

“RACE. THE COLOUR OF SHAME”

“Ms MacLean’s debut novel illuminates the difficulty of racial identity and the chaos it can create. The narrative deftly investigates racism beyond simple black and white figures. This astutely delicate dramatisation of race relations dotted with ghosts, sex scenes and rambling in New Orleans and abroad can be thrilling. The story provides a worthwhile glimpse at how startling the answers to questions of heredity can be.”

Kirkus review

“With a fluid and truly elegant style, and the controversial subjects of race as well as reincarnation, the talented Marie-Madeleine MacLean has brilliantly created a sinfully entertaining novel with the full force of intelligence behind a frightening drama. This is indeed a brilliant debut novel and certainly an instant classic...”

Literary and creative Artists

“Race” is a thrilling, thought-provoking and highly imaginative novel which succeeds at feeling original due to its heady mixture of reincarnation, ghosts, family secrets, violence and sensuality, in the disparate worlds of London and New Orleans. Even more impressive is that all these elements unite into a coherent whole, anchored by deep themes and a set of colorful, compelling characters. Combining Christian angels with Voodoo Gods, makes for an interesting and truly original supernatural cocktail which helps recast familiar Christian iconography in a fresh way, that makes readers look and think about the world in a different way”

Hollywood Coverage

“This exceptional debut novel brilliantly defines the unique style, exceptional descriptions and the superb punctuation of its undeniably stylish French author. Crisp, thought-provoking, as well as richly detailed with a undeniable designer’s eye, the seemingly aloof Marie-Madeleine MacLean has certainly achieved a brilliant and absolutely seductive novel; certainly as brilliant as its stylish and beautiful author.”

Jacques Bruyas. Author

“Race is a truly surprising, inspiring and engrossing story by which the reader will see his horizon of thoughts certainly enlarged, and will realised that his heart is capable of beating for all human beings; irrespective of skin’s color and race. Simply luminous.”

Brenda Lee Eager. International award winning singer, songwriter

“The truly gifted Marie-Madeleine MacLean is indeed a sheer literary revelation with this fascinating, original and sometimes deeply frightening debut novel, which has been written with great clarity, sincere conviction and an undeniable French charm. ‘Race. The colour of shame’ is not only an exceptionally brilliant story; but also a truly meaningful thriller. A ‘literarity’ which can truly be called inspired...”

Diana Rose Hartman. Author.

RACE. THE COLOUR OF SHAME

by

Marie-Madeleine MacLean



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To the great spirit and soul of the following...

The late civil rights activist, Reverend Martin Luther King, for his supreme dedication to end racial discrimination in the United States of America; and for the matchless eloquence of his exceptional “I Have A Dream” speech, which put to shame the advocates of segregation and argued that racial justice and equality is in accord with God’s will, and continues to inspire the conscience of America today...

The exceptional and talented Ms. Oprah Winfrey, whose media presence has not only raised public awareness of the immense human suffering caused by racial prejudice and social inequality; but whose empathy and grace reminds us all to look beyond the superficial and strive for empathy. Ms. Winfrey is also the living proof that greatness doesn’t come from a specific gender, genes nor race; and even less by one’s family entitlements. Her strength and natural generosity has inspired my constant respect and sincere admiration.

My late father-in-law, the extremely talented best selling Scottish novelist Alistair Maclean; for his advice and generosity. I can still sense your shadow...

My first literary agent, the late Mr. Jay S. Garon, formerly with “Pinder Lane & Garon Brooke”, New York, NY. I truly thank him for his priceless advice and counsel, and for the most invaluable advice “to always stick to my guns and to listen first to my inner voice; instead of the confusing advice of others who would have preferred I do formula books...”

And finally, a huge thank you from the bottom of my heart to the Almighty, as well as my incredibly efficient ‘Guardian Angel’,

for having protected me against myself during my ‘sweet journey through hell’, while I was suffering the terrible loss of my loving sisters, Jacqueline-Edwige and Monica, their children Stephane and Paola, as well as my adorable brother Jean-Pierre.

