

Investing in Plastic

If it weren't for Muriel Serene, Gladiolus would have been much like any hamlet in the Florida swamp. Steamy dankness cloaked its single traffic light, church, restaurant, two bars, and a cluster of low houses occupied by a host of citizens related by blood or history or both.

All took it for granted that Muriel made Gladiolus special.

For as long as anyone bothered to remember, Muriel lived near a stand of mangroves in her little house at the end of a bleached shell path. Just inside her purple front door was a large vase stuffed with plastic flowers that she shared with her many visitors. Her only family seemed to be her great-niece, Lily Gilmore.

Everyone in Gladiolus showed up on Muriel's doorstep sooner or later. By way of example, the minute that Cassie Little learned that her husband had died in a woman's arms at The Seahorse Hotel, Cassie headed straight up the shell path to Muriel's purple door. Spitting mad, and her husband's body already growing cold, Cassie didn't have much time to jump-start her ravaged heart into proper mourning.

Muriel Serene was the only one with a prayer of setting things right.

"Oh, honey, I already heard," Muriel said, as Cassie stormed in without so much as a knock. Cassie sank into the beanbag chair. Muriel peered over her half-glasses, then slipped a needle through the center of her embroidery hoop.

"You heard all of it?" Cassie asked. Her eyeballs were flaming and puffy. Half-moons of sweat spread under each arm.

“Oh, I think so. And here’s the deal. We all know how much he loved you. Didn’t he buy you those crystal beads last year on Valentine’s Day? The ones that sat in the window at Reed’s for two years, until the red velvet under it had turned clear white from the sun?”

Cassie nodded.

“Didn’t they cost nearly as much as the porch he put on your house last spring?”

“Every bit as much,” Cassie said.

Muriel poked her needle back through the hoop, catching the stitch just so.

“Seems to me he wouldn’t do that for just anyone.”

Cassie pressed her hands together. The rotating fan in the corner paused on its journey from side to side and faced Muriel full on. The stream of its breeze lifted the hem of her caftan, puffed her bell sleeves into angel wings, and ruffled some gray strands that peeked from her turban.

“As far as I can tell, James was a special kind of guy,” Muriel continued. Her words came out slow, like honey. “That girl with him? She was nothing to him and she knows it. You’re the only one big enough, wide enough, sweet enough for a guy like James. James wasn’t a bad guy. If his heart hadn’t given out right at that moment, he would have come straight home to you and begged for a batch of oatmeal cookies, now wouldn’t he? And after that, a double shot of the Captain.” Muriel winked at Cassie, who nodded and wiped a tear from her cheek.

“James didn’t mean to be a trouble-maker,” Muriel said. “There’s a name for people like him. Scientists have figured it out. They call them multi-taskers, because

their minds are too busy to stick to any one thing. James was just a multi-tasker sweetheart, and you were the calm at the center of all that tasking.”

Muriel put her hoop down, stood up and studied the bouquet of plastic flowers in the painted vase inside her front door. She pulled out a red rose and handed it to Cassie.

For James’ funeral, Cassie pinned that plastic rose to the lapel of her jacket, right next to the crystal beads. She left everyone breathless as she swooped down the aisle in her red heels and skintight black skirt, one black-gloved hand on her husband’s casket. Her friends hugged her and told her how special she was, hard as it was to be the widow of such a dedicated multi-tasker.

Eldridge and Sue Ellen Henderson were at the funeral, too, with their grown son Chester. His eyes focused skyward, the way they had for the last twenty years, since his birth. The Henderson family sat with Cassie in the front pew, mostly because of how special Chester was.

Muriel had been the first to figure it out, all those years ago.

Chester was born right when hurricane winds uprooted the Gladiolus welcome sign and slammed it into the town’s traffic light. Right there, in the middle of the deserted intersection, in the front seat of their Ford Maverick, Chester slid from Sue Ellen’s womb. He was eerily quiet, with big blue eyes that stared upward. The fancy Miami doctor who examined Chester a month later pronounced that even if Eldridge and Sue Ellen had made it to West Beach General, the outcome would have been the same. Chester had something terribly wrong with him, the doctor said, and wrote the name for it on a slip of paper. Eldridge flushed the paper down the toilet at the first rest stop on the way back to Gladiolus.

