



The Golden Horn

(storybook)

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The swamp was filled with duck weed and water hyacinths. Flourishing cypress, red maples and water elms poked through the water like frozen water ballerinas, twisting and stretching in a dazzling imitation of dance. Clumps of lacy pearl-gray moss shrouded the ancient trees, creating a cool green cave of leaves over gnarled branches.

Birds glided overhead. The tranquility was broken only by intervals of millions of cicadas singing their songs. The swamp was eerily quiet at times, filled with unseen life, a peculiar beauty all its own. No matter how perfect the silence, Jody always had a feeling she was never alone. She knew the swamp well; she knew how spooky and dangerous it could sometimes be. She'd seen all kinds of con men and strange characters hiding out in her travels. She once covered herself with gray tree moss and crawled on her belly to get close enough to see and hear two men bragging about robbing houses Uptown. They were dividing their loot and making plans to take the riverboat across the muddy Mississippi to West Bank to lay low for awhile.

Jody lived in a small shanty house along the swampland. The cracks in the walls were covered with cardboard and tarpaper to keep out the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter. It was a small Cajun community called Pierre's Folly where most Cajun folks lived and pretty much stayed to them selves. They preferred their own lifestyle, food and music, that is, except Jody who was curious about everyone and everything. As a young girl when she wasn't in school she got up at dawn, filled her pockets with sweets and didn't return until dusk. Her mother often worried about her. But Jody hadn't caused her one bit of trouble, so she allowed her the freedom to run.

This great swamp was the very one Jody rescued her pet snake, and good friend, Ropé. She worked for *hours* before tricking the gator into letting go. The gator was at least *fifteen feet* long, with the *largest* jaws and *sharpest* teeth in the world. Well, anyway, that's the way the story goes when she tells it over and over to her friend Henry. And when the snake hears Jody tell her story, at the end he adds, "That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth."

Late one morning when Jody was walking along the edge of the misty swamp she stopped to watch a snake eyeing a large blue dragonfly sitting on a pad of water hyacinths. The snake waited until the fly settled down before

it smoothly slithered through the water and over the hyacinth plants to prepare for its strike.

Two eyes barely above the water were also watching and waiting for the same fly. Slowly the gator moved closer to the fly and opened its huge jaws. Suddenly, CHOMP! The dragonfly immediately disappeared down the gator's dark throat. The snake, being too close, got caught in the gator's jaws. It wiggled between the gator's sharp teeth and with its head dangling out one side and its tail dangling out the other, he began to beg for mercy. "Help! Help! Someone help!" he pleaded. "I'm poison! You don't want to eat me," he told the gator while struggling for his life.

Jody, hearing the snake beg for its life, felt sorry for it. "That's right, Mister Gator. That snake is poison, *Very* poison!"

The gator was listening to Jody, but, afraid of being tricked, didn't open its jaws.

The snake's eyes were bulging with fear as he continued to cry out. "Please, oh please, someone help, can't anyone see I'm being eaten alive?"

"He's right!" Jody repeated, "The last time I saw a gator eat a poison snake like that, its belly swelled up this big and popped plum wide open." Jody held her arms out as far as she could reach. "Then a hurricane came by and, *poof!* blew the gator right away. You sure don't want to eat *that* snake!"

The gator, fearing of popping open and vanishing into thin air, reluctantly loosened its jaws to allow the snake to go. Jody seeing the snake was free breathed a sigh of relief.

The gator raised its head from the water, "Thanks for your advice little one," he said, then slowly lowered himself until nothing could be seen but two eyes moving in the water.

Jody continued to walk along the swamp watching the birds and imitating the sounds of the cicadas singing. Suddenly something cold rubbed against her leg. Looking beside her she saw the snake she'd just rescued from the gators jaws. "Are you following me?" she asked.

Nearly out of breath, the snake replied, "I wanted to thank you for saving my life back there."

"I seen you weren't having much luck saving yourself."

"If you'd seen that gator's throat you wouldn't be thinking too clearly either."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Do you have a name?" Jody asked.

"Of course I have a name." The snake pulled himself up closer to Jody and stiffened his long slender body as if getting ready to make a speech.

"My name is Ropé, everyone calls me Ropé," he said with a heavy accent on the end as if to sound important.

Since that day Ropé seldom let Jody out of his sight, he wrapped himself around Jody's arm and together they roamed the swamplands and neighborhoods to see what was new or what was old for that matter. Each day brought new adventures. Some days more interesting than others. He created his own space to sleep at the foot of Jody's bed and a place to eat at the family table. There were no more chilly nights under rocks or dangerously searching for food. It took time for Jody's parents to get used to having a snake running freely in the house, but Ropé soon became part of the family.

Jody learned that Ropé was not the ordinary slimy brown distasteful beast that she'd encountered before. Instead, Ropé was a colorful, educated, wise cracking comical reptile full of information who she sometimes turned to for answers.

It was a warm spring morning just after the baby gators hatched when Jody first saw Henry. It wasn't far from where she lived. He was sitting on a log watching the baby gators bask in the sun. She quietly snuck up behind him and while hiding in a bush, she poked him with a long stick. Henry, thinking he had just been bitten by the mother alligator, never looked back. He took off running and screaming all the way home. His mother, hearing his cries, ran to meet him. After calming him down long enough to hear what happened and Henry realizing he wasn't injured. He looked back and saw Jody with Ropé clinging to her arm and began to laugh. From that day on, Jody and Henry quickly became best friends.

Henry Johnson lived in Cow Hollow, not far from Pierre's Folly in a Negro community where people were proud of their heritage and traditions. Like Jody's family, Henry's family was a loving family who took a liking to Jody the same as Jody's had taken a liking to Henry. When Henry first started bringing Jody into the community, the neighbors warned him he was different. "Remember Henry," they reminded him, "us Negro folks are different than other folks." Henry didn't quite understand, but he tried to explain to Jody.

"We're different, you know."

"What do you mean, you're different?" Jody asked.

"I don't know I just hear people say we're different than other folks 'round."

"You have eyes and legs like me, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"You have a mama and daddy, right?"

"Uh-huh," Henry replied.

"Don't you eat and sleep like I do?" Jody asked.

Henry scratched his head and thought for a moment, "Do you eat sweet potato pie?" he asked.

"I eat crawfish pie."

Henry giggled, "It's not the same. Come with me, my mama makes the best sweet potato pie in Cow Hollow."

Henry's mother had an iron pot of steamy thick gumbo cooking on the stove. "You're just in time for supper," she said.

"Jody wants sweet potato pie," Henry told his mother.

"Jody wants sweet potato pie or is it you who wants sweet potato pie?" Henry's mother asked with a twinkle in her eye. "Best you two set down there and have some of this hot gumbo while I cut you some pie." Henry's mother filled two bowls with the thick creamy mixture and sat it on the table in front of them.

Jody waited, her arms resting on the table. "Ma'am, she said, Ropé is hungry too."

"You mean that thing eats gumbo?"

"Yes ma'am."

Ropé pulled himself closer to the table, "That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth, I eat anything Jody eats."

Henry's mother put a bowl of gumbo in front of Ropé. They blew the steam away with each spoonful until it was gone, then quickly started eating the sweet potato pie.

"Good, huh?" Henry asked.

"Best pie I've ever ate," Jody replied. "Now we're the same, ain't we?"

Henry smiled, "Uh-huh, I guess we are."

"That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth," Ropé added as he stuffed the last bite of pie in his mouth.

Henry and Jody started laughing when they saw the lump of pie moving down Ropé's throat.

Now, when folks see Jody and Henry together, they're not sure just who lives where.

Ropé was playfully chasing Jody down a dirt road. Just before the bend she decided to surprise him by making a quick turn to her left and run up a narrow pathway. Suddenly before her stood a tall gray-haired old man.

Startled, looking up into his large dark eyes, she asked, "Mister, you scared me, where'd you come from?"

"Been here all my time."

"I didn't see you."

"I seen you."

"Do you live around here?"

