Songs of Leaving

by Peter Crowther

And I saw the dead, great and small alike . . .
Revelation 21

The final ships go up reaching for the stars in the closing days of what is to be the last winter of the world.

They ride interlocking plumes of power and steam like anxious fingers of smoky fire, colored sunset orange and cornfield yellow in the still afternoon. And each of them belches out a tumultuous roar, a hymn of steam and gasoline, a cadence of harmony and discordance, a syncopated symphony of regret and anticipation.

A song of leaving.

They have already left from Islamabad and Jerusalem, these ships—or ships like them . . . like them in intent if not in appearance—and from the arid wastes outside of Beijing and the heat-shimmering flats of Florida; from the snow-covered plains surrounding Moscow and the scorched tundra of Kenya. From a thousand thousand places, the ships have lifted into the sky in these tired days, with the distant horizon darkened not only by their sheer number but also by the approaching asteroid.

The towering silver points of the final ships rise to hit the clouds and then puncture them, pulling them down and around their midriffs, bellies bulging with the almost-last people of Earth, their pinpoint faces turned to the grimy windows, acceleration pulling at muscle, sinew and flesh as they watch the cities and the meadows fall behind, and the endless gray ribbons of highway and the veiny drifts of water drop down and down until they are at first partially obscured by the clouds and then completely obliterated by swirling whiteness.

On the ground, silent faces—some alone, some huddled in groups—also watch as the last ships dwindle in the azure blue, growing smaller until they are no longer ships but merely glittering shadows, and then distant needles and then, at last, merely the tiniest specks in an otherwise clear sky.

And then they are gone.

Ahead of the ships lie the domed cities of the Moon and Mars. Beyond those, a series of space-borne stations littering the heavens, some finished and some still under preparation. A colossal paper chase of metal and plastic, stepping stones of rivet and cable, leading humanity's survivors across the airless void and on towards untold adventures and undreamed-of destinies. The ships will touch down and their passengers and crews will consolidate and plan their next steps, always looking with one eye to the darkness before them and the other to the ghost of the doomed planet they have left behind. Only some of them will survive the journey. But that's something they do not think about.

Back on the Earth the silence rushes in to remove the memory of the ships' engines, runs along the worn-down pathways of a million forests and the dusty streets of a million towns, replacing their throaty roar with the sound of the wind through the trees and the creak of swinging store signs.

The asteroid was first noticed by amateur astronomer Julio Shennanen, through the $199.95 telescope bought as a 30th birthday present by his brother Manuel from the *Keep Watching The Skies* store on Bleecker Street and erected in Julio's back yard in the Brooklyn suburb of Park Slope.

Julio, who was a native of New Orleans, had moved north when his wife Carmen had gotten herself a job as a child-minder to a wealthy couple in a penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park. Initially referred to as 'Shennanen's Folly' by a skeptical sky-gazing fraternity, the object reported as a shadow over Alpha Centauri turned out to be a whole lot more substantial and a whole lot nearer when it could be viewed by something costing a little more than a week's grocery bill. It turned out to be a whole lot more menacing, too.

At the request of its discoverer the object was re-named 'Fat Tuesday', ostensibly because that was the day on which it was first spotted (and because, at roughly the size of the entire Eastern seaboard, it was big). But the underlying reason was an acknowledgment of Julio's hometown—inasmuch as 'Fat Tuesday' was a literal translation of 'Mardi Gras', the name now regarded as the entire celebration but originally intended as referring only to the final day . . . a day of feasting. It was also—and perhaps more significantly—a recognition on Shennanen's part, even in those early days of the object's arrival in our planetary skies, that the Carnival's days were numbered . . . the Carnival being Earth and all who lived upon it. A kind of 'lucky' cosmic coming-together of events for

would-be wordsmiths with nothing better to do with their long New York evenings than star-gaze.

