

Vouido
(version 1.5)

“I just don’t think,” she said as the sun clawed through the blinds to leave a scar, golden, on her cheek, “things are going to work out.”

It was a cliché except . . . clichés weren’t supposed to hurt so much.

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

His stomach clenched, twisted. In his mind various alternatives: laughter, tinged with self-loathing bitterness and the knowledge that *of course* she would leave him; rage mixing with authority and the feeling of power as he slapped her; tears, those same tears she saw as evidence of his weakness—those same tears that *he* saw as evidence of his weakness; moving in, suddenly and surely, like a movie star, to kiss her, the strength of his passion and love for her breaking down all her barriers and fears of intimacy until she embraced him and returned the kiss, desperate for his love.

But those were not the actions of Theodore Woodrich. Instead . . .

“Oh.”

And she walked away.

“This ain’t no hippy, happy Wiccan magic, chile, this is *Vodou*.”

Her voice was cracked leather. She was old and age sat in her eyes like a grinning dinosaur, all sharp teeth and no mercy. Yet, her dark skin was smooth, lined only around her mouth and eyes. From laughter? He couldn’t imagine this woman ever laughing.

“We is dealing with the Spirits here. *Loas*. Even the good’uns ain’t what you might call *nice*.”

His mouth was dry, the palms of his hands wet. An urge to giggle swept over him as the smell of incense and herbs and something dark, earthy and wet wrapped around his head and the candles shivered. His day off from the book store and what the hell was he doing in New York, in this dark den of beads and spells; animal parts suspended in canning jars full of formaldehyde—darkly expectant and waiting for the proper ceremony to unleash that invisible, organic energy called magic.

He didn’t even believe in this crap.

Just what the hell was he doing?

He wiped his hands on his jeans, tried to muster some spit into his mouth (failed) and croaked out a quick “I understand.”

Swinging with Tarzan. Lean, taut muscles and sharp senses: an illusion of power and control in contradiction to his soft, pre-adolescent and fat (though *chunky* was always the word used) body. Quick with a ray-gun and a whiz at piloting spaceships. Able to wield a sword at Conan's side, use magic like Gandolph. Theodore's childhood was one of retreat and fantasy. From nothing in particular, merely everything in general. His parents were kind, unusually function for the time and culture. A kid brother who could always be convinced to take the bad guys side when playing with Star Wars action figures . . . so, even for a kid brother, he wasn't all *that* bad. Looking back, Theodore had no major complaints, remembered no traumatic events, and had rather cheery memories from his youth.

Yet, he had spent most of it alone, joyfully locked within the worlds of science fiction and fantasy. Aware, somehow, that when he grew older, such safety would no longer suffice. He played no sports, had no interest in taunting girls—in fact, he liked being with girls more than with the boys he knew. The boys with their games of cruelty and violence. And around others, Theodore could not help being a gentle, nurturing young boy.

And a part of him knew there was something wrong with that.

Madame Cecilia's smile told him that she understood, quite fully, that he did not, in fact, understand. The bangles on her arm, silver and seemingly potent in the candlelight, clinked as she dismissed his understanding or lack thereof with a wave of her arm.

"Don't matter none. I's the one doin' the magic, so I's the one that bears the consequences. Mostly."

There was the smallest hint of compassion in her voice, like a whispered promise made by a lover in the dark, after sex and half-asleep, but as she said –

"You have the money"

– it was gone, and the goosebumps he'd been ignoring grew shivery strong with the realization that even if this voodoo shit wasn't real, it was really happening. He was going to pay this old woman with the reptile eyes to place a love spell on Christine in hopes of getting her back in his life. The pointless sadness of the situation almost brought tears. His mind sped toward the various ethical dilemmas rising, like a concrete wall of reason blocking the rush of desire and need, but he twisted away, veering chaotically into a dark denial of morality.

"Yes."

Choking, face frozen, an eight year old Theodore shouted stop. Alex, the cold-blue-eyed and red-headed bully of the street, laughed and plunged Theodore's head once again into the snowbank. The snow and ice stung like nettles, piercing the fantasies running through his mind. Fantasies of summoning his strength and pushing back,

twisting until he had Alex in a head lock, shoving that stupid bully's face, not into the snow, but into the concrete sidewalk, breaking nose and teeth until that stupid, stupid, stupid bully left him alone. But, choking and weak, all he could do was shout, then say and then finally whisper, over and over again, stop.

