

A Slow and Careful Speaker

(Ms. Gladys at the Multimillionaires' Club)

by James Lynn Smith

Thank you for that introduction and good evening fellow club members. Please ignore my bandaged finger. It was subjected to a slight accident when I was closing my car door.

When I deliver a talk, people sometimes wonder why I speak so slooowly and with such de-liberate enunciation. I usually smile and pretend my attention is diverted, but now I will tell you why. This lady is desperately afraid of mispronouncing words. You see, I was endowed with magic words to counter spells cast by practitioners of voodoo. But it can work two ways: One slight slip of the tongue, and my listener may be changed into a pig, or worse, develop a passion for catching flies like a frog. It's truly disgusting to see a slimy, sticky organ roll out from the mouth and zap a bug in midflight.

*

How did I get my magic words? Long ago when we were much younger and poorer, my husband and I hitched a ride to Belize on a friend's cargo plane. But because of aircraft engine problems we were diverted to Haiti. Since the delay for proper maintenance was going to be two days, we decided to explore Haiti. We acquired an automobile and drove out from Port-au-Prince to see the surrounding land.

Somehow we ended up on a narrow road and saw the path ahead was blocked by maybe half a dozen animals. At first I thought they were goats, but as we got closer we saw they were human-like shapes. Most were hunched and bent

over as though subdued by a mysterious power.

An older native woman dashed out from behind shrubbery and shouted to us. “Be careful of the zombies. Do not look into their eyes.” She ran to our car and peered in at us. In a lower voice she said “A rival priestess sent a group to attack me, and I am using magic spells to stop their advance.”

Some of the creatures were down on the road, twitching and moaning. Others were stumbling, their eyes uncoordinated.

The voodoo priestess looked at our empty back seat. “Can you please take me back to the small village you recently passed through?” She entered our car and we reversed our direction, the nightmarish spectacle vanishing in our rear view mirror.

“We thought zombies were mere superstitions,” I said to her. “How can this happen?”

“Some voodoo priestesses convince followers to become zombies. This to get forgiveness for some serious misdeed committed in the past. Something so bad family and community shun and curse them. She gives them special drugs to put them into a trance, and then places them under a sheet in a shallow grave. Covered with loose soil for some time, low air penetration results in mental loss. Then they are ‘resurrected’ to do her bidding in a ceremony with many incantations.”

The priestess recalled my having looked into the eyes of the zombies. “That is bad, my dear. You will need protection. Otherwise the creatures will intrude into your dreams until you lose your mind. That is the power my rival has given the zombies.” She taught me certain words to say that would stop any onslaught of malicious intent. Then she placed a spell on me that gave the words power.

*

After that time I taught school, and a petulant student once acted in a disrespectful manner. I wanted to say, “Your behavior is repugnant, and if you

continue you will be sent to detention.” However, I was angry and my words spilled out too quickly. I accidentally mispronounced words and they came out as phrases of a magic incantation. Instantly he grew *huge*, long ears like a donkey and started screaming. He ran out of the classroom, and to this day, his exact whereabouts are unknown. It is rumored that he eventually got a job in pest control where he listens to walls for evidence of termites.

*

So now you know why I speak slowly and carefully. Even whispering or painful, angry muttering might accidentally send emanations to others within hearing that could cause them ill fortune, even change their past. The unintentional spell could also affect their memory so they would never know their luck had been had been better.

I am honored that, though I am not wealthy, you accepted me into the Multimillionaires’ Club years ago...You don’t remember that being the name of this club?...You don’t have millions?

Uh-oh. Was I overheard when I shut the car door on my finger?

More Short Stories & Readers’ Theater Scripts at

Storylandscapes.net