

Hibiscus

by Tiffany A. Turbin Santos

Part I

The table was covered with cheap cloth flowers; you know, the kind that are all faded from years of desperately trying to make some godawful windowsill merry. Ragged edges marking the passage of years. Years I had been else where. The Upper 9th Ward was a place I was eager to leave behind. I only got as far as Houston: waitress by day, barfly by night. I empathized with the flowers.

The air in the turquoise and lime-green three-room shotgun was stale; even with 97 percent humidity and a sun that would roast a chicken, I preferred the back porch. I settled on the glider next to Uncle Ren.

“How you doin', chérie?” he asked.

I sighed. “Until now, I thought I would always have a chance to apologize. You know. For the way I left.”

He squeezed my shoulders. “Doughn't worry about it, chérie. She knew you din't mean those things you said.” Uncle Ren, of course, was a world class liar. Alright, not a liar as such, but a con man for real, for real. He worked Rue Bourbon from Rue St. Peter to Rue St. Ann. His favorite con was the change up. He called it a classic example of greed. Walk into any of the overpriced souvenir shops filled with landfill fodder and approach the cashier directly (helps to alleviate suspicion), and ask if you can get some change. The standard reply from the uninitiated will be that you need to make a purchase. Buy a pack of gum, and try to pay with a hundred. The key is that during the entire interchange, thank the cashier for being so helpful, and promise a good tip for her or his jar. When they offer you twenties, say you need tens. Then say you're sorry, but you need some twenties. Move your hands fast, talk constantly so they can't count, and in about five minutes you'll be able to walk out of the store with an extra \$20.

But I decided that right now, I needed to believe him. I leaned into him and closed my eyes. A merciful breeze swept the smell of jasmine and coriander past me. So rare are these breezes in the summertime, Creole people have given them a name: *Mukmuk*. When the sizzle of the air becomes audible, you can hear folks talkin' 'bout how we need some mukmuk up in this city. My gran mam told me the story once while I was all wrapped up in her flappy arms.

“Chérie, you know why folks dun call dis here summer breezes mukmuk? Is 'cause many years ago, whene'er a slave don have a chance to skedaddle off into the swamp and try to get some relief from the plantation work, he think it gon be so much better. But in those swamps, chérie, there be things that make you go white as a sheet. And dat take some doin'.

Then there come along dis fine young man; Mukmuk was his name. He was tall and proud. They say he ruled a country all by hisself back in Mother Africa. And when he run off, it was like a rare breeze of joy and hope blew all through the Quarter and areas thereabouts. So we's named those breezes after him. Some people say if you look just right, you can see him runnin' through the Marigny, pullin' those breezes behin' him.”

I used to believe all of her stories, especially the ones about me becoming a great actress. “With those fine looks and good hair, you gonna be famous, chérie.” But now I just felt faded and ragged around my edges.

In four hours, friends and family would be arriving for the funeral. I didn't want to see the casket. I didn't want to see the march to St. Vincent de Paul Cemetery. I didn't want to see the joy of the second line. I was not sure I could truly “cut the body loose” as my gran mam told me we all needed to do. But this was only partly true; the rest of the truth was I didn't know how to handle seeing my old life at the funeral. At least not while sober. I started thinking of ways to keep a low profile.

The Deacon's secretary, Miss Pomerleau, had mentioned a small room in the rear of the church would be available for the family. For those overcome with grief like elderly aunts who fainted dead away, she had said. Sounded like a nice soft place. I reached into the pocket of my jeans and fingered the small metal token that marked six months sobriety. Taking a to-go cup to a funeral was maybe in poor taste. Best to slip away to a package liquor store for a petite bottle.

“I'm gonna take a stroll. I'll be back before noontime.”

“Yous want me to go with you, sugar?” Uncle Ren asked.

“Naw. Need to clear my head a bit. I'll be fine.”

