

# Perfect

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Anecleto woke up early as he always did in the summer. He sat on the bed, rubbed his eyes then standing up, lazily stretched. He sauntered across the room, leaned on the window sill and looked out to see what the morning had brought.

The station wagon was there! The Millers were visiting their grandfather! He glanced at the clock on his dresser and quickly washed his face, jumped into his jeans and walked out onto the balcony.

Anecleto considered going downstairs, but it was getting too close to the time and he could be delayed and miss them so he sat on the railing and waited.

Anecleto, alerted by the sound of the door opening, immediately stood up. The first to march out was Mr. Miller, stout, erect and authoritative with a trim mustache and full of energy followed by the shuffling Chuck, the bouncy Peggy and the slender Mrs. Miller smartly dressed in pedal pushers. Chuck was quite sleepy and simply stood by the car door while Mr. Miller unlocked the car, but Peggy looked up, saw Anecleto and waved.

They climbed onto the station wagon and after warming the car for a moment, Mr. Miller eased out of the driveway, drove to Main Street half a block away and turned right. Anecleto had no idea what the activity would be, but they were right on schedule, even on the first day! They were so organized.

Anecleto lingered on the balcony for a while. He had met the Millers the year before, but only toward the end of their stay and only for one brief afternoon. This time he planned to take advantage of the full week and get to know them better. They were fun. Chuck was his age, twelve, and Peggy a year younger. Both were fair haired, freckled and friendly, but the whole family was fun, even Peggy. It must be exciting to live in a big city like Dallas, he thought, and not like this boring, old border town that was barely in the United States. And they were so organized, even in a small town their week was filled with scheduled and supervised activities that involved the four. They did things together.

Then, almost like turning off a faucet, the stream of thoughts ceased and Anecleto sprang from the balcony, ran across his room and bounded down the stairs two steps at a time.

Fabiana, an incredibly old, wrinkled and withered lady who lived alone in a small, weather beaten house half a block away, was already in the kitchen when Anecleto came down. "Would you like some breakfast?" she asked in her puny voice.

Anecleto nodded and Fabiana started her slow shuffle to the refrigerator. Anecleto ran and took out the eggs and brought them to the stove before the old lady had taken three steps. She muttered something and started chopping onions and tomatoes. The menu was always the same, scrambled eggs with onions and tomatoes. She used to come once a week to help, but now she was coming daily. She wasn't much help, she moved so slowly, and he wondered why his parents even hired her.

After cleaning the stove, Fabiana joined Anecleto at the kitchen table, took a tobacco pouch out of her apron pocket started to roll her own cigarette. She held the cigarette paper between the malformed, knobby fingers of her left hand and steadied it by resting forearm on the table. Holding the Bull Durham pouch in her right hand, she held it unsteadily above the paper and started tapping it spastically with her forefinger. At first only a few strands of tobacco rained out of the pouch then a clump fell that bent the paper and it landed on the table. She closed the pouch, put it in her pocket then, laying the paper flat on the table, started getting pinches from the clump and arranged the tobacco in a series of smaller clumps on the paper. At the height of each maneuver she clamped her toothless mouth and the tip of her nose almost touched her chin. It looked to Anecleto that she was about to swallow her face. He wondered if that was possible, that someday they'd find her reversed like a sock with the bones on the outside.

Fabiana, using both hands, carefully rolled the paper, brought it up to her face, wet the gummed edge of the paper with a tongue that darted out of a shapeless orifice and completed forming the lumpy cigarette by twisting both ends. With surprising authority, Fabiana struck a kitchen match and it flared giving off a phosphorous smell along with a hissing sound. After the burning match settled to a steady yellow flame, she brought it to the tip of the cigarette which burst into flames until it got to the tobacco and she finally took a first puff. Then, looking out the window with her feeble eyes, started to talk of things Anecleto didn't and didn't want to understand.

Anecleto was almost through with breakfast when he saw Alfredo, his friend who lived next door, approaching the back door. He quickly took his plate to the sink and ran upstairs. He simply did not want to be bothered with Alfredo today. Anecleto knew that Fabiana would not hear the knocking and if she did, it still wouldn't matter -- she was the ultimate stonewall!

