



A Blind Soul

Luciano DeSanctis

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Book cover design by Paolo N.. DeSanctis.

Book edited by the author himself.

3339156@comcast.net

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*To my dear friend; my love; my wife; the late
Elizabeth Catherine Ann Nelson-DeSanctis.*

April 11, 1947 — July 30, 2005



We are evermore one with all.

In One's Own Way

Alone in Rio's Tavern, Cecilia Santos wondered if this job was really worth it. Business was unbearably dull. Cecilia's eight-hour shift was almost over, and a lousy eleven one dollar bills were all she had in the jar. She tossed the dollar bills in her purse simmering with resentment.

While drenching the beer mugs in the soapy then clear water, Cecilia kept her eyes fixed on the neon clock with the blue and red beer logo on the wall. She was dying from the urge to get out of there and away from the loud twangy Calypso music, the stench of alcohol, and most of all, the patrons' boisterous laughter and their off-color remarks. For the past few days, Cecilia has been miserable and hasn't had much of an appetite. She's also been feeling queasy and worn out. *Where the fuck is Pete with my pills?* It's been two days since Cecilia missed her prescribed dosage of anti-anxiety medications. After moving to the village of Rio in southern Florida, she's been

struggling to reach the city of Stuart at the Health Department on time to pick up her medications. Even if she could leave work earlier, it would've taken hours to get there by bicycle. With no other option, Cecilia had to resort to getting the medications by mail, but of course, the order was late.

This morning the Health Department assured her on the phone that the medications would definitely arrive today. Thank goodness, it arrive on time. Five minutes ago, her secret rendezvous lover had called and told her that he would stop over with the medications.

It wasn't long before the door opened, and a husky Caribbean man entered the tavern. Cecilia's eyes looked over the newcomer. Along with his beautiful physique, she took pleasure looking at his twisted long corn rowed black hair; it didn't take long for the familiar tingling sensation to start. After moments of affectionate feelings, she quickly broke the charm when she realized that the Adonis she was examining, intentionally ignored her, and approached the pool tables.

Cecilia made a disgruntled expression when the newcomer raised his hand in greeting to his gallant fellow workers who were regular league pool players.

That's really rude! fuck you amigo, and all of your friends; you're all just lowly-life orange pickers — losers.

These men were attractive to her, and she was attracted to them, but she had enough experience with this type of man. Regardless, she had to end every sexual seduction attempt by these so-called orange pickers, knowing that they would eventually become annoyed with her. And that's exactly what happened.

Cecilia hadn't come all the way from Ponce, Puerto Rico, to start her new life with losers again. She had come here to start a new, clean life—the days of being bribed, the rivalry, the disloyalty, and walking the ghetto neighborhoods as a prostitute were over. She was soon to be twenty-six years old and tired of her job-to-job, meager life. She yearned for a better one, and no one was going to stop her from achieving her dream—to be

respectable and walk the earth like a blue-blooded lady.

By the draft beer dispenser, Cecilia overheard their gossip about their boss, Pete Pascal, reconciling with his wife again. The men spoke loud enough, but very diplomatically on the whole thing. And she knew that the essence of gossip was to let her know that all of the orange pickers knew about her sexual affair with their boss.

Cecilia flinched mentally, after having known that her secret was not a secret after all.

Bull! Dumbass — better stop this teasing! Their words caused a shiver that slipped down her spine. *You know! Well, good that you know about us — Amigos, all of you better watch your steps — don't go and lose your jobs.* She then stopped her hyperactive thoughts, shook it off with a deep breath and then regained her calm. She turned around to them with a professional disposition. She wasn't going to be immature and emotionally unstable, not after all the tedious work of keeping her overtly past sexual life hidden from this village.

Her goal was to establish herself with a very respectable reputation of a hard working single common woman looking for a better life. That was all she wanted, a way to move to the next social rank. Then move up from there.

Fuck them, fuck everything! As soon as I get out of this hellhole bar, I'm going to spend some good quality time with my new man. She promised.

In One's Own Shadows

The high-pitched sound of Pete's cellular phone startled Cecilia, and then a flash of anger developed.

Coño! He could have muted that Goddamn phone, she thought, biting her lower lip while eyeballing her lover's latest gadget.

Out of reach, the clamshell-style device, clasped to his brown belt and khaki pants, lay along with his blue shirt on top of his carry-on luggage. Cecilia's attention to Pete had completely vanished. At that awkward moment, she was still like a statue, on a squeaky bed, with a resentful mood and an unsettled state of mind; meanwhile, her lover continued to mount her like an intact dog.

Goddamn! Someone tell me it is not that stuck-up puta calling again! Cecilia mentally pronounced. *Dumbass! Now she's going to put a guilt trip on him. Yes, she's going to get him to reconsider the divorce again— this shit got to end!*

Pete's silence about his marital life was confusing, and had made Cecilia tense. He ignored the subject whenever it came into the conversation. All she really knew about the man was that he was a wealthy real estate broker who also owned an orange plantation that took up most of the land in Rio. He lived with his bitchy wife, and their thirteen-year-old son in a historic plantation house passed down through generations. It was obvious, from the bits of nitty-gritty she had extracted out of him, that his wife was the real loony of the pair. Her bickering tongue had dragged her husband into a miserable existence and the likelihood of an early grave. Evidently, nothing was good enough for this woman. Finally, this morning, Pete admitted to his wife that the rumor of an extramarital affair she had heard was actually true. He then came through with his promise of moving to a motel. According to him, everything was said and done in this morning fall out.

What a sour bitch! She had it coming! She ought to know that a rich husband is a rare

commodity; instead, this bitch treats such a man like compost!

Cecilia's tension rapidly escalated as her thoughts strayed back to her dreadful teenage days of sexual assaults by her foster parents. She had never forgiven her foster mother for her negligence in letting her husband take her virginity thirteen years ago; sex for her was like taking out the trash, and she still could not shake off that misfortune. Her feelings for these people had never completely healed. It was as though they had sucked the spirit out of her.

I'm not a kid any longer, and I'm no damn fool, she strongly thought.

Since the sad day of her abortion, when her foster mother cut her out of her life, Cecilia had no option but to sprout and nurture her young mind alone. She managed it by engaging in sexual activity for payment and by making her way into the world living a lonely, wary life. As far back as she can recall, there were no loved ones in her life, and she liked it that way; anyhow, relationships hardly last, and

most likely, they end in some sort of violence. Cecilia understood very well why she was so edgy and cautious and was quite aware of the dilemma of the little fish, of keeping a distance from the bigger fish. After all, she was a little fish, and without doubt, this little fish needed to be convinced that her lover, Pete, was going to go through with his intention to divorce his wife. At this crucial time, wives typically are living through denial when directly confronted with evidence that their unfaithful husbands had cheated. Cecilia was gambling that when the truth finally sinks in, Pete's marriage sinks in with it.

She mentally shrugged. *No, she can't be that brainless calling again; probably, it's someone wanting to buy property.*

The Twenty-First Century loomed before her, and with a bit of luck, before the new period, Cecilia will have obtained her Florida real estate license. In her mind, Cecilia lived in a chaotic world filled with imperfect people with problems that would hurt her if she let them. Wrath was a second-hand emotion. The

earth was nothing but a lonely, imperfect planet filled with imperfect people who were created by some sort of genetic mistake. She dealt with life by dwelling in an anarchist mentality. For this reason, she believed that the power of money was the only lifeline from her unruly world. Thus, salvation revived in her mind after her first trust with Pete.

Cecilia was fond of the man, with his southern disposition, but she was uncertain of her attraction. Love was definitely not in her vocabulary. From the time they met, an eerie déjà vu familiarity of Pete had captivated her. For three weeks, the bewildering suspicion had provoked her. It had crossed her mind that perhaps his lucrative real estate business was too overwhelming for her. With no memory of her biological father, she often considered that just maybe a pleasant memory fluke that surfaced from an embedded childhood memory of her father. Whatever it was, it was not sexual; that was certain. Anyhow, she found him to be a strong mentor. The prosperous promise of being one of Pete's

associates was one of those dreamed-of opportunities she had been longing for. Clearly, she needed to please him and felt comfortable using him. It was a trade-off. The shrieking beep persisted. An uncontrollable quiver in her lips developed as her thoughts wandered back to his wife, Emma Mortimer-Pascal. *That puta doesn't get it — what a dumbass! He went to fuck around. Can't that woman get it through her head that it is time to let him go? Oh well, her soon to be ex-husband was not about to stop in the middle of an intimate moment to negotiate.*

Pete was one of the 'good ol' boys' with long roots in the riverside village of 'Rio de Ais', a regular patron who liked to play poker with a small circle of old cronies that were in the agriculture business. It was well known in the tavern that Pete had more than a passing interest in gambling. He frequently went on a nearby cruise ship casino to engage in other forms of gambling. It did not take long for Cecilia to notice that Pete was a melancholy type of compulsive gambler who often lost

control of his behavior. Because of legacy, Pete was well respected by his buddies and the community that his ancestors had helped develop. He was known for owning practically all the commercial land in Rio.

Every now and then, Pete and his buddies would play cards with a snowbird' patron who would start a casual dialogue on how inexpensive real estate was in Florida, and then Pete would brag about his Family line. Cecilia would hear him boast the well-known story of his Great Grandfather, Capt. Josue S. Pascal, who originally came from Tavernier Key, founded a settlement in Rio, and in eighteen-forty-two, became one of the newly arrived colonists that acquired 160 acres of free land from the government. Under the terms of the Florida 'Armed Occupation Act', men were able to bear arms and entitled to apply for one-hundred and sixty acres of land in certain unsettled areas of East Florida. Captain Josue S. Pascal seized that opportunity and established his homestead at Rio, planting pineapple slips on his plantation.

The slips flourished, and the pineapple industry was born. The mosquito infested waterfront property rapidly became a leading pineapple industry in the world. Although it didn't last long, in eighteen-ninety-five a hard freeze followed by two damaging brush fires collapsed the industry. It was in nineteen-twenty that Pete's grandfather decided to take another direction: raising citrus.

Pete's sensuous groan snapped Cecilia back to reality. She felt his warm hands gripping her waist; she turned her head back and watched him gaze at her ass, studying her soft, robust buttocks. Cecilia was farther from being aroused; at this point, it seemed futile. Even though his body odor blended with his sweet musky fragrance and pleasantly filled her nostrils, she had completely lost interest in the sensation he nurtured. The ringing phone was too distracting. She tried to concentrate on the warm-tingly sensation from each thrust that went deep into her body. Finally, the phone went silent, and then she heard Pete spinning with excitement in sexual climax. At that

moment, Cecilia felt his pulses thumping like a runner's heart while a gush of heat entered her womb.

Finally . . . at last, she thought. She then turned her head back and watched him quiver from the wave of sensation until they slowly faded away from his face. An accidental pregnancy would fix his ass! She felt his expression of gratitude by a gentle kiss on her buttocks. Then she felt him pull away and watched him collapse on her bed, by her side.

By her nightstand, Cecilia pulled out a handful of tissues and shared some with her lover. I need to know if this man can handle the separation. *With that kid, the divorce is going to get pretty ugly.* That thought captivated her attention. She wanted to know more about his intentions and was about to snap a series of questions at him, but bit her lip after she momentarily looked at his stoic face. She was not about to risk a lucrative relationship with the husky wry Floridian with French blood in his veins, who was accustomed to having his way. She was not

going to risk her Real Estate career. She pulled herself together.

"Ay yay! Now, I can use a smoke." She said with her loud Puerto Rican dialect, and then she rolled over with a false laughter while reaching for the box of cigarettes on her nightstand. She lit one, ignoring the butterflies in her stomach with each drag. After that, Cecilia saw his mischievous smile, and she returned a fake amusing look.

