

Cajun Crow and The Mockingbird

Jimmie Martinez



1957

Prologue

At the age of twenty-five, I became a ne'er-do-well lawyer for the Cajun mob in one of the unique cities in America, New Orleans. The mob provided most of the river of alcohol that flowed on Bourbon Street, the seductive women, and illegal gambling, all of which lured tourists to the French Quarter. The Quarter, the town's soul, had a history of appealing to the carnal desires of middle America. At nightfall, gum-chewing, boorish tourists with grinning faces prowled neon-lit Bourbon Street, gawking inside the sleazy, honky-tonk nightclubs. Posters of leering blondes holding their hands over their enormous breasts or strippers in various erotic poses were plastered on the clubs' ancient exterior stucco walls. The drinking laws were lax. Alcohol was sold in "to-go-cups" to anyone with cash. Although gambling and prostitution were illegal, the clubs provided those services from dusk to dawn.

My job was to grease the wheels of justice and laissez le bon temps rouler for the so-called sleazy employees who worked in the Quarter providing whatever services the vacationers wanted and couldn't get in their hometowns. To bring justice to my so-called unsavory clients, I greased the right palms, blackmailed, intimidated, traded favors—whatever it took to keep my clients out of jail. I fought to find justice in the shadowy gray between the inky black sentences of the law where people lived. There was a lot I would do to win a case; the exception was that I would never betray a client. I pushed my legal adversaries hard to rack up court victories and pushed myself even harder.

We expected the law to be blind and treat everyone equally and for people working in the judicial system to be honest and wise. But unfortunately, that was legal fiction. There were as many shades of injustice in the Louisiana and New Orleans legal system as skin tones. Working in the state's and city's criminal justice systems, I

realized they were intolerant and indifferent. They marginalized the weak, and everybody lied. I was no idealist and knew that Lady Justitia in Louisiana, who held the scales of justice, didn't determine guilt or innocence impartially. She had favorites and treated people with lesser financial means, status, or differences with contempt while catering to the powerful, privileged, and prosperous.

I knew life was unfair, and I had to accept that fact. But a person should at least be given a square deal in a legal system that professes fairness and supposedly dispenses justice. But unfortunately, I lived in a prejudiced society and was dumbfounded by the grossly biased laws, cops, and courts. In 1957, Louisiana laws mandated racial segregation. People were jailed for just standing innocently on a corner and booked with loitering. The police coerced suspects when they interrogated them, and the suspects endured the third degree, causing them to incriminate themselves without having an attorney present or being aware of their constitutional rights. Police officers stopped, frisked, and searched people on a whim because someone or something didn't look right.

It was against state law to be a homosexual or an adulterer. Loving the wrong person made you a criminal, ostracized by society. One of my homosexual clients was arrested for wearing makeup. In court, the arresting officer argued that rouge and lipstick hid my client's face. A city law made wearing a mask in New Orleans illegal except during Mardi Gras when anything was permissible. The officer was biased and used the law to harass homosexuals. I argued that my client had a skin condition and chapped lips. Good New Orleans lawyers knew the law; winning New Orleans lawyers bribed the judge.

Paraphrasing the civil rights leader Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, a fair law was a law that was equally enforced. An unfair law was one that the strong imposed only on the weak. I felt that the law was applied selectively. Unlike a dragnet pulled along the bayou's water bottom, the law allowed big fish to slip through the mesh webbing and escape, but tiny minnows were ensnared.

Besides being a lawyer for the Cajun mob, I represented pro bono the poor, voiceless, oppressed, underprivileged, and disenfranchised people. It was impossible to peer into the haunting, hopeless eyes of those who suffered grave abuse and injustice at the hands of the legal system and not empathize or act. I saw myself as a champion of the underdog, a seersucker-suit warrior fighting the all-powerful establishment, and my goal was to leave my clients better off than when I had met them.

Sitting in jail, I picked up the Times-Picayune newspaper and read the headline: Local Lawyer Noel Corbin Arrested For Punching Parish DA.

