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Flash Fiction by Renee Gionet



The boss is late, so I lay out my dismantling tools in Sunday morning silence. The tumbledown slave cabin hunkers on yellow pine timbers. At 150 years old, it tilts leftward to slump against a dusky-red, chicken-killing stump. The wrinkled tar-paper roof breaks a sweat on this spring cotton-planting morning. The cabin's only companion is a scabby magnolia tree.

Once I come near, the cabin commences to whisper. This happens sometimes, certain places swollen with their past. *Lordy, this heat, did you ever see the like? If I could just carry me and Magnolia down by that sweet river we've been listening to for so long. It's forever running on and on about the River Jordan.*

I smile, remembering a house of babbling river rock, its many-storied tributaries, when the boss arrives with a curt “what are you grinning at?”

“Just imagining if this old place could talk, my oh my, what stories we’d hear.”

“The only talking you’re gonna hear today is me giving orders. Make sure each and every board and nail is numbered. This cabin is a national treasure on its way to a big museum in the east.”

After he’s gone, I kneel penitent on the scarred pine floor. Cabin whispers to Magnolia. *It’s been a heap of days since bended knees have graced these old boards. Wouldn’t it be a wonder to have prayers rise up under the eaves again, squeeze out through the chink holes to ruffle your leaves on their way skyward?*

The scream of the first nail pried raises goose bumps on my arms. I drop the hammer, and the thunk echoes deep as a killing blow to a hog’s skull. But I have my orders, so I work through the moaning lamentation of joined boards being ripped asunder. As I number and stack, I study the braille of wood grain and will my fingers to read the embedded tales. I think I’m succeeding, but then realize I’m just recycling stories I’ve read: tears, fish guts, cornmeal, blood, baby drool, afterbirth. Still, the boards flinch at my power over them. The iron I wield, my ability to wrench and separate.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “You’re going to come together again but inside a bigger building, sheltered.”

Did you hear that? Cabin murmurs to Magnolia. *Called home at last, for in the Good Book doesn’t it say in my Father’s mansion there are many houses?* Hearing this loose interpretation, Magnolia shudders to her coiled roots, spiking green grief for Cabin, whose roots were severed long ago.

The stack of boards grows to resemble a rough-hewn table. A table sturdy enough for a loved one’s body to be laid out, tended to. Despair makes molasses of my muscles.

Cabin murmurs, *There’s so much more.* Once again, I search the wood grain. The air stills. Not a flutter of Magnolia’s leaves. The board warms under my hand. Then I feel a stabbing sensation so exquisite that Cabin stops holding its breath and lifts me on a cresting wave.

When the boss returns, I am stretched out under the magnolia tree, delirious with joy. My hand throbs, keeping time with my heartbeat. In the ER, I overhear my boss say, “Working in an old slave cabin, God knows what’s in that sliver.”

I try to explain that the cabin is proof that love can never be extinguished, only boiled down, concentrated. The doctor scribbles a note and gives me a yellow pill. Finally, I just ask for the splinter. A nurse brings it to me in a small vial. A reliquary. Like something a saint’s toe bone gets saved in.

Back at the worksite, the cabin rests in pieces. Magnolia petals blanket the remains.

I roll the reliquary between the fingers of my uninjured hand and walk over to the dismantled cabin. “I have something that belongs to you.”

I find the board bearing the bright bloom of my blood and push the splinter into place. The cabin remnants shudder like a dreamer roused and murmur, *Is it resurrection day?*

Soon, soon, Magnolia sighs, bowing low over her old friend.



Art Information

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Sliver of Joy

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Through the 1990s, Renee Gionet had luck in publishing poetry. Some of the small presses her work appeared in were *Fireweed*, *Calapooya Collage*, and *Z Miscellaneous*. As Renee puts it: "To quote Henri Bosco, *I have my amulets: words*. Words have always been an important part of my life."

Renee also told TW that the impetus for this story began in a "discarded" notebook, where she'd written about "the original chatter around moving a slave cabin from the Carolinas to a new black history museum." The [slave cabin from Edisto Island, South Carolina](#) [5], is now an exhibit at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

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