

Approaching Freedom

An Exile's Quest for a New Self

A Memoir by

MARIA A. NODARSE

Chapter One

It wasn't a scorching afternoon, yet the tall scrawny teenager wearing a Western Union cap looked like he'd stepped out of a swimming pool. I was home for lunch. My mother and I were rocking and chatting on the front porch when we saw *el muchacho* open the small wrought-iron gate in front of our house. His long legs had him at the porch in no time. With his eyes fixed on my mother he said, "*Señora, telegrama*" and asked her to sign for it. *Te-le-gramma*. He could have punched me in the stomach. I'd seen enough World War II movies to know telegrams were bad news. Mami, briefly upset by the messenger's arrival, pushed herself up from her rocker, scribbled her signature on his pad, and said, "*Espera.*" She didn't bother with her shoes before stepping inside the house. She always enjoyed the coolness of the tile floor. A moment later she was back handing the boy some coins. "*Gracias,*" she said.

As the messenger closed the gate behind him, Mami

slipped two fingers inside the unsealed envelope and pulled out a small yellowish sheet of paper with narrow white strips glued onto it. The typed English words were all caps. I watched her scan the words, but then I always watched her. She was a beautiful, svelte brunette with a round face like Myrna Loy's and deep-set almond-shaped hazel eyes, fluid as a river. I locked eyes with her trying to anticipate what she might ask me to do.

"Puchita, *está en inglés*," she said and although she could sometimes decipher English, she handed me the telegram. Her request made me feel grown up. I was doing a good job translating it until I got stuck on a word: "absconded." I'd never come across it before; no idea what it meant.

"Something about Loren leaving school. But let's wait for Papi," I said.

My father arrived shortly after the telegram. His white-linen *guayabera* clung to his skin revealing a few spare pounds around his waist. As he bent down to kiss her—he was six feet to her five two—Mami said, "We got a telegram from Loren's school but Puchita can't translate it."

"That's so unfair! I just didn't know that one word!" I said.

"Not now, Puchita," my mother snapped as she pushed the telegram into my father's hand. He read it out loud in thickly accented but impeccable English. I'd already read that my brother Loren had run away from the academy but Papi's baritone voice conveyed a level of gravity I hadn't grasped.

After Loren's troubles with several of Havana's private schools, my parents had shipped him off to Georgia Military Academy in the States a year earlier, in 1957. Now, as he

was about to finally graduate, he had pulled this stunt. The telegram went something like this:

MR. NODARSE:

YOUR SON LORENZO AND FRIENDS ABSCONDED
WITH MILITARY EQUIPMENT TO JOIN CASTRO'S
FORCES STOP DESTINATION MIAMI STOP POLICE
ALERTED STOP.

GEORGIA MILITARY ACADEMY

Our cook Belén watched this scene from the arched kitchen doorway, her massive black body blocking the door. She'd wanted to tell Papi lunch was ready. Having a sixth sense about things, she hadn't ventured outside her realm yet. There was no need; she could hear every word. I caught her eye, and her look acknowledged what I'd suspected: our ranks destined us to be mere spectators.

Papi read the message again, translating it into Spanish. He wanted to be sure Mami understood what it said. "Lorenzo, we must find Loren and stop him," my mother said, sounding like an army drill sergeant. "I'm not having my son killed at eighteen."

"Águeda," my father said, "I'm not sure we can even find him. What's wrong with that boy anyway? Another couple of weeks he'd have been home with a high school diploma."

"What do you mean? He has to be stopped."

"First, we have to find out where he is. I'll call some parents. Maybe one of the kids called home. Better still, I'll call Georgia."

“Remember our phone might be tapped,” my mother said.

“What makes you think they didn’t read the telegram?” Papi was right; our mail was regularly opened and re-sealed with tape.

I saw Belén motioning me to come into the kitchen. As Papi placed the long-distance call, Mami stood next to him hanging onto every word he said. I took Belén’s advice and headed to the kitchen.

“You better stay here,” Belén said.

“Why?” I asked, wanting to be where the action was.

“*Porque el horno no está para galletitas,*” Belén said. Roughly translated, it means the oven was way too hot for cookies.

A few days later my father called collect from a payphone in Miami. I could tell he was with Loren. Good thing too—after the telegram’s arrival you could’ve sliced the tension in our house with a knife.

“No, he shouldn’t come back,” I heard my mother say. “It’s too dangerous.” She paused and I could tell my father was explaining something. She listened attentively, frowning and biting her lip. “Let’s do that,” she said at last. “He’s safer in Mexico with Fello.”

Just last year we’d been a family of six; now there were three of us left at home, like the storied bears. My grandmother, *abuela*, who’d always lived with us and who I adored had recently died. Fello, my oldest brother, had left to attend medical school in Mexico after Fulgencio Batista, Cuba’s present dictator, closed the University of Havana on November 30, 1956.

Batista's corrupt government, the brutality of his police, and the social and economic injustices thrust upon the Cuban working class had fueled years of persistent student demonstrations and riots. Thousands of people had been murdered or had disappeared at the hands of Batista's secret police under the guise of crushing communist sympathizers. As in the rest of Latin America, Cuban political unrest first brewed at the universities. The University of Havana had always been the birthplace of dissent. Numerous student revolutionary groups dedicated themselves to the struggle for liberty and justice for all the Cuban people. Disruptions through demonstrations or sabotage had become daily occurrences in the lives of Cubans throughout the island.

Years earlier, during Gerardo Machado's dictatorial regime, my own father was a Havana University law student. During *el Machadato*, as his regime was referred to in the streets, urban turmoil and terrorism abounded in Havana. The university was a hotbed of political opposition and agitation. The government closed it in an effort to stamp out persistent demonstrations and organized dissent, preventing my father from graduating when he was scheduled to.

Even at twelve I had a good idea of what was going on in Cuba. Exploding homemade bombs and Molotov cocktails were a frequent occurrence in Havana. Bombings were so common that when the nightly cannon was fired from La Cabaña, the old fortress in Habana Vieja, a tradition dating back to colonial times, people would ask, "Was that a bomb or *el cañonazo*?" Since *las bombas* were often hidden in public bathrooms, my mother wouldn't let me use the

restrooms when we went to the movies or department stores. But the sabotage didn't keep people from going out. People seemed to be indifferent to the explosions. Once in a while I'd wonder how many bombs it would take to make people stay at home.

Batista's police regularly tortured or shot political opponents who organized demonstrations against his government, even some who didn't. It wasn't unusual to find graphic black-and-white photos of their victims filling the pages of *Bohemia*, Cuba's popular weekly magazine. It was as if all sides wanted everyone to know the cost of dissent and the price of freedom. There were places like El Laguito, a small lake in the outskirts of Havana, where bodies were dumped on a regular basis. In a way, one could say at least the families knew where to look when one of their own disappeared. Rafael Salas Cañizares, Chief of the National Police, got what he deserved when he was mortally wounded in a shootout with rebels on October 20, 1956. His death served to demonstrate that Batista's iron rule was susceptible to attack.

After revolutionary student groups stormed Batista's presidential palace on March 13, 1957, a brutal reprisal followed. I still remember the day of the attack because of the panic it caused among everyone I knew. My family sympathized with the students who charged into the presidential palace hoping to assassinate Batista. While the palace was under fire, student leader Jose Manuel Echevarria and several others commandeered an important radio station, shouting into the microphone of Radio Reloj that Batista was dead. Echevarria was shot and killed by police on his way back to the university. Forty students died during the palace

attack. That day prominent people thought to favor the revolution were taken out of their houses and shot.

That was just what was happening in the city of Havana. In the provinces the fighting in the Sierra Maestra kept escalating, and spreading to other provinces, particularly Las Villas. Batista's press releases sugar-coated the fighting in the mountains, but few were fooled. Back then people liked to say, "*Lo bueno que tiene esto, es lo malo que se está poniendo.*" What's good about what's going on is how bad it's getting.

