



The UpStairs Lounge

Dead men do tell tales

by **Aaron Ragan-Fore**

The psychic is already on his second glass of cheap red wine, and he's been in the bar only ten minutes.

Phillip is in his late thirties, slight of stature, intense in disposition and nearly bald. He sits stoically, cloaked in the gloom of murky bar air at the head of the table, regarding his fellow ghost-hunter Kalila, her dark, straight hair bobbing as she dances along to the routine of four muscular young men, a Village People tribute group.

The costumed performers, on break from a show at a competing club down the street, are in the throes of an impromptu performance of the disco hit "Y.M.C.A." here in Jimani Lounge, an Italian bar at Chartres and Iberville, in New Orleans' French Quarter. Kalila seems especially enchanted by the cop character, a friendly African-American man in an incredibly tight tee shirt.

Phillip is hitting the red hard. He'd much rather be ogling the beefcake, but he's already picking up strong psychic impressions from the floor above, and the wine, he explains, "smooths out the edges." He's more forthcoming when pressed: wine drowns out the telepathic barrage of voices and impressions constantly battering at his consciousness. His daily intake is in the neighborhood of fifteen glasses. Phillip makes a point of never beginning a supernatural investigation without first bellying up.

Instead of watching the high kicks, Phillip has busied himself unscrewing the top of a plastic salt shaker. He neatly dumps the contents into a small plastic baggie he has produced from somewhere on his person. Phillip twists the baggie tightly closed and pockets it, as if squirreling away an ounce of cocaine.

"Do you believe in coincidence?" Phillip drawls at me, in an accent that reveals his backwoods Oklahoma origins. "I don't," he states flatly. We're here tonight to investigate the site of the gay bar that occupied the space one floor above us in the 1970s, and Village People look-alikes "randomly" showing up feels like fate. Or prescience.

Just a quarter-hour ago, Phillip left his night job at Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo, a French Quarter occult supply shop catering mostly to tourists. Phillip is one of the store's in-house psychic readers, advising vacationing secretaries and sloshed frat boys how to get laid or get loved.

The Jimani, pronounced like "Gemini" but misspelled to incorporate the given name of its founder, Jimmy Massacci, Sr., occupies the first floor of a building whose second story once housed the UpStairs Lounge, the gay club. The UpStairs had been a gathering place for the Quarter's nascent gay scene, even hosting homosexual-inclusive church services, until a Sunday evening in June of 1973, when someone lit an incendiary device, lobbed it into the stairwell leading up to the club and locked the street-side door from the outside.

Twenty-nine people, mostly homosexual men, died in the flames that night, while another three victims succumbed in the following days. The destruction of the UpStairs was the most deadly fire in the city's history, and an event that quickly evolved into a rallying point for gay rights in the Crescent City. The arsonist-murderer was never caught.

The space once occupied by the bar is now a storage room and office space for the Jimani below. Kalila has never been in those rooms on the building's second floor, but she did investigate the stairwell here once before, years ago. At that time she cut the investigation short, overcome by powerful negative sensations. Current Jimani owner Jimmy, Jr. has agreed that tonight Kalila can conduct a new investigation.

"Do I have time for one more wine?" Phillip quizzes Kalila.

Our nominal leader seems to be getting antsy – she has a forty-minute drive back to her home in the suburb of Laplace – but acquiesces: "You're the oracle," she says to Phillip. He downs his third glass of wine quickly, like a prescription.

A burly, sour, middle-aged man, an employee of Jimmy's, escorts us out the front door and around the block, where he grudgingly unlocks an unmarked door on Iberville, a pointed contrast to the jaunty awning that once marked the club's entrance.

It's too dark to see it tonight, but as we wait for the door to be unlocked, our little hunting party is standing on a sidewalk plaque inscribed in memoriam with 32 names. "I don't believe in coincidences," Phillip offers up again, the second invocation of what will turn out to be a mantra for the evening's activities. "Things happen for a reason." Phillip seems more on edge, more irritable, with each step closer to our destination, and even mutters an "Oh, shit" as the surly employee finally coaxes the door open.

