

DELICE

BY HOLLY NEWSTEIN

The grinding sound of stone on stone was muffled by the hot, still air. Moments later a heavy stench so foul as to be almost visible filled the night like an exhalation. A white-clad figure leaned into the opened tomb and pulled something bundled in a stained sheet out into the moonlight. It slid to the brick pavement with a thud.

The white wraith closed the tomb with a groan of effort. It bent over the bundle and gently pulled the sheet aside.

“Ah, me, cette petite. Quelle dommage.” It lifted the bundle from the bricks and carried it away, until they were both swallowed up in the inky shadows.

A sickly yellow flash of lightning illuminated the “dead-houses” in the cemetery. Thunder sounded a rolling boom in the distance.

The first thing Delice heard was the storm. Fat raindrops thrummed on the tin roof, but it would bring no relief to the stifling August night. “Ce pauve, ce pauve,” crooned a strange, soft alto voice. Skirts rustled as the voice’s owner moved about the room.

The voice and the rain and the whisper of fabric were very soothing to her. She had not had many peaceful moments in her short life, so she lay quite still, taking small breaths. She did not want the spell broken nor the moment lost.

A warm hand touched her cheek.

“Ma pauve, wake up now.”

Delice opened her eyes.

A tall, turbaned woman smiled down at her. She was slender, with café-au-lait skin and slanting black eyes. Deftly she slipped a necklace over Delice’s head, placing the cloth amulet on her chest.

“Some gris-gris for you. To help Ava Ani. Now we bathe you.”

Delice felt a strange pulsing heat fill her chest. She watched as the woman filled a basin with warm water. Then she took little ceramic jars from a shelf and began adding things to the water—powders and dried leaves. Fragrance filled the room—a sweet green smell, different from the earthy, mildewy, rotten-meat odor that clung to the inside of Delice’s nostrils. While Ava Ani steeped the leaves in the basin of water, she chanted softly in a language Delice did not quite understand. It was French, to be sure, but it was from the islands—Hispaniola, perhaps. Not the dialect Delice was used to here in New Orleans. The one Madame and Monsieur spoke.

The woman found a clean white cloth and brought it and the basin over to where Delice lay motionless on the table. Ava Ani turned Delice over onto her belly. She gasped as she looked at Delice’s back. Delice had never seen her own back, but she knew it was crisscrossed with scars from the whippings Madame had administered over the fourteen years of Delice’s life. Madame had a temper, oh, yes. Ava Ani traced each scar with a smooth fingertip.

“Each tells a story, no, ma pauve? But this one will have a happy ending. Oh, yes, Ava Ani will help make it so. And you will help also.”

Ava Ani began washing Delice’s thin backside with the scented water. Such tenderness! Delice could not remember ever being touched like that. No, she had only been touched to hurt, or worse.

A tiny shudder went down her spine. Ava Ani must have felt it.

“Good, good,” she murmured. “The spirits fill you.”

When Ava Ani finished bathing Delice, she combed rose oil through her hair, making her matted woolly locks become smooth waves and ringlets. Then she helped Delice sit up and dressed her in a red silk dress that fit her perfectly, even over the chest, where Delice’s womanhood was beginning to show. Delice had never owned such a fine dress.

“Ne pas ce pauve. Maintenant, elle est belle!” Ava Ani grinned at Delice, showing straight, white teeth. “Now I need a ribbon, a red silk ribbon.” As Ava Ani looked for the ribbon, Delice glanced around.

She was in a one-room cottage, sitting on a table. There was a bed in one corner and a fireplace in the other. Everything was clean and neat, down to the mysterious bottles and boxes arranged on a shelf

over the bed. Hanging down from the shelf was a cloth, embroidered with an intricate, multicolored design. A veve.

Delice realized that she was in the house of a mambo, a priest of the voodoo. But how did she get here? Last night she had been home, at the Maison DuPlessis. And something had happened. Something bad. And was it last night? It seemed longer, somehow.

Suddenly it was hard to remember. Hard to think. Madame always called her stupid. Jeannette always said Madame must be stupid to think such a thing, but perhaps Madame was correct. Right now Delice felt like her head was full of wet cotton.

Ava Ani was back, tying up Delice's new curls with a ribbon. "Non, non, non!" she exclaimed. "Madame, she is the stupid one. I know, and soon we shall tell Erzulie too. Erzulie is a powerful *djabo*, and she will help. Madame will learn, and Monsieur too. No need to look so surprised, ma petite. Oui, Ava Ani knows all." She helped Delice down from the table and placed her in a chair in the corner.

"Now, petite fille, you sit and rest. Wait until the evening comes."

Delice did as she was told, closing her eyes. She listened to the sounds of the Vieux Carré coming alive as the rain stopped and the clouds gave way to a hot, red, fiery dawn. The fragrance of the bougainvillea hung sweet and heavy in the air.

