



Sugar Skull

A SHORT STORY

BY

MARGARET ELIZABETH HULSE

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A Narrative from the Adventurous Heart Literature

Collection

Dallas | San Pedro | New Orleans



Creole dictionary:

Chaw [choh]- interjection: *Slang*. (used to express disgust, disappointment, frustration, contempt, or the like.)

Gyal [**gyal**] - noun:

1. a female child, from birth to full growth.

Mawga [**maw**-guh] - noun: *Slang*.

2. very lean or thin; emaciated.

“I’m staying in the blue condos, just down the street,” The tourist chick said, as the bartender slid a shot in front of her. The sky was transitioning from dusk to night and the moon began to rise above the horizon, casting an ominous glow amidst the thatch roof of a brightly lit island bar.

It was early October and San Pedro was relatively quiet. It would be another month before tourists flooded the island.

Mona, a chic Texas artist who’d resided in San Pedro for almost a decade with her San Pedrano husband, sat a few barstools down from the tourist, minding her business, sipping a glass of wine as she scribbled palm leaves into her sketchbook. She knew she was referring to the rental unit below hers. There was only one blue condominium complex on the block. It wasn’t a big complex; there were only three stories, two units on each floor, and most of the residents worked from home, so the vibe was generally low key.

When Mona and Antoine moved in, they enjoyed a peaceful scene set across the street from the Caribbean Sea in an old

island neighborhood with a view that challenged eternity. Mona's drafting table faced the water. She'd open her window each morning and draw inspiration from the salty air. They were in their mid thirties at the time and envisioned a quiet Caribbean life.

As people tried to recoup losses during the pandemic, bars and restaurants started popping up all down the street, the residents started renting their spare units to tourists, which challenged the 'chill island work-from-home vibe.' What was once a quiet pocket of the island where fishermen would wake at sunrise to head to sea and return at sunset to sell their fresh catch along the shoreline was now being referred to by developers as the "up and coming party strip."

The late night music and whoops and hollers from drunken tourists challenged the ambiance of a natural mystic that blessed the once quiet seafront neighborhood.

"I'm Leslie... from Vegas. I'll be down here for a month," the new chick said, as she downed a shot of tequila, followed by

another and with that, Mona knew the girl wasn't anyone she should deal with.

Mona had seen tourists come and go.

She watched them come for a myriad of reasons: warmth, tranquility, relaxation, adventure, escapism and... pure debauchery.

Sometimes the tourists wouldn't know why they came, and Mona didn't feel that it was her responsibility to help them figure it out. As an American woman who had built a life on the island, she was like a magnet to the travelers who came to her for guidance. She used to share her story with them. She'd encourage them, if they wanted to survive in the Caribbean, to learn from her mistakes... the things she had to learn the hard way, so they wouldn't have to—to no avail though, because she learned that for the most part, people are going to do what they want to do.

But there's a saying in Belize: *if you don't listen, you're going to feel.*

So Mona stopped trying to offer guidance, but as it goes on a small island, everyone ends up knowing everything that goes on with everyone. The tourists weren't exempt from this, especially the ones who'd come down for extended periods, and there was something about this Leslie chick. Mona possessed a strong sense that she was going to go back home a changed woman, whenever that might be. It wasn't unusual for a tourist to get lost in an alternative island lifestyle and extend their stay.

Leslie looked like she was in her early 40s. Somewhat pudgy, with wavy, dirty blonde hair that fell down her back. Dressed like a quintessential tourist, she wore a crop top and a floral wrap skirt. She had taken a hibiscus flower from a tree in the yard and tucked it behind her ear.

She glowed the way everyone glows on their first night in San Pedro, after they take their first breath of seaborne air.



Mona awoke the next morning to the scent of cigarette smoke. It curled up over her balcony into the window over the drafting table that Antonie ceremoniously opened for her each morning so she could drink in the island breeze.

With an inhale of second hand smoke, Mona rolled her eyes, sucked her teeth, and slid her window shut.

“Mona!” Antoine called Mona into the kitchen and in a hushed voice asked, “How long she plan ah stay ‘ya?” He wasn’t a fan of Leslie either.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I overheard her say that she’ll be here for a month.”

