

Party Time

Besides church, Dinah's favorite place to pray is in front of her bathroom mirror in her northwest Detroit home. Sometimes, after being forced to give someone a piece of her mind, she begs for the lord's forgiveness; at other times, when she knows she'll have to deal with some godless heathen, she prays for patience. However, this morning, she's praying that God will see fit to accept her big brother Theo into heaven with their mother, grandparents, and of course herself when her time comes. Theo hasn't passed away yet, but according to his eldest son Leon, the doctors advised that there's not much time left. Unfortunately, Dinah has a lot of praying to do; since besides being an atheist, Theo is a scoundrel.

In Dinah's opinion, Theo's rebelliousness began twenty-five years ago after their mother was killed by their preacher grandfather during Thanksgiving celebration. Mother announced she'd become a Buddhist, which instantly outraged Grandfather. He struck her in the mouth with such force that she died instantly. Since then, Theo has been unashamedly arrogant, foul-mouthed, a drunkard, and a hell-raising philanderer. Dinah's lost track of how many tramps he's brought to family outings over the years; she's surprised he won't die while mounting a twenty-something-year-old stripper instead of succumbing to colon cancer. Still, Dinah loves Theo, so she feels she must help save him from burning in hell— even though Theo's chances of making it are slim to none.

Dinah and Theo were as close as close could be before their Mom died, but because the tragedy brought her closer to Jesus, and Theo to Satan, their relationship has been reduced to mere cordiality. They still see each other at family functions, Theo checks in on her from time to time by phone, and of course, he greets her on her birthday. — In fact, five months ago, during her sixty-fifth birthday party at the Detroit Renaissance Center, Theo gifted her a beautiful set of

diamond earrings. After she removed them from the box and held them up for everyone to marvel, Theo came to her, kissed her on her cheek, and whispered, “They sparkle like your smile, Dee-Dee.” — While reaching for her hairbrush, she says out loud, “See, he’s not all bad, Lord. He can be so sweet sometimes. Plus, Lord, you know he’s a good father to his three kids.” Dinah doesn’t mention the fact that the kids all have different baby-mamas. She’s pretty sure though that having good taste in jewelry and being a good father won’t compensate for Theo’s being an unrepentant sinner.

The exhaust fan’s hum breaks her train of thought long enough for Dinah to remember part of a sermon that Grandfather preached at non-church members’ funerals. Grandfather would stand at the pulpit looking out at the congregation like an emperor addressing his adoring subjects and proclaim,

“All are on the verge of becoming an angel at death’s door! There is happiness when facing the afterlife because your earthly sins are behind you. There is but one way to escape your sins; one way to evade hell, and one way to find eternal peace, salvation, and life everlasting! Repent; ask for God’s forgiveness and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior.”

Remembering the sermon convinces Dinah to take her own pastor to Theo’s house and force him to repent, but she knows it won’t be easy. Theo, and the devil, won’t give up without a fight. In the past, whenever other family members tried to bring him back to the fold it’s gotten ugly; so much so that five years ago Dinah advised them to give up, but now it’s her responsibility to succeed where everyone else has failed. After all, she figures, it might be easier to persuade him to see the light now that he’s knocking at death’s door.

Dinah's so occupied with Theo's soul that she only now realizes she hasn't brushed her teeth. So, she reaches into her vanity drawer, removes the tube, and squeezes the paste onto her toothbrush, but she realizes her mistake the second the brush enters her mouth. Her body convulses as she frantically spits the repulsive pulp into the sink. She pauses long enough to look down and read the label, "Hemorrhoid Cream." No matter how much she spits, she can't get rid of the toxic taste, so she grabs her mouthwash, gulps it, and gargles feverishly. It takes her six swigs before she's sure it's all out. "I'm not having it, Satan," she says. Finally, she grabs a new toothbrush, brushes her teeth, and begins styling her hair. "I'm gonna save you, Theo," she adds, before turning out the light and getting dressed.