But there was nothing 'lucky' about the appearance of Fat Tuesday, particularly where Julio Shennanen was concerned. By that time, the writing was on the wall for the world, and there were some in the world who held Shennanen responsible—sad and bitter folks who had spent a lifetime blaming others for anything that happened to them. And so it was that, on the evening of the anniversary of his discovery, the computer programming sky watcher was shot and killed outside his home, with Carmen looking on from the bedroom window. When Julio's screaming wife ran out to help him, she got a bullet in her back for her trouble.

In a letter of pasted newspaper copy sent to the *New York Times*, the assassin said that he (or she—nobody ever found out) was committed to ridding the world of this blight on humanity (Shennanen) and, in so doing, remove the threat of Fat Tuesday. (Though quite how those two items could be connected was beyond all but those who sent fifty-dollar bills to PO Box addresses posted up on TV screens at the end of an afternoon session of down-home 'back to basics' sermonizing on cable.)

The assassin was never caught—at least, not by the authorities—and the threat to others in the scientific community remained. Despite the fact that the media and pretty much everyone she spoke to or heard from condemned the action with vigor, a now wheelchair-bound Carmen Shennanen left the excesses of New York State and returned to the Big Easy where she disappeared into an anonymity worthy of the FBI informant protection program and one that even Julio's brother Manuel could not pierce.

Meanwhile, Fat Tuesday blunders on.

According to one pundit, the asteroid is on course to 'kiss' the Earth in the early afternoon of February 8 2007, just seventeen months after its first sighting. "The particularly bad news is that this is going to be no platonic peck on the cheek," NASA's resident expert in 'heavenly affairs' Professor Jerry Mizzalier goes on to tell Oprah Winfrey in a show interview whose transmission is debated for a full week before eventual release to a waiting and increasingly despondent world. "It'll be the full enchilada," Mizzalier continues, "a big smackeroo on the lips and the tongue right down the throat."

"And then?" Oprah asks in an uncharacteristically trembling voice.

Mizzalier's shrugged response says it all: the kiss is just the foreplay. After that, mankind gets fucked. Big Time.

When you put your mind to it, you can do a lot in nine months.

Throughout 2006 and into the January of Earth's final year, all potential solutions were considered while, at the same time, work continued feverishly on the construction of spaceships that would, if all else failed, carry the seed of humanity—and as many of its fellow planetary inhabitants as could be realistically mustered in so short a time—to the stars.

The alternatives were running out fast. Nuclear missiles failed to have any effect. "It's kind of like trying to blow up an elephant with a .45," Jerry Mizzalier explained colorfully to Dan Rather. "You may get lucky and dislodge a nickel-sized chunk of meat but that's about all." That was Mizzalier's last TV appearance. Two days later, he told the *Washington Post* he was going down to the Keys to make his peace with God—"And maybe do a little fishing on the side."

Four attempts at landing a hand-picked crew of demolition experts *a la* the *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* movies of the late 1990s got no nearer to Fat Tuesday than a few hundred miles. It seemed that either real-life Bruce Willises and Robert Duvalls were somewhat thinner on the ground than their celluloid counterparts . . . or movie-makers and screenwriters had simply got it wrong (hard as that was for many to accept).

Perhaps not quite so colorful as Jerry Mizzalier but no less succinct was the nonagenarian British astronomer Patrick Moore's verdict on BBC television's *Newsnight*. "One should liken it to a game of snooker," the monocled scientist explained to Jeremy Paxman, with a characteristic pin-wheeling flourish of his arms, "with Earth sitting defenseless in the middle of the table, right in the path of the white ball."

On the other side of the Atlantic a couple of days later, Colorado physicist W. Martin Parmenter picked up the analogy on a special edition of *The Jerry Springer Show* when, along with other luminaries of the scientific establishment, he was invited to hypothesize the outcome of the 'Big Kiss'. "I don't know diddly about snooker," Parmenter said laconically, "but if we switch to the game *I* play, then we're the eight ball on a table in a pool hall in Denver . . . and we're about to

get hit full on with enough force to drop us—or what's left of us—in the corner pocket on a table in a cellar barroom in Mexico City."

