

Dear Miss Mandy,

I'm writing to you from the inside of a fuel-filling station in Charleston, West Virginia. The whole place smells of oil and sweat, but the alternative would be giving myself to the whims of the humidity and unending drizzle of too-warm rain. Jim Culver and I, along with a few others, are making the trek down to New Orleans. Unfortunately, Jim and I aren't traveling just to visit our roots and breathe in the southern air.

Some days ago, I received a letter from Betty Lane, an old friend of both Jim and I, that was rather mundane, if even a little nonsensical. She invited myself and Jim to come down to perform at a new venue she was locating talent for, and while I was considering phoning Jim about it, that proved unnecessary because he appeared at my doorstep! His expression was immediately of concern to me, and when I saw a letter clutched in his hand, I felt unease creep over my skin. He had also received a message, but his was much more alarming. In it, Betty spoke of losing time, feeling watched, and described such a visceral sense of dread that we both agreed right then and there to make our way down to check up on her.

We managed to convince Preston Fairmont to bring us in his automobile (he owed me a favor or three), and it turned out that a few others had reasons to head southways, too, and so we've become a little group of sorts

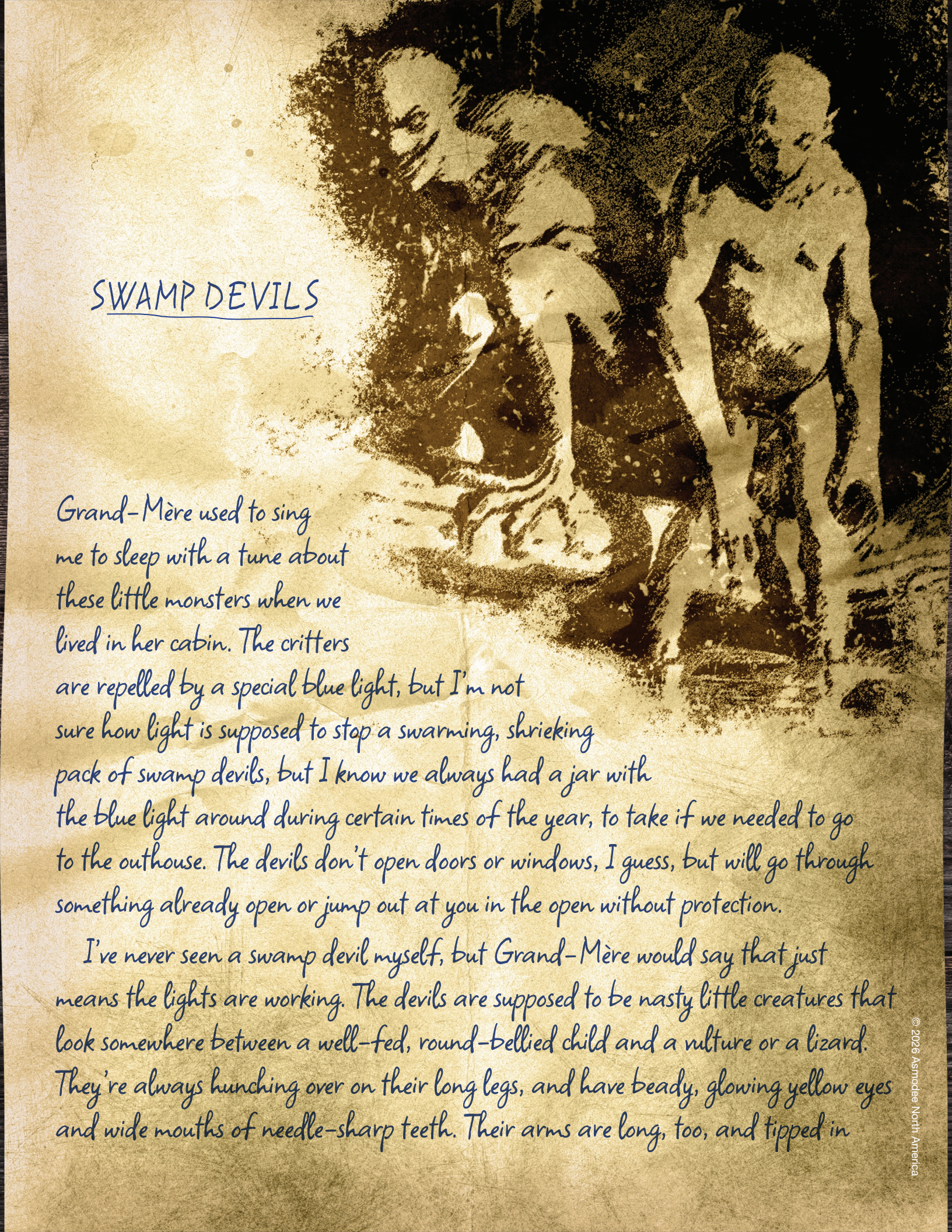
for the time being. I've been trying to distract myself from the iron ball of nerves that has formed in my belly, and in my efforts a fair few memories of my time in Louisiana with Grand-Mère have jarred loose, clattering around my head like a handful of marbles.

I know you've been collecting stories and notes on all of the kinds of monsters and critters that lurk around in the corners of the world, and I thought of a few that Grand-Mère would sing or talk about. I don't know if any of them are real or stories, but you and I both know that sometimes stories come to life if enough people believe in them. Maybe it's oral history storytelling, memories and thoughts passed down and changed here and there over time—or maybe it's all just lessons mixed with imagination.

I'm just jotting down one I remembered here, but I can send you more as I think of them. I'm sure plenty more will wiggle free from my mind as we continue on south. I hope you're doing well, Mandy.

Your friend,

Marie Lambeau



SWAMP DEVILS

Grand-Mère used to sing me to sleep with a tune about these little monsters when we lived in her cabin. The critters are repelled by a special blue light, but I'm not sure how light is supposed to stop a swarming, shrieking pack of swamp devils, but I know we always had a jar with the blue light around during certain times of the year, to take it we needed to go to the outhouse. The devils don't open doors or windows, I guess, but will go through something already open or jump out at you in the open without protection.

I've never seen a swamp devil myself, but Grand-Mère would say that just means the lights are working. The devils are supposed to be nasty little creatures that look somewhere between a well-fed, round-bellied child and a vulture or a lizard. They're always hunching over on their long legs, and have beady, glowing yellow eyes and wide mouths of needle-sharp teeth. Their arms are long, too, and tipped in

razor-sharp talons just like their feet. They're as pale and grey as the bayou mist in the morning.

The lights themselves are made by putting these tiny blue glow-bugs in a jar. You need exactly two to a jar—no more, no less. Have to cover the top with a cloth that air can get through for them. I've heard them called a few names, usually blue fireflies is common enough, but Grand-Mère called them Moon Luminaries. The little things go absolutely out of their minds for honey and other sweets, like maple syrup. You can only keep them for a time, though, else they get sad eventually and their lights go out. But if you let them go, they'll sure enough come back after a time if you treated them right.

