

A reunion; a wedding: all the linens have been freshened.

A Short Story

Anthony Paul Griffin

Act 1 - *Yes kez sirumem.*

As Anise Bilal stood over the sink, she hummed a song her mother sang to her when she was a child. She smiled as she washed the beans which ran between her fingers. A smile of anticipation, a mother's smile – and even though she initially had doubts about her child's chosen mate, her doubts were no more. Only days remained before the wedding; hours before her house would become the center of her family's universe.

Bilal, as we called her, was always one Father Time seemed to favor. She was nearing her sixty-fifth birthday and he had not disturbed her smile. Her lips remained soft and supple; they possessed a

pinkish/brownish hue which bespoke of her vitality. Her skin glistened as if he, Father Time, gave her the body oils he robbed from the rest of us as we aged. I remember looking at her family album and noticing her mother and her mother's mother both possessed light colored eyes – she told me they were as green as the ocean's waters. However, Bilal's pupils were black and shiny as new marbles; they provided a wonderful contrast to her fair skin and the tuft of strawberry blond hair which tapered over her left shoulder. It was only one tuft; the remaining hair on her head was black as coal. Bilal never dyed her hair, but she was often accused of doing so by inquiring words hidden as a compliment. When asked where she got the idea of the color combination, Bilal would smile and say “*my momma, my daddy.*” It was also this contrast of features which attracted everyone to her. It seemed every race or nationality wanted to count her as one of their own.

I had asked her about her name, and she told me it was her late husband's family name; she wouldn't provide much more. She did tell me he would answer any inquiry about his history by saying firmly he was an American; he said nothing more. Bilal said Mr. Bilal never talked much about his family. I always got the impression he told her everything, but those matters were not part of our conversations, not even with her closest friends. Yes, I considered myself to be one of her closest friends. We had known each other since the death of her husband over thirty years ago.

She did tell me once Mr. Bilal pursued her from the first day they met. "*He pursued and I ran, but not too fast,*" she would say, with a slight chuckle. Eventually he told her he loved her – which is all that mattered to her. Bilal married Mr. Bilal when she was young, she twenty-three; he forty-five. I remember seeing Mr. Bilal in town when I was younger, he wore his

hair short. It wasn't nappy, wasn't straight either. His skin was olive toned, with hints of a light brown mixed into the color hue. I assumed he was a coon ass like the rest of us.

Mr. Bilal died eight years into their union; he died in an automobile accident. Although their union was short, it bore them three girls, Emily Anise, Arin Anise, and Claudia Ann. Mr. Bilal had a son from a prior union, his name was Jacir.

Jacir was ten when Bilal and Mr. Bilal married; he referred to Bilal as *Māda*. She told me it meant mother in both Armenian and Farsi. Jacir chuckled every time he used the word; he followed it with, "*I know of no other.*" If Jacir was close enough he would always kiss Bilal. Bilal would lovingly strike him, explaining at the same time, "*looking more and more like your daddy.*"

Emily was a female version of her daddy; she did have Bilal's eyes though.

Arin Anise, the middle child was a blend of both. Claudia Ann was a younger, taller Bilal. If you closed your eyes, Claudia's voice was her mother's voice. The same sing-sing happiness her mother displayed, Claudia was so blessed to possess.

Anise O'Neal Thibodeaux Bilal was made in America. She was a possessor of the South's secrets. She could be, maybe was and did possess physical features which were Irish, African, Indian, and French - a DNA gumbo. Bilal fair skin and eyes told one story, her full hips and body told another. Her nose and lips were ambiguous. She said her height came from her mother, who was a slight-bit under six feet. Bilal was not quite as tall.

Bilal's diction was Cajun, although her favorite phrase was one that her late husband often said to her - *yes kez sirumem*. He told her it meant I love you. Bilal told me she tried to look up the origin of the word and couldn't figure out whether it was

Arabic or Armenian. She realized that it didn't matter much to her; she just loved him saying it. *He was so cute when he said it.* She fell in love all over again, "Every time he said those words." Even though their time together was all too short, their love was not.

She sang her mother's song, danced her mother dance, and smiled her mother's smile while she picking the small pebbles from the water. Although Bilal had complained earlier in the week about being tired, she dismissed it as the pressure associated with the family reunion and Claudia's marriage.

All the linens have been freshened. Bilal completed buying all of her supplies three days ago. Ten pies, seven cakes, and dozens and dozens of cookies later, she knew most of her baking was complete. Bilal wanted to wait until Wednesday to bake her breads, a day before the reunion. Today, she bought boxes of fresh vegetables

at the market. The wedding was scheduled for Friday at Our Lady of Mercy.

