

THING OF DARKNESS

John Royan

NOTE TO THE READER:

The script is based on a true serial killer and, as such, it depicts a number of extremely violent crimes. The author has tried to remain true to the facts while while also maintaining a respect for the victims. Some readers may find these accounts disturbing.

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OVER BLACK

CASSIE (V.O.)

You won't believe this, but it's true. It was in all the papers. You can look it up if you like, the more than fifty people murdered with an axe in Louisiana in 1911, the dozens more killed a year later throughout the state... and the most infamous case of all, the murders in New Orleans in 1918 and the "*Night of the Axeman's Jazz*". It's all documented, all true. But of course not everything that happened made it into the papers. Some of it was just too hard to believe, I suppose, but still true. I know, I was there. Not from the very beginning, whenever that was, but long before the end, if there truly was an end.

FADE IN:

A rundown house on poverty row.

TITLE:

Mermentau, Louisiana 17 October, 1911

TWO LITTLE GIRLS and a BOY, all under ten, play in their yard, their older sister keeping an eye on them.

CASSANDRA "CASSIE" LACROIX (13) is a burgeoning beauty with caramel skin and wavy black hair. She sits on an old swing hung from a tree, spinning lazily side to side, ruminating on her future and a hazy red sun in the distance.

Suddenly Cassie stops swinging and looks toward the porch of her house. Turns back to her siblings.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

All right ya all, time to go in.
C'mon now, Mama wants us.

The little kids stop playing and migrate toward their sister.

A moment later "Mama", MARIE LACROIX, a pretty black woman in her thirties, comes out onto the porch wearing an apron.

MARIE

Cassie! C'mon, girl, get your brothers and sisters in here and help me get supper on the table.

INT. CASSIE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT

Cassie eats dinner with her family. Marie and CHARLES LACROIX, her white father, seated at one end of the table.

There is LAUGHTER and CROSS-TALK. A poor but happy family convening over the one square meal of the day.

MOMENTS LATER

Marie comes out of the kitchen into a darkened dining area carrying a birthday cake covered with FORTY candles.

Charles blows out the candles and the children clap and CHEER.

Marie hands Charles a small present. He shakes it and holds it up to the kids.

CHARLES

So what is it, a new rake?

The kids LAUGH and Charles opens the present: a pewter flask.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Oh, now that's perfect. It's just what I need: a little somethin' to keep me warm on those cold winter nights.

13-YEAR-OLD CASSIE

Read it, Papa, read it! Mama had it inscribed.

Charles reads the inscription.

CHARLES

"For Medicinal Purposes - To the Finest Man in my Life".

Charles leans over and kisses Marie.

13-year-old Cassie smiling, savoring the love between them.

INT. BEDROOM - CASSIE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - LATER

Cassie tucks her younger brother, BOBBY, in bed. The little guy looks up at her mischievously, his mouth closed tight.

CASSIE

What's that, Bobby, hmm? What you got in there? C'mon, open up.

The little boy smiles proudly and reveals a missing tooth.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
 Ah, look at that. That stubborn
 little tooth finally came out, didn't
 he. But where'd he go, huh?

She tickles Bobby.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
 C'mon, where's he hiding?

Bobby LAUGHS, pulls his hand out from under the covers and
 shows Cassie the tooth.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
 Okay now, let's do like I told you.
 We'll put it under your pillow and
 the tooth fairy will come. All right?

Bobby nods and Cassie puts the tooth under the pillow.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
 Make sure you go to sleep now. That
 old tooth fairy's really shy and she
 won't come if you stay awake.

Cassie looks around at the other two children, one of her
 little sisters watching her.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
 You too, Miss Nosey, go to sleep.

The little girl turns over.

Cassie stands and looks down lovingly at her baby brother
 and sisters. Turns down a bedside lamp and leaves.

CUT TO:

A MOONRISE

And a night breeze rustling through the trees.

The old swing swaying back and forth as if ridden by a ghost.

Cassie comes out the back door of the pitch dark HOME wrapped
 in a shawl and enters an OUTHOUSE.

CLOSE ON: A WOOD PILE

At the side of the home. An axe on top of it.

A TALL SHADOWY FIGURE enters frame and picks up the axe.

Carries it through the back door INTO THE HOME.

Bumps an apple cart that falls to the floor.

CHARLES LACROIX

Wakes up in bed. Rises onto an elbow and listens.

CHARLES

You hear that?

Marie groans and turns over, mutters sleepily.

MARIE

It's the wind, Charles.

Charles thinks. Leaves the bed.

Turns into the hall.

MARIE

Lies there with her eyes closed. An abrupt THUMP, THUMP comes from the hall. Marie stirs, concerned. She gets out of bed and goes to look for her husband.

Turns into the hall when WHOOSH!... the silvery blur of an axe caught in the moonlight whirls through the air and lands with a sickening THUD!

INT./EXT. OUTHOUSE - NIGHT

Cassie stands and leaves.

She approaches the house, the back door BANGING.

Cassie enters the HOME. Closes the back door curiously then turns and stumbles against the apple cart. She puts it back in place and listens. Wary.

Cassie walks through the blue darkness inside the house. Comes upon a dark mound obstructing the hall.

Moves closer and sees her mother and father lying in a pool of blood.

Cassie SHRIEKS and rebounds into the wall. Slips and falls in the blood.

She pulls herself to her feet in a panic, her bloody hands slipping on the wall.

Cassie staggers out of sight into the kid's room and lets out a gut-wrenching WAIL.

CASSIE (O.S.)

NOOOOOO!

OPENING CREDITS

FADE IN:

A BLACK ROOSTER PAINTED ON A SIGN

Outside a French Quarter bar.

INT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

A real dive, more cave than bar, where JUSTIFY JONES, a tall black bartender, plays checkers with METHUSELAH. A WORKING GIRL a stool away rubbing her feet, her highball and high heels on the bar before her.

CASSIE LACROIX (20)

Sits in a booth in the darkest corner of the bar slumped up against the shoulder of a handsome BLACK SAILOR.

Cassie sips a glass of bourbon. Misplaces the glass and spills ice on the table. She ponders the ice. Flicks it off the table with the tip of her finger.

CASSIE

Give me a cigarette.

Black Sailor lights a cigarette and puts it in Cassie's mouth.

BLACK SAILOR

Yeah, my mama didn't raise no fool.
I'll put my time in with Uncle Sam
and get me a pension. That's what
I'll do. Then I'll get my own boat.

Cassie listens at the edge of her attention, taking in the working girl at the bar still rubbing her feet.

CASSIE

(thinks out loud)

I bet she walks ten miles a day.

Cassie sits up and takes a pewter flask from her purse. Fills it with what's left of a bottle of bourbon.

BLACK SAILOR

Hey, baby, what do you say we blow
this joint? Go back to my room. I
don't ship out till midnight.

Cassie puts away the flask and weighs the offer. Decides.

CASSIE

Why don't you take her? She looks like she could use a break... and the cash.

(flashes a glance at
Black Sailor)

And don't tell me you never pay for it. After that sad performance last night, baby, you need lessons.

BLACK SAILOR

Hey, what's that supposed to mean?

Cassie shoulders her purse and slips out of the booth.

CASSIE

It means, lover, this party's over. I'm blowing this joint, just not with you.

She takes a drag and blows a veil of blue smoke at Black Sailor. Walks out.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(as she goes, to
Working Girl)

He's all yours, hon. His name's Lamar, but I call him Speedy. Charge him by the hour and you won't make a dime.

EXT. BOURBON STREET - DAY

Cassie walks under the porticos on the world famous street past other French Quarter bars pumping out JAZZ.

A group of SAILORS on a balcony across the street CAT-CALL at Cassie who ignores them and boards a

STREETCAR

Cassie drops into the nearest seat and lays her head against the window, bone-tired.

She gazes out the window with idle, lusterless eyes at all the color and seediness of the Big Easy in 1918:

WWI RATIONING and RECRUITMENT banners festooning the stores.

Quaint Creole Cottages with stained and decaying masonry.

The omnipresent signs of Jim Crow up and down the street: "Whites Only", "No Dogs, Negroes, Mexicans", "Colored Served In Rear", etc.

Soldiers and sailors, both black and white, cruising in packs by the bars, hellbent on a good time or the trouble it brings.

