

When It Comes to Love, You're Fukúed

by Tessa Spencer

The curse of the Dominican Republic is one that is so feared that its believers spend their whole lives watching their step in order to avoid falling under its often fatal hand. The tale of Oscar and his cursed family is one that shows the fukú in all its glory, for their story is so tragic that it leaves little room to doubt the existence of this Dominican curse. What is this fukú that was placed on the De Leon family and causes them so much turmoil and strife over the course of their lives? It seems that the harder they struggle to achieve their greatest happiness, the more suffering and discord are laid upon them. It seems as if the fukú that has been placed upon this family has caused them to be incapable of ever achieving what will truly make them happy: finding true love. In fact, their attempts to do so bring them even greater misery.

But what is a fukú? Since not all of us have grown up under a Dominican influence, this term is foreign, even slightly humorous. But in the world of the Dominican Republic, it happens to be quite the opposite. The fukú is a curse (Diaz 1). As the narrator of this story Yuniór tells us, it is specifically known as “the Curse and the Doom of the New World (1).” Sometimes this curse works fast, like lightening, but other times it creeps up on its victim so they do not see it coming. But no matter how fast or how slow, how big or how small, the fukú *never* misses its target; once it is coming for you, there is no way to escape (5). There is only one way in existence to avoid the target of the fukú: the zafa (7). Everyone who has grown up where this “fukú” curse is well known, such as Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, fears this ominous curse that is quite prevalent among their culture(1).

The fukú is said to have entered the Americas with the African slaves; it is referred to as “the death bane of the Taintos (1).” When the Europeans invaded Hispanolia, this new curse was unleashed, the curse that is sometimes called the “Fukú of the Admiral (1).” It is called this because “the Admiral,” better known by the name of Christopher Columbus, was not only one of the reasons it came to be, but also because he has suffered greatly at its hand (1). The people of Santo Domingo, “The Land He Loved Best,” fear to do as much as utter his name, in case they should end up cursed for even doing that much (1).

It was not until the Trujillo came to power that the fukú grew to the height of its horror. Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, one of the cruelest men ever to rule in the Dominican Republic, made the fukú what it is today: crazy, out-of-your-mind scary (2). Dominicans were said to not even be able to think bad thoughts about Trujillo without having the curse befall them, let alone do anything else, like plot against him, without having the next seven generations plus be cursed in the very worst way (3). It was a time of fear that was not easily erased after Trujillo’s death. The tale that Yunion tells of Oscar De Leon and his cursed family is evidence of the power that the fukú still has today.

Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral is one of these unfortunates who tries to exploit Trujillo. As it can be foreseen, his efforts do not go unnoticed, and the Doctor ends up dying in prison. This is not the end of it though. After Abelard’s fall, his family begins to suffer horrific fates. His wife steps out in front of a speeding truck; his favorite daughter Jackie is found face down in a pool containing only two feet of water. His other daughter, Astrid, takes a bullet to the back of the head while praying in church; even their *servant* catches this curse and is stabbed with a blow that is fatal. His final child, Hypatia Belicia

Cabral, also known as Beli, Lola and Oscar's mother, is lost for several years, mistreated to the extent that she never once speaks of the events after saved by her father's cousin, who we know as La Inca (249). After these initial blows of the fukú, the lightning strikes seem to cease, but instead, this inescapable curse, the fukú, keeps simmering, waiting.

In the years that follow, it becomes clear that there is something stopping the members of the De Leon family from achieving a life full of love and happiness, especially one with a significant other. They each desire it, each member moving from failed attempt to failed attempt with a renewed hope that perhaps this time will be the one, but to no avail. Beli only lasts through three relationships before she cannot not take anymore: first Jack Pujols, who only pretends he loves her because of her body, followed by the Gangster, whose lies almost get her killed and then leaves her heartbroken, and finally the father of Lola and Oscar, the final tear her broken heart can take.

