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## Untitled

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# UNTITLED

Jasmine Settles

On my 25th birthday, I ate like a Queen. Dined like I hadn't before, and obviously, I hadn't, at least not in this capacity. *Cuisine: a style or quality of cooking; cookery.* In my opinion, Cuisine is a historical professor of any culture, land, sea, and colonizer. As a southerner, food makes sense. It makes whole of halves and is a proportionally scaled balancing act, like sweet tea to a salty palate. But this was my 25th, and my palate craved swamp water. As a lower Mason-Dixon resider and Bible Belt Rester, *food is life.* Food is essential to my identity and my ancestor's existence. So we eat and feel while existing. We taste and thrive while manifesting. And we never die because *food is life.*

We arrive six feet below sea level. There I am in the pages I've read, and all the texts are now loud and breathing a bold font that is crawling up my nostrils and down my spine. I rolled down the window to have to wind whisper to me, "about time... we have been waiting." The city, the infrastructure, the space, and the time all seem to stitch into one another, forming this new world made just for me to experience. A new home that I had never gone to but was revisiting. So now, in the land of feast.

It is time we eat.

We sat across from one another, anticipating nothing but the expectancy of easing hunger. When my order proposed itself, nothing could make me happier than I was at that very moment. Not even Jesus delivering it himself could make me salivate any harder. Beautifully plated, it rested in front of me, intimidating my virgined taste buds. Grinning from the plate, a fried soft-shelled crab floated and reminded me how batter, grease, and high heat make a lot of things....well, everything taste like a *delicacy.*

This crab, well let's call him... "*him*"? Him, only because I am conditioned to think all things are instinctively male, like God. So, let's give this crab a name. I believe there is a significance in naming things that were taken from their home, family, and environment. And in this case, I would assume, it was sacrificed for the sake of this text. At least I hope, sometimes purpose is tricky like that. Yet and still, I hold a

deep sympathy for things that experience trauma in this manner. So, in honor of, I will address the fellow formerly known as *him*, as Freshwater Bayou Baby. This Freshwater Bayou Baby was accompanied by a bath of long grain rice, hopefully, picked by well-paid hands. Slave labor is still legal. *Still*. This rice and Freshwater Bayou Baby both sat in a bath of:

- *preheated butter*
- *sweetly browned rue*
- *sautéd bouquet of the holy trinity*
- *drenched in shrimp stalk*
- *stirred with the power of steamboat paddles*
- *simmered with the added remains of other Bayou Babies*

All of this was blended with the original recipe of seasonings and spices that are buried in the mandibles of someone's ancestors, possibly mine. Twenty-five years after my mother gave me to the world, my current state of existence is about a foot below sea level. The aromas here notified my senses that they were crossing into Cajun customs, and the feeling of a spiced heated history I had only seen in font and photo was now living. Near the end of my meal, I am filled. Capsaicin attacks my taste buds, but I am in delight, and I am at peace knowing that the foreign battle in my mouth feels like home, and at home, you become reminded of your past life. The menu calls it *Blue Crab Étouffée* for twenty-three dollars. I call it *Priceless, Casa, Maison*.

Its heat over-bared my tongue. I mentally assured myself I was accustomed to this type of heat, but I wasn't. My palate was underdeveloped due to misplacement of home and body. My track record for spicy food topped at Memphis styled Hot, and what's a hotwing to handpicked spices? Even, "Is it that hot? But you love hot foods", from the voice across the table couldn't provide me with assurance enough. It made me think jokingly that maybe the ancestors made it this way to keep massa from wanting the only meal they could make at the time, but massa wouldn't want it, he had already eaten. I chuckled to myself; maybe, you did too reading that. After guzzling the last of my swamp pop, I asked for forgiveness for not being able to finish all of my spiced rue and rice. The ancestors understood.

### *Hot Enough to Melt Sugar*

The walk back to the hotel was more vibrant than the walk there. The moon was out, and that meant people were charged and charging. We slept in *55.67 percent* of the moonlight that night, and my soul had rested in its bones for the first time.

