

Gifted
by Reggie Morrisey © 2010



Gifted

The gifted Tampa taxi driver, Theodophilus Rian, grabs the keys to the Coffee Pot Bayou mansion located in Saint Petersburg, Florida and runs with them. Even though Theo has to stop driving a taxi while he waits to clear licensing hurdles blocking fares between Pinellas and Hillsborough counties, he figures he can dip into his savings to live a new high life.

His friend and benefactor, young Eve Framer Kendall and her no-good husband, Troy III, bestowed this gift residence on the 45-year old taxi driver (Eve's fake Uncle Theo) for as long as he wants to live across Tampa Bay.

When they hastily wed in Tampa, the coed couple declined to live in Troy's childhood home that his estranged father and new wife gave them. Instead, they settled into a hip Davis Island condo to await the birth of their unexpected baby and pursue degrees at Tampa universities.

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Theo figures Troy pursues more than his degree, having seen the gloomy groom – at his own wedding – salivating over Eve’s sexy former college roommate! And, after years of watching humans misbehave in the back of taxis and in Tampa strip clubs he once managed, Theo knows he will be dusting off the heart of a devastated Eve one day – just as he had spent decades consoling Eve’s deceased mother, Dolores, after *her* romantic misadventures. Dolores never had the sense to pick this former chef to live happily ever after, though the lovesick Theo stood at the ready in her shadow.

But life is short, as Dolores death at 39 proved, so, Theo determines to be a happy man. He shaves his beard, trims his mustache, packs a suitcase with new duds, and bums a ride to the mansion from a buddy named Trey Hargrove. They cross Tampa Bay and head down Fourth Street in Saint Petersburg, turn left, past First Street, and rumble onto the redbrick road of Coffee Pot. With a backhand wave to Trey, Theo walks to the mansion's circular drive, and nods a greeting to a watching neighbor and her two cats.

The Mediterranean style mansion sits on a wide and shady lot. Its burnished tile extends into a center hall and great room and a balcony wraps around the oak-paneled room. As in a deserted castle, its furnishings are covered with sheets. A knight in dull armor stands near the stone fireplace that anchors the west side of the room. On the east side is a French door to a glass-enclosed sunroom. Its potting tables are empty, waiting for a gardener’s footsteps. Moss-draped oak trees shade the place and keep the harshest the sun at bay.

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Theo warms to the gourmet kitchen. His hands run along the granite counter surfaces and tap the pricey espresso maker and gourmet appliances. He bends down to hug the six-burner stove and peeks at the wine closet's dusty few bottles of port. The meals he will make fill his mind as he enters the dining room, facing the pool and back gardens. He pictures his guests at this table oohing and aahing at his culinary magic.

Climbing the stairs, Theo sees shades of beige dominate the second floor bedrooms and master suite – walls – bedspreads – bath tiles – towels – even paintings whisper beige. Theo enters one room, which clearly defies the beige edict and which he presumes had been grim Troy's room. Its walls and ceiling are covered with horror movie and grunge band posters, so menacing that Theo dubs the room "The Chamber" and shuts the door.

Theo settles into his beautiful life. As he jogs along Coffee Pot and through Old Northeast each morning, passing tropical gardens on canopied streets, he slims down from his taxi-driving weight. Next, he discovers the downtown outdoor market that crops up each Saturday a few miles to the south, and he bikes along Tampa Bay to get there. While at the market, he listens to street musicians and shops at the booths stocked with food, flowers and crafts. Biking home, he hangs sacks of produce and cheese on the handle bars.

As part of his new week-day routine, the gourmand scours the local paper for coupons and sales. When he cannot ride a bike, he hops on a bus to the supermarket. Within

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days at the mansion, he reclaims his flair for cooking healthy meals, fills a sunroom shelf with pots of herbs, and delights in eating his lunch by the pool.

Theo makes friends with the agreeable bus driver, Samuel, and a few seemingly sane regulars, like the wheelchair-bound Miss Mattie, who is nearly 80 and lives to shop.

Everybody knows Miss Mattie. Theo likes how she is always laughing and greeting people who board the bus. Except for an occasional harrumph from one or two lemon faces, most passengers perk up with her attention. On impulse one day, Theo invites Miss Mattie and Samuel to a dinner he is planning for the new mother, Eve.