Chapter Two

We visited my brothers in Mexico City the following Christmas. Havana was on the brink of open warfare. My parents decided our going to Mexico was safer than trying to bring my brothers back home.

We had welcomed the New Year at a lovely residence in Coyoacán, near Mexico City, where relatives of Fello's girlfriend lived. It must have been around two in the morning when we returned to the furnished three-bedroom rental where we were all staying. I was in no hurry to go to bed; I was still dressed to the nines in a red taffeta dress, still wearing my first pair of heels. I remember my hair being up that night, I'd wanted it gathered in a French twist so I'd look older. It must have worked since I managed to score several dances with some handsome university students.

My mother was readying for bed, searching the cabinets for more blankets in an apartment that felt like an icebox, when she turned and asked, “Puchita, did you have fun?”

“What a question! Mami, it was my first New Year’s Eve party! Of course I had fun.”

We heard a knock on the door. “*¿A esta hora, quién será?*” Mami and I said almost in unison.

“*Triunfó la Revolución,*” heralded the wiry young man at the door, one of the building’s resident Cuban refugees. The revolution had triumphed. We’d heard celebrations throughout the building, but it was New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1958.

“Why do you say that?” asked Papi.

“My uncle just called me from home—Batista’s gone,” he answered.

We’d left Havana knowing—and hoping—Batista might be toppled during our absence but we never thought he’d abandon the city without a huge fight. Our stay in Mexico would last a few days longer than planned. We were scheduled to leave the following Saturday, but the airlines were suddenly swamped with Cuban exiles trying to get home again. Papi, being something of a wheeler-dealer, had obtained our plane tickets by bartering advertising space in *Campeón*, the sports magazine he published, with Cubana de Aviación. Since we hadn’t paid cash for the tickets, the airline kept pushing us to the back of the line. I loved being in Mexico so I was in no hurry to leave.

On the morning of January 9th we caught a flight home. The tension during the flight was palpable; I think

everyone on board was Cuban. None of us knew what to expect when we reached Havana. Rancho Boyeros Airport, on the southern outskirts of the city, felt like a war zone. *Barbudos*, rifle-carrying bearded men wearing olive-green fatigues, milled about the terminal. Later everyone would recall the rosaries that hung from their necks. I couldn't peel my eyes away from the armed rebels. They reminded me of the war movies I'd grown up with. On the way home from the airport I spotted dozens of *rebeldes* patrolling the streets in Batista's tanks, trucks, and jeeps.

Billboards, walls, and store windows were already covered with revolutionary slogans: *Patria o Muerte*, *Venceremos*, *Viva Fidel*, *Viva la Revolución*, *Cuba*, *Territorio Libre de América*, *Movimiento 26 de Julio*.

We'd missed Fidel's triumphant entrance into Havana by one day, but it was broadcast repeatedly on television. Crowds had lined the streets for miles as Fidel and his *guerrilleros* marched victoriously into the city on January 8, 1959. Fidel had taken several days traveling the six-hundred mile stretch from Santiago de Cuba to the capital, knowing people's growing anticipation would be at a fever pitch. Not a single bullet was fired to oppose him. I gave it no thought at the time but later I decided Fidel's unchallenged victory march into the capital reflected the people's reaction against the cruelty of Batista, his corruption and greed, and, in a way, against the Americans who had owned Cuba for so long.

Cubans were tired of corrupt politics, of persistent denials of freedom of speech, of the failure of civil resistance, of general strikes. They were tired of the

government's indifference to their need for education, medical care, housing, social and economic justice. I think *el pueblo* must have concluded that nothing short of a revolution could stop Batista, so why not throw their support to Castro?

Passing through our neighborhood I noticed a few houses looked vacant. Their front doors were open, no one seemed to be around. Down our block, Nena's two-story house—where I'd spent so much time playing with her granddaughter Gema—was deserted. I worried about Nena and her husband, but my main concern was whether my girlfriend Gema was still around. As if reading my mind, my mother said, "They probably fled with Batista."

"Maybe they went to visit her uncle in Florida," I said.

All the way home on the plane, I kept imagining my telling Gema about my first real New Year's Eve party! About my hair, my shoes, and the handsome boys who'd asked me to dance. I couldn't have guessed she would've left. I'd known Gema my entire life. Our mothers were best friends. Gema's parents lived in a nearby neighborhood, but she spent a lot of time at her grandparents' home. When she was there, we were inseparable.

I never dreamed that just standing in front of my house could make me so deliriously happy or that seeing Belén there, holding the fort for us, could make my heart chuckle. I ran to hug her. She was my Rock of Gibraltar, and when she said "Puchita," and flashed that smile with a gold tooth, I knew I was safe. I asked her, "Belén, do you know if Gema left?"

"How would I know? People who left didn't exactly

say goodbye, you know. Not that they would have told me, of all people. They just disappeared.”

“*Caballero,*” she said. She always addressed my father with the Spanish word for “gentleman” and my mother simply as *Señora*. “¿*Sabe quién se mató?*” she asked. Looking straight at him she told him. One of my father’s closest friends, a judge, had committed suicide, probably fearing accusations of corruption.

“*Señora, ni le cuento,*” Belén told my mother.

What was it she couldn’t begin to tell my mother?

Monday morning, fussing more than usual, I readied for school. I couldn’t wait to tell my friends about my thrilling holiday in Mexico, about the New Year’s Eve party, but mostly I wanted to see and hear what had happened while I was gone. Would Phillips School be just as I’d left it or would it be *revolucionario* like the rest of Havana? And my classmates, would they still be there or gone like Gema? I still remember what I wore that day, a black-and-brown plaid long-sleeved cotton shirtwaist dress—it was winter—anchored by a wide beige belt. Once a gangly tomboy, I’d recently become keenly aware of my appearance and budding femininity. That morning I found it hard to tear myself away from my mother’s full-length mirror. My legs are too long, my torso’s too short, my head’s too big. I look like a lollipop. “Puchita, hurry up, you’re late,” I heard Mami say.

As we walked out of the house I asked my father once again, in hopes of wearing him down, “Aren’t you ever going to buy a new car?” He drove a pug-nosed, lusterless

black 1950 Chevy, and it was 1959!

“They don’t make them like this anymore,” Papi said.

“I’ll say.” I shot back.

Most of my classmates’ parents drove late-model, humongous, two-toned American cars with huge fins. Cars like the ’58 Dodge Kingsway, Ford Fairlane, or Cadillac Fleetwood. It was embarrassing to be seen stepping out of a car so totally passé. Yet to my father that pugged-nosed Chevy was a symbol of his honesty. What other man in Cuba, handpicked by Batista in 1952 to fill a prestigious political post, had the same car when he left office as he had when he had assumed it? As Cuba’s *Director General de Deportes*, Sports Commissioner, my father had been assigned an official government car, a two-toned Buick, the latest! And a uniformed chauffeur, a charming, slight black man who much to my amazement smoked cigarettes and chewed gum at the same time.

Papi’s political fame didn’t last. His lofty ideas of expanding the city’s sporting facilities and encouraging the poor to make greater use of them, didn’t jive with Batista’s plans of extracting cash from Palacio de los Deportes to enrich himself and his friends.

My snotty preoccupations disappeared when I stepped out of the car: What a relief to see the school just as I’d left it, at least outwardly. No banners or telltale signs of *La Revolución*, which is not to say us students were all of one mind. Some kids were openly enthusiastic about the revolution, others weren’t, but I don’t remember any discussions getting out of hand. A few teachers favored

the revolution and now felt free to discuss the corruption that had characterized Batista's dictatorship; it was civics after all. Many of my classmates echoed their parents' "wait-and-see" attitude while others claimed Fidel was a communist, most likely reverberating what they heard at home.

