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## POLICE STATE

by Norman Spinrad

Whoever said it, maybe at one of the old time Mardi Gras, must've been doin' some good stuff, when he did: "Things are more like they are now than they've ever been before."

Some say the Eternal Mardi Gras is the Disney version, what with the traditional Krews' parading limited to the traditional lead-up to Fat Tuesday and the traditional routes while the big time floats from Hollywood, X-rated, corporate, and otherwise, run the Eternal Mardi Gras all year all long all over New Orleans except through the X-rated theme parks, and I suppose you can say that much is sort of true, given that it was Disney I brought in first.

But whining that the Mouse has gone and done to the French Quarter what it did to Times Square, not to mention the way it's oozed out into the rest of New Orleans like the annual dose of Mississippi mud during the Hurricane Season, is going a tad too far, seeing as how the Quarter had fallen far off its fabled glory days even before Katrina.

And as for calling yours truly Jean-Baptiste Lafitte a swamp rat traitor to the Free

State of Louisiana or the true soul of the city for dealing them in and starting the Eternal Mardi Gras, you expect me to apologize for saving the city from literally drowning to death?

Oh yes, I did!

Everyone knows New Orleans had been on its economic ass for decades just like the state it was leading down the willy hole, barely able to pay the cops to keep the behavioral sink at bay, and the garbage men to pick the corpses off the streets before they rotted an' toss 'em in the bayous where they belong.

The Hurricane Season wasn't exactly going away, now was it, and what the Dutch were demanding to build the necessary dikes and seawalls to save what was left of the Big Easy from finally going under would've been about the total budget of the city government for the next decade or two. No Hans Brinker Seawall back then, need I remind you?

I guess I do.

Amazing what short memories ingrates have.

New Orleans featured itself as the "Big Easy" since before Mickey Mouse was even a gleam in Uncle Walt's evil eye, but just because the truth wouldn't look so good in the tourist guides doesn't mean we don't all know that it's always really been the Big Sleazy, now does it?

This city was built as a haven for pirates and slavers by disreputable governments for their own disreputable purposes and the riverboat gamblers, saloon keepers and whorehouse impresarios like yours truly, rollers high, low and medium, who serviced their trade.

It was born as the Big Sleazy. What pays here, stays here. Always been like that. Always was, still is, always will be, the Loas and the Free State of Louisiana bless this town and vise versa cause nothing else ever has.

Easy?

Yeah, sure.

Born between a bend in the mighty and mighty ornery Mississip and a permanently flooded saltwater marsh presumes to call itself Lake Pontchartrain serving as an overflowing catch-basin for tidal surges when the major hurricanes hit and giant mud puddle in-between.

Easy?

Expanding on land below sea level. Tossed around like a beachball between the French and the Spanish. Finally sold to the Americans by Napoleon like a cut-rate whore just before he knows he's gonna lose it anyway.

Those who adapt survive, like the Cajuns from icy Quebec said when they found themselves in the steamin' bayous of the Delta, those who don't ain't been heard from lately.

So making legal what the Big Easy always was and promoting it as the world's first forthrightly X-rated tourist destination to pull our terminal condition from the Mississippi mud is not "selling out the soul of the city" or "whoring ourselves to the mavens of show business."

Because the Big Easy has always been a whore, a charming, sleazy, free-wheeling, good-natured hooker with a heart of gold and an eye for the main chance, which of course is what makes her easy, and bein' easy is the name of the game in this

business, which has always been the main game in town.

I should know, now shouldn't I? The whorehouse business I know well enough to have been doing better at it than I was with the saloons, and the saloons weren't exactly in the red either. And let an old bordello impresario tell you, who would ever hire a hooker who wasn't all of the above, and good-lookin' too?

In case you're forgetting, the Big Easy wasn't exactly looking as appetizing as a platter of Oysters Bienville before the Revolution. She's all cleaned up and spiffed up and lit up and giving herself the star treatment now, to the point where ingrates and ignoramuses and precious green fairy godmothers can afford to complain about how New Orleans is peddling her previously jazzy derrière as the Liberated Las Vegas to less than the genteel bohemian trade of their absinthe fantasies.

Whoever wrote that song about there being no business like show business got it wrong. As things stand now there's no business but show business and we all are in it and always have been. The only difference now is that it's making us a lot more money, it's making the Good Times Roll again after all those years in the deep dark shit, and that's good enough for me, and if it's not good enough for you, this ain't your town, you'd best leave and go somewhere more to your tight-assholed liking.

But y'all come back on vacation from the saltmines, y'hear! Whatever your pleasure, we got it, and if we don't, don't worry, no matter how pervo it may seem to your sweaty vestigial morality, we'll get it for you. Here in the Eternal Mardi Gras of the Big Easy, we make no such judgements, we're impossible to scandalize, de gustibus non disputandum.

What pays here, stays here, and never fear, we do still want your money.

#

Martin Luther Martin never had any use for the name that was inflicted on him at birth, learning to call himself Luther in the lower grades of the 9th Ward, transmuting it quickly into Luke, cool hand that he decided he would be after seeing the Paul Newman movie, and keeping it as a gang-banger, no Mohammed This or Barack That bullshit for him, no Rat Man or Baron Samedi or other such Vu Du mumbo-jumbo either.

Luke Martin was a self-made man from the git-go, like who had a choice, popa doin' long hard time in Angola for armed muggery and general bad-ass thuggery by the time he hit the first grade, momma makin' her junkie ends meet by selling the shit and her own pootie at street-level, that is to the extent that you could call anything a street in the Alligator Swamp.

Mudville, the Lower Ninth, Stilt City, the Alligator Swamp, whatever. Mudville because the so-called "streets" were perpetual rivers of mucky mud and better you don't know. The Lower Ninth because it had always been the southern section of the Lower Ninth Ward, now as a reminder that it was below sea level, not that you needed one during the Hurricane Season. Stilt City because anything that wasn't build up on a platform tall enough to keep it above the incoming surges wasn't there for very long and people had long since given up on the obsolete concept of "foundations."

The Swamp because everything north of Mid-City and/or east of what was once the Industrial Canal could count on being a real swamp from the beginning of the Hurricane Season to two months or so after it ended, which was more than half of the year, that is if that year's Hurricane Season wasn't any worse than normal. No one tried to build anything that wasn't stilted and platformed above the record high water mark,

and during the Season, it became a down at the heels Venice, with patched up rubber dinghies, home-made rowboats, dugout canoes, and half-assed rafts standing in for romantic gondolas.

The Alligator Swamp not so much because the real reptilian deal had managed to make its way up from the bayous and survived what dry season there was retreating to the Industrial Waterway or the Mississippi, or even some claimed, Lake Pontchartrain, but because the top predators of the human ecological niche were sharp-toothed and lizard-hearted young Alligators who would bring down their own fathers if they could find them and devour their own mothers if the bitches ever accumulated anything worth stealing.

Nothing else could even dream of living long, let alone prospering, in the Alligator Swamp. The down and dirty economic base of the Swamp was street-level drug dealing and trick turning in the Quarter or the Garden District one step ahead of the police you generally couldn't afford to slip the necessary bakshish, the herbivore level above that was the bodegas and liquor stores and pharmacies that serviced the hood, and everything above that was the carnivorous gangs.

That was it. If you were born into this behavioral sinkhole you became a drug dealer or a hooker surviving on foraging expeditions to higher ground, sooner or later got into the hard stuff and got taken off, or you got into one of the gangs that did the taking.

So young Luke took the path of least resistance, not that the resistance was insignificant, not that there was any other path to take, and managed to gain admission to a scruffy and scurvy low-level gang called itself the Vu Du Daddies, though what they knew or cared about voodoo would fill about five of their remaining braincells, and as far as they were concerned what they might father by gang-banging some skank was none of

their business.

What was their business was what more powerful alligator packs allowed to be their business, which wasn't very much. Muggings. Burglaries, but not of the more lucrative liquor stores, which were reserved for the dominant gangs, bottom of the food chain dealing.

Condition Terminal before your little baby feet could hit the soggy ground.

Of course, you could always get a job and leave. That's what they told you in school if and when you bothered to show up.

Hah, hah, hah.

What was viably left of New Orleans was the Quarter, and the Garden District, and the mostly so-called Business District, and arguably portions of Metairie. The rest of what was within the city limits, not to speak of the suburbs beyond, was once middle class housing taken over by struggling minimum wage workers when it wasn't more Alligator Swamp, and there weren't really enough of even those jobs to keep much more than half of this proletarian populace above the subsistence-level official poverty line and their heads, uh, above water. Things being what they were, no one up there with a job on offer was about to lay it on something that slithered up out of the Swamp clacking its hungry jaws.

But one not so fine day at the tail end of the Hurricane Season, Luke emerged from the family hovel at sundown to join the Vu Du Daddies for a night of nothing in particular and had a vision that changed his life.

The streets were in the slow oozy process of emerging from the bayous they had been during the Season, the worst time of the year for getting around, too muddy to get

anywhere on foot without being sucked down into something worse than quicksand, what was left of the waterways so shallow that proceeding by rowboat or raft was like mud puppies flip--flopping their way from puddle to puddle.

Nevertheless, or perhaps because their meth-sotted brains saw this as some kind of advantage, a half dozen or so members of the Fuck Yo Mothers had boosted some out of date TVs and microwaves from one of the few appliance stores in the Swamp and were fleeing with the loot in two wormy old bayou pirogues fitted with rusty electric outboards, here and there having to dismount, hold tight to the gunwales, and push their overladen boats off a not-yet emergent mudbank.

The Fuck Yo Mothers were as high up the food chain as it got in the Swamp, which only made this sorry spectacle even more pathetic, and Luke might even have laughed at these addled buffoons were it not worth your life to be caught doing so.

And then roaring and gliding and magically slip-sliding up the mudway at graceful flank speed came one of those toboggan-bodied propeller driven air boats snapped up at cut-rate prices by the New Orleans Police when the Okefenokee and the Everglades became deep year round lakes.

Three cops having a high old time, at least as Luke was seeing it; one driving the speeding airboat, another standing up beside him waving a pistol, the third at some kind of long-snouted curdler mounted on a swiveling pedestal.

The police airboat caught up with the Fuck Yo Mothers in nothing flat, and took to gliding mocking circles around their two boats, then neat figure-eights around and between them just to taunt them, hah, hah, hah, go fuck yoselves, muthas!

Now of course anything with descended testicles in the Swamp automatically

hated the police, Luke being no exception, but who could keep from laughing at this sarcastic display of police primacy at the expense of and over these feared lizard-lords of the Alligator Swamp?

And that was when it came to him, even before the cops began playing the tight beam of their sonic curdler over them, causing them to scream, grab at their ears, and, it would seem, piss, and possibly shit in their pants.

Think of the Cops as just another gang and it was immediately apparent.

The Cops were the Supreme Gang of the Alligator Swamp.

They had the top gear. They had the colors. Each of them got a top of the line gun for nothing and plenty of ammo for it. Each of them made more money in a year than anyone else in the Swamp, without risking hard time in Angola like poppa.

Forget the Vu Du Daddies, Luke told himself. Forget trying to join the Fuck Yo Mothers or the Spades of Ace or the Darth Invaders.

The Police is the gang to get into.

That was when Luke knew that a Cop was what he wanted to be, was destined to be, and he never looked back. Started going to school just often enough and study just hard enough to squeeze through to a high school diploma. The Police were always looking to recruit gang-members from the Alligator Swamp for their down and dirty knowledge of the behavioral sink hole, but rarely getting any takers, seeing as how they were the Enemy. But if you looked at the Cops as just another gang, as the toughest, best-armed, best-equipped, richest gang of all, you took advantage of the invitation to try your stuff at the police academy.

Better than having to make your bones, or get banged by the whole gang, or go

through some disgusting punk vu du ceremony, which was the sort of thing you had to do to join any other gang worth getting into.

#

Let me tell you, New Orleans was knocked back on its soggy ass by Katrina, and much worse by what followed, now known as the Hurricane Season, and so was I. Katrina was nothing compared to what followed, like a pug got knocked down in the first round by a haymaker, managed to crawl more or less to his feet on the eight-count, only to get socked again, and again, and again, each roundhouse right stronger and stronger.

Before Katrina, ol' J.B. was riding high on the return from three saloons, one of which was actually in the Quarter and a couple of cat houses, one of which was a three-story establishment right on the fringes of the Garden District. None of 'em was washed away by Katrina, and all of them were high enough to have survived the advent of the Hurricane Season.

But the same could not be said for the tourist trade, accelerating a downhill slide that had been going on for some time beforehand, not when the Big Easy was a few dozen square blocks of the French Quarter down to Jackson Square, and more than half of what was left of the rest of the city was a huge urban marshland infested with human reptile life known all too far and wide and accurately as the Alligator Swamp.

The tourist trade that was just about rising off the canvas after Katrina got knocked back down again and again by the Hurricane Season, and it finally became understood that the situation would be permanent, and that the Alligator Swamp would remain a gangland urban bayouland whose denizens were not below seeking their pickings in the turf of honest sleazy impresarios like me.

It was worth your life to venture out of the Quarter or the District at night, not that the days were much better, and the saloons I had in Nowhereland became the giant sucking sounds of expenses over receipts gurgling down the drain. I owned the building the one in the Quarter was in, or anyway whatever the bank sold the mortgage to did, and it just about covered the monthlies, and I had an apartment above the bar.

The bordello on the edge of the Garden District was also in the black, if not by much, and I owned that too, along with your friendly government subsidized lone sharks, but the whorehouse outside the district became a den of meth and heroin addict hookers half a step up from street traffic, and what they attracted is something you don't want to think about, and neither did I.

Those who adapt survive, so I closed everything that I was renting space for, leaving me with the nameless bordello house known only by its address and phone number, and my Bourbon Street Saloon, LaFitte's Landing, and a much reduced monthly nut to carry.

If it was no longer exactly cocaine and cognac and Antoine's for lunch and dinner every day, at least it was only a few cuts below the lifestyle to which I looked back so fondly to have become accustomed to.

No one expects the Spanish Inquisition or the Banking Crash of '08 or one disastrous hurricane to be followed by an endless line of bigger and bigger brothers and sisters or an alligator to come up through the toilet and bite you on the ass.

So how was I to foresee the Great Deflation?

How was anyone except the sons of bitches who created it to get even richer than they already were?

#

“Is this some kind of fuckin’ joke?” were the first words out of Patrolman Luke Martin’s mouth when he read the address.

“You find something fuckin’ funny in some poor sucker’s eviction notice?” snarled Sergeant. Larrabee, aka Sergeant Slaughter, aka the Mouth That Roars. “You’re not some kind of sicko Bourbon street comedian, Martin, you’re a cop, remember, or anyway you’re dressed like one and this ain’t Mardi Gras, so keep your black sense of humor to yourself, just take Moreau with you, hold your nose, and go enforce it.”

“This is my address,” said Martin Luther Martin.

There it was, the full legal form of his name on the final eviction notice, the exact same form on the mortgage contract he had so proudly and hopefully and stupidly signed less than two years before the onset of the Great Deflation, aka the Deep Six Fix, aka Up Shit’s Creek, aka the Bimboid Dollar.

Luke the Alligator Swamp creature had been right about the Cops being the top gang in the Swamp. As soon as he had the badge, and the uniform, and the Uzi machine pistol, there was nothing there about to stand up to him or give him no shit, knowing it would come back up at them from the Powers That Be, if he didn’t blow them away first. He was a Lord of the Alligator Swamp, and whoever didn’t like it, tough shit.

Unfortunately, the Alligator Swamp was where they dropped him, in a new “community outreach unit,” meaning in charge of drawing lines that the gangs could understand and making it clear that they would be enforced by whatever means they might stupidly make necessary. They had only let in a few boys from the Swamp because some asshole in the mayor’s office thought it would be an interesting experiment.

Or maybe he wasn't an asshole, for at least in Luke's case, it worked well, to the advantage of the New Orleans Police Department, but to the disadvantage of his fantasy of pulling himself up out of the Swamp by his badge and his bootstraps.

There were only a dozen cops in the unit, three experienced trouble-making police force veterans assigned to it as punishment, and nine recruits from the Swamp, and since it was a pilot unit, there was only one of it, and it was assigned turf in the Alligator Swamp too close to the Quarter for what was deemed touristic comfort.

Your mission, they were told, and there's no bullshit about accepting it, is to keep the wild life confined to its Swamp and out of the Quarter. By whatever means works, nobody gives a fuck about how, use your initiative and don't bother filing reports. Just make it so. Succeed and we've got your backs all the way up the line to the Mayor's office. Screw up and nobody ever heard of you.

The three old guys hung around the precinct boathouse punching their time clocks and passing the time bitching and drinking and good riddance. The other eight alligators were a random sample of second and third raters unable to get into a Swamp gang of significance and hoping they could be better positioned to line their pockets under the colors of the Police. But Luke took the mission seriously, and he was good at it, perhaps because he took it seriously, or maybe because he found it more fun than he had ever in his life dreamed of having.

The rest of the unit had no problem with him presenting himself as the Honcho to the major gang leaders in its area as long as he didn't get them into shit that was too dangerous for enjoyment or arduous enough to seem like work, and the local gang honchos had no choice to but accept him as the Honcho of the gang called the Police.

And it didn't take that many demonstrations to convince them that the Police ruled whatever aspects of the turf they chose to. But Luke, with the enthusiastic backing of his rudely indolent fellow officers, made the Police the popular law of their jungle by the way he laid it down in the true spirit of the Big Easy, which even they were born and bred to understand on a cellular level.

Look, the Police don't want no trouble, and trouble for us is getting shit from up the food-chain because you motherfuckers are letting your roaming homies into the white man's turf and the green men's main meal ticket. You gotta stop that now, so we don't get pissed off, because if we do, trouble for you is us, and if you don't get the message, you're welcome to try us out once. Just once.

On the other hand, the Police don't want no trouble from what goes on in the Swamp as long as it stays in the Swamp, don't be any trouble for us, and we won't be no trouble to you, who needs it, right. We're not runnin' hos, we're not dealing anything, and if we steal this and that once in a while, we're not gonna make ourselves pigs about it. Who goes along, gets along, ain't there enough shit in this city, we don't have to make no more for each other, now do we?

It worked. The power of the Police was still feared in this section of the Swamp but it was also seen as accommodating, something you could deal with as long as you dealt straight, like with a theme-bar out of some old song, "the cops here don't need you, and man they expect the same." The statistics showed that it worked. The department got the money to expand the program to as much of the Swamp as they could afford by suggesting that the business interests of the Quarter and the Garden District, being the main beneficiaries of this great new street crime suppression program, would be well-

served if they forked over the necessary grease, and maybe not served at all if they didn't.