I paused to study my unflattering headshot under the headline. My winning smile looked more like an evil sneer exposing fin-shaped incisors. Ugh, was that me with the awful, toothy grin? I started to read the story, ignoring the terrible picture that looked more like me than I cared to admit.

August 22, 1957—A bloody fight broke out between New Orleans attorney Noel “Crow” Corbin and Orleans Parish District Attorney Benjamin Heck at a committee hearing examining communist activity in New Orleans and their links to Negro organizations and the civil rights movement.

After a tense exchange, Heck attempted to punch Corbin. In turn, Corbin hit Heck, knocking him out. Police officers dragged Corbin out of the committee room and arrested him. Heck was taken to Touro Infirmary for treatment. Doctors said that aside from losing several teeth, Heck’s injuries were minor.

I heard my cell door squeak open and placed the newspaper on the bed. A waiter from Antoine’s Restaurant entered, carrying plates under a silver cover. Popes, US presidents, celebrities, English royalty, and even Al Capone dined at Antoine’s. The almost two-hundred-year-old New Orleans establishment had had centuries to perfect its French Creole meals. It was the birthplace of several famous dishes such as oysters Rockefeller and pompano en papillote (pompano fish baked in parchment paper with crabmeat and garlic.)

With his tailored, inky-black tux, starched white shirt, silken black tie, black hair peppered with silver, and impeccable demeanor, the waiter personified elegance and style, something sorely missing in the dingy jail. He placed the covered plates on the white tablecloth draped over the small table in my cell. His military posture was ramrod straight as he dramatically pulled the silver cover from the dinner plates, which were embossed with a gold French coat of arms. The only thing missing was a blast from Al Hirt's horn announcing that the meal was served.

He said in English with a slight Parisian accent, "Sir, as ordered, turtle soup, oysters Rockefeller, pompano en papillote, Pommes de Terres soufflées, and our famous baked Alaska."

John had been my waiter at Antoine's for many years, and I was probably the only person to whom the restaurant delivered takeout. It was great to have friends, and I was fortunate to have many in low and high places. "Thanks. Have you brought enough food for the guards?"

The guard outside the open jail cell said, "Our food is in the cafeteria. I wanted to ensure you were comfortable and had everything you needed."

"Please go eat while it's hot," I said.

As ordered, the guard started to walk away, then stopped and asked, "Mr. Corbin, reporters are in the prison waiting room asking to interview you. Do you want me to get rid of them?"

"Yes. Tell them I'm comfortably tucked in for the night. I'm being set free tomorrow, and I'll make a statement then."

The guard resumed walking away from the cell, briskly moving toward his sumptuous meal.

John pulled out a chair for me. "I have taken the liberty to bring you a bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to bring wine to jail. Should I pour you a glass?"

"Sounds delicious, but I'm taking a break from alcohol." The food smelled great and thrilled my palate. "Please join me. This is way too much food."

“Sir, I couldn’t. But with your permission, while you are eating and I’m waiting to clean up, I wouldn’t mind opening the wine and having a glass.”

“Please do. I hate to be alone while I eat.”

“Sir, would it be impertinent to ask you a question?”

“Stop being so formal and ask away.”

“I saw your fight on the noon news. The man on the TV threw the first punch. Yet the officers in the room arrested you.”

“Ben ‘Heil Hitler!’ Heick is the Orleans Parish district attorney, and the law doesn’t apply to him.”

“Then, knowing that, why did you hit him?”

“Because a Negro kid was wrongfully accused of being a communist by racist politicians, that’s why!” I noisily slurped a spoonful of the soup and thought for a moment. “And I have never represented an innocent client before.”

Part One: The Island

1951

Chapter 1: *Mon Pere*

When my father, Edgar Corbin, was six, his mother died. Attempting to escape poverty, his Cajun father, Tee-Gar Corbin, moved him from a sharecropping farm in southeastern Louisiana to New Orleans. Culturally isolated and entering the first grade at the all-white public school in the city, my dad had no idea that in 1921 it was against the law to speak Cajun, a dialect of French, in school. Speaking Cajun French in Louisiana in Anglo society was about as socially acceptable as passing gas or picking your nose. Besides suffering linguistic discrimination, Cajuns were disdained by Anglos and thought of as being uneducated, country bumkins who lived in shacks, went barefooted and were un-American because they spoke a foreign language. The state school textbooks promoted American values and English while belittling the Cajuns, describing them as primarily unsophisticated farmers slow to adopt American traditions.