Samuel drives Miss Mattie to Theo's house. They are the first of his guests, she in a purple sundress and hair trimmed with purple jewels. She, Theo, and Samuel watch for cars to turn into the driveway and chat about the bayou view. Still to come: young Eve, her newborn son, and no-good husband, plus Theo's pal Trey Hargrove and his girlfriend, Tammy.

Eve and Troy III park their SUV. Out comes the baby, Troy IV, his paraphernalia, and the sexy fifth wheel of Eve's former roommate, who an irritated Theo recognizes from the wedding. When Trey and Tammy arrive, Trey happily takes in the vision in stilettos and mini-shirt, but Tammy does not seem to even notice his interest in the young woman.

In fact, Tammy had not realized how attractive she found Theo until she stepped into his mansion. Unlike a lot of taxi-driver types, he is neatly dressed and well groomed. Last

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Tammy saw Theo was at the trailer park when Dolores died, and he was no prize. Now she hangs on his every word as he offers a mansion tour.

The tour party advances up the stairs, except for Troy, who says, “Been here, done that!” and Miss Mattie, who circles the knight in dull armor in her wheelchair to examine its detail. Troy’s thumbs fly across the cell phone keypad as he texts his buddies and ignores the old woman’s knight chitchat.

Troy is aloof most of the day as Eve fusses with her ever-crying baby, appearing ready to burst into tears herself as she paces with him by the pool. Miss Mattie takes pity and holds out her arms for the newborn. She rocks him as Eve stretches out on a lounge chair. Troy manages to get two words out of Eve’s former roommate as he gulps a beer. Across the circle of guests, Tammy plies Theo with questions about his new life and whines about Trey’s recent lack of work.

“Hey, Trey,” says Theo, “This neighborhood is full of signs for day jobs,” adding. “You could cruise around and be back in 30 minutes with enough phone numbers to keep you busy for weeks.”

“It’d be a hike to get here from Tampa every day,” figures Trey. “Not worth the gas.”

“Heck, you could stay here with me,” says Theo expansively to Trey and the beaming Tammy. Theo stands. “Anybody want more wine?”

That’s how Theo acquires two house guests, with as open-ended an invitation as he got from Eve. And, as the houseguests settle in a week later, things fall into place. Trey heads out early every morning for odd jobs. In bikini and coconut oil, Tammy takes up

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her position in a lounge chair by the pool. Theo makes them lunch, beaming over the hugs and kisses Tammy lavishes on him.

All of this activity is not lost on Theo's neighbor, the wealthy Eldora Shane. Though her Moorish-styled mansion is twice the size of Theo's digs, her life is devoted to a spiritual home aboard the 90-foot *Bright Future*, a converted yacht, and she just comes and goes.

When she is not engaged in encouraging souls who cruise the waters of Tampa Bay, she lavishes attention on her cats and keeps her eyes open for potential souls to save.

Trey is working an odd job and Theo is food shopping when Eldora stands at the side hedge and gamely calls out to Tammy by the pool. Tammy nods politely at Eldora's standard enlightenment spiel, but her ears perk at the mention of a yacht sanctuary.

"I'll have to think about when I'd have time to see it," says Tammy.

Eldora looks around the empty garden. "When you're not busy," she says. "Just knock on my door, and I'll take you."

Trey is full of the devil when he arrives for lunch. He recounts a hell of a morning spent repairing a back door at a house just off Coffee Pot, owned by a woman he knew named Honey Post. Seems they had once butt heads at a construction site and neither one was in the mood to stand down.

"I should have known when I spotted her big stupid truck pull into the driveway," he mumbles between gulps of chicken salad with walnuts and apples. "She went off on me, but it was her boyfriend, Tex something, who told me I had the job, so I held my ground."

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“Then what happened?” asks Tammy.

“I fixed the damn door, took my money, and got out of there.”

Placing a spring mix salad topped with grilled portabella mushrooms on the table, Theo says evenly, “So, it all worked out.”

“Witch was all over me,” Trey broods, “‘Watch the glass!’ she yells, like I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“And you know where she lives,” whispers Tammy, glancing up at Theo.

“Yeah, I know where she lives,” nods Trey. “Her and her boy toy.”

“Trey, you got your money, so move on,” says Theo, holding up his hand, “I don’t want trouble.”