"*Amor*, what a bull you are!" She said playfully, followed by a calculated giggle. Cecilia then reached to him and planted a deep kiss under his thick and wide yellow mustache, followed by a tongue roll inside his mouth. After that, she pushed him away for another cigarette puff. Pete wanted more. He grabbed her rusty short tangled hair with both hands, *and* pulled her for another tongue roll kiss. Then he let his mustache brush her cheek a few times. In that intimate moment, suddenly, Cecilia watched Pete's attention move on to the nightstand, to the pleasant aroma of rum that reeked from their leftover

stale plastic cups of rum and pineapple juice. "I'm plumb beat out. That was rightly nice while it lasted. I'm fixing myself another drink," he said anxiously, speaking from the forward part of his mouth with a soft drawl of the South Florida dialect, while rolling out of bed. Cecilia realized that the effect of alcohol had diminished.

"Me too, *Amor*, I can use another drink." she asked politely.

Pete acknowledged with a smile, as he rolled his soiled tissues into a ball and as if a pro-basketball player tossed it across the room; it swirled into the basket.

"That loving was powerful good!" He winked at her with a proud grin, and then strolled into the bathroom. "By now you ought to know rightly well that I don't ever miss."

Grow up, she thought. She rolled her eyes wondering why he is not checking to see who had called. After a while, Cecilia could not hold her thoughts any longer.

"I bet she's calling you again?"

"I reckon," he said, sternly, as he came out from the bathroom. He then grabbed his boxer shorts and put them on with a wry face, and then hastily made his way to the kitchen.

Cecilia's mouth fell open. "That's not fair, I've been good to him; he could at least check the Goddamn phone!" She whispered almost out loud for him to hear, someone tell me what is going on? Her heart skipped and her blood ran cold, but she knew the importance of trying to appear calm. Back in Puerto Rico, those who knew her well were never pleased with her, but then she had never tried to please anyone over there. *Why start now?*

On the way to the kitchen, Pete became aware of the trailer's deteriorated condition. The crackling sound of each bare step on the lace brown rolled rubber tile was both amusing and annoying. The trailer was practically a vintage piece, probably from the early seventies. The walls were somewhat opaque beige with antique lamps. Most of the furniture

was rundown pressboard and, of course, the rusty blue-green pipes underneath the kitchen sink are obvious.

Quickly, he gazed at a squadron of palmetto bugs retreating into obscurity. He looked around. *What a shit box, he thought.*

By the kitchen table, Pete paused for a second and locked eyes with the half-empty fifth of rum. The bottle sat near his dried out cigar lying on the ashtray, behind the plastic cups and the transparent tiny bag with cocaine residue. He was about to grab the bottle when he noticed a line of sugar ants marching on the table heading to the opened carton of pineapple juice.

"What? Damn these pesky little critters!" He yelped, then quickly grabbed a paper napkin from the table and swiped off the ants.

"Hey Girl, you've got ants here!"

"No! I got rid of them a month ago," Cecilia, screamed, "I used the same stuff I've been using in Puerto Rico."

Pete chuckled. "Girl, you best get an exterminator, I know a good one."

"An exterminator? *Amor*, I have no *dinero* for an exterminator. Summer business here sucks. I can't wait for the fall season to start selling real estate to these so called snow birds so I can get myself a decent apartment and an air-conditioned car."

Pete grinned as he tossed the melting ice from each cup into the sink. He lusted after Cecilia; after all, the naïve female was fourteen years younger than he was. Her youth nourished his Soul. Unlike his conventional bony wife, the hourglass shape of Cecilia's body was just perfect for his taste. What he mostly loved about her was her alley cat disposition and blind ambition for some type of achievement. Yes, indeed, she was the woman whom he had always dreamed of.

We'll do just fine, He thought. He grabbed the bottle of rum, *If you don't get feisty on me*. His hands trembled as he filled his plastic cup half-full and then swallowed it straight.

"Girl — trust me, you're fixin' in doing the right thing taking up real estate. Soon, there will be no off-season in Florida. This here area

is real estate heaven! It's growing like wildfire! It's going to be a mammoth of a metropolis. You're fixin' in making powerful, good, smart money!" he said, confidently.

After he filled his cup full of rum and pineapple juice, Pete reached for the cigar on the ashtray and re-lit it. He puffed on it as he peered through the kitchen window that faced the western sky and the Saint Lucie River. Beyond the arched palms and mangrove shrubs, Pete saw a flock of pelicans gliding along. The ice-blue sky was filled with puffy silver clouds. Lemon-orange colors streaked from the west where the sun was dimming. Its colors reflected on the river, highlighting the ripples.

Overlooking the river, his eyes unexpectedly focused on a hilly underbrush piece of land that was a part of his mother's 280-acre estate. A Native American Indian tribe called 'Ais' once populated the prized land, until they were wiped out by warfare and diseases brought to the New World by the French and the Spaniards.

Behind that hill, Pete saw a bluer vision of the steeply pitched, wooden shingle roof of his mother's French plantation house.

Though now historic and technically limited in many ways compared to modern homes, years of weather conditions had eroded the cypress wood structure, which now required major renovation. Nevertheless, the structure sat on the most valuable possession his mother had, where the view was spectacular, overlooking both the Saint Lucie and Indian Rivers meeting the Atlantic Ocean.

Moments later, Pete looked at the North side below that hill and spotted a mobile home park that sat on 30 acres of land once owned by his family.

Pa sure messed up. If only he'd waited, I could have turned that into a fine Civic Center. Pete shook his head in speculation.

It can still be done, but how would I persuade Maman? He'd always felt that his deceased father, an orange grower, was foolish selling the extra land he had accumulated to his fellow veterans. Like many, his father did

not foresee the day the area would become the fastest growing area in the country. Pete envisioned sky-high buildings along that river. He marveled at the prosperity of a property owner. Now, at forty years of age, Pete sought after his birthright, not willing to wait it out. This was the perfect timing for Rio. It was booming with new residences, and big businesses were about to move in. It was the right time to begin the construction of his luxurious villas along that hilly stretch. This would be before the construction of his retail and medical buildings on the commercial land he owned in the nearby vicinity.

Pete intended to demolish the rundown plantation house, but first he had to persuade his feeble mother into moving to a newly built assisted living facility, located in the nearby town of Port Saint Lucie. However, his sentimental mother wouldn't budge. The proud woman wanted to preserve the old way of life. Instead, she intimidated her only offspring with a pledge to revoke her will and make a contribution of a portion of the scenic

land to the village of Rio, to honor the past with a park and recreational facility.

Pete sensed his frustration, and took a swallow as he leaned forward toward the corroded window to ponder his dilemma.

Oh shoot! After spending time and money getting that goddamn document done, he ranted in thoughts, while taking a puff on his cigar. That old lady is off her rocker! She aims to undo me. Goddamn, I should have gotten a power of attorney when I had the chance.

Pete felt his face cringe. He could never come up with an answer that satisfied him. He slowly began to rotate his cigar while continuing to puff. *Maman has quite a distinct manner of making her point! But, one way or another, I'm going to keep her from changing that goddamn will.* He pondered as the alcohol took its boozy effect. The cigar now tasted harsh, so he took his last draw. *Oh heck, Maman is too sickly now; eventually she'll give in, and then I reckon I'll get my inheritance.*

At that point, Pete's eyes focused on the combined colors of speckled lemon-orange rippling on the River, and he began to reminisce about his childhood days with his best pal, Emma. He had a vision walking along her side with fishing nets and spears. Back then she was skinny boned, freckled faced and always portrayed a kind of a tomboy personality. Her eyes were more greenish than pale brown. Her dark blond hair always fastened in a ponytail. They always were watchful for alligators and other critters, crossing the orange grove to the warm river where they would scour the creeks under the long rooted mangrove for a promising *snook*.

In those days, when Floridians really were Floridians, and the river was over filled with life, everyone in the village would hit the river to cast a net and fill a cooler with fat, yellow-brown *snook*, he recalled. Pete paused for a second and then he stared deep into the sparkling waters. *Goddamn, I got to get a bit of fishing!*

It didn't take long for his dilemma to reappear. It showed his gloomy face at the thought of his mother's influence that had so changed his wife so much. Besides sexual gratification, Pete's adultery was motivated by an unconscious desire to get even with his pal, his wife, who let him down by not getting the abortion he so begged for her to do, after receiving the shocking news that the baby was positive from the *trisomy 21* screening test.

Pete had struggled with the direction his life had taken for too long, and he was tired of being trapped, suffocated, and without options. He had transferred his affection to another woman because he wanted to be free to experience the kind of intimacy and romantic love that he had lost with Emma a long time ago.

That foolish woman! He shook his head in disapproval, as his thoughts continued, *we would have had a normal life together.* He suddenly dismissed his predicament by gazing back to the pelicans and watching one dive into the blue-green water to scoop a

catch. The pelican surfaced with a flapping yellow fish clamped in its bill. It vanished into the pelican's baggy throat. *Oh heck, every foolish thing happens to me.*

Pete stopped by the bathroom door holding two cups of rum and pineapple juice. He rested a shoulder on the doorframe while his eyes romantically fixed on his lover. Cecilia stood in front of the rundown white vanity, wearing her red-flowered baby doll dress. She was involved in fixing her hair with a variety of little colored plastic butterfly clips, so that the butterflies would be all in a row on top of her short curly auburn hair. Pete liked the way she had arranged her hair, and with the dress on, it made her look like a teenage princess. Her face was smooth, oval, with plump lips, and startling brown eyes. He wished his libido hadn't faded. Nevertheless, he eyed her up and down admiring the full effect of her beauty.

With a cigarette in her ruby mouth, Cecilia studied her face in the mirror while refreshing

her cheekbones with a little brick colored powder blush. Pete took notice of the olive green brass ring on her left ring finger; the heart shaped stone glittered from the reflection of the square bathroom ceiling light. He winked at her; she smiled at him as she twisted her head to put on a set of brass-copper loop earrings.

"The way you're sitting there, your looking so pretty." He uttered, and grinned.

Cecilia took a deep drag of her cigarette and then tossed it into the toilet bowl. She drew near him, flirting sexually, by blowing the last breath of smoke at his face. He chuckled and handed her a cup of the rum and pineapple juice. He then proceeded with a French kiss. She smiled at him sensuously and then gulped down half of her drink as they walked into the bedroom.

"Whew! You gave me another strong one." She smiled while staring at his jewelry. Pete grinned, and then he kissed her again on her large mouth. He wanted to let her know that he was still in heat.

During that intimate moment, his eyes gazed at the mirror above her dresser and saw his face — a stranger.

His wavy blond hair was drastically changing, receding with shocking white hair that stood out around his porky pink face. He peered at the red veins in his sagging blue eyes and noticed that they were filled with remorse, and then looked away and shut them momentarily.

The alcohol numbed Cecilia's anxiety, and she felt more assertive. Pete's wide white-gold chain, Rolex watch and the sapphire diamond ring kept her breathless. She ogled the jewelry, rolling with intoxicated stifled laughter while her hands ran around his upper body, caressing him. Pete softly touched Cecilia's face and followed with a kiss.

Her ring spurred him with a great deal of curiosity.

"That's a *peridot* rock, right?" he pointed.

"No-no, it is jade." She said solemnly.

"I reckon it's a sentimental gift from an old boyfriend." He remarked with a jealous grin.

Cecilia took notice of Pete's slurred speech, and she turned her eyes away.

"It's my mother's necklace," she said in a low voice. She then gulped the rest of her drink. "My dad gave it to her."

"Oh shoot, I can only recollect you mentioning that you were an orphan."

"I did have parents," she retorted. Her facial expression was sharp and her eyes sparkled.

"And if you need to know, my mother's name was Tierra and my dad went by the name of Carlos Santos. She was sixteen and he was eighteen when they got shot in the midst of a drug raid."

"This happened in Ponce?"

"No-no, in San Juan. I was six-months-old then, that's what they tell me anyway."