The bitterness that she takes from these heartaches brings out the worst in her relationship with her daughter, Lola, who in turn cannot not find a relationship that can last. She goes through losers, like Aldo, who she lives with in misery to escape her mother, but her story is a bit different than Beli's, who is the victim of unreturned love; Lola finds boys who loved her, and yet it can never last due to some unseen force; some people would call it bad luck, we will call it the fukú. Max, the boyfriend she finds when she visited La Inca in the Dominican, the one who loves her and cherishes her more than anyone else, lives in another country, keeping them apart. If this is not enough to keep Lola from being happy, Max also dies after she breaks up with him upon her departure, leaving her forever with the guilt of the death of one she loves. She also has Yuniór, the playboy douchebag who knows he cannot treat a girl right, nor does he even want to

try—until he meets Lola. And yet, even though he wants to be true to her and cares about her in a way he cares for no one else, there is no way to outsmart the fukú. Wanting to be happy is not enough to fight of this powerful curse, and Yuniór cheats on Lola, ending their possibility of happiness together.

And then there is Oscar. Oscar De Leon is a character that cannot help but be pitied from the first page of the book to the final chapter. He is the complete package. Any single insecurity that a person may have with themselves, Oscar possesses. From physical appearance to a level of nerdiness that trumps all others, he is the ultimate misfortune, a combination of every embarrassing and self-deprecating aspect anyone could imagine. He is the boy who could not be “torn away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains (Diaz 21).” He “could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic (21).” According to Yuniór, “Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to (21).” Whether this nerdiness be the work of the fukú, or if that only made things worse, it is still very apparent why Oscar finds himself to always be alone.

The book constantly reminds the reader that it is unusual for a Dominican male to be obese and unattractive; in the same way, Oscar is sure to be reminded of this inability he has to fit in. Not only this, but he also agonizes over the fact that men of the Dominican culture are supposed to get hundreds and hundreds of women, a feat that he is nowhere near accomplishing and something that he anguishes over all through the book. He falls for girls, and he falls hard. Maritza, Ana, Jenni, Ybón, only mentioning the ones

whose names are known to him. All of his energy is poured into his hopes and desires to find a girl who will love him, but the fukú strikes again, leaving him alone and devastated in every case.

It intrigues me how completely consumed by this need Oscar is throughout the whole story. Why is it that Oscar is so hung up on finding a romantic companion? Is it because the fukú wants him to desire desperately what he cannot have? Or is it the other way around, and the fukú is working to prevent closely-bonded relationships *because* they are so badly desired, not only by Oscar, but his whole family? In an article, written by Diana Sanchez, Jessica J. Good, Tracy Kwang, and Eric Saltzman, of Rutgers and Texas Universities, titled "When finding a mate feels urgent: Why relationship contingency predicts men's and women's body shame," this very subject is discussed. The truth is, relationships give necessary physical and emotional benefits as well as boost the self-esteem of those who take part; this is especially true for relationships of the romantic nature (98). Along with this piece of information, it is easier to understand why Oscar is so focused on the one thing, because people's lives tend to center around these relationships, whether it comes to their attention or not (98). So it is not as if the fukú has made him desire something that is unavailable to him, but that the thing he truly desires is what the fukú is working against.

People like Oscar, Beli, and Lola do not center their life around relationships only because of the emotional attachment and connection that a person desires as they get older, but also because the society we live in pressures us to believe that the proper procedure is for us to settle down with a person of the opposite sex. These pressures are even more dire for Oscar, for he is not only male, but a *Dominican* male, which sets standards for him to achieve on a whole other level of attracting women. When someone

is unable to comply with these social expectations, such as Oscar is over and over again, they are likely to feel hopeless about themselves (98). This sense of hopelessness is found to repeat over and over in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar*, not only by Oscar, but nearly all of the major characters.

