



The Carpenter's Zen

AN ILLUSTRATED SHORT STORY

BY

MARGARET ELIZABETH HULSE



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

Copyright © by Margaret Elizabeth Hulse 2018
Mpulse Studio | Charlotte St. Charles

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

For information, address Mpulse Studio,

margarethulse@mpulsestudio.com

The Carpenter's Son

The Carpenter's Son

A short story

By

Margaret Elizabeth Hulse

Mpulse Studio | Charlotte St. Charles
A Narrative from the Adventurous Heart Literature
Collection
Dallas | San Pedro | New Orleans



Creole dictionary:

Mada-rass [**mah**-duh **ras**] - noun: *Slang*. Vulgar.

1. a mean, despicable, or vicious person.
2. anything considered to be despicable, frustrating, etc.
(used as a general expression of contempt or anger).

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



Antoine ran a piece of mahogany through the lathe and paused to wipe beads of sweat from his brow. He had a large order that he was working around the clock to fulfill. He needed an apprentice, but his stubborn and introverted nature blocked him from accepting help. I hadn't seen much of him over the past week. He was buried in his workshop and I was working full time in my studio gallery, Mpulse Studio. Our marriage worked well because we respected one another's commitments and honored one another's space.

Mpulse Studio was located in Boca del Rio. I had just moved it from the town square, near the pier where Antoine kept his

workshop, in hopes to generate a more peaceful, creative ambiance away from the hustle of the tourist shops. Still, the tourists knew how to find me, and my space was frequently visited by the ex-pats, as well. I became known for inspiring creativity and spirituality through the tranquil effects of my salt-scrubbed watercolors and sensual jewelry designs. But I branded myself in a way that didn't resonate with the local San Pedranos. My bohemian 'woo woo' attitude was unique to the North Americans who came to the island in search of self actualization, to those of us who left the grind of the American work style to find ourselves in the magic of the tropics. But to the locals, it was 'just the tropics', and my work was 'just island art.'

I burned a stick of incense, a gift from a boutique in Tulum, and breathed in the charcoal aroma. *Om Tuttare*, one of Deva Premal's Sanskrit chants, lingered in the background. I set the tone for a morning of serenity, as my usual customers had come to expect, so when two Belizean women sauntered through the front door, I was caught off guard. One woman was Creole. Tall and thin, with caramel skin and long black hair worn in two tight braids that ran down her back, she embodied simple grace. She was dressed in tribal printed

leggings, a tank top, and a pair of Keds sneakers. The other woman had Mestiza features. She was short and curvy with olive skin. Her waist length, dark brown hair was frizzy from over processed highlights. She wore a bright pink tube top embellished with the words “Island Queen” in gold metallic script letters, cut-off denim shorts, and matching bright pink flip flops. The women spoke to one another in Creole as they wandered around my space, running their fingers along each piece of jewelry and work of art that I had on display.

“Can I help you?” I smiled as I greeted them.

The tall Creole woman gazed toward me with dark, doe like eyes, as if she wanted to say something, but just shook her head “no.” The Mestiza woman flipped her hair, adjusted her shoulders, and replied, “we jus’ here lookin aroun.” She walked with an exaggerated sway in her hips.

“Okay.” I smiled. “Just let me know if you have any questions.” I went back to my workspace and continued assembling a pair of mother-of-pearl and silk earrings.

The women weaved throughout the entire space, chatting amongst themselves, holding various pieces of jewelry against their collarbones and checking their reflections in the mirror. They made their way around my gallery, and over toward my workspace when the Mestiza woman nudged her friend and commented, “I tol’ you I’d find him.” She nodded toward my easel. I looked over my shoulder. They were gawking at a picture of Antoine and me. “Dat mada-rass looks twenty years older ‘dese days.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?” I asked in a contrived version of a courteous tone.

“Antoine.” She nodded toward the photo. “Kimberlea told us dat he was aroun’ here.” Kimberlea was a bartender at one of the local beach bars. Everyone on the island knew her in some degree or another.

I pursed my lips and nodded back at the Mestiza woman. My heart pounded and I nervously placed my fingers on my collarbone and began fidgeting with my *Love* Necklace, a simple gold charm that I designed to remind myself that no

matter what I'm experiencing, I have all the love I need to survive.

“Antoine is my husband.” I quipped. “We've been together for over a year.”