Flatfoot cops. Hustlers and shoeshine boys. Street musicians and working girls.

A DAPPER WHITE MAN in a polished roadster pulls up alongside the streetcar. Looks up at Cassie and smiles.

Cassie looks down at him with a blank expression. Casually raises her hand and flips him off.

EXT. TOULOUSE STREET - TWILIGHT

Cassie approaches an old Creole Townhouse, heavily-shadowed in the light of a dying day.

INT. CASSIE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - SAME

She pads through a dingy lobby where her FAT WHITE LANDLORD lies on a couch behind a counter reading a paper.

FAT LANDLORD

Well, look who finally decided to come home, the Oreo. Where the hell have you been?

CASSIE

Out feeding the kitty, tubs, as if it's any of your business.

FAT LANDLORD

Hey, I want my rent!

Cassie pauses at the bottom of the stairs.

CASSIE

You fix the hot water?

FAT LANDLORD

I'll get around to it.

CASSIE

(start up the stairs)
Yeah, right. And I'll get around to rent... one of these days.

INT. CASSIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cassie enters her dark coop-like home.

Pulls the flask from her purse and takes a swig of the bourbon. Sets the flask and her purse on a nightstand.

An inscription on the flask reads: "*For Medicinal Purposes - To the Finest Man in my Life*"

Cassie slips out of her clothes and gets into bed.

LATER - A MELANCHOLY LIGHT FILTERS

Through Venetian blinds laying a soft glow on Cassie half in and out of the sheets, her nude shadow-draped body and soft black curls the envy of Aphrodite.

LATER STILL

Cassie sits up in bed and turns on a light. Listens to JAZZ MUSIC coming from outside.

She goes to a window and peeks through the blinds. SEES...

A BAR ACROSS THE STREET

People drinking and dancing.

CASSIE

Observes them for a time. Turns away and goes back to bed.

INT. NEWSROOM - NEW ORLEANS TRIBUNE - DAY

The newsroom of the first Black-owned daily newspaper in the country. It's like any other newsroom, the way a backwoods airfield is like any other airport, only less so.

Cassie, dressed in a long skirt and white blouse, walks in the front door. Threads her way through a HALF-DOZEN BLACK MEN and WOMEN working at their desks.

One by one they take notice of Cassie, watching her walk to a doorless small office on the side of the room.

HELEN, an elderly black woman, stops Cassie as she walks by.

HELEN

Hey, Cass... How are things? We missed you.

Helen gives Cassie a look, more than a meeting of eyes. Helen indicates with a glance a co-worker at another desk.

HELEN (CONT'D)

Earl and I came by your place... We was lookin' for ya.

Cassie's gaze goes from EARL to a glass-enclosed OFFICE across the newsroom where editor ROY JENKINS (40s) sits talking on the phone.

He sees Cassie. Stares coldly then turns away.

Cassie bypasses Helen and goes into her office.

Finds a YOUNG BLACK MAN seated at her desk. A box on a sideboard filled with Cassie's things.

CASSIE

Who are you? What are you doing at my desk?

Helen has followed Cassie in.

HELEN

Cass, this is Andy...
(voice faltering)
He's new.

Cassie takes it all in then makes a beeline for the EDITOR'S OFFICE where she opens the door and slams it behind her.

Roy, still on the phone, swivels in his chair and looks up at Cassie who just stands there fuming.

ROY

Let me call you back.

He hangs up.

CASSIE

I don't deserve this. You back-stabbing sonofabitch, after all I've done for you and this paper. How could you?

Roy just looks at Cassie without batting an eye.

ROY

Sit down, Cass. Go on, take a seat.

Cassie glares, breathes, calms down a little then takes a seat across from Roy.

ROY (CONT'D)

So where've you been?

CASSIE

You know where I've been, same place I always go, doing the same things I always do.

ROY

Better now?

Cassie has no retort, 'cause they both know that ain't true.

CASSIE

What do you want from me?

ROY

I don't want anything, never have,
except maybe a little accountability.

CASSIE

We've been over this, Roy. I may
have my faults, but I'm a hard worker
and you know it. It's just now and
then I need a little time to myself.
You know, to work things out. I
thought you understood.

ROY

I understand. But it's not now and
then, and it's not a little time
either. And I've given you a lot of
leeway, probably too much. So here...

He takes an envelope from a drawer and tosses it on the desk.

ROY (CONT'D)

take all the time you need.

Cassie looks bitterly at Roy then takes the envelope and
flips through the cash inside.

ROY (CONT'D)

That squares us.

CASSIE

Hardly.

Cassie exchanges a last meaningful look with Roy then heads
for the door.

ROY

Hey, Cass.

Cassie stops in the doorway and turns.

ROY (CONT'D)

For what it's worth I think you're a
helluva reporter.

CASSIE

For what it's worth, I don't give a
damn what you think, you or anyone else.

Cassie leaves.

CUT TO:

A DARK AMBER LIQUID

Poured over ice, for Cassie, sitting at the bar in the BLACK ROOSTER, taking solace in her favorite bourbon.

START MONTAGE OF CASSIE ON ANOTHER BENDER

- a.) Drinking alone with Justify, the bartender.
- b.) With other PATRONS as the establishment fills.
- c.) A handsome LATIN MAN lays cash on the bar, buys a round for Cassie. Clinks glasses and toasts.
- d.) Cassie and LATIN MAN walk arm-in-arm down a sidewalk into a DANCE BAR.
- e.) Where sweaty JAZZ MUSICIANS play under halos of light.
- f.) Cassie dances. Drinks. Laughs. Lives it up like there's no tomorrow.
- g.) Deeper into the night Cassie and Latin Man slow dance. He fondles her ass. Kisses her.
- g.) A SAXOPHONIST plays a lilting, soulful tune beneath the conical throw of a dome light attached to a ceiling fan.

The flat wood blades of the fan turn in time with the music.

END MONTAGE ON A MATCH CUT TO:

A SIMILAR FAN

Above Cassie lying in a HOTEL ROOM staring up at the ceiling, her nude Latin lover lying beside her.

Cassie slips out of bed and wobbles into a BATHROOM.

Washes up at a rust-stained sink.

Stares into a mirror with bloodshot eyes, a woman weighed down by fatigue and self-loathing looking back at her.

Cassie shuts her eyes and we CUT TO BLACK.

After a long silence we hear a WOMAN WEeping.

FADE IN ON:

MRS. CYNTHIA ELLIS (40s) a black charwoman hunched over on a bench out in front of a neighborhood GROCERY STORE, a bag of cleaning supplies at her feet.

Up the street a HEFTY uniformed POLICEMAN greets DETECTIVE PAUL HAWLEY (30s) exiting a 1915 Chevy 490 police car.

The Hefty Policeman ushers Paul from the black sedan over to Mrs. Ellis.

HEFTY POLICEMAN
(huffing and puffing)
This is the woman who called it in...
She's the one who found them.

Mrs. Ellis looks up at the stolid, handsome detective with tears streaming down her cheeks.

PAUL
(noting her cleaning
supplies)
You work here?

MRS. ELLIS
Yes, sir. I comes here every day
except Sunday to help Mrs. Maggio.
I always open the store while they
sleep in.
(holds up a key)
But today, they didn't come out...
So I went into the house to check on
em.
(breaks down and sobs)
Who could do such a thing.

Paul and the Hefty Policeman exchange helpless looks.

INT. MAGGIO'S GROCERY AND HOME - DAY

Paul walks down a narrow aisle lined with canned goods to a rear door that leads into the home.

Moves through a parlor into a dim hallway.

At the far end is a back door to the home with a LOWER PANEL REMOVED spilling light onto the hardwood floor.

Paul stops and stares at the murderer's entry point: the small square opening below the lock and the removed panel set carefully against the wall.

PLOP! PLOP! PLOP!

Blood drips from a hand hanging off a bed.

Detective Hawley in the doorway beyond it, viewing the bodies of JOSEPH (33) and CATHERINE MAGGIO (31) under the sheets.

Blood and brain matter splattered across the headboard.

Joseph's throat is cut and his head split in two at the ear.
Catherine face-down beside him with an axe stuck in her skull.

ON PAUL

His expressionless eyes.

EXT. TOULOUSE STREET - DAY

Cassie walks down the sidewalk toward her apartment building.

Climbs the front steps then stops. Feels something. She turns and looks up the street at a CROWD outside a store about a block away.