"Just over yonder," the old man said, pointing to a small unpainted house with a rusty tin roof hidden under a cove of large oak trees with gray moss hanging to the ground. "Lived here all my life."

"What's your name Mister?" Jody asked.

"Folks around here call me Guthie."

"My name is..." before she could finish, he interrupted.

"I know your name."

"How'd you know my name?"

"I know lotsa things," he answered in a soft gentle southern voice.

"Come; take a seat on my porch. You two look like you could use sumptin' to drink."

Ropé, making sure he was included and unable to turn down food or drink, spoke up, "Yeah, we sure are thirsty."

Cautiously, Jody and Ropé followed the old man to his house and waited on the porch while he went inside and came out with two glasses of sweet tea. He went back inside and came out again with a glass for himself and a small bowl of pralines. "Have some, I made them myself." He said, placing the dish on the wooden box beside them.

Jody and Ropé ate the sweet sugary pecan pralines, quickly finishing every crumb.

"Ummmm, that sure was good." Ropé said, licking his lips and washing the sweet down with the last of the tea.

"Sure was, thanks Mister Guthie," Jody said, standing up. "We gotta go now, to meet my friend."

"Next time you come this way I'll have some more waitin'," he told them.

"We'll be back," Jody promised, starting down the steps.

"That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth," Ropé added.

Guthie was the oldest man in Cow Hollow. He was loved and respected by the people in the Parish. Folks came from all around to seek his advice

and brought their children to hear his stories. Some say he is a healer and knows the future as well as the past.

It was a common sight in New Orleans for young boys to dance to music made by assorted pans, tin cans, and the clapping of hands while people stop to do a little Cajun style dance. Spontaneous dancing in the streets was essential nourishment for a young musician's inspiration, but Henry had more in mind for himself. He told his friends he was going to become a famous trumpet player and travel the world when he grew up.

When Jody saw Henry, she told him about meeting Guthie. "He's old, *really* old, he must be a hundred," she said. "It was spooky how he just came out of nowhere."

"Wow, he sounds scary. I've heard people tell stories about him, but I ain't seen him."

"Can't be real scary, 'cause he gave us pralines and told us we could come back for more. Say's he knows lots of things, he even knew my name. I bet he can tell you if you're gonna be famous."

"You think he can?" Henry asked.

"We can ask. I'll meet you tomorrow at the crossroads and we'll go there together. If he gets scary, we'll run."

Nearing Guthie's house the next day Jody called out, "Mister G-u-t-h-i-e-we're back."

Guthie opened his screen door, "I seen you brought your friend. Set there on the porch and I'll be right out."

Jody and Henry sat on the bench. Ropé pushed in between them and waited. Soon Guthie came out with a jar of sweet tea and a small plate full of pralines. "Just a minute, I'll get us some glasses," he said going back inside. Guthie came back carrying four glasses and poured each of them a glass of sugary tea and sat down in his rocker. "Now, tell me what brings you here?"

"Sir," Henry said, "Jody says you know lots of things. I was wondering if you can tell me if I'm gonna be famous. 'Cause when I grow up I wanna play the trumpet with the big bands?"

"Well, let me see," Guthie said, closing his eyes, smiling and slowly nodding his head up and down, "I see you playin' that fine music just like the others, only better, problem is..."

"What's that?" Henry interrupted curiously.

"You gotta start playin' every day."

"Can't," Henry said, lowering his head.

"Why not?"

"Ain't got no horn."

"How are you gonna play music if you ain't got no horn?"

"Don't know yet."

Guthie sat quietly and rubbed his chin, thinking. Then he looked straight into Henry's eyes, "Son, you're gonna find a way. I know you will."

Early the following day Henry went Downtown to the different second hand music stores checking out horns. Knowing he didn't have money to buy one, he stopped musicians on the street and in the square and asked to borrow their horns. Some took the time to show him notes and offered him tips on playing. He watched and listened from doorways of clubs to the bands playing inside. Soon he the started playing the music he heard in his head. Sometimes with success and other times without.

By the time Henry was thirteen his father realized he was serious about playing the horn. So he took the money he'd saved doing extra jobs to buy a second hand trumpet from the music store on Bourbon Street and gave it to Henry for his birthday. "Son," he said, "You've showed us you've made up your mind to become a musician. Your mama and me believe you will."

Henry remembers this day as the happiest day of his life. With Guthie's words in the back of his mind he set out to fulfill his dreams.

Often on the way to meet Henry in Cow Hollow Jody and Ropé stopped by to visit old man Guthie. He always had plenty of pralines and sweet tea waiting for them. It wasn't just the treats Jody liked about Guthie. She liked the many stories he told. Some were made up and scary, others were actual things that happened in Guthie's life. Each story started out the same, but no two were ever alike. At the end of each story, Ropé enforced it by adding, "That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth."

Henry sometimes joined them on Guthie's porch that is, when he wasn't Downtown hanging out with the street musician playing his horn or working along the Mississippi River helping his father load and unload cargo.

"Just sit right there." he told them, "And I'll bring us some of that sweet tea." Guthie disappeared inside the house and came back with four glasses filled. He sat down in his old rocking chair, took a sip from his glass and began his story. "Well, now let me see, the gators were tired of gettin' all that negative attention. Folks thought of them as heartless, vicious beasts, only

good for their skin and eatin'. They wanted to prove to folks that they had a kind heart, were smart and important. So early that spring, before the Mardi Gras season began, the gator King called a swamp meetin'. Hundreds of gators gathered on that little island in the middle of the swamp. Why, all you could see were gator heads bobbin' up and down. The meetin' went on until the moon hid its face behind a veil of clouds."

"Wow!" Henry said, "that musta been a long time."

"I reckon it was," Guthie replied.

"What did they do next?" Jody asked.

"Well, that year they decided to join the Mardi Gras Parade. They made hats and costumes usin' flowerin' vines, moss, and bits of colored shiny paper they found behind stores. Then they hid behind the barn, where they make them floats and waited until the last float pulled out onto the street. Then they followed close behind. The King was leadin' the gators. He wore a long trailin' robe made of gray moss woven with blue and yellow flowers. His crown was sparklin' with pieces of colored glass glued on with tree sap. Struttin' beside him were his two honorable gators dressed in colorful hats and blue coats of flowers. Followin' behind them were hundreds of gators just whippin' their tails from side to side and marchin' to the parade music and tossin' flowers as they passed through the crowded streets. The cheerin' was so loud that folks ran from the houses to see what all the commotion was about. That year the parade was such a success that folks asked the gators to come back the followin' year. But that wasn't what the gators wanted. They just wanted to prove sumptin'. And that they did."

"What was that?" Henry asked.

"They wanted respect; they wanted people to know that gators are smart and have a gentle heart just like everybody else."

Remembering the day the gator let him go free, Ropé chimed in, "That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth."

Guthie pushed himself up on his long thin wobbly legs, "You best be gettin' on home, your mama's gonna be worried about you."

"Next time we come, will you tell us another story?" Jody begged.

"That I will," He answered before going inside to lie down to take his afternoon nap. Lying on his bed Guthie smiled thinking about Jody and her devoted friends Henry and Ropé. He'd watched over the years, her coming and going without a care or fear in the world. Why, he was sure she'd seen more places and knew more folks than anyone in the Parish.

On their way to meet Henry, Jody and Ropé stopped by Guthie's to give him the oyster Po-Boy sandwich her mother made for him. When Guthie saw her running up the path he opened the screen door,

"Where are you headin' in such a hurry?" he asked. Of course, Guthie didn't need to ask, he already knew.

"Gonna meet Henry in the cemetery."

"Cemetery! What are you gonna do in the cemetery?"

"Just talk and listen to Henry play his horn."

"Next time you come by, I'll tell you a story about them cemeteries."

"You will?" Jody asked. "Maybe the day after tomorrow, I gotta help mama tomorrow. Jody went in the house and placed the brown poke with the Po-Boy inside on a small table covered with a checkered oil cloth and started out the door. "We'll be back, real soon."

"I'll be waitin'," Guthie called out as he watched her run down the path with Rope' clinging to her arm.