The disappearance of Springer from the airwaves following the show was openly considered by many to be the single silver lining in the approaching dark cloud that was Fat Tuesday . . . that and the appearance of an advertising board carried by a barefoot man down the full length of Broadway, his handiwork proclaiming, in hand-scrawled letters that were a mix of caps and lower case, 'It's official—Fat Tuesday is a load of balls'.

By the time of Earth's last fall, with the browning leaves bidding a fond and final farewell, all continuing attempts to avert the inevitable catastrophe were cosmetic at best. The real energy was now being channeled worldwide into the construction of spaceships, huge gleaming monoliths that grew quickly on hastily-prepared launch-pads around the globe. That not all of these vehicles would survive the trip was accepted, as was the inescapable fact that, statistically speaking—particularly considering the haste and the resulting corner-cutting of their translation from blueprint to steel and wire and circuit board—many of the ships would not even make it off the ground. But it was a risk that an escape-mad humanity receiving its quota of 'lottery' tickets ('Life's a lottery,' ran the impassioned ad campaign, 'so make sure of your tickets today') was more than prepared to take.

When the last ship to successfully depart the green hills of Earth lifts to relative safety above the planet's atmosphere on February 4 2007—a Tuesday, appropriately enough—the tally of successes against failures (for anyone remaining on Earth who might be interested) is an impressive 3.718 to one.

And then they are gone.

Small ships, sleek pointy-nosed sliver-shaped missiles bearing ten- or twelve-strong crews snuggled amongst carefully-secured boxes of artifacts and flags and religious ornamentation, and huge-bellied blunderbusses carrying cryogenically frozen embryos of the Earth's animal and insect populations and thin trays of seeds containing all manner of florae and fauna . . . all have disappeared over the months and weeks and days, up into the sky and far away. Now all that is left are the unlucky ones, the ones whose lottery tickets haven't paid off.

There are billions of them in mountains and valleys and towns and cities,

all the distant off-the-beaten-track communities from China to Scotland, from the wine-growing regions of France to the sidewalk cafes of Vienna, all of them paradoxically breathing a sigh of relief as the last gleaming means of escape passes behind the clouds—in much the same way as the terminally-ill patient relaxes when all the fit-and-well visitors depart the hospital and leave the slowly dying to get on with the job in peace and quiet. 'Misery loves company', is the way it's often described.

But the truth of the matter is that, in these final hours, there is little sign of misery.

Movies and literature which, in the last half of the previous century, foretold of anarchy and chaos in the face of humanity's end, couldn't have got it more wrong. With the last spaceship now a memory of chances missed and debts now to be paid, a strange calm falls across the cities and towns and villages of Earth.

What little looting there has been has been dealt with swiftly and without mercy. A do-it-yourself system of law and order has grown throughout the winter months, bringing with it an acceptable face of vigilantism in which people are openly but unemotionally intolerant of any among their number who fail to live up to the dignity now expected of the last remnants of the species.

Because, after all, what use is a new video recorder? Or precious jewelry? And anyway, most storekeepers simply leave their stores open and go home. So stuff is there for the taking but most people leave it be: gleaming Chevys and Cadillacs sitting in unmanned showrooms; the very latest fashions from Gucci and Versace adorning silent mannequins in the windows of stores whose doors lie carelessly and casually ajar; and rare first issues—in mint condition, no less—of silver- and golden-age DC comicbooks, their costumed impossibly-super heroes staring off the covers regretting that there's nothing even Krypton's first son can do to avert the disaster spiraling closer with every passing minute.

Everywhere is quiet.

