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Abstract

[This is an edited extract from Célestine Hitiura Vaite's forthcoming novel, *Tiare: The Husband Who Didn't Deserve His Wife and Everything That Happened Next*. To be released in Australia by Text Publishing 1 May 2006.]

CÉLESTINE VAITE

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Pito Tehana steps off the truck at the petrol station facing the bakery in Faa'a. His calico bag is thrown casually over his shoulder and a smile is on his lips because work is over. Still smiling he gives a little slow nod to one of his wife's many cousins walking to the Chinese store, meaning, *Iaorana*, you're fine?

The woman shrugs an insolent shrug, flicks her hair and keeps on walking. 'You need something, you,' Pito mutters under his breath.

Another of his wife's relatives walks past, but this one has already done her grocery shopping at the Chinese store. Today, that means a family-size packet of disposable nappies and ten bread sticks. Pito gives another *Iaorana*, you're fine? nod. She raises an eyebrow, gives Pito a long look and turns away.

'*Iaorana* my arse!' Pito calls out, thinking: Here, now you have a reason to be rude to me.

He is puzzled, though. It's not that he expects Materena's relatives to be overwhelmed at the sight of him, they never are. But give him a nod at least! A little nod, where's the politeness, eh? It's not as if he was asking for a salutation to the sun!

Then Pito spots Materena's Cousin Mori playing his eternal accordion and drinking his beer under the mango tree near the petrol station.

'Mori!' Pito calls out. '*E aha te huru* Cousin?'

'*Maitai, maitai!*' Mori calls back, putting his accordion down.

Mori never ignores Pito. *Enfin*, Mori never ignores anybody. The two men shake hands.

'Eh?' Pito asks Mori, who sees and hears everything from his mango tree. 'What's the story with the Mahi family this time?'

Mori considers the question. 'Well, it's about you, *hoa hia*.'

'It's always about me, what did I do now?'

After a moment of hesitation, Mori spills the bucket. 'The family says that you don't care about Materena's new job because you didn't invite her to the restaurant and she's been at the radio for a year.'

Pito gives Mori a blank look.

'Twelve months, Cousin,' Mori continues. 'And you know about Materena's

radio program, it's a success, it deserves champagne, an invitation to the restaurant. It's the most listened program in Tahiti, Cousin!' Seeing Pito's incredulous face, Mori asks, 'You didn't read *Les Nouvelles* on Tuesday?'

'Non.'

Mori shakes his dreadlocks, meaning, you don't read the *news*? 'There was an article, it's official, nobody can say it's just stories. Materena is the star of radios! But she hasn't turned into a *faaoru*, a show-off, she's still the same Materena that we know. She says good morning, she talks to you.'

There, Mori has spoken the truth.

'What else they're saying about me?' Pito wants more information. What he's just heard isn't enough.

'You're a big *zéro*.'

'Eh oh,' Pito protests, looking wounded.

'You're thirsty Cousin?' Mori hurries to ask, as if to make himself forgiven for the harsh comment.

'*Oui*, my throat is a bit dry,' Pito admits, and sits down on the concrete. He never refuses a beer with Mori. It is so rare. It's not that Mori is tight with his beer but when you drink thanks to your mother's generosity, you can't distribute like you want.

Pito takes a few sips of his warm beer and explains his case. He doesn't like to eat at restaurants, it's simple, *d'accord*? He doesn't want somebody coughing on his food, spitting on his food, talking over his food. When you eat at a restaurant, you don't see what's going on in the kitchen. And anyway, he likes to eat at home, his wife is a number-one cook...

'Where's the problem?' Pito asks Mori.

'Cousin,' Mori says nicely. 'Women like to eat at the restaurant now and then. It's an occasion. They put on a beautiful dress, makeup, shoes... They feel special and they have a rest.'

Pito shrugs. He'd like a rest too, and not having to work eleven months of the year. Everybody would like a little rest, but it doesn't mean people can tell stories about him.

'It really annoys me,' Pito continues, 'when people talk like they know what they're talking about and they don't even know.'

By 'people' Pito means women, because they're always talking those ones, they never shut up. 'My husband did this, my husband did that. My children talk back to me. Tonight we're going to eat breadfruit stew...' They talk in the truck, outside the Chinese store, inside the Chinese store, over hedges, under trees, by the side of the road, on the steps of the church, on the radio... Even when they have the flu and their voice is croaky, they talk and talk and talk.

Mori chuckles.

'I'm sure women are born with a special mouth,' Pito says, pretending he doesn't see the cranky look another relative by marriage fires at him as she

walks past with her bread sticks. Mori gets a friendly wave. Mori always gets a friendly wave.

'Cousin,' Pito says.

'*Oui* Cousin.'

'What else are they saying about me?' Pito mentally prepares himself for another story. With the Mahi women, there's never just one story.

But Mori has said enough for today, perhaps even too much. His lips are stitched.

'*Cousin*?' Pito repeats.

'That's all I know.'

Fine. Since Mori doesn't want to speak, Pito will say a few words. In his opinion, Materena's relatives have never liked him. He understood this during his first official visits to Materena at her mother's house. Before that, Pito's visits to Materena were behind the bank, under a tree, in the dark and in total secrecy. Then Materena fell pregnant and ... welcome into the family eh? The moment he arrived in the neighbourhood, the Mahi family felt they knew Pito Tehana. 'Hope you're not going to abandon Materena after what you've done to her,' one of Materena's relatives would greet him. 'You better recognise Materena's baby.' 'You better not make Materena cry.'

The first time Loana met Pito her greeting was much shorter. 'Ah you're here.' She did her little eyes at Pito as if he was a nuisance and not her potential son-in-law, the father of her unborn first grandchild. 'Take your thongs off before walking into my house.'

Pito never stayed for too long back then, ten minutes was enough. He had to save a bit of energy for the journalists waiting for him by the side of the road. 'You don't care about Materena's baby,' they said. 'We see in your eyes. Have you bought any blankets for the baby, at least? We don't dance the tango alone, you know. It takes two.'

Pito couldn't believe his ears! In his experience, a Tahitian man who does the right thing (by this Pito means visiting the girl he got pregnant) is feted like an *ari'i*, a king! The girl's relatives give the father of the unborn baby a chair to sit on, and somebody (usually the grandmother) gives him something nice to eat like biscuits — fried prawns if he's lucky. This happened to two of Pito's brothers. But all Pito got from Materena's family, he tells Mori, was *tutae uri*. Dog shit.

'I bet I could write a book on all the stories your family has told about me over the years,' says Pito.

'It's true.' Mori smiles. *Aue*, if Pito only knew! He could write a whole encyclopedia!

'Unbelievable.' Pito finishes his beer, thanks Mori and gets up. 'Your family can say what they want, I don't care.'

'Maybe you should, Pito.' Mori's smile drops.

'A man can congratulate his wife in other ways. There's no need to go to the restaurant.'

‘True, Cousin,’ Mori agrees, feeling friendly towards Pito again. ‘A bouquet of flowers, a —’

‘I congratulate my wife in my own way,’ Pito goes on, with a smirk that tells long stories. ‘And no complaints so far.’

Pito walks home, his head held up high.

‘You talk of a congratulation,’ Mori says to himself, and picking up his accordion he attacks a love song, the one about Rosalie and how she left.

Rosalie, sings Mori,

Elle est partie...

He doesn’t know why that song came into his mind. It just did.

And if you see her, bring her back to me.