

Marie Lambeau

The Entertainer

MARIE LAMBEAU STEPPED OFF THE stage at the Black Cat Club, glistening with sweat after a long set under hot lights. The beaded fringe of her dress swayed as she slipped through the crowded backstage toward her dressing room. All she wanted was to sit down for a moment in the quiet and the dark. Her Grand-Mère's rituals filled the audience to overflowing every night, ensnaring them in her siren's song, but they took something from her in return, something she wasn't sure she'd ever get back.

As she skirted a stack of handboxes, the stage curtain fluttered and the musicians of her backup band came pouring through. Half of them were fill-ins thanks to a strange illness that had been working its way through the club; Marie had had it the week before, and the things she'd seen in her delirium could not be unseen. Now most of the brass section was out with it, although with the audiences the Cat had been pulling in, they'd had no problem finding replacements. The new folks had played well enough, but goodness were they boisterous. They poured into the tiny area backstage, hollering just as loud as the audience.

Marie pressed her hand to her forehead. In her younger days, she would have been ready for anything after a show – a drink, a dance, maybe even a cuddle. But over the past few months, the audiences had swelled and her energy had ebbed. She tried not to think about the rituals that filled the house every night. After all, what other choice did she have? A girl had to eat, and if she hadn't taken action, the Cat would have closed. That would never happen if she had anything to say about it.

She left the band to their revels, slipping into her tiny dressing room. Inside, she slumped in a chair without even bothering to flick on the lights. Her head pounded as if the music was still playing. Maybe if she rested a moment, it would subside.

There was a rap at the door, and Grease Jennings stuck his head in. He was a handsome devil and knew

it. His slick ways with the ladies had earned him the nickname, and he seemed to take it as a compliment, but Marie didn't see it that way at all. Too bad the scoundrel couldn't take a hint. He'd been here a week and wouldn't stop propositioning her.

"Marie, cher," he said, with a bad impersonation of her accent. "Come have a drink with us. You've got to be parched."

"Not tonight," she said. "I have a headache."

"Then let me see you home!" he exclaimed. "I insist."

She let out a sigh. Grease would follow her home, and then things would get awkward. The band would fall apart without a sax player. Better to keep the peace and slip out after a quick nightcap. Once he got into his cups, he wouldn't even notice she'd gone.

"Very well," she said.

He clasped his hands together like she'd agreed to run off with him.

"Excellent," he said.



SHE HAD MORE FUN THAN SHE'D expected. Clarence, her bassist, stuck by her side the entire time despite Grease's attempts to peel her from the group. The grizzled old guitarist had plenty of stories to share about his grandchildren, and the drink soothed her sore throat and wrung the tension from her shoulders. Despite herself, she was happy she'd come.

Then Grease said, "Let's turn this party up a little. Have any of you ever used a Ouija board?"

Clarence snorted. "Boy, we don't fool around with that spiritualist claptrap here."

Marie made no reply, but Grease's eyes sought her out anyway, desperate for her approval. He winked at her.

"Come on; it'll be fun. I'm a bit of an amateur spiritualist myself. Don't any of you want to contact your long-departed loved ones and see what messages they have for you?"

"Oh, that's terrifying!" exclaimed one of the cocktail waitresses.





"I'd love to talk to my ex-wife," said the drummer. "Boy do I have a few things to say to her."

Grease and the drummer laughed.

"It's settled then. Let me get the box," said Grease.

"The dead aren't toys." Marie's throaty voice cut through the space, drawing everyone's attention. "Be careful you don't open a door you can't close."

"Don't worry, cher," said Grease. "I'll keep you safe."

Clarence snorted again, and Marie rolled her eyes. Foolish children. But it was impossible to smack sense into some people. She'd wasted enough breath over the years to know that.

As Grease set up the board and instructed his audience on the use of the planchette, Marie drained the last of her drink. As much as she disliked the careless use of the spirit board, at least it would give her the opportunity to make a Grease-free exit. She said her goodbyes to Clarence and stood as the musicians clustered around the board, fingers on the planchette.

"It's moving!" exclaimed the waitress.

"Spirit," intoned Grease melodramatically, "who are you? What is your name?"

Shaking her head, Marie headed for the door.

"M... A... oh, what's it spelling?" babbled the waitress. "R..."

"Marie," said Grease. "Is your name Marie?"

The planchette swooped across the board.

"No? Do you want to talk to Marie?" asked Grease.

The planchette moved again. The waitress gasped.

"Marie, the spirit has a message for you!" she said.

Marie rolled her eyes. Grease really was desperate to keep her from leaving, but she wasn't going to fall for his tricks.



"I told you," she said. "My people take gris-gris very seriously. It's not to be played with. I'm going home to sleep, and I suggest you all do the same."

As she turned back toward the door, she could hear the planchette moving again, scratching over the rough surface of the board. It sounded quite fast; Grease must be very put out. Then there was a loud tearing sound. The waitress screamed. The planchette imbedded itself into the wall next to Marie's head, the prongs driving deep into the plaster.

She froze, clapping a hand to her ear. The planchette had just missed her. She could see a strand of her hair pinned to the wall beneath it. Had Grease thrown it at her? She found it difficult to believe that he could embed it in the wall like that.

She turned slowly to see the wide-eyed group of



musicians staring at her. The planchette had dug a furrow across the board, stretching from the word “Yes” all the way to the opposite edge. She could almost feel the spirits clustering around her, begging for a way in, and she steeled herself against the temptation to listen. She would heed her own warnings, even if these fools had not.