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We peer into the gloom. I can tell that the narrow, steeply winding staircase ahead of me was once red. Some of the bright paint still clings to the steps in odd places. At first I assume it's simply age that has stripped the paint from the wood. With a chill, I realize that the stairs are, in fact, charred and blackened from the fire, scrubbed to an obsidian shine by the footsteps of workmen and bar employees in the ensuing three and a half decades. The day after the holocaust, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* noted that "a mass of bodies" was found here, in this cramped, tomb-like corridor we must now enter single-file.

The last time Kalila investigated this location, she reminds us, the door at the top of the stairs, the door into the former site of the UpStairs Lounge itself, was locked. That was okay with Kalila, though, as she had no desire at that time to enter. The psychic imprint on the place made her so ill, she relates, that she was forced to leave after only a few moments of investigating the stairwell. On that occasion, in the midst of her psychic episode, Kalila had seen a vision of a man, arms outstretched in Christ-like supplication, his figure ablaze.

"Well," Phillip announces with mock cheeriness as he tries the door, "it's open now!" Phillip stands at the head of our small, single-file posse, at the top of the stairs, and opens the door a crack. Jimmy gave Kalila permission to access the stairwell, not the storage room and office beyond, but we interpret the unlocked door as an invitation – or is that a sign? – and the two psychics steel themselves to enter, like divers sucking down a series hearty, regular breaths just before plunging into unknown waters.

Before he enters, Phillip turns awkwardly in the cramped space, extends his left hand, palm down and bids each of us in turn hold a hand parallel to his. I can tell he thinks I'll feel something. I am not a believer in such things, but what the heck, I'm game. I bring my right hand close to his, very close. Phillip holds his palm stiffly, flexing it flat with a will, as if he's fighting the impulse to smack my hand.

When our palms are only a couple centimeters apart, when my fingers can detect the heat of Phillip's skin, something happens. I feel the blood of my hand rush upward to the palm, drawn to Phillip's hand as if it's somehow magnetized. The sensation lasts only a split-second, but in that instant I feel as if each and every red blood cell in my fingers is an insect, seeking Phillip's light and heat.

We wordlessly agree to keep the lights switched off as we enter the room. I can dimly make out two refrigerators against one wall. Metal shelving holds cans and cans of foodstuffs, bottles and bottles of cleaning chemicals. The only illumination comes from the small flashlight I'm poking into darkened corners, from the streetlights below and, at irregular intervals, headlight beams from the Quarter slicing across the walls at odd angles. I can hear party noise from outside, from below, from down the block... another Tuesday night in New Orleans.

Phillip is already getting something. He strides around the dusky room, commencing with a psychically powered monologue. "There... was a lot of love in this room," he begins, wistfully. I start to walk towards a darkened room off to the side of this storage area before Phillip's icy voice stops me short: "I wouldn't do that!" I suddenly realize that the energy in the room changes, the further from the center I wander. It's as if there is some sort of electricity in the air, moving in a ring around our little party of investigators, its epicenter spiraling between us, the storeroom's corporeal visitors. It's the palm of Phillip's hand, magnified.

"They had a purpose," Phillip states. "Were they trying to organize something? Were they trying to organize a ... civil rights kinda march, or... something?" In his near trance state, Phillip toggles so rapidly between addressing questions and statements to us, and to the supernatural presences he's sensing, that it quickly grows difficult to keep track.

Kalila says she is starting to feel ill like last time, but Phillip is focused on something else. "*This* is what matters," he states, indicating the far wall with the two refrigerators. "This wall is what matters. 'Cause you know what? He stood here. He stood here. He preached from here."

A particularly loud burst of revelry rises up from the Jimani below, as if in agreement. I know, from my own research, that church services *were* held here in this room. The New Orleans branch of the Universal Fellowship Metropolitan Community Church, a gay-friendly ministry, did meet here at the UpStairs, on occasion. The night of the fire was a party night, not a church event, but the UFMCC lost ten members, a devastating blow to a congregation that numbered only 35.