Cassie approaches the group of people gathered out front of

MAGGIO'S GROCERY STORE

Weaves her way toward a policeman guarding the crime scene. Opens a purse slung from her shoulder and shows her employment card, the ID of the times, to the policeman.

THE CARD READS

NEW ORLEANS TRIBUNE
Identification Certificate

Name: CASSANDRA MARIE LACROIX

Occupation: REPORTER

Age: 20 Sex: FEMALE

The card also shows Cassie's address, an editor's signature and the date it was issued.

The policeman lets Cassie through to Detective Hawley who stands under the store awning questioning Mrs. Ellis.

As Cassie approaches Paul hands Mrs. Ellis over to Hefty Policeman and walks off toward his police car up the street.

CASSIE
(hurrying after him)
Detective Hawley. Detective!

Paul stops and turns.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
What's going on? Has something
happened to the Maggios?

PAUL
You know these people?

CASSIE

Yeah, I shop here all the time. I live down the block. What's homicide doing here? Are they all right?

PAUL

No, they're not all right.

Paul walks on to his car.

CASSIE

(keeping pace)

What were they robbed? Do you have a suspect?

PAUL

I'll brief the press when I get back to the station. You can find out then.

CASSIE

Aw, come on, Detective, I'm first on the scene... and I know these people.

Paul walks into the street and opens his car door. Pauses and takes a good look at Cassie. Seems to like what he sees.

PAUL

It doesn't appear to be a robbery, and we have no suspects.

He gets in his car and Cassie hurries to the open window.

CASSIE

How were they killed? What was the murder weapon?

PAUL

An axe.

Paul starts the car and drives away and Cassie stares after him, stunned.

EXT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

Cassie crosses a street and enters her local watering hole.

INT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

Justify Jones is alone behind the bar cleaning a mirror. He turns when Cassie enters.

JUSTIFY

Cass. A little early isn't it?

CASSIE

For what?

Justify smiles and goes back to his cleaning.

JUSTIFY

If you want something to eat go next door. The cook called in sick again.

Cassie sits at the bar and fires up a cigarette.

CASSIE

That's 'cause he's been eating your food. Is your phone working?

JUSTIFY

Yeah, since I paid the bill.

Justify passes a candlestick phone behind the bar to Cassie then proceeds to set up a drink.

CASSIE

No, I just want to use your phone.

Cassie thinks about it.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

You know what, all right, go ahead, just one.

Justify grins wryly then pours the bourbon and goes back to cleaning the mirror.

Cassie dials a number.

INTERCUT between CASSIE in the bar and the TRIBUNE NEWSROOM.

RECEPTIONIST

New Orleans Tribune.

CASSIE

Hi, Gail. Let me talk to Roy.

RECEPTIONIST

Sure Cass, hold on a sec, he's not in his office.

The young RECEPTIONIST sets down the phone and walks over to Roy who is engaged with Helen at her desk.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)

Sir, I have Cassie Lacroix on the phone.

Roy gives Helen a chagrined look.

ROY
Put it through to my desk.

Roy goes to his glass enclosed office.

Cassie waits.

Roy picks up the phone.

CASSIE
Hi Roy, it's Cassie.

CLICK - the phone goes dead.

CASSIE

Sets the ear-piece back in place and stares at the phone.
Downs her drink.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
(to Justify)
Hey!

Justify turns and Cassie points at her empty glass.

EXT. BLACK ROOSTER - NIGHT

Cassie comes out of the bar with yet another HANDSOME MAN.

They walked down the street together, LAUGHING, weaving and stumbling, pretty well gone.

HANDSOME MAN
(slurred)
Hey, hold up, I gotta take a piss.

He turns into an alley and pees against the wall.

HANDSOME MAN (CONT'D)
You ever notice that once you start
pissin' you just can't stop. Huh?
Why is that?

He looks back at Cassie and sees an empty street.

FIND CASSIE

Riding a STREETCAR (#2).

Gazing out with glazed eyes at the passing streets. Worn thin by her destructive habits.

CASSIE

Walks up stairs and enters her APARTMENT. Shuts the door.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS TRIBUNE - DAY

A maroon 1916 Renault DM Tourer comes down the dusty unpaved street. Parks outside the Tribune's front door between a tarp-covered wagon and a donkey-drawn cart packed with fruit.

Roy Jenkins steps out carrying a briefcase.

He approaches the Tribune's front door fumbling with his keys. Looks up and stops in his tracks.

Cassie sits on a bench out front. She stands and stares. There is a moment here, finally...

ROY

If I didn't think you were going to come through with one helluva story, I wouldn't even consider this.

CASSIE

I won't let you down.

ROY

Don't let yourself down.

Something in Roy's eyes suggests he's more than on her side.

ROY (CONT'D)

Helen said you might've known the victims.

CASSIE

Yeah, I knew them. They were nice people.

ROY

Murdered with an axe.

Cassie and Roy exchange a meaningful look.

ROY (CONT'D)

You think there might be a connection?

CASSIE

Maybe. I don't know. But something doesn't feel right. I don't know how else to put it.

Roy comes up close to Cassie.

ROY

Just remember this isn't a crusade, no matter how personal it might feel to you. Treat it like any other story.

Cassie concurs with a nod.

ROY (CONT'D)

And keep an eye on your deadlines.

CASSIE

Count on it.

EXT. MAGGIO'S GROCERY STORE/HOME - DAY

Cassie walks down a narrow alley to the back entrance of the Maggio's home.

A sign posted on the back door reads:

KEEP OUT - RESTRICTED AREA - NEW ORLEANS POLICE

Cassie looks at the damaged back door.

FLASH CUT

To her own family's back door.

NOTE: Cut-ins of Cassie's memories are in BLACK AND WHITE.

CASSIE

Reaches up through the missing panel and unlocks the door.
Steps inside the

MAGGIO'S HOME

She walks slowly down the narrow hall, her shoes CLICKING
off the hardwood floor.

CUT TO Cassie's parents lying on the hallway floor.

CASSIE

Stops outside the Maggio's bedroom.

FLASH the entrance of the bedroom in her childhood home.

CASSIE

Steps into the scene of the crime.

QUICK SHOTS OF BOTH BEDROOMS:

Bloodstained mattresses, lamps and toys.

Pools of blood and splattered headboards.

The bloody arms and legs of Cassie's siblings.

Blood-matted hair. Gaping wounds.

CASSIE GASPS

And wheels from the room and puts her back to the wall, her hand over her mouth as she chokes back tears.

CUT TO:

AN OLD BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH

Of seven-year-old Cassie in her white First Communion dress holding hands with her three-year-old sister. Mama behind her with infant Bobby in her arms.

CASSIE

Sips a cup of coffee and stares at the framed photo set out on a desk in CASSIE'S APARTMENT.

She opens the desk drawer and takes out a scrapbook. Flips through it as she has her coffee and a smoke.

THE SCRAPBOOK

Is filled with newspaper clippings from the serial axe murders of 1911-1912. Dates and headlines read:

FEBRUARY 13 1911 - AXE-MURDERER KILLS 4 IN CROWLEY LOUISIANA

MARCH 22 1911 - ANDRES FAMILY MURDERED IN THEIR BEDS

MOTHER AND 3 CHILDREN VICTIMS OF AXE-MURDERER

2ND AXE MURDER IN LAFAYETTE!

FAMILY OF 8 MURDERED!

AXE KILLER STRIKES AGAIN IN CROWLEY!

LOUISIANA TERRORIZED BY SERIAL AXE MURDERS

WHO WILL BE NEXT IS THE QUESTION FOR LOUISIANANS.

DEATH TOLL HITS 49 IN AXE MURDER MYSTERY!

Zero in on a headline... 13 YR OLD GIRL SOLE SURVIVOR OF MERMENTAU AXE MURDERS.

Accompanying the article is a PHOTOGRAPH of Cassie's home with the old swing out front.

CASSIE

Stares at the photo, flooded with memories. Takes her pewter flask off a counter and gets her coffee up on its feet.

She pages through the articles - pausing on one:

High Priest of Voodoo Cult Questioned in Axe-Murders

Cassie scribbles on a note pad: *Napoleon Dufay, Sacrificial Church, Crowley.*

CUT TO:

A welcome sign in a one-horse RAILROAD DEPOT:

CROWLEY

Louisiana

"The Rice City of America"

CASSIE

The lone passenger to step off the TRAIN.