"You have the materials?"

The hair from the brush she had used the night before she left him. He had not touched that brush for three months, not until he had made this appointment. The photo of them together, her smile bright and unguarded, his arm around her, her hand on his leg. His breath was rapid, but slowing as he accepted his course of action.

"Yes."

"We begin."

"My Teddy," Christine had said, as moonlight traced their naked bodies and she lay with her head on his shoulder, fingers rubbing, almost absently, his left nipple. The words electrified him, singing along his nerves and dancing upon his skin. *Hers*, he thought and expected fear but found none, simply a new vibration of thought that coursed through his body like wild mustangs through an arroyo. *Hers* as he seemed to fall into place, that one word the final piece of the jigsaw puzzle of Theodore Woodrich. The moon suddenly seemed to shiver and smile, but perhaps that was only Theodore. He did smile, then, and let out a breath that seemed held for all his life. *Hers*. Not ownership, but possession, a rightness, a claim upon himself which he gladly offered. *Hers*, he thought, *yes. Yes. I am hers.*

He had met Christine at a party ten months earlier. She was dancing to an Aerosmith song and he watched her, trying not to stare too intently, and forgot to breath for a very long time. Her movements were utterly devoid of pretense, her dance for no one but herself and he thought to himself "She is very beautiful."

"Oh, I loved him, don't get me wrong. I know I'm an idiot for loving him, what with the fact that I was getting drunk to deal with having sex with him for god's sake but at the same time I would get angry when he would come over and want to watch t.v. instead of . . . you know. I was so stupid. But somehow, I . . . did love him."

She was drinking a white russian, her hazel eyes glazed slightly as she leaned against the wall. He was sipping a Guinness, worried about his stomach's reaction, but unable to resist having some sign of social acceptance in his hands. Theodore listened as she spoke of her last ex and wondered how a woman so intelligent (BS in Accounting, MFA in creative writing, running her own bar and published in several very reputable

literary journals) could give so much of herself to such an . . . asshole. It was only later, several months after she had left him, when he began to understand.

That night, she danced. He watched. They sat on the kitchen floor and laughed at stupid jokes, talked about the media's culpability for anorexia, discovered that they both loved the novels of Sherri S. Tepper and Robert Heinlein, sat sometimes very quiet and watched the people around them, spoke of childhoods, and smiled at each other. A lot. There was a levelness to her, a strength which seemed to soothe his nervousness and self-doubt. She made him feel comfortable and adventurous at the same time, as if, with her, he *could* be and do all the things he'd ever imagined. And, late into the night, when most of the people had left and she leaned against his shoulder, yawning widely then smiling, he fell madly and somewhat idiotically in love with her.

He followed Madame Cecelia into another room. This one was dark and narrow. Dominating the back wall was an ornate altar festooned with religious icons, candles, incense and amulets, a chaos of reds and golds and dark browns. In front of the altar was a tapestry, dark red, embroidered with a gold heart surrounded by lines and symbols and on each edge of this were four more candles, red as blood. The room seemed thick with something more than incense and he coughed, lightly, three times. The bent figure of Madame Cecelia went to the candles and lit them quickly.

"First off, we calls on Papa Legba, the Guardian of the Crossroads."

She poured a thick liquid into a small, silver bowl and set it in the center of the altar, brushing a necklace of rosary beads out of the way.

This is stupid, he thought. Stupid, stupid and really stupid as he felt himself sink in to the gentle murmur of her voice. Speaking French—or was it some Creole dialect, he didn't know—her voice seemed to lose all its rough edges, smoothing into a susurrating pulse, easing his breath and the shaking of his hands even as it crept inside his head, making him somehow afraid. But the emptiness that was Christine was large, devouring and he swallowed hard, thinking about all the times she had berated him, silently, for not making decisions, for not taking charge. Well, for once, he thought, for once.

The flames licked and spat at the thick air.

Before Christine there had been Nancy. Dark and disturbed, his first girlfriend, his first lover. Her eyes full of sharp edges and despair. One evening, coming home from work, he found her curled in the bathroom, vomit splattering her t-shirt and drying on the tiled floor. She was crying and, in a thin, strained voice like a stretched wire about to break, she whispered "help me, help me." The bottle of vodka he had won at a raffle the year before and had only opened once for a solitary drink on the previous New Year's Eve, was empty.

