

The Diamond Question Mark

Contributed by James Nolan

From: Boulevard, nos. 71 & 72, Spring 2009 THE DIAMOND QUESTION MARK by James Nolan My grandfather again trusted banks. Inadvertently my grandmother was always washing ten and twenty dollar bills that he had squirreled away in suit pockets and rolled-up socks. With wooden clothespins, she would clip the soggy bills to her wash line between the step-ins and sheets. By the time I was growing up, in the newly prosperous 1950s, the subject of my grandfather and his lost money had become something of a family joke. Yet I suspect that during the penurious years when my mother's family moved from one shabby rental to another in downtown New Orleans, the joke wasn't a particularly funny one. No, they weren't poor people. One look around at the antique furniture, the crystal and silver, the opera programs fanned out on the coffee table, and the embossed editions of classic literature published at the turn of the last century, and it was obvious that they were once used to a more luxurious life. They happened to be rich people who just didn't have any more money. The golden age in which they had prospered was over, and had been for such a long time that their grandchildren studied about it at school. Disillusioned, they survived the rollercoaster ride of their era with some degree of grace and dignity. With wry grimaces, they distrusted the instant riches that flourished around them in their later years, afraid that once again they would live to see the financial system come crashing down around them. Luckily they didn't. They missed the present catastrophe by almost four decades. My grandfather, Lenow Alexander Partee, had been a spoiled teenager in Memphis during the gloriously spendthrift 1890s, the era that Mark Twain satirically labeled the Gilded Age, or rather, the first Gilded Age. The youngest of five brothers and sisters, my grandfather was doted on by a loving family and waited on by a staff of servants. Cotton may have been the family business, or perhaps it was dry goods, I'm not sure, but the Partees lived in a mansion in the Pinchback District, had an office in a building they owned on Front Street, and sent their children to the finest schools. "When I was seventeen," my grandfather told me, chomping on a cigar like W.C. Fields, "my father said I could do anything in the whole wide world that I wanted to. He would send me to Yale, say, or buy me a bicycle. I took the bicycle, and after I rode around the block for a couple of years, headed West." His mother Jessie's family, the Lenows, were probably assimilated Jewish immigrants who originally bore the name Lenowitz. In 1852, Jessie Lenow's father founded Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis, one of the first park-like burial grounds established during the rural Southern cemetery movement. When my grandfather's only sister Etta died unexpectedly on her wedding day in 1911, the family commissioned an Italian artist to sculpt a life-sized statue of her out of Carrara marble. The statue was shipped from Milan to Memphis and still graces Elmwood Cemetery, although now is blackened by time and decay. Jessie Lenow was graduated in 1876 from the Tennessee State Female College, and I've always been amused by her graduating essay, written in the curlicued calligraphy of the day, titled "The Influence of Beauty." Flowery estheticism was the muse of the first Gilded Age, much as postmodern theory has been the muse of the second. "Thus beauty sits in regal state," my great-grandmother penned, "and rules with royal hand the million loyal human hearts; and, if knowledge then be king, and the mind of man the throne on which he sits, we must, at least, proclaim fair beauty queen, and woman's face her chosen seat." Although my snickering boyhood reading of this lofty passage conjured images of a bosomy beauty queen sitting on a woman's face, clearly a florid classicism marked an age with the aristocratic pretension that its prosperity would never end. I'm not certain when my grandfather's fortunes first began to decline. His three successful brothers—Cherry, Alva, and Raymond—considered their younger brother "shiftless." For a few years he wandered the country on his inheritance, and could gab at length about Frisco and Buffalo and St. Louis, the bustling world of redcaps and porters and bellhops. Shortly after World War I, Lenow Partee drifted to New Orleans, where he married into an affluent Creole family of tobacco merchants. Although not a French Catholic, he was charming and had elegant penmanship, that watermark of a true gentleman. But his inheritance was dwindling, so he eventually found a job as an auditor, a profession that valued his fine hand and dapper appearance, even while he continued to rely heavily on family stocks and