She crosses the street to a two-story HOTEL.

A car out front with a hand-painted sign on the door:

FOR HIRE BY HOUR OR TRIP

INT. CROWLEY TAXI - DAY

Cassie rides through the sparse little town of low red brick and wooden buildings, as many wagons as cars on the street.

FARTHER ON

The taxi travels a dirt road into a WOODS.

CASSIE

How far is the church?

A wiry white CAB DRIVER glances at Cassie.

CAB DRIVER

It ain't no church, ma'am. Never was.
It's an unholy place if you ask me.
Even now, with what's left of it.

CASSIE

Has it closed?

CAB DRIVER

See for yourself, ma'am. There it is.

Ahead of them is a BURNT OUT BUILDING in the shade of a huge oak tree draped with Spanish moss.

CASSIE
You might have told me it burnt down.

CAB DRIVER
You didn't ask.

The taxi stops outside the charred remains of the church.

CAB DRIVER (CONT'D)
What you wanna' come out here for anyway?

CASSIE
I'm a reporter for a newspaper.

CAB DRIVER
You? Get out.

CASSIE
Yeah, imagine that.

CAB DRIVER
No offense, ma'am. I just never
heard of such a thing.

CASSIE
What happened to the priest who ran
the church, he still around?

CAB DRIVER
Sheee, ma'am, he weren't no priest,
no kind of pastor neither if you ask
me. The folks around here tried to
get him to move on, but he wouldn't
budge. So God took a hand and burnt
down his church, so the story goes.

He flashes a row of tobacco-stained teeth at Cassie.

CASSIE
Do you know what happened to him?

CAB DRIVER
He lit out for New Orleans, last I
heard. Put a curse on us the day he
left. A blessing to see the back of
him, if you ask me.

Cassie looks at the charred stone altar still standing, a
black fallen beam lying across it like a sacrificed victim.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - NIGHT

A cat ferrets a dinner out of a garbage can. Tips it over
with a CLANG and scurries away.

AXEMAN'S POV:

Of the cat running off under the squares of light emanating from the back windows of a row of homes.

A TALL DARK FIGURE

Approaches a window. Spies a LITTLE BOY and GIRL at play. The children chasing one another out of the room.

THE AXEMAN

Follows them, moving along the side of the house. Catching glimpses of the kids and their parents through side windows.

INSIDE THE HOME

Their FATHER flips through a rack of records.

KID'S FATHER
You kids get out of here. Go play
in your room.

The tall dark figure passes by in the window behind him.

THE EYES OF THE AXEMAN

Scan a wood pile at the side of the home. The handle of an axe hidden under a tarp.

He picks up the axe. Fingers the blade.

Turns toward the house, its side-alley door.

He tries the handle. Opens the unlocked door!

Suddenly a JAZZ TUNE blares from the home: "*Livery Stable Blues*" by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

The Axeman shuts the door. Moves into the alley and listens.

CLOSE ON

The Victor record. The emblem of the dog looking into the gramophone spinning round and round...

As the LIVELY TUNE PLAYS we INTER-CUT SHOTS of the record spinning with the attack on...

HARRIET LOWE and LOUIS BESUMER

A middle-aged couple lying together in bed.

Harriet comes awake. Senses something.

Looks at Louis asleep beside her, the open window beyond him where a lace curtain rises and falls... rises and falls.

Harriet turns over in bed and looks into the deeper shadows of the room where a TOWERING FIGURE in a hat and coat suddenly balloons out of the dark. Axe raised. Face in shadow.

A terrified Harriet CRIES OUT! Her ABORTED SCREAM stifled by a sweep of the axe.

The blood-glistening blade wielded violently, hatefully, over and over again.

As the JAZZ TUNE PLAYS, winds down and ends.

The spinning record SUPERIMPOSED over the bedroom carnage.

Louis's head a pool of blood and mashed brains.

A piece of Harriet's scalp thrown across the pillow.

The Axeman reaches down and takes it.

Drops the axe and walks out.

HARRIET'S HAZY POV

Of the tall dark figure leaving the room.

Her lips mouthing a SOUNDLESS CRY, for she isn't dead.

THE CLICK-CLICK-CLICK

Of hard-soled shoes on tile takes us to

INT. CHARITY HOSPITAL - DAY

A stern-looking NUN wearing an enormous white cornette strides down the sterile hallway of one of the wards.

Detective Paul Hawley waiting for her at a NURSE'S STATION.

NUN

(arriving)

Detective. The doctor says you may speak with her now, but only briefly. Do you understand?

The Nun stares hard at Paul, sets the detective straight about who's in charge here, his badge be damned.

PAUL

(amused)

Of course, whatever you say.

The Nun squints critically then turns on her heels and marches down the hall, her absurd cornette flapping like a pet albatross perched on her head.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Harriet Lowe lies in bed with a bandage around her head.

The Nun leads Paul into the room. Goes over to Harriet and speaks in her ear then turns to Paul to proceed.

PAUL

Mrs. Lowe, I'm Detective Paul Hawley with the New Orleans Police. I'd like to ask you a few questions.

NUN

She knows this. I told you to be brief.

Paul bypasses the Nun and comes closer to Mrs. Lowe.

PAUL

Who did this to you?

HARRIET

(just above a whisper)
I don't know. A man.

PAUL

Can you recall anything about him, anything distinctive?

HARRIET

Tall. He was tall... and dark.

PAUL

Was he a Negro?

HARRIET

I don't know, could be. He was like a shadow.

PAUL

Did he speak, say anything?

Harriet stares at Paul and shakes her head "no". Then her attention wanders, her eyes disengage.

NUN

I think that's enough for now, Detective. She needs her rest.

Paul looks sympathetically at Harriet. Nods to the Nun and starts out of the room.

HARRIET
(softly)
He smelled.

PAUL
(turns back)
Excuse me, what was that?

HARRIET
The man, he smelled like lilacs.

CUT TO:

THE LOBBY

Where Paul gets ambushed by Cassie waiting for him by the front door of the hospital, smoking a cigarette.

PAUL
Miss Lacroix. How is it I knew you'd turn up.

CASSIE
Maybe you have second sight.

PAUL
What's that?

CASSIE
An ability some people have to sense certain things before they happen.

PAUL
I sense you have an ability to pester me. Does that count?

CASSIE
Is she going to live?

PAUL
Yeah, scarred and without a husband, but she'll live.

CASSIE
How about a description? What do you have to go on?

PAUL
He's tall, that's it.

CASSIE
So then it's a man, by himself?

PAUL
Looks that way.

CASSIE
Nothing else?

PAUL
(jesting)
Maybe he's an Indian.

Paul grins and walks off.

CASSIE
What makes you say that?

PAUL
(turns briefly)
He took part of her scalp. But I
better not see that in the papers.

Paul walks out and Cassie stares after him.

CUT TO:

A WHITE MARBLE SCULPTURE OF MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

Casting Lucifer out of Heaven, a figurehead atop a tomb in the city's ST. LOUIS CEMETERY.

CASSIE

Shielding her eyes from the SUN as she looks at it.

She moves on. Walks through the "City of the Dead" a sprawling cluster of vaults, mausoleums and parapet tombs.

She comes to a wrought iron fence at the edge of the cemetery.

Views an OLD CHURCH outside the back gate.

Cassie approaches the entrance, passing a sign that reads:

"SACRIFICIAL CHURCH OF NEW ORLEANS"

Cassie enters the old wooden building. Walks between the pews toward a colorful altar. Looking around at the

Peeling plaster walls and several paintings of Voodoo gods:

BONDEYE, the Creator. DAMBALLAH, the Serpent god. OGUN, the god of iron and rum and some other minor deities.

She halts before a lime green ALTAR adorned with candles and skulls, hats, charms and mock coffins with crosses in them.

Beside the altar is a frightful, erotic painting of the skull-faced BARON SAMEDI seducing a black maiden in a cane field.

Cassie stares at the picture. Senses something and turns to find NAPOLEON DUFAY standing in an open doorway at the side of the church with a broom in his hand.

Napoleon's about 30 and Creole like Cassie, tall and extremely handsome; a man who has a way with women and knows it.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Hello. Is there something I can do for you?

