

L'hibiscus Morts

By: Casey Baron

I met my mother among fire and Soca when I could barely spell beautiful. She was a thick bodied woman with brown skin and a face like a hungry wolf. That evening when she saw me she licked her chops. My father saved me from her rage that day. A rage that would provide a violent-orange swallow, of families, establishments, and economies.

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I remember when my father came in to wake me that day. Prime Minister George was on the radio giving a briefing on attacks happening around the Caribbean, and a call to end civilian protests. He came in my room at the peak of fowl's chirping, and this happened every morning as sure as the sun rises. To his surprise I was already awake, sitting on the bottom layer of a bunk bed while Berus laid his three furry heads on my lap.

"You know there was a time when you were scared of him," father said. He sat next to Berus and ran his smooth sausage linked fingers through the hound's middle noggin.

"I know," I said, as a heavy beam of light shone through the aging glass shutters of my once shared bedroom.

"What's wrong?"

The inevitable question usually lead to an inevitable answer.

"Nothing," I said. Father continued to probe away until I eventually gave way, "It hurts, dad. My head, it hurts." He looked at me with the familiar face and uttered a lackluster answer.

"It will be ok. I went through it and so did your mother, all a part of growing into the universal ring."

"When did your gifts come in? Will I have the same ones as you? As her?"

"Hey, calm down," he said. "I don't know. We'll have to wait and find out."

"Okay, can I ask you another question," I said. Only now that I realize that was a question in itself.

"Shoot."

"Is that mom? Attacking all those people?"

"I think so," he said. My hands began to tremble and I took a gaze at the scars that mom left on Berus the last time she was around. I wasn't old enough to remember what happened, and dad doesn't tell me. I've never seen her face.

"Will we be okay? Why can't we leave?"

"We're safe here, Marlon. This is home, we'll be okay. The army and stuff here, they know how to deal with people like mom."

"Doesn't that also count to you and me," I said. I clutched onto a Berus a bit tight.

"Yes, but we're not fugitives. We'll be okay. I promise."

There were several mornings like that with my father lately, the back and forth, it was like playing cricket for an eternity. And with every moment following the asking of that question I was locked in a spiral: washing, rinsing, and repeating as though the answer would change, hoping the universe would get a bit kinder.

“Listen, your mother will have other things to deal with, trust me,” he said.

I looked at my father still downtrodden, fully aware that it was misplaced rubbish.

“What else is wrong? Is it another bad day,” he said.

That's what he would call it, a bad day. At that age I did not fully know how to explain what I was feeling to my father, as it was a rather difficult thing. Now I think I can surmise it pretty well. It was like a subconscious countdown in my head. One, two, three, and snap. A wave would descend through my body, seemingly stealing all available traces of dopamine with it and shoot down my spine. I would then begin to feel like a manico trying to escape Berus' multi-mouthed clutch; quite helpless while every gulp felt like I was swallowing chalk. For my father to call it a bad day was doing a disservice to the depression jacking my mental state.

“Yes dad, a bad day.”

Like I said, I couldn't explain it to him then. Both my parents went through the process of getting their gifts, but neither of them dealt with anything like this. Anytime I mentioned it to my father he was confused. No one in the family tree suffered from what I dealt with.

Father moved Berus out of the way and began to tickle my sides as he forced me to kick and jump all over the bed. All the while Berus scratched my father's back and licked his head, trying to get in on the game. After a few minutes father stopped.

“You good now,” he said, the man smirked at me proud of his accomplishment.

Meanwhile Berus scampered out of my room, made a right, took a few steps, made a left, and

hauled down the stairs for some servings of meat and milk which father routinely left out for him.

“He’s a big pup already, anyway time to get ready, up now,” he said.

“Can I see the trick first, please,” I said.

“We don’t have time, come on.”

“Please dad.”

“Fine, but only one, a quick one.”

He climbed off the bed and reached around his back pocket to pull out a purple pouch stuffed with black sand. My father took the pouch in his left hand, and left his right hand open.

