

# *The Piper Zaragoza Show*

Myronn Hardy

I would have thought it a prank, teenagers being bored or cruel, until I saw those two women in the copy shop. Both were practically obese, unattractive, wearing spandex head to knee, and indeed made it their lives' work being in everybody's business. Their names: Magdalena Torres and her apostle, Altagracia Tejado. I'd seen them all over the neighborhood, always talking about somebody and the wrong they did, how Jesus, with mercy of course, was going to come down and strike somebody dead. They'd ordered three reams of lilac paper that took two weeks to appear at the shop; the owner, with relieved news, rang both women. They came from their apartments almost immediately. I knew this because I was in the shop when they galloped in complaining that the paper's arrival was less than prompt.

The store only had three copiers, one fax machine which was always broken, and four white telephones to make calls abroad. If you were kind or the owner liked you for some reason, he'd provide a small cup of sweet coffee; one swallow, it would be gone. I was happy to get one each time I came in although I hated coffee. Yes. I

drank it down quickly and smiled, “Muchas gracias, delicioso, Señor Hurtado.” He’d nod, smile, and take the cup before settling behind the wood counter with his crossword puzzle. I was almost finished making five copies of my new play. Why did I bother? I assumed a rejection from each theater. It was my history, but I was submitting nonetheless; therefore, I had some hope, some belief in lightning.

Yes, when those ladies finished copying the lot of their flyers, six other women with tape guns arrived. They each ran out of the shop when handed a stack of warm pages. Like insects, they took immediately to light poles, shop windows, and parked cars. After the two women paid for the use of the copy machine and, of course, the special paper, they handed flyers to the owner and me. “Beware,” they whispered. We read the sheets shocked, “ATTENTION! There is a nymphomaniac running loose in Washington Heights. Ladies, lock your men up. If that can’t work, make sure those fuckers come directly home from their jobs or wherever else they say they’re going!” We both rubbed chins before laughing.

“This was what they needed the paper for?” the owner asked. “Those women are crazy. Locas.”

“Those women aren’t getting any. Just bored and jealous,” I said.

“But this is what makes life so much fun, New York so much fun. Oh, one big asylum this city is.”

I laughed harder and paid for my copies before heading to the post office. In that brief time the whole neighborhood and later as far downtown as Canal Street was tattered with purple flyers. Young men read, then snickered or yelled, “Damn, I need this bitch to meet me.” Women seemed disgusted, but some were laughing, though not as hard as the men. Small children, both boys and girls, began asking their mothers and sometimes fathers to define a mispronounced *nymphomaniac* and were told they were too young to know, understand, or say. Some parents said it was a bad word which made the children more curious: ask during dinner, before bedtime, repeat on playgrounds. In line at the post office, people talked, tried to figure out the nymph in question. Even the slight man who stood at the bulletproof glass enclosed counter wanting to send a plain store-bought box of brown sugar to the Philippines had his theory which, of course, was wrong: “I know. It’s the woman who wears the green-satin teddy when walking her Afghan hound

down 175th Street.”

“Yeah, she does that even in winter, even with snow and ice on the ground,” another said, scratching his face, his belly an overly watered pumpkin suspended over a thin alligator belt.

I knew who it was, and she wasn't a nymphomaniac. She lived on the third floor of my building. I was on the sixth. I remembered seeing her from my fire escape. She was walking home from work. Other men watched her, tried to talk to her, lips close to ears, eyes bucked, tongues darted. I didn't exactly know which apartment she lived in or if she was simply visiting someone. I only knew, along with every other man and woman for that matter, that she was exceptionally beautiful, unnaturally so. Those women in the copy shop saw her too, looked her up and down, sucked their teeth, frowned, whispered to their friends. I thought she was *Falasha*: born in Ethiopia, escaped to Israel, then to New York. I was wrong, which alas, wasn't unusual.

As I walked downstairs on my way to work each morning, I began noticing several bouquets piled near 3F and Cesaria Evora blasting from the door. This happened for perhaps a week before I noticed the beauty from the fire escape or anywhere else. I became jaunty like never before, at least not that early, hearing the music each morning. It made my days so much better, my disposition lighter; somebody else liked the music I did, somebody in my own neighborhood. On my way downstairs, I heard the music stop. From 3F she emerged, smiled, and extended her hand after flinging several bouquets into the apartment. “Hello, I'm not a florist.” She laughed, “I'm Piper Zaragoza.”

