Living Statue

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By Melinda Compton

“Order your king cake here!” The sign twirler and his sign scream an advertisement for Fleur de Lis Cakery at Wren as she pushes her way through the crowd under the porticos, heading towards the public restroom tucked into the corner of the row of restaurants, high-end boutiques, and tourist traps. She would like to smack the sign out of his hand. Two doors down from him, a purple tube boy wearing a string of beads the size of cantaloupes flaps in the wind, competing with an advertisement for “The best king cake in Louisiana!” Wren holds a paint can close to her body and ducks around both the sign twirler and the erratic blow-up, pushing open the door marked with a large “W.”

It’s not ideal to get ready for work here, because there are far too many drunk people even at two pm and the mirrors are cloudy, but Sheila and her husband have company this weekend so she couldn’t do it at their place.

Wren began to paint surfaces—the desk at school, scrap paper from the home copy machine, the walls, her own skin—when she was a toddler. She was restless as a rule, and in middle school, Wren made it her mission to learn every game in the world so that she could never be bored. Indoor or outdoor, solo or group, sport or card game, it didn’t matter; she learned them all. By the time she turned 18 and graduated high school, she had run off to Baton Rouge for art school. Her sister Laurel had supported her when their parents told her she was on her own. While in college, Wren discovered a penchant for performance art. The art of movement and nonmovement fascinated her, and her drawing professors groaned when she would show up to class, final project drawn in marker and paint across her own body. After she graduated, pursuing a graduate degree wasn’t financially feasible, so Wren did what she had always done: perform. This time she took to the streets of her hometown of New Orleans to make money as a performing street artist. Back then, she thought she might eventually go to the Netherlands to compete in the World Championship of Living Statues, but that turned out to be a pipe dream; however, she’s been painting herself up in Jackson Square for three years now instead.

The ancient Grecian woman Wren plays is fairly simple to perform—she just holds her arms and hands regally out from the rest of her body while standing atop a pedestal, but it takes her almost two and a half hours to get ready. She carefully dips her brush into the metallic gold face and body paint time and time again, swirling it in the can so the consistency remains even throughout. She fixes the gold leafy crown to her head, making certain the leaves don’t move when she pushes against them. She takes special care around the eyes as she covers everything that is Wren and turns herself into a nonspeaking, nonmoving, nameless woman. Even with the cloudy mirrors, Wren can see how she gleams, and she knows she will be blinding in the sunlight.

Now, she’s a living statue. She walks out of the bathroom and quickly crosses onto the side street right by the Square, setting up her box pedestal and arranging the empty paint can.
she’s painted to look like a Grecian urn that collects her tips. Dull to shiny, just like that. She steps up onto the pedestal and strikes her pose. She looks out across the Square to see Andrew Jackson and his horse, carved in bronze, and resolves to be as they are—just a part of the scenery.

Three hours later, Wren blinks and shifts her eyes around her. The square is emptier than it’s been all day. Most tourists have either retired to their hotels for a nap before the night’s festivities or have moved to congregate along the lines of the street where the “Family Gras” parade will soon begin. Wren scoops up her full bucket of paint and her money bucket and walks across the square to where Sheila is finishing up a reading for a drunk grandmother. As the grandmother stumbles away, clutching a half-empty Hurricane to her chest, Wren taps Sheila on the shoulder to let her know she’s there and settles down in the foldable client chair across from her to count.

Sheila nods a hello as she shuffles the tarot cards back into the deck. “How’d you do today?” she asks.

On a normal day, in a three-hour shift, Wren would make anywhere from $75 to $150, but she gets excited as the number she counts ticks up and the bucket seems not to empty. When she finishes counting, she shows the wad of cash to Sheila and slaps it into her other hand.

“$250, hell yeah.” Wren has never been a numbers person, but they seem to be all she’s been thinking about in the last couple years. “It’s February and it’s Mardi Gras. Primetime, baby. And nobody overly creeped me out today, so yeah, I’ve been feeling pretty good about myself today.” Sheila laughs, likely remembering the stories Wren has told her of hecklers who get into her face and stare at her for as long as they can muster, or of the men who make suggestive comments to her about what’s under all that paint. “What about you?”

“Same boat,” Sheila says, shaking her full tip jar. “I’m going to go home for a couple hours then come back later tonight. God, I love Mardi Gras and I love tourists.” She packs up and waves as she leaves.