Luke should have gotten the credit, it should have gotten him given an expanded sector, if anyone high enough up had read the non-existent records his unit had been ordered not to keep, would his brother officers have any self-interest in contradicting the police powers that be, were he not a kid from the Swamp himself, did such a post not require a minimum rank of sergeant the way the pecking and beak-dipping order was being set up.

When Luke protested, they gave him a consolation prize, they did him a favor, though he didn't think so at the time, they pulled him out of the Swamp, dropped him in a prowl car, and made him an ordinary cop in the Business District, a demotion of some emotional kind for a top Alligator Swamp gang honcho, but a far sweeter beat to any true New Orleans cop.

Which step by step Luke evolved into.

That was the favor.

After a few years he came to understand that.

In the Swamp, the Police were the top gang, and he had been very happy playing the top gang-banger, what Alligator Swamp boy wouldn't have been with that level of firepower backing up his big mouth, but in the Business District, in the Quarter itself, indeed in most parts of New Orleans that were above the water twelve months a year, the police were part of the System.

Actually, being New Orleans, it wasn't exactly an organized system, more a civilized recognition of the naturally evolved hierarchies of this here ecological habitat, system Big Easy style.

The primary job of the police beyond the Swamp was to prevent murders, robberies, rapes and muggings to the extent possible and acceptable to those facing election, and to arrest enough murders, thieves, rapists and muggers to look competent on the news broadcasts and sites, and to prevent traffic jams, which were few and far between these dim days.

Corporate swindles were not to be looked into as long as they showed someone a profit and were incorporated with the approval into the amoeboid overall monkey business of New Orleans.

Vice was generally not a police problem, namely whorehouses, genteel streetwalking, a certain tolerated level of drug dealing by approved entrepreneurs, back-alley poker and craps, but of course these enterprises had to rent their unofficial licenses from the police with cash in paper bags, small ones for small-fry, larger and larger ones for bigger and bigger fish.

The corruption of public servants by the semi-public powers, being merely virtual bags of money being passed among the same brotherhood of sleaze, were not a problem for the police either, unless power struggles downtown dragged them into it, in which case the problem was Kingfish sized, but not to anyone below the level of Captain.

Such intricate and complicated machinery could of course hardly run without a sufficient amount of grease at every level. The police had no license to steal, nor were any but soon-to-be terminated rogues fucking around with dealing or pimping, but ordinary cops were not to be denied free drinks and food in saloons, nor their fair share of the cash flow thereof.

Where Luke come from, he had no moral problems with any of this, indeed where

he come from, “moral problems” had been an unknown concept, nor did he long object to being ripped from his roots in the toxic swampland and planted in richer higher ground.

His salary supported a one room apartment in a rough-edged corner of Metairie as soon as those paychecks started coming in because no one was about to demand security deposits or months in advance or any of that shit from a cop or they’d find themselves hip deep in code violations. A patrolman’s salary and his ration of grease afforded Luke Martin a life-style he had never dreamed of attaining, indeed never really had understood existed.

He could eat in restaurants. He could buy new clothes. He could hang out and drink in saloons, and he soon found out that there were police hang-outs, bars frequented by off-duty cops, their wives and girlfriends, cop groupies, and the younger offspring of police families, generations of cops going into the family business.

The police were more like a tribe than a gang, and Luke found that this was a tribe he wanted to get into. And then he realized he was already in it. And then he met Luella.

One of her grandfathers had made Captain, the other had made Lieutenant, they had retired in style, but when her father rose to Sergeant, he had liked it just fine and stayed there. Luella was seductive in an aggressively black bourgeois way, the get up and go to climb to those lost levels of police aristocracy was definitely de regour in her choice of mate selection.

To make the usual long romantic story short, Luke was up to it, and up to her, or up to convincing her that he was, and she was up to him, and they ended up married in a police style wedding.

He had not yet risen out of the ranks when she got pregnant, but what with being a cop and the daughter of a cop, and the granddaughter of a Captain and a Lieutenant, the police tribe had greased the skids into Luke swinging a two bedroom house on high ground with a nice sweetheart mortgage of the kind that was making the rounds at the time. They were young, Luke hadn't been on the job long enough to be considered for Sergeant, but Luella's family connections could take him that far in a year or so, they were already comfortably middle-middle class. They had another kid.

And then the shit hit the fan. It hit a lot of people's fans.

All too soon enough it was being called the Great Deflation.

If anyone really knew what had happened they kept it to themselves because it was angrily assumed that only those who had made it happen understood exactly how they had done it and how many retro-trillions they had made out of it, and if they spoke up and identified themselves they would be lynched by popular demand of all races, creeds, genders, and religions.

As near as Luke could figure it out, the Great Recession had tanked the dollar when the state governments that couldn't balance their budgets started inventing their own money and the Federal government which couldn't meet the interest on what they had to borrow from the Chinese loan sharks did something to turn the dollar into toilet paper for a while to make what they owed affordable to carry.

When they had sufficiently screwed the Chinese, they did something else, and the inflation cooled down, and what banks and such stuff that survived had made beaucoup bucks doing it, so low down payment sweetheart mortgages, especially in New Orleans where distressed real estate abounded, were once more available, if not to wetbacks and

dope dealers, then certainly to a police officer with a regular salary.

So, with no little insistent encouragement from Luella, Luke, like millions of other suckers, had bought the house and signed the mortgage contract without reading too deeply into the fine print.

And then the They who no one anyone Luke knew could identify ran another number, so complicated that some people said they had screwed themselves too, being left with tons of properties they just about stole, but with no one much to unload them on.

Then somehow the value of the dollar starting rising for the first time in memory, and not just against some foreign monies, but in actually in terms of what it would buy, what once bought a six pack of beer bought a case, what once bought a patrolman a two bedroom house could now buy a Captain a mansion in the Garden District.

For a few months everyone was suddenly rich in terms of what their salaries would buy, but if everyone was rich, then nobody was really rich although some people were more not really rich than others, and so the economy can't work, or some such bullshit they used as a reasonable excuse to start cutting salaries to match the deflating dollar and then indexing them downward yearly.

But Luke, like millions of other suckers, including major industrial corporations and landowners, had mortgage contracts written in fixed dollars before the Great Deflation, which meant that the true value of their debts in current dollars were enormous. And the interest on a debt the size of Luke's even at the sweetheart rate on his lease would now gobble up twice his salary if he tried to pay it.

Which, like the massed millions in his position, he hadn't for six months, figuring, or more truthfully desperately hoping, that the police tribe, or the government, or Mama

Legba, if you were jungle-bunny enough to believe that shit, would rescue his ass and his house from the repo man.

So Luke couldn't even honestly tell himself that he hadn't been expecting this eviction notice.

But he could hardly have imagined that even Sergeant Slaughter would hand it to him and tell him to serve it on himself.

#

Don't expect me to explain what really caused the Great Deflation, because the smart money, what's left of it, says the what is a who, and the why is to make money off it somehow, what else, and if the suckers who are born to be screwed every minute in this great nation ever find out who and why, there won't be enough tar, feathers, railroad ties, and rope in all of Dixie to do the necessary justice.

Now I'm just a bordello impresario and saloon keeper at the time who got shafted up the ass by two mortgages I couldn't even think of carrying under the sudden circumstances but on buildings I had to have to stay in any business at all. Don't stop me if you've heard the same sad story too many times, you've probably told it too many times yourself, we all live in the same leaking submarine, I'll get to the sharp point of that stick as soon as I've had my two cents worth too on what the hell happened.

When in trouble, when in doubt, if you don't have it in you to wave your arms and dash about, follow the money, something, after all, that I have been doing myself on a certain less lucrative level all my life.

So who made out in the Great Deflation?

Who made out when the dollar that would've previously bought you one cheap

stogie now would buy a whole box of primo cigars? Everyone, or so it seemed at first, when everything cost ten times less dollars to buy. Every Man a King, as good ol' Huey Long promised to win elections back in the day.

But for each dollar that bought ten times more, someone had to be selling something for ten times less, I was selling a bottle's worth of Jack Daniels for the price I used to get for a shot of bar whiskey. A full nighter with one of my best girls in the royale suite now went for the previous price of a blowjob behind a parked car. The same thing, of course, was going on in every business in the country, and obviously it couldn't last.

Those who adapted, survived, which was anyone with a brain in his head large enough to figure out that you had to cut what were now ridiculously high wages, which wasn't too hard to do, seeing that the Federal Minimum Wage would have supported a family of twelve in high style if it wasn't adjusted downward.

Seemed for a moment nobody got screwed.

Nobody who didn't owe any debt written in stone in the pre-deflation numbers.

Which, what with mortgages, and credit cards, and corporate and government bonds and the National Debt, and car loans, was just about nobody, the governments of the United States, Louisiana, and New Orleans, and yours truly included.

But riches, like gamblers' luck, or the famous shit that flows downhill, has to flow from one place to another if it's moving at all, real wealth is the kind that can't be created or destroyed by the price of bullshit futures on the schlock exchange or the dollar price of pussy. Farmland, factories, sports franchises, boats and trains and planes, real estate.

The lion's share of which had debt of one kind or another to Big Banking, the

Credit Card Banditos, the Lizards of Wall Street, the Chinese, the Koreans, Ali Blah Blah and the Forty Financial Engineers. Debt that could neither be carried nor written down to its true worth in current dollar terms and believe me I tried!

During the Great Recession, seems like these bastards had ended up selling Confederate Money derivatives and deadbeat-backed mortgage bonds to themselves in the biggest Pyramid Scam in history, and when it collapsed, they ended up repossessing a lot of real estate they couldn't unload without all these government mortgage backing programs.

Now the same Wall Street Lizards were foreclosing on anything they could wrap their tongues around, and it didn't take a financial engineer to see that when the government sucked the necessary hot air out of the dollar and it fell back to earth, as it had to if the Chinese weren't going to foreclose on the entire United States, those who had run this version of the Great Scam would own the country, real estate, livestock, and factories, and be able to turn it into their plantations like the Lords and Ladies of the Ante-Bellum romances.

That's the who, and the why, but don't ask me how they did it, I've got the necessary street smarts of a bordello impresario and saloon keeper, but I reckon the historians, and the conspiracy creeps, and the politicians, and the novelists and movie makers, will be trying to figure that out for the next hundred years or so, and living quite well off of trying.

J.B. Lafitte, like millions of other folks not in on the scam, had a more immediate impossible problem. I was deep in foreclosure on the whorehouse in the Garden District and the saloon building in the Quarter and if I didn't find some way to weasel out of it

shortly, I'd be entirely out on the street.

And at the time, I hadn't a clue.

Did you?

#

Mama Legba claimed to have been born on a bayou, why not, it had been good for her image when she was no more than a street kid character in the Quarter, it played even better on the air as the self-styled Voodoo Queen of Louisiana, it was technically true, and Marylou Beaudreau had been her own self-creation for about as long as she could remember.

She was indeed born on a bayou in the Delta, and yes, to a Creole momma and a Cajun papa, and all that jazz, as the official press bio had it. But Moma and Papa had never exactly been the offspring of umpteen generations of zydeco musicians keeping the faith down there in the swampland of beloved folkie lore.

Moma and Papa grew up in the bayou country all right, but as children of a skanky hippie commune inhabited by the addled descendants of the debris of the Louisiana Summer of Love, growing bad grass and stunted vegetables, collecting food stamps, and whatever else they could scam out of whatever governments, and stoned to the gills on acid or mushrooms when they could get it.

Moma and Papa escaped to the Big Easy soon after Marylou was born to a lowlife highlife in the Quarter, bar-tending, waitressing, singing badly and playing banjo worse for street change so they could keep telling themselves they were in show business, dealing a little this and that on the side maybe, Marylou Beaudreau didn't ask and they didn't tell.

She had been part of the act since she was old enough to walk and pass a hat, cheaper than hiring a monkey, and cuter anyway, but attempts to incorporate her into the musical performance itself proved futile, since she displayed even less musical talent than they did.

Marylou had partaken of the herb in the spaghetti sauce or brownies, the occasional mushroom in the tea on special occasions, for as long as she could remember, didn't every momma's child, wasn't it always around the house, though being righteously anti-tobacco in the old hippie tradition, her parents wouldn't let her actually smoke anything, of course.

But one magic evening, when Marylou was approaching her tenth birthday and the cuteness was wearing off, the three of them ventured to Jackson Square to do the act, which as usual was drawing more mosquitoes than coins tossed into the kid's hat, when an old man black man in tails and top hat stopped for a moment to listen.

A dude in top hat and tails wasn't exactly outre in these environs, and of course he would be carrying an ivory-headed cane, though the dreadlocks didn't seem to quite match, and what he was smoking looked like a fancy cigar all right, but the smoke smelled more like the herb, and there was something in his eyes that instantly captured Marylou's total attention with a melange of fascination and fear that were she a year or two older would have been hypnotically sexual, and even then....

"You and me are gonna be like husband and wife," he told her. "Erzuli wants a ticket to ride, and the horse she's betting on is gonna be you. You're gonna be a one-trick pony, chile, but it's gonna be the best trick there is."

And Marylou found herself opening her mouth to receive the cigar or spliff or

whatever it was between her lips, and taking a long drag before Papa indignantly yanked it out, and--

--and the next thing she remembered was dancing like a fiend on fire, Moma no longer singing but banging out the same intoxicating drum-beat on a garbage can as Papa was on the body of his banjo.

How long it lasted, she never knew, because she never was exactly there, she had no idea what she was doing, she had never danced like this before or even imagined it, and she wasn't exactly dancing now, something or someone else was dancing her body, like a hand up a puppet. But she wasn't exactly not there either, whatever it was told her to just stop thinking so they could enjoy the ride together, we got the power, ain't it a gas!

The only main measurement afterward was of more coins in the hat than had ever been there before. The magical performance proved to be repeatable and likewise the enhanced proceeds but not reliably. Sometimes it happened, sometimes it didn't, giving the kid a drag on a drag on a spliff or a puff on a cigar didn't seem to matter, and Mr. Top Hat and Tails never showed up again.

Marylou's parents made out off the magic but never did understand what was happening, and Marylou herself didn't achieve enlightenment until as a young teenager she was approached after such a performance by a black guy maybe in his twenties, dapper in a vaguely goth rock style, who asked her the identity of the loa who had been riding her.

When she told him she had no idea what he was talking about, he told her she had a lot to learn, and he was willing to teach her, and what with his good looks, his vulpine smile, and her being a reluctant virgin at the time, she decided to take him up on what she

thought was it.

But it wasn't.

Instead they ended up in a cellar in Treme where a voodoo ceremony was being held. Like anyone in New Orleans or any tourist even planning a trip there, Marylou knew something about voodoo or thought she did, at least the Disney version.

An ancient religion brought over by slaves from Africa. Nothing to do with Jesus or Mohammed or Moses and their singular honkie God. Spirits, whole carload lots of them, with powers of this or that, and it could get pretty specific, and they didn't care about sin all that much, in fact they mostly like to boogie, and if you did the ceremonies right and were lucky, you might be able to ask for their assistance and get it, though maybe not always exactly as you had intended.

What she learned at her first voodoo ceremony when she saw both men and women dancing under the influence was that that was exactly what had been happening to her. When she inquired more deeply of those in the know she was told that she was one of the lucky few chosen as horse by a loa without having to even ask. And not some minor leaguer either.

From the story she told, it was plain to them that the apparition in Top Hat and Tails was Papa Legba himself, sort of ringmaster of the supernatural krew, and he had told her by name that the loa who had chosen her was his own sometime consort, Erzuli.

Erzuli was one powerful loa, indeed didn't she have Papa Legba himself by the balls when she wanted to, she was the most powerful female spirit, meaning among any number of other things, the power of the female spirit itself--muse and seductrice, nurturing and ambitious, earthmother and vamp, loved and admired, but too complex and

capricious to be entirely trusted.

Upon this inner level of understanding, Marylou was far from being satisfied to be ridden by Erzuli, she wanted to be Erzuli, what red-blooded American girl wouldn't, or at least be there with Erzuli as herself to enjoy the experience and the memories. This took some years and effort to attain. Ceremonies and cigars and brandy didn't achieve anything.

It finally took white man's magic to do the trick.

Her parents were of mixed mind about her quest. Papa would have no truck with this voodoo stuff, but Moma, being a moma, had a much less jaundiced attitude to her daughter's determination to strike some sort of karmic deal with Erzuli, and it was she who suggested the acid.

So Marylou dropped 500 mikes in her next attempted seance with the loa. And when she started to peak she found herself talking to herself inside her own head although it began as a one-way conversation, calling upon Erzuli, wheedling, expressing her thanks and ire interchangeably, masturbating, practicing Moma's yogic breathing, doing everything she could think of to call this spirit from the vasty deep.

When she pricked her finger with a needle and lapped up a few drops of her own blood, it finally answered. Erzuli entered her body, and began dancing her around, but with Marylou still fully conscious inside her acid-soaked brain. It was like dancing with the voice of her sister spirit in the dark.

About time! she told her rider.

Your time, Erzuli told her, no way we could reveal your destiny to the girl you were, sister, you had to be ready to accept being the willing steed to where we're gonna

ride, you had to understand at least a little, 'cause we're going to have to have your willing help to get this done.

New Orleans, the Delta, and environs around them, were the lands most beloved of the loas in America, Erzuli told her, not that she had to, and they were in dire straights, not that she had to tell Marylou that either, for by this time people were beginning to realize that the Hurricane Season was becoming permanent. There was nothing else for it, so she and Papa Legba had decided they must lead the loas out of the closet and save the people.

We're gonna emerge from the shadows into the kleig lights of show business, Erzuli told her, we're gonna ride you there, it's a noble mission as such things go, but sister, we are all gonna enjoy it, we are gonna be stars! We are gonna be on television!

From there to Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew, syndicated live on various secondary channels on most cable hookups in Louisiana, local UHF broadcast stations throughout the South, and streamed on its own website for devotees in the rest of the universe, was a series of relatively easy, relatively small steps, with one loa or another riding Marylou through them as the task required.

There seemed to be an endless pantheon of them, some like Erzuli and Papa Legba major players, others, like Bade, Agwe, Dumballah, specializing in various forms of luck, or knowledge, or performance, and not very reliable, and the hint of even more minor spirits back there below the line in the shadows to call upon as needed.

Not so different from the command structure of a television production company or outlet, making it easy for the loas to interface with same in riding Marylou up the ladder to the current distribution level of Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew. In

that respect, the magic of show biz, major and minor, was not that far removed from voodoo.