As soon as Sue Ellen and Eldridge unpacked, they showed up on Muriel Serene's doorstep. Sue Ellen held Chester in a tight little bundle inside a striped blanket. Muriel got everyone lemonade and then reached for the baby. She unswaddled him and stroked his tiny arms. Throughout, he never looked at her, his gaze frozen upward. His rosebud lips made occasional sucking motions, but his sky blue eyes scarcely blinked, clear and steady as could be. Muriel asked Sue Ellen and Eldridge about Miami. Did they walk along wide flat beaches, did they spot any movie stars? They said they hadn't.

"It doesn't matter. What's the big deal about movie stars, anyway? You've got something way better than that right here, something that a movie star can't even begin to measure up to. A baby like this only comes along once in a generation or so. See how his eyes are always looking up? He's in touch with heaven, that's what he is. He's a direct communicator. All the stuff that keeps the rest of us so busy? None of it's ever gonna matter to Chester. His eyes are on bigger things. You brought a direct communicator into this world. Why, Gladiolus is blessed to have all three of you." Muriel pulled a plastic daisy from the vase by the door and tucked it inside the edge of Chester's striped blanket.

That day, word of the gift of a direct communicator spread like wildfire throughout Gladiolus. Along with their gifts for Chester's christening, the townspeople brought their dreams and sorrows and laid them bare for Chester's intercession. They touched his soft baby fingers and stroked his round cheeks. All day long at the christening, he lay in his pine cradle, without a tear or a whimper, his eyes focused aloft. Folks still wander into the Henderson's house on Swamp Road to sit with Chester, quiet, while he stares directly into heaven for them.

At James Little's funeral, from his usual seat in the front pew, Chester's eyes lifted above the people, the minister, James' coffin, and straight up to heaven, making Cassie and everyone in the church feel just a little better that the direct communicator was, as always, on the job.

The service for James Little was simple. Afterwards, in her red stilettos, Cassie led them in a slow procession to the cemetery, where a headstone already marked the last resting place for the town's most famous multi-tasker. After a ceremonial and tearful burial, the whole town made their way to Cassie's house. Muriel's great-niece, Lily Gilmore, was with them, visiting for the weekend from the gleaming world of Tampa.

"Lily is in college, reading so many books that they would fill this house from the floor to the ceiling if we stacked them in piles," Muriel said. She bent over, slow and careful, to slip a tray of popovers into Cassie's oven. "She's going to understand porpoises and turtles, figure out the language of the world that swims around us. Not many people can learn to understand sea creatures. It's a gift. Almost like magic."

"I'm not doing that anymore, Aunt Muriel. I've switched majors. I'm in business administration now," Lily said.

Muriel turned to Lily and smiled. "I don't know what that is, but I'm sure it will be real nice, too."

The folks gathered in Cassie's kitchen couldn't help but study Lily as they opened cabinets, set the table and poured drinks. They hoped for a clue to settle the ongoing debate over Muriel's ancestry, something they'd always puzzled over, but never thought to ask her. Some were sure that Muriel was black, others just as sure she wasn't. "She's half-Spanish and the other half from some Pacific Island," Cassie had once stated with

authority. Some said she was French and left it at that. Muriel's long skirts and turban headdress covered enough of her that clues were hard to come by. They all agreed on one thing. Muriel was not young, and hadn't been for a very long time.

They found Lily as difficult to pin down as her great-aunt, what with her polished mahogany skin and elegant nose. A pair of tortoise shell glasses with rhinestones in the corners magnified deep chocolate eyes. Her hair frizzed a little at her temples and again at the nape of her neck where it swung down her back in a heavy braid. She had Muriel's voice, soft and textured, like velvet.

After the celebration at Cassie's, Lily and her great-aunt walked back to Muriel's little house with the purple door at the end of the shell path. They shared a plate of sliced mangoes with grated coconut and a whole bottle of sweet wine.

"So, tell me about business administration," Muriel said. She slipped on her half-glasses and picked up a long rectangle of purple cloth. Her needle slid through the fabric.

Lily puckered her face into a frown. "That's pretty, what you're making, all covered with flowers," she said, and reached out to touch it. "It's okay, this business stuff," she continued. "If a person spends all that money on college, something useful ought to come of it."

