

PROLOGUE

GATO 2005

I call him my “Dadi.” Of course, he not my father. I’m fifty-eight; he fifty-six. Actually I think I trick him. I call my real father, *mi padre Cubano*, “Papi.” I think this Anglo or Greek don’t know the difference, especially since I call his wife “Mami.” I call my own mother “Mami.” His wife I give respect because she don’t believe my bull-shit. He help me, he cash my check, he bring me back to life, so I give him respect. But I know how to fool him, so he don’t get my full respect. Back when I’m somebody, when I have rank, I have some girlfriends. They call me “Dadi.” See what I mean, how I trick him?

But he don’t always take my bull. Then I have to listen to his. Then I have to do what he say. Sometimes it like he put a bullet up my ass. Like he tell me I have to move in two days. I have to do my laundry in ten minutes. Who is he to wake me up with this news? But I get up, get dressed, wash my face, and remember, “Gato, play this guy like a string.” That’s what Memo say.

Back then, Memo and I, we drink together in the park. I tell him this guy give me change, a dollar or two, if I hold his dogs when

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he go in the video store. He might buy some junk radio or tool I find in the garbage. Five bucks, ten bucks. This is when I am in the rooming house, but my check won't last, so I sweet talk and hustle so I can eat, drink, whatever. Then they throw us out of that place and I have to live in the park. So now he let me clean his yard for ten bucks, one time twenty. So I think, OK, I move out in two days, two weeks, what's the difference? He say the city will pay the rent at the hotel. Then I'll have the whole check. I'll give my Dadi some excuse so he'll give me one hundred, two hundred all at once. Play it up, stretch it out, stretch him out before I go to the hotel.

Last time I live on the street is when I'm "dead." I always remind Dadi, "Remember when I run across the street telling you and Mami, 'I'm dead. I'm dead.'" Then I show them the letter from Social Security. Let's see, I memorize the first line, "We are sorry to learn that JESUS CARDENDAS, the person for whom you were receiving Supplemental Security Income payments, died July 30, 2002." My eyes are burning, I read it so many times. The paper is so crumpled from folding in and out of my back pocket. How can the government do this to me when I fight in their war and become a citizen? Just because they say so, don't make it true. But I no can prove it because I have no ID, and without ID, Social Security say they can't give me a check. I ask Dadi, "Do I look like I'm dead?"

I figure showing this letter to Dadi is good for ten bucks, it good for two, three, five from almost anyone I show it to. Why you think I run from inside the park and across the street by the school where Dadi and Mami are? You can never just get money from him. There have to be a reason. He read that letter, Mami read it. I explain it, my payee died. I don't know if they know about a payee. He start asking questions like a machine gun, ask one question, ask another, he don't even give me time to answer. Who your payee? When he die? You go to Social Security? You lose your ID? The payee have

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your ID? Mami, she slow him down so I can tell the story before he interrupt me with another question. Then he get political. Say it is messed up, they can't do that to me.

But Dadi do something. I don't know exactly what, make some calls to the bank, to Social Security. Mami write a letter saying she know me fifteen years. They say I can stay with them till everything is straight and I get my back pay.

That was just in time. October the weather is getting bad, real bad, rainy, cold. Mami, she nice, she cook for me. For an *Angla*, she know how to cook rice and *gandules* real good. But she don't want me there when Dadi at work. I leave with him in the morning and look for him coming home from the train, or walking Bruno and Domino, their dogs. "I get them," I say, take their straps. I want to do something useful, but not too much. I ain't picking up after no dog. But then if I see someone else, I give him back the dogs. "I be back in a minute." I don't know how long it been when I get back. Maybe I drink a couple of quarts with another *Cubano*, find a VCR in the alley, sell it for two bucks. First time I show up 'bout nine o'clock, Dadi he mad, he tell me, "You ain't here by eight, you can sleep somewhere else." OK, he let me in once after eight, but I don't try my luck the time I find out it almost ten. Mad is one thing. But I don't want to listen to him lecture. I have to be responsible, give respect; no wonder I'm homeless. Who's he think he is, my Papi?