“Hollis Coleman,” I said. Her hand was soft, leather and cashmere. She looked better up close, skin like water, a bronze sunset. I was nervous, found it difficult to swallow.

“How long have you lived here?”

“You mean in the building?”

“Yes.”

“Three years. And you?”

“Two weeks. This is my cousin's place. She's away in Colorado and I'm watching her daughter. I'm originally from Puerto Rico.”

“I was born in Minnesota, but I grew up in Michigan.”

“Why did you come to New York?”

I didn't want to answer the question. It didn't make sense

anymore. "I'm a playwright, trying to be a playwright." I hated that introduction and had to think of a new one.

"My little cousin's school is doing *Macbeth*. Maybe you can help her read lines? She's playing Lady Macbeth."

"How old is she?"

"Nine. Fourth grade."

How was a nine-year-old, a fourth grader, doing *Macbeth*, playing Lady Macbeth? Was the teacher insane? A nine-year-old girl attempting to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands, not to mention the murders and eventual suicide? No wonder everybody, including and especially the children, seemed ready, no, eager to kill somebody for nothing. But that really wasn't a Shakespearean problem, and most probably they didn't understand what they were saying, what the play meant anyway.

"Wow."

"Please? Come by around eight tonight, just a half an hour. I'm a tailor. I work at a French dry-cleaners on the Upper West Side. We can do a trade. I'll get some shirts cleaned for you, maybe hem a pair of slacks?"

I hesitated.

"Come on, it will be nice to get to know you."

The knowing part got me, "I'll show up at eight." As soon as we parted, me to the subway and Piper to the drugstore, men resumed talking to her; probably wondered if she'd had time to smell the flowers they'd purchased, read their notes or their horrible poems, if she'd chosen me. Those two women who made the flyers were there too, staring through their orange lenses meant to keep the sun away: *bitch, slut, whore* beneath their breath. I wanted the day rushed more than usual. I wanted to find out who she was. I needed luck, an edge, anything.

I showered when I got home, put on a newly washed pair of jeans and a blue shirt with stripes. I didn't have any cologne, damn it. The unscented deodorant would do along with unscented soap. Had I become boring or was I always like this? Damn my sensitive skin.

When I got near the door, Piper was talking to three guys telling her stories of water: the islands whence they came, knew, wanted to take her, potential meetings in restaurants, how unique their

sudden love for her was. I stood in the stairwell and watched their fingers through her hair, on her back. “Hollis,” she yelled. I walked to her as the men ogled. She looked at them, “Next Thursday.” They kissed her cheeks and left. I felt jealous, betrayed even. I didn’t know and definitely wasn’t seeing her, no claim whatsoever. *Claim*, yes I was a beast. What was wrong with me? She held my hand, “I’m glad you came.”

“What’s happening next Thursday?”

“Cesaria Evora’s show. I have a whole group of people going with me. Do you want to come?”

“Yes. Yes, I wanted to talk to you about her. You play her music?”

“Every day,”

“I know. I hear it.”

“Too loud?”

“Not loud enough.” I laughed, “I dated someone who loved her, went into a trance when she heard her voice. She’d close her eyes, roll her head back, move about rooms as if swimming.”

“Was she beautiful?”

I wondered why she’d asked. Did that matter? Was that any of her business? And what was I going to say, ‘No, she was hideous’? I stopped to see what was in her face. If I could understand from where that question sprang. “She was ugly as udders.” It appeared she’d forgotten how to talk. “I’m playing. She was beautiful.” I looked at the ceiling. I didn’t want her to see my eyes, nothing of me for that moment. Sarah was gone, dead for two years. We were together for seven. She told me of her ovarian cancer two weeks before her death. She’d known that fact, that detail, for over a year but didn’t tell me, not a hint even after one was removed, nothing. She thought it would go away, dissolve in the body, pass in dark urine. That was what she told me. We stayed up late that night and talked about her two years studying in Florence. The three marble sculptures she made and sold. She wanted one of them back, for me to have, possess, evoke her in its form.

“I won’t get to see Machu Picchu with you,” she said. I rubbed her back and knew she was right, “Nothing ancient for us.” I was miserable. I hadn’t changed.