He cleaned her, put her in fresh boxers and t-shirt and carried her to the bed, all the while whispering “I’m here, shhh, it’s all right now, everything’s going to be all right.”

“You,” she coughed, “weren’t here.”

She had set him on fire, this tragic woman who seemed some kind of beautifully wounded bird. Set him on fire with a passion that frightened him. A passion that denied self-control, a desire like fever, sweeping over him and leaving him shaking and weak. The need to touch her, to be inside of her body, to hear her laughter, to kiss her tears and, especially, to save her, began to erase all the boundaries of himself. Struggling to maintain, he fell deeper and deeper into her madness and self-destruction. Like a dog chasing a car, he tried to catch her pain with his kindness and love, but her self-hatred moved too fast. In the end, he gave up, panting and exhausted and hating himself for not saving her, for not being able to endlessly give of himself. He found himself hating her need, hating his desire for her need. Hating the way she would look at him, the sharpness in her eyes cutting him into a paper god. He grew tired of her tears and the accusations and the pointless jealousy. He would lay awake at night, feeling her feed upon his soul. Her hunger was not diminishing, rather it grew with every part of himself that he offered. He knew he had to leave her. Knew that he would die, in some fashion, if he didn’t. Despite his love, despite his care, despite his promises, he did, eventually, leave her.

And a part of him knew there was something wrong with that.

“Erzulic Freda. The Patron Goddess of Lovers. We call her next.”

The air smelled sweet and sour, like rotting Chinese food. The smoke from the candles caught at his eyes, bringing tears.

“Place the photograph in the center of the heart.”

He sat, cross-legged to one side of the tapestry, he pulled the picture from his shirt pocket and stared at it for a moment, trying to decipher the hieroglyphs of the past, trying to understand the etchings of loss carved in this frozen moment of happiness. He failed, seeing only a lost joy, a lost magic in his life, a lost happiness, not for only him, but for them both. This time, his tears needed no coaxing from the candles. He placed the picture where Madame Cecelia indicated. She held out a vague shape wrapped in cloth.

“Take this. Unwrap it and place it on the photograph.”

For a moment, vision clouded by tears and smoke, mind racing from the chill of power and mystery, he envisioned himself unwrapping the cloth to reveal a still beating heart. A cramp squeezed his gut like a vise. The cloth fell to the floor, revealing a small, copper bowl. He placed it upon the photograph and, following her directions, put strands of Christine’s hair into the bowl. Then watched as Madame Cecelia’s shaking, harsh-veined hands poured a small amount of black, viscous liquid, smelling of old blood

and molasses, over the hair. The room began to fade into a beating, pulsating sensation and Theodore watched his own hand, as if it were a stranger's, fumblingly light a match and put flame to the mix of liquid and hair. The old woman's voice stretched and distanced itself, as if she were moving away down a very long, narrow hallway.

I don't . . .

A thought, something vaguely important, flared in his mind, but was consumed by the acrid stench of burning hair and the thickening of the air into something more than mere candle or incense smoke. Shivering, he hugged himself.

She . . . I . . .

focus

The sound knifed through the air but he couldn't remember hearing the old woman actually speak the word.

focus on her focus

Closed his eyes and with unsurprising clarity, her face stared back. Months of doing little else but focusing on her gave him an instant ability to recall the texture of her skin, the slight crookedness of her teeth, the strand of hair that would, despite any attempt at neatness, leap gleefully to hang, solitary and mischievous down her cheek; the smell of her skin after showering, like a light lime sherbet, the soft brightness in her eyes as she looked at him, bodies bathed in moonlight, hearts beating double-time as they came together, marveling at the synthesis of flesh – it was all there, the slightly off-center triangle of moles on her lower back, the exact arc of her eyelashes, the sharp, pleasantly vinegar taste of her armpits, all inside his mind as outside his body the air grew hot and the burning hair curled, stank. His body became rigid as stone, muscles screaming with tension as he focused, desperately willing the power to be real, the spell to be power, the real to be love and his love to be power.