Grease was looking a little green, but as the cocktail waitress fainted, he caught her in a gesture of automatic chivalry.

“Now do you believe?” he asked Marie.



THE NEXT DAY, GREASE CORNERED HER on the way into her dressing room with desperation in his eyes. He held his hat in his hands, the brim creased from their squeezing. She stopped, sighing. As aggravating as this confrontation would be, it was better to get it over with before things turned ugly.

“I owe you an apology, Marie,” he said, taking her completely by surprise.

“Yes, you do,” she said, firm.

To his credit, he didn’t balk.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he continued. She snorted, and would have put him in his place if he hadn’t continued. “I was just tryin’ to impress you, and I took it way too far. I’m real sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” she replied after a moment’s consideration. “But please, listen to me when I say that things like that spirit board aren’t to be played with. My Grand-Mère used to say—”

“Did you know that my mother used to live next door to your Grand-Mère?” he interrupted, lighting up. “Back in the 90s, it would have been.”

“You sure about that, cher?”

“Yes, ma’am. Ma used to tell stories about her. The way she tells it, the only reason she and Pa got together was because of one of your Grand-Mère’s charms. Some sort of love spell or something. I think she’s got it put away. If you’d like to come for tea, I could hunt it up for you.”



Marie hesitated. Was this just another ploy to get her alone? She wasn't sure, but the opportunity to see those old charms had its allure. She wondered if they still retained any of her Grand-Mère's power, even after all this time, and whether or not she'd be able to use them. Besides, she could handle the likes of Grease Jennings.

"I'll come," she said. "What day?"

He brightened.

"How about tomorrow?" he suggested.



THE NEXT DAY, MARIE SHOWED UP IN her Sunday best – hat, gloves, and all – for afternoon tea. Grease gave her a little bow and showed her into the parlor where his mother waited. She was older than Marie had anticipated, her dark skin shriveled like a dried-up walnut. She took one look up at Marie and brightened.

"Maisie!" she exclaimed. "You old alligator! Did you bring my... you know, the..." She trailed off, then brightened again. "Maisie!"

Grease crouched down next to his mother, patting her on the shoulder.

"It's Marie, Ma," he said. "Remember? I said she'd be coming for a visit."

He shot an apologetic glance in Marie's direction.

"Sorry," he said. "Sometimes she doesn't seem to know where she is or who she's talking to. She knows me well enough, but everybody else gets all jumbled. We can still have tea though, and I'll pull that box down from the attic for you if you'll give me a minute."

"That'll be fine," she said.

He smiled gratefully at her and headed into the kitchen, leaving her with the old lady. She sat on the flowered sofa, smoothing her dress over her knees.

"Thank you for having me for tea, madame," she said.

Mrs Jennings leaned forward. Her cloudy eyes cleared, fixing on Marie's face.

"Hello, mon 'tite," she said.

The old lady's creaky voice shifted, dropping into

a deeper register and twisting into a thick Cajun accent. It had been years since Marie had heard that voice, but she would know it anywhere. It was her Grand-Mère, and her Grand-Mère's pet name for her. A chill ran down her spine.

"Grand-Mère," she said. "What do you want?"

"Now is that any way to talk to a long-lost relative?" Mrs Jennings sat back, mouth twisting into a familiar sly smile. "It's time to pay the piper, and I've come to collect."

"I don't know what you mean," said Marie, but her stomach had sunk to her knees. She knew; she just didn't want to admit it.

"Don't you? Well then, I'll just be taking my gris-gris back with me. Then what will you do? All those seats in that little music house of yours. Do any of your friends know what you're doing to fill 'em?" Marie blanched, and the old woman cackled. "Thought not."

"There's no harm in it," she said, trying hard to believe it.

Mrs Jennings clucked her tongue.

"Oh, 'tite," she said. "There's always a price. Soon enough, it'll come due."

"I'll stop," vowed Marie.

"Sure you will." The old lady snickered. "Think you can? Once you unlock that door, it's hard to put the beast back in its cage."

"What do you—"

The door to the kitchen opened before Marie could finish the sentence, and Mrs Jennings slumped like a puppet with its strings cut, drool trickling from her mouth. Grease took one look at her and sighed.

"She been sleeping this whole time?" he asked. "I'm sorry. I couldn't find the sugar. She must have put it somewhere, but lord only knows where."

"It's okay," replied Marie, standing up. She had to get out of here, had to find some space to think about what this all meant. Spirits didn't lurk around the living world for a lark; they always wanted something. She shuddered to think of what this one would demand.

Of how much she already owed.

"I should go," she said.

"I still haven't gotten that box out," said Grease, his expression falling.

Mrs Jennings jerked upright, letting out a cry of surprise.

"Maisie!" she said, staring at Marie again. "It's so good to see you!"

"Really," said Marie. "I must go."

"If you're sure. I can bring the box to the club tonight, if you like?" suggested Grease.

"Sure. Of course. That would be very kind."

Marie hurried toward the door, the back of her neck prickling. It felt like someone hovered right over her shoulder, a presence she'd felt for a long time but had stubbornly denied. As she pushed open the screen and made her goodbyes, Mrs Jennings began to sing "Au Clair de la Lune".

Her Grand-Mère's favorite song. The power in those words sent shivers down her spine, but she couldn't deny

that something in her – something deep in her blood – sang the same song. Someday, it would become too loud for her to deny, but not today.

"You should sing it tonight, dear," said Mrs Jennings, in her own voice. "It'll be positively magic."

