

She was a paradox, a mystery. Not really silent, and yet it was as if she was not really there. Like a ghost that lingers.

### **Soleil...**

I was still in UST when I first saw her, sitting placidly underneath one of the big trees that dotted the campus. A paperback copy of *Great Poems* by Louis Untermeyer lay open on her lap, long tapered fingers idly playing with a thin gold necklace.

I did not know why I came up to her, she was a stranger to me. Perhaps because I owned the same book or maybe because of the way her eyes would travel distantly as she paused from time to time. As if the words were being savored with an unspoken passion.

"Hi!"

She looked up, startled at my presence, her eyes so dark that you could lose yourself in them.

"Hi!" I said again, softer this time, feeling sheepish and suddenly at a loss for words. "Uh, sorry to disturb you but, you see - I mean - I have the same book and I didn't expect to see a copy, uh, you know..."

Sudden laughter met my blundering efforts. The heat rapidly crept up to the roots of my hair and I wanted to die.

"I understood perfectly." She said with a grin, just as I wanted to run away.

Those charming lips pulled at me and it was with difficulty that I turned my attention to her next words.

"Not a lot of guys feel comfortable with poetry. I'm glad that you like them. Who's your favorite author?"

I did not have one. The book was a gift, my mother's mistaken initiative to help me learn about the finer things in life. Fortunately, I just came from my Literature class. "Lord Byron." I answered smoothly.

Her smile grew even wider and she invited me to sit beside her. Confident now of her acceptance, we began to talk like two old friends.

She told me that her name is Soleil (pronounced So-leyl). An unusually fancy name, which meant 'sun'. It came from French or Italian, I think. Wherever. It did not matter. What mattered was that was how we started to become the best of friends. In the end it was more than friends.

It has been what? Seven? Ten years now? I do not really remember. I suppose like that book of poems that lay underneath all the other books I possess, Soleil is a memory buried beneath my consciousness. Never entirely hidden. I remember her now sharply, while the radio played a song by Barbra Streisand, that remarkably lovely voice singing: '...the years will kindly show, how mem'ries come and go. They ever flow like the tide...'

"Really, Nick." She was saying exasperatedly. "Nobody's like Barbra."

I grunted, not really fond of the songstress. My own tastes ran along the lines of Rolling Stones. Snazzy artistes, as Soleil described Streisand, only served to depress me.

"You have no taste at all, Nicholas Barretto." She would say with a frown. I would only grin at her attempts to change me.

I wonder, would she be happier, if she knows that I now have a collection of tapes by Barbra Streisand. It seemed so important to her then.

Soleil - a contradiction of terms. Happy and sad. A bubble of energy and a mist of sadness. If someone had asked me if I'd do it all over again, given half the chance, I would have said yes in a heartbeat.

"Sooooooo, is it good or is it good?" I asked her with a satisfied grin after watching Casablanca at her home.

She did not answer but just stared at the ending credits in the screen. Something in her profile wiped away the smile on my face.

"Soleil- "

She started when I put a hand on her arm. And for the first time, her eyes yielded some of the ghosts that lingered to touch her at times. In a moment, her lips curved in that half-sad smile that I have come to know so well.

"Sorry." She said sheepishly. "Did you say something?"

"Are you all right?" I asked instead. "For a second there, you looked terrified-or something..."

"Don't be silly." She raised an eyebrow, a habit that irritated me.

I was flustered at the quick change. For a moment, her face held a haunted quality. It was not the kind of expression that you'd expect to have after watching Casablanca. Then this sudden switch back to the mischievous Soleil that I had grown to know so well.

"But-" I began, then decided I must have imagined it. "Oh, forget it."

She laughed. "Are we going senile here?"

"Am not." I glowered jokingly. Then in my best gangster voice, I said: "Don't be brash with me, young lady. If you know what's good for you."

She looked at me haughtily. "I don't think you could do it."

I frowned, and then grinned. A slow smile began to light up her face. Soon, we were laughing, exchanging silly inanities that meant nothing at all.

The next day, I woke up to a knock on my bedroom. Still groggily half-asleep, I stumbled out of bed to let my mother in at 6:15 in the morning.

"Mom..." I groaned. "It's a Saturday, remember?"

"I just received a call from someone who said she's Soleil's aunt." She said without preamble. "Your friend's in Makati Medical. It seems she took a lot more than her prescribed medication dosage."

I remembered uttering a smothered "Oh, my God." suddenly awake. I did not even bother to answer the questions in my mother's eyes and dressed quickly. What could I say to her? That save for that second of mixed anger and fear in her eyes yesterday, I have absolutely no clue at all on what the hell is going on.

I found Mrs. Angeles outside the ICU doors, trying to staunch the overflowing tears. After driving through the legendary traffic of Makati, something in me suddenly did not want to go near her. But, of course, I did.

"Mrs. Angeles?"

A strained face looked up at me.

"Hello, Nick." she said, roughly wiping her cheeks with a sodden tissue.

I sat beside her, at a loss on what to do. Clumsily, I reached into my pants and handed a handkerchief to her. She gave me a watery smile and took it gratefully.

"Thank you." She whispered hoarsely.

"Uh, what happened, ma'am?"

I thought she would start crying again but she just dabbed at her eyes. "She was very quiet last night and I think I must have felt uneasy. When I asked her about it, she said she's just tired and would turn in early. Sleep it off, she said."

Her face contorted, as if struggling to keep her composure. "Later, I checked on her and found her lying quietly on the bed. At first, I thought she was sleeping and then I saw her pills scattered on the floor. I brought her here when she would not respond to my calls."

*Pills?* I looked down at my shaking hands. "What are the pills for, ma'am?"

