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Jacob didn't want to come here but it was Diego's choice. For his 10th birthday he wanted to hang with his Nana's side of the family and, surprise-surprise, they did not come from his mother's childhood stomping grounds of Lincoln Heights or Echo Park. Maria avoids this island like the plague but Diego does love his grandmother.

Here on the beach beside the Puesta del Sol complex the kids are playing stick ball while Jacob is juggling the tabs between thing one, La Pachanga, and thing two, the Copacabana. When the check for food and drink for the high-profile *iFamilia Cubanaza!* gets this big the business owners tend to get a little on edge. Funny how these things sort themselves out when you hand them actual money.

Especially when the exchange rate is out of this world.

At one time the hotel complex *Playa Puesta del Sol* was the Hope Diamond of the Miramar District but that was a long-long time ago. The epicenter of what was known as 'Playground Havana' in the late 21st Century has not fallen into total disrepair yet, but this and the Varadero are pretty much the only areas that have not come unraveled since those heady days. For quite some time the big-bankroll tourists have been going off-world and itty-bitty Cuba has been fighting for the retro-discount weekend getaway dollars ever since.

Jacob has always envisioned Cuba as a postmortem of the wacky octo-millennial scramjet epoch, and as factual as that may be on the surface he's found that the people here are genuinely wonderful, the food is even more so, and the rattrap ambiance and dynamic culture of this island is positively starting to grow on him.

Here they use paved roads for Cro-Magnon old automobiles that run on gasoline so how's that for atmosphere?

The one thing that has held true through the centuries is that *Puesta del Sol* continues to live up to its name and the sunset over Jacob's left shoulder is catch-your-heart-with-your-teeth staggeringly beautiful, and much to his delight Maria has finally come to share it with him. As she steps up he notices she's changed her shirt to a red tank-top with some big-eyed, fedora-sportin' Toon on it.

Jacob asks, "Super Pachanga, what-b-that?"

Maria laughs, "You didn't settle the bill, *a chinga* you nuked it! The manager is running around giving everybody t-shirts."

"Well, whatever it is, the shirt frames your tits quite nicely!"

As Maria plops into the lounge beside him, she takes his hand and smiles, "Why, thanks for noticing!"

Just then Maria gets a tacnet uplink in from Bob, <"We're almost there. Maybe ten minutes out.">

Maria looks up and of the hand full of flights zipping along the Straits of Florida at simple Mach speed, one far off blip in the direction of the Keys is dropping from space and decelerating, <"I see ya, Bob. I got you clearance to land here on the beach. Just confirm with Havana on approach.">

<"Thanks, Tiger.">

Maria then squeezes Jacob's hand, "After all this time I think my mother is starting to warm up to you."

Maria's mother hated Jacob when she first met him, she hated him when the two got married, and she hated him even more when they divorced because how dare you divorce her daughter; but today was a unique day for Ophelia Herrero de Ramirez because Jacob made her look good...for being a *Bolillo* that is. He and Maria are big-shots where they come from but the family here doesn't know why? They know he's been throwing money around but they don't see it because he respectfully kept it on the down-low. Then to top it all off he's her son-in-law and in a world where matrimony anymore is long passé, a quaint notion at best, even being the ex-son-in-law does count for something here—and it counts big.

Then to top that, and this makes Jacob laugh inside, there she is on a bench thirty feet in front of them small-talking away with the notorious Monique Ribot. What a surreal sight—Monique with his son, Seth, and his granddaughter, little-Monique, both obviously nomin' on fries while watching Diego, as the catcher, coach his granddaughter, Connie, on how to strike out the batter—one of the many cousins from the island. All the while the family strains-their-brains trying to figure out how Monique factors in? None of them will be so uncultivated and

boorish as to ask because obviously it has to come from Jacob's side of the fence, but what does rattle their lifters is that Ophelia is going to be caring for Diego post-surgery and now they just caught wind that Diego's care will be at Monique's chateau of all places.

For Ophelia it's total and complete radon-feather in your cap bragging-rights, and her efforts trying to keep it on the Q.T. has made it only bigger than life and in their face.

Jacob retorts, "Warm up? Not hardly."

