

## The Greatest Spell of All

By joshua bee alafia

### TREATMENT

The credits roll over love spell casting in the form of two cloth wedding dolls being lowered into a pumpkin encircled with white candles, cutting to a couple; Lucien and Cecilia, making the dash to the car from the church doors, through a shower of birdseed in slow motion. We cut to the reception where the couple feed each other wedding cake and dance salsa. The crowd is jubilant, a mix of the Dominican and African American families and their friends. Tato, 55, Dominican mechanic/love spell castor (I envision Paul Calderon,) embraces the bride in congratulations, and gives her back the photo and hat he used to bring the couple together with. The bride's cousin Veronica, 38, a Dominican journalist frequently writing for the Village Voice, learns how the couple ended up tying the knot from her friends and family gossiping in the bathroom, and thinks Tato's love spells make a great subject for a newspaper article. Lucian's Aunt Olivia overhears the conversation and seeks Tato's information to help her in her conquest for the love of her pastor at church. Veronica brings Tato out to the dance floor full of questions. We learn that Tato carries a tradition that runs through his family for generations. We flashback to the Dominican Republic, where nine year old Tato helps his mother prepare a love spell by bringing the pumpkins and washing herbs. Tato has to think about the prospects of a newspaper article, and thus these two characters entwine destinies that will transcend a working relationship.

Toussaint, 32, Haitian funk guitarist and neighborhood heart throb, (a D'angelo, Mos Def, Derek Luke-type) enters his favorite breakfast spot/coffee shop, ecstatic about a Time Out Magazine article hot off the press about his funk band, Translation. His more conservative, professional sister, Celeste, 34, takes a seat at a booth while Toussaint shows the waitresses, Julia and Annalise, the article. Julia has a big crush on Toussaint, and is bowled over when he hugs and kisses her and Annalise, overwhelmed by the moment. Toussaint and his sister talk about their love lives a little; both are unsatisfied with their choices of mates, yet both support each other's choices, the way brother and sister tend to play devil's advocate with each other sometimes. Toussaint feels like he hasn't met his soul mate yet, and has an inclination to pursue that goal, however idealistic it may sound. The man is a genuine romantic more than just a player musician.

Veronica arrives at the garage where Tato works fueling Hilton and Toni's ammunition for heckling Tato, as if the love spell casting wasn't bad enough. When he sees her back-lit, bookish with her glasses and wearing form fitting jeans, Tato can't deny his attraction to her and his defense mechanisms engage in the form of a thwarting bad mood. She takes him out to lunch at a local Jamaican restaurant and he agrees to do the article. He begins breaking down some of the particulars in the magic, how he sees himself as playing a part in peoples destiny and how the spells don't go completely against peoples will.

Veronica is fascinated, and the chemistry between the two of them is percolating.

Toussaint works in his father's shoe store in Brooklyn, specializing in high-end women's footwear. Maybe it's the prince charming posture he takes, placing shoes on women's feet that enchants so many of his female customers, he flirts with them but remains somewhat oblivious to the extent that they dig him. He and his bass player, Zach, are talking about band matters when Sophia, 50, an attractive African American professional, walks in with her lap dog and flirts with Toussaint over buying some boots. They have a warm exchange and Sophia loves the attention until Maribel, 27, Veronica's cousin and Toussaint's admirer and regular customer, comes in and distracts Toussaint with purchasing needs. The women share a jealous moment and the dog senses the vibe and gives a little growl.