She gave me a strange look. "She didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

She hesitated, and then spoke quietly. "At 14, she was diagnosed as HIV positive, Nick. Now she has full blown AIDS."

I could not believe it. Or perhaps, I would not. A sudden coldness was seeping through me. "A-AIDS?"

Mrs. Angeles nodded miserably. "She didn't, huh? I suppose I can't blame her. Please don't hate her, Nick. It had been a long time since she had someone like you."

It was hard to follow her; I was still reeling from shock. AIDS? It couldn't be. Only gay people had AIDS, I thought, not young and beautiful Soleil.

"I-uh, Mrs. Hernandez, can-can I see her now?"

"The nurses said not to disturb her."

"I promise I won't. Please, I-I just want to know if she's okay."

After some deliberation, she nodded. "All right. I know she would want to see you too."

I was not prepared at the sight when I opened the door. Never had I seen her that pale, plastic tubes running everywhere. It was frightening, as if I was staring at a person I hardly knew. My first instinct was to wake her, wanting only to hear her voice. To hear the old Soleil cracking jokes and calling me names. Then she opened her eyes and smiled.

"Hi, Nick."

I stood beside the bed and smiled back, hoping that the warmth in my voice sounded real. "Oh, hello. Should've called if you couldn't sleep. I could have read to you over the phone."

She laughed softly. "I didn't want to bother you."

The sadness in her eyes was more than I could bear. "Don't be silly." I said. "You'll never be a bother, Soleil."

"I'm sorry, Nick."

I held her free hand. "You should have told me."

She smiled a wan smile. "I'll be fine, it was just an accident. The pain was a little worse than usual and I must have taken more than I should."

What can I say? More than anything else, I wanted to hear the only thing that will reassure my fears. So I nodded and grinned stupidly.

"You better be, young lady. You still have a lot of explaining to do to my mother."

Soleil and her parents were on their way to Tagaytay when a truck collided with them, killing her parents instantly. She had needed transfusions before they could save her. Three months later, the memories of the accidents as solid as the body casts that she still had to wear, a routine check up revealed that she had accidentally been given contaminated blood.

She had been 14 then. A teenager in the middle of confusing puberty forced to accept her parent's death. Learning she had AIDS, it said a lot for the strength within her that she did not even try to slice her wrists.

AIDS was still a new disease then and people were just beginning to find things about it. Her medications, which had not been less than ten pills and capsules, had

become a part of her everyday routine. And loneliness had become a matter of course.

I could remember that distant afternoon while Claudia Angeles explained everything in the cafeteria of that hospital. Several times, she broke down, so wrapped up was she in her grief that she could not see what the revelation did to me. A part of me was repulsed and another part was afraid of what lay ahead. Yet, even then, I knew I could not leave her.

After all these years, I could still hear Aunt Claudia's entreaties for understanding and forgiveness. I could still taste the bitter laughter as I assured her of my loyalty while the bright sun filtered briefly through the windows.

Soleil, Soleil...

She looked up as I entered, a bunch of daffodils in my left hand. Smiling, she put down her pen and held out a hand.

"They're beautiful, Nick." She said, admiring the flowers and stood up. "I'll get a vase for them."

I nodded and let her go. This was her first day home. Unable to pick her up at the hospital because of my school schedule, I came directly here. Consciously, no changes had been made, no welcoming essence amongst the walls. It was simply a normal occurrence through the years.

"How did you get in?" She called out from the kitchen.

"Aunt Claudia." I replied, trying to inject enthusiasm in my voice. "I met her on her way out the door, so she let me in."

Soleil came striding back, in her hands a crystal vase filled with water and the flowers in it. She set it on the coffee table and began arranging them. I sat beside her on the couch.

"How's school?"

I smiled, trying not to notice the weary edges in her eyes. "The same as always. Booo-ring."

"Really, Nick. You should be grateful for the chance to be in school."

The blood rushed to my head and I was glad that her eyes remained at what she was doing. I just realized how much effort she put on all the things that most of us take for granted.

"I mean, so many kids are out of school." She continued conversationally. "And so many wanted an education of any kind. They can't help it but you can at least appreciate what you have."

Trying to summon up a frown was the hardest thing I did. "Are you trying to lecture me, lady?" I grumbled, feigning my most serious face.

Soleil raised her head to look at me and laughed. "Oh, don't be so prissy, Nick. You know I'm right."

Her laughter caught at me. Clown that I am, I raised my hands in surrender and grinned back. "Okay, okay. You win."

She gave me a lingering smile and turned her eyes again to the flowers. "I'm sorry, Nick." she said softly.

We never really talked about her disease, letting things go on. As if nothing of importance had happened.

"There's no reason to be sorry."

"I should have told you."

I bit my lip. "It would have explained so much, but you didn't have to."

She gazed at me, silent for a moment. "You really meant that, didn't you?"

"Yes."

A slow smile lit up her face. "Thanks, Nick."

I spread my hands. "For what?"

From then on, things were easier between us. I used to hear a lot of 'I have to go', or 'I have to do something' without telling me exactly what it was. Now, she tells me 'I forgot my medication' or 'I have to go to the doctor again.'

Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better if I knew nothing.

"Hey, nice embroidery." I plopped down beside her on the couch. "Is that for me?"

She stuck out a tongue at me. "Don't be cheeky, Nick. It's for Aunt Claudia's birth - ouch!!"

"Oh, no." Instinctively, I reached for her. "Here, let me see."

"Don't." she shrank back. "Are you out of your mind?"

Stunned, I watched her stand up and go to the kitchen without another word. Everything had been so fine that I had forgotten to be careful. She had taken the needle, showing infinite caution. I had forgotten that she had lived with the disease half of her life.

