

American-Cuban

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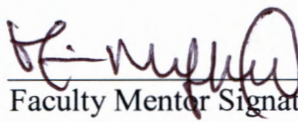
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Master of Fine Arts Degree

MFA in Creative Writing  
The University of Tampa

June 15, 2017

 6/20/17  
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Miami city of magic. Miami a swamp.

*It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the  
scroll;*

*I am the master of my fate:*

*I am the Captain of my soul.*

*W. F. Henley*



**Fire-tipped waves surrounded the creaky boat as it entered Port-Au-Price Harbor** and floated toward the bonfire dotted hills. Moonlight bathed the deck as *La Fortuna* was enveloped by a hard and hectic drumbeat. The captain stood at the bow of the ship, and spoke to a beautiful woman made of dark saltwater that clung to a blood-red coral skeleton. The men had seen their captain talk to the ocean many times, but never had they heard him plead with the waters. He had yelled at them in the middle of a storm, much as Christ had done on the Sea of Galilee, and the waters had calmed, but not completely. Manuel Cedron was not Christ-like, and he had brought his crew to enjoy the Voodoo rituals and festivals. He had warned his men to be wary of the women dressed in white skirts with gingham blouses, because they'll swear that they can save you from impending disaster and bless you with good fortune. Of course, it would require alcohol, money, and blood to secure these blessings. Calming a storm is easier than gaining favors, or privileges from the Gods.

A hundred yards from the beach the men dropped a fifteen-hundred-pound anchor into the firelight water, and my great-grandfather and his crew of five quickly lowered and boarded a battered wooden skiff. My great-grandfather was a man of power. Spiritual power, mental

precision, and a fortuneteller. He knew men's futures, and what was required to manipulate those futures. There is no sovereign man, and our existence has always been manipulated by men like Jesus, Hitler, or Krishna. My great-grandfather was a handler of men's futures, a guide of humanity's possibilities, and he sat soundlessly with his crew as they enthusiastically rowed toward shore, but he hadn't told them that it was his marriage ceremony that they would be party to. Three weeks earlier, while La Fortuna unloaded Haitians and rum at Havana harbor, a seven-foot-three-inch Mulatto, a giant with black charcoal eyes had boarded the ship. That giant was now waiting on the beach to greet them with bottles of rum, and three satchels filled with dozens of pre-paid potions. The crew were drawn to him as women are drawn to a man's masculinity—they were enthralled by the possibility of learning to possess such power.

The skiff was beached, and the tattered crew quickly uncorked the bottles that the giant handed them, and swallowed large gulps of dark rum. The alcohol spread in their bodies and emboldened their desires. Their objectives were still unknown to them, and their unspoken dreams were never possibilities. Manuel was last to jump from the skiff. He immediately dropped to his knees, and lay in the wet sand before the mulatto. The giant gently blessed his back as he bent to touch his shoulders. An act of camaraderie, conviviality, or simply love? For love does exist, or at least should, between mentor and student, between master and apprentice—between Gods. Manuel rose and stripped, accepted the white porcelain bottle that the giant handed him, and then splashed his body with the spring water, honey, powered cinnamon, and five perfumes potion. Can the spirits resist the smell of masculinity mixed with magic? Can anyone resist such a man? Possibly a woman of equal prowess has the capability to not only resist, but maybe become his equal.

My great-grandfather took the white linen shirt and trousers that his *Padrino* handed him, and dressed quickly so that the clothes would absorb the concoction that slowly dripped down his muscled body. The pounding drums sounded stronger, and were accompanied by wild, high-pitched shrieking, followed by deep guttural groans, and the two youngest members of the crew were wide-eyed with fear. These salt crusted men were at home on the sea. Land, jungle, and human spirituality, or sorcery were not unknown to them, but raised their physical and emotional caution. They can steer into the wind, and ride the swells of the oceans, but hearing the unsympathetic sounds of Voodoo reached their souls and made them shiver. The first mate smiled as he reached behind the youngest smugglers and pinched their asses. One fell to his knees and the other fell back into the skiff. The men laughed at the two young crew members, but not very enthusiastically. Voodoo has a way of heightening caution, as easily as allaying fears.

The crew quickly drained a third of their bottles in the three minutes that it took Manuel to be blessed and to change. He took the bottle his first mate handed him, uncorked it with his teeth and poured a short stream of rum onto the beach. The Warrior God is always first to drink. The Warrior God is first in anything that involves the Saints. This privilege was given to him by the God of the universe—father of all that exists, and is destroyed or altered. Some men have learned the rules of life, some men have perverted the rules, and very few can do either effectively.

Ritual complete, he drank half the rum in several swallows, producing an alcohol-induced sweat that mixed with the concoction that still clung to his body—another swallow and it was time for dancing. Dancing is the heart of ritual and the pathway to spiritual possession. The giant flung a canvas bag over his left shoulder and threw two satchels to the youngest members of the

crew. They obediently shouldered the bags, and followed the other men from the beach, and disappeared into the jungle. They drank as beating drums echoed through a tropical forest filled with the screaming and singing of ritual. The moon tried to light their way but the jungle canopy diffused its light into shadow, and bats swooped all around them feasting on the fleeing insects that the troupe disturbed. Following a path known only to the giant, they finally reached a clearing filled with the orchestrated mayhem of Voodoo drums, possessed dancers, and blood sacrifice. High priests and priestesses ran through the crowd sprinkling the blood of doves and roosters on everyone, while young kids bleated as knives cut their jugulars, and their blood streamed into cauldrons filled with their mother's milk. This blood-milk would be fed to the babies and young children. Amidst the noise of religious fervor, a circle of men and women chanted and swayed around a dark-haired Mulatta who danced naked at the center of the fervent believers. As the crew approached, she slowly began to pour a honey mixture over her large round breasts, and down the back of her neck. She moved slowly and deliberately, forcing her scent into the crowd. Men sniffed the air and tried to press closer to her, but the women that surrounded the priestess served as her protectors.

The men were mesmerized by my great-grandmother's sticky swaying, and with a smile of satisfaction she continued her religious display. Squatting with knees outspread she retrieved one of two white buckets that had been placed in front of the bonfire that crackled behind her. The giant whirled as he started to leap toward her in jumps that lifted him four to five feet off the ground. He leapt into the air with his right-arm stretching to the moon, and his left-arm clutching his satchel tightly to his chest, as if trying to bring the moon's light into the potions in the satchel. He pulled a jar of brown coarse powder from the moonlight blessed satchel, and emptied it into bucket number two. The priestess spun slowly on her left heel as she watched him mix the

powder with the perfumed water in the second bucket. My great-grandmother had agreed to this Voodoo marriage because of promises that it came with a white Cuban ship's captain, and leaving Haiti for a new beginning in Florida.

The sticky and glistening priestess raised the first bucket and slowly poured half of its sweetened goat's milk over her body. She smiled as the milk spread over her grinding pelvis, and down her strong tight thighs. She began to spin on the heel of her right foot, and flung the remaining milk in the bucket at the circle of believers that surrounded her. The women around her started mimicking her, spinning on their right heels in small tight circles as they began to undress. The men that had been barred from reaching the priestess lavished their attention and desire on the undressing initiates. She squatted next to the second bucket and thrust her hand into the cool potion while chanting in *Locumi*—he is mine bring him to me. She stirred as she looked from man to man searching for the one she had been expecting, and found my great-grandfather standing ten yards from her, surrounded by three women who were rubbing their hands against his legs, groin, chest, and back. Her eyes locked with his, and the women that surrounded him backed away in submission as she approached. She raised the bucket, and poured half the contents on his head and down his body, as he slowly turned before her, and then she poured most of the liquid that remained over her pubic triangle. The little liquid that was left she threw, along with the bucket, into the dancing flames of the bonfire. She raised her arms to the moon, as he continued to turn before her. The moonbeams bounced from the bonfire onto the possessed, the curious, and the terrified.

The potion spent, she took Manuel by the hand, and led him into the center of the human circle. She closed his eyes and started spinning him. As he turned she reached into the earth and retrieved a red bottle filled with spring water and *Agua Ardiente*. She took a small swallow, then



filled her mouth and sprayed him; immediately he opened his eyes and stopped spinning. She poured the remaining water on herself and wrapped one leg around his waist, as her right hand gripped and squeezed his erect penis. She tore his clothes with her nails, pushed him to the ground and mounted him. My great-grandfather closed his eyes again and had visions of wealth, and property. American dirt, American dollars, and an American family. All blessed by Cuban *Santeria* and Haitian *Voodoo*.

**My name is Alejandro Cedron, Alex to my friends,** and the death of my father started a cascade of personal, cultural, and religious inevitabilities that I'll recount in these pages. He was a *Santeria* high priest. A father I loved when I was very young, grew to hate in my early teens, and rebelled against as I approached manhood. The reasons for our separation were mainly due to a question of lifestyle. We had not seen each other in over sixteen years, when the old man reached out to me. It had been a pleasant and prosperous sixteen years, and I was not pleased with his reappearance.

August in Miami, and all my plants were struggling to breathe. The white tropical clematis and pink oleanders, the only members of my garden unaffected by the heat, were swimming with color. Their bouquets complimented each other, and filled the garden with a pleasing, perfumed humidity. My mobile started to ring as I cleared the trumpet flower trees—I didn't recognize the number.

"Alejandro?" I recognized the voice immediately.

"Do you know who this is?"

“Yes. And I really don’t want to talk to you.”

“Please don’t hang-up. *Necesito hablar contigo.*”

“We’ve said all that we need to say to each other.”

“I’m dying, and I’d like to see you before I leave,” he said quickly.

What was I supposed to do? Yes, I could, and wanted, to turn away and forget I had a father. But sixteen years ago, my spirits had told me that a reconciliation would be inevitable, something I had forgotten until this call. Let me be direct: I hear, smell and perceive more than most men and women. Mothers do have their intuition, but that is generally just about their children or immediate family. Spiritual insight has many forms, and is always dyed with cultural colors. I call it spiritual insight to make it more palatable to those of you who may find Santeria difficult to understand or accept. I don’t always dream in English, or believe that my island homeland is Cuba. I was born at Baptist hospital in Kendall, not because we are Baptists, but because we lived on a three hundred acre working farm in the Redlands, and Baptist was the closest hospital. Mangoes, limes, and avocados were not our most lucrative crop. Illegal cock-fighting rings, and pleasure huts for the migrants and locals, along with alcohol and drugs were our best sellers. Illegal ventures were a family tradition. This gives you a better idea as to why I wasn’t happy to hear from the old man, but the illegalities were not the only reasons. There are always more reasons than we disclose.

Could we forgive each other, possibly love each other again? Maybe. But, I don’t believe everyone deserves, or is entitled to a second chance. Sometimes it’s best to just forget that someone ever existed. I’ve been told that to forget or abandon a parent is impossible, but I had not found it so difficult. Though forgetting like forgiving is never easy, and yet I could have

happily continued our separation. But, now having remembered that reconciliation was inevitable, I accepted his interruption, and would attempt to reacquaint myself with an estranged father before he died. I would have preferred not to attempt a reconciliation, but I am bound to my *Orishas*, and to ignore what they had told me so many years ago would not be wise, and with this acceptance my memories exploded.

“How could you have become such a failure,” my father had said at our last encounter sixteen years ago. I can now admit that I enjoyed being my father’s disappointment, it meant I had not become mean, abusive or unscrupulous. I used my ‘failure’ to distance myself from my heritage, my family, build a home, and discover a spiritual purpose of my own making.

“I’m glad you consider me a failure; that means that I’ve actually become a better man than you,” I said. “You have another son that from all accounts has developed into the man that you hoped I would have become. I am not a part of your family, and you are not welcomed in my life. My son will not be your grandson.”

I had tried to keep my anger from overwhelming my words, but I wasn’t sure if that was possible. It wasn’t a good departure from my old life, but I had a young son to raise, and myself to discover. Besides, I knew that my guardian angel was shepherding me along my chosen path, and now I must give you some more information about myself. *Elegua* is my guardian angel, and we speak to each other, or rather we share with each other, and I try to interpret the correct meaning from our confidences. The spiritual is not always clear, but I’ve found that if you take the time to try and understand, you eventually will. The old man’s impending death was not a total surprise—death does tell you when it’s approaching. Nine days before he called and interrupted my garden stroll, my spirits had communicated that he was dying, but had not

reminded me that I would have to see him again—I think that omission was intentional. I had hoped his death would completely free me from my family, and I understood that there probably would be some repercussions due to his death. Repercussions, a nice way of saying problems. So here I am at another crossroads.

My ability to commune, understand, and convey messages from the spirits are a Caribbean cultural expectation. They are as normal as rain and just as beneficial—most of the time. Spirits are a human evolution. Death provides us with the means to disrobe from the physical and explore the universe. Well that is our potential, and in my case, it was an ordinary Saturday morning, while sleep still fogged my brain, and smoky silhouettes of ebony and red danced around an amethyst fire. The silhouettes merged and passed through each other creating colors that I had never seen, and when I tried to force myself awake the fire flared into dangerous flames that held me in that kaleidoscope world of foretelling. Fear was not the problem, but interpretation was. The wrong interpretation could destroy all that I'd built, all that I hoped for. My visions were usually more mundane: an apparition, a voice, or just a sudden knowledge of an event would pop into my mind—knowing where to build my new store or which properties to buy. But vibrant colors, shadowy silhouettes and fire, were harbingers of destruction and karma, or, resurrection and destiny. In the only similar vision that I had experienced the colors had been white, yellow, and lavender, with children playing on the seashore: the foretelling of my son. But this time a high-pitched whistling forced me to press my hands against my ears as it grew into a piercing screech. I was going to explode into a scream, but just as I started to open my mouth, the whistling changed into a soft cooing. The fire subsided and my naked father appeared opposite me. We were separated by the smoldering bed of grey glowing ashes, and he stood smiling with his fingers entwined, his hands dangling in front of his genitals with a modesty that

he had never possessed in life. I stretched my hand toward him, but the ashes burst into purple flames that engulfed my arm, and I jumped falling from my bed with a loud slap onto the mahogany floor. Francis snapped upright with the sound. Fear was still not the problem, and interpretation had just become more difficult.

“What’s the matter? You all right?” Words of concern from someone you love, and just jolted out of a sound sleep. My dilemma was this: do I tell the truth?

“Just a bad dream,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

We had met three days after my twentieth birthday, three months into the mourning of my second wife, and after a week of lovemaking we were a couple. From our first encounter, we aroused a sexual energy that had lain dormant in both of us. The first time that we discovered the pleasures of each other’s body is still a vivid memory.

“Touch me again with your tongue.” And my tongue lingered on an erect nipple. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.” I hadn’t stopped. We became strong and constant lovers, and that passion had not faded. And, here I sat on a cold wood floor staring into the darkness as I waited for the sounds of deep, undisturbed sleep, before tucking my legs beneath me and springing to my feet. The room was painted a calm cream color, and the soothing night light bounced off the wall behind me, triggering buried memories, or a possible future. Nameless people with bloodied faces ran screaming all around me, and mountain rainforests bright with moonlight filled my mind, making my body twitch. I stood naked with my eyes closed, shaking my head and clenching my teeth. Then I felt the warmth of an airy embrace, opened my eyes and walked to the bathroom.

*There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll always protect you. But you have a duty that has come to be fulfilled. Do not turn away from this. It will not be easy. But embrace it and your reward will be greater than anything you've already been given.*

I wrapped myself in the red silk robe that was my thirty-sixth birthday present, and slipped from the bedroom toward my study. The hallway was bathed in soft white light from two picture lights. I opened the study door, stopped before entering, and turned to look at the white wicker furniture of the Florida room. Something was watching, something beyond my sight. Demons or ghosts? Spirits of light or darkness? Did it make any difference? I could argue that yes it made a very big difference, but in reality—my reality—the difference was minimal, and my interpretation was starting to solidify.

Light or dark, demon or ghost, these are all lost and ambiguous souls. The stories of ghosts throwing objects and tormenting people are true, but the dead spirit doesn't want to do these things. Living people, with purpose or unknowingly, cause spirits to do these things to themselves and others. Jealousy, lust, envy, and unrequited love are generally the cause. Occasionally a demon does appear, a real demon. A spirit of death and destruction. It is called into existence by immense hatred and the promise of violence. Only saints and angels can manifest the spiritual power necessary in the kingdom of men to combat these demons. My kingdom, my realm, is secure because of the protection of my guardian angel, and the power of my Orishas. But, something was watching me. Something beyond my sight, something desperate—probably.

**Key West in 1910 was a coral island metropolis of nearly 20,000 people.** The archipelago was surrounded by mangroves and crimson-colored bougainvillea that hid pirates, smugglers, criminals, and other degenerates. My great-grandfather arrived in February, running from Cuban authorities to whom bribes were owed. He used their bribe money to buy a yellow, gabled, eight room, two story Victorian home on Simonton Street. The stately house was built of Florida Pine with a white wrap-around porch, and white gingerbread embellishments. The house had been built two years earlier by an ailing Chicago businessman as a winter retreat. Purple bougainvillea crowded the empty lots on either side of the house, and the businessman only enjoyed his house for a year-and-a-half. If my great-grandfather was still alive by April—Cuban bureaucrats didn't like being betrayed—he would also buy the two purple lots. He wanted land, as much as he could coerce, steal or win. Paying a fair price was always the last choice. The beginning of American dirt.

Middle-class tourists began to arrive with Henry Flagler and his train in 1912. The 18th Amendment brought to Key West the wealthy who were on layover to Havana, as well as four criminal entrepreneurs that would try to take some of my great-grandfather's smuggling trade. "I'll give you the opportunity to leave with your lives," Manuel had told the four. One replied, "You don't know what you're getting yourself into spigotty. I'll be back with more men than you can handle. Isn't that right, Jonesy?" Jonesy nodded. "This is America, and you are not going to last long here," said the third Irish immigrant. The fourth man, the youngest, no more than seventeen, didn't say a word, and just lowered his eyes as his three friends were dragged into the dense mangroves, by six machete-wielding Cubans. A half-eaten leg was later found on the sand of Rest Beach, and the fourth, the youngest, found new employment, and never returned to New York.

The locals and parched voyagers were drinking Cuban and Haitian rum in the wooden speakeasy that my great-grandfather built in the middle of the southeast lot—now his—next to his yellow house. He chose this lot because the 12-14 feet bougainvillea bushes with their tangle of arching branches and menacing thorns, was impenetrable from the street and hid the wooden structure completely. He built the speakeasy shack with no windows facing Simonton Street, so that any light and noise seemed to be coming from the house. The neighbors behind the main house, and the ones behind the speakeasy shack, were reduced-rate patrons, and knew that any indiscretion on their part would most likely cost them the life of one or more of their family members. Most of the locals had visited the shack, and they were no longer awed by Manuel's Haitian priestess. The local men and women had experienced her allure more than once, and were now indifferent but not totally immune to it. They frequently availed themselves of her services, mostly fortunetelling. American dollars.

My great-grandmother was a dark-skinned siren, with thick black hair that streamed down to her waist, and large breasts with perpetually erect nipples that taunted every man as she passed. She wore necklaces of colorful beads that dressed her in an exotic gaiety that men found irresistible. Her skin exuded a sweet erotic scent and her dark green eyes possessed a seductive stare that few could resist. She dominated the men with her stare, and aroused them with her scent, as easily as she struck fear and envy in their manicured women. She used her body to drug any man she needed and her desire was never satiated. Great-grandfather knew the effect she had on the men, and used her to his advantage. He gained money, land or favors from the powerful and rich, or sought vengeance for their transgressions.

She told the seekers of their future demise or distinction using little cowry seashells that spoke only to her. She could imprison your enemy's soul with some sweat and a few strands of



hair, or, find you a new love and rid you of an old one. Compensation varied, not according so much as to the request, but as to the person making the request. The charge could be money, sex, property, or a favor to be collected at a later and more propitious date.

“Your life is going to change dramatically,” my great-grandmother told an overly-coiffed woman from Chicago. “But, not in the way that you want it too. Your husband knows about the young man, and he has no intention of letting you go. You must leave.”

“What horse-shit are you trying to sell me?” said the woman. “Do you think I’m some country bumpkin that you can scare with your silly shells? You’re not getting a cent from me. Go peddle your crap to someone else.”

My great-grandmother smiled as she collected her cowry shells and watched as the door to the shack opened and in walked a tree-log of a man. His hands were big and calloused, his neck pockmarked and thick like the mast of Manuel’s smallest boat. He approached the woman from behind, and his bear-sized hand gently tapped her shoulder. She turned, and the slap knocked her off her chair. The music stopped, the conversations ceased, and everyone parted as the man dragged the screaming woman by her beautifully coiffed hair. Someone opened the door as they approached, and the screaming stopped when the tree-man covered her mouth with his hand, and the four musicians resumed playing their Cha-Cha-Cha. Some visitors came to the shack for rum, and maybe for a story to tell the folks back home. Most left with stories that they would never recount. My great-grandmother Yadira left the speakeasy and walked to the gabled house. The wet nurse greeted her at the back door, carrying a pair of twin ten-month old boys, each straddling a hip. The American dynasty.

*Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise  
from outward things, whate'er you may  
believe. There is an inmost center in us all,  
Where truth abides in fullness and, to  
know, Rather consists in opening out a way  
Whence the imprisoned splendor may  
escape, Than in effecting entry for a light  
Supposed to be without.*

*Robert Browning*



**Our three months of reconciliation began on August twenty-fourth.** School just started, Francis was working, and I was alone in the house. It was a brutally humid day in Miami, the bay breeze softly tussling the palm fronds, like I used to tussle my son's hair when he was young, and Manuel Cedron senior arrived at our agreed time. My spirits dictated the time and duration. Why only mornings until early afternoon? They didn't tell me. Maybe so that I would only see him at his best. But he was dying, and seven to eight hour visits were not going to change that. *Don't worry about the details.*

"*Senor,*" said Soledad the housekeeper as she entered the Florida room. "There is someone at the door, and he says that you are waiting for him."

"*Si,* Soledad, he's my father. I'll go get him."

"*Su padre,*" she said a little bewildered. She thought my father was already dead. In this household, a resurrected father would not have been completely impossible. Resurrection is something to look forward too, something I have yet to accomplish.

“Hello old man,” I said. “Follow me.” Yes, I was a little terse, but then I had every right to be. He had never been an ideal father; then again, according to his needs, I was never an ideal son. The details of either case don’t matter—or at least shouldn’t. Well maybe I should tell you just a little about how I feel about him. He was—and probably still is—an arrogant, abusive, conniving, deceitful, and untrustworthy bastard. *Don’t be so biased. You were a handful.*

“*Gracias senorita,*” he said with flourish and a big smile as we passed Soledad. He looked as I remembered him. Tall, thick blue-black hair, not as fair skinned as me, with milk chocolate brown eyes that twinkled. He was still handsome and charming, but he did walk slower than I anticipated. We reached the Florida room sliding doors and walked out into my garden. I really didn’t want to share the garden, my sanctuary with him. So I tried to walk him quickly through the roses, but had to wait for him to catch up, and hoping that he wouldn’t wilt the bushes as he passed. *Stop these thoughts, you are not a child. You are here to help!*

“Your grandmother would have loved your *jardin,*” he said as we walked through the perfume of the English roses. “You seem to have inherited her knack for making things grow. Do you know where she got it from?”

Generally, I don’t mind small talk but I really didn’t care who had a green thumb before me. No one helped me with the planting, pruning or fertilizing, and having a question and answer period about ancestral gardening prowess was a shitty segue way to restarting a relationship. So I reminded myself: be nice, participate, and see where this goes—you agreed to this conclave.

“I always thought that it was from her mother.”

“No, my grandmother was a Santera of considerable prowess and knowledge. But, my grandfather was the plant man. He would stop the car to gather seed pods, or take a cutting from a bush, and he would make the seed sprout and the cutting root.”

The humidity clung to our bodies as we stood under a sculpted, gray buttonwood tree that had twenty-one purple *Phalaenopsis* orchids hanging from its branches like jewel earrings. There was no direct path to the boat dock, there was a shorter path, but I led the old man on the longer gravel path to the citrus trees. They were also sculpted, all the trees in the garden were, but the pink lemon, dwarf red grapefruit, and dwarf orange trees didn't have flowery earrings hanging from their branches. They were adorned with variegated foliage, perfumed blossoms, and ripening fruit.

I don't remember much about my grandfather. He was murdered when I was seven-years old. I remember my father planning revenge against the cock-fighting patron who had knifed him three times in the torso before slicing through his throat. Revenge was a quick and quiet murder. The man's body was never found, and there were no suspects. The only thing that the police did have was almost one pint of blood, and his right-hand thumb to identify the missing rest of him.

I understand that my father had vengeance on his mind when his father was killed, but how could he have involved my older brother Manny junior? Manny Jr. is six years older than me, and already possessed much of our father's personality. Supposedly or luckily, I was too young to partake in the ritual exsanguination. It seemed appropriate that we reached the Bonsai garden, and were assaulted by the crimson blossoms of three bougainvillea sitting atop white, three feet tall Doric columns that were surrounded by white marble chips as ground cover. There was no grass in my garden, and the ground cover changed from section to section. I guess you

could see my life reflected in the plants and accessories that were my garden. A conglomeration of differences that form a cohesive and pleasing whole—at least that’s what I tell myself. Fruit, perfumed flowers, and manipulated little trees cleanse the soul and calm the mind. That’s what I’ve chosen to believe. That’s what I’ve chosen to embrace.

“It’s nice to know that thugs, drunkards, and drug purveyors can have a garden like mine.” He just shook his head and sighed. This surprised me. Normally he would have started cursing and swinging. Imminent death apparently does change us, and I chastised myself in silence. Maybe I was being nasty precisely because I had memories of murder, exsanguination and vengeance. Or maybe I was being nasty because I wanted to differentiate myself from my father. But more likely, I was angry at myself because I had been jealous of Manny junior—he got to participate in murder and I didn’t.

My father, was born of the Latino macho culture, and tried to impart that culture to both his son. He smoked illegal Cuban cigars, had sex with anyone he could charm, pay or overpower. He had told his doctor he was dying before the doctor’s tests confirmed his prognosis—what the disease was didn’t matter. He also knew that he could delay the inevitable, but chose to die quickly. I believe he wanted to avoid losing his good looks, and also avoid the awkwardness of asking anyone for help. Manuel senior had embraced his death as the natural progression of his growth. He had always told us, “Don’t get too attached to life, it will eventually end. But the learning doesn’t stop.” This is a convenient attitude to have when you’re involved in prostitution, drugs, and other illegal enterprises. I would have preferred that he waited until after he died to visit me. *Don’t worry. I guarantee that he will.*

We finished our stroll through the garden, and Biscayne Bay opened to us. The humidity dripped from our foreheads, but the bay brought a smile to both our faces. The sailboat played on

the water, and the sky was a tourmaline blue dotted with high, thin white clouds. The ten o'clock sunshine would burn our skin so we retreated into the shade of the Chickee on the deck that adjoined the boat dock, and sat down.

“Have I ever told you how the family came to be rooted in Florida?” he said.

My patience and resolve were dissipating. I know I agreed to this meeting, but all I wanted was for him to die and leave me alone. I didn't voice my desire because I had told my guardian angel Elegua, that I would help the old man. *And help you shall.*

“Yes, a long time ago, when we still had a relationship, and I don't think we should try to re-start a relationship with a story.” I wanted to be good. I wanted to let go of the hurt, but I couldn't seem to find the well-adjusted man I thought I had become.

Families should be more than their ancestors, and love transcends death—at least that's the way God planned it—and that my spirits have helped me to believe. This story that he wants to tell me is about whom I should have been, not who I am. Spiritualism was flourishing, and men were men in his story. Fortunately, or not, I was not like the men in our ancestral story—I'm not saying I couldn't have been. I could easily have embraced the drugs, the women, and the witchcraft. But something divergent entered the world with me. *You were born into this family for a purpose, and that purpose is just starting to arrive.*

I crossed my legs, and stole a sideways look at this man that was dying. He looked like my father, but he felt changed. Changed toward me. Now do I want to stay as I was, or must I embrace the bastard? So being blessed with insight comes down to this: acceptance and forgiveness of both of us—for both of us. He turned to look at me and said, “I hope you still pay

attention to the Warrior God.” I nodded, not yet fully interested in speaking to him, or maybe fearing what I’d say.

“Do you still sacrifice? No don’t tell me, we’ll talk about that later.”

“Yes. I had to start again before our meeting.”

“Good. I don’t want any of my baggage staying here.”

“What about the baggage that comes after you die? Or are you deluding yourself into believing that there won’t be any?”

“No. I know that when I die you’ll have to deal with situations that I nurtured. Not until I faced death, not just thought about it, but really faced it, did I come to understand how much I had fucked-up. If after this morning together you decide not to see me again, all that I want is to know that you have forgiven me.”

“I’ve already forgiven you, even if it doesn’t sound like I have. What I’m struggling with is whether to continue seeing you.”

I watched as this stranger, this old man, my father, closed his eyes, smiled, then looked at me, with what I felt was love.

“We haven’t seen each other in over sixteen years, what are you doing here?”

“I’m dying, and I need to remind you that your heritage comes through me. Who you have become is your own creation, but the slab that you have built upon was laid by my ancestors, your ancestors. You have chosen the path of self-fulfillment. Maybe the only ancestor that had your strength was your great-grandfather. My father wasn’t strong enough and neither



was I. We could not forge a new path. We could not live a life other than the one that we were born into. I hated you when your choice was not what I wanted you to choose.”

“Then we’re even, old man. I hated you too. You confused my life. I looked to you for direction and received orders. I looked to you for clarification and received orders. I looked to you for love, and received nothing but orders. I don’t want to discuss the beatings, but I’ve never forgotten them. I can understand some of your reasoning, but you didn’t think for yourself. You didn’t live your life, instead you accepted a cheap, magisterial version of a life, and wanted me to do the same. I didn’t make my choices to hurt you. I made them because I was too unhappy to continue living the way you dictated.”

We looked at each other, and there was no anger, or disappointment. The understanding that it all could have been so different showed itself in the sadness that filled our eyes. He reached over and squeezed my hand.

“You need to hear me say that I am proud of you. Approaching death has a way of clarifying, and focusing what is truly important. You are important to me; you are the present and the future of our story. Without you we would never be anything more than crooks.”

He was out of breath, and stopped for a minute. It amazed me how much I had chosen to forget. How much I had already chosen to accept.

“Do you still own the house on Simonton Street?”

“Yes, and when I die it’s yours.”

“When I was born you still owned over twenty-five acres in Coconut Grove. Did you finally develop them as the Orishas had me tell you to?”

“Not all of it. I still own fifteen acres, six apartment buildings, and three office buildings. Five undeveloped, waterfront acres will be yours. This is something that I had already decided, and won’t change, whether we continue to see each other, or not.”

I wanted to say that I didn’t need an inheritance, but I always liked the house on Simonton Street, and since I had to help him why not get paid for my effort?

“Do you still have the cockfighting rings, warehouses, and cocaine distribution facilities in northwest Dade? I never understood how we let drugs, prostitution, and murder become our heritage.” *You must let the past go.*

“We both know the answer to your question, and as for drugs and murder being a part of your heritage, they are if you let them.”

“Do you remember my tenth birthday? You had started celebrating with four or five girls not much older than me. Do you remember me begging you to go home? Well I remember you telling me that I needed to start knowing what it was to be a man, a man of power and spirit,” I said. “Our family beginnings were not sweet and adorable, but then, most wealthy families have committed some type of lucrative atrocity. I understand that, but we embraced the darker side of our heritage instead of trying to bring light and understanding to our family. I don’t know why it had to be me. I don’t know why you didn’t understand, but that was then. I’m interested in what we do now. You and me.”

I stopped to calm myself, and release the anger, fear, or sorrow that made my hands tremble. “The spirits make my life more challenging, but I usually understand what is happening to me. Now here you sit, technically you’re my father, but all I see is a sick old man.”

“I am sick,” he said. “What I’m doing here is trying to ease my guilt, seek forgiveness, and die, somewhat at peace. I can’t do any of that without you, and all I can do is apologize for the things that I did to you. Please, don’t abandon me now. Don’t do to me what I did to you. You get to choose if you want to help a dying old man, your dying father, or if you don’t want to help either of us.”

“You used to tell me that my ancestors were enterprising businessmen, and that you had followed in their footsteps, and I would follow you. You completely ignored Manny Jr., and I paid the price for your neglect.”

I felt tired and ashamed. Why invite him over, if all I was going to do was berate and chastise him? What happened to my grand act of forgiveness? In the end I was a hurt, and vindictive child.

“We are both lost. Your brother is a problem that I created and unfortunately, you’ll have to deal with. Again, I ask for forgiveness. I never questioned who I was, or asked myself who I wanted to be,” he said.

This is as good a place as any to tell you a little about myself, or to slowdown and calm myself. My height, eye color, preferences, spiritual quirks, and dislikes will be divulged throughout the story. Here I need to answer the quintessential question: who am I? Hell of a question with many possible responses. I could make myself out to be a kind, generous and loving man, or a man that turned his back on his family and abandoned tradition and culture. But, I’m just trying to understand my life, and help those that ask, to understand their lives. Not to give you the wrong idea, but I also really love to dance, drink and fornicate—I could have said ‘make love’ but sometimes it’s just sex (luckily for me with someone that I do love). I’m a man who gets

guidance from dead ancestors, messages from dying strangers, and a multitude of information about the living from both. This tends to make me a little different than most men. Conversing with a dead mother, or hearing the spirit of a dying person ask for help is a common occurrence. This is not about religious dogma, or belief. Whether you're a Christian, Jew, Hindu or Taoist doesn't matter. We all have cultural and spiritual ties to our ancestors, whether they be murderers or saints. My spiritual acumen is mystical and helpful in nature. I do not dream about pointless situations, but about opportunities and possibilities. This possible reconciliation is a case in point, and a very determining challenge for me.

Something was changing in me. It was a distinct shift in my attitude. I had made my choice. Elegua had asked me to help the old man, and I couldn't disappoint him. I can act like a spoiled child, and I can decide to not see this old man again, and my life would not suffer because of that decision. But, I couldn't bear to disappoint Elegua, so I accepted that I would again have to be a part of the family that I had abandoned. With this decision, I wasn't as angry as when this encounter started, and it wasn't the inheritance that prompted my change. I think I finally believed that the old man had changed. It may be his new-found gentleness, or the kindness and pain that his eyes contained. I really am his son. I really needed to help him. *Now we can move forward.*

"We smuggled rum, killed those that tried to stop us, took vengeance upon those that we felt wronged us, and became wealthy land owners in the process. Wealthy American-Cuban landowners," I said.

“You were always obsessed with truth. As a child, you would ask the elders to tell you stories, and then you would argue that they were not telling the truth, and then you’d recount the facts—you were always accurate—but the facts are not always the truth.”

“I must admit that when I was young I was proud of what we owned, and sometimes found myself drawn to the lifestyle that made us wealthy. I could see myself dealing drugs, and removing obstacles, but something happened to me when I was around eleven: my mother came to visit me.”

“You never told me this.”

“There’s a lot that I haven’t told you, so I guess we’ll have to continue these visits.” It was time to move on—to move on together. Those were the facts that resurfaced, and whatever truth they contained we would have to rediscover together. We started to move from the bench to the boat. He released the boat from its mooring, and I guided my cat-rigged sailboat La Fortuna into Biscayne Bay. My father, no longer just a dying old man, sat down after setting the sail, and we glided south toward the upper keys.

*This is good. It won’t be easy, but worthwhile. You and your son will benefit greatly from this gesture, and the coming trials will not be insurmountable. You have my blessings, and protection. From now-on you’ll be known as Mensajero Del Principe. You will deliver my messages, change our religion, and survive the cataclysms.*

*Every man must do two things alone;  
he must do his own believing  
and his own dying.*

*Martin Luther*



**If you can feel perfection in a funeral, then it was a perfect day for *Itu-tu*.** *Itu-tu* the Yoruba tribe's soulful pleadings for a high priest's safe passage from this world, into the world of truth. Women will wail the tribe's loss, as the men toast the corpse and recount embellished stories of forbidden love, hardship, and glory. Only a handful of the older men will recount the stories of supposed, and actual miracles. It's appropriate that my father is going to be buried with the dead murderous fathers and sons of some of the early Florida pioneers. No not the Merricks or the Fishers, though I can't be sure that they weren't murderers, but I'm sure their descendants don't know or care to find out. Even if they do know, I doubt they'd admit to murder in the name of the family. I though, don't have any doubts about my own father. The 1920's cemetery was three blocks away. "Was I ready for this?" I said to myself. A couple of pedestrians heard me, and quickened their pace to pass me. I have tried to ignore my heritage believing that to embrace it would make me like my father, but these last rites for a Santeria High Priest would force me to reconcile with my ancestry or abandon it completely. Reconciling with my father had been easier and more fulfilling than I had thought possible, and here I am back where I started. *Not entirely.*

As this November Monday sun rose in the eastern sky, the salted breeze at fifty feet tossed the palm fronds into an erratic dance, while a flock of blue-breasted parrots noisily

fluttered and squawked through the air. I reminded myself that palm trees and parrots are as much a part of my life as my father is—death is also a part of me.