St. Louis Number One Cemetery was Jody's and Henry's favorite meeting place. It was usually quiet, unless, of course, Henry was playin' his horn or there was a funeral going on, in which case, they hid, waited and watched from behind the tombs until everyone left. It was a peaceful place where they could be alone, laugh, play jokes on each other, share their dreams and talk about their adventures. Ropé tagged along if he wasn't out doing his own thing, you know like snakes do, well, most snakes, that is. Ropé was nearly human. Being with Jody, he did all the things humans did and being a snake before that, he could do all the things snakes did. That made him a valuable asset to Jody and Henry, who often needed his expertise.

When Jody and Henry stopped by to visit Guthie a few days later, she reminded him about the story he promised to tell her.

"Which one was that?" he asked.

"About the cemetery, remember?"

"Oh, that story. I remember. Well, now let me see, it was a long time ago," Guthie stopped talking and rubbed his chin, "I'm not sure, but I think it was in 1886 when the whole city of New Orleans was under six feet of water. It rained days and nights. Folks thought it was never gonna stop. The people who had two story houses moved to the top floors and the ones who didn't just sat on their roofs and waited it out. Me and my brother, well, we climbed up that oak tree over yonder and as far as we could see, there were things floatin' around in that muddy water and over at the cemetery," Guthie

pointed in the direction of St. Louis Number One on Basin Street where Jody and Henry met, "there were wooden coffins poppin' right up out of the ground. Some broke open and the dead just floated around."

Ropé tightened his grip on Jody's arm. She nudged him aside.

"Them bodies didn't want be in the ground, they wanted to be where they could hear the music that played the day they went there."

His eyes wide, Henry asked, "Can the dead hear?"

"Can the dead hear? Sure they can hear. Why do you think we talk to them?"

Jody, eager to hear more, sat quietly.

"Well, after the rain stopped and the water went down, folks built all them levees around the city to keep out the water and they gathered their loved ones and built a city for the dead. Some didn't recognize their own so they filled the tombs with bodies just to give them a restin' place. Why, some of my kin and some of your kin are together havin' a fine time."

"Really?" Jody asked.

"That's right," Guthie continued. "At night, when everyone is asleep, they're in there havin' a grand ol' time doin' the bone dance to the very music that followed them there. If you walk through the cemetery late at night, you can hear the awfulest racket with all them bones crackin' against each other."

Jody shuddered.

Guthie leaned closer and rattled his teeth. "sounds sumptin' like that," he said in a hushed voice.

Silence...

Ropé breaking the silence spoke up, "A very long time ago when I was snaking around the cemetery I peeked through a crack in one of those tombs and all I could see were piles of bones. They musta been real tired cause they were lying everwhichways."

Guthie smiled and slowly rose from his rocker, "You kids best be runnin' on home before it gets dark. Your mama's probably waitin' supper."

Hanging onto Guthie's final words, Ropé pulled himself up tall and drew a deep breath. "That was a good story," he said, "That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth."

On leaving Guthie's house they walked in silence down the path going to Jody's house. It was easy to recognize the different neighborhoods by the cooking odors which invaded the streets. The sauces were pungent from basil, oregano, cayenne, and other hot spices.

Henry was the first to break the silence, "I could eat a whole sweet potato pie all by myself!"

"Me too. Mama's gonna have crawfish and rice waiting for us."

"Don't forget me," Ropé said feeling a little left out.

"Don't worry, Mama always makes enough for the whole Parish."

Going up the porch steps, they could smell the spicy Cajun aroma coming from the kitchen.

"Smells good, Mama. Is it ready, yet?" Jody called out.

"Be ready as soon as you youngen's get washed up.

Henry and Ropé followed Jody to the back of the house and splashed water from the wash tub on their faces. Teasingly, Henry cupped his hands and tossed water in Ropé's face.

"That's enough," Ropé said shaking his head. "I'm not a WATER MOCCASIN!"

"I was just trying to help you."

"I don't need your help. I've been cleaning my self all my life."

Realizing Ropé was annoyed, Henry apologized, "I'm sorry, I was just playin'."

Ropé smiled, "That's okay."

Quickly they dried their face and hands on the towel hanging on the nail beside the door and made their way to the kitchen table and sat down.

Jody's mother was never surprised to see Henry sitting at the table. "Why, he's family," she would tell the folks in the Parish, in her French Cajun accent. "He's been around," she'd pause as if to think, exaggerating a bit, she'd smile and say, "I really don't remember, but I think it was the day Jody was born." She sat the bowls of hot crawfish and rice smothered with tasty Cajun sauce in front of each of them. Ropé pulled himself up straight at the table so as not to be overlooked. "I wouldn't forget you, Ropé. You're family too, you know," she said, smiling.

Ropé responded with a beaming smile.

Over the years as Henry's music abilities improved, he moved around the corner to Jackson Square where the more experienced musicians played and more people strolled by going to the French Market and the Café du Monde to enjoy chicory coffee and beignets covered with powdered sugar.

In the evenings the square was filled with crowds of people, bandleaders and fellow musicians who smiled, clapped their hands, and nodded their heads in appreciation of Henry's music. This gave Henry the encouragement he needed to play his best.

Lightning flashed across the sky, and thunder roared. The wind blew the sounds from Henry's trumpet back into his face. Large raindrops began to fall. Henry stopped playing and grabbed Jody's hand and ran for shelter under the iron balconies along the street. Ropé, unafraid of getting wet and enjoying the warm rain took his time in joining them.

"I better walk you home before the storm gets worse," Henry told Jody, "Your mama's gonna start to worry about you." Henry slid his horn under his shirt while Ropé wrapped his cold wet body around Jody's warm arm. They walked quickly through the streets; their conversation was limited to shouting through the wind and rain. By the time they reached Jody's house, the storm was slowly leaving, the sun was trying to peek through the clouds, and the arc of a rainbow was beginning to form across the sky.

Henry reached over and pushed the wet hair from Jody's face, "meet you in the cemetery tomorrow afternoon," he said.

Jody stepped upon her porch and before disappearing into the house, "I'll be there," she replied.

The next day, after helping her mother clean the house and pick some vegetables from the side garden, she hurried to meet Henry in the cemetery. He was leaning against a tomb playing his horn and didn't hear her coming. Remembering the story Guthie told them long ago, *how the dead could hear*, she quietly climbed on top of the tomb, leaned over, cupped her hands around her mouth, called out in a deep shaky drawn out voice, "*Henry, oh Henry, you're waking the dead...*"

Henry terrified, nearly jumping out of his skin, stopped playing, "I told you before, *NEVER* do that to me, it makes me very nervous!"

Laughing, Jody apologized, "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

Every year Cow Hollow celebrated their own festival. They called it "Asili," an African word meaning rebirth or new beginning. As long as Henry could remember Magic Mama had been queen of the Fest. The day before the celebration Jody and Ropé joined Henry and the folks of the community in decorating the neighborhood. Ropé being the limber one slithered up trees and on roof tops tying balloons and banners, while women in the kitchens were preparing their specialties. The men brought tables and chairs and placed them on the neighboring lawns.

Magic Mama came from Africa when she was three years old. She was given her name for the spiritual powers she performed when she was called upon to deliver babies in the community. Before she handed the baby to its mother she held it gently to her bosom, rocking it, she closed her eyes. With a smile on her face, she sweetly chanted an African prayer passed down by her mother. The families believed their babies had been blessed and would live a long and healthy life.

When Magic Mama walked through the streets wearing her long colorful dresses and flowered bandannas neatly wrapped around her hair, children held her hands and ran along beside her begging to hear more about the legends of their African ancestors.

The morning of the festival musicians brought their drums, clappers, flutes, horns and other musical instruments they'd made themselves and played lively African music. From outside and in, horns and trumpets sounded. Hundreds came to participate in the fest. Men, women and children met in the streets and hugged. Some sat on the grassy lawns while others danced and sang. Much of the African dance represented birth, love, freedom and worship.

