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A GIFT OF EASTER LILIES

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The market place was typical of those found throughout the island. A long open shed covered by galvanized iron, the ground wet from the water leaking from vegetables sprinkled continuously to keep them fresh looking, the smell of sweat, noise and an all pervading smell of rot.

Michael's presence was notable among the other vendors in that he was always neat in appearance. Considered handsome by the female vendors, he was of indeterminate race, always carrying a small towel on his shoulder, which he continuously used to wipe sweat from his face.

It was there that Joanna, the young attractive red woman, whose features and penchant for colorful clothing spoke of her Spanish background, first noticed him.

That was three years ago, and although their eyes always made four, they had never spoken to each other. However, it was dutifully observed by the other vendors, that although she had never bought anything from him, she would always walk past his stall, her gait becoming almost imperceptibly slower as she did so.

Two weeks before Easter, she paid her usual visit to the market, walking through it hand in hand with Martha, a young lady who mimicked her in resemblance, clothes and mannerisms and who was her constant companion. Among the vendors, rumours had circulated, beginning from their first visit to the market. It was said that they were lovers by gossips, while those with a more generous spirit credited their closeness to friendship.

They lived together in a house in the village close to the market. It was commonly known as the Mattress Village because of the fact that it once had a thriving mattress factory that was a primary source of employment for the villagers. It utilized the fiber from the coconut estates that ringed the village. With the advent of synthetic foam for the making of the mattresses, the demand for the fiber-based mattresses came to an end and the factory was forced to close. The owner simply did not open the doors one morning and the factory had stood there ever since, the corpse of a by-gone era, the lock having long since broken off, the mattresses inside, in various stages of production, still stacked against the wall.

Joanna and Martha lived in the village, not far from Michael, the mattress factory lying between both houses. They had moved into the village about five years previously, in a house willed to Joanna by a father she hardly knew, a belated apology for neglect. Despite the proximity of both their houses, their deliberate disregard for each other continued, even within the village.

Of Martha, the villagers knew little. The truth being that she was a neighbor of Joanna in the village in which they had previously lived. She was a deaf mute. Growing up together as children, they had worked out a system of hand signals and face movements, which allowed them to communicate with each other.

Martha was however embarrassed to do this in public, so it was never done in the presence of others.

Martha was about thirteen when the signals that spoke of the horror began, thus Joanna, over the next three years, came to know of the abuse Martha endured at the hands of her father. He never knew of signals, and never suspected that Joanna knew of his incest.

They were both sixteen when Joanna inherited the house and a monthly stipend, from her father. It was a timely occurrence. Using the Carnival season as an excuse, they fled the village, never to return. Martha's father, fearing police investigation, claimed that they were both adults who had left home and frustrated all efforts to trace their whereabouts.

On that pre-Easter visit, Joanna saw Easter lilies being sold at Michael's stall. Together they made their way over. Martha attracted by goods at another stall drifted off.

“How much for that one?” she asked, pointing.

“That one is no good, this one better.”

He held up a plant for her viewing.

“But it look so bad.”

“Unlike you, but it have good potential.”

She ignored his amateur attempt at a compliment.

“Will it flower for Easter?”

“I sure about that. But let me keep it and take care of it so I could make sure. Collect it when you come by again.”

“Before Easter?”

“By Easter.”

She walked off to join her friend, making sure that her path contained no intervening stall that would block his view of her retreating body.

Martha had deliberately moved off when Joanna made her way over to Michael’s stall.

Several times Martha had started to signal to Joanna of what her body had done to her during the final weeks of her abuse, responding of her father’s embrace despite her revulsions of him and his touch, as if her body had a will of its own, so that beside her silent screams and tears, she would dig her nails into her own flesh to short circuit her body’s betrayal. Her aborted signals had started to ask Martha if she had ever had those feelings. What if they were coupled with love? How would it feel?

When next Michael saw Joanna in the village, he asked, in a continuation of their last conversation.

“When you going to pick it up?”

A query he had to almost hurl at her, so quickly was she walking by.

She stopped.

“When you going to give it?”

He was startled by the manner of her answer. She had stopped and stared into his face, passing her hand over her hair as she did so.

“When are you going to give it?”

An uncertain query, a subtleness almost lost in the myriad of sounds enveloping them, an offer, a request, a plea, all at the same time.

“How?” His voice was just as questioning. Unconsciously imitating hers.

“You know where I live, let me know when you ready.”

This time her voice was a whisper of wind in the coconut trees, the sound of waves weeping on the shore after a night of being frayed by the wind, a dry coconut falling with a thud on the sandy beach.

“Look for shadows in the moonlight.” He replied, walking away with effort.

The full moon cut huge swathes of light across the beach. The coconut trees, long, slim sentinels of the night, cast irregular shadows, creating a patchwork of darkness and light, a crazy checkerboard in the night.

Michael listened to the breeze outside. It was as strong as it always was, blowing offshore and cold. It forced a sighing sound from the tree branches, giving a soundtrack to the light quilted night. He came off his bed and walked outside, making his way over to her house. When he reached his destination he stood in the moonlight so that he cast a long shadow that climbed up her wall and over her window.

She saw the shadow cross her window and came off her bed. Naked to the waist she walked over to her window. Denied the sun, her breasts were white. He could not see her face, only those two breasts, framed in the window.

Michael turned and walked slowly toward the mattress factory. He did not turn to look, but he knew that Joanna was behind him.

In her hand she carried two blankets. She had hurriedly pulled on a tee shirt that reached to her knees.

In the mattress factory she spread the blankets on a long abandoned mattress and holding his hand she pulled him to her.

They spent the night in its dark embrace, embracing, his only reason to relieve himself of a ponderous tumescence, she to answer questions for her friend.

She awoke before him. It was still cold outside, the sun just beginning to shed light on the morning as she walked home.

Sitting on the steps Martha was waiting, her hands signaling numerous questions, the answers to which may free her, leaving behind just a memory, a tremor of a horror to be recalled only with great effort.

At her feet was the Easter lily, in full bloom.