The look in her eyes chilled him, even as hot tears ran down his face. They sat, not touching, naked on his bed. The condom still on his flaccid and betraying penis. She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them and would not look at him.

"What did I do wrong?"

Her voice stung, tasting of bitter dandelions. He swallowed hard, his neck tensing with fear and self-hatred. Even this, he thought, even this.

"Nothing."

"But we were . . . you were . . ."

She turned away, shoulder-blades sharp on her back, like angel's wings.

" . . . *inside of me.*"

He heard himself muttering platitudes about the position, or the condom, or that he was tired or . . . any number of possible reasons. None of which she seemed to

believe. None of which *he* believed. Still, the words flowed from his mouth and he paid no attention to them, thinking only there is something wrong with me. Again and again, there is something wrong with me. He tried not to cry. He tried to rub her shoulders, she pulled away. He wanted to touch her, to go down on her, to erase the failure of his performance with fingers and tongue, to show that his desire was still present, still real.

"I'm hungry," she said, leaving the bed and pulling on a pair of gray sweatpants and a green Purdue University sweatshirt. She left the room without looking at him.

Removing the condom, he threw it in the wastebasket and put on his boxers and jeans, then collapsed again on the bed. He felt so very small. Like a boy pretending he was a man. His stomach churned as he heard, from the kitchen, the clang of metal pans and the slamming of cupboard doors. Why, why, why, he thought. Why . . . what happened?

" . . . inside of me."

The words echoed, snapping in his mind like steel wires.

The ceremony changed pitch, shifting to a high vibration, making his skin tingle. He felt sharp and yet dully aware of what was happening. Smoke from the candles coalesced into a single, sinuous form. Tasting blood, he realized he was furiously biting his lower lip. A phantom form slid through the room and he placed more strands of hair into the copper bowl. Watching them curl and burn he listened vaguely to the foreign words of the old woman. Her eyes were tightly shut, her voice a growl laced with a slick fluid of power. She seemed much taller, fuller, more present. The smoke shape moved reptilian and stroked his cheeks, burning like candlewax. Breathing hard, his mouth hung open and nausea thrilled his body. Something rolled into him, tickling his penis, filling his stomach. It was a red feeling, with the texture of stormclouds and the taste of sex. Instantly he knew that this was what power felt like. Real power, not the power of imagination or suspending his disbelief, not the power of stories or literary magic or illusory journeys through space and time . . . no, this was power like that of fire to burn, or razors to cut, or words to injure or, yes, the power of love to kill. Breath shallow and quick, vision swimming with the bright darts of hyperventilation, he repeated, nine times, the words he was told:

"Erzulic Freda, lead the one astray, lead her back to the path of my love. Erzulic Freda, lead the one astray, lead her back to the path of my love."

Nine times and with each word, the room coagulated, breath came hard, skin felt raw and a dark light blossomed within him. A presence filled him, alien and dark, but flecked with brightness and an almost lunatic joy. His muscles quaked and the need to defecate spiked through his shaking body.

He awoke, her hands stroking his sweat-streaked face. Her voice suffused with care as she said "are you ok?"

A bad dream. His body still shook, images clung like spider's webs, sticking to his retinas even as the jaundiced streetlight seeped in through the blinds and held the darkness at bay. Christine looked intently as he swallowed, nearly choked, coughed and swallowed again.

"A bad dream."

"Well," her voice lightened, an effort to make him smile, "I know *that*, silly."

He smiled. Briefly.

"What was it?"

"I don't . . . it's gone. I don't remember."

He did remember, and the sour taste in his mouth was one of fear. He had seen Christine running, from a far distance, and there was something wrong with her eyes. Dream memories of anger filled him and he had wished her to fall. She did. Falling to a ground that moved down and down, falling soundlessly, falling hard, falling with something wrong with her eyes. And in a dream jump-cut, he was standing above her, laughing as he looked down. She lay, crumpled and at very wrong angles, face down. Her breath rasped thick, like a clogged sink. With glowing hands and under a bruise-purple sky, he turned her over to see the maggots weeping from the spaces where once were her eyes. His laughter turned to screams, or his screams to laughter. Something slithered up his leg.

Then he awoke.

"Well, it's over now, you're ok."

She kissed him lightly. He shivered and after she was asleep, he lay awake for a very long time, silent tears wetting the pillow.