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Phillip seems given over to a sorrow we're all beginning to feel. "*They didn't know*," he whispers, urgently. I'm not sure what he means, but I feel my throat tighten, my eyes water. "They didn't know until..." Phillip trails off, caught in a coughing jag. As if to answer Kalila's unspoken question, Phillip murmurs, "It's not a reaction to the..."

He doesn't finish, but his meaning is clear. *The smoke. The thirty-five year-old fire.* "My sinuses are bothering me," Phillip explains. Little wonder, really, considering the man's prodigious cigarette intake. When I met Phillip yesterday for the first time, business was slow at the occult supply shop, so he sucked down four or five smokes in the first twenty minutes of our conversation, washed down with a midday bottle of Abita Beer.

Beyond the room, out in the Quarter, police sirens scream, as if to conjure the events of the long-ago arson. Phillip claims not to know the particulars of the fire, but the scene as he describes it, as if it's unfolding as a movie only he can see, turns out to be (my research shows) startlingly accurate. Phillip describes how the smoke and flame rolled into the room: "It all came at once." How the horrified clubbers ran to the windows. "They broke 'em, they thought they'd let the smoke out," Phillip says. "Thought someone would see the smoke, put out the fire."

But smoke and heat were nearly all that could escape through those windows. They had bars on them, for security. "No one could get out," Kalila intones mournfully. "They melted to the bars."

Horribly enough, this is true. Witnesses to the gruesome scene reported that William Larson, the church congregation's pastor, pressed himself against the security bars in his final moments, screaming "Oh God, no!" before a falling air conditioning unit ended his life. (Larson's lifeless form was the first thing the current Jimani owner, Jimmy Massacci, Jr., then thirteen years old, saw when he arrived on the scene. "It looked like a white mannequin," Jimmy recalls.)

Phillip has started again. "They ran..." He strides, long-legged, to an even darker corner, with a sink. The faucet is dripping. Phillip regards the corner sadly. "They huddled in there, y'know? And they died over there." This too is true: the *Times-Picayune* reports of bodies "piled knee-high" against the windows, near to where we currently stand. I listen to Phillip's high-pitched voice. "They were *so sure* someone would come. They were *so sure* someone would put it out."

"Well, this door wasn't here," says Kalila, indicating the room I'd almost entered. "They were trapped."

"That's why you stay out of there," Phillip directs at me, offhanded. A high-pitched waver has entered the medium's voice, further emphasizing his accent. It's almost like he's crying, but not quite. Phillip's lilt is matter-of-fact, wistful, as if he's contemplating a lost love.

His voice changes again, now conspiratorial, almost harried: "Get ready," as if he's preparing to grace us with his grand entrance.

Or, as if *someone* is.

Phillip stares intently at a fixed point in the empty ether. For the moment, we the living are once again forgotten. "You're Jimmy," Phillip states, quietly, definitively. He pauses, listens intently, waiting for another ghost to identify himself. "Ernest." Phillip may be on the level. Perhaps the spirit of James Curtis Warren or of James Walls Hambrick, men who perished in the blaze, introduced himself to Phillip as "Jimmy." There is no known "Ernest" among the dead, but three unidentified white males were interred in the city's Potter's Field.

Phillip rattles off another couple of names, then seems suddenly irritable: "*One at a time*," he snaps. Evidently the spirits are coming too quick for the medium to keep up. His voice is urgent, an almost inaudible whisper. "*Stop. Just stop.*"

The roll call complete, Phillip surfaces enough to engage us once again. “I’d like to tell ya that smoke killed ’em before the fire did, but it didn’t. It hurt. It hurt *a lot*.” Phillip slips open the drawstring of his shaman’s medicine bag, rummages around, and produces the small baggie of salt from the Jimani downstairs. He strides through the darkness to the north corner of the drafty room and dashes a pinch of salt in the cardinal direction, a blessing. “Be made welcome,” Phillip says solemnly, as he sprinkles the mineral. He makes a circuit of the room, stopping at each corner and repeating his table-top condiment blessing. “Be made welcome... Be made welcome... Be made welcome.”

