

Excerpt from “Resurrection” by Dana E. Donovan ©2008

She didn't answer, and instead palmed my chest, pushing me to one side. I stepped back and watched her prepare the kwi for the ceremony.

Most of the candles she needed were already lit: the red, white and purple ones in particular. She blew out the only three yellow candles and lit up the remaining four black ones. Next, she cleared a spot on the kwi to set out the items from Angela's pakët, arranging the objects from large to small around the strangely adorned chicken bone stick-figure, which took center stage. The last thing she did before turning on a music clip of Congo drums and clanging rhythm sticks was set out an earthen bowl about the size of a small kitchen wok, which she filled with shredded coconut husks, dried palm clippings and chips of common cordwood. I smiled at the hokey set up; thinking how clumsy it might appear if duplicated in some silly made for TV movie. But Mambo Ella took it very seriously. I could see it in her eyes as she prepared the kwi that something mysterious was already happening. Even as I looked around, I noticed how smoke from the candles had begun gathering over her head in lazy loops like spider silk. It followed her around the room, spiraling in a halo and collecting like storm clouds. Only then did I feel the chill of doubt blow down my back, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. I pulled my collar up and shuddered, and as I did, Mambo Ella looked over at me and smiled.

“Guédé Nibo is here,” she said.

I shook my head. “Who?”

“He gives voice to the dead whose spirits have not yet been reclaimed from below the waters. That is a good sign.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. It means that Papa Guédé has not yet found your Angela.”

“That’s great,” I said, though already the seed of apprehension had begun gnawing at my will. I cleared my throat and swallowed, thinking that now might be a good time to call things off. But as I opened my mouth to speak, she flicked a light into the wok, sending the kindling ablaze in rush of air. I fell back from the heat, and by the time my eyes readjusted to the light, I saw that she had already started dropping items from Angela’s pakët to the fire. All the while she chanted, dancing in circles and calling out to Guédé Nibo to guide the lost one back to this earth.

Sprinkled in intermittently with items from Angela’s pakët, Ella included various incense, some sweet smelling like lavender, vanilla and cinnamon; others less aromatic and reminiscent of melaleucæ bloom and willow moss. I felt that phantom chill behind me increase, even as the heat from the fire grew more intense. Flames, at one point, reached as high as the ceiling, licking the rafters and scorching cobwebs further away in the corners. The drumbeat coming from the stereo, either by design or utter coincidence, grew steadily louder, faster and rhythmically variant in concert with the fervor of fire, lending the impression of one provoking the other, or perhaps taking turns.

In an increasing state of paranoia, I glanced over my shoulder and readied my escape; convinced I would need to make haste once the

building ignited in a raging inferno. I saw through the beaded curtain separating the rooms that the puppets and dolls, which before had seemed so interested in my actions, now wanted nothing to do with the night's entertainment. All had turned a blind eye to the room, abandoning me to the whims of circumstance, not that I could blame them. Why saddle the moment with the burdens of the beast, when another ten minutes would have them all looking like molten blobs of Crayola crap?

I turned back to take one last look at the crazy old woman from Voodooville before making my move, when something miraculous happened. In a flash of scattered light, the flames that had danced in electric bursts suddenly froze in mid-quiver. Jagged veins of orange and red were left stretching in perpetual reach for a ceiling it could no longer touch.

I looked to the old woman. Her eyes were black and cold, fixed on the still flame as if arresting it with her stare. I glanced back over my shoulder. Once again, the dolls and puppets were in complete attendance. Only then did I realize how quiet the room had become. The drumbeat had ceased; the hissing of candle wax silenced, for the candles themselves had also succumbed to a moment locked in time. Terrified, but intrigued, I approached the sculpted flames and attempted to touch them. My hands trembled as I reached out, my fingers detecting the heat yet ignoring the sensory warning so primal and basic. Beads of sweat rolled off my temples. I felt the rush of adrenaline stimulating my senses, heightening anticipation already beyond expectation. A part of me wanted to giggle, another wanted to

cry and yet another insisted I run like hell. But I did neither and none. Before my hand made contact with the flame, the woman I once thought nuts but now regarded as brilliant, ordered, “STOP!”

My hand snapped back as if snagged by rubber bands. I looked across the petrified flames. The charcoal nodes that were her eyes now held *me* in their steely grip. A guilty grin crossed my lips till a shudder wiped it away. There were so many things I thought I should say, the least of which had something to do with commending her on her stupendous feat. Instead my lips parted and out popped, “What?”

“Don’t touch it,” she growled.

“Touch it? I wasn’t going to touch it. You think I’m crazy?”

Her eyes softened, letting out enough leash to allow me a reasonable retreat. When I had stepped nearly all the way back to the curtained doorway she resumed the ceremony. With a wave of her hand the fire returned to a frenzied stir. A riot of colors meshed in a panic, snapping and crackling and filling the room in a smoky haze. It would have been easy then to slip away without notice. Mambo Ella had all but lost herself to the cause. With her eyes closed, her head hinged in a pendulum sway and that haunting groan rising up from the pit of her gut, I suspect even a ballistic missile could not have rocked her off focus long enough to stop me. But I did not run, not when I realized what was actually happening. It seemed subtle at first, barely detectable. Though not as visually dramatic as freezing fire, this next phenomenon seemed no less remarkable.

At the risk of pissing her off, I inched closer to get a better look. I know Mambo Ella saw me. She even smiled a little as the shock on my

face confirmed my suspicions. Once again she had manipulated the flames in a most unnatural way; only this time, instead of arresting them in a single freeze frame, she somehow managed to turn them back, virtually rewinding time and driving the flames in reverse. The smoke that I thought had been filling the room had actually been collecting in a pool before me, waiting to funnel back through the flames and into the burning fuel. Tiny flecks like shooting stars zipped across the room and into the wok as popped kernels from the wood returned to their knots. Never had I seen anything so remarkable in my life. Even the spent fuel, the coconut husks, palm clippings and cordwood seemed to replenish and regenerate itself from thin air.

After a while, I pulled back again, expecting some grand finale complete with explosion and sonic boom. Instead what I got was a tremendous dud. Mambo Ella addressed the flames with opened arms, as if preparing to hug the life out of it. In essence, I suppose that's exactly what she did. With a slightly stooped posture, she leaned into the flames and appeared to scoop them up into her embrace, and when her hands came to rest in the shape of a cross at her chest, the fire was gone. I looked around the room, and again at her in beguiled curiosity.

“Is that's it?” I asked.

She scowled as though bored with my presence. “Go home Alex Payne.”

“But....