"Hmmm." Muriel said. She tilted the fabric she was working on so Lily could see the beginning of a burst of white petals against the dark background. "This one's a lily, for you."

"It is." Lily smiled. "Who's this one for?" She pointed to a tiny pink blossom, its petals only half-unfurled.

“That one?” Muriel’s velvety voice thickened a bit. “That’s for someone from long ago. Not all flowers come to full bloom, do they?” She fluffed up the purple cloth and repositioned her needle. “Now back to your school, this new plan of yours.”

Lily wondered if she should ask more about the little pink blossom, but decided it wasn’t the right time. She cleared her throat. “I mean, I’m sure I’ll come to enjoy business administration more when I’m finished with school.”

“No question.”

“My mom and dad will be happy once I’m able to support myself.”

“Seems to me anyone lucky enough to bring a baby into this world and see her through so many years would be happy enough already.” The embroidery fell onto Muriel’s lap while she drained the last sticky drop of wine from her glass. She stood up. “You have a long drive back to Tampa tomorrow. Do you need an extra pillow for the couch tonight?”

In the morning, while Lily packed her Ford Focus, a strange car pulled onto the sandy stretch behind her. A young man in khaki pants, navy jacket and a stern expression got out and grabbed a shiny brown briefcase from the back seat. His white shirt was open at the collar. He didn’t wear socks.

“My name is Benjamin Abner. I’m here to speak to Muriel Serene.” His boat shoes crunched on the shell path to Muriel’s front door.

Lily followed him back to the house, where Muriel was sweeping the sand from the kitchen floor. Benjamin Abner opened his briefcase and set a stack of papers on the table. After only a moment of introduction, he announced to Muriel that the house with the purple door wasn’t really hers. He couldn’t understand why she was there.

“Nobody else was,” Muriel said. “Would you like some lemonade?”

“No,” Benjamin Abner said. He swatted at a fly on his ankle. “Legally, this house is now for sale. By the heirs to the property, its rightful owners. No thank you, that is.”

Muriel didn’t blink.

Lily asked to see the papers. She skimmed through a long document with initials after every paragraph. She set her car keys on the table, twisted her braid and fidgeted with the rhinestones at the corners of her glasses.

“Don’t worry. There are agencies for people like you.” Benjamin Abner said to Muriel. He turned to Lily. “They’ll relocate your aunt.”

“Great-aunt.” Lily picked up her car keys. “Are you quite through?” she asked.

A film of sweat beaded Benjamin Abner’s upper lip. He nodded, gathered his papers and crunched his way back down the path to his car.

“I’ll come back next weekend, Aunt Muriel. Don’t worry,” Lily said.

“I’m not worried. If I’m not here, take care of things. And by the way, don’t forget to look inside the vase.” She pointed to the clay vase in the corner, filled with its wild spray of plastic blooms.

Lily frowned. “You’ll be here.” She kissed the top of her great-aunt’s turbaned head.

That night, Muriel closed her eyes and never woke up. The whole town of Gladiolus wept. The minister at Gladiolus United asked Uncle Clarence to perform a symphony with bells and water glasses at her funeral. “It only seems right,” the minister said.

At the ceremony, Uncle Clarence's sightless eyes dripped tears while his hands tapped out just the right notes. When his eyes went bad from what he called immaculate generation a while back, Uncle Clarence had called on Muriel Serene. She told him that his eyes were taking a break so that his ears could have a turn, on account of the fact that his senses were more democratic than most. She attached four bells to a braided cord and rang them. They both listened. She hung a strip of jingle shells from driftwood. They touched the knots in the wood and the sea-polished edges of the shells. They slid their hands over her worn table. They touched and listened. She sent Uncle Clarence home with a plastic zinnia from the vase by the door.

"It's orange," she told him, "the color of brightness, flame, fat pumpkins, blazing sunsets. It's a strong color."

"I'll need strength," he said.

The strains of Uncle Clarence's funeral music wrapped around Lily the second she opened the door of her Ford Focus. She hurried up the walk and slipped into a pew at Gladiolus United, her heart heavy with regret. She wished she hadn't left for Tampa where her childhood dreams of dolphins had given way to spreadsheets. She wished she'd asked Aunt Muriel to drink sweet wine and talk about the tiny pink blossom that never had a chance to bloom.