In his room, Anecleto made plans on how he was going to approach the Millers. He knew they would return from their outing around ten, but that may not be the best time. They usually just got out of their station wagon and went inside the house and did not emerge until their afternoon outing. It looked like the best time was late in the afternoon, when they returned from their second excursion. However, he would remain vigilant and not miss an opportunity. Perhaps he'll see them in the morning and set something up for the afternoon.

At nine thirty, Anecleto went to the front of the house and waited for the Millers to return. True to form, the Millers arrived shortly after ten and Anecleto, nonchalantly, started playing catch with a baseball.

"Hi, Cleeto," Chuck yelled the moment he got out of the station wagon. Chuck, with Peggy close behind him ran toward Anecleto who, after catching the ball, walked a few steps to meet them.

"Hi, when did you get here?" Anecleto rubbed the ball in his hands.

"We got here last night."

"Yes, last night," echoed Peggy.

"Chuck, Peggy," Mr. Miller said, "we have to wash up. You can play later."

"We gotta go. We'll see you this afternoon." Chuck and Peggy waved and went into the house.

Mission accomplished, Anecleto was content.

When Anecleto answered the door that afternoon, he didn't just see his uncle; he saw another obstacle to his plans. Tio Tavo was not really his uncle, but a bachelor cousin of his grandfather. He would visit occasionally, stay for a few days then leave. While Tio Tavo did not drink very much, he drank often and managed to maintain a state of equilibrium somewhere between sobriety and drunkenness until late in the evening when the scale would tip against him and his gregariousness would acquiesce and he'd doze off and his father would guide to the guest bedroom. Normally, Anecleto enjoyed his uncle, but not now. Not when the Millers were here. Of all the weeks in the year, why this one? He'd be an embarrassment, a shove to a family that was already tittering on the brink of insanity.

"My, Cleto," he said, in Spanish, "you've grown at least two inches since I've seen you last! You're a smart boy." Tio Tavo touched Anecleto's left ear and pulled out a quarter. "What's this," he said in mock surprise, then handed the quarter to Anecleto.

"Thanks." Anecleto half heartily hugged his rotund uncle. The childish trick was embarrassing.

The Millers returned from their afternoon outing a half hour early which shortened Anecleto's vigil by thirty minutes. Anecleto stepped up to the front gate and waved.

"Mom, Dad. Can I go to Cleeto's to play?"

"Me too!" Peggy said.

"No, not you," Chuck said.

Mrs. Miller looked at Mr. Miller.

"Peggy has to go," Mr. Miller instructed. "Take care of your sister. Dinner is at seven."

Anecleto loved the precision; dinner at seven. They always had their dinner at noon, but breakfast and supper, especially during the summer, were more haphazard. "We have a tree house in the back," Anecleto said, beaming. "Come on, I'll show ya." Anecleto decided to take the shortcut to the back yard by going through the house. While Anecleto skipped through the house, Chuck and Peggy slowed down, fascinated by their surroundings. "Come on," Anecleto urged. They walked past the living room, through a hall and got to the formal dining room, where Anecleto's parents were working on a newsletter. The moment he entered the dining room, Anecleto knew he should have gone around rather than through

the house. It was not his parents or the pile of papers on the table that bothered Anecleto, but Tio Tavo was there and that meant a delay and perhaps an embarrassment. "Mom, Dad, Chuck and Peggy are here. We're going to play in the back yard," Anecleto announced and headed to the back door.

"Hi," his father said, "visiting your grandfather?"

Chuck nodded.

Tio Tavo, who was sitting at the table with his back to the entrance turned around and slowly stood up. "I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting this young gentleman and young lady," he said, rather formally in English with a thick accent.

Anecleto retraced his steps. The get away did not work. "This is Chuck and Peggy Miller."

"Very glad to know you." Tio Tavo shook hands with both and Peggy giggled.

"What is this you have here?" Tio Tavo pulled a dime out of Chuck's ear and gave it to him. "Is that the way you carry money?" Chuck shook his head and chuckled.

Peggy laughed with merriment. "Why are you laughing, young lady?" He then pulled a dime from her ear and gave it to her. Peggy giggled and covered her mouth. Tio Tavo looked at Anecleto and winked. "I can't reach that far," he said and tossed him a dime. It was humiliating.

Chuck and Peggy were duly impressed with the tree house which was a platform built between two ash trees about six feet off the ground, however they seemed to be more interested in the activities in the dining room.