Some unbooked, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable appearances in minor talk show audiences by Marylou ridden by Erzuli or one of the supernatural krew, and they were booking her on the same sort of stuff as an unpaid guest. From there to her own show was simply a matter of magical performances coalescing into the format of Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew and riding that onto the kind of second level television that featured local and regional televangelists and chef shows, umpteenth runs of series that were famous a long long time ago, and pitchmen for kitchen tools, lawn furniture, and snake-oil cures. From that to the current somewhat more elevated distribution in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast was simply a matter of outlets reading the rising ratings and jumping aboard.

Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew was a voodoo reality show and as such it had a major fan base in the Big Easy which even sponsored its own float in a Mardi Gras krew, excellent penetration in the Delta and Cajun country, dwindling slowly as it proceeded up the Mississippi past Baton Rouge, regarded as the work of Satan in upstate Bible Belt Country, where there was nevertheless a Born Again audience who couldn't resist tuning in for a guilt-ridden peek at what Jesus was saving them from.

The set was nothing in particular and the show was shot around and about where an auditorium could be rented cheaply, like a medicine show without a tent and small caravan of SUVs in lieu of a snake-oil pitchman's pulpit wagon. Members of the audience shouted, costumed themselves, danced, and otherwise competed to be granted the attention of Mama Legba.

The winners were summoned forth to tell their tales of woe or disease or economic desperation or love or dreams and scams they longed to actualize and implored Mama Legba to intercede with a loa on their behalf.

Sometimes she did, and sometimes she didn't, since the show was only an hour long, and she had to pick and choose, or rather at least at first, Erzuli did, and sometimes the voodoo djins Marylou found herself being rode by granted their wishes or at least promised to, but other times gave the supplicants what the loas themselves believed they deserved, which, while usually funny, had a tendency to get sardonic at best and sinister at worst.

But always entertaining to a certain widely appreciative yahoo taste one way or the other, as Marylou Beaudreau was subsumed into and ridden by an unpredictable pantheon of dancing, chanting, evangelical, boastful, helpful or foul-mouthed loas, who spoke and sang in a vast variety of octaves and voices, though at least always in some dialect of English.

It was like a Guinness Book of Records case of split personalities accessed by the ghosts of vaudeville, African mythologies, Cajun folklore, Hollywood spooks and phantoms, some of them who did appear to be able to work voodoo magic in the real world, at least according to unpaid testimonials brought on stage or via tv phone in the last five minutes. Whether it was the real deal or just a truly fabulous act was an endless subject of dispute in local weeklies and supermarket tabloids, which did not exactly hurt the ratings or the contributions that were solicited in lieu of paying commercials.

It was Erzuli's and apparently Papa Legba's diktat that the star of the show be called Mama Legba, Papa Legba's wife, the brains behind Pa, and/or who had him by the

balls when she felt like it, as various versions of her opening rap had it, but for Marylou Beaudreau to actually become the air personality Mama Legba, for the ridden and the rider to share the consciousness of the show biz avatar, for the horse and rider to become a spiritual centaur for the duration was another matter.

Erzuli rode her as Mama Legba during the intros and extros and the selection process. Marylou had no say in who Mama Legba chose to favor or what she said, but at least Erzuli allowed her to stick around inside her own head to enjoy or not Mama Legba's fun and games as the case might be. But Erzuli could and did drop whatever other loa she wanted to into the saddle, and whenever she did, Marylou was left with no memory of who had mounted her or what had happened before the loa dismounted. And while this discombobulation before the camera made for good television, it was too often uncomfortably at her expense.

Once the show was well-established, therefore, Marylou threatened to go on strike, not to show up for the broadcast unless she were allowed to at least become Mama Legba to the extent of at least having some kind of input into Mama Legba's lines and moves, if not script control, then at least some leeway in ad-libbing this and that herself.

Erzuli was no loa to be bullied, indeed quite capable of bullying most other members of the supernatural krew and enjoying it, as many of them could testify, and as far as she was concerned, this was a hollow threat, since Marylou could always be turned into a permanent horse to be ridden wherever she or whoever else pleased and with her obstreperous consciousness permanently erased if she tried it.

But Papa Legba, loa of the crossroads, of destiny and fortune, and therefore in a certain modern way of show biz too, after all, chose for once to intervene, perhaps just to

show who really wore the pants when he felt like it, perhaps because by his lights it would improve the act if Erzuli and Marylou did an Abbot and Costello, a Smothers Brothers, a George and Gracie, a Punch and Judy act inside the singular character puppet of Mama Legba.

So the personal history and flesh and blood rap of Mama Legba became that of Marylou Beaudreau and was granted a certain amount of air time, though how much was always a subject of much dispute, while it was always Erzuli who took over when it was time to summon the spirits from the vasty deep.

It made for an air personality that Moma and/or Papa could easily enough have gained power of attorney over without even greasing the judge had they cared to, but Marylou ladled out their fair share of the proceeds, so they never did.

The Mama Legba show went on.

And if the sisterly collaboration between Marylou and Erzuli never ceased to be a prickly sibling rivalry between junior and senior, it worked, however contentiously, they were still in Show Business.

#

Well even Sergeant. Slaughter wasn't enough of a hardcase to expect Luke to serve a final eviction notice on himself, evict himself by force if necessary, and arrest himself for resisting arrest if he resisted, nor would any patrolman in the precinct carry out such an order on a brother cop if the Sergeant were crazy enough to try and give it himself.

So it went up to the Lieutenant, who kicked up to the Captain. The Captain tried to cover his ass by asking for volunteers which he knew would not be forthcoming before

he kicked it up to a political level, and let the wise guys downtown who created this mess deal with it.

But by that time the word was out in the local cop bars and spreading through similar saloons throughout New Orleans and Luella's family connections in the force were making themselves known, and hundreds of other cops in stages of foreclosure were encouraged to confess that they were in similar dire straights themselves, or knew they were about to be, and it became a political issue in the extended police family and its groupies and supporters in the press.

While the politicians downtown in the mayor's office and environs were kicking the gong and grease around trying to avoid being the one caught having to order the police to arrest each other, the Police Benevolent Association, not quite a union, and not quite not a union if push came to economic shrug, convened a meeting.

Patrolman Luke Martin by this time had become the poster boy for the issue within the ranks, where being ordered to evict yourself was both an ultimate outrage and a source of unprintable and unbroadcastable dirty jokes, and with the press, where they were repeated in PG versions. So Luke had already had cameras and mikes shoved in his face, and it wasn't exactly a surprise when was called up to introduce the motion, and he didn't even have to get loaded to be able to stand up there and deliver it without shitting in his dress uniform pants.

The motion had been written for him, but after he read it, he was encouraged to do his own thing, and left to his own devices.

"I move that no officer of any rank in the New Orleans Police Department serve or enforce any eviction notice on any officer of any rank in the New Orleans Police

Department, issue any order to do so, or take any punitive action against any officer of any rank in the New Orleans Police Department for refusing to obey any such order from any source whatever.”

The call for seconds was greeted by a unanimous uproar, rhythmic pounding of feet, that became a steady clapping for a vote in the manner of a baseball crowd clapping for a grand slam with the bases loaded.

Standing up there with it raging all around him and through him, even though Luke had answered a few questions here and there to open mikes, he felt something had never even imagined, something like an intoxication rolling over him and through him.

Like a high? Shit, it was a high, and there wasn't anything like this being peddled on the down and dirty streets or the high class coke dens either, or so he imagined.

He was more alive and righteously pissed off than he had ever been in his life, and this was his moment in the spotlight.

“I been ordered to evict myself from the house I bought on bullshit credit and a cop's patrolman's salary with a mortgage contract said all I had do do was pay 6% of what I owed a month, and half of that would go to pay off the down payment. Seemed like they were giving it away, right, like the first hit from a street dealer, y'all know just what I mean, doncha? Sound familiar to you guys, now don't it?”

Well when this Great Deflation shit hit the fan--who the fuck knows who's fan it was or who tossed us into it--I found that 6 percent a month was more than my whole new salary, I couldn't keep up the monthlies even if I starved my family to death.

So I say up their asses, whoever, and however, and wherever, or whatever they are, who want to dump all of us out of our houses and into the shit laughing all the way

to the banks they own themselves! I say there ain't nothing lower crawling in the Mississippi mud than these motherfucking bloodsuckers, y'all know just what I mean, now doncha, except a cop who would arrest another brother for being one of their victims!

So I say that anyone here who votes otherwise should get what he deserves right, here, right now, and y'all know just what I mean by that, now doncha!"

The motion passed unanimously.

#

The so-called Police Strike wasn't really a strike at all until the cops turned up at Lafitte's Landing to serve the final foreclosure and eviction notice that I had been expecting for a couple of weeks, so at least I can claim credit for turning what started as no more than the police refusing to evict each other from their homes into a popular political issue, admittedly to save my own ass.

If you were a cop, no cop would evict you, if you weren't, tough titty, they were still throwing everyone else being foreclosed on out into the street. This was beginning to not sit too well with John Q. Sucker, or with the yellower or pinker shade of the local press, and the New Orleans police, whose undeclared motto had always been get along with us and we get along with you and therefore generally not unpopular even with the less than pure as the driven snow citizenry of the Big Easy, were not exactly gaining public support for their selfish little "strike."

Though of course the banks and even more shysterly shady financial entities who were demanding that the mayor, or the governor, or somebody do something to collect their legal property were about as popular as a Holy Roller preacher in a whorehouse.

So for the mayor to ask the governor to send in the State Police to do their dirty work even if they did own his soul would have been political suicide. The governor, a Republican likewise in thrall to local krew of the Lizards of Wall Street, wasn't running for re-election and might have done it if asked, but he was the lamest of ducks now towards the end of this election year, and was planning to run for the next available Senate seat.

Now ol' JB had never been involved in party politics, Democratic and Republican hacks got free fucks in my whorehouse and free drinks in my bar within reason as insurance payment on the necessary favors when it came to liquor licenses, non-enforcement of closing times, whorehouse protection, and so forth, but that's as deep as it got until I got into shit that these so-called political connections couldn't or wouldn't get me out of, namely the immanent loss of my saloon and my bordello, the very establishments that had been laying the freebies on these ingrate bastards all this years.

Wouldn't you have been pissed off? Wouldn't you have wanted to get even?

Wouldn't have you considered it not only voodoo justice but a pure hoot to save your own enlightened self-interest doing it?

LaFitte's Landing was no cop bar, but as a Bourbon Street establishment, the local cops enjoyed free hospitality in and out of uniform, only good public relations, some of the regulars were cops, and some of the cops were regulars, an ideal situation for a saloon's ambiance. So I got tipped off as to exactly when the final foreclosure and eviction notice was going to be served.

I had been doing a lot of thinking about his beforehand, as you might have imagined, and I had come up with a plan, a Hail Mary maybe, but I didn't have a better

idea, and anyway, I owed my friendly local policemen for the tip off, now didn't I.

It can get to be a pain and a little expensive because reporters, especially second and third grade ones, can drink like fish or state legislators as long as it's free, but it's a useful expense to keep little items about your Bourbon Street tourist attraction in the local media, and it's for sure cheaper than buying advertising which you can't afford anyway.

So I made a few easy phone calls that I hoped would be good for all three ballclubs, those who go along, get along, right. I promised the police, that, in return for tipping me off on the impending eviction, I would arrange to get it some press coverage if they would assign their poster boy, Patrolman Luke Martin, to do the dirty work. This might have been an offer the police couldn't understand, but it was certainly one they had no reason to refuse, and the half a dozen print guys and the single video outlet I tipped off to be there considered it quite a favor.

Nor did they do much more than the pro forma bitching and moaning after being set up outside LaFitte's Landing for over an hour waiting for the squad car to arrive when I told them they would have to stay outside a bit longer while Patrolman Martin and I discussed how we were going to play their primo photo op over as many beers as necessary inside.

This I told them as Martin was descending from the squad car leaving the driver inside without him getting a word in edgewise before I ushered him inside the bar which had been cleared for the occasion.

This was not surprising, I had done my homework on this guy, wouldn't you, not just the coverage but the police scuttlebutt, I knew his life story, I knew how he had made his mark pacifying a piece of the Alligator Swamp and keeping the animals under his

control out of the Quarter, and it was better than even money that this was a dude I could deal with.

Especially with a sweetheart deal like this.

Look, I told him, wasting no time, I'm gonna tell you why you're not gonna evict me when we walk out of here. You're not going to do it because not doing it will get you promoted to Sergeant with no sweat at all, maybe even Lieutenant.

Martin just sipped at his beer, and gave me a nod and a look like a player at five card draw calling for another three cards, so I laid them out for him.

So I dealt it for him. Sooner or later, the Lizards behind the Great Deflation were gonna pump air back into the dollar, everyone knew that because that was the nature of the great scam, at which point the police, like everyone else, are going to need great big pay raises. And unlike not everyone else, they were going to need popular public support.

Protecting only themselves from eviction while doing the evil bidding of the bloodsucking bankers when it came to kicking ordinary citizens out into the street or the bayou was an I'm all right jack attitude not gaining the police favor and if it ever came to forceful busts, which sooner or later it had to, the popularity of the police would end up at the bottom of the Swamp.

"Tell me about it," was all that Martin finally said, giving me the cold knowing look of one of the alligators thereof that he had once been.

"I was about to," I said, and I did.

If the police publicly declared that they would not longer evict anyone in the Big Easy to serve the economic masters of the bought politicians, they would become the

heroes of the city faster than you could could repeat the Kingfish's tried and true political platform, "Soak the Fat Cats and Spread It Out Thin."

"All you gotta do, my son, is walk out there with me and declare it," I told Patrolman Martin.

"I don't have the authority to do anything like that, and you know it, my man, you gotta know that, or you gotta be crazy."

"Like a fox, Luke," I told him. "You don't need any authority, 'cause you got the power! You're gonna be the hero of the people, and the hero of your brother officers as soon as you say it, and probably for the duration of this fiasco, however long that may be. The saviors of the little guy giving the finger to the Fat Cats. Nobody ever lost an election in Louisiana running on that one! And no cop is about to contradict you and his own self-interest. And every local politician is going to be so freaked out that you might run against them that if you play your cards right they'll see to it that you make Lieutenant to keep you from doing it. It's a royal flush in spades, kiddo, a hand that can't be beaten."

It seemed to be pretty clear from the look on his face that the Patrolman Luke Martin that was and the Lieutenant Luke Martin to be saw the Light and the Way immediately, but he wasn't yet above calling for a free shot of whiskey over which to pretend to be considering it before shaking on it and leading me outside to face the salivating press.

"Screw this shit!" he declared, tearing my eviction notice up into confetti and tossing it at the camera like a Mardi Gras throw. "Screw you know just who we mean screwing us all out of our homes and our shops and our businesses to make out by being

as bad as bad gets and trying to turn your police force into their fuckin' rentacop pigs!"

And he actually broke into a bar or two of some old punk song that said it all for him:

"No, you're not gonna make us, no we're not gonna take it, no we're not gonna do it any more!"

Okay, Huey Long he wasn't, but the kid was natural enough to deliver his message loud and clear enough to have done the Kingfish proud, not to mention saving the ass of yours truly.

"My full name is Martin Luther Martin and for the first time since I crawled my way up out of the Alligator Swamp I'm proud of all of it! I'm proud to be a citizen of this poor city standing up here with you! I'm proud to be standing here telling you that your police are on your side! I'm proud to be proud to be Patrolman Martin Luther Martin! Power to y'all! Power to y'all from your Police! Power to the People! Power to the People's Police!"

#

Luke had made the New Orleans Police the heroes of the city and himself their mouthpiece as appointed by the press, but the Democratic mayor, who was under heavy pressure to demand that the lame duck Republican governor send in the State Police to break what was now being called the Police Strike and enforce the eviction notices, made it clear to the Police Commissioner that he had better damn well make sure Martin stayed on script, whatever that was going to be when his spin doctors figured it out.

So they made Luke Sergeant, and they promised Lieutenant after the gubernatorial election no matter who won, but only if he did his assigned duties and obeyed orders to

the letter, and they transferred him to public relations downtown, where his assigned duties were to sit behind a desk doing nothing, and his orders were to keep his big mouth shut unless and until official words were put into it..

While this might be boring, it was the softest duty Luke had ever had or even imagined, being paid for doing nothing, and with a raise too and another one if he played ball, and it sure beat chasing down perps, handing out traffic tickets, and dealing with crazed junkies, meth heads, and drunks who just might be packing, or worse still being called to deal with domestic violence.

Those who go along, get along, and Sergeant Martin Luther Martin was getting along just fine, Lieutenant Martin Luther Martin was gonna do even better, and going along by lazing around listening to music, reading newspapers and magazines, watching TV on his phone screen and sneaking sips of beer from the six pack in his desk drawer and the occasional doobie in the alley, did not exactly seem a hard way to get along.

At first.

But the election campaign was heating up, and it looked like for the first time in decades, it was going to be decided by what happened in New Orleans. The Big Easy was no longer so big a percentage of a statewide vote, even counting the Delta and the Cajun country around Lafayette or the usual cemetery vote, Shreveport alone had as many voters, and under normal circumstances, the upstate vote would seal the deal.

However these were hardly normal circumstances.

The New Orleans Police were in open revolt against the hated banks and mortgage sharks with the enthusiastic support of the voters, and that could hardly fail to be the dominant issue.

Harlan W. Brown, the Republican candidate for governor, was a state senator from born again redneck country, and was running against ungodly, chaotic, money-sucking, satanic New Orleans and French-speaking un-American Cajuns, and would've put on a sheet and a pillowcase mask if he didn't have the Klan vote already locked up.

He made it clear that when he was elected, the first thing he would do would be to send in the State Police to restore law and order to the godless atheistic Alligator Swamp, which as far as he was concerned, was anything further down the Mississippi than Baton Rouge, and maybe the state capital too.

Elvis Gleason Montrose, the Democratic candidate, was likewise a state senator, but from New Orleans, and his chances depended on turning out an even more overwhelming Democratic vote out of New Orleans than usual, but even that wouldn't be a winning hand, unless he could do it without alienating more upstate redneck vote than usual.

Montrose is fucked, was how it was put to Luke. If he supports the Police Strike, he fucks himself upstate, and if he doesn't, he fucks himself here.

What's all this bullshit got to do with me? Luke asked the Captain of Public Relations not unreasonably. He may have been reading newspapers and watching more news out of sheer boredom, but this kind of stuff he tuned out on the way to the strike and sports coverage.