Dinah and Pastor Meeks, the preacher who took grandfather's place after he was committed to a mental facility, arrive at Theo's home and are greeted by Leon and then escorted to Theo's sickbed. Theo immediately wakes when he hears his son and sister talking. His eyes are jaundiced, his face is ashen, and his usual jolly baritone voice has weakened, but Dinah's comforted when Theo manages to resonate his trademark playful demeanor. "I must be on my way out if you're standing here," Theo says.

"That's not funny, Theo."

"Where's your sense of humor, Lil' Sis? Anyway, it's good to see you."

"It's a blessing to see you also. I've brought someone to visit. You remember Pastor Meeks, don't you? He's in charge of Grandfathers church."

Pastor Meeks steps forward, "Hey, Theo, long time no see."

Theo's eyebrows furrow, and his smile disappears, "What's up, my man? It has been a long time."

“I asked the pastor to accompany me so we could pray with you.”

“No disrespect to you, Dee-Dee, but that won’t be necessary. You know I gave up on that bullshit twenty-five years ago. It’d be nice to talk to you though; Pastor Sugar Britches and his buddy Jesus can wait out in the hall while we chat.”

The pastor’s eyebrows raise as he covers his mouth, but he immediately relaxes his shoulders, brings his hands together, and smiles. “We’ll still pray for you, Brother Theo.”

The veins in Theo’s neck swell and his frail body stiffens as he struggles to raise his head. “I don’t need your fake-ass prayers, you bible-thumping scum. Leon, throw this con artist out of my house!”

Pastor Meeks flees to the hallway as Dinah’s face turns purple. “How dare you disrespect Pastor Meeks like that, Theo!” Dinah says. Leon attempts to gently usher her out, but she refuses. Instead, she scowls at Theo, and like a death row warden speaking the last words a condemned man will hear, she says, “Soon you will see the error of your wicked ways. You need to repent before it’s too late.” However, Theo and Leon just stare at her without saying a word. Theo’s always been quick-tempered and confrontational, especially when it comes to religion, but he never argues with Dinah or his children.

After leaving Theo’s house, Dinah continuously begs the pastor’s forgiveness, but she also pleads with him to help her find some way to get her big brother into Heaven. Pastor Meeks tries to convince her that Theo is too far gone, but after she persists, he tells her about a Catholic ritual which might solve her problem.

“But, Pastor, we’re Baptists, are you sure it will work?”

He explains that Baptists are more passionate worshipers than Catholics. “The Bible says, shout to the Lord, all the earth; be jubilant, shout for joy, and sing,” he says. “God loves jubilation, Dinah, but those Catholics don’t do no shouting. They whisper instead of singing. That’s why God gives them so much trouble; he can’t hear em’. They do have some great old prayers and rituals. There’s one ritual called the Communion of the Saints that might do the trick. The way it works is if a Christian prays for someone else’s salvation, they, in turn, become closer to God. Therefore, God is more inclined to answer their prayers.” The pastor warns her that Theo’s deep-rooted sin makes it an uphill battle, but like a good spiritual leader, he encourages her. “Of course, you know there’s no greater way to favor God than prayer. So, if you can get other church members to join you, and you guys give it your all, then the Lord might forgive Theo.”

Dinah is all in.

The next evening, her church members agree to help her pray every morning for Theo, and since she knows the lord will need more convincing, after Theo dies, and while he is still in Purgatory, they agree to pray at his funeral while encouraging other attendees to join in. After the meeting, they form a circle and hold hands as Dinah leads them in their chosen prayer. “Father God,” she says as the others repeat, “I know that no one can see you without Jesus. I ask that you lead Theo to your son so that he may know your greatness, and that he be allowed to spend eternity with you. Amen.”

Dinah says out loud on her way home after the meeting, “God won’t have no choice but to accept Theo.”