In addition, shortly prior, I had the painful loss of three of my best friends; the sweet and beautiful Josée, Evelyne and Kookie; all of whom died of cancer...

I also thank the Lord again for giving me the strength during the last two years to cope, on a daily basis, with the painful mental decline of my beloved mother, the beautiful, sweet and generous Yvonne-Marguerite, who recently passed away with Alzheimer’s. She was pure, constant undiluted love, and her nurturing strength and faith made me who I am... I miss you terribly, maman.

May God bless their loving souls...
Amen.



**“We all live on the same planet;
but not in the same world...”**



Prologue

“New Orleans. Louisiana”

La Rêveuse

A fluffy whitish thing, soft as a cloud slowly hovered above the new-born’s face...

The infant wanted to reach out and grab it, but something sinister in the metallic blue eyes of the man who held the pillow seemed to paralyse her. The tiny baby girl exhibited neither terror nor tears; instead, she mimicked the expression of her killer, as if she was little more than a mirror, as if she hadn’t lived long enough to cultivate a will of her own. Yet, if the man had looked a little bit closer, had cared to gaze beyond the infant’s fleshly eyes and into the window of her soul, he would’ve seen the discouragement; sensed the rage that waited behind that silent mask of resignation...

After all, the soul had barely begun to remember itself. It had breathed the stale air of the palatial birthing room of the Hoxworth Castle for less than an hour, and already knew that it would not be

allowed to fulfil its destiny. Not at this time; not in this particular body...

When the little head of the infant crowned between her mother's legs, the soul felt blessed that it had been given another chance to live. Attentively, it registered each utterance that echoed throughout the room. Several people had gathered around the princely bed, nervously awaiting the new Hoxworth heir, and they'd softly cooed, whispering their warm welcomes.

The soul had felt its tiny lips curve into a natural smile, as the blue-eyed doctor carefully wiped away the blood that smeared her little face and carefully proceeded to inspect her skin. Counting each finger and toe, his trained eyes had lingered on the soft flesh of her belly, perhaps a bit too cautiously...

"A perfectly proportioned baby girl," the family doctor proudly announced, handing the infant to her mother. "You must be thrilled, my dear!"

The young mother had breathed a sigh of relief. "She is more beautiful than the summer sunrise... I will call her Angelica Aurora Maria," she announced, beaming.

Her husband proudly smiled, accepting the congratulations from the family and the elite members of the household staff; but his mother, Theresa, did not stop staring at the infant, scrutinising her, as if searching for a defect.

"Look! Her skin is darkening!" The matron snarled a moment later, snatching the baby from her mother's arms before handing it to the doctor.

Seconds later, a deadly silence slid over the room, like a cold shadow...

“She is not white!” The elderly woman’s words crackled with disgust; then she shrugged her shoulders, shucking off any responsibility for events that would inevitably follow.

“Joy and celebration” had given way to fear; voices had become high-pitched and accusatory. The soul prayed for a compassionate servant, like the young black maidservant who stood in the corner, weeping as she wrung out the bloodied cloth the doctor had used to clean the baby.

In a blink of an eye and without a single word, like so many times before, the death sentence had been pronounced...

“How can it be?” Reginald Hoxworth, the father lamented, as he nervously watched the infant’s skin slowly losing its pinkish cast and becoming more alike to a “café au lait”. His expressive grey eyes darted anxiously from his new-born daughter to his young beautiful wife, not knowing who to blame, before he mouthed silent curses to both God and the devil, casting a particularly wrathful stare at the handsome black butler, the brother of the young maid servant who wept.

“This is hardly unusual,” the family doctor said, in a matter-of-fact way. “After all, sir, such a misfortune was not completely unexpected...” He added while lowering his eyes.

“Take it away!” The matron ordered with great disgust, dismissing the baby with a wave of her bejewelled hand. “And give my daughter-in-law something to calm her nerves. She’s hysterical,

can't you see?" Disdainfully, she shot a wicked glance towards the baby's mother, who'd curled up in the foetal position, her body shaking convulsively, her grief settling into her heart like a viper.

Fervently, the soul prayed...

The grandmother's demands were executed without further discussion.