When she came back, her finger was wearing three bandage strips.

"I know, it's a little too much." she said, noting the glance I gave to her hand. "Sorry, Nick. I shouldn't have screamed at you."

"I hesitated. "No. No, that's considerate of you really. What am I thinking?"

Soleil laughed nervously. "Apparently nothing."

I fell silent, not knowing what to say.

"Nick." she reached with her other hand and pulled me down on the couch beside her. "We have to talk."

Something inside me rebelled at the tone of her voice. "There's nothing to explain, Soleil. I understand perfectly."

"That seems to be the problem. You don't."

I tried to grin at her, failing miserably.

"Look, Nick. More than anything else, except for my aunt, you've been the greatest friend anyone could have and I'm very grateful. I mean, so many are terrified to be near me, let alone to talk to me that admitting I've AIDS was like suddenly having horns and tails. I learned to take it."

"Soleil-."

"No, please." She touched my hand. "Let me finish. I have to say this. Nick, I am not what you can call 'normal'. It seems as if you're making yourself believe that I am. I'm lucky so far because I still look okay but I am sick."

I bit my lip. "I know all that, Soleil."

"No, you don't. You can't touch me when I'm bleeding. You can't visit if you have a cold or something and I can't go to you either. I can't stay out late to party, I can't dance the night away-"

"Why not?"

"Because I'd end up feeling painful in the morning and my pain threshold isn't what it used to be." she gave me a weak smile. "And I can't let you fall in love with me."

In spite of myself, I reddened. "It's that obvious huh?"

Soleil laughed a little. "That would only be the reason why you're here with me when there are probably others who'd like to be with you."

"Give me one good reason."

She didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Nick, please."

"No, don't give me that. What possible reason could there be for me not to love you."

She stood up. "Oh, God, are you really out of your mind? I have AIDS, not sunstroke. I'm already dying even as we speak."

I got up on my feet and faced her. "No, you're not. Stop saying that, Soleil. Every private and governmental researcher is racing to outdo each other to find a cure. It won't be long now, you can't lose hope."

There was a sudden mist in her eyes. "Oh, Nick, I'm not. But I'm being realistic. We both know that I may not even last the year."

The words tore at me. "Yes, you are." I insisted.

"Nick-."

"At any rate," I continued with a wavering smile. "It's too late. I already am too much in love with you and there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's not a very good idea."

"And you know you're in love with me too."

She hesitated, and then smiled softly. "It's that obvious huh?"

I grinned, hiding away my pain. "No, but you just admitted it."

Soleil was silent for a few seconds. "Wrong move."

"Definitely." I said, reaching out to brush away the fallen tears. "But there's nothing more you can do about it either."

I remember wishing so hard for the afternoon to never end.

"Why, Nicholas?" Aunt Claudia beamed. "How thoughtful of you."

I watched her rub the scarf against her cheek. "Happy Birthday, Aunt."

"It's very beautiful, Nick." Soleil whispered in my ear. "I'm sure she'll treat it like jewelry."

I grinned back at her. "What time's the party?"

Aunt Claudia heard the question. "Oh no. No party but some of my friends will come to treat me for lunch."

"Her *barkada* called me up to ask if she can come out and play." Soleil spoke so seriously that I chuckled.

"Soleil, you naughty child." the older woman wagged a finger at her. "Why don't you kids go have a picnic? There's no sense spending it inside the house. It's a beautiful day. The sun is shining and a little fresh air will do the pair of you a world of good. I'm sure you'll find all that you need in the fridge."

The idea was a welcome one. I wished I thought of it first. "Are you sure you don't want to go with us." I asked solicitously.

"Yes, yes." she waved her hand in the air, already turning away. "I must get ready, the girls will be here soon."

Soleil gazed at me. "Would you really prefer to spend the day with her?"

I shrugged. "Sure. She's a nice lady and it's her birthday, you know."

She smiled suddenly and hugged me. "Nicholas Barretto, you are the sweetest guy I know."

"I'm the sweetest guy I know too." I muttered and kissed the top of her head. She was still chuckling when we took out the chicken and the ham.

I took her to Roxas Boulevard. We chose a nice shady spot, spread the cloth on the grass and faced the breakwater.

"There." I said smugly after arranging everything. "Now, this is comfortable. Doesn't that scene just take your breath away?"

"Oh, yes. A haven for short-lived affairs."

"I know." I said with a wink.

Whenever she laughed, it made the world so much better. It was so precious and alive. Oh, yes, she had been right. I was pretending that everything would turn out right.

"Soleil- "

"Hmm?" she murmured, not even glancing at me.

"I love you."

She turned to me. "I know."

"Sometimes, I- -"

Her fingers brushed at my lips. "Let's just enjoy the day, Nick."

I responded by kissing her hand. "You're right, honey. I'm sorry."

"Now, what would you like to demolish first?" she said, changing the subject in a beat.

"Demolish?" I muttered in mock indignation. "Why lady, that sounds terrible. That sounds almost rude, as if I can't control myself."

She handed me a tissue wrapped sandwich. "That's chicken."

"Thanks." I accepted grudgingly and she laughed, not at all fooled at my grumpiness.

Lately, Soleil had not been eating enough and we always urged her to eat more. But this afternoon, her appetite seemed healthy, which made me happier that her aunt had suggested the picnic.

A young girl, filthy and thin, came near us just as I was finishing another sandwich. She held out a hand in supplication.

"Oh, dear." Soleil said. "Are you hungry? Here, take these."

She must have handed half a dozen sandwiches before she turned to me. "Are you still hungry? Don't worry, we'll have dinner at the house."