bonds. It was still the Roaring Twenties, and the country was rolling in dough. For a gentleman of his breeding, certainly everything would work out. And it did, until October 29, 1929. Overnight his portfolio turned into worthless paper. Then on the morning the banks failed in New Orleans, the Lenow Partees woke up in their townhouse with nothing. Rien de rien. My Creole grandmother, Olga Glaudot, bundled up her two young children and moved back into her family's home on Ursulines Avenue while my grandfather, tail between his legs, took a room in a boarding house. This was to be a temporary arrangement, of course, only until the experts in Washington straightened out the unfortunate financial mess. President Hoover himself announced on the wireless that "prosperity was just around the corner." Soon after, the Auguste Glaudots lost the tobacco business in the French Quarter, along with their stately house on Ursulines. As the Depression deepened, the three generations lived crammed into a single shotgun rental in the rundown Seventh Ward with their vases, crystal, mahogany furniture, and fin de siècle library. My grandfather, "too good for any job," as his Creole in-laws complained, eventually landed work with President Roosevelt's W.P.A., and somehow the family scraped by. My mother grew up during the Depression. No, you've heard this story before, or one just like it. She had only two dresses, one to wear while she washed out the other by hand. After her baby sister was born, her older brother delivered newspapers to help put food on the table. Many were the nights when she got by on just rice with a pat of butter. Every gnawed bone was tossed into the eternal pot-au-feu simmering on the stove. For a while she was shipped off to live with spinster aunts on Bayou Road who had relatives in the country, from which came a reliable supply of food. Although the shelves were stacked with books to read, they all had been published before 1910. The only other entertainment was the funny papers. And this genteel poverty into which I was born. My grandfather advised that unless I studied Latin, I wouldn't amount to much in life. He would point out the flamboyant curves of the signature on the flyleaves of his books and cluck as I practiced my

own clumsy penmanship. As a teenager, when anyone encouraged me to choose a profession in which I could make tons of money—insurance, investment banking, real estate—my grandfather sighed. He could picture how that would end, with men in top hats leaping out of office windows. At that point he might repeat one of the various refrains he called his "thoughts of the day," no doubt cribbed from souvenir ashtrays in the French Quarter: "I'd rather be a dirty bum riding a slow freight train way behind than a multimillionaire in a golden casket on a fast express in the baggage coach ahead." Then he and I would laugh and laugh. One thing that my grandfather did believe in was jewelry. Diamonds and gold, to be exact. That was wealth you could hold in your hands, and didn't lose value. You could add to it, an ounce of 24-carat gold or a diamond at a time. He felt that when you were sporting a diamond stick pin on your tie, you really had something. The wads of bills deposited in his clothes that my grandmother regularly ran through the rinse cycle were actually down payments or monthly installments on the various purchases he was negotiating at the jewelry stores on Canal Street. Every day he would rise at noon—a gentleman never did business before noon—and carefully dress himself to ride the streetcar to Canal Street to mail a letter, buy a cigar, have a cup of coffee, shoot the breeze with hotel doormen, and haggle with jewelers. Even though he was in his late eighties by this time, he didn't dress like the turn-of-the-century dandy you might expect. It was the swinging 1960s and he dressed Mod, in clothes I would have killed for. I was in high school then, living with my grandparents, and often I'd sneak into his bedroom to splash on English Leather cologne before a date, or to borrow a Madras shirt. The striped double-breasted sport coats with the wide lapels were off limits. "You've got to keep up with the times," he told me, admiring his spit-shined Bass Wejuns. "Is this too loud?" He pointed to a red paisley tie over a shocking-pink body shirt. "Groovy," I said. He was less enthusiastic about the jewelry. Gold cuff links weren't my bag. My grandfather, natty man about town, claimed to be the spitting image of the haberdasher Harry S. Truman. On May 8, 1969, he typed a fan letter to the former President, extending effusive greetings on his eighty-fifth birthday and commenting on their "resemblance": A nice person stopped me in the street a few years back and said, 'Cap, if you were a little taller and some heavier, I'd swear