The doctor motioned for one of the oldest black maids to remove the mulatto infant from sight, before swiftly injecting a previously prepared hypodermic needle into the ivory flesh of the now screaming mother.

"No! Please, I beg you, Theresa," the mother pleaded. "Don't do it! Have mercy on my child! We could give her away... Nobody needs to know! Have mercy, please; please Theresa!"

The eyes of the birthing party sunk to the floor...

They all knew too well what had to be done, and despite the desperate moans of the broken-hearted mother, they all silently told themselves that it was for the best...

If such a thing had happened in Paris, Rome, or even New York, it would have been different; but this was New Orleans in the South and, more importantly, these were the Hoxworths.

One mulatto infant was enough to bring down the entire house of cards and force the matron and her son to forever abdicate their positions as the undisputed "King and Queen" of New Orleans' high society.

No! That wayward colour gene - the same one that had found its way into the Hoxworth dynasty one drunken night and many

generations ago - must be cast out, with little thought to the soul which had tried, again and again, to be born and speak its truth.

One day I will live, the soul promised itself, as its assassin lowered the white lace pillow, while the young black maid made the sign of the cross, her eyes wide and terrified, but unable to look away.

The doctor's face was grim as he firmly pushed the pillow down.

“What a pity. Despite the tone of her skin, she would've been a beauty,” he sadly remarked.

The mulatto infant didn't struggle; the soul was too proud...

It was only a moment before the baby surrendered to the darkness and became still as a doll; then the soul rushed back to whence it came, but the pain of being discarded like the contents of a full chamber pot would follow it into its next incarnation, like a spectral tail of a comet. The sour memory of betrayal and abandonment had latched onto its core, as a reminder that it would not find peace, nor restore its innocence, until its murder was revenged.

Wandering through the ethers between death and life again, the soul would wait for the opportunity to return to the earthly world; but the soul was patient by nature, as time was merely a human construct, and knew that one day it would take its revenge. Soon enough, the soul would be reborn again...

Amen.



Chapter One

“New Orleans”

Present Day

It was barely eight in the morning and the air was already stifling...

André Boivin, a gentle man with a broken heart, folded the pale blue blanket that covered his wife’s frail body and carefully smoothed the white cotton sheet around her; then he lovingly caressed the familiar creases of her wrinkled face, before placing a soft kiss on her forehead. Futilely, he prayed that her voice would fill their home with life like it did before she fell ill; but he knew that it was only a question of days before Josephine would take her place in the small cemetery, alongside five generations of her kin...

Holding her bony hand, André lingered, wishing for the impossible. If only God would grant his beloved Josephine one more month, they could celebrate their Golden Wedding Anniversary; but it was a month that could as well be an eternity...

Since the day that André fell in love with Josephine, he'd selfishly prayed that he would die first. Not because he feared sorrow, but because he feared going insane with grief, and also because he feared for his beloved daughter; Angela...

André couldn't understand his wife's stubbornness, and no matter how hard he often tried to convince her to change her mind, Josephine remained adamant in her decision that before she died, Angela would be told the terrible truth.

Thirty-two years ago, Josephine had given "Madame" her word; but now she refused to enter the world of the dead with a broken promise tainting her soul.

Age had made Josephine terribly superstitious, and she'd told André that she'd be cast into the fire of hell if her soul didn't come clean before the Lord.

André shivered when he imagined how his youngest daughter would react when she found out that her life was built on a lie...

Given Angela's love of justice, she would no doubt confront the remaining players in the tragic family saga and fight to uproot the motives behind the repeated atrocities committed in the name of "honour".

Yes, my golden child would fight, André sadly thought.

It was that upcoming battle, and the inevitable repercussions it would have on their family, which caused his bones to ache.

André raised his tired eyes to the ceiling, questioning the mind of the Almighty. Shaking his head in dismay, he crossed

himself. If he were to accomplish the task at hand, he would need to ignore his worries about the future and simply focus on the present.

He parted the faded rose-printed chintz draperies, before summoning all his remaining strength, so that he could push the heavy paned windows open.