Nine times and with each word, Madam Cecelia wavered, shifted as if underwater and through a trick of the licking flames, he saw beneath her, beyond her to an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of bright teeth and dark eyes demanding blood. Smiles wide, incorporeal faces gazed at him, judging and resentful even as they submitted to human will. He felt himself as filth, the meat of his body stinking and disease-ridden compared to the energy existence of these gods, these *loas*.

Children screaming under a bright blue, recess sky. Fifth grade boys: Jim, Steve and (yes) Theodore had chased Marcy around the playground, Jim finally catching her, pinning her down and kissing her on the mouth (no, no tongue). Jim looked up, his hands tight around Marcy's wrists, a smile cutting his freckled face as he said "come on" and Theodore watched as Steve leaned over and kissed the girl's mouth. "Come on." So quickly it happened and Theodore moved in, his chin grazing Jim's arm as he leaned down and kissed her. She tasted of salt, like sweat, and a little like peanut butter. She

had very light gray eyes, wide open, speaking silently as he leaned over, very dark hair surrounding very smooth, white skin.

Over the years, the actual kiss was forgotten, lost in moments of a clenched stomach and the voice in Theodore's head that had whispered, "wrong, wrong, wrong." But those eyes . . . He had never forgotten that girl's name or her eyes. Or the voice in his head, after Jim let her up and she ran away, asking "what have you done?"

Nine times and with each word he grew hard, feeling Christine (but not Christine) press her body to his, taking him inside, interpenetrating him with a force like hot wires, electric rain. Burning air clawed down his throat, filling his lungs with the weight and pressure of power. He felt a cry rise up . . . but not a cry of despair or pain. Rather, the cry was an order, a dominating shout that demanded voice. And it frightened him. Yet, the burning seemed to cauterize his psyche, scarring the timidity and gentleness into a new configuration of rough desire. His back aching with tension, bowels heavy as lead, Theodore felt a red pulse translate itself through his body, emerging as a sharp smile, lips pulled back feral, teeth bared. The smell of flesh stung his eyes, the taste of blood flooded his mouth. Smoke circled, struck like a snake, circled again. The old woman stood, muscles hard over wiry body and her voice tripped, faltered and then moved lower, a deep growling bass that shook his bones. Her hands: claws. Her eyes: open wounds. The smoke circled, burning, burned, circling.

A Sunday afternoon hobbled along, crippled time. Christine would not look at him and he could hear the just-short-of-whining tone creep into his voice.

"You said you'd come over when you got back from the club."

He had left the party when everyone had decided to go to a dance club, needing space and silence. Needing to be away from the feeling that he was somehow failing her. Again.

"Oh. I did?"

She moved. The metal futon creaked. Time sat down for a well deserved rest.

"I . . . I kissed Mark last night."

He almost smiled. Almost. The irony was that, as they sat, not touching and with a barbed-wire distance between them, he had been cutting himself to little bleeding, guilty pieces because all night he had lain in his bed, picturing her fucking Mark. Knowing what she was like when drunk, knowing that some spider-like, dark and prickly thing had crept between them at some point in the last few weeks, knowing . . . no, not knowing, but feeling that on some level the hurts they inflicted on each other were becoming less accidental, more venomous. He had hated himself for his thoughts, wanted to scratch them from his distrustful brain, excise them like a tumor. He almost smiled. Almost.

Time, asthmatic and slow, limped on again. There were tears. He begged: a cotton-candy weakness in his voice, pink and nauseating as the words “please don’t leave me” drooled out of his mouth. There was a gaping idiocy in his tone, a pathetic quality that made her shudder and pull further away. He knew that there was something very wrong with how he was dealing with this. He knew, fought, failed and finally stopped speaking.

They had sex. It was like chewing on coffee grinds, or smelling rotten eggs. He felt cold, chilled and took no pleasure in the act. It was hard sex and mean, but he felt something shift and unfold inside of himself when she came, as if her orgasm opened a door to something like power. I did this, he thought, I did this: made you tremble, made you scream, I did this to you even after you betrayed me, you . . . you . . .

The taste of copper and a dark thing skittered in his mind, he quickly shut the door. They lay in bed, she fell asleep. Time vomited itself from dying day to thick night.