Five days later, Dinah gets the expected, yet dreadful call from Leon informing her that Theo is gone. Unfortunately, after attempting to help Leon with the arrangements, which she assumes includes a funeral at the family church, Leon tells her that as a result of Dinah and Pastor Meeks last visit, his father explicitly ordered him and his siblings to forbid religion from the proceedings. Leon also explains that his dad had long ago dictated his wishes to him and his siblings. He promises to share the plans with Dinah and the rest of the family after meeting with the undertaker this evening. Dinah's pissed after hanging up, but she has no intentions on honoring Theo's no-religion wish; she and her prayer warriors will not be deterred from praying Theo into paradise.

Dinah has been so busy praying since Theo's death that she hasn't been able to take Leon's call about the funeral arrangements. Instead, she asked her thirty-six-year-old daughter, Clarice, to deal with it. So, as she and Clarice drive to what she thinks is Theo's funeral, she's shocked when she learns that instead of a traditional wake, Theo's children arranged for a going away party at a downriver hotel ballroom. "Those kids are as crazy as their father," Dinah says. "Why can't they have a normal funeral with a pastor and scripture like everyone else?"

"You know your brother has to do things his way, Mom. Anyway, *I think it's pretty cool.* I'm going to do the same for you."

"You do, and I'll come back to haunt you. Besides, I made my final arrangements five years ago. The pastor knows what scripture to read, and my plot and headstone are paid for. So, all you have to do is choose my outfit; and you better choose wisely."

"*What?* When were you going to tell me all of this?"

"I'm telling you *now*, and just so you know, the lord will be watching, and *so* will I."

“Mom, this is something you and I should have discussed. Why would you do all of that without including me? I’m your only child.”

“Humph. You see what Theo’s children are doing with his funeral, I ain’t taking any chances on you messin’ up *my* blessings.”

“Mess up your *blessings*? I know you *better than anyone else in the world*. Anyway, Uncle Theo planned everything with *his* family, and *they all* seem pleased.”

“*His family*? I’m his family. I’ve known your Uncle Theo longer than anyone else in the world, and ain’t nobody talked to me about nothing, ’cause if they had, Theo would have a church funeral with a pastor and prayer.” Dinah turns towards the window as they drive through south Detroit towards I-75 while Clarice shakes her head, tunes to the 90’s rap station Dinah hates, and turns up the volume

It’s 12:33 when they pull into the hotel parking lot and Dinah breaks the silence, “I still can’t believe the funeral is in a hotel.”

“What does it matter, Mom?”

“You *can’t* have no funeral at a hotel. I bet it’s against the law. It’s all just so shameful!”

“Whatever. Just please be nice, Mom.”

“Humph.”

Once inside, the bellman directs them to a ballroom on the main floor. Other than Theo’s children, Dinah and Clarice are the first to arrive. As they enter, Dinah scans the grandiose room. The ornate crystal chandeliers, lush wine-colored carpet, and gargantuan wall-length mirrors are so ostentatious that Dinah wonders if they’re in the right place. At the front is Theo’s gold-plated casket atop a raised-dais with crushed-velvet rope-barriers and a single microphone stand next to

it. Three columns of cushioned chairs face the dais. “What is this a coronation or a funeral?” Dinah whispers to Clarice who rolls her eyes. Dinah then focuses on the strange green, white, and blue flag draped over the bottom quarter of the casket. “Theo’s a veteran; he should have an American flag,” she says, but Clarice again ignores her.

There are two pictures atop the casket. One is of Theo and his children, the other is a childhood portrait of him, Mother, and Dinah, but it’s the large poster propped on a stand next to the casket which irritates Dinah. It’s Theo at the beach wearing yellow speedos. He’s grinning scurrilously while smoking a cigar and embracing two young topless ladies. What’s more sinful for Dinah, is that his hands are groping their breasts, but before she can complain, Leon greets her and Clarice with a hug and kiss before escorting them to reserved seats in the middle row. “Why are we in the third row?” Dinah asks.

“There’s only enough seats in the front row for my brother, sister, and our mothers, Auntie Dee.”

Dinah rears back with her hand on her hip as Clarice glares at her and intervenes, “These are great seats, Leon. They look very comfortable.” Tugging at her mother’s purse, she says, “Come on, Mom, sit?”

“I guess these will have to do,” Dinah says.