Bilal had prepped five turkeys, four fresh hams, three cases of pork ribs and two cases of lamb shanks. She had been cooking and preparing in earnest for at least a week, all in preparation for the marriage of her youngest. Claudia suggested having the wedding near the reunion. The combination of a celebration, a family gathering, and the union of her baby and Robert Broussard's son all made her work that much more pleasant.

Mr. Bilal left his family comfortable, even before the accident. Money was never an issue, but you could never tell it from observing Bilal's habits. Bilal refused to spoil those children. She never hired help and did her own cooking, yard, and hair.



The Louisiana cypresses gracing Bilal's driveway were now starting to sway in the wind. She didn't remember whether rain was expected in the area or not. The sky instantly became sullen, or appeared to have a darkened mood. A group of clouds positioned themselves over her neighborhood.

The sun's presence now was only a wink. Bilal looked out the window and noticed birds circling. Their circling

reminded her of the birds she mentioned to her mother when she was a child. When Bilal and her mother crossed the rows and rows of sugar cane, her mother pointed to the birds and explained the birds' behavior told a story; sometimes the story related to the weather and other times it related to death.

It was approximately three when Bilal noticed her oldest girl pull in the driveway. Bilal pushed away from the sink, dried her hands and turned to place a bowl of peeled fruit in the refrigerator. She thought she turned too fast, she felt pain move across her chest and up her neck. Her skin became flush, she held onto the table at first, then the refrigerator. Bilal lowered herself to the floor and closed her eyes.

Bilal heard Emily, her oldest daughter, call for her. "*Mother, you're here? Mother, you're here? Mother!*"

It seemed as if the noise of Emily's feet against the wooden floor was next to her

ears. Of all thoughts to have - *I hope that gurl puts my furniture back in place.* She chuckled at herself, continued to hold her chest, and repeated over and over and over again, *lordy, lordy, lordy.*

Surely, this will pass. Her thoughts were interrupted by a foreign pain. It stabbed her chest wall with a greater force than anything she knew. It felt different than the pains of child birth.

Emily entered the kitchen and screamed. Bilal attempted to open her eyes but couldn't fully. Her skin now felt as if it were on fire.

Bilal raised her head, looked at her child and mouthed *yes kez sirumem.* She said nothing else. When the Emergency Medical Service truck pulled out front, Emily Anise knew her mother had passed.



Emily felt her mother's spirit leave the room even before the strangers in uniforms entered; she stood near the same spot Bilal had stood moments earlier, only now Emily stood frozen in place and time – she heaved dry tears. A car pulled into the driveway, but she did not look up. She could not look up; she just couldn't. The sounds of the feet and screams of her sisters followed.

Mother!

**Act 2 – *The Repose: a dance,
a laugh, Chauncey
Guillory.***

Father Andropot was now serving his eighth year at Our Lady of Mercy. Bilal's death had touched him greatly. Even though he had recited the Requiem Mass on an unknown number of occasions, after hearing of Bilal's passing, he sat in his rectory and recited over and over the words he knew by heart. He placed fresh flowers throughout the church, hung flowing white banners in the upper rafters and open the upper windows to let them flow in the wind. His words seemingly intermingled with the banners as he performed the Church's ancient ritual.

*Out of the depths have I cried
unto Thee, O Lord:
Lord Hear my voice.*

*Let Thine ears be attentive to the
voice of my supplication.*

*If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark
iniquities, O Lord, Who Shall Stand?*

*But there is forgiveness with Thee:
because of Thy Law
I wait for Thee, O Lord.*

*My soul waiteth on His word:
my soul hopeth in the Lord.*

Father Andropot extended his hand sky-ward, the banners continued to flow in the rafters above, the white linens on the altar gracefully flowed in the cross-wind as Father Andropot asked those honoring Bilal to stand. Jacir's mind wandered.

Māda this is Jacir. *Mada*, I wish we could get up and dance, but we can't. I wish I was brave enough to interrupt the service, but I'm not. I want to tell Father Andropot dancing and laughter was your prescription for all which ails us. I won't, I can't. I know you so loved the formality of the Requiem Mass. I will keep my mouth shut.

Māda, your new son-in-law seems to be adjusting to it all; at least I think he is. Lord knows he was shocked with the decision to proceed with the reunion and the wedding. Claudia wasn't taking no for an

answer. When he agreed, I finally figured out your advice to me about love.