In front of the Maison DuPlessis, a crowd was gathered. Ava Ani joined them, listening to their conversations and waiting for a glimpse of Monsieur or Madame. The house was still, the shutters tightly closed over the windows as if in shame.

Shame, vraiment, thought Ava Ani. She knew the story, perhaps better than anyone in New Orleans. The DuPlessis were a prominent family in society, wealthy and handsome. But their neighbors whispered to each other about the strange sounds that came from the house late at night—screams and inhuman moans, like animals in pain. Finally the neighbors' curiosity was at last satisfied.

Last week, Delphine DuPlessis had chased her maid all through the house until the terrified slave girl had sought refuge on the roof. Madame DuPlessis had followed her onto the roof, and somehow the girl had fallen from the roof to her death.

A cursory investigation had been made, and the DuPlessis were charged a fine for maltreatment. That was the end of that. But a few

hours later, someone had set the kitchen on fire, and when the fire department arrived, they made a grisly discovery.

On the third floor, Denis DuPlessis had a private, locked chamber. When the door was opened, the officials discovered four young slave girls chained to the wall. Whips, ropes, iron pokers, and other grisly implements were found. All of the girls had had their tongues cut out so that they could not tell what had happened to them in the room, and one had her eyes sewn shut as well. They were horribly scarred and filthy, faces and limbs deformed from unspeakable abuses.

Delphine had known of her husband's peculiarities and not only tolerated them but acted as a procuress for him. The girl who fell to her death had been selected by Delphine for the chamber but had escaped before she was bound and chained.

A shutter flicked open an inch or so, then closed. A barely perceptible movement, but Ava Ani saw. That meant Monsieur and Madame DuPlessis were still there. They would not be for long, Ava Ani knew. No, no, with their money and their position, they would make their escape from New Orleans. Back to France, perhaps.

Time is short, thought Ava Ani. *Very well. Ce soir.*

Her hands closed tightly into fists, fingernails digging red crescents into her palms.

While Ava Ani was gone, Delice tried to remember how she got here. She found that her mind worked slowly, so slowly. It took her most of the day to piece it together.

She remembered that Madame had summoned her quite late to Madame's fine, high-ceilinged bedchamber. Madame was thin and pale, with eyes like ice. Madame had looked her up and down. Her eyes lingered on Delice's chest and the spot where her legs joined her body. Delice wondered if Madame could see through her threadbare calico dress and see the sprouting of soft dark hair that was growing there. Before Jeannette left, she had told her that the hairs meant you could have a baby now. Delice missed Jeannette terribly and wished with all her heart that Madame had not sold her last year.

"It is time," Madame sighed. "Go wash, Delice, and then come back."

"Yes, Madame," Delice had replied. She quickly returned to Madame's chamber, face and hands clean.

“Denis wants you,” Madame had said, and then laughed queerly. “Come, we will go upstairs.”

Madame’s laugh frightened Delice. But she dared not show it lest she be whipped. Maybe she would be whipped anyway; Madame was so strange tonight. She timidly approached the third-floor room, her hands twisting in the pockets of her dress. Madame followed her at a distance, her shoes tapping lightly on the floor.

Monsieur opened the door to the room with a big smile and put out a hand to welcome Delice. But then a puff of wind had opened the door wide. The smell of excrement and infection and pure raw fear had filled Delice’s nostrils. She saw the bodies of the girls, chained in dumb misery, limbs smeared with feces and blood. One had lifted her head and met Delice’s gaze, her eyes vacant under a mat of blood-crusted hair.

“Jeannette!” Delice breathed, recognizing her girlhood friend. Jeannette had not been sold. Jeannette had been here, for almost a year.

Delice wasted no breath screaming. Her muscles jumped to life. She pushed back Monsieur’s fat white hand and turned, moving with catlike speed. She shoved Madame to the floor and ran to the hall door. She tugged frantically at the knob, but it would not open. Madame and Monsieur were running after her, the shoes tapping out a frantic beat now.

Delice spun around and ran into one of the guest bedchambers. At the far end, a window opened onto the second-floor roof. She would climb down somehow, she thought. She flung the shutters open and crawled out onto the roof. She pressed herself into the shadows, her heart pounding.

She heard Madame say, “Give it to me, Denis, you fool.” Then the rustling of Madame’s silken skirts, like a snake’s hiss, as she too made her way onto the roof.

Delice tried to make herself small, to inch her way along the sloping, slippery tiles without being seen. Madame’s pale eyes were sharp, though, and cut through the darkness like a lantern.

“Delice!” she called, and out of habit Delice looked up.

The clouds parted, and the moon shone down on Madame. She stood not ten paces’ distance. Her dark hair was tumbled and wild, her face ghostly white in the silver light.