People stay home, make love gently and talk feverishly, trying to pack all the thoughts and hopes and love they thought they had left into the few hours that remain. Sons and daughters return home like it's Thanksgiving or Christmas. In between their conversations, minds idly drift to thoughts of what it will be like when the end finally comes: wondering what it will be like, sitting in a 15-story apartment building and seeing a wave of water thundering towards the window blotting out the blood-red sky . . . wondering what it will feel like to have your mid-

west home blown up from around you while you crouch with your family behind the sofa or, if you have one, in the cellar listening to the sound of Earth breaking up. Consequently, most folks don't leave potential talk- or love-making-time empty.

The last ship has gone.

Fat Tuesday's kiss is now accurately scheduled for 2.17 PM on Saturday.

On Wednesday, the Earth gives up its dead.

"Hey."

The boy turns around and looks at the man standing out on the street by the white picket-fence gate. "Hey yourself," he says, shielding his eyes against the sun's glare. It's almost mid-day and the California heat is stifling but, even so, the street is busy with people.

The boy's name is William Freeman—his friends call him Billy; his parents, Will—he is twelve years old and suddenly acutely aware that, as far as he had been concerned, the street had been pretty much deserted the last time he looked. And that was only a few minutes earlier.

"You must be Will," the man says, beaming a big smile and resting a liver-spotted hand on the gatepost as he looks William up and down.

William nods. The man must be a friend of his mom and dad, someone who's maybe been out of town for a while and has come back to more familiar surroundings for when the asteroid hits. Right now, though, William is more concerned with a tall thin man standing across the street with his back to them. This new man's hands are resting on his hips and he's shaking his head staring up at Mr. and Mrs. Manders' place, seeming to take a lot of interest in the new glass conservatory Mr. Manders tacked on a couple of summers back.

"Don't you want to know who *I* am?" the old man at William's gate asks in a voice bearing more than a hint of amusement.

When William turns back to the man he can see the distant shape of Fat Tuesday over to the east, hanging on the horizon like a party lantern. "Who are you?" he asks, wondering if it was his imagination or does the man suddenly seem a mite familiar.

The screen door squeaks open behind him, whines shut and clatters twice. William turns and sees his mother walking across the lawn, picking her steps real careful, like she was walking on thin ice. Her left hand is up to her

mouth, her right holding a hank of hair at the side of her head. She's staring—with a mixture of frown and wide-eyed amazement—not at William but over his shoulder. William looks back at the old man.

"Hello, Pooch," the man says.

"Daddy?"

George Chinnery was the first to make contact. It had to be *some*body and, as luck would have it, it was George.

George slipped away to new adventures in the spring of 1998, leaving behind him a breathless cardiac arrest team, a callous flat green line on a bedside monitor and a weeping daughter. William had been almost four years old but still young enough to forget quickly. Forget and accept . . . or maybe the two were the same thing.

But while George was the first, over in the quiet suburb of Hawthorne, an area in the sprawling Californian conurbation that was famous for producing one of the last century's most enduring musical acts, the others quickly followed.

Hillary and Sam Arnold sit on the bed in their son's room.

Around them are strewn the collected ephemera that is all that remains of little Joseph Arnold: comicbooks, a Millennium Falcon toy spaceship—that looks nothing like the huge ships that have so recently left Hillary and Sam and the rest of the Earth far behind them—and a few favorite pieces of clothing that Hillary just hasn't had the heart to throw out when the tumor took their little boy away.

There are no tears. The tears dried up years ago. Now there is only a grim and quiet resignation that sometimes fades right into the background . . . only to return when they least expect it, usually in the mornings when, on waking, the imminence of Fat Tuesday—or even its very existence—seems for just a fraction of a second to be the remnants of a very bad dream. Only it isn't a dream at all.

"You want me to get some pills or something?" Sam Arnold asks his wife in a voice that is just above a whisper. He runs his hand down her back.

She shakes her head and folds the sleeves of little Joseph's sweater, laying the garment gently on her son's pillow.