Maria shakes her head, "In spite of your fierce reputation you are the kindest, most loving, and giving man I know but, understand this, Astro Boy. It's my job to bitch about you. It's Ophelia's job—hey it's everybody's job to bitch about you! It keeps ya honest."

"Well, don't do me any favors, okay?" Jacob then switches gears, "I've been wanting to ask you, now that we have a minute alone, you know that Paula there was Pablo and Lucia was Luis, right? They all, even Adolfina, made the change by puberty right?"

"Eeeh, not Hector, but I never really kept up with 'em."

"This runs in your family, ya know."

Maria looks at him, "Don't ruin the moment, motherfucker."

"No! No-no-no-no! It's just that Diego makes sense now."

Maria looks back out to the sunset, "I'm glad Diego's choice makes sense to you now. It was obvious to everyone else."

Just then a tennis ball comes flying in and Jacob catches it with one-hand. Diego races in after it and slams into Jacob, hugs him big, kisses him on the cheek, snatches the ball from his hand and shouts back while running off, "Thank you, Pop!"

Jacob can deal with the long hair and pony tail but it's the make-up, no matter how faint and unobtrusive, that he has a hard time with so, with a sigh, "My son...the daughter I always wanted."

With piercing eyes, Maria looks over at Jacob and tries to bait him with a snarl, "Wait until he sucks cock."

"Waddya mean?" Replies Jacob with a look on his face that says, *doesn't he already? Everyone else does!*

To Maria a good fight has gone to waste because Jacob didn't bite, "You really haven't been keeping up on things. He likes girls!"

While Jacob blinks, Maria gives it a second to let that sink in, "But, I'll admit I'm jealous. As much as Diego has been a cuddle-bear with me all these years, and in spite of his affinity for girls he's always had a crush on his daddy. Like all good daughters should."

"You're suggesting I should spend more time with...her."

"Ya think?"

As the drop ship slides up to the shore, Jacob smirks to himself just loud enough for Maria to overhear, "My son, the lesbian!"

"Do I catch a whiff of envy?" Maria sits up and turns to him cackling like a witch, "That's not a Freudian slip! Uh-uh, in my book that's a Freudian wardrobe! And, it goes without saying—"

With a stern finger, Jacob cuts her off, "Then don't say it."

Maria purses her lips together with a smile and struggles not to blurt out all the comments and digs she has saved up for this very moment—and now this. As the ship spins around, drifting backwards over the sand, she agrees that this is not the time to verbally pulverize him for being inattentive to those closest to him, or opening himself up to her ridicule just because he's being stupid-easy.

Jokingly she gives a stern finger back, "Tomorrow then!"

In a fit of juvenile silliness both their fingers start poking and parrying at each other as if they were in a rapier duel.

Just then they hear Jessica clear her throat, "Get out much?"

With the ramp of the ship opening both Jacob and Maria hop up, while Maria complements Jessica, "Nice shirt!"

Jessica, facing off with Maria, is flanked by her boyfriend Josav, the Herrero family anchor and business GM, Lucia, the dark and brooding 'Michelangelo of the mill-printer', Paula, and the family matriarchal comedy-relief, Adolfina. Staring at Maria's b-cup, Jessica glances down at her own tank top where the cartoon characters eyes are exploding from her double-d's, then with a glance back up at Maria's she gives herself a self-approving chirp.

Maria mocks flipping out, "Bitch! If you weren't seventeen—"

Just then seventy-two year old Adolfina, like all the family girls, a chiquita-hot callipygian meaty-bone with a trim waist, big hair, getto hoops, daisy-dukes with a halter two sizes too small, throws her hand out and says, "Maria, *creo que no!* You may be *familia* but this is my girl now! Don' make me hurt you!"

Jacob adds with a laugh, "You and what army?"

