

*Preface: This is a story about a boy, Edward, a citizen of New Orleans, Louisiana, who suffers from autism. He thinks, perceives, and acts differently because of his illness. This short story reminds of his diary, while the contextual description of relationships between American and French cultures is provided through the prism of Edward's complicated life.*

My name is Edward and I am 14 years old. My mom tells me I am sick with autism, but I do not feel that. As far as I know, any sickness is accompanied by pain and hurt, but I have nothing of these. Still, there is something that distinguishes me from other people. I am thinking rationally, logically and consequently; all my life depends on reason and mind; therefore, I have troubles with feeling emotions. When my father left me and my mother, I heard she was crying and weeping all the night. She told me she felt serious pain in her heart. But I could not feel the same and I have never cried. To be honest, I did not realize why I should feel something at that moment: according to rumors, father found some other women and could not live without her, and he moved to Canada, leaving me and mother together in New Orleans. As a result, mama faced some health issues and became physically exhausted. I do not share her anxieties – why to be upset, the life goes on – but I always help her when she asks me. However, I can take care of myself: I attend special classes in my school, because my personal doctor, Mrs. Bucher – others call her a therapist, but I do not use this word because it is odd – says I am special. I do not know what it means.

I do really like studying math and history. Math is very interesting to me, because it is logical and accurate. In fact, I hate being inaccurate, and I do not like when others are inaccurate. People usually accept asymmetric things and disorder in their life, but not me. I like symmetric and smooth things, with strict proportionality and distinct shapes. And I hate red color, it makes me scared enough. History is also captivating, because it reveals things that were in the past; real things, not the fiction. That is why I neglect any fiction literature or movies, because it is unreal and irrational. For example, I know that my city was founded by French colonists who came to America a long time ago. This fact left the mark on the life of New Orleans: I compared colored photos of many French cities and came to conclusion that they were very similar to New Orleans. The architecture, the streets, the names and titles, and the cuisine – everything was and still is the legacy of France. I think America may be proud of such city as New Orleans: it has some vivid part of Europe which, in fact, has the ordinary values of the USA. I mean the prevalence of hot dogs, cheeseburgers, and steaks remind us where we are. Some of our neighbors are descendants of those French colonists, they have French names, – like Mrs. Bucher – they know some French words, and they have good relationships with usual Americans.

Most of them are happy to live together, but not me. I have no friends, because I do not like to speak to others, except the well-known people like Mrs. Bucher and Mr. Rouge, a pastry-cook who is always kind to me and my mother. We are living in a private house nearby the French Quarter where all those French traditions are displayed. I am curious enough, but I do not like to speak with other people. I can walk by myself, ‘investigate’ the world, but I do not like loud and noisy people. For instance, once a year we have Mardi Gras, a carnival with French traits. It is a time when people are celebrating, wearing weird masks and clothes – mostly of red color which frightens me a lot – and share happiness with each other. One may say this carnival is ten times better than the famous celebration in Venice. This tradition also came from France to America. However, for me it is a panic and challenge: when it starts, I usually lock myself in my room and close up my ears with hands. I have no friends, but I have Dorris. Dorris is a pet, a home rat, which is white and fluffy. I love Dorris so much. Perhaps, I love other animals like cats, dogs, and birds because they do not speak to me.

My story begins with an accident: one day I found that Dorris was gone. He lived in a comfortable cage and, from time to time, I let him out for walking. He always comes back to the cage when wants to eat or sleep. But this time Dorris did not come back to the home. All the day I spent for searching the house: I looked at my room, the living room, in the kitchen, at the mother's room while she was sleeping, in the basement, and in the attic. Dorris has really gone. After the supper, before the sleep, I put some logical theories on Dorris' disappearance: first, he could simply escape the home and lost in the unknown territory; second, he could be wandering around the house, but some other pet caught him, and he did not come back; third, Dorris was kidnapped by someone who visited our house. It included Mrs. Bucher, Mr. Leroy, mother's psychiatrist, or Mr. Delacroix, a hired laborer who helps our family in cleaning up the house and shearing the lawn. I do not like him because he is always gloomy and wears a red apron while working. However, I excluded Mr. Delacroix from my list of suspects: he usually comes once a week and each Saturday, but Dorris disappeared on Wednesday. Detectives call it 'alibi'.