“Thanks, Auntie. I’m sorry, but I have to go back to greeting guests.” He hugs her before rushing back to his post.

Dinah notices her prayer group arriving a few minutes later. She waves at them, but pauses when she sees a bar with liquor, wine, and beer in plain view along the wall behind where they’ve chosen to sit. “Leon needs to have the hotel people remove the liquor from that bar,” she

says to Clarice, who continues looking straight ahead. “Is this everyone? Humph, he must have been more of an ass than we thought,” Dinah says.

“*Mom, mind your P’s and Q’s please?*”

“What in God’s name kind of flag is that?” Dinah asks. “And why did these heathen kids use that picture of him on the beach with two naked tramps? And a bar, at a funeral? This is triffin’.”

Clarice explains that Theo ordered a DNA kit a few years ago and learned that their descendants originated from Sierra Leone, which is the nationality of the flag. Since then he’s been trying to reconnect with his roots, but she says nothing about the bar or picture.

Given what she’s seen so far, Dinah realizes that getting Theo into Heaven will be a lot harder than she anticipated. She says under her breath, “Lord, please don’t make a decision yet?”

Hearing muffled voices behind her, Dinah turns to see a group of well-dressed men arriving. Two of the men are Theo’s best friends, Antoine and Delbert. The two men hug Leon, and his siblings then walk over to console her and Clarice before taking seats in the second row. Dinah likes Antoine and Delbert because they’ve always been professional and respectful; not to mention Antoine’s brother is the pastor of the largest Baptist church in the city, so she doesn’t mind their preferential seating.

Before long, there’s a steady stream of people arriving, but she’s surprised to see Muslim men and women dressed in kufis and hijabs. “I thought he was anti-religion. I guess he didn’t have a problem with terrorists,” she says.

“*Mom! Come on now? That’s not nice.*”

Neither of them realizes the elderly couple taking seats next to them can hear. The couple frown, but Dinah's glare convinces them to sit elsewhere. Soon, she recognizes one of Theo's ex-wives, and not long after, the other four arrive. Each woman sits next to their respective child, but Theo's fourth and fifth wives have none, so they sit in the second row, which ticks Dinah off. They smile at her, but she looks away.

Soon the room is full, so Dinah contemplates when she and her friends should begin praying, but when she opens the program to pick a spot, the heading on the inner page gives her pause. It reads, "Please Refrain from Religious Expressions." Shocked, and embarrassed, she looks over at her prayer warriors to determine if they too have seen the edict. "I'll be right back, I want to say hello to my church members," she says to Clarice.

When she arrives, her friends offer condolence hugs, and after the last hug, Dinah motions to the bar and points to the program. "Can't nobody stop the lord's work. *Amen*?" She whispers.

"Amen," they respond.

Dinah smiles, returns to her seat, and again examines the program. The event order includes recorded music, Sierra Leone folk songs, a Frost poem read by Leon, and afterward, mourners are invited to give testimonials. She decides this is when she'll make her move. Reading on, she's puzzled by the last program entry; "Party time," she says aloud. "What in Jesus' name is party time?"

"Shush, Mom!"

Before she can respond, the room chatter subsides as Leon climbs the dais. For the first time in years, Dinah notices his resemblance to his father. He's wearing a silky black royal-

yellow satin shirt and a bluish ameaba tie. *Probably from Theo's closet*, she thinks. But he also has Theo's broad shoulders and his warrior's chest. "His daddy's clone," she whispers.

When Leon lifts the mic to his lips, his right cufflink reflects glimmers from the skylight. A beam filters through the crystal chandelier and shines a warm kiss on Dinah's pupils. For her, it's a sign God awaits her work.

"Welcome everyone. Welcome to the celebration of Dad's life," Leon says. His baritone voice is so much like his dad's that it reminds Dinah of when they were teenagers. Boys would call their home for her, but hang-up when Theo answered because they thought he was her father. Leon announces, "Please stand for the national anthem." Suddenly, three women dressed in traditional African costumes emerge from the rear doors and march down the aisle carrying Sierra Leone flags. They turn to face the crowd when they reach the coffin and begin singing the Sierra Leone national anthem. Everyone stands and places their hand on their chests, but Dinah refuses, until Clarice nudges her shoulder.