Either way, he was told, Brown gets elected governor, and the New Orleans Police Department is going to be fucked even worse if he does. We can't let that happen. But the police can't officially support a candidate, and even if we could, as far as upstate is concerned, that would make Montrose the candidate of what Brown is already calling a

coup by the most corrupt police force this side of hell.

There's only one hope, it's not much of a hope, but it's all there is, and it's you, Sergeant. Martin. This can't be an official order, but your ass will be back in the Alligator Swamp if you don't obey it anyway, Martin. You've got to personally campaign against Harlan W. Brown, but speaking just as a cop with his house in foreclosure, as the cop who started the strike we all know and love, but not for the New Orleans Police Department.

Say what?

Against Brown, not for Montrose, you damn well better not even mention Montrose's name, and he's not gonna mention yours, Martin, you're his hatchetman. He mushmouths his position on the strike as best he can, you pin the Wall Street Lizard tail on the Republican elephant. If it doesn't work, we're all screwed anyway, but if it does, you get jumped directly to Captain, and that's a promise directly from the mayor and Montrose himself, they'd even put their nuts in your hands by putting it on blackmail paper, if you demanded it.

Hey look, maybe I started the strike, maybe I talked about it when I got a mike shoved in my face, seeing as how I'm a cop, and the real pigs want to take my house away from me, and this motherfucker Brown is in their pocket, Luke insisted, but I can hardly even understand what the rest of all this shit even means.

Don't worry, he was told, you'll be scripted.

I dunno....

Talk it over with your wife, he was told. Sleep on it. Then tomorrow you decide whether you want to do the right thing and make out big time or pussy out on your

brothers and the citizens of New Orleans and have a lifetime career, however long that may be under the circumstances, as a Patrolman in the Alligator Swamp.

Well anyone with the street smarts of your average sewer rat got that much, and so did Luke, if not with any great enthusiasm, but Luella just about had an orgasm. Captain's only the beginning if this guy Montrose gets elected, and no matter what happens, we keep our house! You could even end up elected to the state legislature some day!

Luke could even see it going that far.

But....

But what do I know about voting on anything in the state legislature? he asked her.

Are you for real, babe? Everyone knows Louisiana has the best legislature money can buy. All you gotta know is who's ladling out your bowl of the gumbo and how to vote to keep it coming.

#

Louisiana was a state where one governor had enhanced his popularity by whipping it out and pissing on the legislature and ending up still governor while in the bughouse and another had promised never to gamble in Vegas again if they legalized casino gambling here, and now we had a gubernatorial election during which a popular rebellion by the New Orleans police was the main issue, which the Republican candidate was threatening to end by force if necessary, and the Democratic candidate, rope-a-doped into a corner, couldn't even afford to take a position on.

Not crazy enough for you, you say you want more political fun and games for

your paperbag full of taxpayers' dollars? Hey, no problem in the Big Easy! How about the Montrose campaign and the New Orleans police using the hero of the Police Strike to call Harlan W. Brown everything from a racist redneck son of a bitch to a signed, sealed, and delivered house nigger of the bloodsucking banker lizards what sold Louisiana and everyone in it down the Mississipp, all of which everyone knew was true, none of which the Democratic candidate could afford to say himself in public?

Crazy?

Yeah, like a fox in this crazy state.

With the Hurricane Season more or less over, and what tourist trade there was left outside of Mardi Gras season in February trickling back into the Quarter, and the election a little more than a couple of months away, the polls showed that it was working.

Montrose wasn't just in the lead, he was starting to pull away going into the stretch.

Luke Martin was gonna raise more new Democratic votes out of the Alligator Swamp than even Barack Obama had, and the sort of dryland New Orleans yuppies who normally would tend to vote Republican for the usual asshole reasons were going to vote Democrat in record numbers to support the Police Strike that was keeping a lot of them in their houses too.

Maybe the Brown campaign had had that figured, maybe they could've survived it on the usual upstate redneck vote, but Louisiana politicians in general averaged about 100 watts of brightness, Louisiana Republicans maybe 75, and what they forgot to figure on was that a lot of those upstate rednecks they were counting on had homes and farmland about to be gobbled up by the Great Mortgage Scam too. A few local police departments up there were also starting to refuse to deal with evictions, and candidates for local

offices, and not just Democrats, couldn't support Brown if they wanted to win their paychecks and the paper bags that went with them.

Montrose was going to win, maybe even by a landslide if the Republicans didn't pull off some major political voodoo, and even the dirtiest of the usual dirty tricks weren't going to do it. And they sort of did, if not with the results they intended, or anyone could have predicted.

Including yours truly. Who could have seen it coming? It seemed like such a good Big Easy idea when he pitched it to us. And nothing to do with the election. We being the sort of unofficial French Quarter Chamber of Commerce whose main function was to get together now and again in one of our bars or restaurants to get a bit potted toasting the glory days of yore and bitch and moan to each other about how lousy the latter-day tourist trade had become in fallen New Orleans. He being Charlie Devereau.

Charlie was one of us. Charlie owned four restaurants, none of them what the French would've given a star, but all of them famous from long ago as far away as Paris and so running in the black even now. Everyone knew that Charlie voted Republican, you could tell that from his net worth, but so what, he wasn't the only one of us, we were all at least a little drunk, yours truly admittedly maybe a bit more than that when he laid it on us, and it seemed so cool, so...New Orleans, that I was among the guys that burst out laughing, poured myself another glass, and toasted it.

Let's get Mama Legba to run for governor, she can't win, but who cares? was how the weasel put it. The Voodoo Candidate will draw free national and international press coverage like horseshit draws flies, TV outlets all over the world will gobble up Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew like what tourists we got gobble up my File Gumbo

and Oysters Bienville, and all of it will be enough primo pr for exotic New Orleans to make ‘em forget about hurricanes and Alligator Swamps and have ‘em flockin’ back to the Voodoo Capital of the World like, uh, like ants to a puddle of blackstrap molasses.

But how you plan on getting her to do it? someone demanded skeptically.

Ol’ JB got it immediately, or thought I did. You’d need to do more than take off your shoes so you could use your fingers and toes to count how many local TV personalities in the US of A had used their shows to run for office, so why wouldn’t one use running for office to get her local show to go national or even bigger if someone just put the idea in her head? Especially when she didn’t have to worry about winning.

When I put it to the guys that way, Charlie put it to me his way.

“You’re the guy who bullshitted Luke Martin into stepping front and center, now ain’t you, JB? So you’re the guy to go sell this to Mama Legba, no sweat, right, about as hard as, uh, peddling pussy to a shipload of horny sailors. And you’re an expert at that, now ain’tcha?”

Charlie Devereau, the bastard, did have a way with words, now didn’t he? I swallowed it like uh, a big-mouthed bass taking the tackle baited with a nice fresh little crawdad, hook, line, and sinker. Wouldn’t you?

#

Jean-Baptiste LaFitte had never had anything to do with Erzuli, Papa Legba, or any other of the Supernatural Krew, they never rode anyone who didn’t ask for it one way or another, certainly no one who didn’t even credit their existence, and so none of the loas that hovered in, around, under, and about the consciousness of Marylou Beaudreau had ever had any truck with him.

But in her previous more lowly incarnation as a street busker who was alternately shooed away from outside his saloon or welcomed to draw a crowd there according to whim, she, like every street character in the Quarter was well familiar with him, since, after all, he was more or less one himself. Besides which, Marylou had more or less made a deal through Erzuli with the loas that helped both ball clubs, which was that Mama Legba was their airtime show horse, but they let Marylou Beaudreau ride her as her pony most of the rest of the time unless called upon.

So it had been Marylou speaking to JB Lafitte through Mama Legba with Erzuli hanging back when she answered his supplication for an “audience” on a matter that he teasingly told her would make her a lot richer and a lot more famous. What former street entertainer who had been lorded over by his favor or lack thereof could resist a bended-knee offer on his part like this?

So she dressed up in fancy TV costume and granted him his audience reclining on a divan in the reception parlor of her Garden Quarter digs, like a voodoo goddess on her mystical throne, complete with incense, altar, velvet curtains, and objets de magie noir.

For all that it impressed Lafitte, she could have been wearing cut-off jeans and a ratty New Orleans Saints T-shirt and seated on a pickle-barrel. She felt Erzuli’s ire at his down and dirty indifference, but somehow it made Marylou feel almost affectionate towards his this don’t-impress me jack-shit attitude, birds of a feather in the long ago, flocking together in the catbird seat, as he got down to show biz monkey business straight from the git-go.

LaFitte represented a cabal of saloon owners, nightclub owners, restaurateurs, upscale bordello impresarios, and the grayer like, economically dependant on the Quarter

in particular and New Orleans in general to attract their life's blood tourist trade beyond the days of Mardi Gras, which, thanks to Katrina, the Hurricane Season, and the odious reputation of the Alligator Swamp, they were becoming less and less capable of doing, year after year.

The deal was that they wanted Mama Legba to run for governor, using the show and nothing else. The format wouldn't have to change hardly at all. People in the audience would recite their woes, maybe some of them could be ringers to put a little promotion for New Orleans as a tourist destination spin on it, and beg the loas to intercede. Whether they did or not didn't matter.

What would matter was that the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans would be running for Governor of Louisiana. What would matter would be that every town in the state big enough to support a television outlet of any kind would pick up Mama Legba and her Supernatural Krew. Networks would bid for the rights to take the show national. International! World-wide! Merchandising tie-ins! Mama Legba as the Voodoo Oprah!

"What's in it for you guys?" Marylou Beaudreau asked skeptically streetwise through Mama Legba.

What do you think, Lafitte told her in like mode, the same thing, of course. A shitload of worldwide snakeoil hype for the Voodoo candidate for governor. For the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans. For New Orleans as a tourist destination! The shot in the arm all our businesses so sorely need!

Marylou was all for it, what one-time street-busker or talk-show guest rat wouldn't have loved the idea, nothing to lose, a world wide audience to gain, and she would have said so immediately, but Erzuli took over, and Mama Legba spoke in quite

another voice, a commanding voice, a loa's voice, that had JB Lafitte doing an uncomfortable take.

“What is your offering?”

“What's my offering, lady? I just made you an offering you can't refuse. A freebie! And we're not asking for anything in return.”

“You wish enlistment in your cause. For that, an offering is required of you, a token if nothing else.”

“Okay, like a Mardi Gras float, you want our krew to toss you a golden coconut, we'll pay for the petition campaign to get you on the ballot, we'll put up Mama Legba posters in our establishments, why not, you want handbills, sure, after all it's not like we have to buy your TV time.”

Marylou could feel Erzuli wanting Mama Legba to do a little loa cocktease for the fun of it, but she never got the chance, because Marylou then felt something she had never quite felt before, the power of Papa Legba, loa of the crossroads, of destiny, taking over completely, causing Mama Legba to grin like the Cheshire Cat ate the canary, and speak in the self-satisfied trickster voice of Brer Rabbit having just been launched back into his favorite briar patch.

“Ya talked me into it, wise guy,” that voice told J.B. Lafitte, as Mama Legba lifted Papa Legba's phantom stove-pipe chapeau off her brow and tossed it to him, “our hat's in the ring!”

#

Did I really believe in this voodoo stuff? Hard to say, I suppose it depends on when you asked me, and what you might mean by believe. Everybody in New Orleans,

in the Delta, as far east as Lafayette, as far north as Baton Rouge, had always known that there was a long voodoo tradition in southern Louisiana, could hear it in the music, smell it in the air, knew this and that about chicken sacrifices and dancing trance ceremonies, and Mama Legba and Her Supranational Krew had introduced the loas as regional pop cult air personalities.

But if you ask ol' JB whether I believed that what took over Marylou Beaudreau on television was the real mystical deal, or that split personality business the shrinks talk about, or just some really good acting, that's when the question of when you asked me comes in.

I was never a fan of the show, I don't believe in being a fan of anything, but as someone trading on the Big Easy's dwindling magically romantic atmosphere, I had a professional self-interest in catching it from time to time. Seemed like good for the tourist trade was all I cared about at the time, was it real or was it acting Memorex concerned me not at all.

But confronting it in the flesh two feet in front of me, all three of them, was another matter. When Marylou Beaudreau was playing Mama Legba, she wasn't all that spooky, she wasn't the greatest actress in the world, but she was sane enough to know a winning hand when it was dealt to her, so it was hard to believe she was either a schizo or that she was playing those...those two other spooks that took over the meeting, and loas is as a good a name as any for whatever was speaking to me through Mama Legba.

And I gotta admit, that according to the polls, 68% percent of the people who heard Papa Legba repeat the performance on television were stupid enough to believe it, and I at least began to believe it too.

Marylou Beaudreau usually stayed in Mama Legba's catbird seat through the introduction, and the call for sad stories from the studio audience, and none of the whining stories they told had ever seemed to be scripted, and Marylou would stick around till Mama Legba's choice of who would get to meet their fairy godmother loa was made.

But this time, the audience was obviously full of ringers because many of the tales of woe they told all had the same knife edge to them, and it was slashing right across the political belly button of Harlan W. Brown; foreclosures, lost jobs, alligator attacks, hurricanes, malarial mosquitoes, the general chronic desperate straights of New Orleans and demographic environs, all laid at the feet of the Republican candidate like moldy corpses for his featly to the Wall Street Lizards and the Powers that Be.

And this time, afterwards Marylou didn't start to to pick and choose who would get to summon forth a loa to ride Mama Legba, this time Mama Legba seemed to somehow, for the first time, speak not as Marylou, not as some smart-ass loa, but as some kind of composite being, as if some deal had been made inside that head between the one called herself Erzuli and the Maryou Beaudreau who occupied the body when it was not otherwise engaged.

"We have an announcement to make," was how they put it. "We came here with slaves from Africa when all Louisiana was just one big Alligator Swamp and we've been here ever since. We've answered your calls when we felt like it if you knew how to summon us properly, you've been our faithful horses, and we haven't been the worst of riders, but we've steered clear of the weird and wonderful politics of a state that's been weirder and more wonderful than we are. But now the worst of riders are in the saddle

of the state of Louisiana and fixin' to stay there. And if we all let them, they'll pick our pockets to fill their own and turn it right back into a fetid Alligator Swamp again--"

And then there was a sudden voice change, and what emerged was male basso profundo and skat man at the same time, and there was a sudden power behind Mama Legba's face that turned it into a mask, with eyes glowing through it that was not very possible to believe were merely human.

"--and we're not gonna let them, now are we? I'm Papa Legba, and I'm running for governor of Louisiana. We all are, me, and Erzuli, and those of us who have revealed themselves on this show, and those who await their horses. Mama Legba for governor. A vote for Mama Legba is a vote for all of us. For a long time now, this whole country in general, and this great state in particular, have been laid low by what a man who became president once called 'voodoo economics.' Well that wasn't voodoo economics or voodoo politics, and it still isn't, that's not any kind of voodoo at all, it's still the same old financial snake-oil stealing your homes and your land and your jobs."

And that apparition tipped a phantom top hat with a grin for a big television audience just as it had in a private audition for me.

"We are the real thing. We are voodoo. We got the power. And we gonna use it for you, not against you, you elect Mama Legba governor of the state of Louisiana. A vote for Mama Legba is a vote for real voodoo economics and real voodoo power. I am Papa Legba, I am the guardian of cross-roads, the gatekeeper of luck and destiny, and Mama Legba is the doorway I'm opening for you to walk through. But I give you the choice. More voodoo economics and voodoo politics or the real deal? I'm not from Wall Street in New York, so I'm not saying fuck you, and I'm not from Los Angeles, so I'm

not tell you to trust us.”

And Mama Legba wristflipped a pair of phantom dice across an invisible table.

“I’m from Louisiana, and all I’m telling you is, you gotta roll them bones.”

#

If asked, and even if not, Luke Martin always would have said he didn’t give a swamp rat’s ass for politics, and even his enlistment in the campaign against Harlan W. Brown was an offer he couldn’t refuse pure and simple, like the Godfather sez.

But now Luke realized to his displeasure, and no little fright, that his very own personal future was riding on an election for Governor of Louisiana. As long as Montrose had been ahead, he had been the golden boy of the New Orleans Police Department, but if Brown won, and sent in the State Police to crush the New Orleans Police Strike, not only would the New Orleans Police Department be arrested on its own turf or otherwise screwed, Sergeant Martin Luther Martin, spokesperson for the Police Strike, would take the departmental blame that would surely flow downhill.

So like it or not, Luke now realized, he had what the mushmouths in the Montrose campaign liked to call an “enlightened self-interest,” which was just fancy words for the law of any jungle or alligator swamp, do unto others before they can do unto you.

And now this crazy Mama Led candidacy had turned the race around. Now Montrose was losing and big time. Because anyone who would vote for a tight-assed redneck tool of the Slime Lizards of Wall Street wasn’t about to vote for the Queen of Alligator Swamp New Orleans and Her Satanic Demons instead.

But not that many who had previously been ready to vote for Elvis Gleason Montrose had been going to do it because they thought he was hot shit, especially since

he would never show some balls and come out supporting the Police Strike. According to the polls, Luke himself was more popular than Montrose because he was trashing Brown, and a lot of people who were gonna vote for Montrose just because he wasn't Harlan W. Brown had now switched to Mama Legba.

Last he saw, Brown was way ahead in the polls, pulling 41%, with Montrose getting 30%, and Mama Legba 29%.

Why not? Luke himself would rather vote for Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew, which were at least promising to keep the State Police out of New Orleans, than for Brown, who wouldn't promise anything, were his own ass not on the line. But it was. Like it or not, Luke Martin had become enough of a politician to understand just by being thrown in the water and having to learn to swim, that Mama Legba, the TV Voodoo Queen daughter of Satan as far as the Born Again Brown voters and Brown himself were concerned, was going to elect Harlan W. Brown Governor of Louisiana by stealing the enough votes against him away from Elvis Gleason Montrose.

Welcome to the Alligator Swamp, Martin Luther Martin.

Welcome to the Alligator Swamp of Louisiana politics.

#

I should've seen it, shouldn't I? We all should've seen it, or anyway at least one of us should've seen that Charlie Devereau was conning us all in general and yours stupidly truly in particular into bullshitting Mama Legba into running in order to elect Harlan W. Brown.

But now all we could do was watch the polls, get drunk together, cuss Charlie, who we would've just about lynched if he show up at the Quarter Chamber of

Commerce, and piss and moan about how we had been tricked into screwing ourselves by our own righteous natural greed.