Grasshopper, named at birth by his mother, because of his size, grew up in the same small community as Henry. Henry wasn't sure if Grasshopper had another name, since everyone, including his family, just called him "Grasshopper." Grasshopper had the longest legs and arms and the biggest feet anyone had ever seen. His mama said, "his body was never gonna catch up with his legs and feet." He ran faster and danced better than anyone in Cow Hollow. Folks said he had more rhythm in his little toe than most people had in their entire body. When he heard the beat of the drums every bone in his body started to move.

Tables covered with bright colored cloth were filled with platters of crawfish, spicy thick gumbo, fish, red beans and rice, pecan pie, and of course Henry's mama's famous sweet potato pie and Guthie's pralines with jars of lemonade and sweet tea.

After music, dancing and singing and a belly full of food the Fest ended at sunset. Magic Mama lit the bonfire to ward off evil spirits for the following year and bring in the promise to keep harmony in the community. Declaring the festival a great success, the balloons were let go, floating toward the moon. Everyone gathered around the fire and joined hands to sing the traditional songs of love, freedom and peace. Before going home, the men worked into the night and early morning to return the neighborhood to its normal state.

Day after day, Henry made his rounds to the different clubs Downtown. He stood by the doors listening to the bands inside. Most of the musicians had heard him play in Jackson Square. When they took their breaks, they came out to say hello. "Henry, someday you'll be playing in there," they'd tell him. "You just keep practicing, your day is gonna come."

Henry was growing impatient, because his horn was old and the valves often stuck. He found it difficult to play the notes he wanted to hear. "My day is a long way off," he told Jody, "I'll *never* be that good."

"You will," she assured him.

"Nope. I'll still be playing in Jackson Square when I'm old."

Jody was concerned that Henry was losing his self-confidence. He started playing less each day. When Jody and the musicians tried to encourage him, he didn't show the interested as before. Finally worried, Jody decided to consult with her friend, old man Guthie.

When she arrived at Guthie's house he was sitting on the porch in his rocking chair soaking in the morning sun.

"Come on over here, have a seat. It's about Henry, ain't it?"

"Uh-huh, how did you know?" But Jody knew better than to ask.

As if to read her thoughts, Guthie said, "you're wonderin' how you can help him become a musician. Right?"

"Right." Jody repeated.

"Well." He said, "Let me tell you a story about the Legend of The Golden Horn." He paused for a moment rubbing his short gray beard. "It's a mythical golden trumpet that can make anyone who plays it become the best trumpeter in the world."

Jody, taking in every word asked, "It can?"

"That's right, but first, you gotta believe in yourself to make it happen. The problem is it belongs to the Gator King who lives on an island *deep* in the middle of the swamp. So far, no one has been able to reach that island and those who've tried have never returned. Folks say it's haunted. Sometimes late at night when you look across the swamp you can see the *Fifolet* Ghost shimmerin' and dancin' through the darkness warnin' everybody to keep away."

Having never seen a ghost Jody asked, "What does the *Fifolet* Ghost look like?"

"Can't say, never seen it, 'cause it's surrounded by a bluish light that's so bright it hurts your eyes to look at it."

"Will it hurt you?"

"I reckon it will, no one has ever got that close to find out."

Jody knew exactly where the island was. Many times she'd watched trappers traveling in that direction, but she'd never seen anyone return. Later, she saw boats floating upside down and paddles bobbing in the water.

"I hear the King has many valuable treasures he keeps heavily guarded by his clan."

"Wow!" Jody was fascinated by Guthie's story. "I've got to find a way to get to that island and borrow The Golden Horn for Henry. When he becomes the best trumpet player in the world I'll return it to the King," she told Guthie.

"Oh No! You can't do that," Realizing Jody was determined to find the King, Guthie tried to discourage her by explaining it was only a legend, but Jody's enthusiasm to help her friend overruled Guthie's advice. Without waiting for Guthie to finish his story, Jody was out of her chair and down the steps.

"Thanks Guthie," she said, "I've got to hurry."

"Wait!" Guthie called out, but Jody was already down the path and didn't hear him.

"That girl sure has a mind of her own." He said, shaking his head and thinking aloud.

Now, everyone knows Kings are protected and Jody knew the King of the alligators would be no exception. The swamp around the island would be full of aggressive alligators ready to attack anyone who came close. This was going to take a lot of planning if she was going to reach the King. When she got to the end of the path Ropé was sunning on a rock.

"Come on, we've got to start making plans," she said, leaning over offering Ropé her arm to cling to.

"Plans for what?" Ropé asked.

"We've got to find the King on that island in the middle of the swamp." Jody pointed across the swamp to an island hidden behind cypress trees covered with moss.

"What King?" Ropé asked, "I didn't know there was a King out there."

"You know, the King of the gators. Everybody's got to have a King."

"King or no King, I don't want any part of crossing the swamp and ending up between the jaws of another gator," Ropé replied.

"Didn't I save you before?"

"That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth, but you can count me out."

"Don't worry; I won't let anything happen to you. I need your help, so I can help Henry.

"Ropé knew how important Henry was to Jody and he knew he owed his life to her. Reluctantly, he replied, "Well, okay, since you put it that way, tell me what I have to do."

"Thanks." Jody said, giving him a friendly hug and ignoring his fears. "I knew I could count on you."

Jody and Ropé were up early the following morning making plans to cross the swamp. They gathered cypress logs and laid them side by side and cut smaller logs and nailed them across the larger ones to hold them together. They found rope used for cargo left along the Mississippi and tied it around the logs to reinforce them. Jody found a bucket of tar in the shed in back of the house. Remembering as a younger girl helping her daddy cover a fishing boat with tar, she coated the logs and filled in the cracks with pieces of rope soaked in tar, and allowing each coat to dry thoroughly in the sun before applying the another coat.

"This will keep the raft from getting water logged and sinking." she told Ropé.

When the tar was dry, using her last bit of strength, Jody pulled the raft to the edge of the swamp and pushed it into the water to check for leaks. There being none, she searched for a pole. Unable to find anything suitable, she removed a long slender board from the back of the shed and coated it half way up with tar and left it to dry in the sun. She was sure she would be across the swamp and back with The Golden Horn and have time to replace the board before her daddy noticed it missing. By the third day the raft was ready, but she still hadn't figured how she was going to keep the gators from attacking them.

That night when she got home, she could smell the sweet cakes her mother had been baking all day. Her mother baked King Cakes every year during the Mardi Gras celebration. Hundreds of sweet cakes covered with thin green icing, neatly wrapped, sat on shelves, waiting to be sold in stores and restaurants.

"*Ma Cheri*, what have you got all over you? Get out back and wash that stuff off before you come in here," her mother told her.

Jody went to the back of the house and washed in the tub of rain water and tried to scrub off the tar. She rubbed herself red with an old towel hanging on the clothes line and went inside to eat her supper. Ropé, having

no noticeable tar on him, had already found his place at the table and started eating.

That night, in bed, Jody laid awake thinking of ways to get across the swamp without the gators overturning the raft. Suddenly an idea came to mind.

Near dawn, before her parent's woke, she slipped into the small pantry where the King cakes were lined up on the shelves. Hoping her mother wouldn't be too upset, she filled her pillowcases full of cakes. She walked out on the porch where Ropé was waiting. "Wrap yourself around this and help me carry it to the raft," Jody told him, handing him a pillowcase full of King Cakes.

Sniffing the sweetness, Ropé asked, "What's this for?"

"Gators."

"Gators?" Ropé repeated suspiciously.

"That's right, you're gonna toss a cake in every gator's mouth when they come near the raft."

"Me?" Ropé asked, never gotten over being caught between the jaws of a gator and nearly slipping down its deep dark throat before Jody rescued him.

"Remember you said you'd help me."

"I know, you don't need to remind me."

They put the pillowcases full of cakes on the raft and pushed it further into the swamp before jumping on.

The sun was rising; a mist swirled on the water. All was quiet except for the soft splashing of a pole being dipped and pushed through the water.

Ropé looked around. "In this immense swamp, I will breathe my last air. I'll die here and be eaten by gators!" Just then, the raft tilted to one side and two gators poked their heads above the water, their jaws wide open. *I'm dead*, Ropé thought.