"Relatives?" He asked, pressing on.

She wished he would stop. She did not want to tell him about her shaky past: her endurance living in a foster care home, the abortion that was arranged, the child fathered by a betraying foster parent, her life in

prostitution, and her parents' connection to drug trafficking were subjects too painful.

"No one claimed me," she snapped. "This ring is all I got of my family. And I don't want to talk anymore about it, okay?"

"All right, girl . . . all right," he said with a dispirited face. He then went on sipping his rum and pineapple juice.

For a moment, there was silence.

"What's up with her?" She inquired as if she were a child. Then she set back to study him. She realized that he did not like the question by the way he put his drink on the night table.

"Now what are you so worked up about?" He demanded as he started to put on his tan khaki pants.

"She keeps calling you, that's what, and that means to me that it's not over. You're going to go back to her. Are you?" she asked, whining.

"Oh now, girl, hold your horses, you don't need to get feisty."

He snickered, and then buckled his belt. "My relationship with Emma is kind of full of twists and turns. Other than that, I've told you

that it is over," said Pete with a reassuring voice.

"Then why do I feel like it's not over, why is it so hard for you to break up with this woman?" Cecilia sipped her drink anxiously, waiting for an answer.

"Well, one reason is my *Maman*, that's got something to do with it," he said out of silliness. "Then there's my son's . . . "

Apparently unable to answer, he paused. "Trust me; I am trying to work this out with Emma in a friendly manner." Then Pete looked at her affectionately. "Girl, stop fretting over this, I'm in love with you."

"You are?" Cecilia said with a sharp face and misty eyes. "But I don't get it, why do you need to stay friendly with her for your mother's sake?" as she gulped down the rest of her drink and flung the plastic cup on the dresser.

"Because I have my reasons," he stated in an exasperated tone.

He paused to contemplate, and then his arms went up in frustration.

"Girl, goddamn it, listen. I am not about to burden you with my family squabble. Not now." Pete turned away and commenced to button his blue shirt. "I reckon I can stop over there to talk to them and finalize this after I get situated at the motel. It will soon be over, and then we can go on with our lives," he said with exasperation.

Cecilia became cautious after noticing her lover's stern, frustrated face. She reminded herself that no matter what, the overall picture was her career in real estate and Pete was a springboard into that world.

"Sorry *Amor*. It's okay. Everyone has family problems and your mother is a good reason enough to work it out with that woman." She wiped her soggy eyes, and then gave him a loving look. "You know, I love you too . . . *Amor* . . ."

Pete softened, took a deep breath, and then paused for a second.

"Girl, listen to me," he articulated as he locked his resentful eyes with Cecilia. "I'm condemned with a disturbed son."

"What are you talking about, your son is on dope?" Cecilia asked, still gazing.

"No, that ain't so. I'm telling you that Josh is badly retarded." Cecilia was stunned. The twitch from her lips came back as her thoughts wandered back to his wealth.

With a retarded son, he'll be taken to the cleaners. A spark of anger took her out of control.

"You're definitely going back to her! Now I know why you want to remain friendly with that puta." She said wiping the tears streaking down her face. She did not want to hear anymore, and was about to walk away from him when he grabbed hold of her.

"Girl, chill and just listen! Emma and I started slowly growing apart years ago, when Josh came into our lives. My marriage worsened after my wife got herself involved in religion. Emma turned out to be an obsessed, religious freak. Her preacher has filled her head with believing in miracles that someday her son could live a normal life."

Cecilia stared into space wondering if all of this was worth it.

"And what about your sick '*Maman*' she controls your life too, right?"

"Heck no! *Maman* is a lady with old French upbringing, and now, her health is failing. You see *Maman* is one those old folks that despises divorces and today's way of life. She's totally convinced that her grandson can remain living in her home for the rest of his goddamn life. And, I'm not about to go for that kind of nonsense. Josh was diagnosed with some sort of mental retardation. They called it Down's syndrome and Autism. He should be in a mental institution! But I'm not about to bust *Maman's* bubble with a divorce. Heck no! Not until I get what's rightfully mine," burst Pete, his eyes glossy and fixed on his goal as he sat on the bed. "I don't expect you to understand, but for now, I intend to arrange a trial separation period until I straighten things out with *Maman*." He then put on one his brown shoes.

You are such a jerk! I understand you more than you think, Cecilia thought. She was suddenly hit with an uneasy feeling after finding out who really had the wealth. An old feeling surfaced, being used terrified her. She hid her right hand as it started to shake and concentrated on being strong. Pete just went on talking.

"You see there are special institutional homes for folks like Josh and he should be living in one of these homes at once. This kid can't talk right, make friends or do anything, and there are experts out there who can handle and take care of him. It would be best to get him used to living alone now before we all die. I have begged and argued with these fussy women over and over about this, but they pay me no mind."

Cecilia held firm.

"I still think you're going to go back to your wife," she retorted in a calm voice. She felt used and she did not like him anymore. She then reminded herself that she needed him for her career.

"No, I will have none of that! I'm too strung-out from both of these women. And I ain't going to go on living in a relationship that is stagnant . . ." He took a deep breath and sighed. "Frankly, I don't rightly know how to breathe life back into the relationship. You see, you can't communicate with these women: do you understand?"

"Oh yes, *Amor*, call if you like, tell them you'll be over there tonight. See if you can work things out." Pete grabbed his cellular phone out of its holster and was about to punch in the numbers. At the same time, his eyes glazed on the number of his last caller. He became puzzled.

"*Amor*, what is wrong?"

"I don't know." He snapped, and then waved his hand to stop interfering.

The number came simultaneously with the thought of his mother.

"It's the God dammed hospital . . . *Maman*," Pete said nervously, tapping the redial button.

"Ay yay!" she rolled her eyes, "I need another drink and a cigarette." Cecilia said irritated. Quickly, she grabbed her plastic cup from the dresser and sped out of the room.

After the second ring, a soft female voice came on the phone.

"Emergency unit," someone said.

"Yeah, this is Pete, did you call?"

"Mr. Pascal, hold on sir." A minute went by before she came back on the phone. "Is your wife Emma Mortimer Pascal?"

"Yeah, that's right. How is my mother?"

"You need to come in, Sir. The doctor wants to talk to you."

"Just tell me what the hell is going on around here!" Pete said in a serious tone of voice.

"Please wait a minute, Sir," her voice was shaky. A man's voice came on the phone.

"Mr. Pascal, I'm Doctor Dagda. Your wife is very sick. She's suffering a migraine and a loss of balance and coordination."

"Emma? Heck, she gets them migraines all the time. She'll be all right?"

"Sir, right now, we are doing a CAT scan. Your wife was found disoriented out of her car in front of Rio's Tavern. Fortunately, someone called the ambulance."

"What're you saying Doc, she's going to be all right?" Time slowed down for him.

"No, Sir, your wife is showing signs and symptoms of either a cerebral aneurysm or a hemorrhagic stroke. In either case, the blood vessels in that area of the brain need to be operated on as soon as possible." At this point, Pete was numb, ignoring the doctor's statement. "Apparently, she was suffering one of her severe recurring headaches that your mother told us about . . ."

"GOD — NO!" He did not want to hear anymore.

"Your mother, she is devastated. A clergyman has been accompanying her. Would you like to talk to one of them?"

"No! I'll be right there." He said as he turned off his cellular phone.

Reality sets in. Pete's face became pale, a mask of grief. The childhood memories of him

and Emma came into view, as if he was watching some old photographs coming from a slide projector. He slumped over and sat on the side of the bed. His breath was slow and labored. He clenched his jaws and he swallowed hard as the tears ran down his cheeks.

Cecilia walked over to Pete with a fresh plastic cup of rum and pineapple juice and looked at him hard with an eerie sense of relief. Pete cast his sapped eyes at Cecilia's compassionate face, and then her face blurred as the tears flowed.

"Goddamn, no! I didn't want this . . .?" he gasped. Cecilia gestured at him to swallow while she took a deep drag of her cigarette. She had pulled herself together, her career was all that mattered, and for now, 'a friend in need' is the role she will play with Pete.

He gestured not to drink, and then sobbed quietly with his face buried in his hands. He did not want to numb the pain anymore.

Seven days had gone by and Gisèle Toussaint-Pascal was overwhelmed by her daughter-in-law's death. The image of Emma Mortimer-Pascal lying in her coffin kept coming back to her like a throbbing headache. With the aid of a staff, she wandered around in her French-style living room observing in detail her daughter-in-law's colorful butterfly paintings. The watercolor collection was elegantly set up around the walls of the room among the ancestral portraits, wall mirrors and planted ceramic vases. Gisèle was aware that her home was *passé* and she should be brave and allow her son to renovate the place with modern fixtures and things, but she detested change. Besides, every bit of her home held so many precious memories, the valuable antique furniture was mostly from the nineteenth century. Thank goodness for Emma's Jamaican friend, Ms. Tanya Taíno, who helped her maintain the big home dustless. Ms. Tanya as she liked to be called, adored her grandson, and she was always there for her and Emma. Ms. Tanya was part of her family and her plantation workers

whom she respected and honored. Gis  le believed in the simple virtues of farm life just as her parents had a long time ago in Lille, France. Everyone who had a home on her land was part of her family.

Her moistened eyes fixed on her son's wedding portrait; she couldn't help but gaze at Emma's parents. She took the last gulp of Rhine wine and then faced Eva and Edwin Mortimer who were old deceased friends, God-fearing, hard-working fishermen in the village of Rio.

They both came from England, and Gis  le remembered the day their daughter was born, how fearful Eva Mortimer was in delivering her first and only child. At the same time, Gis  le was also in the hospital in labor with her son. They were both in their early Thirties and had their share of miscarriages. They learned to comfort each other with the thought that somehow this child would live. When they both came through, from that day onward, Gis  le's friendship with the Mortimer's evolved into a close family tie. Sadly, in nineteen-

seventy-nine, a waterspout deep into the Atlantic Ocean capsized the Mortimer's sixty-five-foot old wooden boat and they were never to be seen again.

The tragedy gave Gisèle a precious gift: a daughter. Gisèle and Emma blossomed with a mother and daughter's love. Their bond helped them withstand painful traumas that came into their lives. Coping with Josh's disability was one of those traumas. Like a good mother, Gisèle did all she could to help her daughter. However, it never occurred to her that she would face such sorrow, such pain from the loss of her daughter in law. Yes, through the years, Emma had played the perfect daughter, and now, she blamed her son for her death.

"Oh, why did God take her away from me? Why?" She wailed with the sound of her Walloon dialect while staring aguishly at Emma's portrait.

"*Imbécille!*" she uttered to herself. "He would not recognize a good woman if he ran into one." Her face showed the scorn she

felt. "When will my son ever grow up?" She looked away to the darkest corner of the room and began crying.

She pulled a white handkerchief from the pocket of her cobbler apron and wiped her eyes and nose. When she was done, she slipped the handkerchief back into her pocket and walked to the oak hide-a-bar cabinet to refill her glass. After filling her glass, Gis  le took a good gulp, refilled it again and then grabbed her staff that was resting on the cabinet and made her way toward the kitchen. She was about to enter the kitchen when Gis  le stopped and turned to the china cabinet on the corner of the living room, and glared lovingly at Jean Pascal's black and white image in her wedding photograph. She recalled the blessed morning in Dover, England, where she came face to face with the handsome towed-colored American Air Force Major, while walking to work to a shirtwaist factory. Back then, Gis  le was still in shock from her relatives' death in Lille, France. She was survived along with one of her three

brothers from intense aerial bombardment that had demolished their city and home. She was fortunate that her brother who was a captain of a cargo ship took control of the situation and relocated her to Dover before he too became a war casualty. At the end of World War II, Jean Pascal moved her away to Rio, Florida. She left behind the slavish life of a sewing machine operator. Gis  le considered her new life with Jean a work of God. Life on the orange plantation was uncomplicated and each day became more and more comfortable. She pursed her mouth in a self-satisfied smirk at the nineteen-year-old bride in the photograph: The chin line bobbed haircut and the bias cut wedding gown that hugged and showed off her curves. She stared deeper at photograph and saw how fortunate she was to have escape from there. Yes, she had a very fortunate escape, indeed. But now, like her sparse pure white hair, along with weathered wrinkly skin, the dream of passing on her good fortune was a stifled dream. Her son had made it a misfortune.