Lucia, Maria's cousin and Adolfina's niece, asks with knowing clarity about the ship on the beach, "*No jodas! A Razorback?*"

"*Qué?*" Adolfina, seeing the ship and all of a sudden realizing the Annex connection, taps Lucia in the face and wags her hand at her, "*Por favour, de nada! No importa! Si?*"

Watching the ship hovering in place, Lucia says, “Ya-ya, *si!*”

With Bob and Michal stepping down the ramp nobody knows who Bob is—but every one of them who made the change suddenly recognize Michal Pitney. Michal is the ex-secretary-general to the United Nations and hero to each and every transsexual that walks the Earth and beyond. Still a politically weak and prejudiced community to this day, Maria’s Cuban family, drama queens the lot of them, are high profile because they are the Latin American ‘reality show’ hit of the decade. Transsexual mechanics and metal smiths all, whose family owned business (*Herrero Custom Auto Works - Milling and Printing*) just so happens to be the largest custom classic-car garage and machine shop for the whole of the western-hemisphere.

Every male born of the family, save for one lone nephew, have either made the change or are in the process of making that change. It makes for great television but they are off-season now and Adolfina is a little miffed that the cameras crews are not around for Michal showing up like this.

Then the question dawns on her, *who are Maria and Jacob to know people the likes of Monique Ribot and Michal Pitney?*

Diego breaks away from the game and trots over to see Michal who is obviously there to support him (becoming a her) and where Adolfina’s crew gave Monique a respectful distance and a bow of the head—with Michal the whole lot of them flock to her as if she were a rock-star or the Pope even. All but Paula, that is.

With them gone Paula asks, “S.A...so, what do you do?”

“Doesn’t matter what I do, but I know what you’re thinking.” Maria gets in her face and thumbs back at the family mobbing Michel, “You clear it with them first because I’m not gonna deal with the fucken’ blow back if you get dead! I can’t watch over you.”

Paula closes the gap between them, “I’m twenty-three. I don’t need no watchin’ over. I can handle anything you people dish out.”

“Yes, you can, you’re just like Adolfina through and through, but you got a good thing going here. Why piss that away?”

“Good thing? What makes you think that? We were already swimming in money before this *Cubanaza* bullshit! It’s expanded into all markets and now there is no getting away from it! My life is my own and there is more to life than this farce. *Entiende?*”

“*Si, estoy aprendiendo.*” Maria softens ever so slightly, “It’s a come as you are so just bring what ya got on. If you’re standing by that drop ship when we leave you’re in, but...” Again, Maria nods towards the family, “You run that gauntlet first. *Arranca!*”

Paula passes Bob, who has pulled himself away from the mob, and as he steps up he asks, "Are they who I think they are?"

Jacob nods yes so Bob adds, "I'd love to see their shop!"

"The mill-printer?" Jacob asks.

Bob nods yes, "Most definitely."

Maria inquires, "So, Alpha-poo, have you seen the plan?"

Bob cringes, "I've been so avoiding you, Ramirez."

"I need your feedback, Bob."

"No, I'm not commenting. It's your call."

"I take it you don't like it?"

Bob is astonished, "What clued you in exactly? I don't know if Kiplinger is worth this much risk but, if they want to do it and you think you can pull it off, then by Christ's shit-stain have at it!"

"They like the idea of calling their own shots, Bob."

"Really!" Bob leans in, "Least we forget that *they*, whoever *they* are, decided all on their own to announce that *they* were gonna expand their product line! Did *they* think ahead and consider the possibility that somebody *may* push back? Anybody?"

RRI (i.e. Rapture Red Industries) ale is bottled on Sapphire, yes, but nobody knows where the source beverage comes from. With RRI announcing they were releasing a line of Wine, Vodka and Rakija the FDA out of North America decided that they wanted to follow up on their original request, from forever ago, to inspect the brewing and distilling operation because checking out the bottling plant just doesn't cut it. The proteins and carbohydrates in the ale don't jive with other off-world products that have a proven terrene-flora origin and this has piqued everybody's curiosity. Twenty years of micro-brew distribution in North American has come to a screeching halt until this query can be resolved, so the U.S. Ambassador to the FIS petitioned to seek jurisdiction to compel RRI to open their books. And then, when things weren't surreal enough, the World Health Organization filed a brief in support of that petition and the United Nations blew a gasket over that because they don't know how to legally quash the WHO brief without further recognition of the FIS no matter how indirect it may be.

So, this has been Bob's headache of late.

Bob smiles at Maria with what comes out of his mouth next, "And, since *they* don't want to quit distribution, you're gonna just dig the solution we all came up with! You guys get to run a taxi service twice a day out of the Church Key! How's that for starters?"