After the last note the women take their seats and Leon continues by reading the poem, *The Road Not Taken*. Dinah recalls when years ago, Theo read it to her and Mother. She closes her eyes and cries inside as the words wash over her; just as she did then. Leon announces at the conclusion, "Friends and family, before Mr. Antoine and Mr. Delbert begin their testimonial, I want to announce that the bar is open. Why don't we take a few minutes to put in our drink orders? — Oh, by the way, drinks and later entertainment are courtesy of Dad, and there's no limit on either. Also, feel free to spark-up if you like."

It takes a few seconds for the words to sink in, but when they do, Dinah zooms from solemn to outrage. "*Oh my God!*" she says, but her words get lost in the exuberance as folks head for the bar. Dinah springs up intending to find Leon and smack him upside his head, but Clarice

grabs her wrist, which makes Dinah want to slap her first, but judging from Clarice's scornful glare, she realizes it's pointless.

"*Sit down, Mom!*" Clarice orders.

Dinah's eyes are ablaze. It's unfathomable to her that drinking and smoking dope are going on at Theo's funeral. *There's no way God's letting this go*, she thinks.

Clarice says to Dinah, "Mom, this is what Uncle Theo wants. I know you think it's ridiculous, and to a certain extent, so do I, but there's nothing we can do about it." She pauses and bites her lip.

"Spit it out, girl!" Dinah says.

"I need to warn you; Uncle Theo reserved the entire hotel for three days of partying. There may be drugs, prostitutes, and who-knows-what-else going on. So, it might be a good idea for you to leave right after the testimonials."

Dinah's shocked to hear Clarice say, 'you' leave, instead of, 'we' leave. "*Girl, do you mean to tell me you plan to take part in this sodomite celebration!?*"

"I'm just trying to support the family, Mom." Clarice turns away so her mother can't see her grin.

Before Dinah can respond, a young male server approaches and asks for her drink order, but her killer-gaze results in his moving on to the next person. She looks over at her fellow parishioners who appear shell-shocked. Some are praying out loud, and Dinah's sure it's not for Theo. *Maybe there's just too much Satan here*, she thinks.

It takes fifteen minutes for people to return to their seats, and during the lull, Antoine and Delbert stumble to the dais with bloodshot eyes, the sight of which forces Dinah to change her opinion of them. *These two are part of the problem*, she surmises.

Antoine announces, “Here lies my brother, my main man, and my friend. If I were to tell you about our adventures, I’d most likely be arrested and divorced.” Everyone except Dinah and her church members laughs. “We’re not here to say goodbye,” Antoine continues, “I’ve said my goodbye to my friend. Anyway, Theo hates goodbyes. No, we’re here to revel in our love for him by having a good time. Let’s celebrate Theo’s death the way he lived, with class, style, and reckless abandon.” He retrieves a clear bottle from his inside jacket pocket, removes the cap, and takes a swig, then passes it to Delbert who repeats the routine. The two men open the top section of the casket and pour the remaining liquid over Theo’s corpse; they then stumble back to their seats as the room erupts in laughter and applause. Dinah closes her eyes and asks the Lord “to forgive Theo, his children, and his satanic friends.” Most of all, she begs him, “not to blame her.”

When she opens her eyes, Leon has returned and is thanking the two men for their devotion and guidance. He then invites others to speak, and much to her surprise one of her church members, Johnny Jamison, approaches. Johnny and Theo were friends in high school, and though Johnny asks about Theo whenever she sees him in church, she’s sure the two hadn’t spoken in more than fifty years. *What could he have to say?* She wonders. However, when he makes eye contact with her, she realizes he’s about to preach. “Thank you, Lord,” Dinah whispers.

When Leon hands him the microphone, Johnny says, “Brothers and Sisters, let us bow our heads in prayer!” However, before he lowers his head, Leon grabs him, wrestles the microphone away, and orders him back to his seat.