Tato lives in Brooklyn with his daughter Yolanda, 25, (a Rosario Dawson) and her son Massi, 5. Yolanda tells Tato about a dream she had where her mother was singing with Tato playing the guitar, as she used to before she died of breast cancer, and stopped and told Yolanda to tell him to pick up the guitar again. After much coaxing, Tato brings out the dusty guitar case, tunes the guitar, and plays a Bossa Nova like Bolero until Veronica comes for her appointment. Tato takes her downstairs to his basement, where he divines with cowry shells on weather or not a love spell is appropriate for the circumstances. The basement houses a giant Kongo altar and is adorned with candles and wooden carvings. Tato sits on a straw mat while his clients sit on a chair at the edge of the mat. Veronica brings a photo of Ricardo, 44, her most long-term boyfriend, and a baseball cap of his and Tato works his magic, sending Veronica home with an herbal bath to bathe in. The next day, Veronica is shocked to run into Ricardo in the street since he had moved to Los Angeles some years ago. After she accepts that nobody put him up to the chance encounter, she agrees to have dinner with him. They end up in bed and she reaffirms all of the reasons it never worked in the first place. Ricardo is a lawyer who specializes in representing Latino musicians, and carries a certain arrogance when talking to Veronica, dismissing her desires to get married in the past as old fashioned and reducing love to a legal document, but there's a hint of fear of true commitment that comes across. As she leaves him, she feels liberated, knowing that the "what ifs" that ran through her mind were just delusions of wishful thinking. He reluctantly walks down the hall after her in his bathrobe, but without the necessary pep in his step to reach the elevator before the doors close and she disappears from his life again.

Veronica's newspaper article on Tato brings him an onslaught of appointments. Lucien's Aunt Olivia steals her Pastor's clerical collar in a comical scene, and comes to Tato to put the whammy on the pastor and they end up happy together. When Toussaint's band Translation plays, five of his admirers who are destined to come to Tato are in the audience. The first is Rita, Toussaint's ex-girlfriend who can't move on, because she hopes Toussaint could drop funk band and play in a more commercial arena.

Their reunion is short lived to say the least, but Rita leaves with a new perspective: accepting Toussaint for where he's at and realizing that they don't have a future together. Julia, the coffee shop waitress comes to Tato as a last resort, and her date with Toussaint is uneventful and awkward. Sophia, Toussaint's shoe store customer, cooks Toussaint a dinner that makes him fall asleep on the couch, after her session with Tato, and she also realizes he's just too young for her. Translation's drummer, Max, a tomboy who's had a long standing crush on Toussaint, goes to Tato and finds Toussaint in her arms after a rehearsal. They kiss and bang teeth, bump heads, and Max realizes that kissing him is like kissing her brother. The experience is healing for her, as she cries on his shoulder and admits that she's really ready for a relationship. Finally, Veronica's cousin Maribel goes to Tato and kisses Toussaint backstage at a Translation set break, only to realize that she feels nothing for him, and it was all crush that existed solely on the surface.

The power of union in Tato's love spells gain such a good reputation that his co-worker at the garage, Toni pays him a visit spurred by Toni's mother, Zorida, when Toni's wife leaves him. Zorida is furious that Toni's wife left him after they brought her out of extreme poverty in the Dominican Republic to live in New York, and she ran off with a neighbor. Most of all, Zorida has developed a true mother-daughter bond with her daughter-in-law. They allude to Toni's neglect of his wife, especially in bed, and Zorida gets so emphatic about the situation, she breaks into convulsions and goes into a spirit trance channeling a male spirit named Francisco. Toni has never experienced this and panics, but it's commonplace for Tato and he calls Yolanda to help him attend to the spirit and allow it to give the advice it came to give, then revive Zorida into her natural self. Tato works his magic and Toni's wife comes back, Toni making the effort to be a more attentive husband. Zorida is so pleased that she surprises Tato one day with platters full of Dominican soul food, a huge flan, and brings more clients.

One beautiful spring afternoon, the members of Translations converge in Prospect Park, Brooklyn for a somewhat informal photo shoot before one of their rehearsals. The bass player, Zach's girlfriend Blaise is taking photos, and they discuss the plausibility of soul mates incarnating with each other through the ages. Max isn't really a believer, but Toussaint is full of faith. Yolanda and her friend Raquel happen to be walking through the park with their children, and Massi runs over to listen to Toussaint's guitar playing. Blaise catches a shot of Toussaint and Massi with Yolanda in the background, and Toussaint lays eyes on Yolanda and is instantly, deeply affected. Blaise sees the whole interaction, torn between celebrating the purity of Toussaint's reaction and being loyal to Max's crush on him.

Tato goes through a lightening of heart through the process of increased love spell casting, and playing the guitar again. His attraction to Veronica and his need to talk to someone about the dilemma of casting multiple spells on Toussaint, brings him to ask her out on a date to see Translation play. He's a nervous wreck and Yolanda encourages him, telling him that he's mourned and been alone for long enough.