Because Oscar has not been able to get a girlfriend since he was seven, his failure in the romance category is more epic than that of his mother or sister. While their romantic failures dramatically affect their lives, it is not in the same way that Oscar is handicapped. Raymond C. Knee, Amy Canervello, Amber L. Bush, and Astrid Cook got together from a collection of universities and a tech school to conduct a study called "Relationship-contingent self-esteem and the ups and downs of romantic relationships." This study shows that romantic relationships are the most potent aspect of a person's life above all other important facets, such as academics, appearance, acceptance of the others surrounding a person, and the love offered by a family (609). Perhaps this is another reason why Oscar is so very desperate to find a loving companion; without it, he does not feel complete. It is often said that people should never depend on another person to make them happy, however Oscar does just this; he can never truly appreciate his life without having someone to appreciate it *with*, which the fukú is sure to prevent from ever happening. A study by Suzanne B. Pielage, Frans Luteijn, and Willem A. Arrindell from the Department of Clinical and Developmental Psychology, University of Groningen in Groningen, Netherlands agrees with this idea, saying that even though these other aspects, such as the family and education, can be significant as well to a person, they do not offer what the romantic relationship does, which "is an important source of happiness and wellbeing" that can help to be a support when someone is going through a tough time (461).

Oscar goes through his entire life without this kind of support due to the fukú that he cannot escape. Every time he finds a girl he wants to be with (which is not too hard for Oscar to do as he gets more and more desperate), she is always there for support, except the fukú will not allow her to be there for him, but someone else. When he loves Ana, she is devoted to Manny; when he wants Jenni, she is more interested in “entertaining” her punk townie, as for Ybón, she has to think of her own safety when it comes to which man she is loyal to. This kind of loneliness that Oscar endures is sure to be detrimental to his mental health. In an article written by Polly Young-Eisendrath titled "Learning about love through the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis," it is explained that emotions have a strong influence over our cognitive processes, including attention, perception, memory, and decision-making (312). Therefore, as Oscar grows more lonely and desperate, the more he is going to think about this one thing that he knows will make him happy.

Since romance plays a good deal with our emotions, no matter at what age, it can be hard to not be affected by relationships. Oscar has to deal with the sense of rejection and emotional distress that has been building up his entire life, since he has always been single and unable to share his life with anyone. He tries to let out the emotions that he cannot express any other way by writing; Oscar loves to write. While he is a big sci-fi fan, he also writes about characters who act in ways that he wishes he could act, and sort of lives vicariously through his characters. Despite these efforts, the lack of the true relationship that is denied to him by his family’s fukú handicaps him in a way from which he can not recover.

The effects of a relationship-less life can be detrimental; in Oscar’s case, it spurs an attempt of suicide to escape the pain of loneliness. Beli’s reaction after her

devastating heartbreaks was to close herself off from ever being close to another person again. Lola, in an opposite fashion than both her mother and her brother, became strong and unwilling to accept anything less than respect from a boyfriend. If they tried to pull something on her, they were gone before they had time to blink, and she never turned back. These defensive measures that the De Leon family has developed are a direct effect of what the fukú has caused.

It is not uncommon for someone to feel that there is no way to escape the loneliness after many rejections and years of feeling alone, as Oscar does. After all, the intimacy found with a partner is an important source of the self-worth and validation that someone has for him or herself (Sanchez, et al 90). Beli has known this self-validation, as she often reminds her children at how pleasing her body was to their father, usually as a way to remind herself as well (52). Lola is cared for by Aldo, even though it does not last, and adored by Max; she knows that she is not something that no one wants, and she is not willing to settle for less than what she deserves. This is because when someone sees that their partner appreciates who they are and accepts them, they are able to do the same and be happy with the person they are. Also, the connection that a person obtains by being in a relationship with another person is important, as is the companionship that it offers (90). While Beli and Lola's relationships may not last, they are still able to grasp that self-worth that is felt when someone else cares. Oscar is unable to feel this, which hinders his own value of himself.