CASSIE

I was visiting the cemetery and saw your church. It's charming. I couldn't resist a closer look.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Now is that any way to greet a stranger, Miss Lacroix, with a lie? I read the Tribune and frequent Bourbon Street so I know who you are. Why don't we try this again. Now, is there something I can do for you?

CASSIE

I'm doing a story on the axe murders.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Oh, yes, the Italian grocer and his wife.

CASSIE

No. I'm more interested in the murders of 1911. In particular, the ones that occurred in Crowley.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Oh, I see. And you think there's a connection.

CASSIE

Could be.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Am I suspect?

CASSIE

You were back in Crowley.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

And now I am here and the murders have started again. Is that it?

CASSIE

Yeah, that's it.

Napoleon saunters out of the doorway over to Cassie.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Left me save you a lot of time and trouble, Miss Lacroix. I'm not the one you're looking for. I wasn't charged back then and I had nothing to do with what happened the other night.

CASSIE

Then perhaps it was another member of your church?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

I think I can say with absolute certainty that the one responsible for the murders in 1911 was not a member of my church.

CASSIE

And the Maggio murders?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

The same. Even if they are connected you're barking up the wrong tree.

Napoleon leans on a pew and holds the broom between his legs.

NAPOLEON DUFAY (CONT'D)

You don't usually write articles on crime, do you? Politics is your beat, civic affairs? Why are you so suddenly interested in murder?

CASSIE

It's a big story, could be my ticket out.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

To where? Who's going to hire a woman reporter, a Creole; except that struggling little paper you work for.

CASSIE

There's work out there: Chicago, New York, Paris. Someone will hire me.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

I suppose. Attractive woman always manage to open doors, one way or another. Don't they?

CASSIE

Have the police questioned you?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Not yet.

CASSIE

They will.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Let them come. I have nothing to hide. People who commit crimes, no matter how clever they are, can rarely stand up to scrutiny. Most murderers are found out the moment the police interview them. They ooze guilt and the police can smell it. Only an innocent person or someone with remarkable composure can stand up to their questions. Now I ask you, do I strike you as a man with remarkable composure, or am I just innocent?

Napoleon looks at Cassie with a wicked glint in his eye.

CASSIE

You strike me as arrogant. And arrogant people think they can get away with anything, but rarely do.

Cassie brushes past him and heads for the door.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Miss Lacroix!

Cassie turns.

NAPOLEON DUFAY (CONT'D)

I'm having a gathering tonight, a small ceremony, a Voodoo ritual I'm sure you'll think primitive. But you may find it quite enlightening. It might even help you in your quest.

CASSIE

Help me find who murdered the Maggios?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Who, Miss Lacroix, or what?

The words hang in the air. Napoleon turns his back to Cassie and starts sweeping the church.

NAPOLEON DUFAY (CONT'D)

(throws out)

We start at midnight.

INT. 7TH PRECINCT - NIGHT

Paul sits at his desk reviewing crime scene photos of the murders of Louis Besumer and the Maggios.

A thin bald detective, call him RHODES, walks up with a folder full of newspaper articles and drops one in front of Paul.

RHODES
Get a load of this.

Paul picks up the article about Cassie's family: "13 YR OLD GIRL SOLE SURVIVOR OF MERMENTAU AXE MURDERS."

IN THE FINE PRINT

"Little 13-year-old Cassandra Lacroix hospitalized in shock after having discovered the bodies of her murdered family."

PAUL
I'll be damned. It explains a lot, doesn't it?

RHODES
Why she's hot for the story or a lush that sleeps around?

PAUL
Where do you get this crap?

RHODES
Take a run by the Black Rooster on any Friday night and see for yourself.

Paul ponders the article then stuffs it in his shirt. Grabs his coat and walks out.

RHODES (CONT'D)
I didn't mean tonight!

PAUL
(calls back amicably)
Fuck off.

CUT TO:

BLACKNESS

And BEATING DRUMS!

Suddenly a torch flares to life illuminating the skeleton-painted face of BARON SAMEDI, the "Spirit of the Dead."

Baron Samedi dances around the church COURTYARD in a long coat, loin cloth and top hat painted with a white cross.

A crowd of WORSHIPERS in a circle around him, CHANTING, CLAPPING, SINGING as the Baron whirls around handling a snake.

INT. SACRIFICIAL CHURCH - NIGHT

Cassie enters.

The church is empty except for FRANCINE, a beautiful black woman in her 30s, sitting at a table next to the open back door. The RHYTHMIC DRUMS coming in from the courtyard outside.

Francine wears a tignon and colorful clothes. She counts out cash, a glass of wine, a small box and a ledger on the table before her.

CASSIE
(approaching)
Good evening.

Francine glances up at Cassie then finishes the count and puts the money in the box. Stands to go.

FRANCINE
You're too late. It's after midnight.
The ceremony's already started.

BOOM! The front door to the church is closed.

Startling Cassie. She looks back at a CHURCH JANITOR walking away from the front door and turns again to Francine.

CASSIE
I'm sorry. It's my first time here.

FRANCINE
Being on time shows respect for our
religious practices, and our deities.

Francine gives Cassie the once over. Polishes off her wine and sets down the glass then flips opens the ledger.

CASSIE
Thank you.

Cassie looks at the ledger:

A date, printed names, donation amounts, here and there the word "Guest".

Cassie signs in and Francine closes the ledger and looks expectantly at Cassie who fishes a few bills from her purse and puts them in the box.

Francine picks up the box and the ledger.

FRANCINE

This way.

She leads Cassie into the old church sacristy, now a SUPPLY ROOM between the church and courtyard. The POUNDING DRUMS and CHANTING of the ceremony coming louder from outside.

Francine puts the ledger among others on a shelf. The arrayed church records have a year written on the spine.

Cassie notices.

Francine escorts Cassie to the back door where they look out at the CROWD gathered in the courtyard.

FRANCINE (CONT'D)

If you haven't been here before,
remain quiet and don't ask questions.
And whatever you do, don't faint.

CASSIE

Thanks. I'll do my best.

Cassie walks outside. Francine stares after her, something more than idle curiosity in her eyes.

CUT TO:

BARON SAMEDI

Dancing erotically with TWO SENSUOUS WOMEN OF COLOR wearing tignons and flowing white dresses held high over their thighs.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

The houngan or high priest, overseeing the ritual in a white ceremonial robe and colorful headdress of skull and feathers.

PICKUP CASSIE

A face among the crowd, peering over the shoulders of the worshipers in front of her.

The DRUMS STOP and Baron Samedi and the women exit a white circle painted on the ground and disappear into the crowd.

MOMENTS LATER

An inverted chicken flutters and CLUCKS. Napoleon holding it up to the crowd. Drawing a knife.

Blood spills.

And a shirtless drummer begins a RHYTHMIC, HYPNOTIC BEAT.

Napoleon waves a spear in front of a line of men and women dancing in a trance. He points to a THIN YOUNG MAN.

HOUNGAN/NAPOLEON DUFAY
Kalfu, esprit de la nuit, avance!

CASSIE

Whispers to a YOUNG BLACK WOMAN next to her.

CASSIE
What's going on?

YOUNG BLACK WOMAN
The houngan has invoked the spirit
Kalfu, Loa of the Night. A possession
is about to take place.

The crowd grows perfectly silent and Cassie watches as the DRUM BEAT ROLLS and the ritual unfolds.

The thin young man shimmies and shakes. Lets out a CRY.

His eyes roll and he drops to the ground.

Lies there shaking... writhes and rolls. Pops up to his knees then goes rigid and CRIES OUT IN A DEEP VOICE.

He falls back on the ground clasping his throat, choking.

The DRUMMING HALTS and members of the crowd GASP.

The thin young man froths at the mouth, shakes horribly, with his eyes rolled back in his head.

Napoleon Dufay springs toward him with the outstretched spear.

NAPOLEON DUFAY
Pars, Kalfu, libere ton serviteur.
Laisse le partir! LAISSE LE PARTIR!

The thin young man grimaces in pain, arches his back at an insane angle then faints and collapses in a heap.

With a COLLECTIVE SIGH the crowd rushes toward him pushing Cassie aside.

She moves away from the commotion into the quiet of the

SUPPLY ROOM

Stops and catches her breath. Thinks. Then noses around.