"What are your mom and dad working on?" Chuck asked.

"They're putting together a newspaper."

"Really!" Chuck's eyes widened. "A real newspaper, like the Herald."

"No, not like that. It smaller and it has mostly editorials."

"Gosh. Do they print it themselves?"

"Not alone. The party has an old printing press and when they have enough stories and enough money, they print the paper. It's kinda silly, they're always fighting lost causes," Anecleto said. Chuck and Peggy laughed and Anecleto laughed with them.

"You're funny," Peggy said, "like your uncle."

"That silly old fart isn't really my uncle." All three laughed.

Chuck looked at his watch. "It's almost seven, we gotta go." Anecleto was content.

He had taken center stage and they liked him. Life was sweet.

Once again, Anecleto saw the Millers leave on their morning excursion. He ran downstairs and once more Fabiana made scrambled eggs with onions and tomatoes for breakfast. However, instead of having orange juice with breakfast,

Anecleto had coffee. He mixed the coffee with lots of milk and then added three heaping teaspoons of sugar which he did not stir, but let settle to the bottom. The coffee was okay, but it was the syrup that formed on the bottom of the cup that he enjoyed.

It was while taking out the trash that Alfredo showed up. Anecleto had forgotten about his friend, but there he was, dark, thin and barefooted. Normally he would be barefooted too, but this week he had been wearing tennis shoes. The Millers were never barefooted.

"Hi, Cleto, whatcha doing?"

"Nothing." Anecleto shrugged and shook his head.

"Wanna go to the woods?"

"Na." Anecleto and Alfredo walked toward the house where Anecleto sat on a bench under the porch.

"Well, what do you wanna do?"

"Nothing." Anecleto searched for an excuse, but his mind was blank. He just didn't want to be with Alfredo. It was boring. "I got things to do in the house," Anecleto said, suddenly standing up.

"Like what? I'll help."

"Nothing, I just don't feel good. I'm going to bed." Anecleto entered the house and locked the screen door.

"Okay," Alfredo said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Anecleto watched his friend leave and almost called him back, but didn't.

Again Anecleto happened to be in the front yard when the Millers returned from their morning sally. Anecleto went over and helped unload the station wagon.

"Dad, can Cleeto come in and play over here?" Chuck asked.

"Of course," Mr. Miller said, then turning to Anecleto continued, "if it's okay with your mother. Go ask."

Anecleto, with Chuck at his heels, made a beeline to the front door, opened it and announced, "I'm going to the Millers to play."

"Hold it, young man," his mom said, who just happened to be dusting the living room when Anecleto made his announcement. Anecleto stopped and entered the house. "Since when do you just make announcements of your whereabouts?"

"Mom, can I go over to the Millers to play?" Anecleto asked, making sure he didn't show he was bothered by the delay or the delay would be greater.

"That's better. Yes, you may."

Excitedly, Anecleto followed Chuck to his grandfather's house which was a large, Spanish style mansion. He couldn't believe it; he was about to enter the inner

sanctum! At the door he paused to savor the moment and looked around him. Half a block away he saw Alfredo looking at him.

"Come on, Cleeto," Chuck said from the hallway.

Anecleto turned his back on Alfredo and entered the house.

Chuck and Peggy led Anecleto directly to the patio which was completely enclosed by the house on two sides and walls on the other two. On one side of the large patio was a giant ebony with a swing hanging from one of the branches.

"Isn't this a neat swing?" Chuck said. "Get on." Anecleto sat on the board and started swinging then got off and let Peggy climb on. "Grandpa says that this tree is over a hundred years old!"

"That's old and it's still strong," Anecleto said. Peggy was swinging lazily and listening to the conversation.

"It almost died a few years ago and Grandpa had to get a tree doctor to fix it."

"A tree doctor!"

"Yes, a tree doctor. You see," Chuck explained, "it was rotting away and the doctor took out the rotten part and filled it with cement. See." Chuck pointed to a patch of cement on one of the main branches of the tree.

"Well," said Anecleto, pretending to have a stethoscope and listening to the heartbeat of the tree, "you're in top shape, tree."

"You're so funny!" Peggy laughed and giggled.