Miami in the fall and winter is filled with American and Canadian snowbirds, and South Americans not happy with their spring. I love this city, or really its weather. I don't go to bars—any more. Europeans are also discovering how much more their Euros can buy them here than at home. We Miamians, and our visitors, embrace the warm weather, clear sunshine, and ocean breezes with abandon. Instead of sex, drugs and rock and roll, its sex, drugs and salsa—hedonism at its best. Okay, I do also love this city.

The exhaust fumes from the heavy traffic on Biscayne Boulevard can't completely overpower the brackish smell of the bay, and as Mercedes, BMW's, and common American cars hummed, purred, and clunked beside me, I knew that I had lost the tranquility of my life. My quiet moments spent dangling my legs over the seawall behind the house and contemplating the calming condominiums of Miami Beach were no longer a daily routine, and I had become a man of routines: walking, meditating, prayers, and sex at two day intervals. Unknown visions or warnings still invaded my mind at the oddest moments, but the time to ponder and understand those interruptions was missing. Warnings and direction didn't stop, and my faith was repeatedly tested since I couldn't properly investigate these messages. Don't misunderstand me, I see my father as I see this city: great weather, hedonistic, murderous, moneyed, and manipulative. Since his visits started my life has grown into disarray. *Again, not completely.*

Simple things have become harder. Home is still tranquil but not as peaceful. Work is more demanding, or maybe just more oppressive, and I feel distanced from the residents and their cures. Elegua and the Saints are still the steady beacon that always counsel me, always



soothe me. They have taught me how to invest my life, so that my soul won't have to return to this world of men. They have also taught me practical things: how to make money, what properties to buy, and what to do with them. But, my time with the old man is also very beneficial. I'm not sure how the benefits of our mutual beneficence will manifest, but, I'm sure it will.

Prompted by the parrots, I drifted into my past as I absentmindedly walked toward the cemetery. Five years ago, my son Cristopher and I were watching the Ringling Brothers annual parade of animals, as the circus made its way down Northeast Second Avenue to the Miami Arena. A spectacle of elephants, horses, lions, tigers, and sparkling, feathered outfits on animals and human performers. Everything strolling down a decaying avenue when the front left tire of a gaily festooned lime-green F150 dropped into a gapping three-foot deep hole in the asphalt. The preoccupied driver was busy whistling at a pair of exposed black buttocks, and didn't notice his parade predecessors bend their straight line to avoid the hole. The sudden drop catapulted a wrought iron cage, and two clowns onto the street. The hooker laughed as the clowns rolled over each other and scraped their hands, elbows and knees. The cage rolled four feet and slammed into a battered lamp post that was bandaged with tattered paper advertisements. "Come back when you're finished with the clowns, honey," yelled the hooker at the inattentive driver, as the cage door popped open allowing six Amazon parrots to escape. Cuban Royal Palms that line Biscayne Boulevard are the main food producers for the parrots, and the islands of Biscayne Bay offer refuge, and relatively undisturbed breeding grounds. Within three years the flock of six grew to thirteen, and became noisy neighborhood regulars.

The west side of Biscayne Boulevard is mostly an affordable neighborhood for many of the working poor of Miami, but it is starting to feel the steady, spreading gentrification of

downtown Miami. The eastside of the boulevard harbors expanding walled and gated pockets of middle and upper class enclaves, with Biscayne Bay as their backyards. Old homes are scattered throughout the neighborhood. Some are pristine and well-kept Grande Dames, others dilapidated drug dens—most are somewhere in-between. My neighborhood, like my life is full of contradictions and spotty development. Yes, I am a little depressed, confused and sad. But, I am going to a funeral, so all these feelings should be normal. I'm happy that I can feel all these emotions for the old man. I didn't think that his death would have mattered to me.

My alabaster skin came from the French branch of the family that had settled in Cuba in the early 1800's, and my green eyes were my great-grandmother's gift. At birth, most male children have swollen penises, but Manuel senior had boasted and displayed my penis to friends and family members with pride at what I had clearly inherited from him. If anyone doubted that his son's penis had been his gift, he would gladly show them his own. Manny junior, my older brother, did not feel pride or even affection—he hated me. “Look at this little man. He is the future of my family, the crowning glory of my existence. He will take this family down a road filled with fame, money and permanence,” our father had said. I didn't cry as I was jostled from man to man. I smiled seeming to delight in all the attention. Manny junior leaned against the Florida room wall, watching his father carry this newborn in his left arm and drink from a bottle of Johnnie Walker. He was only six years old, but his dislike had already fully formed. Looking back on my life was a new habit, and trying to understand why things happened was a new dilemma. Knowing where we come from is supposed to be cathartic and explanatory, but it was only confirmation. Not confirmation of who I am, but of what I could have become.

Our mother was glad to have given birth to another male child. She did not want to bring a daughter into her world of abusive and domineering men. This would be her last child—she

had decided that nine months ago. As her husband drank and paraded his seven-day-old son through a house full of raucous, drunken men, her cheeks expanded like a chipmunk's, as she filled her mouth with water and swallowed her second handful of Secobarbital sodium tablets—prescribed for her insomnia. “More than anything I want to sleep; peaceful, undisturbed sleep,” she said to no one. Then she lay down in her bed and covered herself with her favorite white, embroidered comforter. Sibling hatred and suicide, this was the party that I had been born into. Remembering can be painful, but this pain should be embraced, laughed at, and finally overcome. Grand ideas, but pain is never overcome, just endured. It could have been worse—my spirit could have followed either the paternal or maternal path. Luckily my guardian angel Elegua wrestled both tendencies into a different path. I didn't know that then, but hindsight is always clearer and more precise. Sometimes hindsight is just a waste of time. Insight, is what I'm hoping to gain. Insight into what my family will become. In the effort, is the gain? *Maybe*.

Alejandro became Alex for the Miami Americans. I'm six feet three inches tall, two inches shorter than my father. At thirty-six my black hair is graying at the temples, and I'm grateful for inheriting my father's good looks, and thankful for the minimal amount of the old man's personality. Owing to that lack of psychological and emotional commonality, our relationship had been one of discipline and rigorous training, preparing me for my initiation into the Santeria Priesthood. It sounds clinical, but preparation for initiation is like writing: rules are elevated or broken by creativity. As if anything about religion is creative. Religious leaders don't always agree, and in Santeria if you've been initiated, your guardian angel can override required ritual or accepted practices. The Elders, the dogmatic, the power-hungry, and the stupid sheep, tend not to easily accept an override. Someone must not be reading the shells correctly, or is in cahoots with the privileged initiate. The religious can be dangerous, and very entertaining.

From the moment that I was born, I was subjected to psychic masses, baths for spiritual purification, and meals of exotic ingredients for physical stamina. What Capybara meat and common weeds had to do with purification and stamina was a mystery then, but has become much clearer with time and practice. Manny junior was never pressured to try and achieve the greatness that our father wanted and expected from me. A newborn to be a privileged initiate; a newborn to be suspicious of; a newborn protected by the Saints, and hated by the priests and practitioners. What karma—what a show. Our father had never harbored any illusions as to his eldest son's abilities, but his lack of interest in Manny's capabilities had pitted him against me from the start.

To help preserve the physical stamina that I was given, I walk ten miles of this boulevard every day, and occasionally ingest meals with exotic ingredients—no more capybara. After my walks, I used to sit on the seawall behind the house. I especially like sitting there when the Bay is rough and choppy, because the water slams against the seawall sending brackish spray into the air, and if I'm lucky onto me. But since I started seeing the old man I find myself unable to indulge in this simple pleasure. The Bay has given me my favorite memories, and my father tried to introduce me at age two to *Yemaya* the mother of the world and goddess of the sea. On that day, Dad took us to Virginia Key the old 'colored' beach, and as we approached the surf he looked out at the water and saw some sharks feeding, blood gurgling and staining the ocean ten feet from the beach. He had brought Yemaya some offerings of fruit, but when he saw the goddess rise from the water and shake her head no, his plans changed.

"Let's go in," said Manny junior.

"We can't."

“I want to go swimming,” insisted Manny junior.

“If you go swimming, Yemaya will take you to the bottom of the ocean and hold you prisoner. You’ll be her slave and never be allowed to leave,” he said. “But, if you still want to go swimming, you can.”

My father wasn’t worried that the sharks would attack his son. The important thing was that his sons never challenge his decisions. So, he used Yemaya to scare the eight-year-old with imprisonment and slavery at the bottom of the sea. Manny junior did not blame our father or Yemaya for not being able to go swimming. He blamed me. He always blamed me. He couldn’t go to Disney World because I had a cold; he couldn’t go sailing because I hadn’t been presented to Yemaya. He couldn’t get his father’s approval for anything since I was born. Every problem, every difficulty was my doing, my fault. When we returned home father consulted Yemaya, and she prohibited him from placing me in her waters until I turned five, and after my initiation. So, my brother took that declaration as vindication. For the next three years he saw all his problems as my fault, and it never stopped.

I wish that I had fond memories and stories of my big brother. He was never more to me than the resident bully. Father knew that we were at odds, and started me in self-defense classes at age five. “Your brother is never going to be your friend, and I won’t always be around to keep him in-line. So you better learn quickly how to defend yourself.” That was his grand gesture. His great concern: make sure the five-year-old could defend himself against someone twice as big as him. Of course there were days when no amount of training could make-up for being smaller, lighter and younger than my indigenous bully. So I learned early how to use rocks, sticks, soda bottles, forks, or anything that could cause pain. Manny junior learned that I was never without a

weapon, and his bullying became my training in preparedness and concealment. Great training and discoveries for a five-year-old. And where were the Saints during all of this? *Waiting and preparing for a child's initiation.*

My memories bounced inside my head as I walked, but suddenly the pungent pleasing smell of amaryllis overtook me, and the memories receded. The perfume wafted from the front garden of an old Dade County Pine house that dated back to 1921. I tried to find a supplier of Dade County Pine when I was building my first house because it's impervious to termites, but the only way to get Dade County Pine is to buy a house already made with it. A coral rock walkway led to a wide whitewashed porch. On either side of the walkway were two five-by-ten feet flowerbeds bursting with hundreds of amaryllis bulbs in red-white bloom. This show happened every year, and lasted three to four weeks. I stopped to sniff the air and look for the hundredth time at this old house. Death and burial became a distant future as I inhaled the sweet perfume. My eyebrows began to twitch, as pin-pricks reached out from my brain and into my eyeballs. Suddenly the house became what it had once been, filling my nose with the smell of moist earth, and wild orchids that were the homestead's horticultural history. The littered lawn in front of the amaryllis beds changed to an earthen pit barbecue, on which thick alligator tail steaks, marinated in garlic and lime, sizzled over a searing wood fire as they were basted by a tall thin man, with a long frizzled black and gray beard. This could have been my grandfather—but for the fact that facial hair is not present in any of the Cedron males. Despite the pinpricks, I love these visions of the past and would have lingered, but my father was waiting, and with that thought the pictures subsided, my eyebrows stopped dancing, and I resumed walking.

The first eighteen years of my life were difficult, but I never thought of following in my mother's footsteps. At eighteen, three months a newlywed and a freshman at the University of

Miami, my father's alma mater, I blocked my father's drunken fist for the first time from connecting with my chest. My father had always been careful to strike in places where the bruises would not be readily visible—he didn't always succeed. Manny junior was married, had a house of his own and a son. He was no longer subjected to the drunken abuse. He had become the drunken abuser.

"You drunk bastard," I yelled as I blocked the second punch. "I've had enough!"

"Everything you have I've given you," he said as he charged. "You're nothing without me!"

"I've made you money, and obeyed your rules for the last time. And you're the one that's nothing without me." During the battle that ensued I broke my father's jaw, three of my fingers, and gained my independence. An independence that separated me from my father. My brother and I had never bonded, and we have not spoken since I was twelve. I had graduated to knives, and gave him a four-inch scar on his left cheek: It was our last fight. My father's visits could never erase all these incidents, but they provided me with an opportunity to forgive and a chance at peace for my dying old man. I had been preparing for this burial for three weeks. The old man and I had discussed what would happen.

"It will be a loud and entertaining affair," he had said. "Most of the elders will be there. They didn't all like me, but I never really catered to anyone except my Padrino. You won't have to worry about them, my Padrino will keep them in-line. Besides they are all afraid of you. You're the only Santero they know that was allowed to determine his own path, without having to ask any of them for guidance." There is the crux of all my problems: privilege.

“I want you to visit my Padrino after my burial, he knows you’ll be coming. He’ll tell you who to see in Guantanamo, and you can make the arrangements for Chris. At least I’ll die knowing that the family will continue, and that the spiritual gifts will only get better when Chris is initiated. I would have liked to have gotten to know my grandson, but I can’t blame him for not wanting to know me.”

“I’m sorry. I did try to get him to accept at least a meeting with you, but he was adamant that you two were not meant to meet in this life.” Family. That’s what it’s come down to—how to stay a family, survive as a family, and let the spirits lead us forward, as a family.

### MYTH PART ONE

**The Chief God walked in his garden with the cool morning mist for company**, and picked red Goji berries as he walked. Suddenly he doubled over grasping his stomach and fell to the ground head first. The Tree of Power that was the center of the Chief God’s garden, which he had tended for over a thousand years, dropped its five lobed white leaves and its succulent purple fruit shriveled, at the same instant that *Olofi* the Chief God hit the ground.

The mystical physicians tried for three days to cure him, but his illness was unknowable. “We have tried our strongest magic and still Olofi grows weak. Our world will end if he cannot continue to tend his garden. Send word to his children that they must come to the palace with their greatest magic to cure the Chief God. We will bed Olofi in the center of the holy portals chamber and greet his children as they arrive,” said the 300-year-old physician.

“What about his wife?” asked his apprentice?



“Do not bother her she cares nothing for the land, its people or her husband.”

The Chief God’s personal attendant, Asher, blew Olofi’s silver ram horn as the physicians covered their ears. Thousands of silver dragonflies glinted in the sky and were inside the palace in seconds. The Chief God’s palace was an intimidating structure built on the eastern edge of a bluff overlooking a dark, deep and narrow gorge. The cold and opaque Lake of Life lay to its north, and fed seven waterfalls that poured down into the holy Pool of Destiny. The palace was built with white marble that had thin, shiny veins of silver embedded in it, and had been quarried from the steep sides of the gorge. The Chief God’s gardens surrounded the palace, and a thousand-year-old, 23 feet thick and high perimeter stone wall kept the Eternal Forest from invading the garden. The Chief God had created the silver messengers from the silver embedded in the gorge marble. The silver was mixed with dirt from his garden, and water from the Pool of Destiny. They dried shining in the sun for three days, and then Olofi spat life upon them.

A human village of thirty-one stone and cedar houses straddled the single cobbled road in and out of the palace, and housed two hundred and seventeen humans. These were the ancient humans: the first to be created and serve the Chief God. Their sons and daughters populated all the lands that the Chief God had created, except for the Eternal Forest. That was the Warrior God’s domain. He was known by many names—*Echu* and *Elegua* the most famous.

“Fly into the mountains, jungles and forests seeking all the Chief God’s children. ‘Our lord your father, is dying and you must come to cure him’ that is the simple message that you will deliver. Make haste, the lord god needs our help” said the attendant, and the silver dragonflies dispersed.

First to arrive was Oshun. She was a sand-colored beauty with green-grey eyes, chestnut hair to her waist, and smelled of honey and carnations. She was seated on a luminous diamond of water that rose from the well of the River of the World—one of the five holy portals.

“Father” she cried as she approached Olofi’s bed. The priests and mystical physicians in attendance opened like the Red Sea to allow her access. “I have brought the water of the world that you gave me when I was but a child. Drink and let the world heal you,” she said as she poured the water into her father’s mouth. Olofi slowly swallowed, but the water flowed out his ears. The Chief God showed no sign of recognition, but coughed as she cradled his head in her wet lap.

Suddenly, the portal of the sky was filled with a rushing wind and Oya blew into the holy chamber. Her portal had a flattened funnel cloud as its lid. Unlike her sister, Oya was a sturdy sensuous woman, with a voice that could caress you like a whisper, or slap you like a whirlwind.

“Sister do not cry,” she said as she approached Oshun. “Together we are stronger than his illness. Let me blow on your waters with the Winds of the Universe and have him drink.” Oshun poured from her gourd and Oya blew gently on the water. Oya placed her hand on her father’s forehead and let flow the twice blessed water into Olofi’s mouth. “Drink father your daughters are here to save you.” Olofi swallowed the water and again it drained out his ears.

“The first time he swallowed the water flowed clear from his ears, but now it flows yellow. Sister stay here with him and I will ride my river to the ocean and fetch our mother” said Oshun.

“We will save you father” said Oya as her sister disappeared into the water of the world.

**The vomiting subsided, and I thought of the past—my past.** I thought that I didn't have any regrets, but facing my mortality has brought regrets, unachieved goals, and personal disappointment to the forefront. So I'm dying; that was inevitable, normal and expected. To know that you will die is not the same as understanding that you are dying. The difference isn't philosophical, cultural, religious or psychological. Understanding is a spiritual faculty—understanding is the way of growth. So how do I grow toward my death? How do I embrace something that terrifies me?

*You won't face it alone. I will guide you. I will lead you toward your growth, but that growth starts here in the life that you have left.*

"Thank you for your help, but I thought it would be my guardian angel *Chango* who would come to help. At a minimum my mother and father, or some of my ancestors that would have come to guide me. I don't know who you are. I don't know why you're here. Are you really my guide, or my punishment?"

*If I were here to punish you, I would have just done so and not announced it. You have met me once, thirty-seven years ago, and you'll have to discover that memory on your own. You knowing who I am does not give you any greater power against your disease. You are dying, and you cannot change that. You can however change the path that is yours after death. Your path in the world of the spirits is not a pleasant path, as it stands at this moment. But that can be changed. I can help you create that change. You will have three months to become what you should have become during your life.*

“I hear what you’re saying but if I haven’t been able to become that person in sixty-two years, how will I be able to evolve to that stage in just three months? Why should I even trust you? Show yourself!”

*You must believe without seeing me. I could show myself and make it easier for you, but I don’t want to, and you don’t deserve to see me. When you die you’ll see me. On your own you cannot do anything but suffer, die, and suffer again. With me you will be able to ease your suffering and die at peace. This is not an easy task to accomplish, and you will have to face all the horrors that you have created in your life. You will have to decide if God really is someone that you want to know, or just someone that you say you believe in. Your next three months will be as difficult or as easy as you make them. I am here not just for your benefit. I have other humans that depend on me and love me. Whether you try or not, whether you succeed or not, does not matter to me, but it should matter to you. To change how you will die and what follows your death is the opportunity that I am offering you. Do not think that you are entitled to this opportunity. I am here because your son deserves the chance to know his father as someone other than a degenerate.*

“What would I be allowing; what would you be capable of? I have enough to deal with, and don’t need the struggle of a vague possibility of an easier death and afterlife. You say I have three months, and I have no reason to believe you. I am an initiated Santero. I have resources, spiritual and physical, to ease my death, to guarantee me an easier afterlife. What makes you so special—so arrogant?”

*You really are a stupid human. Do you think that any of your physical or spiritual devices will work after this conversation? Nothing you have will work or be of value unless I allow it.*

*Unless I feel that you are worthy, and in this moment, you are not worthy of peace and ease. I decide how you die and what happens to you after you die. You can try and contact any spirit you wish, they will not respond, they cannot protect you or help you. I have taken control of your destiny. You had the chance in life to determine your destiny, but you chose the easy way. You embraced the circumstances that you were born into. You didn't use those circumstances to help anyone but yourself. You are a miserable, egotistical, selfish man, and I'd prefer to let you suffer. But, your son is at a crossroads in his evolution, and I will always give him any help that I can. By trying to help you, I help him.*

“Why are you so angry with me? Why didn't you challenge me before now? You expect me to believe that you are here to help me, but you tell me that no other spirit will respond or help me. You are not here to help, but to punish me.”

*I could if I wanted to. I could make you suffer much more than you are, but even if I forced your death upon you tomorrow I'd still be easing your pain. The punishment you think I am forcing upon you is nothing more than the punishment you created for yourself. The once proud Santero must now face the consequences of his choices. That is why you will have three months of pain and the possibility of peace which only I can offer you, the choice is yours. But if you decide to ease your burden, in the next three months do not ever question or defy me. I am here because of what you can do for other humans, other initiates. That you will benefit from accepting this challenge is a secondary outcome.*

“So you have an ulterior motive for offering to help me. You are not a sweet and benevolent spirit that is here to help me. You're here to help someone or several other people.”

*No. I am here to help you. My other humans will be fine whether I help you or not. But if I do help you and you help yourself. My humans will gain an understanding and peace that without you will take several more years for them to accomplish. You are a shortcut, nothing more. Does knowing this make you feel better? Does this knowledge help you chose?*

“It makes me more curious, and sounds like a fair trade. You will help me now because by offering me your help, you help those that you care about. And you call me arrogant. If it weren’t that helping me will benefit your other humans, would you have ever offered me your help?”

*No. Luckily for you, your approaching death has provided you with an opportunity to help yourself. Do not worry or think of anything else, you have nothing to do with anything that I may want or am trying to accomplish. You only should prepare for your death.*

“In the sixty years that I have been a Santero, I’ve never met a spirit like you. You don’t seem to care about anything except your own agenda.”

*In the time that you have been a Santero you have not learned anything other than to fulfill your own desires. The power that you have tasted and been awed by, is nothing compared to the true power that abides in the world of men. We Spirits do not give you any of our power, we just facilitate your use of the power that exists all around you. And, you understand nothing about the power that you can access after your death. I have lived many lives, and I’ve learned what I needed to learn. You have learned almost nothing. That is what makes you arrogant, and despite that you are worthy of this opportunity. But do not think that I need to do this for you, or for the humans that I do love. This is an opportunity for you to glimpse what real power, real*

*love is all about. What you do with this glimpse will determine what you will experience in your life after death. Death is just the end of human living, not the end of your life. Now Choose.*

*Religion is for people who are scared to go to hell. Spirituality is for people who have already been there.*

*— Bonnie Raitt*



The sunlight rippled across the bay as we sat at Carmelo's bar and grill, each of us lost in personal thoughts, while nursing our iced Johnnie Walker Blacks. Best Western's Bayside Hotel was crowded with other lives. The sailboat bobbed on the bay, the sun was climbing higher



in the sky, and the seagulls and blackbirds waited for food to hit the wooden deck—a few grew tired of waiting and stole a French fry or potato chip from inattentive diners. The short fifteen-minute sail had made me hungry and thirsty. We should have been drinking water, or something with electrolytes, but scotch was much more conducive to loosening our tongues, and lifting our spirits. But old memories kept surfacing. “It’s beautiful here on the water,” said the old man—more to himself than to me. “Yes, it is and the scotch makes it prettier.”

We had been seeing each other every weekday for over three weeks, and an ambiguous comfort was starting to unite us. We weren’t quite father and son yet, but the likelihood of that happening was becoming more probable. We were getting stronger. More accurately I was getting stronger, and he was getting more peaceful and serene as we tried to build a relationship that would survive his death. So here we sat, son and dying old man waiting for lunch, and drinking to remember that we still had a little time. A little time to reclaim a relationship—it’s amazing how much we can accomplish in a short period of time, when we really want to accomplish it. *You are learning what you need to, and not just for this relationship.*

It helped to see families laughing, talking, and generally enjoying each other’s company. Maybe we could learn something from the company of strangers. Latinos tend to be loud, and Spanish, Portuguese, and some English competed with the Salsa music reverberating from the speakers. Refined Argentinian and brusque Chilean accents were predominant, but melodic Peruvian, and resonant Ecuadorian peppered the steady conversations. We were the only American-Cuban accents, and we spoke mostly in English, but sometimes a word in Spanish fits the story, or the mood better. We didn’t speak Spanglish like I do with my son. I finished my glass of scotch, and signaled to the pretty waitress that we’d like another round. “You know that

Manny junior is not going to be happy with you,” I said. “And, you know that I don’t particularly care what he thinks, but he is a hothead, and I’ll have to deal with him when you’re gone.”

The old man finished his drink, and turned to look at me. He looked tired. He didn’t seem to want to talk about upcoming problems, his death, or my life. The blue waters of Biscayne Bay held his interest. “Do you remember the first time I took you sailing?” he said. “You were five years old and dressed in white. A young and enthusiastic initiate.”

“Where are we going Daddy?” you had asked.

“You and I are going to enjoy Yemaya’s ocean. Just you and me, and I don’t want you to mention this to your brother. Okay?”

“Is this our secret?”

“Yes two great Santeros are going to visit one of our greatest protectors.”

“Am I a great Santero?”

“Oh yes. You will be one of the best.”

“I like being the best. But I thought Elegua is my greatest protector.”

“Yes he is. He is your guardian angel, and has accepted you as part of his tribe, his family. He will always guide you and provide for you.”

“Like you do.”

I remember that sail clearly. It’s a happy memory. One of the few that I still think of as happy.

“Here you go gentleman, and your food will be out shortly,” said the waitress, and then placed our glasses before us. She removed the empties, smiled, and turned to attend to an older, Argentinian woman who was anxiously waving at her.

“I know Manny is going to be a problem for you, and that Elegua and Yemaya will protect and guide you. But I’ve also taken precautions to ensure that he won’t get too destructive. My spiritual *Guerreros* will stay with you when I’m gone, and some of my human acquaintances have been paid fifty percent of forty-thousand to look after you and your family. They will come to you to collect the balance thirty days after my death.” He took a long swallow, and seemed relieved by this precaution. “We both know that he’ll lash out quickly. But, I also know that you’ll be prepared. You were always prepared.”

“Here you are guys: two dolphin sandwiches with sweet potato fries and coleslaw,” said the waitress. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Two more drinks pretty young lady,” said the old man with a smile and a wink.

We ate in partial silence—he asked a couple of simple questions, and I gave him simple answers. The smell of the grilled fish sandwich made me salivate, and I devoured it with mouthfuls of fries. He ate the fish and nothing else—he had progressively been eating less.

He paid the bill, as he’d been doing since we started sailing, eating and drinking together. I guess it made him feel like a father. The bay and ocean were always our dessert. Sometimes it came with strong winds, and frothy waves, other times it had been like swirled blue icing, docile and serene, and always a welcomed treat. The small engine purred as it pushed the sailboat away from the restaurant boat dock, and in five minutes we were far enough into the bay to set the sail. The wind took over the engine’s duty, and propelled us north toward Baker’s Haulover Inlet.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked, as I guided the boat under the A1A Bridge and into the Atlantic. “I’d love one.” He handed me my covered thermal cup filled with ice and scotch and said, “I have a myth about the Warrior God that I want to tell you. It’s a myth that isn’t recounted often. We old guard *Santeros* don’t like this myth, but I think you’ll appreciate it. It relates to us in particular.” He turned to look at me, but his eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses. “I’d like to hear it, but let’s just sail for now,” I said. He smiled at me and turned to contemplate the sea and think, or just remember.

**He looks happy to be with me.** It’s been good so far, unfortunately now he gets to see the effects of dying. He’s had so much death in his young life, and here I am adding to those memories. I’m very happy to be a father again, even if not for very long. It has taken me a long time to get to this point—a long time to understand. I would not be able to do what he is doing for me, and for his residents. But I have never been that strong. I always knew that he’d be greater than me. Maybe that’s why I pushed him so hard. No, that’s a convenient and buoyant excuse. I was a bastard—not just to him but to everyone in my life. This time with him may not be enough to save me, but all I want is to die in peace. The son that I rejected is now my only hope of peace. The things I’ve done, the pain I’ve caused, and yet he’s here with me. Forgive me Olofi, and take care of him.

**Manuel Cedron junior’s study was cold and dark.** The thermostat steady at sixty-five degrees, and the blackout curtains drawn tightly together. The light that filled the room came from a stainless steel, swing-arm halogen lamp that sat atop one corner of the mahogany desk. The desk itself was pristine except for a couple of careful piles of paper, and the carpet that

supported it was early 1800's Bokhara. The polished teak paneling glistened softly in the light, and Manny sat stone-still. He was naked in his leather wing back chair, and his body was covered by a thin layer of sweat despite the cold interior. Three hundred pounds, six feet four inches tall, drugged and nasty, he sat with nostrils flared, as a tense satisfaction tingled through his body.

"I know that I'll get most of the money," Manny said to himself. He felt that he deserved more than that—he felt he deserved everything. He had embraced the lifestyle his father had dictated; he had embraced the marriage his father had dictated; he had embraced the family business and its risks. Everything should be his. He was the first-born and rightful heir, but he knew that Alex would be given some of what should have all been his. The Saints had allowed him to decide his own fate, but he had chosen his own desires over the doctrine of the religion, and disgraced the family. Alex deserved nothing.

Manny's thoughts fueled his cocaine rage, and he took his 9MM Glock from his desk drawer and shot the poured concrete wall of the fireplace. Two shots—two kick-back vibrations that travelled down his arm, into his body, and further arousing his penis. The sharp sound of the shots, and the gunshot smell calmed his brain. The study was soundproofed so the children and his wife could not hear what happened beneath their beds, an uncharacteristic concession to propriety—his father's suggestion. He was ecstatic at the old man's death, and continued to make plans for an inheritance he had yet to receive. He briefly wondered if he'd get the supermarkets. Alex already had three, but he doubted that his father would give him the other four. He knew that he would spend a considerable amount of the cash, and sell thirty to forty percent of the stocks. He would develop most of the 100 acres that the old man was sure to leave him. "A couple of new strip malls on Northwest Seventh Street, and maybe a house in Normandy

Shores,” he said, and smiled. “I’d like a house on the beach. Somewhere to get-away from the cow and her useless children.” The old man would have made provisions for his mistress, but the bulk of the estate, he thought, would be his.

He placed the warm gun back in its drawer, opened the middle drawer of the desk, and withdrew a small eight-by-six-inch rectangular mirror, a single-edge razor blade, and what was left of his cocaine. The stash had started as a small fortune of uncut flake. He had divided this among himself and the two young beauties that Jimmy had brought with him. In-between the drinking and snorting, he had fucked all three before dismissing them. “Manny, I’m not in the mood,” Jimmy had said. “But I am,” Manny said. He saw Jimmy grimace from the initial entry—exactly what he wanted to see. Manny was ruled by pleasure, and inflicting pain was a pleasurable act.

First on the agenda, after the burial and transfer of money, he would fly to Caracas where Felix would provide him with premium, uncut cocaine and thirteen year olds, both at bargain prices. His father would have loved the young girls, but not the drugs. Dealing drugs was fine, but doing them was not good for business. He allowed himself to indulge his nose, but he drew the line at cocaine—heroin, crack, or any other drug never attracted him. God, he could feel himself surrounded by three or four youthful prizes. The thought added to his stiffness, and he wished he hadn’t forced Jimmy to leave with the girls. The intercom buzzed, bringing him out of his reverie, and he pressed down hard on the button.

“What!”

“Manny you have to come and dress for the funeral,” said Sandra.

She had once been a beauty, but now she was fifty-five pounds' overweight, and stretched from bearing six children—the male twins, Fernando and Hernan, died after three months. It was a heavy loss, and the only one to help her through the depression had been Peter her eldest. Manny could not understand her discontent, but then he never really cared that she was discontented, and ridiculed her for the weight gain. Her parents had arranged the marriage. She knew that she was marrying into a Santeria family, and had told Manny that she would not become an initiate while they were still dating. Sandra believed in the spirits, most Latinos do, but she could not stand the blood sacrifice. She had a personal allowance of five thousand a month, plus the expense account for the house and children, and Manny felt that the allowance should have been enough to keep her thin and pleasant. For the past five years, he visited her bed twice a week despite her size. The sex may have been a little rough, but she wasn't petite and delicate, and those sexual encounters served a purpose: she needed to be reminded that he ruled her, and this household. Manny knew that domination was easy, his father had taught him that—control was something that had eluded them both.

“I know what time it is. Are my clothes ready?”

“Yes, they're laid out for you.”

“Get the children ready. I'll be done in twenty minutes, and I don't want any delays.”

He rose from the chair, and walked to the bookshelves that lined the twenty-two-foot eastern wall of the study. His link was minimal to the ancestral power, and none of his children had inherited even a spark of psychic or spiritual ability. He removed the third book, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (he liked the title), from the fifth shelf of the bookcase, and firmly pressed the panel behind the book. Alex was the one with full possession of the ancestral

gift—destiny hadn't cared that he was the second son. Alex had been gifted with guidance of the future, correction of the past, and had added to the family's fortune before he was ten years old. The five-foot middle section of the bookcase opened inward four feet. Manny had always struggled to control his displeasure and dislike for Alex, but dad was dead, and there was no need to try to be nice anymore. He walked through the opening and entered a large room with several four feet tall statues of catholic saints. Flickering Saint-color--coordinated--candles, fresh fruit, decaying fruit, breads, pastries, and half-smoked cigars decorated the statues. The room reeked of dried blood and incense, and was dotted by stray white, black and brown feathers. Some were chicken feathers, others guinea fowl and dove. Saint Barbara was standing by her castle holding her sword. Saint Lazarus' wounds were being licked by stray dogs. Saint Christopher carried the Christ child on his shoulder, and Our Lady of Charity, the patron saint of Cuba, rose from the sea to calm the waves and save two Native Indian brothers, and an African slave child—she apparently wasn't fond of the colonists. Manny chose a necklace of black and brown beads that had belonged to his father, and which he had cleansed in goat's blood, washed in holy water and dried in the midday sun. He left the room, pressed the panel, and the bookcase closed behind him. Today's funeral would be a turning point in his life, and he didn't need Alex's power to know that.

## MYTH PART TWO

**The River of the World spilled onto a vast blue and green estuary**, which was filled with migratory birds, crab, and shrimp. "Mother please come to me, we need your help," yelled



Oshun at the ocean as she walked on the shifting sands. She waited for a moment and repeated her plea. “Mother we need your help.”

A wave appeared on the horizon and started to close upon the shore. Thirty-two feet of sapphire blue water reached the sand and broke gently into iridescent foam positioning Yemaya before her daughter. Yemaya had stayed in her ocean realm for a century, and did not visit her children or husband. Land held no allure for her. The sea had always been her home and she should never have allowed the Chief God to lure her away from it.

“Daughter the sky is a bit gray, your river a bit stifled, and the plants demand some water. Call your sister and have her wind clear the clouds so I may see the sun, then overflow your banks so that the plants may drink instead of screaming at my ocean” said Yemaya as she lowered herself onto a red coral throne that rose from the sand.

“Mother, I scream because our world is at its end. Father is dying in his palace,” she said and sat in the sand before her mother. Her tears fell onto her dress that was made from woven strands of her river’s sweetest water.

“Take my hand, and we’ll see what he’s up too,” said Yemaya, and the ocean formed a bubble around mother and daughter, then disappeared into the sand.

Oya heard the rush of water, turned toward the sound and saw the seawater bubble rise from the Ocean of Life portal, and gently place her mother and sister on the terracotta floor.

“Hello mother,” she said with no enthusiasm. “I’m surprised that you remembered your way back to the palace. It’s been over a hundred years since any of us have seen you.” Yemaya smiled but said nothing.

“We don’t have the time to revisit old hurts or betrayals. How’s father?” asked Oshun. She didn’t want to discuss their mother’s abandonment. Not that she had forgiven her, but she had decided to give all the love, that would have been Yemaya’s, to her father.

