

NO TRAVELER RETURNS

Written by

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EXT. NEAR NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA - DAWN

Cicadas skitter down the trunk of an ancient tree, past a pool of rainwater nestled between intersecting branches.

A child's RED EYEGLASSES rest in the pool, half submerged. Whimsical, girly hearts decorate the corners of the frames. One lens is severely cracked.

Ruins of an antebellum plantation house stand like distant tombstones in the mist. A big dog BARKS hoarsely and urgently off screen. We will meet this guy later.

The BUZZING OF INSECTS builds and SMASHES INTO:

EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF COURTHOUSE - DAY

A street full of SCREAMING protestors compete for space with news crews, police and onlookers.

DURRELL ALEXANDER (49), African American, shoves his way towards a group of Black women holding a "Justice For Iris" banner. He's an ex Marine who's still in great shape.

The banner topples over in the wind, engulfing a throng of people in billowing black and white cloth.

Police tear through the cloth, escorting IRIS CHARLES (50) African American, regal and defiant despite her handcuffs. Iris' hair is close-cropped and DYED RED.

Her white lawyer, MICHAEL BEAUREGARD (70), is by her side. He's a genteel elder statesman of New Orleans society.

As Iris passes Durrell, he is intensely focused on her. She turns her head to look at him as the POLICE ESCORT pulls her through courthouse doors that SLAM into BLACKNESS and SILENCE.

INT. BAYOU NOIR PRISON - IRIS' CELL - MORNING

Iris paces in prisoner garb that clashes with her elegant demeanor. Only a hint of red now remains in her salt-and-pepper hair.

She peers into the hallway through the plexiglass window to see a workman's pant legs on a ladder.

She shouts like a referee at a sporting match--

IRIS

Time!

The worker is Durrell. He descends the ladder and approaches her door, Cell 103. Same intense look he had in the protest crowd. He grips a drill tightly as if it were a pistol.

IRIS

That's a stormy face. But check out those eyes. Am I the only one who sees the bluebirds in there? You're a sweet man, aren't you!

She looks him up and down. His name tag: "Durrell Alexander, Systems Engineer."

IRIS

I've been watching your walking shadow strut and fret up and down this corridor every few days since I got here... two months now. You ain't said nothin'.

DURRELL

And your sound and fury, signifying nothing.

IRIS

(re: Shakespeare quote)
Touché, mon ami! You familiar with the Bard, our lovely Mr. Shakespeare? Why's a Black man who knows "Macbeth" work in this shithouse?

Durrell doesn't respond.

IRIS

(checking him out)
You live alone, Mister Fix it Man?

Iris saunters away towards the back of her cell.

IRIS

Tornado warnin' for the whole New Orleans area after 6PM. Could be Katrina comin' back!

She laughs derisively. Then, sensing Durrell is about to say something, she rushes back to him before he has a chance.

IRIS

Can't get over those eyes, my man! That's where the real storm is! Angry thoughts all lit up inside your head... Gotta be scaring the bluebirds.

Durrell looks bemused by Iris' poetic weirdness.

IRIS

The TIME between the flash of light and the sound is the holiest moment I know.

She steps closer.

IRIS

My present circumstances prevent me from viewing the electricity in the sky tonight. Darlin', could you watch those fireworks for me, and count the TIME?

Durrell, confused, glares at her. She closes her eyes.

IRIS

You'll gape at the first flash in the sky. Then silence, while the furious dark cloud considers what he wants to say.

She opens her eyes and looks directly into Durrell's.

IRIS

Measure that time for me, whispering to yourself... one, two, three... until the light turns to sound and presses your chest and your inner ear. Then come tell me about THAT TIME.

DURRELL

Why would I...ever...do anything for you?

IRIS

You were in the crowd outside the courthouse.

Iris waits, but no answer comes.

IRIS

Sorry I disappointed y'all protesters.

Iris smiles.

IRIS

Word is you dazzled em' when you were interviewed for this job you got here. The Chief Guard says you're a genius.

Durrell just looks at her.

IRIS

If you come visit me again, maybe I'll tell you how I did it.

(beat)

How I killed that little girl.

She hums a few notes of what sounds like a children's song.

IRIS

This is for little Durrell, still playin'
with his broken toys.

She breathes onto the glass, fogging it up. Then begins writing on the fogged window with her finger by making what to her is a backward "s" at the left side of the window, and a backward "s" at the right side of the window.

Then an "i" just inside each "s." Then an "r" on each side, then a single "m" in the middle.

While she's writing, she's singing the song she was humming:

IRIS

*Let it rain, who cares.
I've a train upstairs,
with a brake that I make
from a string sort of thing,
which works, in jerks,
cause it pops on the spring
which stops with the string.
So that's what I make
when the day's all wet.
It's a good sort of brake,
but it hasn't ... worked ... yet.*

She's written a palindrome: "sir i'm iris" on the fogged surface, which we see clearly in Durrell's POV

Durrell's face betrays his realization that Iris has glimpsed inside his soul. He shakes slightly as he takes a step back, then climbs his ladder to resume his work.

Iris cackles and screeches O.S. Durrell winces at the noise.

HAROLD JAMESON (50s), Chief Guard, a tall Black man with a bit of a belly and a seen-it-all attitude approaches, looks up at Durrell on the ladder.

HAROLD

What's she screamin' about now?

DURRELL

Crazy shit, like always.

Harold peers into Iris' cell.

HAROLD

Don't speak to her. She knows what you're thinking before you say it, then flips it over in your head with them big words she uses. Turns your brain into hamburger.

DURRELL

I believe you.

HAROLD

Ain't no wonder they used to burn women like her at the stake.

They both turn to look towards Iris' cell.

HAROLD

She was on Oprah, right?

Durrell is appalled that Harold doesn't seem to appreciate what an esteemed person Iris had been.

DURRELL

She was the Poet Laureate of the United States, Harold. She taught Shakespearean Studies at Oxford University in England, man! And Juilliard. You ever heard of it?

Harold doesn't respond.

DURRELL

It's a fuckin' amazing school. Miles Davis went there. Wynton Marsalis.

HAROLD

They got a decent football team?