Next day I asked Mrs. Bucher if she knew something about Dorris. When I speak to people, I always say what I think, and I never lie. I was sincerely disturbed by vanishing of Dorris and I was confident I should learn the truth, making some sort of investigation. Mrs. Bucher said she knew nothing about Dorris' escape, but she encouraged my initiative on making personal investigation. She knew me well, because she was both my teacher and my doctor, and she wanted me to speak to her about all things that surround or happen to me. She showed a hope that I could find Dorris, but I was quite pessimistic. It had been two days ago since the moment of Dorris' escape, and my chances of finding him were aiming to zero. In the evening, I asked the same question to Mr. Leroy who visited my mother every day. He said he even did not know about some pet in our house, but he recommended me to search in the French Quarter or somewhere around; because Dorris is a rat and, maybe, he smelled some aromatic scent from French groceries. This version was improbable, but I was already lacking of clues. Therefore, I decided to search him around.

All the next day was associated with my investigation in the neighborhood. The closeness to the French Quarter made my mission quite realizable: hopefully, someone could pick up Dorris because he looked like a pet, not a wild rat from the sewage, and he was very friendly and not afraid of people, unlike me. The investigation of neighboring houses and yards gave no results, while one of the neighbors, Mr. Lockraine, yelled at me when I tried to get into his shed. I do not like Mr. Lockraine and I left his territory as quick as possible. I can walk around while my mother is working as a book-keeper all the day until the evening. But at that day I did not just walk but conducted an investigation. I went to the French Quarter to find some information about the escaped rat.

As I said, I do not like to be here, far from home, because it is usually a loud place with noisy people. I detest when someone makes noises around me, but most of all I hate when someone touches me; I can punch him in response, and it will be hurt. However, there were not many people on the streets, and I felt myself better. Wandering along the streets of the French Quarter, I discovered a lot of interesting but illogical things. For example, I found numerous French restaurants and cafes located in front of each other. It was irrational, because one restaurant will be enough; instead, a pet shop would be logical. Nevertheless, open-air cafes released tasty smells. One day mom took me to Café du Monde and I ate beignets, the fried dough pieces covered by sugar powder. They were tasty. French cuisine in New

Orleans is diverse – gumbo soup, Jambalaya, stew meat dishes – but I do not like it all. Thus, I do not like French roast beef Poboys because it is usually very asymmetric; or I do not like red beans because of their color. People say that French gourmets eat “frog legs” in France; I never saw anyone in our restaurants, but instead I tasted lobsters and crabs.

I did not find any signs of Dorris in the French Quarter. I was just passing by the book shop with old-fashioned advertising ‘L’Album Litteraire’. It was an edition established by French-speaking African poets, as far as I know. I was seriously bypassing the rails around the French Quarter – I was afraid of big moving red trams. However, I examined them at the distance – perhaps, I would find Dorris’ body. I stayed away from the French Market full of souvenirs and pots and pans. It was a real challenge for me to pass by the antique French shops, because there were a lot of red porcelain figures in the shop window. One African-American with a distinct French accent, allegedly a barman in the jazz-club ‘Preservation Hall’, asked me “Hello kid, how are you doing?”. He was happy, but I did not share his enthusiasm, and I did not know him at all. I just went away without saying a word. I know that New Orleans is a homeland of Louis Armstrong, but I do not like jazz music due to its loudness.

On my way back home, I noticed one house that I missed in our neighborhood. It was a house of Mr. Jean-Baptiste, an old and sullen man, who is a janitor in our district. He usually sweeps the streets and removes garbage. His house was like Mr. Jean-Baptiste himself: an old, tottering, worn-out, and unpleasant house covered by rude weeds and mangy walls. Mr. Jean-Baptiste lived alone, as far as I know, and different rumors were floating in the air. Someone said he was a killer, as no one knew about his family, which was murdered by him and immured in the walls of his basement. He had a scar on his left cheek and it scared me a lot. Children and adults passed his building by all the time. However, I found some courage to approach his yard – it was the only possible place in the neighborhood where Dorris could be afterwards. However, when I came to the dusty window and looked inside, I saw Mr. Jean-Baptiste sitting in the rocking-chair. I saw his stare in front of me, because he noticed me. All I had to do was to run away, and I did.