Wren usually tries to avoid the French Quarter unless she’s working. It’s far too crowded and expensive, but she knows that the Big Easy Daiquiri around the corner from Jackson Square has two working slot machines, and she can’t wait any longer. There are far too many people to make the sidewalk an option, so she walks in the gutter. She pulls a black sweatshirt from high school over her clothes, tucking the wad of cash in the front pocket, but she still draws stares as she walks, paint buckets in hand. She’s anxious. She hasn’t had the money to gamble in days, and she’s been waking in cold sweats, nightmares of stolen chips and mutating lottery numbers dancing through her uneasy sleep. She needs to make enough today to be able to pay the bookie his $300 and to get a new can of paint.

The parade is starting, and Wren can feel the energy in the crowd lift and swell as hundreds of pairs of eyes turn towards the sounds of the marching band and see the first trumpets as they come into view. A few seconds later, an oversized jester head appears on the first parade float. Its eyes are diamond-shaped black holes.
Distracted by the jester, Wren almost runs into a toddler that dashes out into the street, grubby hands reaching for a strand of purple beads lying neglected in the gutter.

“Whoa.” She holds her hand out to steady the girl before she tumbles headfirst onto the cobblestone and pulls her back to the sidewalk so that she won’t be trampled by the plumed marching band and their swinging brass instruments. A hugely pregnant woman rushes past Wren, almost pushing her over a second time in her panicked rush to get to the child. She clutches the girl, who is maybe three years old and wearing a cherry-print dress, to her side.

“Maddie, don’t run away from me like that. You scared the heck out of me, chick.” Wren feels every muscle tense up at the voice, so much like Wren’s own, which pierces every one of her muscles with recognition. Her breath catches in her throat, and she feels like she might choke. “I’m so sorry about that. Thank you,” the woman continues, turning to look up to see her daughter’s savior. Her eyes widen when she sees Wren standing there, pinching the crunchy fabric of her gilded dress between her fingers.

“Oh my God, Wren. Hi.”

Wren knows what she must look like. The wind bustling through the Square has brought involuntary tears to her eyes that are now drawing tracks through the metallic paint on her cheeks, and, aside from the sweatshirt, the rest of her is still entirely painted gold. People are not used to seeing people like her walking around on the streets, do not want her to be capable of movement at all. The less real she pretends to be, the more money she gets. Right now, though, her sister’s stare is making her feel far too real, far more real than she wants to be. It feels like the crowd surrounding them has dissipated. Laurel straightens, holding Maddie tightly against her with one hand and bringing her other hand protectively to her belly.

“Hey.” Wren looks down at her feet, sneaking glances at her sister, trying to see what else has changed in the two years since she saw her last, when Laurel kicked her out of their shared apartment and told her she was done having a sister who only cared about wasting her money away on slot machines instead of paying the rent. Maddie wasn’t even walking yet. Where does Laurel live now? With a boyfriend? A husband? Does she still work as a paralegal for the corporate law firm downtown? Does she still start every morning with a cup of ginseng tea? Does she think about her sister?

Laurel is just three years older than Wren, at 29, but her mahogany hair is streaked with gray, the hallmark of women in their family, and she looks tired, although that may be from the stress of having a four-year-old at a parade. However family-friendly this particular one may claim to be, it’s still New Orleans.

“Good. More than good, actually,” Wren says, too quickly. She curses in her head. *Awful. I’m homeless. I’m an addict. You were right.* “Congratulations,” she says aloud, gesturing to the unborn baby.

“Thanks.” Laurel pauses as if debating how much she should say. “He’s due March 16th. A Pisces, like you.”
Wren feels her heart warm involuntarily. The idea of an invisible olive branch hangs between them, but she feels the weight of the cash hanging in her sweatshirt; she knows that nothing has changed. Her hand flutters to it.

“That’s awesome, I’m really happy for you. But, uh, I better get going. Got places to be. Enjoy the parade.”

“Okay.” Laurel looks at her like she wants to hug her, but Maddie tugs at her hand, trying to get her mother to look at the feathered horses now marching down the street. As Laurel looks down to respond, Wren can see the flecks of gold on Maddie’s wrist where her painted fingers held the girl. She mutters a “goodbye” to the pair under her breath and turns around, shoving her way through the crowd as quickly as she can.

“Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me.” Wren looks at people’s feet as she pushes through them, trying not to notice the whole families, a mix of locals and tourists, with kids riding on parents’ shoulders and siblings fighting over leftover beignets.

As Wren pushes open the door to Big Easy Daiquiris, the sounds of the parade fade, and she is relieved to see that both slot machines are empty. She inhales, trying to stop her breaths from being the shallow puffs that have been all she can manage for the past several minutes, and sits at the left one. The bartender doesn’t bat an eye at having a disheveled living statue sitting at her slot machine, just points to the row of daiquiri machines behind her, sloshing in their rainbow colors and surrounded by neon signs, and asks if she wants a drink. Wren shakes her head and settles into her seat, perching her toes on the edge of the metal bar below the chair.

She feeds dollars into the machine, peeling them one at a time from her pocket. With each one, she relaxes a little more, sinking into the red pleather seat. Wren can feel the knot in her chest begin to loosen with the first pull, but each pull of the machine that follows turns the jester faces into Laurel’s and the cherries into the print on Maddie’s dress as they spin past. The “New Orleans” carved in a silver-coated plastic on the machine’s edge screws and rotates.

If Wren looks at the city name—New Orleans—and squints her eyes ever so slightly, it looks a bit like a twisted, mangled version of the word “normal.” Or maybe only she sees that, and it’s only because she lives there. But that’s what the city is to her. Twisted, mangled, yet normal. And it’s not just the voodoo. She’s seen things in this city, her city, that in any other place would consume a person’s thoughts for days on end. Years, even. But in New Orleans, those things happen ten times on a single night on Bourbon. Or off Bourbon, if hand grenades just sound like a terrible idea.

A pink fluffy-collar sexual submissive being walked around by a man in a dark suit. An elderly man wearing a tail and a top hat. A gaggle of women in Goodwill wedding dresses. A gator in a Saints jersey. A frat boy wearing diamond-crusted nipple tassels. A ghost down at the corner of her favorite Creole restaurant. A man fighting a pit bull because the dog looked at him weird.

Wren has seen them all, but she never expected to see Laurel.
She closes her eyes, trying not to see her anymore. She remembers the last time she saw her sister, face pinched and blotchy red as she slammed the door on Wren. It was such a small thing. That stupid king cake.

Wren had come home from Harrah’s without a penny left to her name and had been in a vile mood, but Laurel’s face was bright as she opened the door, a tiny Maddie balanced on her hip.

“Did you get it?” she had asked excitedly.

“Get what?” Wren had snapped. She could smell the way her clothes reeked of cigarette smoke, and her head was beginning to pound as the free drinks from the casino wore off. She was also trying to calculate how much she would have to earn to be able to put down enough money at the poker table to pay her credit card bill that was due in four days. It was nearing the end of Mardi Gras, so she was getting enough work, but still. Mostly, she remembered, she had just wanted to shower.

“The king cake, dummy. You found the little baby last year, so you have to get the cake this year.”

“Oh, shit. No, I didn’t.” Wren had said, rubbing her eyes. Stupid plastic baby.

“You said you would get it. This was supposed to be Maddie’s first time. We were supposed to do it together as a family.” Her voice was still low, but it had turned cold.

“Sorry, I just don’t have the money right now.”

“You don’t have the money? Really? That’s funny, because I know you just came home from the casino. You obviously had money before you went.”

“I just don’t have it, okay? Lay off, it’s not that big of a deal.” Wren had put her fingers to her temple, massaging where it throbbed with every breath she took.

“You’re right, Wren. It’s not that big of a deal. It’s really not. But you know what is a big deal? The fact that I’ve been paying your half of the rent for the last two months. Not to mention groceries, electricity, your insurance, and your student loan payments.” She had set Maddie down in her playpen then so that she could use her fingers to count out the number of ways Wren had managed to disappoint her.

“I told you I would pay you back.”

Exasperation was apparent in the curve of Laurel’s mouth. “Right, just like you told your bookie that. Just like you told all your friends that before they stopped being your friends. Just like you told Mom and Dad that before they cut you off. You have a problem, Wren.”

Wren had hugged her arms to her chest and her eyes blurred with tears. “It’s just for fun; it’s nothing.”