Oh yeah, the expanded national audience for the Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew New Orleans freak show was pulling in more tourists during this off season than had showed up in years, but when Brown took office and sent in the State Police, and took a hard Christian line against the Easy of the Big Easy, it would come in the build-up to Mardi Gras, and promises to enforce booze, drug, prostitution, and nudity laws, were not exactly going to pack 'em in.

But then it happened. It just seemed part of the act at the time. Who would believe such a ridiculous threat? Until....

I was in my own saloon at the time. If the joint wasn't packed, it was two-thirds full, half of whom who I made for tourists, not bad, and of course we had to have Mama Legba and Her Supernatural Krew up there on the big screen, which helped move the expensive new drink I called Voodoo Shine.

In the middle of a seance where Erzuli was doing the talking to some moma kicked off the welfare for something or other, Mama Legba suddenly shut up and froze. Didn't move a muscle. Didn't have anything you could call an expression on her face. Blank. No one and nothing at home. For a very uncomfortable moment that turned the barroom silent.

Then she began to dance one of those voodoo twitch and jerk dances she did when a loa climbed into her saddle. But this one was in slow motion, graceful in a way like a snake, like a cobra dancing to its own tune, sinister you might say, something cold-blooded coming to make a call, something that should only come out at night, something

that if it never came out would not be missed at all.

This same cold and coldly-grinning presence likewise took over the mask of Mama Legba's face as she stopped dancing, or rather came up from somewhere into it on the final flourish, turning it skeletally grinning.

"I am Baron Samedi," said a superhuman voice like that of some lordly reptile speaking with perfect pitch and diction remixed by a master sound designer going for perfect creep. "I am death and destruction when that is my mood. And that is my mood now. We are offering you our open rein in this, our home west of the great ocean, through our chosen horse among you, Mama Legba. Yet you would spurn our boon and choose instead to vote for the game as usual and deny we even exist. I am Baron Samedi. I am death and destruction. Defy me and perish. I will show you that we exist."

Earthquakes and tornadoes. Avalanches and tidal waves. Volcanoes and forest fires. One skeletal horseman of all the apocalypses riding Mama Legba, riding the airwaves. Somehow you could smell graveyards and napalm even on tv, now couldn't you?

"I now call up a hurricane such as the world has never seen. It begins now in the Gulf, and it will dance slowly up the Delta and up the river to New Orleans and drown the city to the crowns of the treetops on the highest hills. It will then raise a tsunami tidal bore that will roll up the river and swamp Baton Rouge, roaring up the river to the border, inundating the Mississippi flood plain as far as Memphis. Neither Jesus nor the Army Corps of Engineers can save you from the wrath of Baron Samedi."

#

Mama Legba had never been ridden by Baron Samedi before, Marylou had never

even felt that reptilian presence lurking within her before. She could well imagine the terror this televised apparition must be calling up, and she should have felt it all the more so because for her his existence could not be laughingly denied.

But she didn't. Erzuli and Papa Legba were there with her too, and they were amused. And so, it seemed was the entire Supernatural Krew, and even Baron Samedi, as he turned their mount over to Erzuli with a death's head grin, and a phantom bow.

"Baron Samedi is the lord of doom with a bad attitude, but am also Erzuli, loa of love, lust, mama knows best, and dancing the pants off ol' Dr. D, among a few other things," Mama Legba declared. "And this is not just his game."

"I am also Papa Legba, guardian of crossroads, the giver and taker of choices," said Mama Legba, "and I give you this choice which is also a test. We have the power to turn back this hurricane. You must show us you believe this. You must choose Mama Legba in your own hearts, we will know if you do, and if enough of you do, your prayers for salvation will be answered."

"If you don't," said Baron Samedi, "we'll know that too. And we will not be amused."

#

What a carnival act, right, like the mother of televangelists, but at least not demanding that we put one hand on our tv sets and the other in our wallets, at least not yet, a great act, maybe, better than speaking in tongues or snake-handling, vote for me or I'll kill you, but without having the cards, a ridiculous bluff not even a rube from Keokuk would fall for, let alone the voters of Louisiana, let alone the Big Easy, let alone yours truly.

Good for a graveyard chill and a barroom laugh.

But no one was laughing when next morning's weather satellite shots showed a huge fully-formed depression in the Gulf of Mexico about the size of Texas already whirling in on itself.

For twenty-four hours, the thing just sat there in the Gulf, slowly and deliberately becoming an impossible hurricane, far larger than any ever reported, its winds rotating about its eye at tornado speed, while weathergirls panicked on the air, and I tried to board up my brothel and saloon, and the roads out of the city clogged with people fleeing every which way like cockroaches from a sudden light in the basement.

Then it began to move slowly but steadily towards the mouth of the Mississippi Delta. In a straight line like a balloon on Baron Samedi's string.

#

Colonel Terrence Hathaway had more than once heard it said that, given the state of the world, it was easier to believe in the Devil than in God, and had always denounced this as blasphemy, sometimes only in his own heart, sometimes in a good Christian voice loud and clear.

Until the results came in on Election Day.

22% for the Democrat, Elvis Gleason Montrose.

35% for the Republican, Harlan W. Brown.

43% for Marylou Boudreau, aka Mama Legba.

And the Superintendent of the Louisiana State Police was about to confront this Daughter of Satan in the flesh for the first time.

Mama Legba, the Voodoo Queen Governor of the State of Louisiana.

How could God have allowed this to happen?

Or rather, his faith told Colonel Hathaway to more truly ask, why?

The how of it was, after all, easy, he had seen it on television, and so had most of the rest of the world.

While everyone else except his own well-trained troops charged with ordering the exodus fled northeast and northwest, Mama Legba had rented an airboat and planed south down the Mississippi towards the whirling wall of black cloud, alone save her brave pilot, followed at a dangerously close distance by television boats and helicopters broadcasting the event through the longest lenses they had and no doubt praying for the best, like the refugees from the storm who had access to their coverage and the still-fleeing multitudes who did not.

But to Who?

To What?

Mama Legba, or whatever satanic demon had then possessed her, had announced that she would sally forth as the “horse” of her Supernatural Krew to stop what the news was now calling the Tornado Hurricane if enough of their believers, if enough deluded fools who became their believers, would simply pray to them for salvation to persuade the loas that she had the hearts of the people of Louisiana on her side, or anyway a good enough winning plurality.

Colonel Hathaway had been Superintendent of the Louisiana State Police since he had retired with honors as a full colonel in the United States Army Military Police. He had been born on a farm in Alabama, far from the ungodly fleshpots and famous sin-sodden politics of Louisiana and particularly of the Devil’s playground, New Orleans,

and had been Born Again as a Christian at West Point, but his years as the commander of the State Police and the necessary habitation in the state had educated him in how far down the sides of the Pit people could slide and still remain standing on the Earth.

Buying and selling votes for money, proclaiming that Jesus Christ was on your side in order to win them, was no big deal in the environs with which Colonel Hathaway was now all too familiar, but requiring the voters to conduct blasphemous voodoo ceremonies as prayer to Satan and his Demons or else was a level which no Louisiana politician had previously plumbed. Save your state and your city at the price of your souls.

And a multitude of the hell-bound were doing it, the television broadcasts cut away briefly from the woman in white robes in the prow of the airboat approaching the Tornado Hurricane across the already-flooded swampland to feature scenes of gibbering demon-possessed harlots, headless chickens flapping away from bloody knives, crowds of praying worshippers not falling to their knees before Jesus Christ, but dancing in full demonic possession by and for the pleasure of the Prince of Darkness.

Terrence Hathaway had crossed himself repeatedly through all this, on his knees at home with his wife and three teenage children, praying good Christian prayers not to Satan but to the Lord that these very sights would not tempt their fearful hearts.

Or his.

For as the camera boats and helicopters retreated to a safe distance from the vortex that rose through the heavens and filled the world below them from horizon to horizon, and all that could be seen was the tiny figure of Mama Legba lit up from below with some kind of Hollywood spotlight, her arms raised and outstretched like the Christ

of the Andes, facing the whirlwind alone, he could not help it, as a Christian he might loathe her as a slave of Satan, but as a soldier, his heart could not keep from going out to such martial bravery.

Mama Legba might be far from the cameras, but she still had a sound feed from a microphone on the boat, yet there was nothing to be heard above the monstrous hissing roar of the storm. But then, some sound editor somewhere did a remixing trick, and the Tornado Hurricane was reduced to accompaniment to her mighty amplified voice.

“I am Mama Legba and I am running for governor,” she declaimed.

“I am Marylou Beaudreau, just a local girl got to be on TV,” she said in quite another voice, though equally loud.

“I am Papa Legba,” said a sly male voice. “I stand at the crossroads of your destiny. I am the master of thumbs up or thumbs down.”

“I am Erzuli, I hear y’all, and I love y’all.”

Terrence Hathaway took to crossing himself obsessively once more as the voices became the Babel of a demonic multitude, until those voices merged with that of the Whirlwind.

And then there was sudden dead silence. Complete silence. Even the voice of the storm could not be heard.

Only the voice of he who had called himself Baron Samedi. He who a good Christian knew by another name.

Did he not?

“I am Baron Samedi. I am Mama Legba. We all are.”

And the mouth of Mama Legba began to speak in a multitude of tongues.

“I am Erzuli. I am Mama Legba. We all are. And we have all heard you.”

“I am Papa Legba. I am Mama Legba. We all are. And we all ain’t about to destroy the city we love most in all the world, any more than y’all are.”

Mama Legba turned to face the far-off cameras, tipped a phantom top-hat to them as she did a little bow, and somehow the move put a wink in the voice that spoke.

“But y’all really knew that, from the git-go, now didn’ ya?” said the synchronized collective voice of that multitude.

Mama Legba turned to the vortex, and snapped her fingers...

once--

And the whirling cliff of black cloud pulled into itself to form a huge corkscrew twisting upward--

twice--

And the tip of the corkscrew left the ground.

thrice--

And the Tornado Hurricane screwed itself into the sky like a film of its birth run backwards and disappeared.

“Of course,” said Mama Legba, “you lose our favor, we can always bring it back.”

Huey Long, the cynical egomaniacal, demagogical governor of Louisiana in during the Great Depression, had caused a new governor’s mansion to be erected in Baton Rouge as a half-assed half-scale replica of the White House, because, he said, “I want to feel at home in the one in Washington when I move in.”

For reasons Colonel Hathaway found impossible to morally comprehend, the “Kingfish,” as this unprincipled mountebank was affectionately called, was still a

blackguard hero in this blackguard state, perhaps because he was the image that the political varmints who infested Louisiana prayed to during elections.

And his White House was still there, though even the Kingfish might be outraged at its being occupied by the Voodoo Queen Governor. Huey might have stolen chickens, but there were no tales of him having slit their throats as sacrifices to Satan.

Like everyone else, Terrence Hathaway had seen plenty of Mama Legba on television, far too much as far as he was concerned, but now that he was actually entering her gubernatorial lair for his first meeting with her in the flesh, he realized that, like everyone else, all he really knew about Mama Legba was just that, a electronically graven image on television. A fraud? An act? A mad woman? Possessed by demons from hell? A manifestation of Satan Himself? He knew nothing about Mama Legba's soul at all.

Assuming that she had one.

Did the demons of Hell have souls? Did Satan? Did these so-called loas? Did evil spirits have evil souls or were they soulless creatures? This was too much theology for a simple Christian to truly comprehend, but Terrence had the feeling he was about to find out anyway.

Mama Legba received him in a bureau mercifully unlike the Oval Office and wore a businesslike dark blue business suit befitting a female governor rather than a Voodoo Queen. She seemed younger in person and smaller, somehow shrunken in stature, in awe of her own office.

As he soon learned, in a sense she was. No demons spoke to him through her. His conversation was with a Marylou Beaudreau, a former street busker whose full dossier he had read, hardly an intimidating personage, who, she gave him to understand,

was herself feeling, if not entirely intimidated, quite isolated.

The state legislature was marginally Democrat, but that didn't matter, because both parties completely ignored her. The previous cabinet was still powerlessly in place because no one remotely qualified would serve in one of hers. She had no political advisers save the well-known saloon keeper and whoremonger Jean-Baptiste Lafitte who had talked her into running, and what he was mostly interested in was using the Voodoo Queen Governor to pump up the tourist trade in New Orleans. Even all the lobbyists, bagmen, and political payoff agents of the Lizards of Wall Street and other economic players who abounded in Baton Rouge ignored her. Not that she would solicit bribes or accept them, but for no one to even try was an insult to the office of governor of Louisiana.

Colonel Hathaway was surprised and somewhat undone by the sympathy he felt for this satanic creature, if that was really what she was, for her jaundiced view of state politics and its machinations was little different from his professional opinion. If it were not politically impossible, and an honest judge could be found, he would happily arrest half the politicians and lobbyists in Baton Rouge, and on legally sound indictable charges.

"I'll come to the point, Colonel Hathaway," Mama Legba told him. "Would you obey an order to send State Police into New Orleans to forcibly evict people from their homes because the New Orleans police won't do their sworn duty?"

"As an army officer I have often enough had to enforce orders which as a Christian I found repugnant. But to disobey orders I was sworn to obey would be oath-breaking, equally repugnant, and punishable by court martial. As far as I'm concerned, a

policeman is a soldier in a different uniform.”

“That’s not quite what I was hoping to hear,” Mama Legba told him. “I’m not going to give any such order. But it would help if you made it public that you wouldn’t obey it.”

She enlightened his utter befuddlement. The legislature was pretty much owned by the economic Powers That Be, like wise the separately-elected Republican Lieutenant Governor, as everyone knew, and the pressure was on to send in the State Police to break the New Orleans Police Strike, and maybe even arrest the instigators like Luke Martin.

Since Mama Legba had been elected promising not to do any such thing, there were already resolutions being drawn up to give the legislature the power to order it themselves over the head of the Governor, which might not be ruled unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court, seeing as how this was Louisiana, and even they knew which side their bread was buttered on.

“But if you declared you wouldn’t obey any such order no matter where it came from, it would be a lot harder for them, and I think we all know who they are, to get away with it politically. I need you to go public with this, Terrence, if I may, and everything I’ve learned about you tells me that you’re not part of this shit, and you’re supposed to be a real Christian, is that right?”

“I try to be.”

The voice changed, became at the same time stronger and insinuatingly supplicating like a reptile, the voice of the loa Eruzli as heard on television, likewise the eyes peering through the mask of Mama Legba’s face. Terrence Hathaway would have crossed himself but for the words it spoke...

“Then tell me as a Christian, would you throw innocent families out into the muddy streets to make the rich richer, would you want to stand before your Maker and try to walk through that needle? As a cop, would you arrest fellow officers for refusing to commit such a sin by obeying an order from the servants of Mammon?”

The words....

How could such words not touch his Christian heart and his officer’s honor?

“What are you asking me?” was all he could say.

“Would you do it?”

Colonel Hathaway prayed for an answer. None was forthcoming. “I will pray that I never have to find out, and that believe me, is the heartfelt truth!”

“I do,” said Mama Legba. “And I want you to help me keep it from happening.”

Go public, she told him. J.B. Lafitte can set it up with a reporter or two. Let it be known that you will not send the State Police into New Orleans.

Such...honorably words...such...Christian words....

But that which spoke them....

And then, as if his mind was easily read, it was a male voice that spoke, the voice that called itself Papa Legba, like a fellow officer in another country’s army, like one wise and seasoned cop to another.

“Look, we both know that we’re not each other’s first choice of allies, you believe in Jesus Christ and his apostles, you believe that I either don’t exist or I’m speaking as Satan, I believe I’m Papa Legba, guardian of crossroads and standing at a fork in your destiny. You believe your God will show you the right path, so I drop it in your own lap, mortal. You’re the traffic cop at the crossroads this time, as an MP, you’ve been here

before, now haven't you? So you don't like the medium, but what about the message? If you can't trust me, can't you trust what I'm saying, can't you know a Christian truth when you hear it?"

Terrence Hathaway trembled in his chair. Terrence Hathaway's head began to pound. Terrence Hathaway's heart had never been more deeply troubled.

"How can I trust what you say? How do I know I'm not hearing it from the Prince of Liars?"

"You can't, my man," said the voice of Erzuli, "and half the time none of us on this side of the line don't trust Papa Legba's words as gospel either, he's the Trickster too."

And the face, the mask, of Mama Legba gave him a lubricious wink. "But come on, hon,' if you can't trust your friends, you should at least be able to trust your enemies. And Christian or otherwise, isn't what's right what you feel good after?"

"I'll allow myself to be asked whether I would obey such an order, and refuse to answer one way or the other, at least I can go that far for now," Colonel Hathaway finally found himself saying. Having to say, for that was all that the conflicting demands of sworn duty, officer's honor, and Christianity could allow him to do.

Stand there and execute a holding action for as long as possible at the current... crossroads.

And pray long, and hard, and regularly, that he would never be forced to choose one path over the other.

And pray that if the Lord did lay that burden upon his shoulders, Jesus would at least grant him the knowledge of which was right before he condemned himself to

whatever he was fated to feel afterward.

#

How, you may ask, did J.B. Lafitte, saloon keeper and bordello impresario, end up as the Voodoo Queen Governor's chief and only political operative? Easy enough, after I thought about it. I owed her one for having talked her into running for an office she never thought she would have to actually occupy, and no one with any kind of political job or hope for one or dream of one would touch the job with a barbecue pit fork.

Handling the Born Again Christian Top Cop of the State of Louisiana proved far easier than a bad boy from the Big Easy could have imagined. He needed no coaxing and little preparation, I just handed him the script I had one of my barfly writers crank out, set up a "chance meeting" in the street with a news crew supposedly on the way to cover something else, the reporter stuck a microphone in his face, followed her own script, and popped the question.

"Colonel Hathaway, would you send the State Police into New Orleans if so ordered by the governor, yes or no?"

"The governor has publicly promised never to do that, so until she goes back on her word in public, that's a question I don't have to answer, and don't want to answer, so I won't."

"But if the legislature passed a bill ordering you to do it?"

"I would imagine that Mama Legba would veto it."

"And if the legislature over-rides it?"

"You're asking me if that's within their legal powers? I'm no lawyer, that's for the courts to decide."

“And if the courts say it is?”

Good old Hathaway paid attention to the camera for the first time, and spoke to it as directed. “I try to be a good Christian, and it was Martin Luther King who made a lot of us realize that it could sometimes be necessary for a good Christian to break the law and suffer the consequences. But I am a policeman sworn to uphold the law. I was also a cadet at West Point where we studied the campaigns of Julius Caesar. So I’ll let him tell you what they say he said before the Rubicon...”

He paused as directed, turned his back on the reporter, and delivered the line over his shoulder as he dashed away.

