

CONJURE MAN

A short story by
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Mama Mulate had a horrible migraine. She thought about going straight home from work but it was Monday and Mama was a creature of habit. Every Monday, after class, she went to Pascale Manales for oysters and beer. Despite her migraine and the persistent drumming of rain on her windshield, she was ready for a break. Besides, one of her favorite ex-students shucked oysters in the bar.

Mama swallowed three aspirin and found a spot in the parking lot, hoping no one would ding her fully restored 1960 Bugeye Sprite while she was eating. She didn't need to worry. The parking lot was empty. Cray Toussaint greeted her when she entered the restaurant.

"Professor Mulate, I didn't think you'd make it tonight. The place is almost empty because of the hurricane heading our way."

"You think I'd let a little rainstorm cause me to miss hearing some of the best new poetry in New Orleans? Not on your life!" Mama took a stool at the oyster bar and gazed around the largely empty room. "You're right. I don't recall seeing the place this dead."

"All the tourists have left town and gone to Memphis or someplace safe. There's just a skeleton crew here to take care of the regulars."

"Does that make me the only regular?"

Cray Toussaint grinned as he polished a beer mug.

“There are several diners in the main part of the restaurant. Sarah’s working the tables and Danno cooking. I suspect we’ll get busier as the night draws on. What can I get for you?”

“Two dozen freshly shucked oysters and a cold Dixie.”

Cray poured beer from the tap behind the bar. Before he handed the chilled mug to Mama Mulate, he shucked a single oyster and dropped the tasty mollusk into a vodka-filled shot glass.

“The oyster shooter’s on me. You look like you need it. Hard day?”

“Not if you like grading essays from eighteen freshmen nincompoops.”

“Haven’t heard that word in awhile,” Cray said as he began shucking Mama’s oysters.

Realizing she’d probably just dated her self, Mama killed the oyster shooter. “Better give me another one of those. And one for yourself, on my tab, of course.”

“Why not,” Cray said. “Guess I can make my own rules tonight.”

“You bet you can,” Mama said. “The shot was what I needed. My head’s feeling better already.”

“I’d have thought an authentic voodoo mambo would have a powerful potion to handle a little headache. Or maybe a strong gris gris.”

Mama grinned. “Vodka and aspirin are hard to beat.”

By ten, Mama and Cray had polished off three dozen oysters, half a dozen oyster shooters and a gallon or so of Dixie Beer. A strong wind blew up from the Gulf as they held hands and stared into each other’s eyes.

“Your last poem was superb,” Mama said.

“Then can I come home with you?”

Mama was almost taken aback by Cray’s boldness.
“I don’t date my students.”

“I dropped out two semesters ago.”

“Maybe so, but you’re not much older than my daughter.”

“I didn’t know you have a daughter. Is she here in New Orleans?”

Mama sipped her beer before answering. “I confess I don’t know where she is. We had a falling out and haven’t spoken in six months.”

Talk of Mama’s errant daughter brought a chill to the conversation. It was accompanied by a clap of thunder and gust of wind and rain pounding the windows and front door. Cray took the opportunity to change the subject.

“Nasty weather out there. Maybe I should take you home to make sure you make it okay.”

“And then what?”

“Have a nightcap or two while we wait for the storm to pass?”

“You are cute, but I think we need to get to know each other better.”

“I’ve known you three years and we were holding hands just a minute ago. Do you always hold hands with people you don’t like?”

“I like you a lot, but I need to think about this awhile. And no buts, understand?”

Despite Cray’s continued protests, Mama finished her beer and left the restaurant alone to her old two-story house. She found a late model Land Rover parked in the driveway, a somber couple waiting in the front seat. This, in itself, wasn’t unusual. As a voodoo mambo, Mama administered to the needy masses at almost any hour. The man and woman

followed Mama through the rain to the screened front porch.

“I’m John McGinty and this is my wife Susan. I know it’s late, but we really need your help,” the man said as Mama pushed the creaky screen door shut with her shoulder.

John and Susan were an attractive, middle-aged couple - a financially successful couple from the looks of their expensive Land Rover in Mama’s driveway.

Despite the beer and oyster shooters she had consumed, alcohol rarely affected Mama Mulate. “It is late,” she said. “Can’t this wait until tomorrow?”

Mama’s words caused Susan McGinty to start crying and she hugged her husband tightly. “It’s our son. We don’t know where he is.”

“Have you called the police?”

“It’s not that simple,” the man explained. “What we need is information on our missing son and we were told you could help.”

“I’m a practitioner of the Vodoun religion. What you probably call voodoo. I’m a mambo, or priestess in the religion, but I’m not psychic. What you need is a seer.”

Susan McGinty stopped crying for the first time. “You know such a person?”

“Yes,” Mama said. “A man old as time its self. His name is Zekiel. Those that know him call him the Conjure Man. He can tell you where your son is.”

“How can we find him?”

“You can’t,” Mama said..

“We’ll pay your fee if you’ll take us,” John McGinty said. “And whatever the Conjure Man charges.”