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The medium ends the circuit at the south wall, at a large metal table, the type cooks use to prepare meat. He stands behind it like a pulpit, and with the two Jimani refrigerators as a backdrop, knocks with his fist slowly, methodically, three raps upon the tabletop, then intones: “Greetings.”

Laughter swells from below the floor. Phillip, undisturbed, breaks into another channeled speech.

“It meant something... Their individual lives, their individual deaths. *It meant something*,” he hisses angrily. I wonder for a moment if Phillip is directing the invective at us, then decide he’s simply overcome with emotion. “Some of the living mourn you,” he addresses to the spirits. “Most of you went to your own respective afterlives. For the confused...” Phillip pauses, seems to regroup. “Another queer with no religion offers you a chance to move on, a chance to depart.” Phillip’s voice, formerly gravelly and shrill, melts into a cozy buttered whisper, somewhere between smoker scratch and bourbon smooth. “A chance for *peace*.”

“In the name of God,” he continues, “may you know peace. Whoever did this, they’ve suffered on their own.” He’s winding down now. “But you have a chance for peace. Your suffering is over. Whether you went quick, whether you went slow... For all you who gathered at the window, *step away from the window*.”

Phillip’s voice suddenly rises in triumph: “Okay,” he says, “we’ve got three resentfuls!” Apparently Phillip has ferreted out a problem: three irate spirits who refuse to cross over to the afterlife, and he’s just the man to solve it. “Oddly enough,” he says, “only three.”

Then Phillip’s tone shifts so abruptly that at first I think he’s speaking to us, his fellow investigators: “*Damn*, you bitches have done a *number* on this!” He indicates his medicine bag, the laces of which, I’m shocked to see, have somehow knotted together in intricate tangles since Phillip opened the bag and threw the salt less than five minutes ago.

Phillip tries to coax the lingering spirits to leave, but the resentfuls must be reluctant. “You need a life,” Phillip snarls at the ether. “Cut short at *twelve*, cut short at *seventy*, you still got somethin’ to do! *It sucks! Get over it!* It’s your chance to move on, make a start again. No more anger.”

Now Phillip has managed to extricate a device known as a Boji stone from his twisted leather medicine bag. It is smooth and blue and round, like a large marble. He’s attempting some impromptu magic, to release the spirits from their ties to this room. Phillip palms the small orb, then casts it sharply against the metal tabletop, *clak!* as if smacking at an insect. The sound is jarring, but not as jarring as the way the little globe immediately shoots directly off the west edge of the surface when Phillip releases it, seemingly propelled by an unseen hand, descending to land, *thot!* on the low-pile carpet below.

I bend for the Boji, wanting to help, but Phillip instructs me to leave it where it lies and extends one lanky arm to cast its mate, *clak!* against the table. The second stone circles and circles around the tabletop with the force of a pinball, still describing great arcs long after simple momentum should have stopped it. The stone’s thin metallic rumble, as it circles the cosmic drain, somehow matches Phillip’s crawly drawl. “Some of ’em are gone,” he suggests. “It feels a lot lighter in here.”

“Hm, yeah. It does,” Kalila agrees.

Phillip turns his attention again to the twisted bag. “They’ve done a fuckin’ *number* on this thing,” he laughs as he starts to detangle the laces. “It will take me *hours*.” To Kalila, now: “Still a few hostiles.” He says the word, *hoss-tie-uls*, with three syllables.

“Oh, it’s okay to be gay!” Phillip assures someone unseen. Then back to all of us, “It feels better. It even feels cooler.”

My head is starting to feel as twisted as the bag laces, with Phillip’s frequent shifts in addressing first the spirits, then the living, then the

spirits again. I don't know what to believe any more, but I know something has happened here.

"Did your resentfuls go?" I venture to ask.

"It'll take them awhile longer," Phillip explains. "But the door is open for 'em."

Phillip strides abruptly, purposefully out of the room and begins to descend the charred staircase. We follow in his wake.

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