After playing about an hour under the tree, Mrs. Miller approached them and declared that it was time to wash up. The three filed into the house, washed their hands and sat at the kitchen table where Mrs. Miller served them each a sandwich and large glass of milk. Anecleto didn't care for milk, but he drank it anyway.

"Mom, we're going out to play in the patio."

"Chuck," Mrs. Miller said, very calmly, "you know better than that. It is rest time."

"Mom, can't we go outside?"

"No, it is rest time."

Anecleto followed Chuck and Peggy out of the kitchen and to one of the rooms upstairs. "Do you have to take a nap?"

"No," Chuck laughed, "we just have to play indoors, quietly for about an hour."

Chuck opened the closet and took out a monopoly set. "Wanna play monopoly?"

They were in the midst of the game in which Peggy seemed to have the advantage when Mrs. Miller entered the room with a tray. "It's snack time," she announced.

"I've brought you some pop and cookies." Mrs. Miller lowered the tray and placed it on the bed then gave each an orange soda and two cookies. "Have you been having fun?"

"Mom, tell Peggy she has to make some deals or it really isn't much fun."

"He's just saying that because I'm ahead." "No. Its just not fun unless you make trades and deals."

"If she doesn't want to make deals, she doesn't have to," Mrs. Miller said in her composed manner. "Maybe you should play something else now." Mrs. Miller picked up the tray and left. Anecleto was really impressed with Mrs. Miller's passivity.

They played and talked for an another hour when Mr. Miller entered the room.

"Kids," he said in a baritone voice, "it's time to put your things away and get ready. We'll be going horseback riding this afternoon."

"Great, can Cleeto come?"

"We didn't make arrangements for that," Mr. Miller said, "but, if it's okay with his parents, he can go fishing with us tomorrow morning. Would you like that?"

Anecleto went home absolutely elated. Not only had he been invited to go out with the Millers, they were so well organized. Everything was scheduled and planned. It was wash up time, lunch time, rest time, play time, put away things time, get ready time. It was fantastic. Everything was set with no chaos.

He got permission from his parents and went to bed almost immediately after supper, hoping that the night would pass more quickly that way. Anecleto was up by five and by seven, he was outside waiting for the Millers to emerge. At seven

thirty the Millers filed out of the house, all with white noses. Mr. Miller was dressed in a complete kakhi safari outfit including the jump boots, hat and a blue scarf. Mrs. Miller wore yellow slacks, a yellow blouse and a straw hat with a yellow band. Chuck also wore kakhi pants and shirt, but was wearing sneakers instead of boots while Peggy wore a yellow outfit that was almost like Mrs. Miller's. Anecleto's discomfort in being out of uniform was quickly dispelled by Chuck's and Peggy's excited welcome.

The fishing trip was a complete success. Mr. Miller was an expert fisherman and gave constant instruction on fishing techniques. Anecleto learned the proper way to bait the hook, the right weight for the line, the depth to fish, the best way to cast a line and a myriad of other fishing secrets. Anecleto had not realized how complex fishing could be. That they didn't catch anything did not daunt Anecleto's new found interest in this sport.

"Cleto," his father said at the dinner table at noon, "your mother and I are going to Los Ebanos this afternoon for a series of meetings and a political rally. We won't be back until late tonight. Do you want to come with us or do you want to stay with Tio Tavo and Fabiana?"

"I'll stay." Anecleto's father always gave choices. The political rallies were always exciting and fun, particularly when his father and mother were on the platform making speeches, but the meetings got boring especially in a small, hick town like Los Ebanos. Besides, the Millers were here!

It was late in the afternoon, the Millers were on their excursion and Anecleto languished in the living room. Tio Tavo entered the room with a pitcher of lemonade and two short glasses. He carefully placed the pitcher and glasses on the coffee table and starting pouring lemonade into one of the glasses.

"Would you like some lemonade?"

Anecleto, who was sitting on the floor, shook his head.

"Very well." Tio Tavo, who always wore a suit even in the summer, sat on the easy chair, removed a flask from his inside coat pocket and added some rum to his lemonade. "I've hardly seen you this trip." Tio Tavo paused and took a noisy breath that sounded like air rushing through a rusty pipe. Anecleto noticed that the white of his eyes were cream in color and rimmed in red.