“There is to be *no mention of religion!*” Leon announces. “If you can’t abide by Dad’s wishes, then please leave!”

The crowd cheers as half of Dinah's church friend's walkout.

Dinah's hope fades. She decides it's up to her alone to save Theo's soul. So, needing time to seek spiritual guidance, she says to her daughter, "I'm going to the restroom."

"Do you want me to go with you, Mom?"

"No!"

Once in the restroom, Dinah locks the door, enters the stall, inspects, closes the lid, and sits. Deciding to give herself ten minutes, she closes her eyes and prays. Within seconds her breathing slows, her eyelids feel heavy, and her anger fades.

Dinah doses off, but awakens when she senses a chill. Seconds later, an eerie pall fills the room, and the overhead light flickers. She jumps to her feet, opens the stall, and peers out, but sees nothing. She sits down again, but this time locks the stall door. Still, the eeriness remains. It's like she's stuck inside a fun-house mirror.

Suddenly, from seemingly everywhere, a deep voice says, "First you curse me when I'm dying, and now you walk out of my funeral!"

"Who's there!?" She fumbles with the stall lock; turning, pulling, and kicking before she gets it open, and once she does, what she sees causes her knees to buckle. It's Theo in the flesh, smiling as only he could. Hoping he disappears, she blinks repeatedly, but it doesn't work.

"I bet if it were Jesus standing here, you'd believe it." The voice, the smile, and the sarcasm convince her it's Theo.

"Theo?" She whispers.

"Damn girl, I died five days ago and already you don't recognize me?"

"*What?*" She says while covering her mouth.

“Oh, *now* you’re speechless.”

She’s confused, but unafraid.

“We need to talk, Dee-Dee, “I’m sorry about the way our last meeting ended.”

“You *didn’t* have to act like such an *ass* to my pastor. “

Theo laughs. “*Damn*, a brotha’ can’t speak his mind when he’s *dying*?”

Dinah smiles. “Your disrespect for the Lord gets on my last nerve.”

They laugh and glow at one another.

“Listen, Dee-Dee, we don’t have much time. As I said, I’m sorry for the way I acted. But I didn’t need a preacher speaking crazy words over me. All I needed was you and your smile. Anyway, you know Grand Pop destroyed my faith.”

“I’m sorry about that, Theo.”

“Why are *you*, sorry? *You* didn’t do it.”

“I’m sorry because it destroyed our family.”

“Dee-Dee, our family is stronger than you think. Anyway, please listen, because I have to move on.”

“Okay, Theo. I’m listening.”

“I came back to say I love you, and that I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“Are you going to Heaven?”

“Ha-ha, Girl, I’m going wherever people go when they die. Mom, Grandma, and everyone else are waiting for me.”

“So, you *are* going to heaven?”

“Will you *stop* that? Just know that I’m fine and I love you... Do me a favor, please?”

“Anything.”

“Look after my kids. That’s what I wanted to say the last time we were together. I need you to promise to look after them.”

Tears well in Dinah’s eyes. “I will, Theo. I promise. Is there anything else you want me to do?”

“Just one thing, please enjoy my party. You deserve to have a good time.”

She lowers her head and sobs. “I will, Theo. I will.”

When she looks up, he’s gone, yet, his aura remains. Dinah wipes the tears from her eyes and reapplies her makeup. She prays before leaving, though she’s still dazed and confused.

When Dinah returns, four women are making their way to the microphone, and as she takes her seat, Clarice stares at her. Dinah doesn’t know the women, and it appears Clarice doesn’t either. They’re wearing pastel colored makeup and neon hair-weaves that end at their butts. Their lady-parts bulge through their skimpy dresses and their stilettos look cheap. One girl takes the microphone while the others look on. All four have gold teeth, and two of them are chewing gum. The leader begins, “Hi, Theo’s friends and family. We’re here because ten years ago we spent a night with Theo that changed our lives, and since then we’ve been inseparable.” She pauses. “I was in Vegas when I got a call from Theo. I’d known him for years because we’d hook up whenever he was in town, and though it was business, I enjoyed spending time with Theo.”