"Quick!" Jody yelled, "Toss a cake!"

With an icy shiver creeping up his spine, Ropé quickly tossed a cake in each of the gators mouths and watched them disappear into the water. As soon as they were gone, more appeared on the other side.

Before he could toss more cakes, he began to slide off the raft. He quickly wrapped his tail around one of Jody's legs for support and continued tossing cakes into the gator's mouths.

As they moved deeper into the swamp, Jody looked around. All she could see were huge eyes staring at them. In front of her was the island where the trees hung low over the water. They wove together and formed a tunnel that blocked out light. It was dark and eerie. Jody knew they were being watched

by curious gators as she slowly worked her way through. Mosquitoes were whining in her ears, but she didn't dare to free her hand to swat them. Off in the distance the sudden cry of a screech owl sent a shiver down her spine. Ropé, nearly out of sweet cakes, looked across the swamp and saw hundreds of gators peeking above the water. He didn't know what he would do if they all decided to attack. He stayed low waiting. But for some mysterious reason, everything became calm as they moved closer to the island. Then, suddenly, gators darted out of the water with a frightening speed and surrounded them as they stepped off the raft onto the soggy, but solid ground.

Jody's feet froze.

Standing before them with his head raised high was the largest and grandest alligator Jody had ever laid eyes on.

"Let them be," he bellowed loudly in a deep voice. With his orders, the gators crawled slowly back into the swamp. "What brings you to my island?" he asked. "Haven't you heard it's dangerous?"

"We have Sir, but we to come to ask a favor, Mister King," Ropé replied, nervously.

"A favor, what could that be?"

"Sir," Jody said, "We hear you have a Golden Horn that can make anyone who plays it become the best trumpet player in the world. We would like to borrow it for my friend Henry."

"Why is that?" the King asked.

"Well Sir, his horn is old and won't play any more. If he could play The Golden Horn until he gets a new one, it would help build his confidence. We promise to return it, Mister King."

"I see," said the King. "Very well, since you have been so brave to come this far and have expressed compassion to help a friend, I will entrust to you The Golden Horn, but you must promise to return it before the leaves on the trees turn to gold."

"Oh, we will, we will, I promise, Mister King." Jody repeated.

The King moved to a huge mound of moss and with his powerful nose, he pushed the moss aside, displaying a large gleaming chest, spilling over with treasures. There in the midst of silver, jewels and golden coins was the shiniest golden horn Jody had ever seen.

"You may take this horn," he said, "and if your friend is willing, it will help him. Go now and my protectors will lead you safely back across the swamp to make sure no harm comes your way."

Jody took The Golden Horn, wrapped in a worn purple velvety cloth, and bowed to the King. "Thank you for your kindness, Sir, you've been most generous. We'll return your treasure before the leaves turn to gold," she said, backing away.

When they returned to their raft, the King's protectors were waiting to push them safely home. On the way back, Jody and Ropé were too excited about meeting the King and admiring the horn to notice two greedy gators swimming off to one side with eyes focused on them.

Upon reaching land, Jody jumped off the raft and turned to wave to the King's protectors. She saw nothing, only empty waters. It was as if they'd been there one second and vanished the next. She and Ropé hurried off to find Henry. When they arrived in Jackson Square he was playing the dull dented horn his father gave him for his birthday. His shoulders were slumped; his head low, his enthusiasm was gone. He missed the beautiful notes he'd once played. Puffing and nearly out of breath, Jody and Ropé pushed their way through the few people who'd gathered to cheer Henry on.

"We've got it! We've got The Golden Horn!" Jody yelled, holding up the shiny horn so Henry could see it.

The moment Henry took the horn in his hands; his fingers began to dance gracefully over the valves. He raised it to his lips and began to blow. The notes were high and clear.

"Wow, it's like magic!" he said, amazed.

He raised the horn back to his lips and played again. Suddenly! This was a sound not heard before. A clear and beautiful music! Had Gabriel come down to play for them? Certainly a mere human could not make these sounds! But there in the square was a young teenage boy playing a trumpet with the most indefinable beauty and precision ever heard. A large crowd of people gathered to listen, some playful and full of dance, others reverent.

By sundown and on into the late evening the square was filled with folks gathered around to hear Henry play.

When the crowds had gone home Jody told Henry about their adventure and how scary and dangerous it had been crossing the swamp and how the King's protectors led them safely back.

Henry knew he had two friends who had risked their lives for him. To them he would be forever grateful.

"We've promised the King we would return the horn before the leaves turn to gold. By that time you'll be the greatest trumpet player in the world," Jody told Henry.

"That's the truth, and nothin' but the truth," Ropé added.

"How will I know I've reached that point?" Henry asked.

"You'll know, we'll all know when the time comes," Jody assured him.

During Mardi Gras celebration, crowds stood on the graceful iron balconies and lined the streets six and eight deep, waiting for the lavish parade to start. The Masquerade Ball at the Theater d' Orleans was filled with gaiety and loud music poured into the streets from the doors left wide open. People stopped to gawk and listen to the music as they moved slowly along the streets. The blare of marching music and the reddish glow of torches announced the parade was approaching while people danced in the streets in their colorful costumes. Strings of beads and gold and silver coins were tossed from the elaborate floats of Rex, Momus, Comus, Zulus, Mistick Krewe and many more. There was no rest for the club bands and street musicians during carnival season.

Henry found his place on the corner of Royal and Toulouse Streets. On the way he stopped to watch an old Negro man sitting on the sidewalk strumming an out of tune guitar and singing some low and unrefined vocals. *"Not me, never, I'm gonna be famous. I'll play the best clubs around and I'll be the best,"* he promised himself. Henry played late into the night taking turns with the other street musicians, while Jody sat nearby listening.

Ropé was jazzed with Henry's music and the excitement of the Mardi Gras. With his quick wit and colorful personality, he entertained the young and old and kept them laughing by forming his long body into knots while moving to the rhythm of Henry's music.

By late evening Henry's pockets were filled with coins. They walked home through The French Quarter under the gas lamps one after the other. The "white wings," as they were called because of their white uniforms, were pushing their brooms, cleaning the streets, getting ready for the following day. "This is a magical, magnificent place to live!" Jody told Henry.

"Sure is, maybe some day I'll live Downtown and play my trumpet on one of those balconies so everyone can hear, Henry said, enthusiastically.

"Yeah, and I'll be down here listening to you," Jody replied, laughing.

Henry didn't let The Golden Horn out of his sight. At night, he laid it on the chair beside his bed. It was the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes and the first when he opened them.

That day and for time there after, Henry returned to the square to play for the crowds. Musicians stopped to listen and watch in awe. Bandleaders

could hardly wait for Henry to become of age and play in their clubs. The offers were many, but Henry was only seventeen and still had time to choose.

Jody never grew tired of hearing Henry play. She sat for hours listening and watching the crowds come and go. Her full attention was focused on Henry; she hadn't noticed the two gators lounging under a shade tree at the far end of the park, eyeing the golden horn.

Grunge and Bumpy weren't really *bad* alligators, they were playful and a bit daring at times, but *this* shiny golden horn was more than they could resist.

"He never puts down the horn," Grunge complained.

"He will, he'll get careless one day or grow tired of it. We'll just have to be patient and keep our eyes open," Bumpy warned. "When we get the horn, we'll have it melted into gold coins. We'll be the richest gators in the swamp. Richer than the King! Who knows, maybe we'll be crowned the next King! Everyone will bow to us!"

Imagining being rich Kings, Grunge and Bumpy jumped up and began dancing around the tree holding onto each others' tails and singing. "We'll be rich, we'll be rich, and we'll be King, King of the swamp!"

Suddenly, Grunge stopped. Being a lazy gator, he rolled over on his side and yawned, "Yeah, I like that part about being King and basking in the sun all day."

"I like the part about being rich," Bumpy replied.

"Hey, remember there are two of us. Will be both be Kings?" Grunge asked.