She checks the door behind her and a side window to be sure she's alone then goes to the shelf lined with old ledgers.

She fingers through the years. Finds 1911 and takes it out.

Pages through it. One page the same as another. More names and dollar amounts and some occasional notes.

Cassie passes a page with a BLACK LINE blotting out a name. Scans another page or two then pauses and just stares blankly into space, struck by something, a thought? A feeling? An urging from her second sight?

She flips back to the page with the blacked-out name. Zeros in on the date atop the page:

JANUARY 7th 1911

She tears out the page. Folds it and tucks it in her pocket. Replaces the ledger then senses something and turns.

Napoleon Dufay stands in the doorway.

NAPOLEON DUFAY (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

Cassie smiles, a bead of sweat trickling down her cheek.

CASSIE

I had to get out of that crowd.
It's so hot. The woman who signed
me in was drinking wine. I was hoping
to find some, have a drink.

Napoleon walks over to Cassie who stands between the shelf and an old sink filled with dirty glasses and plates.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

She brought her own bottle and, if I
know her, drank it all herself. I don't
keep any wine or liquor here. My
congregation is poor and I don't want
to put any temptations in their path.

Napoleon captures the bead of sweat on Cassie's face with his finger, sensually.

NAPOLEON DUFAY (CONT'D)

You know people, always giving in to
temptations.

He gives Cassie a look that all women understand. Cassie turns away. Changes the subject trying to alter the mood.

CASSIE

That was quite the ritual. Is that
young man all right?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

He's fine.

CASSIE

What happened to him?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

I called forth the Loa Kalfu, but tonight I don't think he came alone. It was a bit much for a boy his age.

CASSIE

So he was possessed?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

Briefly.

CASSIE

By more than one spirit?

NAPOLEON DUFAY

It happens sometimes. When you create a rift into the spirit world, you don't always know who will come through. You don't believe that, do you?

CASSIE

I believe what I saw.

Napoleon closes the space between them. Gently moves one of Cassie's curly bangs out of her eyes.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

I should be going.

She turns to go but Napoleon grabs her arm.

NAPOLEON DUFAY

What were you really doing in here?

CASSIE

I was nosing around. It's what I do. I'm a reporter.

Napoleon keeps hold of her. The tension builds.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

You're hurting me.

Napoleon let's go of her arm.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Thank you for an interesting evening. We should do it again sometime.

Cassie walks out.

Napoleon lingers, then looks at the ledgers on the shelf.

The 1911 ledger slightly out of place.

He pulls it out. Flips through it to the torn out page.

EXT. TULANE UNIVERSITY - DAY - GIBSON HALL

The heart of the institution, a four story rectangular structure done in the Romanesque style.

A monument sign on the manicured front lawn reads:

TULANE UNIVERSITY
Est. 1834

CASSIE

Climbs steps leading to the arched entrance.

CUT TO:

THE PAPER WITH THE BLACKED-OUT NAME

Dipped into a pan filled with a clear chemical solution.

CASSIE AND AN OLD CHEMISTRY PROFESSOR

At a sink in a LAB trying to uncover the concealed name. A periodic table of the elements on the wall behind them.

OLD PROFESSOR

So if I figure this out are you going
to put my name in the paper?

CASSIE

Sure, if you want.

OLD PROFESSOR

Heavens, no. The only time I'd want
my name in print is for an obituary.
And then just to thumb my nose at my
creditors.

He takes out the page and dips it in a second red solution then lays it on a cloth.

CASSIE

So how does this work?

OLD PROFESSOR

It's magic. See...

He shines a red light on the page and a name rises out of the black ink... "Alton Baylor"

A soft lamentable RIFT ON A TRUMPET begins to play.

CUT TO:

An old black man holding his hat over his heart, watching a
NEW ORLEANS FUNERAL PROCESSION

On the STREET in front of CASSIE'S APARTMENT.

CASSIE

Looks down from her window at a large black family behind the musicians, the pall-bearers and a wreath-topped coffin.

They march down the street one slow step at a time.

Suddenly the TRUMPETER hits a note and the band breaks out in a LIVELY TUNE. The whole procession springs to life and starts dancing down the street.

Cassie pulls herself away from the window and goes to a map of New Orleans spread across a table.

ON THE MAP

Labelled pins indicate the location, order and year of the axe murders: #1/1911... #3/1911... #1/1918(Maggios)... #2/1918 and so on.

Cassie studies the map. Places her finger near a pin tagged SACRIFICIAL CHURCH - the hub in the wheel of murders.

EXT. CREOLE TOWNHOUSE - DAY

Cassie turns off a sidewalk into a rundown building.

INT. CREOLE TOWNHOUSE - DAY

An OLD CREOLE WOMAN in a rocker knits a shawl behind a counter. She gets out of her chair as Cassie walks in.

OLD CREOLE WOMAN

Bon jour.

CASSIE

Bon jour, memere. I wonder if you can help me?

OLD CREOLE WOMAN

I'll certainly try. Are you looking for a room?

CASSIE
No, ma'am, my husband.

OLD CREOLE WOMAN
Oh, I see.
(gravely)
Is he with someone?

CASSIE
I don't know. Could be. I'm just
trying to find him.

OLD CREOLE WOMAN
Oh, you poor dear. I know exactly
what you're going through. The same
thing happened to me. My Lem chased
every skirt in town. But I fixed
him good. I shot him with his own
gun. You aren't plannin' to shoot
your husband are you?

CASSIE
No.

OLD CREOLE WOMAN
Good. The sonsofbitches ain't worth
it. Got me five years, and that
from a black jury.

CASSIE
He owes me some money. I've been
checking the whole neighborhood. I
know he's around here somewhere.

OLD CREOLE WOMAN
Well let's just see.

She puts on her glasses and opens a registry.

OLD CREOLE WOMAN (CONT'D)
What's his name?

CASSIE
Alton, Alton Baylor.

CUT TO:

A SERIES OF SHOTS OF CASSIE CHECKING THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

Going in and out of shabby and quaint APARTMENT BUILDINGS.

COUNTER CLERKS and LANDLORDS. Being rude or helpful. Opening
doors... and SLAMMING them.

Cassie wearing out her shoes on the stone-block streets.

Walking in sight of the SACRIFICIAL CHURCH.

Exiting a BUILDING and checking her map on the stoop.

Passing a group of men and women drinking in front of a BROTHEL, ignoring their ad-libbed CRUDE COMMENTS and LAUGHTER.

She detours into an ALLEY where a large dog leaps out BARKING.

Rests on a SIDEWALK bench. A red sun setting in the west.

END WITH CASSIE approaching a house with a sign out front.

FURNISHED ROOMS

INT. BOARDING HOUSE - TWILIGHT

IDUS, a skinny old man, peers over the top of his glasses.

IDUS

Nope. Sorry. Can't help ya.

Cassie stands across a counter from him making inquires.

IDUS (CONT'D)

There's no one here by that name.

FAT WOMAN (O.S.)

(a voice from a back room)

What name's that, Idus?

IDUS

(snaps back)

Taylor!

CASSIE

No, sir. It's Baylor, Alton Baylor.

A FAT WOMAN in a wheelchair rolls in from the other room.

FAT WOMAN

What are you saying now, old man?
We have a Mister Baylor. He's in
unit twelve.

CASSIE

Alton Baylor?

FAT WOMAN

I don't recall his first name. Let
me see.

The Fat Woman opens a drawer and comes up with a card.

FAT WOMAN (CONT'D)
 Yep, that's him. Alton Baylor, no
 previous address.

CASSIE
 Is he in?

FAT WOMAN
 I don't know. We don't see much of
 him. He keeps strange hours. Paid
 his rent six months in advance.

IDUS
 Oh, that fella', the rude bastard.
 (to Cassie)
 What do want with him anyway? I'd
 stay clear of that man, missy,
 somethin' definitely odd about him.

FAT WOMAN
 Oh, shush. He's not odd, he's just
 the quiet type.
 (to Cassie)
 He don't say much, but a lot of soldiers
 come back from the war that way.

CASSIE
 How do you know he was in the war?

Fat Woman and Idus exchange looks.

FAT WOMAN
 We just figured on account of him
 being blind and all?

On Cassie, intrigued.