“Erzulic Freda, lead the one astray, lead her back to the path of my love.”

The question was, just who was astray?

He felt raw. His insides scoured by gravel and asphalt as the smoke curled, sneered and began to dissipate. The sharp, burning odor relented slightly, allowing him space to breath. He coughed. Tears made the room swim and twinkle as Madame Cecelia grinned: rapacious and serrated. Her black eyes sucking the light from the candles. Bile crept up his throat and he forced down the bitter taste, stomach shaking.

“It be done chile. Loas’ll work now to bring her to you. They’s workin’ to make it happen but no time set, you understand? Could be that it’s tomorrow, could be it’s next week or next month. Or could be it’s even next year. No ways to know. But she be back to you, that’s for sure. She be back.”

He coughed, wiped tears and tried to stand. Nearly fell as he realized both of his feet were numb, asleep. A dark whisper fluttered in his head: what have you done? He felt sick and ashamed but there was a residue of red power beating through his heart, hands and head. He smiled. Could feel the darkness where once was innocence. He knew that if seen in a mirror, his new smile would be much the same, but melted slightly, less naïve, less open, less kind. Pins and needles began to chew into his feet as the circulation returned. The pain was welcome.

“You take yourself a moment. I’s be back to clean up then you go . . . and chile, what’s done is done and this here magic’s been done. No regrets.”

As she moved away, she seemed shrunken, collapsed in upon herself and devoid of the power she wielded mere moments ago. She turned, no kindness in her

dark eyes or yellow grin, appraising him like a piece of meat to see if he was muscle or fat. He nodded, she left.

No regrets? Always regrets. But about this?

He bent and retrieved the picture from beneath the bowl. Traced her trapped image with his fingers. Maybe it was the shadows thrown by the candles as they licked over the photograph. Maybe it was the remains of the incense smoking in his eyes. Maybe it was pounding blood in his skull threatening a migraine. Or maybe it was a reflection of his newfound smile, but looking at the photograph, he saw a darkness in her eyes. A darkness previously unnoticed. Looking closer, a haunted and somehow *wrong* expression lay upon his own image. Taken two months before she left, he realized she was gone long before she walked away. He never let himself know, really know that he *knew* she was unhappy. That he was unhappy, that they were . . . wrong. He laughed sharply, like a lizard regurgitating itself, finding his capacity for self-deceit almost funny.

What the fuck am I doing here?

Again, the sour-apple taste of bile crawled in his throat. He shook his head and nearly cried out as the blood boiled into his feet. I think I just wasted . . . no, not wasted I mean I don't expect this shit to work and Christine come knocking on my door when I get home, but still, there . . . I was . . . and his thoughts caught themselves up, tangled each other and his love turned anger, anger turned sadness, sadness turned grim recognition and they all twisted and turned above a fire of self-awareness. There had been more than moonlight and kisses between him and Christine. There had been spider-bites and razor-blades as well. Anger and miscommunication as well as softness and the taste of sex. He had forgotten too many moments, bad moments. But whatever had actually happened in this room—and it was most certainly *not* a congress of voodoo spirits called down to work a love potion on his ex-girlfiend—at the very least this little psychodrama had reminded him of the darkness that lay between himself and Christine. A curl of nearly dissipated incense smoke touched, lightly, his forehead and a thought flared: who are you to know, boy, what is real? Then gone as Theodore coughed and grinned. Fuck it. Fuck *her*. He was done with this shit. Really done.

Madame Cecelia returned and his time was up. At first, as he fumbled the photo into his pocket he muttered vague, uncomfortable words and would not look at her. He felt ashamed, dirty, the same feeling he had when buying porn from some old, gentle-looking woman who could have been his (or at least someone's) grandmother. But then he put on his new smile that chilled him even as it worked to spark some new vibration of energy within him. An energy that spit cold flames and doused him with an icy alive-ness. He looked at those dark eyes set in that wrinkled face, looked and for the first time saw in them a piece of darkness he had no desire to refute: not a blackness so much as a dark gray marbled with a fatty whiteness. Less a color than a texture. Not

innocent. Not nice. But his to be claimed through experience and through action. His laugh, though sharp, was less bitter.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“No chile, you not.”

The air outside was sharp, cool. He inhaled deeply, as if he hadn’t breathed in years.