

# **Mighty Fire**

An original short screenplay

by

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**FADE IN:**

**EXT. NEW ORLEANS - DAY**

We ain't talking about the Quarter now. This here is the Seventh Ward.

JEAN JUNEAU, a Creole of 27, strolls along the cracked sidewalks of Lapeyrouse Street, a battered acoustic Yamaha guitar strapped to his back.

His long legs stride with purpose -- a man who knows where he is headed.

**EXT. DOMINO SOUNDS - DAY**

A record shop. More like a record shack, really.

Jean stops in front of this weary building.

A warped shingle on the door -- OPEN -- seems more a challenge than an invitation.

Displayed in the front window, a life-size skeleton in an upright coffin -- posed as if to strum the vintage Gibson Byrdland guitar fitted into its bony fingers.

**INT. DOMINO SOUNDS - DAY**

Jean enters the quiet shop.

A rogue's gallery of Bluesmen adorns the walls -- framed portraits of Johnson, Hooker, Patton, and more.

Jean weaves his way through the crates of dusty albums, then spies what he is looking for and begins to forage.

TAPPING SOUNDS approach him from behind.

DEALER (O.S.)  
Robert Johnson...best they  
ever was, by my reckoning.

Jean turns to find the RECORD DEALER behind him. This ancient black man wears a straw hat and a broad smile.

He walks with a cane -- it TAPS as he moves -- while white smoke curls up from the pipe clenched in his teeth.

JEAN

Nothin' like him. Then or since. But I'm looking for for something special...ain't in this here box.

DEALER

And what might that be?

JEAN

Mighty Fire.

The Dealer snorts so hard that plumes of hot ash erupt from his pipe.

DEALER

Ho! That ol' myth?  
Ain't no such song!

But Jean is dead serious.

JEAN

I been looking a long time.

The Dealer stops laughing.

He walks a half-circle around Jean, tap-tapping with his cane as he looks the man up and down.

DEALER

You ain't even been alive a long time...talkin' to me about some kind of "long time."

Quick as a flash, he points the tip of his cane into the center of Jean's chest.

DEALER

Who sent you here, Mr. Long Time?

JEAN

No matter. It woulda' pulled  
me here anyway...buzzing in my  
ear like a hornet...

(holds up his hands)

...like electricity in my  
fingers...I know it's here.

(he stands tall)

And the name is Jean...Jean Juneau.  
Be my picture up on these walls  
one day.

And the Dealer nods, warming to this brash young man.

#### **A RECORD CASE**

Plops onto a table. Made of worn, stained leather, it  
looks to be 100 years old.

The leathered hands of the Dealer -- as worn as the record  
case itself -- pop the latch and open the case.

Inside is a single 78 RPM record in a plain, brown sleeve.

#### **INT. DOMINO SOUNDS - DAY**

The Dealer gently lifts the record from the case.

Jean looks on in awe.

JEAN

So it's real, then? Robert  
Johnson's final song.

DEALER

Mighty Fire. Real...and legend.  
It lives in both worlds.

JEAN

But is it true? What they say?

DEALER

What they say and what's true  
ain't always the same thing...

**FLASHBACK - INT. JUKE JOINT - NIGHT (M.O.S.)**

As ROBERT JOHNSON plays, men and women gyrate to the music with soulful abandon. Even a few brave white folk.

A SMOKE-EYED WOMAN approaches Robert with a sly smile on her lips and a bottle of rye whisky in her hand.

DEALER (V.O.)

Robert Johnson, man that he was,  
was poisoned by a jealous woman.

Robert takes the bottle and guzzles it down.

DEALER (V.O.)

Now any other man, that would be  
the end of it. But the devil wasn't  
through with ol' Robert just yet.

**FLASHBACK - INT. TENEMENT SLUM - NIGHT (M.O.S.)**

Robert writhes on a mattress without sheets.

DEALER (V.O.)

He lingered in agony for three  
long days...said he could already  
feel the fires of Hell lickin'  
his skin.

Twisted convulsions as Robert screams.

DEALER (V.O.)

Three days. Long enough for a  
man to lose his mind...and long  
enough for one last song.

**FLASHBACK - INT. TENEMENT SLUM - DAY (M.O.S.)**

Robert propped up in bed with his guitar. Contorted in pain. Rivulets of sweat stream down his face.