The outermost branch of an ancient magnolia tree sprang gracefully into the room, as if it had been waiting for the last chance to offer sweet Josephine a fragrant pink blossom. André hoped its sweet scent would bring her solace from the pain. More than once, he had caught his wife whispering to that tree with a beatific smile brightening her face. She told him often that the old magnolia tree was the guardian of their secret; more likely, it helped to carry the burden of her lie, a verdant confessor that helped to alleviate the shame that crawled into her belly, whenever she'd slid over Angela's questions...

"Why must we tell her?" André asked his sleeping wife. How could Josephine - how could he? - admit something that they didn't even dare to whisper about in the dark because they were too afraid that their beloved golden child would hear them through the thin walls? But André knew there was no use in arguing the issue any further, because Josephine was a headstrong woman and she wasn't going to turn into a mouse just because she was dying.

He tiredly closed the bedroom door and silently made his way down the old wooden stairs. They seemed to creak and moan with more complaint than usual; or perhaps the house was too quiet, already in mourning...

As André picked up the phone in the living room, the furrows on his brow suddenly deepened.

How do you tell your child that her mother is dying?

How do you keep your voice from trembling?

How do you tell your child to hurry home in time to give her mother a final embrace, knowing that she will find out that everything she believed in was, in fact, based on a lie?

Angela would not be able to bear Josephine's death, let alone face the terrible battles that lie ahead of her.

Even the width of the Atlantic Ocean wouldn't suffice to hide André's own weaknesses, his guilt and his shame; and yet, it had to be done.

After all, it was Josephine's dying wish...

Finally, with trembling fingers, André succeeded in ignoring the conflicting voices in his head and tiredly dialled the number. Across the pond, a woman with a decisively British accent picked up:

"Hello. This is the Royal Ballet School. How might I help you?"

"This is Mister Boivin speakin'. I'm Angela Boivin's father. Can I please talk to my daughter, ma'am?" He struggled to keep his voice from faltering.

"Well, I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Boivin is in rehearsal at the moment. Might I take a message for her?"

"No. This can't wait no longer, not a moment. You see... her Mama's dyin'," André said, almost apologetically.

“Oh, Blessed Mary,” the woman whispered, her cheery English reserve giving way to panic. “Of course, I’ll fetch her immediately! Don’t go anywhere, sir, please.” She put him on hold and the music of Schubert floated sombrely through the airwaves.

“Thank you, ma’am,” André sadly said, feeling his throat tightening. Although he had rehearsed a speech, now he couldn’t remember a word of it; instead, a parade of images marched through his mind...

It had been five years since he’d seen his golden child. Angela had come home to introduce her husband, a handsome and wealthy well-bred English attorney. He and Josephine were very happy that their youngest daughter had found love, but her siblings had had a more difficult time accepting her choice of a husband. The three of them acted as if Angela had committed high treason, but as usual, Josephine kept calm, trying her best to keep peace in the family.

Angela was always a good girl and a clever one, André told himself, smiling as he remembered her twirling under the shade of that old magnolia tree.

By the time Angela was six, she had already set her sight on the heavens.

“I’m going to be a ballerina, daddy-pie,” she proudly told him, with more assurance and determination than any of her siblings. From that day forward, André never doubted that his adorable “little poodle,” as he affectionately called her, would be a star.

Angela exceeded in everything she set her mind to, even catching the eye of the haughty Miss Lili Wing, a former prima

ballerina who had an uncanny ability to sight and mentor future stars. Miss Wing had obtained a grant for Angela that allowed her to study at the Classical Dance Academy in the city, and soon afterwards had convinced her parents to send her to London, where she would rapidly blossom under the tutelage of the famed “Elyse Veloso”, at the Royal Ballet School.

In less than a decade, the beautiful Angela Boivin became one of the brightest stars to light up the international ballet scene; yet, she never forgot her common roots, or the harsh reality of the poverty from which she came.

From the day Angela began earning a decent salary, she gratefully sent her family as much money as she could; and within a couple of years, she had paid off the mortgage of their New Orleans home, enabling her father to quit his job at the slaughterhouse, where for over forty years, he had inhaled the foul stench of death...

