

## A Final Thought

Antonio took a pull of his cigar, exhaled slowly, and watched the smoke rise up and dissipate into the hot, muggy night air. “It doesn’t look like it’ll be much longer.”

Raoul sighed. “I know. I can’t believe the old man will be gone.”

“I keep feeling like he’ll come out of the coma and recover, with that unlimited energy he always had.”

“Well, we have to face that this time there’s no comeback in the cards.”

Antonio nodded, sipped his brandy and looked out onto the water. Beyond the expanse of dark cobalt blue rose up the shimmering lights of downtown Miami. His father had said the view was why he bought the house. “You’ve got to see this

view, it's absolutely great, talk about pizzazz." But it had been months before he reached out to invite Antonio over. When he finally did, Antonio had stood at the balcony railing between his father and the latest girlfriend: sixty years old, in a crop top and leggings; his father had said, in between comments on the view, "Antonio, look at how young and beautiful my woman is." He had been pushing ninety, so Antonio supposed the description was somewhat accurate. She had gone on and on about the view. "Your father has amazing taste. I love waking up in the morning, drinking my coffee and looking out onto this. I'm such a lucky girl..." and on and on. Imagine calling herself a girl at that age. But then again, she was pumped with enough silicone and botulism toxin to make her appear much younger, so that's probably how she got away with it.

Antonio tried to grasp the fact that within the next few days his father would be gone. His father, a force of nature, strong and vibrant; right up until the end still going into the office every day, still taking his girlfriend out for nights on the town. His father; three ex-wives behind him, and an endless stream of girlfriends; now he lay in his darkened bedroom, alone except for his sons, his consciousness having slipped away forever.

Antonio took another long inhale of his cigar. “You remember how he always said, squeeze everything you can out of every moment of your life. But in the end,” he pointed to the glass doors that led into the bedroom, “that’s what you have. What was it all for?”

“Look. Now’s not the time for your philosophizing. You never approved of him. I already know that,” replied Raoul, flicking his cigar in the ashtray.

“Yeah, and you decided to follow in his footsteps without a thought.”

“Believe me I thought. I had to think a lot in law school, a lot more that you did in the police academy.”

“And what were you thinking when you decided to dye your hair blonde? I mean, come on.”

“Nicole likes it.”

“I know, you need to keep her happy. She is much younger, and then, you have to worry about her straying.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I mean, the way you got together...”

“Just because you’ve been with Audrey for all these years, the two of you sitting in that tiny house, doing puzzles and staring at your dogs.”

“You’ve never gotten it, just like Dad. Remember what mom went through when he left her? You did the same thing to Lucia.”

“You have no idea what went on between Lucia and I.”

“I think I figured it out when you dumped her for Nicole, your new secretary, with the huge, bionic breasts.”

“It makes sense that you would say that. Look at your wife, in her drab blouses and jeans. Someone spectacular like Nicole is too much for you.”

Antonio laughed. “Yeah, spectacular. And the new Ferrari? Is the spectacular girl happy with the spectacular new car she pressured you into getting?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you tell me when you drive home in your ten-year-old Kia?”

Antonio shook his head. When he had married Audrey his father had said, “she has no pizzazz.” But Antonio had always loved her muted beauty—brown almond eyes, set over delicate cheekbones, long, thick black hair. Her face was the background of his life, and he was content.

Raoul’s phone buzzed. Again.

“I guess you better get going. Nicole needs you. Probably some sort of makeup emergency.”

“That’s enough.” Raoul paused. “But what if...what if tonight is the night?”

“He doesn’t know anything anymore. As long as one of us is here.”

“I guess so.” Raoul ground out his cigar and stood up. They entered the bedroom. The monitor beeped rhythmically and cast a green glow over the room. Raoul paused at the side of the bed, reached over and squeezed his father’s arm. “Goodnight Dad.” They exited the bedroom and started down the spiral staircase.

“But I’m curious about what you think,” said Antonio, as they got to the landing. “Dad will be gone from this world soon. Don’t you think it’s absurd? I mean all he went through, his work, the women, and then he dies. It doesn’t make sense.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t make sense? That’s life. Everyone dies.”

“But then what does life mean?”

Raoul’s phone buzzed in his pocket. “Look, I’d love to stand here and talk about all this, but I have to get back to Nicole, who at this moment is lounging by the pool. To me, seeing her in a bikini, that’s meaning.”

“Who knew you could buy the meaning to life at a plastic surgeon’s office? How much did those breasts cost you anyway?”

“Look. Just make sure the night nurse checks the morphine drip, OK?”



“Of course I will.” Antonio opened the front door. “I don’t understand you Raoul. That’s as far as your mind goes? A pair of store-bought breasts?”

“Hey I know what I know, and it earns me a lot of money. You on the other hand...”

Antonio shook his head. “Sometimes I can’t believe you’re my brother.”

“Likewise. Look, just keep me updated, OK?”

“I will.”

Raoul went down the steps, got into the red Ferrari and started it. As he drove away the hum of the engine became fainter, then died out. Crickets chirped, and here and there lightening bugs lit up over the vast front lawn. Antonio closed the door and climbed back up the stairs to the sick room. When

he crossed the threshold he started; the night nurse was already there, sitting in the chair next to the bed.

“Oh, hello. I didn’t know you were here. But, how did you get in?”