I could hardly complain. When the girl left with a smile and twenty pesos in her pocket, Soleil turned to me with bright eyes.

"Thanks, Nick. That was very generous of you."

"That's okay, honey. You want to go home now?"

She lay down on the blanket. "Let's stay a while longer."

I brushed away the errant tendrils of hair on her face. "Of course. Anything you say."

"I wrote another poem just the other day." She said after a few seconds of silence.

"Where is it?"

"It's not here. But I know the lines."

"Can I hear it?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure you'd like it."

"Yes, I will."

"Maybe later."

I stared at her. "Soleil, don't tease."

"You'll hate it."

"I will not." I could not help the irritation from showing.

"Hmm, okay. But, don't say I didn't warn you." She took a deep breath.

Shall you remember me  
When I fall from grace  
When the rains fall heavily  
When I lose the wintry by-ways

Shall you reminisce the times  
When we pass the moments of Spring  
In laughing wispy climes  
With gaily colored wings

Shall you recall the tender passion  
The gentle kiss of the raindrops

The bright colors of our vision  
The brimming fullness of our cups

Shall you call back with vengeance  
The loss of that eternal Paradise  
When the angels ended their dance  
And filled the earth with their cries

And shall you remember me  
As I bid farewell to the sunlight  
As I wave goodbye to our memory  
And pass through the gaining twilight.

She was right. I hated it. But not for the reasons she thought. "It-it doesn't seem complete." I commented, trying not to stumble on my words.

"I knew you wouldn't like it." She sighed.

"I didn't say that. All I said was that it seems incomplete."

"So, you hated it."

"Soleil, I wish you wouldn't put words in my mouth."

"Okay, okay. No need to get huffy about it." She rolled her eyes. "You didn't hate it but you didn't exactly like it."

I shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "It was uh-okay."

"Hmm. I suppose I should be happy with that."

I hated that poem, still hate it today. But I couldn't tell her that then. I forced a grin, pushing the unpleasantness to the back of my mind. "Am I supposed to just agree with everything you wanted to say?"

A dimple appeared at the edge of her cheek. "Yes."

I smiled back, forcing the fear from my heart. "Nooooo. Don't think so."

She gave me a punch in the arm.

"Owwwww. That hurt."

"That's for being mean."

"Oh, really?" I gave her a mock leer.

She looked at me warily. "Nicholas. What are you going to do?"

"Retaliating." I caught her against me and began tickling her ribs.

By the time I let her go, everyone was looking at us. But I did not care. She was still laughing when I kissed her on the lips.

"Oh, Nick." She said, surprised at what I did. I had not really kissed her fully on the lips before. And in public.

"It's been a good day, hasn't it?"

"Yes." She gave me her slow smile. "Yes, it is."

"Take your picture, sir?"

We both looked up to see one of those guys who walk around with cameras hanging off their chest.

"Oh, can we Nick?" She said immediately. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I had no money left.

"Uh, honey-"

"Oh, you can borrow some money from me and pay it later." She said smoothly, mischievous eyes looking at me.

I could not help laughing. "Oh, okay."

I put my arms around her and we both grinned to the camera. The picture that came out later was not very good but she gladly paid for it. I wanted to get our money back, but she looked so amused at me that I decided not to say anything else.

She insisted on seeing the sunset even when I did not want to. It was growing dark and the wind was rising, but we stayed until dusk.

"It's getting cold honey."

She snuggled closed to me. "Just a while longer, please."

So, I held her tight, my senses filling with her scent, the feel of her skin, the melody of her voice.

She was silent when we reached her home, signifying her weariness. Aunt Claudia was already waiting for us at the door and even she commented on her tired look. Soleil did not even bother to contradict me when I told her to go to bed.

"Careful on the road, Nick." Soleil gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek. "It's not safe to go gallivanting around these days."

"It's not safe if you knew about it, you mean."

A soft laugh. "You're so smart."

I smiled. "Don't worry about me, honey. I'll be okay, you go get some rest."

She nodded and turned to go to her room. "I love you, Nicholas Barretto." She called out at the door.

She looked so sweet, standing against the door, as the light inside the room bathed her in soft shadows. There are moments that you will always remember. That moment I will keep forever in my mind.

Fleeting smile and she was gone.

"She looks really tired, Nick."

I turned to see Aunt Claudia behind me.

"But happy." She added. "And that's something I haven't seen in a long time."

"I'm glad too, Aunt Claudia." I agreed with a chuckle.

"You take good care of my niece, Nick." She said, laying a hand on my arm and leading me to the kitchen "And I am very grateful."

She handed me a cup of coffee when I was finally seated. "You don't have to thank me ma'am. I'm quite happy to be with her."

"Here." She took a plate from the cupboard and set it before me. "Have some dinner. Soleil told me that she gave away the sandwiches so you must be hungry."

She put a steaming bowl on the table. It was ***Sinigang na Hipon***. The smell alone was enough to make my mouth water. "You don't have to go to all this trouble for-"

"Nonsense." She slapped lightly at my wrist. "It's still my birthday, and you will not let me eat alone, will you? After all, my cooking couldn't be that bad. And stop calling me ma'am. It makes me feel like some schoolmarm that never smiles."

I laughed. "You're one sly woman, Aunt Claudia. Don't you ever stop moving?"

"Only when I'm sleeping. Now help me set the table. You're not a guest here, you know."

She reached for the other plates and we both prepared the table. I had not been lying to Soleil when I told her that her aunt's a nice lady. I felt comfortable with the older woman and found her company enjoyable.

"...and after she gave away the last of our food, that's when she remembered to ask me."

She smiled softly. "Even as a child, Soleil had always been a giving person." She paused, and then continued on. "My niece really loves you, Nicholas."