"Nope, there's only one King and I'm the biggest," Bumpy said, stretching his body as far as he could to prove it.

"I want to be an equal King. Two Kings will have more power than one."

Bumpy, knowing he needed Grunge's help, said "You're right, there's room for two Kings, but first we've got to get the horn and have it melted into coins. Then we'll have a King's treasure." They both rolled over and began to laugh.

Bumpy and Grunge continued to follow Henry and hang out in Jackson Square watching and waiting for the opportunity to snatch The Golden Horn.

A storm was coming; the wind was beginning to blow. Henry was wearing a short sleeve shirt. He was cold and tired. There were only a few people gathered in the square, so he decided to go home early. While

walking home trying to keep warm he hummed the tunes playing in his head. He didn't notice along the shadowy streets and alleyways he was being followed by two gators up to no good.

When he got home, he grabbed a piece of bread from the kitchen table, smeared it with his mother's gooseberry jam and gobbled it down. His hunger temporarily satisfied, he lie down on his bed and fell asleep.

Grunge and Bumpy moved around the sides of the house peeking through windows until they saw Henry asleep and The Golden Horn on the chair beside his bed.

"I see it!" Bumpy said, whispering and drooling. "Bend over, so I can stand on you and slide through the window."

Grunge bent over and stiffened his body, giving Bumpy the support he needed to get inside. Creeping softy so as not to wake Henry he quickly took the horn and passed it through the window to Grunge. When Bumpy slid out the window his tail caught the window frame bringing it down with a bang!

The loud noise woke Henry. He sat up, seeing the window closed; he thought the wind from the storm caused the window to fall. He covered himself up, turned over and went back to sleep.

"Wow! That was too close, I nearly lost my tail."

"You'd look pretty funny without a tail," Grunge teased.

"Not so funny if it were your tail."

Bumpy and Grunge hurried away from the house and hid in the darkness under the trees. "We'll have to hide the horn and stay out of sight for a few days to throw everyone off our trail before we go to the mint," Bumpy told Grunge.

Grunge was impatient, "We could have it melted, be rich, and outta here by mid morning."

"I'm the one who risked my life getting the horn, so we'll do what I think is best. We'll hide it under the cypress roots and wait it out."

Grunge frowned, but had to agree.

Henry was shocked the following morning when he woke to find his horn missing. Thinking back to the night before, he remembered the storm and being tired. But he'd come home tired many times before and had always left his horn in the same place. He ran through the house searching and calling out.

"Mama! Did you see my horn?"

"No, son, I ain't had time to look for no horn. Where'd you leave it?"

"I thought I left it on the chair beside my bed, where I always leave it."

"You better go back where you been," his mama told him.

Without stopping for breakfast, Henry checked the porch. Then he ran down the road to Jody's house to seek her help.

"What do you mean you lost the horn?"

"I don't know, it just up and left. You know, I *never* let it out of my sight."

"We've got to find it, remember, I promised the King I would return it before the leaves turn to gold and I must keep that promise."

They rushed Downtown to search the Square where Henry played the night before. Then they walked through the streets stopping everyone who passed asking if they'd seen the horn, but no one had.

"Until we find it, you'll have to play your other horn," Jody told Henry.

"That won't be the same."

"I know, but you've gotta keep playing if you're gonna become famous."

After searching most of the day they went back to Henry's house hoping to find it lying on the chair where he was sure he left it the night before.

Disappointed, Henry removed the horn his father gave him from under his bed. It was old and dull and the valves were hard to press. When he put it to his lips and began to blow, the notes didn't come out clear. He put it down in disgust.

"I'll never be able to play this!" he told Jody.

"You can't stop playing now," Jody reminded him.

Henry went back to Jackson Square the following day and tried to play, but the crowds didn't gather as before and soon Henry's dreams of becoming a musician began to vanish.

On the way home, Henry decided to stop to talk with Guthie. He knew old man Guthie would have the answers and could advise him on what to do. The closer he got to Guthie's house, the more he hesitated. *What good can he do? He can't know what I feel. I'll just be wasting his time,* Henry thought to himself. Henry kept walking.

Old Man Guthie was sitting on his porch listening to the early evening sounds and watching the moss draped trees dance in the late summer breeze. He was remembering his childhood days when he and his brother ran together on these very same grounds. That was a long time ago, but it

seemed like yesterday. He was about to doze off when he heard leaves crackle and twigs breaking, footsteps approaching. Silence...

"Come out here, my boy" he called. "What's botherin' you?"

Henry stepped from behind the tree where he stood thinking and walked around to the porch.

"Sit down," Guthie said, motioning to the rickety weather-beaten bench beside him. "Got sumptin' on your mind, I can tell."

"I lost The Golden Horn, can't play no more," Henry told Guthie.

"You lost that horn? Where's the other one?" Guthie asked.

"Can't play it, it ain't the same."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know, just can't."

"Cause you can't or 'cause you won't?"

"Done lost my talent ain't there no more."

"Son, you were born with your talent, we are all born with talent, but not the same talent, and not everyone uses it, that's why we're different. You got to have the desire and the confidence to make your dreams come true. That takes hard work." Guthie moved his chair closer to Henry. "Listen, listen," he said. He closed his eyes and tilted his head. "The magic is makin' things happen that we're afraid of..." He paused for a moment. Softly, he asked, "Can you hear it?"

Henry closed his eyes, listening. He heard a trumpet playing in the distance. The music was sweet and clear. He looked closer and saw himself playing on a stage, his fingers moving gracefully, the notes he'd never played before were flowing so musically.

"Do you hear it, son?" Guthie asked again.

"Yessir, yessir, I hear it!" Henry leaped to his feet filled with excitement. "I can do it!" Henry told Guthie.

"That you can, now you must go and make it happen."

Guthie stood up and put his hand on Henry's shoulder. "You saw it, you heard it, now go and play it."

With his renewed confidence Henry rushed home and started playing his horn. It didn't matter if he missed a note; he played it over and over until he got it right.

After hiding out for several days, Bumpy and Grunge decided it was safe to have the horn melted into gold coins. Early that morning, they dressed in disguise and headed for the mint downtown on Esplanade Street. Before going inside, Grunge hid The Golden Horn under his coat.

A tall, thin, balding man with bushy gray eye brows stood bending over the counter reading the New Orleans Times-*Picayune*. He raised his forehead allowing his glasses to slide lower on his nose. Standing before him, he saw two characters grinning from ear to ear.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Grunge removed the horn from under his coat and smugly handed it to the man. "We would like to have this melted into gold coins," he said.

The man took the horn, turned it over, felt the weight, and began to laugh. Bumpy and Grunge thought he was laughing because of the fine treasure they had just given him and they too began to laugh.

Suddenly he stopped laughing, leaned forward, and peered into their eyes. His edgy voice raised an octave.

"Why, who are you trying to fool? This is nothing but a piece of tin. I wouldn't give you one plug nickel for it," he said, pushing the horn back to Grunge.

Bumpy and Grunge's jaws dropped. "What do you mean, tin? This is The Golden Horn!"

"That's just a myth! Or haven't you heard?" the man replied. "Now go on, get out of here, and don't bother me with such foolishness!"

The two gators ran out the door leaving it open behind them. They hurried down St. Charles while deciding what to do next.

"I know!" Grunge said, "Let's travel along the Mississippi until we find someone who's looking for a treasure. We'll show the horn and convince them its pure gold. We'll take their money and move far across the swamp. We'll be rich and they'll be left holding a piece of tin."

"An excellent idea! But we've got to start now before word gets out that the horn is missing and it's not *really* gold." Bumpy said.

Jody, remembering her promise to the king, went to old man Guthie to ask his advice on finding The Golden Horn.

"Sumptin' tells me someone came in the middle of the night and took the horn while Henry was sleepin'. If that's what happened then the bad ones who took it will feel the need to brag. We'll go Downtown, keep our eyes open and listen to the talk." Guthie told her.

The following morning with Henry and Ropé they walked down Canal Street, turned on Rampart to St. Peters and left on Charles Street.