“I’ll cross that bridge if and when I come to it.”

#

They had delivered Luke Martin’s promotion to Lieutenant as promised, but the suits above the uniforms hadn’t been about to cut him one for free, in fact he was given to understand that the uniformed police force professionals up to and including the Captains were in very bad odor downtown, he stank even more rotten in the politicians’ nostrils, and at the time even the top of the real police pecking order couldn’t outpeck them.

But now there was also another police pecking order which thoroughly despised the peckerwoods of the political pecking order--the pecking order of the Police Strike. And that pecking order had extended the strike to refusing to bust whorehouses, streetwalkers, drug possession, dealers, liquor license violations, anything and everything short of crimes of violence or outright physical theft and burglary, including traffic and parking tickets.

This had had the intended effect, making every city cop a proud hero of the people

and the New Orleans Police Department, the People's Police as much of the media had taken to calling them, supported by picketing and demonstrating druggies, hookers, saloon keepers, car owners, and a general run of the screwed and downtrodden, a power in the Big Easy second to none and maybe a little more than that.

But up in Baton Rouge and the hinterlands beyond it was another story. The State Legislature was soon to vote on a bill to order the State Police to replace the New Orleans Police on their own sacred turf, and the head counts showed it was going to be a close call, and the NOLA police weren't about to count on the Voodoo Queen Governor to veto it, seeing as how there seemed to already be a move on to impeach her if she did.

Time for us to do more than flex our political muscle for the girls to swoon over. Time to use it in the streets to kill that damned thing before it passes. Time to raise up mass demonstrations against it, the legislature, and the upstate-dominated State Police.

Time for you to do it, Lieutenant Martin. Captain you will be if we kill that bill, because we'll be in control here, not the rats downtown, and if they squeak too loud about anything, we threaten to arrest a few of them chosen at random on corruption charges or perversion charges, it's not as if our friendly madams and bordello owners haven't slipped us plenty of juicy footage on all of them in return for services not rendered to the letter of the law.

They'd find that those who go along, get along, an offer they can't refuse.

And neither, of course, could Luke, and why would he, by this time it was easy. He had a staff to make his phone calls and drive him around, he had J.B. Lafitte, the governor's boy, on loan to handle the press details and hand him scripts for his appearances when needed, which was less and less, even according to Lafitte.

“You’re a natural, Martin, just let it all hang out, you’re a voice from the people, you’re the voice of the People’s Police and its true service to citizens and tourists, as we’ve got the press putting it these days, it’s the lead story everywhere in New Orleans, we can draw you all the press you can eat anytime we want to, and you can use ‘em to turn out crowds where and when you want to”.

Lafitte was fuckin’-A right. He handed Luke a script, and he turned out the press for a performance in front of city hall.

“On behalf of the People’s Police which is protecting y’all from the real criminals tryin’ to do y’all in instead of rousting boys and girls who just wanna have fun and those of y’all making an honest living givin’ ‘em what they want, I want to thank the people of New Orleans for your support of our new policy. Which is concentrating on protecting you from the Wall Street Lizards would steal your shoes out from under you if they could and you could still afford a pair, and just let y’all alone ‘less you’re stealing from each other, killing each other, trying to, or beating the shit out of each other, and letting the Big Easy be the Big Easy up front.”

He could rely on Lafitte’s scripts when he was supposed to get something political accomplished, but they didn’t care much how what had to be said got said, he could open up loud and clear however he wanted like a star rap artist as long as he didn’t forget he was fronting for the People’s Police, not some musical act, that he was serving what he was learning to call with a straight face a political agenda.

“But there are sewer rats and upstate holy rollers and water moccasins and all sorts of varmints bought themselves seats in the State Legislature with the payoffs from We All Know Who they call campaign contributions and which has bought We All Know

Who the best legislature that money can buy. And these motherfuckers wanna throw your asses out into the streets don't like the People's Police letting The Big Easy be the Big Easy because they hate New Orleans. They hate y'all for knowing how to boogie! Because they hate boogying! Most of all they hate the People's Police for letting it happen and protecting you from them!"

What he was saying was off a political script and he was touching the required bases, but the words and the music were his own rap, up through and out of him from someplace that had never been alive before.

"Now we got ourselves a Voodoo Queen Governor who's on our side, but in a few days now, the legislature that's owned crook line and sinker by We All Know Who is gonna vote on a piece of shit to give them the power to send the State Police into New Orleans with orders to take back this city from your People's Police and enforce their tight-assed upstate redneck version of every pissant law, rule, and regulation we've been keeping from hassling y'all. And arrest a bunch of your good People's Police brothers and sisters for crimes against inhumanity. And throw thousands of you out of your homes.

So it's short time to tell these servants of the people, that anyone who dares to vote for that is gonna find his ass out in the street, because if he does, you won't vote for him next time around, all the money in the world spent to bullshit you on election day won't buy back his seat in the legislature."

This stuff was not only getting easier and easier, it was getting to be more and more fun, if that was what you could call what Martin Luther Martin was feeling, but if it was, it was a different kind of fun than Luke had ever had before.

But that was no problem, far from it, Luke Martin had actually not only found a cause he could wholeheartedly believe in for the first time in his life, he had found that there was nothing shameful about losing the sort of cynical innocence that would previously have soured his enjoyment of being the hero of a cause he believed in fighting for. No drug had ever given him a high like this! The look he saw in Luella's eyes these days made him feel ten feet tall and the sex was off the scale.

“So your People's Police are asking you to fill this square and Jackson Square too with people twenty-four seven all day every day and let Baton Rouge know what's good for them and what isn't until they get the message that if they vote to send the State Police in to mess with the Big Easy they can start collecting unemployment insurance but they had better not open their flannel mouths or show their public trough snout faces in this city ever again!”

Whoo-ee!

Doing well by doing good?

I should tell 'em to graffiti that motto on the squad cars of the People's Police.

Why the fuck not?

Luke was about ready to have it tattooed on his own lucky ass!

#

Well it seemed to be working, and it might have ended up working, if Luke Martin hadn't screwed up so big time. But then who knows, the Free State of Louisiana might not now exist if he hadn't, and isn't it in the spirit of Big Easy politics that our present prosperous state could be the godchild two or three times removed of a fuck up?

I gotta admit that the way Luke Martin delivered the message raised it above the

script that was written for him. Crowds confronted city hall day and night. Jackson Square was a Mardi Gras block party twenty-four seven wall-to-wall, barbecue stands, beer out of barrels, loose joints by the handful, hookers in and out of porn costumes, sex, drugs, rock and roll, with the People's Police lookin' on collecting cheers, applause, and free drinks.

There was the forest of placards on poles in the ground that Mama Legba asked for, and that the Quarter Chamber of Commerce was happy to pay for, seeing as how the Square was getting to overflow, and the overflow took lucrative refuge in our welcoming establishments. On each pole was the name and picture of a state legislator with the 'ol red crossed circle stop warning around their heads, though here it was a target crosshairs for the rotten eggs and tomatoes and putrid fruit that people were encouraged to throw at them for the tv cameras, though the People's Police did draw the line at shit.

Would it have been enough? New Orleans and its neighborly like-minded environs like to think so, but then we always seemed to forget that there are more people out there in the rest of the state who had as much fear and loathing for the wicked ways of the Big Easy as we had for these Bible Belt rednecks, which we of course never called them to their faces when they snuck down here for a sin break.

The truth was that even if New Orleans, the Delta, Cajun country, was to lynch every one of their representatives in the State Legislature and replace them with a member of the People's Police, it was still going to be a close thing. Upstate delegates were needed to defeat the bill to invade the city with State Police stormtroopers, as Martin and the like were so diplomatically putting it. This was not gaining many upstate votes, but some kind of cop brotherhood was at work statewide, and here and there local

police forces were adopting the laid-back People's Police policy on what the media was now calling "victimless crimes," namely if none of the participants files a complaint, we don't have one either, and we're not in the business of playing freebie rentacops in the unpaid employ of the Lizards of Wall Street who want to throw voters out into the street.

In these districts, voting in the legislature to send the State Police into anywhere where the local citizenry supported and celebrated their People's Police was political suicide, and more districts were letting their representatives know it.

A close call, but even if the bill passed there wouldn't have been the votes to overturn Mama Legba's veto, that's the way JB Lafitte sees it, but we'll never know, now will we? Because Luke Martin went and dumped a mess of live alligators into the nicely simmering gumbo and it overboiled out of the pot.

Why he did it has by now been a conjecture in a tv miniseries and any number of books, academic, psychoanalytical, Evangelical, political, conspiracy theory, and otherwise, and I've read some of them, none of which makes any sense. And Luke Martin refused to tell me anything then and still does.

Hey, so we're never gonna understand, but hey, as the Bard says, "All's well that ends well," now ain't it?

#

Afterwards, Luke Martin could've told himself that the devil made him do it, it was true enough, after all, or anyway some kind of evil spook, but that was only half of the truth, whether he had had any say in the words he found roaring up through him or not, he felt in sync with them wholeheartedly. If he had been possessed by a loa went by Baron Samedi, was not as if he had been an unwilling so-called "horse."

He had been summoned to Baton Rouge by the governor. He had never met Mama Legba in the flesh before but he had seen enough of her on television to know that this somehow wasn't her. The woman's body sat behind the desk like a bad-ass Swamp Alligator. The eyes behind the mask of a woman were stone-cold killer.

And so was the voice.

"Come along way from the Alligator Swamp, ainya, Lieutenant? You don't go back there much at all these days, now do you?"

Luke shuddered at the voice and squirmed at the truth, which was that he hadn't been back to the hood since he made Sergeant.

"Has it changed?" he sneered back defensively.

"No, it hasn't changed, boy. Have you?"

"For the better. And...and for the greater good."

"Think they're saying that about you down there? What about their greater good, or anyway at least lesser agony?"

"The People's Police aren't hassling anyone down there unless we got a murder or something. We don't go down there unless they make us have to, or unless they want us. I don't think we're unpopular in the Alligator Swamp."

"Out of sight, out of mind."

"Right."

"As long as they stay down there, right? We don't want the likes of your old homies up there in Jackson Square or the Quarter or in front of city halls, now do we?"

"I've been told that it's...it's...."

"Politically counterproductive? Well, as you may notice, boy, I'm sitting here in

the governor's chair, and I say it's counterproductive to not let the lower reaches of the citizenry of the city have their voices heard, they're gonna be on your side , now ain't they, and I, Mama Legba, governor of the great state of Louisiana, order you to go down into the Alligator Swamp and invite the outsiders in."

Luke was torn in time. The boy from the swamp knew that this was the right thing to do, and the memory of that boy relished the thought of doing it, but the professional officer of the People's Police that he now was who did not think it was exactly a brilliant idea.

"I...I...I don't think the governor has the right to order me around," Luke stammered.

"Maybe, maybe not," said the thing inside Mama Legba, "but Baron Samedi has the power. Ain't it the sad truth of your world, boy, you want something done right, you gotta do it yourself."

And it was inside him.

Whether he had ever believed voodoo was anything more than another cult scam, was no longer relevant, he had to believe it now as Baron Samedi took control of his body and his words and rode him on an airboat around the Swamp indeed like a horse, a horse who was there, who could see and hear everything he was saying and doing and had a horse's right to his own opinion, but was the mount, willing or otherwise, of whatever held the reins in the saddle.

It was a wild ride through the far lowland reaches of the Alligator Swamp, still partially flooded in the aftermath of the Hurricane Season, depressing sights and stenches Luke had not been subjected for a long and somehow shameful time, delivering more or

less the same short speech from the airboat, what, thirty, forty, fifty times, like a ward-heeling politician trolling for votes.

Amidst a populace too trodden down in the mud, too beaten into switchblade swords, too reliant on their own down and dirty alligator resources, to ever have bothered voting for some dry-ground mushmouth, living too completely by the jungle law of the Swamp to trust even the laid back law of the People's Police.

And therefore not to be trusted in fuckin' civilized political company, Luke knew all too well, to be kept in their place even by one of their own managed to claw his own way up and out.

Until now.

Whether the loa inside his head was really letting him say what he pleased as the day wore on or just using his sense of the local lingo to phrase his own rap didn't matter, because what he was saying fucking well pleased him.

“Despite the uniform, I'm one of you, born, bred, and blooded in the Swamp, and y'all probably know I was a cop down here, made the New Orleans Police the top alligator in my turf, and me the Honcho of Honchos. Well here I am again, Lieutenant Luke Martin of the People's Police, I ain't the dude I was, and the People's Police are not what the cops in this down were, we wanna be your police too.”

That line usually went over like a wet fart, but it was a deliberate set-up.

“Now y'all heard that sorta bullshit a million times, and the New Orleans police never delivered anything to ya but a kick in the ass and time inna joint, so why should you believe it now? You shouldn't, was I still you, I sure wouldn't! Your People's Police aren't promising you anything except not to hassle you any more no how nowhere

in this town unless you kill someone or rape someone or steal someone's shit, and you don't even have to believe that. What we're doing is asking for your help."

That was a line sure to shut up hecklers down here, or anyway good for a laugh.

"Now those of you what have stole yourself a TV know by now that the redneck bastards in Baton Rouge are fixing to send in the peckerwood State Police to bust cops like me and mine and restore the so-called order of the hard-assed holy rollers what's been holding you down here in the dirt, and the drylanders of New Orleans are demonstrating in Jackson Square and in front of City Hall to save their People's Police.

You also know that the New Orleans Police kept alligators like us out of there, but now I'm telling y'all that the People's Police aren't just going to let you there, we want you there, we're asking you to go there, we're fuckin' begging you, to turn out in a free New Orleans to show those motherfuckers in the legislature that you too support the People's Police. You do this for us, your People's Police is gonna owe you favors, and hey, this is the Big Easy, we all know better than not to deliver. Those who go along, get along, and that's your People's Police, doing well by doing good, we got that tag painted on our squad cars."

Maybe it was this Baron Samedi using him as a mouthpiece. It didn't matter. The alligators of the Swamp were maybe no longer his brothers out in the alley but that which spoke seemed to be getting through to them, persuading them to ally themselves with their previous worst enemy, to actually try supporting their People's Police.

The ruthless power inside his head the Christians would probably call an evil demon hadn't spoken a word to Luke since it took over and it never did again during the whole airboat not-so-grand tour, but when it left Luke Martin to his own devices, it left

him feeling not used by some devil like a punk in the joint, but like the horse of some noble knight favored by the rider who had ridden him into the doing of a great and greatly righteous deed.

If that wasn't voodoo magic what kind of magic was it?

Or so Luke believed when the sun that went down on the Alligator Swamp came up on thousands of its home boys and girls already having joined the demonstrators in front of City Hall and the permanent Mardi Gras in Jackson Square.

The Captains and higher ups in the People's Police chewed out his ass for making such a dangerous and radical move all on his own, Luke hardly being in a position to fob it off on a one-time possession by a voodoo spook. But when the alligators among the demonstrators and tourists did little more of interest to the police watching over them than a few dozen pockets picked, fist-fights broken up, half a dozen muggings, and mostly confined their previously criminal enterprises to hooking, questionable games of chance, and the peddling of refreshments, while enthusiastically waving any picket sign passed to them, they changed their tune and crowned him their political boy genius and promoted him to Captain forthwith.

He had two days to bask in the backslapping and free drinks and enhanced media stardom before the shit, whoever or whatever started throwing it, began hitting the fan.

#

You asking me whether the swamp alligators just couldn't be let loose in the civilized and money-making quarters of New Orleans without succumbing to the temptations of their fetid criminal natures to rob and loot and generally do what comes natural when the police allow them to rampage out of their cages or whether it was

ringers and agents provocateur?

Well that was a political question from the git-go, no neutrals in that foxhole, and it's been like that ever since.

There were many, and still are, who find it easy enough to need no pointy-headed liberal explanation of why human apes would inevitably go apeshit on their own. But the bill to send in the State Police was up for a vote the next day, it was still close, and rioting in New Orleans was not exactly the gift of the gods to the People's Police, now was it, seeing as the bill suddenly became sure to pass.

So you'll pardon a cynic like yours truly for believing that even if agents provocateurs might not have been needed, those in the process of trying send in the State Police would hardly have left the cashing in on such a golden opportunity to their own reading of the law of the jungle, and not blaming the alligators alone for the damage done to his saloon when it spread out of Jackson Square up Bourbon Street.

It would seem to be a tad suspicious, after all, that the rioting seemed to start independently around City Hall and in Jackson Square at about the same time, as the sun was beginning to go down on two peaceful scenes, a reasonably orderly and organized political protest and the same sort of thing transformed into the kind of permanent happy carnival that was to give me the idea of the Eternal Mardi Gras after a lot more water had passed through the Industrial Canal.

A few fist fights broke out, someone hits someone else with a bottle, someone snatches someone else's roll of cash, someone kicks over a three-card Monte table, someone pulls a knife, is that a gun, wiseguys start copping feels, and it starts spreading from dozens of little independent ruckuses, and they pool together like the blood on a

slaughterhouse floor, and the smell of it is in the air, and yeah, the alligators snorting it do begin to go apeshit.

And once that happens, and the People's Police moves in to try and cool things out, which only makes it worse, the rioters, and by now that's what they are, and there are plenty of drunken tourists and dry-landers among 'em now too, flee, or get chased by the cops, out of the Square and away from City Hall, up the adjacent feeder streets and out in the city, where there's goodies in the store windows and booze in the liquor store windows available for free if you're willing to smash some glass, why not under the circumstances...

And then the TV cameras show up, and everyone tries for their bad-ass 15 seconds of fame, and the cops are constrained to run around like chickens with their heads cut off 'cause this is chaos for coping with which there can't be a plan, and you got looting and rioting in the Big Easy over no one really knows what and no one really cares.

Among the participants, that is. Up there in Baton Rouge, they cared a whole lot.

#

Well what am I supposed to do now? Marylou Beaudreau, aka Mama Legba, aka the Voodoo Queen Governor of Louisiana, pleaded with the voices not presently in her head, as she sat their all alone in the gubernatorial hot seat waiting for Hathaway to get over here.

Erzuli, Papa Legba, and the entire Supernatural Krew had done a fast fade into the wings when the news of the rioting in New Orleans reached Baton Rouge, which was with electronic speed. We're only the lords and queens of the voodoo pantheon, was their

general attitude, this Louisiana political black magic is too much for us.

Only Baron Samedi had anything else to say to her about it, and that was hardly any help.

“In India, some call me Shiva, loa of necessary destruction that a new creation begin, and Lenin said you can’t fry a revolution without breaking eggs, think of me as evolution in action.”