Even in his teenage years, her son's dreadful behaviors caused Gis le much stress. The boy never did well in school, skipped school countless times. He had crashed their trucks more than once due to his excessive alcohol drinking. And God knows what else. Perhaps she wasn't such a good mother after all.

Like most mothers in her generation with one child, Gis le practically lived her son's life and tolerated the spoiled child by giving him too many material possessions and letting him have his way. She should have kept her busy husband informed about the boy's behavior, but her husband adored his son and she did not want to see him disheartened. In spite of everything, Gis le had always thought that her son would one day change and settle down. So, along with her love, she continued to live his life and give him everything she could.

He was just as bad after having his only son, Josh. This unfortunate child gave Pete more excuses to be miserable. Now, Gis le detested her son — she could not stand him anymore. She scoffed at life and at her son. He

had it all: a great home, a profitable business, and a good wife. *And, he couldn't find happiness?* It was then that the infliction of a failing parent surfaced: a deep scar that reopened from time to time and could never completely heal.

Her thoughts went to present days when she had been all set to endure her son and daughter-in-law's separation. She was prepared to put her foot down, along with her daughter-in-law and wait it out for him to change. She wanted to show her spoiled, money-oriented son what mattered in life; like appreciating family life and the good things God had blessed him with. Even so, that was not to be. Now, she must find another way.

The growling noise of her Standard Poodle, in the screened patio, awakened Gis  le from her sorrow.

"Enough! Francette. Leave them peacocks alone." Just then, she walked in the vintage kitchen, and with the aid of her staff, Gis  le slumped over the table by the cast iron wood

stove. Slow, labored breaths racked her heavy old body as she attempted to clean up spattered pieces of chicken, with tomato gravy and rice on the table. The chubby woman was a diabetic and she had a bad heart that had survived two attacks. And now, her memory was beginning to deteriorate and that was frightening her. At the age of seventy-three, she did not know how long she could last.

For the moment, the splashing of water and the singing of his favorite song, '*When The Saints Go Marching In*,' kept Josh busy. Gis le admired her grandson's singing voice. He had perfect pitch; if only he could stop jabbering like a parrot, Gis le thought, holding a bowl and a glass of leftover food. Besides her son, the boy was all that was left for her to live for, and she wanted to make sure that her dream for the boy's life would become a reality.

On her way to the sink, her eyes watered, and she was ready for another cry.

"Done!" Shouted the boy.

“Coming *mon chéri!*” She quickly tossed the leftover food in the garbage and then put the bowl and the glass in the sink.

“Coming!” she whispered as she pulled a handkerchief from her apron pocket to wipe her eyes. Her constant sobbing was now disturbing; she was a proud churchgoing woman who took pride in being strong. ‘Every day is a preparation for death,’ had been her slogan. By realizing this, it had helped her face her mortality; somehow. However, Emma’s death had broken her faith. It was hard to bear, much worse than her beloved Jean. It made her fear the unknown. Gisèle was astounded by the sentiment that she was responsible for upholding both her grandson’s and her way of life. If it weren’t for her son’s fear of having his inheritance taken away, her son, in a heartbeat, would put both of them in an institution. Now she was getting too old to keep up the battle of words with her son. She needed assistance in taking care of both her grandson and herself. I doubt that Ms. Tanya would take my offer and quit her job at the

hospital. *I could offer to pay her health insurance — but how?* Her lawyer came to her mind; *he will know what to do.* First, she needed to revoke her will to preserve her proud plantation home that was passed down to her from generation to generation. She was not going to let luxurious villas' scar her land from its natural beauty. Secondly, if Ms. Tania doesn't take the job, she will resume her search by asking the women that work in her orange grove. Gisèle closed her eyes and uttered a pledge.

"My daughter Emma, I will do all I can to fulfill both of our dreams."

The preservation of her land and taking care of Josh were now her priorities. It was her duty — God's test to her before her passing. Her son would have to abide to keep his inheritance.

Gisèle walked in the bathroom and cautiously began her usual routine.

"Done? *Bon mon chéri,*" Gisèle said approvingly as her grandson unplugged the tub.

"Mammy?" Josh protested.

"*Chéri*, I have told you before that your *Maman* is in heaven."

After helping Josh stand-up from the tub, Gisèle grabbed a bath towel from the towel rack and wrapped it over her grandson's petite body. She then helped him dry his small head of blond hair moving the towel down his bony torso, all the way to his legs and feet. She noticed that her grandson's heart was beating faster than normal. She rested on her staff considering the palpitation.

"Oh *Chéri*, you are in so much stress. Why aren't those nasty pills working?" she uttered under her breath. Gisèle detested giving her grandson antipsychotic medications. She believed that a natural remedy such as St. John's Wort would be just as effective. But, she never was able to convince Emma. "We will talk to your doctor about your pills, *mon petit*," she said as if her grandson understood every word. Josh made a frustrated grunt; he understood the word 'doctor,' and he didn't like them. In this stage of Josh's life, his baby-

fat body had shrunk to look somewhat like an abnormally skinny toddler. His slanting blue eyes indicated features of a helpless child who counted on the assistance of others to provide the direction for every step of his day's activities from rising in the morning until going to bed at night. In pity, she reassured herself that it was just God's way. Like most grandparents, Gis  le loved her grandson, but she considered him a cross-to-bear— you either accept it or you don't.

“Right foot first, mon petit,” ordered Gis  le while assisting her grandson from the tub.

“No, mommy!” Josh howled with a strange tone of voice. He then bit his own arm like a dog in a rage.

“No, no *ch  ri*, don't bite.” Gis  le protested sternly as she attempted to pull Josh's arm out of his mouth preventing another of his breakdowns. Since his mother's death, breakdowns had been an everyday occurrence and tonight was no exception. Gis  le quickly grabbed the picture board from the vanity and

tried to show her grandson the next step of their routine.

"Mommy!" he shrieked, striking the picture board from his grandmother's hand, and then Josh fell on the floor, dead weight.

"*Chéri*, if you control yourself, after we finish, I will let you play with your butterfly jigsaw puzzle board" Josh loved butterflies, and he liked to put together the complicated picture puzzles. The obsession likely developed from his mother who was a butterfly enthusiast. Often, the two of them would take to the fields with a butterfly net to catch one or two for their butterfly house that was suspended from the ceiling on the corner of Josh's room.

"Puzzles?" Obediently, he stopped the hysteria, looked up at his grandmother, and then took her hand.

"Yes, I'll let you play," said Gisèle while trying to help her grandson from the floor.

By now, Gisèle face was flushed. She had worked up a sweat and her eyes were glowing. She should not have to be bargaining

everyday with her grandson, and put up with his tempestuous behavior. It was bath and bedtime; playing the puzzle game was not part of the routine. However, after a week, Gis  le was running out of steam, and now, she understood quite well that her ability to follow Emma's routine was pointless without a qualified assistant.

Gis  le washed her grandson's bite wound with warm water, and then resumed coaching Josh through the familiar steps of his evening. She accepted her grandson's mental state, however, the self-mutilation was much too puzzling.

Later, in his bedroom, Josh sat figuring out the small pieces of puzzles while his grandmother brushed his straight, fine blond hair. He would impress Gis  le with the rapid ability to complete a jigsaw puzzle that girls and boys of his age would not even undertake.

Josh was twenty-five minutes late for bed when he completed his puzzle board. By then, he was sleepy and ready for bed.

"Butterflies!" He sounded out with a hint of accomplished gleaming in his eyes.

"*Bon mon chéri, bon!* Now let's put them away," said Gisèle helping her grandson from the puzzles. She put them away on his desk, and then walked him to the butterfly house to say his ritual goodnight.

"Good — night — butterflies!" Josh said, sweetly.

Afterwards, Gisèle walked the boy to his bed, where he hopped onto his bed and she pulled the bed sheet over him, tucking him securely.

"The bus?" Josh questioned.

"Yes *chéri*, tomorrow is school and you will be with Ms. Scriber. Pleasant dreams."

"*Ma Maman est dans mon Coeur,*" said Josh with a dimpled smile.

"Yes *chéri*. Your *Maman* is in your heart!" Replied Gisèle, startled by Josh's use of French. Rarely did her grandson speak a full sentence of English, only in French — it was remarkable. He would exchange a few words either through his picture board or with

the aid of sign language. His oral skills were of baby chatter and repeated words just spoken by other people. Yet, this same boy often did things that astonished people. He could recite in a beautiful tone of voice every phrase from every song he heard. He had the extraordinary ability to recall every person's name, places as far back as in his toddler years. And, he was good in disentangling a yarn or loosening a knot that others would not even attempt.

At that moment, they gave each other a granted look, and then Gis  le knew that her grandson was beginning to depend on her. A beam of hope swelled her spirit. Most likely, her grandson would grow to be comfortable with another that would follow in her caregiving footsteps.

When the vomiting let up, Pete wiped himself with toilet paper and flipped it in the toilet. He then pushed the knob, and staggered out.

The room had a heavy desk with three large leather chairs. He sat in the chair staring at the

empty bottle of brandy that lay on some of the documents that covered the desk.

“Ah!” he cried in a helpless voice while rubbing out a sharp pain from his right eye. The alcohol had erased his consciousness and a cold sweat poured out from his head. He felt his body was jittery, but his mind was numb and slow. While looking around the room, he pulled a couple of tissues from a tissue box, and wiped his face. The clock on the wall read 3:12 am. It was then that he realized that he had blacked out. After a minute, he made sense of the room, recognizing his framed certificates and awards mounted on the wall.

“This here is my office?” he whispered. *Oh, heck — I am fine*, he thought. It had been a long time since he had gone this far. *I drank too much — what happened?*

A dizzy spell passed by, he rubbed his head, and then last night’s bitter argument with his mother flashed into view, as if someone was transmitting into his mind. He shook his head and began talking to himself in an arrogant way. “I can’t believe what she’s doing to me.

Going to go change her God-damned will just like that, so that my son could live with her in that forsaken worn out house.” Pete could not shut off his mother’s voice rumbling in his brain. With both hands, he rubbed his head and tried to avoid her voice by thinking of something else. After a moment, finally, his mother’s voice faded out of his mind. He then bit his lip. “God-damned will! After begging her not to change it, she’s going to pull it off. That old lady is going to give away the finest section of my land to the village of Rio. That ain’t right, that’s my bit of land, Goddamn it! Just ain’t right taking my birthright away like that. That piece of land is the most lucrative asset I have.” He kept talking, making gestures as if someone were listening on the other side of the room. “*Maman* is barking up the wrong tree, like it or not, Goddamned it, Josh is going to live in the group home. That’s the way it’s gonna be! That old lady has no right dictating my son’s future . . . not, my future!”

There were times that Pete wished his son were dead, or he never existed at all. Many

times he'd awoken from a dream to prevent everyone's suffering by killing the boy through suffocation. He was too embarrassed that his son had this disability. It also frustrated him because his son wouldn't communicate with him or recognize that he had a dad.