The memory of standing amidst a room of bloody sow carcasses catapulted André back into the present. He was about to hang up when Angela’s lovely voice broke the silence.

“Hello, Daddy. What is it?”

For a few moments, they silently listened to the rhythm of each other’s breath. Angela was too afraid to ask what was wrong, and André didn’t want to break the sad news.

“Is it Mama?” She finally asked. “It is Mama, isn’t it? Is she...?”

“Your Mama is... No, poodle, she’s not well-,” André said with a broken voice, holding back his tears.

Angela suddenly felt a sharp pain in her abdomen, as if an invisible hand seemed to claw her intestines. Deep down, she already knew what her father was going to say. Her dreams of late had been more foreboding than usual. The strange steel blue eyes and the motionless angels floated in and out of her dreams, but the shadows were becoming more pronounced, much more frightening than before. She often awoke drenched in sweat, unable to breathe, grasping for air, choking as if the white downy wings of the angels were suffocating her in her dreams.

By the time her father finally mustered up the courage to explain, Angela didn't want to hear the bad news anymore.

"It's her heart, honey... You know your Mama, always working hard and giving all she had to everyone, but her own self." André was mumbling, his own sorrow paralysing his tongue.

"But can't you find a better doctor? I'll pay any price, daddy, you know that! It's way too soon!" She almost shouted.

"I know, Poodle, I know... But there's nothing that can be fixed anymore. It's your Mama's time, that's all; it comes to all of us..." He sadly said, refraining from crying.

"Not Mama, not Mama!" Angela cried. "Not now!"

"It's gonna be alright, honey... Your Mama is ready. And she's sufferin' too much for the life to stay in her."

Angela angrily wiped away her tears. "It's not fair! How long until...?" She slowly began, feeling revolted.

"Just a few days... A week at best," André almost whispered, guiltily wishing that he'd called his daughter sooner; but he had

hoped that the stubborn Josephine would reconsider telling her about old “madam Elisabeth”...

“I’m... I’m really sorry, Poodle,” he finally said, before he broke down and wept.

Hearing her father sob took Angela by surprise. She had never heard him crying before. Now it was her turn to be strong.

“Yes daddy... I understand,” she said sadly. “I’ll catch the next flight... Tell Mama that I’ll be home soon... I love you, daddy-pie; and please, please, don’t cry.”



Chapter Two

“London”

England

Angela hung up the phone and clutched the desk, futilely trying to keep herself from spiralling downwards into a vortex of despair...

Feeling the burning tears, Angela closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her shoulders, and then she slowly began to rock back and forth, pretending that she was in her mother’s loving arms. Suddenly, the melody of an old lullaby that had soothed her when she was a child and when the summer sky was full of lightning and the air crackled with thunders began to play in her mind:

*Don't be afraid, my golden child,
Don't be afraid of wind nor thunder light.
Don't be afraid, my golden child,
Mama is here and all is right.
Hush, hush, sleep now, and close your eyes,*

Don't be afraid of night

Close your eyes, my golden child.

As long as Mama is here, then all will be right...

But now Mama will be gone and nothing will be right anymore, Angela sadly thought, rocking more rapidly, before briskly shaking her head, to force herself back to sanity. *Mama's still alive and it is not the time to give in to grief; not yet anyway...*

Angela called home and asked her chambermaid to pack a suitcase for the trip to New Orleans before phoning her husband.

“Law Firm of Haddington and Haddington. Mr. Pierce Haddington’s office. This is Mrs. Dobson speaking. How may I help you?”

Angela hesitated. “Hello Mrs. Dobson. May I speak to my husband, please?”

“Oh, hello Mrs. Haddington. What a lovely surprise,” the receptionist softly said. “I wanted to thank you for the tickets to the ballet... You were absolutely divine, but I must say that your new partner wowed me. Who is that gorgeous Russian blond? My husband was a wee bit jealous, I think. He...”

“I’m truly sorry Mrs. Dobson, but I need to speak to my husband now. It’s quite urgent.”