In her hand was a pistol.

“Delice, get back inside. Now!” Madame commanded. She raised the pistol, pointing it at her.

Delice had stared at the pistol. Madame would surely kill her. But to go back inside . . . that was worse than death. Suddenly Delice was no longer afraid.

If I am to die, then I will die. But I choose.

She rose up and began to run. She heard a pop, and then a ball sang past her ear. She felt the hot rush of air against her cheek. She ran and ran, and suddenly she was flying. Flying . . .

And then there was nothing. Nothing until she had awakened here, at Ava Ani’s.

That night, two slender figures moved slowly and silently through the black-velvet darkness that enshrouded the city. They disappeared down an alley that ran behind the Maison DuPlessis and slipped over the fence that enclosed the rear yard. Ava Ani paused as two shiny blue eyes watched her from under the boxwood hedge.

“Venez ici,” she whispered, staring back at the eyes. Delice watched as Madame’s white Persian cat came out from under the shrubs and approached Ava Ani. It moved slowly and deliberately, like a child’s pull toy, straight toward her. Delice watched, fascinated. She hated Henri. She had been bitten and scratched countless times by that ill-tempered cat.

As Henri reached Ava Ani, she reached down and picked him up by the scruff of his neck. A blade flashed, and in a moment Henri was dead, his belly opened. Ava Ani dusted fine powder around him in intricate patterns and began to chant softly in a strange dialect.

The chant grew louder and louder, until the sound seemed to come from inside Delice’s head. Her ears pounded. Her body no longer felt heavy and clumsy. She felt light and quick—and a fever began boiling in her veins. She rose up on her toes, threw her head back, and opened her mouth.

A cool wind, light as a zephyr, sprang up. It circled around the cat, ruffling the blood-caked fur, barely disturbing the veves Ava Ani had designed around the sacrifice. It rustled through Delice’s red silk skirts. Suddenly Delice’s mouth snapped shut, and her body shuddered convulsively. Then she was still and slowly turned her head

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toward Ava Ani, who bowed her head in fearful respect before the powerful djabo. A fierce, terrible beauty suffused Delice's narrow face.

Delice spoke. "This cat pleases me. I will do as you ask. It will be my pleasure, oh, yes, indeed." Delice laughed, a merry sound in the darkness, and with a swirl of red skirts she was gone.

Ava Ani fled.

The rustle of silk was the only sound in the Maison DuPlessis that night. Something moved through the house like an avenging angel. When the sun came up, the Vieux Carré pulsed with screams, as more grotesque discoveries were made at the Maison DuPlessis.

Next to the well behind the house lay the bloody, disemboweled carcass of the DuPlessises' cat. Fine flour had been carefully sprinkled around the body. In the ominous red early-morning light, flies were already thick and buzzing on the cat's exposed organs and its sightless china-blue eyes.

Denis DuPlessis was found in his bed. His throat was slashed, his eyeballs cut out and placed neatly, side by side, on his tongue, which had been pulled from his mouth and down over his chin. His hands had been cleanly amputated at the wrists and lay on the gore-soaked coverlet, palms up as if in supplication.

Madame DuPlessis was also in bed with her throat cut, her nightgown pulled up around her waist, and the murder weapon sheathed to the hilt between her legs. It was a long, exquisitely sharp knife, of the kind used to cut sugarcane. Blood had splattered and splashed all over the walls and the ceiling, making glistening black rivulets as the drops rolled toward the floor.

No one in the house had heard anything except the faint sibilance of silk on the parquet tiles and the oriental carpet. But under the stench of the house, the smell of hot pennies and vomit and sulfur, was the sweet fragrance of rose oil.

Ava Ani had been waiting. Delice arrived just at dawn, her dress stiff with blood, her eyes gleaming, her hands caked with gore. She had smiled broadly at Ava Ani.

"It was pleasant indeed, mambo. Now I return the girl to you." Delice's eyes rolled back, and she fell to the floor, a small, limp bundle.

Ava Ani picked her up and carried her to the fireplace. Even though the morning was stifling hot, a fire burned. In front of the fireplace there was a tub filled with the same scented water she had washed Delice with the night before. Ava Ani pulled off Delice's red silk dress and threw it in the fire, where it smoldered then suddenly blazed with a bright blue-and-white flame.

Delice's eyes opened again, and she found herself once more at Ava Ani's. How had she gotten here from the DuPlessises'? The fire caught her eye. Delice thought the flames looked clean and pure, not smudgy and orange like usual. Then she saw the remnants of her dress burning in the fire. Why was Ava Ani burning her new dress?

It was a shame to burn that pretty red dress, but Delice could not find the words to protest.

Ava Ani bathed Delice again, and the water turned red as it ran down her thin body.

