The first time I met Louisiana, I was in my twenties. I had been living with my parents in Meridian Station, Mississippi since my first year of high school, when they had bought a house and some acreage from my uncle's estate. The town was small, but close enough to Meridian that there were always people passing through, stopping off the highway on their way to Jackson or Birmingham. We didn’t have much to offer them, a few cafes, a movie theatre and a couple of bed and breakfasts. I had gone to the university in Meridian on Mondays and Wednesdays for a degree in Agribusiness to satisfy my father’s command that I “do something to help work the land he had labored so hard to buy.” In the evenings though, my uncle had given me a job at the police station working the front desk, and doing semi-traffic-cop kind of stuff. In the first few months I had seen it all; robberies, domestic violence, brush fires, even crazy old men chasing their kids with a shotgun. I think some days the heat just plain drove people nuts.

It was the Friday before Labor Day and I had just gotten to work when my uncle came swaggering up the steps with his hands to his hips, laughing and hollering with the deputy beside him. When they came in I could see it had been another one of those days. Maybe some hardheaded S.O.B’s wife had gone AWOL again.

“Hey, you’re not working ‘till next Tuesday son, get on outta here.” He said, still hooting.

“What do you mean? I just got here?”

“What do I mean? Son, it’s the Labor Day Holiday. Don’t you know that? I’m sure your ol’ man is gonna be pleased to have your help out in them fields this weekend. I’ll see ya back here on Tuesday.”

The man didn’t have to tell me twice; I was already half-way out the door when he called back to me.

Why don’t you drive by Sonny Park on your way home and have yourself a laugh too boy. Or a date?”
The two burst into their sinister laughter again as I let the doors close behind me.

I didn't want to spend my weekend at home, so I sat parked out front of the station, thinking hard of a reason to give my father, so I could spend the time at school in the city. But it was a school holiday and he'd never have believed something like that.

On my way home, as I passed the park, I almost forgot to look over at what uncle Wren and his deputy had been talking about. When I did, I didn't notice anything and I wondered what had been there before. I circled around the final turn and noticed a woman seated on the curb. After I passed her, I pulled over and shut the car off. I could see her in the mirror. She was wearing a red dress and wiping at her face while clenching an armful of clothing. Walking closer I could see that the fabrics were feathery and jeweled, silver, green, and gold. Her knobby legs were bruised, dirty, and her shins were badly scraped. The way she had them clamped at the knee, bent off sideways to conceal herself under her skirt, made her look like some kind of ostrich-legged bird that had struggled to get up, but couldn't. I offered to help and she glared up at me, her face smeared with make-up that had run way down into her cleavage.

"Thanks, but no thanks officer, I've had enough harassment okay."

"I'm sorry about the sheriff ma'am, he's a bit of a stickler with folks from out of town, but he's really not half bad."

"He's the Sheriff? Jesus! Not half bad? That man's a bigot! Look, either arrest me or leave me alone, so I can catch a ride out of this hell hole."

After she spoke, I suddenly wanted to plop down on the curb beside her and wait to catch her ride out of town rather than face the weekend ahead. I was desperate to go anywhere but home.

"Oh, do you want a ride? I can drive you anyplace you need to go."

She looked up again, this time in a half twisted expression of laughter and madness.

"I said get the hell away from me!"

With that, her tone had deepened so much that I was startled backward realizing that she was a he and that now he was angry and sobbing. I stared hard at her figure, the man's voice echoing in my head. He was wearing the biggest high heel shoes I'd ever seen, a red wig, and had shaved every hair off of his body. I hadn't noticed until
now. I walked close again and sat down on the curb.

“You’re exactly right,” I said, “this place is a god damned hell-hole and even if it’s just to Jackson, please, let me drive you.”

I began to gather the articles of clothing that were sprawled out around us and I retrieved both pieces of a pink trunk that had been cracked open on the ball court.

“Thank you,” she said, wiping her face with a sequined cloth, “I don’t know why you are doing this, but if you try anything...”

“I won’t. I swear. Just tell me where we’re going.”

So we drove until ten and agreed to split the cost of a room for the night just outside of New Orleans. She said her name was Louise, but had for several years gone by the stage name “Louisiana Duchess”. Her parents had taken her to the French Quarter ten years before where she had, for the first time ever, seen a man in drag. As I drove, she talked incessantly about her “old life”; her friends and family, the apartment she had just moved out of in New York, the Southern Decadence festival she was to star in that Sunday in New Orleans, and the man she’d caught a ride with in Saint Louis, who had then thrown her out in Meridian Station. She hardly paused to breathe when she talked, and every once in a while, she’d come up for air to let out a roaring laugh at some funny thing she’d said, and I would hear the he in her voice.

I was born in Kansas City, and had lived there until we moved to Mississippi. I’d really never been anywhere, but Louisiana had been everywhere, done everything. I hung on her every word, and at times found myself laughing and reminiscing with her in memories that hadn’t even belonged to me. When I parked the car at the motel, I couldn’t believe we’d driven all the way out of state and into New Orleans.

We had gotten a smoking room with double beds and practically run over one another to get the AC on when we got inside. It had been one of the hottest Septembers in years, over 100 degrees that day.

“I just realized I don’t have any clothes with me, just this uniform.” I said.

“I’ve got plenty of clothes in my trunk, wear anything you like.”

I laughed mockingly at the pink trunk we had just heaved into the room before catching her eyes in the mirror and suddenly feeling ashamed.

“I think I am good.”