EXT. BOARDING HOUSE SHACKS - TWILIGHT

Cassie walks through an old version of a trailer park, a
 couple dozen shack-like homes occupying a dirt lot, the smoke-
 spewing chimney of the Jackson Brewery and the spires of St.
 Louis Cathedral in the skyline behind her.

She stops and looks around at the impoverished setting
 reminiscent of her youth:

Piles of junk. Laundry lines. Rusty bicycles and wooden
 carts. Even a shade tree with an old swing.

SHACK 12

Cassie checks the #12 on the door of a unit up to its windows
 in weeds, off by itself as if banished by the other homes.

She KNOCKS on the door. Listens. Tries the lock then peeks through a front window at an interior too dark to see.

Cassie circles the shack. Finds a back window facing a field. Unlocked. She raises the window and crawls inside.

INT. SHACK 12 - SAME

Cassie rises and dusts herself off, peering through the dying beams of sunlight in the heavily shadowed room.

She comes upon a lantern on a table in the middle of the room. Strikes a match to light it. Decides against it and moves through the dark with the match.

Finds a painting on an easel: a macabre abstract with agonized faces, graphic nudes and anatomical gore: the artistic melange of a mad or evil mind.

The match goes out and Cassie strikes another.

Illuminating a cot on the floor and canned goods on a shelf.

She slides open a closet revealing a tall dresser, a travel bag and hats on an upper shelf. Coats and clothes on hangers.

A bottle of eau de toilette on the dresser. It reads:
"Essence of Lilac".

CUT TO:

A SHEPHERD'S CROOK STREETLAMP

And the CLICK-CLICK-CLICK of a blind man's cane tapping the wooden planks of a duckboard sidewalk.

ALTON BAYLOR

Walks home. A tall, broad-shoulder man obscured from prying eyes under a long coat, black hat and dark glasses.

CASSIE

Opens the first dresser drawer. Newspaper articles, stacks of them, all related to axe murders, many of the ones that Cassie has, but others too from Texas and Kansas.

CUT TO:

ALTON BAYLOR

Turning the CORNER down the street from the office.

CASSIE

Strikes another match and opens the 2nd drawer.

More papers: sheet music and pen and ink drawings of demonic faces and body parts - a hand, a breast, lips, ears and teeth, etc. And a fine drawing of the city at dusk.

Cassie shuts the second drawer and checks the one below it.

More papers and parchments covered with strange characters, a kind of code or ancient language. The odd characters drawn in lines, circles, triangles and pentagrams.

Cassie pockets several of the papers and the match goes out.

CLICK-CLICK-CLICK!

ALTON BAYLOR

Walks past the OFFICE down the path to his shack.

IN THE OFFICE

Idus reads a paper at the counter unaware of Alton's return.

CASSIE

Strikes another match, her face aglow in the flare. She kneels and opens the bottom drawer.

Holds out the match and reveals a collection of old blood-caked scalps. Cassie GASPS... when RAWH-RAWH-RAWH! a DOG SUDDENLY BARKS. Cassie turns. SEES...

Alton Baylor through the front window approaching the shack with his cane, a leashed dog BARKING behind him.

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS stomp outside the door.

A KEY JIGGLES the lock.

Cassie shuts the dresser drawer and blows out the match.

CUT TO:

ALTON BAYLOR

Stepping into his home. He sets his cane by the door and walks to the table. Opens the lantern and lights it.

Goes to the closet, opens the door and hangs up his coat.

Cassie tucked into a ball in a corner of the closet, concealed by the hanging clothes, Alton Baylor's legs just inches away.

He leaves the closet open and walks away.

CASSIE'S POV - FROM A LOW ANGLE BETWEEN THE CLOTHES

Of Alton Baylor arranging dinner. Moving in and out of view as he gathers a spoon and a can opener.

A glass of water and some Libby's canned beef.

He sets his dark glasses down on the table.

Opens the can and eats with the spoon.

Cassie glimpsing his profile, his sharp nose and goatee.

CLOSE ON ALTON BAYLOR'S

Yellow neglected teeth.

His filthy black nails.

CASSIE WATCHING

Waiting.

Trembling with fear. She holds tight to her knees and shuts her eyes, fighting to contain her terror.

ALTON BAYLOR

Lies down on the cot. Fully clothed. Boots on. Leaving the lantern lit on the table.

CASSIE

Waits. And waits...

CUT TO:

THE MOON RISING

In the still of the night.

BACK TO CASSIE

Creeping out of the closet on her hands and knees.

Alton Baylor asleep on his side with his back to her.

Cassie crawls to the door.

Turns the lock ever so slowly... CLICK! Cassie freezes. Looks back at the tall man, now laid out flat on the bed.

Cassie watches, making sure.

She cracks open the door, rises out of her crouch and bolts out the door but is suddenly grabbed by her hair and yanked back into the room.

Cassie SCREAMS! Flails and fights back. The room whirls.

Flashes of a wicked face - the lantern - a window.

Alton Baylor drags a struggling Cassie across the room.

They crash into the table. Knock the lantern to the floor.

FLAMES SHOOTING up Alton Baylor's leg. He releases Cassie and beats out the flames.

Cassie clammers across the floor. Grabs a fallen chair and bull-rushes it out the window.

SMASHING the glass. Landing hard on the ground. Staggering to her feet and racing away.

ALTON BAYLOR

Snuffs out the flames on his pants.

Walks past a fire on the floor and looks out the window at Cassie running away.

He bends down and picks up Cassie's fallen purse. Walks casually to the closet as the FIRE SPREADS to the table.

He takes the travel bag off the shelf and packs some clothes. Opens the drawer and removes the scalps.

Puts on his hat and coat and looks around for his glasses.

He picks them up off the floor and puts them on. Grabs his cane and walks out.

EXT. SHACK 12 - NIGHT

Alton Baylor walks away from the BURNING SHACK, his tall dark figure blending into the velvety blackness of the night.

INT. BEDROOM - SCHNEIDER HOME - NIGHT

MARY SCHNEIDER (28) eight months PREGNANT, rolls over in bed and looks through a mosquito netting at a nightstand clock:

Five minutes after midnight.

She turns over and faces an empty pillow.

CUT TO:

EDWARD SCHNEIDER (EARLY 30s)

Heading home from the night shift, walking down a dark MOONLIT STREET dressed in overalls, carrying his dinner-pail.

MARY

Pulls the covers up to her neck and shuts her eyes. After a moment, the COVERS START MOVING SLOWLY BACK DOWN THE BED.

Mary opens her eyes, looks at the receding covers then peers through the mosquito net at the outline of a man and smiles.

MARY

(drowsy)

Oh, Ed, you scared me.

The shining steel tip of an axe blade moves the net aside.

Mary stares with her mouth agape. Paralyzed with fright.

The Axeman steps onto the bed and brings down the axe.

Mary SCREAMS! Turns. The blade glancing off her head, knocking her unconscious and slicing off her ear.

CUT TO:

ED SCHNEIDER

Hearing the SCREAM, flinging away his pail and sprinting the last few yards to a garden gate in front of his house.

THE AXEMAN

Reaches into a river of blood and picks up the ear. HEARS JOHN whipping open the gate with a CLANG!

The Axeman walks calmly from the room into a REAR HALLWAY and out a back door with a missing panel.

EXT. SCHNEIDER HOME - NIGHT

The Axeman emerges into an ALLEY and tosses the axe aside then walks off into the night.

CLOSE ON THE AXE

Still dripping with blood.

INT. 7TH PRECINCT - DAY

An exhausted Cassie sits across a desk from Detective Rhodes who fills out a report.

Across the room Paul speaks with a PATROLMAN.

Rhodes bites a nail between scribbles then looks up at Cassie and self-consciously lowers his hand as Paul walks over.

PAUL
So how long have you been here?

CASSIE
Feels like forever. Why, what time is it?

PAUL
(checks his watch)
It's almost four. Why don't you go home and get some sleep.

CASSIE
I was hoping to go with you.

PAUL
Where?

CASSIE
His house. Aren't you going to check it out?

PAUL
(re: the patrolmen)
He already did. There's nothing there but a bunch of cinders.

CASSIE
Did you read my statement?

PAUL
Yeah, and you're lucky I don't have you arrested.

CASSIE
Wait a minute, am I missing something? I'm telling you, this guy's the Axeman.

PAUL
Come here.

Paul leads Cassie to the CITY MAP behind Rhodes's desk.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(points to the map)
Okay, you were here, right, with the Axeman, at about what, eleven thirty?