As for me, I found the *barbudos* handsome and virile. I'd be glued to the television watching Fidel give a never-ending speech until I couldn't take it anymore. At the podium, swarthy Fidel, *el comandante*, was predictably accompanied by his brother Raul, by Camilo Cienfuegos, and Ché Guevara. Camilo, tall and lanky and better looking than Fidel, always wore a big Western hat and everything about him, especially his aw-shucks demeanor, reminded me of Gary Cooper. Next to Fidel, Camilo appeared taller, gentler, the real McCoy. I remember tearing out a magazine page just so I could hide a picture of Camilo in one of my dresser drawers.

When the school bus dropped me home for lunch that day I found my mother sitting on the porch, bare legs atop the glass coffee table, *Anna Karenina* on her lap. I bent down to kiss her and noticed she'd been scribbling in the book, something she'd always warned me not to do.

"Mami, what are you doing?" I felt excited to catch her doing something she'd forbidden me to do.

"Writing a list of characters and the dozen names each one has. It's the only way I can keep them straight. There're so many characters to keep track of."

"Back in a minute," I said and went straight to the

kitchen to kiss Belén. Belén never came out of the kitchen to greet anyone. No exceptions. It wasn't unusual for visitors to stop themselves, mid-sentence, and say, "*Dios mío*, I didn't say hello to Belén."

"I was waiting..." Belén was in the habit of saying in those occasions, "...waiting to see how long it would take you."

"*Hola*," I said, and gave Belén a kiss. Did I say she was my second mother, I adored her? That afternoon she wore a burlap skirt, meaning she'd made a promise to San Lazáro. In the past, Mami told me not to ask Belén about her *promesas*. "Private," my mother had explained. I suspected Mami worried I might adopt some of Belén's superstitions and she wanted logic to rule my life. My mother's efforts notwithstanding, I had a schizoid childhood: logic in the living room and superstition in the kitchen.

"I was thinking of getting you a *medianoche* for your *merienda*," Belén said referring to my favorite sandwich, a small egg bread bun with ham, Swiss cheese, pork loin, mustard, and a sliver of a pickle—the perfect size for a snack. *Medianoche*, midnight.

"Will Mami know?" My *meriendas* came out of Belén's pocket. Well, actually, that's not entirely true; Belén did so much wheeling and dealing it was impossible to tell. My mother thought if I ate too much after school I'd lose my appetite for dinner. Belén didn't think time should interfere with eating and my mother knew it. If, come dinnertime, she saw me spreading my food across the plate instead of eating it she'd ask, "Belén, what did you give her?" A straight-faced Belén

always said, “I swear, *señora*, not a thing. *Nada*.” I had no doubt God would strike Belén dead any day now.

“I wasn’t going to tell her. What do you take me for, a fool?” Belén said.

“Good.” On my way out the kitchen I patted her fanny.

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing, wiping your hands on my butt?” said Belén.

I scurried to the porch where we had the best rockers, upholstered and ample, made from bamboo. I’m what is known as a *sillonera*, a person who loves to rock back and forth, nonstop. Mami, still struggling with the Russians, ignored me so I picked up the *Bohemia* issue lying on the coffee table. *Bohemia*, Cuba’s leading magazine, sold millions of copies during the first couple of weeks of 1959, all celebrating the triumph of the revolution.

“¡*Qué horror!*” I shouted, turning away my head in disgust. Sepia-colored photographs of General Batista’s mutilated victims, corpses of tortured men on morgue slabs, pictures of torture instruments and torture chambers splashed across the pages of *Bohemia*’s revolutionary issue.

“Puchita, don’t look at that,” Mami said.

“They’re real?” I asked.

“Afraid so.”

I tossed the magazine on the table, went back to the kitchen. I knew when Mami was interested in a book, she’d rather read than talk.

“Belén,” I asked, “do you think Gema’s grandfather knew what was going on? Like do you think he knew about the torture and the killings?”

“I don’t know for sure,” she said. Seeing the

disappointment in my eyes, she added, “My guess is he didn’t know.”

“I miss her so much.”

“Gema?”

“Yes. I miss our walks around the neighborhood. The two of us liked Tito. Gema never admitted it, but I could tell. I don’t think Tito liked us. I think he liked older girls.” Tito was the brother of a young woman Fello really liked.

“That’s because he’s older. Thinks you’re a couple of kids.”

“Not that old,” I said.

“Old enough to like women, not girls. Besides your mother never liked his family.”

“Are they gone?”

“Don’t know. Like I said, *la señora* doesn’t like them. Where’s Gema? Miami?”

“No, about two of hours away from Miami.”

In the pre-Castro days, Gema’s grandfather held a government job at *palacio*, as we called the presidential palace. Being a friend of Batista, he secured a diplomatic post for his son in Florida where he’d been living with his wife and two children for some years now. Alina, the daughter, was still my good friend. She came to Havana every summer to spend time with her grandparents down the block from my house. Twice I’d been lucky enough to go to Florida with Gema to visit her.

I couldn’t believe the freedom Alina enjoyed in the States. She even went out without a chaperone. I

remember us going to a party given by one of her friends and not a single adult was there. The boy's folks had left him the house. In Cuba we brought parents to parties.

Gema's absence hurt deeply. I couldn't accept she could just disappear from my life. Yet I was incapable of working out in my head how or when I'd see her again. She and her family wouldn't be returning anytime soon. I forced myself to face facts—Fidel wasn't going to let any Batistianos off the hook. Quite the contrary, he was thinking of new ways of punishing them. Gema and her family would not return. I couldn't name the emptiness I felt. I had no clue where Cuba was heading, but I wanted the country and the life I knew back.

Chapter Three

Castro's horrors soon followed. The *revolucionarios* swiftly seized General Batista's *carniceros*, butchers. It was impossible to avoid seeing photos of Batista's atrocities, splashed as they were across Cuba's newspapers and magazines. The masses, oppressed and exploited until now, called for retribution: executions in the name of justice. As photogenic as a Hollywood movie star, Ché Guevara, Fidel and Raul's trusted accomplice, led the revolutionary tribunals that dispatched Batista's collaborators to the firing wall. In addition to Batista's henchmen, a lot of innocent people were massacred at *el paredón*, as often happens when the victors thirst for blood. They televised the executions; complete with a chorus of vengeful Cubans on the sidelines screaming, "*Paredón, Paredón, Paredón.*" To the firing wall. Not our finest hour.

My parents tried to shield me from the televised *fusilamientos* but it was tough to know when they would broadcast anything. Apparently the regular TV broadcast schedule had been tossed out with Batista. After school I used to watch *Hopalong Cassidy*, *The Lone Ranger*, and several other westerns. My mother would join me occasionally. When a cowboy got knocked out, punched, shot at, Mami would say, “Watch: now a woman will show up with a bowl of water and a *toallita* (a small towel) and after she places the *toallita* on his forehead everything will be fine. Americans solve everything with a *toallita*.” But those days were gone, now you could never tell what would be on TV. Couldn’t even count on watching *Perry Mason* or *I Love Lucy*, the revolution’s broadcasts ruled.

Nearly ten months after Fidel’s triumphant takeover, on the night of October 28th to be precise, Camilo Cienfuegos vanished at sea as he flew his Cessna from Camaguey to Havana.

A search of epic proportions followed. His disappearance was the lead story on every news program day after day. Mami was fond of saying the hunt for Camilo reminded her of the silent cliffhanger movies of her youth. By the time the search was called off, the towering figure of *El Líder* had eclipsed the memory of Camilo. Neither Camilo nor the plane was ever found.

At school, among friends, we couldn’t stop talking about Camilo. “He was gorgeous!” I said. “What was he, twenty-five?”

“People liked him too much,” one of my classmates said. “That’s why Fidel had him killed.”