*Some love you for a reason;
Some love you for a season;
There are few who love you for a lifetime?*

Their marriage may have a chance to work. Let's see, the reunion was on Thursday, the wedding on Friday and now a funeral on Monday. I say his love is being tested.

Māda, we've been busy, but I'm not tired. I was in Monroe when Emily called; the drive was the longest two hours of my life, but it was also one of the most meaningful. I leaned so hard against my door that I felt like I was going to break the armrest. Before Emily's call, the wind had picked up and the sky had grown dark. When she told me she found you and told me what your last words were *yes kez sirumem*, I had to pull over.

This storm had not been forecast. The storm formed to the southeast in Saint Landry

Parish. It has traveled 100 miles, and was now stalled over Rapides Parish. The wind pounded Jacir's truck causing it to sway; he sat on the side of the road listening to Emily's pain.

I asked Emily how Arin and Claudia were; I could hear them in the background. She never did reply, I too said little. All I could say was "*It's going to be alright.*" I don't know how many times I repeated the same words. After the call terminated I screamed – so did Mother Nature.

During my drive I thought back when I first met you. I knew you were important to *Pedär*; he just seemed different after he met you. He hadn't smiled in a long time; at least I don't remember him smiling much until he met you.

Pedär longed for a home I didn't know. He told me about attending Shiraz University of Technology. He told me it wasn't named that when he attended the

school. *Pedär* didn't say much more about why he had to leave. He would change the subject or just grow silent.

The storm lifted when I got to Bunkie. The last part of my trip, I promised I would learn more about *Pedär's* history. I know - it is the same promise you tried to get me to make over the years. "Boy, you are not just Cajun," you would say. I wanted to be so much like everyone else, I didn't listen to you.

I got home about seven. And even though we cried, we did something else – we talked. The more we talked, the more we realized you didn't want us to cry. No, no, this doesn't mean we have no more tears. We just promised each other it would be a more meaningful tribute to have the reunion and the wedding; now, not next year. Arin said to do it would be a good tribute to our family. Emily agreed but she also kept telling us she loved us; she did so up until the early morning hours. We didn't

understand why. She laughed when she said it; we laughed every time she laughed. Claudia mentioned she had to get her some orange shoes. When Claudia mentioned the orange shoes, we roared. During the laughter, Arin looked up from the couch and said, "*il est trop fou!*" We roared again. Claudia said, yes, she was crazy, and she was going to get those orange shoes. We knew that our decision was the right one.

"No tears," Arin asked. "No tears," Emily and I said in unison. "But I miss her so much," Arin cried out. Emily whispered, "We all do." Emily grabbed Claudia, as tightly as was humanly possible; a long hug - a loving hug. It was good to see this happen, because when the evening started, Claudia said nothing.

Claudia had positioned herself in the corner of the room near the picture of Grandmother Yvonne and sat quietly. Her head was bowed and remained bowed. Her hair covered her face; she continuously

twirled her hair between her fingers – just like you. I watched her closely. I did invade her space once though. *Māda*, she didn't push me away, as she had done over the years. “*Boy, get away from me! Boy, leave me alone!*” She said none of that, she let me hug her. She smiled when I called her *Māda*.

No, we didn't just sit there and cry. We also cooked off the food you had prepped for the reunion. We finished the dinner you had started. I tried to sample everything, because the seasoning was yours. The beans seemed possessed. You were there; weren't you?

We knew others would think we were crazy for going forward. I heard you laugh at the reunion. Oh God! *Māda*, the reunion was packed. When people heard of your passing, they had to come. I saw you wipe away tears of joy, when Robert and Claudia didn't just walk out of the church,

they practically two-stepped. Or maybe you were laughing about those orange shoes.

I must admit my favorite part of this weekend was when we decided to have a contest to see who could tell the best *Bilal* story. When Claudia put on your favorite dress and struck your pose, we all laughed so hard we cried. She told a story about how you made up a boyfriend to make *Pedär* jealous. *Māda* she looked like you; she walked like you and sounded like you when she told her story. When she got to the end she extended both her hip and butt and whispered:

That man stopped working late at night. He started going places with me. When Daddy thought Chauncey Guillory might be a member of the parish, he joined Our Lady of Mercy. Father said I normally would have to confess my sins, for my deception, but he then followed his statement with a sly smile and said it was for the greater good in light of the four new members I brought to the parish. We both smiled.