In the tradition of Marie Laveau and other famous New Orleans’ voodoo practitioners, Mama subsidized

her Tulane English professor salary by accepting money for her voodoo spells and potions. Knowing without looking the amount would be sufficient, she took McGinty's check and stowed it in her kitchen teapot. She returned carrying a large bottle of rum.

"Zekiel doesn't take money but he does enjoy his alcohol. Let's go before the storm grows worse."

New Orleans is below sea level, the streets beginning to flood as Mama and the McGinty's left the house. The sky was black, a strong, persistent wind blowing up from the Gulf. They headed out of town, toward Gonzales, accompanied by no other cars and only a few large trucks on the highway. An hour passed before Mama spoke.

"Slow down. The bridge over the canal is hard to see, even in broad daylight."

John McGinty steered the Land Rover onto a dirt road barely visible from the highway and crossed the raging canal on a wooden bridge. The road led through a desolate area that could only be described as a swamp. It was actually the City's storm overflow area where water was diverted when flooding occurred. McGinty followed the dirt road for two miles until Mama spoke again.

"Turn here. Zekiel has a shack on a little hill in the woods."

They found a shack around an abrupt bend. An old black man occupied a rocking chair on its rickety front porch and he made no attempt to rise as they parked the Land Rover. A lop-eared hound lay at his feet. He also had a black cat with a long tail that looped like a question mark over its back. The old man slowly pulled himself up from the rocker and crossed the porch with the help of a cane. He was stooped with age and had no meat on his little body.

Just ropy sinew and tendons and furrowed skin stretched tightly over ancient bone.

"Didn't know if you'd make it tonight with the weather and all."

The McGinty's exchanged dubious glances, apparently wondering if they'd wasted their time and money. "You knew we were coming?" John McGinty asked.

The old man chuckled. "Old Zekiel knows just about everything. Come inside, out of the storm."

Zekiel's accent was straight from the bayous of south Louisiana, but imprinted softly with a hillbilly twang. Despite his obvious age his voice was deep and clear, as were his anomalous blue eyes. Mama and the McGinty's followed him into the ramshackle structure. Big trucks passing on the highway melded with the sound of wind whistling through pine boughs, strengthening the feeling of desolation. It was more than just a feeling. The black cat rushed between Mama's feet, slipping through the screen door before she could close it.

"Watch out for Pancho," Zekiel said. "He'll trip you if you aren't careful. And the hound is Baxter. He don't say much except when the moon is full."

As if acknowledging their names, Baxter barked and the black cat named Pancho rubbed against the old man's legs. The shack was small and dark inside and weathered cardboard papered its thin walls. A flowered curtain suspended from a wire quartered the single room. An old army green cot marked the spot where Zekiel slept. There was no indoor plumbing.

A table of stained oak occupied the center of the room. On the table a coal oil lantern glowed, lighting the shack's cave-like darkness with flickering flame. Scattered papers, various gem stones and what looked

like an antique microscope lay strewn on the table. Boxes of old newspapers and magazines littered the floor and various bottles containing who-knows-what lined the walls in homemade shelves. Boxes and crates scattered about the room were the only places to sit down.

Zekiel ambled over to a squatty icebox in the corner. It was a real icebox of white porcelain, chipped and yellowed with time and rust showing through flaking paint. He returned with cold drinks for the McGinty's and a ceramic jug. Removing the cork from the jug he tipped it over his scrawny old shoulder, holding it there until clear liquid dribbled down his face before handing it to Mama.

"I need your help and you'll need a dose of shine for what we're about to do."

Mama tipped back the jug, instantly tasting some unknown fiery liquor. Zekiel gripped the jug in his gnarled hand, holding it until a near lethal amount passed her lips. Then he took two dark stones from a cigar box on the table.

"I know you have strong doubts," he said, looking at John McGinty. "I need you to believe in me before I can help you. I want to show you something."

After clearing a spot in front of him with his forearm, he held the two stones about six inches apart. They clashed together with a loud click when he released them.

"Lodestones?" John McGinty said.

Zekiel nodded. "Powerful attraction. Agree?"

"Yes, but there's a scientific explanation."

Ignoring McGinty's skepticism, Zekiel said, "They have the same powerful attraction as between planets and stars."

"Maybe --"

"Same powerful attraction the moon has on tides."

"We're here for answers, not a science lesson."

Zekiel continued, ignoring the skepticism in John McGinty's voice. "You believe lodestones have power? You believe in the attraction of stars and planets and moon and tide? Why not believe in the power of all stones?"

"What power? Other stones have no such power as far as I know," John McGinty said.

"Oh but they do. So does every stone."

Zekiel reached in his cigar box, this time removing a translucent, blood red gem. Beside the coal oil lamp sat a glass of water. The red stone plunked when he dropped it into the glass.

"Bloodstone," Zekiel said. "It gains power from water. Together they can suck a hurricane from desert sky." Distant thunder sounded outside the shack. "Storm's coming."