Thanks a whole lot!

Both houses of the legislature had used the instant news of the riots to ram through the bill requiring the State Police to go down there and restore the rule of law and righteous civilization to the so-called Big Easy now showing its true satanic colors with the same speed of light, and the damn thing was sitting on her desk.

They needed her to sign it, or veto it so they could override it, and she couldn’t sit on it for very long with rioting running out of control in New Orleans, she didn’t know what the hell to do, and those words from Baron Samedi were the last advice she had gotten from that quarter. Either way, the legislature was going to send the State Police into the city, and that was going to be like napalming a forest fire from helicopters. Even the middle class of the Big Easy, what was left of it, loathed the State Police as redneck storm troopers practically from another country, besides which local police forces always went bugfuck or tried to at outside intrusions on their turf.

Why couldn’t the assholes see that?

Or worse still, maybe they did.

#

“You’re going to have to command the operation whether I give you the order or

the legislature does,” the governor told Colonel Hathaway, “so tell me what to do.”

Mama Legba didn't look like any kind of satanic Voodoo Queen now. If Satan had been inside her, if the Prince of Darkness was responsible for this situation, it would seem it had gotten out of hand even as far as he was concerned, and he had fled the scene of his crime. This was just one more civilian leader dropping a mess of their own making into the lap of the military.

“What are you asking me to tell you? My tactical plans for quelling the riots?”

The governor waved a sheath of paper in his face. “Whether I should sign this thing or not!” she screamed shrilly. “Whether I order you in or let the legislature do it, that's what it's down to!”

“Is it?” Hathaway found himself blurting. “From my perspective, what it's going to come down to is whether I obey the order or not. I've left that an open question--just as you wanted me to, remember, governor.”

“I can't take any more of this shit!” the voice of Marylou Hathaway cried forlornly. “I don't know what to do and no one will tell me!”

“You should've thought of days like this when you ran for office.”

“You think I ever really wanted to be elected?”

And then the governor more or less pulled herself together. “Okay, Colonel, two can play pass the hot potato. As governor of the state of Louisiana, I'm officially giving you the order now. What are you going to do about it?”

I could just resign. Terrence Hathaway suddenly realized at that moment. But he couldn't say it, he couldn't say it because he couldn't do it, the temptation was there, but no commanding officer could preserve his honor by walking away from a distasteful,

dire, or even suicidal duty with the lives and property he had sworn an oath to protect at stake.

Besides which, they'd only appoint someone else to do it, and the result would be the same.

Or would it? He at least would escape blame for whatever that result would be.

Oh no I wouldn't! Terrence told himself. Not the blight on my own soul!

For that had been a most un-Christian thought. No true Christian would hand over this cross to another! No true Christian with the responsibility and unwelcome opportunity to save the people of New Orleans from their own madness could walk away without trying. He might have thought an unthinkable thought, but doing the deed was doubly unthinkable.

His duty as a policeman, an officer, and a Christian were the same, and that was some brave comfort, but what exactly was that in real world tactical terms?

“What are your orders?”

“I just told you, take the State Police into New Orleans and stop the rioting!”

“Under what rules of engagement?”

It was a perfectly automatic next question for any commander to ask upon being ordered on a mission. But this time something else was resonating with Terrence Hathaway's military mind, for in his Christian heart, he realized that rules of engagement had more than one aspect.

The military rules of engagement defined the limits of the force, weapons, and tactics to be used, and in a situation like this, also the level of acceptable collateral damage and casualties. But the Christian rules of engagement defined the collective good

to be fought for and hopefully achieved by the military action, defined his moral duty.

And gaining that clarity of soul began to clarify Colonel Hathaway's mind.

"Neither of us want to do this, but both of us know that it has to be done, besides which, we can't stop it," he told the governor. "But you and I, right here, right now, can, and should, set the rules of engagement."

It was definitely Marylou Beaudreau who gave him that look of a deer caught in the headlights.

"You don't set the rules of engagement, the legislature will do it, and they'll set rules of engagement which will be mass arrests, water cannon, whatever means necessary, arresting Luke Martin and the leadership of the People's Police, bloodbath or not, because the real game is for the legislature to seize control of the city in the name of restoring order and use it as cover to make the State Police do what the People's Police won't, namely the dirty work for the Lizards of Wall Street. But if you set the rules of engagement right now, I will be legally and morally bound to obey them."

"Such as?"

Was that a masculine voice speaking through Mama Legba now? "What rules of engagement do you suggest at this cross-roads?"

"No heavy ordnance. No provocative helicopters. No firing of live ammunition unless fired upon. No mass arrests where there is no mass violence. No enforcement of any law or regulation not currently being enforced by the People's Police. No arrest of Martin or any other People's Police officer."

"My, my, my," said a female voice not that of Marylou Beaudreau, "a pacifist warrior."

“A Christian warrior,” Colonel Hathaway corrected. “I’ll be commanding four or five thousand men if you authorize those numbers, and they’ll be armed with both lethal and non-lethal weapons.”

“Yeah, that’s your onward Christian soldier, all right, but here’s one more rule of engagement,” and now it was definitely the male voice speaking. “You are in command of the State Police forces yourself, but I order you to engage, with the People’s Police. It’s still their city, not yours, not anyone else’s, and you are under their command.”

“You mean the State Police only serve as auxiliaries when called upon by the local police authorities?”

“You got it, Christian Soldier,” said the voice of Papa Legba. “How do you like it?”

But it was Marylou Beaudreau who had the last words.

“And when the People’s Police tell you thank you very much, it’s time to leave, they throw you a great big farewell party, and you bring your boys home.”

“You know what,” said Terrence Hathaway with his first smile of the day, “I like it just fine.”

And the face that smiled back at him was definitely a real human.

If he didn’t have abundant reason to believe otherwise, he would have said the face of one relieved Christian.

#

Luke Martin’s instant appointment to “Deputy Assistant Chief of Police,” a position that had not existed before the governor ordered in the State Police, was no reward for his central part in creating this crisis, they didn’t have to tell him that, but they

did anyway, and in no uncertain terms. He needed the fancy title, which didn't put him in command of anything and which had been invented for the purpose because he was going to be the People's Police liaison officer with the State Police commander who called himself Colonel Hathaway.

His official job was to transmit requests by the New Orleans Police for State Police back-up to Hathaway, requests, he was given to understand, that would be as few and far between as possible. His real job was to stick to Hathaway like a leech wherever he went by car, airboat, chopper, or horseback if it came to it, appear to be the one giving the orders as senior to the commander of the intruders, and use the big mouth that had stirred up the alligators in the first place to somehow herd them back into the Swamp.

Colonel Hathaway arrived in New Orleans at the head of his troops atop an armored personnel carrier, with a long line of troop trucks and busses behind him, and an impressive number of highway cops on motorcycles, or rather outside Metairie, where he assembled his forces at the old International Airport to await his People's Police liaison before deploying into the city as agreed upon.

Luke had never seen so many cops in the same place at the same time before, something like four thousand of them, so he had been told. If cops you could call them. The State Police always favored military-looking uniforms, as many of them as not were armed with assault rifles, the rest, in helmets and body armor, had plexiglass shields and taser-billies in addition to their side-arms, and they were lined up in neat ranks like an army division on a parade ground.

Colonel Hathaway didn't salute him, but he looked like he wanted to, so Luke saluted him with a sarcastic click of his heels. Hathaway was not amused.

“This is not an invading army, son, despite current appearances,” Hathaway told him. “This is just martialing my men in good order at what is going to be our base camp. When on off-duty shifts, my men will leave the city and return to bivouacs here.”

Hathaway then surprised Luke by taking his rank and official position quite seriously. “I’m an experienced veteran commander of Army Military Police as well as these State Police,” he told him, “but neither I, the MPs, or the Louisiana State Police have any useful experience quelling urban riots and restoring order in an American city, nor ever thought we would have to.”

So I intend to take these rules of engagement serious, Hathaway told Luke after he patiently explained them. “You will not directly command any State Police unit nor choose what unit to deploy where, that’s my job, but you will request deployments from me and you will suggest what I do with them, and frankly, given my lack of tactical experience in these matters, I will regard those requests and suggestions as orders unless I believe they are crazy. That’s your job.”

Luke didn’t know whether to be flattered or appalled, not knowing jack-shit about this sort of thing either. But he did have his own orders, to ride Hathaway around the city, stick to him, and somehow use this show to calm the waters he had turned into a class-five human hurricane when Baron Samedi had been riding him.

“Well?” Colonel Hathaway demanded.

Well....

Well, seeing as how his real job was to get the rampaging alligators back in the Swamp, seemed like he should think gang logic as he had back in the day. Nobody had told him to make sure Hathaway didn’t get killed while he was parading the state flag,

but it seemed like a good idea, and a good excuse to show superior force without having to use it.

#

Is this kid some kind of military genius in the raw? Colonel Hathaway found himself wondering. They certainly didn't teach these tactics at West Point.

Martin had told him that the first step was to tour the field of action to see what was really what first hand, and that was certainly obvious procedure. They would do it together, which seemed excessive and excessively dangerous bravado, Hathaway thought, but when Martin told him that they would do it excessively well-guarded by a squad of a hundred state motorcycle police with a trooper in full riot gear riding pillar on each bike, and that they would ride in a People's Police squad car, he began to get the picture.

A roving show of force that would appear overwhelming to any but very large and well-organized groups of looters and rioters, which, he was told, were nowhere assembled.

At first, Martin seemed to be rushing the unit around at random, but a pattern soon emerged, like that of those lunatic scientists who drove around hunting tornadoes. Martin was looking for trouble spots. Main commercial avenues where roving mobs of looters were overwhelming the scattered squads of People's Police, who could only hope to disburse them by using live ammunition at their own peril, which they were understandably loath to do. Jackson Square and other such locales, where mass demonstrations had degenerated into chaotic brawls among so-called "Swamp Alligator Gangs" and the general drunken citizens and tourists.

Two hundred State Police roaring in through these melees on motorcycles certainly served admirably as short sharp shocks, scattering perpetrators in panic and freezing the action long enough for the riot police to dismount and form a cordon around the two of them like an impregnable Roman turtle, which formation had been on the syllabus at the Point. After a few such deployments, they got the full maneuver down to as little as 90 seconds.

After which, Martin would get on the bullhorn, and Terrence Hathaway learned why this young man had been given such a seemingly senior duty. Natural military genius or not, the boy was a natural stump speaker, and in the process of repetition, perfected a speech well-tailored to his unwilling audiences.

“You got about twenty fuckin’ minutes to get your asses outa here before more of these State Troopers arrive. The People’s Police aren’t interested in rounding up you assholes, we don’t have the enough cells and drunk tanks to do it if we wanted too, and neither do the State Pigs, there’s still this crap goin’ on when they get here, those trigger-happy rednecks will just start shooting. So get your asses out of here!”

As first, their unit would just roar back out through the mob, knocking them around and bowling them over, but when this provided less than satisfactorily rapid dispersal, Colonel Hathaway suggested lobbing a few tear gas grenades into the mobs on the way out, and the tactic became repeatedly quite successful.

However this did not discourage all the rioters fleeing in all directions from gathering elsewhere to wreak their havoc, and there were plenty of them left to keep their unit dashing madly around the city from one ground zero to another.

Martin came up with another brilliant idea.

Look, he told Hathaway, we got plenty of squad cars and you got plenty of bikes and riot police. So we put together as many of these joint units as we can, one People's Policeman on one of our squad cars who knows what to say and a couple of hundred State Police each, and they chase 'em all over the city, give 'em no chance to stop and loot or destroy property, no chance to congregate together, get more barbled and beat the shit out of each other, no chance to even catch their breath.

"Wear them down, wear them out..."

"Right."

It seemed a masterstroke to Colonel Hathaway, and inspired one of his own, though admittedly it was time-honored military strategy--give the enemy an avenue of retreat and only one place to retreat to, namely where you wanted them.

"I've also got thousands of footsoldiers standing around at the airport doing nothing. Enough to form a cordon around the--

--border of the Alligator Swamp!"

"We drive 'em all toward it--"

"And we let them in, we invite them to escape--"

"The Alligators flee back to the Swamp--

"And those who are left are the kind of folk who don't want to be caught dead down there and they disappear into the woodwork."

The two men grinned at each other like comrade officers.

Which, in that moment, by Colonel Hathaway's lights, they had indeed become.

"You ever thought of joining the Army, Luke?" Hathaway said. "As an officer. If this works, think I could wangle you an appointment to West Point."

“This thing works, Terry, and I think you’d get a hero’s welcome and a Captain’s badge at the least if you decided to join up in the People’s Police.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Colonel Terrence Hathaway. And he was truly touched. And he really did.

#

Well I’m no military man, no cop either, and neither are most of the citizens of New Orleans, but then you don’t have to be a ballplayer to know a perfect game when you see one pitched and appreciate the brilliance of the performance.

Well, at least a no hitter. The People’s Police and the State troopers didn’t quite stop the rioting without any shots fired or injuries, but the Big Easy was cooled down without anyone getting killed and without anyone getting hit by live ammunition, and yours truly took that as as close to perfect as police performance could possibly get in this nasty ol’ world of ours.

Such was the general opinion and then some throughout the city spreading, out into the national press coverage and even reaching into the American Gothic reaches of upstate Louisiana. Made you proud to be an American! one Yankee talking head put it.

Colonel Hathaway and Deputy Assistant Chief of Police Martin even got a full hour on one of those serioso Sunday interview shows. Luke Martin made with the streetwise go along, get along policy of the People’s Police, and Hathaway seemed to be lost in thought all his own for a long moment before owning that it would work if you could codify it into police rules of engagement.

“It would make a policeman’s life easier if he knew that the people knew that the police weren’t going to make themselves a pain in their butts.”

“We just did it,” Martin reminded him. “You, and me, and the People’s Police of New Orleans.”

Well, yes and no. The way yours truly got it, and I got it direct from Mama Legba, the governor was going to nail it down, and drive it home in the speech she was going give, not in the rose garden of the Kingfish’s Disneyland White House in Baton Rouge or giving the finger to the legislature beside the statue of Huey doing likewise, but in New Orleans.

I didn’t write the speech or hire a hack to do it, when Mama Legba spoke live on television, you never could know who would say what how, but I knew what she wanted to get across because she told me while I was convincing her to deliver it not in front of City H, which would be a tired old cliché, but in Jackson Square, where the celebrations were already going on, where she would be seen her reigning as the Voodoo Carnival Queen over the 24/7 mini-Mardi Gras it had become.

Now I admit it had evolved that far all by itself, but you’ve got to give JB Lafitte credit for being able to be inspired by what I observed, for that was when the vision of the Eternal Mardi Gras hit me full-blown like a bolt on the road out of Las Vegas that hordes of tourists would be taking to New Orleans year-round not just during two measly weeks in the winter during the so-called real thing.

Mardi Gras all year round! X-rated! Anything goes! Big time corporate money financing floats and parades and theme parks and all. Turning swampland into pay dirt. Paying taxes for the privilege. A cooperative police force going along and getting along, along with a piece of the action. Yours truly putting it together and getting likewise.

The People’s Police had thanked the State Police for their assistance with one of

those giant cardboard keys to the city handed to Colonel Hathaway in front of city hall, and we barkeeps had been thanking them with unlimited free drinks at no little cost, and the ladies had been thanking them by making it so easy for anyone in a State Police uniform to get laid that I had to cut the rates in half in my whorehouse.

Mama Legba had already issued an order for the State Police to withdraw from New Orleans and all that remained was to organize a proper to enjoy a final triumphant farewell parade past cheering crowds out of the city. Everyone knew that much.

But I knew that she planned to take it further.

Much further.

She told me that she had heard what Colonel Hathaway had said on TV, and if he and the People's Police could send her a piece of paper with what they were doing in practice as police rules of engagement and Colonel Hathaway thought they were workable, she would issue an executive order making them official policy for the State Police at least and maybe they would catch on in local jurisdictions.

No more victimless crimes and no more police wasting their time and pissing people off trying to enforce bluenose laws against them. Not the Law of the Jungle or the Law of the Alligator Swamp, but the true Law of the Big Easy, statewide.

This wasn't one of the Supernatural Krew talking, this, I tell ya, was just Marylou Beaudreau speaking as the governor with in her own words with her own voice, which she didn't get to do so often, so give the girl herself some little political credit.

If not political street-smarts.

"You flat can't do it," I told her. "You're talking about an executive order to ignore crimes committed under eighty-million obnoxious laws passed by the state

legislature for the last couple of centuries.”

“Well, couldn’t I send it to them as a piece of legislation, you know, with an attached laundry list of the laws they’re repealing....”

“They’d tell you shove it up your ass!” I told her in less than my usually gentlemanly manner.

New Orleans had become a Mardi-Gras size celebratory street party, but Baton Rouge was not amused. The Powers That Be were in a towering rage, and their uh, legislative allies were feeling the private pressure of their frustrated rage. We didn’t want the State Police in New Orleans just to stop some riots, you were supposed to use the riots to get them in there, take control away from the so-called People’s Police, and keep them there to protect and defend and collect on our economic interests until some kind of local police force who would do the same thing could be put together.

But now even the Grand High Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan couldn’t even dare to demand disbanding the New Orleans People’s Police in public without having to lynch himself. And this go along, get along notion was already spreading, because cops in every little podunk were getting the idea that it’s less dangerous, less hassle, and less work to nod and wink at what’s bothering nobody so as to include themselves in than to play the uptightly righteous minions upholding law and order.

“You put them in check,” I told Mama Legba, “and when you order the State Police out of New Orleans, it’s checkmate. But Huey Long himself in a Superman suit with a whip and a chair couldn’t get the Louisiana State legislature to repeal a shitload of laws of the land to make the cops happy while enforcing only the necessary remains.”

“What about the people, JB?” Marylou Beaudreau whined plaintively. “Should

they only get the laws they want?”

“As long as they got the kind of police they want choosing what they want to see and what they don’t, who gives a swamp rat’s ass? We’re all from the Big Easy, remember, we all go along, we all get along, including the guardians of the laws we like and our lightly-greased protectors from the ones we don’t.”

The People’s Police had cleared an area around the portable stage large enough to land a helicopter. In the spirit of things, they could’ve also easily enough cleared a path down Bourbon Street, into the square, and up to the stage for Mama Legba to arrive at the head of a parade. But I’d say that would’ve been a tad over the top into the tacky, now wouldn’t you?