“He breathes but not to a regular schedule,” said Oya as she turned away from the approaching duo. Oya never forgave her mother for leaving them. She had to raise her younger brother—the Warrior God—while her older brother left to satisfy his insatiable carnal desires. And, Oshun ran-away with an ancient metal smith giant to one of the lakes in the Holy-Mystery Mountains.

“Well let’s see what we can do” said Yemaya.

While the women tended to the chief god, one of the silver messengers found its way into a circular clearing, deep in the sacred forest, where a crystal-clear creek cut the clearing into two perfect halves. A fieldstone and cherry-wood bridge spanned the gurgling creek, and led to a six feet wide s-shaped gravel path. Set off the east bank of the creek at the end of the path, was the Warrior God’s cottage. It was surrounded by a stone fence, and twenty-one Royal Palms. Three goats kept the grass lawn in front of the cottage trimmed, and were barred from the garden area by a woven willow fence. A large guava tree was at the garden’s center. The guava tree was ringed by bushes whose small red blooms camouflaged thousands of thick thorns. Raspberry, gooseberry and Goji berry bushes were interspersed in a precise circle around the living barrier.

Yellow, orange, red, pink, purple and white geraniums dotted the garden. Some flowering in shade others in full sun, and the snow-covered peaks of the Holy-Mystery Mountains served as backdrop. With a slow, quiet ease, the thick oak door to the cottage opened as the dragonfly alighted on one of the wood pillars of the bridge. A five-foot seven-inch tanned young man with

blue-black hair, bright brown eyes, and only one hundred years old, nimbly ran to the bridge and extended his open hand to the dragonfly.

“Come and rest a minute before you deliver your message,” said the Chief God’s youngest son.

The Warrior God had fought in two wars, and killed many men, demons, and rival gods before reaching the age of eighteen. Killing, war, and death led him to prefer the company of animals, and he left the palace and its intrigue for the sacred forest on his twenty-first birthday. On his journey to the sacred forest he met his companion and they discovered their complimentary healing powers. As stories of their gifts sifted throughout the land, the sick, the dying, and many parents with ailing children came to them to be cured. The Warrior God was known for saying ‘no’ just to get a reaction. A passionate dancer of leaps and whirling, hollering and hooting, and, a faithful lover for over seventy-nine years. He was disliked by his brother and sisters, but loved by strangers. Elegua the warrior god had become a serene healer.

Yemaya tried ancient incantations in a language known only to her and Olofi. Elixirs made from the flesh of white and yellow phosphorescent sea-creatures from the most hallowed depths of her ocean had no effect. What he swallowed clear became tinged with red, and swirled with black mucous as it flowed out his ears.

“Has the prince been found?” asked Yemaya as she turned away disgusted by the liquid seeping from Olofi’s ears.

“No my lady. The messengers have left our lands to follow a rumor that the prince is on a quest,” replied Olofi’s attendant.

“What quest could he have undertaken,” she asked as she turned and looked at her daughters. “Do you know where he could have gone?”

“No,” replied her daughters.

“Does anyone know anything in this palace,” screamed Yemaya.

“The messengers are following the rumor that the prince may be searching the wild lands to the west for another beauty to add to his harem,” replied the attendant.

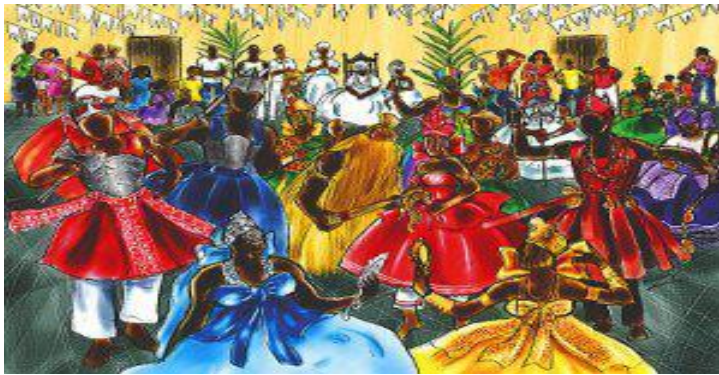
*Security is mostly a superstition.*

*It does not exist in nature, nor do the  
children of men as a whole experience it.  
Avoiding danger is no safer in the long  
run than*

*outright exposure.*

*Life is either a daring adventure,  
or nothing.*

*Helen Keller*



**I walked past the thick filigreed wrought iron gates** that flanked the entry to the small City of Miami cemetery. A green-gray canopy of sprawling Spanish oaks shaded the old graves and marble mausoleums with bromeliad and epiphyte-spotted branches. A black asphalt service road split the cemetery in two, providing a clear view to the west end gates, and a row of empty warehouses that lay across a potholed section of Miami Avenue. Beyond the north wall was an open lot dotted with the ghetto debris of needles, plastic baggies, and painted with the bright yellow flowers from hundreds of nameless weeds. Northeast Second Avenue was the east boundary, and afforded commuters quick, direct access to and from downtown Miami, even during rush hours. Not everyone liked driving this ill-treated avenue, and many commuters opted for slower Biscayne Boulevard.

The tall, thick coral rock wall that surrounded the cemetery was topped with a crown of rusted wrought iron spears that neighborhood residents had decorated with aluminum cans and Styrofoam cups. The barbed wire was a 1960s addition, and graffiti marred the whitewashed walls. This was not the graffiti that was beginning to have an artsy following. This was the graffiti of gangs and bored teenagers who thought no one would care, not because the cemetery inhabitants were dead, but because the surrounding blocks were dead. The south side of the

rectangular wall abutted the carcass of an Oldsmobile dealership that had collapsed in on itself, and in the southwest corner waited the grave-awning that straddled the family plot, next to the Cedron great-grandparents mausoleum. No one here yet—I had hoped there wouldn’t be. I wanted time alone to daydream about my past, and reconsider my father’s final visitation. This was not all I’d have to reconsider and revisit. This cemetery was filled with dead reminders and remnants of my past.

Dinner had been a meal of fried, whole yellowtail snapper, almond wild rice, and steamed carrots marinated in Vidalia onion vinaigrette. Bourbon served neat for Francis, and perfect Rob Roys for me. Our drinks were accompanied with a spicy sausage salsa, and sea-salt pita points before dinner at 9:00. The conversation was funny, serious, venting, and typical of our conversations during cocktails. I lifted myself from my cushioned cane chair in the Florida room, and stood looking through the glass wall that faced east toward Miami Beach. I picked up the empty Waterford ice bucket from a silver tray atop the antique Barbados wicker table, and walked toward the kitchen. My father’s spirit materialized in the kitchen doorway, and I stopped midstride, then moved forward through the vanishing apparition. “I should have paid more attention,” I said to the doorway.

Eyes downcast and shoulders slumped, the old man’s somber image waited in the corner of the kitchen by the wine bottle buffet table. He spoke softly in distinct and gentle English—at least that was the language I heard. Most spirits require effort to understand them, but the old man was clear and concise. *That’s because you helped him find clarity and precision.*

“It’s almost time for me to leave, and I’ve come to remind you to remember our conversations. You have been correct in most, not all, of the ideals that you have chosen to

believe, but you are my son, and you will always be of our household, our clan, and our spirit is your legacy. You must find peace and strength as part of this family.” He paused and breathed deeply, his translucent chest expanding. “When I leave, you will receive the understanding of race and destiny, and most importantly, the vision of direction.”

I had not felt such peace since I was a very young child. That age of innocence that all children out-grow. Instinctively I moved toward the spirit to embrace him with final forgiveness, but my father raised his hand, and I was overwhelmed by the self-reproach that comes from realizing something when it’s too late.

“I know what’s in your heart,” he said. My time is over. Remember your ancestors will always be available to you, and that you were born to regulate the rules of our rituals, and share with those that knock at your door. But, you have the final decision as to whom you will help and how.” He raised his head and looked at me, a gentle smile on his lips, bright tears sparkling as they fell from the corners of his eyes, and with that brief visual embrace he disappeared.

Christopher reached the kitchen doorway, stopped and stood watching as his father spoke to something visible only to him. He knew from experience that it was best not to disturb him when these spirits interrupted his life.

“What did you see?”

“Your grandfather saying goodbye.”

Francis walked to the kitchen doorway. “Are you two going to stay in the kitchen all night?” The static electricity crackled as Francis brushed against the doorway. “Another vision?”



“Dad saying good-bye.” Alex placed the empty ice bucket that he still held, on the white marble countertop. He opened the freezer door and filled the ice bucket, then turned, walked past them and left the kitchen.

Chris and Francis looked at each other, but stayed where they were. Chris was about to speak when they heard from the Florida room, “Don’t you two start to create monsters where there aren’t any. I’ve known he was dying for three months, and now it’s over. I’ll have to start making the arrangements tomorrow.”

They returned to the Florida room, and Alex waited for them to settle themselves into their chairs. “The old man and I are at peace. Forgiveness is a wonderful balm, and we were father and son again, at least as close as we could be. Sixteen years of stupid separation resolved in three months. The time we wasted being angry and disappointed with each other, and now there is no more time together. All these gifts, all these visions and yet I can’t explain the sheer loss of not being able to touch him, to see him—physically anyway. For the past three months I spent every weekday with him sailing, visiting churches, walking the beach, and drinking lots of scotch.” As he spoke, Alex’s eyes, his great-grandmother’s eyes, darted in all directions, as if he were searching for something to focus on. “He explained many mysteries that had plagued me, and I regained the part of my heritage that I had abandoned at twenty.”

“Christopher,” said Alex as he rose from his chair. “Tomorrow I’ll start to teach you rituals that your grandfather taught me when I was younger than you are now. In the last three months I’ve gained a deeper understanding of the knowledge that I’ve always possessed.” He refilled his glass with the last Rob Roy from his pitcher. He stared beyond the dark garden, the still boat, and lost himself in the bright lights of Miami Beach. Everywhere his eyes darted there was light

surrounded by darkness. Miami didn't seem familiar anymore. The dark water was ominous, and the sky was a patchwork of charcoal gray clouds that were starting to release their load of rain. "I'm missing something, but can't figure out what. Eventually it will come to me, hopefully when the knowledge will still be useful. I have some plans to refine for these coming days, so I'll be in my study for a while." He turned and looked at them, tried to smile, then turned and walked down the hall to his study. The gray hair at his temples was slowly turning white, and he would emerge from his study with white sideburns, a confused heart, and the knowledge of what he must do.

The phone call of his father's death came while he was locked in the study.

Alex remained sequestered for twenty-one hours, and fitfully slept on his couch for four, dreaming of black sharks, howling wind, and a violent sea. No one disturbed him as Miami was inundated with unseasonable rain, and destiny, fate, or universal percentages forced the coming and unavoidable confrontation. *Meditate, say your prayers, drink and cry if you wish. You're getting stronger, and the coming challenges will not overwhelm you*

*Keep me away from the wisdom  
which does not cry,  
the philosophy which does not laugh  
and the greatness which does not  
bow before children.*

*Khalil Gibran*



**Hi, my name is Christopher Cedron**, and I was born on leap day, of the leap year 2000. I don't much care for my birthday. Especially since it only comes every four years, but there are some cool advantages. I get to designate when I want to celebrate the three years before my birthdate, and I usually get more than I ask for: adults always try to compensate for what they can't control. So I started my life with an inconvenience. This doesn't explain all that happens later, but with fifteen years of hindsight, I can say that compared to most kids my age I've had an interesting life so far. Not a fairytale or storybook life, but an exciting adventure, filled with mystery, and mayhem. I may be making these experiences out to be better than they were, because while I was living all this excitement, I was filled with fear and uncertainty. Growing pains, I guess.

To understand the situations and tendencies that I've grown-up with, I have to give you some family information. I am an American-Cuban. No, not a Cuban-American. My father explained it this way: You were born in the U.S. and your heritage is first American and second Cuban. I was five or six at the time, and really didn't care either way. But some of the other kids, and several teachers that were Cuban-American, didn't like the Cuban part being second. So here

I am, a leap year child and an American-Cuban. You should also know that I was raised by my father.

The first fifteen years of my life I considered mostly uneventful. The usual boy growing-up stuff. Learning to speak two languages and eating things that weren't always that appealing. Being an only child was great: no competition for food or affection. Speaking to spirits and having prophetic dreams was welcomed and hoped for by my dad. Some dreams were normal: dumb girls, strange animals, flying without a plane. But some were about people that I didn't recognize, yet somehow knew. Fearsome tall figures performing primitive rituals in rural Africa or India, all with a *National Geographic* flavor. My most frightening dreams or visions—I don't know which—were of screaming women and fleeing children trampling fruit and flower offerings, as gray-black figures raced after them wildly swinging bloodstained machetes, while speaking in a language that hurt my ears and made my whole-body twitch and jerk. I didn't understand the words, but I could understand the fear.

By age five I was accustomed to my strangeness. My dad said it was mostly my over active imagination, but I always felt that he wasn't telling me the full truth. I was lucky though, he usually had an interpretation that made sense—at least to me. Then again, at that age I would have believed anything he told me. I wish I could have asked my mother. I had lots of photos of her that my dad had given me when I was about four years old. He presented me with a Danish butter-cookie tin filled with her pictures, so that I would stop asking him what she looked like. He helped me scan them into my new computer—he was a wiz with the computer and started me early. By the time I was five-and-a-half I could scan on my own and I scanned anything I could lift—Toy Story dolls, my hand, elbow, Candyland game board—but the most memorable were

the worms that squished rather easily when I pressed down the scanner lid. The messiest, and most destructive, was my grape juice. Dad had to get me a new scanner.

By age six, and my messy scanning days behind me, I graduated to video and kept a video diary. I recorded everything—entering the house, leaving the house, driving with my dad, my dog’s funeral, my parakeet’s funeral—but I was too scared to tape Hurricane Wilma. I did try, but the rain hit the window so hard that I dropped the camera and it broke on the tile floor in my room. I ran to my bed and managed to hide trembling under the covers as my dad opened the door. He came to the bed and asked, “Do you think you’re old enough to stay-up with me until the storm stops howling?” I jumped into his arms and we went to the den that was the only room the generator could power. We listened to music and my dad read to me for all of ten minutes before I was peacefully asleep in his lap.

I had a life-threatening flu-like episode when I was eight. “Maria, I need more water from the bay. He’s burning-up,” my father said to the nanny. The old nanny appeared with another bucket of water, and threw it at me as I lay in an old galvanized-steel water trough. “*Senor*, go speak to Yemaya,” she said, and my father walked to the bay and knelt to plead for my recovery. Every hour for five hours, he forced me to swallow three tablespoons of a potion that he made from herbs and flowers from his garden. He pinched my nose and immersed me in the brackish water of Biscayne Bay that filled the old water trough that he had kept in his potting shed. My nanny rubbed my body with large black river stones that she warmed in *Corojo* oil on a pan above a fire-pit outside the potting shed. She was an old lady, wrinkled and deeply tanned by the sun—or maybe she was born that way. She had been my father’s nanny, and went to work for him when he married. She never spoke about my mother; she rarely spoke about anything.

What I remember most about that sickness are the dreams. Lush islands surrounded by a dark blue sea; a sky filled with stars that never ended, and me on the beach in my water trough. Hundreds of small adult-children danced around me holding torches as they beat me with thin, long branches. They didn't beat me to hurt me, but I think to scare something out of me. I survived the spirit-flu, and we celebrated with a party. I've learned that Cubans—even the American ones—celebrate whenever they can. A marriage, a birth, and even death is a time to remember the dead person with booze and music. All my classmates were invited, only three showed up, and they're still my only three friends. After my battle with the spirit-flu, my dreams were still as wild and weird as ever, but somehow they were calmer, or maybe I was. I didn't get as anxious or scared. I met the warrior god when I turned nine. And, Hurricane Wilma is still the great event in my life.

**The last two days had been filled with preparations for this final farewell,** and each breath filled my lungs with the smell of dirt and grass. Tears streaked my cheeks as I stood beside the mound of earth that would cover what was left of my father. I squatted and took my tears onto the tips of my fingers, grabbed a small fingers-full of dirt, and squeezed the earth and tears into a ball with my right hand, as I removed a linen handkerchief from my pants pocket. Walking slowly away from the grave I dropped the small ball of salty earth in the center of the white linen square, and placed the handkerchief back in my pocket. I then placed the stargazer lilies that I had brought with me on the third grave to the right of my father's. My first wife Aida has lain here for nineteen years. We married young, both eighteen; both families having plotted and planned our union since we were six. The arranged marriages of Santeria were part of the island religion's tradition, and had transplanted easily into the Miami colony.

Aida was the only child of an elite Havana society widow that had managed to leave Cuba with a small fortune in jewelry. In Miami this well-trained *bruja* married the four-time mayor of Hialeah, before his first term. I had loved Aida as much as I was capable of loving at eighteen, and I was surprised by how strongly I felt that love. I was not like the other boys that had attempted to court her, and been rejected by her mother. I tried hard to be sensual, and sensitive to her needs. I was more serious about life than most eighteen-year-old boys, and I treated her as the princess her mother had raised her to be. My father gave us a wedding present of a waterfront lot on Belle Meade Island. “You’ve earned this land, and I want you to continue to add to the family fortune,” he had said. “And, Aida’s mother will build you the house.”

At the age of eight I had been told to invest ten thousand dollars in an unknown company that were producers of a new product: personal computers. My father wouldn’t listen at first, but then we struck a bargain. If he loaned me the money, and if there were profits, I would give him twenty-five percent. Manuel senior knew that if he didn’t give me the ten thousand dollars, the spirits would most assuredly take more than ten thousand dollars as payment for his lack of faith. Personal computers exploded, and within three years I sold his stock, and my father used his portion of the profits to start the first Cuban owned, supermarket-chain in Miami—also my suggestion. In the following seven years, we built one new supermarket per year. So, when I married at eighteen, I was given three supermarkets, and groceries were to pay for my and Aida’s educations at the University of Miami.

Aida’s mother had told her daughter that she would have to learn to dominate me with sex. “A woman that knows how to grasp her husband with her mouth and vagina will never be mistreated. For a man with Alex’s gifts you’ll have to learn to use your mind, and your entire body.” She gave her books to read and movies to watch, so that on our wedding night she could



begin the domination of her husband with the loss of her virginity. Aida learned all she could, but on our wedding night it was I that dominated her.

“Don’t be afraid,” I had said.

“I’m not afraid of you. I’ve just never done this before.”

Slowly I removed her clothes, kissed her neck and nipples as I lay her on the bed, and we experienced such intense pleasure that she trembled and cried beneath me. “Are you O.K.?” I asked as I lay atop and inside her. “Yes,” she replied, and then smiled, cried, and wrapped her young athletic legs around me. We were man and wife, filled with young love, expressing the sexual stamina of youth. She was now a woman, and her turn to dominate.

Eight months of marriage, eight months of me cooking for her, caring for her, loving her, and she was three months pregnant, just starting to show. “I’m happier than I had thought possible,” she said. But, her young body was not as strong as her spirit, and the baby gave her debilitating morning sickness, but she didn’t care, she was going to be a mother, and bring a child, a life, into our world. I her husband, her lover, would be a father, and would love and protect them both. She had spent most of the week in bed. Monday vomiting and cramps; Tuesday vomiting and nausea; Wednesday, vomiting and dizziness; Thursday all of them throughout the day.

Friday arrived with a cold front, and the temperature was a cool seventy-two degrees at nine when she woke. No vomiting, cramps, nausea, or dizziness, just a clear, cool morning for her and our daughter. I hadn’t wanted to know the gender of the baby, but she needed to plan a new life, and knowing whether boy or girl made planning easier. She felt like the day, new and fresh. She was going to drive to Palm Beach and do some maternity shopping, maybe if her

stomach continued to behave itself, she'd reward it with a Caesar salad. She dressed in front of a full-length mirror. A powder blue dress, not too tight around the waist, with a pleated, whirling bottom, a white, wide-brim straw hat, and white and blue leather wedge sandals. She felt pretty, and felt our baby stir inside her. They were going to have a nice drive, do some shopping, have a nice lunch, and come home to me.

She was opening the door to her Mercedes, and easing into the leather driver's seat, as my Porsche roadster screeched onto the driveway, and jolted to a stop an inch from her rear bumper. I jumped from my car, bounded to her open door, and breathing heavily grasped her forearm tightly.

"Get out of the car!"

"We're going... I mean I'm going to Palm Beach."

"Please, get out of the car," I said. "I can't let you go." It had come to me while checking the progress of the new gourmet food store that I was building. "I saw you behind the steering wheel of your car. You were holding onto the steering wheel so tightly that your hands flushed pink with the strain, and then you began to scream as you swerved to avoid the cars piled up in front of you, and the car raced down an embankment and into a canal."

Despite my vision, or maybe because of it, she was angry that I wouldn't let her go. This was the first time in days that she had felt well enough to leave her bed. "I need to get out of this house," she protested.

“You are not going anywhere.” I said. I grabbed the keys from her hand and threw them onto the Cuban tile roof of the house. They clanged and slid about three feet before catching on the corner of a cracked tile.

She ran to the front door, but forgot that she didn’t have a key to unlock the door, so she kicked it. I came up behind her and unlocked the door. She didn’t speak or acknowledge me as she stormed through the house to the master bedroom. She entered the bedroom, loudly slammed the door behind her, and roughly threw the bedspread and pillows onto the floor. Her anger still not vented she stomped on the pillows until she was winded and could stomp no more. Piano music reached the bedroom, and she lowered herself onto the bed. I was playing something familiar and pleasing. She listened lying on our bed, and smiled when she heard me make a mistake. “You’re not as good as you think,” she said to the ceiling, and then slept for two hours. When she awoke she walked down to the den, and we spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in silence.

The next morning, she found the *Miami Herald* spread-out on the breakfast table. On the front page, there was a picture of a trailer truck and the headline “Deadly Turnpike Accident Claims Two Lives.” The truck had a double-blowout, and swerved into two lanes of traffic causing a chain reaction of accidents—two deaths, and twelve hospitalizations. The picture showed a trailer turned on its side, it’s cargo of green mangoes dotting the traffic lanes—whole mangoes, crushed mangoes, mangoes still in their crates—but she was still pissed that I threw her keys onto the roof of the house.

In a month the incident was forgotten, and all was back too normal. The morning sickness had ended, the baby was growing, and the new store was opening in a week. It was a hot

Thursday in June ten in the morning, and the humidity was already at ninety-six percent. I had met with my contractor at seven to make sure the new store was still on schedule, and stopped to buy some white dendrobiums, calla lilies, and white chrysanthemums for Aida before heading home. I didn't know that she had gotten out of bed as I left for my meeting. She was going to visit her mother, and then buy some flowers on her way back home. She was going to get me yellow carnations for my office.

"Hello," I yelled as I entered the house.

"Hello," I yelled again as I walked toward the kitchen. I was about to yell one more time when I was greeted by the housekeeper.

*"Lo siento estaba haciendo el laundry,"* she said, and took the flowers that I carried.

*"¿Dónde está Aida," I asked?* She delivered Aida's message: visiting mom be back by noon at the latest. I was walking to my study when the doorbell rang. The housekeeper emerged from the kitchen to answer the door. *"No Te preocupes, yo lo contesto."* I opened the door on the third ring.

"Mr. Cedron?" asked a forty-something, and stereotypical muscled Miami police officer.

"Yes. What's happened?" I was blind, unprepared, and vulnerable.

"May we come in?" the officer said.

I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't distinguish the sky from the bay, my mind raced everywhere at once, and, I couldn't make sense of those words.

"There's been an accident, sir. May we come in?"

I looked at the policeman then at his partner, and she lowered her eyes.

“She was pregnant,” I said, and then sat and sobbed in our doorway.

With that incident still lingering in my mind, I walked to the Spanish Oak that extended its branches over my father’s open grave, and sat down between two gnarled roots that intertwined before disappearing underground. The traffic sounds were muffled by the trees and birds, except for the occasional car horn blaring. Sunshine funneled through the branches in beams that seemed to come directly from God, and I leaned my head against the tree trunk, closed my eyes, and dozed into more pleasant thoughts of my past.

**I sat very still in my bed with the door ajar** so that I wouldn’t miss my father’s departure. I heard my father speak with the housekeeper, and then I heard the front door open and close, but once my dad left I felt an unusual loneliness. A feeling I hadn’t felt before, or understood. I felt emotions, aspirations, and conflict trapped in my room, in our house, and I shivered as I tried to concentrate on them. I have experienced the deaths of a couple of residents, but even those deaths I experienced from the sideline—my father made sure of that. Francis was in the garden, and the housekeeper made a little noise as she cleaned the kitchen. The words that we spoke last night, good words, words of love, concern and confusion, still stuck to the walls of the house and bounced around in my memory. I had decided last night not to be a part of my grandfather’s burial. Dad didn’t try to change my mind, and he didn’t try to wake me, or knock on the door to my room—as he usually did—before leaving this morning.

Grandfather had never really meant much to me. We hadn’t even met. A Cuban grandfather, loud, domineering, spiritually gifted, womanizer and beater of his children, now

dead—how could I care for someone like that? Why should I? Dad has always been careful not to say things that he might regret later, but he also couldn't make the old man into a saint. He was mostly kind, except when the truth of a situation made it impossible to be kind. He never lied to me. "My father is what he is," he told me. "He isn't the kind, gentle old man that you see on the Family Channel, or, the COPD and other drug commercials. I do hate him sometimes, but remind myself that I shouldn't." The only death that I had directly experienced was my old nanny's passing when I was seven. I remember dad coming out of her room, and crying as he closed the door behind him. I waited a couple of hours and snuck into her room. She was lying on her bed, and I recognized her as my nanny, but couldn't feel her presence anywhere in the room. I was turning to leave the room and I heard her say, "Adiós mi niño." I turned and smiled at her. "Bye," I said, and closed the door.

I have always known that my mother died when I was born, but I hadn't understood that I had caused her death until I was six years old, and it was my uncle that forced that understanding. It was a clear Sunday morning, and part of our routine was that dad and I would go to the Twenty-Fifth Street market, which opened at eight on Sundays, and we would leave at noon when Sam the manager arrived. My father always took our two attack-trained Dobermans with us to open the market—the neighborhood of Northeast Twenty-Fifth Street and Northeast Second Avenue was still in transition, but within three years the downtown urban sprawl would overtake and transform the neighborhood. Waiting for us on this Sunday was a big, sweaty man. His smell was strong and grew worse as he walked closer. I had never seen this man before, and I didn't want to get close to him. Dad noticed my anxiety and said, "Don't worry, he can't hurt you."

"What are you doing here?" Dad asked, as he restrained the growling dogs.

"I'm the bearer of bad news. Your grandmother died last night," said the sweaty man. He walked toward me, and I leaned against my dad's leg. I didn't like the way the man smelled: sour and dirty. "Father asked me to come and deliver the news personally."

"I'm sure *your* father told you to deliver the news, not asked."

The dirty-man ignored Dad and looked straight at me. I wasn't afraid, but angry. He reminded me of the boy that had taken my Batman comic book, and I remembered dad telling me to learn to control my anger.

When I was six years old, I had used the spirits to punish another six-year-old who had taken my Batman comic book and hidden it. "Use those friends of yours that don't exist to find the comic book," the kid said. We were surrounded by a growing group of children that had stopped their play to prod us into a fight. I didn't move towards the other boy, or threaten him. I just stared into the boy's eyes. The look was enough to set the boy backing away—all his bravado and taunting ended when his right ear started to throb and bleed. The child cried frantically and all the children quickly stopped their prodding. I told the boy, "I'll make the bleeding stop, if you tell me where you hid my comic book." But, I already knew where the comic book was.

The bloody ear caused me terrible nightmares. Ugly orange, dirty and vicious spirits tormented me for two nights. On the third night, and as dad tucked the sheet around me, I started crying. I told dad what I had done to the boy, and what was now happening to me. Dad laughed gently, and then held and comforted me. "Little boys as well as grown men make mistakes, but the important thing is to learn not to repeat those mistakes. Because of the special gifts you possess, the consequences of your actions are more forceful, and you will have to learn to control

your temper.” This dirty-man was just like that little boy, and I didn’t want to control my anger—I wanted to punish this man for being dirty.

"So this is my nephew. Kind of puny for his age." Dad led the dogs to the steel entry door, and tied them to the door. "You look like your mother." The smelly dirty-man reached out to touch my head. "Too bad she died giving you life, but at least you'll never forget her since your birthday is the day you killed her. Had you not killed her, she probably would have been able to save the family from the shame your father has brought upon us. He was meant to be a rich and powerful Santero, but he threw that away for a piece of ass."

Dad firmly grabbed the dirty-man’s wrist and stopped his hand as he tried to muss my hair. "You've delivered your message. You can go now and report back to your keeper. And tell him that I'll visit my grandmother's grave in my own time. He won't have to worry about me showing up for the funeral. He can beat his breast and pretend that he loved her. I won't be there." Dad led me to the door, and stood me behind the growling dogs. The dogs moved closer to me—they also didn’t like the big smelly man.

"You arrogant little shit. You think you know everything and that you deserve more than the rest of us. I don't care how gifted you are, you're a disgrace to this family," the man said as he moved toward my dad. He would have continued forward, but dad quickly stepped forward, and pushed hard at his chest forcing him to take a step back. The dogs barked and growled straining at their leashes. I wanted to help my dad, but I stayed with the dogs and covered my ears because of their loud growls and barks. The man, emboldened by the restrained dogs, was about to leap at my dad, but dad rapidly placed the stiletto knife that he had been caressing in his pants pocket, against the man’s throat—the same knife that I had discovered while rummaging



through his big desk in his office. He caught me with the knife and told me never to play with it, and then showed me how the blade pops out, and said that the knife was named after the long thin blade. The knife made the same swoosh noise it had that day as the blade appeared.

"We're no longer children and my days of being abused and beaten by you and your father ended a long time ago. They ended with you in pretty much this same predicament. You still have the scar from that confrontation, and I will not hesitate to give you another," he said. Then he pressed the blade to dirty-man's throat for a few more seconds before slowly lowering the knife.

"The next time you have any announcements to share, use the phone. This is the last time that I want to see you until it's time to bury the old man. Until then stay away from me."

The dirty-man's face was bright red, and it seemed like minutes before he abruptly turned and stomped his way to his black on black Mercedes parked twenty feet away. Dad quickly unlocked and yanked the security door open. He carried me into the grocery store, before returning outside for the dogs.

That was how I met my uncle Manny. The memory of that day has never faded. I remember how the thin silver blade of the knife reflected the early morning sunshine. I hadn't understood all their words, but the emotions were seared in my memory, and I never saw my uncle again. I learned from my older cousin Peter, a decade later, that my uncle had gotten worse with age, and developed into a meaner version of our grandfather: arrogant, manipulative and extremely abusive. When I listened to the stories that Peter recounted I finally appreciated what my father had done for me by abandoning the family. I understood how much dad loved me, and

how he had spared me from the types of memories that plagued Peter. Even now, Peter can't stop the nightmares.

Done with reminiscing, I left my bed, dressed myself with a blue pair of Levi's jean shorts and a yellow T-shirt that was one size too large, and left my room through the sliding glass doors that led to the backyard. I waved to Francis who sat in one of three Adirondack chaises drinking coffee, reading the *Miami Herald*, and occasionally staring at the approaching rain. It was beautiful rain, preceded by a sheer curtain of sunshine through which you could see a gray film of water that was starting to obscure the high-rises of Miami Beach. I walked quickly to the 'healing house'. My father had named it that to distinguish it from the five other buildings that made-up the family compound: two houses and three twelve-unit apartment buildings. The healing house was an old two story 1912 Florida Homestead structure with a natural coral rock foundation, Dade County pine exterior and interior, and an attic that had been converted into four bedrooms for a total of eight. The gardens surrounded the main house, our house, on almost an acre-and-a-quarter. The healing house sat on half-an-acre, and was connected to the main house via a gravel path that snaked through the garden. The palm trees, grey buttonwoods and the thick multicolored foliage of crotons, and ten-foot-tall red hibiscus obscured both houses from the street. A wrought iron fence surrounded the two structures, and separated them from the street and the three apartment buildings that made up the rest of the family block. It had taken dad ten years of planning, purchasing, and renovating to arrive at this well-manicured stage. In those ten years 100 men and 63 women had resided in the healing house, and most had been healed. A small percentage, six men and two women, didn't have the strength, or will to heal, and had died there.

"Good morning Phil. How are you doing today?" said Chris as he entered the healing house kitchen.

"Not too well. I had a hard time sleeping last night." Phil poured himself another glass of tea. "My dreams kept waking me. Strange dreams of several big men and alligators."

"Is the tea helping at all?"

"I'm not sure it's doing anything but hydrating my body. It's been two weeks and I still don't have any relief from the fatigue, or nausea."

"Dad said that it would take at least three weeks before you would see any noticeable improvement."

"Why will it take three weeks for me, when Stan improved after only five days on this stuff? I'm tired of collecting the herbs, drying them and brewing them, only to continue feeling as bad as I did two weeks ago. And your father only keeps telling me to be patient. Well, I don't have the luxury of time, to be patient."

Stan walked into the kitchen. "Oh Phil, stop bitching about not having the time. You're the reason the tea isn't working. You demand a cure without putting any effort into the cure. You bitch and moan about collecting and drying the herbs, and about having to drink the damn tea. Maybe, just maybe, your attitude is the real problem." Stan said, and opened the refrigerator door. "Hi Chris."

"It's easy for you to be all cheery and positive," Phil said. "The tea worked for you, but it hasn't done shit for me."

"How many times must you be told that the tea does not work without help from you? I believe in what I'm doing. I have faith that I'll find my cure. You don't want to do any of the work. You want the cure to appear as a pill, an ointment, a tea, or a prayer that will instantly heal your body. You want to be cured but you don't want to put any effort into being a part of your cure. Don't blame the tea for your failure."

"You're a fucking bastard. You walk around here strutting, and telling everyone else what's wrong with them, as if you really knew what's going on with our bodies and minds. You're just lucky your body hasn't completely betrayed you."

Stan didn't answer, or linger to hear anymore. With a nod to Chris he left the kitchen. Chris too wanted to leave the kitchen and asked, "Have you seen Peter?"

"I think he's in his room."

"Thanks."

He left Phil with his complaints and despair. Stan was right. He just didn't want to struggle. Chris said hello to a couple of the other residents of the house as he made his way through the living room and up the stairs to Peter's room.

*"Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing."*

*Desmond Tutu*



**Six weeks and we were still meeting to drink, sail, pray and bear our souls.** The old man is thinner, his body being eaten by a disease that he has never named, and I was watching him waste away. His smile and eyes are still bright, but he can't serve as first mate any longer. Pulling ropes, setting the sail, and bending and straightening his back are increasingly more difficult. Without discussion we switched roles and he helmed *La Fortuna*—which was still difficult—while I did all the grunt work. It was like being a child again during a period of my youth that had not yet gone sour. I was beginning to feel like his son—maybe because I wanted to, or as a gift to a dying man. *It doesn't really matter why you feel this way. But it is important that you remember this feeling when he's gone.*

"I remember the first time I realized that you were changing, and that I was pushing you away." He guided us east on Government Cut, past the Port of Miami, and the massive container cargo cranes of Dodge Island. Fake antique cars of molded cocaine was just one of the more creative drug smuggling attempts at the port. The McArthur Causeway leading to South Beach was to our north, and the choppy Atlantic lay straight-ahead.

"You were seven or eight-years-old, and you had just asked me why I drank so much and needed so much pussy. You actually said pussy and I laughed hearing my favorite son use that

word—a word that I taught you.” He winced as a wave slapped and lifted the boat. “Do you remember that?”

“Oh I remember that incident very well.” I said. We all believe we remember our childhood exactly as it happened, when in fact our details are usually skewed according to our personal biases. Ask Manny Jr. what he remembers about that day and he would say, “You were acting like a little shit and got what you deserved.”

I remember the old man laughing just before he slapped me. But, there’s no real benefit to finding out which version is true for him. The slap was real, and what would we gain by me reminding him of a slap that happened over twenty-five years ago? A single slap was nothing that he would probably remember, but something that I would never forget. I’m not as confrontational, or vengeful as I was at the beginning of our time together. I guess I have changed in these six weeks.

“I don’t remember everything,” I said, “but I do remember you laughing.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “But thanks for lying.” We passed Fischer Island, the coast guard station, the Miami Beach Marina, and bounced into the Atlantic. We both enjoyed the mild roughness of the ocean, and the wind was steady and strong. Damn I’m tired of remembering and reliving my youth. A strong wave hit the boat and sprayed me with saltwater. I opened my mouth, and extended my tongue to gather a few drops from my lips. It was warm, salty, and I loved the way it tasted. Maybe I’m still a child?