you were Harry S. Truman.' I went him one better and said, 'Major, you've paid me a high compliment, for I've always considered Mr. Truman one of my favorites. The next time you are up and around Walnut and 12th, you might 'salute' the old drugstore on the Northwest corner for me, my favorite haven of rest 61 years ago. The letter is signed, "Just an old-time Democrat from the Deep South." Truman never responded, but I've saved the carbon copy for the attached oval photo and for the shred of biography it provides: at one time my grandfather hung out at a corner drugstore in Independence, Missouri, no doubt dazzling the girls with his wit and wardrobe during the economic panic that hit the country in 1907. When he would return from those daily expeditions to Canal Street jewelers, huffing and puffing, he'd often be mumbling under his breath. "Jesse James stuff. Might as well hold me up with a gun in broad day light." Then he'd slip out of his vest pocket the piece of jewelry in dispute to ask what I thought. I first saw the diamond pendant when it was a rectangular chunk of 14-carat gold with a single diamond at the center. My grandfather would lounge on the unmade bed in his room, listening to a radio perpetually stuck in the static between two stations, chewing on a cigar and holding jewelry up to the light. My grandparents had separate bedrooms not only because of tobacco smoke but because my grandfather used the metal wastepaper basket as if it were a brass spittoon. And sometimes he missed. "Diz-gusting," my grandmother said, curling her lip. Long-suffering Mae West was no Mae West to her husband's W.C. Fields. Picture one of those devout widows dressed in black on their knees in the shadows of Notre Dame. In my grandfather's room, every piece of paper—matchbook covers, calling cards, the backs of envelopes—was covered with columns of minute calculations as he juggled his various accounts with the Jesse James jewelers. He was obsessed with the diamond pendant for more than a year. He couldn't decide whether it should be a pendant, a tie tack, or one of a pair of cuff links. At the time I was starting to buy my threads at Army Surplus, so didn't offer an opinion. Nobody I knew was wearing diamond tie tacks to hootenannies or protest marches. Beaming, he called me into his room late one night to show me something. We'd often share a midnight beer with cheese and crackers. After all, he was well into his second childhood as I was emerging from my first. The pendant was finally finished. "What is it?" I scratched the peach of my chin. "That's what Paillet wanted to know. Every time I had a few extra dollars left over from my Social Security checks, I'd ask him to mount another diamond on it." He was always so nonchalant about money. He'd scrimped and saved years for this piece of jewelry. "Finally he said, 'Mr. Partee, what are we making here?' And I said, 'Mr. Paillet, I don't know. So make it a question mark.'" And there it was, a diamond question mark, a paisley-shaped curl of stones bordered in silver and set in gold. On the back it was signed "Paillet." "What does it mean?" I asked. "Got me." "Cool." I was reading Jean-Paul Sartre, and it struck me as so . . . Existentialist. "I see folks running around wearing their religious medals—St. Jude, St. Joseph, Virgin of Whatnot. This expresses what I believe. Saint I-Don't-Know." And then he chortled. Earlier that year my grandfather had shocked the Sunday dinner table with his agnostic dream. "I had a dream last night," he announced over demitasses of black coffee. "Pass the sugar." My grandmother rolled her eyes. "I was in a tiny cement cell, and the floor, ceiling and four walls were slowly closing in on me a few inches at a time. I knew that when they met, I'd be gone, and nothing would be left—no time, no life, no death, no God—nothing." "Diz-gusting." My grandmother crossed herself. Every time I'd get up at once to clear the dishes, leaving my grandfather and me at the table. Eyes watering, he was shaking his snowy white head, stirring the spoon inside an empty cup. Years later I found out what the diamond question mark was really about. It was my inheritance. At the end of the second Gilded Age, I'm sitting here studying the stash of jewelry that my grandfather left me. Here's the Swiss Universal gold watch that I once brought to be adjusted at Matteucci's, the watch shop in North Beach. It hadn't worked in years. "I know this watch," the elderly Mr. Matteucci told me. "Look, here's my mark with the date inside. I last cleaned it in 1962." "Was PawPaw in San Francisco in 1962," I asked my mother. I didn't remember that trip of his, but the jeweler's mark proved it. "Of course not," she said. "He won that watch in a poker game in the French Quarter." "Then the San Francisco