"You're being very quiet; there must be a lot of things going through your mind." He paused and took another noisy breath. "You're a very intelligent boy, just like your mother and father." He took a sip of his drink and a breath. "You are also the luckiest boy in the county! Not only are your parents smart, they're educated and principled. Your father is the smartest, most educated man in this county and he is your personal teacher." Tio Tavo took another noisy breath and Anecleto was thinking of ways to escape.

"You're going through a difficult age," Tio Tavo continued. "And your parents are giving you a lot of freedom and that is always difficult because you have to make choices. Freedom means nothing if you have no options!"

It was a miracle! The lecture was interrupted by the chime of the doorbell and Anecleto quickly got up and opened the door. It was Chuck and Peggy! Anecleto quickly unlocked the screen door and opened the house to them. This was totally unexpected. Anecleto led them to living room then excused himself, promised to return shortly and ran upstairs to his room. He hadn't made any plans. Nothing had been scheduled and he didn't want them to get bored.

Anecleto looked around his room. There was the skeleton of a model airplane he hadn't finished, but that wasn't really interesting. He opened his closet and saw nothing of interest. In his dresser he found the cigar box with his money collection. It was not a complete collection nor did it follow any special scheme; it was just coins and paper money from both the United States and Mexico that had struck his fancy. His favorite was an old American dollar bill that was like the modern bill, only bigger. Yes, he would show them that. He picked up the box and ran downstairs.

When Anecleto returned to the living room he found that Alfredo had joined the group. The three, each with a glass of lemonade, were sitting on the floor listening to Tio Tavo. They were so immersed in the tale that they did not even notice that Anecleto had joined them.

"About a hundred years ago," Tio Tavo took a breath, "a woman, concerned that her beloved husband and son had not arrived, set out after dark to search for

them." He took another noisy breath. "During that long night, ranchers reported hearing the loud, agonizing cry of a woman, but they saw nothing.

"In the morning, when they found out that this family was missing, they organized a search party to look for them." Tio Tavo took a sip of his drink and another breath. "The first thing they found was the horse and it was dead. They didn't find anything wrong with the horse -- no wounds, no cuts, no bruises, it was just dead with the eyes open!"

"The eyes were open?" Peggy exclaimed.

"Yes." Tio Tavo nodded and widened his eyes. "They looked around and then they saw her. At first they didn't recognize her. She was standing under a tree on top of a hill. Her hair had turned white! And her eyes were wide open and unblinking." Tio Tavo paused and took a slow breath.

"Was she dead?" Chuck asked.

"No, but she never spoke again!"

"Well, what happened? What did she see?" Peggy was excited.

"No one knows. She took her secret to the grave." Tio Tavo paused and everyone waited in anticipation. He couldn't stop the story there! "Sometimes, when the moon is full, you can hear wailing in the woods that sounds like a woman crying. Waaaaoooooeee." Tio Tavo stretched out the cry and Peggy edged closer to her

brother. "Legend has it," he continued, "that it is this woman forever looking for her beloved husband and son.

"One night, when I was a young boy," Tio Tavo pointed at Chuck, "about your age. I was here, in this very house. We had come to visit and Anecleto, Cleto's grandfather, and I were sleeping in the screen porch over there." Tio Tavo pointed toward the back of the house. "When we were awoken by a wail that sounded like a woman crying."

"You heard it here?" Alfredo asked.

"Yes, we got up and listened carefully and again we heard it. Waaaaoooooooooeee. Anecleto put his pants on. 'I'm going to go and see,' he said." Tio Tavo took a deep breath. "I didn't want to go, but I wasn't going to stay behind."

"Why didn't you call your parents?" Chuck asked.

"I don't know. We should have, but we didn't. Now there are pastures, but then it was woods all the way to the river. There was a full moon and I could see small, white fluffy clouds go across the sky very fast." Tio Tavo paused for a moment.

"We walked through the woods for a while then stopped and listened. We heard it again and we were getting closer. We walked in the direction of the sound and we came to a clearing. We saw two trees on top of a small hill and we walked to it. From there we could see a long way." He took another deep, noisy breath. "We were there on top of the hill when suddenly we heard the cry right behind us. Waaaaoooooooooeee," Tio Tavo wailed very loudly and stood up.

Even Anacleto, who had heard the story before was startled. Peggy grabbed her brother's arm and Chuck tensed.

"We jumped and rolled off the hill." Tio Tavo sat down and took another breath.