“Your brother gave me the key.”

“But I was just at the door.”

“I have the back door key.”

“I see. Can you please check the morphine level?”

“I already did. All is well.”

“Should I turn the light on?”

“No, darkness is best, it keeps the patient relaxed.”

“OK.” Antonio glanced at the balcony, but instead of going back out he sat in the second chair next to the bed. “How much time do you think he has?”

“He could go at any moment.”

“You must see a lot of death in your line of work.”

“Oh yes. I’ve seen more death than you can imagine.”

“How do you deal with all that?”

“Death is natural, it comes to all.”

“But still. Day in, day out. Does it ever hit you, how absurd it all is?”

“How so?”

“What is the meaning in anything, when it all ends in death? It makes no sense. It’s irrational. I mean, my father, going from one woman to another, he made all that money, his work, his striving, then he dies. It’s like, life is a series of meaningless moments, when the last one passes away, it’s over, and it means nothing.”

“That’s how most people think now. It’s very efficient.”

“Efficient? What do you mean?”

“That is to say, nowadays, most people subconsciously accept that life has no meaning, and they try and distract themselves from that fact.”

“But the thing is, looking around, there’s order to the universe. People can engage in science because there are laws of nature. So then, why would human life be the only thing with no order, no purpose?”

“The idea that human life is an accident, that humans evolved, guided only by brute, meaningless forces is the air everyone breathes. Just as centuries ago, the air everyone breathed was Christianity. But that time, thankfully, has passed.”

Antonio felt silent. There was a moment, he had thought back to it over the years, when he and Audrey had gone camping. One morning he had gotten up, unzipped the tent flap and stepped outside. Orange sunlight filtered through the trees, illuminating the leaves and bathing the ground. A few minutes later Audrey emerged from the tent; when she said “good morning honey,” he turned. Her hair was lit up by the orange light, and a soft glow surrounded her face. At that moment Antonio felt there was something in Audrey that would always go on, that it was impossible that one day her essence would cease to exist.

“Maybe there is something more,” said Antonio. “But then again, order could have come about by accident. The primordial soup of atoms could have, by chance, arranged themselves into what we see around us.”

“True, but then again, the idea of order had to exist in the universe, the concept of order, for any order to come into being at all.”

Antonio sighed. “Maybe. I don’t know. It’s so hard to know.”

The nurse chuckled. “It seems so, doesn’t it?”

A memory from long ago, when Antonio was a child, and his mother would take him to the cathedral, floated into his mind. Sitting in the pew, near the flickering blue candles, in the cool dimness. His mother with her hands together, looking up at the altar. But all that had ceased to mean anything to him years ago.

Then, the day he found out his father’s cancer was terminal, it had hit him. Without something that brought everything into being, life was absurd. If human consciousness ended at death,

then it was nothing in the end. The only way it made sense was if—he remembered the dim cathedral, the wafting incense—something that seemed even more absurd were true.

Years ago he had a conversation with a friend. His friend had said, as they sat in the quiet café, that he didn't care that the universe was meaningless. No. He looked straight into the abyss, and with his own strength, he created meaning. At the time, it had made sense to Antonio. It had seemed like the only way to go. His meaning had always been Audrey. But now, thinking back to it, he wondered, how could anyone create meaning in a meaningless universe? How could meaning of any kind exist if the universe itself were meaningless?

The doorbell rang. “I wonder who that could be. Excuse me.” Antonio stood up, went down the stairs and opened the

front door. Roaul and a man dressed in blue scrubs stood on the doorstep.

“Why haven’t you picked up? I’ve been calling and calling,” said Raoul.

“I left my phone outside. Why didn’t you use your key?”

“I couldn’t find it. I thought I had it on the keyring, but it’s not there. Anyway, there was a mix up with the night nurses. That’s why he’s late.”

“What?”

“We’re so sorry about this Mr. Martinez,” said the nurse.

“But they did send someone.”

“This must have been a bigger mix-up than we thought,” replied the nurse. “Let me go up and talk to whoever they sent. I’ll clear it up.”



“Alright.”

The nurse and Raoul followed Antonio up the stairs.

Halfway up the staircase they heard the monitor alarm going off.

They rushed into the bedroom. Raoul flipped the light switch.

“Antonio what did you do to him!”

The old man’s eyes were wide; terror shone out of them.

His mouth was open as though he were trying to scream. His hands were near his shoulders, palms up like he trying to push something away.

The nurse held his fingers to their father’s neck. “I’m so sorry. Your father has passed.” He went to the monitor and typed into the keyboard beneath it. “He’s been dead for an hour.”

“What? That can’t be, I was sitting there, the monitor was beeping—”

“Antonio, what’s wrong with you! Why didn’t you call me? I had the right to know that he died!”

“Raoul stop. You don’t understand. There was no indication that he passed. I was sitting right there—”

Raoul shook his head and stormed out onto the balcony.

Antonio glanced at the chair where the night nurse had been sitting. Had he gone into the bathroom? He crossed the room and knocked on the door. Silence. He knocked again. Then he turned the knob. The door opened onto an empty bathroom. Antonio checked through every room in the house, and he found what somehow he knew he would find—no one there. He climbed back up the stairs into the sick room. The nurse had turned off the monitor and was wrapping up the cords.