My dad was a mixture of various ethnic groups—part Native American and French with a splash of Spanish—and only spoke a smattering of English on his first school day. He was surprised when confronted by unfriendly students and teachers. Using the school room as a pulpit to Americanize Dad, his teacher scolded and punished him for speaking a language and being part of a culture the state wanted to eradicate. Wearing the only piece of clothing he owned (faded, patched, blue overalls covered in grass stains), he was forced to stand in front of the class and repeat what the teacher demanded. Frightened, he stared at the floor and not at his jeering classmates. Stuttering in imperfect English with a twist of Cajun French, he was barely understandable as he whimpered with quivering lips, “I-I can-not speak Ca-Ca-Cajun ever.”

Moments later, squirming at his desk, he scrunched his face in pain, staring at the floor. He didn’t know enough English to ask to go to the toilet, and the dam burst. Urine poured down his pants legs

and puddled on the floor. Smelling the ammonia stench and seeing the puddle by his bare feet, kids screamed in disgust, then the entire class laughed. He bolted out of his seat like a racehorse breaking through the starting gate and puked in the hallway.

Students with skin as pale as the buttery moon repeatedly mocked him for being dark and speaking so little English. The girls with blond hair, blue eyes, and primly starched dresses with white, knee-high stockings were the cruelest. They mercilessly teased him, saying that no one would ever love someone as dark as he, and called him racist names like coonass, white trash, or the n-word. The dehumanizing power of those ugly, insulting words and the ease with which they were said humiliated him. Like most whites, they believed Cajuns were foreigners who scarfed down strange foods like boudin, cracklings, jambalaya, and alligators. When the teacher dragged him by his ear to the principal's office for wetting his pants, she told him that he would be better off going to a colored school.

After being humiliated in New Orleans, my dad and Tee-Gar moved back to rural Louisiana and stayed with an aunt and eight children. Despite living in a one-room, dilapidated shack with ten relatives, he was happy to be back in Cajun country. On a gloomy, rainy day when he was only eight, Tee-Gar stumbled out of the house drunk from a quart of moonshine. On the road, his father looked back and waved. Then my dad lost sight of Tee-Gar as he strolled around a curve in the dirt road and vanished into anonymity, leaving his only child broke and at the mercy of the goodwill of others. As a result of his experiences in New Orleans and being shuffled around by uncaring relatives or strangers, Dad felt inferior to whites.

My dad hoped that Tee-Gar would return and tell him that he had gotten a job and they were moving into a fine brick home. It was a small boy's fantasy that, over time, faded. No one ever mentioned Tee-Gar's name again. As time passed, it was like the man had never existed except in my dad's mind and heart. My gentle, easygoing father told me he never saw his dad again. Until he married Mom, he

aimlessly drifted in life, and his only anchor in the world was his love for fishing and hunting.

Years of being outdoors had tanned and wrinkled Dad's face like a walnut shell. He had a nose like a hatchet blade and looked like the Indian on the buffalo nickel. His hands were as rough as sandpaper and callused, with fingers stained yellow from nicotine. In contrast, his hairless skin was as soft as a mother's touch. His close-cropped, coarse, black hair was dusted with specks of glittering silver. Most of the year, he wore a white T-shirt with sleeves rolled over his sunburned arms to hold a pack of Picayune cigarettes and matches.

Rocking on the porch and swatting the mosquitoes that swarmed at twilight, Dad said, "Noel de Valcourt Corbin, you are eighteen and a big boy. When I was a kid living in the city, I learned never to tell Anglos dat you eat boudin, dirty rice, and gators cuz the girls' parents won't let you date their daughters. They don't like our kind and think we're swamp trash, stupid, and lazy." He rarely talked about his family and felt he didn't fit the typical American image. He desperately wanted me to be a good American.

