

## **Loways and Highways**

By Regina Rose Kazanjian

Highways are always gray. South or north, highways are gray. It's the plants that change. As Belle and Jesse drove northward, the blooming peach trees and apple trees thinned out and gave way to spindly tree skeletons. Jesse couldn't even tell what kind of trees they were. He saw fewer and fewer live oaks, twisted in complex yoga poses. Instead, he saw businesslike bare trees, evenly and artificially spaced along the highway's edge.

Mostly, Jesse watched the highway. The highway stayed the same, no matter how much the trees changed. Yellow lines flashed by just under his window and the monotonous gray tones blended into one continuous blur. A few hours northward, the grass was brown and patched with dirty spots of snow.

Jesse closed his eyes and remembered. His dad used to come home from training and poke his mom's belly with one hand as he dropped a bag of wriggling crawfish on the counter with the other. After boiling the water outside and then dumping in the crawfish to cook, he'd take Jesse out on the Louisiana back roads for a joyride. At first, dad would drive and Jesse would squint his eyes against the hot wind that rushed in the windows. He'd watch the kudzu-draped bushes and trees zip by. Then, sometimes, his dad would let him drive. He'd clutched the wheel and driven a speedy 25 miles an hour at first. Eventually, after a month or so of driving, with his dad's urging, he cranked that up to 40. Then 50. Soon, was driving drove 70 miles an hour down the lonely, dusty gray roads.

"We're almost there," Grandma Belle interrupted Jesse's thoughts.

"Mm." Jesse didn't even look up from the road whizzing past his window.

His thoughts drifted back—he remembered going home to the cooked crawfish. His mom would boil potatoes and lemons along with the fish. She spiced them with something that turned the rusty red crustaceans a brilliant scarlet and rimmed the family's lips with red when they ate them.

"You know, hun, this will be a better life for you." Grandma interrupted his reverie again. "I can't take care of you like I wish I could. Man, I wish I could! You're m'yone grandson and I love you like a son. But I don't have 'nuff money to give you a good

upbringin' and no time, neither." She squeezed and unsqueezed the steering wheel as she spoke, her hands animating the conversation even when they were occupied.

Jesse wanted to tell his grandma how much he wished he could live with her, but more than that he wanted to cry. Only, he wanted to be strong most of all. He managed to reply with another inarticulate grunt.

Belle veered off the highway. Jesse saw a dirty theater with neon lights next to an unremarkable shopping center.

"We'll be at da house in five minutes."

They drove through an intersection as Belle turned on her windshield wipers to swipe away drips of rain. Jesse wanted to cry again.

They pulled into a neighborhood full of oddly assorted houses. Some were old and run-down; some were old and kept-up; a few were new.

"We're lookin' for number 3702."

"Right there, Gramma."

They pulled in.

Jesse stepped out of the car and looked around. He looked up and saw gray tree branches against gray sky. He looked down and saw brown grass, dirty wet snow, and gray driveway.

Belle pulled his bag out from the back of the battered orange Nissan and they walked up to the door. She rapped the knocker. Jesse wondered who had knockers anymore.

A dyed brunette in a pastel sweat suit opened the door.

"Jesse! Praise the Lord you made it! I haven't seen you since you were a baby! You've grown so much in fifteen years!"

Jesse wondered why his other grandma ended every phrase in an exclamation point.

"Yeeeeeeas, he's a bit bigguh than when he was a just-borned baby," Belle said with a touch of sarcasm.

"It is so good to see you again, Belle! The last time I saw you must have been when Jesse was born! I'm so nervous, driving on those highways—I haven't been down south since then. Why don't you stop in for some juice before you're on your way? We can chat a bit!"

"Well, that sounds fine, but I think Jesse better get settled in his room first"

“Oh yes, I almost forgot! I’m in such a fluster, having a *child* again!”

The new grandma led Jesse and Belle through an open foyer with high walls of window and then down a hallway.

“Here’s your room. It’s got a bathroom, too! And see that quilt on the bed? I picked it out yesterday!”

Jesse followed the new grandma through into the room. There was an empty bookshelf to his left and a bathroom to his right. On the wall across from him, there was a large window. There was a bed in the corner to the far right.

