

#16

ONE SUMMER NIGHT, WITH SPIRITS (987 words)

A hot summer night, as all summer nights are in New Orleans. From riverfront parks and warehouses to expensive homes along Lake Pontchartrain, heat lay like a thick wet blanket over the city.

Two human figures stood in midair over the river. Smoke from ships far below drifted up and passed through them.

"My city," said one, with pride. He was blond, with a thick beard starting to gray, wearing the odd combination of dark gray wool trousers and a worn buckskin shirt. "The gateway to all of French *Louisiane*."

"You founded it, sir, yes; and to you must go the blame." This speaker was older, and dressed in the finery of Louis XV's court: velvet coat, breeches, a ruffled white shirt. From a pocket he drew an enameled box, pinched up snuff, inhaled, sneezed. "What sense did it make to found a city amid a pestilent swamp? Why, in my time as governor, the lowlands flooded every year! And it was all lowlands!"

"Eh. Better to flood than to freeze solid, monsieur."

"If that is a slur against my beloved Fort Detroit, sir, I warn you that even in our present state I shall still demand satisfaction!"

"You know the rule. No duels in the afterlife," said the younger apparition. "See, on its three hundredth anniversary, what *Nouvelle Orléans* has grown into. Rushing river traffic! The miraculous lights extending to the horizon, meaning people and homes and businesses all the way to the lake of my patron Pontchartrain! In my time the locale was mostly a swamp, I freely admit. But see it now! See this magical bridge

so high above the river: a bridge we could only dream of as we rowed between the banks. The sheer *resilience* of these people! *Étonnant!*"

"Spaniards." The elegantly dressed ghost spat. "And from what I have heard, *les américains* were no better."

"American?" said a new voice.

Another wraith strolled up to them. He was heavy-set, jowly, and clean-shaven, with slicked-back dark hair. Ashes from his cigar speckled his white linen suit and red-and-purple tie; he paid no attention.

"Americans? Ain't nothin' better on earth, 'less it's a Southerner. How you been, Jean-Baptiste!" he called to the younger ghost. "Ain't seen you in, hell, must be seventy years now."

Jean-Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, grinned back. "Huey, *mon ami!* Glad I am that you could join us. Permit me to introduce a countryman of mine, the esteemed governor of our colony before I built my city: Antoine de La Mothe."

"I prefer to be known as Sieur de la Cadillac." The older ghost pointedly ignored the thick-fingered hand that the newcomer held out.

"Well, Monsieur Caddy-ack, I'm Huey P. Long. Everybody around here calls me the Kingfish." Huey grinned. "One thing about bein' dead, cigars cain't hurt you any more. Care for a Cuban, Antoine?"

"No." Cadillac glared at Bienville. "You call me here to meet one of these, these culture-free barbarians?"

Bienville smiled. "If, Cadillac, if ever you were to leave your eternal card games with King Louis in your small pocket of the afterlife, you could learn much about what has happened in the world since you passed on."

"Ever since I died on that operatin' table," Huey said, "I been watchin' and studyin' on the world. Especially this hard-partyin' part of it. And you know somethin', Antoine?"

"I prefer to be called --"

"Look here." Huey tossed his cigar into nothingness and took Cadillac's arm. He waved his free hand at the vast sweep of twinkling lights that ran from east to west, from the river to the dark northern horizon. Below them a tug thrashed its way upriver. A faint breeze brought them the roar and clang of Saturday night revelry in the streets of the French Quarter.

"These people, the people you say have no culture?" As he spoke, Huey's manner and diction slid from folksy charmer to persuasive political orator. "They're *tough*, Antoine. They had to be. Being a colonist isn't easy, is it? Weren't any weaklings in your Fort Detroit, I'll bet. The weak stayed home safe in France, but the tough ones like you, they were here! Right?"

"I suppose so --"

"I know so. On reflection, so will you. Your tough boys and their posterity turned your fort into a world-class city. Hell, they made cars for the entire planet!"

"What are 'cars'?"

"Explain it later. Where was I? Oh, right. The people who came to Louisiana and put it on a paying basis, on the way to becoming Americans? They had to deal with hurricanes, fires, yellow fever, floods. Not to mention the crookedest politicians America ever saw: my rascals."

Huey grinned again. "And yet they *prospered*. They drained the back swamp and stopped the fevers; they pushed through roads everywhere; they landfilled the edge of that lake and turned it into high-priced real estate; and ships from all over the world called on that riverfront down there to make New Orleans a first-class port. And if I was alive today, Antoine, I tell you, I'd be *proud* to join 'em to commemorate three centuries of triumph and survival. Now you got to respect that!"

"You have a point." Cadillac glanced at the smiling Bienville, back at Huey, and shrugged. "Perhaps I shall think on it."

"Good. That's all I ask. Jean-Baptiste, I'd love to stay, but I see my brother Earl a-comin'. Every time I meet him now, he bends my ear about how I didn't leave him enough inheritance. Antoine, you a card-playin' man?"

"Piquet is my game, sir."

"Pfft. Me and my rascals, we'll show you a real man's game: poker. That Doc Holliday guy I play with, he'll teach you not to draw to an inside straight. Jean-Baptiste, you come along too. Mind that step there, Antoine, it's a bad one. Trip on that, boy, you be in hell before you know it."

THE END