

Second Place Winner

Uncion

Lars Hoel

Standing at the end of the service bar farthest from the door as he waited for his latte, Kenneth scanned the interior of Persistent Coffee with the eye of a trained journalist. Men and women in equal numbers, dressed in what his paper sometimes labeled “boho chic.” Most occupied mismatched chairs around a motley assortment of thrift shop wooden tables, making earnest conversation while nibbling vegan breakfast burritos and sipping expensive caffeinated beverages from biodegradable paper cups. A few others had parked themselves alone in corners, deeply involved in their laptops and mobile devices. Some wore headphones. A placid, drooling pit bull lounged nearby. Sylvan Esso played on the sound system.

Somehow in all of this, Kenneth was sure there was a story. A truly good—no—a great New Orleans story. Better than his “Local Artist Creates Sculpture From Medical Waste.” More in-depth than “Area Musician Plays Fats Waller on Didgeridoo.” More memorable even than “Celebrity Dentist Tell-All Memoir Brings Pain,” which snagged him Honorable Mention at the 2016 Louisiana Press Club Awards. Something that would propel him off the Lifestyle pages and into the Metro section. A story so well told it would astonish his editor. “You deserve a regular column,” she’d say, her voice quavering. “And I’m going to reach out to the publisher and see if we can’t get you syndicated.”

Not that he’d ever met his editor, let alone spoken to her. He wasn’t sure the paper even had a physical address anymore. But maybe that was a good thing. Kenneth Fremmel in person was less Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday* and more like the poor schlub hiding in the desk.

Still waiting, he scanned a notice board the size of a fridge door. Among the jumble of shapes and images were the usual ads for guitar, yoga and watercolor instructors. Grainy photos of lost and found pets. Flyers for drag brunches and body art services. Nearly illegible hand-drawn posters for bands with vaguely threatening names: Death Poodle. AntiCrust. Now appearing at a dive bar near you.

Taken as a whole—the *gestalt* of it, he thought, smiling to himself—the notice board was like outsider art. A 3-D collage of colors, shapes, textures, spilling off the board surface and onto the nearby doorframe, it spoke a language he didn't understand, bellowed a cry for attention in an alien tongue. And yet it conveyed—

"Ken?" a voice jolted him back.

"Kenneth, yes." As he lifted his cup he noticed the barista had drawn a lopsided fern in the froth on top. Or possibly a mermaid? "Ah well, *foamus fugit*" he said, hoping as he sipped that someone had overheard.

He passed the notices again en route to the condiments table, pausing to transfer the cup to his other hand in order to grab a napkin. In that moment his gaze landed on a small grayish square appearing in the center of the chaotic collage like the eye of a hurricane.

It had not been there before. Of that Kenneth was certain.

He leaned in for a closer look. It was about the size of a postage stamp. In the middle, a single word had been—not printed, but typed with an actual typewriter.

Uction

Beneath that, tiny handwritten numbers. Kenneth squinted, looked around him, then removed the notice and slipped it into his pocket.

At home a stolid, unabridged *Webster's Dictionary* rested on a special stand. Kenneth held the U thumb cut and opened it to the 21st letter. Flipping pages, he looked for a match to this vaguely-familiar word. Uncreate . . . uncreated . . . uncrown . . . There.

A few minutes later, he shut the covers with an irritated *fwump*. It didn't make sense. He checked his notes. "Anointing with oil—medical purposes—consecration. Unguent, ointment—anything soothing." So how is that helpful? He held the tiny oblong up to the light. Could it be an ad for some sort of massage therapist? Kenneth snorted at the idea. In that case it would win an award for least effective graphic design ever.

He turned his attention to the row of numbers so small they looked like chia seeds running along the bottom. He grabbed a magnifying glass. Ten . . . eleven . . . twelve . . . fourteen digits. Too many for it to be a phone number. Or—wait. Maybe an international number with a calling code? He copied them into his notebook, sighed, then opened his laptop.

An hour later, a knock on his door roused Kenneth from a Facebook video.

"Oh, hi Emma," he told the security camera. "Yeah, c'mon in."

"Hey," she said, wheeling a single-speed bike through the door. "What's this about an 'unknown number?' What kind of number?" Although younger than Kenneth, Emma Kowalczyk had worked longer at the paper. Long enough to rise from freelance photographer to Tech Editor and unofficial IT Manager, the person you called when "Warning! You may have a virus!" pops up in your browser. "Just so you know, I don't do crypto."

"I have no idea what that is," he said, handing over the tiny square of paper. "No, it's this."

Emma squinted, her jet-black hair falling around her face like a privacy curtain.

"'Uunction.' That's interesting. Like a priest, when you're dying?"

"Maybe. But what about these?" He used a pencil to indicate the tiny squiggles.

Her eyes locked onto them. She waved away Kenneth's proffered magnifier.

"I thought maybe a phone number—"

"No," she said, with another dismissive gesture.

"Yeah, I got that far but—"

"Did you try a Web search?" she asked, still focused on the paper as if deciphering a Nordic rune.

"Um, no. That's, ah, that's why I called you."

