

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Baldwin's Perfect Storm

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Abstract

James Baldwin's arrest in Paris in December 1949 gave birth to his perfect storm. His ten days in Fresnes jail weakened him physically and emotionally. He made it out, but upon release he was mired in self-doubt and enveloped in a bout of depression. He returned to his hotel, ready to try to get back to his life, however daunting that effort would be. The hotelier's demand that he settle his bill, and do it quickly, awakened his obsession with suicide. He simply could not handle one more obstacle in his path; he chose to kill himself in his room. Ironically, he saved his life when he jumped off a chair with a sheet around his neck. In a matter of seconds his death wish was replaced by his equally obsessive need to write, witness, think, party, drink, challenge, and love.

Keywords: jail, suicide attempt, Paris, hotel, bedsheet

December 27, 1949, Paris: James Baldwin had one hour to pay his hotel bill or go. He had survived Harlem, New York City, and the United States, and he was beginning his second year in France. The hurdles he had faced as a young Black man—and one who wanted to earn a living as a writer—had been difficult, but he had been strong and resourceful enough to get over each one as it cropped up. But the hotel bill that day and his frame of mind were unusually grave. On the one hand he didn't have the money, and, on the other, he had no place to go to. Baldwin's outlook suggested three options: pay, leave, or die.

Ten days earlier: Baldwin found himself in the eye of a perfect storm. His friend had taken a sheet from one hotel and brought it with him to the Grand Hôtel du Bac where Baldwin was staying. Somebody took umbrage that a sheet from Hôtel des Deux Arbres was in Hôtel du Bac and the police were called. They found the sheet on Baldwin's bed. Baldwin was charged with receiving stolen goods and taken to jail. The perfect storm was born.

That Baldwin, an African American, was arrested because of a bedsheet—the same thing commonly worn in the USA by the Ku Klux Klan—put a fine point of irony on the genesis of the storm. For Baldwin, a sheet could be as lethal as a gun when the Klan wore it; it caused him to be arrested when his friend stole it; and it provided the means to hang himself when all he had was nothing worth living for. If given a second thought—which he did—a cotton sheet screamed subjugation of his people. In bygone days—but not that far gone—“King Cotton” strolled his fields filled with hundreds of his slaves; his grandmother, Barbara, was one them. But in the fall of 1949 Baldwin was thousands of miles from the Klan meetings back in Alabama. He was on a different continent, across the Atlantic Ocean, and a sheet, of all things, kicked up the storm.

The irony of the basis of his arrest gave way to the fact that he was, bottom line, just another arrested man when he got to the jail. He was weaker than most and he couldn't speak French. From the existential perspective who he was in the world was thrown off-kilter. His arrest and jail time brought him face to face with the question of his right to be alive.

Baldwin's body—often his Achilles' heel—made the arrest especially difficult. In late fall he had been hospitalized twice. He was not fully recovered when he was walked out of Hôtel du Bac, under police escort. It's hard to imagine that ten days in a jail cell in December didn't chip away at his already diminished health. He knew some French, but he wasn't fluent. He couldn't speak for himself in court. An interpreter had to be secured for him, thus delaying his court appearance and extending his time in jail. Like every other man in the cell he was, in everyday parlance, a nobody. Fame had not yet attached itself; he enjoyed no favors, from any quarter, for anything. And he was penniless. The idea of release, based on his own recognizance or by posting bail, was laughable. He couldn't get out of jail under his own power. He was terribly stuck.

Baldwin's arrest in France undermined his own sense of himself; for in the eyes of the French criminal justice system he was, like his white friend who stole the

sheet in the first place, just an American. The color of his skin didn't matter; it was meaningless here. In one fell swoop, his quick, pugilistic Harlem intellect no longer provided a solid stance for throwing a punch. He was, vis-à-vis all the ways he had previously prepared for a fight, unarmed.

Lastly there was the ever-present voice in Baldwin's head that began in childhood. Under the right circumstances, it counselled him to take his own life. Baldwin's obsession with suicide was like a tiny bullet lodged precariously in his frontal lobe that could not be surgically removed. Something could jostle it just enough and he'd decide that killing himself was the right thing to do. What usually jiggled the mortal lead was a fight with a lover.