“Oh, I apologise for going on and on,” the receptionist said, taken somewhat aback by Angela’s strange tone of voice. “It’s not often that I get a chance to speak with you. Your husband is in conference at the moment, but he shouldn’t be more than half an hour.

You could leave a message perhaps. He's with some rather upscale clients - petrodollars, you know..." She said, lowering her voice.

"That won't do. It's imperative I speak with him now. My mother is dying, and I'll be catching the next plane to Louisiana, where my family lives."

"Oh my Jesus! In that case, I'll fetch him... I'm so sorry," Mrs. Dobson nervously said. As she rose from her chair, she noticed the dark blond well-mannered elegant woman in her mid-sixties approaching her desk, her pencil-thin eyebrows raised with obvious interest; she'd obviously been eavesdropping...

"Is that my sister-in-law on the line?" The woman asked, an insecure smile brightening her alabaster powdered face.

"No, Mrs. Haddington. It's your nephew's wife, Angela. She needs to speak to him."

Gail Haddington's superficial smile fell from her face like a brick and was rapidly replaced with an expression of undiluted contempt.

"Oh, I see... Doesn't she understand that we don't interrupt important meetings each time we need to whine about our aching Prima Donna feet?" As if she were marking her territory, Gail Haddington firmly placed her terribly expensive Hermès 'Kelly' brown crocodile handbag on the secretary's desk.

Mrs. Dobson's heart raced as she stood up for Angela. "But she rarely - if ever - phones the office, Madam. This is an emergency!"

“Well... let me be the judge of that, Margaret, will you? What’s exactly the problem?” Gail dryly asked, swiftly moving her waffle thin body to the left, blocking the secretary’s way.

Mrs. Dobson firmly placed her hands on her waist. “For God’s sake, Mrs. Haddington, her mother is dying! Now let me pass, would you please?” She demanded, fully aware that speaking in such a manner to the highly irritable Gail Haddington could cost her the job.

A slick smile crept over Gail’s face as she nervously toyed with the large triple strand of priceless ‘Mikimoto’ white south sea pearls that hung around her slender neck.

“Well, I just can’t imagine my nephew mingling with those people again,” she finally said before raising her eyes. Gail could feel her facial muscles straining to frown and was extremely glad that she’d taken her dermatologist’s advice to receive some Botox injections last week...

“Well then, I suppose that this little funeral will be quite a folkloric event, if nothing else...” She dryly added, grabbing her expensive handbag and gingerly stepping out of the way. “What are you waiting for? Go... go!” She dismissively waved her taupe-gloved hand. “And while you’re in there, Margaret, tell my husband not to keep me waiting much longer; and also, my dear, bring me a cup of Earl Grey with lemon, as well as some of those delicious watercress and salmon sandwiches... I’ll be in the salon.”

Mrs. Dobson shrugged. It wasn’t her job to cater to the culinary desires of the insufferable Gail Haddington, but knowing how bitchy the woman could get, the secretary decided to do as she

was told. After all, Pierce Haddington was a kind employer, and jobs were hard to get lately. *But first things first*, she told herself, as she walked passing in front of the senior Mrs. Haddington. She softly knocked on the double mahogany doors of the conference room. A moment later, Pierce picked up the line, his voice worried.

“Darling, what’s wrong?”

“My father just phoned. My mother is dying...” Pain coursed through Angela’s body as she painfully spoke the words again.

“Oh, good grief! I can’t tell you how sorry I am. Well, give me two hours to pack. And don’t worry, darling. I’ll take care of everything!”

Angela’s mind flooded with a familiar embarrassment. “No, my darling, please... It’s not necessary, but thanks for the thought. I prefer to go alone... You’ll be out of place there, you know that,” she softly said, feeling sorry for him.

“But darling, that would be highly unethical and just plain rude!” He firmly protested.

“Please, try to understand. My mother is so ill that she won’t notice your absence anyway...”

“But the rest of your family will,” he insisted.

“Please, Pierce... It’s better this way. They’ve already made up their minds about you.” She sadly said, feeling ashamed.

“All right, all right then.” His tone was a mixture of reluctance, anger and resignation. “At least, let me take care of the expenses. Tell your father to choose only the best of everything.”