The marshmallow clouds drifted across the sky and the midmorning sun shined brightly on the foliage in the courtyards. The natural brick exteriors were incandescent with the kind of light which one only saw after a rainfall. Women were out scrubbing the front steps of their modest cottages with

powdered brick, used to bleach the wood, which was highly regarded as a symbol of good housekeeping. Others sat on their front porches exchanging gossip, a mild pleasure relished by the whole neighborhood.

A chill sunk deeper into Guthie's bones. He noticed the cool air was colder and his legs weaker than usual, but his determination to find The Golden Horn gave him the energy to keep moving. Ropé slithered ahead checking out the alleyways he knew well. Jody and Henry stopped in doorways listening to conversations and occasionally asking questions while walking toward the French Market.

When Ropé started up Orleans Street, a glimmer caught his eye. He focused his eyes and stretched his long slender body to get a better view.

"Look!" he yelled, "there's The Golden Horn!"

Grunge and Bumpy heard his yell and, seeing Henry and Jody running their way, quickly ducked into an alley to escape.

Ropé, having just searched that very alley, knew exactly where it ended. He flashed through the streets until he came face to face with the two gators.

"Stop there!" he screeched, while blocking the alleyway and demonstrating whirlwind motions with his graceful long slim body.

Grunge and Bumpy tried to turn back, but every way they turned the snake appeared before them.

"No, you're not getting away!" Ropé said nervously.

Guthie, Jody, and Henry arrived before Ropé realized he was alone with two gators and acting out of fear.

"Okay, okay, you can have it," Bumpy said holding up the horn. "It's only tin."

"What do you mean, tin?" Henry asked.

"We tried to have it melted into coins, but it's worthless. You can take it to the mint yourself if you don't believe us."

"That doesn't matter!" Jody interrupted. "I promised the King I would return it, that's a promise I intend to keep. He won't be happy when he hears the two of you have taken The Golden..." Jody stopped, "... or tin horn from us, intending to have it melted into gold coins for yourselves."

Claiborne, a large, burly Cajun man, was coming around the corner; he heard the noise and saw the commotion. "What do we have, a brawl going on?" he asked.

Henry recognized Claiborne as the man who sat in Jackson Square evening after evening listening to him play. He was a generous man who often slipped a fistful of coins into Henry's pocket on payday. Folks who

didn't know him feared his size until they heard his huge belly laugh which made those around him join in his laughter.

"Not a brawl, sir," Guthie replied. "These two gators came in the night and took The Golden Horn from Henry and tried to have it melted into coins."

Claiborne, who helped to keep peace in the town when not working on the docks stepped closer to the gators. Raising his huge fist, he asked, "Is that true?"

Grunge lowered his head in shame. "Yes sir, we were..."

Claiborne didn't allow Grunge to finish. "I'm going to lock the two of you up until we can decide what to do with you. Things can get pretty rough around here when you don't follow the law," Claiborne told them.

"Wait!" Jody said. "I have an idea. If they'll take us safely across the swamp to return the horn, we can let their King deal with them."

"That's a great thought, when will you be going?"

"Now that we have the horn we can travel tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, until then, I'll lock them in the warehouse near the river. That'll give them a taste of what happens when you take things that don't belong to you."

When Jody arrived the following afternoon, Claiborne was waiting. "I'll go with you to the swamp to make sure these two gators take you across," he told her. Claiborne opened the warehouse door. Grunge and Bumpy covered their eyes to keep out the blinding sun light. After spending the night in a cold dark warehouse with no food they were ready to get back to the swamp where they could bask in the sun.

Claiborne stood by and watched Jody and Ropé jump on the raft and push off while the two gators led them safely across.

On reaching the island they saw the King standing tall with his protectors surrounding him. They moved cautiously forward to greet him. "Mister King, we've come to return The Golden Horn as promised," Jody said, bowing, as she handed the King the horn wrapped in velvet.

"Did it help your friend?" the King asked, knowing that it had.

"Yes Sir," My friend has confidence and now realizes he has the talent to become a great trumpeter. He will become famous someday and you must hear him play."

"That day will come and I will be there."

Noticing the two alligators slumped over, their heads down, the King asked, "Why are those two standing beside you?"

"I think they have a confession to make, Mister King," Jody said.

"A confession, what could that be?"

Shamefully, Grunge started explaining how he and Bumpy waited until Henry fell asleep and slipped through his bedroom window and took the horn from his bedside and tried to have it melted into gold coins.

"I'm not surprised!" said the King. "There are always those who try to take the easy way. Some will lie and steal, but honesty is the only way to get what's important in life. You will have to pay the penalty for your wrongful acts," the King said, pointing to Grunge and Bumpy. "The two of you must remain at the far end of this island and keep guard until you have earned your freedom back. But first, you will take our friends safely home. Now go!" The King ordered standing firm.

"King, Sir, first I must tell you..." Jody paused.

"What is it you want to say?" the King asked.

"Well, Sir, the horn... The Golden Horn..." Jody hesitated again, not wanting to disappoint the King. "Well, Sir, it's not really gold... it's tin."

"I know," said the King "The power of The Golden Horn is in the minds of those who believe in it."

Understanding, Jody smiled and bowed to the King, then turned and followed the two gators to the edge of the water and jumped on the raft.

Bumpy and Grunge led them safely across the swamp. On reaching their destination, Jody gave a wave. "We hope someday you'll return as friends," she called out.

"We will," Bumpy called back, raising his head high out of the water and flopping his tail.

Jody and Ropé, happy to be back on safe grounds, waited and watched the gators lower their heads into the water and swim out of sight going toward the King's island.

Henry bought a shiny new horn with the coins he'd collected playing on street corners and in Jackson Square and from helping his father working along the Mississippi. He went from club to club standing outside the doors watching and listening to the Jazz, Blues, Ragtime and Dixieland bands play. He knew when given a chance, he would play as well or better than any of the other horn players. The musicians knew Henry well from hanging around the clubs. After hours, they'd invite him inside to play with them.

On the way home, Henry slowly walked under the gas lamps and enjoyed the river mist that tends to overhang the city, giving a mysterious and

mirage-like appearance to the buildings. He walked past the dark, long, narrow "shotgun houses" with their hallways running through the middle with one room behind the other. He took a shortcut through St. Louis Cemetery Number One where he and Jody often met. At night the cemetery became spooky with its tombs above the ground and heads of angels staring as he passed through the twisting, eerie maze that quickly turn from charming in the daylight to terrifying at night. Even the darkness seemed to have eyes. Feeling uneasy, he watched in both directions. When he arrived home, the kerosene lamp was out, the house was quiet, and his parents were asleep. He stretched his tired body the length of the flimsy bench on the porch and went to sleep, holding his horn in his arms.

On the nights after Henry finished playing in Jackson Square he stood outside of Papa Joe's Club spellbound, drinking in the sounds of the jazz band, the trumpet, saxophone, bass, and guitar and piano, he loved so much.

Jody grew tired of standing and sat down on a corner step to listen.

"Someday that'll be me playin' in there," Henry told her.

"Ain't gonna be long," Jody reminded him.

"Wish it was tomorrow."

"I've got better things to do than to sit here all night listening to you two," Ropé said.

"I can't imagine what that would be," Jody said, looking directly into his eyes smiling.

"I'll let you know when I find out," Ropé replied, running off humming, chasing fireflies and disappearing into the night, leaving Jody and Henry in front of Papa Joe's Club.

The band stopped playing to take a break. Jody and Henry moved away from the door to allow room for the people to come and go and sat down on the curb.

A hand touched Henry's shoulder. "You're Henry Johnson, aren't you?"

"Yessir, I am."

"I've been watching you over the years. Heard you play many times."

Henry sat dumbfounded, looking up, and then recognizing Papa Joe, he jumped up. "You have?"

"Sure have. Heard you been practicing with some of the bands around town. Tell you what, when you get old enough, you come see me. I could sure use someone like you in my band. You're good, and I only want the best."

"Sir, I'll be eighteen soon."

"Come and see me when you're ready. Until then, you just keep on playin'."