Next day I told Mrs. Bucher everything, including my last visit to the old house. She looked alarmed, and she advised me to deal with the disappearance of Dorris, because my intensive search may lead to real troubles. She promised not to talk with my mother about that, but she wanted me to give a word for not doing it again. I did. I dealt with Dorris’ escape, because it was illogical to search any other signs. It was some sort of disappointment: not because I failed to retrieve Dorris, but because I did not learn the cause of his disappearance.

I do not believe in fate, because I cannot touch it. However, I do believe in people’s decisions and their consequences. In the early evening, I ought to visit a nearby grocery shop and buy a milk package, because my mother asked for. I do not like to speak to others, but I can buy food and other products. If a seller asks me something, I answer but I never look at the eyes of my speaker. The same thing is every time I leave my home. But when I came back from the milk shop, I have put myself at risk – to be precise, I was on the verge of the death. By crossing the street, I did not notice the approaching sport car moving with increased speed to me. However, I could not move: I was paralyzed by some force, because the car was bright red. In terms of the increased paralyzing fear, I have experienced some “shutdown” of mind. I have had these shutdowns before: like someone turned off the light in your head. The only thing I remembered was a strong push from outside.

I woke up in the late night, and I suddenly realized where I was: in the old house of Mr. Jean-Baptiste. He was again sitting in his rocking-chair, and no other visible furniture, except the worn-out sofa I was lying on, was found. I do not how, but I understood everything. I felt no fear when I said: "You saved me...right there, on the street". He only smiled, and his scar somehow shrunk. I added: "Thank you". He answered: "You are welcome, Edward". There was no anxiety, no previous panic, no fear, while Mr. Jean-Baptiste was not terrible anymore. His voice was old but mild, and his face revealed his chronic loneliness in life. "Why did you look in my window yesterday, Edward?" – he asked very kindly. "I was looking for Dorris. He is a rat and he has escaped". "I see. But I have not noticed any rats in my house for years. Only cockroaches". I believed him, because he did not have any motives to hide the truth. However, the situation had already fueled my curiosity. "You are living alone here, aren't you, Mr. Jean-Baptiste?" He sighed: "Yes, alone. Since I have buried my wife 15 years ago". I wondered: "But you should have children". He sighed even more deeply: "No, I have not. My wife could not be pregnant. But I still loved her. I loved her as a man can share his love with a woman; as any child loves his parents; as any patriot loves his homeland and his history". The word "history" really encouraged me: "And what is about your history and homeland, Mr. Jean-Baptiste?". He smiled: "It is all about New Orleans, boy. It is full of French spirit and American dreams. My ancestors were Creole people, the French immigrants that came to America and brought their Creole culture and language to this land. Unfortunately, America has absorbed both language and culture of Creole. Like my native people, I am still a devoted Catholic. Do you believe in God, Edward?". "No, sir, I do not". He sighed: "I do believe in God, I think everything has the God's purpose. Even this scar on my face – I got it when I worked a fireman". He struggled with keeping focused when stood up from the chair. "You should go, Edward. Your mom must be worrying about you. Sorry, your milk has...spoiled" – he smiled again. "Okay. I will go". Standing on the house threshold, I said with all my heart: "Can I visit you tomorrow?". It seemed like his eyes were glittering from water. "Yes, Edward, you can". I saw such eyes on my mom one day, but I felt nothing again. I left the old house.

Next day I came to Mr. Jean-Baptiste's house, but unknown people in white and green hospital gowns were around the building. The ambulance was also nearby. Perhaps, a young physician saw my confusion and he said: "Sorry, kid, the old man has gone. Leukemia. He was 81 years old, and he was absolutely alone". At the moment, some mixed feelings and thoughts were growing inside of me. That is how one of the Creole people and their dynasty – people who presented and accommodated our city, New Orleans, as it is today – passed away. It was a really bad day for me. I could not explain why, but the loss of Mr. Jean-Baptiste had nothing similar to the loss of Dorris. I could say I lost a friend who, for one evening, made for me more than any other non-family man, and even my father who was just a coward and egoist. I was not crying, but I felt myself quite depressed. He lived in isolation, everyone disdained him for things he had never done. He was in isolation like me. But in his last night in life, we met each other.

Since then I have treated all French elements in the USA with some respect and nostalgia. I had not found Dorris yet, and I really dealt with his disappearance over the time. I did not recover from autism at full, and I still avoided red color and other unknown people. However, I had a new mission in my life: I look for the lone people, because they were the most honest and frank people in the world. They were like me.