"Jack Mason says old man Phillips—you know? down on Times Square?—he's giving them away to any that wants them. Wouldn't take me—"

“I couldn’t bring myself to do that,” Hillary tells her husband, turning to look at his face, seeing the darkness beneath his eyes. She recognizes that darkness: it isn’t fear, it’s the helplessness he feels at being unable to do anything for those he cares about. Since the death of Joseph and their decision not to try replace him, that ‘those’ is just her.

He runs his hand up to her neck and gently kneads the skin between her hairline and the collar of her housedress. “It wouldn’t hurt,” he says. “Jack says old man Phillips said-”

“How do they know?” Hillary says in a tired voice. “And, anyway, it’s not the hurt I’m bothered about.”

“Then what is it?”

She shrugs and looks up at the window, imagining the cold skeletal trees of Central Park just a couple of blocks away. “No idea.” She moves closer to him on the bed and wraps her arms around him, smelling his musk of fading cologne and skin mingled with cigarette smoke. “I had the dream again last night,” she whispers.

“Little Joe?”

Hillary nods. “He said he was coming for us.”

Sam pushes her back gently, holding her at arms’ length. “Is *that* why you don’t want me to get the pills?”

Hillary’s eyes search her husband’s face for some indication of an answer to his question. “I don’t know,” she says at last. “Maybe.”

“Oh, honey,” he says, “I wish it could-”

The knock on the apartment door sounds like a rifle crack in the stillness of the New York afternoon. And yet, for all that, it is a small knock . . . a delicate knock. And outside the window there seems to be some kind of commotion and lots of shouting . . . like a parade, maybe.

The news traveled fast, spreading like wildfire fueled by the wind of the approaching asteroid. Dead people were coming back to life . . . kind of.

It sounded comicbook-crazy but it was true.

Telephones the world over buzzed and hummed with the news: sons and fathers, daughters and mothers, uncles and aunts and sisters and brothers . . . they were all coming back, sauntering down paths and knocking on doors, drifting into backyards and onto porches, peering through once-familiar kitchen windows

and smiling never-forgotten smiles.

At first, the people who heard the news thought it might be some by-product of the asteroid . . . like something dreamed up by George Romero and Stephen King, a plague of flesh-eating cadavers shambling the highways and byways of the doomed world in a final devastating flourish of death and destruction. But then their own doorbells and buzzers sounded or their own windows rattled with a distantly familiar tapping or mailboxes clattered open to allow long-ago special calls in long-ago special voices that had lived on only in dreams and wishful memories. Sure, it just had to be something to do with Fat Tuesday, but the animated corpses seemed to possess not only no malice, evil intentions or appetite for human skin and cartilage but also no idea of how they had gotten there.

They came in droves, huge processions of men, women and children, some young and some old, some no more than babes in arms carried by another of their number, and all of them marveling at the things they passed by, each of them making their way to a familiar place and to familiar faces.

They came into towns and cities, along arterial blacktops empty of cars and trucks, and along the narrow roads that are the blue veins connecting communities. And a few came by other means . . .

The Mississippi River is almost 2,500 miles long, drifting and winding from a stream you could step across in northern Minnesota and washing miles wide through the country's heartland and down into the Gulf of Mexico.

If you counted the Missouri—which feeds into the Mississippi from the Rockies just north of St. Louis—and the Ohio, which gets in on the act around Cairo, IL, and the Red, the Arkansas, the Tensas and the Yazoo...you'd be talking about getting on for 4,000 miles of river system. Only the Nile and the Amazon are longer.

The Mississippi and its tributaries drain almost one and a quarter million miles, including all or part of 31 states and some 13,000 square miles of Canada. Through Prairie du Chien in Wisconsin it drifts, where French fur traders exchanged goods and services with the Winnebego; down through Cave-In-Rock, Illinois and into Vicksburg, with its vast Civil War battlefield where, on a still night you might just hear the cries of Southerners still withstanding General's Grant's 47-day siege; and on down to Hannibal, boyhood home of Sam Clemens,

who took the *nom de plume* of the riverboat captains' calls for measuring the water's depth—'Mark Twain!'