“Chaw,” Antoine quipped. “Gyal need fi pace herself.”



Leslie's first few days were typical for a tourist.

Late nights at the bars.

Day drinking on the pontoon boat.

But it was when Mona saw Tricky walk out of the condo early one morning, that she raised an eyebrow.

Tricky was one of the most notorious coke dealers on the island—always in and out of prison and he never seemed to care. For the most part, the police left him alone, but sometimes when a new officer would arrive on the island, they would try to make an example out of him.

Regardless, his presence meant one thing... Leslie was doing blow.



Days passed and Leslie's quintessential tropical tourist attire faded into oversized t-shirts and baggy cut off shorts that

showed off a faded sugar skull adorned with monarch butterflies that she had tattooed on the back of her left thigh.

She had befriended Alexis, a skinny forty-something woman in real estate who lived on the island part time. Too skinny. Almost skeletal. Her pelvic bones protruded from her hips which she proudly flaunted in her low rise jeans. When she first visited the island, she turned heads. Blonde, petite, big blue eyes. Vibrant personality. But after a month, her beauty began to fade. Her ability to string cohesive sentences together had faded as well.

With a penchant for cocaine in common, Leslie and Alexis became inseparable.



Unlike Mona, Leslie didn't open her windows to drink in the morning air. She and Alexis kept the windows closed, curtains drawn and AC running at full capacity. From the furniture upholstery and piles of wadded up clothing strewn

across the floor, a musty scent of stale cigarette smoke lingered within the ice cold walls. Unwashed plates of food, from when they *did* eat, littered the counter and the glass table top was smeared with remnants of white powder and sticky bottle rings left from empty beers and bottles of rum.

Leslie took to keeping a plate on her bedside table where she kept a few lines railed out.

“Les...” Alexis snorted a small line and wiped some residue from the bottom of her nose. She carried a small, almost empty, bag out to show Leslie that they were running low.

“Shit... hold on.” She set her phone down and grabbed her purse. “I need to finish this call. Can you take my debit card and get cash out of the ATM? How much do you want to get? Just a dime bag? My pin is 8080.”



Les and Alexis both had Tricky on speed dial. He was in and out of the condo religiously. Alexis seemed to have moved in too, making it *their* condo.



The island mornings were sacred to Mona. Each day, she'd venture out on a run along the shoreline, seeking inspiration in the shimmering waters that took on a deep blue-silver hue from the light of the rising sun... and each day, she'd arrive home, endorphins rushing through her veins, ready to take a cool shower and start her day, only to see the two women who had yet to make it to bed, chain smoking under the palapa.

Leslie's glow had faded.

The island wasn't treating her well.

She wasn't treating herself well.

She'd been swallowed in the sea of Bacchanal and didn't seem to have a clue where she was headed.



Not knowing, or caring, what time of day it was, Leslie curled up in her wadded, unwashed sheets.

Weeks of daily cocaine use dragged on... the substance kept Leslie in a state of euphoria, numb to the horrors she faced back home—she'd grown apathetic. An emotional skeleton of the caring, compassionate woman she once was.

But it didn't matter because the drugs... the drugs were her *saving grace*.

Until the night she crashed for the first time... she was so tired.

But Alexis wasn't ready to crash.

But she had no money.

But Leslie did.

And Alexis knew that Leslie's debit card was in the pocket of the purse that she had tossed on the coffee table right before she stumbled to her room.

Before Alexis found herself in San Pedro, she was selling real estate in Tucson, and before that, she was dancing topless on stages at a popular Arizona men's club. Always referred to as "one of the A-listers," she was used to money being thrown at her and didn't have any qualms about taking it from anyone.

pin: 8080

Les wouldn't notice. She would have wanted more anyway... she would have spent the money anyway.

And it was true, and when Les woke up, she was ready to rally and Alexis was prepared.

Tricky had already stopped by.

No questions asked...

Les was exhausted though.

She was so exhausted that she didn't realize how exhausted she was.

This was supposed to be her *island time*. Her vacation that she'd saved up for. This was her time to get away. To explore adventure, Caribbean passion... maybe find romance. Maybe fall in love... It *was* her plan, but at this point she was just trying to escape an ominous event that continued to plague her.