When I saw I was losing control, I would wear a pair of orange, high heel shoes, dress real nice and leave the house. I was going shopping I would tell him. No, I don't need you to go with me.

Those shoes drove that man crazy. He thought I was going to meet Chauncey Guillory. I never told him Chauncey Guillory wasn't real. I never told him what those orange shoes did to him. He would hug me and love me all night long. You babies wouldn't be here if it wasn't for those orange shoes.

When she finished, we were silent for a brief moment. Claudia tried her best to keep our promise of "no tears." Claudia froze for a brief moment, laughed and fell to the ground. After she laughed, we laughed. When she doubled over, we grew silent again. She then rolled and rolled; she held herself as she rolled. Claudia's orange shoes served as a twirling beacon in the evening sky. She remained in a ball, hugging herself, while saying, "I'm not crying! I'm not crying"! Claudia wiped her eyes, she

laughed and cried; she cried and laughed.

Robert then grabbed her and held on.

Claudia's story was the last story of the day. We smiled at each other, applauded and hooted as loud as we could; everyone then turned to each other and exchanged hugs. We ended the reunion with everyone singing your mother's song and dancing your mother's dance.

Māda, thank you! I was a young boy when you married *Pedär*. I was a young man when I left home. And over the years, as I have aged, you have always made me feel important. I was your child and you accepted no other description, no other explanation.

Jacir knew the Mass was coming to its conclusion when Father Andropot intoned -

*For with the Lord there is mercy,
and with Him is plentiful redemption.
Peace be with you, and also with
you.*

The congregants responded in unison, “And also with you.” Although Jacir verbally responded likewise, he continued to internally bid farewell to his *Māda*.

I have known no other mother. I know I didn’t listen at times when you attempted to give me advice. You would laugh at me and tell me how much I was like my father. I remember how you would be amused when I got excited about some girl’s looks. When I professed my love, you would just say, “okay.” When I told you that she said she loved me, I got the same speech, “some love you for a reason, some love you for a season, there few who love you for a lifetime.” When I continued to press, you repeated the same thing and encouraged me to learn life’s lessons; if I did, I would be a better man. *Māda*, I am still learning life’s lessons, but I thank you. I have and will continue to love you for a lifetime.

I know it is not necessary to stop this mass. We have already laughed and danced; we are still laughing and dancing because of what you have given to us all. *Māda*, I know of no other, *yes kez sirumem*.

The Sun’s ray stood ready to welcome Bilal’s guests. Before they exited Our Lady of Mercy, the lights flickered ever so slightly. Jacir knew his *Mādar* heard him; his smile was as bright as the sun’s stare. He tightly hugged and hung onto his sisters.

Act 3 – *The dirty rice taste like paper.*

Mother, this is Claudia. I am in a stall in the women's restroom. I have been here for at least forty-five minutes. I got tired of playing with the dirty rice. It wasn't your dirty rice; it tasted like paper. Mother, dirty rice shouldn't be treated like that – her rice was overcooked. The chicken livers and gizzards had not been browned and were in large chunks. What is wrong with that woman! I swear to God there wasn't a lick of celery, pork, garlic, or salt in her rice.

People used to cook in the church, and they were good cooks; or at least good church folks didn't let those who thought they could cook, but couldn't, get anywhere near the kitchen. Mother it is the same with those people who get up and sing in the church who can't sing! They need to go to choir practice, but that is another story.

And Mother, God, bless her soul, Mrs. Hattie knows she can't cook. She had no right bringing that dirty rice down here.

And Father Andropot is something else; he had the nerve to bless that woman and her damn rice. If he had said her rice was good, I swear I would have immediately contacted the Diocese to have him removed.

Mother, what are you doing? Are you really gone? Tell me something. You know I came in the restroom because I'm mad at Jacir. He keeps looking at my eyes. I told him I wasn't crying. I told him to leave me alone. Mother, I'm not going to be the one to violate our agreement. So, what if this is my second time in the stall. I had to go. I had to go. I really had to go!

I am never going to take off these shoes; at least that's what I told Robert. I think he believes me. In fact, I can't wait to take them off, they hurt. No, they don't hurt physically, they just hurt my brain. They make me laugh and cry for you. They allow me to be you and to see you. You know, I told Robert they were never coming off - he hugged me. I now understand the powers

those shoes had on Daddy. I hope you are smiling Mother. I'm trying.