But he plays -- focused. He plays to a microphone set by the bed as if this were his last act on God's earth.

DEALER (V.O.)

The deathbed song of a man  
who knows what's waitin'  
for him on the other side.

Robert plays on -- and how he plays -- as he attacks the  
guitar with crazed eyes and a chilling intensity.

**BACK TO PRESENT**

**INT. DOMINO SOUNDS - DAY**

The Dealer returns the record to its case.

DEALER

And the men who were brave  
enough...fool enough...to  
capture such a song...  
well, they long gone.

JEAN

Gone crazy, you mean... 'long  
with any other soul ever heard  
it. That's what I hear.

The Dealer smiles.

DEALER

That's what they say, isn't it?  
'Course, I ain't never played  
it to find out. But that's  
what they say.

As the Dealer closes the record case, Jean reaches out to  
stay the man's hand.

The Dealer frowns. He already knows where this is going.

DEALER

She ain't for sale.

JEAN

Everything's for sale.

Jean pulls a roll of cash from his pocket.

DEALER

You insult me.

JEAN

It's everything I have.

DEALER

Not everything. What about them  
strings cross your back?

The Dealer nods to Jean's guitar. Jean pulls back.

JEAN

I would sooner sell my soul.

And -- of course -- the Dealer smiles at that.

DEALER

Seems I knew a man once told me  
that everything's for sale.

#### **A GLASS OF WHISKEY**

A hand lifts the glass, and a moment later, it is slammed  
back onto the table -- drained.

#### **INT. JEAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Jean has been drinking. The bottle of whiskey on the table  
before him is nearly empty.

The only other item on this table is a record album.

Mighty Fire.

Jean rubs his tired, red eyes. He glances to the corner,  
at his open guitar case.

The case empty, splayed open. Gutted. Souless.

Jean sighs, stands, and lifts the record.

A decision made.

**INT. JEAN'S APARTMENT - AT THE PHONOGRAPH**

Wearing headphones, Jean holds the needle aloft over the spinning album.

After a long moment, he drops the needle onto the vinyl.

And though we watch in silence, what Jean hears seizes him like a jolt of electricity.

His fists clench. He moans in ecstasy. He throws back his head, his face contorted by bliss...pain...rapture.

It is too much to bear. He drops to his knees. Tears of joy stream down his cheeks.

**FADE TO:**

**THE PHONOGRAPH NEEDLE**

It butts up against the center of the spinning album.

**INT. JEAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Still kneeling -- utterly spent -- Jean looks to be in a trance as the needle traces its endless, final groove...

*...sh-nick...sh-nick...sh-nick...*

...but he soon rises shakily to his feet.

Jean moves the needle back to the front of the record and closes his eyes -- prepared to listen once more -- but instead of rapture -- a confused frown.

JEAN

No...

He moves the needle to another spot on the record, and then another, with a growing panic in his eyes.

JEAN

NO!



Jean snatches the record from off the turntable. He gazes at the record in disbelief.

**JEAN'S POV**

His own shocked reflection stares back at him from a smooth mirror of black vinyl.

The record is unblemished. Not a single groove to be found in its sleek, polished surface.

The music is gone.

**WIDER**

Enraged, he flings the disc away. It shatters against the wall into 1000 ebony shards.

He looks to his empty guitar case. Another decision made.

**EXT. LAPEYROUSE STREET - NIGHT**

Jean is once more outside Domino Sounds.

**INT. DOMINO SOUNDS - NIGHT**

The glass door shatters. Jean steps through.

He makes his way through the dark interior of the store until -- CLICK -- the lights snap on.

Startled, Jean spins to face GASTON -- a burly Cajun who emerges from a back room.

Gaston has a shotgun leveled at Jean's belly.

GASTON

Just what in hell you think  
you doin', boy?

JEAN

Wait...please...I can...I can  
pay for the window.

Jean carefully pulls the wad of bills from his pocket.

JEAN

I just want my guitar. The man here today...he took it from me. And I need it back.

GASTON

Wasn't open today. Weren't nobody here.

JEAN

But he was here! An old man in a straw hat. He walked with a cane...smoked a pipe. You don't have a man like that?

Gaston narrows his eyes at Jean.

GASTON

Take me for a fool, boy?

Gaston snatches a figurine from a display shelf -- one of many such figures there -- and flings to Jean.