She stumbled to the bathroom, looked herself in the mirror, tried to rub away the dark circles under her eyes, then bent down to inhale another line of blow.

The rush though... to Leslie, it felt worth it.

Then... she couldn't take it anymore. She crashed again.

She'd been speaking in slurred sentences and could barely walk in a straight line. Her body wasn't used to this kind of abuse. Sure, she'd party from time to time when friends would come visit her in Vegas, but that was pretty low key... mostly at the hospital, working long hours on her feet, then curled up on her couch watching Netflix on her days off. That was her life, until the incident occurred...the incident that would derail both her life and her beloved career.

What happened to her was never supposed to happen to a professional and compassionate trauma nurse, and the flashbacks riddled through her mind.

She'd spent seventy-two hours, disoriented and confused, in jail after enduring a severe handcuff injury during an assault by an ICE officer because she refused to draw blood on an unconscious patient without her consent. In a state of shock Leslie struggled and resisted. The radial nerve of her right forearm had been struck with so much force that she lost ninety percent use of her wrist.

She was taken to the Las Vegas Police Station where she was treated like a dog in a kennel. Because she resisted, because she struggled, she was thrown into a little white solitary room and released to walk to the water fountain only when she banged on the door loud enough to get an officer's attention. And that's only when they felt like assisting her. Many times, they would watch her through a sliver of a window as she banged on the steel door, and laugh at her desperate pleas.

They would let her out of solitary every eight hours during shift change so that the officers could get a headcount of inmates, but they handcuffed her each time, hard, and just out of spite, further aggravating her strained wrist.

She was spiraling. All she could think about was her patient who had been admitted hours earlier after being involved in a car accident. She didn't know much more, but her patient had *not* been arrested. The officers didn't have a warrant for her blood. The supervisor stated that without either, Leslie wasn't authorized to draw blood.

And her supervisor had the audacity to stand idly by as Leslie was being paraded through the hospital that she'd worked in for over a decade, hands cuffed behind her back, her arm squeezed by an officer twice her size, yanking her past her favorite doctors, her closest friends, the people whom she would have done anything to fight for.

And she sat alone, in an eerie silence, except for the buzz of the flickering light in an otherwise sterile room. She awaited a moment that she had no idea when would occur: to stand before a judge and plead her case.

Seventy-two hours later she was released on the streets of Las Vegas, her possessions still sitting in a cabinet in an office in the hospital. Alone, numb, void of emotion, she walked around like a zombie until she got it together and made her way home.

Several months passed and she and the hospital were wrapped up in a lawsuit against the government agency. She had been

suspended without pay while she awaited her board review. It was all protocol. The same protocol that led her to endure the haunting atmosphere of a dimly lit jail cell where she sat in a corner, knees curled up toward her chest, trying to quiet her mind.

She was drowning in betrayal, doubt, and uncertainty.



Belize was supposed to be Leslie's tropical escape—a place where she could get away from the horrors that lay ahead for her, but the slightest bit of pressure on her damaged radial nerve brought back memories of the eerie buzz of the flickering fluorescent lights that shed a macabre glow in the holding cell they locked her in.

She laid down on her sweaty pile of sheets.

Alexis shivered slightly and sighed as she eased into the condo and found Leslie collapsed on her bed.

She walked into her room to check on her, but she was sound asleep. She ran her fingers through Les's matted hair and, like second nature, grabbed the wallet from her purse and slid the debit card out.

She figured she'd go ahead and get an 8-ball this time and save Tricky a few stops by their condo. Les would be okay with it, she was sure of it... 8080.



Les shivered as she tugged a wrinkled sheet over her head to block out the afternoon light. She'd been napping in the musty dark, ice cold condo for hours and had no desire to move, but she was restless, nonetheless.

It was late afternoon when she began to stir and Alexis convinced her to get ready to go to a Halloween party on the north side of the island. She'd met some ex-pats who were

throwing a beach bonfire and she'd used Les's debit card to pay for transportation to get them up there.



Seeking an evening of repose, Mona sat on her balcony hoping for some kind of ominous, eerie Halloween ambience to experience as the sky faded from bright blue to a dark, gray dusk, but she ended up watching the two intoxicated women stumble as they approached the rented golf cart.