“After laughing I slapped you. It was the first time you didn’t cry after being hit. You looked at me with anger and disappointment. I’ve never forgotten that look.”

I looked at him now with a smile, and couldn't help but feel that it's too late. A few drops of saltwater can do that.

"So you weren't as cold hearted as you pretended back then. You actually knew that you were driving a wedge between us, but you didn't stop." There was no reproach in my voice, or anger. Just the same disappointment that I felt when I was seven or eight. I have to stop this. I can't continue indulging this emotional crap. I have to be a man; use the spirits; sacrifice a bull if I have to. Enough with the regret, with the desire that things should have been different. They weren't different. *I'm very happy that you are of my household; my tribe. Now be his son. Give him the kindness that he never gave you. Try to remember that it wasn't all bad.*

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Forgiven." I realized that I really was forgiving him, and a much more forceful wave slapped the boat and wet both our faces with the spray. We both smiled, and I watched him taste the ocean. I guess it's time to share more of myself.

"I want to tell you about mom's first visit, but before that I want you to tell me the *Pataki*, that you mentioned after our lunch at Carmelo's," I said.

"There are twenty-one parables that the Warrior God's fabled lives provide to us. The Warrior God's Companion is one of the twenty-one, and was told to me by my Padrino when you turned five and were about to undergo your initiation." He looked at me and then lowered his eyes. "This is a myth that I should have shared with you, especially after Yadira died, but I wouldn't believe that it was about you; about us."

"Is this about the Warrior God's male companion?"



The old man looked at me and smiled. I smiled back pleased with the ease that had surfaced between us. I was feeling good about having my life turned upside-down, and the opportunity to get to know him better.

“So you know this myth?”

“It’s the reason that I’ve been able to find my happiness. Your Padrino told me the myth after Yadira died. He knew that I would never find happiness without finding-out who I wanted to be.”

My father shifted in his seat and said, “Elegua’s other myths make him out to be a husband, a womanizer, a fun-loving partyer, religious and mystical. This myth showed his capacity to be single-minded, and not caring about the consequences—at least that was what I thought when I first heard it. That is what I thought of you when you took Francis as your lover. When my Padrino had told me this story, I told him this had no bearing on our relationship; you would never abandon me. It wasn’t until I became sick that I understood that I had abandoned you. And, when I became sick I went to my Padrino who re-told the story, and also told me that there are many stories of the other Orishas and their forbidden loves.”

So the Orishas knew what I had always instinctively understood—love is all that matters. Yes I had forsaken my paternal love, I had no choice. I may have blamed him for pushing me away, but I was the one that decided to turn-away. Either I did as I was told, or I would no longer be a part of this family. It had been my decision, but it had been a mutual—if unspoken—understanding. I had been disowned and disavowed. *You have better insight into who I was when I was a young, but what you understand is not all of me. When you leave this life we shall travel the universe with your father, and understanding will not be necessary.*

“Had I told you and discussed what this story meant, we may have remained father and son. But I didn’t. I was too proud, too dictatorial and conceited. I wouldn’t allow you a life that I had not preordained for you. You had to be the son that I wanted, not the man that you wanted to be,” he said. “As I’ve been saying everyday since we’ve been meeting; I’m sorry. I know that I can not erase the hurt, the pain, or the time lost, but I truly am sorry for everything.”

“As I’ve said before, forgiven. And now let me tell you about mom’s visit. I had just turned sixteen, and you had prepared a party of girls for me and all your cohorts. You had us draw the names of the girls from a hat. After my dutiful, but still pleasurable sex and alcohol, I left you and the other dirty old men to enjoy yourselves, and retreated to the solitude of the orchid house. You didn’t care where I was or came looking for me. As usual all you wanted was pussy and alcohol.”

Quick moving, grey clouds obscured the sun casting their shadows over us and the houses of Stiltsville. Only a mile from the Cape Florida Lighthouse the seven remaining houses had seemed like lonely outcasts in Biscayne Bay, and then with the sudden burst of sunshine they became beautiful beacons of a bygone era in the middle of Biscayne Bay. The ocean, the sky, the clouds, and even the seagulls seemed to be mangling my emotions, and bruising my memories. We bounced through Biscayne National Park, and headed away from Nixon’s Florida White House on Key Biscayne toward Elliot key. The choppy waters were buffeting the boat a little more than we had anticipated, and the old man seemed to be struggling. I took the wheel from him, and he settled onto one of the passenger deck seats next to me. I realized I still felt closer to a mother that killed herself and I had never know, than I do to this sick old man that I had been seeing for over six weeks.

“My mother came to visit me in the orchid house, and I was a bit ashamed. I had just finished having sex with two girls, and drank more Scotch than I was used to—so I was feeling pretty good. But once she appeared I sobered-up immediately.”

“Hello my son,” she said.

“I guess you’re my mother?”

“I know you don’t know me, but I needed to speak to you.”

She was a ‘blurry’ spirit, and I couldn’t get a clear feeling from her. Blurry spirits are generally troubled, disgruntled, or just nasty, but I wasn’t sure which type she was. She had killed herself a week after I was born and apparently hadn’t evolved much. I had never given her any real thought. The physical abuse and the spiritual interruptions had kept me grounded in the present. I had once asked father why she died, and he said, “She was a weak woman and took the easy way out. Don’t waste your time thinking about her.” It was interesting that I actually took his advice and didn’t think about her. This first visit led to a second and finally a third, and I’m sure as hell going to tell him about all those visits so that he can see what caring for, and loving someone can be—even if you’re dead.

“Do you just need to speak to me, or is there something more that you need?”

“I need your help, but I’m here because I want to help you.”

“Let’s start with what you need from me.”

“I need you to hold a prayer vigil for me.” She didn’t elaborate, or ask if I knew what that was. I did know how to perform what she was requesting, but it was how matter-of-factly she had asked that bothered me. Life with my father had made me skeptical and wary. I knew she

was my mother. I felt the truth of that, but since I had never known the physical woman I didn't have any reference to compare the spirit too.

"That's easy enough. But, why should I help you? You abandoned me."

"I am truly sorry for what I did. All that I can tell you is that it was stupid and selfish. I should have stayed and tried to help you." She seemed to want to leave, but thought better of it. "My spiritual existence has been difficult. I watched as you were beaten and abused and I couldn't do anything. I wasn't allowed to interfere. But I have been granted this opportunity to help you and myself."

"Is there anything else you need from me?" What could I say to my dead mother? Go away, and don't come back? I may still smell of pussy and scotch, but this blurry spirit deserved my help.

"I would like to ask for your love, but I know I cannot expect that. Please treat me as a petitioner that God has sent to your door." She looked directly at me and smiled. It was a smile that made me swell with innocent compassion.

"Your father will tell you soon that he has decided whom you shall marry. You must accept his choice. She is meant for you, and you for her. I know that you will probably fight against this anyway, but after you argue accept the girl. She will make you very happy." Her smile stopped me from challenging or questioning her. Why is it that spirits do this to me? They request, and I become deaf and dumb. I lose the ability to say no. I need to learn to say no.

"You know that I cannot marry until I'm eighteen? Oshun has forbidden it."

“Your father will tell you soon that he wants you to pursue and charm the girl. She is of course a virgin, and very fertile.”

“Will I have children?”

“Yes, a boy.” She looked at me and waved before disappearing. She must have known that I would ask for more information. Information that she couldn’t, or shouldn’t provide.

“It was a brief encounter,” I said to my father. “Of course going against your wishes was always attractive, but what swayed me into compliance was having a son.”

We arrived at Alabama Jacks, and as usual it was busy. We moored the boat and walked inside. Alabama Jacks is more swamp-front than waterfront, but the food is good and the patrons boisterous. It’s on the mangrove side of Card Sound road, and the only dive on Card Sound. Actually, there’s nothing else on Card Sound road, and that’s probably why it attracts so many bikers, loners, and needy fathers and sons.

We sat at the bar and ordered two double Scotches on ice to help combat the heat, and an order of conch fritters, fried clam strips, and fried shrimp Buffalo style.

“I had always wondered why you had not protested when I told you that you would marry Aida. I was ready to beat you into submission, but also knew that the day was approaching when I wouldn’t be able to beat you into submission any longer.”

“I was as surprised as you were when I didn’t protest. I had decided that I would at least make some noise, but when you told me all my bravado was gone. It was probably my mother that stilled my tongue.”

“It amazes me that you are so comfortable with the spirits. If they ask me to do something I always require more explanations, more information. Especially if it’s someone that I knew.”

“I have a pact with the spirits, and a pact that I entered into with my mother after her visit.”

“What was the pact between you and your mother?”

“If I did as directed, then I would be free of you, and she kept us apart for sixteen years.”

The appetizers arrived and we stuffed ourselves with fried foods.

### MYTH PART THREE

**The rested dragonfly flew out the open door toward the palace** to deliver the message that the Warrior God had consulted with the Gods of other worlds, and Olofi will survive this illness. He and his companion will ride the plains caribou and be there in one day.

“I will go into the forest and collect twigs, seed-cones and leaves from our Angel’s tree, and mushroom flowers from the earthworms. You must gather the herbal medicine from your garden and thorns from the blood tree. The three gold coins for her thorns have been blessed, wrap them in some of the white cloth that you have woven and remind her that I have sent you. We will gather the stones of time from the mountain giant together, before we leave,” said Elegua to his companion before leaving the cottage with a leather pouch, his sword of power at his side and the spear of faith strapped to his back.

The caribou carried them to the palace gates, bowed their heads for his blessing and ran back the way they came. The commander of the guard stopped the Warrior God, and told him that only the gods, human royals and high priests were allowed to enter. His companion, being an ancient human but not of royal blood, would have to wait outside. The Warrior God told the commander that his companion was here to help cure the Chief God, and asked when had commoners been banned from the palace? The commander apologized, but said that three years ago the Chief God himself had given the order that no commoners be allowed to enter the palace without his approval. The Warrior God's eyes watered with anguish and his nostrils flared with anger. As he took the red leather satchel that his companion carried he said, "Wait for me at the cottage," and entered the palace with a backward glance.

The Warrior God was quickly led to his father. He did not acknowledge his mother or sisters.

"All of you leave" he said as he walked to his father's bed. He looked at the attendant and asked "Where is his Ram's Horn?" The attendant walked to an ivory trunk beneath one of the windows and retrieved Olofi's horn.

"Welcome home" said the attendant and handed the horn to the Warrior God.

"It is good to see you Asher" said Elegua as he took the horn and placed it at his father's feet.

Everyone had stopped to watch the exchange and Yemaya said "Hello to a servant and no greeting for me?"

“It’s time for all of you to leave,” he said without looking at his mother, and unsheathed his sword. Everyone left without further inquiry or protest.

The Warrior God set his stones in a circle around the Chief God, praying to the Lord of The Universe as he placed each stone. He started a fire at the north axis of the circle and placed the twigs that he had gathered, into the fire. The twigs filled the chamber with an acrid, gray smoke. He then heated the creek water that they had brought with them, and placed the herbs from their garden to steep, as he prayed to the spirits of earth, sea, sky, and mountain. The grey smoke became saturated with the pungent sweet smell of Aghada, the citrus odor of Akarakara, and the licorice smell of Anise.

The chamber glowed grey-green-gold, with the warrior’s magic. He gave the Chief God some of the warm water infused with herbs, and rubbed the Chief God’s entire body with the remaining potion as he chanted human prayers, as well as, incantations that the Lord of The Universe had taught him in his cave, high in the Holy-Mystery Mountains. The Warrior God repeated this ritual every three hours for nine hours, before the Chief God opened his eyes. Another six hours of tea drinking, prayers and massaging passed before the Chief God could speak. In a whisper weak voice Olofi said “My son you can have anything you wish.” He then closed his eyes and slept.



*So I say to you,*

*Ask and it will be given to you;*

*search, and you will find;*

*knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

*Jesus Christ*



**I woke at ten-seventeen to find myself in the cemetery, but not alone.** My nephew Peter sat about three feet away from me. "How long have you been there?"

"About five minutes," Peter said. "I couldn't bring myself to wake you. You looked so peaceful, not worried about anything, or trying to resolve other people's problems. It's amazing to see you so calm and content. You are content?" Peter asked.

"I am very content, and I'm very happy for your company, even though you will have to leave or hide when the others arrive."

"I'll stay until they get here. I feel comfortable here. It's quiet and the trees are somehow soothing. ~~and waved his hand at the scene around~~ It's strange that I feel so good here. Maybe it's because I'm no longer afraid of winding up here. I've loved my time with you, Chris, and Francis, but we both know that I'll end up here soon enough. I will end up here won't I? I won't have to be buried somewhere else?" He asked these questions with such calmness that I ~~could feel~~ have thought as if he was talking about something mundane and ordinary.

"You'll be buried here, next to Aida."

"And where will you be buried if I take that spot?"

"I'm not going to be buried. My ashes are going into the Atlantic so that I can travel the world forever. I won't miss life that much. I'll miss the people that I love, but life itself won't be too great a loss for me. I find that as I grow older, I understand that I am much more a part of the spirits, than of the living," I said. "I have many years ahead of me, and many people to bury, but my life is only to prepare me for the existence that comes after death. But you shouldn't be talking about dying. You need to talk about living."

"But you're an anointed Santero, you're supposed to be buried."

"There are many things in all religions that the followers are supposed to do. I've never been very good with arbitrary rules—burial is one of them."

\_\_\_\_\_ The sound of a motorcade interrupted us, and I stood to watch the approaching hearse and limousines. Peter ran to an oak tree that stood about sixty feet away in the corner of the cemetery. The sleeping homeless person that sat with his back on the perimeter wall next to the tree didn't stir. The hearse stopped, and the riders of the chain of five limousines opened their

doors and started walking toward me, and the open grave. The mourners' surprise at seeing me showed in their faces: eyes opening wide, brows furrowing, and then the whispers started. My brother emerged from the first limousine stood for a moment beside the car, briefly stared at me, then looked around and seemed relieved that I was alone.

Sandra pulled her bulky frame from the limo and stood behind her husband. She looked at me, and then beyond me to the grave awning. She noticed a figure that quickly moved behind the trunk of the oak tree in the corner of the cemetery, ~~and~~ there was ~~have~~ something familiar about the thin figure. The children started to pop out of the limo, and drew her attention away from the tree. I watched all three children come out of the limo, and watched Sandra look toward the oak tree again. She ~~seemed to scan~~ scanned the cemetery, and noticed d the homeless man that leaned against the perimeter wall. But ~~;~~ didn't notice the figure that had just stretched out on the thick, fourth branch of the oak tree.

"I was hoping you wouldn't come," said Manny ~~to Alex~~.

"After doing all the work, and preparation, as father asked me to, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. But wouldn't you know it, I was hoping that some pressing drug deal would have kept you away."

"Please not in front of the children," said Sandra.

"Sorry," I said. "I made my peace with the old man, but your husband is still an open wound."

“Stop being such a pussy. We don’t like each other, we never have,” said Manny.  
“They’re my children and they need to know that what I say is what’s important in their lives.”  
He looked at Sandra and she instinctively backed away.

The mourners approached in groups of three to five, some of the women wailing, some of the men laughing, and several groups ~~passed-shared various~~ bottles of *Agua Ardiente* that were helping them get into the mood for a burial. Manny moved with the mourners toward the grave. The casket was removed from the hearse by six tall black men, heads covered with white bandanas, necks heavy with bead and bone necklaces, and bloody machetes strapped to their waists. A couple of Manny senior’s fellow Santeros preceded the coffin dousing the ground with Firewater, holy water, honey and assorted white flowers. Drums started to play, and women started to spin with large rolled bundles of smoldering herbs and thick incense sticks. The herbs and incense filled the air with a ~~heavy, sugarcane-~~grass smell. A group of seven muscled men in tight, white linen slacks cut off at the knees, and tight white T-shirts, ~~wore-wearing~~ bracelets of cowry seashells with green and yellow beads. ~~They~~ jumped spinning into the air as they spat Firewater onto the procession of mourners. Throbbing drums were joined by bells and whistles. The clamor was to alert the ~~Spirits-Orishas~~ to come and guide the deceased into the world of the dead, and the homeless man laydown and covered his head with his cardboard blanket.

Manny reached the open grave, and began to beat his chest, and tear his shirt from his body as tears streamed down his cheeks. I stood close to the tree that I had slept against, with my arms tightly crossed against my chest. I watched the controlled mayhem, and tried to keep myself from succumbing to the music, incense, and wailing. The drumming quickened, the whistles rose an octave, and I began to sweat and tremble. My guardian angel conquered my mind and entered my body—the possession was swift. I began to dance, spinning on my right

foot, and then leaping into the air laughing at the crowd of mourners, and landing in a crouch.

With each leap, I came closer to the grave. I could feel myself do these things, but thought or felt that it really wasn't me doing any of this. The Elder that had been walking slowly to the grave behind the coffin stepped in front of me after my third landing, just before I could roll into the grave, and placed his hands on my shoulders.

The short, briquette black, ninety-year-old elder struggled to restrain my guardian angel from leaping into the open grave and taking me with him. As large droplets of sweat dripped from his nose, and down his face, the Elder began to chant a prayer to calm the spirit:

"Lord of all Paths, help your son whom you now possess. Protect his body from injury, soothe his grieving soul, and Bring him back to us with his body stronger due to your presence, And his mind wiser by your blessing. You have his father, let that be enough."

The Elder filled his mouth with a mixture of holy water and firewater, and sprayed my face with the waters that bulged his cheeks. It took three sprays before I collapsed beside the grave. The Elder reached down and stroked my hair until my eyes opened. All the mourners had surrounded me and the Elder, [and were stroking my limp body](#) as they waited for Elegua to release me. Manny stood by the grave flushed with growing anger. I—not Elegua—had once again stolen the attention away from him. As I rose to my feet the mourners began to return to Manny, and his family, while Sandra smiled behind her husband, [seeming to enjoy](#) his discomfort.

The coffin reached the grave, and was placed on the coffin lift that would lower it slowly into the earth. The hired mourners encircled the grave, swaying, crying, drinking, and praying as

the [spirit](#) drums struck a slow, melancholy beat. The Elder raised his hand and all the noises ceased.

"We come to bury one of our priests. My friend, and my apprentice. Manuel Cedron senior was a man of vision and great strength. He was blessed with a firm relationship to [the Orishasspirit](#), and an understanding of the responsibility that the power of that relationship required. Now as we send him back to the world of spirits, let us all remember that the lessons that we do not learn here will have to be faced in the life that comes after death. Take heed my children, you will have to make your peace [in lifeas you live](#), or [in after deathyou die](#)." He looked at me and said, "Look for your father in your dreams, and remember the good, not just the bad." He then removed a white velvet pouch from his pants pocket, opened it and began to sprinkle the contents—a powder of dried spices, the ground bark of *Abre Camino* and sweet grass—over the coffin. When he was done, he grabbed a handful of blooms from the buckets of mixed white [flowers that had been placed around the grave by the women](#): carnations, daisies, mums, and dendrobiums [that had been placed around the grave by the women](#). He removed the flowers from the stalks and cast them onto the coffin. Finally, he kissed his hand and touched the coffin before moving away so the mourners could repeat his actions.

With the mourners finished, it was now the families turn at the ritual. Sandra and the children went first, [then Alex](#). Manny ~~was last; he~~ approached [the casket](#) crying, and tearing what was left of his tattered shirt from his body. When he reached down to grab his hand full of flowers, he [apparently](#) couldn't resist the power of all eyes fixed on him, and he slid beneath the casket into the grave screaming. "Why have you left me alone? What am I to do without you?" The Elder calmly walked to the grave, followed by two of the muscular men, knelt and quietly asked Manny to grab the men's hands and come out of the grave. Manny hesitated, but then took

hold of the extended hands and was lifted out. I could see ~~three~~several of the mourners giggling, and I hoped Manny wouldn't remove their bonuses from their payment envelopes.

I went last. I noiselessly cried as I grabbed my hand-full of white flowers and threw them onto my father's casket. "Have a safe journey Dad," I said. ~~Alex~~ Ritual complete I turned and nodded at the elder, and started to walk toward the back gate of the cemetery. ~~and~~ Sandra led the children to the waiting limousine. and I walked with my head lowered, and my hands in my pockets. Movement by the oak tree in the corner made Sandra turn her head, and she watched a thin figure climbed down from the tree. The thin figure started toward the gate to meet-intercept me, and reached the gate first, but I didn't notice Peter until I was upon him. I removed my left hand from my pants pocket, and draped my arm over his shoulder as we both walked through the cemetery gate. Peter turned toward Sandra and waved. I turned and saw Sandra as she started to walk toward us. She must have realized that the young man was not her nephew, but her son.

"Where do you think you're going?" Manny asked, as his hand clamped onto her elbow. She hesitated for a second or two, and replied, "I just needed some air before getting into the car. All the incense has irritated my eyes." Manny looked at her and saw the tears running down her face. In a rare moment of compassion—or maybe the rag was bothering him—he took the last piece of his shirt that hung from his waist, and gave it to her so she could wipe her eyes. She took the strip of linen, and started walking back to the car. She didn't wipe her eyes, and dropped the strip before getting into the limousine.

#### MYTH PART FOUR



**Olofi woke to see his warrior son standing by a window softly** blowing his silver ram's horn into the night. The sound that he produced was a low bellow, and a moment later a large black raven with red eyes and a silver streak down its back, alighted on the marble windowsill. The bird moved its head to look at the Chief God, and Elegua turned to face his father.

"All I want is for my companion to be allowed to accompany me wherever I go. Never to be barred from being by my side."

"Are you sure that you want to waste the gift that I am offering you on the company of a human? You could have my kingdom or my garden, why waste this gift?" asked the Chief God.

"I do not want to rule and I have a garden of my own. All that I ask is that my companion be at my side whenever I wish it," replied the Warrior God.

"So be it."

The Chief God asked the Warrior God to stay with him as he recuperated. The Warrior God told his father that he would stay in the palace during the day, but at sunset he would leave to sleep in his cottage, and return at sunrise. The Chief God was disappointed that the Warrior God would prefer a human's company to his. But, since the Warrior God had saved his life he allowed him to leave at sunset and return at sunrise. The other Gods were also staying at the palace, and they were jealous of the Warrior God, and his companion's special treatment. Their jealousy of the mortal grew more dangerous every night after the Warrior God's departure.

For a week, the Chief God had dinner every night with the other Gods, as he recuperated. Every night they would complain about the Warrior God. As the days passed they began to tell

the Chief God that the Warrior God cared more for his companion than he did for the Chief God. At first the Chief God defended the Warrior God, but, as the week passed he became irritated with the Warrior God's absence at dinner. At the end of the week the Chief God was feeling so well, that he decided to have a banquet. The other Gods convinced the Chief God to invite all the mortal kings and queens of his realm. When the Warrior God was told that the mortal kings and queens had been invited he asked the Chief God if he may bring his companion to the banquet. The Chief God became angry and told him that his companion was not royalty, and had already been blessed with more than any other mortal, and could not enter his palace. Elegua decided not to press his father, and have his companion by his side. The other gods taunted Elegua as he left the palace that night. He would tell his companion that he would have to attend the banquet alone.

While the Warrior God was away that evening, the other gods convinced the Chief God not to allow anyone at the banquet to leave before sunrise. The Warrior God attended the banquet alone, and tried to leave the banquet when the midnight gong signaled the time, but when he attempted to open the banquet doors he found them locked. He called to the guards outside the doors to let him out, but they told him that by the Chief God's order, no one could leave before sunrise. He returned to his chair at the banquet table.

"Why didn't you tell me that I'd have to stay until sunrise?" he asked his father.

"Is it so wrong that I want you by side at this celebration?"

"You should have told me, and not trapped me here."

"I'm your father and I don't have to ask or tell you anything. You are to do as instructed without complaint."

“This is why I left this palace and its intrigue. I was never more than a killer to fight your enemies,” said Elegua.

Olofi rose quickly from his chair, overturning it. The music and dancing stopped, and all eyes looked at the pair.

“I am your father, and creator of all you see. I do not have to advise you of anything, or ask that you attend me. You are to do as you are told,” yelled Olofi.

Elegua didn’t respond or look at his father. He was silent, and sat straight and still. One of the attendants raised his chair and Olofi sat back down. The warrior god sat without moving for three hours, and watched as the gods and guests drank and danced.

At four in the morning, the Chief God collapsed and fell into a deep coma. All the gods tried to revive him to no avail. They asked the royal humans if they could do anything for the Chief God, but none of the royal doctors could revive the Chief God. An hour passed, as all the gods and doctors tried to revive the Chief God. As the hour reached five, two of the seven other gods collapsed and became comatose. The remaining gods were terrified that they would also succumb to the sickness that had befallen the Chief God. They pleaded with the Warrior God to save them as he had previously saved the Chief God.

He told them that he could not help them because no one was allowed out of the palace until sunrise, which was an hour away. The gods went to the banquet doors and screamed at the guards to open them, but, the guards responded that only the Chief God could open the doors because he had put a spell on them. They told the guards that the Chief God was dying, but there was nothing they could do. The Chief God had not told them how to break the spell.

The remaining gods begged the Warrior God to help them. He told them that he could not. All his herbs, and potions were with his companion, and he needed the plants and his companion to cure them. The royals meanwhile hoped that all the gods would die. Then they would be able to take their lands and riches. Until this desire surfaced in their hearts they had not been afflicted with the illness that had attacked the gods. But, as they plotted amongst themselves, one by one they collapsed.

At six, as the sun rose the spell was broken, and the guards opened the doors to the banquet hall. The Warrior God breathed deeply as he walked passed the guards, and into the rising sun.

**It had been almost two years since Sandra had seen her son,** but the night of his banishment was still a sharp and painful memory. What she regretted most about that night was her own inaction, and inability to help her son. It started with Manny arriving home in a fury.

"Sandra, where the fuck are you! I want to see you now!" he had shouted, as he walked into the foyer, and kicked the entry table to his right. Sandra heard the Steuben vase with its purple tulips strike the marble floor and shatter into shards of expensive crystal. "I'll have to get another replacement," she said to herself, as she hurried to the girl's room.

"Sandra!" he yelled again.

She had heard him the first time, but she was scrambling to hide the children. She hid the girls in their closets tucking them behind large boxes filled with old toys that she kept there precisely for this purpose, and then she hid her son under his bed. What could possibly be

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wrong? She thought. Did one of his mistresses disappear again? Could it be about his father? It didn't matter she'd have to deal with his anger.

"Manny. What's wrong?" she asked from the top of the stairs.

"Your son is visiting gay bars. I saw him myself. He was groping and kissing some faggot. He stopped when I pulled them apart and punched the guy in the face." Crystal crushed beneath his feet as he furiously paced back and forth. "He didn't go to basketball practice, or the after-season party. He was out looking for a dick to suck."

Sandra walked down the stairs, watching her husband kick one of the thin legs of the mahogany entry table splitting it in two. Don't get too close to him. she reminded herself. He threw one of the halves of the wooden leg at the mirror that hung above where the table had stood. The mirror shattered into thousands of sparkling pieces that reflected little points of light onto the walls and ceiling.

"How did you find him?" Sandra asked, standing at the base of the stairs.

Manny leapt the five feet that separated them, and struck her cheek with such force that she was thrown against the wall.

"It's none of your damned business how I found him. But I did find him, and as of this moment he doesn't live here any longer. Is that clear?"

She leaned against the wall crying, and wiping blood from the corner of her mouth. Maybe I could poison him; mix something into his cocaine she thought.

"Is that clear?!"

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"Yes." I should have killed him long ago.

Sandra looked at her husband as he sat [in the limousine](#) with legs splayed, readjusting his groin, and remembered the look of disappointment on Peter's face as he left their house that night, and walked out of her life.

**The bar closed at its usual time, just before the witching hour.** The owner and patrons had rushed to separate Manny from the couple. It was bizarre and comical, to see four drag queens pull Manny by the hair and push him against the bar. Manny was going to attack, but saw four or five more queers with bottles standing [ing](#) behind the drag queens [that pinned him to the bar](#). ~~so he~~ [He turned pushed himself free](#), then [turned](#) and left ~~the bar~~ under the watchful eyes of the [bottle wielding festive drag queen](#) mob.

Peter and his companion were tended to with towels and ice. The girls gave them shots of tequila to ease the pain, and dull the adrenaline. These ladies were used to men that thought themselves more masculine than they were. It takes guts to shop for size twelve pumps to match a purple sequined dress. What they had learned from years of closeted denial, is that it takes a real man to be a drag queen—at least that's the reasoning that got them through the day. The drinking, congratulations, and pride in their defense of the couple continued for ten or fifteen minutes before the owner said that he needed to start closing. It took another twenty minutes for everyone to trickle out—last to leave were Peter and his companion.

"That bastard has been here before, and I never liked him, but I didn't think he was the violent, jealous type. You two need to be careful," said the bar owner as he pecked their cheeks goodnight.

Peter sat in the car staring at the darkened house. "You should stay with me. You don't have to go back to that bedlamite of a father," said the man with the swollen eye.

—He was a nice man. Gentle, generous, and he loved Peter. He was ~~only~~ ten years older than him, very handsome, and most importantly not abusive.

"I can't stay with you. He'll come looking for me, and you'll be the one in trouble. Remember, it's called contributing to the delinquency of a minor." He hated leaving the car. He wanted to stay and return to swollen eye's apartment, but he had to be careful. He had to protect him from his father.

"I feel sorry for my mom she'll have to pay for this evening," he said. Peter left the car and walked to the white wrought iron fence that surrounded the property. He easily scaled the fence, and ran to the bougainvillea trellis at the side of the house. Peter carefully started his well-practiced ascent toward his bedroom window stopping only to watch the car U-turn and disappear down the darkened street. He felt more alone than he had ever felt—completely without support, or love. The bougainvillea reminded him that it had very dangerous thorns, and he climbed slowly trying to avoid further encounters, but he never came-away unscathed. One more year and he'd be free. He didn't know what he'd do. If his current love is real, then maybe his life would improve. If it turned-out to be just an affair, his options were minimal—hustling is always an option, and even that was better than staying here. "I'll figure it out tomorrow," he said to the bougainvillea.

He'd done this climb many times and knew where the best handholds were, and the strongest branches to place his feet on. In four minutes, he was lifting his eight-paned bedroom window. He quietly eased himself into the bedroom and walked to his bathroom without turning

on any lights. He stood in the darkness listening for a minute before feeling safe enough to turn on the bathroom light. Peter started a hot shower, undressed and then stood beneath the shower with his eyes closed. The water washed away all the day's troubles, and he could forget about his father for a few minutes. Why did I come back? I should have escaped. I can't destroy Tony's life, in ten months I'll be legal—just wait, he thought. He stayed under the hot spray, not moving or lathering. The water started to cool, soaked and satiated he stopped the shower, stepped onto the bathroom mat and slowly dried himself. The cotton bath towel quickly absorbed the water from his hairless seventeen-year-old body. He turned off the bathroom light, and walked into his dark bedroom with the towel wrapped around his waist.

Manny's fist sprang from beside the dresser, and struck his right cheek. The second blow hit his sternum forcing the air out of his lungs. The third blow only partially connected with his left temple. He saw the fourth blow coming, and his youth helped him to avoid it connecting with his chin. Peter threw the wet bath towel into his father's face, and dashed for the bedroom door. Manny reached out and grabbed his hair, jerking him back. Peter's arms flayed at his sides searching for anything to use as a weapon. His right hand landed on his latest baseball trophy that sat atop his dresser. He grabbed the trophy and when his father pulled him close enough to strike, he jammed the trophy as hard as he could into his father's midsection, but Manny didn't let go. Peter rammed the trophy into Manny's midsection again, and quickly once more. Manny loosened his grip.

"You little faggot, I won't have one of my sons become a dick sucker. You're going to be a man if I have to beat you every day of your life."

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Peter managed a half turn, and the bat from the trophy smashed into his father's face tearing a two-inch gash in his left cheek. Manny let go of his hair and Peter ran toward the door.

"What the hell were you doing at the bar?" Peter shouted. "Looking for a dick to stick up your ass. I know it's not the first time you've been there" Instead of speaking he should have run, but he was tired of running—tired of this dictatorship.

His father grabbed his shoulder and spun him around like a rag doll. Manny grabbed Peter's throat and pinned him against the door. Peter tried to strike, but Manny blocked the trophy and Peter struggled to breathe. Chocking, he pulled at his father's hand but couldn't budge it. His throat throbbed, and his eyes stung from the sweat dripping into them. With all his strength, he thrust his left knee into his father's groin. Manny's grip loosened. Peter gasped for air, and then kicked Manny again. This time his father let go and fell to his knees.

"You're nothing but a frustrated faggot," Peter tried to yell, "and if you ever come near me again I'll cut-off your balls and shove them down your throat."

Peter's knee struck his father's face breaking his nose. The final blow was with the broken trophy to the back of Manny's head. Manny hit the floor holding his swelling testicles.

"I'm leaving now."

Peter grabbed his dirty shirt and jeans from the bathroom floor, while clenching his weapon and watching his father. He opened the door to his bedroom and ran into his mother.

"Where are you going?" Sandra asked.

"Away from him and this house," he said. "You never stood up for me, yourself or any of us. You never tried to stop him from beating us, and I won't let him beat me again."

Peter felt the familiar disillusionment that he always felt toward his family, but suddenly there was a finality that he had never felt. "I feel sorry for you. You're going to stay with the bastard, when you should have left or killed him years ago." He looked at his mother, but wouldn't allow her tears to sway him. "Good bye."

Peter descended the staircase three steps at a time, walked to the front door and turned to look at his mother one last time. His brother and sisters emerged from their rooms in time to watch their naked and bloody brother dotted with light from the mirror fragments, close the door behind him. It had all just ended: abuse, fear, food, clothes, school, and family. Everything was gone, and yet everything was better.

Peter stood in front of the thick door and vomited. Empty, he began to cry then quickly dressed in his legacy: a pair of dirty jeans, and a sweat-soaked shirt that was now spotted with blood. No one approached the door, no one checked on his condition, no one came after him. Disappointed with his family, and yet content with his actions he climbed over the gate. This was the last time he would ever have to climb a gate, or a treacherous trellis.

He had always concocted victorious departure scenes: his father begging for forgiveness, his father bloodied and unconscious, and sometimes his mother joining him as he left. But the reality was that he was now on his own, and the shakes started when he reached the street corner. Maybe he should have been nicer to his mother; maybe she should have loved them more; maybe there is still a future for them.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Time to go," he said to the darkness.

*Religion is meant to teach us true spiritual  
human character.*

*It is meant for self-transformation. It is  
meant to transform anxiety into peace,  
arrogance into humility, envy into*

*compassion, to awaken the pure soul in  
man and his love for the Source, which is  
God.*

*Radhanath Swami*



**Peter opened the door to his room,** and found his cousin lying on his bed. He quietly walked to the bed, and pounced on the sleeping Christopher. His cousin pushed hard against him throwing Peter onto the floor. Peter laughed as Chris apologized.

"You shouldn't go around pouncing on sleeping people. I could have really hurt you," he said, and then helped Peter to his feet.

"You couldn't hurt anyone, you push like a girl. You're just lucky that I weigh as little as a girl or you'd be begging me to get off your chest. But, it's nice to see you, and I guess you're here to be informed about gramps' burial."

Peter sat on the bed and leaned against the headboard. Chris pulled the rattan chair from the corner of the room, and placed it beside the bed. All the rooms in the healing house were furnished the same: —a double bed, a rattan chair, desk, and dresser—all of which sat on a large choir rug. A full-length mirror was attached to the closet door, and reflected the light streaming in from the window. —The occupants chose the color for the walls, and all other accessories. Peter's room was a mild yellow, with a white-washed pine floor. The pictures on the walls were all framed in simple high-gloss, black plastic. They were charcoal sketches of his brother, sisters, uncle, cousin and Francis. The two largest sketches were a self-portrait, and a colored-pencil sketch of Alex's house, done in reds, greens, purples and blues. Christopher would have given anything to be able to draw half as well as Peter, but his talent was with words the spirits.