Through misty eyes, she noticed that nearly everyone in church had a plastic flower, looped through a buttonhole or shoelace, tied to a purse strap, tucked into a vest pocket. She had to peer around a plastic snapdragon that sprouted from a nest of silver hair in front of her just to see Muriel's coffin. She recognized the purple cloth that covered it, littered with a field of embroidered flowers. Her moist eyes searched for the

shiny white threads of her lily. The memory of the flash of the needle in Muriel's hands made her heart hurt.

"Look in the vase," Lily remembered. After the sad procession to the cemetery, she drove to Muriel's house. She turned the handle of the purple door, half expecting resistance, but it swung open. Muriel's vase was where it always was, inside the door, stuffed with plastic flowers, a few still stuck with yellow price tags from Reed's. Lily slumped in the beanbag chair and stared at the vase. A knock on the door made her jump.

"Come in," she said.

The woman with the plastic snapdragon in her hair entered and shut the door behind her. "I'm sure glad to find the house open. You know, Muriel never locked her door." She paused and fiddled with the stem nearly stuck in her scalp. "I'm Thelma Riddle, Muriel's good friend. But I guess we're all Muriel's good friends. I had to come. I hope you'll excuse me. Believe it or not, my George died the same night that Muriel did."

"Was George old?" Lily asked. She didn't know what else to say.

"Oh, my, yes. Probably twenty. Maybe more. Until last month, he still went outside in the evening. He napped in the sunspot on the front porch every morning. But this last month, he was real sick. Didn't even touch his Fancy Feast. I don't know what I'll do without George. Without George and Muriel Serene."

"George was your cat." Lily took a deep breath. "I had a cat once."

"Then I guess you understand. Well, there's nothing to be done for me, now that Muriel is gone. I just hate to lose them both, you know."

“That’s just it,” Lily said. Her own voice surprised her with its certainty. “Muriel and George are together. I’ll bet you’re closer to Muriel than any person in Gladiolus today, your cat taking off with her and all. If you listen hard, you’ll hear that cat purring out in his sunspot real soon, with Muriel nearby. If I had a very old cat, I’d consider it a blessing and an honor that Muriel took George under her wing when it was his time to go. Why, Thelma, what do you bet that those two are ambling around heaven right this minute, just plotting a visit to you?”

Thelma slapped her knee. “Well, they are now.”

In her enthusiasm, Lily had edged so far forward that she nearly fell out of the beanbag. She straightened up and sank back into the chair. Thelma watched her.

“Well?” Thelma asked after a minute.

“Well what?”

“My flower. That’s what Muriel does. After she helps you, she gives you a flower.”

“Oh. Well, go ahead and take one.”

“That’s not the way it works. She chooses it for you. It’s always the right one.”

Lily watched the snapdragon bob in Thelma’s silver bouffant. “Yes, I guess it is.” She went to the vase in the corner, and after a moment’s consideration, pulled a plastic Queen Anne’s Lace from the tangle of stems. She handed it to Thelma.

“That’s it. Pure white with a little black spot, like my George. A royal weed for a royal old alley cat. Why it’s a miracle.” The plastic tendrils on the snapdragon scratched Lily’s cheek with the force of Thelma’s hug. “Lily Serene, thank you.”

Lily started to tell her that she was Lily Gilmore from Tampa, not Lily Serene, but stopped herself. After Thelma left, she took out the plastic flowers from the vase and laid them on the floor. The vase was tall, narrow at the top with a bottom that ballooned into a stout base. Underneath the flowers were what seemed like hundreds of tiny scrolls, each tied shut with a snippet of embroidery thread. Lily pulled out a scroll, loosened the thread and unrolled it.

“Wanda Cafferty. Car accident. White Dahlia,” she read. She rolled it back up, tied it, and opened a few more. It was always the same--a name, an event and a flower in her aunt’s telltale flourish. She dumped all the scrolls from the vase, careful to corral them with her elbows so they didn’t skitter away. She dug deeper into the vase and hit something solid. With difficulty, she squeezed three rectangular bricks through the neck and out the vase’s mouth. The bricks were wrapped in chamois. She unwrapped them and stared. Gold bricks, she was sure of it, even though she’d never seen one before. One had a note attached.