Did you see what Robert's daddy wore to the funeral? Mother, I love my husband to death ... oops death is the wrong word ... but what is wrong with that man! His suit wasn't clean, his shirt was wrinkled and he didn't match. I told him next time I was coming to his house and dress him. He laughed. I didn't.

Emily and Arin are doing fine. They play the role of big sisters well. I think they came in the restroom looking for me a couple of times. I picked my feet up and balled up on the toilet so they couldn't see me. I didn't answer. Okay, I was wiping my eyes at the time, but I wasn't really crying.

Thank you for this weekend. I have never had so much fun and sadness at the same time. It's like eating those sweet and sour balls I loved when I was a kid. Mother, Mother, Mother, when we cooked, I

applied your lessons. The food was wonderful.

Mother, I took six rolls of boudain and placed them in a shallow skillet of boiling water for about a minute, then drained the water off and seared the boudain; I did this to continue breaking open the casings. I then added garlic and butter to get a crust and to brown the rice. Your big cast iron skillet worked wonderfully.

I continued to add butter to help the boudain brown and allow it to finish cooking. Okay, Mother, I just like butter. And yes, I remember your lessons –

Continue to scrape your pan so that the food won't burn, let it brown in places, so that it forms a crust, but not flat out black or anything. Turned down the heat to medium low and add the green onions, which you have cut up, (about three bunches), and then add the six roma tomatoes, sliced, which have also been lightly

salted and allowed to breath at room temperature for fifteen minutes. Let this simmer for another three minutes.

See I remembered!

Mother, the boudain reminded me of the Persian Jeweled Rice you cooked for Daddy, but without the fruit and nuts. The onions and tomatoes served the role of my jewels. Arin made tzatziki sauce you said Daddy liked so much. We had those Cajuns screaming. Stop laughing, Mother!

The next morning, me and Emily and Arin ... *"I know Mother, it's Emily, Arin and I!"* ... you see, me and Emily and Arin tried on your clothes and picked out those we were going to wear for each event. I'm never *gonna* to take these clothes off. I'm never *gonna* take these shoes off. Mother, I miss you.

Did you hear the lie that man told at the reunion? The nerve of his ass! Okay, I know I'm not supposed to be cursing ... but

he is an ass. He made it sound like you were close to him. He said he felt he was one of your best friends and you and he had known each other since the death of Daddy. I knew you couldn't stand the man. We were nice. We said nothing. I think my eyes are still crooked from staring so long and hard at him as he lied. Lord knows I kept waiting for you to trip him, to slap him, to hit him over the head – to give us a sign you heard and disagreed with his lie. I guess he told his lies because he knows the dead can't come back and tell the truth.

I don't how much longer I can stay in this stall. I know I'm going to stay as long as necessary - so that boy will leave me alone. Even though I can't stand him, I love him so much; I even told him so when we were cooking. His childhood teasing doesn't matter anymore. His unwillingness to accept I was no longer a child, when I was a teenager, seems so trivial now. I use to tell him, *"Boy, you ain't my daddy,"* but

he would just ignore me. If he had to, he would run the boyfriend of the moment away. He served as a big brother and father to me, but Mother I will never admit that to him. His head is big enough. He thinks he's cute!

Do you put a little flour in the filling for your pecan pie? I looked at the back of the bottle - it mentioned *nothin'* about flour. I know you do something different. My pie was okay, but it wasn't your pie. Never mind, I'll figure it out.

God, Mother her dirty rice was horrible, just horrible. Why on earth did they even let her put her dish on the table? Why?

Mother, remember when she brought a pudding to the church and I took it off the table and hid it behind the sink. The parish hall was infected with bugs for months. You wanted to punish me for my act of kindness. I was twelve and I remember saying that "*I'm surprised the bugs even ate*

that slop." I wasn't going to apologize for saving people I love from her *damn* cooking - I am sorry Mother, I didn't mean to curse. You didn't punish me for my defiance, you just laughed. Stop laughing Mother, stop laughing!

Do you like my dress Mother? Okay, it's your dress. Do you like my hair? I'm sorry Mother, I have to go now - my favorite song is playing. Also, Emily has found me; she is looking under the stall. I love you, Mother.

Claudia placed her head on the shoulder of her Robert. Her song played, which was really one of Bilal's favorite songs. Jacir, Emily and Arin danced with and around them forming a protective cocoon. The cypresses continued to sway, the birds gracefully bid farewell to Bilal. The sun understood and provided the vitality for life's continued dance. And yes, the consistency and predictability of life continued ... no one dared eat that women's dirty rice.