At the funeral in New Orleans, I sat between her mom and dad. We wore white in the church including the priest who embraced

the three of us for almost ten minutes. I came back to New York, closed the blinds, and played *flôr di nha esperança*; for two days, one song, a hard bed, a cracked ceiling:

*S'm sabia  
Qu'gente novo ta morrê  
'M ca tava amá  
Ninguem  
Ness munde.*

"She looks like my mom," Piper said. "She passed when I was three so I didn't get to know her but I have pictures. She looks like her."

"She's singing to you."

"I guess so, a woman from Santo Domingo singing to her daughter in Portuguese." She laughed. "My dad said she couldn't sing. The roosters tried to help her along. Those sounds must have been something horrible, but pretty, too. You know?"

I shook my head, "I thought you were from Puerto Rico."

"I am. I was born there, grew up there as did my dad, but mom was Dominican. The Caribbean isn't that big. Boats do exist. I thought you were Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Dominican when I met you."

"You did?"

"Yeah, you have," she stopped herself, "You seem..."

"Like you? Not black American?" What the hell did that mean anyway? I didn't want the conversation to become irritating. Oh God, if she started talking about being Taino or any other Native American I might have had to yell or walk away. Our talk of ethnicity is an attempt to flee us, to leave skin on the ground, to love some "master" we fought or don't want to escape. "I'm a mirror." She laughed, raised eyebrows while closing the door. She knew not to say it.

The apartment didn't look like mine. I mean it had the same floor plan except she had two bedrooms and I one. The ceilings seemed low and concave. In the living room, there were several plants: potted palms, variegated spiders, aloe vera. The mantel looked like an altar: bouquet after bouquet in mason jars, glass and ceramic vases, mugs, some without water, simply tossed below an

ivory and maple crucifix. Hanging from the pale yellow walls were several silver and wood framed mirrors. I imagined Piper checking her reflection before sleeping. Was this really me? she'd think. I waited on the brown lumpy couch as she walked into the kitchen. The headless mannequin near the two windows wore what seemed to be an unfinished dress filled with pins. How would the dress look on Piper? Would its silk give her more power or take some of it away? Would it make her move differently? Would she mistakenly or not so mistakenly leave a stray pin somewhere in the material with the possibility of being scratched, pierced capriciously?

A small girl ran into the room wearing a long blonde wig reciting Lady Macbeth's first speech.

"Who's there? What, hol!" I responded.

"Alack, I am afraid they have awakened, And 'tis not done: th'attempt, and not the deed, / Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready; he could not miss'em. Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't. / My husband!"

I stood and walked to her, "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

"I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry. / Did not you speak?"

"When?"

"Now."

"As I descended?"

"Ay."

"Hark! / Who lies i'th'second chamber?"

"Donalbain."

"This is a sorry sight."

She looked from side to side, "I don't know the rest. I'm still memorizing."

"You're doing very well."

Piper began clapping. "Wow, Hollis, this is Lisandra. Lisandra, this is Mr. Coleman."

"Hollis, I'm Hollis, Lisandra." I shook her hand. I usually hated precocious children. Maybe, hate is too strong. I found them grating, too aware of their audiences and manipulative, too old even though sometimes they were innocent. Lisandra didn't bother me in that way. It had everything to do with her being an actor, always trying, wanting to be somebody else. She was like me.

“You know the whole play, Hollis?” she asked.

“Just about. I played Macbeth in high school.”

Piper smiled. “You must have been good.”

“Oh Piper, I was the best.” We both laughed. I couldn’t believe I said that. I was embarrassed.

Piper placed glasses of lemonade on the coffee table. We all sat down. “Lisandra has been wearing that wig for the past two weeks.”

“I’m getting into character,” she said, tossing fake hair from her shoulder.

“She’s been wearing that hair to school every day. She slept in it last night.”

“You imagine Lady Macbeth blonde?”

“Important people are blonde.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Her mother wore that wig after her own hair fell out. She thought dying her hair would make her look like Marilyn Monroe,” Piper said before drinking from the glass.

“Is that the ultimate dream of dark women? There are so many makeshift ‘Marilyns’ walking around here.”

“They’re doing it for you. They know what makes men turn, makes you notice them. We know what you’ve learned. We see you.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to be Marilyn. And I don’t want to be blonde.” She took the empty glasses into the kitchen, “I’m going to let you practice.”

“I want to be Marilyn,” Lisandra whispered.

“I thought you were Lady Macbeth?” I asked.