The Mestiza woman sucked her teeth. “Gyal, you can keep Antoine. I'm jus tryin to find him so I can give him back his son.”

“His son?” I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. We'd been together for over a year and he never uttered a word of being a father. I looked at her, blindsided, with wide eyes and stuttered, “Um... okay... so you.. don't know how to reach him?”

Not only had my husband kept a life altering secret from me, I didn't know what I was about to get in the middle of. I didn't want to misspeak on his behalf, but at the same time if a child's livelihood was at stake, we had an obligation to be involved.

I took a deep breath and looked the Mestiza woman in the eye. “I’m Mona.” I tried to smile. “I’ll be back home this evening. If you give me your number, I’ll have Antoine contact you.” I handed her a pen and a piece of scrap paper.

The Mestiza woman sucked her teeth once again, took the paper and scribbled: *Selena 501-555-5972*

My stomach dropped when I saw her name. Selena was his ex-wife, the woman who left him for another man right after they got married.

As the two women exited the gallery, Selena dipped her hand into a bowl of complementary matchbooks that I kept by the front door. She put about ten of them in her Louis Vuitton knock-off purse.



It was almost 8:00PM when Antoine arrived home. I had been pacing for an hour, trying to figure out how to ask him about his son. Not only had he betrayed me with his secret, he hadn’t seen his son since I’ve known him, which doubly

disturbed me. I couldn't imagine how badly his son needed him.

I gave Antoine enough time to settle in and grab a Belikin beer from the refrigerator, and as soon as he popped it open and took his first sip, I handed him the small note. "A woman came by the gallery and left this for you." I stepped back and swallowed my breath.

I tapped my foot on the floor while Antoine studied the note. His face morphed into a frown. He sucked his teeth, crumbled it up, threw it on the floor, and plopped down on the couch. My jaw dropped. "Don't you want to know what it's about?" I didn't know how to breach the subject sensitively, and I was getting angry.

"Antoine. You need to call her."

"Chaw." He expressed his disdain in Creole. "You think dat I want to have anyting to do wit dat bitch?"

"Antoine, I know she hurt you, but you have a son with her! You have a responsibility."

“Chaw.” He spat out again, this time crossing his arms over his chest. “I ain’t got no son. Don’t believe anyting dat woman has to say.”

“You have to at least talk to her. You have to figure out what’s going on.” I reached down and picked up the crumbled piece of paper. I pretended to throw it in the trash, but slid it into my back pocket.



Knowing it was going to be a disaster, I made arrangements for Antoine and I to ‘accidentally’ run into Selena at a local beach bar. He never would have agreed to meet with her, and it made more sense to beg for forgiveness than ask permission.

As I expected, the evening was a train wreck, but even more so than I could have imagined, infused with feelings of selfishness and betrayal from all of us except from the person who mattered the most: the eleven year old boy who was

being used as a pawn so his mother could move, childless, to Honduras with her husband.

I didn't expect Selena to bring her son to the bar. I was shocked to see a spitting image of Antoine, sitting on a bar stool, sipping a cherry Coke. Luckily, Antoine didn't see them when we walked in so he settled with a beer and fell into conversation with his friends. But as soon as she made her presence known, years of pain and anger emerged.

"Uh uhh." He said and shook his head 'no.' He turned to me and said, "Now I've been betrayed by both women I've married." He pressed his Belikin bottle to his lips and took a long swig, slammed it on the bar, and walked toward the exit. "Mona, I thought you were different. Do me a favor and don't ever talk to me again." He shook his head and walked out onto the sandy beach.

I placed my hand on my heart and breathed in the pain.

"Chaw." Selena murmured then sucked her teeth. "Dat madda-rass. I told you he got problems." She didn't seem surprised by his actions, but I was stunned. I wanted to chase

after him, but I didn't want to cause a scene in front of his son. Selena fumbled through her fake Louis Vuitton bag and unearthed her son's passport. "Here you go." She turned toward him, gave him a kiss on the forehead, chugged down her rum and coke, and left him with me.

I opened his passport: Alexander Vela. He had Antoine's last name.

I looked at the boy. He sat at the bar, shoulders hunched over, still sipping his cherry Coke.