Dinah scans the crowd. Most everyone is on the edge of their seats, except Clarice, who’s clasp her mouth and staring at her mother in disbelief. The remaining prayer-warriors are crossing their hearts and praying. Some are down on their knees. The woman continues, “That

evening, Theo asked if I was down for a group thing, and of course, I agreed. It's impossible to say no to him and his money."

The crowd erupts.

"Anyway, I laughed when I arrived at his hotel room to find these three girls and no guys. I mean Theo was a good lover and all, but thinking he could handle four of us was crazy. He was like in his fifties. When he went to the other room to mix drinks, we joked about this old man wanting to commit suicide by sex, but it didn't turn out that way. By the end of the night, we were in awe of Theo. He made love, not screwed, but made love to us. This old man and we four working girls climaxed at the same time. It was like God blessed our hook-up." She turns sharply towards Leon. "I'm sorry, it slipped."

"It's okay, Miss, continue."

Dinah's had enough. She springs from the chair and makes a beeline for the young women. Startled by her aggressive approach, the speaker raises the microphone over her head as the others drop their purses and take fighting stances. Dinah stares down the speaker. "Hussy, if you don't hand over that microphone, they'll have to carry you tramps out of here on stretchers."

Since they don't know who she is, or if she has backup, they surrender the microphone and slink back to their seats.

Dinah looks out over the crowd and raises her left hand. "First, let's give glory to our Lord and Savior, because, through him, all things are possible." She's buoyed by her remaining church members sanctified chants. "I can't sit any longer and watch as my dear brothers going home ceremony becomes a satanic ritual. Theo wasn't a church-going man, but still, I know deep in his soul he loved the Lord. We grew up in Grandfather's church, and I remember watching him as an altar boy on Sunday mornings. I was so proud of him. Unfortunately, our family

tragedy separated him from the comfort of the lord's guidance, but Theo never separated himself from my heart. He never stopped loving us, and we, I, will never stop loving him." She's about to begin the prayer, but instead, she sobs. The tears stream down her beautiful brown face as her melodious moan fills the air like an Ella Fitzgerald song; haunting but sweet. The cry lasts for what seems to her is an eternity, but then she realizes Leon hasn't grabbed the microphone or rushed her away from the dais. She's free to pray, but again, Theo's aura envelopes her, and with it the memory of her promise.

Wiping away tears, Dinah raises her head and smiles at her nephews and niece. They're staring at her and crying, but she sees nothing but love in their innocent eyes. She knows now that they would never stand against her. They're her family. She remembers what Theo's daughter Lydia said to her on the phone the day Theo died, "Dad said you would always be there for us if we needed you. He told us you loved him as much as we do."

Dinah's ambivalence is gone. Looking into each child's eyes, she speaks to them, "I'm sorry kids. What you've planned here is not something devilish, it's a testament to your love for your father. I love him too, and what I love most about your father is how he loved us; you, me, our family, and his friends. Your father was a strong man who lived his life to the fullest. He valued happiness as his purpose, and as his religion, and I suppose what we all want is to be happy. Theo, your dad, was happy. He was happy because of you, he was happy about his life, and in all my memories, I see him happy."

Dinah looks out on the other celebrants; some are smiling, and others are crying. She sobs again, but this time it's cleansing. The tears feel like rose petals kissing her cheeks. Dinah's overcome by the same strength she felt once before during Mom's funeral. Then too she was

sobbing when two strong arms wrapped around her. She didn't have to open her eyes to know it was Theo. He whispered to her, "Don't worry, Sis, everything's gonna be fine."

Theo's soul is no longer Dinah's concern. She doesn't know if his destination is heaven, but she's sure it isn't hell, so she wipes her eyes. Scanning the room, she spots the server, raises her hand high in the air, and smiles a full sweet smile. "Young man!" she says. "Could you please bring me a large glass of Pinot? It's party time!"
