafu suspiciously, but when introducing them, Sledge mentioned that Snafu was the reason Sledge lived through the war, and Sid's features softened. He smiled and glanced between them. Sidney had a warm way about him. Snafu rode in the back of his car, Sledge up front. Sidney's wife was pregnant, he said. She was expecting in four months or so. Sledge promised to visit again as soon as the baby was born.

Snafu stayed quiet. He was amazed when they pulled into Sledge's driveway. The fact that Sledge's family even had a long driveway of carefully pruned bushes and trees made Snafu vaguely sick to his stomach. He came from a family that lived in a house that didn't have a single right angle. Everything was slanted, but the house was warm. Looking up at the pristine white house on the hill, Snafu felt the dirt of the war creep back in. He suddenly felt like he had mud in his hair, he had splinters in his fingers and dried blood on his hands.

Sid let them out right in front of the house, before bidding his farewells and driving off. Sledge glanced at Snafu, took a deep breath, and ascended the stairs. Someone must have seen them coming, because before Sledge could even raise a fist to knock on the door, it flew open and Sledge's mother was embracing her son. There were tears in her eyes. Sledge introduced Snafu as

the one who kept him alive to his mother, and that did the trick for her. She ushered them in and immediately sat down at the table with them. Sledge's father wandered in some time later, he gave Snafu an understanding look when Snafu mentioned that the war wasn't a walk in the park. They were served dinner by the Sledge family's two servants, and Snafu had never felt so guilty to be born into a poorer family. Snafu realized that this is what Sledge grew up with, the servants and the big white house and the carefully maintained grounds.

After dinner, Snafu was put in a guest room just across the hall from Sledge's room. It felt odd to be away from Sledge, even for just a little while. Snafu opened the window and breathed in the cool air. Here, the only sounds were of crickets and cicadas and the wind in the trees. It was nothing like the constant debauchery at the nightclub. The only lights were that of the lights on the driveway, there were no neon lights to permeate Snafu's temporary room.

Snafu sat in the open windowsill and smoked a cigarette, watching the smoke trail away into the night. He tried to sleep, but being in a bed, and a soft bed at that, after weeks of sleeping on the floor with Sledge felt strange. Being away from Sledge felt stranger. Snafu missed the warmth of Sledge beside him, he missed hearing another person breathing beside him. After almost an hour of tossing and turning, Snafu decided he had had enough. He quietly padded to the door and opened it slowly. He stepped into the dark hallway. Sledge was just outside of his own door.

"Eugene?" Snafu asked, confused.

"Couldn't sleep, I was coming to be with you." Sledge whispered. Snafu smiled at the humor of the situation.

"I was coming to your room," he confessed.

Sledge grinned and pulled Snafu into his bedroom. They settled into Sledge's bed, and Snafu smiled as he breathed in Sledge's scent on his sheets. He turned to find Sledge already looking at him. "Thank you for coming here with me, Mer." Sledge said quietly. "It makes being back easier to deal with."

Snafu pressed closer underneath the covers. That was the only response that Sledge needed. Both were asleep soon after.

After a week of being at Sledge's house, of sleeping in Sledge's bed, something shifted for Snafu. Suddenly, he wanted to lean over and kiss Eugene on the lips when Eugene did something endearing. He wanted to run his hands over Sledge's pale body, he wanted to claim every inch with his mouth. Sledge must have noticed the shift in Snafu's behavior, how his passing brushes became longer, hungrier.

Just as Sledge had never shied away from anything Snafu did or said, Sledge only made those brushes of contact even longer. He sent Snafu long looks full of heat when no one else was looking. At night, when they shared Sledge's bed, he pressed his palms to Snafu's exposed chest. It all made Snafu's heart race in a way that had never really happened before to him.

One hot day, they sat on the back porch, eating ice cream. It was melting in the heat and Snafu looked at Sledge right as he licked a long drip of ice cream off of the cone, and that was all it took, before Snafu was surging across the porch to take Sledge's face in his hands, to press their mouths together in a clumsy, off-center kiss. Sledge knotted his fingers in Snafu's hair, he moaned into Snafu's mouth. Snafu had never been more aroused. When they pulled away, Sledge's lips were red and full and his pupils were wide. Very few words were exchanged between them as they snuck

up the stairs and into Sledge's room.

Eventually, their time was up at with Sledge's parents. Eugene calmly explained to them that he and Snafu were going back to New Orleans, and that Sledge would be staying there permanently. When they left, Sledge brought things from his home back to their apartment. On their first night back, Sledge and Snafu finally moved from the floor to Snafu's bed, where the white sheets looked green and purple and blue from the lights of the club across the street.

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