I traded the money from Gordon Barker for gold, as I have no use for money. Tried to help Gordon, but he had a heavy burden. Son jumped from bridge four miles above Gladiolus. I told him the huge stone in his belly will weigh him down his whole entire life, and all he can do for it is help every person he meets. My guess is he’ll find lots of folks have stones in their bellies too. Maybe a few even heavier than his. Didn’t he just come back some five years later with a whole pile of money, which I traded for these gold bricks. Muriel Serene.

Lily rewrapped the bricks and stuffed them back through the mouth, down the long neck and into the bottom of the vase. She gathered the scrolls, dropped them inside,

then picked up the tablet and ballpoint pen near Muriel's embroidery hoop. On a thin sheet, she wrote 'Thelma Riddle. Passing of George the Cat. Queen Anne's Lace.' She cut a snippet of silver embroidery thread, rolled the paper into a scroll, and tied it shut. It rustled when it landed in the vase. Lily stuck the plastic bouquet back in place.

She thought about the gold bricks that Muriel bought all those years ago with the money from Gordon Barker, but she thought even more about the little pink blossom sewn into Muriel's purple funeral cloth. She wondered if Gordon Barker knew anything about Muriel's past.

Everyone had heard of Gordon Barker, media mogul and angel whenever disaster struck—flood, pestilence, famine. She'd even read about him in her business classes. Lily looked up the number of the Gordon Barker Relief Foundation and punched it into her cell phone. She had to talk to six receptionists, but every time she said the name Muriel Serene, obstacles melted. Finally, a man with a low, smooth voice answered. She identified herself as Lily Serene, since that seemed easier, and they talked for a while.

Gordon was sorry to hear about Muriel. He told Lily that a long time ago he had been on the verge of suicide when he stumbled upon Muriel Serene's little house in Gladiolus. "I wouldn't have made it otherwise. I gave her something in return," he said, humbly and haltingly. "It's of no consequence to me, really, what she did with, the, er, token of my appreciation. But I guess I'm just curious."

Lily looked around her. "She invested it."

"Really," Gordon Barker said. "In what?"

"Plastic," Lily said. "Mostly plastic, and a little gold."

"Very wise. Prescient, in fact."

“That was Aunt Muriel.”

“Lily? I’ve always wondered. Did Muriel ever say if anything in particular led her to undertake her line of work? Of course, again, it’s none of my business.”

“No, she never said.” Lily’s heart sank. The answer to that question was the very reason she’d called him in the first place.

They hung up.

I never asked her, Lily thought. As far as she knew, no one had ever asked Muriel anything about herself. Lily’s eyes burned from tears of guilt and regret and wondered if there was a worse sort of pain. Why hadn’t she understood that there was such a thing as too late? She went to the kitchen and found a bottle of Muriel’s sweet wine and drank half of it. She had a financial analysis class in the morning, but she was a little drunk and too tired to drive her Ford Focus back to Tampa. She fell asleep in Muriel’s bed under a lavender coverlet.

The next morning she was still too tired. The day after that, she decided she needed to stay another few days to pack up Muriel’s belongings before Benjamin Abner and his cohorts descended on the house. Her seminar on the implications of the tax code on philanthropy would have to go on without her. When she couldn’t think of any more reasons to delay, she carried a box of Muriel’s embroidery to her car and promised herself that tomorrow she would lock up the little house at the end of the shell path once and for all. She finished the last bottle of Muriel’s sweet wine, the ache of regret heavy in her heart.

In the morning, a knock on the door awakened her. Her mouth tasted fuzzy and her hair frizzed from her braid in all directions. She grabbed one of Muriel’s turbans

from the dressing table, threw on a robe and wondered where she'd left her eyeglasses. She answered the door.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Benjamin Abner said. His white shirt was a little rumpled, but this time he wore a tie.

"It's almost ready," Lily began.

"I didn't come about the house. I came ..." He bowed his head. "...to pay my respects to your aunt." Bare ankles stuck out from his shoes.

"Oh," Lily said. "Great-aunt."