"You see, ma fille. Erzulie came when Ava Ani called. Erzulie liked Madame's fine Persian chat enough to ride you to justice. Yes, yes. It says in the Hebrew Bible, 'Justice, justice shalt thou pursue.'" She poured clean water over Delice's head as she stood in the tub.

Delice blinked. She remembered nothing of a woman named Erzulie. And what was this about liking Henri? She opened her mouth to ask, but no sound came out. Her voice was gone.

Ava Ani saw Delice's mouth open and close, like a fish's. "You cannot speak. But I think you wish to know what has happened. The DuPlessises, *ils est* mort. Erzulie killed them in their beds as they slept the sleep of the damned. And you, ma fille, you made a fine cheval for her. She used your feet, your hands, to do what needed to be done." Ava Ani helped Delice step out of the tub and wrapped her in a length of white linen. She took Delice's face in her hands and looked into her eyes.

"You remember, do you not? Madame chased you onto the roof. She had a pistol, no? She pointed it at you, her hair all tumbling and looking like a devil from hell."

Delice nodded. She was trembling. Her mind was so slow, her body so heavy. Her hands throbbed as though she had worked them very hard. Ava Ani's eyes searched her face.

"You ran, petite fille. You ran right off the roof and fell. Fell onto the stones in the courtyard. Fell hard."

Delice finally understood. She was a zombi. Ava Ani had brought her back to life in order to avenge her own death. Her dark eyes widened in terror.

Now she was enslaved forever, mute and stupid. Ava Ani had stolen the blessed release of death that she had chosen for herself—the one thing she had been able to choose, denied her for eternity.

Delice tried to scream, but all she could do was breathe out a rusty croak. She tried to pull away from Ava Ani, but the mambo tightened her grip on Delice's face and shook her head.

"Your work is done here, ma pauve. I have no more need for you. Soon you will sing again. This time, with the angels." She began to chant low, swaying with the rhythm of the song. Delice swayed with her, her hands curled around Ava Ani's wrists, her eyes shut. A white fog filled her mind, and she thought she heard singing.

"Mambo Ava Ani?"

Ava Ani whirled, her white skirts flashing in the darkness. "Who wants to know?" she replied, hiding her fear under anger.

"Philippe LaPlace," came the response. "Why are you here? Did the . . . information I gave you not serve?" Philippe came forth from behind a tomb.

"It served me very well," Ava Ani replied, her teeth clenched. She did not like this bokor-man of the Cochon Gris. But she could not be rude. She had come to him, filled with rage and grief for the victims of the DuPlessis. He had helped her in her plan to rid New Orleans of them and taught her the powerful dark voodoo she would need to know. She knew Philippe was powerful, and he frightened her. Still, she did not care to be spied on. She turned away from him in order to place a linen-wrapped bundle into the tomb she had just opened.

"So I heard," he said. A low chuckle echoed in the deep indigo shadows. "Erzulie is a creative one, is she not?"

Ava Ani shuddered. Philippe came forward and stood next to her. He ran his hand along the open edge of the tomb. "You sent the little girl back then?" he asked. "Pity."

"Delice did all that was needed. I have no need for a zombi to do my bidding. She spent her life enslaved. No need for her to spend her death there too." Ava Ani rolled a length of red ribbon, scented with

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rose oil, into a small tight coil. She slipped it into the gris-gris bag she wore around her neck.

“You are too soft, Ava Ani,” scoffed Philippe. “Join with us in the Cochon Gris and find your true power.”

“Non, merci,” she replied, a bit tartly. Ava Ani leaned her weight against the stone slab. She pushed with every ounce of strength she had, and slowly the slab slid back into place, sealing the tomb. Delice again shared a dead-house with the corpses of the other DuPlessis slaves.

Ava Ani straightened up, wiping the sweat from her forehead. In the faint starlight she saw Philippe scowling at her. Her almond eyes narrowed, but she forced a smile.

“Erzulie liked the fancy white chat I fixed for her,” Ava Ani said sweetly. “Mais oui, she liked it very much. She said to me that she had never had such a fine gift.” She watched Philippe’s shadowed face. A moment passed—and then a flash of white teeth answered her.

“Very well, mambo. I see you made a friend of Erzulie. You go back to your little magic and I will go back to mine.”

“C’est bon,” Ava Ani said, but he was already gone. She turned back to the dead-house.

“No more voodoo, ma fille. Now only angel songs.” She got down on her knees and fumbled around her neck. Under the gris-gris bag that hung between her breasts she found her rosary. She pulled the cross out from the neck of her dress and let her fingers slide along the warm, smooth ebony beads. “Now I pray to the Catholic gods for your eternal rest, ma petite.” She knelt in front of the dead-house and crossed herself.

“Hail Marie, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. . . .”

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