“Maybe you playing poker on the weekends and betting on football games with your high school friends was just fun. Maybe going to casinos when you turned 21 was nothing. But now? You’re 24-years-old.” Laurel shook her head. “I have bailed you out so many times, and you can’t even pick up a cake?”
Wren had nothing to say to that, so she went into the room they shared and packed a duffel bag and her paints. She had bent over the playpen to kiss Maddie on the forehead, and Laurel had held the door for her as she walked out.

It was only on the night Laurel kicked her out that Wren had realized people in New Orleans tend to walk away from things they don’t think are any of their business, even things that should probably be their business. People’s eyes skim over dark alleyways and pretend that loud conversations are hushed and indistinguishable. Words become noise and people become statues, and that’s what happened to Wren.

In the daiquiri shop, she stops pulling the lever on the slot machine when she’s down to $50. “Fuck.”

Her hand hovers over the lever as the mismatching symbols stare back at her—a cherry, a “7,” and a “BAR.” Maybe the next pull will bring up the matching “7”s she craves more than anything. She begins to push it down. Maybe not more than anything. She leans her head against the left side of the machine, staring down to the row of symbols and to her hand resting on the cold metal pull. She groans and clenches her hand around the pull, then pushes off from the machine and cashes out with the bored bartender. She tucks her money into her paint bucket, wondering if she can dodge the bookie for another week.

She’s not sure where to go, and she feels listless. She finds herself walking back towards Jackson Square. Sheila doesn’t know Wren is homeless, so after she finishes working, Wren always tells Sheila she’s going to head home, but tonight she has no energy for pretenses. She hasn’t even gone back to the restroom to wash the paint off her body.

“You look like you’ve been through it, girl,” Sheila says as Wren walks up to her table. Wren musters up a tiny laugh that makes hardly any sound and stretches her arm out to place a $10 bill in Sheila’s jar. “Will you read my cards?”

“I thought you didn’t believe in this stuff,” Sheila responds, looking curiously at her friend.

Wren shrugs. “I don’t, really. But you deserve it.”

“I stare at you while you work every day, right there across the way. If anything, I should be paying you. I appreciate it, though.”

Wren nods and drums her fingers against the table restlessly. Then she reaches into her paint bucket again and pulls out a $20 and places that in Sheila’s jar on top of the $10.

“What are you doing, Wren?”

“I don’t know.” Wren paces a small line back and forth in front of Sheila’s table and grabs the rest of the money from her bucket. “I just feel like I’m stuck in place, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

Sheila chuckles, shoulder-length earrings clinking together like miniature wind chimes. “That’s because sticking in one place is what you do for a living.”

Wren stops pacing and roots her feet into the ground, tries to feel the stones under her feet rather than the money in her fist.

“I want to go home,” she tells Sheila, who looks puzzled.
“Then go home. Maybe clean some of that paint off you.”
To where? The old apartment? To Sheila’s house? To her childhood home in the suburbs? Laurel’s place, wherever that is, with Maddie and the soon-to-be baby boy?
She turns away from Sheila. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I will.”
She leaves the square and walks down the road a bit until she reaches the store where she saw the sign twirler earlier today, although he’s retired by now. The crowds have thinned out a bit since the parade ended, but the night crowds are beginning to crawl out and onto the street. The cooling night air has become raucous and loud. Wren opens the door to the Fleur De Lis Cakery, deeply inhaling the scent of flour and sweet spices, and places her final $20 bill down on the bakery counter.
“One king cake for delivery, please.” The baker behind the counter looks exhausted—he doesn’t blink an eye at her appearance, just hands her an order card and tells her what she needs to fill out and where she needs to sign. Wren tenderly grips the pen between her fingers and holds her arm out, careful not to rub her metallic arm too hard on the glass casing.
She fills out the “From” portion, jotting down “Your sister.”
In the “To” portion, she writes “Laurel, Maddie, and Baby Boy.”
There’s an area for a message to be delivered alongside the cake, and she puts the pen up to her mouth, sucking air through her teeth while she thinks. There is so much to say, but the card only gives her four lines. After a few moments, Wren just writes, “I owe you,” and scribbles a signature at the bottom. Satisfied, she hands the card back to the baker. He barely looks at it before flipping it back to her.
“The address,” he says laconically. Wren furrows her brow and stops to read the field. Home address. She stops and sets the pen down. She has no idea where to send it.