The negative stereotyping of being a Cajun and abandoned haunted him all his life. At forty, he was still self-conscious and felt like he was always that poor Cajun child who spoke funny, stuttered, and came from a foreign country and culture. He avoided leaving the Cajun-speaking areas of Louisiana, fearing people would laugh at him. Dad had been raised during a period of history where he had lived in two different states with the same name: a Cajun French-speaking Louisiana, where he had been born and was at ease speaking French, and a second Louisiana, where he felt intimidated and couldn't express his thoughts in English. Dad always wanted to live in Cajun, Louisiana, where the roads were waterways, Papa Noël delivered Christmas gifts in a pirogue, and the people enjoyed a simpler life.

Everyone I knew respected Dad. He would never let you down, and his word was his bond. He was a humble, fun-loving

family man who enjoyed music, food, and drinks. He was a great teacher and taught me by example and to respect everyone. I learned everything a person needed to know from him about fishing, hunting, and trapping. I was constantly awed by his talents and wanted to be a great outdoorsman like him. I loved him and didn't understand why my hard-working, playful dad, who could do so many things so well, thought so little of himself. Around Anglos, he physically shrunk in size. It was as though the discrimination he suffered had withered his body and spirit.

1951

Chapter 2: *Mon Mere*

Christened Ella Mae de Valcourt, my mom was as Cajun as jambalaya, crawfish pie, and filé gumbo. Born and raised in Cajun country, she never experienced the humiliation Dad had endured. Raised by well-respected Cajun parents, she took pride in her ancestors and instilled that pride in me. Although poor, she boasted that her family, the de Valcourts, were French royalty who had migrated from Normandy, France, to Nova Scotia and eventually settled in Louisiana. I could sit for hours listening to her stories of fortunes that the de Valcourts had been heirs to and lost.

“Mom, how much do you think the family fortune is worth today?” I would ask.

The answer was vague or kept changing with each telling—sometimes \$2 million, then growing to \$20 million another time. The despised British redcoats were cursed for stealing our land and inheritance and making it all the property of the English king.

Mom would laugh. “*Chérie*, I’m thankful for all we have. If we had more, we would probably be miserable.”

I doubted she was serious. Because, at that time, I thought that money made everybody happy.

The large, leather-covered Bible emblazoned with the de Valcourt crest recorded our family’s births, marriages, and deaths. Mom thought it was shameful not to know your ancestors. Our Bible recorded our family’s history with hundreds of names dating back to the eighteenth century. Mom would clutch the worn Bible in her hands and preach the importance of knowing the roux ingredients that made us. She would carefully turn the thin pages to the names of our relatives. The first name in the Bible was Osma de Valcourt, and the last name was mine, Noel de Valcourt Corbin, born October 12, 1933.

Osma had migrated to the maritime provinces of Canada from Normandy. After being persecuted and expelled from his land in Canada to colonial Louisiana for refusing to sign allegiance to the British Crown and renouncing Catholicism, he and other Cajun families settled in South Louisiana and on several small barrier islands off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico. Seeing the abundant wildlife, waterfowl, and bountiful waters teeming with fish, oysters, and shrimp on an uninhabited island, Osma realized that he had found the promised land. He named the island Bon Terre, meaning “good earth.” He died and was buried on the island in 1776, while it was a Spanish territory. That was the same year the Second Continental Congress issued America’s Declaration of Independence.

Mom said with a raw, heartfelt intensity, “Be proud that you are Cajun.” Her brown doe eyes twinkled with pride as she continued, “*Mon Dieu!* Our people have suffered much and survived, first from the British and now from the Anglos. It’s 1951, and Cajuns are still forbidden by law from speaking or teaching our native language in school and are called hideous names. I will fight to preserve our Cajun French language. If we lose that, we’ll lose the Cajun culture and traditions, dishonoring generations of our family. But being discriminated against will only make us stronger.”