“Twenty-seven,” Luis, a friend since kindergarten, said.

“They’re friends, Fidel and Camilo,” I said. “They go all the way back.”

“My parents say Fidel had him killed because he tried to defend a traitor.”

“But they were friends!” I insisted.

A nation grieved when Camilo was pronounced dead. All over Havana swaths of black fabric draped Camilo’s photographs. People took to wearing mourning bands. At school a girl in a lower grade who’d enrolled right after the revolution tied a black ribbon around her white sleeve.

“¿Y eso?” I asked, knowing full well what it was, resentful of this usurper trying to appropriate “my” Camilo, not to mention my school.

“Honoring Camilo.”

“That’s so tacky,” I said, and was sorry the moment it came out of my mouth. That was pretty low I realized. She was much younger than me. The girl turned on her heels and scurried away. There’s always been something in me that enjoys the rush of being a little bad. But being discourteous to the new kid was likely to cause me trouble.

For me, Camilo’s death was the proverbial straw. When they gave up searching for him, I realized how fed up I was with revolution. Didn’t want to hear more slogans, read any more posters. Not one more *Patria o Muerte, Venceremos*, not one more *Cuba, Territorio Libre de América*, not one more *Gracias Fidel*. Done. *Basta*.

The day after I told off the new kid, my teacher summoned me. They wanted me in the office. My only real—and admittedly annoying—discipline problem was that I was a non-stop talker. *Una cotorrita* as they say in Cuba, a little parrot. So as I headed for the office I expected to be reprimanded for never listening, for always having *la boca abierta*, my mouth open.

I stood at the doorway and when I saw the stern look in la Doctora Luisa's face I just about wet my panties. La Doctora Luisa, white-haired and motherly, was the school's assistant principal, and all of us liked and respected her. In the gentlest of voices she said, "Come in and sit down. You've let me down." Nothing could have made me feel smaller.

"Let you down?" I asked. It was just talking after all.

"The fact that you've been here since kindergarten," she stopped again, this time to look straight into my eyes, "doesn't mean you own this school." I wanted to interrupt her during her brief pause, but she'd signaled me to wait. "What you did was wrong. If we don't let other people express their opinions, why should they listen to yours, or mine or anybody else's? You should apologize."

I stared at the floor. "I'm sorry," I said, finally realizing why she was disappointed.

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to the poor girl you've upset."

"Just don't tell my mother."

"Too late," Doctora Luisa replied. My heart trotted.

When the school bus dropped me home, my mother's

nose was still buried in *Anna Karenina*. I hurried over to kiss her cheek, hoping to quickly dart into the house as if nothing had happened.

“Puchi, you have to learn to be careful. Things are very different now,” she said.

Maybe it was watching all those Hollywood movies; maybe it was just being a romantic adolescent; or maybe it was that at school we were studying the French Revolution, who knows? The fact is that in spite of being overdosed with all the slogans, all the propaganda, I thought of Fidel as a Robin Hood figure, a maverick who stole from the rich to give to the poor. I thought Fidel was doing things for the people, for the very poor. I’d seen Havana’s slums, full of barefoot parasitic children with distended bellies. That’s where my head was when I learned the government had forced land and property owners to lower the rents (by a third or a half), when the Revolution had mandated agrarian reform and when Fidel had signed *la reforma agraria*, amidst *campesinos* and *guerrilleros* in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Talk about staging! The agrarian reform law limited land ownership to 1,000 acres, with the government appropriating the rest, turning Cuba’s economy upside down. Agriculture was collectivized and although we didn’t own land, many of our friends did. Each week there seemed to be fewer kids in my school. Entire families took off to Miami by the plane-load, their men unable or not allowed to work in the businesses Castro’s regime had seized. The Cubans who escaped during the early stage of Castro’s revolutionary government, between 1959 and 1962, were probably the best-educated large group of immigrants to

arrive in America since the Second World War. They had been doctors, lawyers, business entrepreneurs, university professors. White, educated, refined professionals, they were the poster children in the battle against communism. It was precisely for this reason that Fidel had to put an end to what had become a brain drain. On the one hand, Fidel didn't want the *gusanos* in the country but on the other, neither could the revolution afford to lose the nation's entire skilled workforce. It was rumored Fidel would stop the Havana-Miami flights while there were still some professionals left in the island.

My father had always worked for an American company in Havana and he knew his breadwinning days were numbered. During the revolution's first year my parents worked to be optimistic. They hoped the worst was over and some kind of stability would soon return. Papi's family was still in Havana and his mother's health was fragile. I overheard Mami saying it was time to leave Cuba but Papi wouldn't hear of it. He wasn't leaving his mother behind, and she was too weak to travel. For once, I kept my mouth shut. I couldn't work out what it would mean to live in another country. What about Belén? Would she and her husband come with us? I didn't want to leave; many of my friends were still in Havana at the only school I'd ever attended, a school which was my second home. Mami talked as if it would only be for a short time. Probably just months she'd say. Maybe I'd still be able to celebrate my 15th birthday with my friends. But on the other hand, if we stayed in Miami for a while, maybe I'd see Gema again.

As the sweeping nationalizations continued, my

fathers' job was swept away with the rest. A short time later *abuelita* passed away. Papi had already stopped publishing *Campeón*, the sports magazine I'm sure, given time, would have become a hit. Well known in the world of sports, my father had no problem getting athletes and sports commentators to contribute to the magazine; he even had a doctor write a column on sports medicine, way before it became popular. Advertising revenue had been growing before the revolution but took a big drop afterward. But none of that mattered because the government had taken over everything. So my father left for Miami with a tourist visa, a suitcase, and little else, certain his English skills would help him land a position in Florida. The moment he landed a job and found us a place to live he'd send for us. The significance of his leaving didn't really register with me. Maybe because he'd always traveled for business; maybe because, as people like to say nowadays, I was in denial. What I remember vividly is my mother's growing concern about our getting out of Cuba. Every day the rumor mills worked overtime. In Miami, it was said, the word on the street was Fidel wasn't going to let any more Cubans leave the country, period. No one knew what to believe, or what Castro might do next. Now with Papi gone, and still searching for work, and with no money coming into the house other than the little Loren could earn, my mother was becoming increasingly worried. By early September 1960 Mami decided we should get the hell out of Cuba. Fello was safe, still in Mexico, and she was sure she could persuade Loren to come with us. She misread Loren. He wouldn't hear of it; he was twenty-one and was

staying. Once ready to join Fidel in the mountains, Loren's furor took a turn. He was now determined to help bring down Fidel and his cronies. It hadn't taken long for him and his friends to realize Cubans had traded a right-wing dictator for a communist tyrant.

Loren's late hours, his odd comings and goings, led my mother to suspect he'd joined one of the underground organizations aiming to overthrow Castro's government. She wasn't giving in easily. She took his hands, looked into his eyes and said,

"Loren, there is no need for you to get involved. The revolution won't last. Nothing here ever does. Your father and I lived under Machado's dictatorship, and he was much worse than Batista; we've lived under a succession of presidents who lined their pockets with the people's money, and we've lived through Batista's tyranny. In the end they all fall."

"Yeah, but this is different and you know it."

Chapter Four

Belén stood on the other side of the glass wall at Rancho Boyeros Airport. *La pecera*, the fish tank, that's how Cubans nicknamed the waiting room because it separated with glass those hoping to leave from their relatives watching from the outside.

Belén's blackness stood out in the mostly white crowd. She was in her Sunday best: a short-sleeved tailored plaid dress with a wide collar. She wore the gold jewelry—bracelets, loop earrings, a gold pin—that she'd bought on installments with her hard-earned money. Her hair was the same, straightened with a hot comb, parted in the middle, and covered with a black hairnet; and she wore her bifocals. Our eyes locked, and I realized she'd been crying. "*Para que me recuerdes,*" she said right before we got separated, handing me a miniature leather-bound copy of Memphis'

An Imitation of Life that I still keep in my night table's drawer. I blew her kisses across the glass wall and said as loudly as I could, "*Volvemos pronto, Belén,*" believing I'd be back in no time. At fourteen I didn't doubt I'd always see the people I loved again.