Several days had passed and Alexander and I had settled into a routine. I honored Antoine's space, and let him spend time alone on his boat. This wasn't the first time he'd done this, and it infuriated me nonetheless, but he knew how to cope by removing himself from his pain.

I didn't have any experience caring for an adolescent. I wasn't sure that I was even qualified to be a stepmom, but I did what made sense, which was take Alexander with me to

my art studio every day. We fell into a routine. Each morning, Alexander would walk to the corner store and pick up fresh flour tortillas. I scrambled eggs with black beans, and sipped on a cup of hot tea while he watched morning cartoons. Our golf cart ride from our San Pablo neighborhood, across town, was relatively silent. Alexander was a quiet boy, and the only thing he and I had in common was Antoine, and I didn't feel comfortable talking about him. Alexander just gazed out upon the sea as our golf cart bumped along the rocky sand.

I had a small desk in the back of the studio that I turned into a workspace for Alexander. I gave him carte blanche to work with any of my materials, but it didn't come as a surprise when he went straight to the wood working tools that Antoine had been storing in my space. Perhaps Selena had told him that his father was a carpenter. I didn't want to ask, but I found comfort in his innate ability to whittle small, whimsical objects, as Antoine did when I first met him.

In the evenings, Alexander and I walked to the corner store together to pick out things to prepare for dinner. I thought it was a sweet way to bond, but to Alexander, it was much

more. He insisted that he was protecting me from the drug dealers that gathered halfway down the sandy, banana tree-lined street, one of whom continually asked me why Antoine hadn't been around, and proceeded to refer to Alexander as 'A Junior.'

His name was Hector. He was a tall, slender Honduran man with short cornrows and a crooked smile, absent of a few bottom teeth. His demeanor frightened me, but he never posed much of a threat, so I ignored him. Each time we passed him, I playfully patted Alexander on the head, as a 'thank you' for keeping me safe.

Our routine continued for several weeks. I was used to Alexander. I appreciated his company, and I wanted the best for him. One day in our golf cart ride on the way home from the studio, Alexander turned to me and asked, "Miss Mona, where is my daddy?" My heart sank. I didn't want to tell him the truth. I couldn't.

I took a deep breath and smiled to hide my pain. "Your dad has been away working."

“He don’t love me Miss Mona.”

I sighed. Alexander was astute. “Alex, your dad loves you. He’s just going through a hard time right now. He has a lot on his mind and he needs to focus on his work.”

Alexander sat in silence for a moment. “He doesn’t think I’m good enough to be his son?”

I pulled the our golf cart alongside our apartment and turned off the engine. I turned to him and looked him in the eye. His expression was just as deep and brooding as his father’s.

“No sweetie. That’s not it at all. Please be patient.”

“I need to show him dat I am a man.”

I saw so many of Antoine’s characteristics in his son. He was turning inward. He was putting the blame on himself and carrying his father’s burden. He slid out of the golf cart, hung his head and sulked as I followed him around the back of the building, through the dense royal palms, to the cement staircase that led to our front door. I offered to make him

something to eat, but he retreated to his room and locked his door.

My patience with Antoine had worn thin. It was time for him to come home. I gathered pieces of Alexander's woodcarvings and went to see him. The sun was setting on the lagoon when I arrived at the dock. Hues of orange and blue fused together, casting a dark twilight haze behind Antoine's solemn stature. He sat, slumped at the helm of his boat, sipping a Belikin, and staring down at his phone. He didn't acknowledge me when I took a seat on the pier next to him.

"I brought you something." I set down the bag of Alexander's wood art. "I thought you might find some inspiration in these."

Antoine turned to me, placed his elbows on his knees and buried his head in the palms of his hands. He took a deep breath then looked toward me. "Ya know," he began. "I never taught dat I would have to relive de past. I never taught dat Selena was going to come back and haunt me. She ruined

my family. I lost my modder because of her...” He paused and sighed. “I don’t want her bad juju anywhere near me.”

My heart sank when I thought back to the night on the pier in Dangriga, not long after I first met him.

After several hours of our intimate conversation, he finally began to talk about why he left Dangriga. He explained that he and his brother Andy, along with their parents and his aunt and uncle (his father’s sister and her husband) took a trip to St. Lucia. His aunt was a teacher and had an opportunity to open a school there. They heard how beautiful the island was and all decided to join her for a little while. Antoine had a boat and he offered to take everyone.

