FOURTEEN

Dan and Lu’s marriage

In New Orleans years back—say the 1910s and 1920s—the word and the business of marriage was right before you. You saw and lived amongst people who lived married lives. I saw couples living together. I heard the talk and comments of elders, always discussing problems. I grew up among relatives—aunts and uncles, great aunts and uncles, cousins—most married. Solid marriages. Wives managing homes and husbands working and providing for their families. I heard comments of people, married couples and their families. I saw my relatives live the poor black peoples’ life-style, holding steady jobs at the same location for a long stretch of years. Working, managing, not complaining; contented and living within their means. The men earning the money and the wives managing the house; the men bringing their salaries to the wives, keeping their allowance and making do.

Now playing music only as a living, trade or profession was and is today uncertain, shaky and unpredictable. But there are daily actions in living that are constant and serious. First there is food: three or more meals each and every day. Sleep: a clean bed. A house: the rent paid. And a person or persons to maintain and keep the house. From the age of twelve on I was aware of this house set-up, how the home functioned. I saw the well-adjusted families, how they lived. And there was a multitude of families to watch and pattern your life after. You saw and heard of partings, break-ups, separations, and why they happened. All sorts of disasters. I saw the married couples living nicely, working steady on jobs—the low-salaried jobs, but managing to enjoy life. Accepting jobs in service. Not skilled jobs, but important jobs, taking care of the maintenance, cleaning of buildings: porters, watchmen.

Isidore Barbarin worked with the undertaking business as drayman and carriage driver, with horses, until 1925, when the undertakers changed from horses to automobiles. Isidore worked steady because people die steadily. Dying is good business. My stepfather was a skilled baker and worked steady. Bread is the number one food. Now at sixteen I was playing music professionally. Isidore fathered nine
children and, I would say, managed a well-governed home. If you want a comfortable house you took care of your salary and gave your salary to your wife. My grandmother Josephine, Isidore’s wife, was a very wise woman, and from close observance, prophesied the outcome of neighborhood happenings.

Now around the time when I first started playing with that little kid’s band, the Boozan Kings, I would come in late at night, around eleven or twelve, which was after the curfew. I had an understanding mother, because she knew I was out there hustling, doing as many musicians did, playing in joints and honky-tongs and backrooms and house parties, all kinds of strange places where people wanted music. New Orleans then was a good-time town, and there was no real curfew. As long as people were spending money, the bartenders said, “Stay up! Stay up!” So at this time I began courting Blue Lu.

My mother was always telling me, “Mr Daniel” (that’s what she called me), “You don’t want to end up like your daddy, caught up in that night life. When you get through work, come on home. Don’t stay up to make the money and then spend it, and be with those fast people. It’s alright to play for them, but don’t associate with them. If you want to make old bones, you don’t want to die young. Having a bucketful of these wild, fast women, that’s trouble. Them fast, wild young women are jumping from man to man. They’re just wild. Ain’t nothing to them. They with you tonight, Sam Monday night, Bill Tuesday night. You understand, they’re fast and foolish. They’re common. They’re trash, garbage. Pick out a sensible young girl from a respectable family. Plan on getting married and living a normal life. Learn you a good trade and play music for pleasure. Take notice how your grandfather lives. You don’t see him overdoing nothing.”

I said, “Uh huh,” but thought, “Isidore sure fathered a lot of children.” And so I began to look out at the multitude of young girls around and about. And just at that time a couple of young aunts began scouting, figuring, and setting up a liaison—meeting—with me and a few well-chosen young girls. That was a New Orleans custom. The discussions, planning, campaigning as to what young people would make compatible mates. This was a serious matter. You knew who would make a good couple. My aunt Marie Phillips Barbarin, the drummer Louis Barbarin’s wife, had observed Louise Dupont, a fine young pretty girl, and theorized that we would make a fine married couple. So she saw me and said, “Daniel, whatcha doing Sunday?”

I said, “I don’t know yet.”

She said, “I’m having a little soiree, a party, Sunday afternoon