

## Fence Line

By Ramona Long

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She is having one of her headaches.

The throbbing starts in the morning, so early it is still dark, as Amelia stands at the long wooden table piled with ice and raw shrimp. She works as she always does, methodically removing shells in three slick movements: yank off head, slice underbelly with thumbnail, squeeze the tail. If it's done right—and she always does it right, she's been peeling since she was a child—the cold body pops out, slimy smooth and naked.

The shrimp gets thrown onto clean ice, and the shell is dropped into the bucket at her side. Head, belly, tail, shell in bucket, over and over, until the bucket gets full. When it is, she carries it to the boss, and he marks it. Fifteen cents for a full bucket of shells. On a good day, she can fill ten buckets. \$1.50 for the day's work, on her feet the whole time, except for the break to eat and stretch and up her feet so her ankles won't swell.

Her first bucket is nearly full when the headache comes to life. The throb starts under the black kerchief wrapped over her hair and forehead to keep the sweat out her eyes. It starts on the right side, radiating towards her eye. She scrunches her face squeezing tightly. But the pain is still there when she opens her eyes. Throb, throb, throb, and now a shimmer of light on the edge of her vision.

A cold finger of dread, colder than the mountains of ice strewn across the rows of peeling tables inside the shrimp shed, crawls up her spine. By the time she gets home, the pain will be blinding.

“Amelia, what's the matter? Why you making those faces, *cher*?”

She shrugs. Head, belly, tail, shell in bucket.

“Headache,” she says. Because the questioner is her cousin Betrice, and all the Marcelle women suffer from bad headaches, Amelia adds, “*Tres mauvais.*”

Betrice nods. Her fingers move like Amelia’s. Head, belly, tail, shell in bucket.

“*Paure bete*, come with me at break time, I’ll rub your head. I had me a bad one last week. *Mon dieu!* I about switched my boy, he wouldn’t leave me be to lie down....”

Betrice keeps on talking. The other women join in, eager to share their maladies, or criticize their husbands, worry over their children and gardens. The tables come to life. Talk is the only thing they can do that doesn’t slow them down while they’re shelling shrimp for fifteen cents a bucket.

Amelia could peel raw shrimp in her sleep, and sometimes it feels like it. Last night, she had a pile of shirts from Mr. Leon, who owns the hotel. Up ironing until midnight, and then up at four to get a place in line. There are no reserved spots at the shrimp shed, even if the boss is your husband’s second cousin, and he well knows that Tomas left you widowed with five children. If you need work, you show up at four to catch a place at a table. Everybody’s got mouths to feed. You’re not the only one wearing black for a year, with four more to go. Everybody on the bayou’s got need for a day job.

At the break, she unites the damp kerchief and shakes loose her hair. The kerchief is soaked with sweat, but the hot air feels good on her head. She runs her fingers through her hair. It hangs down her back, almost touching her waist, and is so silky smooth, it snags in the cuts the shrimp *picons* leave on her hands.

She walks to the giant weeping willow shading the bayou side and sits on a rough wooded bench built around its trunk. She breathes in the salty breeze and rolls her neck

from side to side, then stretches out her arms. Her thin wedding band catches the sun. Her fingers are white as an oyster shell, her skin pale and wrinkled from the brine.

She braids her still-damp hair and rolls it into a *chignon*. She eats her boiled egg while Betrice stands behind her and rubs small circles on her neck, and then slowly moved up under the *chignon* and towards her scalp.

“*Cher*, your head’s tight! You not sick to your stomach this time?”

Amelia says no, though sometimes the headaches are so bad, she vomits. Not today. The egg goes down easy. Sometimes eating helps, sometimes not.

“At home, make you some coffee,” Betrice says. “Strong, strong. And a cold compress.”

Betrice’s fingers dig into Amelia’s scalp. “Tell me if I’m hurting you,” she says, but Amelia says nuh-uh, and Betrice rubs harder. She is a generation older, old enough to be Amelia’s mother. They all learned the cures. Cold towel, Strong coffee. Head rub.

And prayer.

“*Notre Pere, qui es aux cieux, que ton nom soit sanctifié...*”

Amelia hears the low recitation of the Lord’s Prayer that Betrice mumbles as she massages. ...