"María de los Ángeles," I heard. My mother called me Puchita unless she was upset. Then it became Maria de los Angeles. I whipped my head towards her. She was surrounded by *barbudos* in crumpled olive-green uniforms, rifles slung over their shoulders. A gruff-looking *miliciano* opened her suitcase, battered and mostly covered with blue Pan-Am stickers, and pulled out my mother's neatly folded underwear and stockings. "*Su cartera,*" he said. Without looking at the young man she handed him her boxy patent leather bag. He took out her wallet and counted the money. "Is that all you're carrying?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, lying; I knew she had money inside her brassiere. And there were the medals as well. Papi had dozens of gold medals and just as many silver medals, all won at tennis tournaments. The medals, mounted on black velvet in a gold, glass-encased frame, were my father's pride and joy. Mami had removed them from the frame and put them in a brown paper bag she rolled and buried in her suitcase. She knew she was taking a chance, they could get confiscated, but she wanted to surprise my father.

"*Su cartera,*" he said again, this time addressing me. Mami took a small step toward me. I remember getting a whiff of *Femme*, her preferred perfume. *El miliciano* opened my handbag but not my wallet and then took his

time checking me out. I feared he'd want my *dormilonas*, the small diamond studs I'd worn since I was an infant.

"How much money are you carrying?" he asked. I tried to think of what was in my bag, but before I could answer he said, "Next" and stretched his hand towards the person behind me, "Identity papers" he said. I snapped my handbag closed while Mami quickly gathered her clothing, stuffing it back into her suitcase. I knew she was fuming, but no one could say a word. The man standing behind me reminded me of my godfather Marcelino. His straight silver hair, combed back, was resplendent with Brylcreem. His white linen suit, heavily wrinkled after the long wait, called attention to his elegance. Unlike my *padrino* this man had that haughtiness of the upper class.

"How long do you intend to stay in Miami?" one of the *barbudos* asked him.

"*Un mes,*" he replied. "*De vacaciones.*"

Traveling was a big deal back then, especially air travel. Well-dressed, well-heeled men and women filled the lobby: men in white linen suits or *guayaberas*; women wearing make-up, jewelry, and stockings; gussied-up little girls and suited boys. Moving through the airport the difference in appearance between the would-be passengers and dozens of armed, scruffy young *barbudos* hit me like a brick.

As my mother and I approached the stairway of the Cubana de Aviación plane, the passengers ahead of us looked up to the airport's crowded second-floor wide terrace and waved one last goodbye. I spotted Belén in no

time, blew her kiss, took a few steps, turned around and blew her another. My mother also searched the wide terrace, her eyes darting from one young man to another. “Look, there’s Loren,” she said. My movie-star looking brother would have been conspicuous in any crowd. That morning he’d worked his shift at Cubana de Aviación’s ticket counter. He looked striking in his blue uniform. His decision to stay behind had broken my mother’s heart.

Reaching for my seatbelt, I asked my mother when we’d be back. “*Pronto*,” she said.

“¿*Qué es pronto?*”

“*Seis meses, más o menos.*” It was September 26, 1960, which meant we wouldn’t be back for Christmas. I’d never been away from Belén for that long.

”Where am I going to school? I hope it’s where my friends are.”

“I don’t know, Puchita. I know we won’t be able to afford a private school in Miami and I don’t know how public schools work.”

“I hope they’re not lousy like in Cuba.”

“I doubt it.”

“They look good on television.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.”

The moment the stairway was pulled back, the plane began moving to the runway. As the plane left the ground, my mother stared out the window, fixing her eyes on the landscape, on the copper-colored soil and verdant royal palm trees that like giants towered over the island’s lush vegetation. Climbing up through the tropical clouds the

plane bounced and shook like an old jalopy car. I was glad the flight was barely an hour. Many of the children started to whimper and cry. The little boys looked cute but awkward in their tiny suits while the girls, cradling their favorite doll, appeared more at ease in their fancy dresses and shiny black shoes. Elegant mothers dabbed their tears with white, embroidered linen handkerchiefs. As I remember it, there were fewer men than women and children, and I recall their gravitas. The aircraft's atmosphere was solemn and foreboding. I wanted to ask my mother a few more questions about what lay ahead, but I felt so wretched that like most passengers, I kept to myself. We were at the tail end of the first wave of refugees to hit Miami. Like all others who left Cuba early on, my family and I were certain that Fidel's government wouldn't last and that our stay in Miami was temporary.

With my big eyes about to pop out I inspected the terminal as we descended the stairs to the tarmac at Miami International Airport. The waiting crowd was large, and we were still too far away to be certain, but I was sure I'd caught sight of my father waiting for us near the gate. It looked like he was talking with another man standing beside him.

Papi's hair had turned jet black. I, not one to like change, decided he looked better with his salt-and-pepper hair. And besides, this contrast drew attention to his ever-deepening widow's peak which I didn't know back then was a neat thing to have. At just over six- feet tall, long-limbed, with an athletic build, and still a good-looking

guy for his age, my father would have been hard to miss at any airport.

“*Gracias a Dios*,” he said with an ear-to-ear smile, his white teeth—polished and even, like piano keys—flashing against his dark olive complexion. He was nervously excited. We Cubans are superstitious and Papi never talked about anything good without giving God his proper due. “Now all we need is Loren here *con el favor de Dios*. Let me introduce you to Chiquitico,” he said, turning to the swarthy man by his side. He liked to sound like that, formal. “We’re extremely fortunate to have him as our neighbor. He kindly drove me here in his car to pick you up,” he said.

Chiquitico’s hair matched my father’s, but since he was younger, he looked pretty hot with that jet black mane. Had they used the same Clairol number? Had they helped each other with the coloring?

Chiquitico had the looks of the quintessential Hollywood Latin lover—earthy, sultry, and vigorous. He went to get his car while Papi helped us find our luggage. We followed Papi out of the terminal to the sidewalk curb where he ushered us into an old blue Ford sedan. It made Papi’s 1950 Chevy look like a limo. “I paid thirty-five bucks for it,” Chiquitico said with no small amount of pride. To keep the right front door closed he tied it with a rope to the back door.

“Careful,” he said when I stepped in, pointing to a hole in the floor. “Lets you stick out your foot when the brakes don’t work.” He broke up with laughter. As we left the airport he said, “I’ll drive down Flagler so you can see it.”

We’d been to Miami several times before. It was a

popular vacation spot with my family. I was happy to see that Walgreens, home of the world's best soda fountain, and Burdines, showplace of the coolest fashions, were still there. When we headed southwest, or *El Sagües*, to use the Cuban pronunciation, I realized this wasn't the Miami I knew. Southwest Eighth Street (*Calle Ocho*) was flooded with signs like *Batidos*, *Café Cubano*, *Envíos a Cuba*, *Sándwich Cubano*, *Medianoches*. This surrogate Miami looked and sounded—Cuban music pulsing from storefronts—like a sham replica of Havana. Cuban men huddled in front of insignificant cafes, smoking and drinking espressos from dainty pleated white paper cups, gesturing operatically, talking in loud voices at machine-gun speed, no plurals, no word endings, words chewed out at a frenzied speed, to their very marrow—*mijito*, *venpaca*, *nomedigatu*, as opposed to *mi hijito*, *ven para acá*, *no me digas tú*.

I'd wanted to feel like I was in the United States, not in Fake Havana. "Well," I said as I looked out the car window with a face as long as the peninsula itself "at least Burdines and Walgreens are still here." I wondered how the Americans felt about their city becoming unfamiliar. Ignored once more. "Papi," I said, determined not to be deterred, "how far is your apartment?"