Tato picks Veronica up at her apartment and brings her flowers. They're both so nervous they decide to kiss before they eat dinner so they can digest their food properly. They share a tender embrace and a magical kiss. When they end up at Toussaint's gig, they're engaged with the music. Translation is a blend of Fela Kuti, Parliament, Hendrix-esque over driven guitar, and Prince. Toussaint recognizes Tato from Tato's guitar and singer duo days in the past, and greets him. Tato is shocked and doesn't quite know what to make of the situation. Toussaint asks for some guitar lessons to get the Bossa Nova feel into his guitar playing, and Tato reluctantly agrees with prodding from Veronica.

Toussaint comes over to Tato's house for a guitar lesson. Massi recognizes him from the park and calls him "the park man." Yolanda breaks a glass pouring water for Toussaint in the kitchen and Toussaint tells her that his people think that's good luck. Tato asks him where his people are from and he replies, "Haiti." Tato has an unsterotypical reaction, calling the two cultures one people, one island, with different colonizers. This is a stance that some Dominicans who practice African Spiritual Traditions have because of the great influence of Haitian Voodoo on the Dominican traditions. Tato and Toussaint bond and have a good class. Toussaint leaves and Yolanda comes out after him with the hat that he forgot. They have a short exchange and he asks her out. She declines, but is flattered. This only makes Toussaint further committed in his adoration of this woman he just met but feels he's known for an eternity.

Toussaint and Zach are discussing women and Zach's observation that he constantly dates women whose fathers abandoned them and how he plays out the same scenario on some level. Toussaint sees Yolanda walk past the store and runs out and follows her into a book-store. Sophia comes into the store after Toussaint leaves and asks for him, but finds herself attracted to Toussaint's father, Jean Luc. Toussaint and Yolanda have a breakthrough conversation and the exchange reaffirms his feelings for her and seems to begin to open her eyes to his charms. Yolanda opens up and explains that she has had to distance herself from Massi's father because he is a wanna-be gangster and has been a negative force in her life for long enough. Back at the shoe store, Jean Luc and Sophia find themselves in the back room while Jean Luc takes some new shoes out of a newly arrived box and Sophia uses the restroom. They have a kinetic moment and kiss. Jean Luc's sister Maude comes into the store with his daughter Celeste, and Sophia leaves. Toussaint come in and his Aunt reads him and tells him that one of his Spanish speaking friends has been doing some sort of magic on him, some sort of love spells. The whole room is shocked, but it rings true in Toussaint's heart.

Yolanda is washing paint-brushes when Tato comes into the kitchen with pumpkins that have Toussaint's photo in them to put them in the garbage. Tato drops one of the pumpkins, and Toussaint's photo falls onto the floor in front of Yolanda. She asks her father if he put a spell on her because she's been unable to get Toussaint out of her mind and Tato discourages her, and tells her that he's put connected Toussaint with five clients. Simultaneously, Toussaint comes to Tato's house full of inner conflicts and intercepts Tato as he's taking out the garbage in front of the brownstone. Tato invites him in.

Toussaint feels betrayed and confronts Tato, telling him that his Aunt Maude is a seer and could read that he had magic done to him. Tato is completely honest and unapologetic. Tato lets Toussaint know that he can't blame Toussaint if he never says another word to him but still urges him that the spells never go against peoples will and he meant no harm in them. Toussaint is disgusted and storms out of the house. Yolanda rushes in when she hears the door slam and she and her father trade a silent moment of head shaking.

Translation plays Frank's place, the Brooklyn dive that where we were introduced to them. Toussaint plays with a intensely bluesy and dissonant feel. The song they play is about illusion and his site of Yolanda and Raquel in the audience fuels a passionately dissonant guitar solo. Yolanda and Raquel leave after the song ends and Toussaint follows them. Outside, Raquel gives them a moment as she brings the car around and Toussaint asks her if what he feels for her is real. She says it must be because she feels the same, and they kiss right there on Fulton St. sidewalk. True Love turns out to be the greatest spell of all.