As a youngster he and all the kids heard about the neighbor boy who shot himself in the head, at the doorstep of unrequited love. The boy was black as coal. The girl he loved was just too fine—too fair—for the affection of a boy so dark. The young Baldwin could not get the image out of his mind: blood running out of the boy's head and onto the welcome mat at the girl's front door. A few years later his friend, Eugene Worth, jumped off the George Washington Bridge. In Baldwin's world, death was always an option to stop unbearable pain. That day in Hôtel du Bac he needed to stop his pain.

Mugshots. He turned left, right, then looked straight into the camera. He remembered when he threw a mug at a waitress in a Trenton, NJ diner. She had refused to serve him. *Yes, I threw it, it cracked that mirror, and I ruined, if only for a few very satisfying minutes, the Island of White where an American citizen who works hard—yes, sir, massa, laying track is hard—and looks like me can't even order a hamburger.* Baldwin had lost his patience with the racist system that had, twice that night, denied him a no-frills, affordable meal. The cracked mirror had to be replaced. That expense was not as big of a shock to the diner's receipts as the terror that interrupted the white patrons' dining pleasure. The sound of breaking glass brought them all to attention. The enraged Black man had a target on his back when he ran out, but he had survived. A successful denunciation of the system from a little righteous impatience. Both had felt good to him.

He lived to tell his mug-throwing tale, but he had to admit he almost died because of it. He stepped back and assessed himself from every angle imaginable after that episode. He was, after all, a thinker.

What he knew: he didn't want to end up in prison, he didn't want to die of an overdose, he must not be goaded into striking out in violence by the scared white society. He must not work against himself out of frustration and impatience. And he knew he wasn't like most of the people he ran into. Baldwin put it best: "I knew I was black, of course, but I also knew I was smart." What he wanted: to live his real life, not the spirit-crushing existence White America forced on him. *No safety net.* Unfettered by caution, Baldwin decided he would write, love, and witness full bore.

He walked down the hall handcuffed and in leg irons. When he felt the baton tap, he stopped. The guard pointed with it and indicated which way to turn at every stop. He made another right turn and saw the cell's entrance, a waffle-like, wall-to-wall grid of bars from floor to ceiling.

The guard outside the door, stick thin with red hair, had a wad of keys attached to his hip. He unlocked Baldwin's cuffs, leg irons, and then the cell door. He pulled it open and suggested the path with a sweep of his free hand, like the doormen did at the ritzy buildings back in New York. *Thank you, Red. I'm Black.*

The cell was cold. There were twenty men on benches along the three walls. A few of them leaned on each other as they slept. Some rocked back and forth, arms folded across their chests, and stared at the floor. Nobody talked. One guy with food in his beard paced from the back wall to the cell door, and to the wall again, non-stop. *Twelve, thirteen, fourteen. Stop. Turn. One, two, three, four.* Baldwin thought about the jaguar he saw on a school trip to the zoo. The black cat did the same thing along the front fence of his cage. *He's gone mad.*

He was thirsty and hungry. It had been a long day of questions and trying to make himself understood. But mostly it was waiting. He was tired. He folded his arms across his chest, just like the others, lowered his head, and closed his eyes. *Not a word of this in my letter home.*

A paper cup hit him on the forehead, followed by a young guy who crashed across his lap, sucker punched by the brute sitting by the cell door. Baldwin took out his handkerchief. He wet it with the bit of water left in the cup and dabbed the blood off the fighter's lower lip. *I am my mother's son.* "You're just a kid," Baldwin said, *who doesn't have enough sense to stay away from the biggest man in here.* A smear of the kid's blood ran across Baldwin's shirt.

Red unlocked the cell door; five more men walked in. He noticed Red's godawful acne. The new five took up the extra bit of room; now everyone had to sit up. The bench made Baldwin's bones hurt. It was difficult to find a comfortable position, one his spine could tolerate.