"It's not my apartment, Puchita. It's our apartment. It's not far," he said.

"Puchita, just look out your window," Mami injected. "We'll be there soon."

I realized Mami had barely spoken a word since getting off the plane. The car turned on Tenth Avenue and somewhere in the neighborhood of Second Street,

Chiquitico parked his thirty-five-buck car, got out, and untied the rope holding my door closed.

We followed *Chiquitico* down the sidewalk. He turned up a walkway leading to a faded yellow two-story apartment building. A few Cubans hung out on the front porch. We're not going to live here, are we? I knew better than to ask.

"Move on, Puchita, I'm tired," Mami said. When we left home that morning my mother had looked stunning in her hunter green and black dress and high heels. But that was before saying goodbye to her son, to Belén, and the neighbors who were staying; that was before encountering the *revolucionarios'* insolence at the airport. Now she looked like yesterday's corsage. Ignoring her exhaustion, my father focused on his recent acquaintances, dragging us from one person to another saying, "Let me introduce you to my wife and daughter." He was always like that, he tended to disregard what others wanted, certain he knew best. Mami and I had met everyone; could we go inside now?

"Mami," I said, in an effort to cheer her up, "smell the coffee?" We climbed up to the second floor and Papi opened the door to a matchbox-sized apartment. I didn't want to go in. In Havana people had maid's rooms larger than this. Was this really to be our living room, dining room, and kitchen? There was a separate bedroom with a double bed that left almost no space to move around it. I felt claustrophobic just looking into the bathroom.

"*Espero que les guste,*" my father said. Was he crazy? He expected us to like this? I must have looked miserable because he quickly added, "When I get a job we'll get a

bigger place.”

“It’s fine,” my mother said, “it’s fine.” She was beat.

“So, Puchita, what do you think?” Papi asked. I said nothing. As a kid I had grown antennas to pick up on Mami’s moods. It was safer that way. My mother shook her head a little. I realized this was not the time to say how horrendous the place was. Mami could barely stand up. Papi wanted us to like it. And I didn’t want to get in trouble.

“Where am I supposed to sleep?” I asked. Papi pointed to a daybed covered with a flaming flamingo-themed bedspread.

“It’s only for a while,” my mother said.

I reached down and grabbed my suitcase and popped it open. “Where do I hang my clothes?”

“I guess we’re all going to share the bedroom closet,” my mother said.

The aroma woke me up. Mami had made coffee. She’d remembered to bring *la tetera*, a fabric coffee-making contraption shaped like a cow’s teat attached to a metal hoop with a handle. I looked around the sorry-ass apartment—dinette set, stove, refrigerator, kitchen sink, all right in front of my eyes—and wanted to shriek, but there was something so matter-of-fact, so domestic and assuring in the way Mami went about making coffee that watching her and getting a whiff calmed me. We’re really going to live here. I longed for the privacy of my bedroom.

“Puchita, we need to find a store. We have nothing to

eat,” she said.

“You want me to ask someone where the closest store is?”

“We’ll have to walk, so we won’t be able to carry much.” I rushed downstairs to the super’s apartment. Anything to get out of there. I couldn’t stop thinking of the only home I’d known. I kept seeing it the way we’d left it, as if we were going on an errand: armchairs and sofa facing the TV, diplomas hanging in the hallway, the porch’s four rocking chairs parked around the bamboo coffee table, waiting for a conversation to begin. I’m sure even the frog was at its usual place, at the bottom of the yellow ceramic pot centered on the coffee table. Funny, how well I remembered the frog.

“Ayyyyyyyyyy” I’d screamed when I saw the frog jump inside the water-filled pot.

“Puchita,” my mother had said, “What’s that all about? It’s only a little frog. What could something that small do to you?”

“Blind me,” I said.

“Blind you? How?”

“Peeing in my eyes. Belén told me that if a frog pees in my eyes I’ll go blind.”

“Puchita, use your head. How can a frog possibly pee in your eye? Think.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Belén!” Mami called.

Now Loren and the frog had the house all to themselves. Belén would come and cook for him. “*Señora*,” Belén had

said, “I’ve been cooking for that boy all my life and I’m not about to stop.” I wished I’d been Loren’s age in the old Cuba, wished I’d been able to go to Tropicana, Sans Souci, Montmatre, wished I’d had the opportunity to see all the famous people who came to Cuba to perform like Edith Piaf, Xavier Cugat, and Carmen Miranda. If I’d been Loren’s age, I’d have danced the night away and then, like so many *exilados*, I could have said, “*Que me quiten lo bailado.*” “Let them take all those dances away from me.”

To fall asleep at night, I came up with this trick of recreating my house so as to stop worrying about how my father would get us out of this hole. I’d start at the sidewalk, open the small wrought-iron gate, walk the red tiles and climb the five steps up to the porch, walk past the goddamned frog without fear, walk into the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen. I’d see Belén in the kitchen in her burlap skirt and wonder why she never wore an apron. But after getting to the kitchen I’d grow melancholy and then I’d decide to stop there and start imagining the club.

That first week it poured, and I’d stare out the rain-streaked apartment window feeling sorry for myself. Every September since kindergarten I’d gone back to the same school, with the same classmates, same principal, same janitor even. Now I couldn’t even go to school—a ny school. Until late 1960 Miami’s Dade County schools would only accept exiled students who were not permanent residents if their families paid tuition. We

didn't have the money, so I was stuck with my mother all day long in that two-room pissy apartment.

One morning Mami sat over her *café con leche*, her mind a thousand miles away.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I was thinking about Loren. It worries me he's still in Cuba. I hope he doesn't get into any trouble."

"You mean because of what he did in Georgia?"

"I mean because he's a rebel and I don't want him doing anything he shouldn't be doing. They can do anything they want to him. Throw him in prison and let him rot there."

"Mami, nothing is going to happen to Loren."

"Now you're starting to sound like your father."

"So, that's it, Loren?" I asked.

Mami looked at me and nodded. "Thank God Fello's in Mexico. I hope he doesn't have to interrupt his studies."

"You think he'll be able to finish?" I asked. It was difficult to worry about Fello. He'd always been a hard act to follow.

"We have to hope for the best. He's frugal, not like Loren."

When Loren was at Georgia Military Academy, he'd draw dollar signs on the margins of his letters. Fello, on the other hand, would sometimes tell my folks he didn't need money yet, he had some left over.

"If anybody can do it, it's Fello," I said. He was my hero in those days.

"I don't know, Puchi," Mami continued, "whether he'll be able to finish. We're running out of money. I don't

know what's going to happen if Lorenzo doesn't get a job soon. We'll be out of money in two months."

"In two months?"

"We can pay rent for two months; we can get by for two months. That's it."

"What happens after that?"

She looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. Since arriving in Miami I hadn't heard her complain once. She hadn't griped about moving into a matchbox; she hadn't mentioned how she wished her sons were with her and not abroad. She saw me grinding my teeth. "You shouldn't do that Puchita. It's bad for your teeth. Don't worry; Lorenzo will have a job by then. He's a lawyer. He knows English. He's a fast typist. He worked for an American company for twenty-five years. Why wouldn't he get a job?"

What I heard my mother say was that we might starve to death in two months' time. Boredom was already making me eat too much—dresses didn't fit, pants wouldn't zip, shirts looked about to pop open, but I didn't want to talk about it. "*Te estas poniendo gorda,*" my mother would say as if I didn't know I was getting fat. What else could I do but eat? We didn't have a television. I was the only teenager in the building. It was either boiling hot or pouring rain outside. Not a word out of me. What's the point? Instead, I helped myself to some cottage cheese and strawberry jam, stuff I wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot pole in Cuba.

"Mami, is there room here to make *arroz con pollo*?"