Pete had a disgusting leer in his eyes; the paranoia was consuming him slowly while he looked over his mother's unsigned copy of her will that was on his desk. His thoughts of debts that had accumulated from his gambling spree now came to mind. *Heck, I'll get my money back; sooner or later my luck will be in my favor. It's got to be someday. Even a blind hog finds an acorn now and then. I just got to keep that foolish old lady from revoking her Goddamned will — can I contest it?*

He paused, searching once again for a solution. *Heck, unless I pay off that Doc and that lawyer of hers, contesting that will going to be a waste my time. Maman ought to know that I ain't going to go for that sort of shenanigan.*

For the last time, he tried to search in his mind some other way that he could convince his mother. "Oh the hell with it!" He said in the midst of a yawn. Who was he kidding, anyway? Last night's argument proved once again that his mother could not be confronted with his sheer logic. She was too fast with her French tongue in lashing out her ethical statements. "Maman plumb forgets. She forgets everything, but of course, her rubbish religion," he uttered to himself. He could never stomach religion, and when she started with that last night, that's when he went out of control, and left his mother's house. Religion was not going to cure his son, period!

Abruptly, his mind changed to another thought; perhaps it was too soon telling the old lady about his desire to marry Cecilia. The news did not set well. With that thought in mind, Pete became motionless. And then again, a flash of arrogance surfaced. "Oh hell! that's the way it's going to be!" He uttered grimly. After that, Pete composed himself. *Ain't got much time, dementia or not, I got to*

work out a deal with Maman. That's pretty much my only chance. No, no more of these petty quarrels, I have to handle that old lady in a cunning way. Get her after she drinks herself into a stupor— yeah, that's what I'll do. He paused to think clearly, *Maman knows rightly well that I have custody of my son, but for his protection, I will put him in a group home. And she well knows that with a young wife on my side, another grandchild could likely be on the way.* With that thought, maybe he could change his mother's influence.

Thirty minutes had passed, and Pete began to feel more irritable. His hand was beginning to shake and his face started twitching. He looked at the bathroom door with only one thought in mind. A drink will get this under control. He staggered to the bathroom cabinet; his pudgy face was all mashed together in a frown. He leaned down and opened the cabinet doors. He looked in and behind the toilet tissues and reached for the coffee can full of nips of vodka. He then staggered back to his desk.

He twisted one open as he plopped down in the chair.

"Ah — good!" he murmured after gulping it down. The alcohol warmed his stomach, and soon he would be on his way to recovery. Pete knew he drank too much; he could not help it with all his troubles. Only Cecilia understood him.

Now, finally, he had some attention from somebody. He yawned.

"Oh, hell with it," he whispered to the ceiling. He needed rest, and so he pulled back his chair and closed his eyes. "I'll deal with *Maman* later, he thought as he fell asleep."

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The Atlantic hurricane season had officially begun. Cecilia left the office and went straight to the Pascal's residence. Pete was to be there as soon as he finished showing a home to a snowbird that was interested in moving permanently to the area. The afternoon sky was clear blue, and the Saint Lucie River had a bright blue-green glow from the morning sun. A gentle breeze moved the tropical trees,

clean and refreshing. Cecilia drove slowly on the bridge crossing over the river wondering about her visit with Pete's family. Her fiancée felt that it was the right time to introduce her to his inner circle of friends and family and to some of the plantation workers that were going to be by the river watching the race. He had invited his old buddies and their families for a backyard barbecue dinner, and to watch the annual boat race held on the Saint Lucie River. The ordeal terrified Cecilia; she had no idea what she was facing. The main reason Cecilia was so reluctant and uncomfortable was that Gisèle might suspect that she was the one with her son the night Emma died. *Hay-yay , that would be my luck*, she thought sneeringly. *Pete better get there soon*. More than likely Gisèle knows and she'd better be well prepared. After a moment, Cecilia looked at herself in the rear-view mirror. "Hay-yay this hair — so curly? Damned humidity!" She whispered while driving unconsciously. Although, her make-up looked fine, she felt bloated, queasy and crankier than ever. She

grabbed her purse and took out a box of cigarettes, lit one with a deep drag as she restlessly drove over the bridge. Her old deep blue denim dress was the one dress she had that covered her knees, and it was becoming uncomfortable due to some weight gain. I'm getting so fat, got to cut down meeting clients in the restaurants. Cecilia knew that her missed period was part of the cause, and that's when pregnancy came to mind. *Coño! It's been ten days now. I may have to buy one of those home pregnancy test kits. Of all the Goddamn days, I have to feel like this.* She lamented, while puffing on her cigarette.

The sparkles from her engagement ring caught her eye. It was a traditional teardrop shaped diamond, plain, classy and elegant. Cecilia looked at it with a delightful smile; she was finally going to be someone's lady. Her thoughts moved on to Pete, on their recent weekend trip to Atlantic City where they stayed in the Tajo Mahal. She smiled affectionately at the wonderful remembrance of being really excited when her fiancée that

night asked her for her hand in marriage. He had taken her to the Dynasty restaurant and had a private table reserved for two in the corner. She remembered being nervous, wondering if this was the time. He told her how he couldn't live without her, and then waited when it came time for dessert to ask the question. He then lifted her napkin, and underneath, there was her ring. *What a glorious romantic night!* She thought.

Cecilia grabbed her cell phone from her purse and dialed his number; the phone was off. *I guess Pete is still working. He always shuts his phone off whenever he's showing a house,* thought Cecilia. Josh and Gis le came back in her thoughts. *That's right Cecilia; you're going to be stuck alone for a while with a retard and a senile old woman. Hay-yay just deal with it, woman!* She shrugged off that thought by taking a deep breath, exhaling, and focusing on the bright sun shining through the window in her new white Camaro cooled by A/C.

She turned on the radio, and began to listen to the music that was playing from a popular Palm Beach Caribbean radio station. She grabbed her cigarette from the ashtray and took a puff, then gazed at the sparkles of light from the river that overlooked the wooded town of Rio.

A moment passed by when a traffic light at the intersection went red. Cecilia slowed down and stopped the car; she began to hum along with the music as she looked around.

She saw a detour sign that pointed to the next street, and another sign that read: 'Welcome to the nineteen-ninety-nine Saint Lucie Boat Race.' Crowds of people were walking to the event. By the river, a section of Old Dixie Road was closed-off for the annual boat race. The event included a variety of merchants, refreshments and entertainers who were scattered along the street. Her dark eyes scanned the blockaded road. *This looks like it's going to be a blow off party, a good place for Pete to take me late tonight,* she thought. At that moment, her eyes moved away and

spotted a group of Caribbean boys moving musical equipment from a decrepit, psychedelic colored van.

"*Hay yah!*" she whispered to herself, biting her thumb while staring with bulging eyes. The light changed. Cecilia looked back at the boys from her car's rear-view mirror studying their well-tanned physiques while unconsciously driving through the green and following the detour sign. These boys brought back memories of her youth. By the early age of thirteen, she used to get much respect from such boys. Back then her shape was just right. Her bosom would turn their heads around. In spite of that, her teen-age years were shameful. She was a naive out-of-control rebel, who periodically ran away from her foster home, had countless affairs with men who were basically losers. More than once she had gotten herself convicted of burglary. *No, no more being with losers! No more playing a losing game! The days of being a bottom feeder are over and I'm done with getting what I was getting!* She strongly

believed in this, and besides, she had Pete on her side. Pete might be much older, but he came from a wealthy family, and yes, if she could, she would have his child.

Cecilia eyed her short hair cut again in the rear-view mirror.

“Coño! This hair of mine! Why is it getting so curly? Damned humidity,” she whispered, as she drove on to Old Dixie Road unconsciously.

Ten minutes after, Cecilia drove into the Pascal’s pebbled driveway, and parked her car under a stately mango tree. The enormous old cypress plantation house was impressive with its French design. The architecture included a large open porch that ran the length of the north and south sides of the house, a steeply pitched wood shingle roof and batten shuttered entrance door and windows mounted on heavy strap hinges secured by large wrought iron hooks.

Cecilia got out of her car, and looked around at the manicured premises. Twisted sea-grape trees with their heart shaped green

and red leaves framed the lot down to the river. The citrus trees were ripe with fruit. Scattered about, tiny white flowers of jasmine filled the air with a sweet fragrance. The grass she was walking on was deep green and pleasantly spongy. The backyard view was spectacular. An old boat docked on the river, and the water's edge was dotted with an assortment of dazzling deep pink milkweed flowers, violet passion flower, and yellow Mexican sunflowers.

Nearby, a group of peacocks grazed on the land. Newly hatched peachicks followed their parents. The yellow colored peachicks were being taught how to feed, while a large brightly colored male stared at her, fiercely protective of its chicks. Suddenly, the peacock puts up his fan-like tail feathers, with a bloodcurdling call.

"Stupid bird!" Cecilia shouted at the bird as if it understood her, and then gazed at the bird wondering if it would bite her. Meanwhile, she straightened her denim dress.

Abruptly, she noticed a great white butterfly coming her way. The butterfly attempted to land on her curly hair. Cecilia slapped the insect to its death.

"Stupid bugs!" She wailed after seeing that the area was full of them, and she did not want the pests to fly and become lodged in her hair.

The glazed French door opened, and along with a barking poodle dog, a heavy woman with no make-up stood watching as Cecilia walked toward the entrance.

"*Assez! Francette.*" With her staff, she kept the Poodle inside the entrance hall.

Hay-yay, here goes nothing! Cecilia thought as she approached Gis  le.

"Good Day Mademoiselle, I am Gis  le," she said while struggling to prevent the barking *Francette* from bolting out of the door. The old woman looked older than expected. Her thin bobbed white hair was dull with a yellow hue, one side pulled back around her ear.

"Hello, I'm Cecilia," she said with affection, even though the dog had made her uneasy.

"I don't know what to say *Mademoiselle*, *Mademoiselle*. *Pierre* is not here. It's a futile effort to try to reach that son of mine on the telephone. My son should be here at home to welcome his guests. Don't you think?"

Cecilia smiled and then ignored the question. She looked intently at Gis  le, who was wearing a full-figure deep-blue dress with uneven designs of light blue flowers. Her expression was somehow familiar; her image brought back a pleasant, vague memory of a motherly woman with whom she once lived for a brief period of her childhood.

"You're talking about Pete, right?"

"Correct, *Mademoiselle*. I'm aware that my son likes to be called 'Pete.' However, *Pierre* is the name his father and I gave him, and that is what I am accustomed to. You see, my son is not even content with his own name."

"Oh, anyhow — I've also tried to call him. I think he's showing a client a house," Cecilia answered while looking at the dog with caution. Suddenly, *Francette* sneaked out

the door and started to chase the peacocks, which scattered away into the high ferns.

Seconds later, *Francette* stopped the chase and then turned around and headed toward Cecilia barking and growling. *Damn!* Cecilia cringed in fear. "It bites, no?" Asked Cecilia with a panicky voice. As a child, she had been the victim of a canine attack and never quite got over the bites on her left leg.

"*Assez — enough! Francette*, get back in this house!" Ordered Gis  le. "Come, come, Mademoiselle, cuddle her. She won't bite you. She'll be good after a sniff or two."

"She is a cute dog." Cecilia said uneasily.

"Enough, enough! *Francette*," Gis  le repeated. The dog then calmed down. Cecilia then stepped forward, carefully patting the cream-colored animal, hoping that it wouldn't bite. Then, the tail came out from under the dog's legs and began to vibrate upon noticing a familiar scent from Cecilia's shoes.

"Around here, we have wild peacocks running around, and *Francette* is too old to chase them. Even if she did trap one, she

wouldn't know what to do. She would just bark herself silly."

Cecilia showed relief while walking into the entrance hall.

"Those cute birds out there, are they yours?" she asked to make polite conversation.

"No, *Mademoiselle*, those peacocks come from a nearby estate. The owner, rest her soul, brought back a pair of them years ago from India, and now, their descendants have pretty much become a part of our neighborhood," she answered, looking quite dignified. "Come, I just finished baking a batch of orange-pineapple biscuits. They're still warm, which is nice! I was going to have some with my espresso and *Pernod*. Would you like a cup of espresso and some *Pernod*; or perhaps some other drink?"

She's being so kind? Cecilia thought.