Mom was a stunningly beautiful woman with midnight-black hair, vibrant brown eyes with flecks of violet, and a fit physique at thirty-six. Aside from the dark, smooth, hairless skin and high cheekbones that Dad and I shared, reflecting our Indian, Cajun, and Spanish roots, I favored Mom’s family. She was a self-educated woman with a photographic memory that I had also inherited. Until I was old enough to go to school, the mainstay of my education had come from our family Bible, and I had memorized long passages from the Good Book. She always insisted that I read and be exposed to different ideas. As a teen, I had devoured J.D. Salinger, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Miller, George Orwell, and Tennessee Williams. From those books and with Mom’s tutoring, I began to see the rich

diversity of people and wanted to confront the inequalities and brutality of our world.

She taught me that our moral responsibility was to be kind, respectful, and help others regardless of race, age, or wealth. To mistreat people was morally wrong and against our Catholic teachings that preached tolerance and condemned racism. Also, it was no better than how the British had treated our Cajun ancestors. She had a good, kind heart and never said a harsh word about anyone. Mom felt that prejudiced people failed or refused to try to understand or appreciate people who were different.

Residents of Bon Terre and the surrounding communities looked up to her. She was known throughout the area and on the mainland as a generous and compassionate woman. She frequently sent me to deliver food and clothing to less fortunate families. Those families didn't have to make their needs known or be a particular color. Mom shared the best that we had. She was sensitive to the community's problems and believed in neighbors helping neighbors.

She was determined that the children living on the island get a good education, no matter their skin color, and regardless of some biased laws scribbled on paper by Anglos at the state capitol. She followed a higher power, rules carved in stone, the Ten Commandments. The only school on the island was for white children. So Mom organized the island population to raise money and accepted donations from wealthy Cajuns who lived in New Orleans to create a remote island school that was not subject to the central control of the state.

After pooling the money the islanders had raised and funds generated from donations, she hired a teacher to teach all the children who lived on the island in the one-room schoolhouse. Not all whites agreed with Mom's insistence on integrating the school, and a few kept their children in the island's public school or moved. She was not one to bridle her tongue. She didn't care that some white islanders disliked her because the new school was the first integrated school in

Louisiana. It was also the first school where children weren't punished for speaking Cajun French.

Though she did not compare what Cajuns experienced to the horrible suffering that Negroes endured, she argued that our ancestors had suffered some of the same stings of discrimination. It was hypocritical for Cajuns to support segregation. She believed that Negroes and Cajuns had a shared history of heartache and discrimination that should unite them. And if any ethnic group besides Negroes in Louisiana should have been outraged by discrimination, it was Cajuns.

Mom was the doctor, nurse, midwife, and mother confessor to the islanders or anyone who needed help. She was related to every person on the island by blood or marriage and had delivered many of them as babies. She tended to the sick and the injured without asking for payment. Even though we were afflicted with nagging poverty, she gave each newborn baby a gift basket filled with clothes, bottles, and other things needed to start life. The mothers knew Mom didn't have much. But if they refused the gift, she would lie and say that the baby care package was a gift from some wealthy person. Mom wanted no credit for the work she did. Bon Terre residents were proud, self-sufficient people who didn't have much money to pay for their medical services. Dad joked that the islanders were so poor that you'd go into debt if you robbed them.

Since I knew we struggled to make ends meet, I asked Mom, "Why don't you charge for all you do? It would make your life easier. When you get paid, it's usually food and clothes, and you give that away."

With a voice from a congenial period long past, she said, "Son, we are on an earthly pilgrimage, doing God's work, and I've found that being generous and serving doesn't go unpaid. We favor God by being charitable and providing for our fellow humans. That gives me great joy and is incredibly rewarding. I find it's more pleasing to give than receive."

Since her ancestors were pioneers who had first settled on the island, they were considered unspoken leaders. Mom, by default, continued that unbroken de Valcourt tradition. When I grew up, she expected me to do the same. She was Bon Terre, born and bred, and the most honorable Christian I knew.

I tried to follow Mom's moral code and wanted to be a fisherman like Dad. I had a great family. But I knew that family consisted of more than having parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, etc. What made a family was that people, related or not, gave each other unconditional love, respect, and compassion. With my parents, I had all of that and more. We had an unbreakable bond that held us together.