"*Claro,*" she said, which means of course.

"¿*Flan*?"

"Puchita, can you think of something else besides

food? That's all you talk about. You're not getting fat, you ARE fat. You eat all day long."

She was right; I was storing food for the lean times ahead, for that empty-cupboard day.

"Belén's apartment was bigger than this." I wanted to complain about the size of our apartment but she wouldn't bite.

"About the same."

"Guess so," I said, remembering the day I went home with her. She'd needed something from her apartment and I went along. Belén lived in a charcoal-colored building in El Cerro, one of Havana's oldest neighborhoods. The apartment was minuscule—and immaculate. When I walked into the living room, the first thing I spotted was a large altar devoted to Santa Barbara, a bright red glass votive candleholder to each side of the saint's statue, a ripe crimson apple in front. Belén lit the candles and a ruby-red light flooded the room. I wanted to ask her about the offering, I wanted to say, "Belén, you really think Santa Barbara will eat that apple?" But I knew better because I had said something like that once as we drove past the Chinese cemetery in El Vedado. When I saw *los chinos* offering food to their ancestors I'd asked, "They think they're going to eat it?"

"And do you think your grandmother will smell our flowers?" my mother replied.

My first lesson in tolerance.

Chapter Five

Mami wanted to conceal the pots and pans that sat on three pitiful plywood shelves above the kitchen sink. I guess she had to make the place feel like it was hers. “Do you want to go to *El Tencén* and see what we can find for these shelves?” she said. That’s what Cubans called the dime store, *Tencén*

“Claro,” I said.

In Cuba, we went to the big Woolworth dime store in Habana Vieja practically every Saturday. Back then nothing made me happier than to sit at the long soda fountain bar and wolf down a huge banana split while Mami sipped on a malted. I can still see the front of the two-story Woolworth facade with its protruding massive gold letters, all caps, set against a fire-engine-red background. Now I was ready to jump at the chance to go to the grocery store, the hardware store, the pharmacy,

anything to get out of that crappy apartment.

The afternoon felt like a humidity festival; my clothes were drenched in sweat in no time; even my hair weighed me down. It was roughly a ten-minute walk to the nearby five-and-ten. “Feel that air-conditioning,” Mami said as we entered Woolworth’s. When I didn’t see an escalator, I wondered where the rest of the store was. I noticed the fabric section at the back of the store. From where I stood it didn’t look like much of an assortment but my mother plunged ahead. She picked up a red-and-white checkered oilcloth and said, “It’s not what I had in mind, but it’s cheap, and we won’t be looking at pots and pans all day. Tell the clerk to give you two yards.” Most sales clerks in Miami only spoke English back then. Mami grabbed some thumb tacks and a pair of scissors and headed for the cashier. I was in no hurry to leave. I wanted to sleep at Woolworth’s; it was so cool in there.

We left the store reluctant to face the torpid humidity we’d briefly escaped. I was about to say something to that effect but as we crossed the street, we smelled the wet soil and with a sudden clap of thunder, the rain poured down with typical tropical temper. We dashed for the cover of a nearby store awning but Mami stopped abruptly, gasping for air.

“¿*Qué pasa?*” I asked, worried there might be something seriously wrong with her.

“*No nos vamos a encoger*” she said and laughed. It’s not like we’re going to shrink. But I could see she’d run out of breath. Now that I was with her all the time it was hard to miss how easily she got tired. Mami used to have women help with the housework in Cuba. Besides Belén,

who really ran the house, there was always a cleaning woman/washer and ironing lady. But why was she so tired when we lived in a place you couldn't take more than five steps at a time? Nerves maybe. The rain stopped as unpredictably as it had started. Miami was a lot like Cuba: in less than half an hour the sun would dry the streets and sidewalks and you wouldn't be able to tell it had rained at all.

What little we had in that apartment came from Woolworth's; the clunky sea-foam coffee mugs and cereal bowls we used every day could have survived a missile strike. Anything that came with the apartment was useless, particularly the cooking pans, thin as onion skin. Mami's first purchase in Miami had been a large cast-iron frying pan.

"Isn't the frying pan too heavy for those shelves?" I asked as she stood on a dining room chair pleating the oilcloth and tacking it to the edge of the wooden shelves.

"Quizás."

She stepped down off the chair to examine her creation and then picked up the leftover cloth—she could have bought half a yard less—and shaped it like a bow, then stuck it in the middle of the top shelf. *"Muchísimo mejor,"* she said with pride.

As it turned out, we wouldn't starve. But not because Papi had landed a job. We started getting boxes of surplus and donated food from the Catholic Relief Services of Miami. Powdered milk and eggs, vegetable oil, institutional packaged cheese, tins of spam, and jars of peanut butter

we never figured out what on earth to do with. I think it was Chiquitico's wife who came up with a recipe for a mouth-watering flan using powdered eggs and powdered milk. My mother became popular in no time. Women would knock on the door and ask to borrow her cast-iron frying pan, "Águeda, ¿me puede prestar el sartén?" She and Chiquitico's wife seemed to be the only ones in the building who knew how to cook. I remember women dropping by our apartment and asking, "Águeda, ¿cómo se hace el arroz?" Rice, really! Mami would brew them "un cafecito," and at those times with those women I saw her smile.

One late October afternoon we were both sitting at the dinette table almost whispering so as not to wake up Papi, who was napping in the bedroom after hitting the pavement all morning when we heard a knock on the door. "El sartén," I said, thinking out loud about the frying pan, our great investment. Mami had always been generous; besides, we were all in the same boat. She wasn't the only one lending stuff; I recall an ironing board on the second floor making more rounds than a Greyhound bus.

"¡Dios mío, Loren!" my mother screamed at the door. "Ay Lorencito, no te imaginas." Nothing, not even my father landing a job, could have surpassed the joy she felt setting her eyes on her son. Loren bent over and hugged her.

"You'll break her in two," I said and jumped up to hug my handsome brother. At five six, I was just the right

height.

“Lorenzo,” my mother shouted, “Loren is here!”

“How did you get out?” Mami asked.

“I had a *Cubana de Aviación* ticket, a vacation pass, and an American diplomat who owed me a favor got me the visa.”

Papi came out of the bedroom. “*Bendito sea Dios*. Now we can sleep again.”

“Loren, I was so worried about you,” my mother said. “We heard Fidel’s locking up people in prison with no good cause.”

Loren ignored the remark, apparently uninterested in discussing Fidel, and ran his eyes over me. “*¡Qué gorda te has puesto!*” You got so fat! To make his point across, he puffed his cheeks like a blowfish.

Criticón. That’s what everyone in my family was good at: criticizing. Would it have killed him to say “I missed you?”

“Gracias,” I said. “You staying?”

“Of course I’m staying. If anybody’s crazy enough to want to travel to Cuba, I’ll give him my return ticket.” Loren said, pleased with himself. “Papi, how’s the job hunting?”

“Bad. I think they don’t want to hire Cubans. They don’t think we’re white enough. Besides, the rumor is Fidel won’t last long and they say they don’t want to train people who have one foot in Cuba.”

“So you haven’t found any work?”

“Just a painting job.”

“Painting?” Loren asked. My father had never done physical work in his life.

“You hear about a job and no matter how early you get there, there’s a long line of Cubans ahead of you. There’s a bus drivers’ strike, so if Chiquitico is not free I have to do a lot of walking.”

“This place is like a closet,” said Loren. “Are you sure you have space for me?”

“What a question!” answered my father.

“Loren, tell me about Belén,” I said.

“I almost forgot,” Loren said. He picked up his suitcase and put it on the loud Floridian bedspread, took out a box, and handed it to me. “*De parte de Belén.*”

I grabbed the box and found my favorite treats inside: *boniatillos*, *guayaba*, *torticas de Morón*. I grabbed the *torticas de Morón* and stuffed my mouth with shortbread cookies.