White piss, Black piss, French piss, Arabic piss. He felt an odd solidarity with the men as he stood on the edge of the hole in the center of the cell that served as a toilet. *Spanish piss, German piss, bloody piss, and piss that refuses to flow.* He relieved himself into the abyss. *We're all just animals in here.* Back on the benches they snored, belched, wheezed, and farted. Sleep was the best way to cope with the anxiety and boredom.

His father slapped him across his head. His ring left a small cut on Baldwin's ear. His brothers Wilmer and George were next, then his father came back to him. "You say you lost that mother fucking dime?" He covered his face with his hands in anticipation of the next slap. Red saw Baldwin's hands go to his face. "Américain!" Red yelled and put the prisoners' sandwiches down on the table by the door. Baldwin woke up. Red put a hand to his face and made buffoonish cries, mocking Baldwin. He got a good look at Red's acne. *Cigarette burns, they're cigarette burns. Some monster tortured him. At least daddy didn't leave scars on my face.*

He walked to the bars and to the back wall a few times. The movement relieved the aching in his back. *Why don't they call my name? Something is wrong.*

Day four: the sergeant and Red chained five prisoners together; he was the last man on the coffin. The sergeant led them down a passageway to a door that fed them right into the prisoner benches in the courtroom. They filed in and filled the

second row. A large French flag hung majestically behind the judge. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité. My own tale of two cities.* At eleven years old he fell in love with Charles Dickens and his classic work. He had wanted to be Mr. Darnay so he could marry the fair-skinned beauty, Lucie.

Each man stood, with chains clanking, when the clerk called his name. He counted fifteen cases over the next few hours. The judge pounded his gavel, stood up, and opened an invisible door to the right of the dais. Baldwin panicked and jumped up. "Your Honor! My name wasn't called. Wait!" Two court officers rushed him and pushed him back down. "You didn't call my name!" He yelled his plea at the attorney in charge. "Why didn't you call my name? "Je m'appelle James Baldwin! Je m'appelle James Baldwin!" The clerk stood and hurried right up to the front row of prisoner benches. He tore his spectacles from his face; veins were throbbing at his temples. "Monsieur Américain! You must wait for an interpreter!"

Back in the cell he took refuge in Dickens again, but remembered the classic tale in more detail. *Nobody came for Darnay.* He lost his appetite for the sandwiches Red brought in.

Day five, middle of the night: a kid woke them all up with his screams in Spanish. Red was furious when he woke up. He ran his baton across the bars. The kid, a haggard teen, yelled louder, went to the bars, and spit through them. Red entered the cell; all but the kid retreated to the back wall. The Spanish kid spit again and hit Red in the chest. Red's baton glanced the kid's ear and with another crack the kid was on the floor, his whole body shaking. *He's catching a fit.* He had seen a girl at school have a seizure. Red took a step toward the kid; the guy who spoke German kneeled over the kid and pinned his arms to the floor. "Look!" Baldwin yelled and Red turned from the kid. Baldwin held the Spanish teen's pack of cigarettes inches from Red's face. Red took the pack and pulled the cell door shut behind him. Urine streamed from between the kid's legs.

Baldwin returned to his spot. *Thank you, Reverend Baldwin, good friend of the Great God Almighty.* Tears streamed down his cheeks. *You didn't give me much, but I'm not afraid of Red's baton.*

The next day the sergeant called the kid's name. "Bonne chance," Baldwin whispered to him. The Spaniard gestured like he was making a phone call. Finally Baldwin understood; he gave the kid the address of his friend, Tom. An old man scooted down the bench and offered him cheese and bread. "Merci," Baldwin said. "Eat," the old man commanded. Baldwin was surprised; "You speak English?" It was the first time he heard the old man talk. Baldwin scratched his neck and shoulders. The lack of a shower had accumulated on his body.

"Père Noel!" Red yelled out as he put the sandwiches on the table and then pretended to hobble like the old man. *It's Christmas.* Tears welled up. He lowered his head and put a hand over his eyes. *I'm failing miserably here, mamma. I'm dying.*

The teen's blood on his shirt had turned brown on the edges. *I need a goddamn clean shirt.* His back ached all the time now; the bench felt like concrete. He could

feel the mass of phlegm in his chest when he coughed; he breathed through his mouth. The men spit into the toilet hole as much as they urinated into it.