Overwhelmed, Jesse tossed his bag on the bed. He just wanted to be alone for a while. “I think I’ll stay here while you talk.”

Belle smiled at him, a smile only the person who loved him and understood him best could give.

“What a nice idea!”

The new grandma and Belle went off to their juice. Jesse considered the strange thought that the juice was probably imported from the south too.

A half hour later, Belle came back to his room to say goodbye.

“I’ll miss you, Babe. Be brave, hun. You’ll feel like a nat’rull part of it soon enough.” She engulfed him in a hug that only a large southern granny could give. Jesse relaxed in her arms until tears pushed themselves against his tight-shut eyelids. He pulled away.

“Bye, Gramma.”

Belle took one more hug and left. Jesse didn’t move from his room until he heard her car start. Then, he ran to the front door and looked out one of the tall, skinny windows that framed the doorway. He saw the back of his red-headed granny’s head in orange car as it drove away.

The new grandma came up behind him. “Why, Jesse, you look so dejected! Come have a bite to eat.” She wanted to comfort him, but she wasn’t sure how to relate to a young boy.

Jesse obeyed. He didn’t feel like refusing.

A week and a half passed and the rain incessantly drizzled down. Jesse ate and slept. His new grandma, Diane, sure believed in feeding growing boys, but she didn’t serve

crawfish pie, jambalaya, or gumbo. Only bland northern foods like meatloaf, potatoes, and oatmeal. Jesse only left his room when he was hungry; the rest of the time he sat on his bed and thought

Often, he thought about the day his dad was deployed. He thought about worrying with his mom every day. At night, he'd run to her room and crawl in her bed when darkness pressed about him and he couldn't shake it. It seeped into his body and he couldn't keep it out. Darkness had always surrounded him at night, but when his dad left, it filled him.

Inevitably, this led to remembering the day the captain came and told them that his dad was dead. Gone. Died in combat. His mom wasn't the same after that.

Diane walked into his room. "Jesse, dear? You want to come out? You've been sitting in here for a few hours now."

"No, I'm fine." Jesse shrugged.

"I'm sort of worried about you! You've been in here so much; it can't be good for you."

Frustrated with the prying grandmother, Jesse slipped off the bed and said, "Well, I guess I could go out for a walk. Get some fresh air and stuff." If you could call the drippy gray weather "fresh."

All the same, Diane immediately perked up. "Yyyyes! What a nice idea. Go and take a walk. Downtown Ann Arbor is down that road a bit, and it's very fun! You can wander around all the nice shops and have...uh...some fun!"

Jesse didn't expect to have nice time. He just wanted to get away.

He pulled on the jacket his own Gramma bought him back in Louisiana, anticipating the cold Michigan weather. He stomped along the gray sidewalk, bracing himself against the 40-degree temperature and drizzling rain. He walked and walked. He didn't look up. He didn't look down. He didn't even look out. His eyes blurred and he walked. Walking gave him a distraction; he didn't think of his mom drinking, flirting with new boyfriends, and dumping him at Gramma's house for three months at a time. He didn't think of Gramma stressing over the bills piled on the peeling kitchen counter.

Then, something caught his ear. A mournful, deep voice that sounded just like the country stations he and his dad listened to on the car radio. One guitar accompanied the

voice. No drums, no additional voices, no more instruments. Just one warm voice and one slightly plunky-sounding guitar.

He walked towards the sound, through two sets of open doors leading into a diner. One door had a scrawled sign on it that read: *Don't park in the party store lot; you'll be towed. You can park behind the old gas station.* The permanent marker letters were a bit smudged.

Jesse let out a breath and relaxed inside the diner. It was warm and damp, more like the south than anything he'd felt for weeks. He looked around the single rectangular room with dripping windows on all sides. Against the back wall, just across from the door, were three peeling rectangular counters, arranged in a square. A waiter in an orange t-shirt ran out of a door behind the counters and dropped four plates on the counter. A red-headed waitress with a big mouth – a warm smile – stood behind a cash register in the middle of the front counter. Clipboards were scattered around her.

“Can I help ya?”

“Um, can I sit with him?” Jesse pointed at the guitarist, who sat in a corner booth. Then, he jumped, realizing that he had asked to sit with a man who he had never met before.