So many places along that drift of water, so many swirls and eddies, you could imagine many things getting out into that watery flow to sail along.

So maybe you could imagine this: a huge, gaudily-painted floating palace pulled from the secret depths of the river somewhere where nobody has ever been, a pair of enormous paddle wheels rucking up the frothy water, its saloons decked out in gilt and scarlet and velvet, bright white paneling and the sound of banjo-picking . . . sailing slowly, drifting between the West Bank and Algiers, drifting under the Huey P. Long bridge upriver near Harahan, and then settling, just a stone's throw from the Moonwalk promenade of the French Quarter where, on an evening in the dog days of the world, a saxophone's lilting refrain merged into the sound of accordions and the smell of tobacco and the whoops and cries of people making the most of their unearned death sentence.

And as the riverboat nears the side, it sounds its horn, a mournful but somehow strangely exultant wail that breaks through the sounds of sometimes reluctant and sometimes forced revelry, causing it to stop, not all at once but itself like a wave, a wave of silence washing through the port of New Orleans where Mardi Gras is in full swing, a true 'farewell to the flesh'. And there they are, hanging from the sides of the riverboat in all manner of clothing, old and young alike, hanging onto railings and wainscoting, leaning against funnel and gate, waving for all their worth to folks in the crowds that soon gather around the moorings.

At the front of the throng of hand-holding beer-drinking revelers sits a woman in a wheelchair, frowning in a mixture of disbelief and an excitement she thought she would never feel again. For now, in this magical short final era of the history of Earthbound humanity, a new ability holds sway . . . an ability known only to children, the mythical race that knows the power of the darkness and the light alike, that knows the real power of acceptance without reason.

'The dead are here!'

The cry moves through the crowds like the wind itself, touching every one of them as they recognize faces on the riverboat, return smiles and waves, anxiously waiting for the boat to dock so that they may all be reunited.

Then, 'There's another one!' someone calls.

And there, up the river, is another boat just like the first one, paddlewheels thrashing the surf of the old Mississippi, churning it up like watery thunder. And

behind that one, itself bedecked with a hundred or a thousand waving bodies, comes another, letting out its steamboat whistle cry . . . only this one doesn't sound mournful at all: this one sounds like the biggest cheer that ever was . . . until the boat behind it, just coming around the bend now, pulls fully into view and lets rip. Now *that's* the *biggest* cheer that ever was . . . at least for a minute or two, a deep-throated calliope wheeze that sets folks to holding their ears and laughing and crying all at the same time.

They hear the clarion call out in the plantations surrounding New Orleans, plantations with names such as Rosedown and Destrehan, where the *garconnieres* are already filling with old familiar faces . . . work-clothed men in overalls wading through the cotton plants or the rice, indigo, hemp, tobacco, sorghum, corn, peanuts, potatoes and sugar, beaming grins big enough to crack the whole face wide open, or appearing from around majestic live oaks bedecked in Spanish moss and from behind centuries-old camellias and azaleas, the watery sunshine dappling them like fireflies.

As the ships reach the dock one by one the people jump and drop and sometimes just walk right off. Their clothes are sometimes yesterday's fashions and sometimes straight out of the turn of the century, a mix of zoot suits and linen jackets, lettered sweaters and gingham dresses, and all kinds of uniform—army, navy, air force . . . and many of them stylistically different, too. But all of them touch down on the riverside walkway beaming big smiles, their eyes scanning the crowds trying to pick out the faces they've come to see. And every time one of the waiters greets one of the visitors—be the newcomer old or young—their first word is often their name followed by a query.

"Poppa?"

"Sandy, is it really you?"

"Son? Welcome home . . . we're real proud of you."

And then come the questions . . . lots of questions. But the answer is always the same: "I don't know . . . I just don't know."

