

Second Place Winner

The Last Dinner at Bayou St. John

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Eight guests arrived at half past eight,
Magnolias scenting every room.
Oaks bent low above the gate;
Lanterns gilded gathering gloom.

The Host stood smiling, silver-haired,
Heirloom glass and polished grace.
He welcomed each with practiced care,
Something restless crossing his face.

Three governors had sought his hand;
His counsel settled feuds and claims.
Old fortunes rose—or quietly fell—
According to the names he named.

His summons bore no stated cause,
No wedding, wake, nor business claim.
Yet none refused the handwritten note—
Each feared to disappoint his name.

The Judge wore linen, crisp and white,
His pocket watch kept perfect time.
He never lost a case in court—
Though some still questioned one old crime.

The Widow dressed in lace that night,
Pearls as pale as chapel stone.
She never met the Host's dark gaze—
Though once he'd called her all his own.

The Priest arrived with lowered eyes,
His rosary wound through careful hands.
He offered blessings free to all—
Yet carried one no soul could stand.

The Gambler smiled through polished lies,
Shuffling cards like shifting sands.
The Heiress wore a carnival mask—
No fortune comes with spotless hands.

The Captain smelled of salt and spray,
Oysters filled his weathered sack.
The Doctor joked the blues away,
Black leather case strapped to his back.

The Lawyer smiled with polished ease,
Answering questions as he pleased.
He measured every word with care—
As though some truths were legal fees.

They raised a toast to absent friends.
The bourbon burned; the candles swayed.
Outside, the bayou curved and bent.
Inside, no honest word was made.

Beyond the dock, one lantern swayed;
A lone skiff rocked against the tide.
The fisherman drew in his nets—
And watched the house with patient eyes.

Before the candles guttered low,
The Host withdrew with soft excuse.
No guest remarked his empty chair—
They simply spoke of other news.

At dawn the breakfast room was bright;
Eight goblets caught the morning's gleam.

Yet seven guests resumed their seats—
The Host was nowhere to be seen.

No widow wept. No priest gave prayer.
No servant voiced a word of dread.
The sheriff simply counted chairs,
Then tipped his hat and bowed his head.

No traveler claimed the missing name.
No carriage sought the vanished guest.
By dusk the parish whispered low:
"Perhaps the bayou knows the rest."

Some whispered of a charter signed,
To claim the marsh and channel's bend.
The bayou fed a hundred homes—
But wealth could starve it in the end.

Three dawns the bayou held its peace,
Then yielded up a silver tine;
An oyster fork, with family crest,
As bright as on the fatal night.

The Captain studied every mark.
"My table never bore this plate."
Yet something flickered in his eyes—
Too swift for anyone to name.

Next came a rosary, dark with silt,
One weathered bead forever gone.
The Priest received it without a word,
Then crossed himself and hurried on.

By week's end, from the reeds below,
A single pearl shone pale and cold.
The Widow touched her vacant strand,
Yet never asked who broke the gold.

A fleur-de-lis cufflink emerged,
Still bright beneath the drifting clay.
The Lawyer turned it in his hand—
"A handsome piece," was all he'd say.

Then drifted in a surgeon's blade,
Its ivory handle worn and thin.
The Doctor frowned. "It's not the one
I carried... when we gathered in."

A queen of hearts came floating next,
Its scarlet edges stained with brine.
The Gambler smiled, then paled at once—
Though only for the briefest time.

The sheriff spread the gathered clues,
Each neatly wrapped, each duly shown.
"These were not left to solve the crime . . .
They were left to name their own."

Each relic pointed toward one guest,
Each tale another soul condemned.
By Saturday suspicion turned
From oldest friend to newest friend.

The sheriff marked each place and date,
Each trinket claimed by wind and foam.
One name appeared beside them all—
The man who bore each relic home.
Beneath the skiff, in oilskin bound,
The sheriff found one final page:
"Bring no accusation forth.
No righteous speeches need be made.

"Release each token, one by one.
No judge need hear what silence speaks.
The guilty carry heavier chains
Than any courtroom ever keeps."

The sheriff folded up the page,
At last the pattern standing clear.
The Host had left no names at all—
He left each conscience facing fear.