"I love her too Aunt Claudia." I said, placing my hand in hers.

"I have no right to ask you to stay with her always."

"You don't have to." I said. "You know I would."

"It will be bad."

I grimaced, suddenly losing my appetite. "She recited a poem for me today. Shall you remember me, I think the title was."

She must have heard the pain in my voice. "I'm sorry." She patted my hand. "I saw a copy of it on her night table. She must have written it last night."

"The other day." I whispered, reaching for the glass of water." She said she wrote it the other day."

Suddenly, I felt like bawling like a child, anger and frustration seeping to my bones. Hurriedly, I stood up, not wanting to make a fool of myself in front of her aunt. "Uh- it's getting late. Thanks for dinner, Aunt Claudia, but I really have to go. Mom's probably going crazy with worry over me by this time."

She laid down her fork and stood up the same time I did. "Of course. Say hello to her for me. Your mom's a good person, Nicholas."

Unlike most people, my mother did not discourage me from seeing Soleil. She had just asked me to mind the necessary precautions and gave her understanding. "Sure. No problem."

At the door, she pressed my hand. "Take care, Nick. And thank you."

I gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Tell her I love her, Aunt Claudia."

She nodded and I turned away quickly. I didn't want to wait for her tears to fall.

The next few days had been hectic for me. It had been the preliminary examinations of the second term and had been unable to visit. My mom had understood my need to be with Soleil but she would kill me if my grades took a dive. Even Soleil had told me not to go to her home during the weeklong examinations, or to even call her.

Finally, the last exams came and went and I was able to go back to their house. Aunt Claudia opened the door for me.

"Nicholas!!" She greeted pleasantly but I did not miss the traces of weariness in her voice. It instantly put me on edge.

"Hi, Aunt Claudia. Missed me?" I grinned, almost afraid to ask. I handed her the flowers as I stepped inside the room.

"They are beautiful, Nick." She turned around. "Come with me. I'll put these in water."

"Is Soleil here, Aunt Claudia?" I followed her to the kitchen.

She took an upturned vase from a cabinet above the sink and began filling it with water. "Yes. She's sleeping but she'll probably be waking up soon."

"In the middle of the afternoon?" That frightened me. She never took naps at four in the afternoon.

The older woman glanced at me and I noticed the crow's feet at the edge of her eyes. It seemed more prominent than ever.

"Is something the matter, Aunt Claudia?"

She began to undo the twine on the flowers, spreading the stems on the sink.

"We just came from the hospital, Nick. She contracted pneumonia over the last week and her T-cells dropped even lower."

It was as if all the blood was suddenly pumped out of me, making me lightheaded. T-cells or T4 lymphocytes play a crucial role in the body's immune defenses against invading organisms.

With AIDS, it's a highly reliable indicator of a body's susceptibility to opportunistic infections and tumorous growths. The most predominant and threatening complication is pneumonia, which is frequently the first infection to occur and is the most common cause of death. In a healthy person, an average T-cell range is between 500 and 1,500

"How-low low?"

"Two Hundred and Eighty Six."

"Why is she here then?" I said, trying not to panic. "Isn't she supposed to be staying in the hospital, where a doctor can see her immediately if there's any problem."

"The doctors said she'd do just as well here at home if she just rests. Besides, it should be safer here. What with all the sick people coming to hospital for all kinds of diseases, she might contract something else."

"Aunt Claudia, you're rambling."

She stopped arranging the flowers and looked at me tiredly. "Soleil wanted to come home. She said she's tired of being woken in the middle of the night just so they can stick needles everywhere in her body."

I was speechless for a moment. "And we're just going to let her do what she wants? What if - what if something happens to her?"

"Nothing's going to happen to her." She snapped. "Look, I know you're worried, Nick. But she will be all right. It's not the first time I had to pull her out of the hospital earlier than I should. She'll be fine."

An awkward silence fell between us.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Claudia." I whispered, feeling deflated and ashamed for my rudeness. "I-I'm just scared, I guess."

She patted my hand. "I know."

"Hello, Nick."

We both turned to see Soleil standing at the kitchen doorway. The sight of her, after only a week of absence, did nothing to calm me down. But I tried my best to cover my fears.

"Hi, honey." I said, smiling fixedly. She looked so pale and thin that a gust of wind might knock her over.

"I hope you both got it out of your systems now." She smiled, a touch of amusement in her voice. Still, even her voice sounded weak.

Immediately, I went and gave her a hug. "I missed you so much."

"Me, too."

I pulled a chair for her to sit on when she stopped me. "No, Nick. I don't want to stay here. It's stuffy enough without both of you breathing down on me. Let's go to the garden."

So I supported her by the arms and we both went outside, leaving Aunt Claudia in the kitchen. By the time, we made it to the lawn chairs, Soleil was laughing at me.

"I can walk just fine, you know."

"Okay, okay." I said, sitting beside her. "Just humor me."

"I did."

It was nice to hear her laugh. And so painful.

"Hungry, sweetheart?" I croaked. "I could get sandwiches for us if you like."

"No." She said. "Get one if you like. I'll stay here."

"Not really." I held her hand and kissed her on the lips. "Did we wake you?"

"No, I was already awake." She smiled. "I was on my way down when I heard you arguing with my aunt."

I looked down at our hands. "Sorry you had to hear that."

"It's not her fault, you know."

"Yes, I know." I admitted wearily. "My temper got away with me. It's just that honey, don't you think-"

No." She interrupted curtly then softened. "Please, let's not argue, Nick. It's been a while since we saw each other. I don't want to fight."

"I'm sorry, honey." I said again, feeling like a parrot. "I'm just worried."

