

"The Root"

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I

Lola Rose stumbled in an area of muck as she trekked into the backwoods of the New Orleans swamp; her natural clumsiness exposed itself in her steps. The stumble forced her to truly reconsider this absurd mission. Tallulah would have certainly talked her out of it. Mud slicked Lola's galoshes, grabbing her feet as if to tug her into a moist grave. She wrapped her arms tightly around her body, pulling the large jacket tightly as if it were a second layer of skin. Mosquitos buzzed manically, the rapid whining of their wings penetrating her eardrum. Lola Rose shot her right arm up, releasing her grip and swatted at her ear. Her feet slosed in the swampy goop as she pressed forward.

Frogs groaned savagely, deep, guttural rumbles replacing their usually airy ribbits. She turned around to go home, but the question lingered in her mind. Was her husband, Ike, cheating? Thoughts of possible infidelity forced her through the swamp, into the opened claws of Spanish moss covered trees, along the slicked trail for the thirty minutes it took to reach her destination. She'd heard stories about the cryptic Madame Laurette Batiste that lived in the bayou country.

"That's why Blind John is blind," Tallulah, Lola Rose's best friend, had said to a man while they were in the liquor store one time. "All because he went to go see Madame Laurette Batiste."

"But Blind John had always been uh asshole. Shit. I wouldn'ta been surprised if his own mother stabbed him in his eyes. Sorry sap-suckah. He always saw the worst in people," the man said.

"What happened?" Lola Rose questioned.

"They say he cursed her out, but he won't speak about it. Everybody knows Madame Batiste don't take kindly to disrespect," Tallulah said. The conversation echoed in her mind with each step.

Jean Pritchett had gone bald after a visit to Madame Batiste. She went to bed with a full head of hair and awoke the next morning to a pillow covered in curly black strands, her head resembling a worn tennis ball.

Adam Dreaux couldn't rise to the occasion after an exchange of angry words. He'd been the talk of most gossip amongst the ladies of the night described as a real hard hitter and a ride on a fine horse across the country to Pleasuretown. Now the horse couldn't even stand, let alone take them anywhere.

Even the school children sang in passing, "Madame Batiste, black as coal, cross her wrong and she gone take your soul."

Madame B, the queen of the swamp, say her name and your dreams she'll haunt. Laurette Batiste, the voice that causes your screams."

But there had been just as many tales of the good things she'd done. Toby Thomas got a promotion at the sawmill. Bernadine Boudreaux finally married after three public jolts at the altar - all different men. Sister Johnson's grandbaby was able to walk after spending four years confined to the bed. Rumor was besides praying over the infirmed girl, Madame Batiste concocted a healing elixir from fermented garlic and sour milk.

Sister Johnson was a member of Mount Carmel Missionary Baptist Church, the first person to welcome Lola Rose there. Out of respect, Lola called her "sister" as Sister Johnson was an elder in the church and her sister in Christ.

She gave Lola Rose directions to Madame Batiste's place without any questions. "If you reach Lake Pontchartrain, you done passed it. Look for the circle on the tree. But most importantly, be respectful and mindful," Sister Johnson said after explaining the twists and turns into the heart of the swamp.

Lola Rose's pace slowed as she turned right around a cluster of trees, one marked with a circle, and spotted a cabin of sorts in the distance. She marched slower; crackling noises from the trees jarred her back to the tumultuous reality of her

situation. Lola Rose was indeed at the threshold of her sanity. She needed answers.

Her mind drifted to the sweet man Ike Collins once was, the man whose fidelity she never had to question. The reassuring rubs against the small of her back, the security in his tight embraces, the gentle way he tucked her hair behind her ear when he'd help her make their dinner. Where was that man now? Somewhere along the lines the structure of their household changed. He just wasn't himself. Lola Rose even went so far as to speak to another one of the elders at the church, Sister Etta Mae Toliver. Sister Toliver's expertise grew from forty-three years of marriage. She was seventy-five but didn't look a day over forty, no deep lines or extreme wear on her mocha skin to exhibit a hard life. Her cinnamon brown eyes welcomed Lola Rose and her questions.

They sat on the pew next to each other one Sunday morning before church started. Her words were simple and what Lola believed to be spot on: "In marriage, honey, you fall in love and out of love all the time." Sister Toliver adjusted her long white gloves. "You just gotta make sho that you stay in your marriage when times get hard." The organ started playing and ended their conversation. Lola wasn't able to continue her line of questioning. Her foot slosed in muck, bringing her focus to the journey ahead, but she still had so many questions.

As the saying goes, an idle mind is the devil's playground, and Lola Rose had a world's fair of ideas. With her left hand, Lola Rose clenched her white sweater in the middle of her chest, wrinkling the smooth fabric; and with her right hand, she clutched her pocketbook snugly to her side. Her chestnut eyes scanned the swamp and occasionally darted to the small diamond ring on her hand. She shook her head, jostling her press-n-curved styled hair.

Lola Rose stood uneasily at the base of the petrified wood porch. The muggy heat assaulted her skin. A sticky breeze sought to lasso her away, but she held her ground. Her determination to know, to get the answer, burned inside like an inextinguishable flame. She trembled as the oak and pine trees swayed. A few willows wept and wailed around the decaying log cabin.

