

contours of the cranium cracked in several places. The ceramic glaze. A few were intact, though cracked. The cheekbones! The eyes of an eerie transparency. A kind of knowledge passed between her and these eyes yet she did not know: was this a child's skull? Had a child been buried here, it must have been decades ago, on her family's property? Unnamed, unmarked? Unacknowledged? Unknown?

For several fevered hours the woman dug deeper into the earth. She was panting in the overhead sun, which seemed to penetrate the straw hat as if it were made of gauze; her sturdy body was clammy with sweat. She discovered a number of scattered bones—a slender forearm, curving ribs, part of a hand, fingers—these too parchment-colored, child-sized. What small, graceful fingers! How they had scratched, clawed, for release! Following this morning, forever, the finger bones would be at peace.

By early afternoon, the woman gave up her digging. She could find no more of the skeleton than a dozen or so random bones.

She went up to the house, and returned quickly, eagerly, with a five-foot runner of antique velvet cloth, a deep wine color, in which to carry the skull and bones up to the house. For no one must see. No one must know. "I am here, I will always be here," the woman promised. "I will never abandon you." She climbed to the second floor of the house, and in her bedroom at the rear she lay the velvet runner on a table beside her bed and beneath a bay window through whose diamond-shaped, leaded panes a reverent light would fall. Tenderly, meticulously, the woman arranged the skull and bones into the shape of a human being. Though most of the skeleton was missing, it would never seem to the woman's loving eye that this was so.

In this way the woman's bedroom became a secret temple. On the velvet cloth the skull and bones, unnamed, would be discovered after the woman's death, but that was a long way off.

ANNE RICE
 "Freniere" (from *Interview with the Vampire*)

"But, let me describe New Orleans, as it was then, and as it was to become, so you can understand how simple our lives were. There was no city in America like New Orleans. It was filled not only with the French and Spanish of all classes who had formed in part its peculiar aristocracy, but later with immigrants of all kinds, the Irish and the German in particular. Then there were not only the black slaves, yet unhomogenized and fantastical in their different tribal garb and manners, but the great growing class of the free people of color, those marvellous people of our mixed blood and that of the islands, who produced a magnificent and unique caste of craftsmen, artists, poets, and renowned feminine beauty. And then there were the Indians, who covered the levee on summer days selling herbs and crafted wares. And drifting through all, through this medley of languages and colors, were the people of the port, the sailors of ships, who came in great waves to spend their money in the cabarets, to buy for the night the beautiful women both dark and light, to dine on the best of Spanish and French cooking and drink the imported wines of the world. Then add to these, within years after my transformation, the Americans, who built the city up river from the old French Quarter with magnificent Grecian houses which gleamed in the moonlight like temples. And, of course, the planters, always the planters, coming to town with their families in shining landaus to buy evening gowns and silver and gems, to crowd the narrow streets on the way to the old French Opera House and the Théâtre d'Orléans and the St. Louis

Cathedral, from whose open doors came the chants of High Mass over the crowds of the Place d'Armes on Sundays, over the noise and bickering of the French Market, over the silent, ghostly drift of the ships along the raised waters of the Mississippi, which flowed against the levee above the ground of New Orleans itself, so that the ships appeared to float against the sky.

"This was New Orleans, a magical and magnificent place to live. In which a vampire, richly dressed and gracefully walking through the pools of light of one gas lamp after another might attract no more notice in the evening than hundreds of other exotic creatures—if he attracted any at all, if anyone stopped to whisper behind a fan, 'That man . . . how pale, how he gleams . . . how he moves. It's not natural!' A city in which a vampire might be gone before the words had even passed the lips, seeking out the alleys in which he could see like a cat, the darkened bars in which sailors slept with their heads on the table, great high-ceilinged hotel rooms where a lone figure might sit, her feet upon the embroidered cushion, her legs covered with a lace counterpane, her head bent under the tarnished light of a single candle, never seeing the great shadow move across the plaster flowers of the ceiling, never seeing the long white finger reached to press the fragile flame.

"Remarkable, if for nothing else, because of this, that all of those men and women who stayed for any reason left behind them some monument, some structure of marble and brick and stone that still stands: so that even when the gas lamps went out and the planes came in and the office buildings crowded the blocks of Canal Street, something irreducible of beauty and romance remained; not in every street perhaps, but in so many that the landscape is for me the landscape of those times always, and walking now in the starlit streets of the Quarter or the Garden District I am in those times again. I suppose that is the nature of the monument. Be it a small house or a mansion of Corinthian columns and wrought-iron lace. The monument does not say that this or that man walked here. No, that what he felt in one time in one spot continues. The moon that rose over New Orleans then still rises. As long as the monuments stand, it still rises. The feeling, at least here . . . and there . . . it remains the same."