"Yes, espresso with *Pernod* will be fine." Simultaneously, they gave each other a forced smile while Gis le escorted Cecilia to the living room.

Near the kitchen entrance, Cecilia noticed a moldy smell and then a whiff of the sweet aroma of the orange-pineapple biscuits filled her nostrils.

"Where's little Josh?" She asked curiously.

"Mon petit *chéri* is at church with his nanny. I stayed home this Sunday so I could bake, and get things done around here. Josh should be arriving soon." Cecilia noticed the butterfly paintings hanging around the wall, but they didn't appeal to her; she was too curious in knowing what her adversaries looked like. She inquisitively glanced around the living room at the elegant portraits that were mounted on the walls looking for the images of Josh and Emma.

A gut level recognition came over Cecilia after she pinpointed the sizable family portrait. Cecilia wandered towards the portrait with her eyes wide open.

"We had that portrait done when Josh was six months old," explained Gisèle with a mournful voice. "It's unfortunate that my Jean never got to see his grandson grow up.

Shortly after it was done, bone cancer took my husband away from me.”

Cecilia pretended to listen to Gis  le, while a bizarre apprehension passed through her mind. *No, No lo creo! Why do I feel that I’ve known this woman from somewhere else? She lamented; que passa? I keep thinking that I’ve been with these people before.* By now, the vague feeling had amplified, and looking at the portrait of them, all together, sends a chill up her spine. Still, that was only a small part of what had shaken her. What was most distressing was Emma’s hazel eyes that seemed to talk to her, like an old bosom friend. She didn't know what to make of it, and it threw her off balance beyond anything she had ever experienced. Promptly, she gave Gis  le a gesture of approval, and then turned her head away. She set out to observe the fine antique French furniture on the wooden cypress floor around the room.

“Pretty Mrs. Pascal, your furniture is extraordinary. I don’t reckon they make furniture like this anymore, do they?”

Cecilia asked while physically examining one of the finest solid cherry armchairs in the room.

"Correct *Mademoiselle*, this furniture has been here for three generations." Cecilia looked impressed, and after a few seconds, she became more at ease. After a while, the 'Rococo' fireplace made of white marble, evocative of shells and smooth rocks, caught Cecilia's eyes.

"Very nice, I like the shells' décor," she said with enthusiasm.

"*Merci beaucoup*. I was in my final month of carrying *Pierre* when we renovated this fireplace, and at the time, I couldn't help my husband do the work. He constructed that fireplace all by himself. You know, it's tedious work putting all those shells and rocks in that arrangement. I am sure my son has told you about his *Papa's* accomplishments, no?"

"No — not really, I'm sorry to say, but Pete doesn't talk much about his family. Until today, I have not seen any of his family. My guy doesn't hold any pictures in his wallet. I just

don't get it. Anyhow, I'm very pleased that we're finally getting acquainted."

"*Imbécille!* Not even to show you a photo of his *Papa* who was so good to him," Gisèle said, disgusted anew with her son.

Cecilia ignored the comment with a shallow smile.

"You've got a lovely view out there with those two rivers going out to the ocean," Cecilia commented, trying to change the subject.

"You see, this son of mine has become a distant man. I'm afraid he didn't speak to me about you either." She paused, "You and *Pierre* are engaged, are you not?"

"Yes, but he hasn't made up his mind yet on our wedding date," replied Cecilia.

"Tell me, *Mademoiselle*," inquired Gisèle with a piercing stare, "what does your family think about you marrying an older man who has a son like Josh?"

Cecilia hesitated, unsure of how to answer. "I've got no family. Let me just say that I was raised in a foster home and I've been on my

own since I was sixteen. I never knew my parents. They were victims of a bad hurricane in Puerto Rico. I was the only survivor. I am told they were very poor.” Cecilia wanted to leave it there, but she was hoping for some compassion from her host, so she continued, “I’ve been a waitress and bartender pretty much ever since I left the foster home.”

Giséle watched Cecilia keenly as she tried to explain while evading her eyes.

After that, Cecilia didn’t want to say anymore.

“How old are you?” asked Gis  le.

“I just turned twenty-six last month, on April eleventh,” replied Cecilia.

There was a long pause.

“My dear *Mademoiselle*, you’re marrying for security — are you not?

Money can’t buy you another day. You should not be trading the prime of your life with such a miserable old man.

Cecilia noticed Gis  le’s motherly tone, and then realized that somewhere in their conversation they had established some sort

of cordial relationship. *This woman is not what she imagined she would be. Pete made her out to be a miserable old grouch.* "Pete and I get along really well together," Cecilia blurted.

"With a distant man?" returned Gisèle.

Cecilia drew a deep ragged breath. "I get along just fine with my guy."

Her connection with Gisèle was obscure, but now, Cecilia wanted to be perfectly candid.

"Let me tell you Mrs. Pascal that I know deep down in my heart Pete is the one for me. I love Pete for what he is, and I would be a good wife for him. But I suppose, in a way, I am marrying him for the security that marriage provides." Cecilia didn't know if she really meant what she was saying, it just came out of her mouth from nowhere.

"I see. How long have you known my son?" Gisèle asked.

Cecilia became defensive again, but showed a guarded enthusiasm at Gisèle's question.

"I reckon it was about three months ago, when I took his real estate course. It was a month after the funeral that we became friendly and we started dating," Cecilia said enthusiastically. Deep down, Cecilia was beginning to get annoyed; she was alerted that the conversation would link to Emma, and she didn't want to go there.

"Hay-yay! We got to start planning for our wedding pretty soon," Cecilia announced.

Giséle looked surprised.

"You're also in real estate?" she inquired, while motioning Cecilia to sit down on the antique.

"Yes, I now work with him. Didn't Pete tell you?" asked Cecilia with a perturbed voice.

Giséle sat in an armchair and pored over the espresso in a demitasse for Cecilia, and then pointed to the bottle of *Pernod* on the silver tray on the occasional table. She motioned at Cecilia to have a biscuit. Cecilia accepted the offer with a nod and a smile.

"*Mademoiselle*, Pierre has never mentioned you until a week ago," said Giséle as she

poured the Pernod in her espresso. "And I must confess that your matrimonial engagement with my son is very shocking."

Cecilia felt jumpy; she needed a cigarette. She went for a biscuit.

"Oh well, that's Pete for you," she said, trying to lighten the subject. "But you got to know that I've told him many times that I wanted to meet you and Josh. But I understand that you two haven't been getting along," she added sheepishly.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle*. We have not been getting along," said Gis  le with a straight face, while she handed over to Cecilia one of the saucers with a cup of espresso, then took a cup for herself.

"*Mademoiselle*, my time in this world is limited, and I have an unsettled matter left to fulfill. That is my daughter-in-law's wishes.

"Pete told me that Emma didn't want her son in some retard group home, right?" asked Cecelia insensitively, while biting a mouthful of a biscuit.

"Correct. I am glad that *Pierre* has discussed this matter with you," said Gis  le while sipping her coffee.

"All that Pete told me is that Josh is seriously retarded, and he's making arrangements to have his son live somewhere where people can take good care of him." Cecilia looked at her bitten biscuit, the semi-sweet orange flavor was now unappealing. "Very good biscuit," she said trying to deflect Gis  le's attention from the matter.

"*Merci.*" Gis  le said looking at her hard. "What I am saying is that my daughter Emma and I do not trust what you call a 'retard home.' It is not for my grandson. We want to see Josh live in this house comfortably, with Christian principles."

Cecilia stifled. Pete had told her that he had handled this delicate subject with his mother. Josh was to be moving to a group home.

"Mrs. Pascal, I don't want to be rude, but let me say that Emma is not around any longer to take care of her son. From what I have been told, taking care of Josh at home is grueling

work, besides, it's Pete's son too, and he should have the right to decide what is really best for him," Cecilia said boldly.

"No *Mademoiselle* I will not permit that. You ought to know that your fiancée only cares about himself," Gisèle replied angrily.

"But Mrs. Pascal, this subject shouldn't really be any of your business."

Gisèle rolled her eyes and then sternly reassured her by pointing them at her. "I will not permit it, and I do not care about whose rights I am infringing upon! I only care about protecting my grandson's way of life!" Gisèle replied with a strong tap on her lap. She then paused for a second, struggling to regain her composure. "Please, don't think that I am looking after my son's affairs. I lost my patience with his immoral ways a long time ago." She said ashamed. Then, Gisèle's heart filled with more bitterness. "My grandson has the right to live comfortably too. Didn't Pierre tell you that my attorney is working on revising my will?"

Cecilia got agitated, and stammered. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean *Mademoiselle* is that *Pierre* will have to share my wealth with Josh. *Pierre* may have most of the land; but not my savings and certainly not this house, and the land that it sits on. This part of the estate will be left to my grandson along with the financial means to take care of him. Later, after my grandson's passing, my last will and testament shall see to it that this picturesque piece of land will be given to this lovely village to become a sanctuary in memory of those who have made history here. I do this for my beloved Jean and my darling Emma. And my son better snap out of his all business attitude and honors the ones who gave him his treasures.

A squeamish feeling came over Cecilia; she had felt it before and knew it for what it was; a tinge of jealousy.

Pete better do something about this! She thought while giving her host a calm and agreeable look.

In the meantime, *Francette* started wiggling her tail, and ran to the front door. The disturbance of a slightly squeaky door latch and handle was heard. The door opened, and Pete walked into the hallway carrying a bag of groceries and a case of fine beer.

All frenzied, *Francette* jumped on Pete looking for a treat.

"Easy girl, easy; now, now settle down!" he said with a chuckling voice, while trying to keep his groceries from spilling. "Old dog, you're too feisty for your age."

When *Francette* settled down, Pete looked down the hallway and greeted the two women with a nod of the head.

"Hey y'all, I just sold old Jenzen's shack!" said Pete, grinning as he walked briskly to the kitchen. "Made some good smart money this week, vacant lots and acres are selling like hot dogs and beer!"

"Good for you *Amor*! But who would want to buy that old shanty shack?" sneered Cecilia loud enough for Pete to hear her in the kitchen.

"You know who? That retired Yankee that you met this morning, that's who," Pete replied excitedly while putting away the beer. "Praise for easy cheap credit and Florida's low property taxes too!" Pete tossed a dog biscuit on the floor, and *Francette* eagerly gobbled it. "That old shack happens to be a mile off from the nearest paved road with no electricity and no city water, and that Yankee is looking to be living there permanently."

"I guess that *snowbird* is tired of the big city life," replied Cecilia.

"He's taken to our cheap real estate! This Yankee is planning to dismantle that old shack and put in a manufactured home. Even with a dusty-dirt road, it's a smart move buying that acre today. That Yankee knows rightly well that more of his kind are coming to resettle down here, and that road down his way would likely be paved along with sewers, city water and the whole shebang."

"I pity the next generation. Soon, this village atmosphere of ours will be no more." Gis le said dismally. "And that old shack you

two are talking about happens to be the only 'cracker' home left around here built by the hands of pioneers. That pine home has a great deal of history built right into it and it should be converted into a museum to help preserve the legacy of Rio for future generations.

"Shoot *Maman*, you want to pickle every old thing in Rio. And by now, you ought to know that you can't stop progress around here," Pete remarked sweetly, while coming out of the kitchen.

"*Merde on Progress!*" Gis  le snickered with a strong thump of her staff on the floor. She then refrained herself from speaking the subject any further. "Did you see that the corn is peeled and the baked beans are in the oven?"

"Yeah, I see you also made my favorite, mango lime cream pie."

Pete walked over to his mother and locked her in an embrace.

"You look like a ghost, Gis  le uttered while handing her son a demitasse of espresso with Pernod."

"Maman haven't we argued enough," Pete protested as he walked over to kiss Cecilia. "I brought them hors d'oeuvres you asked for."