"You should have gone. The spectacle was wonderful. There was incense, flowers, drums, bells and whistles. Some of the men were dressed in tight cutoffs and muscle shirts. There were some beautiful bodies jumping into the air. Oh, I forgot you're still undecided as to what you like. Well, these guys were perfect for me." Peter adjusted his pillows behind him. "I know. I'm terrible. It was my grandfather's burial, and I'm checking out the leaping bodies. Well they were the best part of the show, except for your father. As many times as I've seen him possessed it still amazes-freaks-me-out me. I could feel his guardian angel from the tree limb that

I was lying on. My hairs still bristle with the memory.” Peter paused and rubbed the hairs on his forearms.

"He sparkled as he started to dance, roll, and leap into the air. That elder guy, granddad's Padrino, was holding onto your father, and placing himself between your dad and the grave. I couldn't see your dad's eyes, but he must have had that spaced-out look he gets when he's possessed. You know, he looks at you, but he's not really looking at you." Peter rubbed his forearms again. "Everybody started to surround him leaving my stupid father and family alone by the coffin. They all wanted to touch your old man, or I guess his possessing spirit. The elder guy lifted his hands to the sky and spoke in *Locumi*. I didn't understand a word, but your dad was back several minutes later."

Peter stretched and pounded the pillows before reclining, and then smiled mischievously at him. "Now, of course you didn't expect my father to just let your dad have the spot light. The stupid old man turns around and jumps into the grave, screaming and asking why the old man had to leave. I just started laughing so hard that I almost fell out of the tree. I wasn't the only one that found it funny, you could see quite a few people pointing and laughing. It was outrageous Chris. You really should have been there."

"That's a nice story, but you're leaving your mother out of it," ~~replied said~~ Chris. "Did she see you? Did she recognize you? Did you try to see her? Did my dad try to speak with her? What happened with her? And, don't tell me that you don't give a shit about her." He looked directly into Peter's eyes. "Take your time, but, you are going to tell me."

**Alex entered the house and as usual,** Cleo, a long-haired dachshund, was at the door wagging her tail. No, she was not named after Cleopatra, but Cleo Laine the jazz singer, and she was the Alex alarm. She would announce his return by running to whichever door he would be using, barking and whining until he entered the house. Erick, the sixteen-year-old, short haired red dachshund, would slowly rouse himself from sleep when he heard her commotion and join her. This time Francis joined the dogs in the kitchen by the garage door. It was noon, and a lunch of meatloaf, [peas and onions](#), and German potato salad was plated and waiting in the top wall oven.

"Well, I should go away more often if this is the greeting I'll receive upon my return."

Alex bent to pet the dogs, and then rose to kiss Francis.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving. Funerals always make me hungry."

Francis looked at Alex's face, focusing on his eyes. "It looks like your guardian made an appearance."

"I guess it's no use trying to disguise those intrusions from you, but I know you still have a difficult time with spiritual possession," he said, and then sat at the kitchen bistro table where Francis had placed his lunch. He took a moment to thank God for his food, and then proceeded to fill his mouth with meatloaf, potatoes and peas—his cheeks bulged from the amount of food. He chewed rapidly, and moaned his approval as he closed his eyes, and rocked his head from side to side. He took a large swallow of ice water from the glass that Francis had placed next to his plate, and his cheeks emptied to make room for more.

"Slow down, and tell me what happened."

Alex took another swallow of food and water. "It was, more or less what I expected. People crying, beating their breasts, singing, dancing, gossiping, and melodramatics." He paused for a smaller helping of food before continuing. "Sandra, [and](#) the kids ~~and my brother~~ were there, and Peter also showed up, but he went and hid in an oak tree. My father's Padrino was there, and all these hired mourners wailing, filling the air with incense, and strewing flowers everywhere. Men were jumping, drums pounded, bells ringing, and shrill whistles blowing. Manny of course, couldn't resist the temptation to make a fool of himself. He started to cry and tear his stiffly starched linen shirt to shreds. I tried to stay in the background, and in control, but before I knew it I was somewhere else, and Elegua had taken my place."

His glassy, dilated eyes looked through the kitchen window at the choppy waters of the bay, and he chewed some more food. "I was gone from the rest of the show, [or I think I was the show-but](#). When I returned, sweaty and soar, we threw our white flowers on the casket and said our goodbyes. Then my brother threw himself into the grave, asking why the old man had left him. I wish they would have buried them together, it would have made my life a lot less complicated."

He swallowed the last third of his ice water in one gulp, wiped his lips with his napkin, thanked God again, as well as Francis for the food, and rose from the table with his plate and glass in hand. He walked to the double sink, rinsed the plate, fork and glass, before placing them in the dishwasher. Francis had walked into the den as Alex rinsed everything, and sat down in one of the matching rattan chairs that faced the entertainment center on the north wall of the den.



Alex stopped in the doorway to stare at the bay again, then walked to the east facing wall of sliding glass doors, and pressed his forehead and nose against the glass.

"Sorry, I'm still a little disoriented, but the food has helped," he said. "I can't help but feel that the old man's funeral is just the beginning of a three-ring circus, and I'm saddened by the thought that I'm correct." His tears started, as they had done many times before, and Francis went to comfort him as he done many times before.

**The limousine stopped at the entry gate to the house,** and Sandra realized that they were home. The limousine drove to the front entrance, and she quickly opened her door. She didn't wait for the children or Manny, and hurriedly entered the house leaving the waiting housekeeper at the open door. She climbed the stairs by twos, and breathing heavily she raced down the hall to her bedroom. She retrieved her purse and car keys and was coming out of the bedroom when Manny caught up with her.

"Where are you going in such a rush?" he asked.

"I'm going to church. This funeral has upset me more than I thought it would. I can't seem to get the thoughts of death out of my mind. I can still smell the incense, and hear all the crying and wailing. I need to sit in a quiet church and pray."

"And what about your children, and all the people that will be here later?"

"I'll tell Maria to feed the kids." Sandra reminded herself to slow down.

"I don't expect to be more than an hour, or hour-and-a-half, and Maria has everything ready." She looked at Manny and smiled submissively. How I hate this man, she thought.

"I'll be back before anyone arrives." With those words, she then descended the stairs, and made her way to Maria in the kitchen.

Manny stood at the top of the stairs watching his wife casually turn towards the kitchen. He entered the bedroom, and changed into a black Brooks Brothers polo shirt, forced his feet into black gabardine slacks without removing his soft-soled loafers. Sandra slowly drove her car out of the garage as Manny headed toward the kitchen. Manny grabbed a bottle of Heineken from the refrigerator and opened it before entering the garage. He unlocked a tall padlocked metal storage cabinet, and retrieved a black device that looked like a Palm Mate computer. He pressed the on button, and the eight-by-eight-inch screen glowed green. A map of Miami slowly started to crawl across the screen, and when the city covered the entire screen a red dot started to flash on Northwest thirty-sixth street heading toward the 112 Expressway entrance. He watched the red dot's progress as he finished his beer. He didn't get into his car until the dot passed the Northwest twenty-seventh avenue exit, heading toward Interstate 95. "Interesting, where the hell is she going," said Manny to himself. He pressed the garage door opener on the visor of his Mercedes, and threw the empty bottle of beer into an open garbage can before driving in pursuit of the red dot.

Sandra drove at seventy-five, weaving in and out of traffic, and watching the clock to make sure that she didn't take more than fifteen minutes to get to Biscayne Boulevard. Normally it was a twenty to twenty-five-minute drive, but saving even five minutes meant more time with Peter. The traffic on the Boulevard was light and she took all of five minutes to drive from the thirty-sixth street exit to twenty-second street; she turned onto twenty-second street, and parked the car ten feet from the entrance to Alex's house. She wasn't thinking of Manny—or of the

consequences if he found-out that she was here. Peter was all that she thought about, all that she wanted was to hold her son.

The bay at the end of the block was choppy, and water hitting the seawall sent foamy sprays onto the street and sidewalk as she ran to the entry gate, and pushed hard and long against the intercom bell.

"Who is it?" asked a woman. How strange to hear a woman's voice on the intercom? It must be the housekeeper, she thought.

"I need to see Alex," she said.

"And who are you?"

"Tell him it's Sandra his sister-in-law, and please hurry." She looked down the street, half expecting to see Manny's car turning the corner. The gate release buzzer sounded, she flung the door open, and rushed onto the coral rock entry path. She closed the gate with such force that it shook with a loud clang. Sandra ran to the door, reaching it as it opened. Alex stood in the doorway, and caught her as she fell forward trying to knock on the open door.

"Easy," said Alex, as her knuckles struck his chest. Her left hand grabbed his arm to balance herself. She looked into his eyes and started to cry.

"It's O.K. You're safe here. It's when you leave that you must be careful. Manny isn't going to forgive you for coming here."

Alex and Francis guided the sobbing Sandra to the living room couch. She dropped onto the couch, and started to shiver. "Sit with her while I get some whiskey."

Francis sat next to Sandra, fidgeting like a teenager on his first date.

"Here take a sip of this," Alex said, as he placed the glass to Sandra's lips. She was used to following orders, and dutifully swallowed. The first sip warmed her mouth and throat; the second warmed her cheeks and chest; the third sip warmed her entire body. Maybe Alex could be her ally? Hopefully he could help her recover what she had lost, and she had lost so much more than just her eldest son.

"I'm sorry for barging in like I did, and for being a hysterical woman, but your brother has me on a very short leash, and I just panicked. I only have thirty to forty minutes before I should leave. Please take me to Peter," she said, and then took another sip of the strengthening whiskey. "I saw you two leave the cemetery. I wanted to run to him, and was starting in your direction, but Manny stopped me. I have to see Peter," she repeated. "I have to beg his forgiveness for not helping him with his father. I wasn't strong enough. I'm not sure that I'm strong enough now, but I will not lose any more of my children, and if I can I'd like to regain the son that I have lost. Please Alex, you must help me. You're the only thing that Manny fears. Help me get my son back." She squeezed his left forearm with her free hand, and looked pleadingly at his face.

"I can't force Peter to come see you, but, I will strongly suggest that he does." Alex gently released her grip on his arm. "Stay here with Francis." He walked to the sliding doors, then outside into the garden and towards the healing house. Sandra sipped the last of her whiskey trying to think of something to say to Francis. This was the first time she had met the man.

"I want to thank you for taking care of Peter," she said.

“Peter’s been great. He and Chris are always together, and complement each other very well.”

“I don’t know my nephew, we’ve never met. But Manny has loudly complained that it should have been one of his children to inherit the family connection with the spiritual.”

“Is Alex’s power as great as his father said it was?” asked Sandra.

“My opinion is biased, but yes he really is quite amazing,” said Francis. “What I admire most about him is that he isn’t perfect, and doesn’t try to be.”

Francis took the glass and went to get some more whiskey.

“I’m sorry that I never came to see you and Alex. It never dawned on me that Peter would come to his uncle. He had never met him, didn’t know why he was disowned, and his name was only spoken in the house two or three times. The kids knew better than to ask their father about Alex.”

She took the glass that Francis offered her.

“Peter never came to see us,” Francis said. “We went to dinner at a restaurant that a friend of ours had just opened on South Beach. We were having drinks at the bar, when Peter arrived with the man that he was living with. Alex recognized Peter immediately. Alex stared at the boy, and ate a couple of peanuts, before walking to their table and bluntly asking him if he was Peter Cedron. The man that Peter was with began to protest Alex’s intrusion, but the boy replied that he was, and asked Alex ‘Are you my uncle?’ Alex said yes, and Peter bolted from his chair and hugged Alex tightly. We moved to a table for four, and listened as Peter told us about what happened after his father had found him at the bar with the man that he was now having

dinner with, and living with. Alex shook with anger as Peter told us the story. Alex rose from his chair, walked over to Peter, and gave him a bear hug. 'I promise you I'll never let him touch you again,' Alex said. Peter cried, I cried—even the two queens at the table next to us cried." Francis sipped some bourbon from the glass that he had poured himself.

Sandra studied the man who sat next to her. She could not believe the story he was telling her. She had not imagined Alex would help her son in such a way, but, she didn't know the man that was her husband's brother. She figured that the brothers had been trained the same, and shared similar personalities.

"Peter moved in three months later. He told us that he and his lover had both been diagnosed with HIV. But his lover wasn't strong enough to fight, and Peter found him one morning sitting in the bathtub full of blood. He did leave a will naming Peter as beneficiary, and Alex as trustee of his estate." Francis paused to finish his bourbon.

Sandra was dumbstruck. HIV, suicide, an uncle and his lover, and a nephew that she had never met. She didn't know what she had been expecting to find in Alex's home, but she hadn't been expecting any of this. Now she understood the estrangement and the hatred. She didn't know what to say, so she asked, "Does Peter ever mention me?"

"He's mentioned you, in my presence, a couple of times, and I know that he has spoken to Alex about you. But, you should wait and speak to Peter directly."

Alex opened the sliding door and entered the living room. Sandra started to cry before Alex could deliver his message. "He won't see you now, but if you'll come back tomorrow afternoon at two, and can stay for a couple of hours, he'll talk to you then. He says twenty or thirty minutes is not enough time, and he wants to make sure that you really want to see him, and

not just ease your conscience." Alex sat next to Sandra. "I'm sorry but I can't force him. The two of you have to come to an understanding on your own."

"He's my son. I can't just walk away. I must see him. To tell him how sorry I am."

"Then come back tomorrow. Tell whomever answers the door that you're here to see Peter and they'll let you in."

She placed her empty glass on the wrought iron coffee table, rose from the sofa and calmly walked to the front door—the whiskey had had the desired effect and she was less anxious. Alex and Francis followed her. She turned towards them as she grasped the doorknob and said, "Tell him that I've always loved him, and I've suffered tremendously since he left. All I want is the opportunity to be his mother again." Sandra opened the door, and her eyes squinted as she walked out into the bright sunshine. She felt as though she were lost in a strange city, in a strange life.

**Manny made a slow U-turn, passed the entry gate,** and then headed towards Biscayne Boulevard as they stepped onto the porch. Manny didn't wait to see who came out of the house with Sandra.

"I need to be rid of him," he said. "How stupid can she be?" Manny asked himself as he turned the Mercedes north onto Biscayne boulevard. "The bitch thought that I would believe that bullshit about death and incense upsetting her." He held the steering wheel with his left elbow while his hands unscrewed the five-gram cocaine vile that he had removed from his pocket. "I'm going to beat the cunt to a pulp." He grabbed the steering wheel with his left hand, and with his right hand raised the vile to his nostril. He inhaled two thirds of the contents, shaking his head as

the cocaine hit the back of his throat. He emptied what remained in the vile with his left nostril, and shuddered as the cocaine fed his anger.

Not satisfied, Manny again reached into his right pants pocket. He swerved into the left lane causing horns to blare, and a couple of motorists to curse and shoot him the finger. He didn't bother to acknowledge the motorists, or apologize for his intrusion. His prize in hand he put his elbow to the steering wheel and proceeded to open his second vile.

As he emptied the second vile, the car reached the thirty-sixth street ramp onto State Road 195. This time he didn't shudder, but the usual coke-induced euphoria was noticeably absent. Instead the cocaine anger was swelling. His hands tightened their grip on the steering wheel, and his speed jumped from thirty-five at the bottom of the ramp, to fifty-five as he entered the highway. He narrowly avoided ramming a Ford Explorer, as his speed jumped and he darted across three lanes of west-bound traffic. Finally, in the far-left lane and no car in front of him, his speed climbed to eighty-eight. How to punish Sandra, he thought. A beating will not be sufficient. I'll have to devise an intense, and more permanent punishment.

**The afternoon was hot and humid, even though it was late November.** The window air conditioner buzzed as it cooled Peter's room, and the boys lay on the choir rug with their heads propped on large floor pillows. They stared at the ceiling fan as it slowly turned and circulated the warm air from the ceiling down the walls, and pulled the cool air up from the floor.

"I can't believe that she just expects the last two years to disappear. She's never tried to find me; never tried to help; and now she wants to ease her conscience," Peter said a little too loudly.



Christopher wondered if Peter's loudness was due to the air conditioner, or just his old pain resurfacing. Chris knew that Peter did want a mother again. Chris wished that he had had the opportunity to see his own mother—maybe someday he will.

“Could it be that she really is sorry for not having done anything? Maybe she did try to find you. If you don't speak to her, you'll never know.”

“I don't know if I want back into that family. Why should I take a step backward after having come so far? I have a new life now. It may be a short one, but why should I stress myself out? I need to focus on my health and spirit.”

“What about your brother and sisters? Maybe you can help your mother help them. You had the courage and strength to stand up for yourself. They may need you to show them that they can count on each other, and you,” Chris said. “And by the way stop this I'm dying crap. You're not dying; you're getting stronger every day. I *know* this to be true. So, stop anticipating your death and take a stand against your father. He took your life away from you, but you have it back now.”

**Sandra drove slowly.** Not worrying about the time or what she was going to tell Manny. She looked at the sunshine-blue sky, and felt a whiskey and sky induced peace that had long been missing. She noticed the new rows of palms that had been planted in the highway median. Beautiful Cuban Royal palms, forty to fifty feet tall, with green heads that sprouted and supported dark emerald fronds. I love these palms, they're so beautiful, she thought. She was so caught up in the palms that she almost missed her exit. She quickly swerved into the exit lane to the loud protest of the car she had too cutoff. Sandra looked into her rearview mirror at the angry motorist, mouthed an apology, and she raised her hand to reinforce that apology. She turned onto

Miami Springs Drive, which runs parallel to the Okeechobee canal that feeds directly into the everglades. The northern perimeter of Miami International Airport was five blocks south of the house, and the back of the house abutted the Okeechobee canal, sitting in the middle of one-and-a-half acres.

The original house had been built in 1923—her father-in-law had given them the property as a wedding present. Miami Springs had many old houses on large lots that had been restored wherever possible, and the neighborhood had prospered because they were out of the flight paths for the airport. Their house had been remodeled from its original four bedrooms, two bath, dining room, and Florida room Mediterranean, into an eight bedroom and nine bath Moorish style home, with an attached four-car garage. The dining room and Florida room had not been changed. They were large grand rooms with twelve-foot ceilings, Florida pine floors, and scrolled plaster moldings. A large pool with a cabana and outdoor kitchen was nestled in the middle of a tropical garden, and a wood deck partially over-hanged the canal, with an air boat pointed toward the everglades. The property was surrounded on three sides by a four-foot-high coral rock wall that was crowned with three feet of wrought iron spears and scroll work, and the stucco exterior of the house was painted a gold-yellow. Sandra waited for the gate to open and thought about what she would say to Manny. I should have married someone else, she thought, anyone else would have been better. Too late for that, but not too late to make a change. Manny opened the garage door into the kitchen as she removed her key from the ignition.

“How was your church visit?” Manny asked.

“It was quiet and refreshing, but still a little depressing,” Sandra said. She knew better than to offer many details. Could I kill this man?

“What church did you go to?” You stupid bitch he thought.

“La Hermita.” Why does he want to know what church I went to?

“Why so far away when you have a church four blocks across the canal?” Let’s see how creative a liar you can be.

“I wanted to be by the water. I was hoping it would settle my nerves.” She was careful not to touch him as she entered the kitchen. You must be stronger than you’ve ever been, she reminded herself.

“Did it?”

“Did it what?” Sandra said as she looked for the housekeeper.

“Settle your nerves.”

“It helped, but I’m still a little depressed and very tired. This funeral has drained me of all my energy. Where is Maria? The house should start to fill with family and friends soon.”

“She’s with the kids getting them ready.”

“After school tomorrow, I’ll take the kids to spend some time with my mother. She’s not feeling well, and a visit from the kids might raise her spirits, and I know my father would like to see them. I will also do some shopping for the kids. Do you need anything?”

“No, I don’t need anything. I have all the information that I need.”

Sandra slowly climbed the stairs to the second floor and stopped at the landing, “What do you mean you have all the information that you need?”

“All the information I need to plan my chores for tomorrow. You’ll be busy and so will I.”

**It was four o’clock and all the residents were in the living room** talking amongst themselves, while waiting for Francis and Alex. Their weekly house meetings were mandatory, and one of the most important components for discovering a cure. Francis had wanted to cancel this week’s meeting, but Alex had said that the living needed to be cared for as much as the dead. Peter and Chris were seated together on one of the two matching love seats. Phil sat in one of four white wicker wing back chairs, the chair farthest from Stan. Phil was fifty-one years old, five feet seven inches tall, thin, and generally mean-spirited. Stan was also fifty-one, but six feet two inches tall, once muscular, and generally even-spirited. Phil and Stan shared the same disease, Parkinson’s. They also shared an intense dislike for each other. Phil was wealthy, and never knew what it was like to lack anything. Stan was blue-collar, a mechanic that had a good simple life filled with women, and whiskey. Stan sat on one of eight oversized cotton floor pillows that dotted the red and blue oriental wool rug. All the residents disliked Phil—generally, most people disliked Phil.

Maria was a pretty petite woman battling ovarian cancer. Jane had been a motorcycle dyke until her heroin use, and shared needles gave her HIV. Andrew was a gentle soul, a professor of American literature at Florida International University. His disease was Scleroderma, which not only gave his skin the look and feel of hardened, cracked leather, but had now invaded his liver and kidneys. They sat in the three remaining wicker chairs.

These are the current residents of this house. This is a boarding house, but the inhabitants are a collection of desperate lives that are looking to live just a little longer. Alex didn't always agree with wanting to live a little longer, he had that in common with his father, but he did understand that he could help someone not only live a little longer, but he could help them to discover themselves before they died. All the past and present residents of this Healing House had somehow found their way to Alex's door. The only person that Alex had ever gone in search of was Francis.

The living room was painted a gentle sky-blue, and the accompanying music was provided by several New Age artists, Buddhist, and Benedictine monks. Twelve tall, white candles were spread throughout the room, their flames slightly flickering from the soft breeze of the ceiling fan. The sheer navy blue curtains were drawn closed, and the sunshine cast a soothing blue hue into the room. The antique Barbados serving cupboard was stocked with: cans of soda, bottled water, iced tea, an ice bucket, and crystal glasses. White Copal incense scented the entire first floor. There were fresh Peruvian lilies, red geranium flowers, and French tarragon in orange bloom spread throughout the house. Each room in the house had a small stereo system. Classical, New Age, Instrumentals, and Inspirational music was encouraged. Rock, Rap, Hip Hop, and House music was strictly forbidden. A person surrounded by visual and auditory beauty healed quicker, and the incense was to always have spirituality scenting the air. The surroundings were a calculated treatment for the minds and souls of the inhabitants. Their bodies were also treated by different regimens: baths, teas, exotic meals, and spiritual rituals to strengthen resolve.

Once a resident was ready and capable to move from the healing house to one of the apartments in the other buildings of the compound, music was no longer restricted, and birthdays, whether in the healing house or an apartment, were celebrated with music chosen by

the birthday boy or girl. The house was quite pleasant. The combination of smells, and visuals: paintings, furniture, flowers and colors enhanced the spiritual influences that made the house almost completely pulsate with magic. Almost, because Phil was still around. The other residents had adapted to the rigors of attempting to manifest their personal miracles. Just as one person could be the life of a party, one person can also nullify belief, and cloud the possibilities of someone else's cure. Phil was that person. He may not have intentionally wanted to become that person, but sooner or later you must take responsibility for the person you are. Change is always possible but you must want it.

"Good afternoon everyone," said Alex, as he and Francis entered the living room. A chorus of salutations followed. Alex grabbed a bottled water as Francis settled into the empty love seat. Alex stopped the CD before seating himself beside Francis.

"First I'd like to thank you all for your support and kind words regarding my father's passing," Alex said, and then looked from one to the other.

"Now, who would like to start?"

Alex could feel that Phil wanted to start but he was fighting the desire. Alex waited, but no one spoke. "I think you're meant to start this week." His right arm gestured toward Phil.

"I'm dissatisfied," said Phil as he readjusted himself in the chair. "I've been drinking this tea for over two weeks and I still don't feel any better. The tremors are horrible, and the fatigue is overwhelming. The past six weeks have been hell, and I don't see any purpose to being here." He avoided looking directly at Alex. "When Patty told me about your group I was filled with hope. She told me how you had cured her son. But I don't feel better. I feel worse. I don't know if I can take much more of this useless treatment."

Stan fidgeted as he stared at Phil. He was getting ready to respond, but Alex stopped him with a wave of his hand.

“Why are you here Phil?”

“It’s pretty obvious why I’m here,” Phil said, still unable to look at Alex.

“No. It isn’t obvious. Why are you here?”

“This is ridiculous. You know why I’m here. You know exactly why I’m here.” He finally looked at Alex.

“You’re dissatisfied; you’re angry; but you’re still here. Why?”

Phil hesitated. He always hesitated when fixed by Alex’s stare. Alex reached across the room with his eyes, and allowed Phil to absorb something. But Alex knew that Phil would not use what he was absorbing to help himself. I’ve given you so much, and I don’t want to give you anymore, thought Alex.

“You can cure me,” he said.

“I’ve never had the power to cure you—to cure anyone. I didn’t cure Patty’s son. I’ve never cured any of the men and women that have come to stay here. Nevertheless, most of the people that have lived here have been cured. But not by me.”

“But Patty said that you cured her son. She said that you saved his life.”

“She was wrong Phil. I have never healed anyone. I have only facilitated people with their healings. I can guide you; I can give you teas; I can relay spiritual information to you. But I cannot wave my hand, or throw together a few herbs, or sacrifice a goat, and have any of that

heal you. And, to confuse you further, it is possible that any of those actions could heal you. The magic potion is you. Not me. Patty's son healed because he wanted to heal for his mother's sake. He hated to see his mother in such pain because of him. That ten-year-old boy prayed, begged, and found his remedy within himself. I gave him baths, herbal teas, and taught him how to meditate. I met with him twice-a-day, not because I wanted to, but because he wanted to. He told his mother to only come to see him three times a week." Alex smiled as he remembered the boy's determination. "Phil, find inside yourself what Patty's son found; what Stan has found; what Maria and Jane are endeavoring to find; what Andrew knows exists, but thinks that is closed off to him. Find what Francis found fourteen years ago, and what Peter toys with. I can help. I can guide. I can pray with you, and ask for remedies to soothe and ease your pain and emotional turmoil. But it's your strength, your determination, your belief that will cure you. I can channel many things to you, but only you can make them work."

Phil sat with head bowed. Maria cried quietly, and tightly held Jane's left hand, as Jane squeezed Andrews trembling right hand, and Stan sat cross-legged on his pillow with both eyes tightly shut. Peter had a broad smile and sat staring at his uncle. Francis sat next to Alex with all his body hair standing-on-end.

Chris squinted as he looked at his father. He was the only one that saw the bright white, pink, and blue waves that swirled out from Alex's body. Everyone in the room was absorbing the energy that Alex was exuding. He could see the iridescent white threads that stretched to Phil, and entered his head and chest. The bands of color that poured from his father grew brighter and he had to close his eyes. Everyone sat quietly together for three long minutes, absorbing energy, not saying anything, not moving, not dying, and not struggling to live. Sometimes Alex thought



that he'd like having the power to cure, but he always felt that if he had such power he'd probably wind-up abusing it.

Alex was always amazed at the effect that a little love and kindness can have on someone—well if they're not demanding it, but open to love and kindness finding them. Static electricity crackled from his body as he slowly rose and walked to the garden. The candles flared as he walked passed, and the haze of Copal encircled his body. He left them all waking from their reverie as he followed the garden path back to the main house to begin his recuperation. Francis stretched, then rose to follow Alex back to the main house. No one spoke—they were all groggy. Their sessions used to last fifteen to twenty minutes, until Phil arrived. Then the sessions became tense and short. Even though the time was shorter, still they were never quite sure what occurred during these sessions. But they knew that they did receive an influx of energy, or power, or peace—they weren't sure what it was.

Phil believed precisely because of this influx, despite Alex's denials, that he did possess the power to heal, but would not use it. He was determined to make Alex use that power and cure him. If you have the power to cure, should it be a discretionary power? Should any man have the power of life or death? If you're a Christian, then Jesus had it, and if you believe in spontaneous combustion forget about God, Jesus and cures.

Jane and Maria helped Andrew rise from his chair, and held his arm as they walked to the drum table that stood before the picture window. Jane placed Andrew's hand on the table, pulled the sheers open, and golden fall sunshine flooded the room. Jane took three envelopes from the table, and handed one to Maria, one to Andrew, and kept her envelope. Peter, Stan and Phil followed Jane's example and claimed their envelopes. The envelopes contained the ritual that

they were to perform this week. The individuals in the group would decide who they would share their ritual with—if anyone. Stan always shared his ritual with Peter and Chris. Maria, Jane and Andrew shared theirs. Phil never shared his ritual, and rarely did he bother to perform it. Yet he wanted to be cured, and believed that he deserved to be cured. He believed that he was worthier than the others. His arrogance went beyond that of a rich man. It was the arrogance of the well-educated, and spiritually defunct. This must be what Jesus had seen in the Pharisees. Men of wealth and power that created religious rules that applied to everyone except themselves. Well, that's more than enough of about Jesus, religion and rules—to surmise, Phil is an arrogant asshole. The thing is, he is still deserving of a cure.

Phil waited for everyone to leave the living room before settling into a love seat. He opened his envelope and removed the handwritten note it contained. This time there was only one line on the paper. 'You don't do these rituals, so there will be no more rituals for you.' Phil's face flushed with anger. How dare he treat me like this? Who the hell does he think he is? He would have said out loud what he was thinking, but Phil is also calculating—vengeance is his preferred action. He had confronted Alex a week ago, demanding that he use the power that Phil knew he had. He wanted Alex to cure him. Alex had told him exactly what he had said at their weekly session. Phil had screamed and raved, "Either you use your power to heal me, or, I'll go to the health department and tell them that you're running an illegal hospice, or healing house, or whatever the fuck you want to call this collection of desperation." Alex didn't yell, or get upset. "Go ahead and file as many reports as you can, with all the agencies that you can think of, and when you're through you better have a quick exit plan." This note is the final insult. I'll get the son-of-a-bitch.

**Alex woke slowly**, still weak and groggy from his fitful nap. He lingered in the bed, staring at the ceiling trying to focus his mind on the images that appeared and dissipated quickly. Francis had opened the door every hour, on the hour, for the past three hours. This time he saw that Alex had opened his eyes.

“Can I get you anything?”

“A large glass of ice water would be great.” He closed his eyes and watched a woman scream in pain. The man held her by the hair as he violently forced himself into her. Alex bolted upright when Francis touched his arm to offer him the glass of ice water.

“I’m sorry. I should have called out to you before touching you.”

“It’s fine. I really didn’t want to see what was happening anyway.” He rubbed the cold wet glass against his forehead as Francis placed and propped a pillow behind him. Alex drained the glass, and Francis sat on the bed beside him.

“This meeting was more intense than usual,” said Francis. “Phil is becoming a problem. He doesn’t want to be a part of anything. All the other residents avoid him. Do you think that he should stay?”

“He won’t be with us for much longer,” said Alex. “Enough about Phil, or anyone else. How are you doing?”

“I’m a little worried about you. You’re repeatedly being drained of all your energy. Your father, me, the kids, the residents, the stores, and now your sister-in-law. We’re all taking from you, but not giving anything in return. I’ve never seen you so exhausted after a meeting.” Francis

raised Alex's hand to his lips. "I'm worried that you're depleting yourself, and I don't know how to help."

"As usual you're cutting yourself short. You were not the only one lost that day in the Atlantic," he said and stroked Francis' hair.

"In our time together, you have given me all the love and passion that I have needed." He pulled Francis to him, and they shared a strong kiss that preceded comfortable and bonding sex.

***When your time comes to die, be not like  
those whose hearts are filled with fear of  
death,***

*so that when their time comes they weep  
and pray for a little more time to live their  
lives over again in a different way.*

*Sing your death song,  
and die like a hero going home.*

*Jecumseh*



**Three months and our visits are held indoors.** We both knew that we were nearing the end. I knew that we would only meet one more time, but I don't think that he did. *There's no need for him to know. You've given him more than he asked of you, and you have created what you always wanted. It's now time to prepare for what is coming; for the trials will be swift, and your preparations must be secure.*

"Is there anything that still has to be done?" I asked my father.

"I've told my Padrino to come and visit us today. He'll be here at noon." The old man was struggling to speak, struggling to breathe, and struggling to smile. His eyes no longer sparkled, and he was a tall skinny man who needed help walking, sitting, rising, and remembering what he was talking about. It hurt to look at him, but I wouldn't hurt him by looking away. I was muddled.

Experience had taught me that it was best to not acknowledge my emotions while waiting for the end to someone's life. I had painfully learned to shut them down and just flow within the

events. Death was near, and I couldn't stop it. I didn't want to stop it. It was time for both of us to rest; both of us to move forward. But, now he mattered to me again, and a peaceful death is what we had been working toward these three months. It may not seem that time to prepare for dying is a blessing, but we had been greatly blessed, and there was nothing more to do but wait. At least that's what I hoped for.

"Why is he coming?" I asked.

"To talk about Chris's initiation," he said. "It's time."

**Francis stretched in the Adirondack chaise as he stared at Biscayne Bay.** He didn't notice the choppy water or the gold beams that broke through the clouds. The garden behind him was landscaped for low maintenance and drought tolerance. The only plants that Alex would not give up, despite their high maintenance and water-thirsty requirements, were his roses. Roses rambled throughout the property; some on trellises, some in pots, and most in raised beds. Climbers, landscape, English, Chinese, Rugosa, Hybrid Teas, and species roses were interspersed with miniature roses, lavender, culinary and medicinal herbs from all over the world. Ferns were widespread in the landscaping; as were ornamental grasses. The crowning jewels were the three-hundred-and-eighty-three orchids that were carefully hung within the trees, strapped to tree trunks and trellises. They were wired to grey buttonwoods, tulip trees, as well as, palm trees, arbors, balconies, and filled three pergola orchid houses. Blooms of all colors adorned the yard and house, and fragrances changed as you walked. Francis understood that he had been fertilized, pruned, continuously sprayed to thwart disease, and planted in amended soil, as much as the roses that surrounded him.

Their first three years together were years of learning and frustration for Francis. He saw that Alex lived his life by the instructions of unseen mentors. He asked for guidance and always received it, and he freely gave guidance when sincerely asked. Sometimes he requested gifts from the petitioners. He asked for gifts because putting a price on what he shared gave it value. His requests seemed simple, a rose bush or orchid, but, more often than not, the rose or orchid never arrived. The few people who did send what had been requested were still well, and part of his extended tribe. For all his understanding Francis never learned how to say no with love and kindness. To him no was a negative word filled with negative or nasty emotions, except when Alex said no. Alex somehow made *no* a purposeful possibility; an opportunity from heaven.

People came and asked, received what they requested, and for the most part, never returned until they needed something else. Alex never turned them away; he just increased the value of the payment. When he asked for money most repeat petitioners did not return. Asking for money was his way of weeding out petitioners he did not like or trust. Rarely did he just tell someone to leave, or not come back. He always said, "If it gets to the point that I have to ask for money, they either give me what I ask for, or they go find someone else that gives them less, and requires less of them."

Francis always gave Alex everything that he requested, and did everything that he suggested. Francis tried to fulfill all of Alex's personal needs; he couldn't help with the spiritual because he didn't understand it. His Midwestern upbringing had ingrained in him a protestant kindness that Miami had been slowly transforming into a hard and selective sentiment. He had never been able to fulfill his dreams or desires, because there was always something missing in his personal perception. He was never good enough; never kind enough; never strong enough. He would never be able to express the love that burdened him. He wasn't supposed to desire men.



His life was a success to glancing eyes, but he was scarred. Afraid of the man that he wanted to become; afraid of the thoughts that had driven him into the Atlantic. He increasingly found his life unbearable. He could not reconcile his mental emotions with his penis. He didn't understand himself, and never realized that his yearning would ease if he paid attention to it. I guess that's what a pedophile, or murderer says to justify their actions. But, his reconciliation; his understanding, and acceptance all became attainable when Alex placed his hand on his shoulder.

Francis had usually stayed at home or infrequently accepted invitations from colleagues to dinner, and sometimes to the clubs afterward, and he would watch as they progressively inebriated themselves; eventually propositioning anything in a skirt. While his straight companions drank, and fantasized about the women that strolled past them. Francis drank and fantasized of kissing the men in their expensive suits, slowly undressing them, and then dropping to his knees. Some could feel his eyes and caught him looking. He would quickly turn away to find another suit to stare at. It never occurred to him that the ones that caught him staring may have been interested. He eventually stopped socializing with his colleagues because it was evident that they expected him to do as they did, and bed a woman. Yes some of the men and the women in his office had questions about his sexuality, or lack of it. He was too nice, and the best attorney in the firm, so he was envied but basically forgotten about.

