



## Enzyme Blues

A boy and girl come into the bar and sit next to me, bringing with them the smell of the cold front that is the news tonight in New Orleans. They look so goddam young. It seems they met by chance on the street outside and their dance has just begun. They're talking about oldies music.

"My parents made me listen to them," he says. "I mean, my parents aren't really hippies, but they grew up in that, you know, like sixties thing, so yeah, I've got a couple cuts I like, but mostly I don't listen to them."

"You have a job?" she asks right off the bat. No segue, just a straight-up jump to money.

I smile inside.

"Yeah, at Fishy, I'm the third shift guy. You want a seafood po'boy late at night, well, that's me. But the music thing, it's...well, you know..." He pauses to regroup, doesn't want to blow it now.

I think about harmonicas and their lonesome freight-train lament. That silver sound that can raise the hairs on the back of your neck and jumpstart your soul. Small enough to carry with you like regret into a bar in New Orleans in late November.

She tosses her hair and admits, "I'm in school, but I want to be, like, totally free, you know? Like an enzyme or something."

"Lookout! Look at that roach run!" the boy hollers, pointing down the bar.

Reflexively all eyes swivel: clear ones, red-rimmed ones, glassed in ones, pure unblinking killer ones, all follow the racing roach. We're a mixed bag at this bar tonight.

"Omigod, it's huge! Kill it! Omigod!" She's giggling with excitement and can't sit still. She spins on her stool, clogs dangling.

"It's running that way, look how fucking big that thing is!" he says, and they laugh with young clean teeth at the rest of us poor drinking solitaires.

The roach is indeed large. I lean away from the bar to avoid being run into. The frantic bug passes my ashtray with quivering antennae and disappears over the lip of the bar-top, leaving delicate footprints in the damp around my glass.

My burger is grilling behind the bar and the boy hollers, pointing, "Yah! There's another one, an easy half pounder, on the grill!"

The bartender laughs with them and shovels onions onto the burger. I slide a plastic package of mustard into my pocket and reach for my wallet.

They laugh again, and she dimples up nicely and they fold into one another from neighbouring barstools and kiss solemnly, care-

ful not to spill their beer. They ignore the rest of the world and cling to one another with earnest biology. I'm the only one watching them kiss, draped in their baggy shorts and drab sweatshirts and body piercings. I feel wise and hollow.

I overtip the bartender and take my wrapped roach-burger and walk alone to my hotel and can't even catch the eye of the porter to share a nod hello as the cold front slices the city into groups of people with coats and those without. I don't feel the way I used to feel on my own in a strange city.

Instead tonight in New Orleans with the norther blowing outside I watch some war on CNN and chew my food and wash it all down with cheap scotch. I wonder how how it would feel to be totally free, like an enzyme or something. I reach into my pocket and discover that someone has picked it and stolen my new harmonica.