She touched my face with her other hand. It felt so warm and near that I felt my fears melting. "Don't sweetheart. I'm going to be all right."

I did not insist.

For a while, everything did turn out to be all right. Her appetite had lessened considerably but she seemed okay. I became more hopeful each day. I suppose I wanted to believe in happy endings. After all, miracles do happen. I wanted to believe that we could have a miracle of our own.

"Nick, will you please give these to Soleil." Mom handed me a basket of fruit. I just came home from class and found her in the kitchen, putting vegetables in our refrigerator. The radio was on, playing a Christmas song in the middle of November.

"Thanks, mom." I murmured, knowing that the fruit would have rotted before all of them were eaten. "That's very sweet of you."

She stopped what she was doing and looked at me strangely. "Is something wrong?"

Startled, I didn't realize I was frowning. "Uh, no, mom. It's just that Soleil doesn't eat very much these days. I'm a little worried."

"Oh, dear. Should I come and see her?"

I smiled. My mother had more than given her blessings to us. "No, you don't have to. But she would be very happy to see you."

She nodded and continued arranging the rest of the groceries. "Okay, but not just yet. I still have a lot of work to do and I'm already behind with my schedule. You know that it's the end of the year and we have a lot of auditing to do in the office."

"I know, mom. Don't worry about it."

"Anyway, did you ask her if they could spend Christmas with us. I know it's a little early to ask her but she might make other plans and then it would be too late."

I couldn't help laughing. "Yes, and she's very touched to be invited. So am I."

My mother could out talk anyone I know. That's why she and Aunt Claudia had gotten along just fine, when they'd first met at the hospital where Soleil goes for her checkups.

Mom works as an accountant for the administration, and I once dragged her to Soleil's room. Both of them were nervous at first but my mom's natural warmth overcame all constraints. The rest just came naturally.

"Good." She said, without even missing a beat. "Give her my love when you go see her."

"Okay." I mumbled and began to turn away with the basket in my hand.

"Nick." she called suddenly.

"Yes, mom?"

"We're still friends, aren't we?"

I grinned. "Of course. You're my best friend. Why shouldn't we be?"

She hesitated visibly. "Then you know I am here for you. No matter what happens."

That wiped the smile on my face. "I-uh-did someone in the hospital say anything to you?"

"No." She responded quickly. "I just wanted, you know, I just wanted you to know that I'll always be here for you"

It took another moment before I can respond. "I know mom." I said softly, grateful for the offer and finally turned away before she could see the flare of anger in my eyes.

The days rolled on and Soleil and I trudged along. Soon it was my holiday break and Christmas was at our doorstep. Time had a way of speeding along when you wanted the days to grow longer. I still refused to believe that I was running out of time.

A couple of weeks after my prelims, Soleil was hospitalized again for four days. The doctors agreed to send her home.

AIDS was a relatively new disease and the local community was not really equipped to handle specialized care. Soleil had refused to go to a government center so the hospital arranged for a health worker to periodically check on her.

It took a lot out of me to accept the situation but I realized there was hardly a thing I could do about it.

I watched her grow weaker everyday, the pain and anger continually building up within me. It had become a strain to do everything else. My grades began a downhill path and it must have taken a lot of restraint for my mother, who put value on education above all else, not to reprimand me.

Everything almost came crashing down when Gabriel, my best friend, came to see me at home. I felt guilty because we didn't spent time together anymore. He was already waiting there when I arrived, so I asked Cocoy, my younger brother, to buy us some drinks and we relaxed in our small garden. We tried to catch up on things we missed but there was a strain hanging between us.

"I really wish you'd get a grip, *pare*." He said suddenly, a bottle of beer in his hand.

I took another swallow before responding. "What the heck are you talking about? I'm fine. I just need to catch up with my grades at the finals but that's about it. It's just a low period."

"It's not only your school work, Nick." He shook his head as he regarded me. "Look, I'm your best friend so I'm telling you this. You can't take out your anger with everyone else."

I stiffened.

"You're so touchy lately that it's getting harder to talk without you snapping somebody's head off."

The moon was riding high that night and the light cast everything in shadows. "Is this why you came here? *Pare*, I don't need a lecture right now."

"This is not a lecture, Nick. I'm trying to tell you that you may not know it, but everyone's trying to be considerate. Do you know that it's virtually a miracle that you don't hear those people talking about you."

"Talking about me? What for?"

"*Pare*, some people won't even go near you, scared that you may have the virus yourself. Laughing about you, making crude jokes at your expense. But not us. We know it's rough, but it's getting harder to deal with you nowadays."

He gestured with his hands. "It's not our fault your girlfriend's going to die soon."

A flash of anger began to engulf me and I grabbed him by the shirt. "Don't say that! She's not going to die!"

Surprised and angry, he pushed me away, rising to his feet. "Hey! What's the matter with you? Are you blind and can't even see what's happening right before your eyes."

"Stop it or I'll-"

"You'll what?" He snapped, rearranging his shirt. "You'll hit me? Well, come on. You're like a volcano waiting to erupt anyway, come here and try to deck me."

I watched him standing defensively, waiting for my next move. The door opened and mom stepped out.

"I think you better go." I muttered, gritting my teeth.

Without another word, he said goodbye to my mother and left. I could hear mom softly talking apologetically to Gabriel as she escorted him out. In two minutes, she came back to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't lose your friends, Nick." She said softly. "They're trying to do what they can."

I could not say anything and she patted my hand before leaving me alone again.

Christmas. Time for holiday cheer and giving gifts. For tradition and faith, for love and miracles.