“Suit yourself. I’m going to use the shower.”
She scooped up a handful of things from the trunk and disappeared into the bathroom. I turned on the T.V. and watched, half-distracted by the noise of the shower. I thought about her cleavage and how I had seen her mascara all smeared up on her neck and chest. She'd had breasts hadn't she? Did she have a penis? Every face I had ever seen flickered though my mind as I tried to guess what was underneath her wig and make up. The TV screen suddenly caught my eye and I scrambled at my sides for the volume controller.

“Ence FESTIVAL! Come see the queen of all queens: Luuuiiissiiiaannnnaa Dduuuuccchhheesss perform on stage Sunday night!”

“Oh my God! You’re on TV! Holy Shit, you ARE pretty famous!” The bathroom door swung open and I froze mid-laughter.

“What are you yelling about?” The voice was deep and I was staring dead into the face of wet-haired man, only slightly older than me, but much better looking, with a tan, and short dark hair.

“Jesus! This is really starting to freak me out. So... you are... a... a dude right?”

“Wow man, you’re slower than most.” He threw back.

“I’m sorry it’s just that...”

“It’s just that I was a woman before? Listen. Don’t trouble yourself too much about it okay. I’ll be out of here in the morning.”

He smacked the light switch and crossed the room to his bed. I was silent for a long time, unsure if I had offended him.

“I saw the commercial just then, when you were in the shower. That’s why I was yelling. I just didn’t expect to see you on the television. And...I already knew from all the things you’d said on the ride here. I was just a little shocked to see you dressed like guy, I really would like to go to your show tomorrow.”

“I am a guy, stupid.” He laughed from across the room and, still in my uniform under my blankets, I had thought of only one thing to say:

“Then, can I have one of those guy shirts you’re wearing? This uniform is not much for sleeping.”

The next morning we drove as far as we could into the crowded streets outside of the old French Quarter. We parked the car on Tchoupitoulas Street and carried the trunk from there. I had never been in a crowd of so many different people, and after several drinks, I was cheering and dancing in the audience. Louisiana Duchess was
stunning. She was funny and admirable, and every time the crowd cheered her name, so did I. When the sun went down I was exhausted and heavy, with a headache from the alcohol and heat. I walked back to the car alone after she had not shown up again after the show. I went back to motel room and sat up most of the night thinking about Louisiana, the drive and the festival. I had imagined the image of that man standing in doorway and wished that she had wanted to become friends after the show, but she didn't come back that night and I slept again in the NY Yankees shirt he had given me.

At around seven, I opened the door to Louisiana Duchess dancing outside singing, still fully high-heeled and head dressed. He was more beautiful and confident than most real women I'd ever seen and talked to me now in a deep voice.

“I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye; my friends are waiting in that car over there. We're headed to Seattle this afternoon. Hey, you wanna come with us?”

Of course I had wanted to, but I just couldn't bring myself to go. I hadn't even told anyone at home that I had left and I was bound to my family there. As we said goodbye she hugged me and he shook my hand too. I wanted so badly to continue down the road in that opposite direction from home. I wanted to see another crowd and another festival. I wanted hear more of Louisiana's batty stories and her cackling laughter, but I never would again. On Tuesday, I never reported to work at the station. My uncle and the Deputy had done something serious to hurt Louisiana in the park that day, and even though she hadn't told me what, I knew he was a no-good man, as she'd said he was.

When I turned twenty-four I drove the same car all the way to Seattle to live. And I did for twenty-three years, until my children had gone to college and my wife and I moved into a house on the coast of the Florida Keys. I had never actually told her about the trip with Louisiana, but when I mentioned it last Labor Day, before driving her to the annual festival in New Orleans, she responded with something about praying that it was not the start of a midlife crisis.

That Sunday she and I paddled through the crowds of Chers, Madonnas, Elizabeth Taylors and Marilyn Monroes. Now there were news crews and gift shops, photo booths and vendors lined up on the sidewalks. It was a circus of tourists and drag queens. I had had a few drinks, but my adrenaline was pumping with so much anticipation
of seeing Louisiana again it kept me sober this time. We watched the
show but couldn’t nearly get close enough for a good view. My wife
and I waited around long after it was over until she finally appeared
wobbling down the ramp behind the stage set.
“Louisiana!” I called out startling my wife.
“Wait here, I see her, I’ll be right back.”
The Duchess hadn’t heard me and I ran as fast as I could to catch
up with her. When she turned around I was struck dumb.
It wasn’t her.
“Hi Honey, you want me to sign something for you?” She was a
Latino man and not Louisiana Duchess.
“What’s the matter Honey?”
“Hi... Sorry, it’s just that... Well, what happened to the real
Louisiana Duchess? The woman I met here twenty years ago? I guess
she’d be about my same age.”
“Honey, we’re ALL Louisiana Duchesses! She was queen of
the crop a hundred years ago. There’s not a queen here who hasn’t
impersonated her. Sorry Honey, there’s no tellin’ who you met back
then.”
And I was crushed.
I didn’t know why I hadn’t ever thought about it before. Of course
it wasn’t his real name he was a drag queen.
On the drive back home, I barely spoke to my wife. I couldn’t
explain to her that the only reason we had ever met, the only reason we
had traveled to so many places and done so many exciting things over
the years was because of a man dressed in drag that I drove to New
Orleans with, all those years ago. She wouldn’t understand what had
happened to me.
“So, what did she say?” My wife finally asked.
I could tell her the only true thing that Louisiana had ever told
me.
“He said that he had once been a guy like me, but that Louisiana
had changed his life forever.”
“I don’t understand,” she said. “I thought you said before that he
was she?”
“Well... he is.”