The Red Hibiscus

Jan Skinner

AYBE I remember it because it was my first cocktail party, but I don't think so. I was in a hurry to be classified as an adult — to live up to my size. So I was sort of grateful when Les asked mother to drag me along to his “Welcome-Home-Liz” party.

And I like Les. He was a concert pianist, with a flair for interior decorating. He'd done some of the things I wanted to do, like playing a sweet piano, making a reputation for his conversation and Martinis, and marrying a girl like Liz.

Les and Liz went well together, like their names. They were two very civilized people. Liz was a little older than Les, but she let him buy all her clothes and pamper her until most people had come to think of her as being years younger than he. There was no doubt about it, their marriage had clicked. Together they could turn a dead evening into a live affair. And they always made me feel like a sparkling conversationalist — me, a high school senior with a crew cut.

It was spring and Liz had just come back from Florida with a tan that was terrific with her blond hair, and a collection of paintings, oils and water-colors she'd done down south. While she'd been away Les had done their apartment over in jewel-toned modern Chinese. Also while she'd been gone, he'd accepted a swarm of invitations, mostly for dinner. I suppose because Liz was back, because she had new pictures to show, and Les had redone the apartment and collected a fair amount of social obligations, it was the logical time for them to throw a party.

Mother has always timed things perfectly. The brawl was in full swing when we got there. Les met us at the door with, “Mrs. Coleman — and the young Mr. Coleman. We've been missing you two. Liz is in the bedroom, powdering her nose. Yours doesn't need it, but I know you'll want to. Bob, I've got a problem you can help me with, a lovely child that's just lost among us old people. Want to make her laugh for me?”

I let him lead me across the living room to a giggling little brunette, who didn't seem lost at all and who certainly didn't need me to make her laugh. She must have been a couple of years older than I, and she was surrounded by men. Obviously, she was doing all right.

After the introductions I found myself with a drink in hand, in the middle of a strange conversation. The current topic seemed to be Liz's paintings. “Best things she's ever done. Awfully good line, color's too clear perhaps, but they've got spirit.” That was from a tall man without his full allotment of hair.

The 'lost' brunette held a cigarette for him to light, “I disagree with you, Herb. Liz has slipped. She hasn't interpreted. She's just put what she saw on canvas. Poof—like that.”

He looked at her across the flame of his lighter, “But that's the beauty of them. The simplicity—it's—what shall I say? It's—”

I couldn't compete in that conversa-
tion. I turned around to try to find mother or Liz—anybody I knew. Then I saw it. One of Liz's pictures, an oil, hung over the fireplace, dominating the room, it's bright undiluted colors clashing with Les's pale subtle color scheme.

There was a disturbing, exotic quality in it. I crossed the room and stood looking up at it. After a moment I wished that I hadn't seen it, for it turned the magnetism of those suave, clever little people in the room into something old and thin, like cigarette ashes floating in cold coffee.

It was a portrait. A man, bare to the waist, in a pair of dirty white ducks, leaning against the mast of a moored yawl. Piers, a couple of gulls, and a scrap of cluttered beach were faded in as background.

But he didn't need a background. He stood, brown in the sunshine, a shadow fell across his barrel chest. His own shadow, elongated, fell on the deck. In one hand — big hands he had — he held a coil of half spliced rope, as if he had been working it and looked up for a moment.

He wasn't handsome, powerful looking maybe, with those sloping shoulders that belied striking power, but not handsome. His head was thrown back, blue eyes mocking while they squinted in the sun, broad nose that looked as if it had once been broken. He had sensual lips, drawn back over big white teeth in a grin. And behind his left ear, it's stem knotted in black hair, was a blood red hibiscus blossom.

I stared at the thing. Liz had done it in brazen colors. Les had framed it in a narrow bamboo frame.

"Now I think that's Liz's best," Les said beside me. "Look how she's done the chest and shoulder muscles, as if she'd studied anatomy for years."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, some beachcomber Liz got to pose, I suppose. She's forever painting the natives. Like it?"

I knew something Les would never know, "I can't make up my mind, Les." I felt inadequate. Looking at Les, I wondered if he'd ever worn a red hibiscus behind his ear.

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**Purple Patch**

We have writing and teaching, science and power; we have tamed the beasts and schooled the lightning . . . but we have still to tame ourselves.

H. G. Wells.