When we stepped out of the car, mom and the other members of my family were already waiting in the living room. They were all so kind and supportive that it made me glad Soleil was part of our holiday tradition. Whatever my family's failings, I would always be grateful to them for this night. In that respect, I was lucky to have a family that had a singular response to public opinion.

"Here, honey." Mom handed a gift-wrapped package to Soleil. Aunt Claudia was talking to my widower uncle Joseph and we were sitting in the living room, watching the exchange of gifts by everyone. It was a family tradition to distribute the gifts an hour before Noche Buena, so that impatient children howling to open their gifts would not disrupt the midnight supper. Of course, supper was still disrupted by impatient children who can't wait to play with their new toys.

Soleil gave a quick glance at me, then to my mother. "I-thank you, *Tita* Bing." Like her aunt, and me, her relationship with my mother had grown to a point that Soleil called my mother *Tita* Bing. But she was still a little shy when talking to my family.

"I hope you like it." My mom smiled. "The embroidery you gave me was beautiful."

Soleil had cross-stitched a rather complex pattern that she had started doing almost three months ago. What with her varying strengths, it took her longer to finish and Mom knew the effort she put into it.

With an impatient hand, she tore at the wrappings and opened the box. A knitted shawl with white lace lay amongst the wax paper lining. A sigh of pleasure escaped her and she smiled happily at my mom.

"It's very lovely, *Tita* Bing." She said, feeling the cloth against her cheek. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"I was not very patient with needle point so I bought that one at a shop in a mall in Cubao. I was afraid you might not be happy with it."

"Oh, no, *Tita*." She reached for my mom's hand and held it. "I'm very, very happy with it."

Mom did not even flinch from her touch. "Well then, I'm glad. Are you hungry, by the way? We will be having our Noche Buena in fifteen minutes but I'm sure a little snack won't hurt your appetite."

"That's okay. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry, mom." I interceded. "I'm taking very good care of her."

My mom looked at me with suspicion. "You'd better, young man." She said, wagging a finger at me. "I have to leave you kids for a while. I'll have to see to the last of the preparations, make sure that the children are not smearing the walls with chocolate cake."

She left the two of us laughing, the shawl already resting comfortably on her shoulders.

"Want to go outside, honey, and break in the shawl?"

Soleil gave a short laugh. "Sure. If that's all we're going to do."

I grinned. "I'll try to keep my hands to myself. Besides, I want to give my gift to you in private."

"Well, in that case." She said, reaching a box at the table near her. "I might as well give you my gift in private too."

The garden was relatively peaceful, everyone was inside the house and we were alone. It would have been quieter if not for some of my neighbours who went ahead and celebrated the New Year a few days earlier. Somehow, that irritated me and my good mood evaporated quickly.

"People don't seem to realize that this was supposed to be a solemn holiday."

"Oh, don't be so grumpy, Nicholas. It's Christmas, after all. Lately, you're getting to be moodier all the time."

It was almost as if she and Gabriel had been talking behind my back. Except that they don't know each other very well. The one time I'd brought Gabriel with me to see her, he was so uncomfortable that I did not ask him to tag along anymore.

"Okay, you're right. People should be throwing firecrackers in the streets, instead of praying in thanksgiving for the birth of our Lord Christ. A lot of accidents happened because of stupid people like them."

She did not respond, staring at a distance. I realized I was being unreasonable but didn't really care. Then the silence bothered me.

"I-I'm, Soleil, I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. I'm acting like a jerk tonight of all nights."

She took a deep breath. "Oh, Nick. Things are going crazy for you, aren't they?"

"Honey-"

"I'm sorry, darling." She said quietly, still not looking at me. "Maybe it would be better if you didn't come to my house anymore."

I was surprised. "What?" I turned her to look at me. "Soleil, no. No, no, no. Don't say things like that. I know I was being cranky and I'm sorry. I was just letting off steam, I guess. The preparation took longer than I expected and I'm just tired."

Her fingers reached out to brush my face and I grasped it to kiss her open palm. "I love you so much, honey."

"Nick, I love you too. More than anything else."

"Let's not fight, okay. I wanted this Christmas to be special for both of us."

For several moments, her sad eyes seemed to say something more, and then she gave me a small smile. "Okay, where's my gift?"

Grateful for the change of conversation, I eagerly dug through my jacket pocket. When I took out a small velveteen box, she looked at me with gay anticipation.

"What is it?"

I was suddenly nervous. It had seemed expensive when I bought it. Now, it did not seem enough. "I-uh-"

She took the box from my hesitant hand and opened it. "Oh, Nick. " She breathed, staring at the ring. She took it out of the box and saw our names engraved within the band. "It's beautiful."

"It-it's not that good, I know. But just you wait. I'll buy you a better one when I get this high paying job after school."

Soleil pulled me and gave me a kiss on the lips. "Shut up, Nicholas. I love it."

"Really?"

"Yes." She said and handed the ring back to me. "Would you kindly slip it to my finger?"

"Why, I would be very happy to, Madame." The ring fit her perfectly and I grinned happily. "There you go."

She spent a moment admiring it and handed me small book-sized package. "Now, open mine. I'm afraid it may not be equal to the gift I have just received but I hope you'd like this one."

I grinned at her. "You're beginning to sound like my mother. " I tore the wrapping paper off and opened the box. There we were, sitting on a picnic blanket, my arms around her, the wind against our faces, daring the world to come and take what we have, in a framed photograph.

It had been skillfully retouched and she looked so beautiful, so healthy. So unlike her today.

"It's our picnic." I said, in a rush of feeling that threatened to engulf me.

Soleil watched the expression on my face happily. "You remembered."

"Of course I remembered." O whispered. "I'll always remember."

I pulled her to my arms and we held each other tight. After a while, mom hollered at us to eat. It's Christmas Day.