“Thank you, my darling. I truly appreciate the gesture. I need to go now. I’m on standby for the next flight. Pray that I get a seat.”

“Absolutely not! The firm’s travel agency can accommodate you, and my father’s chauffeur will meet you at the house in an hour to take you to the airport. Is there anything else you need, my love?”

“No. Thank you, darling. You’re a lifesaver! I love you; I really do...” Angela lovingly whispered, her eyes filling with tears again. Suddenly, the old lullaby started to play in her head again.

Don’t be afraid, my golden child. As long as Mama is here, then all will be right...

“No, nothing will be right again without Mama in my life; nothing...” Angela sadly thought, crying.



Chapter Three

As soon as Angela hung up the phone, she heard the choreographer’s voice wafting through the hallway...

“What is going on, Angela?” Veronika cooed, practically flying towards her. Veronika Valiskaia was still as light on her feet as she was when she danced for the world famous “Bolshoi” in her youth; but her Russian accent, although diffused by the years living in England, was still quite audible. Her doll-like lavender eyes darted back and forth as she spoke.

“For God’s sake, my dear, we’ve been waiting for you over ten frigging minutes, and it won’t be much longer before Boris loses his patience! I certainly don’t want to put up with another one of his moody tantrums. So, Angela, would you please hurry back so we can finish rehearsing this last scene and call it a day? My feet are killing me... Chop, chop! Let’s get on with the show!” She spun on her heel, her movement just harsh enough to show her irritation.

“I’m dreadfully sorry, Veronika, but I’m done for the day. My mother is dying. I’ve to fly to New Orleans immediately.”

The choreographer performed a graceful half pirouette, turning to face Angela again. This time her expression was stern and fraught with worry...

“When? Now? New Orleans? Today? But we have work to do! Can’t it be postponed?” Her tone was shrill and staccato, and she flitted about like a hummingbird; an annoying hummingbird...

Angela put her hands to her ears in irritation. “No, it can’t! My father said it is only days until...”

“How awful, chérie, but still? How will we manage here? My poor Boris won’t like this a bit, not a bit!” She nervously said, hyperventilating. “And there are fittings scheduled and even photos haven’t been taken for the press release yet. The tour’s less than a month away! Dear God, please! Don’t tell me that...” The pupils of her eyes dilated with fear. “But you will make the opening in Monte Carlo?” She asked nervously. “Angela, no matter what happens, you must think like the magnificent artist you are! You have an obligation to your public, my child, an obligation to your art! The dance must go on. The...”

“Please, pleeease Veronika. Spare me! This is not a scene from a play. My mother is dying, do you hear me? Dying!!!” Angela exclaimed before she snapped her fingers in front of the choreographer’s eyes. “Where is your heart? How would you feel if your mother was dying?”

“Well, she died when I was five, so I don’t remember much,” Veronika candidly answered.

“It’s not a wonder,” Angela sadly replied, turning to leave.

The choreographer followed her down the hallway, prancing after her as nervously as a Chihuahua on speed.

“Angela, my dear, please! Let me handle this. At least allow me to tell Boris that you’re leaving. I know how to calm him down.”

“You might’ve had the heart to calm me down, Veronika... A simple ‘I’m sorry’ would’ve been nice!” Angela snapped. “But you do what you want,” she coolly added. “And make sure to tell your dear Boris that I apologise for the “inconvenience” that my mother’s death is causing him today.” She icily said before turning around.

“Of course my dear... Yes, I’ll do just that,” the choreographer sweetly answered, ignoring the sarcasm. “I know exactly what I’ll tell him. Boris is such a sensitive man... But just promise to be back in time for the opening in Monte Carlo, “ma chérie”. Please, please!” She begged, now looking really sad...

Without another word, Angela firmly closed the door of her dressing room.

As she changed into her street clothes, she heard Boris shouting in his Russian tongue, while Veronika futilely attempted to placate him. Then she heard a hard thud against her door. Angrily, she opened it and realised that the enraged six-foot-three blond had thrown his ballet shoes and was now pacing up and down the hallway like a spoiled child. Veronika was scurrying about him, trying her best to calm him down.