GASTON

Damn fairy stories? That's all you got?

Jean catches the figure. He looks down.

#### **JEAN'S POV**

And there is the Dealer. Right there in his hands.

This grinning figurine is an exact replica.

Straw hat. Pipe. Cane.

It can't be.

JEAN (O.S.)

Papa Legba...?

Jean looks back up. Uh-oh.

Only a split-second to register Gaston -- as he drives the butt of his shotgun into the bridge of our nose.

CRUNCH.

**BLACK**

**JEAN**

On the ground, he awakens with a groan.

He climbs to his feet.

**EXT. CROSSROADS - NIGHT**

Jean looks around. A swollen moon overhead. Dark paths stretch off to all four corners of black infinity.

PAPA LEGBA (O.S.)

You late.

Jean turns as the familiar figure of the Dealer emerges from the shadows -- PAPA LEGBA.

JEAN

What is this place?

PAPA LEGBA

You standin' at the crossroads,  
Jean Juneau...at midnight...under  
a Hunter's Moon! Many ways to  
go, but you take one more step  
forward, ain't no turning back.

JEAN

You tricked me...Papa Legba!

PAPA LEGBA

The first rule of New Orleans...  
never play another man's game.

JEAN

I must have that sound! Why let  
me hear...just to snatch it away?

PAPA LEGBA

It's yours to take...with all  
the whisky and women you desire.

JEAN

That's a lot of whisky and women.

PAPA LEGBA

I know you, Jean Juneau.

JEAN

You took something belongs to me.  
I aim to have it back.

Papa Legba is suddenly holding Jean's guitar.

PAPA LEGBA

I tuned it for you. Tuned it  
just so.

Jean grips the neck of the guitar, but before he takes it,  
he levels his eyes at Papa Legba.

JEAN

I will be remembered.

PAPA LEGBA

It is assured.

Papa Legba releases the guitar.

Jean slips his arm through the strap, shoulders the guitar,  
and steels himself for whatever comes next.

Then he starts down the forward path. A few short steps  
and he is swallowed by the surrounding darkness.

**BLACK**

The sound of CRASHING GLASS as...

**INT. DOMINO SOUNDS - MORNING**

...Gaston dumps a dustpan loaded with shards of glass from  
his broken window into a garbage bin.

BLUES MUSIC -- scratchy, soulful, soft -- suffuses the small shop from an unseen turntable somewhere.

Gaston sweeps up another load of glass.

YOUNG GIRL (O.S.)  
 Mama says ain't nothing but  
 songs 'bout cheatin'...one way  
 or 'nother.

Gaston scoffs and turns to this young voice.

**WIDER**

Six-year-old SABINE sits on the counter, rubber-band braids and skinned knees.

GASTON  
 Most what your Mama says is  
 crazy. The rest just mean.

Sabine gazes up at the wall of portraits.

SABINE  
 So why they always lookin'  
 so sad, then...if'n they  
 ain't cheatin'?

GASTON  
 Ain't a sadness, child.

Gaston joins her at the counter.

GASTON  
 They got the blues in 'em...  
 like a mighty fire that burn you  
 up from the inside. But it save  
 you, too. It's the poison, and  
 the cure, all wrapped up together.  
 You understand?

A blank stare from Sabine.

SABINE  
 No.

Gaston smiles and lifts her down from the counter.

GASTON  
Run on, then. This ain't  
no place for you nohow.

And he shoos her out the door.

With Sabine gone, Gaston steps up to one of the portraits.

#### **THE PORTRAIT FRAME**

A small plaque reads, "ROBERT JOHNSON, 1911-1938"

Pulling back reveals Johnson in his iconic pose -- one of only two photos ever captured.

A cigarette dangles loose from his lips. His long fingers caress the frets of his guitar like spider legs.

But the face is now that of Jean Juneau.

#### **WIDER**

Gaston turns from the portrait and pulls a roll of money from his pocket -- Jean's money.

He stuffs the cash into the register and slams it closed.

#### **ON THE COUNTER**

Next to the register, the grinning statuette of Papa Legba.

#### **ON PAPA LEGBA**

He casts a long shadow in the morning sun -- listening to the BLUES, soon joined by Gaston's SWEEPING -- as he patiently awaits his next customer.

**FADE OUT.**