Part II

The nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels was tucked inside the zippered pocket of her purse. A few of Uncle Ren's tricks had kept her from actually paying for the bottle, and she was a few bucks richer besides. She had changed into some more appropriate clothes: button down blouse in a light cream paired with an old A-line navy skirt. A black silk scarf added a somber note, and she swept her shoulder length brown and blond streaked hair up off of her caramel neck. A faded hibiscus bloom, cloth edges frayed, sat at the top of her French twist.

At the church, the grief room turned out to be more of a closet furnished with a solitary, shoddy, avocado-green couch covered in cigarette burns. A closer look at the spiral of metal on the stained coffee table revealed that cigarettes were not always the grief alleviator of choice. The burnt out stub of

a jazz cigarette brought back memories of days and nights spent on the banks of the Mississippi with various girlfriends before she left town at 17, four unbearable months before graduation. The clouds always looked different in NOLA.

She peaked up at them over the lenses of her dark glasses during the march to the cemetery. Familiar hymns, ones her gran mam had taught her, filled the air. She hummed along with “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” out of habit. At any moment the pavement could have turned into a sizzling sea, black and rolling away from their feet.

Uncle Ren supported her arm and kept her walking steady. Mukmuk pulled his breezes past, giving some relief to the late June heat. Inside the inside of her, after pain and apathy were passed by, was an awareness. An awareness that something was just behind her right ear, waiting for her to give it attention in her own time. With each trumpet blast, the awareness grew.

Part III

Walking to the edge of the vault, I think about the whiskey in my purse next to the AA token. Maybe I should hurl both of them as hard as I can against the plaster, watch the glass burst into a rainbow of shards, amber liquid mixing with brick chips and the bile and blood in my throat. Alcohol always wakes the palmetto bugs of my rage, crawling with thousands of filthy feet over the faded flowers of my shitty, spent life.

“Fuck My Life,” but my lips press like vice grips over my teeth. Uncle Ren's arm tightens around my waist. I wish he would just let me sit my ass down. I pull away and slash a hand to wipe the hot tears and snot off my face. I need to spit or throw-up or punch someone in the fucking stomach.

I stumble to a bench a little apart from the crowd. *Over come with grief.* Ha! I'm not sure who I feel worse for—the person inside the coffin or myself. *Coffin of oak covered by a tattered velvet pall.*

Jesus fuck, don't start with the cheesy poetry.

“Chérie, wipe your nose.”

I freeze. This is lie, I am not frozen. I am floating in warm water face up like in a bath tub. All stretched out and naked in Gran mam's porcelain tub with eagle feet and stained yellow all along the bottom. Here but not here at all. The crowd of mourners is still there several feet away, but I can't hear the wailing through my ears anymore. I am listening with my body. Every pore soaking the sounds up.

My head turns without using my neck.

“You should always carry a hankie in your purse. It's a mark of a lady, chérie.”

“Yes, Gran mam.” Her arm skin flaps back and forth as she points at my purse for emphasis. I

find a McDonald's napkin with a wad of chewin' gum in one corner and wipe my face as best I can.

“I'm guessin' you're a trifle upset, sugar.”

I wipe my eyes again, to be sure. No, she is still sitting there next to me in fresh pressed blue gingham. She drapes a solid mocha arm across my shoulders.

“I'm sorry.”

“Uncle Ren was telling the truth fo' once. I know. You was speaking your pain out loud for the world to hear back then, and I just happened to be standin' there. But I'm thinkin' somethin' else is restin' heavy on your pretty head.” As she leans in to kiss my forehead, I smell her liniment. I rub my cheek against the soft folds of her neck. I am embarrassed by my sour whiskey breath. She doesn't seem to notice. Maybe ghosts don't have a very good sense of smell.

“I guess I'm a bit worried.”

“Bout what, sugar?”

“Bout where I'm headed.”

“Shit, honey! You're the one who decides that!”

I look into the familiar eyes and wonder just how crazy I am. My purse is still flopped open on the bench, so I dig out the nearly empty bottle and pour it out.

“Good choice, chérie.”

“What next?”

Her wrinkled hand reaches up to my hair and pulls the hibiscus into view. I smell it before I see it; in her hand is the most vivid orange hibiscus I have ever seen.

“Make us proud, chérie.”