“Watch now,” he said. I gazed upon him with anticipation.

My father pulled the black sand from the pouch, and it flowed smoothly like milk from a bottle. It was all spiraling around his right hand now, black particles senselessly running around his brown palm, until it trickled down like old news into the wooden boards below. Dad took a step away from where he stood, stuck his palm upwards towards the ceiling, and down drizzled black rain from the ceiling above. It flowed from above at my father’s sway as I looked wide-eyed. Back into the pouch he gathered it.

“Good now,” he said.

I rose from the bed and clutched onto his mango tree trunk like legs. He then placed his two hands around my head and clutched tightly. I went off to the shower following that embrace; a right out of my room, past the small table with the radio emitting Prime Minister George’s address, and straight ahead into a wall of familial white cubes adorned with a shower head.

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We walked off the small veranda and down the steps through the yard and into my father's dirty, Chevy Silverado parked out front. The morning sun stunned my eyes a bit, but I recovered quickly. I had in hand my backpack for class, my father carried a short glass of ice and rum, and Berus only carried himself into the bed of the truck. Father started the car, turned on the radio, and more news about the "island killers," came on.

"Can we turn it off please," I said. "I don't like it."

"Sure son." He took a quick drink from the short glass, propped the purple pouch on the dash, and then began to drive down Victoria Street towards the "establishment of my educational development," as he would call it.

Walls of hibiscus plants sat at either side of the street just past our place, their red and pink petals set off with passionate power against their green leaves of nurture. Further down the street we passed over a bridge sitting atop a body of water, I saw my best friend Jomar stuffed among angry protesters and hailed at him hoping to see him in class. Jomar looked sad and didn't respond, I liked Jomar. The protesters had signs reading all sorts of things about Prime Minister George. *Give us our money you scoundrel. The Chinese brought the island money. Not you. Think about the children. Prime Minister George is a dog.* That was just a few of them. I even saw some of the protesters get rotten Guava and bananas tossed on them from balconies of aggravated residents and businessman. Getting further and further into town, we then approached Newtown Savannah's grass green and dirt brown spit of land. Across from the pitch was usually lined with beggars, sellers, and the like. Now they have all been replaced with neon lit signs of Mandarin atop small shops.

“You think that’s why she left,” I said. I nodded my head towards the shops for my father.

“Might be part of it, but I don’t know, bud. Sure, she used to help folks there before they were pushed out of the way, but that wouldn’t drive your mom to leave,” he said.

He patted me on the head and told me to gather my things because we were close by and then took a swig from his glass. We made a right onto Bath road, left onto Cornwall Street, another right onto High Street and finally a left up to Saint Mary’s Primary. My father placed his hand on my head and we ceremoniously knocked foreheads before he ordered Berus to get out and escort me to class. I urged father that I would be okay, much to his disapproval, but he agreed.

“Remember just head down to the sand and head straight to the house. If you’re not home by five I’m coming for you.”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“I’m serious.”

“Yes sir.” I walked off to the courtyard, its surface was dimpled with the presence of young foot soldiers clad in sky blue tops and khaki pants, as a few classmates bum rushed me in excitement, father drove off.

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Mr. Lara was a receding hairline having, moustache wearing, cheeky man of a teacher. Every time a boy got a question right they would undoubtedly receive a high five and a marble.

“Who knows their multiples of six,” he said.

I would raise my hand and burst out,

“Six – twelve – eighteen – twenty-four...” and so on. Mr. Lara was my favorite, and I had a large marble collection.

In the back kids were huddled telling ghost stories about who the island killers might be.

“So the story goes that back in the old days, the people in town would look for Soukouyant’s. Any sign they found of someone being one, they would take that person and kill them,” he said. A boy in the back not old enough to be around for the stories narrated the entire thing. “So one night, three women were tied to wooden posts in Our Lady Fatima’s courtyard. They put oil on all the posts, then lit each one up. Except one of the posts didn’t light. Every time they tried, the fire fizzled. The woman thick in body then said something about coming back for family and revenge, then get this.”