The following day in mid-heat of the summer, I sweated profusely in the middle of a plantation. There I learned that even in my humor, I sometimes assume correctly. The tour guide explained how the enslaved would work in this same type of heat, and how it was *hot enough to melt sugar*. They worked sun-up until sun-down, often leaving food to be the salvation at the end of a horrendous work day. The workers of this land, the hands buried in this dirt still held spices in them, because *food is life*.

Gumbo and Étouffée were meals for those enslaved, pieces of a whole made from scraps. Dinner wasn't brought in their suitcases from their homeland, because, well, slave-ships didn't include a carry on or boarding luggage. They only carried what they had in their bones and braids. Now they were catching the scraps that massa would throw out the back door depending on what he could afford. And decades later, I ate. I loved and appreciated a history of suffering and surviving on scraps because it tasted like I'd known how to cook with sweat and stir with backbones. My history could now be sold back to me as a delicacy, and I devour it as only something delicate should be. With Honor. In 25 years of living, I was still being reintroduced to a people that codified my current existence. I may not have met them or lived their life, but at least I got to eat at their table of sacracy and know what this bondage tasted like.

*Tasted like...*

Fried battered covering crabs' legs and torso. The Mississippi pushed them this way, and I could taste it. The Mississippi had pushed me this way, so I could taste it. The Natchez trail now ran in me. On the way back to the city, we passed through swamps and even saw a gator or Louisiana deer on the side of the road. The vegetation reminded me of this movie that someone dear to my current knowing and understanding of New Orleans and myself, had introduced to me. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, one of the most beloved movies I had ever seen. I thought of Hushpuppy and her father in that storm hoping for the waters to be gracious because leaving their home was no option. They were the swamps. They were the bayou babies, and something wanted to take them from their home, batter them, and fry them into the conformity of modernity. Modernity was pushing them. Levees are always damning to someone. Always. During the creation of New Orleans colonizers did not understand or intend to understand the mobility of the natives, so removing them from the land and from the most abundant resource they had, water, they inevitably forced them into permanency. This permanency removed the people of the swamps and shoved the waters to kill, but Hushpuppy and the dwellers of the swamps made home of it all regardless.

In one of the most memorable scenes, little Hushpuppy finds her strength within herself. She holds a freshwater bayou baby in her hand as her father encourages her to “beast it.” “Beast it!” he yells, “BEAST IT HUSHPUPPY!” Hushpuppy rips several legs off of the crab and sucks the meat and juices from its innards. She then throws the carcass down and stood on top of the table, arms flexed, screaming through the depths of the swamps in her accomplishment. Her surrounded family cheers her on. She had found her strength in her fingers, and life in her hands. She had found food.

### *Feet Need Food Too*

Now back in the city, we walk the streets of French and Spanish labeled cobblestones. The richness of New Orleans battered and covered my legs and torso. The streets have mastered the art of grabbing hold to your skin and sinking into it. I accepted it. The upbeat music conjured streetwalkers’ feet to move, and everything that was there was supposed to be there, for me. Months before knowing that I would be finishing my 24th lap around the sun, miles below sea level, a red book cover called to me in a local bookstore. It was titled *Voodoo Queen*. Voodoo had always been something of different indifference to me. I would tell myself, “I don’t believe in it, but I don’t play with it either, because it can only hurt you if you believe in it.” Which holds some truth but the point was I was lying to myself about not believing in something that I obviously believed in. Voodoo is real. It can hurt you, and it can also heal you. In the story, Marie Laveau was the Queen, The High Priestess of the land. I searched for her through those streets, in people, in buildings, on signs but I only saw pages of books I had read. Eventually, I realized she was not to be found in the physical state, and I began to understand that it was meant for me to be in quest of her knowledge of the spiritual world as it worked simultaneously with the physical and metaphysical world. So, we walked, and I continued to see page after page after page. I saw the square where the enslaved celebrated on Sunday and where Marie conjured on Sunday nights. The place where church was created. Later that night, we made way to Frenchman Street. Each building held a beat of its own. It held a specific service for whichever feet needed it. A rhythm, a tune, a word. Many pairs of moving feet with joyous spirits. These buildings encapsulated life beyond death while providing nourishment for the soul and food for the spirit. Dying was not an option, for we had music. Dancing became the heart as the music pumped it with life. The movements I observed were feet begging to be fed. This is when I saw Marie. She was in the bodies of these spirits, dancing, feeling, and loving. She was in the drums, the trumpets, the sax. I felt the spirit of New Orleans as it thrived