“She sent you a note,” said Loren, “and photos.”

Belén only made it through second grade, but she was innately intelligent. *Inteligencia natural* my parents liked to say. Papi had taught her to calculate percentages when she’d started running a loan business out of our kitchen. Afterward, neighborhood maids paraded up and down the side yard corridor that led to the kitchen door. Belén held court at the pantry’s Formica dinette set. She’d do her calculations on the red Formica table in front of the washer and dryer while her customers sat on the vinyl-upholstered chairs with aluminum legs that matched the aluminum band bordering the table top.

“I don’t want to do this,” I’d heard Belén tell a customer more than once, “but if you don’t pay what you owe, I will have to send my lawyer to collect it.” The lawyer was Manolo, Belén’s six-foot, two-hundred plus-

pound mulatto husband. We had so many maids up and down that corridor that Mami called the pantry “Belén’s office.”

“Puchita,” her note began, “Thank God we’re well here and I miss you with all my heart. Manolo won’t get on a plane so I guess we’re staying. I’m sending you the food I know you miss. And also some pictures. Don’t forget me. God bless you. Always love you.

Belén”

I heard the sound of her voice and my heart scrunched up like a paper ball. I spread the photos on the small dinette table. I wanted to be alone with Belén; I wanted the photos tattooed in my mind. I was no longer the girl in those pictures and I got scared of losing her. *Voy a perder todo lo que era antes*. There was my first communion picture. White dress, white veil, white flowers, like a child bride. A picture of a birthday party at a park with all my Phillips School classmates, a white-boxed *merienda* in front of us, a classic Coca-Cola bottle next to it. What were we? Eight? Nine? A picture of Mami and Papi standing next to me by the swings at the Havana Yacht Club. We weren’t members, so why were we there? A photograph of my neighbor Maria Elena, in her white, starched Baldor school uniform, with her new Dachshund puppy, plus more pictures of me petting dogs, in the park, at our neighbor’s house, in the street.

The next morning, after Papi, Loren, and Chiquitico went out looking for work, I spread out the photos on the

dinette table once more. “You know, Mami,” I said, “it must have been *difícilísimo* for Belén to part with these photos because that’s all she had left of us. I really miss her.”

“You think Belén loves you more than I do because she spoils you?” was her reply. Where did this come from? I wondered. Is she jealous? Had she been jealous all along?

“Belén loves me.”

“I know Belén loves you, but Belén doesn’t know what’s good for you; I do. I give you what you need and Belén gives what you want. Belén spoils you and I don’t. You think I didn’t know the junk she gave you before dinner?”

“It wasn’t junk.”

“It ruined your appetite.”

“Wish someone would ruin my appetite now,” I shot back, always needing to have the last word.

Why wouldn’t Belén spoiled me; she had no children of her own. I was her baby—the youngest of the three—and the only girl. I was sure I was her favorite, but that wasn’t Mami’s problem. Mami feared Belén was *my* favorite. She knew I had adopted a mother—a loving, superstitious, indulgent black mother—but what she didn’t realize was that I had two mothers. Maybe it was time to tell her.

The news spread like wildfire throughout Miami. On October 19, 1960, in the aftermath of Cuba’s nationalization of all large companies, the United States

imposed a trade embargo on exports to Cuba (except for food and medicine). That day our building danced to a different beat, a conga rather than a tango: “*Ahora si se cae Fidel! Ahora sí.*”

“Fidel cannot endure *el bloqueo*,” as Cubans called the embargo. “Cuba cannot subsist on its own,” Papi said.

Mami didn’t like hearing him talk that way. When he used highfalutin words like “dipsomaniac,” she’d ask him, “Why can’t you say ‘drunk’ like everybody else?” But she didn’t pick at him now. You’d think they would argue more now, stuck as they were in this foxhole of a Miami apartment, but these days she let him get away with all sorts of things. In Cuba, she’d never hesitated to put Papi in his place. In Miami I think she felt sorry for him, like that early evening when he dragged his bone-tired body home after painting a house with *Chiquitico*, hunched over and drenched in sweat, looking more like a beaten-down boxer in an old Hollywood movie than the lawyer she’d married. I know it broke her heart. Then there was the day he confessed he’d lied, claiming to be fifteen years younger when he applied for a job at a wholesale liquor distributor, only to be caught in the ensuing lie-detector test, not an uncommon practice in those days. “Shouldn’t have lied,” he kept saying. Exile so crushed Papi that he had to believe we’d be going back to Cuba any day now.

Mami, who’d always had her feet firmly planted on the ground, decided we both should get Social Security numbers so we could work, as if there was enough work

to go around in Miami those days. Off we went, only to find the Social Security Administration office packed with Cubans. Classified as political refugees, Cuban exiles were allowed to apply for a social security card and encouraged to find a job. After a long wait we each got a form and a short pencil and searched for a space on the long tables to work in. I wanted to figure out on my own how to fill out my first U.S. application.

“My name doesn’t fit, Mami,” I whispered. “I counted *los cuadritos* (little boxes), and it doesn’t fit.”

“Just write your name and initial,” Mami said.

“Which name, Maria or Angeles?”

“It’s your name, you decide.” Really, since when do I decide?

“It’s not my name if I have to cut it in half,” I whined. Nonetheless, I filled in five *cuadritos* with “Maria,” then in *el cuadrito* for a middle initial I grudgingly wrote “A,” when it should have been, “d, l, A,” as in “de los Angeles.” Maria A. Nodarse, a practical name for a practical country.

“Why did we have to leave?” I asked my mother while we waited to hand in our applications. She signaled “lower your voice.”

“Because *Fidelistas* were about to lock your father in prison. Because your father worked for Batista. Years ago. But that wouldn’t have stopped them. Because the government stole all the American businesses. Should I go on?”

I wanted to be back in Cuba, with my full name or my nickname, “Puchita.” I blamed my parents for my not being home with Belén, not being at Phillips School, not

being able to swim in our club's Olympic pool.

"Besides," Mami said, "he didn't have a job anymore."

"And he doesn't have a job now."

Mami looked at me. "It's not for lack of trying."

"Well, maybe if he'd stayed home that night, we'd still be there, at home with Belén."

But even as I said it, I knew there was no "there" anymore. Besides, I was proud my father hadn't stayed home the night Fidel gave a speech at the Ciudad Deportiva's Coliseo, a sports complex built in the late '50s by Batista's brother-in-law, my father's convenient replacement. In his speech, Fidel announced the revolution would ensure that Cuba would have its first honest sports commissioner. I'd been sitting on the couch with my parents watching the televised speech. When Papi heard Fidel say all previous sports commissioners were crooks, he jumped up from the couch.

"I was the first honest sports commissioner in Cuban history," Papi said. He had a very high opinion of himself and without giving the matter any further thought he said, "I'm not letting him get away with calling me a crook." He grabbed the car keys.

"What are you doing?" Mami asked, frowning her brow.

"I'm going to clear my name."

"Don't be foolish, Lorenzo; he's not going to let you do any such thing."

"We'll see about that."

In what felt like seconds my father was out the door, speeding away in his old black Chevy. There was nothing Mami could do. She picked up a white box of *Regalias El*

Cuño and her lighter, went out to the porch, and lit a cigarette. “Puchita, call me if you see your father on television.”

Didn’t happen; no one could get that close to Fidel. Accustomed to being recognized from his days as a tennis champion and a sports commissioner, my father assumed he could just walk past Fidel’s guards. Some ego, to think you can take a microphone away from Fidel Castro. If we are to believe his version as he approached the podium Fidel’s guards pointed their guns at him. That’s when a boxer he knew from his sports commissioner days came to his rescue. “*Docto*,” he said—in Latin America everyone is a doctor— “*No vale la pena*.” Not worth it. So goes the story.