



The Bitter Nest #4 of 4: The Letter

1988

Acrylic on canvas

94.5 inches by 84.5 inches

(240.03 centimeters by 214.63 centimeters)

Though she never married, Celia had a child – which was not at all acceptable for unmarried women in those days. The dentist was heart-broken. “It ain’t decent to have a baby and no husband, Celia,” he told her. “What would folks say?” Cee Cee prepared a nursery on the second floor next to Celia’s room and decorated it with quilts and baby things made special in multi-colors pieced together in her inimitable style.

But the dentist put his foot down. There would be no baby in the house. And Celia would have to go away as soon as she started to show, and stay away until the baby was born. He arranged for one of his patients to adopt the baby. However, Mavis agreed, at Celia’s request, to take the baby and bring it up as her own with financial help from her family as long as she needed it. She didn’t care if people talked – they always talked about Mavis any way. And, after all, she felt responsible for Celia getting pregnant. She should have warned Celia that Victor was a married man with three children and that his mother had been dead for many years before Celia met him. He

had been lying to Celia. Everything he told her was a lie. He only wanted a conquest. To get Dr. Celia all the way to Paris just to go to bed with him. He had a bet on it. The Frenchman held the money. Victor won several hundred dollars from his crewmen on that bet. Victor was a merchant seaman. The Frenchman and Victor were chefs on the same ocean liner. But Mavis spared Celia the details of her Paris rendezvous. Better she should just believe, as she did, that he would one-day return to her and they would sail for Paris and take up where they had left off. True love would prevail.

Celia's baby was a boy. She named him after her father, Percel Trombone Lewis. Lewis was Mavis' last name. Mavis brought young Percel up to believe that she was his natural mother and that his father was a sailor who died at sea. Mavis and young Percel moved to Atlanta, Georgia. She had family there and, through Celia, she got a job as a doctor's receptionist. Young Percel grew up to be quite a fine young man in Atlanta, graduated from Atlanta University and went on to Meharry to study medicine. Later, he changed to dentistry.

As fate would have it, young Percel, while rummaging in the attic in Mavis' old trunks, came across a neatly tied bundle of letters all written many years before to a man named Victor.

July 2, 1934

Dear Victor,

Paris was wonderful. I cannot decide whether you are a scoundrel or an angel, but I love you. I want you more now than ever. You are the first man I have ever loved, other than my father. You do remind me of my father in many ways. You are tall and handsome and gentle and kind. And I love you as much as I love him.

In Paris they stared at us, we were so in love. Two Negroes in Paris, kissing on the banks of the River Seine. Remember they tried to take our picture? You got angry. How can I live without you?

Were you serious when you asked me to marry

you that first night in Paris? I don't mind waiting, my darling. But for how long? I want you more and more each day. All the best to your mother. I hope she is well.

Your love,
Celia

August 18, 1934

Dear Victor,

I am still waiting for you, my darling. Those beautiful weeks of love we shared in Paris fill me with joy. I have not heard from you since you left me that night in Paris. I do hope your mother is well. Please give her my best regards for a speedy recovery.

Please write to me soon. I have something very important to tell you, my darling. My love cannot wait much longer.

Your Love,
Celia

September 1, 1934

Dear Victor,

I must tell you, my darling; I am having your baby. If you still love me, as I know you do, please come to me. My father said you used me, but I know your sweet love was real. He is very disappointed in me. Please prove to him that you love me and that you were sincere when you asked me to marry you.

I have so much to offer you, much more than my love. I can help you with your law practice. Daddy just bought a house on Seventh Avenue. It is perfect for us. We can have our offices there and we can live there with our baby. Everything could be so perfect for us, my love.

If you still love me, please come to me and give your baby a name. Mavis assures me that you are

receiving these letters. Why don't you answer me, my love? Please write to me. How can you forget our sweet love in Paris? My love burns inside of me. Please put out my fire.

Your Love,
Celia

December 18, 1934

Dear Victor,

I fear that you have strayed from my love. Was it not enough to keep you warm? Where did I go wrong? I still love you so, my darling. I am so grief stricken to think you will never answer my letters, that I may never see you again and kiss your sweet lips as I did in Paris. I feel like such a fool. But I still love you. I will always love you. Please say that you love me too. I will understand if you explain why you have not written me. Is there another in your heart? How could you betray our love? Victor, I am a doctor. I don't believe that you would treat me like this. Please write me at least once, so that we can say goodbye.

I am having your child. Surely that must mean something to you. Please, darling, write to me. I love you so much.

Your Love,
Celia

March 22, 1935

Dear Victor,

Our baby boy was born today. He looks just like you. I love him very much, but I cannot keep him. It would destroy my father's reputation and bring disgrace on my family. Mavis is moving to Atlanta. She will bring up our baby as her own. I will never stop loving you or believing that you will one day be mine.

Your Love,

Celia

“Mavis! Mavis! Where are you?!?” screamed young Percel over the stair banister. “Get up here!” Mavis ran up the stairs to the attic. As soon as she entered the room, she knew what had happened. Why had she kept those letters all these years? What sense had it made to be a go-between to Celia and Victor? All she had to do was tell Celia about Victor years ago.

But Celia would never give him up, no matter what. She would go to her grave loving a faded memory of two weeks of love in a Paris flat. Victor didn't want to hear from Celia and if Mavis pressured him with those letters, he wouldn't want to hear from her either. And she needed Victor. After all, he was Percel's father. He should be allowed to see his son. But Celia was another matter. That was over. There was never anything any way. But Mavis wanted to hold on to both of them – Celia and Victor – and that was her way to do it. Now she had to face her son. What could she say to him?

Young Percel spoke first. “Celia is my mother? And Victor – the one who comes here to see you when he's in port, the merchant seaman – he's my father? And the dentist, Celia's father, is my grandfather? The old man who talked me into becoming a dentist?!” Mavis stood there with tears rolling down her cheeks, nodding “yes” to Percel's questions. “But Mavis, why did you do it this way – lies and deceit? Wouldn't it have been easier to just stay out of it?” he asked her. “No, I couldn't. I needed all of them. You know I have my problems, and Celia was always so condescending towards me. She always controlled me. Funny, she never took anything but she could always get it from her father's drug cabinet for me.” “And what about Victor? What did you really need him for?” “He was my boyfriend before Celia, but he was married and had three children. It was useless. He would never leave his wife. He came to see us because I told him you were his son.” “Why does Celia think he's a lawyer?” “He told her that. He went to law school but he could never get a job as a lawyer. He tried – you

know how hard it is for us colored people. He had to make a living, so he told Celia what she wanted to hear. Everybody felt threatened by Celia and her family. Only Cee Cee was bearable in that house. She was the only one who was real and she's nuts."

"What is it you're on, Mavis?" "It's morphine, a mild dose." "Does Victor bring it to you?" "No, he only brings me cocaine when he goes to Turkey or South America." "How much of this does Celia know?" "She doesn't know anything about Victor. She still loves him. She believes he'll come back to her one day." "And the dentist and Cee Cee? Do they know?" "Yes. The dentist went to see Victor when he found out Celia was pregnant and planning to have the baby, and threatened to kill him if he ever came near his daughter again. He also threatened his job on the ship. He has connections."

"So, what do we do now, Mavis? Whom do I call 'Mother'?" "You just leave everything as it is. They are all very proud of you – now that I have raised you and you are a dentist. You're like them. They want you now, but I don't want you to leave me. I am your mother. I have no one but you. Remember that."

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