Alexis grabbed the 8-ball and teasingly slid it into the pocket of Les's baggy cut off shorts. "I don't have any place to hold onto it." She lifted her arms and twirled around, showing off a sexy skin tight nurse costume that clinged to her mawga frame.

"I get to be the nurse this time." Alexis teased, totally aloof to the fact that Leslie might be slightly unnerved by her tone deaf costume choice.



Once again, Leslie had rallied in an effort to entertain Alexis, but in reality she was ready to get off the island. She was over the party scene. Halloween was the last thing on her mind. She had no desire to put on a Halloween costume, but Alexis had brought her a captain hat and an eyepatch with some sequins on it.

Leslie didn't know how to get Alexis to leave her alone, but she was also still craving the high, so she didn't press the issue.

She was lost.

She hadn't found bliss. She hadn't found passion. There was one guy she hooked up with, but she was so wasted that she wasn't sure if she had been raped, and she really didn't care because all she could think about was the ICE officer grabbing her wrist, yanking her arm behind her back, shoving her face against the door to her patient's room and slapping a

handcuff against her wrist as she wailed and begged for him to stop.

She had two more nights before she'd be back in Vegas, where the career she worked so hard for might, beyond all odds, be salvaged in the courts.

She climbed in the passenger seat of the golf cart and took a swig of the cocktail that Alexis handed her. Before she could get settled, Alexis swung out of the sandy parking lot, full throttle, and crashed into a small rock wall.

Les went flying into the sand at the base of the wall.

She lay motionless, her arms and legs sprawled out.

The crunch of the cart against the wall snapped Mona out of a mindless zone and in a knee jerk reaction, she ran down to the street to check on the women.

The entire right side of Les's body was scraped up and rocks were embedded in the side of her face. Mona helped her sit up so she could dust herself off.

Alexis stood to the side in shock.

The golf cart had been knocked clean off of its front axle.

“Just... just take me to the clinic to get some fluids and clean some of these abrasions.” As an ER nurse, Les knew exactly what she needed. “Fuck this party. I just need to rest.”

Just as she mumbled the words a police truck passed and paused to observe the incident.

“Officer... they had a little accident.” Mona explained. “Can you just get her to the polyclinic while I help her friend with the golf cart?”

“Are you all together?” The officer eyed Alexis up and down in her skin tight nurse costume.

“No Officer. I live upstairs. I just saw it happen from my balcony,” Mona explained as the officer nodded toward the other officer to get out of the truck, and they stepped aside to talk.

He returned and helped Les to her feet. “Let’s go ma’am. I’ll get you to the clinic. Officer Palacio will stay here to tend to your friend.” He looked Alexis up and down again and caught a glimpse of the cocktails she’d placed in the cup holders.

Mona returned to her balcony and sipped a glass of wine, watching Alexis’s arms flail up and down as she explained to the officer, through slurred words, what happened.



Les could barely keep her eyes open. The ride to the clinic was bumpy and the cocktail that she chugged before the accident wasn’t sitting well.

Upon arrival at the clinic, the officer stepped out of the truck and walked to the passenger side to help her out of the vehicle.

He placed an arm around her.

She stumbled a bit and her foot slid and as he grabbed a loose part of her shorts to help her... the 8-ball of cocaine fell to the ground and they both stood in shock, staring as it lay in the sand.

Leslie's heart skipped a beat. She possessed enough cocaine to be charged with intent to distribute.

“Officer...” she looked at him and pleaded. “I just need a quiet place to lie down... please.”

He stepped away from her, bent down and picked up the drugs... he tapped the bag against his hand for a second and

examined it. He slid the bag into his shirt pocket, pursed his lips, slowly nodded and reached for his handcuffs.

The sky had almost faded to black as the moon began to rise above the horizon. Leslie's face was bone white, void of expression. Her body trembled as visions of flickering fluorescent lights illuminated the holding cell that, not three months prior, started eating her alive as she drowned in betrayal, doubt, and uncertainty. Her wrist throbbed and her body moved into a state of shock as she prepared herself to face a new horror, one far surpassing that of a lost career.

Silence ensued and the outside fluorescent lights of the polyclinic flickered as the officer gently cuffed her wrists in front of her trembling body and led her into the polyclinic where she could lie down.