"I was telling your fiancée about your son and why I will not let you sell this house," Gisèle stated nonchalantly.

"That's fine and peachy with me, *Maman*! I decided not to quarrel any longer with you on this matter. Josh won't be going to a group home," replied Pete while he turned his face away from his mother to wink at his fiancée. Cecilia understood what Pete was doing and responded to his mother with a smile and a nod of approval.

"You know, after my death you'll be watched. You will lose everything if you put my Josh in that prison," Gisèle informed him.

"You don't need to get your feathers ruffled with me any longer," Pete gave way to her.

"What's this change of attitude?" Gisèle asked, her voice dripping with suspicion.

"I'm getting married, that's what! Well — shoot, I'm a happy man who is ready to have a new family now."

"You think marrying a young woman makes you happy?" Gisèle asked with disdain in her voice.

Pete looked away, paying no attention to her outraged question. He affectionately put his hands on his fiancée's shoulders. Turning to face his mother, he said, "Listen, we've had our differences, but I like things settled right with you. I'm in love, *Maman*, can't you see, I'm in love, and I want a fresh start with Cecilia."

A motherly sense of warmth and love came to Gisèle and she almost responded to him when she saw the elation and impish glee in her son. The expression on his face was one she had seen in the man, only in earlier times as a boy. She concealed the feeling quickly. Gisèle then put her empty cup on the silver tray, and slowly rose from her armchair.

"Very well!" Gisèle uttered. "But I stand my ground. Josh holds his rights too." Then she looked toward Cecilia, and asked, "*Mademoiselle*, would you mind helping me with this tray?"

Cecilia was astonished, and pleased she asked.

"Sure thing!" she answered, contented that the difficult matter seemed settled. Cecilia then got up from the sofa, put her empty cup on the silver tray, while Pete swallowed the rest of his espresso with a gulp.

"And you, *Pierre*, get that grill going," ordered Gis  le.

"Hold your horses now, I first need to get me a bottle of beer," Pete said with a grin while handing Cecilia his cup.

Moments later, by the oven, Gis  le stirred the baked beans with ham and pineapple.

"Good God, these beans are about to burn," she said while reaching for her potholder. Meanwhile, Cecilia was busy putting the cups in the sink and turned on the faucet. While Cecilia was washing the dishes, Pete approached her with two bottles of beer.

"Here you go girl," Pete said as he took a swallow from his own bottle. Cecilia drew back her head from the smell of beer. She felt queasy, and stunned by her body's response. It

took her a few seconds to realize that drinking the espresso with Pernod wasn't such a good idea. The minimal pain and heaviness she felt in her breast had magnified, and it could only have meant one thing, *I got to be pregnant*, she guessed. Because now she remembered that she had this sensation before, and it brought memories of the heartbreaking pregnancy that ended in abortion. Cecilia held her old painful memories firm; she was not about to let her past fluster her again. I got to get to a doctor soon, she thought while pushing the bottle away. "No Amor, not today."

"Are you sure you're playing with a full deck?" asked Pete, mockingly.

"I just don't want to get drunk today, okay," she retorted with annoyance.

"Shoot, I never saw you refuse a bottle of beer before," Pete remarked.

Cecilia made a frowning face and then looked at him with a smirk; she reached over to his ear. "I'm not sure, but I think I might be pregnant," she whispered.

Pete looked at her with a gleam in his eyes.

"What? Girl, you make me proud," he softly said with a big smile, "I'm daring to break the news to *Maman*."

"Shoo! No. I'm not really sure," she pleaded.

"Yeah, all right, better be sure. Pete then reached over and gave his fiancée a smooch on the mouth. The beer breath brought back to Cecilia another wave of queasiness. She pushed him away.

"Now, I got to guzzle this one too. A shame to waste beer." He jested.

"Permit me, but your guests will be arriving soon," Gisèle complained with a pan of baked beans in her hands. "And the corn needs to be wrapped in foil for the barbecue."

"I will wrap the corn for you *Amor*," said Cecilia to Pete.

"All right you ladies, I'll get started with them pork ribs," he quipped while sharing a secret smile with his fiancée. Pete then walked over to the refrigerator to get his ribs and prepare them for the grill.

After a moment, Cecilia and Gis  le saw Francette ears perk up and went to the entrance door. Gis  le’s eyes opened wide with glee when she looked through the kitchen window. “Here comes *mon petit ch  ri* with Ms. Tania!” she pronounced with a smile and continued to arrange the hors d’oeuvres on a silver tray.



Hay-yay-yay, the family portrait had missed the beautiful soul of this boy! Cecilia thought as she stared at Josh Pascal’s oblique blue eyes, his small chin and flat nasal bridge as if she was looking through a glass window at some unique and interesting phenomena. Josh actually met Cecilia’s gaze and said hello as he abided by the door holding Ms. Tania’s hand. A sudden pleasant sensation came over Cecilia that she has never felt with anyone else. It was then that she became aware she was feeling affection for this boy, and it was something special. Cecilia wasn’t sure when or where, but it didn’t take long for her to sense that this perfect, harmonious feeling that seemed to

have washed away the lust and distrust from her body and soul was a feeling she had once before, a long, long time ago. Perhaps she had it in early childhood days, and only for a very short period. Nevertheless, whenever or wherever she had it, she realized the feeling was buried deep under her instinct to survive.

“Mrs. Ruth, Mrs. Ruth!” Josh called. He then let go of Ms. Tania’s hand and began to shake his own hands with shouts of glee and excitement at the sight of Cecilia.

Cecilia’s almost beatific smile startled Pete, his mother and the boy’s nanny.

“No, no, she’s not Mrs. Ruth,” corrected Ms. Tania. She then grabbed the boy and pulled him to her. Their eyes met, and Ms. Tania’s scowl and leering eyes conveyed to Cecilia exactly what she was feeling, suspicion of an outsider. “You got to excuse me boy, you kind of come in like his behavior therapist,” said the obese Jamaican woman looking stern, and then showing herself to be very committed to Josh. In the twinkling of an eye, Cecilia looked at the Ms. Tania’s wooden cross around her

neck and her robe like dress that looked so drab and gray, and wondered if this woman was a nun or possibly a clergywoman. She did notice and admire her cornrowed hair that looked so lovely in a geometric pattern on her scalp, which looped and roped around into a ponytail. The hairstyle made her obese round body look a little taller and slimmer. Other than that, Cecilia wasn't sure what to think about Ms. Tania; her face either showing tension or pride.

Giséle snapped out of her dazed look and promptly made the formal introduction between Cecilia, Josh and Ms. Tania. Cecilia regained her composure and greeted them both warmly.

"Come mon petit, come," Gis  le called to her grandson holding an orange-pineapple biscuit.

Meanwhile Pete walked by to get another bottle of beer from the refrigerator. "Hey little rascal!" He said with a silly smile. The boy's face dropped, he pulled back slightly and then stood still, ready to make a dash for safety.

Pete then glimpsed down at Ms. Tania. "Hey doll," he said a little too familiar.

"Her name is Ms. Tania!" Gis  le snapped, drilling politeness into her son.

"That's right, Ms. Tania," he affirmed. "How did the little rascal do today at that church of yours?"

"Me boy do all right till the end," answered Ms. Tania with shallow breath, still recovering from an asthma attack. "Me boy gotten into trouble when we stopped outside to pray for his Momma at the statue of the Unity of the Holy Spirit. But I managed."

Josh stood quietly observing Cecilia while chewing part of his biscuit. Normally, the stare would have made Cecilia edgy, but the unexplained attraction toward him captivated her. She felt a strong urge to be alone with the boy, and yet she had no clue on why she felt this way.

"I was telling your Momma this morning my best wishes to both of you. May me Lord bless you both, and may your love grow day after day," said Ms. Tania politely and gently. Pete

was touched, knowing that Ms. Tania had been a good friend of Emma's.

"Well, well, I declare, I've never known you that well — you — being religious and all. Well — what I'm attempting to say is that I'm much obliged for those kind words."

"In me heart, I know that me friend Emma is grateful that her boy is going to have a stepmother who would look after him," said Ms. Tania to Cecilia in a genuine way, looking her over with eyes that called for accountability for the boy's way of life. "Now, Sister, don't hesitate to call me if you need help with my boy."

"OK, Thank you. But I think Josh and I are going to be fine living together." Cecilia said optimistically while walking over to kiss Josh on the cheek. She then held him tightly with a motherly concern. Cecilia then paused to search for words to describe her change of heart; she had no words to give her fiancée, so she glanced at Gisèle to avoid Pete's eyes. "Yes, I can be a good stepmother," she said, reassuringly.

Giséle shook her head; her eyes were about to water, but she stood firm without a word, because she was not sure if Cecilia was sincere.

Pete cleared his throat and tried to sound gruff. "Yeah, She'll be a good stepmother to the little feller." He winked at his fiancée. He then saw that Cecilia's face was in repose, and she maintained a dignified silence. He saw that his mother was touched by his fiancée's words, and that's when Pete realized that something was odd. Now, if I didn't know better, she's actually taken a liking to the boy.

"*Mon petit chéri* needs to get changed from his Sunday clothes," said Gisèle abruptly. "Pretty soon, we're going to watch the boat race."

"*Yah man!* My boy likes to watch boats," said Ms. Tania while motioning Josh to follow her to his bedroom.

"Can I come along to his room?" asked Cecilia.

Ms. Tania looked surprised, but she acknowledged Cecilia with a welcome smile,

and then took Josh by the hand and they left the kitchen. Cecilia was about to follow along when Pete pulled her over to a corner of the room.

"You've taken a shine to that boy, haven't you?" Pete asked in a whisper.

"How can you not? He's so cute!" said Cecilia smiling.

"Cute? Well, it doesn't rile me none," said Pete sternly.

"You know Amor, you should spend more quality time with your son," she seriously suggested.

Pete's shoulder dropped, taking a back at her suggestion.

"Girl, what the hell is going on with you?" He paused for a second, shook his head, amazed. "You wait and see one of his meltdowns, you hear me? Then talk to me about how cute he is!"

Cecilia knew what he was about to say, and she did not want to hear more.

"I know . . . I know your son is retarded and he's a handful." Cecilia rolled her eyes away

and continued to speak; "I guess what I'm trying to tell you is that being close with your son feels right to me. Maybe it's because I'm pregnant. I don't know." She looked straight at him, "I really mean what I'm saying."

"Well, that takes a biscuit!" Pete said disbelievingly.

Giséle had a keen ear and had been eavesdropping on the couple's conversation. She was about to intrude when she heard tapping on the glass door, and then the doorbell rang. *Francette* started barking.

"Your guests are here," Gis  le mumbled as she slowly walked to the door.

Pete held his fianc  e's hand. "Girl, listen, you need to look at the big picture," Pete's wary voice was a little more than a murmur, "we'll talk about this later." They held hands as they strolled to greet his guests.

They were about to race tunnel-hull boats capable of doing over 120 mph; the sea breeze had picked up and made the river a little bumpy, rocking the race boats as they

waited in line. The engines roared in idle, spectators' eyes were stuck on the start flag as it dropped to begin the first race. But for the time being, Pete and his buddies were not that interested in this race; they were waiting for the next three races that they had waged on.

From his gas grill, Pete could see across the Saint Lucie River brimming with eager spectators, roaring and screaming. On his mother's side of the river, the river edges were dispersed with neighbors and orange pickers who also were enjoying their cookout.

Smothered by a company of family and friends, the sounds of motorboats and the smell of gas fumes mixed with cooking pork put Pete in high spirits. He was looking forward to providing himself and his guests with a full afternoon of excitement and good hospitality.

A flying disc kept three little girls, two boys, and *Francette* busy, while Ms. Tania kept her son's attention by blowing soap bubbles at the butterflies that came and hovered over them.