"We stayed crouched over for what seemed an eternity, but didn't hear anything. Slowly, crawling on our belly, we climbed the hill. We got close to the edge at the top and Anacleto raised his head above the edge and looked around. 'I don't see anything,' he whispered, then stood erect. Just as I stood up, we heard the cry and we saw it!" He paused, more for effect than for breath.

"What did you see?" Peggy was excited and still grabbing her brother's arm.

"It was very simple, very natural." Tio Tavo's tone changed to a calm, expository form. "The branch of one tree was resting on a fork of the other tree and whenever the wind blew, the branches would rub against each other and emit a sound that sounded like a woman crying! This had been happening for so long that there was no bark where the branches rubbed. It was smooth."

"Then it wasn't a ghost!" Chuck said. "That was a neat story. Can you tell us another?"

"That was scary!" Peggy giggled.

Anacleto was proud of his uncle. Not only did the Millers like the story, they wanted to hear more stories.

"Yes, I have another story." Tio Tavo poured himself more lemonade and took the flask to add some rum when there was a loud knocking on the front door.

"Are Chuck and Peggy here?" he asked, very calmly.

"Yes, Mr. Miller." Anecleto smiled and invited Mr. Miller into the house.

"Kids," he said, then, when he saw Tio Tavo's flask, his voice became very stern.

"It's seven fifteen. It's time to go home."

"Cleeto's uncle just told us a neat story," Chuck said. Peggy was already standing by her father while Chuck was still getting up.

Tio Tavo stood up, smiled and said, "Hello,..."

"Hurry up, young man, we have to go." Mr. Miller, ignoring Tio Tavo, turned to Anecleto. "Are your parents here?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Miller's nose flared and then he turned and glared at Tio Tavo who simply smiled and nodded. "Children, we have to go!" Mr. Miller ushered his children rapidly out the door and the three walked quickly to their house.

Anecleto was not sure whether Mr. Miller was angry with his children or with Tio Tavo. Why would he be angry with Tio Tavo? Why did he ask if his parents were here?

Early the next afternoon, Anecleto knocked at the Miller's front door. Peggy partially opened the door.

"Hi." Anecleto smiled

"We can't play at your house anymore," Peggy said, almost whispering. "Dad says your uncle drinks too much and is a bad example."

"Yes, he is right," Anecleto said, still hoping to salvage the friendship.

"And Grandfather says that you are communists and that is the reason your father doesn't have a job." Peggy spoke rapidly and in a whisper.

"What?"

"Yes, he says your communists," Peggy continued. "And Chuck is grounded because he said your uncle was a nice man and he wants to go see him. Dad sent him to bed without supper and told him he had to stay there until he learned manners. And he said that your Mom and Dad were neat and..."

"Peggy," Mrs. Miller said, from the hall. "You are not supposed to be out there! Close the door!"

"We're not communists!" Anecleto yelled as the door closed.

Anecleto felt like a traitor. Chuck had defended his uncle and he hadn't.

To hell with them. If they don't want to come to him, he was not going to them!

Anecleto slipped into the dining room and quietly sat at the table where his mother and father were working. Both acknowledged him then continued their discussion on the merits of an article.

"Cleto," his father said, "your mother and I are going out tonight again. Do you wish to come or would rather stay?"

"I'll stay," Anecleto answered softly.

"What's the matter son. You're rather quiet. Do you have something on your mind?"

"Nothing." Anecleto took a deep breath. "Dad," he said in a normal voice, "are we communists?"

"If what I'm doing is being a communist, so be it."

That was not the answer Anecleto wanted. He just wanted a simple denial. He wanted a "yes" or a "no" and would have preferred a "yes" to having to figure out what his father meant.

"No!" his mother said. "No, Cleto, we are not communists and have never been communists. Some people have spread rumors saying that we are communists, but it's not true. We don't even know a communist."

The answer partially quelled the turmoil in Anecleto's mind. He left the table and went to his room to sort out the entangled emotions of anxiety and remorse. The ordeal exhausted him and he fell asleep.

Anecleto was awoken by the doorbell. He ran down the stairs and was surprised to see Mrs. Miller at the door. He opened the door and stepped outside.

"Hello, Cleeto," she said. "The children are very upset and they want to see you. Would like to have dinner with us?"