Within seconds heavy raindrops began pelting the shack's tin roof as lightning flashed across the dirty window pane. Fetid odor of damp soil and crackling ozone flushed like a wave through cracks in the wall.

"That doesn't prove anything," John McGinty said. "There's a hurricane in the Gulf, not 50 miles from New Orleans."

Zekiel reached across the table and clasped John McGinty's clinched fist in his gnarled old palm. "Son, you have a lot of pain. Too much pain. It sticks out like a red flush on your face. Now lose your doubt and help me find your son."

Again, John McGinty glanced at his wife. This time the look was different. Zekiel took a deep breath. Dark skin visible through the vee in his shirt stretched across his bird-like ribs as he extracted a three inch crystal ball from the cigar box. Metallic needles

pierced its transparent thickness. He placed it on an ebony stand and took another drink from the moonshine jug. After a second drink, he handed the jug to Mama.

"I need your help," he said. "We got to work together to make this work."

"Tell us what to do," Mama said, drawing closer to the table.

The old man cocked his head and stared at Susan McGinty, as if waiting for an answer to an unspoken question. Red light from the bloodstone in the glass of water danced on the shack's dark wall. Outside the storm raged, rain pummeling windows and tin roof.

"Lock your gaze on the crystal. Won't nothing work till your eyes start to dim. Don't blink. Don't do nothing but gaze at the crystal."

Zekiel kept up a low-voiced banter, imploring them to stare at the finely polished crystal ball. Soon his words became a subliminal message, directed to some remote portion of the brain usually familiar only in one's deepest dreams. Zekiel's banter continued for an interminable period. Soon, the crystal ball seemed to turn black and become fluid. Clouds parted and everyone's gaze penetrated the sphere. In it was a vivid panorama into another place and time.

The image of a young man appeared. He was alone, draped in darkness and water up to his neck. As they watched, he closed his eyes and disappeared beneath the water's choppy surface. An explosion of noise jolted them back to reality. Nearby lightning had struck a tall pine outside the window. As Mama watched, John and Susan held each other tightly, sobbing uncontrollably. Zekiel stood from the table and drew Mama aside.

"Their son drowned in an accident. Sometimes

the only way to finally accept something is to see it with your own eyes.”

Morning had dawned before the McGinty’s and Mama arrived back at her house. The hurricane had moved west toward the Texas coast and had miraculously missed New Orleans. All that remained was a dark sky filled with darker clouds. Slow rain that remained would continue throughout the day. Mama didn’t expect the reaction of John and Susan McGinty as they let her out of the Land Rover.

“We are so thankful,” Susan McGinty said. “At least now we know the reports of Robby’s death are true.”

“His body was never found and for years we thought he might somehow have survived,” John McGinty added.

“Now we can have a proper memorial service for him,” Susan McGinty said.

The McGinty’s had found their closure, Mama thought as she watched them drive away. The experience forced her to consider the plight of her own child. Later that day, she returned alone to Zekiel’s shack. This time she took two sacks of groceries, two bags of ice and a fifth of Jack Daniels. Zekiel, Pancho and Baxter were waiting on the porch and Zekiel smiled when she stepped out of the car.

“Been waiting for you,” he said. “I already have the answer to the question you want to ask me.”

Mama retrieved the two bags of ice and groceries from the front seat of the Sprite and followed Zekiel into the shack. After stowing the canned goods in Zekiel’s grocery cabinet and placing the items that needed to be chilled in the ice box, she presented him with the bottle of Jack Daniels.

“Thanks, Mama,” he said. “My favorite.”

Mama hugged the old man, and then held his shoulders as she stared into his deep blue eyes. “You know about my problem?”

“Your daughter. She’s waiting to hear from you.”

“How do you know?”

“I scryed it in the crystal ball.”

“Is she okay?”

“She misses you but she’s fine. She’s waitressing at a restaurant called the Brown Hen in Mobile and has even saved a little money to go back to college.”

“But I was paying for her college tuition when she ran away.”

“She wasn’t running away from college. She was running away from you.”

“But why? What more could I have given her?”

“No more buts,” Zekiel said. “You gave too much. She needed to experience things on her own, without her mother looking over her shoulder.”

“But I - - -”

“I said, no more buts. Mama, the only thing you did wrong is try to hold on too tight. You’re a strong and imposing woman and that makes it tough on a daughter. Give her the space she needs and she’ll surprise you with how much like you she really is. You could call the Brown Hen, though, and tell her you’re thinking about her.”

“Thanks, Zekiel,” Mama said, hugging him again.

“You’re welcome. Now let’s have a shot or two of that Black Jack.”

Storm clouds had cleared when Mama Mulate returned to New Orleans. She had lowered the top of the Birdcage Sprite to let her long hair blow in the breeze beneath the cloudless blue sky. When she got home she would call the Brown Hen Restaurant in Mobile and talk to her daughter. Tell her she loved

her and that she supported any decision about her life she may have made. After that, a dozen oysters, a cold Dixie and an out-of-character Saturday visit to Pascale's seemed very appealing.

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