“Her too,” I spent an hour running lines with Lisandra. It actually wasn’t bad. Lisandra wasn’t shy or bashful. She wanted to be the character desperately. She didn’t like being herself. I didn’t know if she felt her life was too much or too little. Piper came into the room periodically with a pair of slacks, a thimble, and black thread. The loud sewing machine would stop for fifteen seconds, and there she’d be. I wondered if Piper had acting aspirations, if all of this reminded her of school or her father whom she’d mentioned once.

When the doorbell rang, Piper ran to open it. It was a police

officer whom I'd later discover was Magdalena's husband. He took off his hat and greeted us. He kissed Piper on both cheeks as she handed him a ticket. "Nelson, you're going to love it," she said.

"Piper, you being there will be my joy."

I got up. "I'll see you tomorrow evening, Lisandra."

"I need you to stay longer," Lisandra said.

"I need to go to sleep. Good night." I hugged her. Piper gave me a ticket. "Where did you get these tickets?"

"I know somebody at the box office."

"Of course you do."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

I raised my eyebrows but said nothing.

"Come by the cleaners tomorrow with some shirts. I owe you."

I felt used. There was no way on this planet or anywhere else she'd love me. In terms of time and space, it didn't really matter. Emotions were even less significant than our brief lives, mere chemicals in the blood.

That night, I dreamed of dark women with platinum hair devouring North America. California was had first.

There were eight women, all of whom I'd seen in the copy shop holding posters and chanting, "Go home, home wrecker!" outside the building. I couldn't believe what I saw, and most people on my street, it seemed, didn't either. There were more people watching the protesters than protesters themselves. Many laughed and pointed including the women pushing strollers and the children in them. "Shut up, and get fucking jobs," one man yelled, trying to maneuver his way through the congestion. They were blocking the sidewalk.

"If I see you with her, Mr. Denia, I'm going to tell your wife," one protester said, pushing her sunglasses in her pocket. He kept walking as if he hadn't heard. I watched from across the street. The protesters became extremely loud when Piper walked out of the building. They began chanting in unison, "Go home whore! Go home, whore!" Some dropped their signs to throw fists of white feathers at her, but she kept moving. I ran to her as did several others, mostly men.

"What's going on?" I asked.

“I’m just trying to go to work, Hollis.”

“Why are they...?”

“If I understood insanity, I wouldn’t be a tailor. I’ll see you later today.” She disappeared in the A train terminal.

On my lunch break, I went by Piper’s job to drop off my shirts; those same shirts I should have given her before she got on the train, but it wouldn’t have been appropriate, not then. I wasn’t thinking of them at the bottom of my backpack. Who was this girl? The line outside the cleaners, all men from what seemed to be all parts of the city, spanned two blocks. Could it have had anything to do with Piper in the window making hems, measuring pant lengths, letting out or taking in waists, reshaping suit-jacket shoulders, shortening, lengthening sleeves, her laugh, the addiction she caused? Yes, along with the idea of hands or any part of her accidentally or not, brushing against them; those ideas, those thoughts kept them coming over and over. I stood in that line too and was tempted to run home and grab a pair of pants just to have Piper do something with them, “Today isn’t that busy,” the man in front of me said. “It’s usually four blocks and around the corner. There’s nothing like her in this city.” He licked his lips. “I’m going to ask her to Fiji. I have the tickets in my pocket. We could hop on the plane this evening.” He appeared to be a Wall Street type, everything neat and expensive, uniformed. The guy in front of him was a visual artist. I could tell by his mangled hair, paint splattered overalls, and heavy rimmed glasses. It was probably ninety degrees, ninety-five percent humidity, but that didn’t matter. I was soon pushed to the front because I was only dropping off, no need for a fitting. Piper winked before kissing my cheek. The man being fitted glared at me. He probably wanted to jump from that pedestal and tear out my cheekbones. She took the shirts and tossed them in a red-polyester bag. She seemed happy to see me or at least that’s how she made me feel. She rubbed the top of my head.

“Piper, are you going to finish my pants?” the man asked, attempting to burn me with his eyes. As she walked back to him, she winked at me again. I waved and took the train back to my job, which didn’t seem as horrible as it had the first part of the day.

Lisandra answered the door. Piper had left a message saying she’d

be about an hour late. She grabbed my hand and showed me the rest of the apartment: kitchen, bathroom, her peach painted bedroom, her favorite color. "I don't want to be pretty, Hollis."