“Well. Hm. I'll ask him, I guess.” The waitress seemed confused. Lou never sat with anyone. He came into the diner almost every day and played mellow country tunes alone in his booth. Of course, all the staff were acquainted with him and all the locals knew who he was, but he didn't have any particular friends. “Lou? Can this kid sit with ya?”

“Sho. C'mon ovuh.”

Jesse tingled. This guy was southern! He had to be.

“What's yo name, kid?”

“Jesse, sir.”

“Good strong name. An' you say “Sir,” jus' like you was from the south wheah they'se respectful like dat. But don't you bother with dat here. We ken jus' be friends. We don' need no big, better adults an' teeny little scardey kids.”

Jesse looked up into his black eyes. The southern accent made him feel home again. But, surprisingly, it didn't bring back the pain he'd felt for the past year. It just brought to mind the days when he had a southern family, when he lived in hot, humid air and ate hot, spicy food.

“You wanna coffee, boy? I can cover it.”

“Sure. I guess.” Jesse hadn’t tasted coffee in a long time. Southern mamas added a tablespoon of coffee to their baby’s bottles, but in the north, people thought kids couldn’t handle coffee.

“Orangey – get a coffee foe dis’ young man heah.”

The redhead turned from waiting on another booth to face them, and yelled into the kitchen, “Tristan, I got more orders for you!” She tripped into the countered-off section of the diner and held out a clipboard with orders. A teen, his brown eyes snapping, zipped out of the kitchen, yanked the girl’s ponytail, and grabbed the clipboard before she could react. He zipped back into the kitchen, laughing.

“Rrr! That boy!” She rolled her eyes. “The coffee should be out in a few minutes, Lou.”

For the first time since he had arrived in Ann Arbor, Jesse connected with his surroundings. Before this moment, objects had crossed his line of vision, but now, he opened his eyes. He soaked it all in. He let the images enter his body

“You look like you’s los’.”

“Maybe I was. But I don’t know if I am now. I might be...but I don’t think so.”

“Not knowin’ is part of bein’ los’.” Lou fingered his guitar strings and plunked out a tune. “*You’s los’ but you’s gonna be foun’ soon; you came into a di-i-i-i-nah and you foun’ yo southun home. You found an old man a-named Lou and the waitres’ brought you coffee.*”

Jesse grinned. Something that felt like a tickle grew inside of him. He was convinced that this man was crazy, but it didn’t bother him. The redheaded waitress thunked a mug of coffee, a bowl of creamers, and four sugar packets in front of him. Jesse picked up the mug and drank it black.

“*Cuz the coffee’s fo’ a southern bo-o-o-yyy.*”

Jesse’s lips curled up, almost into a smile. He watched Lou’s coffee-colored hands as they pulled a tune out of the guitar.

Lou stopped singing, but he kept playing his guitar as he talked. “De gran’ highway of life moved a little too fas’ for you and you gots yo’self confused, son. You’s a little bit los’. But you gotta remember that the highway keeps a-movin’. You can’t change it.

There's some plezh'rabable stretches of road and some nasty stretches of road, but you gotta keep goin', no matter weah you are. Jus' keep goin'."

Jesse drained the last drop of coffee and smiled. Drinking a southern drink and listening to a southern man felt like letting out a stale sigh of air. He felt good and easy.

He left the coffee shop and took in all the sights around him. He saw puddles speckled with falling raindrops, a boarded-up gas station, and a three-lane road in front of him. He crossed the road, walked over a bridge and came to a new part of town.

It still rained. But, as he walked down the streets, he noticed lights behind the rain. He looked into shops and restaurants where open, friendly people chatted inside the stores, milling through displays of intriguing artsy knick-knacks. One store sold saris; another sold middle eastern instruments and electric guitars. Sharp smells seeped out of restaurants.

He looked ahead and around him as he walked, not down. His feet slapped against the wet pavement.

He looked up in the sky, letting raindrops fall on his nose. He loosened his gait, walking less stiffly, less hurriedly. He smiled at a girl across the street. He took a deep breath of the damp air, letting it touch his whole body. Since he was warm enough inside, Jesse wasn't afraid to let the rain touch him. The falling darkness surrounded him, but it couldn't seep in.