In the massing thrusting pushing throng of people, some searching and some who have already found each other, a wheelchair threads its way to the water's edge where the big paddleboat sits, its deckboards creaking and its funnel hissing softly. The woman in the chair searches the faces and the bodies, ignoring the good-natured jostling as she watches the arms outstretch, thinking each time that the arms are for her but then realizing that the clothes are wrong or the color of the skin is wrong or-

“Carmen. Over here!”

She feels emotion well up in her stomach, feels a tingle down her legs that she hasn’t felt for what seems like a lifetime, and she feels the tell-tale tickle of a tear on her cheek. “Julio?”

Her eyes scan the knees and legs that surround her as she struggles to lift herself from the chair that has become her home, and amidst the mustaches and the sideburns, the long-tail coats and the swirling crinoline, she sees him.

And he sees her.

It’s Saturday morning.

Just another Saturday morning, to look at the folks strolling the streets of New Orleans. But if you sneaked and looked into the French Quarter—not that you’d need to sneak: you can hear the hullabaloo clear across town—you’d think that maybe the Saturday night partying has started just a little sooner than usual. Either that, or the Friday night session is going on past its usual cut-off time.

But then it isn’t just another Saturday morning. In fact, it isn’t just any morning at all: it’s the last day of the world, and the songs of leaving it all behind fill the air like the scent of summer jasmine, thick and wistful.

The light is soft, like a late fall afternoon, with Fat Tuesday now sitting squarely between the sun and the ground, plummeting on to keep its scheduled appointment at 2.17 EST. Just a little over four hours from now.

All of the farewells have been said—most of them many times during the past three days. But there’s been a lot of greetings, too.

Now the dead walk and sit alongside the living, chewing the fat, tapping a foot to the music that seems to wash around everything like the early-morning mist that sometimes spills over from the river.

Over on Bourbon Street, Fats Domino and Mac Rebbenack are duetting on a couple of Steinway Grandes rolled out into the street from Jeff Dickerson’s instrument store, while Alvin ‘Shine’ Robinson powering up and down the fretboard on the Earl King favorite, ‘Let The Good Times Roll’, while Robert Parker’s sax wails and whines. The crowd cheers at every bum note that spills out—they’ve been cheering since well before dawn—as long as the constantly changing band has been playing (and drinking . . . so you can forgive the musicians a lot). Truth to tell, you can forgive anyone pretty much anything this morning.

In the audience, watching Fats and the good Doctor hammer the ivories, are Professor Longhair and Lloyd Price, Huey 'Piano' Smith and Joe Tex, Ernie K. Doe and Lee Dorsey. They'll all get a turn on the instruments and many of them already have. And if and when folks fancy a little oration between the music, former governor Huey Long is all set to bend their ears for one last time . . . though right now, just like everyone else, he seems content to whoop and laugh and slap his leg, spurred on by Democratic congressman John Breaux, the pair of them having given up trying to talk over the music.

The truth is, it's impossible to figure out who's dead and who's alive. Some of these folks you recognize straight off, and you wonder to yourself . . . wonder as you grab another bottle of beer from a passing waiter . . . you wonder just which is which. Not that it matters.

Sitting at one of the tables outside *Cafe du Monde*, at the corner of Decatur and St Ann, working their way through a plate of *beignets* and their third cup of *cafe au lait* while listening to Allen Toussaint play a little boogie-woogie on an old stand-up wooden piano, are Anne Rice, William Faulkner, Ellen Gilchrist and British publisher John Jarrold (who, in all his years in the business, has never missed a convention in the Big Easy). Meanwhile, leaning against the front wall chatting to the driver of a horse-drawn cab, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg seem to be sharing a joke with Truman Capote and John Kennedy Toole . . . with Kerouac holding up a copy of Toole's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Confederacy of Dunces* and shaking his head. Toole just shrugs and allows a slow trickle of water into his glass of absinthe, watching with satisfaction as the liquid turns a bright yellow.