"Américain!" He was shackled and walked back to the courtroom. It was a public spectacle. The clerk read the day's docket; people in the gallery laughed when the chief attorney held up the stolen sheet. Baldwin looked at the people: *You're only there because I'm here.*

Hours passed, six men were released, and his name wasn't called. *What am I, the invisible American now? Does nobody see me here?* Finally he caught the interpreter's eye and motioned for her to come to him. "They have to sentence a man, then we will proceed with your case," the woman whispered. A prisoner was brought in from the back. The chief attorney handed the judge a piece of paper and he read from it. The prisoner's head fell to his chest; a woman in the gallery let out a screaming wail.

He had heard the same cry from women back home at funeral masses. The mother of the dark-skinned boy who killed himself—Johnny on the Spot they all had called him—screamed and moaned and then fell on the floor as her son was eulogized. The saints circled around her, sang, patted, and praised. The remnants of slavery had commingled with racism and insidiously trickled their way through the generations in Harlem. Johnny was simply too dark; he got the message. The little girls, oblivious to the psychological damage, spread the same fatal message on the sidewalks of Harlem. "Johnny on the Spot, she loves you not, shot-yourself-in-the-head," they sing-songed rhythmically as they skipped rope. He had wanted to whip his little sister with that damn rope.

The judge declared something, the interpreter turned to him, and the old man gave him a nudge. "You home, Américain."

He signed the paper and headed toward the exit. "Monsieur!" the clerk in the property cage called out. She passed his belt and an envelope through the small opening in the wire mesh. *My belt, right.* He opened the envelope and saw paper francs inside. He pulled out a piece of paper with precise handwriting: "Jimmy, glad to help. Tom." The old man hobbled to the property cage; Baldwin put the lion's share of Tom's money in his hand. He walked out of the Palais de Justice and crossed the street. *Sturm und drang the Germans would say.*

The storm dumped a spent and rickety Baldwin into Hôtel du Bac. The landlady was right there, watching him. She came from behind the counter to see the disheveled Baldwin with monster red eyes and the kid's blood across his shirt. "Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. Her daughter came from the back room to see what was wrong. The women stared at him. He took the rest of Tom's money out of his pocket and put it on the counter. *Just one night's sleep in a bed.* His voice was almost gone and with very little French all he could implore was "s'il vous plait." The daughter picked up the money and put it in her apron pocket.

He stood outside his room. A woman and a small child walked past silently. He found his room key, went inside, and locked the door. *Hello, my little friend.* He gave his typewriter a pat and pulled the curtains shut. He laid down; it felt so good to be on a bed. There was a hard knock on his door; he opened his eyes. "Monsieur

Baldwin!" the landlady's daughter said loudly through the door. "Monsieur Baldwin! Une heure!" He had one hour to settle his bill or leave. Baldwin's perfect storm continued to blow.

He put a sheet of paper into his typewriter and began pecking the keys. "The courtroom, the cell, the flag, a judge, the court officers, cell keys, the attorney in charge, the gawkers, Red, bars, bailiff, blood, benches, cold, the interpreter, the hunger, shivering, beatings, the Spanish teen, thirst, hallways, a German, the batons, the stench, cigarettes, the man with food in his beard, sandwiches on the table, Red's cigarette burns, the screaming, the pacing, the old man. And the toilet hole. The lives of men reduced to a filthy hole they're forced to stand around like brute animals." He held down the shift lock key; "WHY AM I HERE?"

He swatted his papers to the floor—*I don't have any more money! I don't have a goddamned anything*—and took the sheet off the bed. He threw it over the pipe above. He stood on the chair and put the sheet around his neck.