miles below sea level, and she was in it.

Eventually, we were found by the music that our feet craved as it babbled and as we stumbled across the cobblestones. It forced us to peak our heads in. Some old-school song was playing, that I am sure everyone in there felt I was too young to know. I walked in and let the server seat me. She must have known it had been my birthday because she gave me the best seat in the house. She placed me just to the right of the band. I could see all of the members ready to cook what my soul had come here for. They played old-school, even older-school, and some newer school. But it did not matter to me. My feet wanted to move, and my heart wanted to smile, so that is what they did. The dance floor had now made room for life and joy. The more I danced the closer to the music I got. I was close enough to smell the cologne and perfume of the band members while they were cooking, stirring, and strumming notes.

In all my years, I had romanticized New Orleans. Laid with it in text. Cuddled with it in chapters. But this. This was different. This was my own work. My own creations. My own writings conjuring outside the bounds of my imagination. All of our ideas need space to breathe. To exist. To live. And that is what New Orleans was doing for me, allowing me to live while existing, taste and thrive while manifesting because *food is life*.

### *What Is Freedom Food?*

The next day we scurry out during daylight. Trying to keep our eyes as non-touristy as possible but for me it was impossible. I could not stop reading and writing and imagining all at once. Again, like the day before it was time to eat. We stopped at a small family owned Jamaican restaurant, that from the outside look exactly how I imagined a family owned Jamaican restaurant to look. Nice and cozy. On the inside, I felt like the menu knew I was coming because I wanted everything my eyes could read. Boswell's had a menu full of Jamaica's most exquisite cuisine. We sat across from one another again, anticipating something this time. To be fed, to be recharged because *food is life*. Once our orders were placed, we waited, because there is nothing "fast-food" about the process of preparing a history with hands molded from the same dirt as the food that was grown. Soon the waiter brought over our beverages and plates. Ox tails, callaloo, jerk chicken and rice sat next to each other, but all smothered together with the gravy of the oxtails. As a side dish, I ate beef patties for the first time. The crust on the beef patties flaked in my lap, and I ate that too. I drank a handmade spiced punch, the sugar from the sugar cane coated my lips and palate, while the callaloo seemed to clean my teeth.

This meal felt historical, but not as historical as the Blue Crab Étouffée I'd had the day before—which I equated to my lack and spars reading of Jamaican history—as well as lack of education on Jamaica and its people. So, I ate and was educated while being fulfilled.