“Dere was a storm brewing and I knew it. I shoulde turn aroun’ but I taught dat I could take de boat off de course and finna new course to get to de islan.”

Antoine returned to the saddened state that he was in when I first met him. He sat in silence for several

minutes. I just looked at the dock and waited for him to continue.

He took a deep breath, rested his forearms on his thighs and cupped one fist with the other palm. "I took us right into de storm and de boat was struck by lightenen'. It caught fire." He paused again. Still leaning forward, he now rested his forehead in his palms. "Our mudder drown. Mi aunt loss her husban'."

Antoine and I sat next to one another for what felt like ten minutes. Neither of us said a word.

Selena was having an affair and his heart, and his ego, were crushed. She ended up leaving him for another man. He lost faith in himself. He lost faith in life. He started living precariously in pain, was self absorbed, dismissed concern for others, and let his ego carry them into the storm. For that, he lived with the heavy burden of his mother's death, but he blamed Selena too. Learning that she had kept his son from him for eleven years as well, was more than he knew how to handle. He was afraid that if he looked at Alexander, he

would see Selena, and relive his mother's death, over and over again.

“Antoine, she is not near you. She's hundreds of miles away right now.”

“How do I even know that Alexander is my son?” Antoine shook his head. My jaw dropped.

I pointed to the bag of his woodcarvings. “You should look in the bag and see what I brought you.”

Antoine reached toward it, unenthused. He sifted through the bag and revealed a figurine shaped like a sea turtle. He pursed his lips and nodded, and then pulled out a small wooden disk with crude letters carved into it. *A & A*. Antoine took a deep breath and I saw that his heart started to ache. He placed the disk back in the bag and handed it back to me. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Antoine,” I looked at him, square in the eye. “Sometimes you have to look at your fears head on and trust that you're man enough to overcome them.” I placed my fingers along

my *Love* Necklace and took a deep breath. I left the bag of wood carvings on the pier, turned my back to him and made my way home. I left the golf cart at the end of the street as a peace offering, in case having something to drive home would make it easier for him to return.

The sun set as I ambled along the cobblestone street toward the corner store. I picked up dinner for Alexander and me. It was lonely without him. I enjoyed picking through the produce with him as we tried to figure out what would go well with our usual fare, chicken cuts and coconut rice. We usually ended up eating the same thing every night, but it was still fun to pretend like we were being inventive. He was a sweet boy and it broke my heart that he was caught in the crossfire between a self absorbed mother, and a grief stricken father.

With two small grocery bags in hand, I made my way down the sandy, rocky street that led to our quiet apartment in the corner of the island. I mentally prepared myself to walk past the drug dealers, which I wasn't used to doing alone. In the dark, by myself, the banana tree-lined street seemed longer, more secluded. Hector sat alone in the shadows against the

fence, elbows propped on his knees, looking down toward the sand. As I passed he didn't say anything, he just lifted his eyes and gazed upon me with a baneful expression.

I didn't do it on purpose, but I quickened my pace as I walked past him. I made a slight curve around him, to give myself a sense of more space between us. I couldn't deny the fact that I feared him and that energy was vibrating through the dense, salty air.

I was halfway down the street, with only about five or six more houses to pass before I rounded the bend to our apartment that was tucked back in a dense jungle of royal palms. The final stretch home felt longer as I walked alone. An ominous energy hid in the shadows and my pace quickened even more. My pace quickened to a slow jog as I rounded the corner to the apartment and as soon as I saw the patio lights on, a sense of comfort settled in, but only for a moment because I could feel that force coming up behind me. I ran apace up the cement staircase and dropped my groceries to the ground as I fumbled through my bag for my keys. A motion sensor light from downstairs was activated

and another patio light flickered on and as soon as I slid my key in the door, a tall, slender shadow hovered over me.

I felt a large hand press against my shoulder, and fingers pressed on my clavicle. I stood, motionless, as the shadow bent forward and whispered in my ear, “I finally get to be alone wit you.” I couldn’t breathe. I stood, paralyzed, with the key in the lock, wondering how I was going to get out of this. The force from Hector’s energy was already pushing me down and robbing me of my strength.

“Baby girl,” he condescendingly spoke in a graveled Creole dialect. “Aren’t you going to let me in?”