Mama Legba arrived in a State Police helicopter and mounted the stage with Colonel Hathaway trailing her three steps to the right and rear as a recorded Dixieland band played a cornball version of “When the Saints Come Marching In.” Colonel Hathaway came to a stand of attention. Mama Legba stood there without a podium or visible microphone. TV pro that she was, just a lavalier mike was all it had ever been.

#

Marylou Beaudreau stood there for an eternal beat, scared shitless. During the helicopter ride, the Supernatural Krew had abandoned her. Well, they had all waved a phantom bye-bye, but she was abandoned now nonetheless.

“You deserve this, sister,” Erzuli had told her, “you were a great mount, girl, and this is your hour to enjoy riding your own horse.”

“We rode you to your cross-roads, and you carried us through ours,” said Papa Legba. “Now you’re the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, Marylou Beaudreau and

governor of Louisiana, for a while they're one and the same, and that's just like we want it, don't you?"

Even Baron Samedi got in his two cents in his scary sour fashion. "Have the time of your life for as long as it lasts," he told her. "Live fast, die young, I do like a good-looking corpse.

Thanks a fucking lot! Marylou thought as she surveyed the crowd. It wasn't so much an audience as a carnival crowd waiting to be entertained amidst food stands and beer stands and card tables, genial drunks, and drag queens in full flower, cops and tourists and--

--and fellow buskers waiting to catch her act.

And that thought calmed her down. Hadn't she done this this for spare change since she was a kid, in the family street act, in her own solo street act, long before the loas came onstage in her head?

What the fuck, isn't this the same gig writ large?

"Are we having a good time yet?" she roared.

The crowd roared back and shook beer-cans over their heads in salute, and she knew she had them.

"Are we letting the good times roll?"

Enough people shouted "Fuckin' A!" to allow it to be heard through the wall of joyous noise.

"Are we the city of New Orleans rising from the Mississippi mud?"

Whoeee! Never in her life had Marylou Beaudreau stood there in front of a crowd like this! Never had she held even half a dozen plastered Japanese salarymen around the

corner from Bourbon Street so completely in her hot little hand! It was like being that street-singing kid again magically gifted with a stadium star's golden voice! Screw being governor if I could only keep this forever!

“Are we--

--sledgehammer blows riding down her chest to her navel--

--ahead of the firecracker fusillade sound of high-powered rifles--

--a ribbon of pain just coming on--

Before her head mercifully exploded.

#

Who in hell is George Hockenberry? was what a lot of people wanted to know, yours truly included, about twenty minutes after the shock of seeing the governor blown away on live television.

George Hockenberry was the former Lieutenant Governor and now Governor of Louisiana, that's who. The assassination of Mama Legba was somehow a greater shock than even that of JFK, seen live statewide in quality close up images and endlessly repeated on national television, and having Hockenberry suddenly become governor was for sure not the advent of a previously major player like Lyndon Johnson.

Hockenberry had been an upstate State Senator for more years than anyone could care to remember. No one cared to remember because Hockenberry had never done anything memorable, having risen to the unofficial status of Senate Republican Bagman a decade or two ago, and had been awarded the Lieutenant Governor nomination as a sort of gold watch. Being the long time distributor of corporate and grayer largesse, ol' George was popular with his colleagues and the real world party leadership, but ol'

George was beginning to lose a few of his marbles, and the Lieutenant Governorship was a retirement home, an office he was likely to die in without doing any damage, requiring nothing more than collecting his salary, unless a sitting governor died in office before he did.

But now she had.

We soon got a good dose of what replaced her.

New Orleans was in outraged mourning, he wouldn't dare show his ass here, so his first public appearance the day after the assassination was before the legislature in Baton Rouge. He blamed the assassination of the Voodoo Queen Governor on anarchist communist Arab drug-dealing Mafia dons, or some such thing equally incoherent and equally irrelevant, and accused the "So-called People's Police," which, he reminded us, sounded like something in the Soviet Union, which he seemed to have forgotten no longer existed, of colluding with these evil forces to bring about chaos in order to establish a socialist dictatorship.

His first order was for the State Police to remain in New Orleans to restore an order that had long since been restored, enforce the letter of every cotton-pickin' law on the books, and arrest Deputy Assistant Police Chief Martin Luther Martin and everyone else above the rank of Lieutenant in the People's Police, and anyone wearing their uniform publicly and attempting to play cops and robbers.

The lunatic had inherited control of the asylum.

Or so it seemed for another twenty-four hours while everyone tried to shake this aftershock loose from their brains, and everyone waited to see what the State Police would do, or at least what Hathaway would say to that, while Colonel Hathaway arrested

nobody, and said nothing except that he was proceeding with standard redeployment preparations.

While this was not going on, it became clear that Governor Hockenberry was not in control of anything or anyone including himself, but had simply graduated from being the Senatorial bagman for the Louisiana chapter of the Lizards of Wall Street and the Powers That Be into being their puppet-show lead. An emergency bill sailed through the legislature to authorize, meaning require, the Governor to declare martial law if, with 48 hours, the State Police proved unwilling or unable to carry out his arrest orders and the letter of all laws as God and the property rights of the Powers That Be intended, especially including, as mandated by a rider slipped in when everyone was paid not to be looking, enforcing evictions by whatever means necessary, up to and including the State National Guard.

Coup who?

Coup you, suckers!

#

“What are you gonna do?” Luke Martin asked Colonel Hathaway. “Arrest me?”

“That’s my orders, instead here I am sneaking off to have a beer with you in JB Lafitte’s saloon.”

That’s where they were, and that was what they were doing, and it was before noon too, the only time the joint was closed for business, so the barroom was empty, and Lafitte had made his exit to have brunch upstairs.

“At least you’re not one of those born-again teetotalers”

“This situation would drive Carry Nation herself into the bottom of the whiskey

jar,” Hathaway told him. “What am I going to do? What are you going to do if I try to arrest you? What are the People’s Police going to do if I try to carry out the governor’s orders?”

Martin’s only response was a blank stare, which was hardly unexpected.

“What side will the people of New Orleans be on?”

“We both know that’s a very stupid question.”

Which, of course, Terrence Hathaway knew when he asked it, but he had no idea of what he was going to do in this quandary, and some deep tactical instinct had told him that at the very least feeling out the attitude of the People’s Police to his carrying out his sworn duty would provide him with some intelligence as to the nature of the catastrophe that would ensue if he did.

And of course Martin had obliquely confirmed what he already had wished he didn’t know. Because he damned well knew what he would do were he in command of the other side of the confrontation.

And “damned” was an accurate description in this case rather than a cuss word, because he knew he would not surrender. And being where he was now, he was damned if he obeyed Hockenberry’s orders to commit a terrible sin as a Christian, and damned if he didn’t to at the least being relieved, if not tried for some form of treason or mutiny that the current civilian authorities were perfectly capable of inventing.

“Well,” Hathaway said, “when in trouble, when in doubt, flap your arms and rush about. Or better, conduct the military equivalent.”

“Which is?”

“Keep your troops engaged in snappy parade ground exercises until you can

certify that they are ready for the mission,” Hathaway told Martin and himself at the same time.

He did have 48 hours, after all. And his troops were currently mostly on liberty in the city or sleeping off last night’s hangovers, and without proper sober MP squads, it could take at least that much time to marshal them at the airport in good order and return them to fitness for duty.

#

Well of course, I wasn’t having brunch, I was listening on the camera and mike system that any prudent saloon keeper installs in his barroom, which gave me 48 hours to pull a rabbit out of the ol’ hat.

Why me? Why not? This was the Big Easy, wasn’t it, this was semi-secret Party Town for the weasels in Baton Rouge, wasn’t it, I was also a bordello owner, wasn’t I, one among many, and didn’t we all keep video of the weirder kinks of our political guests for use where and when doing what was good for business required political leverage?

We’re all honorary Southern gentleman, after all, and blackmail material is such an ugly term for persuading those who needed persuading to do what needed to be done.

So after Martin and Hathaway left, I kept the place closed, made a few phone calls, convened an emergency meeting of my fellow whoremasters and madams, and told them what we needed, which was juicy footage of state legislators in perverse pornographic action.

Well, I guess you don’t have to imagine there was plenty of it, but let me tell you, you’d have to be a real dirty bird to imagine some of it. We had the means to control enough votes in the legislature to repeal the law of gravity.

But the necessary target was the governor and there was no footage on George Hockenberry in our extensive pornographic video gallery.

We were stymied until Charlie Devereau slunk into the joint uninvited. About as welcome as a friendly visit from an IRS agent until he told us why he felt constrained to seek our forgiveness and redeem himself in our eyes.

He told us that, while he might be a Republican, he was also a restaurateur who lived and died financially with the tourist trade, and the last thing he wanted was the State Police shutting down the fun and games that were greatly enhancing the same.

And two state representatives dining in one of his establishments had gotten roaring shit-faced drunk, maudlin babbling drunk, and before he had finished gracing them with a genteel VIP ejection, they had blubbered out the terrifying secret they had unsuccessfully tried to drown out of their consciousnesses.

Back when Mama Legba had checkmated the Powers That Be into just the sort of impossible corner we were in now, they had been present at a secret strategy session attended by a score or so representatives, a couple of senators, the usual mouthpieces of You Better Not Ask, and the then Lieutenant Governor.

This savvy and ruthless conclave had come up dry, until George Hockenberry, who was anything but dry, rose far enough from his stupor to offer up his shit-faced unfunny sarcastic suggestion.

“Too bad the Klan ain’t around to just solve our problem with a 12 gauge shotgun or a stick of dynamite, hah, hah, hah,” he had drooled. “‘Cause if I wuz Governor, hey, right, no problem.”

“You don’t suppose--”

“ You think they really---”

Everybody was talking at once, so I had to shout them down.

“It doesn’t matter.”

That shut up the barroom babble. Was my barroom anyway, now wasn’t it?

“It doesn’t matter,” I told them. “We come up with a couple witnesses will testify, we got the goods on Hockenberry for conspiracy to commit murder.”

“You don’t really believe--”

“Doesn’t matter what I or anyone else believes, it’s enough to get the Governor arrested, all we need is sworn testimony. And what do we all do in the Big Easy when we need some sworn testimony?”

That, no one needed to be told. And sure enough when we went through our collective whorehouse footage, we had more than what we needed on the two guys who had spilled the beans in Charlie’s restaurant, some of it really pathetically disgusting.

Even so, I insisted that we pass the hat to buy them a judge who would guarantee them immunity for their testimony, it might even be sort of legal, so it shouldn’t be unreasonably expensive, go along, get along.

“This is the Big Easy, now isn’t it?”

#

Colonel Hathaway had withdrawn his troops from the city to the airport and was taking a certain perverse pride in drilling an indifferent bunch of cops into a spit-and-polish military unit fit enough to grace the West Point parade ground on graduation day when the word came down that the governor had lost whatever patience he had ever had with less than a day to the deadline and was in the process of mobilizing the State

National Guard to insure that he order his own men to do their detestable duty by providing a convincing or else.

Wrong strategic move.

If the State Police and the People's Police had once detested each other in the traditional manner of cops defending their turf, the bad blood between the State Police and the National Guard was on another level. The State National Guard wasn't even a police force as the State Police saw it, but a bunch of farmboys, yahoos, and the unemployed in it for the monthly stipend and two weeks in summer camp to play soldier boys with the toys.

This was enough to shove Terrence Hathaway across his moral Rubicon. The half-wit puppet in the governor's mansion no doubt thought this made his order one he could not refuse, but it had made it an order he could not possibly obey and look himself in the shaving mirror afterward.

I'll resign, he decided as soon as he got the news.

No, he told himself, I can't just fob such dishonor off on whoever they replace me with.

I'll disobey the order and keep my men right here until I'm...

I'm what...?

Fired? Court martialed? Is there such a thing as a non-military court martial?

Colonel Terrence Hathaway had made his moral decision. It was the right decision and he was at peace with it. But when it came to translating it into any kind of strategy he was quite clueless.

#

I didn't bother to trammel Colonel Hathaway with the down and dirty details of how the written, signed, and recorded testimony I presented to him had been extracted, figuring that as a well-known righteous Christian and an officer and gentleman, he had no need to know, and would not be erotically entertained by scanning through the footage that did the trick once removed.

Leaving him twice-removed in his purity and innocence, which was exactly where the enlightened self-interest of all and sundry needed him. He was sincerely and righteously appalled at the revelation, of course, but did not bother to conceal his relieved delight at receiving the ammunition with which to fight his way out of the box he was in, nor hesitate to use it.

But in an admirably non-grandstanding manner, which in the end proved to be the most politic way he could've done it. He didn't helicopter on up to Baton Rouge to make the arrest himself, he simply sent a normal State Police unit to the governor's mansion to arrest Governor George Hockenberry on charges of conspiracy to commit murder, it was done a little after midnight, and the news media was not informed beforehand so there was no coverage until morning and no footage at all until it was announced that he was in State Police custody and the first image that was seen was of Hockenberry in a cell.

Hathaway, after all, had been an Army Military Police commander, and though I've mercifully had not personal experience being arrested and hustled off by MPs, I would imagine this was how they'd do a VIP version, especially when arresting one's own superior.

It's probably also military SOP to consult cagey lawyers at this point and Hathaway did, or so he told me, not to make sure he punctiliously observed the letter of

the law, but to use it to sow tactical confusion.

The Governor was under arrest but he was still governor and this in a state where Earle Long had remained governor while in the bughouse. Having the firing and appointment power, Earle had simply kept firing the medical directors until he finally hired one who would certify he wasn't crazy.

Governor Hockenberry fired Hathaway from his jail cell.

Hathaway denied his legal right to do this, and while the lawyers were having a high old time duking it out with the meter running, he issued a press release which announced that his current order was the final order of the last legal governor, Mama Legba, and under that order, he was to withdraw the State Police from New Orleans when order had been restored in conjunction with the People's Police, a mission which had certainly now been completed.

And proceeded to carry the rest of it out, withdrawing all his troops to the airport, and then parading them leisurely northward toward Baton Rouge, where the Secretary of State was arguing that he was now the governor under the current constitution, and the legislature was threatening to write a new one toute suite.

"I had gotten me two outside civilian lawyers, one from New Orleans, and one from Chicago both having been making good livings defending politicians in corruption cases, imagining that together they could cook up a big enough pot of legal spaghetti to untangle to keep the state without a governor for a good long while," he told me while we were discussing the Disney deal the governor's office years later.

Marching on Baton Rouge was never a threat of a coup, Governor Hathaway still insists, he told me why as he was doing it, and I still believe him.

“How could there be a coup against a civilian government that did not exist legally? Where no civil order existed, it was my sworn duty to keep the necessary peace and carry out the last order from a civil authority that remained valid. Police martial law, as it were, what alternative did I have?”

He always says this with a straight face, and I most always generally believe him. And I always believe him when he insists that he did it to preserve the minimum necessary order while Hockenberry and the Secretary of State and sundry others were pressing their conflicting claims to the governorship through the slow as molasses Louisiana courts leaving the state without a legally undisputed governor.

For four long fondly remembered years as it turned, no governor at all, until a new one was elected at the end of the current term as the constitution required.

I almost believe him when he insists that he never intended it to be him.

But as we all know, that’s how it came down, the trials, and the appeals, tied civil executive government in the required political knots quite long enough to midwife the birth of the Free State of Louisiana.

For four years, the State Police and the People’s Police of New Orleans and their out of town brothers were the only effective government of what came to be called the Free State of Louisiana, playing played go along, get along, enforcing what remaining laws were required, under a fancy legal version the press called “no victim, no crime.”

They went along, and we all found ourselves getting along just fine, while the State Legislature spent its time trying to pass everything by two-thirds vote, which, the Supreme Court ruled, would have allowed them to pre-emptively override the phantom vetoes of non-existent governors if they ever succeeded, which they never did.

How could they?

We the people liked the Free State of Louisiana just the way it was, so good for the high life, the liberty to enjoy it, and the unprecedentedly golden tourist trade, that we just had to draft Hathaway for governor on the promise, which he sincerely endorsed, that as governor he would also do as little as was necessary, not as much as was possible. Who else, after all, could we trust not to upset the sweet and juicy appplecart?

I was the one who made that first deal with Disney which brought in the first theme park Mardi Gras parade, the one still more less suitable for children, but with the Mouse in the game, and the People's Police under Commissioner Martin Luther Martin ready to let the real good times role in the restored commercial capital of the Free State of Louisiana, the X-rated Saints came marching in with one hand in their pants and the other reaching for their wallets.

And so did the Eternal Mardi Gras, with its sex, and drugs, and retro Dixieland, with its corporate financed Hollywood budget floats, its year-round days of wine and roses, raise New Orleans out of the muck and mire to its present fame, fortune, and glory as the Born Again Big Easy.

Las Vegas and Rio, eat your hearts out!

As long as it lives, we all will prosper.

J.B Baptiste has enough enjoyable sins on his soul without adding the sin of false modesty, and I claim my share of the credit, in dollars, euros, pounds, and all major credit cards, so maybe I really am the godfather of the Free Republic of Louisiana, praise from my friends, attack from my jealous enemies.

But for my money, and these happy days I've got plenty of it, Colonel Terrence

Hathaway was its Daddy. Washington was the father of the United States of America and Hathaway was the father of the Free State of Louisiana.

And that says it all.

Or does it?

I saw the Voodoo Queen Float again yesterday. I've seen it more times than I can count, whoever who's ever been to the Big Easy these days years hasn't? It circulates through the city every day of the year. It's got a five-times life-size audioanimatronic Mama Legba in Follies Berger Voodoo Queen stripper's gear taking it all all every half hour. It's got naked girls and boys galore tossing mardi gras throws and plastic mardi gras coins good for free drinks, fucks, spliffs, and shows at participating venues.

And every half hour, when she's down to her nipples and pubic hair, she tosses a few of the very special ones, the ones that get you out of the crowd and onto the float if you dare, to take part in the audioanimatronic voodoo ceremony replete with disneyland dancing headless chickens, and if you're so chosen, to allow some kind of wizard loa virtual reality program to dance you around like its happy horse.

Maybe.

But this time around seeing the show got me thinking.

What if there is no program? What if it's the real deal?

What if this Eternal Mardi Gras is just what the loas intended?

If they're there, they're here, aren't they? If they exist, and they showed up to take it, wouldn't we give them the key to this city? If they exist, maybe they had it all the time already. If they exist, isn't it their party too? They sure are getting along in proper improper Big Easy style, so naturally, why not go along and enjoy the ride?

Does that mean you have to believe in voodoo?

Who gives a swamp rat's ass?

No one wants to rain on anyone's mardi gras parade in the Big Easy.

Y'all come down and see what I mean.

end