Benjamin walked into the house, uninvited.

"I came to apologize actually. I'm afraid I killed her."

"No, of course you didn't. She was very old," Lily said, in her velvet voice.

"I didn't think my job would be that hard." His long arms hung at his side.

"Here, sit." Lily had to press on his shoulders to push him into the beanbag chair. She made him coffee, extra strong. He drank it in a few gulps.

"The first little old lady I have to evict, and she up and dies on me."

"No. Not Aunt Muriel. She wouldn't do that." Lily's eyes were sincere behind the eyeglasses that she'd stumbled across on her way back from the kitchen. Glasses on, she noticed the stubble on his cheeks, chin and over his lip, the dark shadows under his eyes. "She wouldn't do that to anyone."

"How do you know?"

"Well, first of all, Aunt Muriel was too kind to die out of revenge. And second, you didn't evict her. You just said she didn't own her house. For all you know, maybe she would have bought it."

“With what?” Benjamin Abner looked around. “With those?” He pointed at the plastic flowers.

“Who knows? Anyway she didn’t mean to make you feel bad. That wasn’t Aunt Muriel’s way. Trust me.”

Benjamin raised his eyebrows.

Lily took the mug from his hand and refilled it. “Don’t let Aunt Muriel’s dying ruin your job. She wouldn’t want that.”

“I was just doing my job.”

Lily put the steaming mug back into his hand. “Of course,” she said.

Silence filled the room.

“I know what you mean about jobs,” Lily began in a soft voice. “When I was little I thought I would grow up and talk to dolphins. Now I’m studying business so I can make money. Truth is, I hate it.” She eased into Muriel’s sunken spot in the couch and picked up the embroidery hoop that she hadn’t the heart to box up the night before.

“What would you do for a living, I mean, if you could pick?” she asked.

Benjamin sipped his coffee and looked skyward, the way that Chester Henderson had all through the funerals of James Little and Muriel Serene. “I would be a clock maker,” he said.

Lily remembered the rhythmic ticking of her grandmother’s porcelain mantle clock. “Yes,” she said.

“That’s silly, isn’t it, when everything is digital and no one even wants a clock with gears and hands...”

“And ticking sounds,” Lily said.

“Yes, especially those.” Benjamin Abner rubbed his chin. “I forgot to shave this morning,” He stood up. “I have to leave. I have a lot to do. But thanks for the coffee. And for understanding, I mean about my job.” He edged toward the door. “What was your name again?” he asked, his hand on the doorknob.

“Lily.” She paused. “Lily Serene.”

Benjamin dropped his hand. “Lily, I guess you won’t be staying around here, now that your aunt, your great-aunt, I mean, is gone.”

Lily smiled. Certainty popped into her voice. “Actually, I’m staying right here. I plan to buy this house.”

“Well, good, great. I suppose we’ll cross paths again, then. That is, if you’re not too mad at me.”

Lily opened the door for him. “I’m not mad at all.”

Benjamin turned to go.

“Wait,” Lily said. She reached into the vase and picked out a plastic lily, with a giant yellow stamen at its center. “Here. Take this.”

He opened his eyes so wide that three parallel lines spread across his forehead. He transferred the stem from one hand to the other.

“It’s kind of a tradition from my Aunt Muriel. A peace offering.”

“Okay. Thanks.” The questioning lines in his forehead remained.

“Just hang on to it.”

“What about your flower?” Benjamin asked.

“Mine?”

“Why not?” Benjamin reached into the vase and pulled out the first one he touched. “It’s small, I guess, but...”

He handed her a pink rose.

Lily gasped. She saw the unfurled pink blossom on Muriel’s purple cloth with stunning clarity. A phantom taste of Muriel’s sweet wine and mango and coconut coated the back of her throat. A deep peace filled her.

She understood.

If Muriel had wanted to tell her about the unfurled pink blossom, the many steps or missteps of her long life, she would have. It was as simple as that. Muriel’s life was a closed and perfect monument. That had been her choice. The stone of regret lifted from Lily’s shoulders.

“It’s just right,” Lily said to Benjamin, “the flower.”

She reached out to him. Their eyes met, and then their hands, soft and familiar, a touch between friends. Or lovers even.