I left Alexander home alone, but there were no lights on. I prayed that if he was still in his room, he would stay there. I didn’t want him to get hurt. I had nowhere to hide. Hector had me cornered. Antoine kept a collection of knives in the corner of the kitchen, near the hallway. My only hope was getting close enough to them, so I had a weapon to wield. But when I turned the key in the metal door frame, as soon as I heard it click, the Honduran drug dealer had pressed it open from behind, and pushed me against the closest countertop.

“I always wondered what it was like living in a home wit a white chick. Antoine, dat mada-rass, he a lucky fool. I ain’t seen him around in days... I guess he left you for open game.” Hector pressed me against the counter with so much force that my hands slid along the surface and knocked a stack of pots and cutlery on the floor, creating an echoing racket of metal, crashing against the stone tile. A paring knife nicked my ankle as it fell along my leg, and without him noticing, I kicked off my flip flop and slid my foot over it, hoping I could lift it somewhere within my reach.

Most of Antoine’s knives were secured to a magnet, along the wall behind us, between the hallway and the refrigerator. And his machete reseted on the ground, in a crevice between the wall and a small cabinet. I feared that Hector would find it before I did. I tried to stay calm as he breathed and spat obscenities into my ear, one of his hands kept my hips pressed against the counter drawers, and the other fumbled around the waistline of his pants. He kept his body pressed forward, restraining me from any movement. I was bent at the waist in a position that cut my breath short. I struggled to adjust

my body so I could catch my breath and Hector grabbed my hair and yanked it back to keep me still.

My *Love* Necklace came loose and the chain got caught in a sweaty knot of matted hair at the back of my neck. I was getting dizzy. I looked out the window into blackness, offset by the horrific reflection of everything that was happening. We were hidden in a dark pocket of the island and no one could see into this window from the street. I tried to push back, to give myself a little room to breathe, but that only made him retaliate and push me harder against the counter. His shorts dropped to his ankles and his balmy flesh pressed against my back side. I looked out into the darkness and prayed that this would end soon.

In the reflection of the window, I watched a door crack open from the hallway. Alexander emerged from his room when he heard the pots crash to the floor. Our eyes met in the window reflection and I looked at him with a plea of desperation, begging him to hide in his room. Hector didn't want a witness. A feeling of faintness washed over me and my eyelids fluttered. My body collapsed, then suffered the weight of Hector's. He crumbled on top of me. I lay curled

on the kitchen floor, spattered in blood, wedged between the cabinets, and his motionless body.

I caught my breath and looked, wide-eyed, at Alexander. He stood over us, his tiny form shook as he kneeled down and placed the machete on the ground. He walked toward me, took my arm, and helped me slide out from under the drug dealer's lifeless body.

I shook as I took him in my arms, and embraced him. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Antoine returned home that night, but weeks passed before any peace would be confessed.



Antoine fell into a deep depression. Once again, his disdain for Selena caused him to neglect, and bring pain, upon his family. Alexander and I continued with our usual routine. In the morning, Alexander walked to the corner store and picked up fresh flour tortillas. I scrambled eggs with black beans, and sipped on a cup of hot tea while Alexander

watched morning cartoons. Our golf cart ride from our San Pablo neighborhood, across the bridge to the north side of the island, was relatively silent.

One day, Antoine found the strength to leave the apartment and stop by my studio to pick up some pieces of scrap wood that he had laying around. When he entered, he was surprised to see how meticulously Alexander worked on his craft. He stood in silence and watched his son work with simple tools to measure, and make precise cuts, with an innate understanding of the wood, and the patience it requires. Antoine had been avoiding Alexander, fearful that he would see Selena in him. But to his surprise, it wasn't Selena that he saw in his son, it was his mother. The expression that Alexander wore as he focused, and employed his passion and pride in his work, was reminiscent of his mother, whose loving smile he longed for, and cried for, for so many years. Tears welled in his eyes and he stood in silence, as a soft smile formed across his face.



Weeks passed and Antoine watched over Alexander as he pulled a piece of wood through the lathe. He ran the bottom of the mahogany closer to the blade than he should have, carving out a larger indentation than ideal, but Antoine still nodded with pride that his son was learning his trade. He had a pile of scrap wood for Alexander to practice with, and he knew it wouldn't be long before they were working together, side by side.

© Margaret Elizabeth Hulse 2018