Maria's throws her head back, "Oh, fuck. You're kidding!"

"Tower Two becomes lodging and research for the fuck-ton of paleo and anthro and zoological motherfuckers that will be bangin' at your door! Four and Five stay as detention and overflow, but I wanna move that op to the other side of the delta. A five-klick buffer to the main campus ain't enough with civis running 'round."

"I'll get on that. Eighteen...twenty-four months tops."

"Good!" Bob then asks, "And, since I'm adding to your plate, would you like to be at Second Hand next week for the big-reveal?"

"That quick hu?" She thinks for a second, "Watching all those jaws drop would be priceless but, no, I've got shit to do."

"Caesar's hosting a barbecue!" Bob then throws his hands out, "Cow! It's cow, and we're supplying that."

Josav lets out a resounding, "Sounds like a blast!"

Bob knew Jessica was there, and she's safe, but he gestures towards Josav as if he were a carnival curiosity, "Whooo's that?"

Jacob says, "My grandson, Josav, and he is okay."

Rubbing his eyes, Bob blurts out, "Okay! What the fuck?" He looks up at Jessica and Josav and offers, "Would you two like to go next week? You can come as my guests! Michal will be there."

Jessica looks back at Josav who is nodding yes, so she gives Bob a quick, "Ya, if father doesn't have a problem with it."

Jacob replies as Adolfinia, Luica and Paula return after ganging up on Michal, "No, we'll have fun!"

Jessica then adds, "Speaking of having fun, everyone wants to stay a little longer. The family here is awesome!"

"We're hitchin' a ride with Bob so if he's got the time."

Bob shrugs, "Not a problem!"

"Then you and Josav go get Monique's limo from her hotel and load it up. Okay? Let's get that out of the way."

Adolfinia volunteers, "Paula, ride 'em over in the fifty-nine."

Paula asks, "Take the scenic route?"

Adolfinia snits at her, "*Oiga, por favor!* Are you collecting a fare? *Arranca el carro!*"

"Chao!" Paula takes Josav by the arm and looks at Jessica, "You know, if you weren't family I'd throw down on you just so I can have a bite of this!"

As Paula pulls Josav away Jessica looks at Jacob who says quietly to her, "Bruised egos are okay..."

"Broken bones are not!" Chimes Jessica along with Jacob. Following Paula and Josav she asks, "Body bag is in the trunk, right?"

Bob takes his queue and saunters off to chat with Monique as Adolfina and Lucia square off with Maria and Jacob. Maria can see worlds of attitude in Adolfina because in her prime she was an ultimate bad-ass. When Maria was little she was impressed by the stories and finds it odd that now she is here more than Adolfina's equal.

Then, with zero accent, Adolfina fires her salvo, "Do you know how many Maria Ramirez's there are? A bazillion or so? But, just now, I remember that your middle name is Lynn and that kinda narrows the field down—and *YOU* jump to the top of the search like fireworks! Look at you! Big-cheese of spooky-town. I'm impressed!"

Maria protests, "I can't stop her."

"Nobody can! I just got one question. Is it safe?"

"No." Maria shakes her head, "Think *opposite of safe* and you'll kinda get the idea. There are no seat belts on this ride."

"Didn't think so."

Maria pleads, "Talk to her."

Lucia sighs with defeat, "Her mind was made up long ago."

"I promise you this. In six months-time Paula will be given an opportunity to back out. I'll make sure she comes here for a day before making that decision. Now, if she chooses to life-up then her training company goes to..." Maria nods towards Jacob, "This guy. He's due for one, so will that work for you? Best I can do."

Adolfina looks at Jacob, "Papa-J...it's amazing what you can learn in a nanosecond or two. The press was calling you Chernabog?"

Jacob laughs, "Ya, I liked that one! Didn't stick though."

"What did you do to be so hated?"

"Nothing to be proud of, but..." Jacob nods her way, "You! Marine, Afghanistan in sixty-two, purple heart *and* bronze star! I hear it's the most coveted bronze star in the history of the corps."

"Busted back to corporal and booted out with an honorable!"

"I'm dyin' to hear this one!"