According to Professor Duncan Cramer of Loughborough University, we go through life searching for "the one," the one who will love us no matter what, the one who will be there when we need them the most; we are searching to find the approval and acceptance that a romantic relationship has to offer (495). Oscar has never truly

experienced this connection as Beli and Lola have, nor loses it the way they do. He becomes desperate to find a way to experience it, but the harder he tries, the lower his self-esteem falls. The self-esteem of those who have low opinions of themselves has shown to be directly correlated with how a person believes others, especially significant others, perceive them (495); that is, when Oscar discovers that Jenni, his college love, does not deem him attractive enough, physically or spiritually, to romantically be with him, his self-esteem drops. However, in the end of the story, when he discovers that Ybón loves him and wishes to be with him, he is given the confidence to stand up and speak out for himself, something the old Oscar never would have been able to do.

For the majority of the book, Oscar does not obtain this high self-esteem. This is because he is unable to find someone go on *one* date with him, let alone willing to date him on a regular basis. His self-esteem and happiness increasingly worsen, for it is usual for someone to become more lonely and depressed than they would be had they had achieved intimacy with another person. This is the genius of the fukú: keeping Oscar from obtaining a romantic relationship: although he has a mother that loves him, a sister that cherishes him, his writing abilities, and friends, it is not enough to keep him from sinking into a deep hole of depression caused by a lack of girls in his life.

It is interesting how freely Oscar throws himself at girls throughout the entire novel. According to the Dependency Regulation Model in the research of Tracy DeHart, Brett Pelham, and Sandra Murray, from the Universities of New York and Connecticut, which judges how attached people become of others, most people tend to monitor how attached they become to people depending on how dependent that person is on them as well (128). Not during one occurrence throughout the novel does Oscar attempt to keep his emotions in check to parallel those of the subject of his chase. If Oscar were to do

this, he could perhaps save himself from much heartache, such as what he feels when Ana gets back together with her abusive boyfriend Manny, or when he walks in on Jenni and her new man. Beli, too, has this problem of falling too hard for people who do not have mutual feelings toward her, never keeping her guard up to beware of signs telling her that something was wrong. Maybe this is part of the fukú from which they suffer as well; the family De Leon is unable to suppress their emotions, no matter the consequences that are to follow.

In the final pages of the story, it is revealed that Oscar stands up to the men who are about to steal his life from him. When we first read over his final speech, his words seem meaningless, incomprehensible. When he says that he did something that could no longer be stopped, it left nothing but confusion for us as readers. However, when Lola receives the letter he to her before his death saying he has discovered the “cure to what ails” them, this brings about a whole new consideration to his final passing words (Diaz 333). Although Lola never finds out what this “cure” is, Yunior goes on to say that her family is happy and has strong bonds together.

This suggests that Oscar, upon his investigation during his last trip to the Dominican Republic, really does find a way to end the fukú that is terrorizing his family. Yunior also tells us that right before he was murdered, Oscar went away with Ybón, to whom he lost his virginity. Perhaps this was the ultimate zafa, a way to end the curse that had been haunting him his whole life. Despite the fukú that had kept him from finding love all those years, he becomes determined to defeat the odds that were against him. Even though Ybón is engaged to the captain, who has had Oscar beaten to the brink of death, and even though he threatens to kill both Ybón and Oscar if they even step one foot near each other again, Oscar never backs down. Ybón falls in love with him, and for

the first time since before Abelard's fall, someone in the De Leon family truly falls in love with someone who loves him back.

Throughout their entire lives, the De Leons struggle and suffer, trying to achieve nothing but find a person to love them. It is rough the majority of the time, especially for Oscar, who is constantly miserable, but in the end, all of the suffering is worth the happiness that follows: Oscar and Ybón spent a weekend together, completely happy; Lola has her family that is quite content. Perhaps this is what Diaz is trying to portray to his audience: the path to love is tough; it is a struggle. You will be beaten and ripped and clawed at. People will chew you up and spit you out just because they can, but even if that is what it takes to achieve true happiness, it is always worth it. Not only that, but the horrible experiences that lead up to that happiness make it all that more special and worthwhile. Love is a necessary component of life, and no matter what it takes to get there, it is completely worth it.

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