The vampire appeared sad. He sighed, as if he doubted what he had just said. "What was it?" he asked suddenly as if he were slightly tired. "Yes, money. Lestat and I had to make money. And I was telling

you that he could steal. But it was investment afterwards that mattered. What we accumulated we must use. But I go ahead of myself. I killed animals. But I'll get to that in a moment. Lestat killed humans all the time, sometimes two or three a night, sometimes more. He would drink from one just enough to satisfy a momentary thirst, and then go on to another. The better the human, as he would say in his vulgar way, the more he liked it. A fresh young girl, that was his favorite food the first of the evening; but the triumphant kill for Lestat was a young man. A young man around your age would have appealed to him in particular."

"Me?" the boy whispered. He had leaned forward on his elbows to peer into the vampire's eyes, and now he drew up.

"Yes," the vampire went on, as if he hadn't observed the boy's change of expression. "You see, they represented the greatest loss to Lestat, because they stood on the threshold of the maximum possibility of life. Of course, Lestat didn't understand this himself. I came to understand it. Lestat understood nothing.

"I shall give you a perfect example of what Lestat liked. Up the river from us was the Freniere plantation, a magnificent spread of land which had great hopes of making a fortune in sugar, just shortly after the refining process had been invented. I presume you know sugar was refined in Louisiana. There is something perfect and ironic about it, this land which I loved producing refined sugar. I mean this more unhappily than I think you know. This refined sugar is a poison. It was like the essence of life in New Orleans, so sweet that it can be fatal, so richly enticing that all other values are forgotten. . . . But as I was saying, up river from us lived the Frenieres, a great old French family which had produced in this generation five young women and one young man. Now, three of the young women were destined not to marry, but two were young enough still and all depended upon the young man. He was to manage the plantation as I had done for my mother and sister; he was to negotiate marriages, to put together dowries when the entire fortune of the place rode precariously on the next year's sugar crop; he was to bargain, fight, and keep at a distance the entire material world for the world of Freniere. Lestat decided he wanted him. And when fate alone nearly cheated Lestat, he went wild. He risked his own life to get the Freniere boy, who had become involved in a duel. He had insulted a young Spanish Creole at a ball. The whole thing was nothing, really; but like most young Creoles this one was willing to die for nothing. They were both willing to die

for nothing. The Freniere household was in an uproar. You must understand, Lestat knew this perfectly. Both of us had hunted the Freniere plantation, Lestat for slaves and chicken thieves and me for animals.”

“You were killing *only* animals?”

“Yes. But I’ll come to that later, as I said. We both knew the plantation, and I had indulged in one of the greatest pleasures of a vampire, that of watching people unbeknownst to them. I knew the Freniere sisters as I knew the magnificent rose trees around my brother’s oratory. They were a unique group of women. Each in her own way was as smart as the brother; and one of them, I shall call her Babette, was not only as smart as her brother, but far wiser. Yet none had been educated to care for the plantation; none understood even the simplest facts about its financial state. All were totally dependent upon young Freniere, and all knew it. And so, larded with their love for him, their passionate belief that he hung the moon and that any conjugal love they might ever know would only be a pale reflection of their love for him, larded with this was a desperation as strong as the will to survive. If Freniere died in the duel, the plantation would collapse. Its fragile economy, a life of splendor based on the perennial mortgaging of the next year’s crop, was in his hands alone. So you can imagine the panic and misery in the Freniere household the night that the son went to town to fight the appointed duel. And now picture Lestat, gnashing his teeth like a comic-opera devil because he was not going to kill the young Freniere.”

“You mean then . . . that you *felt* for the Freniere women?”

“I felt for them totally,” said the vampire. “Their position was agonizing. And I felt for the boy. That night he locked himself in his father’s study and made a will. He knew full well that if he fell under the rapier at four a.m. the next morning, his family would fall with him. He deplored his situation and yet could do nothing to help it. To run out on the duel would not only mean social ruin for him, but would probably have been impossible. The other young man would have pursued him until he was forced to fight. When he left the plantation at midnight, he was staring into the face of death itself with the character of a man who, having only one path to follow, has resolved to follow it with perfect courage. He would either kill the Spanish boy or die; it was unpredictable, despite all his skill. His face reflected a depth of feeling and wisdom I’d never seen

on the face of any of Lestat’s struggling victims. I had my first battle with Lestat then and there. I’d prevented him from killing the boy for months, and now he meant to kill him before the Spanish boy could.