If the scene were not so appalling, it would be comical...

When Boris saw Angela, he thrust out his muscular chest. “So, Lady, how long must I wait for your return? When will your

mother die?” He almost shouted with his thick Russian accent, as hard as gravel.

“I refuse to answer that!” Angela exclaimed, groping in her bag for her car keys.

“You’d better start thinking about it now! No matter how good you are, my dear Angela, you are not near to being prepared. Be warned! I will not be known as an object of ridicule on account of your failure! I am “Boris Parchenko”, and no one ridicules me! You understand? No one! You must understand that!” Boris finally shouted, visibly beside himself.

“My dear Boris, if you’re the subject of any ridicule, it certainly won’t be on my behalf... Now, if you please excuse me, I have a plane to catch!”

In her rush, Angela had forgotten to latch her burgundy ‘Escada’ shoulder bag, and her wallet fell to the wooden floor. The photo holder had slipped out and lay wide open for all eyes to see...

“Your wallet!” Veronika hollered, picking it up before suspiciously eyeing the photographs. Angela sharply turned around; but before she could snatch her belongings from Veronika’s hands, she saw the all-too-familiar expression of surprise...

“But... but who are these... these people?” Boris peered over the choreographer’s shoulders. A mixture of confusion and disgust appeared upon his face, and he vainly tried to stifle a laugh.

“That is my family,” Angela calmly answered, gracefully stooping down to pick up her wallet.

“Really?” Veronika said, visibly surprised. Her powdered face flushed the exact colour of the Cosmopolitan cocktails she often drank. “Your family? You don’t say?” Her voice twittered with uneasiness.

“Yes Veronika, this is my family. This is my mother, Josephine; and this is my father, André,” Angela finally said, nervously pointing them out. “And if you wish, you can flip the pocket and gawk at my sisters, Blanche and Aimée... As for this handsome fellow, he’s my brother, John.” She said again while looking straight into her eyes.

The choreographer traded knowing glances with Boris, making sure that he could get a good look at the family’s photos, before handing them to Angela.

“So, Veronika, what did you expect, Aryans?” Angela defiantly asked, as she reinserted the photo cover into her wallet.

“Angela, chérie...” The choreographer slowly said lowering her eyes, visibly embarrassed... “We all knew you were of some sort of... exotic ancestry, but it never occurred to me that your family would be quite so, uh; quite so... un-exotic I suppose... They’re just... well, they’re just black!” She flatly said, still avoiding Angela’s eyes. “Certainly the press doesn’t know of your humble origins, otherwise someone would’ve taken pains to acknowledge you as a “black” dancer! Looking at you, my dear, I assumed you may have had some Latino or Middle Eastern blood; or perhaps even some Oriental influence,” Veronika painfully explained, looking somewhat puzzled and quite worried; even sorry...

Since Angela was a child, she had been studied and categorised as if she were a cell under a microscope, awaiting a label of identification. As far as she could remember she was always pointed at, separated, chastised and even often alienated. At the age of seven, she realised that she was a “hybrid”, as beautiful as a rare orchid perhaps; but a hybrid nonetheless...

“Sorry to deceive you, my dear Veronika,” Angela sweetly said with pronounced sarcasm. “However, that’s just what I am: “a mulatto”. And God as my witness, I’m quite proud of it!” She finally exclaimed with a smile.

Before the waiting tears could fall from her beautiful greenish eyes, Angela rushed down the hallway; but she wasn’t quick enough to save herself from the sting of Veronika’s stern warning to Boris...

“This is not good, my dear Boris; not good at all! She’s going to give you a hard time. I can feel it and I’m never wrong about these things... I know she is a great dancer, but you may be better off if you demand a more appropriate partner for the upcoming tour in Monte Carlo. And sweetheart, if it’s ridicule that you fear, you’ll have the intelligence to keep this chunk of gossip hush-hush. Promise me that, darling... Of all the surprising things I can’t believe Angela is a Negro...” Veronika added, joyfully clicking her tongue.

An angel passed and the devil smiled; again...