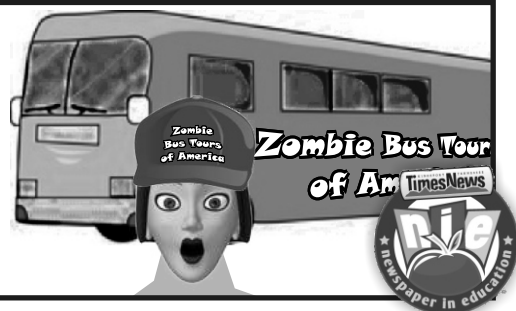


Zombie Bus Tours of America

By: Zevon Price

Part 1



Uncle Pat waited in line while several other buses unloaded. They finally pulled up to the cemetery gates and opened the doors.

"Everyone follow me, and be sure to keep your relatives and friends close. It's very easy to get lost inside here, especially with our more directionally-challenged friends. If you do happen to get separated from the group, just yell Marco. I'll answer with Polo, and we should be able to find each other. Now, hold onto yourselves, because we're about to show you the most interesting cemetery in America!"

Chase picked up her clipboard and followed her aunt off the bus. Twenty people, twenty three zombies. She checked each one off as they disembarked. Once she had them all marked off her checklist, she moved to the back and stood beside Uncle Pat.

Chase squeezed into the narrow entrance, which doglegged to the left and left hardly any room for her at all. She pulled the brim of her Zombie Tours of America ball cap low and breathed through her mouth, trying to ignore the smell. One of the handlers, a woman named Claire, jostled her as she ushered her zombie into the rest of the group.

"I'm so sorry!" she whispered, leaning down. She was almost six feet tall, and the zombie she escorted, Mr. Amos Wicker, was her grandfather. Chase had gotten to know most of the handlers on the trip down, but she liked Claire best of all.

"It's okay." Chase moved aside so Claire could guide her grandfather up to the front. Unlike quite a few of the handlers, Claire didn't seem to mind anything about this whole ordeal. She was patient with her grandfather, who for the most part was mute and confused.

The group followed Liza through the twisting line of tombs. Some were almost completely fallen in, others as new as if they'd just been built yesterday. Some were topped with crosses, others had family names, and some had nothing at all written on them.

There were no signs of the recent exodus of zombies. Chase supposed the groundskeeper would have taken care of that, though.

"Most tombs are double stackers," Liza said. "When someone passes, their body is placed in the top receptacle for at least a year, undisturbed. When another person in that same family passes on, the first's remains are placed in the bottom compartment, with all the other bones of the previously deceased, and the new person is placed in the upper vault. This is what allows so many people to be buried in such a small place. Think of all the land that's been saved by recycling the same tomb. You might say New Orleans was the birthplace of recycling!"

"What a fascinating graveyard!" Claire said. "Isn't it just gorgeous, Grandpa?"

"Technically it's not a graveyard," Chase said. "It's a cemetery."

The woman blinked at her. "A graveyard is always connected to a church," Chase said. "A cemetery is a collection of graves, or tombs, in this case. A little bit of useless trivia you can use on your friends when you get back."

She didn't bother to tell Claire that she'd picked that information up from the guidebook.

"How interesting. Don't you think, Grandpa?"

Mr. Wicker made a sound that might have been a moan, or an agreement. Claire smiled and led him by the arm down the narrow corridor of tombs to where Liza had gathered the rest of the group.

"Prepare yourselves, ladies and gentlemen, because you are about to meet the most famous Voodoo Queen of all times!"

To Be Continued...

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Chase needed a summer job.

Just a chance to earn some quick cash before school, possibly save up toward that car she'd had her eyes on. It wasn't new, but it was in great condition and just within her price range, if she just had a little more cash. She'd planned on going down to the local Mickie D's. They always hired teenagers, and even though she didn't care much for the thought of slinging buns across a counter, she was willing to make the sacrifice. She'd filled out the application and was on her way out the door when she overheard her mom talking on the phone.

"Chase? Well, I don't know if she's looking for a job or not, but I could ask. I'm just not sure I like the idea of her traveling out of state. I know you and Pat would be with her the whole time, but still, that just seems like a dangerous job."

Chase tiptoed back toward the kitchen. Mentioning Pat meant her mother was talking to her Aunt Liza. Liza and Pat had recently started a tour bus business, carting people around the south to and from tourist attractions. She had no idea how that could be considered dangerous, unless one of the old folks got car sick all over the place, but if that meant a summer of traveling rather than asking "Would you like fries with that?" she'd brave a lot more than queasy geezers.