Her heartbeat quickened as her feet creaked on the first step of the dilapidated terrace. There was a sloshing at the back of the house. When Lola leaned over the splintered porch railing, she caught a glimpse of an olive and black alligator. Its large reptilian eyes focused on her, studied her as if she would be its next meal. Her stomach cramped at the thought. She jumped and shifted in her emerald - green, swing dress. Whew! She exhaled and moved closer to the door. A series of high and low hoots from barred owls in the trees jarred her soul. Just leave it be, and go home she thought.

The heavy front door squealed ajar. "So ya come to 'ear ya fortune?" a raspy voice asked from behind the cracked door.

Lola winced and stumbled backward. Goosebumps formed trails on her arms and legs. Her hands shook. The cramping in her stomach rose and spread to her lower back.

"Ya might not like what me have ta sey." The tall, midnight woman opened the door a bit more. Two dreadlocks hung in front of her face, the rest tucked into a white head-wrap. Her complexion was slick as oil. Her icy eyes pierced through Lola's spirit, as if reading her, learning more than any mortal person should ever be privileged to know. Lola Rose fidgeted and cloaked herself in her thin white sweater as the woman stepped closer to her.

"Come in," Madame Batiste said. Her long, boney fingers pulled the door closed behind them. The two women stood in the front foyer of the strange home. Madame Batiste towered over Lola by six inches.

"Ya don't need ta be 'fraid of me, chile." Lola shuddered slightly but maintained her façade in spite of the woman's bluntness.

Madame Batiste cackled a laugh of many ages, many spirits interwoven in her speech. She extended her hand and gripped Lola's by surprise. "Aww yes. Ya have night haunts." She guided Lola Rose in silence inside the house. Lola Rose breathed in a

large quantity of air. Her hands shook like leaves on autumn trees.

The parlor glowed dully from flickering candle flames. Her spindly fingers grabbed a mug and prepared a tea for Lola Rose - ginseng, mint, cinnamon, and marigold leaves. Her hands pinched small amounts of each ingredient. Lola followed her movements carefully, still shocked that Madame Batiste knew without her even having to utter a word. Lola wondered if she'd worn it on her face or if Madame Batiste picked it out of her thoughts.

She hadn't gotten a decent night's sleep in weeks. Screaming banshees and sweltering heat jolted her awake in the middle of the night. Ike would be out like a log, and when Lola Rose tried to wake him, he'd continue his snoring, oblivious to her efforts.

The parlor felt warm and restorative. It relaxed Lola. The scent of sandalwood pervaded the open room.

"Come now, chile, and tell me why ya come out 'ere in de swamp ta see me." Madame Batiste led her to a more secluded back chamber. The light there held a much dimmer quality. A rainbow candle burned along with incense. "De candle purifies and 'elps to realign yer body's center." The smell permeated Lola's nose. She couldn't place it. The fiery quality of it, the hypnotic, calming effect it had enchanted her. "What is that scent?"

"De dragon's blood. It wards off de evil spirits and is a good luck charm." She handed Lola the tea and motioned her hand for Lola to sit at the aged wood chair across from her at the table. "Drink dis. It will help wit' yer readin'."

Lola's shaky hands accepted the antique cup. She sipped the tea slowly, tasting the different ingredients. She allowed the warm liquid to linger in her mouth, sloshing from one side to the other. Then she swallowed. "This is really good," she paused and took a deep breath.

Madame Batiste stared into Lola Rose's eyes. Lola quickly shifted her gaze to her hands, to the rustic cup, to the crimson walls of the dark parlor, then back to Madame Batiste's eyes.

"I...I...," she sipped more tea then continued, "I think my husband is cheating on me," she sighed.

"Why no ask 'im if he is? Why come ta me? De swamp is a dangerous place." Madame Batiste studied her movements.

Lola Rose peered down at the palms of her hands. "I can't ask him without enough proof. He, I'm, well," she sighed heavily. "He's all I got."

"No black magic 'ere," Madame said matter-of-factly.

"No, ma'am. I'm not here for that. I just want proof."

"So, what ya plan ta do if 'im a no good? Ya say 'im all ya got? Go back 'ome."

"Madame," she paused and choked back tears. "My home is with him. I'm an only child, and when I lost my parents in an accident...he was the only one there. We were high school sweethearts, you know?"

"He s'posed ta be ya crutch fa eva?" Madame Batiste placed both of her palms facedown on the table. Her fingernails were long and dark. She scowled and shook her head.

"I don't know," Lola Rose whispered and avoided her gaze.

"Why ya tink 'im cheatin'?" Madame drew her medium lips closed. Lola Rose noticed droplets of sweat forming on the bridge of Madame Batiste's thick nose. Her nostrils flared. Lola studied the seriousness in her face, her thick eyebrows and pierced nose. Her cheekbones high and well defined. Her eyes split Lola Rose, picked her apart. Lola blinked.

"Well, it started with some small things - staying out late, wearing cologne more often than usual. And when I asked him about it, you know the changes in how he acts, his light green eyes would shift, grow darker, and he'd switch the subject. His eyes always changed colors, but never that dark. He'd ask, 'What time are you have to be at work?' and get up and busy himself with something, saying he was packing a lunch for me.

"Sometimes he'd ask me, 'Can you bring me back a cold drank?' Or, 'You mind running to the store for some ice cream?'

He'd tug me into his brawny frame and plant kisses all over my face. Another time he played cool about my attempt to confront him. I asked about a smudge on his collar.

"'Oh this, honey?' He pointed to a light smear of lipstick on his collar. 'A lady bumped into me on the train. You know you're too beautiful for any other woman to steal my eye.' I had my doubts, you know, but without any substantial proof, what could I really do?"