

# Une Belle Soiree

## New Orleans French Quarter 1860

It was a quiet Sunday morning in May. Suzette opened her eyes, as the gentle morning light fell on her cheek. Almost immediately she realized that this was the day of her Confirmation. She quickly rose and nudged her little sister, Francesca. **Franni wake up! Wake up, ma cherie! Today will be a wonderful day. I will be confirmed!** Francesca rubbed all dreams from her eyes and hugged her sister. **Oui oui Su-su, un plus bon jour. A very good day!**



The girls slept in an upstairs room above Papa's Patisserie, his bakery. On most days Papa would be busy baking his well loved baguettes, beignets, and other pastries for the shop. Maman would be helping with the morning preparations. But today was Sunday so the family could spend the whole day together according to French custom.

The Dupré sisters tumbled down the wooden stairs to the kitchen where Maman was preparing breakfast. Papa quietly appeared smiling, wondering what all the commotion was about though he knew well enough. **Ah, mes petites fleurs! What noise you make!** Then with a warm smile Maman beckoned them into the sitting room. She revealed the lace Confirmation dress she had completed late the night before. Suzette's eyes grew large. **Oh, Maman! C'est une belle robe! C'est la plus belle robe du monde!** It's the most beautiful dress in the world!

Suzette and Franni's mother, Madame Emelie Dupre', was a "gen du couleur libre"...a free woman of color. She was renown in the French Quarter for her lovely creations. Silks and laces arrived regularly from France. Among the gowns created by the seamstresses in New Orleans, Madame Dupre's detailed dresses were the most highly prized. The lace for this most important dress had been chosen by Suzette's French grandmother when Papa visited his parents in Paris the past autumn.

Suzette ate her breakfast quickly. She could hardly wait to dress in her lacy finery! When Suzette appeared her parents couldn't help but smile. Maman arranged a large silk bow in Suzette's thick, glorious curls. Papa pinned fragrant sprigs on Suzette's dress and the family set out. The walk down Chartres to St. Louis Cathedral was not far. Families made their way across the broad plaza to the Cathedral's ornate entrance. Suzette loved this sacred building, this house of God. The Cathedral had been the family's spiritual home since 1851 when the doors first opened. It was here that Suzette had received her first Holy Communion. The Duprés felt at home among the congregation. Families of many origins, nationalities, languages and economic conditions worshipped here in harmony.



Suzette walked reverently down the wide center aisle of the great church and joined her Confirmation classmates in the front pews. Scores of candles surrounded the altar in a



heavenly glow. The Bishop began the Confirmation ceremony and spoke kindly to the children. Suzette took his wise words to heart. He blessed each child individually and asked what saint's name each would take. Suzette responded without hesitation, **St Anne, Mary's mother!** St. Anne was the patron saint of seamstresses and of mothers. Suzette hoped to one day be a seamstress and a mother just like her own dear Maman. Soon the Cathedral's grand organ filled the air with joyful music as the children joined their parents to celebrate this truly wonderful day!

Out of the Cathedral and into the sunshine, the families were met by scores of vendors with little carts selling every sort of treat. The large plaza had transformed from the quiet oasis in the middle of the Quarter into a lively festival. Though this happened every Sunday, Suzette felt a special joy on this day! In one corner of the square a young violinist played Pachebel's Canon as if each note were a prayer.

**Su-su,** exclaimed Franni tugging Suzette's arm. **Su-su! Les Marionettes! Voila!** The Dupre' family strolled across the square to a little stage where amusing puppeteers performed to the delight of many children gathered together singing as one, **Ainsi font, font, font...**



The puppet show ended and Suzette's mother guided the family to the edge of the square. As a treat, Tante Marie had arranged for a horse drawn carriage to deliver them to her beautiful home in Faubourg Tremé for Suzette's celebration. The carriage was made of fine wood and soft leather but the ride was quite noisy! Even the horses were spirited as if they knew this was a no ordinary day.



Maman's sister lived in a "wedding cake" mansion. That's how Orleanians thought of homes that were elaborate and exquisitely tiered. As they approached, the mansion's wrought iron gates parted. Su-su and Franni could barely stay seated as the horses moved through. "Tata" Marie met the family with warm hugs and escorted them into the grand salon where dozens of relatives and guests were waiting. Musicians immediately began playing a song dear to Suzette. Dancing music!

But before dancing Maman, Papa and the sisters must eat. Tante Marie insisted! And such choices! Every imagined delicacy had been prepared in honor of Suzette's confirmation. There were platters of bayou shrimp, crawfish, oysters, steaming bowls of fragrant beans and rice, gumbo and étouffées. Guests were offered pecan and bread puddings, beignets and Tata Marie's pralines. Suzette and Franni tried a bit of every dish and then they danced! They danced with cousins, aunties and uncles, friends, each other, Maman and Papa. The musicians changed tempos and the girls danced on.

The magical afternoon that May passed as does one's favorite song, sung with delight and gone too soon. Day's light faded into the mystery of twilight. Papa and Maman gathered their weary daughters and lifted them into the carriage for the return to their happy home above the patisserie on Chartres Street. The horses' hooves landed on the unpaved streets of this storied city in a steady rhythm. Franni leaned against her mother and closed her eyes while Suzette's thoughts wandered through the bright memories of her delight filled day. In her heart she wasn't willing for the music and the fun to come to an end. The rhythm of the horses' hooves reminded her of the dancing marionettes and she began to softly sing the song of the puppeteers, **Ainsi font, font, font, les petites marionettes.....** Franni opened her eyes and joined Suzette singing joyfully, animating the night's ride, miming the words as the carriage headed home.

And so Suzette's beautiful day came to an end. She would cherish her memories of the most beautiful dress, her darling family, a sacred day and a joyous celebration. Tomorrow Suzette's dress would be gently rinsed, dried and stored away. Suzette would rise with the sun beaming and Papa's baguettes baking. She would wake her little sister and don another pretty dress made by her loving Maman. Suzette would join Papa in the bakery, helping in whatever ways a child might, greeting customers with a sweet smile, tucking beignets into little paper envelopes and even pouring steaming cups of coffee.



end, Suzette and Franni would sit with Papa under their courtyard's bougainvillea trellis reading stories. So let us leave them there as they lived and loved many years ago. Au revoir, chere famille Dupré!

When the bakery's doors closed at day's end, Suzette and Franni would sit with Papa under their courtyard's bougainvillea trellis reading stories. So let us leave them there as they lived and loved many years ago. Au revoir, chere famille Dupré!



# La Fin

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