

Introduction

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there,
wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal
ever dared to dream before.*

Edgar Allan Poe

I stepped into the dimly lit café from the vacant Pirate's Alley and ordered an absinthe. The herbal libation became popular in France and has been renowned throughout the ages by poets and writers for its hallucinogenic properties. Famous artists Toulouse-Lautrec and Van Gogh over-indulged in the green licorice-tasting liqueur. The standing joke among locals being if you drink enough of the green fairy, you too can become an impressionist painter. I never drink enough of it to paint a masterpiece or to cut off my ear. It's an occasional indulgence I partake of only once in a while, particularly when I feel avant-garde.

The bartender lit the sugar cube atop the silver lattice ladle, a blue flame danced in the darkness. When the ice water hit the clear green liquid, it changed to a dull, cloudy murk. She stirred the concoction with the ladle then slid it across the bar to me. I took the glass and stepped out of the café into nearby Cabildo Alley.

The barely cool breeze coming off of the river blew a whisk of hair across my face as I made my way to a table in the alley. The skull and cross bones sign swayed

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gently in the wind and a lone cockroach scuttled across the flagstones into a crevice in the side of the cathedral. For the first time in months, a hush took hold of the French Quarter. I sat alone sipping my absinthe in the alley, feeling decadent and cliché.

For centuries, writers from all over the world have used the French Quarter as a backdrop for their fictional works; interweaving their characters into the rich culture and history of this alluring locale that breathes life into them; making them real to us. The French Quarter has intrigued many not only to write about it but also spawned the desire for some to stay. Many a visitor has wandered into this magical place, only to find that they do not ever want to leave. Legend says if you drink the water in New Orleans, you must return. Some say that it is a curse put on the city by the famous Voodoo queen, Marie Laveau herself.

There are other cities that share some of its qualities, such as architecture or style, but none come close to the ambiance of New Orleans. This city has a pulse, a rhythm, a life of its own. There is an energy here that cannot be felt anywhere else. If you're still, you can feel it. Some people recognize it immediately. Others sense that something is different, but cannot quite pinpoint what it is. I have heard some say that it is only because New Orleans is below sea level and that elicits unusual sensations. I do not believe that theory because I've seen and experienced too much. Whatever it is, the French Quarter continues to draw in the curious seekers of the strange, the mystical, and the surreal. Being immersed in the life force of the Quarter, I don't feel what others feel when they first arrive here. I only notice when I leave and no longer feel it. There is an unmistakable feeling of absence inside and around me.

Tales from the French Quarter

In "Jambalaya - The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals," author Luisah Tiesh, a priestess in the Yoruba tradition, refers to that feeling as being "tipsy." She calls New Orleans a "psychic seaport."

She explained, "The psychic energies of many people living and dead hover over the city of New Orleans, possibly because of the water. Visitors to the city become "tipsy" after being there only a short time. "Tipsy" is the name given to that state of mind that precedes possession. (Tiesh, P.4)

Luisah Tiesh said that she grew up tipsy. All of us natives did. Many of us continue to be tipsy, particularly those of us who reside in the French Quarter. This isn't a sensation that we are fully conscious of. It is a part of our being, that, for the most part, we take for granted. I hadn't always been aware of this connection to New Orleans. Not until the last couple of decades have I been able to embrace the uniqueness of being a native to this remarkable, unearthly place.

It seems that this community called the French Quarter is one of the few places on this continent that one can step back into time and relive the splendor of Old French New Orleans. Tourists from all over the world come here to experience that uniqueness.

I am one of the fortunate ones who can remember a childhood filled with routine trips to town on the St. Charles Avenue Streetcar. For us, having jambalaya or *beignets* and *café au lait* was the equivalent of kids in other places having a Coke and a bologna sandwich. By five, I could peel the hard shell off of a crawfish like a champ. On holidays, my mother made pralines on cut pieces of wax paper. I never considered that most people

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actually bought this homemade Christmas candy in stores.

I grew up in a small suburban area outside of the city, called River Ridge, named aptly for its proximity to the Mississippi River. The infamous levees served as my playground where we'd fly kites, ride horses, and roll down steep earthen walls. Sometimes we'd have a parent take us along the riverside and we'd get to walk barefoot on the shore; the Mississippi mud squishing up between our toes as we sank into the soft riverbed. Just a few miles down the road, sits the Manchac swamp. Black water bayous cluttered with cypress trees draped in Spanish moss lined the highway and channeled their way into Lake Pontchartrain; yet another playground. As a teen, my friends and I spent weekends water skiing through the bayous. Lazy alligators lined the shore sunning as we sped by. Nothing more than scenery, no one ever worried that we might wind up eaten by a hungry gator. Of course, you couldn't pay me to go anywhere near that water today.

Throughout my teen years, my parents forbade me to enter the French Quarter. My parents told me stories of people disappearing or being found dead after venturing into the forbidden area. Of course, any kid who isn't afraid of becoming alligator food isn't afraid of the French Quarter either. I became notorious as a teenager for skipping school with my friends and winding up in the Quarter, wandering its streets and alleys, the ultimate adventure for a group of young teenage girls.

A typical visit to the Quarter would usually involve a stroll through Jackson Square to watch all the artists painting portraits. I still have a piece that was done at age fifteen on one of my escapades. We'd find our way to Bourbon Street and go into Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo. A large sign in the shop could be seen from the

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street. It said, "Strange Gods, Strange Altars." Little did I realize at the time, the bond being created between its mystique and myself. Years later, as a young mother, I'd take my oldest daughter, Chastity, on Sundays to the French Quarter where we'd roam the French Market and Jackson Square for hours on end.

I eventually embraced all that the French Quarter had to offer, making a living doing tours promoting the darker side of the city and the spirits that dwelled within. I wanted to step beyond the boundaries of ghost stories in this book. I did include them because it wouldn't be fair not to. I set out to combine all that is the essence of the French Quarter, including but not limited to ghost stories, both documented and folklore. This book is a compilation, a gumbo, of assorted New Orleans' tales. Some are stories of local haunts, strange murder cases, and even funny occurrences in the French Quarter.

Originally, I had hoped that my next work would be fiction. Everyone loves a good story. But as someone pointed out to me, for the most part, especially here in New Orleans; the truth is far stranger than fiction.