sucker he won it from lived in my neighborhood. He and I go to the same Italian jeweler." There is a diamond clip shaped like an arrow, also signed by Mr. Paillet, along with a monogrammed gold belt buckle—LAP—and matching cufflinks. A gold bill clip with a large P. And here are the various rings that my grandfather wore all at once: a chunky emerald, an ornate amethyst, and the only one I've ever worn, a smoky aquamarine. Right after his death in 1971—I was a long-haired journalist living in San Francisco at the time and wasn't invited to the funeral—my mother mailed me his favorite ring, a square amethyst mounted in gold. Like the Romans, I'd drop it in my wine glass so that I wouldn't get drunk. But a street urchin from Berkeley soon ripped it off, and so for years I didn't see the rest of my grandfather's jewelry in Mother's custody. These days I couldn't wear any of this bling to walk the mean streets of New Orleans, the same streets my bejeweled grandfather strolled forty years ago. I'd be devoured alive by fourteen-year-old thugs like Sebastian in Suddenly Last Summer. If the public display of jewelry is a sign of civilization, then we Americans live in savage times. Except for Puff Daddy's bling, I doubt that my grandfather would have approved of the Gilded Age that has just slammed to a close. He would have found the gas-guzzling S.U.V.s, suburban McMansions, \$40,000 Birkin handbags, vacation condos and beach houses, private jets, nouvelle cuisine, \$500 bottles of wine, and kindergarten aimed at the Ivy Leagues, all vulgar and stressful. The Rockefellers, Guggenheims, Vanderbilts, and Carnegies of his youth at least exercised their noblesse oblige to endow museums, universities, and libraries before they bowed out. What have the present robber barons left us except a trillion dollar deficit, mountains of plastic junk from China, and an obscenely wasteful and foolish way of life? The only aspect of the current crash that surprises me is that anyone is surprised. I've been tapping my foot for years, waiting for the present Gilded Age to fold. And I knew it would, like clockwork, as surely as the booms ended that caused the economic panics of 1837, 1873, 1907, 1929, 1987, and 2001. During the past twenty years, I've witnessed the savings-and-loan debacle, which cut short the greedy Yuppie era, the delirious dot-com boom, when San Francisco was invaded by hordes of twenty-five-year-old millionaires with nothing real to sell, and then the housing bubble. When I vacated my North Beach apartment and the rent jumped from \$375 to \$2,800 a month—and the slumlord didn't even fix the doorbell—I thought of tulip bulbs. Like the tulip bubble in 17th century Holland, a crash was inevitable on such an absurdly overvalued commodity. And then came Katrina, which finally convinced me that nobody is in charge. The moment I decided to abandon the devastated city on the third day after the hurricane hit New Orleans, the first thing I stuffed into my satchel was my grandfather's jewelry box. Mr. Paillet's jewelry shop had long since disappeared from Canal Street, along with every other reputable business, and as I sloshed down the once venerable street through knee-deep water dodging bullets from the looting free-for-all, I knew the time had come to flee. Seated on the floor of a stolen school bus driven by a Cajun pirate, I rode through the impenetrable darkness with the diamond question mark dangling from a gold chain under a ratty T-shirt, plastered by sweat over my heart. Breathless but glad to be alive, I felt like my grandfather's "dirty bum riding a slow freight train." As the bus rattled over the Crescent City Connection bridge and out of the city, I thought of the five generations of bones afloat in our family tomb and wondered if I would ever be allowed to return home. I understood why overseas Chinese, Jews, and other displaced people value gold so much. When the time comes, you can run with it. But the inheritance my grandfather is more than jewelry. If culture is experience refined through the passing of generations, then I received the equivalent of an inexhaustible trust fund. He bequeathed me the last living vestige of a democratic country skeptical of wealth, street-wise, smart-mouthed and defiant, one in which any loser can set out to reinvent himself on Whitman's "open road." Over the years, I've come to view the various booms and busts of our times through the prism of my grandfather's diamond question mark. The towers may crumble, the banks fail, the levees break. Don't trust any of it. Jesse James stuff. When I told my Depression-born aunt that I had escaped from New Orleans wearing the diamond question mark, she reverted to the family joke about her shiftless father and his lost money. "Oh you know him," she said, laughing. "It's probably not worth very much."