

“We just write it up as we see it. The El Tee has already said that it’ll be cleaned up before it’s official, but we have an obligation to submit the truth, at least on the first round.”

“O.K. partner, lets finish this before any more time passes. If I call Denise and ask her to meet me at the Cheese Cake Factory for dinner, maybe she’ll leave a little room on those charge cards.”

Both officers pulled their chairs up to their desks and started hunting and pecking on the keyboards in front of them. They looked up at the same time and both asked, almost in unison, “I wonder how this is going to play on the news tomorrow?” They laughed at their synchronicity and got back to work.

(Sunday, 1:30 p.m.)

One would think that Reverend Nettles would be exhausted after preaching the seven o’clock service, followed by his generally more stirring message at eleven. But he wasn’t. The pulpit was his element, the stage where his performances were most inspired. On some Sundays he was a little weak and muted, but today- he was stellar. At least two of the church’s sisters had to be calmed by ushers in white dresses and white stockings with old fashion white nurse’s caps on their heads. The shouters were overcome by the intensity of emotion that Martin had conjured. The spirit in the sanctuary was as thick and overwhelming as wet clammy heat on the Mississippi gulf coast in July.

Most of the members had congregated in the church hall after service. Today, the lady’s missionary society was hosting their quarterly fund-raising lunch/dinner. It was all you can eat for ten dollars a soul. The food had been prepared and donated by supporters

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in the congregation, so all of the proceeds went directly to the missionary society for their ongoing and special projects. These dinners were a big success at the Church; members looked forward to making their favorite dishes for others to taste and tasting the dishes that were made by others. The Reverend was stereotypically rapacious, heading the line and piling the food onto his plate like he hadn't eaten for two days. Everyone around him just smiled and said "...now just help yourself Reverend, there's plenty here for everyone."

Long rows of tables, covered with alternating red and white linen cloths, were adorned with foods grouped by type. There were meats prepared every way imaginable. They had crispy fried and tender fried chicken; chicken roasted, smothered, baked, fricasseed, curried, and sautéed with vegetables. There were beef, pork and fish dishes that would delight the palate of the harshest food critic. Clusters of yellow vegetables, green vegetables, mixed vegetables, and potatoes were sprawled across several tables. Each group had more than a few dishes prepared to unique, and sometimes secret, recipes. Large bowls of fresh salad and baskets of breads- rolls, muffins, cornbread, hush puppies, loaves of white, wheat and rye- filled the last table. Across the room was a selection of desserts that would be the envy of the finest bakeries- cakes, pies, cobblers, sweet breads, homemade ice cream, and fresh fruit smothered in special sauces.

When the Reverend stood in front of the chicken, his eyes landed immediately on the pan with roasted chicken, garlic and peppers, his favorite.

"My lord, that roasted chicken and peppers looks delicious, who made it?"

Martin knew by the smell it was his favorite recipe.

“I made it Reverend, and you know you’re going to love it”

Edwardo spoke boldly and with perfect diction, warmly flashing his toothy smile when the reverend looked his way. Edwardo Domonique Perez was the brother of Alopes, the Reverend’s secretary and assistant. He was the only male in the lady’s missionary society. “E.D.”, as he preferred to be called, challenged the missionary society’s exclusion of men, saying that it was inconsistent with contemporary values of inclusion, that to exclude anyone, on any basis, was discriminatory; and that if they were more comfortable being just the “Missionary Society” he didn’t care, but he was going to participate.

The women fought him at first, but they finally conceded. Especially after Reverend Nettles delivered a passionate sermon on how they were a church fashioned in the true spirit of Jesus, who rejected no one, accepted everyone, and passed no judgment on the individual, but cautioned to only judge the deeds. “We are all sons and daughters of our heavenly Father...” he had preached. That since he had been pastor at the church, everyone was welcome, regardless of race, previous history, or sexual preference. He asked the question, “...what would our lord and savior Jesus Christ do?” if he had to accept or reject a sincere follower. He reminded them to live by the two great commandments, “...the 22nd Chapter of Matthew, 37th through 40th Verse” he cited, “...To first love God and then love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law...”

Besides, since he had turned thirteen, everyone knew that Edwardo was more feminine than masculine and as he grew older, he became more of a woman. Now the Ladies Missionary Society accepted him as one of their own, and there were no questions asked in the congregation.

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“I’m sure I’ll love it E.D. Especially if you used your mother’s recipe.”

“I started out with her recipe, Pastor, but I had to perk it up a bit...you know I like things a little perky.” E.D. raised his hands to just below his chin, tilted his head back slightly and fluttered his fingers as if he were fanning his face to cool off. “Anyway, Alopes uses momma’s recipe so you know mine has to be different. She thinks she’s as good as I am, but once you try that...” he pointed a long slender index finger, extending from a bent wrist, at the dish, “...you can’t go back, if you know what I mean.” He then began to place tender pieces of chicken on the plate that the reverend had handed him. “I can still teach her a thing or two” he continued.

“I’ll bet she’s not the only one you can teach a thing or two.” Martin replied and smiled as he took his plate and hastily moved along the tables to the next group of foods, careful to not look back as he said it.

The reverend took a seat and started to eat his dinner. Church members carefully planned the route to their tables so as to pass by and shower as much attention and affection on him as they could squeeze in within the few seconds of face time that the path afforded them. Depending on the status of the congregante, typically measured by the level at which they consistently tithed, he reciprocated with the appropriate amount of attention to ensure no one felt neglected. His table was joined by three senior deacons and two church trustees. The men talked small and laughed and joked while they ate. On at least two occasions, one of the assistant pastors walked over and whispered into Martin’s ear, evoking a serious look on his face while he made a mental note of the message.