Emma gawked at Kenneth now, as if seeing his fecklessness for the first time. "How do you not know how to use the internet? Aren't you a reporter? Don't you do research?"

Kenneth turned away and pretended to tidy his desk. "Not really. I just call people up and then write about 'em. They tell me pretty much everything I need to know."

Emma took a breath, composed her face and held out her hands, wiggling her black lacquered nails. "Lemme see your laptop."

Two hours later an Uber dropped Kenneth and Emma in the Quarter, in front of a grey and white double shotgun. The late afternoon sun cast a golden sheen over its sharply angled roof. It was a time of transition: tourists making dinner plans and musicians getting ready for the evening gig. A few cars giving up precious parking spots. Old folks walking their dogs before *Jeopardy* came on.

Emma had detected a tiny gap in the middle of the number sequence, meaning it was not a phone listing, a Diners Club card, or a Global Trade Item Number. They were two groups of seven digits.

Map coordinates. Which, when plugged into the app on Emma's phone, had led them here.

"You wanna knock or should I," she asked.

"Um, you. I can't . . . I'm not . . ." Kenneth watched the Uber turn into traffic at the end of the street. "I'm not really a people person."

Emma closed her eyes in disbelief as she rapped the left-hand door. When she opened them, a light-skinned person of color with fine cheekbones was standing in the doorway, as if having materialized there. She was taller than Emma, who Kenneth knew had been on her college basketball team. Her hair was swaddled in a white turban with red stripes. A red shawl draped her shoulders and most of her dress, which appeared to be an African print. She noticed the camera hanging from Emma's shoulder.

"I am sorry. No photographs please. This is a private home."

Emma held out the tiny paper notice. "Did you post this in a coffee shop downtown?"

The woman took the paper without looking at it, turned and disappeared inside, leaving the door open. Emma started up the front steps, then glanced back at Kenneth. He was studying the sidewalk.

"Hey," she said with a touch of asperity. "This is your party, remember? Or do you want me to tell everyone how you bailed on the biggest story of your career?"

The woman in red led them to what may have been a parlor in Victorian times, once filled with furniture and bric-a-brac. Now it held a single table, also covered with a shawl, and three chairs. A small altar adorned the mantel of a disused fireplace and an exotic fragrance of fine incense suffused the air. Gaslights on the wall made a feeble attempt at illumination.

"So, is it yours?" Emma asked again once they were seated. Tea had been offered and declined.

"It must be, if you are here." The woman spoke with a rich, deep alto. Kenneth wanted to ask if she sang in a choir. But instead he blurted the question they had come to resolve.

"What does 'unction' mean?"

The woman steeped her fingers and stared at Kenneth. "You are someone with an overwhelming desire and no hope of achieving that desire."

Kenneth blinked, then rubbed his eyes. *This damn incense*, he thought. "Do you have a Kleenex?"

The woman reached beneath her shawl and produced not a tissue but a small brown bottle. Her gaze never left Kenneth. "You have curiosity but no empathy. You are intelligent but lazy. You are skillful at what you do, but your skill is wasted." She opened the bottle.

Kenneth felt a panic attack coming on. *I can't breathe. Got to get some air—*

Without warning the woman's moistened finger touched his forehead. The attack subsided. Before he could react the finger rested for a moment on the top of his head, and then moved to his throat.

"I, um . . . I don't . . ."

The woman upended the bottle into the palm of her hand. "Lift up your shirt," she said. "If you please."

Kenneth froze. His eyes were on fire, and he felt like he was in a waking nightmare.

Emma reached over and pulled the bottom of Kenneth's t-shirt up to his chin. The woman nodded and pressed her hand against his bare chest, closing her eyes and murmuring incantations in some forgotten language.

The woman now became translucent. Kenneth could see other people entering the room behind her, two-dimensional as if projected onto a screen. It was like one of those TV documentaries with actors in period costumes. Many brought gifts, plates of food, baskets heaped with produce. Then the scene shifted: Kenneth saw the woman washing the hair of a wealthy white woman, gossiping and laughing. Another scene: she is kneeling in a jail cell, praying with a prisoner, slipping him a small brown bottle out of sight of the warder.

"Time to go," Emma was saying, then helping Kenneth lurch to his feet, steering him like a drunkard at closing time down a long hallway toward the front door and into a humid, starry evening.

"And now we come to the final award at this 146th Louisiana Press Association dinner." A short, balding man in a grey dinner jacket was holding court on a raised platform in the hotel ballroom. Men and women seated at dozens of round tables leaned forward. The emcee held a large plaque with gold lettering. "Our winner for Outstanding Feature of the Year is no stranger to all of us, having also received this year's Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing. It's my very great pleasure to present this award to—Kenneth Fremmel."

Kenneth squeezed Emma's hand as he stood and began to make his way to the podium, stopping to acknowledge and embrace various individuals along the way. Emma smiled and raised her camera, ready to capture the moment the award was placed in his hands.

It was the same camera Emma had used to shoot the enigmatic woman in red as she gave unction to Kenneth in that house on St. Ann Street. Hoping to discover her identity.

Which Emma might have done, had the woman appeared in any of the photos.