Three days after New Year, Soleil was admitted for the last time at St. Luke's Medical Center. Aunt Claudia called my mother while I was in school that day.

Mother had me called at the Dean's Office and told me the news on the phone. I left for the hospital immediately. I was not asked to wear the usual reverse isolation gown and mask but was just led inside. It was then that I knew.

Unlike most things in the movies or television, there were no lengthy conversations about the things we did, or the things we had. Soleil had been too weak to speak

and I guess I was busy trying to hold on to the present that the past meant nothing.

I told her over and over how much I loved her. Then, finally, I had to let her go. Her sad eyes were growing weaker and tired that I knew she was just trying to say her good-byes as gently as she could. So for the hundredth time, I told her how much she meant to me and kissed her goodbye. When she closed her eyes, the room seemed to darken even more.

She wore the shawl my mother gave her last Christmas when we buried her. Mom was there with me and even Gabriel showed up. I just stood there, numb and unable to cry. It was a small crowd; she never had the chance to keep lasting friendships. After the funeral, I brought Aunt Claudia home alone.

It was the first time I'd been inside their house since the day at the hospital. It took me a moment longer to tell myself again that she was not inside her room, resting.

"Nick."

I looked at the older woman, startled to see her staring at me. "Uh, will you be okay here on your own, Aunt Claudia?" I asked, a little embarrassed.

"I will be. Will you?"

I swallowed, trying to make light of things. "Uh, yes. Of course. Don't you worry about me. Mom will make sure I'm fine."

Unable to meet her kind eyes, I looked down at my feet. "Nick, we all miss her." She said softly. "I'm sure she knows that."

I nodded numbly, not trusting myself to speak. Then she placed an envelope in my hand.

"She asked me to give this to you." She gave me another smile. "Please take care of yourself, Nicholas."

I stared at the envelope in my hand for what seemed a long time. Then I gave her a kiss and stepped out of the house. Four years later, I gathered enough courage to return to that house. But back then, I thought I never would be able to.

I was afraid to read the letter so soon, even after I reached Roxas Boulevard. I must have been sitting on the grass for an hour before finally opening the envelope. When I took out the paper, something fell on my legs. It was the necklace she was always wearing. I remembered the first time I saw her, reading quietly underneath a tree. I almost shoved back the letter but finally decided to get it over with.

Dearest Nick,

When you gave me that ring at Christmas, I couldn't help wishing we could be together forever; that we can be like any ordinary couple with ordinary plans and dreams. But some things are not meant to be, I guess. I had a wonderful time with

your family at Christmas though. That was, perhaps, the closest thing to normalcy that we will ever have.

But I have never regretted it. Meeting you was a good thing and loving you was the best possible thing that could ever happen to me. If there was anything at all that I regretted, it was how my sickness was affecting you. If only I could have taken away all of your pain, I would have done so in a second. I have loved you so much that seeing you hurting was too much for me to bear. There was not a moment that I did not pray for you, for both of us. You still have a good life, my love; please don't lose yourself in anger. You are such a wonderful person to let life beat you. I want you to be happy, and not cover yourself with grief and frustration.

How can I tell you all that you had been to me? You were my laughter and my hope. I had been dying for so long that I had forgotten how to live. I was tired of living until you came out of nowhere, babbling about poetry that afternoon in campus. I knew you were lying about Lord Byron but you were so nervous that I just had to laugh. You could always make me laugh, Nick.

For a long time, I was just surviving the day-to-day routine but you changed all that. I have been very lucky to find you. Not many could say that, but I could. Not many could have what we had, and for that, all those lonely years I spent alone had been more than compensated.

So, I am leaving you my necklace and the ring that you gave me. I will not be needing them anymore, but I know you will keep them safe. Let them remind you of the times we spent together, of the love we will always have. I will take that love with me wherever I go and I will always be with you.

Someday, I hope someone will come to make you smile again. I'll never begrudge you any happiness, my love. That someone will make you laugh once more and I'll love her as much as you would. For now, I would like to say again, I love you Nicholas Barretto, with all my heart and with all my soul. You are a part of me and I will never forget.

Soleil

I pulled the envelope open and realized that the ring was there. I took it out and slipped it onto the necklace, making a pendant before clasping it around my neck.

"Why are you crying, Mister?"

I looked up to see a young girl standing before me. I didn't realize until then that there were tears running down my face. Hurriedly, I tried to wipe it off.

"Don't worry, Mister. I'm sure she loves you too."

Before I could think of a suitable reply, a visibly irritated woman came up running and pulled her away.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to talk to strangers."

It must have been her mother and she was very angry. I wanted to stop her and tell her not to be so hard on her little girl. But I suppose I would have done the same were I in her shoes.

All the same, the child must have jolted me back to the present and I realized that the sun was beginning to set. I took another moment, remembering that bright afternoon when Soleil was vibrant and her eyes sparkled as the sun in her name. Then I stood up. It was getting late and I knew mom was probably frantic with worry over me.

The doorbell rang, the present intruding on the tides of a past long gone. The door opened and a sudden whirlpool of motion came barreling up to me.

"Daddy! Daddy! You're home early."

I picked up the little tornado and kissed my daughter noisily on the cheeks. "Hello, honey. Give Daddy a kiss. Where's mommy?"

My four-year-old daughter gave me one of her famous wet kisses on the cheeks and smiled. Then she regarded me with solemn concern. "Daddy, have you been crying? Your cheeks are all wet and your eyes are red."

I looked at the eyes of my present life. And wished, once more, to hear her voice again.

"No, Soleil, sun of my life." I said to my daughter. "Why should I be when you're here now?"