Relax. Say goodbye, Jimmy. He felt a tingle of relief; Mr. Hindsight took control. He pulled off the sheet and sat down. He saw Eugene on the bridge's railing. *Eugene, take my hand. Thank you, Jimmy.*

"You can go fuck yourself, lady! I don't owe you shit," a man yelled from the hallway, and brought him out of his memory. He remembered the woman with her child. *He didn't pay her. The son of a bitch didn't pay her.* His reflection in the mirror added his two cents: *The daughter is going to beat the hell out of you.*

The perfect storm had left him perfectly alone. There was nobody to care that he was Black, that his hair was wiry, that his lips were big, that his eyes bulged, that he was poor, that he loved men, that he wrote, was really smart, and a good conversationalist. No one seemed to care that he was from Harlem, was a ton of fun, and had a lot to say, that he had written insightful essays, that he came from slaves, that he'd buy you a drink if he had the money, or offer to share his if he didn't. Nobody knew his name, or that he loved his family and missed them all very much.

Nobody saw his deep pride. He was his mother's helper; he was proud of her trust in him. He raised his brothers and sisters; he was proud that he named his baby sister, Paula. He stood on the chair again, and put the sheet back around his neck. *Why did Red have to beat that Spanish kid?* He stepped off the chair.

The chair fell back and the sheet pulled taut for just a moment. The water pipe broke clean through from his weight. The black hole of his psyche cracked wide open. The Holy Spirit, in all the hubbub, zoomed right in as he fell to the floor.

He looked up at the pipe. *What the hell?* Water came running down, right onto his face. He spit and sputtered to get a breath. He leaned on an elbow to get more air and a better look at the pipe. Instantly he realized he was reacting and moving and thinking differently, like his real self. He leaned back into the flow and took in a few gulps.

The water felt divine in his mouth: on his tongue, under it, on the roof of his mouth, on his gums and the inside of his cheeks. It felt good going down his

throat. It pooled in his stomach. He felt the cells in his lips and his gut coming alive. His eyeballs and arms and ears and nose were soothingly wet. The water made its emotional conversions. A perfect storm's deluge washed over him as he gurgled with joy. He felt giddy. He was coming back to his real life, inside and out. *Renaissance!*

He stood up and pulled the curtains open. "I'm alive again!" he shouted to the children playing in the courtyard below. He yelled out a second time from sheer delight. He was delighted to be so delighted. He had forgotten what that felt like.

He wagged a finger at his friend in the mirror. "Nature abhors a vacuum. Don't you know that, man!" *No more of this craziness.*

That afternoon, Baldwin wanted to die; he did everything right to make that happen. He should have died, but, unwittingly, he jumped straight into the arms of a renewed *joie de vivre*. Suicide interrupted, the perfect storm ceased its morbid gales. All praise and respect to it and its component parts.

Baldwin chose suicide by hanging, not by jumping out of a window. The fall would have killed him. He chose to hang from a pipe overhead, not the back of a door. A door—and especially one in a huge, old Parisian hotel—would not have given way, but the water pipe did. The pipe, a limbless object, in its unique way pulled him back from the edge. And it conveyed its contents to where it was needed most.

Water, potable water. It gives life, it takes life, and it saves. Baldwin's perfect storm blew him from the bottom of a black fog to the peak of that afternoon's brilliant sun.

He gathered his clothes and collected his papers. He flung his duffel bag over his shoulder and tucked his typewriter under his arm. "Momma raised a gifted child," he said as he descended the stairs. *Daddy tried his best.* He got to the first landing. *Run!*

Man on the street. *Jimmy Baldwin, victorious!* The sun was glorious; he felt loved by its warmth. Purged, renewed by the storm, the air about him was clear, clean, fresh as it filled his lungs. He couldn't wait to get to Café de Flor and bum a drink and a cigarette.

Contributor's Biography

Maureen Kelleher is a private investigator in New York City. Prior to moving to the New York area she lived in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she worked as a criminal defense investigator, and specialized in fact investigations. Her field of expertise is old, cold, death row cases where an "actual innocence" legal claim is regarded to be highly possible by death row attorneys. She has helped get three men off Louisiana death row, and worked with Innocence Project New York to help exonerate Andre Hatchett in 2016. She is also a visual artist.