CASSIE
Yeah.

PAUL

You sure about that?

CASSIE

Yeah, I'm sure.

PAUL

All right then, you tell me how the hell he got clear over here on the other side of the river in less than half an hour.

CASSIE

There was another murder?

PAUL

Not quite, the victim will live, a pregnant lady in Gretna. But she's only alive because her husband came home at the time of the attack. The same time he comes home every night, about five minutes after midnight.

Cassie stares at the map.

PAUL (CONT'D)

You got one ferry running at that time of night and that's at one fifteen in the morning. Over an hour too late if it's the same guy.

CASSIE

What if he used a boat?

PAUL

He rents a shack for ten cents a day and owns a boat?

CASSIE

Maybe its a rowboat.

PAUL

If he used a rowboat he should head to Antwerp and enter the Olympics. That's two miles against the tide in twenty minutes. Who is he Hercules?

CASSIE

But it has to be him. What about the scalps I saw?

Paul opens Rhodes's desk and tosses out a toupee.

PAUL

You mean like this?

Cassie stares at the toupee.

PAUL (CONT'D)

A guy woke up and found you in his house and got a little upset. Who wouldn't?

Cassie is silent. Seeds of doubt taking root in her mind.

PAUL (CONT'D)

C'mon, Cassie, you've had a long day. Go home and get some sleep. Leave something for us to do. We'll look into it. I doubt he's our man but we got a name, maybe we can find him.

Cassie stares at the pin marking the latest attack on the map. Uncertain. Nods to Paul and walks out of the room.

Rhodes picks up his toupee and looks at Paul.

RHODES

Is nothing sacred?

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVER - DAWN

The "*HAROLD WALKER*", an old oil tanker steamship, cruises up river toward the docks, her twin white funnels spewing ribbons of black smoke into the pale morning sky.

AT THE WATERLINE

A tarp-covered skiff lies concealed in the weeds near the base of an abandoned brick warehouse.

Out from under the tarp comes Alton Baylor, his face obscured.

He puts on his hat and dark glasses. Takes his bag, cane and coat from the rowboat and walks off through the weeds.

EXT. BOURBON STREET - DAY

Cassie steps off a trolley and walks down the street.

Comes to the Black Rooster and stops and stares at its blood-red door.

INT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

Cassie enters the moody room and takes a seat at the bar as far from the other CUSTOMERS as she can. Justify breaks off a conversation and approaches Cassie.

JUSTIFY

Mornin', Cass. What are you just getting started or is this the end of your night?

CASSIE

What's it to you?

Justify sloughs off the crack with a smile and makes her a drink. Cassie watching him as if he were loading a shotgun.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Hey, I need the key.

Justify takes a key off the back of the bar and sets it down with the drink.

Cassie takes the key and goes to a

BATHROOM BEHIND THE BAR

Washes her face at the sink. Looks in the mirror.

BLACK ROOSTER - SAME

Cassie emerges from the bathroom.

Lays the key on the bar and walks straight out the door.

Justify watches her go, amused, then downs her drink.

EXT. DOCK - DAY

A pair of Charity Hospital Model-T ambulances are parked on the dock next to the "HAROLD WALKER".

Two sick men on stretchers are carried down a gangplank toward an anxious CAPTAIN and SHIP'S DOCTOR engaged in a discussion with a group of HOSPITAL PERSONNEL.

CLOSE ON

The blue face of one of the sick men, feverish and coughing. The great Spanish Flu epidemic has arrived in New Orleans.

INT. NEWSROOM - TRIBUNE - DAY

Cassie is on the phone at her desk, the newsroom STAFF going about there usual business around her.

CASSIE

... Yes, thank you. I've been trying to reach Father Silvestri. I was told he was reassigned to this parish.

Roy Jenkins approaches, tie off, shirt sleeves up, some newspaper copy in his hand, stressed to make a deadline.

ROY

All right, Cass, what have you got? I need something hard for above the fold.

(waves the copy)

All this tripe's softer than church music. Where're you at on that latest attack.

Cassie holds up a hand for Roy to wait.

CASSIE

(on the phone)

Oh, he is, that's great. May I see him today? One o'clock will be fine. What's your address?

Cassie writes down the address and hangs up. Gathers some papers and stands to go.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Sorry, Roy, nothing yet, but I think I know who the axeman is.

ROY

Yeah, me too, my mother-in-law.

Cassie walks by Roy and pats him on the chest.

CASSIE

It's not wishful thinking... and it's more than a hunch. Just give me some time.

ROY

(calls after her)

You run it by the police?

CASSIE

(stops and turns)

Yeah.

ROY

And?

CASSIE

And they don't agree... yet.

Helen looks up from her desk.

HELEN

Oh, hey, Cass, hold on. I almost forgot.

She hands Cassie a card.

CASSIE
Oh, perfect. Thanks, Helen.

ROY
What's that?

CASSIE
I lost my employment card.

Cassie turns and goes.

ROY
(calls after her)
So someone's running around with
your press credentials?

CASSIE
Don't worry about my card it burned
up in the fire.

ROY
What fire!

CUT TO:

A STAINED GLASS WINDOW

A striking motif of a winged, red-eyed Satan tempting an enfeebled Christ in the desert. A placid sheet of colorful light refracting through the panes onto

CASSIE

Walking through the nave of ST. ANTHONY'S CHURCH.

CUT TO:

FATHER OTTAVIO SILVESTRI

The old Italian priest pours two cups of coffee. Carries them over to Cassie seated at a table in his small OFFICE.

FATHER SILVESTRI
I hope you like it strong. I prefer
espresso myself. I had a lovely
machine gifted to me by my old
parishioners but I had to leave it
behind. I told the bishop it was
the one luxury afforded an
impoverished priest. He was not
sympathetic.

Cassie takes her cup and drinks.

CASSIE
It's fine. Thank you.

FATHER SILVESTRI
You know most of the reporters I've met have been fat bald men. So you are a pleasant surprise. Are you Italian?

CASSIE
No, Father, Creole...
(with a hint of shame)
I come from mixed parents.

FATHER SILVESTRI
Wear that badge proudly, my child. In Italy we know the very finest wine comes from the cross-breeding of grapes, but in this country, ahh...
(scoffs in disgust)
so much ignorance.

He smiles at Cassie.

FATHER SILVESTRI (CONT'D)
So, let me see what you have for me, hmm. What is this great mystery?

Cassie takes out the writings of Alton Baylor and spreads them out on the table.

FATHER SILVESTRI (CONT'D)
(examines them)
Ahh, yes, yes... These are extraordinary. Where did you get them?

CASSIE
I'd rather not say.

FATHER SILVESTRI
They are the work of one person?

CASSIE
I think so.

FATHER SILVESTRI
Hmm.

Father Silvestri studies a page, fascinated, puzzled.

CASSIE
Can you translate it?

FATHER SILVESTRI

Given time I can translate some of it, but much of this writing is unrecognizable to me.

He goes over the pages with Cassie.

FATHER SILVESTRI (CONT'D)

What I think you have here are five or six distinct languages. These wedge shaped characters are Sumerian cuneiform, the oldest known writing system which goes back about five thousand years.

(refers to another page)

And this is Aramaic. But these others...

He makes a gesture of bewilderment.

FATHER SILVESTRI (CONT'D)

Can you leave them with me? I would very much like to share them with some colleagues, if that's acceptable to you.

Cassie assents with a nod.

A PALE SKULL-LIKE MOON

Hangs high over ST. LOUIS CEMETERY where a big rat scurries through the miniature city of crypts, tombs and mausoleums.

The rat climbs onto a crypt and sniffs the air. Suddenly a man's heavy fist crashes down on its head.

ALTON BAYLOR

Picks up the rat by the tail and walks off.

After a few steps he swings the rat in a circle and launches it into the night.

Revisit the MOON, the only witness to the murder, as the pure, contralto voice of MARION ANDERSON sings "DEEP RIVER".

START MONTAGE

Of the Spanish Flu Epidemic.

HERE ENDS MY WEBSITE EXCERPT OF THING OF DARKNESS. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO READ IT IN ITS ENTIRETY REACH OUT TO ME AT johnkroyan@gmail.com. THANKS FOR CHECKING OUT MY WORK. I HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT.

John Royan