On the riverfront round back of Cafe du Monde, hookers provide final—and occasionally first—sensuous experiences to men and boys on the steps and amidst the foliage, the sound of their anxious enjoyment permeating the already filled air.

A shoe-shine boy stops Julio Shennanen—"A high five for the shine and just your thanks for the time," he says, holding his right hand in the air, fingers stretched out like twigs. "Gotta have clean shoes to meet your maker."

"I'm fine, but thanks," Julio says.

"How 'bout you, missie?" the man asks, a grin from ear to ear exposing bridgework gaps you could suck pickles through. "Polish up them wheels so fine you could make the sun put on *his* glasses."

Carmen laughs and claps her hands. "No, really," she tells him, reaching

out to touch his arm. “We’re both fine. Thanks.”

The man shrugs and tells them to have a good day, and then he shakes his head and chuckles as he walks off. Alongside him, in the bushes next to a telescope overlooking the river, a tall, red-headed woman is sitting astride a young barefoot man. Carmen and Julio can see only the woman’s back and the man’s feet poking out from beneath her long skirts, and, just for a couple of seconds, they watch the woman moving slowly up and down and they listen to her voice, soothing and encouraging.

Carmen looks up at Julio and feels new strength from his smile.

“Wheel me over to the steps,” she says, nodding to the gap in the railings overlooking the river. “Then you can get me out of this damned chair so’s I can sit on land again.”

Julio does as she asks.

The two of them sitting on the steps, Carmen looks up at the black hole that is Fat Tuesday. “You know,” she says, closing one eye and squinting, “if you look at it just right, you can almost believe you could reach out your hand and feel it.” She reaches up with her left arm to demonstrate, feeling around with her hand.

Without turning around to look at him, Carmen asks her husband, “How close do you think it is?”

“Close,” comes the reply.

For a few seconds, Carmen doesn’t say anything. Then, “You know,” she says, “I think I’d like to go swimming.”

There are already folks in the water, swimming slowly out in the middle of the river but she thinks that maybe Julio will say she shouldn’t do that. Instead, he stands up and takes off his shirt and pants, dropping them into a neat pile beside her. Then he takes off his shorts.

Firecrackers light up the now dark sky and a chorus of cheers and trumpets sound above the already cacophonous din.

“You want me to help you?” he asks.

Carmen’s mouth is wide open in a mixture of shock and excitement . . . the kind of excitement that comes only when you think you’re doing something naughty. “Maybe with my pants and hose,” she says, giggling as she unbuttons her blouse. “And then you can take me down to the water.”

“Take you down to the water?” Julio says. “Heck, you can just fall in.” And he gives her a push before diving in after her.

Carmen hits the Mississippi in momentary panic, sinking immediately beneath the surface, staring up through the swirling water at the dark shape that looms overhead. Then she sees another shape, the thin brown outline of her husband, cut into the water alongside her and she feels his arms wrap themselves around her and lift her gently to the surface.

She emerges spluttering and shakes her head. “You damned fool,” she says, “I could have drowned.”

For a second, neither of them does or says anything, they just float there, Julio paddling with his feet and keeping them straight with his left arm treading the water. Then they both burst into hysterics.

“I wonder . . . I wonder what time it is,” Carmen says as she allows her husband to turn her over onto her back and swim, pulling her with him.

There’s a wind in the air now, a strong wind.

More fireworks light up the sky, turning the darkness into a daylight of sorts. The glow of the fireworks momentarily illuminates the surface of Fat Tuesday and she sees, suddenly, that it looks just like the ground out back of their house in Brooklyn. No more mysterious than that.

Somewhere over in the town, they can hear Dr John playing ‘Such A Night’.

“Who cares,” Julio says, “we’ve got eternity . . . and we’ve got the river.”

Carmen nods and squeezes Julio’s hand. “Amen to that,” she says.

> “The great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun.”
>
> Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*