"I will, sir." Henry said, smiling with excitement.

Papa Joe went back inside and soon the music started up.

"Did you hear him? He wants me to play in his band. We've got to tell Guthie about this. He's gonna be happy."

"Can't tonight, it's too late. He'll be sound asleep. We'll go tomorrow after I help mama do the washing."

"I'll meet you in the cemetery. I've got to go home now, I promised mama I wouldn't stay out late tonight."

"Papa Joe's Band, I can't believe it!"

"I can believe it. So just calm down. You gotta lot of playing to do before then."

"Papa Joe wants *me!*" Henry repeated.

Happily through the streets, under a full moon that hung high in the sky and as round as time they walked together. Without realizing, Henry reached over and took Jody's hand. A throb warmed her heart; as she listened to Henry express his excitement about being asked to play in a band. Not just any band, but the best band in town. Their conversation was one-sided, with Henry doing the talking. But that didn't bother Jody. She was pleased to see him happy. When they arrived in front of her house, and before stepping upon her porch, she turned to Henry.

"Goodnight Henry, I'll see you tomorrow."

Henry didn't immediately let go of Jody's hand. In those few seconds, he looked into her eyes. He hadn't noticed before how beautiful she was until that moment when the moonlight exposed her beauty. Feeling awkward, he let go of her hand. "Yeah, see you tomorrow."

"Jody herself, feeling uncomfortable, quickly turned away and ran into the house, leaving Henry standing before the porch steps. In her room, she peeked through the lace curtains. Seeing Henry's silhouette in the moonlight made her heart ache to touch him. She wanted to reach out and tell him that sometime along the way she'd fallen in love with him. She wasn't sure when their childhood friendship had changed to love, but she was sure she loved Henry.

Henry stood in front of Jody's house, feeling like never before. A childhood friendship he'd treasured and took for granted had now become a friendship of love. He wasn't sure when it snuck up on him, maybe it was when he was too busy thinking of himself. It was love, he was sure, but he

could never tell Jody. He was afraid of losing a friendship that meant more to him than being a musician.

Henry, still looking toward her door slowly backed away from Jody's house. With his heart aching to reach out for her, he turned and walked home.

Jody sat on her bed brushing her hair trying to put her thoughts out of her mind. She crawled into bed, lying on her back, her arms up and hands crossed under her head, she looked to the ceiling thinking of Henry until she fell asleep.

"*Ma Che're*, you're up early and what's all that singing about? You done forgot its wash day?"

"No, Mama, it's just a nice day and I'm happy."

"Why you so happy?"

"Mama, I think I'm in love."

"Love! *Che're*, who you in love with?"

"Henry."

"Henry! Does he know you're in love with him?"

"No, Mama, can't tell him."

"And why not?"

"Cause he's my best friend."

"My lands, honey, you gotta tell him."

"Maybe someday after he starts playing in Papa Joe's Club."

"Did I hear you say Papa Joe's?"

"Yes, Mama. Papa Joe told Henry last night when he got old enough he wanted him to play in his band. That's gonna be real soon."

"Well, until then, help me with this here washing while I go inside and put the red beans on the stove."

Now, everyone in New Orleans knows Monday is wash day and on wash day, it is a tradition that everyone eats red beans and rice.

Jody hurried about, helping her mama wash the clothes and hung them on the line to dry.

"*Che're*, why are you in such a hurry? This is the fastest this washing ever got done."

"Gonna meet Henry, we're going to Guthie's house to tell him about Papa Joe's offer."

"He's gonna be mighty proud of Henry. You go on, I'll finish up here."

"Really, Mama? Thanks." Jody kissed her mama on the cheek, wiped her face and hands, and straightened her hair.

"Mama I love you," she said, as she hurried off to meet Henry.

"My lands, it wasn't long after the war when we met. He was twenty, and I was just seventeen, the same age as her. When I saw those brown eyes and that big smile, I fell in love right there and then. He's still the man I knew he was. That girl is a spittin' image of him, always wanting to see everything and helping everybody." Chuckling aloud she wiped her hands on her apron and went inside to check the pot of red beans cooking on the stove.

Coming up the path to Guthie's house, they saw him sitting in his rocker, his head resting peacefully on his chest. He didn't rise to greet them as he usually did when he heard them coming.

Stepping on the porch, Jody placed her hand on his shoulder. "Guthie, Guthie," she whispered, "wake up. Henry's got something important to tell you."

Guthie's head rolled to one side. Henry moved forward, Jody pushed him back and pulled the worn blanket from Guthie's lap and placed it over his shoulders. With a deep sadness on her face, she said, "Henry, he's gone."

They opened the screen door and went inside. The small two-room house with its bare wood floors was neat and clean. The bed was made, an empty coffee cup sat on the table with a red pencil and tattered piece of lined note paper. The note scribbled in Guthie's handwriting read:

To my friends, Jody and Henry.

Have faith and believe in your dreams. I've grown old and tired and when my time comes, I'll be ready. Life has been good to me.

Henry, when I go, play a happy tune for me.

Your friend,

Guthie.

It had been a long time since Jody thought of Guthie as being old. When she first met him at age nine, he was the oldest man in the world. But for some reason as their friendship grew and the years passed, she didn't think of him as old anymore. She felt he would always be there for her. Now, she would forever remember his friendship and the stories he told and for the encouragement and confidence he gave Henry.

On the day of Guthie's funeral the sun was warm; a slight breeze filled the air with the sweet perfume of magnolia blossoms. Every bird seemed to be flying overhead as if saying good-bye to a friend.

Henry led the marching band and the crowds through the streets from Cow Hollow to St. Louis Number One Cemetery, Guthie's final resting place. The music was slow, sweet and sad. As his body was placed into the modest tomb, Henry struck up a lively, jubilant tune to "High Society". Then he paused a few moments, looked into the sky and smiled. "Guthie, you would be pleased to hear the music and see all these folks who've come to show their love," he whispered. The band went on playing in honor of Guthie.

Henry, now eighteen, stopped by the barber shop to get his first haircut from the barber. He'd always been satisfied with the haircuts his father gave him, but tonight was special. He paid the twenty-five cents to the barber, looked into the mirror, turned his head from side to side and admired himself. "Looks good, thanks," he said.

Tonight was the night Henry had waited and dreamed about for most of his young life. A dream that had finally come true. He would be playing in the best club in town and with the best band.

After a few tunes showing off the talent of his new band member, Papa Joe introduced Henry.

"This is our new band member, Henry Johnson, the best trumpet player around..." before he finished, the audience started cheering and applauding.

Henry smiled to no one in particular and bowed. "Thank you, thank you very much," he said again. The band struck up a lively tune.

Unnoticed, she slipped through the back door of the club and sat down at a small table in back of the room. The candles flickered, giving a dim glow. As she sat watching and listening to Henry play she realized his dream to become a great trumpet player had also become her dream to make it happen. She was happy for his accomplishments, but for some reason tonight, sitting there alone, she was feeling sad.

When the band took a break, she remained seated while people gathered around Henry to congratulate him.

Henry played well, the best she'd ever heard, strong, overflowing with confidence like she'd never seen before. Her heart beat with admiration for him, or was it love? Yes, of course it was love, she was sure.

Lowering his horn, Henry caught a glimpse of Jody's face in the flickering candlelight. He looked past the crowd in her direction. Smiling, he bravely said, "This is for my best friend, the one I love, the one who helped me fulfill my dreams of becoming a musician."

Feeling embarrassed at the attention, Jody smiled back at Henry.

Before the band stopped playing, she quietly left through the door in which she came. She leaned against the lamp post on the corner near the club and waited. Remembering the words Henry had just spoken.

When Henry came out of the club he looked around and saw Jody waiting. He walked over, took her hand in his and kissed her cheek. "Let's go home," he said, "It's such a beautiful night, the stars are out and the moon is shining bright, a perfect night it is."

Jody looked into Henry's eyes and smiled. "Yes, you're right, a perfect night it is. And as my friend would say, that's the truth, and nothin' but the truth."

The End