"We're not communists," Anecleto said, firmly.

"Of course not and that has been a total misunderstanding and we want to explain it to you. Peggy completely misunderstood what was said." Mrs. Miller smiled.

"Would like to come?"

"Yes!" Anecleto was content once more. All was forgiven. "You better ask your parents."

"They're not here. They won't be back until late tonight."

"Are you alone?"

"No, Tio Tavo and Fabiana are here."

"Oh, you poor dear." Mrs. Miller bent over and hugged Anecleto. This was the first time Anecleto had been called poor. He had been called smart, stubborn, surly and stupid, but never poor. However, the reservations that the word had evoked quickly evaporated and after telling Tio Tavo where he was going, Anecleto happily accompanied Mrs. Miller to their house.

Mrs. Miller and Anecleto were met at the door by an excited Chuck and Peggy and they conversed as if they had not seen each other in years. At exactly seven they were called for dinner and ushered into the formal dining room.

The long table was set for six. Mr. Miller and the elder Miller sat at either end of the table and Mrs. Miller sat next to her husband. There was a small conflict between Chuck and Peggy as to who was going to sit next to Anecleto. The argument was settled by Mr. Miller who firmly commanded Peggy to sit next to her mother. Peggy pouted, but desisted and took the designated chair. Once everyone was settled, the elder Miller rang a small bell and the maid started to bring in the food.

"I hope you like roast beef, young man," Mr. Miller said, in a fine baritone voice.

Anecleto smiled and nodded.

"Things were said that have led to some misunderstandings," Mr. Miller continued, "and I want to clear them up. I was upset yesterday evening and it wasn't because Chuck and Peggy were late, I didn't like that your uncle was drinking in front of the children."

"He's not really my uncle," Anecleto said, weakly and almost immediately regretted having said it. He felt like a traitor and his stomach tightened.

"Be that as it may, we find that kind of behavior offensive. I also didn't like that your parents were not there. That is why we have forbidden our children from going over there."

Anecleto felt a knot forming in his throat.

"We're not blaming you," Mrs. Miller chimed.

"No, of course not," Mr. Miller said, "and you are welcome to come anytime. We just don't think there is proper supervision over there." Chuck chuckled and Peggy giggled and Anecleto was not sure why.

"We just have different values." Mrs. Miller smiled. "You are much more mature than our children and they need a lot more supervision."

Anecleto glanced at Chuck and Peggy and wondered why they needed constant supervision. They looked normal. At last all the food had been brought to the table. It had been only a few minutes, but it had seemed an eternity to Anecleto. Mr. Miller led the prayer and besides asking the Lord to bless the food, he asked for better understanding. Mr. Miller sliced the roast beef and served everyone. With that chore done, he sat down and everyone started passing the side dishes.

Anecleto served himself very little. He was not hungry and was trying to figure out what was so offensive about Tio Tavo. He did drink, but he was never violent, vulgar or profane. And he was never rude. The most offensive thing he could think of was that, occasionally, he had bad breath.

"We are not communist," Anecleto said calmly. The statement even surprised Anecleto, who was consciously thinking about Tio Tavo.

"Of course not," Mrs. Miller immediately replied.

"Lad," the elder Miller, who was bald except for white hair on the temples, said, "your parents are good people, who feel that they are battling for a just cause. I'm the first to admit that we have social problems, but we must be patient and wait for the right time to reform. Many good people are unwittingly helping the communist and that is the bigger danger. We must stay united or we'll fall!"

"That is what is great about this country," Mr. Miller said, philosophically. "We can be different and disagree, but still work and live together!"

"Wouldn't the world be boring, if we were all the same!" Mrs. Miller added.

Anecleto looked in turn at Chuck, who was smiling broadly, then at Peggy who was giggling. Were totally unaware of what had been said? The knot in his throat grew to the point that he could hardly swallow. He didn't belong here. Without eating, without having communion, Anecleto stood up.

"Excuse me," he said softly and slowly, making sure that his voice didn't break up.

"I don't feel well. I'm going home."

Anecleto let himself out and walked slowly along the sidewalk tracing the seam of the brick wall with his finger and dislodging the powdery mortar. He walked

about twenty feet, then stopped, turned around and kicked the brick wall. He kicked it hard then hobbled home.

He never returned and they never came over.