The owners had the TVs set to a news station. Trump was writing his name and writing a history of how he would be the president to create an immigration ban that would deny those who wanted freedom into America. He would ban the people from which he considered “Muslim Majority” countries. These were the countries that he felt posed a “terrorist threat”—Libya, Iran, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, also randomly North Korea and Venezuela. Then I began to think how I am sitting in a moment of history. I imagine the ancestors of the people who are being denied access into a country that holds the “image of prosperity and progression”, and I wonder, *What did they eat in time of protest? What did their palates crave as food for life? Did it taste like freedom? What does any form of freedom taste like?* Then I think about my children learning of this moment in history that I am sitting in and them asking me, *Mommy, what were you doing at this time?* And guiltily, I will only be able to tell them. Nothing. I was simply enjoying a culture's history with my mouth, a form in which I chose to explore it. I take an even larger gulp of guilt. I wash the thought down with more punch because partaking in a lands cuisine is the closest thing to freedom I know. The sweetness of the sugar cane punch reminded me of sugar plantations in Jamaica. The hands of that soil still found the right balance of sweet and tang in this tropical punch. And I recall when I read how the Beckfords had written their own history on running a sugar estate in Jamaica. I could never forget their horrid stories of raping the land and its women. Taking the enslaved for all they had and negating the fact that all things that are rooted must be uplifted by an even more powerful force. The enslaved aboriginals would take back the dirt that created them, in a rebellious act of freedom. They set fire to the sugar fields and homes of those who enslaved them. And I can taste the smoke leaving the land in the barbecued jerked chicken. The ox that ran in fear now drenched in gravy over rice and this history was delicate to taste. I was nourished with the idea that in some way or by some bipartisan union down my ancestral lineage I was to know what that bondage and freedom tasted like. I was then left to question, *What will I feed my children? What nourishes them in a country that bans anything it cannot comprehend or colonize? What will they eat for life?* I gulp more punch. Which enslaved will I be? I take a bigger bite. Which freedom will I prepare? But guiltily I eat. Finishing my plate without any conclusions — for now, I was only able to exist and hope to never die because *food is life.*

*Leon Sings During Grace*

I leave New Orleans a year older than that of which I'd arrived. I didn't feel any older, but I did feel something. I can't specify what I felt, but "full" would suffice. We packed our rental to head back to Memphis. To head back home. I'd felt like I was leaving a part of myself in New Orleans, and I was. I also felt like I was taking new pieces of a whole back to the only home I knew. On the trip back, the playlist seemed essential. Personally, I could have rode in silence for 6 hours with the windows down and surveying the land. Interrogating it for all it had to tell me about itself. All the secrets and people it held, but instead, we listened to music. I reminisced on the food I'd encountered and how fried Alligator did taste a lot like chicken—seriously—and I'd had it for the first time in New Orleans. The place I felt I should have had it. Then breaking the internal act of organizing my newly created memories, I was played a song. A song I had never heard, but knew I was supposed to listen to it right then. As we followed the Natchez trail back home, I knew I was supposed to be introduced to Lisa Sawyer. I became immediately envious, because *she was born in New Orleans...Louisiana and she was granted with the name Lisa Sawyer, with long hair she had the skin of the sweetest praline.* And I thought how beautiful, how sweet. I wanted to be as beautiful as Lisa Sawyer, and I wanted to be sang about as loudly as she had been. *She had a grandmother who was Indian, and her mother name was Eartha.* As Leon continued to sing of his mother, I envied her because she would never die. She would forever live in the soul food ascending from her son's lips. She would feed the nostalgic tunes created by Bridges, and I would sing this song to my children one day while serving them a seasoned plate with a side of sweet tea. Then I will tell them how food is life, and how the Mississippi carries a lot of it, including us. And we will say our grace in hopes that they get to touch the soil of New Orleans and eat at a table of sacracry just like their mother years ago. They will know all the things that nourish and feed; while devouring all the things they can call home, all the things that they can find freedom in, and at grace they will pray to never die because *food is life.*

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**WINNER of the 2020 BARRY HANNAH PRIZE**

Of "Untitled," judge Kiese Laymon says: "Untitled" is dripping with evocative deeply southern sincerity. The piece knows and wonders about food, knows and wonders about culture, and most importantly it lingers and wanders through our journeys to liberation. It's a we piece, shrouded in "I" clothes. It made me want to read, write, eat and wail."



Based in Memphis, Tennessee, Jasmine Settles is a writer and creative director. She is currently a graduate student at The University of Memphis, where she will be obtaining a Master's Degree in Literature with a concentration in African American Literature. She is also blessed to create work as the Executive Artistic Director of HomeGrown LLC, a production company based in Memphis, TN which serves as a creative space for local artists. As Artistic Director, she is also the co-writer and co-producer of *Women's Water*, which is a staged choreographed performance piece that takes the audience on a journey of acknowledging the presence of water throughout their life.