

The Vial

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Lily Farquat checked the vial for the third time that day. She held it up to the light and shook it slightly. The old cut glass was heavy, and its facets still threw off quick slants of light, but Lily's eyes looked only for the liquid within.

More accurately, her left eye looked, for at eighty-four, her right eye only offered her a muddy haze, its clarity lost to milky cataracts years ago. Satisfied that its contents were intact, she put the vial back in the cupboard, pushing it behind the cans of soup.

Four days, she thought. Four days. Maybe a dance at Luthjen's. Or beignets and coffee at Du Monde—how long has it been?

All the shades in the little house were drawn; they had been drawn for nearly ten years, winter and summer, drawn the day that Lily turned 75. That day she had taken every mirror in the house and had them sent away.

"Don't care to have anybody looking in on me—they can mind their own business, and I'll mind mine. And I don't care to be looking into any more mirrors. I know what I look like."

She had rid herself of most of the reminders of her past—

everything but the vial. The vial was older than Lily, older than Lily's mother. It had been given to Desiree, Lily's grandmother, by Marie Leveau, after Desiree had saved Marie's daughter from being trampled by a horse.

Marie told Desiree that the potion would grant its drinker youth and vitality, but that its effects would last three years, and not a moment longer. However, the juju would only work if the vial's entire contents were taken at once.

Desiree accepted the gift with sober thanks, but had always laughed about it in private. She'd kept the vial in a drawer, and given it to her daughter Rose on her sixteenth birthday. It was willed by Rose to her only child Lily, accompanied by a note detailing instructions for its use.

Lily had scoffed, but later she'd been given a book about the Leveaus, and having read it, read countless others. She'd looked at the vial ten thousand times since then, shaking it, pulling out its tight glass stopper and smelling it, falling asleep with it clutched in her hand. There was validity in the vial's age, portent in its liquid gleam. Lily knew its power was real.

She bided her time, noting the slackening skin on her arms, the brown splotches on her hands. She'd always been a vigorous walker, loving to stroll the Garden District and the waterfront, but as those

neighborhoods and her body fell into disarray, her interest in walking waned.

But she had the vial. Four days to go. She was dozing in the chair, dreaming of dancing in front of the statue in Jackson Square when the knock startled her awake.

"Lily, it's Letitia. I brought you a few things. Can I come in?" It was the new social worker, whose eagerness Lily had not yet been able to put off.

"Fine, fine, an old woman's sleep isn't important. Why should I rest?" said Lily.

"Now that's no way to talk, on this fine day. I brought you that good strong rye loaf from Boudreau's, and this little angel food cake, because I know that somebody's birthday is close. A little soup too."

Letitia started to put away the soup into the vial's cupboard when Lily scuttled over from her chair.

"Letitia, no, just leave everything on the counter! I'm not feeling well, and I need my rest. Please go, now." Lily gripped Letitia's arm, clawlike, and looked up into Letitia's face, stricken.

"Lily, if you're not right, I'll call the doctor this instant!"

"No, no, no doctor. I'm fine, I just need to be alone. Please go."

Letitia looked at her closely, and then moved to the door. "I can't come by on your actual day, but I'll check in on you right after."

Lily nodded and went back to her chair. In four days, I'll come and check in on you, Letitia—you'll be surprised, she thought.

Lily felt poorly the evening before her birthday. She'd gone to bed early, but couldn't sleep, dwelling on the upcoming morning's transformation. Shortly before midnight, her breathing became labored; she started panting, taking quick, shallow breaths. She felt a strong pressure on her chest.

No, not now, she thought. She struggled up in bed, holding her hand under her rapidly beating heart. The vial. The vial will save me. She pushed heavily out of her bed and wobbled to the cupboard, barely able to seize the vial. She pulled out the stopper and brought it to her lips. The taste of the liquid was sweet, even sparkly.

She slipped to the floor, an image of whirling at Luthjen's flitting through her mind.

The technician had puzzled over the liquid, but having checked it twice, he knew it was water, nothing but. He held it up to the light and shook it, then shook his head.

"Finished with the tests, Jack?" the coroner said as he entered the lab.

"Yep. H₂O, pure and simple. But my eyes were playing tricks on me—it seemed like it was glowing, in some weird way."

"Well, weird is daily on this job. Thought it might be some kind

of poison when they found the old lady with it on the floor in a death grip, the bottle up to her mouth. What's really weird is that they're telling me she was a few hours away from her eighty-fifth birthday—she barely looks fifty. And she supposedly had a clouded eye, but they're both clear as day. That's weird."

Jack nodded and poured the contents of the beaker down the drain. He turned away before he could see the little wisp of light that seemed to hover over the sink for a moment. But it might have been a reflection—it was a brilliantly sunny day in New Orleans.