There were a masculine gay intern and an effeminate legal assistant in the office. Francis had considered approaching the intern, but he knew that he could not approach one without the other finding out. On a particularly lonely Wednesday, as he desperately tried to bury himself in legal briefs which were his usual distraction, he locked his office, and masturbated to thoughts of random men. Twice in less than two hours. It distracted him for all of seven minutes. The thought of his semen hitting the floor again filled him with a depressing anguish that invalidated

all his accomplishments, his emotions snarled his thoughts. What would he feel if someone stroked his hair, kissed his lips, and told him he was loved? He had to stop thinking; he had to stop wanting; he needed a stronger release than masturbating. Torment forced him to his feet, and with hurried frustration, he grabbed his keys from the console table by the door, and tried to rush out of his locked office.

His secretary heard him fumble and drop his keys, and asked through the door, “Is there anything I can get help you with?”

“No. I’m not feeling well,” he said as he walked past her. “And I’m going to work from home for the rest of the day.”

Francis sprinted the thirty feet to the elevator, and impatiently pounded the down arrow. The doors finally opened, he entered the wood-paneled elevator, and tightly grasped the three-inch brass rail at the back of the elevator as he leaned his forehead against the paneling. He felt the mounting anxiety in his body, and began to tremble as the elevator rapidly descended twenty-one floors, then chimed to a stop. The doors opened but no one entered, and he didn’t exit. The doors closed and elevator didn’t move; not much elevator traffic at three o’clock on a Wednesday. A minute passed before Francis turned and opened the elevator doors. Only then did he realize that he had pushed the lobby button, and not parking level two.

His car was parked in the third spot from the northeast corner of the building garage, and had a beautiful view of Biscayne Bay. Francis didn’t remember walking towards the car or opening the door and sitting down in the brown leather driver’s seat. He started the car, and it hummed patiently as he sat trying to talk himself out of going anywhere, but his need for companionship—or more accurately compassion—forced him to put the car in reverse. He didn’t

know where he was going until he reached the iron garage gate and rolled down the canvas top of the Saab 95, and waited for the gate to open. He turned north onto Brickell Avenue and started his journey to the Forge restaurant on Miami Beach. Traffic was light, and he looked north from the hump of SR 195 which offered a long-distance view of the bay, and the islands that Cristo had once wrapped in pink. It was a cool late September afternoon, and the rushing air started to lift him out of his depression. SR 195 dumped all its travelers onto 41st Street, and Francis just kept driving east toward the Atlantic. Miami Beach is only 1.5 miles wide—at 41st street it's just about a mile. Two blocks from the beach is an off-white 2 story stucco building, decorated with gold and black glassless window sashes, surrounded by stucco casings, and faux square columns that create a first and second story facade. A thin older man in a white short-sleeve shirt-jacket with gold trim, and black pants approached Francis' car with a valet ticket. "Good afternoon sir," he said. He had been the valet at the Forge for over 15 years. Francis walked slowly to the restaurant door which was opened by another jacketed man. He walked directly to the bar, and surveyed the room as he chose one of the twenty-two vacant leather green barstools that surrounded the shiny dark oak bar. "Bourbon neat." He said as the bartender placed a cocktail napkin in front of him. Only one other patron sat at the bar. Francis motioned the bartender for his third drink as the second patron signaled for his bill, and took the last swallow from his glass.

"I'm a great listener, and talking might help you resolve your dilemma," the bartender said as he coaxed some Maker's Mark into the Francis' glass for the fourth time.

"My problem can't be talked away, but spend the night with me, and that might do it." He hadn't realized what he was saying until he had heard himself say it.

The bartender smiled and said, "Well if you can wait until eight when my shift ends, I'd love to go home with you." Francis was shocked by his proposition, and the bartender's acceptance. He didn't even know his name and it didn't matter. It could just as easily have been a cabby, a waiter, or a hustler. Francis could not have chosen anyone, so life was kind to him and provided a willing bartender on a drunken afternoon. The bartender appeared at the passenger window in black pants and tuxedo shirt minus the bowtie. Francis lowered the window and asked, "Do you want to follow me?"

"I don't have a car; I live four blocks from here," he said.

"We'll go to my apartment and I'll drive you back in the morning," said Francis.

"Are you sure you want me to spend the whole night?"

"Yes," replied Francis.

The bartender slid into the passenger seat.

Francis indulged in repeated rounds of sweaty sex, and the bartender satisfied their every desire. He didn't leave in the morning. Wednesday turned into Thursday, and Francis and his bartender called in sick, and again on Friday. Saturday, they left the condo to pick up the bartender's clothes from the apartment he shared with another bartender and a waiter. His roommates weren't surprised or sorry to see him leave. For three months, the bartender lounged by the pool as Francis worked. He did cook Francis dinner Monday thru Friday. His major contribution to the relationship was nightly sex on weekdays and twice a day on weekends. Those three months were glorious for Francis, full of clandestine getaways, romantic dinners at home, and sex at all hours. Francis attacked sex as if trying to recapture all his wasted years of

abstinence. The three months passed quickly, and what was love at long-last for Francis, was nothing more than time and sex with someone wealthy for the bartender.

"I hoped you liked the lobster," said the bartender as he rose from the dining table and walked to the sliding doors that led to the balcony. Francis walked up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist, pressing himself against his buttocks as he kissed his neck. The bartender did not linger in the embrace, but opened the door, stepped onto the balcony, walked to the railing and stared at a dark and choppy Bay.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

Francis came and stood beside him. "Well, what shall we talk about?"

"I'm going to be leaving Miami," said the bartender. There was no room for discussion; this was a statement of imminent fact.

"I thought you were happy here with me? What the fuck is going on?" he blurted, feigning anger to hide how wounded he felt.

"It's time for me to leave Miami," was all the bartender said.

"That's not an explanation, but an indulgent and idiotic statement. I want to know the reason why after three months of companionship, love, and sex, you decide to leave without a hint of remorse, or a reason as to why. How can you stand there as if you've reached the end of your holiday, and now have to return to work and the real world?" He gripped the railing handle to stop himself from shaking as he continued. "You've obviously thought about leaving, and decided to keep me in the dark, or was this an overnight decision?"

Francis' voice rose as he looked at the bartender, and saw no emotion, no reaction. He just stood stoically staring into the night sky.

"I have included you in my life, and readjusted that life to accommodate you, and now you're leaving without discussion or explanation. No! I will not allow you to drift in then out, without knowing first why you bothered to stay, and second why you've decide that it's over."

There was a moment of silence then the bartender responded. "Fine. I guess I should have told you earlier, but everything happened so quickly I didn't know how. That first week together was great. Everything was a new and wonderful experience for you; for the first time, you allowed yourself to be gay; you were happy, and I was glad to be a part of that happiness."

"I went to the doctor last week, and he called three days ago, asking me to come to his office. I went to confirm what I already knew. I'm beyond HIV positive; I'm showing signs of AIDS complex. The cold that I can't get rid of, that's all part of it." He stopped for a few seconds. "The never-ending cold is the first sign of more devastating symptoms to come. So, I'm leaving. I've called my parents told them the situation, and they want me to come home; and I want to die at home. I'll be leaving tonight."

Francis opened the door, walked inside and sank into the sofa, too afraid, shocked, and uncertain what to say. His mind raced from one possible scenario to another, all of them ending badly. The minutes crawled by: two, three, and then five. The bartender had followed him into the apartment but disappeared into the bedroom to collect the packed suitcase that he had placed under the bed; after stopping in the bathroom to vomit; he reentered the living room, turned toward Francis and said. "You should get tested." The bartender walked to the front door, and left Francis to die with his parents. Francis sat motionless, not noticing the storm clouds that

were moving in from the sea; he didn't notice the first few drops of rain that hit the glass door, and didn't start crying until lightning split the sky, and sheets of iridescent rain hit the glass distorting the night sky into demons.

His life entered a new phase as Miami absorbed the deluge. Gone was his longevity, reconciliation with his parents, possibility of a long-term love affair. All he could see was the end of all that he had aspired to personally and professionally. From this moment forward there would be nothing but death in his life. The next three months was a blur of work and drugs. Days filled with clients that he began to realize he didn't like, and nights filled with alcohol cloaked in a marijuana and cocaine haze.

**It was six-fifteen on a clear fall morning, full of beauty and promise.** The Atlantic Ocean and sky melted together at the horizon in varying shades of blue. The sun was glowing below the horizon; its gold crown starting to color the dark blue sky as Francis waded into the water; another fifteen minutes would bring the sunrise and an end to his resolve. The water was chest high when a hand landed on his shoulder and firmly held him, stopping his progression into the embrace of the cool salty water. He didn't struggle or try to free himself—neither did he turn to see who was holding him back. He just stood in the surf crying silently until the sun broke the horizon with bright yellow beams that made his eyes squint.

"Come on, let's get back to the beach." said the man that had held his shoulder for ten minutes in the surf. Francis turned toward the beach, and the stranger draped his arm around his shoulders as they walked out of the ocean casting thin shadows on the water and sand. They continued to walk from the beach through the sea grape trees, and across A1A, allowing the three cars that were on the road at six thirty to pass them. They continued onto the par four public golf

course on the Intracoastal side of A1A. Francis walked obediently beside the stranger and forgot the despair that had led him into the water just a short while ago. Looking back on that encounter always made him swell with gratitude—gratitude for a god that until that moment he never really believed existed.

They reached the brackish waters of the Intracoastal; Francis had not spoken a word. He didn't ask who this man was, how he had come to be at the beach, or where he was being led. He didn't care, but he knew he had to follow. They waded into the water, and then onto a sand bar about twenty feet from the shore. A white and yellow trimmed twenty-eight feet sail boat lay another thirty feet ahead of them. A red male dachshund and a female black and tan barked at the sight of their owner returning.

"We'll have to swim the rest of the way," said the stranger. Francis swam; the dogs barked, and the water was no longer his potential killer. They reached the diving platform and the stranger hoisted himself onto the platform and then over the railing onto the boat. He bent over the railing to coax Francis from the water onto the platform. As Francis stood to climb over the railing and onto the boat, he saw the stranger's smiling face for the first time. Dark black hair, kind green eyes, and a mischievous smile created a desirable and handsome face. Francis found himself eagerly climbing onto the boat deck. The stranger walked to the helm, stood behind the wheel and started the engine before hoisting the anchor and gently guiding the boat through the Intracoastal Haulover inlet, and into the turquoise Atlantic. The two dachshunds sniffed Francis' feet and calves as their tails wagged wildly—the male demanded attention by pawing his feet. Francis bent to pet the two dogs, and then sat on the deck. The dogs jumped onto his lap and licked his face. Suddenly he understood just how close he had come to swimming himself under. He stood and breathed deeply the salt air, then closed his eyes as he tilted his head



toward the east and the rising sun. He had no clue as to where he was going, but he trusted this stranger as much as the dogs did, and he wanted to go wherever he led.

The stranger shut off the engine and walked around Francis as he went about setting sails; there were two, one large red sail and a smaller black one. Francis didn't know them by name. He'd only been on sailboats as a pampered passenger. But he loved the quietness of sailboats. You could hear the wind and your thoughts clearly, without the intrusion of a roaring engine. The ocean was calm with one-to-two foot waves that bubbled in the sunshine and foamed on the sandy beach. The dogs, in their bright yellow doggy life preservers, had settled down and sat on either side of his feet. Miami Beach was a series of rooftops three miles to the west. He walked to the helm of the boat, followed by his new companions, and sat on the port side seat so he could look at the skyline and the stranger steering the boat. He was tall and soothing like the sea that surrounded them. Francis felt protected and filled with new hope, but mostly he felt comfortable.

"My name's Alex Cedron," said the stranger. "Lucky for you I was told that I would be needed at Haulover at six in the morning. I often watch the sunrise, but from the comfort of my patio, not restraining someone in five feet of the Atlantic." A smile washed easily over his face and he became irresistible. He could ask for money and Francis would have parted with large sums of it, and Francis did not part with money easily, he believed you never had enough to control life's unexpected challenges.

"Mine is Francis Merlot," he replied with his eyes fixed on Alex's tanned and muscled thigh.

"Like the grape?" asked Alex.

"Yeah, from California not France," said Francis, as his eyes moved to Alex's navy blue Speedo. His penis swelled as his eyes moved up Alex's torso; and finally stopped at the deep green eyes that had been watching his progression and growing excitement.

"We might as well get to it." Francis' was a little shocked with the boldness of this statement, but he wanted Alex to remove his tiny swimsuit.

"Why were you going to kill yourself?"

His penis deflated like a soufflé having been slammed on a kitchen counter.

"Don't worry we'll eventually get to the sex," said Alex as he watched Francis change from horny to timid and uncomfortable.

"Don't search for the right words just tell me."

Francis wasn't searching for the right words; he didn't want to use any words; he wanted not to have AIDS, and not to have to answer that question.

"You can answer now or when you're ready, but we'll stay out here until you do. I can't explain my role in this until you hear yourself tell me what I already know about you."

He spoke with a gentle force that Francis found unsettling—he didn't doubt his words, but his mind found it hard to understand the simple statements that he was making. How could he know? But Francis *knew* that he did. What about his role? Francis had hoped it would have been sex on a sailboat and then a swim in the sea.

"I... I don't... I can't." he stammered, and then started to sob.

**Fifteen years had passed, and Francis** was still astounded by Alex's understanding of people and their situations. Love, hate, jealousy, and avarice were all easy for him to detect. Offering help to the afflicted always cost something. A sleepless night, mandatory cleansing of self, house and its inhabitants—a few times, headaches, nightmares, and nausea. There was never a moment that Alex was not aware of something secret, dangerous, or ninety percent probable. Something that could evolve into murder, or theft, or pleasure and fulfillment. Throughout their fifteen years together impossibilities had been fulfilled, tragedies averted, lives rescued, demons cast out, and sickness purged from doomed bodies. Alex always said that he did nothing but channel power. Whatever the outcome, miracle or catastrophe, it was not attributable to any special authority that he possessed. "We all add or take away from our own lives by our actions, desires and hidden agendas. Men do not control their lives, but, they can guide them. Most men guide their lives unknowingly, but some actively participate in the direction of their lives—we all have this ability," he had told Francis early in their relationship.

**Alex left Francis in bed, and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner.** His love of cooking had started when his father had one of the supermarket butchers teach him and his brother how to butcher a side of beef. Alex enjoyed straightening the knife blade against the steel. He liked removing the beef from the skeleton, and cutting it into steaks and roasts. Manny junior had hated the entire process. Manny senior was giving his sons ancient knowledge about the importance of the animals that they ate, and would eventually have to sacrifice. Knowing the animals flesh fostered respect for the animals, at least that was the lesson they were supposed to learn. Manny junior never came to see the animals as more than just food, or blood for sacrifice.

Alex pressed cracked black pepper onto the two-inch thick, bone-in ribeye steaks. He checked the pan that contained the sautéed vegetables for the couscous, and the salad greens

were ready and waiting in the refrigerator for their vinaigrette. He dressed the Ciabatta bruschetta with roasted tomatoes, pepperoncini, and Parmigiano Reggiano, and placed the tray on the pass-through. A bottle of Clicquot was chilling in a champagne bucket, flanked by three crystal flutes that were painted with several 24-karat gold Fleur-de-lis. Christopher would be allowed one glass of champagne with the shrimp appetizer, one glass of wine with his steak, and all the water or Crystal Light he wanted. The steaks sizzled when Alex placed them in the cast iron skillet. Three minutes on each side, then into the oven to finish cooking. He didn't like people in the kitchen while he was cooking, so there was a seventeen-inch television in the corner to keep him company. Alex listened to the local weather report as he cooked. Francis was out of bed and fixing their drinks.

Late November, and there was a Tropical storm in the Gulf of Mexico, which would become a hurricane by the end of the evening. South Florida was now under a hurricane watch. Francis stood at the kitchen pass-through as the meteorologist said that the Tropical storm would become Gustav, a category one hurricane by late tonight.

"I can't remember the last time we had a hurricane so late in the season," said Francis. "Here's your drink." Francis placed three fingers of Jameson on the pass-through, and then took the tray of bruschetta into the den. Christopher entered the den as his father was taking his first sip.

"Hi. I'm starved. When do we eat?" asked Chris as he took one of the bruschetta. He went to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of Ruby Red crystal light.

"We'll be eating in about fifteen minutes," said his father. Chris knew that it would be closer to twenty-five or thirty minutes. They all sat in the den and listened to the news. They

laughed, munched and drank for half-an-hour before settling down to a satisfying dinner together. Alex kissed them both as they cleared the table, and went back to bed. Francis and Chris talked about the residents, Peter, Alex, and themselves, as they cleaned the kitchen, set the house alarm, and turned off all the lights in the house. Chris hugged Francis before continuing to his room. A simple act of love, acceptance, and appreciation. A family settling-in for the night.

*Sexuality surrounds us like a dangerous aura. The same reverence that is given to the spirit is not given to the flesh.*

*We have had a sexual revolution, but the sexual revolution only has made sex more pervasive.*

*It hasn't granted the level of reverence and respect that it should have.*

*Gioconda Belli*



**Eight weeks now and there's a change in the old man.** There's a change in me. We're not drinking as much. We've started smoking pot, and he's been drinking a marijuana tea to boost his appetite, and soothe his acidic stomach. I never thought that I would ever be smoking pot with my father. Then again, I never thought that I would see my father again after meeting Francis. I could say strange how life works, but my life has been nothing but strange. Talk to spirits and the dead, and it will change not just your perception of reality, but also who you are. That's not entirely true—seeing and hearing spirits is not the problem. How you react to these visions and their possibilities decides whether they become a problem or a blessing. We all see and hear more than we admit to ourselves. I just remind people of what they already know.

Our time together was erasing the sixteen-year separation. Biscayne Bay had become our bay, and my garden his garden. Respect was flourishing, and love was playing peek-a-boo with us. I had a father again; not a father that I completely loved, but at least I felt that I could. The Chickee protected us from the sun, and I was feeling good about myself. I wasn't a hard-ass, and I was surprised with how much my father had taught me. Parental nurturing, or parental abuse always teaches us something. As we sat stretched on our chaises, I could feel the calm acceptance deepening between us. Maybe this is what family should be: acceptance, forgiveness,

and love. Religion should also cultivate this trio—doctrine is not sacrosanct. *No, it isn't, but neither should it be flippantly discarded.*

“How are you feeling old man?”

“The nausea has stopped, and I’m not as shaky as I was.”

“Do you want to go out on the boat, or just lay in the shade and watch the water?”

“Let’s just stay here. The breeze is strong and feels good on my face. I’d love to have a drink.” He took his glass and raised it in my direction.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, another drink won’t kill me, and if it does so be it.”

How things have changed. Me catering to this personable degenerate’s requests, and enjoying spending time with him. This was the first time that he was wearing shorts and a short sleeve shirt since we started seeing each other, and I couldn’t help but stare at the dark maroon spots that covered his legs and spotted his arms. *This isn’t how I want you to remember him.*

“My legs are pretty ugly, but they don’t hurt. Every time I bump against anything, or just rub myself I get these beautiful hickies. But dying isn’t as hard as I thought it would be.” I finally realize how much I’ll miss my son, he thought. *I’m glad you listened and are taking the time to be with him. Don’t worry about him, I’ll look after him.*

I handed him his drink and poured myself one. He seemed to be listening to music or a voice that I didn’t hear. Sounds carried on the wind from Miami Beach, or were salted, warmed and released from Biscayne bay.



"I guess I can continue with my story. If I repeat myself, or forget what I wanted to say, it's because I'm incredibly stoned."

"Before you continue, I want to tell you that Elegua has started to speak to me."

"That's great news. When did this start?"

"A while ago, and I think that I won't be able to continue our visits for much longer," he said. There is still so much to do, so much to share, but my time is gone.

I couldn't tell him that he had another month. "I know," was all that I could say.

We could extend his life, but I had been warned that we'd be extending the life of his body, not the life of his soul. It's time for him to begin his journey, and to reconcile with my mother. Were these two months worthwhile? Incredibly, and I reminded myself to make the next thirty days just as incredible.

"It's okay. I'm happy. Now finish your story. We still have plenty of time."

"After Aida died I was lost, and the spirits were strangely quiet. I spent the better part of a month snorting, smoking, and drinking. One night I even jumped into the bay from the seawall behind the house on Belle Meade, scraped the bottom of my feet, twisted an ankle and hit my head on the seawall. I hadn't bothered to look before leaping, and didn't notice that it was low tide. I sat in the bay for over an hour before Maria came looking for me. She called her brother and he came with two friends to fish me out."

The old man reached across the table that separated our lounge chairs and held my hand. I couldn't help it and started to cry. I blame those tears on the marijuana. The old man looked at me, but didn't say a word. He just squeezed my hand and let go.

“That night after Maria put me to bed and went home. Mother came to visit me for the second time, and I was angry.”

“What the hell do you want? I had yelled. “She’s dead and it was going to be a girl not a boy! You couldn’t even get that right. Go away and leave me alone!”

“I can’t leave you alone,” she said. “You’re still going to have a son, but Aida was not to be the mother.” She wasn’t as blurry as the first visit. She seemed content and stronger. I think she was trying to help me.

“I don’t care. I don’t want to know anymore. I want to be left alone!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t leave you alone. You need to know that she will be waiting for you at Lucky’s Tropical Bar. This Saturday night you must go meet her. She will know that it’s you. All you have to do is go there.” She moved closer to me, and I felt her wispy hand caress my hair before she disappeared.

“I never told you,” my father said, studying the smoldering joint in his hand, “but I did love your mother. She was so different from me. She was shy, calm, and compliant. When I found her peacefully on her side, covered by her quilt, I thought that she was asleep. I crawled into bed and reached over to see if she was willing to indulge a horny young man, but when I touched her she felt cold. I didn’t think anything of it, and started to rub her shoulder. She slipped from the bed onto the floor, and I jumped to her side apologizing. That’s when I realized that she was dead.”

He took a long drag of the joint, and then a swallow of scotch. “I’m ashamed to admit, that when I found the bottle of pills on her nightstand, I became very angry. I felt that she had

abandoned me. I wouldn't even consider that I had driven her to suicide," he said. "It couldn't and wouldn't be my fault. She was a weak and stupid woman. She took her life because she never knew how to live. I was the one that had been wronged. Two small children that now were my burden."

"It's nice to know that we were a burden to you. You always were a selfish bastard. Even now you're here with me because you're dying. Would you have ever thought of seeing me if you weren't dying?" I blurted. "I'm sorry none of that matters anymore."

"I don't know. I have thought of you throughout our separation, but didn't understand until I became ill that I hadn't lived. I had a good time. I had plenty of money, a beautiful house, and a big boat. But when I thought of you, I felt a stinging pain. It was a pain that I never tried to alleviate. You were a disgrace, a disappointment, and a stain on our household. I had no choice but to disown you and forget that you existed." He looked at me and I could see the pain in his eyes, but this was not his physical pain. "I'm sorry. It wasn't until I was told to prepare for my death that I finally understood. If *Elegua* accepted you as you are, I had to do the same."

I reached across our divide, and grabbed his hand firmly. "I'm glad you did."

"Finish telling me how you met Yadira." His voice sounded strong and clear, so I concentrated on that and not his hickies. I have seen many people that I had grown to love wither away and die, and I have learned how to exist on auto-pilot during those times. I should have felt different from those other times, but I don't. If he weren't my father he'd have been living with the other residents. Love wasn't playing peek-a-boo with us, only with me.

"She and her friend were playing pool," I said, "and her smile greeted me as I walked through the door of Lucky's Bar. The unusual smell of her perfume was luscious and sensual,

and I breathed in deeply as I walked past her. She whispered in her friend's ear and turned to watch me as I took a seat. The two women spoke softly to each other, and I tried to hear their conversation. But the music was loud and made it difficult to eavesdrop. I strained to hear a word or two. 'He's.... you.... yes.' I needed to know more. I normally would know more, especially with women, but no insight entered my head. No whisper from my spirits; she fascinated me."

"Hi," she said as she extended her hand. "My name's Yadira."

"Hi," I replied and shook her hand. "My name's Alex. Alex Cedron."

"Would you care to buy me a scotch and water?" she asked.

I felt heat rise from my groin. My stomach gurgled as if in response, and I became lightheaded. Her eyes were a deep hazel green, and her smell was intoxicating. She smiled and conveyed a sensual knowing that I had never experienced. I tried to compose myself and think clearly. How is she doing this to me? Is there a pheromone aphrodisiac in her perfume? Could she feel the electricity that stood my hairs on end? Did my erection offend or arouse her?

"Normally I like when men stare at me, but you seem lost and perplexed. I hope that I have expanded your boundaries, not overstepped them," she said. "If you'd care to know more about me before you buy me a drink, just let me know."

"Sorry, I became lost in your eyes and your smell." What an idiot, I thought. "I'd love to buy you a drink, and what about your friend?"

"She likes Rum and Coke."

I called the bartender and watched as Yadira leaned over the pool table and lined her shot.

"I'm glad you arrived safely," she said. Then sank the 12 ball.

"Thanks. I guess."

The bartender smiled at me as he prepared the drinks. Was he smiling because he had seen this scenario before, or was his smile just asking me for a good tip? I tipped him five dollars, not to impress the ladies, or because his service was exceptional, but because a small act of generosity has hidden rewards for the giver, and I needed to be rewarded.

She took the drink that I offered her and said, "I lost my fiancée a year ago. He died in a car crash."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "You lost your fiancé and I'm a widower, also, a car crash." *So, you already share a common history.*

"Had you been together long?"

"We dated for three years." She placed her drink on the bar next to mine, and walked to the pool table to sink the 4 ball in the side pocket. "And we were engaged for a year before he died. He died of an aneurysm; how long were you married?"

"Almost a year."

"That's terrible; I'm sorry."

This is my Madrina. She pointed to her friend before easily sinking the 1 ball.

"Hi," said her friend. "My name's Caridad but you can call me Cari."

Yadira missed her shot, an easy shot, and they switched places. Cari was darker skinned than Yadira, and her eyes were a shiny black. She smelled good, but didn't exude an aphrodisiac scent. Her smile was wide and mischievous, reminding me of a child that knows she's doing something she shouldn't, but doesn't care.

"Cari is my Madrina, and my oldest friend. We went to Catholic school together for twelve years. She supported and cared for me when Juan my fiancé died." I could see sadness flicker in her eyes, and then it was gone. "Do you know what it means to have a Madrina?"

"Not only do I know what a Madrina is, but I had one of my own. I had been appointed as her student by my father. My father appointed many things: what school I would attend, when I would be initiated, and whom I would marry." I said. "The Saints dictated our lives, and he ruled as their interpreter, messenger, and enforcer. My Madrina was an elder of the Santeria community, and I disliked her. Her perception of reality was clouded by her desire for wealth. Unfortunately, she was skilled in ritual and ruthless in her acquisitions. I was five years old, and preparing for my initiation, but she only lasted four months as my teacher."

"Does your father still dictate who you'll marry?"

"No. His days as dictator are done."

Yadira didn't press me for more information, she just placed her hand on my knee. My cotton khakis warmed, sending a surge of desire through my body. I looked at her and placed my hand atop hers. The music faded, the conversations became distant, and in that instant I was flooded with a satisfaction that I didn't realize I had been yearning for.

“Can you feel it?” she asked. “Do you sense what is happening? This is an exchange. It can be an acceptance, or a refusal. Spirit to spirit. My strength can be yours, and your strength could be my confirmation. People search for things they never find: wealth, fame, love or understanding. Here in this moment we’ve shared more than all those aspirations combined.”

“I was sent here to meet you,” she said.

“And I’m here for spiritual support,” said Cari. “She has a gift for knowing where to be and what to say. I’m not so lucky.”

Was this an ambush or an opportunity? What does she want? What was she offering? Have I already lost? A smile from each of them, and I knew that I wanted to find out. I hadn’t consciously decided that I needed to start again. My life was moving forward, but not as I would have liked, and so I smiled back. The spell was cast, and I accepted it.

“I came here tonight because I was guided to come,” said Yadirá. “My mother was a high priestess of *Oshun*, and my father was a high priest of *Elegua*. I’m not initiated yet because I’m supposed to fall in love, marry, have my first child, and then I’ll be ready for initiation. At least that’s what I’ve been told all my life.”

“My dead mother visited me and told me to come here tonight,” I said. “And I’m glad I listened.”

I swallowed all the scotch and water left in my glass, and ordered another round. What could I do? Could I escape? Did I want to escape? This is what I had always wanted: to be desired, to be grabbed and given direction. No one had had been able to do that for me.

“I get to perform her initiation,” said Cari. “When she called me and said that she knew where we needed to go I rushed to her house, and here we are. Quite a lot to absorb, isn’t it?”

My mouth opened to speak, but no words came to me. Both reached for their drinks, clinked glasses and took a long swallow. Cari placed her drink back on the bar, and took both pool cues to the rack. She came back for her drink, and then walked to the other end of the bar. I could sense the climax approaching, and I was hoping for more than just wealth and property.

“You wake-up one day and the universe conspires to provide happiness and companionship,” she said. “But, here’s the big question, do you want to take me home tonight and have passionate, satisfying sex, and never see each other again? I’ll understand if that’s all you want, but *feel* carefully for we have been presented with an opportunity. I know what I want. What do you want from life?”

The bartender delivered our second drinks with the same smile as before, and I downed my drink, and then finished hers. “What the hell. Let’s try for the gold ring. If nothing else, this will be a hell of a story.”

“That’s not a typical love story encounter. I know quite a few women that would swoon over that story,” my father said. “You always were the lucky one. When you were born, I knew that life would unfurl and greet you with gifts. But I never realized that you would be privileged with emotional and soul gifts.”

He looked out at the bay and grimaced as he moved the legs that he had said didn’t hurt.

“Yeah, it was a pretty interesting encounter. I wish mother or the spirits had prepared me for her death. I was a real mess after she died. Two dead wives all before the age of twenty-three.



At least we did initiate her before she died, and having to care for Chris is what kept me from spiraling out-of-control.”

“Olofi has blessed you with a tender heart and an old soul, and I sit here taking advantage of the energy that you exude. I am sorry for all the time I wasted and can’t recover. I’m sorry for not knowing you or my grandson. I’m sorry for all the obstacles that I put in your path. I’m dying and I’m sorry for the life that I didn’t live. What I’ve learned about myself is that I really didn’t want to be challenged—to change who I was.”

“Don’t chastise yourself old man. It serves no purpose. You’re here now, and you’re not the same man you were two months ago.”

He looked at me and smiled. His face was flushed, but his milk chocolate eyes still twinkled. He is worth my time and effort. *You are both worth the time and effort.*

“I find it interesting that your mother appears to you before you start your relationships. Did she visit you before you met Francis?”

“Yes. But, that’s a story for another time. I’m starving.”

*“Hope is definitely not the same thing as  
optimism.*

*It is not the conviction that something will  
turn out well,  
but the certainty that something  
makes sense, regardless of  
how it turns out.”*

*—Vaclav Havel*



**Sandra moved around the second floor** of the house, trying to make as little noise as possible. She didn't want Manny to hear much rustling, and she had asked the children to be extra quiet as they dressed for school. They were well trained, scared children. The girls barely spoke when in the house, and their brother would shake if left alone with his father. They all shared the same fear: their mother being killed by their father. Maybe they had inherited some of the family prophetic tendencies after-all. They left their rooms without slamming their doors, exited the house in a hush, and tried not to crunch the driveway gravel to loudly as they walked to the waiting school bus.

Manny hadn't disappeared into his den after waking, as was his custom. Instead he moved from his bed to the sofa in the sitting area of the bedroom. He was naked, and watched the last ten minutes of *Good Morning America*. He told Sandra that he wanted his breakfast brought to him. He stretched, scratched his testicles, and then changed the channel. Sandra called

**Commented [H1]:** This line moves the POV to Sandra.

the housekeeper told her about breakfast, and that she would make their beds. How long has it been since she desired a man? How long has it been since any man has desired her?

Jerry Springer started his show by introducing some trailer trash that was fucking her stepfather, her neighbor, and her uncle. Sandra could see that Manny was enjoying the slut. Sluts were his favorite type of woman. Easy to fuck and easy to get rid of. She was bleeped every other word as Sandra set his breakfast tray on the coffee table, and couldn't help but see his half-hearted erection. The tray was heavy with food: four eggs over easy, crisp home fries, a half-inch ham steak, and four large pieces of Cuban toast, Cafe Con Leche, fresh squeezed orange juice, and a large glass of ice water. Enough food to bring his erection into full bloom (or it could have been the slut).

"Go fuck them all you slut," he yelled at the television. Sandra watched him lean over the tray, and fill his mouth with egg, bread and potatoes before taking a large gulp of orange juice. Trailer trash was being slapped by her mother, which caused Manny to open his mouth and spit out mashed food as he laughed at the scene. She was disgusted by her husband, and compassionate toward the slut.

"It's a little late to start slapping the slut now, you old hag," he said. Then wiped the food dribble from his chin. Manny finished his breakfast as Jerry's security men tried to pull the fighting family members apart. How do you pull-apart a marriage without damaging the children? Too late to worry about the damage—it's already been done.

Sandra had wanted to dress and leave the house, but she changed her plans since Manny was not following his normal routine. She wore a size twenty-four, pink silk night gown and robe, with matching house slippers. She had brushed her teeth and short auburn hair before

tending to the children. Normally she would have showered and dressed by the time Jerry Springer was over, but so far there was nothing normal about this day. Normalcy is not a guarantee of uneventful. She had made Manny's bed as he chewed and yelled at the television. They slept in separate beds, which were at opposite ends of the very large master suite, and they had separate entrances into the master suite, again at opposite ends. Sandra was staging the decorative pillows against the headrest to her bed as Manny approached behind her. He grabbed her waist, and she jumped, startled by his touch.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he said. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed his now fully erect penis against her buttocks. She had no choice, and slowly climbed onto her bed.

Manny took his time and satisfied his every whim. Sandra climaxed twice before he was through. Manny had been attentive and dutiful in his sex—it was never lovemaking. Sandra was confused and wary. Why would he be so generous with his attention? These were her thoughts as she lay in her bed, reminding herself that Manny could not be trusted. Did he know about Peter? How could she investigate without arousing his suspicion? He wasn't gifted like Alex, but he was conniving and resourceful.

She shivered and said, "I have to be very careful today."

"What did you say?" asked Manny from his side of the room.

"Nothing. Just going over all my chores for today."

"What are you going to be doing today?"

"I have to go to the doctor for blood work; stop at the pharmacy; buy the girls some socks and underwear, and buy Manny Jr. some tennis shorts and shirts. Then I must go see my mother.

She's not feeling well. I should be back between six and seven." She had created this itinerary for herself, and hoped that Manny would accept it without interrogation.

"I'll be eating out tonight, and I don't expect to be home until about eight," he said.

He hadn't showered after sex. He just towed the sweat from his body, and sprayed his chest, pubic hair, thighs and back with cologne. He didn't believe in daily showers, and he didn't say good-bye. He left the bedroom smiling broadly, and walked down the stairs toward his study.

As always, the study was dark and cold. Manny flipped the light switch as he entered and the four torchieres, one in each corner, illuminated the room. He walked to his desk, and pulled open the right-hand drawer. Manny pocketed his keys, wallet, and four, five-gram cocaine vials. He closed that drawer and opened the one below it. He retrieved his tracking device, and giggled as he closed the desk drawer. He turned and popped the latches to his briefcase and placed the tracker next to his Glock 9MM. Satisfied that he had everything he needed, Manny left his study and merrily walked to his car. Sex, his morning lines, and the excitement of stalking his prey excited him. He was looking forward to confrontation, and this made him ravenous. He drove around the Miami Springs circle twice before he decided on lunch at Juan's Cafeteria on 36th street. The sex had not been as rough as he would have liked, but he didn't want to hurt her before knowing what she was up to. His brother was involved and he would have to do something about that. Manny pulled into the cafeteria parking lot, and lingered in the car. "That bitch is as dumb as the slut. How could she think that I wouldn't know that she was up to something," he said to himself?