"Too late, Lisandra. Didn't you tell me you wanted to be Marilyn Monroe the other day?"

"I lied," she said, shaking her blonde hair. I wondered if she'd seen what had occurred that morning. And if so, how could she understand it? I was still trying to figure it out. "I'm cute, not pretty. There is a difference. When I'm a woman, I want to look normal, average, not pretty. It's too hard, too much attention." I was saddened by her statement, saddened that she knew too much too early, but her astute knowledge would save her no matter how her face and body morphed.

She pushed open Piper's bedroom door. All was white, everything cloudlike: dresser, bed, and cloth canopy; I had the urge to jump into the bed, into the scent of grapes and powder. I was shaking. I shouldn't have been there. "Look," Lisandra handed me a framed photograph of Piper and some man. I assumed he was her boyfriend back home. She pushed the blonde-synthetic hair from her face. "That's her husband." I hadn't noticed a wedding ring on her finger. I felt myself disappearing, sinking into the floor. It had been confirmed. I was a fool.

Piper and I strolled the Lower East Side eating Argentinean gelato. The paper cups were cold in our hands. She rested one hand on my shoulder. I didn't want it there but couldn't help the glow it made, everything luminous. The green paisleys on her white dress looked like leaves, looked like peace. The world was virtuous, and I'd be happy for more than seconds, maybe a day. Little Lisandra, the actress, just made it up. The man in that photograph was Piper's brother, her cousin, her sister's (I knew she didn't have a sister but then I tried to forget) man. "Tell me about your husband." She began looking at the sidewalk. The cracks were long, grass and dandelion ridden. She gripped my hand but moved away, letting air and light in the sliced gap between us.

"A Sudanese man visiting the hotel gave me my first Cesaria Evora CD. He lived in Paris and was vacationing in San Juan. The CD was part of my tip. At the time, I'd wished he'd given me more

money instead but... He began sending me albums every time she put out a new one. I didn't know his name and still don't. Why send anything to me? What does a twenty-three-year-old girl do when she marries someone she loves? What does a twenty-five-year-old pregnant girl do when she learns her husband has two babies and a woman in a village thirty-three miles away from where they lived? She miscarries. She leaves him and comes to New York. She sews a small pocket inside each dress, each blouse, and each skirt where she keeps her wedding ring."

I pulled her close. We kissed for the first time and made love in my apartment. It was so natural, nothing awkward, slow, stars burning in the blood. I was glad I'd washed the sheets that morning: soap and salt in that bed. While Piper slept, I sat on the fire escape watching blue jeans dry wrinkled on the rusted-iron bars across the street. She looked like a sculpture on that mattress: quiet but not cold. Her hand almost touched the floor as did her hair that covered most of her face. The breeze was cool over my bare chest as I wondered what she dreamed. I knew she wouldn't stay with me. Too many responsibilities, and there was, I checked, near the waist of her dress, a pocket with a silver band.

There were more protests outside the building and enough chicken feathers to believe there was a *vivero* or minimally a coop very close. From across the street, I continued to watch Piper leave the building every morning. I knew she wasn't what they were calling her, but I couldn't help thinking maybe there was some truth, something way down that I wasn't seeing or hoped wasn't there. Perpetual throngs of men followed her, appeared from gray air lusting and slipping in puddles of their saliva to get close. Nothing impeded her from partaking. At some point, the human, wild or otherwise would have to give in. Maybe these were purely my thoughts, insecurity rabid. My truth, my belief, was that she was solely with me; well, as much as a married woman could be with anybody extra.

The day before the concert, I left work early. I'd hoped Piper had done the same. Surprise. We'd watch a movie or have it play in the background during sex. I took the stairs to find those dreaded purple flyers covering her door. A man apprehensively gathered some of the daily bouquets left on her mat before zealously pressing

the doorbell and knocking. "Excuse me, sir, do you know Piper Zaragoza?" I recognized him from the mole on his left cheek, but he was taller and thinner than I'd pictured.

"No."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I couldn't be an absolute liar even though I wanted to be. "I heard someone say she's going to a concert tomorrow night. Show up outside the Temor Theater around eleven, eleven-thirty, 73rd and Broadway."

"Who's playing?"

"I don't know."

He dropped one of the bouquets, "I'm too human."

"What does that mean?"

"Mistakes. Sins. There is no room for me in any garden."