1951

Chapter 3: Killing a Mockingbird

Bon Terre was located in the Gulf of Mexico and connected to the marshy mainland by a one-lane, wooden bridge that the parish government had long ago abandoned. After crossing the rickety bridge, cars traveled over a narrow, oyster-shell road prone to flooding. The unlit road meandered through a marsh teeming with wild animals, birds, fish, reptiles, and everything creepy that crawls. At night, the animals reigned supreme. The sounds of coyotes howling, large cats growling, and wild animals crying constantly reminded us that the road was dangerous after dark. The only way to get safely on or off the island was by crossing the decrepit bridge and traveling on the road before sundown.

On the island, life was primitive and simple. Folks never locked their doors; all the crime was on the radio or a TV if you were lucky enough to own one. Miles away from the sins of New Orleans, I felt safe and protected. I loved the tropical paradise with acres of bright yellow wildflowers dancing to the gulf's panting breezes. Wildlife and unexpected adventures were everywhere I turned. I could cast a net a few feet from my house and catch large, brown shrimp that Mom used to make her lip-smacking gumbo. Sitting on the porch with Dad waiting for dinner, I strained to hear the wooden spoon clattering against the side of a large aluminum pot as Mom stirred the rich, dark gumbo roux. An earthy, nutty aroma with the holy trinity of seasoning—celery, bell peppers, and onions—overwhelmed my senses and made my mouth water.

I feasted my eyes on the beauty of the island I called home and especially liked the long summer days drenched with sunlight. Colorful mosquito hawks with delicate, transparent wings shimmered in the sun. Redfish leaped, attempting to snatch one of the squadrons of flies that buzzed on the water's surface. The balmy and gentle wind filled the air with the gulf's salty taste and the sweet

scent of confederate jasmine that grew wild on fences. The island was the center of my world. I didn't care about anything that existed outside it. Except for the vastness of the Gulf of Mexico and the marshes, the limits of my interest extended physically and imaginatively only to the end of the island's shores. I rarely ventured to nearby towns or New Orleans. I was uncomfortable in an overpopulated city where life hardened one's heart.

When I was seven, Mom had traded a hamper of shrimp for a used Daisy BB air rifle to give me as a Christmas present. It was the best gift ever. Christmas Day, I went hunting in an empty lot not far from home. I spotted a bird perched in an oak tree with strands of Spanish moss hanging down its limbs like stalactites from the roof of an ancient cave. The plump-breasted mockingbird puffing its feathers was an inviting target against the ghostly gray winter sky. I clenched my teeth, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. The BB struck the bird, dislodging feathers in its chest that floated and hung in the air like cottonwood seeds.

I ran home with a bird in my hand, yelling, "I killed it! I killed a mockingbird!"

Mom frowned. "Son, you don't kill for the sake of killing. That's a sin. You only kill what you are going to eat or can use. To kill otherwise is a needless, selfish act that serves no purpose. All life is God's gift, and we should never take an innocent life for granted, animal or human. The mockingbird you killed wasn't harming anyone. It sang and brought joy to our island."

In a sober tone, Dad said, "*Eh, bien!* Your mom is right. Killing anything for fun brings bad juju. Especially on the day that we celebrate the birth of our Lord."

Knowing my father was serious and surprised by Mom calling me a sinner, I pleaded for forgiveness, crying, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

As I sobbed and shook, Mom held me in her arms. "Don't listen to your dad's superstitious ways; we all sin. Just pray to God for forgiveness, and He will grant it."

I looked at Dad's ashen face and knew he was dead serious, and Mom's assurances about God didn't convince me. That night, suffering from anxiety, I snuck out of my bedroom and buried the mockingbird under a pecan tree in an empty field near my house. Using twine, the islanders hung colorful glass bottles from the tree limbs to trap evil spirits. It was believed that once the spirits slipped inside the empty bottles at night and were trapped, the morning sun would destroy the haunts. I was praying that if there were a ghost haunting me for killing the mockingbird, he would die in one of those bottles.