He was sure that Sandra would not leave the house immediately. She had to make herself presentable. That would give him enough time for a Palomilla steak with finely chopped parsley,

and raw white onions as a dressing. Fried sweet plantains, white rice with black beans, a Heineken or two, and flan with coconut topping. Cuban coffee would finish the meal—as if he needed another stimulant.

He ate his lunch with gusto, and drank three beers. He then stood at the outside counter, savoring his Cuban coffee. Twelve forty-five, time for another couple of lines. He paid his bill, then walked to his car. As he waited for the interior to cool, he popped a CD into the player, and energetic Salsa music filled the car. Manny retrieved a calfskin passport portfolio from his glove compartment. It contained a small mirror, and a four-inch, twenty-four karat gold straw. He prepared a pair of thick three-inch lines on the mirror, and then quickly inhaled them through the engraved straw. His belly full, and nose numb, he opened his briefcase on the passenger seat, and switched on the tracking device. Ten minutes to one, and Sandra was still at home. Nothing to do but snort and wait.

**Sandra left the house at one.** It wouldn't take more than twenty to twenty-five minutes to get to Alex's house, but she couldn't sit at home any longer. She had called her father, and asked him to pick-up the children after school, and take them to his house. She had also called Saks Fifth Avenue, and had a personal shopper purchase what she needed for the children, and arranged for delivery tomorrow. Finally, she had told the housekeeper not to prepare dinner. Her last act before she left the house was to light a couple of tall purple candles before her statue of Saint Jude, the patron Saint of lost causes. She didn't take State Road 112, the quick route, but instead drove on Northwest Thirty-Sixth Street, the commercial, dirty route. The drive took thirty-three minutes, and she created three plausible scenarios for her upcoming encounter with her son. Two worked-out relatively well, but one did not.

She parked her car in front of Alex's house, and walked to the entry gate. Biscayne Bay was a smooth blue, and sparkled with reflected afternoon sunshine. She rang the intercom, and instinctively blessed herself.

"Who is it?" asked the housekeeper.

"It's Sandra. I'm here to see my son Peter," she said.

"Peter isn't here. He's next door."

"Is Alex or Francis available?"

"They're both working."

"I was here yesterday, and I'm supposed to meet him today at two. I'm early, but I was hoping that wouldn't be a problem."

The housekeeper opened the front door and walked out to the entry gate. Sandra smiled at the housekeeper.

"You can go over to the next house, and ask for Peter. He doesn't live here."

"I thought he lived with Alex," Sandra said.

"No," replied the housekeeper, "he lives with the other residents."

"What other residents?"

"Go ring their intercom, and ask for Peter. He can explain everything."

Sandra hesitated. What is that house? What is happening to my son, and what is he involved with? The housekeeper smiled and pointed toward the other house, and waited until



Sandra started walking before returning to the house. Sandra looked at the house as she walked to the entry gate. It appeared to be a well-loved and preserved two-story wood house, with a wrap-around porch. The landscaping was lush and tropical: red and yellow hibiscus, multi colored crotons, royal palms, queen palms and areca palms obscured most of the porch. She realized that the wrought iron fencing, entry gate, and landscaping perfectly matched Alex's house.

Manny saw Sandra immediately after he turned off the Boulevard, and slowed the car to a crawl. He quickly parked by the rust stained four story office building on the corner and waited. Sandra had stopped in front of the gate to an old house, next to the house that she had visited yesterday. Manny watched as she leaned closer to the entry gate intercom, and then pushed the gate open, but he couldn't follow her walk to the porch steps because of the landscaping. The front door opened, and a man met her on the porch. He saw their heads above the vegetation before they entered the house. Manny drove the car toward an alley that abutted the property behind the house, and parked under a large rubber tree that covered two-thirds of the alley. The cocaine induced impatience and anger flared, and he wanted to run to the gate and kick it down. Instead he pounded on his briefcase with his fist. Some of the tension relieved, he decided on another couple of lines, and to wait fifteen minutes before announcing himself. He wanted them whomever they are, to be relaxed.

"Please wait here. I'll tell Peter that you're here," said the man that answered the door. Sandra waited in the living room, and said hello to the other residents as she paced back and forth.

Her son walked into the room. "Hello," he said. "You're early."

She wanted to rush to him and squeeze him tightly, but fought the impulse and contorted her purse instead. "I couldn't bear sitting around the house any longer. So I decided to come early. I hope you don't mind."

"It's O.K. Let's go up to my room. Chris and I were just talking about you. Well, I was talking and he was listening. I also asked him to stay with me while we talk."

Sandra had expected Alex to be present not his son. "Whatever makes you comfortable," she said. They walked to his room without further conversation. Peter opened the door, and Chris and Sandra exchanged an awkward hello.

Only twelve minutes and Manny left his car and walked around the block. He wanted to get an idea of the layout, but the damn landscaping continued around the entire block, obstructing a clear view of the property. He approached the house and rang the intercom.

"Hello. Can I help you?" a man said.

"Hi. I'm sorry I'm late. I was supposed to meet my wife Sandra here. I see her car's here, so I assume she's already inside," Manny said.

"Yes, she's here. I'll buzz you in," the voice said.

He reached the porch and open front door. "I'm sorry to be such a bother, but work and traffic were impossible today," Manny said. He entered the house, and waived to the two women and a man that were seated in the living room.

"You can go on up. Your wife is already upstairs. It's the third door on the right," the man said.

“Thanks,” Manny replied.

He couldn’t figure out what this place was. Who were all these people, and why is Sandra meeting Alex here and not at his house? He looked at the furniture that filled the living room before he started up the stairs, and stopped at the top of the stairs to look at the antiques that lined the second-floor hallway. There was a certain familiarity about the place. It reminded him of the furniture that his mother had when he was kid—these surroundings somehow reminded him of her. She had killed herself after giving birth to his god-damned brother. Alex had cost him everything; his father’s attention and his mother’s life. No matter how he looked at his life, it always came down to his brother and the mess he had caused just by being born. No one saw Alex for what he was: a pervert and a thief. He took everything from me when he was born, and now he’s trying to take Sandra. “Again, he’s trying to take everything from me,” he said to the hallway.

He walked slowly, looking at the brightly colored portraits and landscapes that led him to the third door on the right. “Whose house is this?” he asked himself. He stopped and listened to the muffled voices before twisting the doorknob, and pushing gently to see if the door was unlocked; it was. He quickly opened the door, entered the room, and immediately closed and locked the door behind him.

Sandra looked at him, and fear plastered her to the chair by the window. Peter looked at his father full of hatred and anger, and Chris jumped to his feet from the floral floor pillow. Manny looked from his wife, and searched the room for Alex. He saw a teenager that he didn’t know, and a young man on the bed that he didn’t recognize either. No Alex. He was surprised

into inaction, and stood in front of the door, staring at the thin young man that leaned against the headboard, and realized it was Peter.

“What the fuck are you doing here, you little faggot? I had hoped that you were dead.” Manny said, standing between his captives and the door.

“I’m waiting for my asshole of a father to die!” Peter yelled.

He shifted his legs from the bed toward the floor, but Manny pounced on him before he could stand. Manny wrapped his hands around his son’s throat and began to squeeze, forcing Peter down on the bed. Sandra ran and grabbed Manny’s arms, trying to pull them from her son’s neck.

“Let go!” she screamed. Manny gave her a quick blow to her right eye.

Manny’s left hand never let go of Peter’s throat. He watched as Sandra crashed into the side table next to the chair she had sat in, knocking the ceramic lamp onto the choir rug. The lamp made a loud thump, and the corner of the table rammed into the window, loudly breaking the glass. Manny squeezed tighter as Peter struggled against his father’s grip, but he could not break free. Sandra attacked again, this time armed with the lamp. She swung the lamp at Manny’s skull, but hit the side of his face breaking the lamp. Manny turned his head and saw Chris frozen in place. He then released Peter, grabbed Sandra by her right breast, and pulled her towards him. There was banging on the door, as he struck her with his fist.

“Open the door! Open the door!” someone screamed.

Peter kicked at Manny from the bed, but Manny had him half pinned against the bed and Peter could not maneuver into an offensive position.

“Open the fucking door!” someone yelled.

Peter grabbed a large green shard of the lamp, and it cut into his hand as he plunged it into his father’s forearm. Manny immediately released Sandra’s breast, and pressed down on his son’s abdomen. Peter struggled to plunge the shard into his father’s arm again, but Manny smashed his fist into Peter’s face, and he dropped his weapon.

Sandra unlocked the door, and Stan, Jane, Maria, and Andrew poured into the room. Manny struck Peter’s face once more, and saw a woman run toward him. Jane sprayed something into his face.

He inhaled and immediately gagged and had trouble breathing. The pepper spray burned his eyes and his throat. His vision blurred. His lungs heaved trying to expel the spray, and Manny released Peter to attack the bitch that had sprayed him. Jane was thrown backward into Maria, as Stan grabbed Manny’s hair and pulled with such force that Manny jumped from the bed. Manny stood blinded, flailing his fists in front of him as he gasped for air. Peter was in perfect position.

“You fucker!”

Peter kicked his father with both legs in the groin with such force that he twisted his right ankle. Manny doubled over and fell to the floor. Peter followed, and pummeled his father’s head with his fists, as blood dripped from his split and swelling lips.

“I’m going to kill you!”

Chris finally moved from where he had stood frozen, and grabbed Peter’s shoulder.

“Easy.”

Peter stopped, but remained sitting atop his father's back. He was bleary, bloody and breathing hard, with pepper tears streaming down his cheeks. He wanted to hurt him more, so he kneeled on his shoulder blade, and pulled his head back.

Phil stood outside Peter's room, smiling in amusement as he watched the mêlée. Stan, Chris, and Jane were now sitting on top of Manny's legs. Peter was holding Manny's left arm behind his back, and Sandra kneeled on his right arm, pinning it to the floor.

"Maria go get us the duct tape in the hall closet," said Stan.

"I'll kill you both for this," Manny said coughing between his words.

He struggled against the five that restrained him. He was a big man, and they had a hard time holding him. Peter hit his father's injured forearm as Manny bucked to try and toss him off his back. Manny howled from the pain, and Peter pressed his right knee against the back of his father's neck.

"You're not going to kill anyone or hurt us again. I'll find you when you least expect it, and kill you very slowly. I want to see you bleed."

Peter squeezed some more blood from his father's injured forearm. Maria roughly pushed Phil out of her way as she returned to the room, and handed Jane the roll of duct tape. Andrew stood in front of Sandra, holding the pepper spray aimed at Manny's head. As Jane lifted her body from Manny's legs to take the duct tape, Stan slipped onto the floor. Manny, helped by all the cocaine, reared up, throwing Peter from his back and freeing his arm from under Sandra. He turned toward her, and Andrew sprayed his eyes and open mouth with some more pepper spray. Manny managed to grab Sandra's arm before Peter punched him in the throat. Manny collapsed,

and gulped wildly as he tried to breathe through his bruised and burning throat. Peter took the duct tape from Jane and tightly wrapped Manny's wrists together. Next, he covered his eyes with a circle of tape that went twice around his head. Maria, Jane and Andrew watched as Peter pummeled his father with punches. Sandra and Stan grabbed Peter and pulled him off Manny. Not satisfied, Peter kicked Manny in the side before Stan could stop him.

"Enough," said Stan. Peter slumped onto his bloody bed.

"I'm going to call the police," said Jane.

"No! Please, don't call anyone," Sandra said. "If we put him in jail, it will just be worse for me and the kids when he gets out. Let's tape his legs and mouth, and give me some time to think of what to do."

Jane, Maria and Andrew looked at Stan for guidance, but Peter was already taping his father's legs. Manny lay on the floor, bound and breathing heavily, as the group of six stood in the far corner of the bedroom discussing what to do.

"We can't just leave him taped, and we can't just let him go. I think it would be best if we called the police. We should have him arrested. That way it would give you time to gather your children and disappear," said Stan.

"I'm afraid that if we put him in jail he'll exact a terrible revenge. Not only on me but on my children. He has a network of men that will find us, and I can't take the children and just disappear. If we take him out to the alley and cut him loose, I do believe all of us will fare better," said Sandra. "I'm not sure what else to do."

"Are you crazy? We must send him to jail. He'll kill you if we don't," said Peter.

**Commented [MW5]:** Here we get an internal sensation from Manny's POV. Use more of them during and after the battle?

**Commented [MW6]:** This line doesn't quite ring true. Is Sandra in denial?

Sandra looked at her son and tried to smile. “I need to protect your brother and sisters. You can take care of yourself, but they’re too young and weak. You know your father will haunt us for the rest of our lives if I put him in jail. I tried that once before you were born, and I spent five days tied, abused and scared.” Sandra raised her blouse revealing the initials MC that had been branded beneath her right breast.

Peter wanted to insist, but Sandra’s tears stopped him. He held his mother tightly, and for the first time in his life Peter was truly considering killing his father. How could he get away with it—could he ask for anyone’s help? His mother would certainly help him. “Whatever we do, you can’t stay with him anymore,” said Peter. Manny rolled on the floor and they all turned to look at him.

“What are we going to tell Alex?” asked Maria.

“Don’t worry about my father. I’ll talk to him tonight.”

“What about the broken window?” asked Andrew?

“We have some Visqueen that was left over from when we painted Phil’s room in the kitchen pantry. We’ll cut a piece and tape it to the window. Hopefully Alex won’t notice it immediately,” Stan said.

“So we’ve decided that Stan will take care of the window, we won’t call the police, and we’ll dump your husband in the alley. That only leaves us with Phil. What do we do about him?” asked Jane.

“You, Maria, and Andrew take him to the kitchen to get the plastic, and ask him what he’s going to do or say about all this. Take your time in the kitchen. While you’re doing that,



we'll take Peter's father down the stairs, through the garden, around to the back gate and into the alley," said Stan. He looked at each of them for agreement.

Phil had watched his low-class housemates from the doorway, wondering why he had been cursed with this disease, and further punished with having to live with these people. He followed his trio to the kitchen. They found the plastic, and he allayed their fears with his calculated answers to their questions. He loved these games, especially when he played with dolts. Phil figured as they lingered in the kitchen, since they hadn't called the police, that Stan would dump Peter's father in the alley.

"You guys go and help them upstairs. I'm not feeling very well. I'm going to get some tea and go lay down," he said. They didn't question his motives, and left him in the kitchen. Phil took a cotton kitchen towel from one of the drawers, and carefully opened the backdoor so that he wouldn't make a sound as he slipped from the house. He could hear Stan and Peter talking as they entered the garden from the alley. Phil squatted behind the lemon balm and rosemary bushes, and waited for them to pass the herb garden. Phil slinked from behind the bushes, and quickly passed through the gate into the alley, placing a rosemary twig between the gate and frame so that it wouldn't lock.

Manny sat battered and bleeding with his back against the driver's side passenger door of his car, and his legs stretched out into the asphalt alley. He still had not removed the cut duct tape from his body. Phil approached, and Manny tried to rise to his feet. He managed to lift his rump four inches from the asphalt before hitting the ground again.

"I brought you a towel for your arm," Phil said. He held the floral kitchen towel in his outstretched hand like a truce flag.

“Who the fuck are you?” Manny tried to yell, but since his throat was still burning, all he could manage was a soft question.

“I’m an unhappy resident of the house, and I believe that we could help each other,” said Phil.

“What the fuck could you possibly have that I would need or want?” Manny rasped.

“Names, entry codes, and schedules,” Phil replied. He smiled a broad, happy with himself smile.

“Talk,” Manny said.

Phil lowered himself onto the asphalt next to Manny. “You’re Alex’s brother and I assume that you share his gifts,” he said.

Manny nodded.

“Your brother refuses to cure me of my malady, and I’m tired of living with these fools. If you’ll cure me, I’ll help you in any way that I can,” said Phil.

Manny smiled, and again nodded his yes.

*What do you mean you don't believe in  
homosexuality?*

*It's not like the **Faster Bunny**,  
your belief isn't necessary.*

## *Lea De Laria*



**The traffic from Brickell Avenue was light.** Francis drove over the Brickell Avenue Bridge, and quickly admired the view from above the Miami River, out into Biscayne Bay. He had always liked the southeastern part of downtown Miami. Condominium homes seemed to be as natural as the palm tree-lined streets. As natural as skyscrapers are to New York, but much more colorful. The downtown Metro Mover whisked workers around the downtown area in air conditioned comfort, and gave them an elevated perspective of their city. A young city starting to find its footing, and like Francis, Miami has discovered the beauty of being different.

Biscayne Boulevard emerged from the downtown square lined with Cuban Royal Palms that rose to over fifty feet. To the right of the boulevard was Bayside Park, and Bayside Market Place. The park hosted many free concerts, arts and crafts shows, and thousands of tourists. Bayside Market Place was filled with burger joints, expensive souvenirs, and at happy hour, with attorneys, politicians, tourists, drug dealers, and thugs. Frozen Margaritas, Rum Runners, and Pina Coladas were poured from large metallic frozen drink dispensers that were covered by thatched Miccosukee Indian Chickees. The Indians had never envisioned their huts being used for any purpose other than supporting their hammocks, and offering refuge from the hot sun, and rainy-season downpours. Francis drove past his old stomping grounds, past the turn-off towards the Port of Miami, and the construction site for the new waterfront basketball stadium.

When he crossed under the State Road 395 overpass—the direct route to South Beach—he always noticed how the boulevard gradually changed its clothes from modern, or recently refurbished buildings, into old and everyday attire. The sky remained, the traffic continued, the palms still swayed, but the attitude was different. The 1920s Sears building on the west side of the boulevard had been whitewashed, cracked and colored by graffiti. But now the only remaining part of the original building is the corner clock tower, which was incorporated into the Carnival Center for the Performing Arts—now the Adrienne Arsht Center. Across the street was the parking lot for the sterile, 1950's modern metallic, Miami Herald building, that had recently been reduced to rubble. And north of that was the Omni International Mall. It had been built to help spur downtown development, it opened in 1977, and closed in 2000 because downtown development was still lacking. North of the Center, between northeast thirteenth and twentieth streets, the boulevard was bordered by old decaying stucco buildings that had been converted into cheap apartments, cheap offices, and low-rent retail stores. Their awning entrances provided

refuge to the boulevards prostitutes, hustlers, and patrons. This was his adopted neighborhood. Not a desired neighborhood, but his nonetheless. Past twentieth-street, the west side of the boulevard was flanked by old middle-class homes and apartment buildings that had become low income family neighborhoods. The east side of this area had fared better than the west, because Biscayne Bay was one to two blocks from the Boulevard, and direct access to the water playground was highly coveted and priced.

Francis had never wanted to live in this area of Miami, and remembered his reaction when Alex had told him that he was buying a couple of houses on Northeast Twenty-Third Street.

“Are you crazy?” he had told Alex. “Who in their right mind would leave a bay-front house on Belle Meade Island, for North East Twenty-Third Street?” Francis loved the house. It sat at the eastern tip of the island, and had a spectacular and unobstructed view of Miami Beach, Biscayne Bay, and downtown Miami. The small gated island was a refuge of luxury in northeast Miami. Your neighbors were mostly professionals and wealthy business people, but, like all of Miami, a couple of undesirables had infiltrated the enclave. Damn I was a snob, thought Francis.

“It’s not a backward step. We’ll spend most of our happiest years there. You must learn to trust me. You know I’m very partial to refined living. This move will allow us to continue to be spoiled, while actually giving our lives purpose.”

The reason Alex gave for needing to move was that there were people that were finding their way to his door, and as he had helped me he would have to help them. Francis could not argue. He didn’t want to argue. He knew that Alex had saved his life, and it was now time for him to save others. But he still hated leaving Belle Meade Island.

Francis turned west on Northeast Twenty-Fifth Street, and drove down the oak-covered street toward Northeast Second Avenue, and pulled his BMW into the parking lot for Select Foods, Incorporated. The parking lot was surrounded by an eight-foot chain-link fence with a razor wire top. The gate remained open until 9pm; after nine you needed a remote to open it, or be buzzed in by the security guard. Juan, the guard on duty today, watched Francis park the car and approach the building. He buzzed the door open before Francis could press the intercom. The four-story building was built as a storage warehouse, production facility, and offices for Alex's five Gourmet and Farmer's Market food stores. The first of La Selecta Farmer's Market stores was on a separate lot across the street.

The front of the first floor was the office space, and the back the receiving area. All the floors were serviced by two large cargo elevators. The second floor was the kitchen area, and freezer and cooler storage areas. The two large freezers on the second floor were stocked with specialty foods from around the world, and proprietary frozen gourmet dinners which were made in the company kitchens. The third and fourth floors were the dry goods storage area.

"He's in his office," said Juan, and then buzzed Francis into the offices.

"I thought you had forgotten about me," said Alex. He turned off his computer and rose from his chair. "Let's go home." They said goodbye to Juan, and exited the building. Alex was feeling good, and he patted Francis's ass—which he knew would irritate him. Francis turned to him with a forced scowl on his face and said, "If you want some of that you better learn to keep your hands to yourself." Alex smiled and they both entered the car. Francis drove south on Biscayne Boulevard, and turned east on twenty-third. Almost immediately Alex felt the hairs on his forearms tingle. Something was wrong.

**Commented [MW7]:** Add a few more beats of action and dialogue here? We have a long driving scene and a truncated arrival scene.

**Commented [MW8]:** It feels like we should be more fully in Alex's POV when this moment happens.

“Slow down,” said Alex.

Francis slowed the car from twenty miles an hour to ten. Alex recognized Sandra’s parked car, and as they reached the alley a black on black Mercedes turned from the alley onto twenty-third. Alex stared into Manny’s bloodshot eyes as the cars passed each other.

Francis drove to the house and parked the car inside the clean and orderly garage. Alex opened his door and raced to the kitchen entry. He entered the kitchen, and walked to his study without acknowledging the housekeeper, or the dogs. Francis entered the kitchen a minute later, and he also walked past the housekeeper, through the living room, into the Florida room, and out the sliding doors toward the healing house.

Phil entered the kitchen as Francis closed the door behind him.

“What the hell has been going on here?” asked Francis.

“You’d have to ask Stan and his crew. I’m not privileged with their confidences,” said Phil.

“Is Alex home?” he asked.

Francis walked passed him. “Yes. I’m sure he’ll be here shortly,” he said, and quickly left the kitchen for Stan’s room.

Phil was not in a rush. He poured himself a glass of iced tea, sauntered to the kitchen door, and out into the herb garden. He sipped his tea, and promenaded through the gardens toward the main house. As he approached the Florida room, the two attack-trained Dobermans barked at him from their dog pen—even the dogs disliked him. The housekeeper was in the Florida room, and Phil opened one of the sliding doors and entered.



“Where is Alex?” he asked.

“In his study. Do you want me to get him for you?” the housekeeper asked. She also disliked this man.

“No,” he replied, and walked toward the study.

The study door was open. “Come in, Phil, I was waiting for you,” said Alex.

The study tables were dotted with bronze sculptures of Indians on horses; bronzes of classic Greek horses, and several modern interpretations of horse and rider were scattered on bookshelves. To his right, on the west wall, tribal masks from around the world surrounded framed pictures of all the countries that he, Francis and Chris had visited. The north wall displayed an eclectic collection of impressionist and pre-Civil War American paintings, and the south wall of bookshelves was filled with hundreds of books and twenty-one Hopi Kachina dolls. A thick, twelve-foot-long oak library table that served as Alex’s desk, faced the east wall of sliding doors. There were a matching set of wrought iron Corinthian column torchieres on either side of the desk, and an overstuffed sofa sat in front the desk.

“Sit down, Phil,” said Alex. “The answer to your question is still no.”

“So you refuse to heal me,” said Phil.

“We’ve had this conversation repeatedly. You know that I can’t wave your disease away, and you refuse to work at discovering the path to your healing. There’s nothing I can do for you.” Alex was tired of this game, and of to being pleasant to Phil.

“You’re a liar. You just don’t want to heal me. You feel like playing God, and I’m tired of you and the idiots that I must live with. I’ve found someone else to cure me and I don’t have to put up with your crap anymore.”

“You haven’t found anything. I want you out of the house within the hour, or I’ll personally move all your belongings to the alley. I don’t want you to disrupt the others any longer, and, I just don’t like you.”

Phil was about to scream some stupid protests, but Alex rose from his chair and walked to where he was seated. Phil sat in the chair with his mouth open.

“Leave.”

Phil trembled to his feet, and had to restrain himself from running out of the study. Alex returned to his chair, and said three prayers. One for Phil, one for Sandra, and one for himself. He didn’t need to ask the spirits for guidance, he knew what was coming, and what he would have to do. He just hoped that he had the courage and timing to accomplish everything successfully.

**Manny didn’t remember the drive home.** Phil had explained why everyone was staying at the house. How stupid are those people? How could they believe that Alex could cure them? Alex had a hell of a racket going. He’ll have to ask that faggot Phil how much Alex was charging them for their cures. Manny assumed that Peter’s cure was gratis. The towel that Phil had wrapped around his wounded forearm was now a bloody bouquet of flowers. His arm was swollen and sore, but the bleeding had stopped. Manny unwrapped his arm as the phone started to ring. It was his private line.

“Hello.”

“Manny, this is Phil.”

“Hi, Phil. What’s up?”

“I just spoke to your brother, and demanded that he cure me. He refused, as usual, and told me to leave the house within the hour. Are you willing to cure me?”

“Sure. I won’t even charge you the usual fee.”

“Alex wasn’t charging me anything.”

“He wasn’t charging anything, because he wasn’t going to cure you. Get a cab and come over to my house. We’ll start as soon as you get here. But now I have to take care of my arm.”

He disconnected the call, and pressed the speaker phone button, then he pressed preset telephone number 7, and listened as the phone dialed and then rang once, twice, and was answered in mid third ring.

“Yeah” was the salutation.

“Carlos it’s Manny. Call Juan, Gregorio, and Tony. I need all of you to come to my house as quick as you can. I’ve got a couple of problems that you must help me take care. Come in through the outside study entrance.”

“I’ll get a hold of them and we’ll be there right away,” Carlos said.

Manny hung-up the phone, and knew that he had put off the inevitable long enough.

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“Please! I’ve told you everything I know,” Phil said as Carlos approached.

“I know you have, but we want to cure you of your terrible disease,” Manny said from his desk chair. Phil struggled against the rope that bound him tight to the wooden, straight backed chair.

“I’ll give you money; anything you want. Please, Manny!” he screamed. Carlos caressed his cheek with his large rough fingers.

“I have money, and if you weren’t an infected faggot I would have already had you,” said Manny, before nodding to Carlos.

“I’m not gay,” said Phil. “I’m not like your brother.”

“In that case, we can prolong this a little longer,” said Manny.

An hour later, one of Carlos’ large hands firmly held Phil’s chin, while the other clasped the back of his skull. A swift powerful twist easily broke his neck. Phil’s head bobbed to the left, as his legs and arms twitched, and a puddle of urine collected at the base of the chair. A minute-and-a-half later his naked body was limp and still. Manny and his men drank shots of twelve-year-old scotch, and snorted multiple lines of cocaine, while Phil silently waited in his chair.

Manny’s men unceremoniously stuffed Phil into a green, army surplus duffle bag. The thin body fit perfectly with room to spare. The men cleaned the soiled chair and floor, then broke the chair into pieces that they tossed into the marble mantled fireplace. All their chores done, they celebrated with more scotch and cocaine. Manny sprayed the shattered and splintered wood with lighter fluid, smiling as he lit two long candle matches and tossed them into the fireplace. The flames engulfed the wood with a loud swoosh, and the men raised their glasses and howled.

**Commented [MW9]:** Where is the POV in this scene? Establish the viewpoint? Use the viewpoint to focus the scene?

Carlos lifted his handy work with ease, and followed Manny through the secret chamber and out the rear entrance—his coked collaborators followed in single file.

Phil was dumped into the trunk of Manny's Mercedes, and Carlos took his place in the front passenger seat. Manny started the engine and then pointed the car toward North Miami and his drug distribution farmstead.

**Sandra left the recovery house, and** called her house from the car as she drove north on Biscayne Boulevard, toward Miami Shores and her parent's house. Rush hour traffic was starting to thicken, and she was distracted as she drove. She thought of the forty-seven thousand dollars that she had hidden inside her Art Deco mantle clock. Sandra quickly swerved in front of an older female driver with stiffly coifed hair that matched her blue-gray Cadillac. The older woman had been cautiously and slowly approaching the ramp for State Road 395, and she had purposely left plenty of room in front of her to accommodate hurried Miami drivers. Sandra told herself that she would drive by the house, and if Manny's car was not there she would just get her money and leave. She gave no thought to the fact that she was driving in rush hour traffic.

Sandra pulled onto the gravel driveway, and slowly inched toward the house, breathing quietly, as if that would hush the cars approach. She was nervous because it had taken twenty minutes longer than she had anticipated to drive home. Manny's car was not in the driveway. She pressed the garage door opener, and held her breath as the door curled-up parallel to the ceiling. The garage was empty. She was about to enter, when she realized how stupid that would be, so she drove the car around the entry fountain, and parked facing down the driveway, toward the street. Sandra hurried, as quickly as her large body would let her, up the front door stairs opened

the door, and slammed it shut behind her. She leaned against the door breathing heavily not from the sprint but from fear, and waited for the house to become completely quiet before heading toward the staircase. Her heels clacked against the marble floor, and she proceeded on her tip-toes. The house was filled with the sounds of her attempt to be silent. Finally, she was at her bedroom door. Her trembling hand clutched the door handle, and she hesitated for a few seconds then opened the door enough to allow her to peer into the empty room. Her heart pounded in her ears as she walked to the fireplace mantle. The rosewood clock's pewter pendulum swung as it had for the past eight years; keeping time two minutes fast. Sandra turned the clock around on the mantle, and slid the thin back panel up-and-out, exposing its mechanical organs. Taped to the mechanism wall, was a tiffany jewelry bag. She tore the bag from its hiding place, left the clock open, and quickly started toward the bedroom door. She trotted from the bedroom to the staircase, and descended quickly, but not carefully. Sandra rolled head over heels the last third of the stairs, and hit her forehead hard against the marble floor.

**Sandra's eyes opened fifty-five minutes later.** She was disoriented, and her head painfully throbbed. Her vision was foggy and couldn't distinguish any shapes, but she could hear voices; masculine voices. They were laughing and speaking Spanish. She tried to move her legs, then her arms, but she couldn't. Every time she tried to move her body a searing pain traveled up and down her back and arms. Her vision started to clear and the voices were crystalline. She was trying to remember what had happened and who these laughing men were, but her mind wouldn't let her remember. When Manny spoke, she remembered what had happened, and her whole body trembled with the knowledge of her mistake.

"She's waking up." he said. The men all rose from their chairs and surrounded Sandra. They were naked, and she realized that she was suspended from the ceiling, at their waist level.

Her body rested on an eighteen-inch-wide and four-inch-thick wood plank that extended from the top of her shoulder blades to the end of her spine. This improvised sling had four leather straps attached to the back of the plank, and each strap was tightened around her body pressing her against the wood. Sandra's ankles were tied separately, to leather straps that were attached to the heavy-duty steel chain that supported the plank from the ceiling, and split into a 'y' that attached to either side of the plank by her hips and shoulders. Her wrists were tied together, and held high by a strap attached to the chain that supported the plank at her shoulder blades. Her head was prevented from sagging toward the floor by a leather head band that was tied to her wrists.

"We were worried that you would never wake up, and miss our party," he said from his leather chair.

"I was so happy to see you when we returned from feeding some of my pet alligators. You looked so peaceful lying on the floor with dried blood around your head," he said as he walked toward her. He too was naked.

"I also want to thank you for your monetary contribution toward my assistants' fees." Manny gently stroked her belly as he walked to her head and released the head band restraint. Her head drooped toward the floor, and she struggled to straighten it, but, pain shot through her neck, and she let her head droop. Manny's fingers pinched her right nipple and she flinched, but did not struggle. Tears fell to the floor from the corners of her eyes, but she made no sound. One of the men was recording Manny's gentle caress, the nipple pinching, and her tears with a video camera.

Carlos un-strapped one of her ankles, and spread her legs painfully apart. The camera man zoomed in for close-up shots of her twitching vagina, and Carlos' swollen ten-inch-long and three-inch-thick penis. Without warning and in three seconds his penis had completely disappeared inside her. Sandra wanted to scream, but couldn't. She didn't know why the scream wouldn't come. The pain shot through her body, but her mouth produced no sound. Manny slapped her cheek, and watched, as her eyes blinked and her tears hit the floor. But, still she did not scream. "You'll beg for mercy before we're finished with you. You shall have to repeat this act with all my friends; front and back." he said as he massaged his erection.

"And, before I kill your faggot son, we will all have him, just as we're going to have you." Her eyes filled with a hatred that he had never seen before. He smiled as he pinched her nostrils closed. It didn't take long for her to open her mouth, and he viciously forced his penis down her throat. Sandra gagged with each thrust, but her stare never wavered. He let go of her nose and she gulped as much air as she could, and when his pubic hairs filled her nostrils, she closed her eyes and bit down with all her might. Manny was the one who screamed. She did not breathe as blood dripped into her mouth, and down the corners of her lips. Manny struck her throat with his fist and her mouth opened, releasing his deflated and bleeding penis. She had not been able to sever the appendage because Manny had used a leather cock ring to help maintain his erection. Sandra had bit down hard, and her right canine broke the skin and burst several capillaries. But the leather ring, wouldn't let her teeth accomplish what she so desired. Her eyes widened as she watched Manny raise one of his three, small sacrificial cauldrons. The blow was swift. Her right temple shattered. She didn't die instantly, but there was no more pain.



**The alley was dark and deserted.** A single street lamp glowed in the heavy drizzle that blanketed the black Mercedes. Manny had been sitting in the car for twelve minutes, waiting for the rain to subside. The ritual would require candles and sacrifice. Each rooster took its turn clucking and scratching—their legs had been tied to stop them from ripping the brown paper grocery bags, and the interior of the car was beginning to smell of rooster (an expensive German chicken coop). Salsa music filled the car with a man's voice, and lyrics of passionate love, as the air conditioner kept the black interior at a cold sixty-eight degrees. Manny entertained himself by singing along with Negron, snorting cocaine, and drinking Aguardiente (necessary for sanctifying the ground and roosters). He switched from CD to car radio; he needed an update on tropical storm Gregory. The meteorologist reported the statistics of the last twenty year, regarding all the storms that had formed in the final two weeks of Hurricane season. The percentages indicated that South Florida would be spared, but the weather report ended with the reminder of the changeable nature of tropical storms and hurricanes. Manny was hoping for a hurricane, it fit into his plans perfectly (disaster and confusion would help hide his crimes).

The alcohol and drugs sent Manny's mind wandering into unsolicited thoughts of his father.

"I hated you" he said to the roosters—they clucked wildly in reply. The interior of the car became chillingly cold, and he could see his breath with each exhalation.

His father's deep voice filled the cold interior.

*"You should go home; this will end badly for you."*

The air conditioner stopped cooling, as Manny shivered.

“It’s too late for fatherly advice. Go back to being dead and silent” he said. Even in death the old was a pain-in-the-ass. The chill left the car and the air conditioner started again.

Three minutes after their chilly conversation, the rain stopped. Manny inhaled some more cocaine before popping the trunk—the necessary parts to the ritual were stacked in a blood-stained wood box. He checked the ammo in the gun (he knew it was full but checked anyway). The Remington Target ammo was the quietest ammo for his Siris silencer suppressed Ruger pistol. A weekend holiday to Tampa two years ago, and he returned with a .22 caliber pistol encased in a stainless-steel silencer for under eight hundred dollars—it was his favorite gun. Manny held the gun as he exited the car, and then placed the pistol behind his belt, against his waist. He flinched as the crotch of his jeans pressed his balls against his thigh—he wasn’t wearing underwear; his injury wouldn’t allow it. He removed the box, and quietly closed the trunk. How dare the old bastard come back from the dead for a visit, with only a warning; stock market information would have been more beneficial, he thought in the increasing drizzle.