Still boiling, Trey returns in the late afternoon with a quart of Jack Daniels. As night falls, he takes it upstairs and stews in "The Chamber" as visions of horror movie and grunge band posters dance over his head. At midnight, with empty bottle, Trey lurches down the stairs to the living room. He stands swaying before the knight in armor until he is seized by a big idea. Later, he appears as a half-armored knight clanking through the yard and past two startled cats. He staggers across First Street to Honey’s house, raises a medieval axe and smashes in her door.

Police in a patrol car cannot help but spot Trey zigzagging through the side yard into Theo’s mansion. With their guns drawn, flashlights waving, and Eldora clutching her two cats and peeking out the window next door, it takes Theo’s calmest demeanor to assure the officers that Trey does not pose a threat. But, with the axe in hand and a dusting of

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broken glass shining on his work boots, they quickly link Trey to the 9-1-1 call from Honey's house.

Tammy follows Trey to the police station. Saddled with bail he can't pay, Trey goes to jail. Tammy returns to the mansion a wreck and puts her arms around Theo. Appalled by the uproar that has made an unwanted name for him on Coffee Pot Bayou, Theo disentangles himself from Tammy and says it is best for her to go back to Tampa.

In the morning, Tammy knocks on Eldora's front door for some solace and rides with her to the good ship, *Bright Future*. Clive Alivus, the yacht's spiritual captain, welcomes Tammy aboard with a warm hug and listens to Eldora's description of Tammy's life in a nutshell, eyes widening at the news of her Coffee Pot Bayou address. He puts Eldora and Tammy to work, folding programs for the Abundance Ceremony scheduled for that night.

The women adjourn to the Eldora Shane Library, a richly furnished space just off the main deck, where assembly chairs are set in front of a stained-glass boat.

As she folds the programs, Tammy reads the message Clive will share at the gathering entitled "Banking on US Commandments."

"God of my 401K
God of low cholesterol
God of home equity
God of laps
You promise immortality
If we shun obesity,
And order wraps.

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God of low interest rates
God of high yields
God of e-harmony's sex appeal
God of "Dancing with the stars"
God of the winners
Of autos that shimmer
Of alternate fuel
Of torture not cruel

See us follow tax rules
Except under the table
And except off our shore
If we are enabled.

God of the Zip Code
God of our overload
We prayed interest free
Had a mortgage guarantee
Until we collapsed.

God on our side
In you we abide
When we vow we will tithe
When you lower the bar
And say who we are
Is just dandy."

Tammy warms to this modern spin on a spiritual path, especially when Clive pokes his head into the library to say his message is no different than prophets of old who led the call for a good harvest, a failed enemy, a fertile bride. In a flash of inspiration on the last count, Clive can see a place for the beautiful Tammy in his contemporary mission among the well-heeled, riding the bow of his yacht – in a bikini. Tammy hugs him and signs on. With Tammy tanning on the bay and no longer a luxurious fixture by the pool, Theo wonders if he had been too hasty to push her away. She certainly was friendly. He

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mopes about the mansion, hardly moved to check out the supermarket sales in the newspaper. He does check out the police blotter and sits at the dining table to write a letter of apology to the victim of Trey's vandalism.

Lame letters tossed into the trash, Theo walks across First St. to Honey's house, approaches her in the yard, and offers to pay for the broken door. He realizes the beautiful woman's mind is on other matters as she watches a young man adjust the backpack on his shoulders and take off down the street.

"I could come another time," sputters Theo, moved by her glistening eyes.

Turning with furrowed brow to Theo, Honey snaps, "Who are you?"

"I live in a mansion a few blocks from here on Coffee Pot and I'm sorry to say my guest trashed your door."

"And you want to fix it."

"I feel responsible since I brought him into the neighborhood."

Honey takes in Theo's smiling face and neat appearance, judging him good looking for an older guy. "I suppose that'll save on my home owner's deductible."

"Pretty woman like you doesn't need to bother with paperwork," says Theo, taking in her tan and curves and luxurious mane of hair.

"All I do is paperwork," says Honey, rolling her eyes. "Five days a week with two days off to get my head on straight."

Theo mentions next weekend they should bike downtown along the waterfront and have lunch at the Saturday Morning Market.