Chase folded the job application and put it in her pocket. She forced her expression to bland disinterest and strolled into the kitchen. Her mother looked up from the vegetables she was chopping for tonight's dinner.

"Hold on, Liza. She just walked in." Her mom put her hands on her hips and blew a strand of curly brown hair out of her eyes. "I don't like this, and you'll have to ask your father, but Liza wants to know if you'd like to work for her this summer."

Chase shrugged, picked a carrot from the pile her mother was in the process of dismembering, and clamped down on her excitement. "I guess."

It had taken the rest of the week to convince her father to let her go. Both Liza and Uncle Pat came over twice to argue him into it. Finally, he agreed, and Chase accepted her new position with Zombie Bus Tours of America.

Zombies had become something of a problem of late, with all the rising from the graves stuff. At first, the world had lost its collective mind, trying to figure out a solution for dealing with newly risen zombies. When it became obvious they were less ravaging, bloodthirsty monsters and more confused, disenfranchised population, the government banned plans for eradication and worked to find a way to integrate the zombies back into the living population. There were the occasional mishaps, but for the most part, things were working out okay. A lot of zombies had been taken in by former family members, and that was where Zombie Bus Tours of America came into play. For a reasonable price, Liza and Pat would take zombies and their handlers on a tour of America, hopefully giving them a chance to reconnect.

Chase stowed her luggage in the under-bus compartment with the rest of the suitcases. The bus was top-of-the line, sleek and silver with tinted windows to keep out the harmful UV rays. The front of the bus was separated from the zombies and their handlers by a glass partition, and the ventilation system pumped out a constant stream of chilly air. Most of the handlers opted for jackets and longer pants, while the zombies wore whatever the handlers had decided to put them in.

Most wore long pants and long-sleeves shirts, the better to hide their slowly-decomposing states. A couple wore air fresheners around their necks. By the time the bus made it to Jonesborough, Chase was carsick from the competing odors of vanilla and cinnamon-pinecone scented death.

Uncle Pat drove while Aunt Liza entertained the travelers with anecdotes and stories about the towns and places they traveled through. Chase handed out refreshments, Cokes and Pepsis for the handlers, little bags of peanuts and sweets. For the zombies, they had small packages of uncooked bacon. She ignored the way they chewed with their mouths open as best she could.

They stopped at cemetery after cemetery, at Civil War battle sites, Patsy Cline's Crash Memorial, and the occasional odd-ball tourist attraction. At each stop, Aunt Liza led the tour while Pat and Chase brought up the rear, herding the zombies and keeping them from wandering off.

The final stop was New Orleans. It was bigger than Chase had even imagined, and once she managed to ignore the kamikaze taxi drivers shooting into gaps between the cars too small for an Escort, she couldn't believe all she saw. The buildings were huge. Skyscrapers stacked side-by-side with grand old houses. The closer to the city center they came, the older the houses were. Tiny, two room shotgun houses sat shoulder to shoulder with stone and townhouses, tucked away behind high courtyard walls. The streets were called banquettes, streets made wide enough to accommodate the dresses the ladies had worn back when the city was built.

"New Orleans, also known as The Big Easy, is one of the most storied cities in all of America," Liza said over the sound system. "It's the birthplace of jazz, Creole cooking, and Mardi Gras. Despite Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has rebuilt itself bigger and better than ever. On the way back, we'll be sure to stop by the world famous Café Dumond in the French Quarter for its coffee and beignets. No trip to New Orleans is complete without a stop at the world's best coffee shop."

Chase had read about Café Dumond in her guide book. Beignets, to the best she could tell, were donuts without the holes, deep-fried and covered in powdered sugar. Kind of like a funnel cake. She was dying to try them.

Although, she couldn't imagine dusting powdered sugar off a bus full of zombies. Still, it would probably be better than trying to feed them gumbo.

"Our destination is St. Louis Cemetery #1. It's the oldest cemetery in the city, just a block outside the French Quarter. It's only as large as a city block, but has more than one hundred thousand people buried inside."

Chase pressed her nose against the glass. The cemetery set across Basin Street from the intersection. It was surrounded by a high washed-out stone wall. Peaked roofs, white and iron crosses, and tall monoliths peeked over the top of the wall. It was smaller than Chase had expected. She'd envisioned a large, cypress tree filled rolling landscape hidden deep in a nook of the city.

"It doesn't look very big," one of the handlers said.

"Oh, not from the outside," Liza said. "But from the inside, it's an entire city in itself. One of the most famous cities in the world, in fact. Every tomb here is built above ground, because New Orleans is actually built below the water table."