I wondered if he'd been a preacher, or a born-again Christian. Perhaps he'd spent some time in a monastery before the body got too warm. "Shit makes everything grow, friend." Why did I say that? It didn't even sound like me but there it was in the air, falling about him, me, the walls. I walked upstairs then sat on the fire escape watching him decapitate flowers; their heads left a trail of yellow and violet.

We danced at the show, but Ms. Evora did not. She sang even as the Senegalese saxophonist spun about, gesturing for her to do the same or at least move, step from the place where she stood. She looked at him as if he were mad and continued her mode, her voice superlative. Piper wore the dress she'd made. It didn't give her any more power than she already had. It just made it more pronounced, gave it a stronger gleam. She invited only one other woman, the stylist who spent two hours before the show blow-drying her hair straight, and, of course, Lisandra, who seemed happy for the first time. The rest were men, many of whom I recognized from the neighborhood or more directly those who came by Piper's apartment: the poets and flower bearers, the beggars, those in lust, we were all in lust, those who protested the protesters, Mr. Denia, Mr. Torres, who'd been separated from his wife, Magdalena, for over a year, and some of his police officer friends, Señor Hurtado and other business owners, cooks, waiters, sanitation workers,

clerks, movers, cab drivers, and those who had no jobs at all or at least nothing anybody mentioned. We took up six thick rows. We formed an island, Spanish-speaking and brown in a white sea. Too much joy, too much beauty, Piper's fingers touching mine. This had to end. There was nothing else.

I saw her husband beneath the building's gold awning but he didn't see me. I immediately dropped her hand. She turned to me as if asking what had happened, but Mr. Torres embraced her from behind. "This was what I needed, Piper. Thank you." He kissed her nose. I heard someone scream as we walked through the opened glass doors. Before I felt anything, there was blood staining my shirt. Yes, I had become the shield, the martyr. Altagracia fled. Her orange tinted shades cracked on the cement. Perhaps suddenly, finally, truly afraid of Magdalena, she, her friend, actually used the serrated blade to cut into somebody: not a tomato, grapefruit, cucumber, or warm roll. Magdalena held the knife and screamed and screamed and screamed as her husband tried to keep her from stabbing anyone else. His friends held her. "You're fucking her?" she yelled, her breath draining in each sentence. "You're fucking her? Why aren't you fucking me? I'm your wife. I'm your wife, Nelson. What did I do to you? What is she doing to you?"

Piper touched my wound as the shirt became more saturated. I saw her husband run to her. They made a set. They made a beautiful matching set.

I woke up in the hospital. Piper sat close to the bed. Her husband was in the far corner, his white clothes blending into the wall. My first thought: how would I pay for this? I checked the bandage on my side: four stitches that would dissolve into my skin. I'd live.

"I thought you didn't know my girl," Piper's husband said.

"Shut up, Sancho." She rubbed my forehead.

I looked at her, focusing on her pupils. "I don't."

"Why are you saying this?" she asked.

"It's the drugs," I said. The opium she was to me.

She was going back to Puerto Rico, back to her husband. She didn't have to tell me. It was in the air, her perfume, the dust, the

light.

“I wish I weren’t weak.” She rested her hand on my chest. “I wished I’d met you...” I went somewhere else. I didn’t want it mentioned. Her wish then didn’t matter. Regrettably, foolishness was contagious, and I’d had my share, too much even. I got stabbed. I was Piper’s involuntary protector, but I would have done the same even with foresight. Yes, I was a hot-blooded jackass, an idiot, the worst of them.

Mr. Torres wanted me to press charges. “After what she did to you, I don’t want her anymore. I’d rather sleep on my buddy’s funky couch forever than go back to her.”

“I’m the lamb?” I said.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m paying for the hospital stuff. I have to do it.”

I was relieved. “I’m not pressing charges.”

“Why not? She’s crazy.”

He probably made her that way, or not. “I don’t want anybody after me. No wrath needed here.”

He laughed. “You don’t want any of that?”

“You can have it all, brother.”

“I like you, Hollis.”

“Nothing to like here, Nelson.”

On a beach, pastel drinks in hand, the Zaragozas relaxed. From the water, the then pregnant Piper saw dark women with platinum hair pulling up chunks of the sea floor, devouring the pieces along with sand, kelp, snappers; they wanted the entire Caribbean, but Puerto Rico would be had first.

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