“What? What happened to her,” I said.

“Her body burst into flames, and her spirit has been wandering the globe ever since. Or at least, that’s my pop said.”

“That’s what your pop said? Just flames?”

“Yep.”

I turned back around and looked up at Mr. Lara’s blackboard. I gulped slowly as I felt fear itch up my throat.

#

I had never seen a man of Monsieur Chanderpaul’s stature, he looked something like a lion and an ox’s illegitimate child. Four years in the Armée de Terre, turned him into a staunch bull of a man. During class on that day my cousins Kurt and Marc kept cutting off in class.

“Marley,” they said. It wasn’t my name, but for some reason they thought I looked like a Marley. I whipped my head around trying to end their disruption.

“What?”

“Did you hear about?”

Monsieur Chanderpaul drove his walking staff into the floor and it caused everyone to come to complete silence, then he started up again. But that did not deter my cousins. Leave it to the imbecile cousins to continue and get us all thrown in detention.

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From then until the end of the day all anyone could talk about was the supposed *elle diable* travelling through our neighboring islands. They said Prime Minister George addressed her in the noon news, the woman was jumping from island to island and killing along the way. Even on the dirt slathered courtyard with a couple basketball hoops, the news travelled like raging boars. Kids who never spoke a lick to each other were now muttering of the possibilities, about the *Soukouyant* that would be coming for all of us. I simply sat on patches of green eating bakes and tuna. In all the madness, I could always delight in the taste of bakes and tuna. Those tales were usually reserved by the elders to scare the young folks, but this felt different coming from all of us. I kept on with my day regardless, more classes, detention, and homeward bound.

#

I walked down miles of sand, miles of black, towards home. The beach was blanketed with memories of dad's trick from the morning and his blessing to return safely. Protestors lined along the backs of hotels and people danced to the pinging and panging of steel drums and then I ran into an unknown person at the time. She was a thick bodied woman with odd markings upon her brown skin and her face was fierce, but not scary because of her guava shaped cheeks. She also had the oddest of neck dressings around her neck; a skull fully attached to the spine. Considering the mad dressings of the protesters around her, she looked right at home. The

woman stared down at me, even resorting to bend her knees in order to gain a proper angle. Her eyes were hazel with a tint of orange, till this day I still haven't seen anything like that. I slightly crept my head around the woman's figure and pointed towards my home not too far in the distance.

"You should get home," she said. The woman gazed like a wolf stalking maimed prey. Meat chops; that had to be her thought of my body.

I backed away and took notice of the fading sun's presence over the sea, meanwhile the protestors took to lighting torches to battle the rising shade upon the sky. Father told me to be home by five and it was definitely later than that now. I was ready to dash past the woman, but she stepped in front of me and stopped me cold again.

"It's getting dark," she said. "Let me walk you home."

"My dad doesn't like me talking to strange people. Or walking with them."

"It will be okay. I just want to make sure you get home safely," she said.

So the woman and I walked home, and we buried the past between the soles of my *Fubu's* and her dark colored boots, all the while heading down the beach towards scolding and fried chicken dinner.

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"So how was school today," she said.

"School was fine." I tried not to look at her and only kept focus on the pavement ahead.

"What did you learn in class?"

"My times tables."

"Oh, your times tables? That's great. Care to share?"

“No ma’am,” I said. The closer we got to home, the more people ran inside closing their doors. Our neighbor Mr. Chuck scurried inside his house at the sight of her. Maybe it was the skull and spine, but I paid it no mind. We were just a few feet from home now, shielded by the hibiscus plants the woman dropped to one.

“Don’t tell your father I walked you home, ok?”

“Sure, he would probably be mad at me anyway. Thanks lady.” I turned from her and ran through the short gate to the house and up the stairs to the door, never looking back.