The sun was now pale blond and shone straight down on Pete. The sweat on his forehead instantly evaporated by the cool, gentle breeze that tended to blow from the Atlantic Ocean, rustling the leaves around him. While basting the pork ribs with homemade fire-roasted pineapple salsa, Pete glanced at his mother and was pleased to see that she was being a good host. She was by the horseshoe pit, serving a tray of hors d'oeuvres. With the support of her staff, she trudged along to each of his buddies, who were playing a game. Under the patio umbrella, Pete saw that his fiancée was sitting at the table with wives who were gossiping and drinking beer. Cecilia was sitting quietly, sipping ice tea and smoking a cigarette, listening and acknowledging their conversation.

The pork ribs were getting nice and brown, and Pete brushed on more salsa. He went for a swallow of his beer and saw that the bottle was empty. He was about to ask Cecilia for a bottle of beer and saw that she was missing from the

table. Pete did a rapid search of the property and spotted his fiancée with his hysterical son and Ms. Tania, as they were about to go into the house. Pete overlooked his son's meltdown, knowing that his behavior was a normal part of his life, and then waved his empty bottle of beer to his fiancée.

"Hey, hey, pretty girl!" he yelled, "I'd be much obliged for another one."

Cecilia pointed at his screaming son with both hands clasped to his ears.

"Yes-yes, okay, *Amor*, Ms. Tania will bring one to you. She'll be right out... I'm going to go and change Josh; the noise from those power boats coming by has made him nervous."

Pete's face just dropped. He saw his son had urinated on himself. That's Tania's job! *What in the tarnation is she up to now?* Pete thought, and then shook his head, perturbed.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Ms. Tania with a silly look on her face.

"Yes, I do. Can you go get him a bottle of beer?" demanded Cecilia.

“Yah, *man* — all right, sister — I’ll go for the beer and then see what you’re getting into,” responded Ms. Tania daringly and then walked away.

The cassette player was the first thing that the screaming boy grabbed when he arrived in his room. It took a few minutes, but Cecilia managed to calm him down by playing an audio cassette of a well-known tune, *‘When the Saints Go Marching In.’* To Cecilia, it sounded corny indeed, but it did calm the boy down.

There was silence in the room now. Because of their strong connection, like identical twins, facial expressions were all that was required for them to communicate. While Josh quietly listened to the music, Cecilia stood by the boy’s bunk bed and pulled down his soaked underwear and long pants, throwing aside the clothing. The stench of urine brought back an old memory of her bed-wetting days in that forsaken foster home, something she quickly put out of her mind. She cleaned the boy very well with some wipes that were on the dresser.

She wiped her hands good and clean, and opened the dresser drawers to look for some clean clothing. She found underwear in the top drawer, and pulled out from the last drawer a pair of boy's shorts. Cecilia sat Josh on his bunk bed and carefully dressed the boy.

It was at that point in time that Josh began to sing along quite nicely with a soprano voice that dumbfounded Cecilia. His perfect pitch voice retained an aura of mystery. Yet again, this incident became another familiar thing to her, as if she had known it all along.

The boy kept busy with his music, as Cecilia sat quietly with him on the bed looking around his room filled with toddler's furniture. She observed the sky-blue walls with colorful butterflies painted on. Her eyes then moved to the framed collection with pictures of people on the wall that were involved in the boy's life. But what was puzzling was that the one missing in the collection was Pete. Cecilia leaned back slightly, rubbed her chin, and then looked away. At that moment, the corner of

the room caught her attention, when she saw the big-netted bag with butterflies flying inside. I don't get it, that woman is pretty strange to give her son bugs for pets? She shook her head in disgust and returned her attention to Josh.

Abruptly, Josh stopped his singing and clicked off his cassette player. Then, with a serious thoughtful face, he turned to Cecilia and remarked loudly, "Butterflies!" He followed with a grin.

His expression made Cecilia smile, happy that he was happy. "Josh, do you like butterflies?"

"Butterflies!" repeated the boy, louder this time, with an approval voice.

Cecilia looked over at the big-bagged net, shaking her head with a half-smile and uttered, "*Hay-yay-yay . . .* I'll just have to get used to them."

The intensity of that shared moment made her think. She turned back to Josh and then gazed him right into his glinting eyes. "Josh, do you know that I'm going to marry your Pa

and are you okay with that?" When Josh met her gaze, she felt drawn into his eyes that were blue like the sky was before sundown.

"Mommy!" He called out to her.

"What?" Cecilia gave the boy a strange look. "Your Mommy is in your heart!"

Josh gazed intently at her and repeated the call, "Mommy!"

Josh's childlike expression was touching and Cecilia pulled back in awe. "Well, I will be a good second mother to you — I promise." Time seemed to stop after her words and everything paused in a moment of bliss.

Afterwards, Josh abruptly clicked on the cassette player and resumed his singing.

A few minutes later, a thumping of a cane was heard, interrupting Cecilia and Josh's moments together. And then, Gisèle and Ms. Tania were in the room.

"Me boy has a blessed voice, doesn't he?" asked Ms. Tania with a big white-toothed grin, as she ran to embrace Josh. "I sees you did good with me boy."

With a smile and a nod of her head, Cecilia acknowledged Ms. Tania.

"Is *mon petit chéri* all calmed down now and changed? Dinner is ready," Gisèle announced.

"Me think it would be bad to bring him out again," said Ms. Tania warily, "me boy don't care for boats."

"These darn boats are louder than I prefer! They are racing too close to my side of the river," Gisèle protested, "I'm going to see to it that it won't happen again." Gisèle then looked at her grandson dismally as she did not want to see him be inside the rest of the day.

"Well, *mon petit chéri*, we will eat our ribs inside," she said regrettably. After that, Gisèle faced both women. "You two go along out there and eat with those people," said Ms. Tania, settling the issue.

"I don't mind keeping Josh company," Cecilia said suddenly while giving Josh a heartfelt squeeze.

Gisèle was pleased to see Cecilia's affection towards her grandson, but her long pause

before she responded, said it all. Because, she was quite aware of her son's jealous nature toward her grandson's. "No, *Mademoiselle*, for now, you need to be with *Pierre*. Ms. Tania and I will take care of Josh."

By some means, Cecilia understood Gis le and was about to agree when out came an idea.

"I've got it," Cecilia interrupted. "let's put some ear plugs in his ears!" Gis le and Ms. Tania looked at each other, dumbfounded.

"That's right, put some ear plugs in his ears," Cecilia repeated, "it should cut the noise down."

Gis le thought it over. "Yes, we have ear plugs; we can try *Mademoiselle*."

"Not a bad idea sister," said Ms. Tania with a chuckle. "Me don't know why I didn't think of it first." Cecilia felt her face glow warm; being praised by women was something she had never come across before. She was becoming aware that she was making a connection with these women — of all things. *Hay-yay, what's happening to me?* She

thought. *Whatever — I don't want this to end!*
Cecilia gave up trying to figure it all out.

Anyhow, the harmonious mood had overshadowed her pregnancy symptoms.

The women and Josh came out the backyard door looking at a line of hungry people waiting for their meal. By the bar, *Francette* gnawed at a pork rib bone, and Pete chattered excitedly while serving his guests the pork ribs, corn on the cob and baked beans. Pete glanced away, and then did a sudden double take at the sight of Cecilia who had a radiant quality about her as she strolled along with Ms. Tania, hand in hand with Josh. Afterwards, he saw his mother approaching the bar with a pleasant look on her face. Pete's curious eyes looked back at his fiancée who acknowledged him with a nod and a smile. He could not comprehend the reason or for that matter, what was going on between his son and his fiancée. He just kept smiling, glancing up and down at her like good pals, perturbed that somehow she was affectionate to his son.

Cecilia now focused her attention on the noisy race boats that were maneuvering across their way.

"How are you doing Josh?" asked Cecilia.

"Mommy?" replied Josh. Cecilia understood and accepted his instinctive clinging to his mother. By now, her competitive resentment toward Emma had completely ended. As a matter of fact, she actually liked the woman, because she understood motherhood. Her pregnancy now was her chance to offset her overwhelming shame, guilt and the pain of the abortion experience that she had buried deep inside.

"Quite often you'll hear me boy call for his Momma. He bawls and bawls for his Momma. And this is how I keep him calm," said Ms. Tania. She then looked at Josh's eyes, "now, now, where's your Momma?" Ms. Tania repeated playfully, "Come now, where's your Momma?"

"Heart," smiled Josh with an index finger pointing at his chest.

"That's right, she is in your heart," smiled Ms. Tania. There was a brief silence before Ms. Tania turned to Cecilia with a serious face and spoke again. "You know me Lord knows how much I love me boy, and I do not want anything bad to happen to him."

"I reckon you do, I sure feel that way! Look at him, he's so cute! I feel good with him, don't you?"

"Listen up! It's the Lord, sister —the Lord wants you to make amends for your sins." Cecilia suddenly was taken aback by Ms. Tania's personal remark.

"What are you talking about?"

"Everybody sins sister, some worse than others, and I'm not to judge, only the Lord judges," pronounced Ms. Tania with a face showing religious rapture, which Cecilia didn't expect. She then looked straight at Cecilia's eyes. "Emma knew about you 'the bartender and her husband' yes indeed, she knew sister and she talked to me about it."

"What are you talking about?" blurted Cecilia, uncomfortable with the emotions churning inside her.

"Me Lord's works in His way and I believe that me Lord led Emma to heaven because of you. Yes, indeed! So, what I'm saying to you now is that don't let the Lord down by not taking care of me boy.

Cecilia didn't know what to say, and for a split second she thought of denying the affair, then she decided to ignore her completely. She then paused just enough to retain her poise. Oh, why hide it!

"Let me only say that it's none of my business that Pete cheated on his wife," Cecilia retorted. "That's between them, and you can't blame me for searching for a better way of life."

"Like I said I'm not judging. The Lord does the judging."

Cecilia kept calm, but she was annoyed. She wanted to know more about Emma's ways and was about to question Ms. Tania when Gisèle interrupted her by calling her name.

The sun had cast striking rays above the high waves, and for the moment, Josh was calm with the two women as they stared out over the river at a bunch of racing boats. Gis le was on her way over with a plate of food for her grandson.

“Looks like the ear plugs are working,” said Ms. Tania.

Cecilia was still annoyed, hesitated, unsure of what to say and then agreed. The boats were about to go by and Josh was not tormented by the noise. Suddenly, a disk thrown by a little girl whirled across Cecilia’s face and startled her. Josh tried to catch it, but the disk soared straight through his hands, and then skipped on to the ground and slowly sank by the shallow edge of the river.

“Me Lord! Where did that come from?” asked Ms. Tania.

Cecilia turned to find out who threw the wayward disk; it was then that a little girl burst into giggles.

“That’s not nice!” said Cecilia playfully.

Everyone's eyes were glued to the three leading boats as they skipped and splashed its way across their viewpoint. Meanwhile, Josh saw where the disk was and slipped away to fetch it. Seconds went by when a thunder-like thud sound startled everyone. One of the race boats had gone off course and slammed into a sand dune, and then went out of control, colliding with another race boat. The collision puts the two boats out of the control path toward their side of the river's edge. Cecilia eyes pinpointed Josh by the river who looked dazed by the sudden vibration and noise. At that instant, Cecilia had a vague premonition of a boat killing Josh, and that's when she instinctively darted for the boy and pushed him away.

One of the boats, regained control, but the other boat hit the shore, sparks flying, and smoke spewing as it headed straight for Cecilia.

In One's Own Light

Floating in slow time, a soul watches creation: a dog barking in alarm; a man running towards a woman's body; another man in the crunched and bended boat looking pained and discombobulated; others were staring in shock.

The man who ran to the body, promptly takes a hold of the woman's neck and pulled her bloody face to him. He placed her head down when he saw that the woman was not breathing, and then went to perform CPR. When someone screamed for an ambulance, it was then that the soul realized that the blood-soaked woman was its body; now a shell of its former self.

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