“Fuck you and curse you” he said, as he put the box on the soggy ground beneath the rubber tree. No voice from heaven or hell was going to stop him, and he went to retrieve the roosters. Sandra paid for her betrayal, and he was determined to exact more than a pound of flesh from his brother. Years of imagined derision and mockery, mixed with the cocaine in his blood, as Manny shot the street lamp glass and bulb. The glass and bulb burst loudly, while the gun made two sounds like stifled sneezes. Manny slipped into the shadows under the rubber tree (incase curiosity brings someone to their window), careful not to irritate his bruised penis. The power and precision of the gun started his adrenaline flowing, and he placed the gun on the ground and began to empty the box. First, a folded three-by-three feet square of thick, rough, natural linen; next, a flat, two inch thick, one foot square-like coral stone. Next, three large

irregular black lava rocks, a jar of cemetery earth (that he had collected yesterday at three in the morning), a small hand ax stained with the blood of his many sacrifices; three twelve inch black candles, a propane lighter, the half empty bottle of aguardiente that he had been drinking from, and finally a jar filled with a mixture of black pepper, red pepper, crushed and partially powdered chicken bones, and fresh chopped horseradish root (all mixed together and roasted in the oven). One of the roosters had been pecking at his brown bag and broke through a spot wet from its droppings—he would be first.

Manny wore black gloves, was dressed in black jeans, a black t-shirt, with a black bandana covering his head, and no shoes on his feet. He sprinkled the roasted mixture over the black linen cloth; then the cemetery earth, and sprayed everything with aguardiente from his mouth. He started to sing and chant in a guttural voice, invoking the spirits of vengeance—the pecking rooster was able to get its head through the bag as Manny prepared. He lit the candles and proceeded to free the rest of the rooster from its bag; sprayed the animal with aguardiente, laid him on the coral rock (holding the torso down with his right foot), stretched its neck with his left hand, and decapitated the rooster with one swift blow of the ax. The headless animal thrashed under his bare foot for only a minute. When it was calm, he lifted the torso by the bound feet, and massaged as much blood from the carcass as possible, to drizzle over the rooster head, that lay on his cruel altar stone. Two more to go.

**Peter and Chris had a hearty dinner of a large supreme pizza**, spicy chicken wings, and fudge brownies—everything but the brownies were delivery. They shared a two-liter Coke as they ate and watched Star Trek Voyager. It was eight o'clock on a Friday night, and this was a

weekly affair. Local and national news with all the residents, then they would go to Peter's room to play the latest video games for an hour. Alex had arranged the weekly delivery of pizzas and chicken wings to the recovery house: 2 large supreme, 1 large pepperoni, 1 large extra cheese, and, two dozen mild and two dozen spicy chicken wings—Alex always made dessert. The residents enjoyed the break from cooking their meals. They planned their weekly menus, and cooking schedule on Saturday mornings. Chris would deliver the grocery list to his father, and Francis would deliver the groceries and non-food items to the residents in the afternoon. Saturday was chores day for the residents: cleaning, tidying, and light yard work. Alex worked half-a-day at the store on Saturdays, and spent the afternoon preparing desserts. He provided desserts on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays.

Dinner and the show both over, the boys lay on the bare floor staring at the ceiling fan—the bloody rug had not been replaced yet. The lead in for Star Trek Deep Space Nine started. Fifteen seconds of action followed by series theme music, and then four minutes of commercials.

“Do you think my mother's going to be O.K.” asked Peter, as Chrysler attempted to increase the niche for its 300 model. Chris hesitated, trying desperately to think of something to say.

“Captain Picard to Ensign Cedron; please respond.” said Peter.

Chris turned on his side to face Peter. “No. I don't think it will go well for your mom. She's waited too long to break free, and I think your father won't let her go.” he replied, while Mercedes-Benz tried to convince the viewing public that they produced the Ultimate Luxury Car.

Peter lay on his back, not wanting to look at his cousin. He knew that his mother would suffer greatly for trying to leave his father, but he wasn't prepared for Chris' confirmation of

what he already knew. The Enterprise was visiting the Deep Space Nine station, and Chris stretched uncomfortably on the bare floor.

“When I was a kid, about five years old, there were times that I loved my father. He bought me presents, took me to the zoo and the beach. I loved the beach. We would go alone; mom stayed home either pregnant or nursing. I was too young to understand that she was just a possession, and the special attention I received was due to being the first borne male” said Peter.

He continued after a brief pause. “I guess for the first five years of my life I was happy. The first four I don’t remember, and the memories of my fifth and sixth years are spotty. I do remember sailing on Granddad’s boat; one of the few good memories I have of the old man. After that, my memories are more painful.”

Chris didn’t respond he didn’t want to tell Peter that his personal childhood memories were filled with a father’s love. They lay in silence, hearing the television, but listening to their own thoughts.

**Alex was seated in one of the matching pair of oversized** rattan chairs, legs extended onto a matching ottoman; Francis occupied the other chair. Vivaldi’s ‘Magnificat’ filled the den with soft choral music as Alex read his spy thriller, and Francis a horror novel; the serenity was broken by the phone. Alex placed his book on the ottoman, as he walked to the counter, and sat on one of the white bar stools.

“Hello” he said.

“Is this Alex?”

“Yes, and who are you?”

“This is Carmen, Sandra’s mother. I hate to bother you so late. But, I didn’t know who else to call. I’ve been trying to reach Sandra all day on her cell phone, but all I get is a recording saying that the user has the phone turned off, to please leave a message. I’ve left her five messages, and she still hasn’t called.”

“I’m sorry but I haven’t seen her since yesterday afternoon. Did you call her house?” he asked, knowing that would have been useless.

“Yes. I spoke to Manny and he said that she went to see you, and he hasn’t heard from her since. I’m very worried; I don’t know what to do,” she said and began to cry.

“Call the police and report her missing” he said. Francis left his chair and went to join him at the counter.

“Have the police go to their house and talk to Manny. If they want to talk to me have them come to my store tomorrow. I’m very sorry that I can’t be of more help to you.”

“I know that Manny has done something to her” she sobbed. “What do I tell the children?”

“For now, don’t tell them she’s missing. Tell them she’s preparing to go get them. Give the police a day or two to investigate before you tell them anything else.”

“Please call me if you need anything; anything at all.”

“All I need is Sandra” she said, before she hung-up the phone.

The wall clock chimed ten, and Alex looked at Francis with anger in his eyes. “The son-of-a-bitch; he’s killed her” he yells, as he bolts from the barstool—overturning it in the process.

“Manny is many things, but do you really believe he is stupid enough to kill Sandra the day after his fight with her and Peter?” asked Francis

“He’s a fool, and he was angry, that combination makes him dangerous and stupid. He may not have planned to kill her, but I’m sure he created a situation, where he did kill her.”

*Religion is the organization of  
spirituality into something that became the  
hand maiden of conquerors.*

*Nearly all religions were brought to  
people and imposed on people by  
conquerors, and used as the framework to  
control their minds.*

*John Henrik Clarke*





**The doorbell chimed, and I rose from my comfortable chair**, leaving my thoughts to warm the seat. I knew who was at the door, and I knew that this meeting would change Chris' life.

"Hola Padrino," I said as I bowed to the briquette black elder.

"Ahijado, it's been a longtime since you've invited me to your home," he said, and gently touched my shoulders. I led the old man to my den, and we sat in matching arm chairs that faced each other at a small, round oak table. My thoughts had patiently waited for me to return, and flooded into my mind.

"This is something that I had wanted Christopher to decide for himself. Initiation is not something that I wanted to force upon him," he said.

"I understand that we have no choice, but he still gets to decide for himself. He's a smart and gifted boy . . . no, young man, and he will listen and understand why it's in his best interest to accept initiation."

"You have not changed," said the elder. "Just because you have been privileged with the gift of choice, doesn't mean that everyone you love also has that privilege. Your son's guardian

angel may not be the same as yours. I know you've always believed that he is, but I am here to find-out."

"You know that the only reason that you are here is because Elegua told me to listen to you, and hear what you have to say with a receptive ear."

"Well it's good to know that you still hear and talk to him," he said. "I wasn't sure if you'd abandoned Elegua as you had abandoned your family."

"I didn't abandon my family. If I had abandoned my family I would not have spent the last three months meeting, listening, caring for, and lightening your godson's burden. So, keep your opinions to yourself. Elegua's words have always, and will always, supersede yours and all the other elder's. So please monitor your words with me. I don't wish to argue, or disrespect your position in the religion."

"Seventeen years have not only changed you, they have also changed me. I don't see you as the arrogant little shit that you used to be," he said. "Now I see you as the arrogant shit that you have become."

"Then why the fuck, have you come to waste my time? My father's dead and buried. I'm just waiting for him to come and visit. And, I would not have invited you here if he hadn't made me promise to do so. I'm an initiated priest, bound to Elegua, and very happy to be bound. But, you are an old Pharisee, a leader in love with your position, and touting your old age as proof of your spiritual power," I said, and rose from my chair. "If all you want is to confirm your opinion about me, then confirm it with your Saints; not with me."

“Well, well. You still have that Cedron temper, that you so hated in your father. The good thing is that you’ve at least learned how to temper that from becoming physical. So, maybe you have become a better man than your father,” he said. “You’ll have to prove that to me.”

“I do not have to prove anything to anyone but myself. I’ll ask again, why have you come?”

“We both know that your son must be initiated, and I am here precisely because my Saints have commanded me to attend to this. You and I will never see eye-to-eye, and that dispute doesn’t matter. Your son has been chosen to correct the imbalance that is mounting, and my grandsons’ futures—all our futures require his initiation.”

*If you are writing any book  
about the  
end of the world, what you are  
really writing about is  
what's worth saving about it.*

*Justin Cronin*



**I thought ‘all our futures’ was a bit dramatic,** but I’m beginning to understand that maybe that’s how the elders see the future. A future of hardship—because of their mistakes or because of the religion, I’m not sure? Maybe they profess the future in these terms because there is always hardship in life—and their predictions are statistically bound to be correct most of the time. What was different about this pronouncement was its fatalism. Latinos love drama, but this wasn’t about drama, but about change, inevitable, cumulative change. Personal destiny is what I’m concerned with. Not the destiny into which you are borne, because we’re not born into anything but life. The destiny that’s important is the destiny that we make ourselves. Yes, we do create our destinies—though our parents, and religious purveyors don’t tell us this. Do you all really believe that there is some grand plan, and we are just pawns, or peasants in that plan? Are the wealthy living an ordained life, an inherited life, or a life of their own making? Kings and queens tried to make the masses believe in their divine right to rule. Hell, even the Popes align themselves with Peter, and absolute infallible doctrines of their own making. I make a lot of

noise about religions, and yet I practice a nature, spirit-based version. I could say that my religion is better than most, but I'm not here to justify religion, just to evolve it.

All this talk of religion leads me back to the Elders—specifically the second elder to visit, and now in my Florida room.

"I'm glad you came Cari. It's been too long since we saw each other."

"Well, you could have called anytime you wanted," she said.

"As I remember, the telephone works both ways."

"You always did have a selective memory. Once Yadira died you basically went into isolation, and no one saw or heard from you."

"Could you blame me? I was overwhelmed by my own pity for myself," I said. "I had a newborn that needed a mother, and all he had was me. He needed love and nurturing. I know now that had I reached-out to you, you would have helped us both. But, I was too distraught with my own loss to be a father to him, or a friend to you. If it weren't for my old nanny my son would have had no one."

"You and your son had access to a community of Santeros, but you turned your back on us. You made the religion, and me pay for something we hadn't done!"

"I didn't think that you or any of the Santeros would accept my new life." I said all this in the realization that I had been the one who pushed several worthwhile people out of my life.

“I didn’t think that any of the tribe would accept my new love. I never gave them, or you, the chance to grow with me. I abandoned all of you, because I didn’t want to deal with any hassle, or rejection.”

I may know a lot, but I don’t understand half as much as I thought I did. The realization of one’s stupidities is a pain in the ass, and a major opportunity—at least I hoped so.

“I’m sorry. I never gave you the chance to help us; the opportunity to see him grow. Yadira would have loved for you to know him. I truly am sorry.”

“Enough with the wuss act. I know you to be a lot stronger than that. At least you called when it became important. I initiated his mother on her deathbed, and Chris’ initiation is something that I’ve always hoped to be a part of,” she said.

## MYTH PART FIVE

**The Warrior God was the only one to emerge from the banquet hall.** Asher and all the servants were anxiously waiting to enter, but when they saw all the gods, and mortals slumped in chairs, strewn on the floor alone and in piles, they hesitated. The Warrior God walked unsteadily out of the palace, and into the rising sunshine.

“What happened?” asked Asher. Elegua looked toward the cottage that he shared with his companion. It stood one-hundred-and-fifty feet from the palace, bathed in the golden rays of early morning sunlight, and a small stream of smoke rose from the stone chimney into the still dark blue sky.

“The inevitable,” replied the Warrior God.

“But how is that you are unaffected?”

The Warrior God unbuttoned his vest and shirt, and showed Asher the black and red velvet pouch that hung from his neck. “My companion made me wear this. He said that it would protect me.”

Elegua struggled to stay on his feet as he descended from the banquet hall balcony, and aimed himself toward the cottage. He fell to his knees as he opened the cottage door. His companion ran to him, lifted the Warrior God, dragged him into the warm cottage, and lay him on a cotton blanket that was spread atop a mattress of snakeroot, sandalwood, rosemary, eucalyptus, and lavender. The companion opened a wooden chest that contained candles, more herb wands, crystals, carved stones, and incense. After selecting what he needed, he lay a square of white linen on the packed dirt floor in front of the Warrior God. The companion knelt as he arranged the stones and crystals, in a circle on the linen square. He placed candles on the four corners of the square, and herb wands at the four-compass axis within the circle. The companion prayed as he placed each item, and began to chant as he lighted the herb wands and incense.

The cottage filled with the smoke of the wands and incense, and a red-gold glow spread as the companion waved the wands over the Warrior God. The chants infused the brunette mud walls of the cottage, making them sparkle and sweat. The blonde companion sweated with the walls as he started to shake. He continued to chant as his shaking turned into a frenzied levitating dance. He hovered, prayed and chanted for twenty minutes before collapsing across the Warrior Gods chest. He lay on the Warrior God for twenty minutes before opening his eyes, and lifting himself to his feet. He again began to chant, but didn’t notice that the Warrior God had opened his eyes. The Warrior God stared at his companion through the golden smoke that filled the



cottage. He heard the chants and prayers, and felt his strength return with each word that his companion spoke. The companion finished his chants and prayers and sat down in front of the linen alter, cross legged and exhausted. He looked at the Warrior God and realized that he was awake. They smiled at each other before the Warrior God lapsed into sleep, and his blue-eyed companion into a deep trance.

The Warrior God was on his feet by sunset, and he was ravenous. After a hearty meal of roast antelope, the Warrior God returned to his father's palace. The palace was in chaos, but the banquet hall had been closed with all its occupants left where they lay. The doors to the hall were opened for the Warrior God, and he entered a dark and offensive landscape. The windows were still closed to keep out the cold, the fires had burnt themselves out, and the uneaten food was being enjoyed by the palace rats. The gods lay where they had fallen, and the royals lay with their physicians. The scavengers scurried to their hiding places as he walked toward his father. The chief god lay motionless on the floor, but alive. For an instant, Elegua thought that it would be best to leave them all where they lay and return with his companion to their forest. But he lifted the Chief God from the cold stone floor, and carried him to the warm healing cottage. He lay his father's body on the refreshed and augmented herb-mattress, and asked his companion if he would save his father's life. His companion responded that he was still too weak, and could do nothing until early morning.

Elegua returned to the palace. He had all the gods and humans carried to their rooms, and placed in their beds. He had the servants collect cedar branches, lemon balm, stinging nettle, and savory from the Chief God's garden, and covered the bodies with the cut greenery and heavy blankets. Incense was lit and dispersed among all the rooms of the palace. The priests were ordered to chant in all the hallways. Charcoal fires were smoldering in the portals room, and

crackled and prattled as piles of pine needles were cast onto them. Guards surrounded the moat of the portals room, and the banquet hall was cleared and cleaned. The Warrior God left the castle after giving all his orders, and went into his father's garden to collect herbs, water, earth, bark, stones, and wind. As he was leaving the overgrown garden, he was stopped by the Universal Spirit's messenger.

The luminous-ethereal messenger explained that the chief and lesser gods, had strayed from their paths, and forgotten why they had been given dominion over the earth and its people. The messenger also told the Warrior God, that he would have to make several decisions that would change the world. "What decisions would I have to make?" asked Elegua. The messenger told him that he could not reveal all that was to come. "The Universal Spirit has been watching you, and he is pleased with your actions." The cloud messenger coalesced into a wet vapor that dispersed into the air, and the Warrior God smiled at the star-filled sky.

Elegua returned from the forest with all that his companion needed, and a growing sense of disaster. He knew that his father and the other gods had changed, which was why he had stayed in his forest, away from the palace and its intrigues. He entered the healing hut with a distressed heart, and told his companion about the visitation. His companion reassured him that when the time came, he would know what to do, and that he would choose the best path for everyone. The Warrior God and his companion had a filling but somber meal together. The companion went for a meditation walk in the cold night air. Elegua stayed in the warm hut praying for his brothers and sisters, and thanking the Universal Spirit for the gift that was his companion.

The night passed in its normal stride, and in the morning the Warrior God and his companion walked to the palace. The commander of the palace guards stopped the Warrior God, and told him that the Chief God had left orders that under no circumstances was his companion to enter the palace. The Warrior God became enraged, and fiery lightning shot from his hands. The palace gates and half of the surrounding wall were blown apart by the lightning. The guards cowered on their knees, and pleaded with the Warrior God to enter alone. Elegua would not enter without his companion, and ordered the guards and servants to carry the gods, and humans out from the palace, place their bodies on horse drawn carts, and prepare a garrison for the journey to his forest. The commander of the palace guard hesitated. The Warrior God raised his hands and destroyed what remained of the gate. The commander immediately gave orders to clear the debris from the road, prepare the carts and horses and gather the gods and humans. The Warrior God gave orders to the commander that they were not to rebuild until the Chief God returned.

The caravan of bodies started its journey to the Warrior God's forest. He and his companion rode side by side at the head of the caravan, leading ten carts heavy with their comatose cargo. They traveled for three days, stopped twice, and finally reached the Warrior God's forest. The garrison of soldiers camped outside the forest, only the cart drivers could follow the Warrior God and his companion into the forest. Thousand-year-old trees soared into the sky filtering the sunshine. Understory trees bloomed in the filtered light. Birds filled the forest with song, leaves littered and fertilized the ground, as wildflowers burst from the clearings in phosphorescent blue, canary yellow, rainbow purple, and iridescent white. The cart drivers were enthralled and terrified. They followed the Warrior God along a path that they could not discern. The caravan zigzagged for two days before finally reaching a grouping of five cottages that stood in the middle of a seven-acre clearing. A stream partially encircled it, and an acre of

cultivated land was surrounded by a three-feet, dry stacked, stone wall. A pack of thirteen black, white, and gray wolves bounded out of the forest to greet their masters, followed by a gnarled, white-haired being using a thick walking stick to steady itself.

The cart drivers placed their cargo, shoulder to shoulder, on the floor of the largest cottage, as the old woman-like creature spoke to the Warrior God and his companion. His companion started a fire to warm the cold cottage, and then told the cart drivers that the wolves would lead them to the waiting garrison. They were all to wait there until the wolves were sent to guide them back to the cottage. The Warrior God called one of the wolves from the pack, he watched as the caravan followed their canidae guides into the forest, and then ran with his wolf toward the river that fed the cottage stream. The Warrior God jumped over fallen trees and mammoth granite boulders. He cut through choking vines with such ease that they didn't slow his pace; the wolf followed his master as best he could. The wolf reached the river to find his master naked at the shore, and wading into the cold mountain water that flowed fast in the river. A goddess rose from the water before the Warrior God as the water reached his heart. She smiled coyly at him as he approached her. She gently placed her hand on his head and pushed him into the river, as she chanted his name. When she lifted him out of the water his dark black hair was now snow-white, and he opened his once honey colored eyes, they were now a grey-blue. His strong muscled body had blossomed five inches in height, width and girth. The goddess kissed his cheek before she disappeared into the river.

The Warrior God walked through his forest in his new body with his wolf beside him. He could feel the increase in strength and a new wisdom that was filling his mind. His heart swelled with pride and love when he thought of his companion. The other gods had grown lazy, gluttonous, and arrogant. They lived in elegant palaces, had grossly ostentatious banquets and

forced-sex with any mortal that caught their fancy. They only protected the peasants because they considered them property. The Universal Spirit had given them dominion over the earth, so that they may help and protect the humans from demons and the evil that does not die, but they had become oppressive protectors. The Warrior God had fought that evil and banished it from his forest, but, its presence had entered the Chief Gods palace. He had lived with his companion in the forest, happy and oblivious to the gains that evil had made everywhere outside their sanctuary. He had fought for, and with the other gods—helping them win their battles against evil. But in retiring to his forest, and banishing evil from his realm, he may have strengthened its power against the other gods. The Warrior God entered the cottage with crystal-blue tears in his eyes.

*A murderer is regarded by the  
conventional world as something  
almost monstrous, but a*

*murderer to himself is only an  
ordinary man.*

*It is only if the murderer is a  
good man that he can be  
regarded as monstrous.*

*Graham Greene*



**Three months together, and I still wasn't ready.** I knew and understood that he was dying but I wasn't prepared for his physical weakness, or his emotional distress. Permanent tears lodged in the corners of his dark ringed, and sunken eyes. Pale folds of dry cracked spider-veined skin were his cheeks, and when he tried to smile red swollen gums hid half his teeth. He had a wheelchair that most of the time he refused to use. So he supported himself with his left arm around my waist and his shoulder in my armpit, while his right hand clutched a thick, carved wooden cane. The top of the cane was a large round ball held in the mouth of a serpent. The snake's thick brown scales wound down the cane, ending in a thin tip of tail. It could have been one of Hermes' Caduceus snakes that he loaned the old man. Medicine could not have stopped the inevitable, but I found myself thinking that the old man should have given it a try. I was tired of death, and holding the hand of the dying. So I swallowed my despair, and draped my arm over his slumped shoulder, slipping my hand into his armpit. We slowly made our way through the bright sunshine, and the flowering roses and orchids, to the bayside deck. I gently helped him onto the teak cushioned loveseat and sat very close to him. He leaned against me with a sigh.

"Tell me about the last time you saw your mother," he said.

"I had been trying to lift myself out of my depression after Yadira's death, and I just couldn't seem to find the strength to embrace Chris as I should have," I said. "It was one of my worst moments. I couldn't dislodge my heartache, and I couldn't tend to my son. If it weren't for Maria my old *niñera* I don't think that I and Chris would be as close as we are." I spoke slowly as if that would extend his life. I'm amazed at how much we've changed. We care about each other. I have tried for sixteen years to kill my memory of him, and now he leans against me not trying to absorb any of my energy, or gain anything through me. In this moment life's a bitch. But the last three months have reinforced my understanding that everything—even the good

stuff, probably especially the good stuff—is relative, and dyed by our desires. I’m tired, sad, and feel more dejected than I thought he could make me feel.

“Her spirit materialized easily before me, and this time she was a bright and distinct essence. Her smile was strong. Her hair was flowing and shimmery, and her eyes were joyful and giving.” The stories of a suicide, and a mother I had not known in life, were supplanted by an essence that I call mother.

“I didn’t understand that my death was to fulfill this one moment. I took my life because I was spiritually too weak to fight against my circumstances. As a byproduct of our past two meetings, I have gained the strength to change that weakness into power,” she had said. “This is the last time that I am allowed to visit you. I will be returning to the world of the living very soon.”

“I’m glad that you’ll be joining us. It will give you an opportunity to enjoy this world. There are many beautiful things and people here, and if our paths cross again in your new life, I’ll know you.”

“Our paths will cross, that is all that I am allowed to say. But, the reason that I’m here now is to tell you that the love that you’ve been yearning for, you will find as a gift from the ocean. You must be at Haulover Park next Monday morning before the sun rises. Go by boat and anchor the boat in the Intracoastal,” she said. “I must leave you now.”

“Wait, that message does not seem complete—you’re not telling me everything.”



“I was told that you would not accept a partial message, but I had to try. The love that you will find in the ocean is not the love of your life. It is a love that you need to experience, and a person that you must help.”

“Then that person will not be my last love.”

“No there is another, but I cannot say anymore. I love you, and always will.”

“Before I could protest she was gone, and I was both pleased and disappointed by her visit. My depression and lack of direction had lifted, but at the same time I was disillusioned and frustrated”

Commented [km10]: Could be sharper

“So you’ve learned that knowledge is a heavy burden, and that the understanding of any knowledge is never what you had hoped it to be,” he said. “And the teacher of that lesson was your mother.”

“No. The teacher of that lesson is Francis.”

## MYTH PART SIX

**Most of the mortal royals, and the gods did not survive the illness that tested them.**

On the third day of potions, massages, sweating, prayers and incantations there were only seven survivors from the original twenty-one afflicted with this spirit-flu. Elegua and his companion had done all they could, and now it was a question of will—the will to be someone other than you currently are. Day three was marked with the deaths of the lesser gods of ambition and longing, and, the deaths of the King of Constancia and his son closed the day. The dawn of the fourth day was pronounced by the death of the chief god.

Dark grey, cotton candy clouds filled with thunder encircled the warrior god's homestead clearing. Rain burst from the clouds and thunder erupted as lightning split the ground that it struck, and winds tried to break the barrier of trees that had intertwined themselves to protect Elegua's home. Hail tried to accomplish what its brother lightning could not do, but nothing reached the warrior god's cottage. Elegua tired quickly of the noise and assault. He flung his father's body over his shoulder, kicked down the door to his cottage and ran to the center of the clearing. He lay the body on the goat-trimmed grass, said goodbye to the husk that had once been his father, and grabbed his father's right wrist with one hand, and his right ankle with his other hand. The warrior god began to spin and his father's body rose from the ground. He spun the body at an angle, his father's head caressing the grass but never hitting the ground. He spun until he could feel his father's leg and arm starting to pop, and threw the body at the clouds. The body whirled as it rose higher into the clouds. Elegua knelt, and sat on the back of his calves, his eyes had not followed the body's progress, and he knew that the body would never hit the ground. His companion touched his shoulder, and they returned to the cottage as the sun scattered the clouds.

*The question of religion was a matter  
for each individual's*

*conscience, and in a great many cases  
was the outcome of birth or residence in a  
certain  
geographical area.*

*James Farlin*



**The rain had steadily thickened while Manny continued with his offering of martyred poultry.** One of the three rooster heads slipped-off the altar stone onto the alley asphalt, and blood ran freely from the stone, mingling with Manny's toes as a voice in his head told him that he should have kept his foot clean, but the cocaine overruled the black magic logic and he didn't move his foot. Wind started to drive the rain through his soaked clothes, and he leaned into the invisible force and walked to the back gate.

Tropical storm Gregory had grown-up at sea, and now focused its hurricane attention toward Miami. Manny was oblivious to the change even though the rain stung his face. The blood of roosters, and his destructive determination had numbed his skin and his soul. The cocaine served its purpose as fuel to his personal rage. He entered the alarm code and the back gate popped open. The path to his liberation crunched beneath his bare feet, when the sudden brightness of the kitchen light stopped his progress. He dove onto the gravel path and did his best to imitate a shadow. The creaking trees, sighing bushes and whistling leaves made it impossible to hear anything. Everything was conspiring against him, but he would not consider stopping now. "I don't how many people I'll have to kill tonight, but my brother will be one of them," he gurgled into the puddled gravel.

**The generators were checked and fueled.** The pantries stocked with canned tuna, Spam, assorted crackers, cookies, and lots of candy—most of it chocolate. The bathtubs were filled with water; double A, and D batteries had been distributed with flashlights, candles, matches and walkie talkies. Now everyone was just watching TV and waiting. Gregory had progressed quickly from tropical storm to hurricane, and all south Florida and the Keys were under a hurricane warning. Surfers had flocked to the beaches in the afternoon to ride the flurry of hurricane waves. Homeowners stormed the gas stations to fill their car gas tanks, and gas cans

for their generators. Home Depot, and Lowe's were swamped with last minute preparers buying plywood, flashlights, batteries, and generators. Supplies were running low by 4PM. By 6PM the wind had increased, the rain had doubled and compliant trees bent as stiff defiant trees were broken. Businesses were implementing their hurricane preparedness plans, and employees had been sent home to collect their children, and fortify their homes. Police, firefighters, and all first responders were checking their equipment, and making reassuring phone calls. Gregory was predicted to make landfall somewhere in Miami-Dade County, and the county residents were quickly shifting from the day-to-day, to emergency mode. Shelters had steadily been filling with the poor, the homeless, and the old, and Miami's streets were now mostly abandoned.

The residents had started the morning by checking their stashes of medication, and herbal tea concoctions. While the residents adjusted, and anticipated, Francis prepared the main house. Impact glass allowed him to watch as the rain increased, the wind bent the trees and tossed the bay into a mad froth. Repeated waves struck and swamped the seawall. One Doberman was with the residents, and the other in the main house. Both disliked the wailing wind, and were especially agitated by the occasional cracking thunder. As everyone prepared at home, Alex was helping at the grocery store. The crew had stocked the shelves twice with canned goods, and the milk had run out an hour ago. Water bottles, soda, juice, and wine supplies were almost exhausted. Bread had run-out with the milk, then crackers, and finally cookies. Handwritten signs informed all the shoppers that the store would close at 3PM, but there were no 'hurricane' foods left by 2PM—except for several cans of sardines and anchovies. Amazing how possible disaster is a boon for business. At 2:30 Alex started to lock all the interior doors, and took pictures of the inventory left in the freezers, refrigerators, and the dry goods—just in case he'd

need them for the insurance company. He couldn't free himself from the feeling that all this was in vain.

*Don't think your preparations won't make a difference. You are helping and protecting those that you can. Some will die, some will choose life, and others have no choice—they must die. You will survive all this. Do not forget about Guantanamo. There is still much for you to do.*

The hurricane pummeled Florida with wind, rain and storm surge. The treasure coast of Florida was under a severe weather advisory. Palm Beach and Broward counties under hurricane watch. Dade and Monroe counties under hurricane warning. Flooding was a problem for everyone, and the wind was steadily increasing. "This is going to be pretty bad, and I'll lose most of the garden. The bay may reach our house, but I know that we'll be safe in the healing house with the other residents. We need to walk-over now before the rain really kicks in. I'll take the dog and go first you and Chris follow me." I knew that this was going to be a challenge of faith and trust. Elegua had warned me that the hurricane was not the only trial. I had hoped that with the old man's death my life would settle down. Maybe this storm is the climactic episode—but I can't feel my way around any of this. Better to abandon one house and keep everyone together. Strength in numbers, or a massacre waiting to happen.

**The wind and rain stopped abruptly, and Manny scrambled from the gravel path to** the rosemary bush. Someone appeared at the kitchen window and stared into the dark herb garden. Manny slowly moved his head to the side of the bush, and saw his son. The back door opened and Manny could hear voices over the wind and increasing rain. He had twisted out of his rain heavy pants, and removed his drenched long sleeved black jersey while he sat behind the rosemary bush. He didn't peek to see who was arriving at the house—he didn't want to chance

discovery—a rather smart move for him. He planned an assault in his black underwear, t-shirt and gloves. The gun was light and he clutched Phil's house keys as he waited for the kitchen door to close. A silly grin camouflaged his intent, and he waited with an awkward patience for the light to be turned off. His father may not be on his side, but that didn't bother Manny—his father had never been on his side. He remembered their conversation just before Alex's initiation.

"I know that you don't like your brother, and that you probably blame me for that. But, your brother was born with a destiny that is greater than ours. He is not just going to be a great Santero. He is going to help evolve our religion, and change the world. How he is going to do all of that depends on us," he had said. "We have to train him in the rituals, and in how to live. So, you must put aside your dislike and jealousy. He is your brother, and if you can't love him that doesn't matter, but you must help him because that way you'll help the family." The stupid old man wanted the family to prosper, but I was also part of that family, and never received any recognition for all that I did to preserve the family. Well I'm the family now, and I'll do whatever the fuck I want.

Manny confidently walked to the back door and listened. All he heard was the wind and rain. He found the tape marked key on Phil's keyring and inserted it into the lock. He turned the key slowly and felt the lock slide open. All his thwarted possibilities fueled his determination. The door opened with a creak and he quickly slid into the kitchen. The kitchen was dark but filled with the smell of sandalwood incense, and the sound of Gregorian chant. Instead of a hurricane party they were holding a religious vigil. "Fucking fools," he said to himself, and started toward the open door and hallway. The chants grew stronger as he neared the living room. He pressed his back against the wall and tightly gripped his gun. In one heroic jump he



stood pointing his gun, and staring at the group that sat quietly spread throughout the sofas and chairs. His son was the first to notice him, and dove for the floor. The shot hit the chair with a soft pop. The fabric accepted the bullet and then it burst from the back of chair with scorched white polyester filler. The monks kept chanting and the incense filled his lungs.

“Where’s my brother?” No one moved; no one spoke. “Where the fuck is my brother?” The floorboard responded, and Manny turned quickly toward the sound. The gun flashed and produced its muffled pop. The dog fell in front of Francis. Another pop and Francis stood bent and holding his stomach. Warm blood seeped between his fingers as he walked toward Manny. He raised the gun and another muffled pop escaped from the gun. The bullet tore through Francis’ chest, bursting his heart before exiting his back. Francis saw Peter and Chris rushing towards Manny just before he died. Peter jumped his father’s back before he could turn around, and pulled the old man’s hair so hard that two clumps of hair and scalp filled his hands. “You fucking little faggot!” yelled Manny as he charged backwards against the wall. Peter’s shoulder blade cracked and he fell to the floor. The gun rose, but Chris grabbed his hand and sunk his teeth into Manny’s forearm. Manny pushed hard with his arm and Chris fell away with a mouthful of his uncle’s forearm.

Alex had heard the first pop as he sat on the toilet, and didn’t think anything of it. Then two more pops, and he jumped from the toilet bowl—not bothering to pull-up his shorts. He freed his bare feet from the garment as he opened the door to the hallway. There was a loud crunch against the wall, and he saw his nephew crumple to the floor. He leapt from the bathroom opening as Chris spit-out his pound of flesh. Manny wasn’t expecting one-hundred-and-eighty-two pounds of protective fury, and sheer hatred, to hit his blindside—he should not have changed his primary target from brother to son. Alex was fueled by an invisible rage, and punched his

brother in the side with such force that two ribs broke. Manny swung around trying to point the gun at his attacker, but couldn't get a clear shot as Alex continued to break his ribs. Two sots popped and hit the wall. Manny spun as quickly as he could and Alex hit the floor. The gun approached its target, but was dropped as a twelve-inch chef's knife that Peter plunged into his father's side sliced into kidney, liver, and stomach. Peter withdrew the knife and forced it between his father's ribs into his lung. Manny turned slowly toward his son and the blade slid across his throat. Manny grabbed his neck as blood sprayed Peter's face. The final entry was directly into his groin. This time Peter left the knife where he had struck. Manny looked at his son as his blood drained from his body. "Go join your father," Peter said.

The wind pelted the house with rain and the house strained under the assault. Trees were broken, live electric cables sparked and flamed, telephone lines snapped and communication ceased. All this happened as spirits, saints, and angels led Francis' soul from the house. No one came to lead Manny's soul, so it withered in a pool of his own blood, as Miami was battered, and raped.

**The flight to Minneapolis was uneventful,** and I held the urn in my lap. Peter was still recovering, and Chris was his nursemaid. All the residents had healed, and new residents were ringing my doorbell. The bay had spared most of my garden—my neighbors didn't understand how that was possible. My father and mother had come to visit, but Francis had not, and I drove my Avis rental to Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. I could have taken a regional flight to Eau Claire and driven for thirty minutes from there, instead of two hours from Minneapolis, but I wasn't in any rush, and I quietly cried most of the way. Snow had already come to the Midwest, and I liked the pure whiteness that covered the landscape. I reached the cabin that we had been building on a five-acre bluff that overlooked the Chippewa River. The view was cold, calm, and beautiful, and

I threw the uncovered urn over the cliff, and watched as the ashes formed a thin distorted cloud and disappeared.

*It is beautiful here, and so different from Miami. I didn't look at Elegua. I know your pain is still fresh, but I have brought you something that you should see.* I turned and saw Francis. *Thank you for taking care of me. I have known love and kindness with you, and my love for you will never die.* "I'm sorry that I couldn't protect you." Francis smiled and disappeared into the sky. *There is still much for us to do. You must go to Cuba and plan your son's initiation. You will have little more than a year to prepare after he is initiated. Our world is changing and you must be ready.*