#

It was the middle of the night when I woke up. After I got home the evening before, father made me clean up and gave me the appropriate lecture and off I went to bed. There may have been anger in the room that night, but there was also life. No life was present when I awoke. Berus wasn’t around, and neither was father. I walked out of my room, and while the house was pitch black, I could see a hue of orange engaging the door frame. I walked up to it slowly, and the house felt a bit warmer with every step I took. I opened the door ajar, and peered through the crack, my small hands shook as orange light filtered through. On the veranda I saw my father standing in front of his rocking chair, black sand orbited around his hands like planets about the sun. And beyond him I could see the woman who took me home that day, she stood behind the Chevy, her brown skin was lit to the brim by burning rows of hibiscus. Their deaths filled the air with ash clouds, but they left behind an odd sweet fragrance. The woman was opposed by a full squad of men touting guns. They looked like toy soldiers I would play with, except their green skin dismissed for all black outfits. My father’s frame marked the midfield point for these two forces, he was stuck severely in the middle.

The army men called for the woman to end her fires. My father was screaming for the men to put down their weapons. And the woman did not scream a thing. She just made the blazes rise higher, her hands burned flames along with them. The air thinned quicker, and the orange blaze took over my eyes altogether. My grip on the door got a bit tighter as well. The screaming between the parties heightened. My grip tighter again. The screaming got louder once more. I could feel every centimeter of that wooden door beneath my palm. The shouting rose to its highest. I pushed back the door and my father reacted sending his black sand to push me back in and board the door. In that moment the men unloaded fire, but I stopped it. I could see the coarse sand grain by grain, the coarse nature of its black magic subdued in air. The woman's fire blaze did not grow any longer, instead it was just stuck in place like a piece from one of my Lego play sets. My father was frozen like an action figure, still life was abound now. I popped through the door frame and walked carefully towards my father, unsure of what I had done. I touched his body and watched it ease back to life, but everything else stood still.

“Marlon. Son?”

“Dad,” I said. I rushed towards him and tried to pull him free from the frozen time.

“What did I do, dad?”

“Marlon stop, you can't move me. It's too late already. You've got to go now. Go with that lady,” he said. Blood slowly oozed from my father's back, it drifted gracefully in air.

“Dad please, let me save you.” I tugged on his pants some more, trying to get him out.

“Marlon stop!” I hooked my small paws to the ridges of his pants. “You have to go with your mom. I was wrong, Marlon. This place, it's not safe for you anymore.”

“Where will I go? With who?” Tears began to roll down my cheeks as my words rolled onto themselves and became odd freaks of sentences.

“That woman over there, that’s your mom. You have to go with her, son. It will be okay.”

The tears just rolled along. I grabbed my father’s legs again. He placed his hand on my head with a tight clutch, and then pushed me back inside the house. Time began to pick up again. I could see the remaining bullets moving closer to his body, each lead piece spun with the intent of butchering dad. The sand began filling the door frame once more. It moved faster, and faster, my fall in unison with everything else, until the sand filled the door frame. Then I heard the plop of my father’s body upon the ground. I sat on the boarded floor shaking, and blood began to seep from beneath the black sand before it crumbled down. Now burnt flesh filled the air. I hustled towards my father’s corpse, bullet holes shredded his body into pieces of his former self. I poked at him, there was no life from his still body, forever still now. My mother walked up the veranda and grabbed me by the wrist.

“I don’t want you,” I said. “I don’t love you.”

“I don’t care, we must go,” she said.

I resisted her urge, but she threw me over her shoulder like a fluffed teddy bear. We walked off the veranda and at the bottom of the steps was Berus. Bullet holes were dispersed about his body as well, the fire gone from him. Tears began to stream from my eyes again. We walked past the burnt men.

“I hate you. I hate all of you,” I said.

I proclaimed it at the top of my lungs until I had no breathe left. I bobbed on my mother’s shoulder as I screamed myself to sleep. The tears continued. The last thing I remember before closing my eyes was the light of fire, and the smell of everything burnt.