“We were on horseback, racing after the young Freniere towards New Orleans, Lestat bent on overtaking him, I bent on overtaking Lestat. Well, the duel, as I told you, was scheduled for four a.m. On the edge of the swamp just beyond the city’s northern gate. And arriving there just shortly before four, we had precious little time to return to Pointe du Lac, which meant our own lives were in danger. I was incensed at Lestat as never before, and he was determined to get the boy. ‘Give him his chance!’ I was insisting, getting hold of Lestat before he could approach the boy. It was midwinter, bitter-cold and damp in the swamps, one volley of icy rain after another sweeping the clearing where the duel was to be fought. Of course, I did not fear these elements in the sense that you might; they did not numb me, nor threaten me with mortal shivering or illness. But vampires feel cold as acutely as humans, and the blood of the kill is often the rich, sensual alleviation of that cold. But what concerned me that morning was not the pain I felt, but the excellent cover of darkness these elements provided, which made Freniere extremely vulnerable to Lestat’s attack. All he need do would be step away from his two friends towards the swamp and Lestat might take him. And so I physically grappled with Lestat. I held him.”

“But towards all this you had detachment, distance?”

“Hmmm . . .” the vampire sighed. “Yes. I had it, and with it a supremely resolute anger. To glut himself upon the life of an entire family was to me Lestat’s supreme act of utter contempt and disregard for all he should have seen with a vampire’s depth. So I held him in the dark, where he spit at me and cursed at me; and young Freniere took his rapier from his friend and second and went out on the slick, wet grass to meet his opponent. There was a brief conversation, then the duel commenced. In moments, it was over. Freniere had mortally wounded the other boy with a swift thrust to the chest. And he knelt in the grass, bleeding, dying, shouting something unintelligible at Freniere. The victor simply stood there. Everyone could see there was no sweetness in the victory. Freniere looked on death as if it were an abomination. His companions advanced with their lanterns, urging him to come away as soon as possible and leave the dying man to his friends. Meantime, the wounded one would allow no one to touch

him. And then, as Fremiere's group turned to go, the three of them walking heavily towards their horses, the man on the ground drew a pistol. Perhaps I alone could see this in the powerful dark. But, in any event, I shouted to Fremiere as I ran towards the gun. And this was all that Lestat needed. While I was lost in my clumsiness, distracting Fremiere and going for the gun itself, Lestat, with his years of experience and superior speed, grabbed the young man and spirited him into the cypresses. I doubt his friends even knew what had happened. The pistol had gone off, the wounded man had collapsed, and I was tearing through the near-frozen marshes shouting for Lestat.

"Then I saw him. Fremiere lay sprawled over the knobbed roots of a cypress, his boots deep in the murky water, and Lestat was still bent over him, one hand on the hand of Fremiere that still held the foil. I went to pull Lestat off, and that right hand swung at me with such lightning speed I did not see it, did not know it had struck me until I found myself in the water also; and, of course, by the time I recovered, Fremiere was dead. I saw him as he lay there, his eyes closed, his lips utterly still as if he were just sleeping. 'Damn you!' I began cursing Lestat. And then I started, for the body of Fremiere had begun to slip down into the marsh. The water rose over his face and covered him completely. Lestat was jubilant; he reminded me tersely that we had less than an hour to get back to Pointe du Lac, and he swore revenge on me. 'If I didn't like the life of a Southern planter, I'd finish you tonight. I know a way,' he threatened me. 'I ought to drive your horse into the swamps. You'd have to dig yourself a hole and smother!' He rode off.

"Even over all these years, I feel that anger for him like a white-hot liquid filling my veins. I saw then what being a vampire meant to him."

"He was just a killer," the boy said, his voice reflecting some of the vampire's emotion. "No regard for anything."

"No. Being a vampire for him meant revenge. Revenge against life itself. Every time he took a life it was revenge. It was no wonder, then, that he appreciated nothing. The nuances of vampire existence weren't even available to him because he was focused with a maniacal vengeance upon the mortal life he'd left. Consumed with hatred, he looked back. Consumed with envy, nothing pleased him unless he could take it from others; and once having it, he grew cold and dissatisfied, not loving the thing for itself, and so he went after something else. Vengeance, blind and sterile and contemptible.

"But I've spoken to you about the Fremiere sisters. It was almost half past five when I reached their plantation. Dawn would come shortly after six, but I was almost home. I slipped onto the upper gallery of their house and saw them all gathered in the parlor; they had never even dressed for bed. The candles burnt low, and they sat already as mourners, waiting for the word. They were all dressed in black, as was their at-home custom, and in the dark the black shapes of their dresses massed together with their raven hair, so that in the glow of the candles their faces appeared as five soft, shimmering apparitions, each uniquely sad, each uniquely courageous. Babette's face alone appeared resolute. It was as if she had already made up her mind to take the burdens of Fremiere if her brother died, and she had that same expression on her face now which had been on her brother's when he mounted to leave for the duel. What lay ahead of her was nearly impossible. What lay ahead was the final death of which Lestat was guilty. So I did something then which caused me great risk. I made myself known to her. I did this by playing the light. As you can see, my face is very white and has a smooth, highly reflective surface, rather like that of polished marble."

"Yes," the boy nodded, and appeared flustered. "It's very . . . beautiful, actually," said the boy. "I wonder if . . . but what happened?"

"You wonder if I was a handsome man when I was alive," said the vampire. The boy nodded. "I was. Nothing structurally is changed in me. Only I never knew that I was handsome. Life whirled about me a wind of petty concerns, as I've said. I gazed at nothing, not even a mirror . . . especially not a mirror . . . with a free eye. But this is what happened. I stepped near to the pane of glass and let the light touch my face. And this I did at a moment when Babette's eyes were turned towards the panes. Then I appropriately vanished.

"Within seconds all the sisters knew a 'strange creature' had been seen, a ghostlike creature, and the two slave maids steadfastly refused to investigate. I waited out these moments impatiently for just that which I wanted to happen: Babette finally took a candle-abrum from a side table, lit the candles and, scorning everyone's fear, ventured out onto the cold gallery alone to see what was there, her sisters hovering in the door like great, black birds, one of them crying that the brother was dead and she had indeed seen his ghost. Of course, you must understand that Babette, being as strong as she was, never once attributed what she saw to imagination or to ghosts.

I let her come the length of the dark gallery before I spoke to her, and even then I let her see only the vague outline of my body beside one of the columns. 'Tell your sisters to go back,' I whispered to her. 'I come to tell you of your brother. Do as I say.' She was still for an instant, and then she turned to me and strained to see me in the dark. 'I have only a little time. I would not harm you for the world,' I said. And she obeyed. Saying it was nothing, she told them to shut the door, and they obeyed as people obey who not only need a leader but are desperate for one. Then I stepped into the light of Babette's candles."

The boy's eyes were wide. He put his hand to his lips. "Did you look to her . . . as you do to me?" he asked.

"You ask that with such innocence," said the vampire. "Yes, I suppose I certainly did. Only, by candlelight I always had a less supernatural appearance. And I made no pretense with her of being an ordinary creature. 'I have only minutes,' I told her at once. 'But what I have to tell you is of the greatest importance. Your brother fought bravely and won the duel—but wait. You must know now, he is dead. Death was proverbial with him, the thief in the night about which all his goodness or courage could do nothing. But this is not the principal thing which I came to tell you. It is this. You can rule the plantation and you can save it. All that is required is that you let no one convince you otherwise. You must assume his position despite any outcry, any talk of convention, any talk of propriety or common sense. You must listen to nothing. The same land is here now that was here yesterday morning when your brother slept above. Nothing is changed. You must take his place. If you do not, the land is lost and the family is lost. You will be five women on a small pension doomed to live but half or less of what life could give you. Learn what you must know. Stop at nothing until you have the answers. And take my visitation to you to be your courage whenever you waver. You must take the reins of your own life. Your brother is dead.'

"I could see by her face that she had heard every word. She would have questioned me had there been time, but she believed me when I said there was not. Then I used all my skill to leave her so swiftly I appeared to vanish. From the garden I saw her face above in the glow of her candles. I saw her search the dark for me, turning around and around. And then I saw her make the Sign of the Cross and walk back to her sisters within."

The vampire smiled. "There was absolutely no talk on the river

coast of any strange apparition to Babette Freniere, but after the first mourning and sad talk of the women left all alone, she became the scandal of the neighborhood because she chose to run the plantation on her own. She managed an immense dowry for her younger sister, and was married herself in another year. And Lestat and I almost never exchanged words."